Dream City – Terugblik op een werkbezoek

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To start I want to thank the Flanders Art Institute, for inviting me to be part of the artistic work exchange visit program to the Dream City biennial art festival in Tunis.

In 2007 I left Tunis at the age of seventeen to study at P.A.R.T.S., the dance and performing arts school created by the choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker in Brussels. This was three years before the revolution in Tunis took place.

The opportunity to study at P.A.R.T.S. was presented through a spontaneous meeting with Theo Van Rompay, the co-director, during his visit to my former dance school in Tunis. At the end of the class he presented himself and he invited me to the auditions for P.A.R.T.S. I passed the audition, I was selected and from there on my life became Belgian.

This means I have been following the revolutionary event from far.

I remember at that time I was a young boy whose only mission was to study and to learn English and to learn how to adapt to this new environment.

So when the revolution started I didn't believe what I was seeing, everything looked so unrealistic to me, since I was raised with the picture of Ben Ali in front of my face in every place wherever I went and I had this image of him as one of the greatest presidents in the world!

So in 2017 this work / exchange visit and its talks and lectures gave me the chance to understand the political situation in the country better, and especially the artistic situation after "The Arab Spring".

I remember very well that on my first day at the Dream City festival, when we arrived from Brussels to Tunis, we had to go to our first meeting, so we were walking in the streets of the medina and for a second I looked around me and I realised that I was surrounded by a community of Flemish artists, thinkers and programmers and it was kind of a funny in-between situation for me to be invited to my own country by a Flemish "European" institute. But I have to say I liked it a lot, I liked this in-between situation, I like the idea of being some kind of bridge between both countries.

Through this visit I experienced the Dream City festival for the first time and got the chance to understand its concept: inviting an artist and giving him some time inside the walls of the medina to get lost and get inspired by its spaces. Then the artist takes some time to reflect, he writes a proposal with what he wishes to work on, then he comes back and works on his idea. The minimum of creation time is six weeks and it goes up to six months. Here I like the freedom the artist gets in terms of time, and I find it interesting that the artist is offered a
space to be able to open up his practice in the intellectual level by getting into discussion with people from different fields and disciplines like politics, architecture ... This breaks boundaries between disciplines and offers the regular audience, "who have the tendency to see art through commercial TV shows", a higher and different vision of art. It shows the vision that "yes, through art we can change something in this world".

I was really impressed by the movement the festival created inside the medina. The movement between the spaces, the movement between the people and how the performances were some kind of a meeting linking the audience and the space.

I was very happy with the presence of the artistic Flemish community in Tunis. Most of the time we have these images of people from Europe coming to "Arab/Muslim" countries with the idea of "you have a problem and we are coming to teach you how to fix it". Here in this meeting it was different, people were just people! They were coming together to discuss universal echoes. People were trying to find ways of communication, ways of connecting and understanding each other. The problems are pretty much the same everywhere, they just have a different shape. There is as much for the east to learn from the west as vice versa.

To have the artistic Flemish community in Tunis gave a fresh vision, different perspectives and ideas and some resting time from the French influence!

This work visit was very important for me, especially in this time of my artistic trajectory since I started working on my first personal creation, a solo called "The Upside Down Man (The son of the road)". It's an autoportrait that talks and questions the topic of "identity" in "the space in-between". What does it mean to be in-between? How can we exist in this in-between, living between more than one country, language, culture and religion? How is one's identity and the view of the self challenged in this in-between process? Is identity something fixed that is given for once and for all at birth? People in-between are frequently asked to choose one side. Why should we choose a side if we already chose to be in-between? Could we consider this in-between space as a bridge?

This work visit in itself was some kind of bridge for me. This experience made me question my position towards my country where I'm not living anymore and how to create more connections between here and there: "Belgium – Tunisia - the world". I explore how to make my dancing into a physical form, a tool of reflection, a movement that mirrors and reflects on the environment and the world we're living in. A movement that creates bridges between countries and people.

**Mohamed Toukabri** is born in Tunis and began dancing at the age of 13, starting with breakdance. He joined the Sybel Ballet Theatre (TN) led by Syhème Belkhodja and worked with them from 2002 until 2008. At the age of 16, Mohamed trained in Paris at the International Academy of Dance. In 2007 he returned to Tunisia to study at the Mediterranean Centre for Contemporary Dance. He worked with the choreographer Imed Jemaa / 5 Productions between 2006 and 2008. In 2008 he joined P.A.R.T.S. (BE), the
school directed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. During his studies at P.A.R.T.S. in 2010 he participated in *Babel* by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Damien Jalet from Eastman (BE). Since 2013 until today Mohamed Toukabri is a member of Needcompany (BE), the international performance company founded by Jan Lauwers and Grace Ellen Barkey. He also performs in the reconstruction of the repertory piece *Zeitung* (2013) by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and *Sacre Printemps!* (2014) by Aicha M’Barak and Hafiz Dhaou from Chatha company (TN). In spring 2018 he will be presenting his first solo creation: *The Upside Down Man* (working title).
Dear Mohamed,

I just read your report, and I share your gratitude towards Flanders Arts Institute for having given us the opportunity to be part of this work visit to Dream City in Tunis. We started talking about your very first creation in April 2017, and that’s how I got familiar with the first 17 years of your life in Tunis. You told me about how your life had changed at 12 when you saw a guy spinning on his head in front of “la Gare de Barcelone” in the centre of Tunis. That’s where you decided to become a dancer. You also told me about a festival in Tunis which was the starting point of your international career at a very young age. A few weeks after you told me all this, you said the festival was taking place in May 2017 and that you were going. I decided to join.

May 2017: my first encounter with Tunis. I was enchanted by the city and its citizens, the vibration of passionate young activists, journalists and artists. Who could have known we would be back a few months later already? What a gift this work visit has been: listening to Tunisian experts of all ages and disciplines, giving us an idea of the political, social and artistic history of the country, talking about the revolution, its dreams and its desillusions, its needs and its wishes for the future. To listen to historian Kmar Bendana, researcher and dance programmer Mariem Guellouz, activist and teacher in design Sana Tamzini and theatre programmer Moez Mrabet was extremely enriching. But I was equally moved by the voices of young and old Tunisians who frequented the festival, and who were present every morning during the talks which were moderated by Eric Corijn. I heard a very young girl with a trembling voice saying how much hope this festival gave her for the future of her country, I heard a very old lady who was almost in tears and who thanked the festival for giving her access to her own city, her past and her history.

This festival and all the events around it were unique. This festival can definitely claim the name it has given itself: Dream City. It was a dream turned into reality, a festival which would be a gift for every city, not in the least for Brussels, your city, my city, our city. I wish for Brussels that it can one day experience the beauty of what we experienced in Tunis: people brought together, people from all ages, backgrounds and disciplines, not simply to see a performance, but to discuss it, to reflect on it, to dream about it together.
Zowat alle voorstellingen hebben me geraakt, iets bijgebracht of verrast. Meer dan eens heb ik gezegd: nu ben ik voldaan, er hoeft niks meer bij te komen. Het lijkt me dan ook niet nuttig om recensies te schrijven over bepaalde stukken. Hieronder enkele hersenspinsels over de trip in zijn geheel.

Na de 5-daagse had ik hetzelfde gevoel als wanneer ik terugkom van 5 weken tournage voor een documentaire. Ik ben al minstens 20 keer in Tunesië geweest. Meestal bij mijn familie, in Mahdia en uitzonderlijk enkele keren in Sousse, Monastir en Tunis. En ik geef toe: het is pas nu ik naar Dream City geweest ben dat ik gevoeld heb wat er echt aan de hand is in Tunesië.

Over het algemeen werden er in de werken weinig metaforen of abstracties gebruikt. Alles was niet mis te verstaan - “rechttoe, rechtaan”. Dat was handig, aangezien ik niet echt Arabisch begrijp, maar wel kon volgen zonder het ‘vertaalblaadje’ te lezen. Er werd met gulheid en veel energie geperformed. Dat is logisch in een post-revolutionair tijdperk: in een dictatuur moet je metaforen gebruiken om te kunnen zeggen wat je niet mag zeggen. Abstractie is een luxe en kan soms verkeerd geïnterpreteerd worden en daar heeft deze generatie niks aan. Ze willen vooruit, ze willen gehoord worden en wel nu onmiddellijk.

De lezingen in de voormiddag waren goed om sommige zaken eventjes op een rij te zetten. De thema’s en sprekers waren goed gekozen. De interventies van de (Belgische) moderator waren een goede graadmeter om ons attent te maken op onze westerse blik, die we te vaak projecteren in contexten die er niet om vragen.

De tussenkomsten van het publiek voegden dan weer het nodige realisme toe. Het stokpaardje van de moderator was de vraag: “Wanneer zal de Medina in de moderniteit stappen?” Iemand uit het publiek vroeg zich af of we niet beter vanuit een ‘méttissage’ zouden denken. Die opmerking was voor mij persoonlijk een verademing. Vooral omdat ik soms de indruk krijg dat de dingen maar écht of geslaagd zouden zijn als ze lijken op wat we in het Westen doen. Alles gelijk trekken zou echt stom zijn, alles vermengen is een schitterend idee. Dat klinkt als grenzen weghalen. Totale vrijheid.

Ik had het erover met een antropologe en die wees me op het feit dat de term métissage verschillende ladingen heeft. Ik heb me er nog niet in verdiept, maar als ik de term hier gebruik, dan wil ik die gebruiken in de zin van ‘fusie’ en omgekeerd aan assimilatie. In het symposium, georganiseerd door Joachim Ben Yakoub, kregen we aangrijpende getuigenissen uit eerste hand van zaken die we ons niet echt kunnen inbeelden als we er gewoon over lezen. De boodschap was duidelijk: Kom met ons samenwerken, maar stop met ons te helpen. Dàt is waar métissage volgens mij voor staat en een belangrijke rol kan spelen.

Fairuz Ghammam is a visual enthusiast who lives and works in Brussels. She wonders about how to change the world and hopes to find an answer as soon as possible. Luckily she grew up with the knowledge that patience is the key to happiness. She graduated as an
experimental filmmaker and works as an editor, cinematographer and director in cinema beyond genres and formats. She equally loves well-balanced steady high-def shots and lo-fi trash, as well as analogue visual experiments, as long as the poetry shines through.

[link to Garag64.be]