

INTERVIEW WITH LATIFA LAÂBISSI

She dances exactly the way she thinks, fully committed, radical. And she does not mince words – we met with her when she was presenting her new work at the Autumn Festival at the Centre Pompidou.

An angry woman

Of course we remember Latifa Laâbissi from two years ago, alone onstage, in a setting designed by Nadia Lauro for *Self Portrait camouflage*, a sort of museum-esque set, a space made by cordoning off a long white space with a podium. Blinding light exposed her nude body, constantly on the verge of contorting into strange shapes and grimaces, evoking areas of dance which are often repressed or hidden, the great grotesque pantomimes of Valeska Gert. She steps up to the podium and chows down on the French flag. In Paris, this goes over fairly well, less so in other cities: in Zurich, ten people walked out of the theatre during the last few minutes of the show, when she was working with the flag and singing Suzanne Gabriello's "lovely colonies of France," and saying, "I hear a large majority of the French-speaking population here voted Conservative." Then in Bordeaux, a bit stiff in a school performance for boys and girls wrapped in their Muslim scarves – there was a certain amount of squirming, giggling, comments. "The girls said, 'it's shameful, you shouldn't be doing that.' And a boy came to see me, appalled – it was the first time he'd seen a woman saying so bluntly what she thought."

It is true that Latifa Laâbissi is blunt, she gets that from her mother, who has her own political convictions and is not easily taken in, with eleven children, five of them born in Morocco. Latifa would be the first of the five others, born in France in the 60s, "somewhere between cannibal and *vahiné*," she says, chuckling. Her mother is also part of her solo, as the daughter uses her mother's Moroccan accent, steering the piece a little toward sketch comedy with a few picturesque comments, like Gad Elmaleh's priceless "On n'est pas sorti de la berge ... " ("We're not out of the woods," something like that.) "She saw the piece on DVD, and she told me that the nudity was very important. My father didn't watch any of it,

that would've been too hard for him. But he knows what I am doing, I talked to him about it, I asked him about French colonial history, repressed French History.”

The history of repression is also something that motivates Latifa Laâbissi's dancing, like her anger. Let us examine the piece she has created for the Autumn Festival, *Histoire par celui qui la raconte* (*The story told by the storyteller*), a piece about the relationship between the prehistoric, “something raw and archaic, something we in theory left behind in order to reach vertical civilisation” -- and the reality of today.

Committed, but not a card-carrier

She talks about Carla Bruni-Sarkozy's interview in *Elle* magazine: “She says that for each planned trip abroad, her husband shows her on a map of the world where he will be taking her. That flips me out, the idea of showing the women of France their *place* ...” Then, speaking about the undocumented in France, she says only, “I cannot criticise Hortefeux (the immigration Minister) – he has no other choice, the situation is complex ... Yes, I am a leftist, but there is not enough work for everyone. I am so tired of fence-sitting! I've seen the ‘retention’ camps and the horrible arrests in Aix-en-Provence. And look at what is going on in the other parts of Europe; there are times in History where you must speak out, no more hints and insinuations.”

Is Latifa Laâbissi politically committed? “Yes, but I am not a card-carrying member of any party. A Leftist Sarkozy does not interest me, and the political arguments are so lame! Even the far-left, which is stuck on a binary ‘oppressor/ oppressed’ rap – it is all so appalling. I express my convictions through my dancing, which forces me to push beyond my own taboos. When I appear naked, with this grotesque, animal quality of nudity, I scare myself; I begin questioning everything I learned from dance, everything we were taught to think about ourselves in dance and elsewhere.”

Latifa Laâbissi began studying at a cultural center near Grenoble, studied ballet, and ten years later discovered contemporary dance; becoming obsessed with

getting into Jean-Claude Gallotta's company. But first she went to New York on a two-year scholarship to study with Merce Cunningham, then after taking a course at Montpellier Danse she did indeed join Gallotta, at the age of 21. "After that I worked in theatre with the director Alain Françon, for whom I danced the cancan; then I spent two and a half months with Ariane Mnouchkine, where I worked with Balinese masks."

Today the dance of Latifa Laâbissi shows the synthesis of her journey, theatricalised, grimacing, incorrect – and without a mask.

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