LEILA'S DEATH

INTERVIEW WITH ALI CHAHROUR

In spite of the difficulties it entails, you live and work in Beirut. What does it mean for you to be invited to the Festival d'Avignon?

Ali Chahrour: It's important that what was imagined and built in Beirut should be shared with a different and larger audience. But it is fundamental for me to work and to present my creations in Lebanon. It's the heart of my artistic project. Back when I was studying at the Institut national des Beaux-Arts in Beirut, I was scouted and hired by Omar Rajeh, the choreographer of the company Maqamat. Working alongside him, I realised one had to struggle to create. I also met the members of the Compagnie Zoukak who made the decisive choice of making a living only from theatre, regardless of the circumstances, without compromising. What inspired me are the choices those Lebanese artists had to make to work within their social, political, and religious environment. For me, the question of creation has become inseparable from the context in which it happens. How can a dance built from western techniques, a dance that has forgotten the great stories of the Arab world, mean anything within our physical frame of reference? What is contemporary dance in this region of the Middle East?

Is that why the performers of *Fatmeh* and *Leila's Death*, the two pieces you're presenting at the Festival d'Avignon, aren't professional dancers?

For *Fatmeh*, I chose to work with an actress, Umama Hamido, and a video artist, Rania Rafei, because they haven't been influenced by contemporary dance. They are both artists free from all choreographic technique. It's very different when it comes to Leila, the mourner. A mourner is a woman one pays to research the dead so that she can write poetic laments that praise their qualities. Her role is to make the living cry by talking about their dead. If she can't make people cry, she's not a good mourner. When I invited her to join me, it was the first time she entered a theatre. I asked her to teach me how to dance, to show me her moves, that sadness her body carries within itself from weeping for hundreds of people. As for me, by looking for what moves her, I forgot what I learnt as a dancer. Working with those women allowed me to forge new artistic tools from which I can create a new dance. Because what I'm trying to do in my creations is to bring about the raw movement of our cultural references. It's not a rejection of globalisation, but a need to create a regional movement based on references with which I grew up and which contain an infinite field of possibilities, which can be shared with everyone.

Fatima Zahra is a central figure of the Arab world. She's the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, but she wasn't allowed to claim his legacy. In the 7th century, the question of the succession of Muhammad led to a schism from which emerged Shia and Sunni Islam. By creating a dialogue between the sacred voice of Fatima Zahra and the secular voice of the Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum, you seem to be questioning the way they both live today in our collective memory, but also religious taboos, symbolised by the veils you use in the show.

The show goes back to the source, to the myths, texts, and legends about the status and role of women, of their writings, of their voices. *Fatmeh* is an encounter between two icons of Arab memory. Fatima Zahra died of grief not long after the disappearance of her father, the Prophet Muhammad, to whom she dedicated many laments, one of which is said during the show. And Umm Kulthum—daughter of a Cairo imam, and whose real name was Fatimah—had a very particular presence and a voice that seemed to carry something sacred. But it isn't only about the encounter between an artistic icon who left behind musical archives and a religious icon who's been the subject of numerous debates. I didn't try to represent them, either. On the stage are two dancers working on a state of sadness. Given that the daughter of the Prophet is a religious figure that represents a state of grief, I called on gestures that are a product of that state. Including self-flagellation, a direct expression of sadness on the Day of Ashura, that religious festival that celebrates the passion of Husayn, son of Fatima, grandson of Muhammad. This act of self-flagellation takes place here during popular songs. As in *Leila's Death*, which mixes sacred and profane, the idea is to use controversial references while insisting on their aesthetic and poetic dimension. The question of taboo is of course present in the position of the bodies relative to the icons. Can a movement arise from them? As for the idea of the veil, it can only be understood in its visceral relation to an

omnipresent question in Arab culture, that of the visible and the invisible, *mastour* and *makchouf*, what is allowed and what isn't, what is said and what isn't. By calling on those questions, I talk of hidden aesthetics, of covert histories, of hidden legacies. But also of the way the body can remove those metaphorical veils to reveal new realities. Because it's important to know that during condolences rites, as is the case with most religious rites, individuals let their feelings take over and allow their bodies to express themselves freely.

***Leila's Death* is about the personal and political transformation of people's relationship to death, the ever-increasing rarity of rites of condolences, and, more generally, the disappearance of a certain cultural legacy.**

Generally speaking, as with *Fatmeh*, I decided to work on themes and with people with strong ties to the Arab culture of the body, opening a particular field of research on the movements used during death rituals.
It isn't an insignificant choice. It's a political choice because the relationship of the individual to the collective, which is central during mourning ceremonies, has changed deeply. It's a technical choice because the body expresses feelings within a very dense social and religious context. It's an aesthetic choice because, during those ceremonies, the body is allowed to express itself differently, more freely. Finally, it's a cultural choice, because those rituals are disappearing. That choice allows me to open a space of dialogue with Lebanese audiences about their history, their everyday lives, their role as active members of society.
Leila's Death is at the heart of that question. In the show, Leila, one of Lebanon's last mourners, tells her story: how she became a mourner, her relationship to death… Her presence on the stage is the same as in life. She doesn't act, she mourns, and thus tells of the intimate relationship between the dead and the living. We're losing this intimate relationship because mourners themselves are disappearing for economic, social, but also political reasons. Economic because people are less and less able to afford to pay a mourner for her service; social because death is now present in our lives every day, and we no longer have time to mourn our dead; political because the powers that be consider that death is a duty that should help them reach their goals. Nowadays, during mourning ceremonies, mourners are asked to praise great religious figures rather than the dead, making any intimate relationship with death impossible. As a result, the ritual has changed, poetically, aesthetically, emotionally. In the show, Leila mourns the people she loves because she thinks she should be allowed to mourn her heroes. Why should she only mourn them as martyrs? It's very different, this political attitude threatens the ritual itself, but also the very concept of martyrdom. When Leila weeps, it's an entire culture of the memory of the dead she tries to bring back to life.

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