

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE with Henri Jules Julien,
July 14 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- January 27 to 31, 2020, La Filature Scène nationale de Mulhouse
- March 24 to 27, CCAM Scène nationale Vandœuvre-lès-Nancy
- April 22 to 25, Théâtre Jean Vilar de Vitry-sur-Seine

MAHMOUD & NINI

Mahmoud is Egyptian. Nini is French. Mahmoud is black, Nini is white. Mahmoud is a man and Nini a woman, Mahmoud speaks Arabic, and Nini French. We could keep adding to this list of opposites, which might at first glance be endless sources of misunderstanding. Except that through the mediation of director Henri Jules Julien, actors Virginie and Mahmoud met in a train station and decided to create a show based on this encounter. *"We've tried to go as far as possible with the questions we each had about the other, and to express our curiosity and our prejudices without being afraid of empathy or mistakes."* From identity clashes to ideological doubts, from clichés to clumsy platitudes, from misunderstandings caused by inaccurate translation to the tricks used to try and get a glimpse of who we are and who the other is: the twists and turns of language and of being are the very material of *Mahmoud & Nini*, a show which explores this "cross-cultural encounter" and its complications, when one sincerely wishes to meet the other.

HENRI JULES JULIEN

A chemical engineer by training, **Henri Jules Julien** does theatre, writes for the radio (France Culture), is a translator and a producer—depending on where he is needed. He's lived for years in the Arab worlds, whose great poets (Rasha Omran, Carol Sansour, Malaka Badr...) he translates, all while producing in Europe artists from Egypt (Ahmed El Attar, Hassan El Geretly...), Morocco (Youness Atbane, Khalid Benghrib...), Syria, or Lebanon. *Mahmoud & Nini* is his third show, based on an idea born in Cairo. He currently resides in Casablanca.

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INTERVIEW WITH HENRI JULES JULIEN

How did you have the idea of writing about a “cross-cultural meeting?”

Henri Jules Julien : Early on in my time in Cairo, where I lived for a while, a Cairo artist abruptly asked me what my projects were. Without thinking too much about it, I told her I wanted to work on “orientalism.” Thinking aloud, she said: “*If you only knew the questions I get asked!...*” Then she explained: “*I’m a woman, an Egyptian, an Arab, culturally Muslim, but also a renowned artist. I can see how emblematic a figure I am, but also how it’s all based on prejudices.*” She was talking of course of the prejudices people had about her, but also about an imbalance in curiosity which means that Westerners often take the liberty of asking her inappropriate questions just because she’s “a woman and a Muslim.” Of course, the people who asked those questions weren’t targeting her personally, but she still had to endure those intrusions and could see how “innocent” prejudices can spread and become commonplace, in particular in the form of seemingly insignificant questions. And of course, “Easterners” also harbour a lot of prejudices about “Westerners,” but as historian Gérard Noiriel wrote recently: “*What sets human beings apart is not whether or not they have prejudices, but whether or not they can impose them on others.*” With this in mind, I decided to put my foot in it and to organise a “cross-cultural meeting” designed as an experiment in prejudices. Long before that, I’d been thinking of Virginie and Mahmoud, whom I both knew separately, as an obvious stage couple. I asked them if they wanted to meet, in front of a microphone, and to try together to get to know each other, recording themselves all the while and trying not to avoid any preconceived notion or trap. And even to seek them out: the point was to encourage one another in this exploration of prejudices, to explore our empathies and our mistakes, which are often linked, to the very end. We wrote down lists of stupid questions they’d heard countless times, of preconceptions, of discouraging or revolting clichés. We laughed a lot, of course, mostly at ourselves, because for one thing no one can ever break entirely free of his or her prejudices, and for another because I wanted each of us to put his or her own house in order first. Speaking of which, the writing itself, to turn all those moments of improvisation into drama, led to another problem: what right did I have to rephrase their questions, to “make them say” what was important to me but maybe not to them, how legitimate was I in “representing” Nini and Mahmoud, even if they’d become “characters?” Which brought the project back to the original question, the one Edward Said formulated in his famous *Orientalism*, which opens with a quote from Marx: “*They cannot represent themselves, they have to be represented.*” Marx was talking about the French peasantry in the 19th century. Said transposes the quote to a geography of oriental worlds and from the political to the cultural field: for him, western orientalism posits that the East is not yet able to represent itself. In a way, the same process continues in our work: me, author, director, held power over the representation of an Arab and a woman! It’s a problem that’s almost impossible to solve, but since the original decision was to put my foot in it, there was no escaping questions like: who’s talking? who’s making whom talk? where does the one talking talk from—or the one who’s making others talk (and what do you know, the one who’s making others talk is yet another man, White, from the West, in his fifties!...)? I don’t know if those are questions of “theatre,” but they are questions of “representation,” which I’m very interested in.

The exploration of language and its structures seems to be a recurring theme in your work.

In my practice of the stage, but also in other media, I have this obsession with the “right” question, and the necessity to word it as clearly as possible. So how could we formulate onstage the question of the cross-cultural meeting? Especially since the idea of meeting the other has become a sort of limp ideology, in particular in the world of art and culture: we’re going to meet each other, thus love each other, and so we’ll make a beautiful show together! I’d rather talk about conflict, about the difficulty of understanding each other even with the best of intentions, about the biases the prejudices weighing on us introduce in our relationships: it’s much more bracing! And more in tune with the way we humans live. Beyond the structures of language, it is the relationships between languages that seem to be both crucial and interesting. With this phenomenon which is at the heart of any meeting, and which is highly problematic: translation. We came up with a very simple form for the stage: a woman and a man, who speak different languages, are at once physically separated and linked by the translation of what each of them is saying into the other’s language. This link, translation, is at once unavoidable, permanent, and challenged again with each new exchange. The form is simple, but as Nini and Mahmoud are always saying, meeting someone, that’s complicated!

For Jacques Derrida, “the other is secret insofar as it is other.” Do you also tackle the question of the other as secret?

I’m not a theorist, but I don’t believe that there’s a secret at the heart of anybody, me or someone else, at least not a secret that would be an “identity,” true, deep, definitive, defined. Neither am I trying to hand wave away the question of identity: no one is rootless, entirely cut away from any history or culture. But for one thing every individual is a collage of diverse and contradictory things. And for another, this collage is dynamic: it has a history, it constantly changes forms and shapes under the antagonistic pressure of its many components. The danger is, of course, that of a fixed Identity, a unique History or Culture. I’d rather look at things through the dynamic prism of translation. It’s a fundamental idea in linguistics: even within a single language, every individual must “translate” what others are saying based on his or her own use of the language. Meaning and identity are forever being negotiated; so imagine between two different languages...! It’s what I’m trying to accomplish, whether I’m translating Arab poetesses, producing Arab shows in Europe, or creating my own shows: I’m always trying to translate. Translating so as not to reduce the other to an “identity,” and not to be reduced in turn. Translating not to understand or grasp the other, but to attempt an approach and travel together for a while. It’s difficult, you have to start over all the time, you experience great failures but great joys as well. But I don’t think we have a choice.

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Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach