

A Cosmopolite's Utopia: Limitations to the Generational Flemish Dance History Model

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Choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui finds himself at a point of friction. He was born to a Flemish mother and Moroccan father, grew up in Antwerp and attended Koran school until the age of twelve. Being of mixed origin, Cherkaoui has always found it difficult to fully identify with a single culture. In Antwerp during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Cherkaoui witnessed the rise of the populist radical right Vlaams Blok party. This nationalist movement argues for an independent Flemish state, but also displays xenophobia in its attitude towards foreigners and non-European immigrants. Cherkaoui was caught in the middle. It can be argued that an ambiguous sense of simultaneously belonging to both cultures and not belonging to either undermined the nationalist discourse surrounding him. Later, he became part of a mixed international artistic and performing community when studying at the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S), the contemporary dance school of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker in Brussels, and performing and choreographing with dance collective Les Ballets C. de la B. This was crucial in instilling a sense of global citizenship in Cherkaoui. This paper will explore the affinities Cherkaoui's work has with cosmopolitanism,¹ particularly through his dramaturgical use of foreign languages.

The postcolonial critical voices that have influenced his thinking on concepts such as the nation, culture and identity, include the writing by Jiddu Krishnamurti and Amin Maalouf. Krishnamurti, whose ideas resonate with both cosmopolitanism and poststructuralism, suggests a change in mentality towards '[h]uman beings who are not labelled with any particular nationality' (11). He would like to see humanity

¹ 'Cosmopolitanism combines appreciation of difference and alterity with attempts to conceive of new democratic forms of political rule beyond the nation-state' (Beck and Grande 12).

become free of nationalism, contending that '[w]e human beings are inter-related, wherever we live' (Krishnamurti 11). According to Krishnamurti, the fact that the world is run through warfare is the result of a specific kind of thinking, which is self-centered and intolerant. This kind of thinking clings on to xenophobic and self-protective beliefs and usually results in nationalism. The key to moving away from this thinking is to adopt a global, holistic outlook (Narayan 64). Cherkaoui has also been strongly influenced by Maalouf's concept of composite identity, which is based on the understanding that identity is not a singular entity, but the sum of one's diverse appearances (20). If one aspect of someone's identity is under threat, it may become dominant and therefore dangerous. As Cherkaoui explains:

I am the sum of multiple identities. [. . .] When one of our identities is put in danger, it becomes more important than the others. When I hear homophobic statements, I am homosexual, when I hear racist statements, I am Arabic. However, I constantly try to remember that I also consist of other, equally important identities.² (qtd. in Hervé n.pag.)

This embracing of diversity may have led Cherkaoui to evaluate cultural difference in a new light. Cherkaoui's recent collaboration with monks of the Shaolin temple in *Sutra* (2008) involved him spending a few months living and training with them in China, giving him the opportunity to refine his martial arts skills and live out the philosophy of one of his heroes, Bruce Lee. During an informal conversation in Antwerp in 2007, Cherkaoui explained that 'when people asked me why I wanted to work with these Shaolin monks, as they are so different from us, I replied that in fact I have a lot more in common with them than with most Westerners: I don't drink alcohol, smoke or eat meat.' Instead of reiterating an exhausted discourse which fixes cultural difference, Cherkaoui emphasizes his interest in Buddhism to reveal his

² Personal translation by author of 'Je suis la somme de nombreuses identités [. . .] Lorsque l'une de nos identités devient plus importante que les autres, c'est qu'elle est mise en danger. Lorsque j'entends des propos homophobes, je suis homosexuel, lorsque j'entends des propos racistes, je suis Arabe. Mais j'essaie de me rappeler en permanence que je suis fait d'autres identités égales.'

affinities with the monks. In his acceptance speech for the Kairos Prize in Hamburg he recently explained:

You are never just one thing, one character, one function but rather each of us has the ability to perform many different functions, within a project but also in life. By recognizing this multiplicity in oneself, you realise that “the Other” (being the other performer, the new culture you discover, or the audience even) is often buried somewhere inside you too. I realise [sic], for instance, when I was in the Shaolin Temple, that a lot of the human elements that appealed to me in China were things I could definitely nurture within myself. I had it in there somewhere. It was just easier to see it outside of me. “The Other” is somewhere inside of you. It’s never really detached from you, and it is this bond that makes me keep looking for other links. It’s a never-ending search for interconnectedness, for common roots. (Cherkaoui)

Cherkaoui’s dance theatre addresses political and societal issues through the active discovery of the performers’ cultural backgrounds. He seems particularly interested in their dance or other movement traditions, such as martial arts or circus techniques. He explored kung fu movement in *zero degrees* (2005) and deepened his understanding of the martial art through his collaboration with the Shaolin monks in *Sutra* (2008). He has collaborated with circus artists Damien Fournier and Dimitri Jourde in *Myth* (2007) and *Apocrifu* (2007) respectively. Another aspect of the performers’ cultural background Cherkaoui is interested in is the singing of orally transmitted music from their childhood, such as lullabies. In one particularly memorable scene from *Foi* (2003), Erna Ómarsdóttir sings an Icelandic lullaby in a penetrating, raw voice. These embodied or orally transmitted cultural elements are often layered upon each other, or juxtaposed, in the performance, to reveal common connections or similarities of principle, mood or intention beyond cultural difference.

The performers often speak in their native languages on stage. However, because no translation is offered, the spectator might become frustrated by the incomprehensibility of the texts; they might become, as Hans-Thies Lehmann has argued, part of ‘a shared *space of language problems* in which the actors as well as

the spectators experience the blockades of linguistic communication' (147). In Cherkaoui's work, the deliberate act of non-translation obscures some of the dramaturgical content with the aim of exposing biases in and limits to the spectator's knowledge. In order to grasp the finesse of the dramaturgy, the spectator requires an understanding of non-Western languages and cultural values. Therefore, Cherkaoui approaches confrontations between different cultures with cultural relativism, challenging the marginalisation of non-Western cultures. Paradoxically, while compromising the conventional mode of communication based on a shared language, Cherkaoui actually aims to improve the understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds through his choreography (Olaerts 17). He acknowledges, however, that this is utopian.³

Cherkaoui's utopia seems to be based on the cosmopolitan idea that all human beings belong to the same community and have responsibilities of justice and hospitality towards each other beyond state boundaries. Cherkaoui, together with co-choreographer Akram Khan, reveals the concept of the nation as a construct in their work *zero degrees*. For this production, the two choreographers collaborated with composer Nitin Sawhney and visual artist Antony Gormley. The two performers are joined on stage by the presence of two latex casts of their own bodies, created by Gormley. The title of the work makes reference to the 'in between' point, the point between positive and negative, between water and ice, between life and death, between one state boundary and the other, between performance and visual arts.

When Khan travelled to India, he discovered that national identity can be determined by something as arbitrary as the colour of a passport. In the story that he

³ The unattainability of the intended effect may in fact be the result of the obscurity of the dramaturgy. The polyglossia of theatre texts can lead to the musicalisation of language, characteristic of Lehmann's postdramatic theatre. Focusing on the musical qualities of foreign languages may set off a process of exoticising and othering, while more pertinent issues are overlooked. This offers the spectator the option not to question his or her own biases and limited knowledge.

tells in unison with Cherkaoui, when the state officials at the border between Bangladesh and India took his passport away from him, Khan realised that without his British passport he no longer had any proof of his identity and panicked. He tells of his encounter with a dead body on a train, an event which deeply unsettled him and exposed his struggle with finding his identity as a British-Bangladeshi travelling to the 'homeland.' By duplicating the storytelling in a second body, Cherkaoui and Khan reveal the peculiarities in the way the story was originally told. It is not a perfect text; it is flawed, with hesitations and sentences abandoned midway, but at the same time demonstrates richness in movement and gesture stemming from Khan's lifelong experience as a Kathak dancer. Uncannily, because both voices speak at the same time, there is an initial confusion about whose story this is: Khan's or Cherkaoui's? Or do aspects of the story apply to both men? Some scenes of *zero degrees* can be read as Cherkaoui 'trying on' Khan's story to see how it fits his body. During the creation process Cherkaoui learnt to perform Khan's grounded, percussive, and explosive Kathak-based movement style. The staged work is thus a direct result of this exchange of oral and embodied cultural knowledge.

Although Khan's central personal narrative in *zero degrees* is immediately apparent, Cherkaoui's narratives are more complex. Towards the end of the performance Cherkaoui sits on the floor facing the audience holding the latex cast of Khan's body on his lap as if he is mourning a loved one, and sings. Khan stands behind the cast of Cherkaoui's body, covering its mouth and drawing his hands away from it, as if he is visualizing the sound of a voice resonating into the space. While Khan's lower body remains stable, his legs extended as he shuffles sideways on his feet, his upper body movements become more convulsive and evolve into a violent shaking. There is a clear development in the relationship between Khan's movement

and Cherkaoui's song, similar in dynamics at first and utterly contrasting towards the end.

Audiences may possibly recognise the exotic sounds of this foreign song as Hebrew, label the song accordingly, and not question it any further. However, in this exoticising process of labelling, issues inherent in this specific lament Cherkaoui is singing are overlooked. The paradoxical theatrical image Cherkaoui presents is more complicated. He sings the Hebrew song 'Yerushalayim Shel Zahav' or 'Jerusalem of Gold,' written by Naomi Shemer in 1967 to celebrate Israel's independence. The first stanza of the song laments the loss of Jerusalem to the Jewish people, whereas in the last stanza the victory is celebrated. The song became a national symbol and unofficial national anthem after Israeli troops captured the Old City of Jerusalem and soldiers sang the song to celebrate the liberation of the city (Masalha 39). However, the song's melody is indebted to the Basque lullaby 'Pello Joxepe'.⁴ Shemer admitted being subconsciously influenced by the song after hearing a friend singing it. Although the rhythm has been adapted from an upbeat, bouncy and slightly irregular 3/8 metre to a clear, steady and regular 3/4 metre, the resemblance of the two melodies is distinct. When Cherkaoui performs the Hebrew song in *zero degrees*, he abandons the 3/4 metre of Shemer's song, occasionally using the entire duration of his exhalation for certain syllables. The song becomes extremely protracted and eerie, adding to a sense of Brechtian *Verfremdung*. This may prompt the audience to question what the song is and where it comes from, thus drawing attention to its unexpected origins.

⁴ The construction of Basque national identity and consequent claims to autonomy should be historically located in the project of modernity (Diaz Noci 2). Arguably, this could be seen to apply to the Flemish nationalist and Zionist movements too. The autonomy claims of these different groups also seem to resonate with Maalouf's concept that when a certain aspect of people's identity is threatened, such as their Flemishness, or Basqueness or Jewishness, this aspect often becomes more important than other aspects of their composite identity and may mobilise them into defensive action.

Cherkaoui is eager to point out in conversation that many of the cultural, nationalistic symbols that are considered to be authentic and pure actually originate from different cultures and are not as unambiguous as people might assume. By unveiling this disorderly cross-pollination of cultures, demonstrated by a nationalistic Israeli symbol having hidden Basque origins, Cherkaoui dismantles the claim for purity of origins when he performs this song. This scene from *zero degrees* demonstrates Derrida's notion of 'iterability' or 'a critique of pure identity,' indicating that the work shares characteristics with liminal performance (Broadhurst 50).

Cherkaoui's Islamic roots and upbringing in a Western country already complicate his cultural identity; the fact that he chooses to sing a song that has become a nationalist Israeli symbol in Hebrew makes for a provocative political statement in the eyes of some spectators. One reviewer comments: 'I can't imagine it is easy to find a Flemish-Moroccan who can [. . .] sing Jerusalem the Golden - in Hebrew' (Flanders). Ultimately, Cherkaoui's aim with this theatrical image is to demonstrate a pluralistic approach to the complex issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, countering one-sided and ethnocentric views. During an informal conversation in December 2008, Cherkaoui explained that in his opinion, there is no straightforward victim and/or aggressor in this situation. With this awareness that social concepts such as that of the nation are constructed and often constricting, nationalistic and ethnocentric ideas are difficult to retain. Instead, Cherkaoui proposes a flexible approach to such complex political issues as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, utilizing multiple viewpoints simultaneously and refusing a dogmatic, singular stance. In certain strands of cosmopolitanism cultures, too, are regarded to be unfixed entities, constantly influenced by, and influencing, other cultures (Scheffler 112; Appiah xv).

For example, Rahul Rao, an emerging scholar in the field of international normative theory, believes that 'all cultures simply *are* cosmopolitan mixtures, evolving in interaction with other cultures, so that we are all "naturally" hybrid and it is purification that is taught and imposed' (20). Cherkaoui actively seeks out occurrences of this kind of cultural cross-pollination in his choreographies; in *Myth* he layers tap dance upon Slovakian folk dance and Bollywood dance, revealing the dance forms' common emphasis on sophisticated rhythms and spectacular virtuosity.

The international and cosmopolitan nature of Cherkaoui's work necessitates a re-evaluation of Flemish dance history. The traditional linear historical narrative is based on a generational model characterized by the mechanism that the old generation feeds and educates the next. For his artistic creations, Cherkaoui prefers to surround himself with collaborators from all over the world, including Japan, South Africa, Iceland, United States of America, Australia, Slovakia, France, Belgium and Sweden. Given the international nature of Cherkaoui's and other Flemish choreographers' work, it will be argued that a geographically isolated historical narrative no longer suffices to characterize the Flemish dance landscape.

In the main sources that constitute Flemish dance history, a divide is made between the post-war ballet generation, the 1980s contemporary dance generation with De Keersmaeker, Jan Fabre, Wim Vandekeybus and Alain Platel, and finally a new generation since the 1990s including Charlotte Vanden Eynde, Meg Stuart and also Cherkaoui (De Belder and Van Rompay; De Vuyst; Lambrechts and Van Kerkhoven; Uytterhoeven). However, there are significant elements that destabilize the generational model. The Flemish dance field has been entered by artists who were not originally trained as dancers, but worked or continued to work in the field of visual arts or theatre. These artists have enriched and diversified the dance field.

Fabre, Vandekeybus and Platel are the key figures who have entered Flemish dance history in this way and pushed it in a direction that Lehmann identified as 'postdramatic' in his key text of the late 1990s. There are also artists from abroad who have actively been invited to base themselves in Belgium: Maurice Béjart was one of them, as was the American artist Meg Stuart; an increasingly high number of P.A.R.T.S. graduates have also been granted funding to create work in Belgium. This internationalisation of the Flemish dance field again undermines the generational model, which can be considered as much more linear and restricted to the boundaries of the nation state. The 'Flemishness' of the Flemish dance field is strongly contested, because of the extensive use of foreign dancers in those so-called Flemish dance productions. It seems that many dance artists working in Flanders are not in the least concerned with 'being Flemish' or using their work to construct a specifically Flemish identity for themselves. Perhaps this is due to the negative connotations of this term following the rise in popularity of the Flemish-nationalist populist radical right Vlaams Blok party. In this regard, the attempt to rationalize Flemish dance history in isolation from international performance discourses might seem distasteful and be frowned upon by the liberal artistic community.

The construction of the notion of 'the Flemish dance wave' is considered a strategy of the 1980s contemporary choreographers to obtain funding both domestically and internationally (Laermans and Gielen, 12-27). The work of a large portion of current Flemish dance artists, including Cherkaoui, is partially funded by international, albeit mostly European, theatres, arts institutions and festivals through a system of co-production. Following a series of international collaborations, Cherkaoui refuses to be grouped under the generalising term of 'the Flemish dance wave.' Indeed, sociologists Rudi Laermans and Pascal Gielen have contested the

'Flemishness' of the wave because of the international nature of the work of many choreographers working in Flanders (12-27). By insisting on the cosmopolitanism of his work, Cherkaoui resists being forced into the linear, generational Flemish dance history. The term generation suggests that the members of the same generation share traits and have something in common. It has become clear that the work of many of these artists is so diverse they actually share few characteristics and attitudes. Artists such as Cherkaoui continue to work somewhat independently from or perhaps beyond the generational historical model in a complex system of collaborations with a wide range of artists.

In the process of re-imagining Flemish dance history, useful insights can be gleaned from Joseph Roach's investigation of cultural transmission in the circum-Atlantic world. His work on the relationship between memory and history opens up a space for histories to be reinvented. He uses Renato Rosaldo's helpful notion of:

a busy intersection in which unanticipated or novel junctures may occur. [. . .] In contrast with the classic view which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes crisscross from within and beyond its borders. (Roach 29)

With regard to the busy traffic in the Flemish dance landscape, generational history can be seen as one of the roads of this intersection, but by no means the only one. Other paths, such as the one leading visual artists or theatre makers to the intersection, or the path of internationalisation, connecting traffic between Flanders and the rest of the world, make up the intersection as well. In this metaphor, current dance artists definitely do not come from the same place and, more importantly, they travel in diverging directions and at different speeds. The cross-roads of intercultural exchange runs straight through Cherkaoui's body, and this is an element which he actively explores in his work.

I would like to propose that Cherkaoui's choreography both facilitates and demonstrates a kind of cultural transmission at work, which is unexpected and similar to the transmission of cultural knowledge Roach describes. Cherkaoui's nomadic lifestyle and cosmopolitan attitudes are central to his choreographic work. Intercultural encounters and exchanges, embodied and/or oral, are at the basis of each of Cherkaoui's creations. These processes are reflected in the staged work, in which elements from different cultures are juxtaposed or layered upon each other, and languages are spoken without translation. Therefore it has become extremely difficult to evaluate the work within an historical framework that is geographically isolated and rationalizes cultural transmission as happening lineally between generations. Cherkaoui's life and artistic choices exemplify the flexibility and fluidity required to overcome the nationalism and ethnocentrism with which he was confronted in his youth.

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