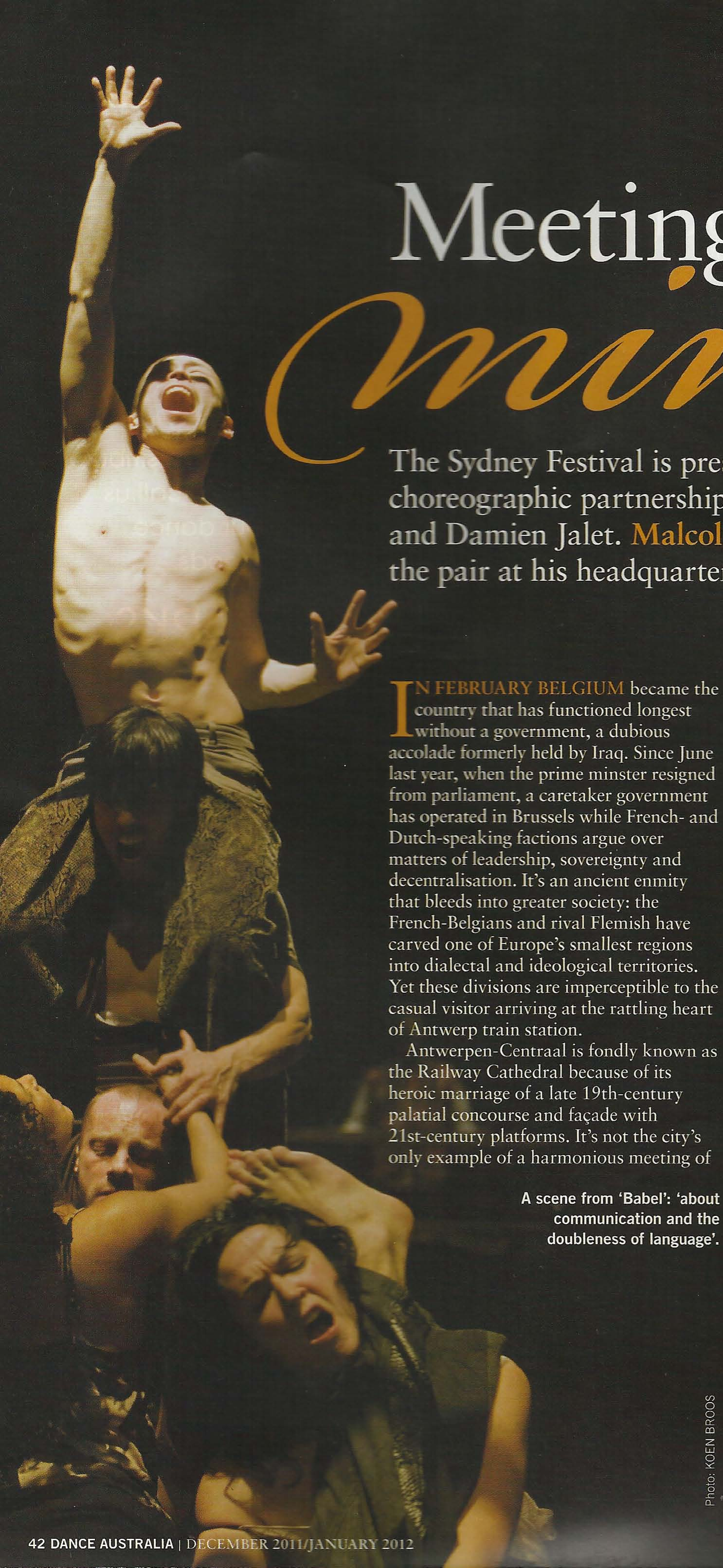
Meeting of *minds*

The Sydney Festival is presenting a work by the choreographic partnership Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet. **Malcolm Rock** met one of the pair at his headquarters in Antwerp.



A scene from 'Babel': 'about communication and the doubleness of language'.

Photo: KOEN BROOS

IN FEBRUARY BELGIUM became the country that has functioned longest without a government, a dubious accolade formerly held by Iraq. Since June last year, when the prime minster resigned from parliament, a caretaker government has operated in Brussels while French- and Dutch-speaking factions argue over matters of leadership, sovereignty and decentralisation. It's an ancient enmity that bleeds into greater society: the French-Belgians and rival Flemish have carved one of Europe's smallest regions into dialectal and ideological territories. Yet these divisions are imperceptible to the casual visitor arriving at the rattling heart of Antwerp train station.

Antwerpen-Centraal is fondly known as the Railway Cathedral because of its heroic marriage of a late 19th-century palatial concourse and façade with 21st-century platforms. It's not the city's only example of a harmonious meeting of two. Antwerp is also where dancer-choreographers Damien Jalet and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui have pioneered a globally admired brand of dance theatre from headquarters in a rambling performing arts complex at the junction of twin highways. Together the French-Belgian and Flemish-Moroccan duo stand as a model of successful diplomatic relations.

Having already interviewed Cherkaoui in 2008, I'm excited to meet Jalet at the De Singel international arts campus whose interior changes considerably as you travel from one part of the building to the other. De Singel, like the station, is the result of a variety of architectural predilections. It's a jumble of the modern, postmodern and even post-modernity styles (a new wing was opened only last year) and functions as a theatre, rehearsal venue and gallery as well as a school for music and architecture. French-speaking Jalet, stocky and hirsute with open features and a personality to match, suggests that inspiration is best found in such a collision of ideas, in *frisson*.

"Where there's tension there's life," he muses. 'It makes fertile ground for art.'

This is certainly true of his collaborations with Cherkaoui, which are more popular and travel more widely than the majority of contemporary dance performances on the international touring circuit. He attributes achievements to their willingness to work together.

"Collaborations are not so well understood by people," he says. "It's difficult to explain how there can be two heads. The assumption is that you will

disagree because that's the way of the world. But we are all the product of a collaboration: we are the fruits of both our mother and our father. Collaboration is the most natural thing."

Appropriately Jalet and Cherkaoui's most recent creation *Babel*, which will have its Australian premiere at the Sydney Festival in January, is about communication and the doubleness of language. *Babel* is an ambitious work for 13 dancers, crammed with content but streamlined in appearance. Care of a series of spoken and choreographed vignettes it aims to reveal the world's continuing sense of tribal identity. The is expanded by British sculptor Antony Gormley, who provides mobile aluminium frames that represent the five continents, ensnaring performers like the cubes of a Francis Bacon canvas. As the title implies, the principal dramaturgical source is the biblical story that tells how God punished mankind's arrogance by splitting the population into different groups with different languages that he scattered across the globe.

Jalet sees the act of old testament vengeance as a blessing in disguise. Without the divine schism, he says, there wouldn't be the spectrum of opinions that have resulted in what we now call "culture".

"Determining an identity is a strong human need," he reasons. "The question is, do you have to define yourself in opposition to others, or can you use different tools for that? Here in Belgium it goes to extremes: we have forests divided into Flemish and French territories, and playgrounds where you can't speak a certain language. It's not so dissimilar from Jerusalem in some ways."

Ideological differentiation of such severity is alien to most Australians. In a land where an entire continent is traversed without any real change of language or character it comes as a revelation to learn that, in northern Europe, a 30-minute drive can take you through countless political and vernacular checkpoints. In terms of dance this diversity has evolved unique voices. Belgium is home to the inimitable creations of Alain Platel and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and is the surrogate home of William Forsythe whose work is the staple of Royal Ballet Flanders. Jalet thinks it remarkable that a country pinched between France and the Netherlands, two arguably more assertive nations geographically and culturally, has nurtured such a wealth of distinctive dance practitioners.

"Belgium is a special case because it lacks a traditional form of dance," he

Mobile aluminium frames represent the five continents.

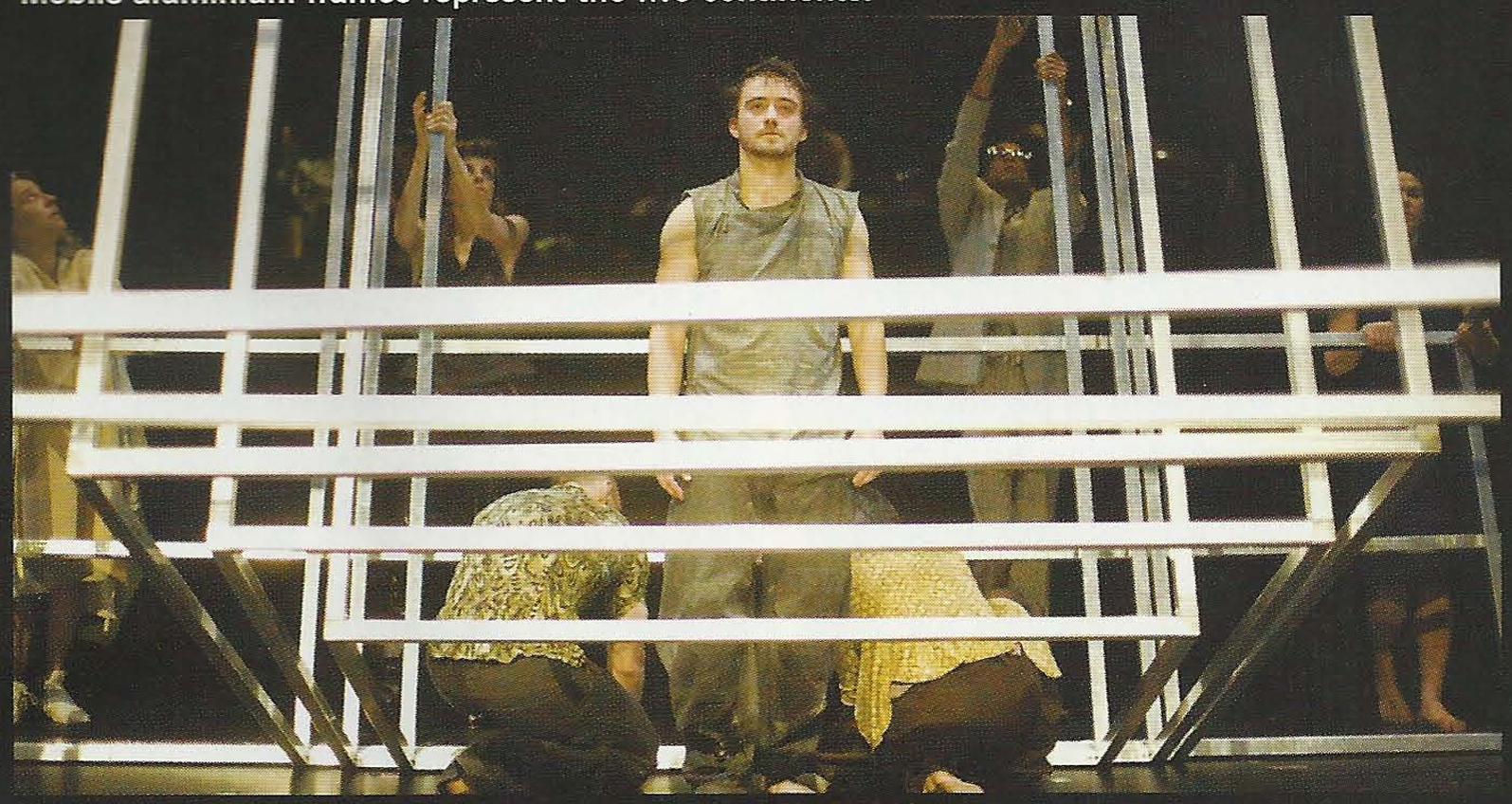


Photo: KOEN BROOS

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explains. "For example, we don't have the continuity of a ballet tradition like France. Sometimes having an amazing cultural past can be a curse: think of Italy that spends all its money on preservation rather than innovation. Even new work in these places is linked with tradition because it is rallying against that tradition."

Fittingly *Babel*, with its themes of variety and unusual integration of dance and text, may not be to everyone's liking. Jalet is unsure how Australians will react in light of the mixed opinions that greeted his Chunky Move commission two years ago. *Black Marrow's* disturbing and sometimes violent content divided audiences and led Jordan Beth Vincent of *The Age* to call it "utterly unamusing absurdity" and "the most disappointing offering" of the 2009 Melbourne International Arts Festival.

"In *Black Marrow* we dealt with the origin of things and the exhausting of the Earth, but some people didn't find the subject relevant," laments Jalet. "I didn't expect to experience such a strong negative reaction from some parts of the dance community. There was an aggressive conservatism, people saying 'you can't do this', which came as a surprise. It seems people were expecting something armless and entertaining."

The themes of *Black Marrow*, Jalet says, developed into the beginnings of *Babel*, but he admits the latter work is less likely to offend. ("I'm really excited to come to Australia with *Babel* because it's a much lighter piece!") He adds that he loves Australian dancers, some of whom appear in *Babel* alongside eight other nationalities.

Meanwhile, with Flemish Cherkaoui, Jalet has discovered what he describes as perfect "creative alchemy". They met at Platel's Les Ballets C de la B in Ghent, East Flanders, where they were contemporaries with the late Tanja Liedtke. Jalet danced in Cherkaoui's first choreography for the company, and the pair have since worked on many mutual projects including a September premiere for Sadler's Wells London that integrated the animation of Japanese cartoonist Osamu Tezuka, creator of *Astro Boy* and *Kimba the White Lion*. Jalet was in Tokyo rehearsing *TeZukA* when the March tsunami hit: "It felt apocalyptic, every day you saw the fear in people's faces".

Jalet seems comfortable amid the throes of social as well as environmental upheaval. Like Cherkaoui, who told me that dance is "an open-minded form that gives me space to express myself, permits the broadest collaborations [and] offers freedom unlike any other art-form", Jalet is grateful for the opportunity to communicate widely via his chosen medium. He observes: "In Belgium we're all talking about the same thing, we just use a different language to talk about it. It's funny to think that *Babel* had its world premiere at theatre La Monnaie, which is where the Belgium revolution started almost 200 years ago, and during the same week that the government was dismissed. We still don't understand each other."

'Babel' will be performed at the Sydney Theatre from January 9-14. ■