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Yauza! Crazy Horse Cabaret Seduces Moscow

By Aliide Naylor

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The precision of the dance moves keeps the French cabaret alive even after the audiences tire over full-on nudity. **Antoine Poupel**

Crazy Horse, the suave and sexy French cabaret, has left the home turf of its old Parisian wine cellars to bring its unique clip show of nudity and rigorous precision to four Russian cities.

The curtain rises on the stocking-snapped dancers until Feb. 26 with the same number it's traditionally opened with since 1989. "God Save Our Bareskin" is a short piece in which the girls parade in a changing-of-the-guard like fashion, uniformed in their black bearskins, suspender belts and little else.

Prior to its more recent jaunts abroad, the cabaret had been in running in France since 1951. It has been over 60 years since it was first established by its creator, Alain Bernardin, who shot himself in 1994. Since then, it's passed into the hands of his family and has maintained his strict original criteria for the dancers' bodies.

Each one must be 1.68 to 1.72 meters tall, with equally precise requirements for the distance between the girl's nipples, and proportionality of breast volume to leg length. Even in the opening number, which requires very little wild or sudden movement, their impossibly arched backs hint at the level of professional training desired.

"There are 11 dancers in all," said Yafa Yemalla, one of the dancers speaking under her stage name. "Everybody's a little different, everybody's got their own background. I danced in cabarets before, back in South Africa."

Some are classically trained ballerinas. A previous performer was even a French champion in rhythmic gymnastics. However, most of this particular grouping came from other cabarets in Paris.

"Some of them were models, actors, though," Yemalla said. "I never thought I'd get in."

Work at Crazy Horse has noticeable difference from the girls' previous jobs.

"For one thing, we're naked," Yemalla laughed and smiled with her glossed-red lips. "And also the style," she added.

The cabaret certainly has a very distinctive style, almost taking on the appearance of a clip show or mosaic, with each section of dancing having a projected subtitle such as "Final Fantasy," "Chain Gang" or "Baby Buns."

The dancers are often, quite literally, dressed only in light, their bodies acting as a blank canvas for pink polka dots, or some frantic sound waves scribbling and pulsating to the distorted music.

"Lesson in Eroticism" takes place on a Dali-esque lip sofa. Another number uses swaths of floaty material and smoke, and a fourth cleverly employs the use of mirrors to create kaleidoscopic visions of disjointed body parts.

Yemalla does one feature behind a barrier of strong yet flexible bars, the size and positioning of which gives the appearance of a Thumbelina-sized dancer writhing behind a giant headboard.

The nudity is so immediately full-on that it loses a little of its eroticism by the middle of the show. It falls second to the precision of the dance moves, while the effects and variety acts come into play more forcefully, just in time.

The new male number for this show drew some loud laughs from the Russian audience, as they watched the two jugglers struggle with swapping their three-piece suits and shoes as they twirled and hurled the juggling clubs at one another.

The clips are punctuated by a square-wigged girl tottering around in high heels, looking slightly spaced out as she waves at the audience from in front of the curtain and kisses the flyers she hands out. The laughter and music layered over the top of the spectacle lends it an eerie, almost slightly Lynch-like quality.

Despite it seeming difficult to relocate the show on account of the props, the setup actually

isn't overly fussy.

"The stage is basically a copy of the cabaret in Paris," said Frank Paquet, Crazy Horse's tour and production manager. "That's what we try to copy the entire tour. We try to create that same close, small atmosphere."

They want to recreate the cabaret, exactly as it is, even down to the timing of the house lights, he added. However, this routine hasn't been without hiccups.

"I have to prepare for the unexpected," Paquet laughed. "Last year we had a situation where the crew and I arrived one day earlier. Some airport workers decided to go on strike and the luggage, including the costumes, got lost. So we had to quickly develop a Plan B, Plan C, Plan D."

In Moscow, the performance takes place at Yauza palace, an excellent venue given the role of music in the performance. However the stage still seems a little large in size in comparison to the original setting. The tour will touch three other Russian cities, including Nizhny Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Samara.

This will be the cabaret's third time in Moscow, after it began touring three years ago, to the delight of former dancer and current show manager Iota Theoreme.

"We can travel everywhere and can now show the performance all over the world!" she said.

"The show is universal, and we don't have to adapt it for specific audiences," added Paquet.

Luckily, they still get time to explore the new places too.

"We're fully rehearsed before we arrive," Yemalla said. "Learning the routines isn't a rushed process because each dancer has their own style of learning and many have to go at different paces."

The most fun part though, they said, is the show itself.

"Everyone puts in very long hours, doing three shows a day," said Paquet. "If everyone didn't love what they were doing, it would be difficult to keep up the motivation."

Le Crazy Horse Paris performs its last three shows in Moscow on Feb. 25 and Feb. 26 at Dvorets na Yauze, located at 1 Ploshad Zhuravleva. Tel. +7-495-645-2245. www.yauza-palace.ru

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