

'Body language across borders', Bára Sigfúsdóttir interviewed by Lene Van Langenhove, *De Morgen Selectief*, October 2017, p. 34-35.

STAGE

# Body language across borders

Things are rolling for the Icelandic Bára Sigfúsdóttir. Her multilayered work is touring both national and international theatres and festivals, and in the meantime she has already completed her fourth show: *being*. For this, the Brussels-based choreographer worked with two Iranian performers. We Skyped one another in the middle of the creative period in Tehran, six weeks before the premiere.

TEXT

LENE VAN LANGENHOVE

## **You first visited Iran three years ago. What made you decide to collaborate with local performers?**

'The Untimely Festival had invited me to perform there and to give a workshop. Masoumeh Jalalieh and Alireza Mirmohammadi followed my workshop and I was immediately impressed by their approach and movement language. Even though at the time we conversed through an interpreter, I really hoped that we would have the opportunity to collaborate. By now this is already my fifth trip to Iran. It is a really beautiful country with delicious food and kind people. And Tehran is a fantastic city with a very lively arts scene.' Now and then we hear about dancing in public being banned in Iran. Is there a contemporary dance scene? There is really a lot going on here. A lot of people are doing very different things. Since there is no professional dance training, people learn by following workshops with dancers who have travelled abroad or with foreign guest teachers. I have noticed that there is a need for more exchange and a more varied offer because everyone is now flocking to the same

workshops. There is a very strong theatre and mime scene but people are also quite interested in forms of movement.’ How is the creative process going? ‘After a first research period in Tehran last year I wanted to invite Alireza and Masoumeh to my work environment. We were going to start with a residency in Belgium. Unfortunately Alireza’s visa was rejected, even though he had been invited by established organizations. Since a third of the creative period went up in smoke, everything was at risk but I didn’t just want to give up my initial idea. Fortunately Alireza later managed to get to Potsdam and Groningen, where we were in residence for three weeks. I gave Alireza and Masoumeh different improvisation assignments to get to know them better as dancers. Now that we are working together here in Tehran, I am elaborating further on that and I am leading them more in the direction of the construction of movement material. I am encouraging them to put their own vocabulary in the show. For me it is interesting to work with performers that did not benefit from a professional dance training like the one we are familiar with in Western Europe. They have a different approach that I find very refreshing.’

**‘I explore how the body is mobilized in different cultures.’**

THE SAME WAVELENGTH

**This is the first time that you yourself are not on stage.**

‘Yes, that is new. I think this is the right moment to try it. It makes me realize how closely my compositions are interwoven with the physical experiment. My way of working is connected very closely with myself, even though I try to look at my own creative process from a certain distance. I film it and then reflect on what I see as though it were about someone else: what is being shown here, what does this scene say? Now that I am on the outside anyhow, I am already looking at it in this way. Initially I found it challenging to come up with assignments for Alireza and Masoumeh that could produce relevant material, but now that we have spent a lot of time together, we are increasingly on the same wavelength. The pieces of the puzzle are falling into place.’

**Until now your shows have been permeated by your richly evocative movement language, which is at once restrained and expressive. What can we expect from the first duet that you are choreographing?**

‘The starting point of *being* is both simple and complex: an exploration of the body and how it is mobilized in different cultures to communicate. I ask myself what similarities and differences there are in the perception through our body. I chose for Masoumeh and Alireza, not because they are from Iran, but because they are creative. Now that I am creating the show with them, I want to be able to show the result both in Belgium and in Iran, without adaptations. The censorship becomes, as it were, a creative framework in which we work. But the show is especially about the encounter: the dialogue between the two performers, between them and the audience, between different cultures.’

**Are you searching for a universal language?**

‘That is a rather big statement, but in a certain sense I am. With this show we want to set a dialogue in motion, not only in the making process but also afterwards, when we perform it in different countries. There is so much knowledge from other cultures that can enrich our view of things. I am aware that my gaze is not neutral.’ We can’t escape our background, we have all been formed by people whom we have met and the experiences we have been through. I hope that this project is my little contribution, that my work raises questions and incites the audience to reflect a bit further.’

**Does music play an important role again?**

‘At present we are only working with sounds that the body produces such as breathing. For my previous shows I always had a specific musician in mind, but not this time. When we started the research, I found the silence and the concentration quite beautiful. You get very sensitive to sounds and rhythms that bodies in movement produce. But it is still too early to say that this will be the only soundscape.’

Being, 26 and 27 October, Campo, Ghent.  
vooruit.be and projectbeing.net