

MATTER

INTERVIEW WITH JULIE NIOCHE

What was the project of *Matter*, when you first came up with it in 2006?

Julie Nioche: For my projects, I build choreographic settings, environments in which one cannot move, much like in everyday life. Spaces that lead to the creation of movement based on those sensations. For *Matter*, I talked to four women, all choreographers and dancers, who live in different countries. The idea was for each of us to create and dance a solo revolving around a paper dress that would dissolve when it came in contact with water. Each performer would create her own dress based on her own story, and would also get to decide what role the water would play. I first created my own solo, then I visited those women so we could put the solos together. In Norway with Mia Habib, in Turkey with Filiz Sizanli, in Morocco with Bouchra Ouzguen, and in Sweden with Rani Nair. I wanted to live in their countries for a while, to experience their daily life, their social, political, economic, and ecological environment. I tried to observe how they'd built their identities as women, choreographers, and dancers, in reaction to their context. Nino Chubinishvili, an artist from Georgia who designed the dresses along with costume designer Anna Riza, and Alexandre Meyer, a musician, travelled with me. Meanwhile, Virginie Mira worked on the set in which we brought together all those solos to create a group play. This process, which went on for two years, had a large influence on our creation. This time allowed us to build a real relationship, which became a fundamental dimension of the play. Which is probably why everyone was more than happy to come back and work on the show again. In Avignon, Filiz Sizanli, Rani Nair, Loan Ha, and I will be on stage. Bouchra Ouzguen and Mia Habib are not available this summer, but they will have been with us for rehearsals. Gilles Gentner, a newcomer to the team, will be in charge of the lights.

What brought you together with the four women who took part in the creation of the play?

The personal history of each of us is the basic material that makes *Matter*. I'm a strong believer in the uniqueness and preciousness of people. We talked and shared our experiences, which led us to realise we had a lot in common because of our status as women choreographers trying to play an active part in our respective societies. Each of us has worked on projects aimed at popularising dance in her own country, in relation to social questions. We share a job, but also a set of more intimate affinities, even though they remain relative. To be a woman in France, in Morocco, in Norway, or in Turkey doesn't necessarily call for the same attitude to find one's place in society, doesn't require the same level of resistance, of perseverance. However, we all talk about those acts of resistance that are necessary for creation, and we embody them in *Matter*. For the show, we all had to respond to the same artistic demands, this idea that we had to expose ourselves, symbolised by the dissolution of the dress in water. Those demands were of course interpreted differently, which led sometimes to symbioses, sometimes to misunderstandings and disharmonies. The stage therefore is like a stretch of water peppered with islands, a place where differences are welcome, with its own space-time that we share and that keeps shifting.

Is feminine identity the subject of *Matter*? Would you say it is a feminist show?

The question of the representation of the body has been at the heart of my work since my very first play, *XX*. Of course, images of the female body are a favourite subject of mine since they are what I live, what I go through every day. I'm a little suspicious of this concept of feminism, though, which in France has very specific overtones. *Matter* shows you women who aren't afraid to take risks, to expose themselves and their vulnerabilities, and this choice to remain vulnerable is seen as a strength. It's up to the audience to decide what they want to take away from it. However, it is of course highly political. If I chose those women, it's because they have a social and political engagement, with their art, but also with their body. Let's say it's a feminine and political show that's about individual stories. I find the concept of metamorphosis particularly interesting, because it allows us to go beyond this feminine/masculine dichotomy. A costume, like skin, allows for this exposition to happen, for this transfer of our fantasies, our social roles, our legacies, our ancestors, our desires, of all that we would want to get rid of. The play is more about how one builds one's identity than about feminine identity in general.

The building of one's identity, sure, but through one's body... What exactly is the place of the body in the play?

The question of how our bodies are made has always fascinated me. Why do we have the body we do, and not another one? It's something that's closely tied to the question of legacy: among all the things that were handed to me, there are those I can't transform, those I could have transformed but have decided not to, those I tried to transform without succeeding, those I have already transformed, and those that are currently being transformed. This process is as much physical as it is psychic and emotional. I would like to know what happened to the women with whom I worked on those questions seven years ago. Would they provide the same answers today? We all go through transformations, the female body in particular. And this impermanence of the body becomes a fascinating material for choreographic creation.

The dresses in *Matter* are much more than just costumes. How were they created?

Each one of us wears a dress that's destined to dissolve in water. We built our respective solos based on our discussions about the meaning of that white dress—a shroud, a communion dress, a wedding dress, etc.—and on our relationship to water. Those discussions would therefore sometimes focus on anthropology and culture, sometimes on geopolitics. Bouchra Ouizguen was born on the outskirts of the Moroccan desert, while Mia Habib lives by the Norwegian fjords; we each brought our own set of representations. The way the water floods the stage is also a very different symbol for each one of us. Nino, who created the dresses, also left her mark; in Georgia, where she comes from, spirituality, religion, and icons play an extremely important role. Those dresses therefore became symbols for feminine archetypes and imaginary characters: the virgin, the bride, Tinker Bell, sexless angels, etc. This creation is the result of all this dialogue between history, legacies, projections, and interpretations. And this dialogue itself created images which we proceeded to deconstruct, to transform, to mix with one another.

If the show isn't a striptease, the dresses do disappear gradually, revealing the bodies of the dancers. Was this the object of a particular choreographic approach?

Some of us didn't want to let the water strip them bare without resisting, without struggling against this element. Those different sensibilities led to our using different types of paper. My dress is made of tissue paper, and disappears at the merest contact with water, while Mia's is made of a much heavier paper, its destruction requiring much more energetic movements. It's an interesting detail: skin, too, has a different texture, resists different things based on our age, our gender, our environment. However, one external element that the dancers can't control plays a part as well: an assistant brings a new set of clothes to each woman after she's shed her dress. She protects us—we're very vulnerable, both because we're naked, and because we're wet—but she also constrains us. And in those new dresses, we suddenly find that we've lost our legs. They've been cut. The image is direct, almost literal. This second set of dresses highlights the necessity for us to go through this process constantly to allow metamorphoses to happen.



Does this preoccupation for fragility, protection, and constraints have anything to do with osteopathy, which you also practise?

I began creating choreographies at the same time as I went back to school to finish my degree in osteopathy and psychology. They may constitute different fields, but my research is the same: I work on the way we develop our sensory imagination. The kind of dance I create with the dancers begins with their memory, their sensations. That's also what osteopathy and other somatic practices deal with. The goal is to learn, or to re-learn, how to feel one's body, in relation to past and current sensations, to rehabilitate or rediscover some functions of the body. Dance and osteopathy are to me practices of adaptation. The concept of lack of control always plays an important part in my work. Even though every performer knows what they have to do, there's always room for the unknown, so that we can never do exactly what we planned on doing. In *Matter*, for instance, our dresses never tear the same way, the water never behaves exactly the same way. Each of us reacts in different ways to those mishaps, those variations. This ability to adapt seems to me an important condition for a person to reach a form of autonomy. Dance allowed me to find ways to adapt to society and to learn to defend myself. I think that dance is for all of us who have taken part in this adventure a way to adapt to our society and to build our own identity. The choice of dance isn't innocent, either, in societies whose relationship to the body remains problematic. Dancing forces us to face the physiological reality of our bodies: we aren't the same today as eight years ago. How can we find a form of stability within this perpetual movement? It's a question that is never dealt with, or even asked, in our education. To find permanence in impermanence helps to build oneself from a physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual point of view, something dance can help with.

On stage, you all seem almost lonely. How do you understand the concept of group?

Our creative process led to a specific articulation between the individual and the group. I knew right from the start that we would, at some point, gather together on the stage. I had this desire for a group, but I didn't necessarily know how to resolve it. Throughout the play, we exist in the same space, but separated from one another. None of us covets or threatens the space that belongs to the others. There's this respect for the other solos, and I see this respect as proof of the existence of a group already. There is this idea of a collective entity, even if we don't look at one another, even if we don't dance with one another. It's a central question in *Matter*, one I'd like to ask again when we start working on it again. How to find ourselves all of a sudden on the same line while remaining autonomous?

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina.

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