

## Room for Variation

The Dance of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui

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[ L I E V E D I E R C K X ]



*Play*, 2010.

Photo by Koen Broos.

“Le plaisir est dans l’échange, on en sort toujours plus riche.”

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui

The Flemish-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (b.1976) presents himself first and foremost as a builder of bridges. Coupling frankness and modesty with unrestrained passion, he seeks out meeting grounds and blends of cultural histories, movement languages and artistic disciplines, always from a non-restrictive, non-hierarchical perspective. With him it’s not so much a conscious mission as a personal inclination. Cherkaoui is known for being inquisitive and eager to learn, always bent on meeting. Just like his language of movement, his career is constantly evolving: the one flows, as if automatically, from the other. After ten years working as a choreographer he can boast a fine-mesh network of personal contacts and collaborators built on kindred spirits and mutual respect. In 2012 he won the National Dance Award for Outstanding Male Performance for *Dunas*.

*Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> (2010), *TeZuka* (2011), his recent ‘major’ productions, together with *Play* (2010), a duet with the Indian kuchipudi dancer Shantala Shivalingappa, are at present the high points of his choreographic idiom.

At 35 years of age, with some thirty choreographies to his name, Cherkaoui is among the international pick of the bunch in dance. ‘Breathtaking’, ‘genuinely global dance’: thus the influential German dance magazine *Tanz* explained its decision last season to proclaim Cherkaoui as ‘Best Choreographer’. From the very first it was clear that the young choreographer would scale dizzy heights. His first major creation, *Rien de Rien* (2000), toured internationally and immediately won a Special Prize at the BITEF festival in Budapest. In Flanders Cherkaoui is part of the third generation of ‘Flemish Wave’ choreographers, the group of innovators in theatre and dance who are now internationally renowned. At the beginning of 1980 its pioneers Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker with Rosas, Jan Fabre with Troubleyn and Wim Vandekeybus with *Ultima Vez* led a radical change of course, introducing post-modern dance and dance theatre in a dance scene until then dominated by ballet. Shortly afterwards their ranks were joined by Jan Lauwers/Needcompany and Alain Platel/Ballets C. de la B. From the 1990s onwards the Brussels-based American choreographer Meg Stuart with *Damaged Goods* provided the impetus for a second generation of innovators with her broken, abject dancing bodies.

## Rêves de Babel

With Cherkaoui the need to build bridges has everything to do with making sense of his bicultural family background: his father is Moroccan, his mother Belgian. In the documentary *Rêves de Babel* (Arte, 2009) the choreographer dwells on the impact of his family background on his career. The fact that he wanted to dance, combined with his proclivities and his place in the family (with a brother four years older) all earned him equally poor marks in the eyes of his father. At school as in his social life, *second hand* was a constant part of his life: he was always being dismissed, not on account of who he was, but because of his Arabic name, or the hand-me-downs from his brother that he had to wear, and, later, because of his homosexuality. It is not without reason that the driving force in Cherkaoui’s world is to demonstrate, to discuss, and to be understood. Dance



*Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup>, 2010.  
Photo by Koen Broos.

theatre is his medium for doing this.

It is only when his father leaves the family that Cherkaoui, in his fifteenth year, can openly opt for dance. Up to that time Larbi had to be satisfied with imitating in his own living room what he saw on television, in pop videos, Bruce Lee and ballet films. So it is logical that he should take his first steps in the professional dance world on television, as a backing dancer in a popular music programme showing Flemish hits.

1995 proves to be a key year for him. This is the year in which Cherkaoui wins a talent contest for young Belgian dancers organised by Alain Platel – leader of Les Ballets C. de la B. – and the Victoria production company in Ghent. The first prize is a trip to New York, with dance lessons on Broadway and workshops with cult choreographer Alvin Ailey. That triumph gains Cherkaoui entry to P.A.R.T.S., Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's internationally renowned school of contemporary dance in Brussels. Alain Platel has to wait until he has completed his studies there before netting Larbi for the iconic *Iets op Bach* (1998). While it is still on tour Alain Platel proposes to Larbi that he should join his Ghent-based choreographers' collective, Les Ballets C. de la B.

## Frames

In 2000, with *Rien de Rien*, Cherkaoui establishes the framework for his future work: a hybrid stage environment in which cultures, ages and disciplines meet. The scenography in this first performance is reminiscent of a mosque, with oriental carpets on the ground and an inscription in Arabic on the rear wall. The imam

is a cellist, the dance a prayer in which both Shiva and tango appear from time to time. The youngest female dancer is 14, the oldest 58 – and capable of seducing a young male dancer. Text and dance take turn and turn about. The female singer and the musician move with the dancers.

The choice of music for *Rien de Rien* – Edith Piaf, Kodaly, Ligeti, and old Italian songs – is typical of Cherkaoui's eclecticism. The choreographer prefers to use live music on stage, to attune the various rhythms, of dance, music and body language to each other as far as possible and then get them to resonate as powerfully as possible with the spectator. 'Rhythm is a powerful link between people', according to the choreographer, 'everyone has an intuitive understanding of rhythm and can communicate by means of rhythm.'

While preparing his first production Cherkaoui gets to know the Brussels dancer/choreographer Damien Jalet, from then on his inspiration and sounding-board. Together they are the Belgian cherry on the cake of Cherkaoui's culture-transcending mission: a French-speaking man from Brussels with French roots and a Fleming from Antwerp with Moroccan roots. In 2005 they collaborate on the choreography for the Belgian national dance event *Ik hou van u/ Je t'aime tu sais*, the wildly popular Belgian anniversary edition of Bal Moderne that was held simultaneously in twelve Belgian cities. Ten years on Jalet signs up officially as choreographer for *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup>.

Cherkaoui maintains his connection with the Alain Platel collective for six years in all. During this period, in addition to *Rien de Rien* he creates key productions such as *Foi* (2003), on the theme of belief and manipulation, *Tempus Fugit* (2004), a commission for the Avignon Festival, and *Zero Degrees* (2005), a duet with another kindred spirit, the British Bangladeshi choreographer Akram Khan. Their collaboration produces a first nomination for a Laurence Olivier award and for Cherkaoui a partnership of inestimable value with the leading British dance company, Sadler's Wells in London. In the same period Wim Vandekeybus writes *It* for Cherkaoui – the solo that they reprise in the Spring of 2011 as a duet. In 2002, with the Ultima Vez dancer Nienke Reehorst he creates *Ook*, a piece for mentally handicapped actors. Both Reehorst and one of the actors, Marc Wage-mans, still form part of the core group around Cherkaoui.

Cherkaoui also looks for stimulus with other companies. He choreographs various works for Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, including *In Memoriam*. In this meditation on ancestral memory and personal recollection Cherkaoui lays the basis for a long-standing collaboration with the Corsican polyphonic ensemble A Filetta. Ancient folk music remains a powerful and fascinating source of collective memory for Cherkaoui as well as an answer to his need to immerse himself in time.

## Antwerp

When the theatrical producer Guy Cassiers becomes manager of the Toneelhuis, the renovated municipal theatre in Antwerp, in 2006, he invites Cherkaoui to become one of the seven artists in residence. It will prove to be a golden gift. For Cherkaoui it is a dreamed-of opportunity to establish himself artistically and luxuriate in the multicultural bath of the port city that he regards as his home. On the other hand, the Toneelhuis has strong international connections and Cherkaoui can reach a new audience there through creative

TeZuka, 2011.

Photo by Hugo Glendinning.



collaboration with other disciplines – theatre, film and video art, literature, performance. The choreographer is able to contribute to *House of Sleeping Beauties*, an opera by Guy Cassiers and the contemporary composer Kris Defoort. The theatre's extensive public relations activity and regular publications ensure that his work receives comprehensive theatrical explanation. The infrastructure and technical facilities there mean that Cherkaoui's own productions can become more ambitious. At the same time he can gather around him a regular core of loyal colleagues: the dancers Damien Jalet, Darryl Woods and the music expert Christine Leboutte.

It is in this period that Cherkaoui becomes acquainted with Patrizia Bovi. She is the musical director of Micrologus, an Italian ensemble that is doing research into the musical culture of oral traditions, a continuing source of inspiration in Cherkaoui's work. Bovi advises him on music and will become a permanent influence in his productions, beginning with *Myth* (2007). In addition the highly respected Muntscouwburg in Brussels offers support as a platform for productions and as co-producer.

## Man from the East

Because the production structure around Cherkaoui has become too large for the Toneelhuis and too fragmented for the choreographer himself, in January 2010 Cherkaoui sets up his own company: Eastman. It is a literal translation of his own name, Cherkaoui, the man from the East. The first new production



*TeZukA*, 2011.

Photo by

Hugo Glendinning.

under this label, *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup>, hits the bull's-eye right away. The performance is a baroque extension of Cherkaoui's mission. The problem of Biblical language-confusion is transposed to the question of how in spite of everything we can strive towards understanding and harmony. Where is the universal beyond the differences? To reinforce their question Larbi and fellow-choreographer Damien Jalet seek out eighteen performers (dancers and musicians) from no less than thirteen different countries. Between them they speak fifteen languages and profess seven different religions. Moreover, most of the twelve dancers come from a bicultural family background, just like Cherkaoui and Jalet themselves.

*Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> is the final piece in a trilogy that marks an evolution in Cherkaoui's thinking. After *Foi* (2003), to do with the impact of belief with manipulating, invisible angels and *Myth* (2007) with archetypes and shadows from the subconscious, the characters in *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> take responsibility themselves for the reality they create in the here and now.

In *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> rhythm is once more a universal means of escape from the snares and pitfalls of differences in language, culture and communication. The audience is given an exposition of how as an individual spectator you can incorporate the rhythm of the performance by means of mirror neurons – showmaster Darryl E. Woods explains this with great humour and aplomb. Bodies remain the universal medium of communication *par excellence*. But there is a lot of work involved, because they have to be fine-tuned to a very high degree. 'My body's not just an object', Larbi said in an interview in 2009, 'I have to try to be every cell of that body. When you reach the point where you are one with your body, then you can transmit energy to other bodies.' The theme of conscious



*TeZukA*, 2011.

Photo by Hugo Glendinning.

physicality is comprehensively presented in *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> in the character of avatar Ulrika Kinn Svensson. She represents hybrid worlds between man and machine, between self-determined and directed behaviour.

The British visual artist Antony Gormley makes a critical contribution in *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup>. His collaboration with Sidi Larbi is a trilogy in its own right. From life-sized casts of the two dancers in *Zero Degrees* (2005), through half-open coffins for the sixteen Buddhist monks in *Sutra* (2008), his scenography has evolved to open structures with five three-dimensional aluminium frames in *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup>. At first sight they vary from large to very large. The ingenuity of it is that these are actually five identical volumes each of which is aligned along a different axis. In this way they demonstrate the similarities behind the differences in a very graphic manner. Gormley's volumes are deceptively simple, versatile, rectangular, extremely clear and with unlimited metaphorical potential: they are used by the performers as city, social structure, play environment, goggle box, sarcophagus, protective envelope or self-imposed limitation. At every point during the performance they present a new interpretation of what is going on at this moment. At the same time the volumes provide a counterbalance to all-too-human limitations regarding perceptive frameworks.

In 2011 *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> deservedly receives a number of major prizes: two Laurence Olivier Awards in London, as well as the Benois de la Danse in Moscow.

In the same year UNESCO grants Cherkaoui the title of Young Artist for Intercultural Dialogue between Arab and Western Worlds for his research into 'the meeting between cultures and explorations of identity'.

## TeZukA

Cherkaoui's latest major production, *TeZukA* (2011), is a classic example of how his creations come about. The choreography derives from his early love for graphic art. As a child he devoured comic strips and dreamed of drawing his own. Later he became fascinated by the culture of Japanese strip cartoons, his favourite being the visionary Japanese manga artist Osamu Tezuka.

Cherkaoui greatly admires the manner in which the latter handles universal themes such as human rights, ethics and tolerance in his cartoons. Moreover, through his Japanese dancers Cherkaoui had become fascinated by Japanese customs and social rituals. Cherkaoui managed to arrange for a calligrapher from Osamu Tezuka's studio to join the dancers on stage to explain the dance. Two Shaolin monks from *Sutra* also dance in *TeZuka*.

Cherkaoui carries this typical, self-organising openness through to the repertoire performances that he promised the Toneelhuis in return for further logistic and productional assistance for his new company, Eastman.

In 2010 the Toneelhuis was given straightforward reprises of *Myth* (2007) and *Foi* (2003), but one season later the original version of *IT* from 2002 merely provided an excuse for further choreographic research. The original piece was a commission by Wim Vandekeybus and Cherkaoui for the Avignon Festival. On that occasion Vandekeybus decided to let his text by Paul Bowles be pondered over by a live donkey on the stage, while Cherkaoui danced the nature spirit from Bowles' tale in a continuous metamorphosis of movement. For the new *IT 3.0* the two decided to take the stage together, both using the characteristic movements of Cherkaoui's original djinn. The new version has thus become an interplay between their respective styles of movement, a confrontation with their own dancing body as it has evolved, an exercise in memory, recognition and letting go.

In 2012 Cherkaoui intends to further explore the structure of components and identities in people and objects. *Puz/zle* is the highly appropriate working title of a project in which he wonders what happens if you take away a piece of someone's identity or exchange it for a piece of someone or something else. The premiere is scheduled for the Festival of Avignon, summer 2012. Cherkaoui will not be showing a mindless reprise of earlier work in 2013 either. In that year the Muntscouwburg in Brussels also has *Three Duets*, three revised duets from earlier work by Cherkaoui in its programme: his adaptation of Nijinski's *Faun*, followed by *Rein* from the opera *Das Rheingold* under the direction of Guy Cassiers. In this Cherkaoui links the theme of obsessive cleanliness with the dancer's body. This is followed by the final duet from *Babel*<sup>WORDS</sup> with Navala Chaudari and Damien Fournier.

Meanwhile Cherkaoui continues to receive commissions from ballet companies. Last year saw the première of his *Labyrinth* (2011), a work for the Dutch National Ballet. In 2012 there are plans for a collaborative effort with the Pilobolus ballet company from Connecticut in the U.S.A..

Just as before, in Eastman Cherkaoui wants to alternate his larger scale choreographies with more intimate work and to test his own contemporary dance idiom against other dance cultures. He continues to tour with the modest *Dunas* (2009) with which he and the Flamenco dancer María Pagés walked away with the Spanish Giralddillo (the Oscar of Flamenco dancing). In the same season Cherkaoui created *Play* with the Indian Shantala Shivalingappa, a dancer who is at home in classical kuchipudi dance but who has also worked with Pina Bausch and Peter Brook. For 2013 a Tango-project is under way with a partner from Argentina. For Cherkaoui this kind of direct confrontation of movement styles invariably opens the way to inspiring research into new cross-fertilisations. ■

Translated by Sheila M. Dale