

Fireman's ball in Monaco

It was of course an attractive idea. The challenge lay in making the execution brilliant.

Photo Alice Blangero – Monaco Dance Forum

Krisztina de Châtel, who has a dance company in Amsterdam, recently had the idea of creating a performance in which her dancers featured together with the city's garbage collectors. In Monaco, where she had been invited by the Monaco Dance Forum (which is currently presenting the third and last part of its monumental festival dedicated to Russian Ballet and its influence on the history of the arts – have dropped the passage about Diaghilev), Krisztina de Châtel of course wanted to give a more elegant impression. She chose to work with the principality's fire brigade which works in a so-called "red zone" – not because its population has suddenly and unexpectedly turned Bolshevik, but because of the high risk posed by the combination of the fierce Mediterranean sun and a dense population living on such a narrow piece of land.

Sea, mountains, excessively tall buildings, underground spaces, fires, pollution, all kinds of accidents... it is a tough job for a team of just 130 men wearing uniforms that carry the silver coat of arms of the Grimaldi family.

Seven sturdy and likable lads from this team joined six dancers for the performance. Krisztina de Châtel didn't – thank God – go off into the "conceptual". Her "Danse des sapeurs-pompiers" is a heart-warming show with no pretensions, masterfully executed by all performers.

Gift

For an artist, working with firemen is both a gift and a difficult choice. A gift because no profession – besides nurses or caregivers – is more unanimously respected and loved in society. Firemen are indispensable. In contrast to their polar opposites, the illiterate and simple-minded football players who become outrageously rich and are adored by imbeciles, these courageous men give their all to protect human lives, properties and our natural environment. And yet they do not receive huge sums of money for the saintly work they do.

Ballet of red cars

It is a ballet of red shiny trucks in varieties one could never have guessed at. The performance also impresses with catastrophes, though the choreographer does not abuse of these effects – that would be too easy. Rather, she lets her dancers mingle in this universe of danger and dexterity where other virtuosos shine. She especially includes – and this is the most interesting and cleverest – aspects of the firemen's know-how, and some of the physical prowess they are subjected to. This is also what makes the performance so engaging: she erases the differences between the world of the arts and the world of rescuers, showing that there is beauty in every noble profession, something aesthetic, some panache, and that there is no insurmountable barrier between these two worlds. By working together closely, the firemen and the dancers have seen that they all exercise exhausting virtuoso professions in which physical and moral devotion must be absolute and in which careers are short. The former retire at 50, the latter at 35 or 40.

High-level sportsmanship

The dancers must have been happy to explore a world we hardly know about, where heroism, patience and daily routine go hand in hand. The firemen were proud to display their athletic bodies on stage for the first time and show the audience their extremely sophisticated and undervalued skills, which make high-level sportsmen of them.

When art is blended with everyday life (to the extent that one can describe the extraordinary daily activities of firemen as everyday) on the ground, underground, under water or in the air, it acquires a new legitimacy, bridging the gap between people and between worlds. Krisztina de Châtel achieved this with excellence.

Raphaël de Gubernatis

The Monaco Dance Forum and les Ballets de Monte Carlo are performing until 17 July. www.monocadanceforum.com or 377 98 06 28 28.