

AT THE SAME TIME WE WERE POINTING A FINGER AT YOU, WE REALIZED WE WERE POINTING THREE AT OURSELVES...

INTERVIEW WITH ROBYN ORLIN

The question of the body is at the heart of many of your shows. How is your approach different this time?

Robyn Orlin: My pieces are always about the body but I never overtly talk about the body, I use the body as a vehicle to talk about many things ... so with this new piece there is nothing different, what is different is working in Senegal with a different group of performers but I will ask the usual questions: to understand the specific relationship that Africa has to the body. How is the body perceived, felt, experienced? How is it talked about? What does politics have to say about it? What does dance? I will try to look into the origins of this relationship to the body. Inevitably, this leads to talking about colonization, about the weight of the western gaze on the African body. That gaze has had to have an influence on the evolution of this relationship to the body in Africa, I think the West ended up colonizing the African body, even when it tried not to, when it tried to be respectful. So we are left with bodies that have ceremonies and rituals from the past and the present but how do we bring these ceremonies into the future to understand our bodies, do we as Africans still have the patience for this discourse and use it to propel us into the future and help to sustain a discourse around our bodies.

How does this lack of discourse on the body manifest itself?

I can't really talk that easily about the whole of Africa but I can see in South Africa that all is not well with our bodies: women and children are raped at a terrible rate for many reasons / aids is still a stigma and we do not talk enough about it even though we have a very strong female presence sitting in parliament. In other parts of Africa it is very evident that homophobia is surfacing, not to mention xenophobia and intolerance for different religions and faiths (I am not sure what I will discover in Senegal this remains for me to be seen). But at the same time, many social and cultural practices revolve around the body: for instance, an old form of punishment was to bring the perpetrator to the center of the village and to have the beggars stand around him and spit on him. The central place the body has in those relationships of power, its own symbolic power, haven't been the object of much reflection. I wonder where we are today, in Africa, in our relationship to our own bodies. It's a question that touches me all the more so because I'm from South Africa: during apartheid, it was forbidden to question our relationship to the body. But I don't want to spell things out too much, so as not to impose anything on my performers, to let them express what they have to say on the subject. As usual in my work, I try to confront my own impressions and intuitions with the performers and in this particular case the group is made up entirely of men, most of them Catholic or Muslim.

The dancers are as much the performers as they are the material of your creations. How do you work with them?

The work I do on every show is different, based on the performers I'm working with. Every one of them has a different story. The body often cannot by itself tell the story of a person, so I think it's important to talk as well. I start by asking the dancers a lot of questions, in order to find material for our work. We usually spend the first week doing nothing but talk, which sometimes annoys or frustrates them. But those initial exchanges end up playing an essential dramatic role. I like stories, so we integrate them into our shows. Even though I'm a choreographer, playwrights and directors such as Tadeusz Kantor, Bertolt Brecht, or Heiner Müller, have had an important influence on me. I always have their work in mind when I'm talking with my dancers, when we're working together on the show, on the text. Perhaps this way of working comes from the fact that, in Africa, we're used to telling stories without our bodies necessarily being at stake. This in turn took on a specific meaning here, since the relationship between the body, speech, and subjectivity is central to this particular piece.

Is it important for you to work in other African countries, beside South Africa?

I am obviously always interested with what is going on in South Africa. It's my country, I'll always be connected to it, but I do try to get away from it a little these days. My last major play, *Beauty remained for just a moment*, revolved around the question of beauty in Africa. I worked mostly with South African dancers, which made it hard not to talk only about South Africa, and about Johannesburg in particular. Working with other African artists, though, is an answer to my desire to experience new things, to my insatiable curiosity. During apartheid, South Africa was cut off from the rest of the continent. It seems to me there is a tremendous richness and profundity around identity, I'm not sure if we use these tools sufficiently and that's worth exploring in terms of our identity.

Do you think what's at stake here, this question of identity, is tied to that specific relationship to the body you talk about?

The title of the play seems to imply it. It's about the power of the body. We have a responsibility as Africans to stop acting like victims. It is time for us to think about our own bodies, and to realize what our strengths are. We've accepted representations of the African body first and foremost as suffering, as a victim. But malnutrition and violence exist in other places as well. We have to take back those representations. I think it's important for the body to be seen as a catalyst, a place of opportunities, rather than just as the object of violence and pain. Many thinkers and intellectuals have identified those stakes, but I'm not sure it's spread to society at large yet... It's always the same problem, that hermetic border between academia and the community that surrounds it. Many African intellectuals have written about the African body. I imagine those writings, those reflections, many of which have notably been produced in the field of postcolonial studies, will have an influence on the play, without necessarily being quoted.

Laughter and metaphors play an important part in your work. Are they a way for you to talk about reality?

Absolutely. Reality is so tough. Many people, in South Africa, only managed to survive thanks to laughter. Laughter allows us to say things we cannot say literally. The impossibility of laughter is death. I think laughter is representative of the incredible resources of human nature, of that survival instinct that always takes over. What I find most interesting in people is their sense of humor. I've also learned a lot from the South African director Barney Simon, who was in a way the godfather of anti-apartheid theatre. He always spoke in metaphors, used storytelling extensively, as well as irony. I think his work has been a huge influence on me. That's probably why I like gay humor as well: this way of using humor as a defense mechanism, as a means of survival and resistance, fascinates me.

Is this new creation about homosexuality, or about sexuality as a whole?

It's a question we'll talk about during the creative process, but I don't know yet how it will manifest itself in the show. I'd like to talk about it openly with my performers, but it's not an easy topic to talk about, especially for African men. Remember that homosexuality is a crime punishable by death in some African countries. Both the question of sexuality and the camp aesthetics that is characteristic of my shows will be there, but the form they take will be defined by that dialogue with the performers.

You're famous for the rapport, the complicity, you create with your audiences. What form will it take this time?

It's very important for me to bring the performers as close to the audience as possible. I also like to have the audience take part in the show somehow. In *Beauty remained for just a moment*, the audience had to play music. I deplore that the audience is so often kept in a state of passivity. In Africa, the audience is sometimes so involved in a show that some will get up on the stage and start dancing. I have no doubt been influenced by this tradition. But I don't know yet exactly what part the audience will play in this show.

Interview by Renan Benyamina.