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Imbizo e Mazweni

This double bill by Via Kathlehong Dance, one of South Africa's most famous dance companies, was very exciting.

The title means "A meeting out of the country".

The first work of the evening, "Toutes sortes de deserts" (All sorts of deserts), choreographed by Christian Rizzo, is a look at, amongst other things, African spirituality. The set was, as could be expected from the title, very, very simple. Just a white marked off square with some chairs outside the square.

It began with a single gumboot dancer, joined by another, and then by the full company of nine. Only three wore gumboots, the others wore sneakers. All wore casual trousers and T-shirts. This was the reality of the everyday happenings. At times the music was almost white noise and at others it was the singing and drumming for which black South Africans are justly famous.

The use of space was excellent and various things happened simultaneously creating an ever changing vista which held my attention. The styles were eclectic, using gumboot dancing, pantsula and contemporary expression. The movements varied between the energetic, rhythmic and aggressive and the deliberate, gentle, calm actions. The choreography itself was interesting, creating a vital interplay between the dancers whether they were working in twos and threes or as a full company. Dancers spinning around, holding other dancers, falling into "faints" or shivering all evoked strong emotions, both from the performers and from the audience.

The spirituality was Africanised Christianity, and it was vocalized in the singing of traditional hymns in the vernacular. The religious fervour became religious hysteria. Outbursts of gumboot and pantsula kept the focus on the indigenous.

When one studies music one learns about the shape of a piece of music, constructed as it is in bars, phrases, dialogues and patterns, made up of melody, rhythm and harmony. This work had a strong feel of something created to a formula, but not in a contrived, ugly way, rather making use of an invisible set structure to contain a beautiful and integrated whole.

Thus the lulls became punctuation and the "rest" at the end was simply a completion of the timing before the final bar lines.

The second work in the programme was "Still life with homeless heaven and urban wounds ... (even bananas have bones)" choreographed by Robyn Orlin. This was a much more cohesive piece than Orlin's work usually is, partly because she makes use of a strong colour scheme in the staging. In this case it was shades of yellow and orange. As she states it is an exploration of pantsula as a spontaneous expression of life reflecting South African culture.

The backdrop was pieces of brightly printed African style cloth with orange backgrounds and the cast were dressed absurdly in yellow/gold/brown costumes of various descriptions, including netball skirts, gold jackets and shoes. At interval the audience had been given bottled water. A webcam was used to create the effect of a tap pouring water. Water in glasses was transferred,

fairly skilfully from one dancer to another despite the dancers' odd bodily positions during the transfer. Audience interaction was solicited as audience members filled glasses. Much water landed on the stage, rendering it slippery. Dancers deliberately slipped and slid, and once or twice slipped and slid by accident, leaving me nervous about their safety.

The finale was worked with the group backing themselves into the backcloths, draping their bodies in orange and donning duck masks. Their physical presence was simultaneously explored together with a video of the performers, in costume, in the townships. It was wonderful fun and it ended with one of the members of the audience being invited onstage to dance with them. It was she who got to announce "The End" to thunderous audience applause.

"Imbizo e Mazweni (A meeting out of the country)", choreographed by Christian Rizzo and Robyn Orlin for the Via Katlehong Dance Company. This took place on 26 and 27 February at The Market Theatre, Newtown.

Picture: Yes

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