



Jason de Wit and Chaf Zouali in 'The Sweet Art of Bruising' (Photo: Anne van Dong)

The Sweet Art of BRUISING

ALI MAHBOUBA on André Gingras's engaging foray into the world of boxing

It's a performance that packs a punch. In fact many a punch, literally, as the two dancers go head to head in a tumultuous boxing match - one that felt so real that the exchange of blows made you flinch. But you never feared for the dancers, as artistic director André Gingras of Dance Works Rotterdam ensured that his men were fully up to the challenge by engaging a top boxing

coach to train them for several months. Gingras was drawn to boxing after being caught up in the thrill and theatrical spectacle of K-1 tournaments (a mix of kickboxing and martial arts). In his latest work, evocatively titled *The Sweet Art of Bruising*, he succeeds wonderfully in translating to the dance stage the maelstrom of excitement and emotions surrounding boxing events, also through the authentic way he presents boxing, resulting in a very innovative and engaging work. The title is a clever reference to the phrase 'the sweet science of boxing' that was coined for this gentlemanly sport some 200 years ago.

Tom Dunk, boxing coach to the women's Dutch and European champion Marichèle de Jong, marvelled at the dancers' athleticism, control and power, and approached them as top spartanmen, demanding relentless discipline. All this paid off, not least in the changed, beefed-up physique of the dancers and the incredible stamina built up.

The tattoo-Clad diminutive jolier Jason de Witt and the brawny yet no less cheeky Chaf Zouali were the two over-efervescent partners in crime (with aliases that comically refer to their ethnic origins: Aïzen Persusion and Tunisian Thunder). It all starts with them getting us into the spirit of things by whipping up a frenzy and getting us to cheer more and more loudly. Suitably warmed up, the two combatants then enter a boxing ring messily strewn with plastic bottles. Here they enact scenes based on how a boxer's life relates to three biological prerequisites of human life: that we all dream, that we all can be bested by fits of blind anger and that we all die. For instance, how dreams of hope and glory can be thwarted by insecurities that lead to internalised anger. Pathos and humour intermingle with extreme physicality. An intriguing hybrid unfolds as boxing moves are interspersed

with modern dance and exhilarating free-running stunts. Most impressive is the rope skipping dance, a 7-minute non-stop display of mercurial stamina-defying synchronized skipping, where the dancers criss-cross the stage in ever so slightly changing sequences - a minimalism reminiscent of Lucinda Childs. That the work ends with a violent killing is



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dramaturgically unclear, but perhaps we've changed arenas with the men now locked in placidational combat. As de Witt lies helpless on the ground, it's as if the thumb-down has been given, a license for Zouali to annihilate his opponent by smashing an iron bar against his head.

Gingras has produced a work that successfully embraces the emotional and social context of boxing. As de Witt explains, this process has come at a point in his life where the fight within himself and his frustrations were finding physical release in the boxing training. And with his improved technique of this sweet art of bruising, he has even started to enjoy taking the blows. In a sense this is a reflection of real life, for once you have mastered the art of living, you can perhaps start to enjoy life.