

The magic void



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By **Mariam Hamdy** February 14, 2008, 2:00 am

It is rare for a particular art piece to transcend form and strike a chord with everyone involved in art creation and consumption, which the Zurich Ballet's performance at the Cairo Opera House did with flying colors.

Choreographed by director Heinz Spoerli, the ballet is based on three solo cello suites by J.S. Bach, numbers 2, 3 and 6, under the title "Winds in the Void."

Spoerli managed to create a mobile painting, lying somewhere between cubism and abstraction. The performance features several duos, spectacular trios and a few solos, all composed with an architectural flair. Spoerli was not so much illustrating the music through visual imagery as he was corresponding to it, so that every note was literally translated into movement.

Bach's timeless music came to life via the cello played by Jens Peter Maintz, the award-winning solo cellist of Berlin's Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester and a professor of cello at the University of Arts in Berlin.

Maintz single-handedly laid the foundation on which the performers unraveled their intricately choreographed dances.

Using these cello suites by Bach was a daring choice by Spoerli, and he managed to translate Bach's work with ease and in perfect sync with the dances. The most distinctive feat of his performance is the contrasts he creates between the sober undertones of the cello and the whimsical approach to his dances.

This slight tension was felt through similar contrasts in the stage design and the lighting, both of which were slightly eerie. The stage was predominantly black with a circular metal structure in the background, which gave the stage a modern edge and occasionally emitted smoke, creating a beautiful haze through the lighting.

The latter image, specifically, was meticulously designed, setting the mood of each dance sequence while highlighting every carved muscle in the dancers' bodies. The colors of the lighting were always a hair's breadth away from being soft, edging ever so slightly towards the fluorescent. In that sense, both the stage and the lighting provided a sad and ethereal undertone to the playful dance routines.

It was these contradictions that kept the audience anticipating the next dance sequence, and they were not disappointed. The entire production was modern, but should have been called Retro Ballet. Everything from the velvet costumes to the stage design and lighting possessed the charm and elegance of the 50s, but with a twist. This imposing charm produced a distinctive, magical aura that was translated into smiles on the audiences' faces. The movements were beautifully synchronized and performed in ripples, illustrating the feeling of wind.

The windy impression was emphasized with the skillful fluidity of the dancers and their feather-light movements. The choreography didn't require the usual strong athletics; it was more about composition and intricacy than the showmanship of formal dancing.

Most of the choreography was centralized in the middle of the stage, which was also the center of the large circular structure in the background. One was constantly reminded while watching this ballet of Michelangelo's graceful, statuesque painting David. The entire performance was akin to watching a collection of artworks as all the dancer's flawless physiques were powdered white, giving one the surreal feeling of having entered the Louvre on a night where all the marble statues came to life.

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The finale was probably the finest point of the performance. All the dancers lined up in a row and looked towards the ceiling. On extending their arms and pointing in the same direction, the curtain descended, just in time for them to catch it midway so that only their legs would show. A male dancer remained completely visible in front of the curtain and on his final upward movement; a larger curtain quickly descended on the entire stage.

The thunderous applause and standing ovation captured a rare moment where art simply transcended all.



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