

BARBARIANS

Who are the barbarians Hofesh Shechter refers to in the title of his trilogy? Are they creatures deprived of language and culture, or immature youths which our instincts train? The London-based choreographer likes allusions and invitations to think, not explanations. We sense what's going on here is to do with instinct; a journey on the border between the beastly and the human. In the first part of this triptych, *the barbarians in love*, six dancers are trapped in a classroom, where lessons about law and order, good and evil are drilled into their heads. A constant electric buzzing interferes with the baroque music, by François Couperin. The dancers alternate between academic postures and tribal movements to the point of schizophrenia, and the tension between classical elevation, the baroque quest for perfection, and the weighty physicality dear to Hofesh Shechter's choreographic language never lets up. Over the course of these three pieces, the audience becomes immersed in wildly different elements that are all nonetheless equally enveloping. The haze, the commitment of the bodies, the repeated assaults on the stage, and the power of rhythms and of the electronic music all combine to provide a sensorial experience which, contrary to what the title may suggest, progressively becomes a more introspective and contemplative territory in which Hofesh Shechter has rarely set foot...

Show premiered on 3 July, 2015 at Berliner Festspiele - Foreign Affairs, Berlin (Germany).

HOFESH SHECHTER

Resident of London since 2002, Hofesh Shechter originally worked as a performer before becoming a choreographer. He founded his company in 2008 and has since then created experiences of rare power. His telluric dance, which borrows from rock and folk as well as from more classical forms, leads to astonishing, trancelike states. His career, first with Tel Aviv's Batsheva Dance Company, directed by Ohad Naharin, where he worked alongside choreographers like Wim Vandekeybus, gives us hints as to the origins of this astounding physical engagement. If his work communicates an animalistic, sometimes even martial energy, like in *Political Mother*, which burst onto the stage to huge acclaim in 2010, this is because it is about the human condition: the tensions between the individual and the community, between free will and authority. And if the audience is at first shocked by a sort of electric current, they can also soon perceive an undercurrent of tenderness, of irony, even of melancholy. Hofesh Shechter, who also composes the music of his pieces, is like a shaman who leads us through communal experiences of introspection.

INTERVIEW WITH HOFESH SHECHTER

You said of your previous show, *Sun*, that it was a study about the beautiful, about good and evil. Is this new trilogy a continuation of this project?

Hofesh Shechter: The question of the definition of categories like “beautiful,” “ugly,” “good,” or “bad” is one I’ve been obsessed with for a while now. That being said, *Sun* was a play defined by its very large scope, which featured many performers and dealt with relatively serious political and social subject matters. The first part of this trilogy, *the barbarians in love*, is very different, very intimate. There may be six dancers on the stage, but they represent only one person, who could very well be me, in a classroom. It is, in a way, the classroom of life, where we have to come to terms and negotiate with the concepts of good and evil. Both those shows probably come from the same place, but this one is more introspective. It could very well all take place within one man’s head, whereas *Sun* took place out in the open.

What is the link between the three parts of the trilogy?

Each of the three parts creates its own universe, its own energy, its own feelings, its own music. The first one plays with the codes of baroque music and dance, but turns out to be rather serious. The atmosphere of the second one is much more physical, groovier, maybe simpler and more concrete as well. The third one is a duet. The performers are also very different from one show to the next. In the first one, they are relatively young, clean-shaven, fresh. The dancers of the second one are more physical, perhaps even animalistic. To perform the last part of the trilogy, I picked two dancers I’ve worked with for years. What links those three parts together, in spite of their very different energies, is of course the space in which they take place. I picture it as a place of contemplation. I’m curious to see what mark each part leaves on the one that follows.

You said of *Sun* that it would be funny, and it turned out to be rather dark. Is that because of your taste for contradiction?

I think in a way that if I were to create the parts I said I would, it would be much less interesting. When I start working on something, it’s as if I were pacing a dark room, walking into walls and stumbling. I encounter feelings and experiences I didn’t know were there. This piece pushed me into a very uncomfortable place; that may be something that the audience will feel. I always try to create a powerful experience, but to do so by pushing different buttons. I try to encourage an exchange of energies, of power, of feelings. The risk is for the spectators to try to find in each new piece something they’ve already experienced, the way you might after a successful date. There is always a risk that they’ll be disappointed.

Who are those *barbarians in love* in the first part of your trilogy?

By barbarians, I mean beings without culture, violent, governed by instinct. Right on the cusp of animality, not yet moulded. I like the idea that their state wouldn’t prevent them from being in love, from creating their own world, their own definition of love. It’s also a game with the audience: the titles of my shows shouldn’t be understood as explanations, but rather as invitations.

I also wanted to convey the idea that the performers are stuck, trapped in that room. Their youth and immaturity can give the impression that they are submissive, constrained. They sometimes act like small animals caught in a trap.

Did you choose to work with baroque music as a sort of counterpoint to this animality?

First of all, I have to say that I really enjoy working with baroque music and dance, which are both beautiful. But what I really wanted was to confront my choreographic lexicon to this typically baroque quest for perfection. The friction, the clash even, between a very polished and harmonious music and my more telluric choreographic lexicon seemed interesting. There's also something painful about this encounter between order and expressiveness, which made me think of an accident in the brain of a creator. This quest for order and perfection, just like the life lessons that are provided at the beginning of the show, feels a little out of place, absurd. The baroque repertoire allows me to describe beings who cling to this idea of perfection, which cannot but slip through their fingers. The forms we think of as the most beautiful are usually those that are closest to classical ones. Not only when it comes to dance, either. Cultural integration and education are what shapes our tastes. In fact, classical dance isn't any more beautiful or "cultivated" than tribal dances: they just come from different cultures. I'm interested in weakening, if not outright shattering, this definition of beauty, of perfection.

Are you also talking about what you do as a choreographer?

There is indeed something of the schizophrenic in the job of a choreographer. On the one hand, you have to create order, that is, to organise on the stage a coherent form. On the other, I'm always looking for the moment where it will spill out of the frame I've defined and allow even me to discover something I didn't expect. There's a permanent conflict between a very mathematical organisation of the space and a search for a more emotional and deeper expression. It's a conflict between what we think we know and what really is, between what we want to happen and what eventually does, between the head and the gut. It's as true of life as it is of choreographic creation.

Your previous creations were overtly political. What about this new project?

I wouldn't describe it as a political piece. At least, it has no direct reference to contemporary Israeli history. What I'm trying to do is at once more precise and more universal. I'm trying to look at the way our brains are conditioned, moulded by systems of belief that create order and security. You can of course look at it as a political act. But I think it is part of a larger and older interrogation of mine about the identity and legitimacy of the people in charge, who establish social and moral standards.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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- 18, 21, 22, 24 and 25 September 2015: Sadler's Wells Theatre, London (England)
- 20 October: Brighton Dome (England)
- 24 October: Banff Centre, Banff Alberta (Canada)
- 3 November: Centre Culturel, Sherbrooke (Canada)
- 9 November: Grand Théâtre, Québec (Canada)
- 10 and 11 November: National Arts Centre, Ottawa (Canada)
- 13 and 14 November: Dance House, Vancouver (Canada)
- 8 and 9 December: Staatstheater, Darmstadt (Germany)

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