

## The Catalan Cosmos

A place of wonders – and their direct antithesis: the Edinburgh International Festival shows two stylistically and qualitatively contrasting pieces of choreography by Cesc Gelabert and Christian Spuck.

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The improvements we have seen in the quality of classic dance performance since the sixties remain undisputed among long-time choreographers and ballet directors. But whilst today's dance companies are in better shape than ever, and whilst their outstanding soloists have the ability to make even second-rate pieces a joy to behold, there is an absence of any truly great stars.

Right up to the early eighties, things were different. The close of the twentieth century had its fair share of exceptional artists whose overall charisma was such that spellbound audiences were unable to pinpoint which of the dancer's technical skills it was that rendered them so captivating. Margot Fonteyn, Eva Evdokimova, Marcia Haydée, Birgit Keil, Carla Fracci, Suzanne Farrell, Erik Bruhn, Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Peter Martins are the names which shine most brightly on this incomplete list. There are dancers today, such as Shoko Nakamura or Johan Kobborg, who are quite rightly admired. But nobody who can bring an entire theatre to its feet for a 20-minute standing ovation.

In contemporary dance, however, where technical performance is often more difficult to assess due to the relative absence of such obvious highlights as the number pirouettes or balance duration, we find a whole host of magnetic personalities of differing ages. Who could fail to be enchanted by Akram Khan, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Russell Maliphant, Sylvie Guillem or Trisha Brown? One of the best of these artists, Cesc Gelabert, is less well-known in northern Europe. The dance world was aware of his talent even before he choreographed for Baryshnikov, reconstructed Gerhard Bohner's masterpieces or danced in a virtual set designed by Merce Cunningham filmmaker Charles Atlas. In the early nineties, he brought the house down in Berlin's Hebbel theatre with solos in which imaginary bulls were vanquished, or in which he appeared in an alien-like costume, reminiscent of salamander skin, whose tight-fitting hood included a giant eye looking out from the back of his head.

Tightly constrained by a highly intelligent dramatic composition infused with art and philosophy, each piece performed by the "Gelabert Azzopardi Companyia de Dansa" allows its own aesthetic cosmos to unfurl. Lydia Azzopardi designs the often fantastic sets and costumes which provide the framework for Gelabert's compelling choreography. Each dance phrase is as clearly structured as a sentence in a logical discourse, each rotation is completed with precision; perfectly balanced, the dancer's

body glides through waves, completes a battement or follows the flow of energy from a hand gesture.

Such precision would be pompous, Mannerist or boring, were it not for the dense pattern these movements weave, slowly allowing the image of a personality to emerge before the astonished audience: that of a man who is controlled but passionate, thoughtful yet full of verve, sensitive without being passive, a dancer who surrenders to the rhythms of the composition whilst, at the same time, unmistakably remaining their master.

Seen in the midst of his young, brilliant dancers, Gelabert is instantly recognisable as the creative mind behind the performance. This identifiable authorship is part of his stage persona and is not vanity, but rather the acknowledgement of a kind of responsibility. In his new pieces, "Sense Fi" and "Conquassabit", the choreographer is also the driver, the intellectual linchpin of the performance. His stage presence takes many forms. There is the divine principle of eternal death and renewal, almost playfully indifferent to the human fate it embodies; then he appears rooted to the spot, slowing the pace in a reversal of his previously wild accelerations, as if he were growing older by the minute and extremely limited in the options available to him. To Handel's Medea aria "Morirò" from the opera "Teseo" he storms across the stage, a tempest of impassioned horror, scattering the ensemble in his wake. Moments of calm alternate with dramatic portraits of human thoughts and feelings.

Naturally enough, the dancer also has seemingly abstract comments to make on the subject of "Tempo". And that is what keeps his pieces so wonderfully different from purely anecdotal dance theatre: his abstract way of thinking, translated into dance steps. Returning once more to Edinburgh for a guest performance, Gelabert can now effortlessly fill a theatre with a two-thousand-strong audience. Their applause is almost rapturous.

The Edinburgh Festival is a place of theatrical wonders – and their direct antithesis. One of those ballet companies with above-average dancers and no stars is the "Royal Ballet of Flanders". It performed "The Return of Odysseus", a thoroughly unsuccessful piece of dreariness created by the resident choreographer of the Stuttgart Ballet Christian Spuck. Penelope and her suitors dance their way through meaningless affairs, the monotony is broken by girls entering en pointe à la Forsythe, and a hysterical Athena in a golden costume summons up, screeching at the top of her voice, an Odysseus sporting flippers and a tutu à la "dance theatre for ever". Oh please!

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