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## Gelabert Azzopardi Dance Company at the Festival Theatre

**The catalytic atmosphere that Cesc Gelabert creates serves well the two elusive dances that he and Lydia Azzopardi present**

Donald Hutera



The bald, fiftysomething Catalan choreographer Cesc Gelabert cannot help but stand out alongside the nine younger dancers in the company that he and Lydia Azzopardi jointly head. He has about him the air of an übercool wizard intent on conjuring magic. The catalytic atmosphere that he creates round himself on stage serves well the two playfully elusive, abstract dances that he and Azzopardi presented at the International Festival this past weekend.

Gelabert emerges from — and eventually returns to — the shadows in *Sense Fi*, a piece set to music by the contemporary composer Pascal Comelade. Featuring whistles and toy instrumentation, his score deftly occupies territory between rock and jazz. The soundtrack isn't the only thing that swings during this half-hour dance. Early on a huge white balloon materialises from the wings, travelling above the bare stage like a lost moon. It floats and sways as the cast — casually clad — duck and dive beneath it in a loose, liquid fashion. Their bounding energy has such a slippery, impulsive quality that you can easily overlook the shifting, exploratory structures operating inside Gelabert's choreography.

*Sense Fi* exudes an attractive sense of dreamy yet driven revelry. Everything about it seems transitory. At one point the dancers place what look like oversized, portable ice cubes downstage. These glowing, sedentary objects briefly pique their curiosity, but there are always new distractions. In another passage the company clusters together, jiggling about and then splitting apart like an atom, only to regroup and carry on as if in a perpetual party mode. Very fitting, that, especially as part of a festival programme.

Gelabert's go-with-the-flow style takes a somewhat grander turn in *Conquassabit*. The title is a Latin verb that refers to shaking and acceleration. The soundtrack is selections from Handel's wonderfully varied choral work *Dixit Dominus*. Gelabert, natty in black velvet with red trim, carries about a golden staff with bells on. The sole set piece is an enormous and versatile swathe of crinkly silver fabric. It hovers above the dancers like a gorgeous cloud or is spread out across the floor so that they can loop and swoop upon it. There are outbursts (including vocally) of emotion and pockets of eruptive action. As in *Sense Fi*, this work fosters both glancing pleasures and a slight frustration. What you're left with are flavours and impressions of a dance that has somehow slipped from your grasp.

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