



# THE SACRIFICE

## INTERVIEW WITH DADA MASILO

**The Sacrifice is the expression of an encounter between contemporary dance and Tswana ritual dance.**

**Dada Masilo:** I've always liked bringing dances from different cultures together; those encounters between sometimes opposing cultures allow me to create with very different dynamics, and above all help me avoid the danger of putting myself in a choreographic box. I want my shows to remain always fresh, in order to play with the expectations even of audience members most familiar with my work. To always surprise audiences when it comes to aesthetics. The show we'll be presenting at the Festival d'Avignon was directly inspired by *The Rite of Spring*. I wanted to explore the concepts of ritual, of community, and of sacrifice that exist in the ballet and are still oh so relevant. Contemporary dance here meets Tswana dance, which is part of my cultural legacy. This type of work is a way for me to explore my roots and get in touch with my ancestors. It's the first of my works dedicated to exploring my own cultural heritage, which I don't know all that much about. I grew up in a predominantly Xhosa culture. I learned the Tswana language, but neither the dance nor roots of that culture. After ballet, flamenco, contemporary and African dance, I've finally decided to look into my own deep roots. In Johannesburg, Tswana dance is part of our everyday life; walking through the mall, you can see youths dancing, it's fascinating. That's what I wanted to look into.

**Tswana dance is a ritual form of dance. There is therefore a direct connection to Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.**

The idea of a tribe, or a least of a community, as it exists in *The Rite of Spring*, echoes the collective principle in Tswana ritual dance; the idea of a group turning to the ancestors to request something. There's an obligatory exchange: to ask something of the ancestors, you have to be able to give them something in return. I gave my work the title *The Sacrifice* because it explores the choice we have to make collectively of who or what will be sacrificed. In African culture, rituals often include an animal sacrifice, what comes out of them are the cries of the animal. When you ask something of the ancestors, whatever it is—asking for rain to come, or for the healing of a sick person—a sacrifice is required and ritualised, blood has to be spilled for the ancestors; only then can dances and songs follow. Rituals weren't originally seen as cruel, but it's true that that's also what it's about, there is cruelty in the killing of an animal. Humans also sometimes underwent scarification rituals in order to spill blood. In *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky's music and Vaslav Nijinsky's dance tell the story of the renewal of a community and the symbol of the coming of spring, a change that has to be ritualised; you then have to sacrifice a human being for there to be a new season, a renewal of nature.

**You previously explored ritual rhythms in other shows.**

One of my previous shows, created in 2009, brought together flamenco and contemporary dance, and the question of a steady rhythm was already there, fascinating. There's a very codified intent in both types of dance, they're very physical, with a pace that digs deep into the emotions and the very being of the dancer. The whole company worked with a Tswana dance teacher, it was important for me that we all learn the origins of that dance objectively and in depth, and not only through my own personal bias. Only one of the dancers was previously familiar with Tswana dance. Learning is a challenge I always enjoy in my work. The challenge also resides in what we'll manage to create from the encounter between two very different dances. Tswana dance is minimalist and elegant, and based on rhythm. There's no explosion, everything remains contained, in particular with the counter-tempo. Its references are the reign of the wild animal, the tension of the hunt, the inherent rhythm of those so-called "quick-blooded" beings. To use those aspects of Tswana dance and to make them fit the rhythm of contemporary dance to find a balance is my aspiration for this show.

**What does the idea of sacrifice mean to you, as an artist but also as a person? And in this show in particular?**

I can answer that question both on a global and personal level. *The Sacrifice* is about the inhumanity of our modern world, its individualistic and discriminatory pitfalls. There's no balance, no justice right now. We live in a time where it's every man for himself, with the rich growing ever richer and the poor ever poorer. I'm trying to tell the story of a cleansing, a way to do away with everything to start again from scratch. The idea is to find a certain form of purity by going back to our roots and by coming together to start again, but differently. We would have to change how we think about climate change, about pollution... *The Sacrifice* explores those dynamics and our collective desire to change the world for the better, but also the spontaneous exactions that are the expression of individuality as the highest imperative. We're exploring the concepts of togetherness and solitude, and the relationships of power that appear between leaders and followers, while being aware that they can sometimes switch roles. Politics in South Africa is very complicated, it's hard to change habits when conditions are slowly deteriorating. There's corruption, and a lack of balance between the various powers... Humour is a way to offset the more dramatic echoes of the show, and laughter plays a large part in *The Sacrifice*. It's sometimes nervous laughter, but it's always salutary.

**Can you tell us a little more about the very essence of your work: music?**

The rhythmic discordance in *The Rite of Spring* has always fascinated me, it's one of the things that drew me to it. That's why I wanted to bring twelve dancers and four musicians together onstage. We improvised together to create a music freely inspired by Stravinsky. Some parts are played live, others have been recorded. It's my first time working with live music, which allows us to keep an open mind when it comes to possibilities of improvisation. *The Sacrifice* is about an evolution from a state of purity to a deteriorating situation, with the music accompanying this deterioration of relationships within the community. So does the way we play with costumes. We start with the white of purity, in the light of spring, to end, just like the four seasons, with gaunter, poorer images, before the obviously upcoming renewal.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach