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## Chouf Ouchouf, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

There's charm and humour amid the acrobatics of a Tangier troupe dating back more than a century

Reviewed by Jenny Gilbert

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Thanks to cinema, most of us carry a mental picture of Morocco's street life, whether we've visited the country or not.

The narrow alleys of the medina in Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky*, the hawkers and acrobats of its hot city squares in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* – such scenes are imprinted on the imagination as indelibly as turmeric stains the hands.

Weaving together contemporary performance and traditional Moroccan acrobatics, the show *Chouf Ouchouf*, which sets off on a UK tour after its run at London's Southbank, evokes the urgent joys and perils of a crowded old quarter. More specifically, the show, whose Arabic title means "Look, and look again", is a snapshot of chaotic daily life in old Tangier, where it's 10 to a house and 100 to the narrowest street. Over the course of a family-friendly 65 minutes, the 12-strong cast move through a set resembling rough-hewn city walls that float apart and reassemble to represent the many facets of the medina.

Groupe Acrobatique de Tangier is a piece of history in itself, the latest incarnation of a family troupe which dates back more than 100 years, and which has form in the UK (they were once a regular fixture at Butlins). In 2004, practising their tumbling on the beach at Tangier, the company was spotted by an impresario who introduced them to a French director (who helped them create their previous show *Taoub*), and in turn to the Swiss theatrical duo Martin Zimmermann and Dimitri de Perrot, who directed this latest.

The beauty of the new show is the way the innocence and simplicity of the original act is preserved, while gaining from a 21st-century scenic eye. The base skills are standard acrobatics: assembling and dismantling human towers three men high in the blink of an eye; backflips, handstands, trampoline, only this version relies for its spring on strong forearms and a square of cloth.

There is charm, too, in the way individual characters shine through – the antithesis of the slick, anonymous Cirque du Soleil. As a man in a fez sits at a table scrunching an empty plastic drinks bottle in his fists, a second, balancing on his hands, comically torques his bare torso into corresponding shapes. Another performs a man-boob ballet, mischievously isolating the muscles of his pecs (kids in the audience were in tucks over this), and a petite young woman, demurely dressed, offers her back as a gym bench for more handstands.

The accompanying music is a mix of recorded nightclub beats, live market-square banjo, and raucous singing by the acrobats themselves, sometimes while squashed cheek-by-jowl into one of set's mobile towers (a telling but ever-cheerful image of urban overcrowding). The performers also imitate the cacophany from other sources on the street, from the muezzin to cockerels and dogs.

But it's not all tourist-postcard cosy. A scene featuring the ubiquitous tartan plastic shopping bag – carried on a woman's head, or comically scooting about with a will of its own (another, even tinier woman must be curled up inside) – are a reminder of the daily struggle for survival among north Africa's urban poor. By the end you feel you have touched something real, with a heart that beats.

*QEH, London (0844 875 0073) today & Mon; Hall for Cornwall, Truro (01872 262466) Thu & Fri; Nuffield Theatre,*

*Southampton (023 8067 1771) 2-4 May; Corn Exchange, Brighton (01273 709709) 7-9 May; Norwich Theatre Royal (01603 766400) 13 & 14 May*

### **Dance Choice**

Kenneth MacMillan's ever-popular *Manon* starts another run for the Royal Ballet this week. Set to music by Massenet, it follows the love affair of a student, Des Grieux, and Manon Lescaut, a fickle young Parisienne with an eye for the main chance, which eventually brings about her downfall. Royal Opera House, five performances from Thursday.

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