

Through the Grapevine review — the slapstick smack of flesh on flesh

The Place, WC1

new

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Alexander Vantournhout and Axel Guérin's hour-long exercise in intimacy and trust melded circus acrobatics and dance

BART GRIETENS

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The London International Mime Festival has been a welcome mainstay of the city's cultural calendar for nearly half a century. The final edition of the festival as we have known it gets off to a fine start with an exceptionally skilful, wordless Belgian male two-hander. Conceived by Alexander Vantournhout for his company Not Standing, and devised with fellow performer Axel Guérin, this hour-long exercise in intimacy and trust melds circus acrobatics and dance with admirably concentrated ingenuity. It makes for absorbing entertainment, marked by an unpretentious intelligence rooted in their discoveries of the differences and similarities between their two lean, strong and wiry bodies.

The show is simply staged on a white floor laid out in long segments. There are no props and the soundtrack (credited to Andrea Belfi) is spare.

Shirtless, barefoot and in identical beige-toned shorts, the men get down to business as soon as they enter the stripped-down space. Soberly facing off in profile, it is immediately apparent that they are literally going to try to get the measure of each other. Whose arms are longer? What are the comparative spans of fingers or lengths of feet? When one bends forward, does his head hit the other's chest or swing clear? A few times they fall into each other's forward-stretched arms, chins on shoulders. The smack of flesh on flesh is funny, almost slapstick.

Vantournhout and Guérin keep pushing the limits of what they can do. Each sits balanced on his counterpart's thigh, then both start revolving.

Seamlessly they adopt increasingly intricate, challenging positions based on weight exchange and symmetry. There are quick lifts, folds and catches, tricky cantilevers and one astonishingly controlled hands-free shoulder balance. Arms tangle round hips and, in a more contemplative, sedentary passage, spiderish lower limbs are shared and even hoarded in an amusing kind of corporeal trompe l'oeil. Where does one man end and the other end? Finding out is hard work for them, but a distinct pleasure for us. Only when the pace picks up and some minimalist beats kick in does this rigorous, engaging duet wax a tad too mechanical. At its best, however, it is akin to what could be deemed experimental physical poetry.

The festival, meanwhile, continues into February with a typical wealth of visual and physical theatre performances, workshops and film screenings. Catch it while you still can.

To January 18; London International Mime Festival ends February 5, mimelondon.com