

## CULTURE

### (Sur)vivre en Syrie, juste pour une heure



Les déboires des Syriens en révolution, sujet central de la performance présentée par Zoukak à Paris.

## SCÈNE

« Chronicles of An Orphan Revolution », mis en scène par Leyla- Claire Rabih, est un spectacle multiculturel, joué en français et en arabe lors du Festival Zoukak Sidewalks à Beyrouth. Une performance illustrant le commencement de la révolution syrienne.

*Rowana CHAAR* | OLJ

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Dans une grande pièce de la maison «Mansion» qui fait office de scène: quelques chaises, un fauteuil, des lumières, un tapis et une grande table face aux spectateurs. Le strict minimum. Certains acteurs se mettent en place, tandis que les autres se cachent dans le public avant de faire leur entrée ou d'élever leurs voix.

La performance *Chronicles of An Orphan Revolution* va commencer... Rideau, action! Le passé ressurgit à travers un échange de mails entre un manifestant syrien et une étudiante syrienne à Paris.

Syrie, 2011: le début d'une révolution, qui continue à ce jour de saigner ses martyrs.

Leyla- Claire Rabih met en scène trois textes de l'auteur syrien Mohammad al- Attar qu'elle a choisis pour de bonnes raisons: «Chacun d'eux constitue une fenêtre sur un moment particulier de la révolution syrienne et en éclaire des aspects différents: les premières manifestations, la volonté de s'engager malgré la répression, les partitions de la société, le glissement vers la guerre civile...» Ils illustrent les événements auxquels la population syrienne fait face depuis cinq ans. La peur, l'angoisse, l'inquiétude, le manque... Le spectateur ressent les émotions des personnages à travers les échanges. Il a beau être à l'abri de la police qui cherche les manifestants, des coups, de la barbarie, il se sent plongé dans une guerre civile qui n'en finit pas.

### **Innovation des formes théâtrales**

*Online*, *Tu peux regarder la caméra?* et *Youssef est passé ici* sont trois différents textes, sans aucun lien, qui bousculent la vision des choses du spectateur, le poussant à se poser des questions, lui qui ne voit l'actualité qu'à travers les médias. L'idée, Leyla- Claire Rabih l'a eue à distance, depuis Paris: «La violence de la répression m'a atteint en plein visage. Peu à peu, la Syrie, la révolution et le désastre syrien se sont imposés au cœur de mon travail artistique», explique la metteuse en scène.

Une heure durant, cinq acteurs racontent comment les choses ont commencé. Leur jeu est particulièrement agréable, surtout que certains d'entre eux interprètent plusieurs rôles. Le temps d'une heure, ils deviennent des manifestants, d'anciens détenus torturés, des activistes. Ils sont tous des victimes syriennes de l'oppression, face à un public qui ne peut agir. Un travail de longue haleine pour Leyla- Claire Rabih, qui a veillé à représenter minutieusement le début de ces événements afin de les retranscrire sur scène. «Je travaille sur ce projet depuis 2014: traduction des textes, recherches de fonds, mise au point d'une équipe, lectures publiques... L'étape présentée à Beyrouth était le fruit de trois semaines concentrées.» Un début fortement apprécié par le public, mais qui n'est en aucun cas le spectacle dans sa forme finale. La pièce se présente sous différentes formes d'écritures théâtrales: un échange de mails, du théâtre intimiste et un road- movie. Un aspect pour chaque texte. «Le travail de scénographie se concentrera autour du rapport à l'image et sa place dans la représentation», déclare Leyla- Claire Rabih.

Cette première performance sera présentée à Paris, au festival «Périls, Syrie», ce soir et demain (27 et 28 février). «Nous poursuivrons le travail afin d'aboutir à la création du spectacle en 2017», conclut l'artiste.

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# L'HEBDO MAGAZINE

Chroniques d'une révolution orpheline. Pour une réflexion continue



## **C'est dans le cadre de Zoukak Sidewalks que le public libanais a eu l'occasion d'assister à Chroniques d'une révolution orpheline, un travail en cours franco-libanais, mis en scène par Leyla-Claire Rabih. Quand les outils de théâtre deviennent moyens de réflexion...**

Ce n'est ni un spectacle, ni une performance, c'est un travail en cours, un projet en cours, comme tient à le préciser d'emblée Leyla-Claire Rabih. Un projet en cours appelé à se terminer d'ici un an. Entre-temps, ce qui a été présenté les 19 et 20 février, à Mansion, est le fruit d'une résidence de travail de trois semaines dans les locaux de cette ancienne demeure beyrouthine transformée en maison d'artistes.

Il est toujours passionnant d'assister à un travail en cours, surtout quand il s'agit de théâtre, d'une scène, lieu de vie et de fantasme, à meubler de mots, de gestes, de déplacements, de silence et d'émotions. Surtout quand le projet s'attache à se pencher sur une situation toujours en cours, à quelques pas de nos frontières, brisant les frontières, comme un ultime rappel qu'avant toute cette destruction humaine, il y avait un cri de liberté, une révolution en germe, enclenchée par des volontés déterminées et muée en guerre.

Une révolution avortée? Une révolution orpheline plutôt, dont il faut remonter jusqu'aux origines, jusqu'à la source. Une révolution toujours en marche, même au ralenti, même en guerre, et qu'on est tous appelé, d'une certaine manière, à chroniquer, comme un devoir de mémoire, comme un devoir d'Histoire qui s'écrit simultanément en un florilège d'histoires.

C'est ce que propose Leyla-Claire Rabih. Depuis 2014, elle travaille sur un projet de théâtre autour de trois textes de Mohammad el-Attar: Online, Tu peux regarder la caméra? et Youssef est passé ici. Chaque histoire raconte un moment particulier de la révolution syrienne; les premières démonstrations et la peur d'être arrêté durant le printemps 2011, la volonté de s'engager à travers un travail documentaire à la fin de 2011 et la recherche d'un ami disparu au cœur d'une terre dévastée et une guerre civile en 2013. Tous les personnages se battent, avec les bouleversements historiques, mais aussi avec leur propre espoir, peur et désespoir.

Présentées en trois séquences relatives aux trois textes précités, ces Chroniques d'une révolution orpheline mettent en branle sensations, sens et sentiments. Plus qu'une simple composition théâtrale autour d'une situation politique complexe, elles sont un acte théâtral qui, tout en interrogeant le monde et ses urgences, s'interroge sur ses modalités: ses différentes formes d'écriture, ses schémas narratifs, les médiums exploitables, l'image, le son, la vidéo, le moyen de raconter les histoires d'une Histoire continue... autant d'outils de réflexion pour tenter de penser, d'appréhender, de comprendre les bouleversements historiques et le moyen artistique de les approcher.

Comment mettre en scène, en émotion et en vécu un simple échange de mails entre Damas et Paris, durant quelques jours du mois d'avril 2011? Charif et Salma communiquent sans se parler à travers la Toile, par voix interposées, à l'image de la voix qui traduit simultanément leurs mots de l'arabe vers le français. Des mots à la fois tendres et crus qui sentent l'effluve des mandarines, l'angoisse de l'exil, l'impuissance, la frustration, la peur, la honte et l'amour. A mesure que les minutes s'écoulent, la tension monte d'un cran jusqu'à la séquence suivante où de jeunes révolutionnaires fixent la caméra pour raconter leur détention, chacun à sa manière, face aux spectateurs, face à celle qui se fait un devoir d'archiver ces témoignages, alors que son histoire personnelle et familiale aurait dû la mener dans une autre voie. La caméra comme son reflet inversé, nous renvoyant aussi à nous-mêmes, spectateurs dans la même position. Qui sommes-nous dans cette révolution, dans cette guerre?

Rassemblés dans une dernière scène autour d'une table de débat, comédiens et metteur en scène sont confrontés à une situation où ne leur restent que des outils de travail artistiques, pour espérer effectuer un périple en Syrie, un «road movie» à la recherche d'un ami disparu, d'une révolution orpheline dont le seul point d'approche, encore accessible, est la frontière. De là peuvent s'élancer le voyage, l'exploration, la recherche. Loin de l'excuse étroite d'un travail expérimental, un projet en cours ne se place pas dans une situation de critique, mais de réflexion. C'est exactement ce que proposent ces Chroniques d'une révolution orpheline.

**Nayla Rached**

### **Travail d'équipe**

Textes: Mohammad el-Attar.

Traduction: Jumana el-Yasiri et Leyla-Claire Rabih.

Mise en scène: Leyla-Claire Rabih.

Scénographie: Jean-Christophe Lanquetin.

Assistant à la mise en scène: Philippe Journo.

Collaboration artistique: Catherine Boskowitz.

Comédiens: Soleïma Arabi, Wissam Arbache, Racha Baroud, Grégoire Tachnakian et Elie Youssef.

Production: Grenier Neuf 2016-2017.

Coproduction: Théâtre Dijon Bourgogne.

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### In praise of revolutionary art: theater and the Syrian Revolution

**ART** For art that is larger than life: Grenier Neuf interprets three texts by Syrian playwright Mohammad Al Attar in a work-in-progress performance at Mansion in Beirut. "Art in this region is vital, today more than ever before," writes Cynthia Kreichati.

Omar Amiralay's *Flood in Baath Country* (2003) is a timeless masterpiece. If there is one film to watch nowadays, this should be it. Amiralay's film concludes his trilogy on the Tabqa Dam, an earth-fill barrage built by the Assad regime on the Euphrates between 1968 and 1973 and located 40 kilometers upstream from the city of Raqqa. When the Syrian Revolution started in 2011, thousands of people who were displaced from the neighboring regions of Aleppo, Homs and Idlib found home in Raqqa. First controlled by the forces of the Baath Regime, the city then falls, in turns, into the hands of the Free Syrian Army, Al Nusra Front and finally the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Since then, the military intervention against ISIS has almost every country in the world bombing Raqqa every day.

In his first film on the Tabqa Dam *Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam* (1970), Amiralay expressed his admiration for the Baath Party's modernizing project in Syria. Amiralay's subsequent films on the Dam, *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974) and *Flood in Baath Country* (2003), are an act of contrition in which he critiques the government's failed policies and the refusal of the Baath Regime to assume responsibility. In *Flood in Baath Country*, Amiralay explores the deep and disquieting consequences of 40 years of rule of the Baath Party in Syria through the tribulations of the inhabitants of the village of Al Machi in the region of Manbij, and its public school. *Flood in Baath Country* is poetic, beautiful, and terrifying all at

once. It is also premonitory. It absorbs the tragedy and propels it onto the viewer who is captivated, who feels with the children of Al Machi, and realizes that something is boiling beneath the seemingly calm surface. Amiralay died in February 2011, a few weeks before the Syrian Revolution erupted. The man and his art stirred and continue to stir intense social, political and cultural debates in Syrian circles, and in Arab and Middle Eastern societies at large.

Recently, Leyla Rabih's **Grenier Neuf**, in collaboration with Zoukak Sidewalks, concluded three weeks of residency at **Mansion** in Beirut, by presenting their work in progress on texts by acclaimed young Syrian playwright Mohammad Al Attar. This is not the first time Beirut hosts adaptations of Attar's plays on the Syrian Revolution. Attar's performances in the city started in May 2011, with *Look at the Streets, This Is What Hope Looks Like*, on the occasion of Beirut Art Center's hosting of the Meeting Points 6 Festival. As the Revolution was in its early beginnings, Attar had worked on a collage of Facebook posts and pictures of Syrian revolutionaries. The posts were accompanied by passages from articles by Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif.



Copyright: Leyla Rabih

In 2012, one year or so after the Revolution had started; Attar staged his play *Could you look into the camera please* at the Tournesol Theater in the city's Tayyouneh neighborhood, for an exclusive one night performance. In 2013, he also worked with director Omar Abu Saada on *Intimacy*, which premiered at the Babel Theater in Hamra, part of the Homeworks Festival of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts that promotes and produces contemporary art practices in Lebanon. *Intimacy* followed the life of a black Sudanese actor who flees the violence in Damascus after 2011, and goes back to his home country



after 20 years spent in Syria. In 2014, Attar's *Antigone of Syria* also ran for three days at Al Madina Theatre in Hamra. Using Sophocles' tragedy as its starting point, Attar, a practitioner of the Theatre of the Oppressed, explored themes of the Syrian War by bringing forward, and on stage, Syrian women refugees now living in the camps of Sabra, Chatila and Bourj.

Two weekends ago, Grenier Neuf's *Chronicles of an Orphan Revolution* brought to an avid Beirut public, pressed on makeshift benches in Mansion's impressive main hall with its powerful acoustics, an hour and a half long interpretation of three seminal texts by Mohammad Al Attar: *Online* (2011), *Could you look into the camera please* (2011), and *Youssef was here* (2013). *Chronicles of an Orphan Revolution* was presented in two languages: French and Arabic. Characters were simultaneously translating monologues and conversations from Arabic into French during *Online*'s performance. However, French was almost the sole language of the interpretation of *Could you look into the camera please* and *Youssef was here*, alienating many in the audience who got up and left before the performance ended.

*Online* is a series of emails between Sherif, a revolutionary, and Salma. The period is April 2011. Sherif relays to his friend, and seemingly estranged lover Salma the debuts of the Revolution in Damascus. He confides in her about his fears and feelings of guilt over abandoning his comrades who got arrested. He tells her he misses her. She responds warmly and worryingly. She doesn't want anything to happen to him, and she loves him. Sherif and Salma are an atomized couple. Separated by distance, they both live in torment in the midst of the nascent Revolution. Their email exchange is brought to an abrupt end when Amir, another friend and revolutionary, informs Salma that Sherif has been arrested.



Copyright: Leyla Rabih

*Could you look into the camera please* tells the story of Ghassan, Noura, Farah and Zeid. Noura is an upper class young woman who recently got divorced. An aspiring filmmaker, she is trying to capture the experiences of those jailed, detained, and tortured during the early days of the Revolution in Damascus. Her brother Ghassan is a powerful lawyer who stands firmly on the side of the Baath regime and disagrees with his sister's project and aspirations. Farah and Zeid are revolutionary activists. Farah is a Christian young woman who was arrested near Bab Touma, Damascus' historical Christian quarter, for distributing tracts, while Zeid is an English educated, tech-savvy young man capable of making fun of his jailers. He even tells

Noura that his jailers couldn't understand the password to his computer because it was English, a language they neither speak nor understand.

Youssef was here retraces the journey of Fares, a Syrian émigré who's been living in Dubai. Fares comes back to Syria to search for his friend gone missing in Raqqa. He travels near the Turco-Syrian border, alongside the lake formed by the Euphrates' dam. He visits Manbij, Aleppo, and finally Raqqa before he decides it is time for him to leave and never come back.

The challenges in presenting such works in Beirut today are many. Aside from the social, sectarian, economic and geopolitical tensions reflected throughout the city, Rabih and her team had to navigate different formats and contents. Their portrayal of Sherif and Salma's email correspondence is brilliant and heart-wrenching but only at times. Their use of the Lebanese accent (and not Damascene for example), and the simultaneous French translation dilute its potency, and are reminiscent of the dialect of Beirut Francophones.

The choice of keeping Arabic in the performance of *Online* seems to serve a specific purpose. Rabih attempts to convey that Salma, who watches the unfolding Revolution and worries about her comrades from the safety of her home in Paris, is caught between two worlds. The rendition of the other two texts in French exclusively becomes questionable. The works are clearly intended for a non-Arab, French audience. What is the purpose then of staging this performance in Beirut and calling upon the audience to interact. Which audience are we talking about exactly?

In *Could you look into the camera please*, the use of cameras directed at Zeid, Farah and the audience, and incorporating a live projection on Mansion's sky high walls is captivating. It pulls the audience into Noura's disownment. However, the French script pulls us out again. Noura and Ghassan's family ties are eroded as she sides with the Revolutionaries and he continues to support the Regime. In the film she's trying to make, she still does not know what is the story she wants to tell, and her conversations with previous detainees reveal more about her struggles than theirs. She is rebelling against her father and her brother before anything else.



Copyright: Leyla Rabih

Rabih's interpretation of Youssef Was Here asserts that Grenier Neuf's work is really still a work in progress. Rabih says in writing that she did not live under siege, bombs or the brutality of the regime. A camera captures what she is writing and her short messages are projected onto Mansion's walls for the audience to read. Rabih cannot travel to Syria's northern regions to relive the journey of Fares. Like him, she is a stranger in Syria. With her colleagues, she questions her legitimacy and their right to tell the story of the Revolution now turned Civil War.

While Grenier Neuf's performance is laudable, its shortcomings are also of considerable importance. Their selection of texts and adaptation do not go beyond the mainstream claims of journalists and scholars alike. It adopts the prevalent expositions of the circumstances, causes and outcomes of the Arab Revolutions. These are reduced to three dominant notions: breaking the barrier of fear, the battle over narrative, and the subjectivities of middle class educated Syrians and the religious minorities. While all three concepts are of utmost importance, the Syrian Revolution and the subsequent Syrian Civil War are much more socially, culturally, politically, and economically complex. Geographically, the texts are reduced to Damascus, Assad's fief, and the triangle near the Syro-Turkish Border that is now mostly under the control of ISIS. Art could probe, discover, and recognize.

At the end of the performance, I couldn't stop thinking about the Al Machi village; featured in Omar Amiralay's masterpiece *Flood in Baath Country* (2003) and located exactly in the region where Fares' friend had disappeared in Youssef was here. In addition to Fares and Grenier Neuf's struggles with questions of legitimacy, and their right, as strangers, to reflect on this Revolution turned Civil War, I wanted to know what had happened to the family of Diab Al Machi, the world's longest serving parliamentarian from 1954 until his death in 2009, his 16 children, 300 grandchildren, and his teacher nephew and the primary school he ran for the regime in Manbij.

Prior to the Revolution, Manbij was home to a very diverse population including Naqshbandis, Kurdish, Circassians and Arabs. Diab Al Machi himself was the leader of a tribal order. I wanted to understand how art and artists viewed, imagined and recreated relations and society in this part of the country, and how they think these changed since 2011. What happened to the members of Al Machi tribes? How did Manbij move from living under Assad to ISIS? Are the Al Machi still with the regime? Did they revolt at any point? What happened to the school? In an article entitled [The Emancipation of Speech](#), published in the quarterly Arabic Magazine *Bidayat* in the spring of 2013, Attar himself remembers the principal and the children of this school. He had seen through Amiralay's film that taming them was an impossible task and that it would not be long before the Revolution comes.

In times of crisis, any art goes; especially when it is produced by collectives of Arab artists and caters to a non-Arab, Western audience. Art in this region is vital, today more than ever before. In its social and political functions, one can hope for art to speak to the inhabitants of the region first and foremost. Beirut in that sense couldn't be more appropriate. These past few years, times have never been worse. Somehow the city has been spared for now. Those fleeing have sought refuge, or at least passage, here. Apart from the Lebanese, there are Palestinians, Yemenis, Tunisians, Bahrainis, Egyptians, Libyans, Iraqis, and Syrians, whose own people disallowed them onto Beirut. Its intellectuals, writers, artists, journalists, pariahs, city dwellers, people with broken dreams, broken hearts, broken everything are thirsty for art, impetuous passion and beauty. In a recent report, the Syrian Center for Policy Research estimated that 11.5% of the Syrian Population was killed or injured during these past 5 years. That is the equivalent of 8 million people in

Britain. The magnitude of the tragedy is incommensurate with any work of art these days. But then again, art can be larger than life.