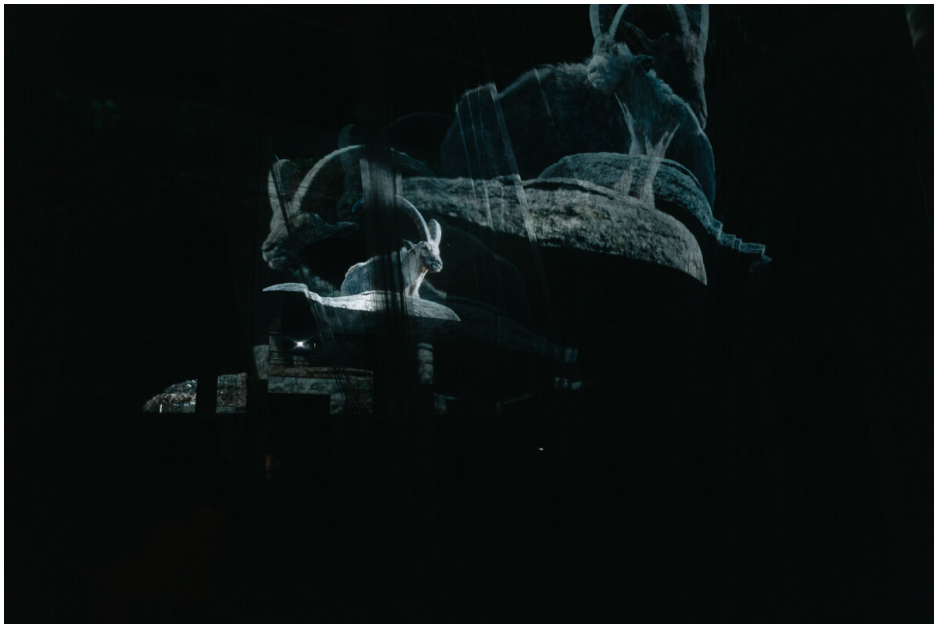


Atlas / The Mountain

RADOUAN MRIZIGA

A rocky trip to the mountains



Marina Srnka
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Contemporary dance is a tricky balancing act where the sublime is often just a step away from disaster. Radouan Mriziga's 'Atlas/The Mountain' packs promising ingredients, but the end result is a bland meal. In this solo, first presented in 2024, Mriziga explores the role of mountains in Amazigh culture. This is certainly not the first foray into the mythological universe of culture from the Marrakesh-born house artist of DeSingel in Antwerp. The earlier 'Goddess' trilogy' ('Tafukt', 'Ayur', and 'Akal') and the recent 'Libya' all took inspiration from it. As the name suggests, the Atlas mountains are the subject of the first part of the new trilogy, to be followed by explorations of the desert and the sea.

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The piece starts on a promising note: a meticulous interplay between rhythm, movement, sound, and space, setting the stage for what could be a layered meditation on landscape and ancestral knowledge. And yet, somewhere between the first measured clap and the final exhausted rotation, the performance stumbles — not into profundity, but into a slow and meandering descent toward tedium.

Mriziga, clad in a curious mix of neon sneakers, an ancient toga, and a self-fashioned goat mask, occupies a rectangular stage framed from two sides by glowing blue tubes. His movement trajectory is mostly circular, with an occasional stepping back and forward towards the audience which is seated along the long sides of the stage. There's an immediate sense of geometric precision, mixed with movement vocabulary from urban hip-hop culture, and coupled with a rigorous control over rhythm. Clapping in a deliberate pattern, he loops this sound into an amplifier. Bells tied to his ankles, castanets, a tambour,

even the sounds of his sneakers add layers of percussion to the loop. It is hypnotic, but also precariously close to self-indulgent. The technical skill is undeniable; the concept, however, struggles.

Through the first part, Mriziga mimics shooting with a bow, after which he lies on the floor, only to rise again. It is merely a pause before he continues to move in circles, adding goatish devil horns with his fingers. Later on he vibrates and shimmies with his hands, looking up toward the shifting lights—yellow, green, and blue in colour. The movement is stymied for a moment when one of his ankle bells drops several times on the ground. He then jumps toward the audience, embodying a shamanistic spirit with arms and legs open, but it is already too late to restore the 'magic'. While Mriziga ambles on, my attention is broken, I start to perceive the room differently, as if awake from a hypnosis or a dream. I become aware of the glances and expressions of audience members seated around me and on the opposite side. I sense that these glances no longer convey committed participation, but rather an indifferent restlessness. If this was the case or I merely projected my own state of mind, I cannot say.

Imagine a metaphor over-explained to such extent that it loses all poetry.

Things take a turn then, but not for the better. The transition to the second part feels like an afterthought without any clear point. Two see-through curtains are drawn across the stage, yet get both partially stuck in the ceiling. For those of us sitting at the far side of the stage, the curtains remain half-finished, the illusion forever broken. A projection appears: images of mountains, goats, and indigenous chants, hammering home an idea we already grasped from the title alone. The lights dim, and the technical issues linger, as the gleaming green exit sign behind the stage pierces my view in the middle (once more I regret sitting on the left side of the theatre). Instead of adding depth, this segment flattens the experience. Imagine a metaphor over-explained to such extent that it loses all poetry. The glowing green exit sign begins to feel more and more like an invitation…

That is when the 'third' part begins. It is announced by strobing neon tubes, a dramaturgical choice that, in contemporary performance, often signals either a dramatic climax or a desperate need for engagement. Mriziga re-enters, without his mask and toga, dressed in everyday streetwear, revisiting movements from the first section, while continuing to dance to the indigenous chant. This, supposedly, is the synthesis: the urban, the sacred, and the mundane collapsing into one, as the mountain itself is often a symbol in the pagan civilisations. However, the choreography feels curiously void of any affect or deeper influence. The mechanical precision of his gestures—fist to chest, arrow-like arms, calculated shimmies—renders the whole thing strangely soulless. And all I wish is to feel something. I observe the audience across the stage, but their flat, almost bored expressions and postures do not offer a reassuring answer.

If '*Atlas/The Mountain*' aims to bridge the corporeal and the spiritual, the earthly and the divine, it does so under the weight of an ambitious concept stranded on its execution. Perhaps the work could have found its pulse, its breath, its meaning beyond repetition and spectacle with a little help from a dramaturge or an external eye. Instead, this mountain ascent never reaches its peak. Exiting the theatre to the Belgian lowlands outside, it feels like a missed opportunity.