

Middle Eastern Representation at the Brussel's Kunstenfestivaldesarts, 2019





Monira el Qadiri's *Phantom Beard*. Courtesy: Nureth Wagner-Strauss.

The Kusntenfestivaldesarts 2019 (Brussels) hosted several shows from Middle Eastern artists this year. Reflecting and sensitivity to presenting a diversity of shows from different cultures, shows from the Middle East are presented in each edition of this festival. They are always welcomed with great interest by the festival's audience and are followed with vivid interest by the Brussels' public, much interested in the theme of migration.

In the 2019 edition, several productions were the work of migrant artists. Two shows stood out: *Phantom Beard* by Monira el Qadiri and *Let us believe in the beginning of the cold season* by Sachii Gholamalizard. These two shows present in a different way the artist's relationship with the countries in which they live, claiming their roots while trying to adapt themselves to the cultures of the European countries.

Monira Al Qadiri, a Kuwaiti artist, educated in Japan and currently living in Berlin and Beirut, presented the performance *Phantom Beard*. This is a multimedia show, and the use of diverse media enhances the mix of cultures that the director has experienced, but also the mix of traditions.

In the first part, an actress appears in front of a screen on which different cut-out and repetitive images appear. In a playful way, she presents the relationship between the two traditions of her personal life - Japan, where she lived for more than ten years, and deeper within, the traditions of the Middle East, from the Arabic peninsula, her homeland.



Set design of Sachii Gholamalizad's *Let us believe in the beginning of the cold season*. Courtesy: Theater Rotterdam.

In the first part, the director who is also the playwright and actress, shows her relationship with her Japanese tradition. The Japanese mentality and tradition imagines that ancestors are present in everyday life. They are above all benefactor spirits, and establish a relationship with the past, and the continuity of life: these are precious relationships, to be cared for, and the loss of which is to be voided. Their worship takes place in homes. In the staging, these spiritual presences are manifested through images projected on the screen in the background - such as large drops or blue flames that appear in front of a dark background with light dots, like a starry night -; these signs multiply on the stage and establish a friendly relationship with the actress. The protagonist enters into dialogue with them.

By contrast, in the tradition of the Arabian peninsula's tradition, sand symbolizes oblivion, which is convenient and desirable. In the second part of the show, Monira al Quadari imagines, in a humorous way, what ghosts would be like in their traditional culture. She poses the problem of the relationship to memory to its context.

Diverse images evoke this Middle Eastern traditional culture. The director/actress appears as an animal like form, in a brilliant gold color, seated on a pedestal, surrounded by a glass case, as if she were an art object in a museum, or a protected king. The showcase seems to protect as much as it encloses. She is like an object of worship, a valuable object.

Shortly thereafter the actress appears dressed in the traditional Arabian men's clothing. The director then ironically represents what would be the spirits of her ancestors, playing at making a cultural transposition. At a given moment, when she turns around, a series of male figures appear, dressed in Arabian clothes: they are the ghosts of her tribe and her family, appearing in a size a little larger than reality, thanks to a rear-projection that creates an unusual and overwhelming image for the audience. But unlike the spirits of the Japanese tradition, these figures interrogate, reproach and mock Monira el Quadri. They are spiteful and vengeful spirits, who laugh and tell stories. The spectator watches as the actress attempts to engage them in conversation.

Shortly afterwards, when the performer sits again on the pedestal in her gold dress, a man's image appears on the screen and reproaches her for what she has to go, saying that she owes everything to her ancestors. In addition to their irony, the projected figures also suggest the image of a tradition that soon disappears. A head slides along oblique lines that inevitably evoke contemporary art.

The staging *Let us believe in the beginning of the cold season*, by Sachii Gholamalizad, an Iranian performer, presents the problems of a young Iranian immigrant in Belgium where she currently lives. The staging represents in different ways the division and conflicts that arise from belonging to two conflicting cultures.

Half of the production is in Farsi and the other half in English with French and Dutch subtitles. The scenography is made up of complex metallic structures from which three television screens of different dimensions are hung. Throughout the show, the protagonist moves among these structures, as if it were a labyrinth. At the beginning of the staging, an image of the metallic structures also appears on the screens, doubling the image of structural complexity, as a metaphor for the protagonist's confusion. Trying to understand the origin of her problems about her cultural identity and her relationship with the country in which she lives, she recalls different episodes of her life going back to her childhood.

The show is composed of several lines intermingled with this main narrative line. The monologue, in which the protagonist asks herself about her identity and how she feels in Belgium, alternates with dialogues that the protagonist carries on with her mother. Her Mother's face appears simultaneously on the three screens, perhaps symbolizing the omnipresence of the mother figure at an early age. But the face of the protagonist gradually appears more and more, when she evokes more personal problems, such as the use of language and how she finds herself. For example, she expresses herself with emotional proximity in Farsi, and she uses English when she wants to wear a mask, with people who consider her as a foreigner. The thoughts of the protagonist are expressed in a very elaborate style, often poetic, with a multiplicity of images and metaphors that evoke her situation of exile.

She evokes memories of her childhood and adolescent games, feelings of maladjustment, as well as various sensations of exile, of guilt, or of sin. Ironically, she comes to compare Belgium to a mother-in-law who does not accept her and does not forgive her mistakes. She expresses her identity conflicts, wondering if she is Iranian or Belgian, listing all the important things she experienced in Belgium, how she feels in the different countries, to conclude that she feels misunderstood and foreign everywhere.

The mother begins to tell her the story of the *Language of the Birds* by Farîd-Ud-Dîn ʿAttar, and shortly after the protagonist begins narrating this Sufi story by establishing an implicit parallel with her own history of overcoming difficulties, interspersing summaries of this story with her personal experiences.

The evocation of the important episodes of their life in Belgium (her first boyfriends, her first depressions...) are mixed with *the language of birds* in which the birds are gathered and guided by the hoopoe, the most intelligent of birds, and undertake a great journey in search of Simorgh, the God. The journey is very long and has no return and involves courage, determination and mental strength. Their journey appears as a metaphor for her personal evolution.

When she evokes her situation as a woman, on whom are imposed ideologies and visions that she doesn't believe in, she establishes a comparison with the problems suffered by the poet Forough Farrokhzad, who was not accepted in her time, and who is a model of independence and struggle for the protagonist. The monologues on personal identity are mixed with parts dedicated to the evocation of the life and work of this poetess.

The end of the show comes after the conclusion of the *Language of the Birds*. After a long journey, thirty birds arrive at the abandoned palace of Simorgh, and there they understand, seeing their reflection in the lake's water, that together they are God. At the same time, at the end of the show, the actress takes stock of her life and concludes that she is at home in Belgium, and that it is time to leave her problems earlier evoked behind her. The monologues and the dialogue parts alternate with songs that the actress sings in Farsi. These are poetic texts, an expression above all desires for growth, accompanied by electronic music and rhythmic changes of lights, with smoke evoking a pop concert, showing the protagonist's cultural conflict between tradition and modernity.

The Kunstenfestivaldesarts also presented a new and outstanding show by the young Iranian dancer Sorour Darabi, *Savushun*, in which he evokes his problems of changing sexuality, his relationship with language, fragility and anguish.



Sorour Darabi's *Savushun*. Courtesy: Tirad Hashemi.

The problem of migration from the Middle East was also present in other shows and manifestations of the festival, such as *Simple as ABC #3*; *The Wild Hunt* directed and represented by Thomas Bellinck. Thomas Bellinck's show, simple in terms of its scenic devices, with a documentary theatre technique close to Milo Rau's shows, strongly denounces the treatment received by illegal migrants from the Middle East: Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey, but also Libya and North Africa. The show is constructed from the recorded interviews of migrants, who narrate the difficulties and horrors of illegal migration, as well as the humiliations sometimes caused by Europeans. At the beginning Thomas Bellinck is on stage presenting the show as a testimony of migration conditions. With great irony, he compares the treatment received by migrants with the painting *The Wild Hunt* which evokes mythical violence, present in European cultures

as if violence was unavoidable. The voices of migrants from the Middle East gradually replace the image, and the spectacle ends with the attentive audience bombarded by a succession of terrible stories told in almost complete darkness.



Thomas Bellinck's *The Wild Hunt*. Courtesy: Kaai Studio.

In a much more direct way, and explicitly denouncing the European policies on illegal migration, both from the Middle East, and from northern Africa, which consists of not helping and letting migrants die stuffed in boats abandoned and adrift in the Mediterranean, the exhibition *Forensic Oceanography*, with numerous videos, diagrams, and reports that the public could stop to read, summarized the data and the overwhelming figures of migration across the Mediterranean and of the dead in the Mediterranean sea. The exhibition detailed the stages of European political decisions that have led to an absence of intervention, abandoning migrants to their fate in the Mediterranean.

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