

THE LAST SUPPER

The Last Supper likes to play with its misleading similarities to Christ's last meal. As in most paintings of the last supper, the guests seat side by side, an unnatural, even affected, seating arrangement. Because if they do share a meal and make every effort to be together, the characters of Ahmed El Attar's play also like to put on a show. They are representative, to the point of caricature, of Cairo's upper class. As post-revolutionary Egypt faces major political, economic, and social challenges, their conversations betray their carelessness, their frivolity, their contempt for the people. The director examines a ruling class obsessed with appearances and money, whose language and positions he uses to expose their vacuity. In an uninterrupted flow of words, his characters wallow in the void they have themselves created, to the point of absurdity. Fiction turns out to be more realistic than many documentaries, and all affirm that this period of "agitation" will eventually come to an end. The Egyptian director and his eleven actors work on language as the location and symptom of a vertiginous crisis of meaning; although it takes place in Cairo and is in Arabic, this last supper could very well be about all of us.

Show premiered on 10 November, 2014 at Théâtre Falaki, Cairo (Egypt).

Preview in Europe : 28 and 29 November, 2014 at Festival Les Rencontres à l'échelle, Marseille.

AHMED EL ATTAR

As a teenager, Ahmed El Attar realised just how much words meant nothing in Egypt. Parents, media, teachers, all spoke of a reality that had little to do with his own daily experience. Today, he forever tries to avoid the traps and explore the potentialities of language by placing words at the heart of his creations. Using various registers and genres—classic literature, popular culture, café conversations—he creates performances that keep dramatic conventions at arm's length without ignoring them completely. After directing his own texts—*Committee* (1998), *Life is Beautiful or Waiting for My Uncle From America* (2000)—Ahmed El Attar starts creating composite works based on schoolbooks, oaths, or political speeches, such as the one delivered by Nasser in 1956 for the nationalisation of the Suez Canal (in *F**K Darwin, or How I've Learned to Love Socialism*). Beyond his work as a writer, a performer, and a director, Ahmed El Attar is an unavoidable presence in Cairo's cultural circles, where he's always trying to shake things up. He is the founder and director of a rehearsing space, the Emad Eddin studios, and of a multidisciplinary festival, the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF).

INTERVIEW WITH AHMED EL ATTAR

The show you will present at the Festival d'Avignon is called *The Last Supper*. However, it has more to do with a family dinner than with a variation on Christ's last meal. Why this title?

Ahmed El Attar: It's a habit of mine: I like playing with titles, to steal them from other works and deceive the audience, play with their expectations. My previous shows—*Life is Beautiful or Waiting for My Uncle From America*; *Othello or Who's Afraid of William Shakespeare*; *On the Importance of being an Arab*; *Mother I want to be a Millionaire*; *F**K Darwin or How I've Learned to Love Socialism*—are references, in no particular order, to Oscar Wilde, Edward Albee, Marcel Achard, Samuel Beckett, but also to the titles of some commercial plays. I don't try to deceive the audience to entrap them, but rather to intrigue them, to force them to leave their comfort zone. This game with the audience, which begins with the title of the show, often continues on the stage. I like to make people doubt the exact nature of what they're seeing. For this play, I borrowed the English title of Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting. However, little is left of it: a large table around which are gathered thirteen characters. Actually, there are only eleven actors on the stage, to which you can add the character of the mother, who is never seen, and the baby, played by a hyper-realistic American doll.

***The Last Supper* is your first show since the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Can the influence of those events be felt?**

After the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, I started wondering about the meaning of what I do. What we'd been hoping for so long had finally happened. What were we to do now? What could I talk about, now that the system had collapsed? One of my faithful companions, Hassan Khan, immediately warned me that the story was probably far from over, which turned out to be true a few months later. What fascinates me in the Egyptian conception of order, and in the movements contesting it, is the omnipresence and the authority of the figure of the father, against which you can never truly rebel. It's a protean figure, taking for instance the form of the president in the political realm, of the boss at work. I've always found this patriarchal relationship to power interesting; it seems to me to be the central question of our recent history. There are always fathers in my shows, I even made one up for my version of *Othello*. This is why the departure of Hosni Mubarak, which we so desired, didn't solve all our problems. We fell back into the same pattern, first with Morsi, then with Sisi. We cannot live without this authoritarian father, even if we hate him. I think our revolution will finally be complete the day Egyptian society manages to kill the figure of the father, to get rid of him. I'm certain this day will come.

Those relationships of power you describe within the family circle take place, in your show, in a very specific social environment...

I didn't want to write a show that would be about the revolution itself, but rather about what it can mean to revolt... or not to revolt. I decided to set the show in the Cairo upper class. I don't feel or express any kind of hatred towards them, but I can only observe that its members live in a bubble. Nothing seems to affect them. The revolution didn't really touch them. Or if it did, it was only

within the limits of their world. For instance, they constantly talk about how tired they are of the situation. With every new crisis, the poorest and least educated are singled out, treated as if they were partly responsible. You'll often hear that Egypt is lagging behind because Egyptians are ignorant peasants, because 40% of the country is illiterate. Obviously, a lack of education in the general populace always works in favour of authoritarian regimes. But in fact, what is most shocking is the irresponsibility of the country's elites. They see themselves as superior, when their world is built on nothing.

Would you say *The Last Supper* is a social satire?

I mistrust labels, such as "political theatre" or "social theatre." I think the theatre is necessarily political and social. But I don't want to make a moral theatre, whose only purpose would be to be edifying. I'm not interested in moralising. I just try to show pictures, a slice of time, to express my vision and my experience of certain situations. What I'm trying to do in this particular show is to create a sort of experience of the void. Everything that happens between the characters of the play turns out to be empty, to be nothing. Even their feelings, as intense as they are, that have them laughing one moment and crying the next, are incomprehensible. That's not to say it is an absurdist play; to the contrary, all in all, it is a realist work. Most people who go to the theatre in Cairo belong to this upper class I'm depicting in *The Last Supper*. It creates a mirror effect. Some, as they leave *The Last Supper* at the end, realise that what they just saw looks a lot like their own family dinners. This very descriptive approach, which isn't directly critical, could paradoxically be said to be more direct.

What is your relationship to the text, to language?

It's always been my goal to deconstruct language, to prostitute texts, so to speak. In Egypt, we grew up in a world of permanent lies: language and speeches were tools to falsify the truth. On television, we would hear that Egypt was the mother of the world. Parents and teachers would say the same thing. Even though you just had to walk down the street to see that it was nothing but a bunch of lies, most Egyptians refused to open their eyes. In my case, it's after I spent a year in France when I was 16 that this unreal world started to unravel. That's probably why I often work on repetition, on the invention of neologisms, on the mixing of fictional texts and real ones. For *The Last Supper*, it's another approach: the text is very dense, but it doesn't matter at all. The characters talk ceaselessly, but they're not saying anything. Language here serves a dual purpose: to give the impression that something is about to happen, before showing that what those people are saying is meaningless. This accumulation of sentences also helps to build and develop characters.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

AND...

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

What we see and what we don't want to see with, among others, Ahmed El Attar, organised in partnership with the Association Tamam, 20 July at 11:00 am
Site Louis Pasteur de l'Université, free admittance

CINEMATOGRAPHIC TERRITORIES

Salò, ou les 120 journées de Sodome directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini (only for children + 16 years old) / Screening followed by an encounter with Ahmed El Attar
21 July at 02:00 pm, Utopia-Manutention

TOUR DATES FOR *THE LAST SUPPER* AFTER THE FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

- from 9 to 15 November 2015: T2G, Centre dramatique national de Gennevilliers, within the framework of the Festival d'Automne à Paris
- 17 November: L'apostrophe, Scène nationale de Cergy-Pontoise & Val d'Oise, within the framework of the Festival d'Automne à Paris
- 21 November: Théâtre Liberté, Toulon
- 24 and 25 November: Bonlieu, Scène nationale d'Annecy
- 20 and 21 January 2016: Bozar, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (Belgium)
- 25 and 26 January 2016: Emilia Romagna Teatro, Bologna (Italy)

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