

Radhouane El Meddeb's Experiments With Gender: In Search of New Bodies

Radhouane El Meddeb's Experiments With Gender: In Search of New Bodies by Omar Fertat *Arab Stages*,
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In a recent interview Rabih Mroué, the Lebanese theatre artist, complained of his inability as an actor, to develop “a dynamic body, athletic, well mannered, obedient, malleable and expressive,” saying: “I can not have that body, which the theatre demands, and I do not know any of my colleagues or my friends or my family that has this body. What I see is that we have bodies that are tired, lazy, spoiled, and flabby and presenting problems that we can not solve. Our bodies seem sad. . . and the body we have is neither perfect or exemplary.”[\[1\]](#)

Faced with the absence of the “model Arab body” that Rabih Mroué has been struggling to find, the Franco-Tunisian choreographer Radhouane El Meddeb, who himself has a body which is equally at odds with the slender and perfect body of most professional dancers, offers an alternative approach, making this “handicap” an artistic asset. Like a Raymond Hugh or Olivier Dubois, he seized upon the abject body in the dance as the only path to liberation for him. Thus the Tunisian artist draws his inspiration from the margins. Reasserting his difference and exploring the female universe through dance are two distinctive traits of the creative path of El Meddeb, which we will attempt to illuminate briefly in the lines which follow:

The art of El Meddeb lies at the crossroads of two worlds: the theatre and dance, even if it has a clear predilection for dance. He came to the theatre by chance or by accident. Accompanying his sister to an audition (because their conservative father demanded that the girl be accompanied by her brother), the young Radhouane was recruited to perform in a play. And during a session of improvisation, in which he “raved for an hour laughing and making everyone cry,” he realized, without knowing exactly what this meant, that being on stage was the job he wanted to do.[\[2\]](#)

He continued his studies at the Institut supérieur d'art dramatique in Tunis, from which he graduated with highest honors. There then followed a period of intense activity in which he participated as an actor in several plays under the direction of some of the most famous directors in Tunisia, such Fadel Jaïbi, Taoufik Jebali, and Mohamed Driss . . . , and performed a few film roles.[\[3\]](#) A talented actor, he was named the “young hope of the Tunisian theatre” in 1996 by the Tunisian branch of the International Theatre Institute. The same year, at age 26, he was recruited as an actor into the training and research workshop of the National Theatre of Toulouse under the direction of Jacques Rosner. It was in France that he fulfilled himself. He staged his first solo dance, *Pour en finir avec moi* for the Rencontres chorégraphiques de Carthage. This production by lauded by professionals and was a turning point in his career. He then created multiple works in France, beginning the following year with the solo pieces *Hûwà*, *Ce lui* for Montpellier Danse 2006. In 2007, he organized the tours *1000 Départs de Muscles*

created by Hela Fattoumi and Eric Lamoureux.

In 2008, he presented his creation *Quelqu'un va danser* for the Rencontres Chorégraphiques Internationales de Seine-Saint-Denis. That same year at the Centre National de la Danse (CND) in Pantin he presented the performance *Je danse et je vous en donne à bouffer*. In 2010, at CND he created his first group work, *Ce que nous sommes*, with five dancers who toured throughout France for two years. In December 2010, he collaborated with Stéphane Gombert on *Chant d'amour*, based upon a novel and film by Jean Genet, which they premiered at the Collectif in Mantes-la-Jolie. In January 2011, El Meddeb became an associate artist at the Centquatre-Paris. There he presented *À l'Étroit* in March 2011, a work commissioned by the Concordan(s)e festival in collaboration with the author Philippe Adam. He presented the work *Tunis, le 14 janvier 2011* at the Beirut Art Center in Lebanon for Meeting Point 6. In July 2012, at festival Montpellier Danse Festival, he created and danced the solo piece, *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*, the choreography of which he shared with Thomas Lebrun. In 2014, he created *Au temps où les Arabes dansaient*, a piece for four dancers at the Festival CDC in Toulouse and at the Centquatre-Paris.

If El Meddeb has decided to break with the theatre in its classic “narrative” form to commit himself to dance, it's because he wanted to express his inner world and that which surrounds him without utilizing words or stories. “The theatre bored me,” he confesses. “I had there the feeling of being at the end of the road. I was a little tired of using a language that was not mine, words borrowed from historical figures and distant cultures. When I made the decision to break with the theatre, I did not at all know what direction to take or what I would do. Dance came to me like a demonstration, like a mode of expression that could replace the theatre. I thus found myself in this new space by finding another way to be in the art, even if I carry within myself a great deal of theater, I have taken on another means of carrying out my scene work.”[\[4\]](#)

It is thanks to Lisa Nelson, a pioneer of contact dance, he came to this insight and created his first solo. El Meddeb said that during a workshop in Spain bringing together Mediterranean dancers and choreographers, the American choreographer, after asking him to create an improvisation—surprised and intrigued by his performance—came to see him and said: “What you have done is fantastic; you have something and you must do it. You have a solo in you. You're a dancer and you can dance.” It is thanks to *En finir avec moi* that the young Tunisian artist became noticed by French critics and professionals. He described it as “an experimental approach to dance seeking to make visible the movements of my body beyond performance technical performance, skill and muscle. Especially using an intimate emotional relationship to the body.”[\[5\]](#)

To a Westerner, dance is an expression that is part of well established cultural practices. A man dancing on stage is a fact which is within the ordinary, not to say commonplace, while for an Arab or North African, dance is considered a delicate act, sometimes blame-worthy, sometimes tolerated but in any case before anything else an entirely female expression associated with sensuality and femininity. From a sociological point of view, it is true that in Arab societies in general the act of dance as a cultural phenomenon is more prevalent among women than among men. Dance is a female ritual present in all the holidays—it accompanies food preparation in the intimacy of the home and appears in the form of trance during the evening of henna.

In order to analyze the artistic universe proposed by El Meddeb, instead of referring to psychological and

theoretical studies about the body and its representations in Arab societies, I would rather rely upon an ethnographic study by Maud Nicolas, published under the title of “What ‘To Dance’ Means: Representations of the Body and Gender Relations in Marriage Rituals in Tunis.”^[6] In this field study observing the actions and behaviors of men and women in the context of dance, the author, “an acting observer” to use terminology dear to ethnologists, chose as a subject of study Tunisian weddings. After several months of observations, Maud Nicolas made the following observations: the realm of dance remains one more inhabited by women than by men; dance has more importance and significance for women than for men; women approach dance more seriously than men; dance is experienced by women as an important means of expression, and, finally, dance is claimed by women as an act of deep relaxation. “It is already a great step,” says one Tunisian woman interviewed as part of this study, “to become comfortable with yourself, to express things that cannot be expressed by words. You must use parts of the body to express it, you are freed from the expression of words and of faces.”

For some women, beyond offering freedom, dance appears as a privileged moment during which they rediscovered the consciousness of the physical existence of their own bodies. “When the rhythms become insane enough,” says one of the participants, “you go into a trance, you exorcise many things.”^[7] According to this study, it is clear that women assume, if not demand, a full and personal investment in the act of dancing. This is hardly the case with men, less at ease in their bodies, for whom dance appears more as a collective act. “They are the ones that most often form circles, or open themselves up to many others, stressing proximity by repeated movements. Their dancing is more like a joyful ruckus than a calculated choreography. The movements of the pelvis are limited, largely offset by arms up and stretched before them. The performers eagerly strike the ground, much more often than women, and a few leaps may, depending on the situation and the mood, punctuate these energetic exercises. No grace is sought here, but on the contrary a demonstration of masculinity. The pelvis scarcely moves because such movements are considered feminine. The bodies are stiff and sometimes even awkward.”^[8]

When the statements made by Radhouane El Meddeb about his work are taken together, there is a striking similarity between the discourses of Tunisian women cited in the study and his. It is as if he has appropriated feminist discourse to interpret it on stage. First of all, El Meddeb acknowledges the female character of the dance: “Dance for me is a female way of movements, in its lightness and grace,” he says.^[9] Then, like the women in the Maghreb, he expresses the inability to say everything and to express themselves freely. The frustration he experienced in his body and soul through a life of marginalization led him into a profound depression and an attempt at suicide. It was only by accepting his body and “allowing the monster within himself to dance,”^[10] by breaking through the barriers transgressing the ethical codes imposed by a patriarchal and conservative society, that he managed to free himself. “Dancing saved me,” he says. “It makes me more and more alive. It is freedom. In creative work today, you can reject any constraint, any dogmas, even those of the dance. The body of the performer may be delicate, heavy, large, or small . . . It does not matter.”^[11] Thus El Meddeb has taken on a female practice and placed on stage a way to exist and of expressing the world which is completely feminine. The difference from his female fellow citizens is that this Tunisian artist has selected contemporary dance performance as his mode of expression, instead of traditional or “classic” dance which is customarily danced by women in the Maghreb. However, even if dance represents a liberation for El Meddeb and is the domain most conducive to the realization of his artistic aspirations, this does not prevent him from giving it a critical and distanced look. He wanted his first show, *Pour en finir avec moi*, to be a kind of *mise en abîme* of the dance because he says he does not like “dancers who take themselves too seriously, who do not know what facial expression is and who never look at the auditorium.” His models are

dancers of Pina Bausch whom he finds “very elegant and noble in this way of using the stage, sometimes apparently wandering about, but always knowing what they want.”^[12] We will try in the following analysis to see, on a thematic level, how Radhouane El Meddeb explores and stages certain aspects of the feminine Arab world, while also explaining the creative process and the visual and physical dramaturgy that undergirds the productions that we are considering here as objects of study.

Je danse et je vous en donne à bouffer

"It smells good, it sings, it dances so why not eat it !!!"

In this “culinary performance,” El Meddeb combines two arts he loves: dancing and cooking. Both domains are considered in the Arab world as typically feminine. He says he wants to restore an intimate feminine atmosphere he experienced in his childhood. “My basic idea is empirical,” he says. “I have in my family for a long time carefully observed my mother and my aunts preparing couscous. This is a national dish, served on all occasions: weddings, circumcisions, funerals . . . the same dish for different events that punctuate the same existence.”^[13] The preparation of the couscous is at the center this performance. The preparation time is the time of the show, the artist dances as the dish is cooking, but also dances while preparing the vegetables and other ingredients. It reconfirms a feminine presence through movement, displacement, changes in location, and other gestures drawn from the choreography of everyday life, and is synonymous with women’s poetry and sensuality. Normally, the artist presents a passionate demonstration of her relationship to the body and to dance, still while participating in real life. Close to the concept of synesthesia, this choreographic approach makes an appeal to all the senses. Sitting on either side of the stage space, viewers find themselves seized by the odors diffused into the space. “The clear deployment of my body thus is in accord with the slow diffusion of the scent of the food, while the cooking time determines the duration of the show.”^[14] At the end of the show, the audience is invited on stage to taste the dish concocted by El Meddeb. Letting the music run on for a few minutes while the public comes up on the stage, the artist seems to extend the show, extending it beyond the time of the performance, inviting the public to share, discover both the dish and the elements that compose it as well as to share the space in which it evolved, was danced, and was prepared. As the artist himself has observed: “There is no ‘relationship of superiority’ between the dancer the viewer. The two meet face to face (there is no longer a stage, properly speaking) which leaves then a frontal report (there is also no scene literally) that leaves the best part to small, an unexpected guest of the choreography.”^[15]

In order to provide an idea of ??the reception that this culinary performance of the Tunisian artist can have, I will quote Pascal Bély, who after having attended the performance at the Festival Danse in 2009, preserved for us the feelings and sensation that a perceptive spectator might have had:

The meat trembled, his body rushed forward. The broth was boiling as he performed a belly dance. Semolina ran through his fingers as he opened his arms. His curves welcomed the dance which, until proven otherwise, seemed a matter of wrinkles and bumps, of grease and of doubling, of liquids and flesh. Between two preparations, he came toward us to play with the time of cooking which suddenly accelerated. He rushed about the stage as if his only watch was the beating of the heart. But the man is no fool: he knows that we envy him because it is 8 pm and our stomach is empty. What are we looking as, what are feeling as odors assail us?

Our heart races while he sits quietly to savor some vegetables. Hunger joins in our desire to dance so that we must struggle against the traditional impulse to remain a passive spectator! It is in this chaos that the encounter occurs: his movements are nourishing because I feel that a metaphorical transmission (from mother to son?) for advancing towards some of us to offer a plate to us. Does the dancer's body exist at the crossroads of a variety of gifts of 'nourishment' given to us? It is a mystery.[\[16\]](#)

In this solo, which he calls performance since its presentation relies heavily on the viewer and the place in which it occurs, El Meddeb draws upon Tunisian reality by way his own life experience using local "materials" and "components"—traditional music, a national dish, spices of the country, a "maternal" dance, everyday female gestures. As in his first shows, even if the artist likes to expose himself on stage in a way that can sometimes appear narcissistic, he seeks to be in communion with the spectator by transmitting to him, through the medium of his body, "the sensations of real and material of his own experience." But this relationship to the spectator is not inscribed in an explicit or linear narrative. On the contrary, El Meddeb says: "My relationship to narcissism and self-fiction is very humble. Everyone has his own ego. Each is an entity. It is a means of self-preservation. Nobody is a collective. That's how the world is constructed. I cannot mix myself with others. I'm a bundle of nerves and contradictions. And I try to register myself with this in a relationship with another. I do not think that creation can be truly collective."[\[17\]](#) We will return later to the role the Tunisian artist assigns to the spectator in what we refer to as the "dramaturgy of the spectator."

Sous leurs pieds, le paradis

While the singer delivers the heartbreaking words of a long forgotten love song lost words, the artist gradually puts on feminine clothing

After exploring a number of different worlds and experimenting with a number of different choreographies: solo performances (*En finir avec moi*, 2006; *Je danse et je vous en donne à bouffer*, 2008; *Quelqu'un va danser*, 2008; *Tunis, 14 January 2011*, 2011), choreography for a single dancer (*Hûwà/Ce Lui* , 2006), and a group piece (*Ce que nous sommes*, 2006), Radhouane El Meddeb returned to solo work to achieve one of his most poignant and original shows, *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis* (2012), which he choreographed in collaboration with Thomas Lebrun.

In this performance, the artist can be said to have presented a serious challenge, because dancing for 55 minutes without pause to one of the most iconic songs of the Arab repertoire, *al Atlal* (The Ruins), sung by the greatest singer in the entire history of Arab music, Oum Kalthoum, known as the Star of the East, was a unique challenge.

This is not the first time El Meddeb has evoked Oum Kalthoum. He took the opportunity to dance excerpts of her songs in the production *Quelqu'un va danser*. This was a first attempt, a first approach, brief but intense. He was aware that to confront head-on and at greater length the Egyptian diva, he needed more control and maturity. As he later reported, it was not the desire that was missing. "Oum Kalthoum is an old desire, like an obsession, but I've always been afraid, because what she sings, her manner of singing, her voice, are so huge, it's so monumental." He waited until 2012, when in a

“toreador” sort of gesture, he entered the arena to dance Oum Kalthoum. This show can be interpreted on several levels: personal, autobiographical, symbolic, and dramatic.

Let us start with the personal. El Meddeb has stated that *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis* is a “tribute to this singer and all that she represents.” And in terms of symbols, this female figure represents a number of things: “This very simple woman has discovered how to take possession of and unify an entire people and an entire generation through her art alone.”^[18] She opened a royal road to generations of Arab singers, since before Oum Kalthoum no female singer had managed to triumph with equal force in a musical universe historically dominated by men. It must also be stated that in addition to her vocal prowess, the fascination of Egyptian diva for millions of people, including Radhouane El Meddeb, also comes from the mystery that has always surrounded her life.

She began singing at the age of ten, disguised as a boy, and she continued to disguise herself as a man even for her professional debuts. She celebrated love in all her songs and yet no love story is known about herself. There are even serious doubts as to whether she ever fell in love. For some, she is a symbol of freedom, which is why she never wanted to submit her fate to the will of a man. Indeed, when she married her personal physician, she was careful to include a clause in the marriage contract that would allow her to make the decision of divorce if that became necessary. The diva has exercised this freedom even in her singing, since she repeated parts of songs as she wished without setting any limits, no matter what the public may have requested. The Oum Kalthoum concerts that were broadcast on the first Thursday of the month on Arab stations were indisputably the only point of contact that united all the Arab people from the Maghreb to the Middle East. Radhouane El Meddeb well remembers that magical, even sacred moment when, surrounded by his parents and his sisters, he impatiently awaited the broadcast of an Oum Kalthoum concert. The unique personality of Oum Kalthoum was thus one of the reasons El Meddeb chose her. “To choose Oum Kalthoum,” he said, “was to pay tribute to this iconic singer, who has a very special existence, a very secret love affair that will never be known. This woman, her career, her relationship to art and to religion, have fascinated and inspired me.” From the very large repertoire of the Egyptian singer, El Meddeb selected *Al Atlal*, a choice he explains as follows: “Oum Kalthoum is a great singer in the Arab world. I know this song by heart, indeed, all Arabs know it by heart, I think. This is our Callas, the star of the East, who sang the most beautiful songs that remain with us. The one I have chosen is very complex because it is a song in which vocally she is at the limit of her abilities.”^[19] Faced with such a legend, we understand the “fear” that Radhouane felt at the idea of ??“performing” a song so full of history, emotion, and symbolism. He rightly feared he might be drowned or crushed by the voice of the diva. However, if we look at the dozens of articles and positive reviews written by specialists of the French stage, we can say that the artist has won his gamble. Here are some of his critics: “Radhouane El Meddeb appears quietly; his face is hidden under the veil of the curtain. His body seems ready to break free, as in childbirth when the cord is cut to complete the birth . . . He stands upright at an angle. Is this some one-legged acrobat who will seek to discover the complete meaning of his limbs by the sound of the concert given by Oum Kalthoum concert given in Cairo in 1966 are shaking the walls of the theater? Is this veiled woman going to unveil herself because this song caused us forever to cast off our rags? Radhouane El Meddeb is ready to be swallowed up in the folds of the setting beautifully designed by Annie Tolleter. Radhouane El Meddeb is ready to enter the dance where this man will gradually feminize himself, taking on the musical skin of Oum Kalthoum and from her receive the strength of the kiss of resistance.”^[20] The piece is not only a tribute to Oum Kalthoum, but it is also a celebration of femininity and Arab women: “This play is a tribute to mothers, women, femininity, [. . .] I love women very much, and when I think of this solo, I say to myself, ‘Is what I am capable of, without falling into cliché or the

easy path of anecdotal dance, to pay tribute to the fragility of women?" [21] As usual, the Tunisian artist did not want to tell the story of Arab women or to make a plea about for the status of women in the Arab world, but he summoned up the female figure by touches, like a painter; by evocation, like a poet . . . by gestures, postures, movements, and looks . . . He let the spectator imagine the rest by stimulating deep sensations with him. For those who saw in his show a political or moral discourse, he responded: "I have not sought to make a political play on the conditions of Arab women or on the issue of the veil, but there are things of this sort that will appear in spite of everything . . . It is true that the idea of the misunderstood woman, who seeks to be released and is looking for a place today, shines forth." [22] Nevertheless, we could say that through the chosen title, "*Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*," Radhouane El Meddeb gives a direction of interpretation that places this show deliberately on the side of women as accomplished human beings, socially autonomous and fully free. Indeed, the title was inspired by a *hadith* of the prophet Mohammed in which he said, "Paradise is under the feet of mothers." As if motherhood was the essential quality of woman and that the primary role of women in society is to raise children. "Again," says El Meddeb, "this is why the words of the Prophet interest me so much. He had to go through the figure of the mother to talk about women. He did not say that paradise was under the feet of women, he said that paradise was under the feet of mothers. And this nuance speaks volumes! We can respect our mother, but we need not respect a woman who is not a mother. In our society, it is important that a woman be a mother. That's the way it is. And if she is not, her situation is problematic . . ."

[23] This celebration of women and femininity has been translated onto the stage in several ways. This first is gestural. The Tunisian artist has not hesitated to employ a variety of gestures and movements drawn from the practice of Arab women from the delicate way of moving the hands seen in the virtuosity required for the execution of oriental dances up to the intense effort required for the trances that some women experiences as a part of the old rituals. The artist does not hesitate to break the rules and societal codes with premeditation, especially when he ululates, a gesture reserved for women only, while closing his mouth and hiding his sex. It is as if he is saying to the spectator that this gesture must be made, despite the fact that it is forbidden to him as a man. If the Tunisian artist expresses a feminine sensuality and plays femininity on the stage, he does this without disguise, not as a woman but as a man, without artifice. [24] Alone, in shorts and undershirt, operating on a bare stage with large curtains as the only backdrop. "Without playing the diva, the dancer, who is moreover an excellent actor, utilizes maternal gestures. The hands, in constant activity, create a language of their own which expresses pain, revolt, power, loneliness," writes journalist Rosita Boisseau. [25] Indeed, Radhouane "puts on the clothing of femininity" in order thus to express his own fragility and his own sensitivity. "My dance is an homage to the heroines, our mothers, our sisters . . . It is a gesture toward to the women around me and have surrounded me, but also to the woman within me, to my own femininity. In unveiling it, I reveal my fragility, but at the same time my perception of sensuality and of courage. This unveiling is conceived without disguise. To put yourself inside the skin of a woman, does not mean dressing, putting on femininity, but to delve deeply within oneself to find generosity and sensuality. Strength and emotion are allied in the dance. In order to be better alone, I used an accomplice, an onlooker, a generous soul, that of the choreographer Thomas Lebrun . . . why has signed this solo with me solo . . . We are two men dancing woman . . ." [26] Still, the dancer does not express this female reality "externally" but through dance and movements of his body, thus he expresses something repressed in all Arab Men. When he extends his arm to support the following chorus, femininity becomes a cry of freedom:

Give me my freedom, unbind my hands I have given all and am left with nothing
Ah! You made my wrist bleed with your chains
Why do I keep them when they no longer hold me!

I keep the memory of the promises you never kept
I'm tired of this prison, the world is mine.

Like Oum Kalthoum, Radhouane El Meddeb wants his contemporaries to dream even while raising their awareness of the beautiful things that the Arabs are losing, among them, of course, the dance. As he said so beautifully, he wants to “Restore a whole dream, in the body, on the plates, a dream threatened by disappearance.”

On a dramatic level, El Meddeb’s stage is very purified, minimalist. This is almost no scenery in *Je danse et je vous en donne à bouffer* or in *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*. Only what is strictly necessary is used in these productions: a table with utensils and ingredients for the first and a bare stage with curtains for the second. Here is a rather poetic description of the setting for *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*:

The stage itself is a composition. Black curtains falling to the stage floor are balanced by long pieces of dark fabrics that hang without touching the ground. Together they form an architecture in several dimensions with the wings providing a decor where several dimensions are backstage setting. A revolutionary wind had to blow to make this space so open and yet so well defined. The space appeared simultaneously immense, in providing an open space for the dance, yet still possessing a mysterious element devoted to apparitions and disappearances. This staging of the dynamic of unveiling was sublime.[\[27\]](#)

Indeed, in the performances of El Meddeb, all is body and sound, with Tunisian music or the song of Oum Kalthoum in the shows that we have cited, which are put in the place of honor.[\[28\]](#) However, even while adopting this artistic approach, the artist is confronted by the emptiness of the scene, the immensity of the stage or simply the “empty space.” As in an arena, you must confront the void and fill up the silence. With generosity, mastery, and talent, El Meddeb has made his audience forget the darkness of the stage. Here is what one critic has written about the latter’s ingenuity in “taming the stage.”

First he must tame it all. Occupy this scenic space where only the song is heard. And taking it over one small step at a time, his body finds its place there. Forward, stop. Stand straight. Extend an arm, the two, looking for the force there which will put to entire body in motion. This arm outstretched toward the earth, toward the child, toward the life that brings about every gesture that spring from itself. Yes, that is the way it is. Radhouane El Meddeb grows out of himself.[\[29\]](#)

From a dramaturgical point of view, I would say that the work presented by the Tunisian artist is a sort of visual dramaturgy, as this was defined by Arntzen in the early 1990s.[\[30\]](#) According to Patrice Pavis, for whom this drama is part of new dramaturgy:

Visual dramaturgy . . . is most common used today to refer to a production without text and based on a series of images. It can be thought of as a “theatre of images” as in the early work of Robert Wilson in his debut, or in dance theatre, musical theatre, gestural theatre (Physical Theatre), performance art or any performative action. The criterion of visual drama is not the absence of a text on stage, but a scenic form in which the visual aspect (the visibility) is dominant,

to the point where the visual itself constitutes the main feature of the aesthetic experience . . . The visual dramatist proceeds as a plastic artist: working from movement, from images and also from sounds related to space, to the images, but also the passage of time . . . What has changed is the status of the visual: the visual no longer accompanies the hearing of the text, is no longer limited to illustration, explanation, or clarification. Sometimes it functions almost to make matters more complex, more ambiguous. Space and the visual are significant materials, supporting formal and abstract physical relationships, a system not of signification and not meant to serve the text or the meaning . . . The visual drama leads us in a direct line from the dance, where it has been considerably developed since Pina Bausch, to become a whole domain of contemporary performance: the theatre of gesture and movement, the physical theatre.[\[31\]](#)

In the productions of El Meddeb, the viewer never gets an explicit, linear message from the artist. Instead of a lecture, El Meddeb suggests, guides, and leaves the spectator free to interpret what he is trying in the process of experiencing according to his own sensibility and intellectual baggage. “My pleasure is to exist on a stage,” he says. “I try to be in communion with the spectator. I try to give my work a kind of nobility and at the same time fragility and precision. On the stage, I am a bit of a maniac, because I did not want to settle for the middle way. I dream of reaching a certain power. This is not pretense, but a kind of idealism. I am going to the end of that which I see inside; I connect to the body the feeling of the real, the material of life.”[\[32\]](#)

In addition to the “visual dramaturgy” proposed by El Meddeb, we can identify another dramaturgy that Pavis calls “the dramaturgy of the spectator,” which positions itself on the side of the spectator though how the latter engages with the performance. This is a post-modern or post-dramatic dramaturgy, different from that imposed by the dramaturg as he was defined by Brecht and Lessing. Pavis has written that “the more we create our own dramaturgy based on an often non-discursive offering, the more we enter the realm of the dramaturgy of the spectator . . . The more the dramaturgy of the production, for example of the dramaturgy of an actor in the manner of the Barba’s actress, is non-discursive, the more we have to ‘re-create’ it ourselves, and the more therefore we must act as spectator-dramaturgs.”[\[33\]](#)

It is this dramaturgy of the spectator that is manifested through the different interpretations given to the productions of El Meddeb. When we read, for example, a number of articles or reviews written about the show *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*, we are surprised by the large number of interpretations. Some saw it as a denunciation of the condition of Arab women, others as a challenge thrown in the face of the Tunisian Salafists, and still others saw it as a hymn to freedom and sensuality.

Radhouane El Meddeb continues his exploration of the Arab body through the prism of femininity, experimenting with other dance forms and engaging in more collaborations with other artists who share his thirst for freedom and love for dance. Among his most recent creations is entitled *Au temps où les Arabes dansaient*, which offers a new nostalgic invitation to travel to lands rarely explored by Arab artists.

Translation from French by Marvin Carlson

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[1] Omar Fertat, « Rabih Mroué et Lina Saneh. Comment ralentir l'occultation du corps/individu », *Intermediality, Performance and the public Sphere* (Khalid Amine & George F. Robenson, editors), 2014.

[2] Interview with Thomas Fernand », *Murmure*, revue autour des arts du spectacle, n° 7, 2007.

[3] He performed in two films by Férid Boughedir *Un été à la Goulette* and *Halfaouine, l'enfant des terrasses*.

[4] Fernand interview

[5] Press kit for *En finit avec moi*.

[6] Maud Nicolas, « Ce que "danser" veut dire. Représentations du corps et relations de genres dans les rituels de mariage à Tunis », *Terrain*, 35(2000), 41-56.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Éverine Kodjo-Grandvaux, « Tunisie : Radhoane el-Meddeb, à corps et à cri », *Jeune Afrique*, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com> [Site consulted 01/10/2013]

[10] The expression comes from the dancer himself. It appears in the preface to the press kit for the production *Quelqu'un va danser...* « *To dance the monster in myself, who is soft and tender, who twists and crawls about.* »

[11] Kodjo-Grandvaux, "Tunisie."

[12] Fernand interview.

[13] <http://www.lacompaniedesoi.com/je-danse-et-je-vous-en-donne-a-bouffer/>

[14] Press kit for the production.

[15] <http://www.lacompagniedesoi>.

[16] Pascal Bély, « Marseille Provence 2013: la danse du ventre de Radhouane El Meddeb», cited in the press kit for the production : <http://www.festivalier.net/> (accessed 7/16/2012).

[17] Fernand interview.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Pascal Bély, « Marseille Provence 2013.»

[21] Press kit for *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*.

[22] Fernand interview.

[23] Ibid.

[24] One might mention the example of the Lebanese artist Alexandre Paulikevitchqui who wore women's costumes, used by oriental dancers, to express his femininity.

[25] “Tirer sur l'élastique de l'excitation,” *Le Monde*, July 5, 2012.

[26] Press kit for *Sous leurs pieds, le paradis*.

[27] Pascal Bély, « Marseille Provence 2013.

[28] One must also mention the strong presence of the voices of the spectators during the concert of Oum Kalthoum that El Medeb selected to use as one of the important elements of his production.

[29] Pascal Bély, « Marseille Provence 2013.

[30] Scott deLahunta, “Dance Dramaturgy: speculations and reflections, *Dance Theatre Journal* 16:1 (April, 2000), 20.

[31] Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire de la performance et du théâtre contemporain* (Armand Colin: Paris, 2014).

[32] Fernand interview.

[33] Pavis, *Dictionnaire*.



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