

Interview with Heddy Maalem

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If you want to know my story, it has something to do with being physically terrified during the war in Algeria because we were in the Aures, right on top of everything happening there, a terrible violence. I perceived it as a child would, I didn't understand what was happening but saw the bloodied bodies afterward. So for me my adolescence was about being torn from my native land, Algeria, losing my father, and all my points of reference. The path for

me, my protection, was to keep going in a battle I did not understand, something like that. And then when I was doing that, I discovered the body and the world of sensation.

I am interested in exploring ambiguity. The idea that the beauty of movement and its representation shows us beauty as well as the feeling of being repulsed by it. We are aware of the idea of beauty at the same time as the idea of death. This is a mystery which interests me and it continues to evolve. So when I work on solos, especially with women, I find that they have an intuitive understanding of their own bodies. Their way of being, their presence, is such that when you look at them their beauty just wipes you out, and the presence of death runs right through you.

What is nudity? Yes, it is difficult and interesting and it moves us. We need for nudity to brush up against us, tease out these questions: the way we look at others, the complexity of that look. I think that in the relationships we have with others it is important to be able to distinguish what disturbs our vision rather trying to shed a light on absolutely everything. I find that extremely dangerous.

A lifetime is like a parenthesis inside which we stumble around where we do three little steps, turns, like slightly sloshed puppets. I find that, whether we stumble or not, it's the way we fall down and the way we get up, I mean the way we stand that is important. Even if we make a lot of mistakes, if we have "a trick knee," it's about the way we get up, the elegance, the class, you know. And that's kind of how I think about dance.

Sometimes we start with a primal idea, something no one else would want to touch. But you're never so close to the truth as when you feel the presence of immense stupidity hovering. You cannot live in fear of that. And happily I wasn't afraid when Nathalie Rinaldi was working with me. I saw she had this amazingly athletic body and I saw she would use this gesture, this fatigue which long distance swimmers get, and boxers who have been fighting so long they can't hold their arms up anymore and we called it "le petit moment du faiblesse". I saw those terrible images from Rwanda where people killed, they massacred other people with their machetes; they had those same gestures, like the fatigue of crop pickers, a horrible routine. I thought we were looking at what informs the gesture, what I see there.

African dances, which I used to watch when I was a kid, they're very nice, but they have been spoiled by our looking at them. We minimize them, reduce them to something folkloric, when in fact they are the vehicle for a great culture that cannot be represented in books. It is something else. And it is important to see this richness where something has been lost. It seemed important that we establish a relationship to these worlds, not through books or intellectuals, but something that would be more sensual, sensitive, something that could only be expressed in dance. I don't know if this will bring change or evolution but it feels like we are opening windows.... Like in a house, seeing rooms we thought we knew but which we decided not to visit any more.

When you talk about the audition—that takes me back five years to Lagos, Nigeria, which was a giant shock in my life. Lagos is something else, not the Africa one imagines. And it was from there that the idea of *The Rite of Spring* came to me. It is how in spite of everything, or how with death, something extremely vital, a brilliance overwhelms us with despair. Lagos is all of that together.

Your question about the black body, well for me it isn't a question about a black body but a human one. The more I use my body and God knows I have worked with mine: martial arts, boxing, fighting, dance.... it's the way I looked at things. For example, on stage I absolutely despise what they call sets, set design, all that. I like it in other people's work, but my personal tendency is to empty OUT the stage, sometimes even costumes on the dancers' bodies are unacceptable to me. Sometimes they are too obvious, you have to have just the right touch. So I get as close as I can to the body, the flesh. And whatever color it is, it's human, it's the same question. It is different, I am not naïve—the fact that I work with black dancers and I show this work in France bothers certain people, not many, but there are some who cannot comprehend how a white man can work so directly and frontally with the body. I am not tiptoeing around this issue but I try to show the respect and delicacy I have for others. There are so many feelings which came into play: I was taken away from my own country, I was made to feel like an illegal there. And when I would ask, "Where is my country?" I would think of the words of the great poet Francois Villon: "in my country, naked as a worm, but costumed as a president, nothing is sure but uncertainty, I seem to win everything, but lose all." That comes from the Middle Ages, but for me it applies right now. Maybe these pieces, *Black Spring* and *The Rite of Spring*, they are on that wavelength. They share the same irreconcilability so of course I apply myself knowing perhaps it is a battle I have already lost attempting to connect something which was not disconnected, but demolished with an axe.

To recapitulate, if we're talking about the works I've created in the last few years, *Le Sacre du Printemps* is an echo to *Black Spring* and the piece I am planning which will be called *Movement in a Wild Garden* it's—at least in my head—a response to *l'Ordre de la Bataille*. All of these works are my attempts at finding what to say. I have this feeling that I might find a form that pleases me but which I manage to glimpse only fleetingly. I can't really describe it. It would be something which would bring together everything I have been trying to say. I went to Africa, partly because of my heritage, my roots, my questions and partly because I sensed that I would find there some piece of brutal reality of human movement that speaks to me and that I would want to work with. And to continue something not entirely focused on Africa and African bodies, since that for me is more unfocused. Like, and I say it without pretention, a painter who goes through different "periods" to arrive at a certain kind of color or brush stroke which ends up being his most concentrated expression.

There is a beautiful definition of art: "art is always a little bit elsewhere and otherwise" So the trick is to find that symbolic space where we can try for that verticality, something that will hold up.

I find it difficult to start a piece without having an idea for its title since I think the title should really sum it up. At a certain moment—I could explain but it's a bit long—I thought I would call this whole series of solos using that phrase of Gertrude Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose" That says it all, that things are what they are and it also reflects my thought that we should really just call a spade a spade, that the right movement is just that, you can't get around it. In each new piece, I am fully aware I am saying more or less the same thing and instead of guilting myself over it, I want to underline it even further. I think that it's all in how you say it, the style, the manner of speaking is everything. I think repeated attempts to say something like "a rose is a rose is a rose" is still focused on the flower, on the essence of what I am trying to say.

There is a Spanish poem that says, "before I die I want to release the words from my soul." I want to release the ones I have in my heart, my soul and that is what I am doing. And I think that when a man speaks out like that he can be reviewed or criticized but we see it is still his word. It stands as those trees stand and what I am saying stands too. We touch upon something which is difficult to reach, to attain, to get as close as possible to what is within our capacity. It is the abyss of doubt and our clumsiness that separates us from reaching this point of being able to express exactly what we want to say.