



WHILE I WAS WAITING

INTERVIEW WITH OMAR ABUSAADA

Up until 2009, you worked in Damascus. Could you tell us more about that period, which forged your vision of the theatre?

Omar Abusaada: I went to school in Syria at a time where we thought there was going to be a debate about democracy, about freedom of speech. After graduating from the Drama School of Damascus, I founded a company, Studio Theatre, with students from the classes of 2001 and 2002. Since we were breaking from conventional theatre, we worked and rehearsed for two years until we had a full show (which I directed and did the dramaturgy for), which we wanted to be in line with the spirit of our generation. In 2004, we presented *Insomnia*, which, come to think of it, contains elements of what my theatre would become. It's a play about a girl and a boy who meet one night and wander together until dawn, going through various places and meeting different people who were never able to make their dreams come true. We were accused of giving the youth of Syria a bad name! It's at that time that I first understood the relationship between the audience and the stage, and discovered that Syrian theatre failed to attract new audiences. I started thinking that the theatre should try to appeal to a wider audience, to different social classes. I really realised that the theatre could play a political role, be a tool of resistance. You need to know that before 2011, there was no way to overcome censorship in Syria. It was a double censorship, on both the text and the performance itself. There were so many red lines. You couldn't talk about politics, about dignitaries, about corruption, or sex, or religion... I was never able to put on a show without having to change a few things, to come up with alternative solutions. It's in that context that our company began following the model of the Theatre of the Oppressed, founded by Augusto Boal on the basis of the understanding of social problems and the search for their solutions. For four years, we worked like an itinerant troupe, The Interactive Theatre, going from village to village and performing on town squares, inviting the audience to join us onstage. I directed three plays, *Poster* (2006), *The Kohl Stick and its Vial* (2007), my first collaboration with Mohammad al Attar, and *Samah* (2008), a play created with minors in reform schools. Since we refused any type of financial aid from the state, the company quickly ran out of money and was dissolved.

In 2011, after a two-year break, your theatre took another turn.

I started working again at the beginning of the revolution against Bashar al-Assad. Meeting point, an itinerant international festival, invited me to direct a play, and I created *Look at the Streets, This Is What Hope Looks Like*, which played in Beirut, Athens, Brussels, and Berlin. It was an entirely different play from what I'd done before, especially when it comes to the text, which was based on two *Guardian* articles about the Arab Spring and a bunch of texts posted on social networking sites by Syrian activists. One year later, I created *Could You Please Look Into the Camera?* with a text by Mohammad al Attar, based on interviews with political prisoners. We then created *Antigone of Syria* with Syrian and Palestinian refugees who live in the Shatila camp in Beirut and tell their stories while commenting Sophocles' tragedy. For those creations, I worked with both amateurs and professionals, sometimes bringing them together; however, we couldn't play them in Syria, for safety reasons.

Why do you live in Syria? How have your working conditions evolved?

All my family and my friends live there, so I decided I couldn't leave. Before 2011, I belonged to a group of independent artists. It was already difficult to find places where we could create. Today, the war has completely changed our lives. It's become hard to get together to work, there's no electricity, almost no means of transportation. And the nature of the text I direct means I'm no longer safe. Part of the people I work with can't come back to Syria, where they could be arrested, questioned, and judged at any time. I haven't had any problem so far, but my playwright, Mohammad al Attar, is in exile. I can still put on shows because I have the support of foreign producers, but also thanks to the donors of the AFAC, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture.

How did *While I Was Waiting*, your last creation, come about?

I've been working on this project for over two years, starting with the story of someone close to me who fell into a coma after getting beaten up. He died. Since then, thanks to a doctor friend with whom I talked about the subject for a long time, I've been able to visit different Syrian hospitals, where I recorded the stories of the families of coma patients. Mohammad al Attar then used those stories to write the text, which evolved throughout rehearsals with the actors. In this play, I tried to understand the relationship a person in a coma can have with his or her body, but also with his or her imagination. I wanted to show how a family will change their everyday routine to take care of someone in a coma, while living in a city at war, which also forces them to change their habits. I also looked into the private reactions of people to such an ordeal because I find it even more difficult to deal with a coma than with death. We follow characters who'll use different means to try to wake up this young man: some of them talk a lot, give him news about his family, talk about what he liked, about the major changes that life in Syria has undergone. We also follow the evolution of characters who'll have to decide between leaving for Europe or staying in Syria. *While I Was Waiting* is also a way to take another look at our dreams. In 2014, I met a woman whose son had been in a coma since 2010. Meanwhile, two of his siblings were killed, another one is in exile, his father died, his friends have left the country or enrolled into the army. And, every day, she wondered what she could tell him of the situation if he ever woke up. And so there's this pretty simple idea in the play: if in 2011, I had imagined that five years later, democracy would have won, that the standards of living would have increased, that we would have more freedom... The exact opposite of what's happening today.

If there's a coma, that means there's still life, still hope. Would you say that Syria is in a coma, too?

Yes, the country is neither alive nor dead, but the metaphor works on different levels. From that point of view, what I observe in *While I Was Waiting* is that the young people who were active during the revolution are now absent or are subjected to a situation they can no longer influence. Five years after the start of the revolution, *While I Was Waiting* is an opportunity to review the situation in Syria, but also to review my own practice of theatre. When the revolution started, I was enthusiastic, I was in the street, playing an active part through theatre. But five years later, my present is very different from what I hoped it would be. I think it's important to understand why we are where we are when our ideals haven't changed. Ever since I first started working, I've been a proponent of a political theatre whose values failed to come true, even though they could have. I'm not as naïve today. I understand now that those in power aren't the only obstacle to the emergence of a new society. One of the main problems is a flaw inherent to the initial construction of Syrian society and of its family system, systematically oriented towards the father and religion. I also realised that Syria is caught in a web of international interests that vary from one region to the next and supersede local or regional interests. Which is a problem. Today, I feel closer to a group of people who think that social justice will be impossible in my country as long as we don't fight for it on a global level as well. The question of the coma also shows this new awareness of changes. As for hope, it's always been there in my creations. Hope is life, with its developments and progress.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu

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