

To the Ones I Love at the Barbican, London EC2

Donald Hutera

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Dance

To the Ones I Love
Barbican

★★★★☆

The Belgian choreographer Thierry Smits founded Compagnie Thor in 1990. Smits has earned a reputation both within his country and abroad as a figure of creative strength and sometimes controversy.

There's nothing remotely alarming about the hour-long and essentially abstract dance with which Smits is making his Barbican debut. Unless, that is, you find the sight of nine hunky yet graceful men of African origin vaulting over the stage to the music of J. S. Bach unsettling. Apparently some do. Smits has been accused of exploitative casting. Why, it's been asked, are all of the dancers black and male?

Smits seems to view it as a simple case of artistic choice. As he said in a recent interview, making the piece was "like writing with black ink on white paper". His statement refers to its streamlined design: a wide-open stage containing six smooth white benches, with a floor and backdrop that are also white. This pristine space becomes a playing field across which the dancers skim, slide, tumble or wheel round each other like well-attuned team-mates.

Their movement is a lyrical yet sporty blend of styles that plants the lithe looseness of contemporary dance atop the precise lines of ballet. Propelled by a Baroque soundscape, upon which more modern or natural sounds occasionally intrude, Smits and company add capoeira-like athletic twists plus a few African inflections to the mix.

The overall impression is of a refreshingly non-competitive harmony. Is the dance homoerotic? Only in the most unforced manner. Smits regards these attractive young men of various heights, builds and personalities with a keen sense of aesthetic appreciation. But are they objects of desire? Only if you want them to be.

In the dance's main motif they regularly peel off or don T-shirts, waistcoats and polo shirts in a range of co-ordinated colours. When they're split into trios, two men rather tenderly help a third to don his top. This is gentle, life-affirming voyeurism. The work has a telling false ending, with dancers rising from prone positions like a collective

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