



مِلْك MILK

INTERVIEW WITH BASHAR MURKUS

Let's talk about what led to this creation: what were its influences, and how would you position it within your career? What is *MILK* about?

Bashar Murkus: I started thinking about this play two years ago. I like to take the time to think and really dig into the subject I've chosen to tackle. The starting point of all my creations is always an idea it seems important to share with the audience. My productions are the result of collaborations with actors, researchers, scenographers, and musicians exploring complex social and philosophical themes. Political topics. Non-political theatre is something I just couldn't do. I'm not talking about a specific context or conflict; the politics I'm interested in is the relationship between human beings and a system. It's a fundamental aspect of my work. Who rules whom? For *MILK*, I asked myself how the current political situation, the modern crises we're experiencing, transform women into a form of tragic matter. I wondered what form a tragedy would take today—partly by looking at the ones that have survived until now—but above all by trying to show how our modern lives transform our bodies to create new tragic materials. While working on this show, I spent a long time trying to understand what it means to lose a loved one. For instance, the loss of a child for a mother. I didn't try to tell a specific story, to create a clear narrative based on that feeling. I imagine that losing a child in Gaza or in Paris is no different in terms of pain for a mother, and my goal is not to quantify or compare. What matters to me is how we live with this loss. During those two years of research with my team, we approached the subject in many different ways to create different perspectives. As a result, we ended up broadening this subject, giving it a deeper, more general sense. Today, this project has more to do with the idea of disaster, of catastrophe. Not about their causes or categories, not even their consequences, but rather about the way those events destroy our perception of time, of life. They divide it in two. They are very specific forces that split time into a before and an after that can never be reconciled. What I'm looking at is the space between this before and this after. A gap that transforms time into something that has no duration, no end. I tried to understand how and to what extent this shift transforms us, shakes us up.

Death is everywhere in the play. It's a reminder that right now people are dying because of political situations all the more complex that they are inextricably linked to international politics. In some countries, the government is asking its people to celebrate their dead as the martyrs of a cause of which they most often are victims themselves. From that point of view, this intimate and personal relationship to death is confiscated by the system.

Yes, for some death is an opportunity to create heroes, because it allows them to better understand and accept its meaning. That was the subject of the play *The Museum* I presented at the Festival d'Avignon last year. When I say this creation deals with death, here in Europe or in Palestine or in Yemen, I'm not saying death has the same meaning everywhere. But as a director who makes a theatre meant to be shown throughout the world, I never speak of specific situations, of a context many wouldn't be able to understand. I don't do theatre to tell the audience of the Festival d'Avignon that their lives are wonderful compared to that of the Syrian people. To do that, one can demonstrate, or question whether those who are supposed to represent us do so adequately. Of course, I'm talking about what I know, my work is based on who I am, what I think, but above all I try to grasp our shared origins. Death is indeed one aspect of this play. More broadly, I'm talking about our relationship to death. How we understand it, how we approach it from a political, but also medical or religious point of view... *MILK* is also more broadly about those undesired bodies, those bodies we don't want to see represented. I'm talking about those living bodies which political systems hide, keep away, or exile. There are many bodies in *MILK*. The bodies of the actors, of course, and those of the dummies used by medical students to study the human body, a body that can still act and move. From this juxtaposition arises a true visual and dramaturgic power. I try to show a sort of metaphor without truly explaining or analysing it, all while trying to find an action that would allow it to exist on the stage.

The space of the stage is a living organism which bears the stigmas of past actions. It is also, throughout the show, touched by a certain form of beauty. A beauty of which the omnipresent milk, which gives its title to the play, would be a poetic representation.

The catastrophe does indeed transform not only the bodies, but also the space. Here the space is a sort of materialisation of time. It reminds us that the consequences of the disaster have long repercussions on our lives. They influence the present, change our perceptions, our conscience, just like they change and influence the physical world around us. Paradoxically, it also allows me to talk about the beauty of the world through the way women transform the stage into a marvelous landscape in order to escape death, better domesticate its effects, and tame violence. And to escape the violence of those situations they're experiencing, they need to create beauty. This play is about our vital needs. Women crying tears of milk, for instance. Milk, for a mother, is a symbol of life. Here, it's a symbol of death. Those women are crying the milk their children should have drunk. It's an idea that came really early, as soon as we started working on the show. Those acute metaphors always have to do with the energy of those women trying to fulfill their needs. In doing so, they transform those needs into a sort of engine for dramatic action. The visual world of the play is built around an opposition between the black of the ground, which absorbs all colours, sounds, and movements, and the white of the milk.

The logo of your theatre and of your company—a white tree on a black background—symbolises your aspirations: to put down roots for the development of an independent Palestinian theatre in Haifa. What are your working conditions like?

I first want to point out that I live in very different conditions from those of my compatriots in other occupied territories. In Haifa, unlike in Gaza for instance, Palestinians fight not to survive but to preserve and develop their culture. I'm currently working in the Khashabi Theatre, which is entirely made up of independent Palestinian artists. We decided together that we needed an independent location and an independent theatre, which would accept no Israeli funding and have no ties to the dominant culture. And since we aren't connected to the State in how we handle our productions, we can produce whatever we want. In any case, the State of Israel doesn't support the kind of theatre I make. In 2014, I created in Haifa *Parallel Time*, a play about the relationship to time of Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails. The ensuing controversy led to the suppression of the subsidies given to the Al-Midan theatre, which had produced and programmed the play. It was a turning point in the history of contemporary Palestinian theatre. It encouraged Palestinian artists to seize their cultural independence, to take responsibility for their own productions in order to ensure the freedom of their culture by allowing them to overcome the censorship of Israeli policies meant to influence or outright prevent their creations.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu