



HAEESHEK...

INTERVIEW WITH HASSAN EL GERETLY AND EL WARSHA

Since its foundation in 1987, your company El Warsha has accomplished acts of resistance by working on what you consider to be the treasures of an imperilled popular culture, starting with the art of storytelling.

Hassan El Geretly: We are indeed known for our work on stories and tales. We worked for instance on tales from the region of Dakahlia, in the delta of the Nile, where we discovered a collection published by an amateur ethnologist (a "Friday ethnologist," as we'd say in Egypt). His remarkable collection features sixty popular tales and became our reference book, and we just republished it. We then worked for years on personal narratives, starting with a show called *He who lives will see a lot and he who travels will see even more*. We then started working on the idea of war, and on the days of revolution in 2011, before coming back to war to work on Gaza. All of that is built on the art of storytelling, of telling and sharing one's story. This work naturally led us to a number of popular practices: stick dance, narrative ballads like that of *Hassan and Nayima*, the Banu Hilal saga, shadow play, etc. It's a whole part of popular culture I discovered as a child during the nights of Ramadan: the verbal jousts that would draw entire crowds, for instance, with orators carried on the shoulders of their friends, challenging each other with magnificent insults. Or the famous poetry recitals of the Café Fichauvi...

Another important preoccupation in your theatre is the question of language(s).

It is impossible to live in the Arab world and to escape the question of Classical and popular Arabic, which are often pitted against each other. We are raised, ruled, and judged in one, and we love and hate one another in the other, a dichotomy that leads to a form of schizophrenia. I don't think we should pit classical and popular Arab cultures against each other: look at the Banu Hilal saga, for instance, so classical in its beauty, with its purity of language, the language of tragedy, but also its poetic vernacular. A sort of *Iliad*, as the poet Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi used to say, an *Iliad* for the Arabs... Our link to that culture is very strong. And the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was largely heard through slogans that appeared in Tahrir Square. Within our company, we were very sensitive to those expressions of language, to the words and phrases used. We think those popular forms of expression are irreplaceable.

Since 1992, taking the forms of an ongoing, uninterrupted work, the *Layâli el-Warsha (The Nights of El Warsha)* mix theatre, commercial music, music-hall, and political cabaret. With the uprising in Tahrir Square in January 2011, you tried to remain as close as possible to the events.

Before that, we'd worked for a long time on Palestine, on the bombing of Qana in Lebanon (on 30 July, 2006) which made a lot of victims, on Egypt. All those events served as source material for our political cabaret. We sang the songs of Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fouad Negm, as well as the poems Sheikh Imam put to music and sang. It became more and more important, especially during the revolution. Then there was the bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria (on 31 December, 2010), an expression of violence that was rejected by most of Egypt and forced every one of us to make clear our position towards what Amin Maalouf calls "*Murderous Identities*." The company therefore decided to take the bull by the horns, and with our bare hands, so to speak. We thought we had to start working on that question right away. At the same time, we created a poster based on pictures by Nabil Boutros in which he photographed himself wearing eighteen different Egyptian outfits, as a sheikh, a prelate, a modern man, an Islamist, etc., a series he called "L'Habit fait le moine" ("Clothes Do Make the Man"). With his permission, that poster was printed by a group of independent cultural associations and was widely circulated under the title "Koulouna Misriyoun" ("We Are All Egyptians"). It was a very important slogan in the weeks that led to the eighteen days of Tahrir Square... So even before we were aware of what was brewing, we went to Alexandria to play an even more political cabaret. We didn't yet know that the revolution would lead to the events of January 2011. I didn't feel like there was any change in direction in our work, though, it was a new step in the same journey, with songs and some beautiful poems, because poetry played a large part in the revolution. There was this incredible artistic renaissance, in theatre, in music, in poetry. I'm thinking for instance of this beautiful poem by Mustafa Ibrahim, a very young poet, but already one of the greats. His poem is called *Foulan el-foulani (Mr. so-and-so)*.

He who was by my side on that day, when they started shooting/
 He whose name I don't know, who I always called "cousin"/
 He who gave me his sandwich that night, when he saw me sing, starving/
 He whose face is the only thing I remember/
 He who led you to the Square/
 He who searched you with a smile/
 He who asked: "Is he really leaving?"/
 He who said "Have a safe trip!" when we said that's enough we're leaving/
 The cab driver who wouldn't let me pay when I said I was going there to protest/
 He who said, tomorrow he's stepping down, and we'll celebrate and dance all through the night/
 He who handed me the bottles, then closed them once they were full of petrol/
 He who was drinking and asked me, "Want a sip?"/
 He whose face was studded with pieces of glass/
 He we didn't see on the news, but whose voice we could hear in the crowd/
 He who went home to eat and shower/
 He who got lost among the crowd/
 The man who soak my keffiyeh with vinegar and carried me when a bullet struck me/
 He who died on that day, a blood debt is owed to him/
 He who drank his blood, this son of a bitch must pay.

Foulan el-foulani (Mr. so-and-so), by Mustafa Ibrahim

How did that project around the testimonies from Tahrir Square come about?

One day I saw a banner in the distance, hanging from a balcony, on which there were two words written in red: "El-garh ouel-farh" ("wound" and "joy"). I used that as the title of the next show of the *Nights of El Warsha*. Then Ramadan began, and we decided we wanted to laugh and to express other feelings than just anger and bitterness. We started singing in the middle of demonstrations, the actors came back for the rehearsals they never missed anymore, they were never late to gather on this raft of sorts that El Warsha had become. They came to sing the ironic love songs of Mahmoud Choukoku, a famous music-hall singer of the 1940s and 50s. He dressed up as a sort of Egyptian Mr. Punch, what we call Aragöz here, a puppet wearing a girdle. He was very popular, and for some reason every single pottery merchant seemed to own a clay statue in his effigy. We worked on this character and wondered whether, because of Ramadan, we would be able to play this particular repertoire. We decided to do it anyway. I created a show called *Ma baina choukouki wa Choukoukou (Between my doubts and his)*, a play on his stage name, Choukoukou, which means "his doubts." Through this means, we introduced jokes and satirical stories about Egypt. Then, when the situation became even more complicated, we decided to call the show *Haeeshek... (I Will Survive You...)*, after the title of a song by a band called The Streetlights. *Haeeshek...* is the latest version of a work that, at first, revolved around the testimony of a mother who lost her son, killed by a sniper on 28 January, 2011, during one of those "Fridays of anger". In Avignon, the show will include other testimonies, in this continuum between songs, tales, and accounts.

Interview conducted by Mustapha Laribi.

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	Pour vous présenter cette édition, plus de 1750 personnes, artistes, techniciens et équipes d'organisation ont uni leurs efforts, leur enthousiasme pendant plusieurs mois. Plus de la moitié relève du régime spécifique d'intermittent du spectacle. Ce carré rouge est le symbole de notre unité.	