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metro stage

Everyday heroes

Life's struggles provide the inspiration for *Gaff Aff*, writes **Samantha Selinger-Morris**.

If any moment can illustrate just how obsessed performance artists Martin Zimmermann and Dimitri de Perrot are with ordinary people and behaviour, this is it.

They've just finished a German run of *Gaff Aff* – their runaway hit about life's struggles, played out on a massive DJ's turntable – when Mikhail Baryshnikov rocks up to their dressing room to tell them how great they were. "And it was funny, because at first we didn't know [who he was]," de Perrot says over the phone from Zurich.

"Yeah, we just know his name, [not what he looks like]," Zimmermann adds.

The pair didn't twig that their admirer was one of the most famous dancers of all time until they saw Baryshnikov in a television advertisement screened during their plane ride back to Switzerland.

"And it was so funny, because, of course, he's a great, great dancer," Zimmermann says.

The humbling encounter didn't stop Baryshnikov from inviting the pair to perform at the opening of his Arts Centre in New York in May. (He couldn't believe they'd never performed in the US before.)

In fact, it's Zimmermann and de Perrot's obliviousness to celebrity – and their fascination, instead, with the idiosyncrasies of the anonymous people surrounding them every day – that has turned them into the performance superstars they are.

Their works, which centre on our daily disconnections with each other, have earned them more than 20 awards for choreography, music and set design.

De Perrot says their inspiration for *Gaff Aff*, which features Zimmermann as a bumbling businessman struggling to build a

home out of cardboard and get on with his day, all on a constantly moving turntable, was the people around them.

"We asked ourselves: 'What would interest people today? What would make them come out from watching TV?' And we were thinking: 'Well, today, freak show, this you can see on television. Special effects are so crazy everywhere, maybe the only thing people don't watch any more – that they forget to watch – is the people just next to them, the people in the street.' So we decided to show a human being, the most normal one, the one you see every day."

It's impossible to pin their works to one genre, as they combine

'It's a metaphor for life ... this could be any one of us.' Dimitri de Perrot

music, dance, mime and DJ pyrotechnics. This is fitting, given the pair's beginnings: Zimmermann apprenticed as a set designer and studied with the national circus school in France; de Perrot is a self-taught musician and composer. (When pushed, the pair, who first met at a Swiss club in the 1990s where de Perrot worked as a DJ, call their works "sculpture".)

And, according to the head of theatre and dance programming at the Sydney Opera House, Wendy Martin, their works examine life's most primal concerns.

"It's like a metaphor for life," Martin says of *Gaff Aff*. "It's like you're watching this character who could be any one of us trying to get through this life. It's a very amusing, but poetic, kind of observation of the ordinary."



Reflecting on the themes in their work, de Perrot says: "Cities are becoming bigger and bigger but people watch each other less and less. Maybe because there are so many social networks, things that somehow make your relations to others [distant], but when is the moment when you're really just in front of somebody and just curious about [them], in the present moment? This is the big question for us."

They see humour, too, in how we

allow modern technology to unmoor us.

Just the other day, in Zurich, they chuckled on seeing a corpulent street cleaner struggle to jam himself into a tiny cleaning car in order to tidy up a small mess on the street with the car's little mechanical brooms.

"It took him an hour or something, which was completely crazy, when you could just use the easy thing [a broom]," Zimmermann says.

Not that they're completely immune to the lure of modern-day technology, though.

They do have a lot of love for their iPhones.

But they've got a plan for keeping their communication grounded.

"We can communicate with smoke signals," de Perrot says, "but through Skype."

GAFF AFF
October 18-24, Playhouse, Sydney Opera House, 9250 7777, \$30-\$49.