

Compagnie Thor, To the Ones I Love, Barbican Theatre

- **Performer/company:** [Compagnie Thor \(http://www.londondance.com/reviews.asp?Company=Compagnie+Thor\)](http://www.londondance.com/reviews.asp?Company=Compagnie+Thor)
- **Production:** [To the Ones I Love \(http://www.londondance.com/reviews.asp?Company=Compagnie+Thor&Production=To+the+Ones+I+Love\)](http://www.londondance.com/reviews.asp?Company=Compagnie+Thor&Production=To+the+Ones+I+Love)
- **Venue:** [Barbican Theatre \(http://www.londondance.com/reviews.asp?Venue=Barbican+Theatre\)](http://www.londondance.com/reviews.asp?Venue=Barbican+Theatre)

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Performance: 17 - 20 November 2010

To the Ones I Love can best be described as a sonnet to the male form. In sixty heated minutes, Belgian choreographer **Thierry Smits'** scantily dressed nine male dancers ripple their Olympian torsos across the stage to warm the coldest heart on a frosty November night. The male body is applauded, admired and elevated to lofty heights of perfection. These dancers are objects of desire, keeping the audience wide-eyed and firmly focused on the stage.

There is no interval, just sequences of liberated movement, a mashing together of dance forms snatched from here, there and everywhere in true post-modern magpie fashion. With little reverence for time and place, the choreographer swipes from dance disciplines and knits it all tightly together to show off the sheer versatility of this handpicked troupe. A martial arts karate kick, an African limbo shape that turns into a balletic sweep or a contemporary stamp, each movement flows naturally into the next, so origin no longer matters.

The movements are unhampered by narrative or fussy stage sets, but there remains a great sense of discipline and perfection. This love song is grounded, despite the choreographer's plea that he didn't want the work to be 'polished.' As the piece unfurls, it reveals a clean and neat structure; the continuous flow of movements clearly broken up into acts.

First, we see a white stage with illuminated long benches, the only props of the night. The dancers are silhouetted black against the white and action is slow, mirroring each other's moves. This opening section brings to mind images of classical paintings, groups of dancers intentionally clustered together to form picture frame moments and singular naked torso movements freeze-framed into neoclassical sculptures.

Lyrical grace is soon broken up with a new pace when the semi-naked dancers dress up in an assortment of red-toned tee shirts and the stage is infused with joyous twirls and leaps. We are witness to free spirits dashing around the stage, playing, smiling and falling with such energy that you almost feel like jumping out of your seat and joining in, but the mood is swiftly replaced with a pas-de-deux, where two male dancers are locked into a passionate embrace. The result is breathtakingly beautiful and unexpected.

This is the first time the choreographer has worked with a group of solely black dancers and their talents are from mixed backgrounds. Some are balletic and others exude sheer streetwise gusto over and above classically perfected technique. One dancer infectiously smiles with such sheer joy of movement and pleasure of performance through the whole excruciating hour, it's easy to forget that dance without a break for this length of time, requires sheer unadulterated athleticism and nothing less.

All of this is brilliantly echoed by a soundtrack that couldn't be more perfect a choice. The dancers zip and glide to **J.S. Bach**, but the mood is soon disrupted by the industrial drone of **Maxime Bodson's** soundscape that slices through the baroque calm and pulls the audience out of a pastoral setting and into an edgier place.

The theme of colour also makes its presence felt throughout the evening. Conventionally, a new change of tone and pace in movement is marked out with dancers stripping off and changing shirts that match the background. Reds, blues, pinks and yellows are just some of the palate that light up the stage.



But just when it starts to look a little predictable and formulaic, Smits grabs you by the short and curlies and makes you think. The choreographer seems to have arranged his dancers into groups of skin colour. Or did we imagine it? Whether this is a passing aesthetic fancy, or a wider political statement on the mixed race origins of the dancers is left wide open and unclear. It could be part of the overall infectious and playful mood of the piece or it could allude to something more sinister, but questions remain unanswered apart from a vague uncomfortable feeling for having noticed at all.

To the Ones I Love is a dedication to all Smits' friends, family, lovers to celebrate twenty years of choreographic creation. The choreographer says of the piece that he is "treating himself to a moment of immense pleasure whilst offering his audience, family, friends, and lovers this visual gift," and a gift it most certainly is. It's rare that so much physical beauty, raw spirit, energy and playfulness can be packed into a one hour entertainment package, but in *To the Ones I Love*, Smits has undoubtedly created a free flowing masterpiece that will burn bright for years to come.

Compagnie Thor are at the Barbican until Saturday 20 November

www.barbican.org.uk (<http://www.barbican.org.uk>)

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