



TOLD BY MY MOTHER

INTERVIEW WITH ALI CHAHROUR

Your previous trilogy was about funeral rites, this one is about love. It includes a first piece called *Layl-Night*, and now this one, *Du temps où ma mère racontait (Back when my mother told stories)*. How did you articulate what we might call those two new chapters?

Ali Chahrou: This new trilogy, entitled *Amour*, follows on from the first, and still deals with the notions of life and death. But it's also a gateway into new avenues of research about the feeling of love and its different levels of interpretation, about the ways to express it in our modern society. We drew from a vast heritage of poems, stories, and myths describing love in the Arab world. The first show, *Layl-Night*, revolved around stories of lovers who had been torn apart or killed because of their love, and more largely because of religion or politics refusing to accept their ways to live their love... It was about their fall. This second part focuses on the family, on the powerful love between a mother and her son, on the infinite quality of maternal love. Both trilogies are tied together by the fact that they are based on personal, largely unknown stories; here, stories whose protagonists are women and mothers. I wanted to bring those stories to the stage, to create powerful legends that would be like Greek tragedies hidden in Beirut. I wanted to show the struggle of mothers, who I see as true heroines. The bodies and voices of those women have very powerful qualities. Like with the first trilogy, we worked on the power of movement, on its simplicity, but for this second opus, we also focused more on the narrative.

The number 3 comes back time and again in your work. First in the trilogies themselves, and here, in the very structure of *Back when my mother told stories*, which is made up of three chapters, with three families.

The show is indeed made up of three levels of stories and references. The first one, which is at the heart of the creation, comes from a powerful and personal story, that of my aunt Fatmeh and of her relationship with her son Hassan, who disappeared in Syria in 2015. It's the struggle of a mother searching for her son. This is the story of a family that no longer exists, as my aunt died in 2018, still looking for her child. She never learnt about the actual circumstances of his disappearance, and spent the last few years of her life looking for him. She never accepted the idea that her son might be dead. The second story, told in parallel and just as real and relevant today, is that of another mother, my father's cousin, Leïla Chahrou, and of her son Abbas. He wanted to become a fighter and a martyr, and now he's a performer in a dance show. To have him dance onstage with his mother, with whom he is very close, with tender and loving gestures, was a challenge. It's a very sensitive subject, politically speaking, especially in Lebanon, because he is running a real risk by sharing his life so. The conflict in Syria still rages. But accepting to do this show changed his life. The third narrative level, interwoven with the other two, is about tragic events taken from the local collective memory, events experienced by those two mothers but which are also an integral part of the lives of the rest of the cast and crew of the show. This story allows us to call on great political and social events, seen through the eyes of a mother. If the political context is approached via a very personal angle, it also allows us to open the show up onto more universal questions. What we see on stage is a loving relationship between a mother and her son, between the members of a family, but also within an artistic family who then dives straight into the heart of each of those family stories. A family within a family, like a *mise en abyme*.

The concept of imbalance seems to be a major element in this show, which oscillates between fusion and separation. What form does it take on stage?

There is indeed a question of balance, a tipping point in all elements of the show: between the infinite love of a mother and the need of her son to break free, between the love of a son for his family and the weight of the relationships he has to learn to handle, between inexperienced performers and professional artists used to being onstage. Everything revolves around clashes and struggles to reach a certain harmony. Some of the performers come from very religious backgrounds, others not at all, their political ideas are often very different. Everyone faces everyone, and those differences create an imbalance. In a way, it's the chaos we live daily in Lebanon, everyone against everyone else. The creation is built around this constant ambivalence, which can be heard in the music composed for the show as well. It doesn't follow from moment to moment the intensity of the dancers' gestures or of the story, it can go its own way and, sometimes, go entirely against the dancers or the story. The narrative isn't linear, either. We really deconstructed all elements of the dramaturgy. The music is sometimes very abstract, aggressive, or poetic. It creates a tension. It expresses the presence of each of the dancers. I wanted to move those bodies around in space and to work on their inherent strength. I also see the movements of the musicians on stage as dance. Their gestures are source of sound, they're beautiful and organic. From the point of view of the choreography, we mostly worked on posture, on the quality and power of the gestures, on the relationship and therefore the distance between the performers. We emphasised those antagonisms, because it's from that confrontation that arises the beauty and power of the show.

There's a form of intergenerational transmission between the performers...

Yes, there are indeed several generations on stage. In addition to Leïla and her son, who are amateurs, I'm once again working with actress Hala Omran and the two musicians of band Two or The Dragon, Ali Hout and Abed Kobeissy, who act as narrators of the stories. Leïla and Hala are from a different generation than the musicians and me, and then there is young Abbas, who is only 18. Here again you have this idea of confrontation, of a clash of generations. Everyone has his or her own perspective, a different relationship to his or her family, a different vision of the very concept of family or of the role of the mother. We tried to better understand the various points of view and questions about politics, society, love, and the way we express it today. The difference between the generations couldn't have been greater, in terms of time spent and words used. Today, we no longer take the time to find poetry in our ways of expressing love. *Layl-Night* was partly about the metaphorical fall of poetry and beauty, about a drop in the time we spend and the richness of the vocabulary we use to express our love. In our modern world, we have to fight to create moments of intimacy and poetry, as if we had forgotten the poetry and infinite richness of our cultural heritage. In the show, we wanted to return to poetry, to the need to take our time to express our love. In this second part about unconditional love, the mother is always ready to fight, whatever the price, always ready to take her time and to let poetry arise. This isn't about a "fall" anymore, but about the power of maternal love, about the protection she can grant to those she loves.

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