



THE MUSEUM

INTERVIEW WITH BASHAR MURKUS

Why do you tackle such intense and politicised subjects, like terrorism and extremism here?

Bashar Murkus: Our working method with the Khashabi Theatre, which we founded in 2015 with a group of Palestinian artists, begins with a very long research process. We don't pick our subjects because we find them attractive or politically important, but because they make us uncomfortable and put us in danger. For *The Museum*, we first tried to understand what terrorism is. We noticed that the word "terrorism" is problematic, because of all its negative connotations. So we turned to the question of extremism, of radicalism, and of the meaning we can give to the actions of a person trying to change the world in his or her own way. I do theatre because I believe, in a way, that theatre and art can change things and redefine the world we live in. At some point in the creative process, which lasted a year and a half, I asked myself whether I would be ready to use violence if I were to realise that theatre doesn't change anything, if my family was killed, if my house was destroyed, if I couldn't feed my loved ones. It's a very difficult question to answer, because I think no human being is very far from using violence to make the world a place he or she can live in. I don't like to talk about the play as a show about a terrorist attack, because that's not what it's about.

Yes, the subject of the play seems to be a universal question about the meaning of life and death in a violent world. You talk about Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" as an inspiration...

We really tried to understand the tipping point when radicalisation turns into action, this very specific moment when a person goes into a public place to kill people. What our society and media show us of those people doesn't take into account the fact that this might be, for them, the only way they know to change their reality. We then asked ourselves about the difference between war and terrorism, without trying to judge if war is good and terrorism bad, or vice versa. In truth, the only difference between the two is that war is justified by the State and requires a lot of means, while a terrorist action is not and does not. One is terrorism of power, the other individual terrorism. Beyond banal political discussions, we wanted to look at things from a human point of view. That's when we used the writings of Hannah Arendt and other thinkers to understand why, in our lives, we commit such acts. The show is therefore not about terrorism, power, or war, but about a wider, deeper subject which questions the meaning of things, our responsibilities, and our capability to reshape the world.

In *The Museum*, the detective repeats "We're orchestrating your final image, and we're going to sign it."

The organisation of a terrorist attack is always imagined as a staging, like a movie directed for an audience who will watch it. It's a production, with a director, a cameraman, a producer, like a play. A text is written, someone has to be in this place at this time and do this action, and it only makes sense if everything is recorded. The execution of a condemned man by the State is also a spectacle. In the past, executions were public, so that the population could come and watch. Today, they happen in sterile rooms in which "spectators" are witness to the event. They are filmed so they can be seen and broadcast. There are three levels of theatre here. The first is that terrorist attack conceived like a staged play, the second is the execution, and the third is the play itself as it is created. The actors who handle the camera and control the video add beautiful images to the stage. The video also allows them to express a reflection which goes beyond the question of terrorism, to explore all the possibilities about the handling of history, its memory, and the cycles of hate it leads to.

What are your working conditions in Haifa like since the creation of the Khashabi Theatre—which means “wood” in Arabic?

The Khashabi Theatre is an independent Palestinian theatre in Haifa. “Independent” in Israel means that our company doesn’t accept government subsidies. Our creations are therefore freer and more open to the world. It’s both a political and artistic choice. As Palestinians living there, we’re fighting for our homeland, for our identity. In Haifa, unlike in Gaza, we don’t fight for our lives, but to stop being the mirror of the State and of the system. Of course, it creates problems to find funding and create our shows... but we made this choice because we cannot and must not forget that we live in an occupied country. Does the occupation mean that we don’t have the right to create culture to save our identity? We’ve therefore decided to take our responsibilities to create our own culture and art. It’s the least we could do. In 2014, I created *The Parallel Time* at the Al-Midan Theatre in Haifa, a play about Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli prisons. This very controversial subject led to the Ministry of Culture and the city council cutting subsidies to the theatre, which led to its closing. That play created a different narrative, asking an essential question Israel didn’t want us to ask. But it’s crucial to be able to create without restrictions. We also have to fight the very real danger of self-censorship. Khashabi took part in a movement to raise artistic awareness of the situation. Today there are festivals, concert venues, art galleries, a cultural life within and for the community. *Khashabi* in Arabic means two things: it’s wood as a material, but it’s also a “wooden” stage. Our logo is a tree growing out of its frame, in the hope that it will bear fruits, not only in Haifa but throughout the world.

You pay a lot of attention to body language. The prisoner’s could be seen as a work of art, dissected, labelled, and exhibited in a museum. How do you approach the question of the body and of movement?

I’m very attached to the idea of the body on stage. Here, it’s not only the bodies of the actors, or bodies in a theatre, it’s at the heart of the play’s very subject: the body before laws, before modernity... Man used to have to fight to feed himself and survive, but in our modern societies we don’t use our bodies all that much. While working on the play, we found a clear link between violence and extremism on the one hand, and this problematic position of a constrained and “immobile” body on the other. We therefore decided to reproduce on stage the effects of each movement or posture the body goes through. *The Museum* is also about the control of the image. The actors are always aware of the impact of the images they’re creating. The idea of having a shootout in a museum came from the fact that a museum is a place where the system controls the image that ends up being exhibited, where people in power write History. The character of the “terrorist” is highly educated, he has a master’s degree in fine arts. His action is therefore highly artistic, he creates an event designed to remain etched in people’s memories to produce the final image. It’s a hard reality to accept for me as an artist that the images that have survived through History and can be seen today are those the people in power decided to preserve.

Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz in January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach