



BABEL 7.16

INTERVIEW WITH SIDI LARBI CHERKAOUI AND DAMIEN JALET

What was the choreographic and historic context when you created *Babel* in 2010?

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet: *Babel* was our first project as a duo. There was no government in Belgium in 2010, as the people we'd elected couldn't find a compromise. The show was about the relationship between the territory and language, it became part of the zeitgeist. It even premiered in La Monnaie, a historic place in Belgian creation, and the only federal institution in the country. We come from both Belgian communities, French (Damien Jalet) and Flemish (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui), and we've been working in harmony for ten years now. We'd wanted to work on that theme before 2010. After *Foi (Faith)* and *Myth*, *Babel* was a return to the present, in which each and every one of us was encouraged to take responsibility for his or her actions within a community. We invited people with strong personalities to use their identities and their own (spoken and choreographic) language, as baggage but also as weapons. We wondered whether to define oneself isn't in a way to assert oneself in opposition to others, or if another way is possible. We thought at first that this show would be more violent and pessimistic than the first two of the triptych. But after a month and a half of research into this subject and its tragic implications, a certain lightness and much-needed humour spontaneously emerged. It allowed us to overcome the seriousness and tragedy inherent to the theme of the show.

When words reach an impasse, does the body become your preferred medium to communicate?

In *Babel*, we imagined that there once was a poetic time that came before words, made of gestures. A precise language, doubtless very fragile, but more personal and meticulous. You can lie with words, but not with gestures. Dance reveals things we don't always accept about ourselves; strength or fragility, a need, a lack, a desire... The codes of contemporary dance allow us to be constantly playing with those emotions. In *Babel*, what is felt is first and foremost the physical strength of the dancers. In our previous shows, that physical strength was tied to tragedy, to the idea of a constant fall. Here, there's a capacity for resilience that allows us to bounce back from the negative to the positive, a salutary rebound for both the mind and the body, which lets you live fully. Every artist in *Babel* has a double identity, a dual culture. The reference to migration and duality is important to us. We each become ambassadors for our cultures. The show plays on the beauty of contrasts, on a variety of colours, accents, and nuances. It is true that *Babel* asks the fundamental question of who we are in a world in which technology is constantly transforming our relationship to identity, or empathies and connections. Yet our need to belong is archaic, almost tribal. So how can we think about the notion of identity nowadays: is it something immutable, does it require structure and limitations? Or is it something that is constantly changing and transforming?

Why recreate *Babel*?

There's an archaic need to put down roots and define ourselves against others. That's the danger: this need of an enemy. Societal motifs repeat endlessly, and one question remains: is it possible to acquire a different understanding of life, a trust in mankind in general? The show questions this relationship to the other. The moments of contact between the dancers are aggressive, but sometimes also very tender. We question the importance of mirror neurons as the basis of the development of language and culture, as creating empathy. From a physical point of view, skin is the only border (and matter) that separates us from one another. It's a fixed, opaque border. But permeability and transparency are necessary. Things can't remain frozen, they have to grow and evolve, but also sometimes disappear. We started from the idea that every language has an army and a fleet. Languages have this martial, violent side. They're often imposed by force, through wars and conquests. Language imprints itself on a territory and generates a visceral energy, it imposes itself, which sometimes leads to hybridity. That's the roots of Europe. While words and sounds are often built in an arbitrary manner, it is sometimes the environment that develops the nuances of a language. There's a lot more words for snow or white at the North Pole than in Morocco. *Babel 7.16* puts to the test our capacity to accept the fact that a show could be the same and keep its identity while mutating fluidly with the evolutions of life. All in all, it's a beautiful experience in evolution.

***Babel 7.16* is a recreation with a larger cast in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes. Is this "update" a choice that resonates with topical questions?**

Babel 7.16 is an updated version of *Babel* that focuses on its relationship to its location and to the space that surrounds it; we would therefore say that *Babel 7.16* is a recreation. It's first and foremost the encounter between the show and the Cour d'honneur. That place inspired us to see the show differently. We're bringing together more dancers than for the original. That number grew as we toured, and it tells of our relationship to the migration of peoples. It's the exponential number that people are afraid of. Afraid of losing their place to new arrivals. We toured for five years, and exchanged with many dancers. Inviting all the dancers who made *Babel* what it was to perform in *Babel 7.16* in Avignon is for us a way to reflect on transmission, on constant regeneration. It's a shifting show that reflects the flow of identities and cultures. The reality is that no one is indispensable to the show, since it was designed as a collective endeavour, but every dancer brings something unique to the table. We also wanted to play with the ambivalence of the initial myth that talks of a curse that could just as well be seen as a blessing. It's essential to have elements that can unite us, but also allow us to differentiate ourselves. Difference can be very attractive, and generate curiosity. The dancers "met" gradually during rehearsal, and we wanted the show to reflect both the difficulties and the beauty of that encounter. We question the relationship of mankind to time: future, past, present. The show tells of social networks, of man as a Facebook profile, an avatar, almost like a robot. In *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang almost prophetically imagined the divine presence as a robot. The arrogance of men announced a form of technological revolution. The internet completely changed the way we communicate, opening some horizons and closing others. The show plays with that contrast: a futuristic form of communication against our very archaic worldview. Working with the body, with dance, allows us to be more lucid about the contrasts and absurdities of language. It can be an agent of harmony or of exclusion. Just like religion, or like any software that you don't know how to use. For the Cour d'honneur, we decided to go with a pared down version of the scenography. The five volumes identical to the multiple surfaces created by Anthony Gormley are the only things we kept. They're complex, shifting symbols, and notably stand in for the five continents. There's a magical link, an invisible relationship, between man and those five volumes on the stage. For Gormley, the human body is a space within which things happen. Those five structures are an extension of the human body. The outside is different but the soul is the same, it occupies the same space.

What does the new title, *Babel 7.16*, mean?

The extension of the title, *7.16*, is a reference to several things: the numbers used to identify software, Biblical verses, or a contemporary date. To share our obsession with numerology, if you add up the digits of 7 and 16, you end up with 5, a reference to the five letters of the word Babel. Numerology and mythology join. There's a logical relationship to everything. For ten years, we researched numerology, mythology, beliefs, traditions, etymology, etc. As contemporary dancers, we're part of a tradition. Just like language. However, step by step, we're taking that tradition somewhere, and so "the past changes because of the present." After November 2015, and the results of the French regional elections—especially in Vaucluse—it was important for us to "re-express" the questions raised by this show. In the original myth, it is said that God didn't want to share His territory with men, whereas all men wanted was to go where God was. To share is a decision, an attitude, in particular when faced with traumatic events. Those moments where extreme solidarity struggles with the fear of sharing.

There are also many musicians on the stage. You pay particular attention to the rhythm, the music...

We brought together two musicians who play medieval music from Italy, Spain, and France, two musicians from Rajasthan, whose music features unique melodic nuances, and two Japanese percussionists who play traditional music. Musically speaking, we're recreating the Silk Road, which was a powerful cultural and symbolic axis. From Europe to Asia. We asked all those musicians to adapt a piece of electronic music for their ancient instruments. Working on rhythm is interesting, because different cultures approach it differently, for both dancers and musicians. The rhythm is a double symbol, it brings people together and allows for dance to happen, but it also represents the sounds of battlefields. With the rhythm comes breathing. When we breathe together, it becomes an act of sharing, as we were taught by a great Sufi musician who came from Istanbul to accompany us in our musical research. It lets you reconstitute the path of thought, which is itself an act of sharing, from me to the other. In some cultures, it is also a space where one can touch the divine. "Respire" and "esprit," the French for "breathe" and "mind," have a common root. "Ah" is in inhalation, "Lah" in exhalation. The divine resides in breathing itself.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant

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