

'The Middle Ages', a choreography by Andros Zins-Browne, is one of those rare pieces that at once are highly exciting, amusing even at times, but utterly leave you quite puzzled. What is it we were watching: renaissance dance, modern dance, postmodern dance, a whatever-dance? What do all these funny, pseudo-historical costumes mean? You would have a hard time deciding on that.

This question is probably not the real issue however. That is the way we understand ourselves, and our position in time and history. That question is represented symbolically by two decisions: the performance has begun long before any member of the audience enters the space, and lingers on after the applause, until the very last spectator has left. But also this: the audience watches itself continually, as it sits on two rostrums facing each other.

The first dance images are quite clear, though slightly confused: five dancers in mock renaissance costumes pace and hop around in the solemn way one vaguely associates with renaissance dance. They wear costumes that refer to the period, as does the music. Soon however, small glitches occur in the music, the light and the dance itself, until a metronome takes over.

From this moment on, there is no more stylistic unity in the movement or the costumes. Dragana Bulut en Jaime Llopis all at once trade their lofty steps for a jive. Kennis Hawkins suddenly puts on a costume that openly refers to Oskar Schlemmer and acts accordingly. Not much later Sandy Williams and Tiran Willemse jump around in leotards as if in a Cunningham performance, or something that more or less looks like it.

And that is just for starters: from the pile of clothes, the dancers pick up whatever pleases them to look now like a commedia dell'arte dancer or a medieval clown, then like a creature from outer space. All along, the light is faltering or fading away suddenly until the whole stage is pitch dark. At which point you hear a cell phone playing a renaissance tune, while its screen sheds a scarce light on what is going on.

Only slowly, the light is coming up again. This time however, it is no longer the soft white light that poured out of the large linen cloths above the audience seating in the beginning. Instead, it is a harsh, yellowish light from HQTl lamps that makes the dancers stand out in an unflattering way. They don't seem to care however: they act as unruly, provocative fools and clowns, poking the kind of fun you might not be waiting for.

The odd thing is that you discover, as a spectator, that somehow you can watch this hotch potch of incongruous movements and actions effortlessly. That is what this 'Middle Ages' really makes us aware of: we live in an era that has done away with purity or unity of style, that has no longer a strong consciousness of its own position in history. We simply traded that for effortless, endless sampling. We know everything, as an image at least, but somehow, that does not seem to add up to a lot. Except then that Zins-Browne makes this point convincingly.

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