



# جوغينغ JOGGING

## INTERVIEW WITH HANANE HAJJ ALI

**You live in Lebanon and make art in Beirut, but you've also been an activist for a long time. With the political, economic, and social crises going on, how are things going for you right now?**

**Hanane Hajj Ali:** It's very difficult. The internet is working more or less fine today, but that's not always the case. We get two hours of electricity a day. The rest of the time, we make do by combining different sources of energy. It's all the more difficult because we had a very harsh winter with freezing cold winds blowing from the east. The banking crisis that started in 2019 has made the situation even worse for the Lebanese people, who cannot access their bank accounts freely. The war in Ukraine has driven the price of bread way up. More shortages are coming. Politicians are the only ones who still live normally and are able to communicate with the rest of the world, who are selling them weapons... Culture is like bread to me: a vital necessity. And culture includes of course education. But things are collapsing here. Schools, universities, professors: nothing's working properly. It's a serious problem. If we don't teach the new generation civic values and principles, if we have no long-term vision, who will the citizens of the future be? I'm scared of the future. Artists have the same desire for change than most of Lebanese society. They've always been part of it, they fight against censorship, against exactions, to defend freedom of speech. Artists have realised that they need to band together to survive. I'm a member of three cultural associations which are coming together to set up relief funds, provide technical equipment, rehearsal or performance spaces to make it possible for artists to even create. But it's not enough for those who, unlike me, aren't lucky enough to be able to tour abroad and earn a living that way.

**With *Jogging*—which has already toured the world—you tell a story about women. Yours, that of two Lebanese women, but also the story of Medea, that great ancient character. It allows you to illustrate the difficulties women face in the Arab world nowadays while avoiding clichés. All face death and violence. All kill their children...**

At the beginning of rehearsals, I didn't mean to talk about the condition of women, but I wanted to work on my relationship to Beirut, to citizenship. As a woman, a mother, an actress, who sees my city torn apart every morning as I run through it. Jogging is like theatre to me: a moment which allows me to think freely, to dream, to resist. Once back home, I write down what came to me as I ran, whether ideas or sensations. A long time ago, as my son was struggling with cancer, as I ran through the streets of Beirut I once thought about smothering him with a pillow! Out of love! To end his terrible suffering! When I realised what I was thinking, I was struck dumb. I couldn't move. And I thought about Medea. While I've always been fascinated with this character, I'd always refused to play her. I didn't think a Lebanese mother could kill her children, whatever the reasons. After I saw myself smothering my own child, I realised how naïve I'd be. From there, Medea haunted me. I started reading everything that had been written about her: plays, novels, films... My research led me to dig out stories of infanticide in Lebanon, including the story of Yvonne, a well-educated and beautiful Christian woman who, in spite of a perfect love story with husband and children, discovered her husband's double life and poisoned herself and her daughters. Nothing could have hinted at this tragic end! A gesture she explained in a 45-minute video she left for her husband, and which then disappeared from the legal record when it should have been saved as key evidence of the crime. The family managed to get the video back to destroy it. No one will ever know Yvonne's deepest motivations, but the facts are striking. In *Jogging*, I reconstructed Yvonne's tragedy as I understand it, and the spectators do the same. That story allows me to remind people that in today's Lebanon, it can be extremely difficult to obtain justice due to a lack of testimony. The disappearance of evidence leads to the collapse of responsibility and truth... And it goes beyond justice, to reach everything from personal to political life. It's extremely serious. The second woman in *Jogging* is Zahra, someone I knew, who was born in the south of the country. Zahra is an autodidact and managed to become a journalist. But she was also married off when she was 15 by her parents and had to struggle mightily to get a divorce and marry Mohammad, the love of her life. She had three children and her second marriage didn't last. Originally a left-leaning woman, she turned more and more to religion and was radicalised. She raised her children

in the love of God and her most ardent desire was for God to take her sons away so that they would be celebrated as martyrs. When two of her sons died in Southern Lebanon while fighting for the Islamic Resistance in 2006, she was proud. But when in 2013 she received a letter from her youngest fighting with the Hezbollah, she understood that he'd been imprisoned and tortured after refusing to kill women, children, and civilians in Syria. Right before dying, he asked her not to celebrate him as a martyr in the name of the truth. With that letter, Zahra's world collapsed. She realised that by raising her sons religiously, she had played a part in their death.

### **Can you describe what today's Medea looks like?**

Medea is a woman who forces us to ask ourselves "How far would I be willing to go in response to pain?" The character isn't a monolith, and neither are the answers to that question. The women whose stories I tell, and mine, are like so many facets of what Medea could be today. As I kept reading about her, I discovered she was an infinite character, or an indefinite one. I end the play by saying that I'll never be able to stop asking myself that question. Is it me? Is it you, the audience? Is it the World that is violent and never stops killing its children? How many Medea are there who no one talks about or even knows they exist? I think of those women who can't think of any way to make the future acceptable for their children except by throwing them onto rickety boats so that they can sail to northern Europe, exposing them to the risk of dying at sea and thus going straight to Heaven. A situation I clearly express in this show by using HOME, a poem by Warsan Shire, born in Kenya to Somali parents, who arrived in Great Britain when she was one and has been living in London since 2015: "you have to understand,/ that no one puts their children in a boat/unless the water is safer than the land (...)/no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck/feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled/means something more than journey."

### **Your play has gone through several endings. It's often evolving. Always with humour.**

I end the play like it began, with a humorous jogging through the room and on stage. But it's true that I've been touring with this show for a long time and throughout the world. Every ending is tied to where I am and to the state of the world. Every new ending is therefore the starting point of a new meaning. Humour is essential because it allows me to talk about Medea. That character is so terrible, so hard to understand that I have to put some distance between us. It's the same attitude I have to exhibit when faced with all the modern tragedies throughout the World. Humour is also a convenient way to talk about the taboos that Arab women face. Taboos that have to do with religion, politics, and sexuality. And in the end, humour is also hope!

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu