



SHAEIRAT #2

INTERVIEW WITH SOUKAINA HABIBALLAH

***Dodo Ya Momo Do* is a dialogue punctuated by Moroccan lullabies between a little girl and her grandmother. In it, you talk about motherhood through those wounded women. What visions of womanhood did you want to transmit by playing with a fairy tale-like speech and musical rhythm?**

Soukaina Habiballah: While writing those poems, I tried to create “wormholes” to allow those women to go back in time and master their own stories, but also the stories of which they had been deprived. Those women may be different, but they are similar in that they all find themselves caught up in wars none of them chose. With Henri Jules Julien’s support, we managed to bring them together within my body and to lend them my voice; in a way, I myself became a “certified” battlefield. While presenting those women, I was continually haunted by another question: “What vision of womanhood do I *not* want to show?” The answer is very clear in my mind: this woman whose words we were translating into Moroccan dialect, I needed not to believe what she was saying.

Your performance goes beyond a “spoken” restitution of the poem. There is also a projection of films about the French colonisation of Morocco.

One of the pillars of the performance was research. The sound design of *Dodo Ya Momo Do* is based on a collection of lullabies I gathered from almost all the different regions of Morocco and in all Moroccan dialects (Darija, Amazigh, Hassani). We recorded those songs directly from the mouths of the grandmothers from those regions. Ever since I was a child, I’ve been fascinated by the only lullaby known to my generation in Casablanca, hence the title *Dodo Ya Momo Do*. When I became a mother, I wanted to sing other Moroccan lullabies to my son, but I found myself with an empty repertoire and with no grandmother. Art can be a victim of time: working on lullabies is a way to fight the oblivion slowly swallowing grandmothers on the one hand, and on the other to create a second, extended dialogue with my own voice on stage.

INTERVIEW WITH RASHA OMRAN

Through the vision of a female double, do you feel like you wrote a book about solitude?

Rasha Omran: Who is this person who “lived in the house before me?” There’s only ever been me in this house: the woman who lived here before me is my shadow, or maybe my own past from a long-gone time. But I could also say it’s the shadow of all lone women, all the strangers who, upon turning fifty, suddenly found themselves completely alone. The only thing they could do was to take note of the hormonal change happening within them, its effects on their bodies and psyches. That, and monitor their daily life and their loneliness among all those changes. Was there another woman in the house, before I came to live here? Yes, there was; but it’s not the woman from the book. I transformed her to look like me, I created her with the void of the house, I gave her all the qualities lonely women share. That means that I didn’t see another person: all I saw was myself. But I’m not unique: I am multitude. I see myself in all women, that’s what I say in the book. It’s also what director Henri Jules Julien saw, ending the show with the verse: “I look at myself closely, I see myself in all women...” All the women I saw in myself were lonely. So yes, my book is full of lonely women. In that sense, it is very much a book about solitude.

You had to flee Syria, and now live in Egypt. Your book does not seem to echo your exile. Yet a line in particular makes that a little unclear: “In my living room there is no map of the fatherland to dream of a return.” Isn’t that solitude also a way to express a distance, to give those poems a tangible and metaphorical, but never militant, power?

One can see that with *She who lived in the house before me*, I didn’t write about the idea of migration or exile. Overall, I didn’t feel like I was an exile. Exile means living in a place you don’t know, whose language you don’t speak. I live in a country whose language I know perfectly well (the language is exile), and the whole world can communicate through virtual means. It’s no longer something that only concerns refugees, exiles, and fugitives. But if I hadn’t had to leave Syria and live alone in a different place where I had to create a new life, from everyday details to friendships and relationships, as if I was starting my life anew, without that distance as you call it, without its effects and this unplanned transition in my life, would have I written a book about solitude? I really can’t say. My friends who stayed in Syria tell me the solitude they feel is almost lethal. If I’d stayed in Damascus, would have I written about the life-threatening solitude all those who stayed behind feel? Or would have I written about war and about death that is expected every day? I’m sure of nothing, except that poetry is an emotional flow and a transfer of the subconscious which appears before us as a text. Poetry is first and foremost metaphorical, otherwise it turns into a diary, a political speech, or a morality lesson. In the end, it’s not surprising for all the texts in my book to be about that alienation. Otherwise I wouldn’t be a poet.

You’re the creator of the Shaeirat project, which invites us to discover four great female voices of Arab poetry. What do you see in their writing?

Whatever we may think of the poems written in the Arab world, there’s a specific danger in their reception, which has an influence on their writing itself. The West (but not just the West) struggles to see Arab women, especially poetesses, as anything but either uber-victims who made it out or as hyper-transgressive and provocative. As if historical, cultural, political or economic determination was an absolutely unavoidable trap. The same image can be found in Europeanised circles in the Arab world—among liberal intellectuals, to simplify a little. The existential circumstances those women experience are of course undeniable; but the strength of their poetry is in their poems, not in ideology.

You directed Rasha Omran’s performance. What approach did you focus on?

The key principle for this project was to have a poetess on stage reading her poems. The audience will first hear her voice in the dark before seeing her alongside Nanda Mohammad for the text in French and, to amplify the text and avoid any mirror effect characteristic of the poems themselves, the presence of Isabelle Duthoit to give us to hear something from before language or from after the fall. The end result is a sort of oratorio with three women, three bodies, three languages. Three solitudes that come together only to drift apart again, but coming ever closer to the spectators.