Gounouj

LÉO LÉRUS / COMPAGNIE ZIMARÈL

Resilience and Vulnerability

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In ‘Gounouj’, frog in Guadeloupian Creole, four remarkable performers dance sumptuously within a forest of surround-sound — one that evokes a botanical garden, an ecosystem, a tropical jungle. We are quickly submerged in beauty, but it’s a feeling that also creates a twinge of melancholy: we sense its perilous rarity.

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Having battled through the rain and our increasingly harsh and speedy city, slaloming to avoid swarms of speeding scooters and other ebikes users to only just made it to my seat in time, the warmth of the auditorium and the glow on stage immediately induced a sensation of calm and relief. A simple corridor of light coming from the cyclo at the back of the stage, the silhouettes of two still figures and the pipping of bird call, the croak of a frog, are enough to reset the spirts — an antidote to the hectic world outside.

Sinuous and sensual, the two figures ignore our presence yet are alert to each other’s. Twitching, hip rolling, undulating, they cautiously sound each other out, sensing and sniffing, mirroring each other’s movement — a shy rapprochement followed by an animal like dart apart. The canopy of sound thickens, layers of percussion overlap and intertwin with the bird song; an irresistible percussive rhythm emerges that reverberates in the performers’ movements, turning them into a dance that hails the entrance of a third performer.

With the new arrival, the trio formed by Robert Cornejo, Arnaud Bacharach, and Andréa Moufounda, segue into a dance in which no one character dominates the other, but where balance and counterbalance, intensity of gaze, the rippling of hips and staccato shoulder shudders, tell of an organic ebb and flow of power and desire, each mini movement innately paired to the pulse within the sound that we now hear as music.

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threated.

Guadeloupean born choreographer Léo Lérus, based his work on Gwoka, **Guadeloupe's** traditional music, percussion and dance practice, which is widely considered a symbol of Guadeloupean identity and reaches back to the experience of enslaved Africans on the Caribbean island. Before moving to France to study contemporary dance as a teen, Lérus acquired the traditional techniques of Gwoka through working with Léna Blou, the Guadeloupean choreographer acclaimed for formalising the fundaments of the practice: losing balance without falling, and an essential and interactive dialogue between music and dance.

Despite my first impressions, Gounouj does not intend to solely soothe or enchant but is a refined and sophisticated response to the threat human activity and climate change pose to the delicate ecological stability of the Guadeloupe's protected natural site Gros Morne/Grande-Anse Creole. Johana Maledon, the fourth dancer to explode onto the stage, embodies the contrast of resilience and vulnerability embedded within the work. Diminutive, almost childlike in stature, she packs a muscular power that all but winds you. As are the other dancers, she's in total command of the highly technical, dazzling movement material with its ricocheting rebounds, sudden drops to the floor, leaps, and what seems like hints of hip-hop, African dance and Forsythesque extensions, all kaleidoscoping before us. But she also incarnates the fierce fury of a being abandoned, the aggression of the threated.

By this point all the dancers' gazes have turned away from each other and towards us, a tiny but charged shift in nuance. About three quarters of the way into the work, we hear melodies within the music, the forest floor atmosphere has melded with that of a fiesta, a Léwoz perhaps, a Guadaloupen social gathering — the traditional home of Gwoka. The dancers continue to toy with balance, speed and recovery, seemingly improvising and playfully challenging each other. It's Maledon that draws the evening to its close, front of stage, magically conjuring the last sound busts with her gestures as the night descends.

Lérus is an experienced and greatly skilled choreographer. With Gounouj he has created a finely chiselled and stylish work that reaffirms how abstraction, structure and beauty can be powerful vehicles for political messages, wherein complexities and contradictions, emotions and thoughts can somehow be grasped all in the one experience.