

Dance collective: Four rooms with a view

Victor Swoboda, Special to *the Gazette* January 24, 2014

Dance collective gets creative by staging its new production in a downtown hotel



Montreal Dancers Emmanuel Schwartz and Peter James rehearse with dance collective, 2e Porte à Gauche, at Hotel St. Germain in Montreal in advance of their dance performance work, *Rendezvous à l'hôtel*. (Peter McCabe / THE GAZETTE)

MONTREAL — Intrigue, sex, murder, theft — hotel rooms are little nests of drama, which is why they've served so well as locations in the movies and also, as revealed recently, in the lives of certain French presidents. Now the enterprising Montreal dance collective known as La 2e Porte à Gauche has decided to invade the traditional privacy of the hotel room by staging its latest dance/theatre production — 2050 Mansfield, *Rendezvous à l'hôtel* — in four separate rooms of Montreal's downtown Hôtel Le Germain.

Unusual performance venues are characteristic of La 2e Porte à Gauche, whose members like to challenge theatrical conventions. In 2012, the group's thought-provoking show, *Danse à dix*, at a downtown strip club, invited audiences to rethink their notions about strippers, beauty in dance and the economics of sexual politics. Presumably some people in the mixed audience had never gone to a strip club before. Staging the show "on site" was an effectively subversive move.

For the show at Hôtel Le Germain, each room will have a pair of dancers acting out a 20-minute scene in front of 20 spectators. All four rooms will be in play simultaneously. After each scene, the spectators rotate to another room.

In a bedroom setting where spectators are close enough to reach out and touch the performers, it could be possible to achieve a level of intimacy that's virtually unattainable in a traditional theatre. But those expecting a voyeuristic feast should temper their enthusiasm. As much as the production hopes to create a close link with the audience, it is not a peep show.

“We try to undo the notion of voyeurism by having the performers speak directly to the audience. They’ll ask, ‘How are you doing?’ ” explained Catherine Vidal, in a recent interview in one of Hôtel Le Germain’s rooms. Along with Frédéric Gravel, she created the scenario for one of the four performing couples. “I suppose the audience might be a bit nervous at the first encounter, but with each encounter, they should be more at ease.”

Rendezvous à l’hôtel is hardly the first Montreal dance show in which the audience positions itself haphazardly on an open dance space. It might well be the first, however, to gather so many people around a bed in such close quarters. Some people, Vidal imagines, might even plunk themselves on the bed.

“We aren’t going to ask them to move or elbow them out of the way,” Gravel said in the droll manner that over the years has characterized his own shows. “Since we can’t control where the audience will be, accidents are possible. We can’t police them. They watch from wherever they want. The performers will have to figure on this.”

Unlike the theatre, where audience members must seek out and find their seats, wait for the lights to go down and the curtain to go up, the audience at Hôtel Le Germain is immediately initiated in the play.

“We forcibly create a relation between the reality of the place and the artificiality of the show,” Vidal said. “We don’t have the theatre’s imaginary ‘fourth wall,’ but we can play with the notion of it.”

“Because in any case, the ‘fourth wall’ is there,” Gravel noted.

The “wall” might be there, but it will be an awfully narrow one.

Although all the hotel rooms have the same sleek, modern look — their white walls and glass panels make an attractive frame for the performers — each scene has its own atmosphere. The number by Mathieu Gosselin and Marilyne St. Sauveur has a video collage of different movie excerpts whose dialogues create a continuous background soundtrack.

Francis Ducharme and Clara Furey show two people in a relationship that soon morphs into a Romeo and Juliet story, complete with Prokofiev’s ballet music. Peter James and Emmanuel Schwartz are two men in a relationship that could be interpreted either as close friendship or as something more intimate. Isabelle Arcand and Marc Béland inhabit a world of ambiguous relationships and identities reminiscent of the characters in movies by David Lynch.

Each scene came out of the creative minds of a different pair of choreographers: Marie Béland and Olivier Choinière designed the scenario for Gosselin/St. Sauveur; Catherine Gaudet and Jeremie Niel for Ducharme/Furey; Vidal and Gravel for James/Schwartz; and Virginie Béland and Olivier Kemeid for Arcand/Béland.

Rendezvous à l’hôtel would not have been possible, of course, without the co-operation of Hôtel Le Germain, which found a generous way of supporting the arts by allowing use of its rooms. True, it’s the off-season and Montreal hotels have empty rooms, but Hôtel Le Germain’s gesture has opened the door both metaphorically and literally to a unique theatrical experience. Like dance itself, patronage can come in many shapes and sizes.