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## Swiss Slapstick

by alex gartenfeld 05/12/10

Last week saw two premieres in one night, as celebrated Swiss performance twosome Zimmerman & de Perrot debuted in New York with the ebullient "Gaff Aff" at the newly opened Jerome Robbins dance theater at the Baryshnikov Arts Center.

"Gaff Aff" roughly means "Staring at a Monkey," which is a bit of Surrealist absurdity but also indicates the performance's themes of self-realization and civilization. The performance begins with a stunning series in which a cardboard box is expertly maneuvered by an invisible actor inside the box, who slides, skips and jumps fantastically; tricks us into thinking there is no one inside; and miraculously gets unclothed and clothed. Later we learn it was Martin Zimmerman all along. The entire stage set is set up as a giant record player—a disk inside a square with a lever—and much of the show's movement in tension derives from the automated movement of the record. Dimitri de Perrot, the duo's DJ, sits at the side of the stage, scratching disks to create a soundtrack like a pulsing heartbeat, except with rising and falling intensities. His stationary position gives de Perrot the impression of control in the performance, which is not dissipated when in one instance Zimmerman swipes at him with a box.



When Zimmerman finally shows his face, he peeks over the top of the cardboard box with a remarkably long, elegant nose. At this point, the cardboard box transforms from a costume to a dressing screen, and then into an apartment building. By the end of the performance, Zimmerman has turned the box from a part of the skyscape into an interior and furnished it, although the effect is not one of synthesis. PHOTO BY MARIO DEL CURTO

"This is my second time to New York," said de Perrot after the premiere. "The first time I was 13, and I entered a costume contest to dress up like Batman." In spite of a slew of what he remembers as "beautifully dressed up Batmans," he won. At the time he lived with his family on top of the YMCA in Zurich; De Perrot and his father took a two-week trip, and they went to the Apollo Theater.

The fascination with America is, with the performers' endurance and precision, the show's prevailing effect, and a telling one. Zimmerman circles the revolving stage amidst a skyscape of limply erect cardboard boxes. His movements and his gestures to

constantly reconfigure the stage are preening, but remarkably lonely and onanistic. It's his endurance that seems to set Zimmerman's character apart from Bartleby the Scrivener. The fascination with Americana primarily manifests in the show's slapstick physical humor, which sees Zimmerman flopping about in an organized fashion on the floor. He Moonwalks, a cliché of just-past Americana, but also a significant moment when stagey, cabaret-style theatrics jumped both to mass popularity and high registers of taste.

It's likely that this insistence on the viability of physical humor, which has been relegated to syndicated TV and bromance films, is why Zimmerman & de Perrot are getting such a belated New York debut. The faux-naïve approach to cold modernist themes of urban alienation is the roughest, and the most memorable, part of "Gaff Aff."