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Suresnes Cités Danse, Théâtre Jean Vilar, Suresnes, France — review

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This year the urban dance festival continues to focus on raw talent, with mixed results



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Aucante

'Petits Morceaux du réel'

The Suresnes Cités Danse festival, a mainstay on the French hip-hop scene, has long bet on raw talent. Original works dominate the line-up, and budding choreographers are nurtured through Cités Danse Connexions, a series of mixed bills for the Théâtre Jean Vilar's smaller second stage. Over time this formula has delivered spectacular results but it also comes with risks, and so far this year's programme has proved underwhelming.

The first two creations on the main stage are a testament to the festival's pioneering ethos. Both push at the limits of hip-hop: Farid Berki's Fluxus Game mines circus and digital arts, while Sébastien Lefrançois spent a year with workers fighting against the closure of a Peugeot-Citroën factory for Petits Morceaux du réel .

Beyond their initial ideas, however, both works stretched limited-movement material to breaking point. Berki's visual games lacked energy and musicality, relying instead on elaborate lighting effects. Petits Morceaux du réel was more coherent, and its working-class characters clearly delineated, but it grew repetitive at the halfway point.

The strongest ensemble works were presented as part of Cités Danse Connexions. Hervé Koubi's Ce que le jour doit à la nuit was created in 2012 but in light of France's growing ethnic divisions, it is fitting to see it in the multicultural Paris suburb of Suresnes today. Koubi discovered his Algerian roots late in life, and Ce que le jour explores them, with 12 dancers recruited from that country. In white costumes inspired by Sufi traditions, they are a muscular, imposing presence; the choreography channels their acrobatic skills into larger tableaux and counterpoints across the stage. They form a tight community of quiet strength, in constant flow.

François Lamargot demonstrated similar qualities with Gardien du Temps. As the work began, his eight dancers were curled into an upside-down foetal position, like hibernating aliens; they woke and regrouped with precise musicality as the score by Jean-Charles Zambo surged in waves.

Women's voices proved more subdued this year. Suresnes has done much over the years to push female talent in a genre historically dominated by male performers, but only two solos by women were on display in the first half of the festival this month.

Both employed a hybrid form of dance and theatre to tackle mental illness in eerily similar ways. Neither dancer demonstrated the vocal command needed to deliver a monologue, however. Jann Gallois' Diagnostic F20.9, a reference to the World Health Organisation's code for schizophrenia, dived headfirst into clichés. In Flagrant Délit, with a stage covered in Post-it notes and whimsical choreography, Mélanie Sulmona's memory disorder offered more individuality, but there is work to be done to encourage choreographic ambition on a larger scale for the women of hip-hop.

To February 10, suresnes-cites-danse.com