

Chouf Ouchouf

14 Apr 2011 in *Dance & Drama, Highland, Showcase*

Empire Theatre, Eden Court, Inverness, 12–13 April 2011

ON entering the theatre to see *Chouf Ouchouf*, the latest collaboration between *Groupe Acrobatique de Tangier* and Swiss artists Zimmerman & de Perrot, one is not merely greeted with a faceless curtain.

Instead, the stage is left open, so that the acrobats actually warm up in front of the audience. This made me wonder why every dance group doesn't do this, as being able to see a crowd traipse in must surely eliminate any nerves that a performer might have before a show.



Chouf Ouchouf (photo Mario del Curto)

What's more, watching the group stretch and chat with each other in their tracksuits creates such an amicable atmosphere that the audience is made to feel like part of the performance, rather than gormless, less-than-flexible bystanders.

In their casual t-shirts and loose shorts, the acrobats are both accessible and attainable: they seem like a real group of kids that you'd see messing around on one of the bustling market streets of Tangier or Casablanca.

There was not a shred of machismo to be found in their performance, even in the most breathtaking moments. Instead, the energy of the city is captured effortlessly with humility and intelligence. The show goes far beyond a simple display of skill and agility: mime, humour and music are all incorporated to produce enthralling symbolism.

However, the first half's mesmeric cartwheels and trampoline stunts take a backseat once the full capabilities of the set are realised. Designer Ingo Groher's creation seems more like an image from a dream than anything real. What could be more spell-binding than a wall that appears to float and intertwine at the bidding of the performers themselves?

It takes the performance to new heights, both in its physical limitations, and its capability for expression. Acrobats appear and disappear at different sections of the stage as if by magic. It's hard to explain the effect it has: the feeling of familiarity created by the back flips and somersaults of the opening segment is overtaken by a sense of uncertainty that demands, as the title's translation suggests, that one should not look, but *really* look.

And yet, for all this ambiguity, the audience is still swept along by the group's unique wit and integrity.

Whatever specific meanings one wishes to derive from *Chouf Ouchouf*, it remains, without a doubt, one of the most amusing and enthralling productions currently touring the UK. Every audience member will take away something different from it: whether that be a new perspective on the workings of modern society, or simply an incentive to have more fun. Personally, I just really want to learn how to cartwheel.

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