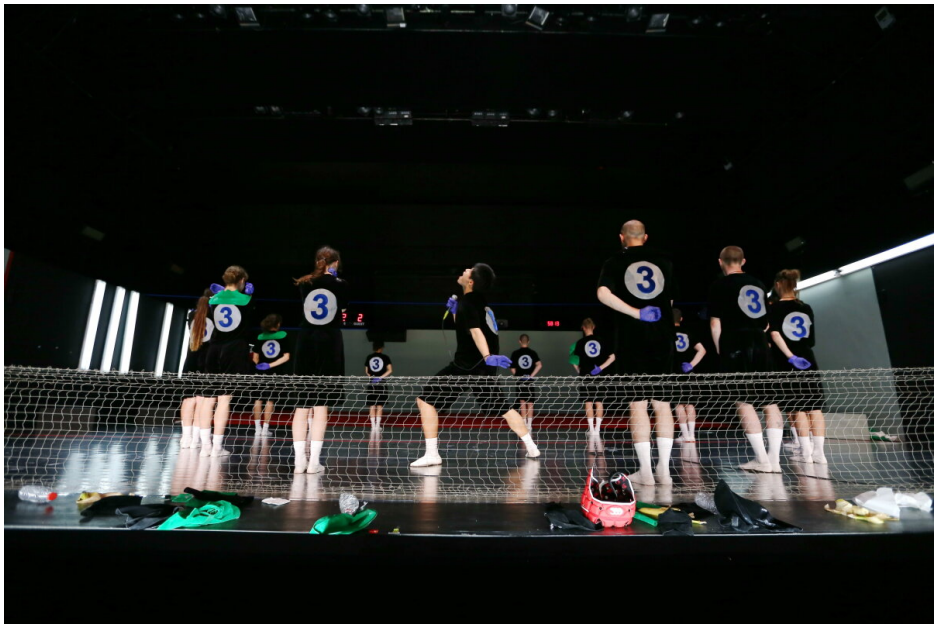


Canine Jaunâtre 3

MARLENE MONTEIRO FREITAS / BALLET DE L' OPÉRA DE LYON

A system caught in its own trap



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Appearing at the Théâtre National for the first time, Marlene Monteiro Freitas presents her piece, ‘Canine Jaunâtre 3’. Created in 2018 for the Batsheva Dance Company, it’s been transposed onto the 25 strong cast of the Lyon Opera Ballet. The dancers’ technical prowess is a perfect match for the workings of the Lisbon based, Cape Verdeans’ intricate choreographic mechanisms.

18 MAART 2024

As we enter the theatre, the dancers are gently swaying in a circle, singing a soulful lament. Once we’ve settled, their circle breaks, the dancers file out and leave us to take in the details of the setting. All we can now see are angles and straight lines: a fine, waist-high robe cordoning off the space front of stage, a raked rectangle of red carpet at the back, another red rope demarking a limit. All this encased by pale turquoise walls, flanked with neon lights. At the back, are a digital clock, a timer and score-keeper for ‘home’ and ‘guests.

After a lingering pause, the dancers return. Still identikit in calf-length black velvet pants and matching tops. All have bright red lipstick and a goatee of white paint covering their chin (a dangling covid mask remarked my astute neighbour). Their extremities are covered in white socks (ballet shoes discernible beneath) and mauve latex gloves — hallmarks in Monteiro Freitas’ work.

Like figurines in clockwork animatronics, their movements are at first confined to a lateral plane. Heads twisted to face us, their eyes glazed and empty, mouths stretched in grimace. Monteiro Freitas’ signature movement style: robotic, regimented, cartoonesque and hyper-precise multiplied by 25 performers and paced by the relentless ticking of a clock or tocking of metronome is mesmeric. But shrill whistle blasts, or bird-like squarks emitted by the performers at irregular intervals keeps us jumpy.

Where are we? A multi-sports’ gymnasium? A Wes Anderson film set? A brand-new medical unit? Are these maniacal hospital technicians on a team-building sports day? The ‘players’ split into groups of threes, fours or fives, each

performing impeccable unisons of ever more distended, distorted but still plausibly human forms. Never faltering and in rhythm, it's their awkwardly angled heads and fixed facial expressions that fluctuate between vapid and fiendish that bear proof that this is not about a friendly match.

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But what IS going on? A possible clue at the very start is a dancer, on all fours, flanked by two erect 'guards'. He is retching relentlessly. The rope at the front — a tennis-net or a barrier around a no-go area — is also intermittently used as the dancers' guide rail. Several times a motely clutch slithers across the stage, clasping the rope, eyes either closed or glazed and unseeing, as though they're trying to cross a chasm. There is no chance to see what awaits them at the other side: like in a tennis match, our attention flips to the action on another part of the court.

Glue in the mosaic of these carryings-on might be traceable in the artfully shuffled playlist: the acapella rendition of Amy Winehouse's 'Back to Black', or Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' during which the 'swans' turn into a corps de ballet of gunmen aiming pot-shots. There is an interlude too, where the audience is required to "collaborate in full": No spoilers here, but it's a moment where ranks are irrepressibly broken, and the unbridled human condition hilariously lauded.

'Canine Jaunâtre 3', is masterful achievement: the movement is riveting, the performers are virtuoso and the audience was breath taken. But I am still wondering why it didn't happen for me. The work seems to be about a society — ours: layered, complex, cruel, competitive, doomed. And beyond Monteiro Freitas' fascinatingly relentless, systemised movement vocabulary, 'Canine Jaunatre 3' is also choc-a-block with metaphors, connotations, masterful designs.

Yet a society becomes of concern to us when we get to know the individuals within it. A demonstration of a system, however stylized and dazzling, eventually runs dry. Towards the end the dancers break ranks once more and drift towards each other to form pairs, entering, finally, a tender embrace, swaying to their own rhythm. The lighting switches from bleak neon to warm. The after party begins. But, despite, or more probably due to the chronometrics, for me, it was too late, the timing was off. I'd already become numb to the experience and started to watch the digits on the stop clock, waiting to be able to re-join the human, if even more confusing, outside world. Information saturation? Product overkill? Too many options? 'Canine Jaunâtre 3' seemed caught in its own trap.