



LADY MAGMA

INTERVIEW WITH OONA DOHERTY

The story of the creation of *Lady Magma* is full of twists and turns...

Oona Doherty: The pandemic forced us to take a break in our work. This was an interruption, not a definitive stop, and it allowed me to rethink the form, to simplify it, particularly when it comes to the scenography. I felt the need to present the show not within the confines of the theatre, but outside of it. The original set and costumes, inspired by the 1970s, were discarded; the aesthetics became less contextual, more primal, close to a state of nature. Which works perfectly with the cloister of the Charterhouse of Villeneuve lez Avignon, which the Festival d'Avignon proposed as venue for *Lady Magma*. There will be five dancers on the stage, but actually ten women are taking part in the project, in case they have to take over a role. Another fundamental thing which happened between 2019 and today, during the time of the pandemic, is that several of them have become mothers, some for the first time. The Festival d'Avignon will be our reunion both as dancers and mothers. This dimension is particularly symbolic for all of us, working as we are on a show about the feminine. The beginning of the show is an internal physical exercise which leads to an emotional experience, both for the dancers and for, I hope, the audience; it's an exercise that echoes those given to pregnant women and new mothers. I want it to be a real physical experience for the audience, which means doing away with the usual relationship between the stage and the room which creates too much distance between the performers and the audience; on the contrary, I want the audience to form a semi-circle around the dancers, as close to them as possible, so as to perceive their every breath, to create an intimate connection between the bodies. I like the idea of having the first few rows sitting on the ground, on the grass. I think the audience of the Festival d'Avignon, who are always willing to participate, will dare do it.

The physical work you ask of your dancers is akin to an inner quest, but also to a quest for filiation.

Indeed, the very introduction of the show, in which the dancers alternately contract and relax the perineum, leads to something almost invisible to the eye of the spectator, a tiny tremor which slowly grows. Those physical actions are the beginning for the dancers of a symbolic quest: to channel within and through themselves the previous generations of women in their bloodlines. For the dancers, every tear, every contortion of their faces, is a quest for the vibrations of their mothers, their grandmothers, all their female ancestors. Every micro-movement of their bodies is in a way a vector of their memories and histories. Those infinitely small movements slowly lead to almost grandiose postures, which turn those women into quasi-divine figures. That's why I want the audience to be so close, to give them access to almost invisible things. Their respective positions in space will lead to so many different perceptions of the show, and some will maybe want to come back to watch the show from a different vantage point to experience it differently.

Can you tell us more about what it means to perform outside? Does the open sky above allow you to explore different sensations or to draw a line between the performers and figures like the Bacchae or cultural currents like the hippies?

Performing *Lady Magma* outside allows us to explore a different relationship to that of traditional theatre, which doesn't quite fit the energy and symbolism of this work. Open nature—like the woods for instance, or even an ancient amphitheatre—is the ideal environment for it. It lends the dance an epic dimension and draws a parallel between those five women and the ancient Bacchae. This work was designed to be danced outside, as close as possible to nature, which is also what we explore in the end, this inner vibration in harmony with our environment, with what we intrinsically are: women, fully. I like to play with the troubling feeling caused by the ceremonial aspect of a show. Here, I turn the audience into voyeurs and direct participants in the ritual to which they are, in a way, invited. Before entering the cloister, the character of *Negroni* provides a prologue and offers a glass to the spectators. Named after a dark and sweet-smelling Italian cocktail, the feminine figure of *Negroni* sits somewhere between a 1970s-inspired cult leader and a 1980s-style lavalier-mic-wearing life coach. The ritual begins there, with this speech in a bar,

with the cognitive functions of the spectators already somewhat altered by alcohol. What I want to see emerge through those references to collective ceremonies, whether bacchanals or hippie cults, is the sensation of a shared experience during the time of the show. That's what I ask of the dancers of *Lady Magma*, that they find and offer a palpable sincerity, for this quest then to become contagious... So that everyone tries to find their way into the most intimate interstices of the breath, of the body, each in their own way. Maybe the spectators will feel so at ease as to let themselves be guided by the movements of the dancers and ultimately join them. It's a possibility I'm studying, even though our modern rituals call for invisibility and silence in the room to leave the sacred on the stage, far from the audience.

Does your show explore a feminist vision of the relationship to the feminine?

Doing away with 1970s aesthetics is a way to re-anchor the question of feminine identity within our contemporary world, instead of just being influenced by the experiences of 1970s feminist activists—who weren't listened to enough but also made mistakes, by not being inclusive enough in their thinking. To replace this primitive dance within the context of the years of feminist liberation would have therefore been redundant, so I decided to focus on a scenography and on costumes closer to our time, to the daily lives of the dancers. The idea isn't to connect it to an overarching feminist questioning at all costs, but on the contrary to turn it into a personal and sincere quest. The real feminist challenge with *Lady Magma* is to give dancers who have become mothers the opportunity to tour with their family, instead of being away from them for several months, as is the case with most productions. It's something we can do with the Festival d'Avignon, and it's something I want to fight for. To have become mothers and to perform *Lady Magma* is meaningful: the question of the feminine is at the heart of the show, and by becoming mothers, both our bodies as dancers and our relationship to the feminine have changed. To our bloodlines has been added one more small being; we're no longer dancing only for our mothers, grandmothers, and ancestors, but also for our daughters.

When it comes to the question of 1970s influences, it's important to mention that David Holmes and I worked on a soundscape inspired by the show *Dionysos in '69*, created by The Performance Group in New York in 1968, and which at the time radically changed the relationship between the show and its audience. With *Dionysos in '69*, Richard Schechner created a festive ceremony to unleash the fundamental emotions of the spectators, a process which was also explored by the Living Theatre. To those sounds, we've decided to associate psychedelic music, inspired by dark sci-fi, to create an identity. *Lady Magma* contains many chaotic creative experiments; for instance, my choreography was sometimes inspired by the technique of Jackson Pollock, who threw paint onto a canvas laid on the ground, often barefoot and drunk. Energy is unleashed and free to enter those who watch, in the simplest and most sincere way possible. It's also in order to free this festive spirit that I offer spectators a glass of Negroni upon their entrance in the cloister, to celebrate drunkenness; not necessarily drunkenness caused by alcohol, but rather the fact that cognitive functions are more malleable, open to an emotional and collective experience. I want to create an empathetic link between the dancers and the audience, but also within the audience itself.

Interview conducted by Moira Dalant