

Self portrait camouflage

A grotesque country

Latifa Laâbissi carves a searing line between the social body and the body of the subject. This work is both astounding and delightful, shaking up the constituent bodies of her ideas.

Stop the presses: the entire country, meaning every single person, no matter what his or her origin, should see *Self portrait camouflage*. However until recently few programmers have been interested in – or had the courage to – present this solo by Latifa Laâbissi. Clearly there is something in it that can be considered distressing, annoying, terrifying, giving this piece a sort of time bomb effect, well-made, casually left by the side of the road of an oversatisfied, too interested-in-the-spectacular French production system?

How many times have we seen nudity on the choreographic stage in recent years? Yet, as she travels through the giant museum-like itinerary, the set conceived by the set designer Nadia Lauro, blazing, reflecting, lit by a wall of dazzling light, the nudity of Latifa Laâbissi reveals an implacably disturbing potential.

In its radical exhibition, crowned by a ridiculous Indian chief headdress, this nude seems to be underlining the weakness of the sex, at the supposed center of a grimacing body. Ripped open, out to the ends of a cataleptic arch, wracked into amazing immobilized contortions, twisted into contradictory angles and frustrated joints, she is contorted, wide-eyed, flung backward, her body shaking in an interminable series of tense, convulsing, extended hiccups. The body is grotesque, sniggering, twisted into impossible postures, feeling the obvious assault of the repressed.

This exhibition is frankly a little scary, but it is also wildly stimulating. It is not for nothing that Latifa Laâbissi found herself reworking obsessively the dances of the great Valeska Gert. During the 30s in German cabaret, the rebellious shapes chosen by this dancer held up to the end, embodying the catastrophe of that time.

In *Self portrait camouflage*, the strange construction of this impossible body ignoring the rules, notably those of French intellectual choreographic taste – begins at first in an obstinate, stony silence. And there are some striking sections danced in complete blackout. They are like gaps in time, reversing for the spectator the images he has just seen. Should we think that this woman is even more nude, in the literal un-veiling of her body onstage, she who is of Muslim origin? Can Latifa Laâbissi be a contemporary dancer like the others? Then this construction chokes itself into a strange inaudible discourse, reduced to gaping grimaces, like those pronounced on the apathetic platform of good conscience.

It is an entirely different discourse, probably much simpler and easily proved -- which we need to hear. In this discourse Latifa Laâbissi gives voice to a parody of cleaning-woman pidgin Arabic – which we are generally not interested in hearing. Here she calls a poor person poor. Absolutely. We are reminded of those slogans which say “it isn’t that we must get rid of the immigrants, but instead we must eliminate poverty.” To bring this idea back from the obscurity where we have buried our crisis phobias, punctuated with images of the immigrants, the delinquents, the Islamists – the artist shoves her insolent body into the fissures and failings of the constituent bodies of this discourse, finishing with an orchestration of the pitiful cacophony of political babbling, a memorable satiric scene.

So all that is necessary is to break through this layer of blindness and deafness which, in the France of 2007, leads to a dangerous depletion of universalist illusions, a worrisome community enthusiasm. This audacious gesture by Latifa Laâbissi makes us dread that layer, like the residue of the masked games of colonial entertainment. An Arab in France, she tears off her veils, in her incontrovertible nakedness which a scrap of tri-colored scarf cannot hide. And which the memory of a few learned ballet steps can no longer discipline.

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