

## AND...

## NAVE OF IMAGES

– Excerpt of *Leïla se meurt* by Ali Chahrour (2016),  
 – *Fatmeh* by Ali Chahrour (2016 / 51 min),  
 July 14 at 14:30, église des Célestins

## FAITH AND CULTURE ENCOUNTER

With Ali Chahrour, July 17 at 11:00, Chapelle de l'Oratoire

## MAY HE RISE AND SMELL THE FRAGRANCE

## "May He Rise and Smell the Fragrance"

(Ishtar's Descent into the Underworld)

From a stage bathed in the darkness of dusk rises a woman's voice, singing a deep song. Drawn to that prayer, a dancer and two musicians enter. Thus opens the last part of a trilogy (*Fatmeh, Leïla's Death*) exploring mourning rituals in the Shiite tradition, which Ali Chahrour invites us to experience as one would a funeral ceremony emerging from the black lands of Mesopotamia. A journey into the origins of Arab myths, led by a priestess—responsible for the crossing of dead souls into the next world—urging men to feel the grief of loss. Putting masculinity and its insistence on strength and heroism to the test, it reveals the weaknesses and helplessness of those men for whom crying is forbidden. One must sing, scream, chant, dance, and through the intensity of those deep and poetic lamentations, pull the pain out of one's body, exorcise violence, and set free a powerful force of life. *With May He Rise and Smell the Fragrance*, the Lebanese choreographer questions the taboos and suffering of a country torn apart by wars, towards a possible rebirth.

## ALI CHAHROUR

Born in Beirut in 1989, dancer and choreographer Ali Chahrour is a graduate of the Lebanese University, with a degree in drama and dramatic dance. Far from western standards, he has built a modern gestural identity inspired by Arab myths and by the political, social, and religious context of his own life. His work explores the relationship between the body and movement, between religion and the sacred. *May He Rise and Smell the Fragrance* is the last part of a trilogy that began with *Fatmeh* and *Leïla's Death*, both performed at the Festival d'Avignon in 2016.

72<sup>th</sup>  
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tireless and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.

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JULY 14 15 16 17 | THÉÂTRE BENOÎT-XII

## INTERVIEW WITH ALI CHAHROUR

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**May He Rise and smell the fragrance concludes a trilogy dedicated to mourning in the Arab world which began with *Fatmeh* and *Leila's Death*, both of which played at the 70th edition of the Festival d'Avignon. What were your influences on this project?**

**Ali Chahrouf:** With this trilogy, I question the presence of the body in funeral rites and in the history of the Arab world. One reference is the Shiite celebration of Ashura, during which they celebrate and mourn the great figures, old and current martyrs of the history of the Arab-Muslim world. For *May He Rise*..., I wanted to come back to the sources of those lamentation rites in Mesopotamian myths and explore the place of men in those rites. From *Fatmeh*, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad mourning her father, to the professional mourner of *Leila's Death*, women play a central part in those ceremonies. As we delved into those ancient texts and legends, the presence of women became even more obvious, there was no escaping it. The figure of Ishtar—goddess of life and fertility, of physical love and war—was the starting point. The title comes from a Sumerian text, *Ishtar's Descent into the Underworld*: Ishtar goes down to the Underworld to conquer the realm of the dead. She fails and is imprisoned in the darkness, and in order for her to be set free, another human has to take her place. Her husband Tammuz—god of abundance—doesn't mourn her long enough, and thus has to take her place in the Underworld. His sister's laments lead to his resurrection every spring, and she takes his place underground for the other half of the year. Through the power of the voice and of mourning, the memory of the dead is transmitted, and life appears again. The sacrifice of Tammuz's sister symbolises this rebirth. This sacrifice plays a key part in the show, and evokes the pain of all the other sisters, daughters, wives, and mothers who have to live through the absence of men, gone or killed in battle. Through all these stories, we also see the face of the mother who has lost her son and speaks to him. The mother is a powerful figure for me. Family was a big influence on *May He Rise*... I grew up surrounded by women, very strong and wilful women. In my family, men die young, and women survive them with dignity and self-control, like in many families in our society. They have to take responsibility for everything, and not only grieving or laments.

**Using those great figures, how did you build the show?**

Given the strength and resilience of those women, priestesses, goddesses, or mother figures, we had a hard time finding interesting roles for men, who in those rites don't have the power to express sadness that women have. For religious, political, and social reasons, they have to hide their feelings and remain strong and hard, at least outwardly. They can't exteriorise their pain, and that's what I wanted to explore in the show: to shine a light on this vulnerability, this powerlessness against death. To study bodies and their movements and presence in Middle Eastern society is to confront them to the intensification of death, which breaks some part of our life down. What I'm looking for within those forms is the simplicity and sincerity of movement, its ability to burrow into collective memory. In *Fatmeh* and *Leila's Death*, I worked with non-professional dancers, who didn't know the first thing about technique or modern dance, in order to find this sincerity and purity in dance. For the last part of the trilogy, I wanted to use all this "raw" choreographic material, all those references, and give them to an actress and two professional musicians. The point was to see what they

would do with them with the distance they've acquired through their experience of the stage. Their job gives them the perspective necessary to play with the emotions that arise from those extreme collective situations, to contain them or express their intensity, their violence, or their poetry. They have to be at once aggressive and poetic; as a choreographer, I'm looking for a powerful emotion.

**Each of your creation is a ceremony to which the audience is invited. How can audiences from Lebanon to the West, with different references and collective memories, engage with this subject?**

I like the idea of moving from the personal to the universal. This move from the individual, starting at a very close level, familial, then local, then universal, brings together interpretations by the audience. They may not share the same references, beliefs, or everyday practices, but they can feel the emotions expressed on the stage. The mother grieving her son is every mother, the pain of loss is the same everywhere. I'm not trying to paint a portrait of my country or to help people better understand my culture, but only to express myself based on what I am as an individual, marked by the place I live. My everyday life is, just like everywhere else in the world, a sum of stories, struggles, and ways of life. Stories inscribed in bodies, layer after layer, and which through dance open up infinite possibilities and can be shared by all. My artistic approach is that of my own story within our history. That's why it's fundamental for me to work and show my creations in Lebanon. It's at the heart of my artistic project. Even if creating art in Beirut means having to struggle at every level: production, financing, safety, censorship. It's not easy to find a comfortable and stable way to create here without compromising your artistic vision, but our determination becomes part of the shows we create.

**How did you choose the performers, and what was your artistic process once on the stage, as both a choreographer and a dancer?**

I decided to end the trilogy with a lone female figure, I didn't want just a performer but a woman who carries within herself the story of what happens every day. Hala Omran is a Syrian actress who lives in France. She has a lot to express onstage, thanks to her rich professional experience, which manifests itself through her voice and body language. She is neither a singer nor a dancer, but she knows how to find the right tone and make her voice carry, how to use her body. Onstage, her personal drama is a strength that helps her embody those great figures. The two musicians I already worked with on *Leila's Death*, Ali Hout and Abed Kobeissy, explore in their music the violence of the Arab world and the reconstruction of their city, Beirut, after the war. I gave them references and tools and let them use those as they saw fit. All three of them work really well together. Then I choreographed what needed to be choreographed, based on what they brought to the project. Having to face what we know and read about what's going on today around us was very painful, but it also gave us some perspective. It was urgent for us to get onstage to challenge all those questions about the political, religious, and social context in which we live to extract from it artistic matter that would go beyond just emotion. I asked the performers to be at once entirely within the emotion and outside of it. They have to always remember that they are actors representing tragic situations and performing violent emotions. It all begins with that experience, that intense relationship with the audience.

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Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach