

Dance that's out of this world: Turin's Teatro a Corte

From a show inspired by zero gravity to a troupe making work in the world's most polluted city, this Italian festival shows an urgent new side to contemporary dance



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Italy may have struggled to establish a contemporary dance scene of its own, but every year its cities pour love and money into their summer arts festivals, many of which offer platforms to a wide range of international choreography.

Teatro a Corte 2011

Various venues

Until 25 July

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Back on the ground, however, the most interesting thread of this year's festival must be its focus on Russia's emerging contemporary dance scene. It's ironic that classical ballet, Russia's most famous and fabulous dance product, started out as a hybrid, created from the best of French, Italian and Danish influences. By contrast, the country's contemporary dance culture has had to construct itself in virtual isolation from the west: its choreographers had to wait until the late 1990s, and the break-up of the Soviet Union, before they could seriously engage with ideas from abroad. Even now, from the evidence of the Turin programme, it's clear how hungry for contact that culture still is.

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Atomic art ... Olga

Pona's Continuous Interruptions

But by far the strongest Russian presence of the weekend was Olga Pona and her company Chelyabinsk Contemporary Dance Theatre (CCDC). It's hard not to view their work, titled Continuous Interruptions, through the lens of the dancers' own life stories. Chelyabinsk, where the company live and work, has been dubbed the most polluted city on earth, having suffered a series of appalling atomic accidents from the late 1940s onwards, courtesy of a nuclear weapons factory nearby. The worst, a nuclear waste storage-tank accident in 1957, produced radiation levels seven times those of Chernobyl – yet astoundingly the city was allowed to keep functioning and its inhabitants kept in ignorance of the lethal toxicity of their environment.

Pona herself moved to Chelyabinsk in the late 1980s when she was 15, first to study tractor engineering, then to train as a dancer. You have to admire the stubborn determination with which she pieced together a contemporary dance style of her own, when all that was available to her were a few pirated videos of western work; even more so her decision to remain in Chelyabinsk once the terrible truth about its past started to emerge. Alongside the other inhabitants of the city, all determined to ensure that life goes on, that businesses and families thrive, Pona is on a mission to create art out of this terribly damaged city.

The heroism and the poignancy of the mission are qualities that shine through her work. Superficially, *Continuous Interruptions* is an abstract piece: its vocabulary a muscular, sculptural fusion of ballet, street dance and contact improvisation; its structure accommodating deftly crafted contrasts of scale and dynamic. The 13 dancers, dressed in street clothes, are beautifully trained, but what makes them riveting is the eloquence and alertness that transforms physical action into a live human event. One woman makes a gesture of poignant appeal, holding out her palms at hip level; three dancers lying on the floor with their faces turned ecstatically upwards seem to be staring at falling stars. As in *Punto di Fuga*, there are some sections where the structure doesn't support the weight of the movement, and – as in *Punto di Fuga* – the austerity of the staging is an issue. With no visual design beyond simple lighting, and with a soundtrack of bare electronic buzz, this 60 minutes of pure dance is a more challenging watch than it should be.

Yet, as a [remarkable documentary titled Tankograd](#) reveals, it is amazing that this company are able to produce anything at all: their productions are created on a shoestring, and most of the dancers have to work second jobs to survive. What they and Pona might do with a decent level of funding would be wonderful to see.