

'Hallo' Stars Martin Zimmermann, Fighting Off the Scenery



BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI

The physical-theater artist Martin Zimmermann does not chew the scenery. But the scenery just might chew him.

In his fitfully involving solo show, “Hallo,” part of the Next Wave festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, rogue décor attempts to crush him, stab him, squish him, guzzle him, tumble him and deprive him of several fingers.

Mr. Zimmermann, a Swiss choreographer and designer, is a leading light in *nouveau cirque*, a movement whose “Hans Was Heiri” played at the academy in 2013. At the opening of this show, Mr. Zimmermann hurtles onstage in a white shirt, black tights and a pair of very squeaky shoes, those must-have clowning accessories. But the shoes squeak only when Mr. Zimmermann wants them to — he can silence them at will — a sly dismantling of traditional buffoonery.

Squeaking away, he explores the stage, an accumulation of half-painted scenic flats. Suddenly, a wooden box swallows him. No sooner has he made his escape than a couple of partitions abruptly fall to the floor.

Their collapse reveals a narrow room, which seems stable enough, until its walls and ceiling begin to shift. In Mr. Zimmermann’s world, even the ground is untrustworthy. Occasionally a few of the floorboards rise up as a menacing laugh resounds — the Telltale Chortle.

But the laughter the show evokes is only intermittent. Pathos is even scarcer. When “Hallo” focuses on the elegant contrast between Mr. Zimmermann’s antic, nimble figure and the more stolid architectural perils, it is darkly witty, reminiscent of the men and the merciless goad in Samuel Beckett’s “Act Without Words II.”

Too often, though, Mr. Zimmermann embarks on frantic and futile vignettes, garbing himself in a captain’s hat or a pair of denim shorts and spouting aggressive gibberish. Once he appears as a yeti. Once with a motorcycle helmet and a vacuum cleaner. These characters, who seem unrelated to Mr. Zimmermann’s main clown, interrupt and erode the more successful passages.

Well before “Hallo” said its goodbye, I was rooting for the scenery.