



LAMENTA

INTERVIEW WITH KOEN AUGUSTIJNEN AND ROSALBA TORRES GUERRERO

Can you tell us about the origins of your project and your research on traditional Greek dance?

Koen Augustijnen and Rosalba Torres Guerrero: It started when we were invited, in partnership with the ballets C de la B, to Ramallah, Palestine, to host dance workshops, which then led to the creation of a summer academy. There, we discovered the *dabkeh*, a traditional dance whose steps everyone knows, whereas in Belgium where we're from, tradition isn't really part of our cultural landscape anymore. From there we created *Badke*, a piece exploring the fusion of those traditional dances and contemporary dance. We performed that show for four years, notably at the Kalamata Dance Festival in the Peloponnese. The Greeks gave us a very warm welcome, because they saw in it similarities with their own dances. They invited us to study those pillars of Greek culture that are traditional dance and music. It took us a while to explore Greek dances because we wanted this project to have meaning, but also legitimacy. It opened up many potential questions. If our approach is that of dance-theatre, we're not interested in the purely technical mastery of movement. It would rather be more accurate to say that the focus of our work is the other. Our project was therefore not only cultural, but political. If we go over all the shows we created with our company, the topic always came from within, from something we felt, from a personal exploration. But with the Palestinian and Greek projects, we felt such a powerful desire and will from the outside that we upended our usual ways of working. We started travelling through Greece in 2017 to get to know the culture and dances of several regions, including the *miroloi*, which comes from the Epirus, a remote, rural, and mountainous region. Dances and music are ancestral traditions there. It was like being struck by lightning. Celebrations are very important, the whole village comes together to dance, in particular for those *miroloi*, which are laments sung at funerals, weddings, or when a loved one is exiled from the village. Those songs and dances tell of the pain of this departure and prepare for the absence. Epirus is a very mountainous region, very hard on people, with very cold winters. It has experienced large waves of immigration, leading to separation and loss. The music tells all that on the throbbing rhythms of violins, clarinets, and lutes. It's similar to the blues: a slow rhythm that speaks of the land, of roots, of nostalgia...

How did you manage to transcend those *miroloi*, a symbol of Greek culture, on a contemporary dance stage?

We first decided to create a musical piece. Since the musicians aren't on stage with the dancers, we recorded the *miroloi* in Athens with an ensemble we brought together specifically for *Lamenta*; some are traditional artists, others are modern bands reinterpreting their heritage. We recorded over a dozen Greek musicians, as well as the French singer and flautist Magic Malik, in order to gather a rich and original musical matter we could then reorganise. The *miroloi*, those songs of lament, provide a space for emotions and play a part in the strength of communities in Greece. Our main question as dancers (but not only) was to understand how the feeling of loss is handled physically in our northern European societies. We discovered that most often, an embodied dance made of rituals and symbolic spaces can help the group or the individual overcome this feeling. They are moments when sadness, frustration, anger, and grief can be externalised, so that the individual can then rejoin society. With that in mind, we're recreating on stage a small community to write our own ritual in a modern world. The *miroloi* aren't for the dead but for the living, for those left behind. We're not trying to copy them, but to find an echo. What we're trying to explore is the absence of the other's body, the loss of sensory contact, and the way this absence concretely affects our modern bodies. We created the show at the Isadora and Raymond Duncan Dance Center in Athens and at the Comédie de Clermont-Ferrand, with women and men between the ages of 25 and 40 and who come from all over Greece. We took this raw material and kneaded it every which way, and the choreographic dramaturgy started unfolding after a series of improvisation sessions. One of the things we never stopped paying attention to was to respect this cultural legacy, and we hope that it's something that can be felt in the show.

Could you describe the result of this fusion?

The stage is empty. We see mostly bodies. It was an aesthetic and symbolic desire, but also a financial goal: to spend our budget on the dancers rather than on scenography. This constraint became our framework; everything must fit in a suitcase. It highlights the bodies and personalities, we don't need anything else to dance, and several generations come together on stage. In Greek villages, it is most often the oldest man in the community who starts the dance, he shows the first few steps, the second dancer in the line supporting the first... A true marathon of music and dance begins. If we're performing this Greek dance in *Lamenta*, it's to go beyond everyday life and reach the possibility of a trance, with as medium a musical curve that starts with traditional music and ends with amplified and electronic sounds. In order to transcend sadness, you have to use it... Traditional *miroloi* help transform loss by working on our visceral, rather than intellectual, side, it's an initiatory sensation we're interpreting in our creation.

Could you say more about the political aspect of this creation: working on a material at once traditional and foreign to you?

A certain stance seems indeed to be appearing. We asked the dancers about their distance from their own culture, about new generations leaving rural areas and thus those places where tradition persists. We wanted to explore the question of legacy while maintaining a certain distance with the idea of the traditional, to look more largely at the community. How to have a voice within a group? Symbolically, the *miroloi* is a music that loops back on itself, just like the dancing bodies form a circle. What do we want to do with it? Do we want to lock our cultural legacy away in a museum, or to let it express itself through our modernity? Working on this material as northern Europeans already seems to us to be a political gesture, a political stand. If we don't really explore the question of our legitimacy in the show, we pay very close attention to the way an artist can use a material that isn't his or hers and preserve its soul while approaching it from a modern standpoint, from an outside, so-called "foreign" point of view.

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant in January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach