

## talk one

November 2008

Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, London

body:language – a series of talks in the Lilian Baylis Studio about dance and live performance presented by invited curators. Dramaturg and writer Guy Cools launched the first series in autumn 2008, asking four choreographers to join him for conversations about their current and past work, showing film clips and quotes selected by Cools during the evening.

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## 'The Mythic Body'

**Guy Cools** with **Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui**

**Emma Gladstone** (Producer, Sadler's Wells):

All the artists Guy's invited are people that he knows well, whom he has programmed, helped produce their work or worked with as a dramaturg – so for me there is a benefit of catching a dialogue between two people who know each other rather than an interview, if you like. For that reason I'm delighted to welcome Guy with Larbi. Welcome Larbi, who has literally just tumbled off the Eurostar. We are delighted to have you here.

"Our body is our destiny."  
(Keleman, 1999, p. 11)

**Guy Cools** (Guy):

I want to thank Emma Gladstone at Sadler's Wells – also with the support of the Jerwood Studio at Sadler's Wells – for organising this series of talks which is basically part of a larger project of myself where I am kind of revisiting my writing and work of the last 10 years, to bring it to another level. I have been here for a week, so this is the result of one week of looking back and trying to clarify my own ideas about dance in relationship with the artists I've worked with.

... and I'm very happy that Larbi is the first one. I think we met at the very beginning – at [*Rien de Rien*] his first dance piece which was created in residence in the Arts Centre Vooruit when I was still the presenter and programmer there.

From there started our relationship and then when I decided to quit the job of presenter to go back to the creative process, one of the very first productions that I was invited to support as a dramaturge was *Zero Degrees* which was created here in Sadler's Wells. I think for all of us who were involved with *Zero Degrees*, that was a very special time – and I'd like to go back to that as well.

The way I've set up this – and sorry – Larbi will talk as well (Larbi "I will, I will – definitely!") because I'm consciously giving him a little bit more time to adapt...

What I've done basically for these talks is each time to invite an artist who I'm close to and have a friendship with – to talk about their work. But I also looked for an angle to frame the talk and to talk about this work.

In Larbi's case it's this little book which is called *Myth* and the body which I think I discovered while we were collaborating together on *Myth* or even towards the end of the process. So it was not part of that process but somehow it was towards the end that I discovered it, and it became very helpful in framing, and also for me to understand, what Larbi was researching.

The book was published in 1999 and it's a series of transcripts of lifelong talks that were held by Stanley Keleman who's a specialist in somatic therapy and Joseph Campbell, an eminent scholar in Western mythology. The talks were held from the late 70s until the late 80s when Campbell died in 1987.

The main subject of these talks was that mythology basically is about the body and that all myths talk about the somatic evolution of the body like its birth, its growth and transformation, and its death.

It's a tiny book but there are so many beautiful insights in it. In this talk I might bring in some other quotes and Larbi has got these quotes also – so they can help to frame everything.

Since *Myth* was the last production we worked on together, and since it was presented here last spring I'd like to start with *Myth*.

Can you both remind me and also the audience what the whole genesis of that production was? You changed the title a number of times, which was kind of important...

**Quote:**

*"A mythic image is the shape of anatomy speaking about itself. The serpent of mythology is the spinal cord. (.) The cortex is the thousand-petaled lotus, the crown of thorns. This makes mythic image incapable of being a reality apart from somatic reality. Mythic image is the body speaking to itself about itself. Myths are scripts of our genetic shape in social language. They are patterns of embodiment: they show us how to grow our inherited biological endowment into a personal form."*

(Keleman 1999, p. 3)

**Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (Larbi):**

Originally actually *Myth* was supposed to be called *Trauma*, which is a very 'heavy' word – ... because at that time I was very much thinking about how to deal with problems, 'childhood problems'... I was 30 and I felt like 'when am I ever going to get over these things?' I like the work in general to kind of help me overcome personal issues... and so I thought well, maybe we should tackle that – also with the whole group. With the dancers I had been working with (some of them for over 8 years), so I felt we can go into a theme like that, but then I felt the word was very negative – like 'trauma' is like 'problem'...

... and to give that to an audience felt not much of a gift – because you already have enough problems of your own. So to add another one; it just didn't feel right. But then as we were going into the traumas and how to deal with them, especially in a 'healing' way, which is a dangerous word as well because you always think 'healing is 'positive' but as we were researching around healing we were finding that people wanted to heal people from things which were very normal, like being gay..., so it felt also that that word was very dangerous – to go from 'trauma' to 'healing' didn't feel right either.

So I was looking... we were talking with the dancers... and slowly we came in a very natural way to mythology, through psychology first and then to mythology – because the connection between both it seems at first very far away but actually it's really close.

What I like about mythology is that it doesn't have a real morality. You have more of a cause and effect going on – if you do this, then this happens; and if that person does this then that happens. They are totally untrue stories – I mean nobody believes them – but at the same time they create an image – and this image helps you to understand a psychological condition.

I really like myths because they have been part of my life since early childhood. I mean when I was studying Latin all the Greek myths and the Roman myths they were all part of my education. At the same time I am Muslim, so I have a lot

of Islamic influence and Catholic influence as well because I grew up in Belgium. So all these things were already there. And we were delving and searching. Trying to make sense out of them and trying to see how we can apply them to ourselves and how we can especially recognise ourselves in these stories, into all these psychological situations. So *Myth* it became like... ok let's talk about the colours that you have in mythology, because you have all of them, you have all the Gods. It's a bit like Hinduism which I'm into right now which feels incredible because you just have a lot of archetypes – maybe the word 'archetype' is also important, because it helps to define all the colours of the rainbow.

Suddenly it didn't become black and white like in most religions – or that it's good or bad and there is nothing in between, but it became more about – there's red, there's yellow, there's blue... There are all these colours, all these gods who have a different intensity and you need them all in order to create a sense of completeness.

As I was finding the cast I had 21 characters on the stage, which I liked as a number because it was very symbolic. It was like the Tarot cards – I don't know if you know there are 21 of them; The Arcane cards. And so it felt that we are getting close to each of them being one Tarot card. So as if all of them together created the universe which was the 21st card.

I like to play with numbers. We were discussing this, constantly jumping between some sort of esotericism – and then at the same time going into just pure facts and psychology which could be very concrete: like there was this scene of Christine (one of the performers) who is more like a mother figure – who rejects her just born child – and you understand the child who wants his mother, but you also understand the mother not wanting this child – because she is just like 'leave me alone – I don't want this connection'.

So you kind of feel torn between who is right and who is wrong – the child really wants, the mother really doesn't want and you have a complex situation, a dilemma. And I like these tensions because I have lots of questions about life and I feel these images they give me the questions on stage which I'm just wondering about, with everyone in the audience as well. Because I am in the audience as well. What do we do with a situation like this? And how do we deal with that? How does a child deal with it? How does a mother deal with it? You get this feeling that there is no right or wrong... it's not so easy. There is just a misunderstanding and desires – so maybe you just have to deal with your desires that are not fulfilled.

So all these things were constantly coming up into the rehearsal room, and, and I wanted to play with that. It became a very complex piece because you never felt you understood what was the right thing to do. You didn't have the hero and the villain it just constantly felt like well 'the hero is not so nice and the villain is actually not so bad'. So it felt closer to reality.

**Quote:**

"Opposites are the tensions that are part of the formative process. When we can embody these tensions, we form our individuality. We are all foolish and wise, wild and tame."  
(Keleman 1999, p. 64)

**Guy**

For me you're touching a lot of subjects that I've been re-exploring as well over the past week. If I just take out one and maybe the other ones come back later on in the discussion.

A lot of your work researches these binary opposites – male/female – earth/heaven – these powers. Also one of the other books I was re-reading this week, called *The Eye Of Shiva* by Amaury de Riencourt, was a book that was thoroughly recommended to me by Akram Khan because he used it as a source for *Kaash* and I think he got it from Anish Kapoor, which is a whole journey of collaborations and influences.

The essence of that book with which I made a link to your work is that originally man is living a magical relationship with nature and the environment. And then when man started to develop a scientific (or rational) consciousness – East and West developed in different directions. Where the West would think these binary terms in oppositions that exclude each other, Eastern thought would approach them in a more complementary way, co-existing all the time and co-operating and not choosing between the two of them.

For me there is in your work, and also in your personality, this kind of Eastern mentality which is not different in the way that contemporary Western science has also tried to re-incorporate this idea.

What is it that attracts you also to Eastern forms of art which you've been exploring more and more recently?

**Larbi**

Well there are many ways of explaining it. In a very concrete way, for instance when you see an Eastern art form like Kabuki, the Japanese art form, a character can be many things at the same time. For instance he has a solo that he creates with a fan, but the fan becomes many, many things – so the fan can be the bow but at the same time it can become later the arrow that hits you or at the same time it becomes a knife that stabs you. Also I really like how the actor becomes many things. He is not just the bad guy or good guy or lover or child. It's not just one thing. When you see Akram Khan's traditional work you see him becoming as much Krishna as Shiva; he is all of them, all the gods. He goes from this one to that one to this one to that one etc.

Everything is constant; you are all of these characters. That's what attracts me as an actor; as a dancer; as a human being, to allow yourself to be much more than just this one thing that you were supposed to be or defined to be or what

people project on you; or that you project onto yourself. No, you suddenly can become all of these things and can be transformed. So in that sense I have been very attracted to eastern art because of that and I try to apply it to my own work. Especially in a work like *Zero Degrees* in which I definitely wanted not only to be the victim but also be the other side and understand that you are both, always everything; you play the role but you have the other side in you.

So that's maybe just one factor – there could be many others...

**Guy**

One of your most recent projects has been an exchange with Shantala Shivalingappa – which just premiered.

**Larbi**

Well it was not a premiere – it was more like a work in progress.

Shantala – she does Kutchipudi which is a certain Indian style – and yeah I went to India to work a little bit with her and she kind of introduced me to that particularly style of dancing – which is something between bharata natyam and kathak which Akram does. It's really quite different, but there are things that make you, as an outside viewer, feel it's quite similar. Again what was interesting for her, for instance, in wanting to work with me (of course I have a million reasons why I wanted to work with her) is that she had been doing a lot of singing and also a lot of dancing but never the two together. This is something that I do a lot in *Myth* or in other pieces, in that I try to be the instrument as much as the one playing on the instrument. She was interested in trying this. So she said I would like to work with you for that; to actually be allowed to sing and dance at the same time. So suddenly we were trying to dance whilst singing the song, which was really very, very difficult. But those little moments when it worked, it was really uplifting – because it felt quite complete because we are really together; it's harmonising.

So both of us got attracted to each other and also our voices matched – it was really nice and we felt very in tune. Also we started playing around the theme of 'Adam and Eve', man and woman together, something very innocent about it – very much the beginning of a story. For instance in my work with Akram – it's more of a fight or union but with Shantala there is no fight – it's really just this kind of discovery.

**Guy**

I'm interested because you just mentioned it as her interest, but also as part of the essence of your work, that is the integration of the voice in the human body – in the singing. I remember that in *Rien de Rien* the discovery of that through your collaboration with Damien Jalet, a discovery that you really described as a somatic experience.

**Larbi**

Yes.

**Guy**

Since then you've not only developed it for yourself – but also asking all of your dancers to integrate that.

**Larbi**

So maybe I should give you the history... for those who don't know.

When I started to work in 1999 with Damien Jalet who is a dancer but also a singer. He works on Italian traditional songs or old traditional songs. Which means not written songs... not with scores. They are actually songs that would be sung in certain villages in Italy during Easter – mostly religious songs. Religious in the popular sense – not by the church, but mostly by villagers who just... they might happen to be the baker but then in that period they all sang and they sing harmonies that are very powerful. In voices which are very nasal – yeah – it takes the whole space. I didn't know this kind of music at all; I didn't grow up with this kind of music – and when Damien brought in this element in the creation of *Rien de Rien* – I got goose bumps, I was totally struck by the harmonies – it was like it was the first time that I understood harmony in music and what it meant. How one voice and another voice, which is like a different voice, created something almost like a third voice. So when I got that feeling I felt that I never wanted to lose that feeling ever again. I want to keep on working on this – and getting deeper and deeper into the meaning of these voices being able to work together; How can two things become one?

And so I started learning to sing; He taught me how to go into the harmony – because it was a very physical thing to do. First of all it was just based on memory – so I didn't have to read. I have this fear of reading notes. It always feels like I can't do it; I don't have the training; I feel very much like an amateur. But when I just have to remember the notes it's much easier as I have a good memory, so things just stay.

So he started to teach me and he would be using his own voice. And slowly we were harmonising and slowly I was feeling the potential of how much one can harmonise with the voice. And then we were combining this with movements – I was behind him, he was dancing in front of me and I was behind him – it was a very simple image that's often used in choreography, four arms create a sense of a Shiva figure. This was in 2000, that was 8 years ago. So we were doing those kind of things, I mean, it was the beginning of my work in choreography. But with the singing it did give an extra layer. I mean just as a movement it was pretty. But because of the singing – the singing and the dancing became one thing – and it felt necessary to do the movement whilst singing and necessary to sing while doing the movement. So

that was my first experience of the voice. Then I was very lucky to meet very, very gifted people in music. And they were interested in my approaches, because they felt that I was really listening and interested.

So I went from Italy to being interested in Corsican music then from Corsican back to Spanish music, so constantly jumping and seeing all the relationships and constantly following my heart – whenever I feel or hear something that really matters to me or just resonates with me I will just go to it and try to understand it. And as Shantala was using a lot of Ragas and in a very different way of using the voice than I was used to, it felt very attractive, but not in an exotic way. It was also as if there was something that was already in my blood – as if it was something I was supposed to be doing. So that's how I got more and more into it.

**Guy**

There are two things I like to comment on that – one is very personal and a second one is going back to our collaboration in the creative process of *Myth*.

Re-reading all of your comments on the voice and music over the past week I've decided that I am going to take singing classes.

**Larbi**

I think everybody should!

**Guy**

I've already sent a mail to Steve Dujardin who is an opera singer and friend of ours... but the reason I am doing the singing classes is not because I want to be a good singer, but I know that as a somatic experience and as part of my personal healing process that that's the thing I need to do. As a child I was always told I couldn't sing...

**Larbi**

Like most people!

**Guy**

...but also what happened was that between the age of 4 and 5 my tonsils were taken out and because I had other operations before, I continued to bleed.

And at that time (which was in the late 60s – early 70s) the only way to stop the bleeding and save my life, stop me from suffocating in my own blood was to burn my throat and that was a very traumatic experience. I mean I've been working on it in other ways and it's improved but there's still a tension there and I now know that singing is the next step to do because I had small experiences with the work I did with Lin Snelling where we sometimes would go into singing.

The other thing, going back to *Myth* and its creation process, was what I observed and what was so beautiful to see, is the way you work like a contemporary scientist... like a science

lab, where all the dancers have a lot of autonomy. You give them subjects and ideas, but you give them also a lot of...

### **Larbi**

Responsibility

### **Guy**

...and freedom to research these ideas on their own. The first week of rehearsals – I remember when we were in the studios of PARTS. The first block that happened... we had 2 studios and maybe 10 different groups of 2 or 3 people. But then still the way to keep these people together as a group was for me the yoga classes in the morning and the singing classes which were mostly tagged in at the end of the day with Patrizia.

### **Larbi**

I think those are the things that I believe in the most right now. I mean dance classes never really spoke to me. I mean I love dance, but the class was never something that I felt brought people together – and maybe it's because it was just the wrong people.

I'm also working with people who really – they have such different styles that just finding a style in the movement that would fit everybody is impossible.

So it became obvious that we needed something else. I was really getting into yoga and understanding more about yoga – about the inside leg, about the spine, about how to be at one with gravity. Because really – standing up – what is it? You have gravity and you go against it but how can you go against it, when you are totally out of sync? You know you are losing a lot of energy – and so you are trying to find this straightness, which is very effortless, once you find it, because suddenly everything is on top of each other.

So I was trying to find a real physical straightness, which is not the straightness you get from the teacher in school (when they say 'sit straight') or in ballet when they say 'stand straight'. The real straightness is something that's really effortless. It's like a feeling where suddenly your shoulders are not hunched up but opened up. You don't feel the weight of the world on your shoulders – you actually feel that it all glides off you – and you feel the only responsibility you have is to be – and you don't have anything else on top of yourself.

So these were the things that I was slowly getting and I was like 'why didn't I get this 15 years ago? Why do I only understand this now?' But at the same time I felt that this is something I wanted to share – and this was really what I wanted to share with the dancers and so I started to teach them the little yoga I knew. Which was all this kind of awareness and also just being very practical about how to get the body to be more flexible – which also makes the mind more flexible. It's just the same thing – the body, the mind – I hate this kind of separation. I really feel... When I feel anger – my liver is angry. It's always the body. When I

have an emotional problem, it's the stomach. When you want too many things, you have a problem around the neck; when you have existential crises... you think – and if somebody dies in your family – and you are afraid to die or afraid to be left behind – it's most of the times the lower back that is the problem.

And as I was taking things from different cultures, it was always the same things that were coming back. When I was in China I was doing a lot of acupuncture because it was a very stressful period there – and they were telling me the things that I already felt like I'd understood before – so I felt that I was constantly hearing the same things when I was learning yoga, when I was learning kung fu, in tai chi and in singing as well.

So it all kind of felt like ok – and for me yoga is the thing that I am ok with teaching it – so I try to share that – and then with the singing I have a good ear – as I can correct people in their way of singing. And I have great partners like Damien, Christine Leboutte and Patrizia Bovi who was doing *Myth* – who is an incredible singing teacher – and so these people were just supporting me in sharing it with the dancers and sharing it with people who otherwise might have thought that 'singing is not for me' – and yes I think that if you are attracted to it then it's for you – because it's a really interesting thing to do.

So those were the two things that in a way very logically brought the group together – when everything else separated it. But then the piece again when we were putting together things slowly – they started understanding co-existence. – and knowing how to relate and seeing how this is happening over there, so I should relate to that or not – but it's true that those two things were the biggest things that brought us together.

### **Guy**

Myself I have a very strong somatic experience (over the past year) that I thought I would have liked to have known about 10 years earlier.

I had a lot of lower back problems for several months and I went to see my osteopath in Montreal – and she diagnosed that my left leg is much longer than my right (a centimetre and a half) – and she said that a lot of times it's like when you're in your 40s – that the rest of your body has problems to adapt to it.

So they proposed I had an elevation in the shoe. It was like an energetic rollercoaster for the first few days...

### **Larbi**

Like you get more energy...

### **Guy**

No – it was just that my whole body was realigning and because of that the consciousness in the energy was very, very, different. But the main things was not only the

elevation – but also they made some tests, and it turned out that my right foot when it was walking – it hardly touched the floor. It was like I'd been floating all my life – so they also gave me another awareness of how to put down my foot better, and immediately it started to work on a psychological level – because my problems since childhood is that I'm not grounded enough and I would easily get over excited... so it was like ok this consciousness is going to influence me in a lot of different levels.

### **Larbi**

It is a little bit like what was also happening as I was understanding more about acupuncture. The little I understood was also the reflexology, the feet, the foot – how, where you put the weight (inside of the foot) and how that also changes your state of mind – when you are very much in front you are kind of going towards the future and when you are on your heels you are much more laid back – It doesn't mean that that's right and that's wrong – it just means that that's that and that's this.

So getting back to *Myth* is that it actually has a consequence. Every action has a consequence. Whether you like it or don't like it that is just purely emotional or personal, at least you know that when you are slightly more in front of your feet you will go forward – but maybe too much. But at least you are aware of what will bring you where and how – and it's like that for everything in the body – how open you can be – even for your arms and your shoulders, your chest is that – there are thousands of things told about it.

One of the things also with the chest is...you know when you have dancers who are very proud – it opens up over here which it is almost arrogant but it also shines – so lots of dancers like to be shiny...but finding... and that's what I like when I sometimes see Akram dance or Shantala – or people that find 'just enough but not too much' – and depending on what the character is – so if it's Krishna it can be a bit more – so then he's going to lift it up just a little. And it's all these little subtleties that make the character; so that's it's not Akram anymore. He's incarnating something else, and he's everything, and can be this or that. I appreciate that in dancers so much. That's why I can watch them for hours – when they are able to go beyond just their ego and become that or this or that – and they are playing with all these possibilities.

Sometimes they do it intuitively and other times it's with a lot of scientific knowledge and that doesn't really matter. What matters is the result and how you try to make this production.

### **Guy**

You were talking so fast that I didn't want to interrupt it with the quotes; maybe we'll keep the quotes for a little later. I propose we have a little break and watch the last 10 minutes of *Myth* then we'll use it as a starting point to continue our discussion.

I've chosen this fragment also because I want to show another fragment of *Apocrifu* later and somehow *Apocrifu* starts where this piece ends – so we will talk a little bit more about that.

Having seen *Myth* now so many times live and also even now watching the video I am reminded of two of its main criticisms –and ones that made you angry – were the complexity and the overt religious symbolism, especially in this final section. But to me they are both very essential to this piece.

Like for instance the complexity is something I remember us fighting about and you being very stubborn saying 'I'll keep everything in, and the challenge will be to compose it in such a way that all these images belong together'. Fortunately we had like a full 3 weeks on stage before it premiered but also after the piece started touring – things were fine-tuned.

But again this complexity – why was it so important for you?

### **Larbi**

As we were making material a lot of things got created and all of them made sense to the people involved. Then what most directors do is like 'kill your darlings'; you have to cut, cut, cut, cut... I was like ok, I've been cutting all my life on the way and like cleaning up, cleaning up – making it very pretty, and cleaned up – and I thought "What if I don't; what if I keep everything, what if everything gets a place; what if I don't reject anything?"

Because I was at that time very much thinking about 'how to handle rejection'; how to handle 'this is not going to have a space', and 'no, your solo is always nice, but this one is better'? You know there is always hierarchy.

But with this piece I didn't want this – I wanted everything to get a space. Because that's what it was all about – it was about finding a space for everything, like an encyclopaedia that talks about all of it and just gets a space for everything. So, I made it a point to keep everything and to just see how I could handle placing each thing.

My image is a bit like homeopathic science in which it is always diluted in other stuff – so the vitamins – they are there but they are there in something else, different things... It's not just pure vitamins, which is sometimes very bad for the stomach because it's too harsh; too radical; it's too clean. Sometimes you need it coming from an apple – where it's just chemistry, it just has other stuff around which helps the body to accept it. The body is very smart; it can take things. And I believe the audience is also very smart and can take out what it needs for itself. So basically this piece became more like a canvas.

As a painting it was acceptable. When I was explaining it as a painting – most people were like "well of course!"

I remember this journalist from Greece – he had seen it once and he came the next morning and told me: "I think it's too much". He was in Antwerp, so I brought him to the cathedral in Antwerp, and when you come to the cathedral in Antwerp there is also a sculpture at the entrance which is really huge and it is full of apostles and all that... it's like you can't take it in – it's too much. And I asked him: "Do you think the artist is too much here." And he was like "ok I get it – it's about that" and when you really focus on the cathedral you can see the story. But most people just get the overall... and then... but that was the point – and ok it's maybe not fashionable right now to do that; maybe it's more fashionable to be pure and to clean it out – to only move or dance – and I just felt no – I really wanted it to be like a painting – I want it to feel like what I care about – and at that point it made sense to the theme – let's maybe stick to this.

In *Myth* there was supposed to be lots of the mythological characters but we were constantly playing with characters who were in a waiting room, like purgatory. And you had other characters which were the shadows of those people – so the people in black were the shadows and the real people were just waiting – and the final scene is where... as we were making the piece we were thinking... what are they waiting for? – and then we said 'oh!' – maybe for the resurrection of Christ because most people are waiting for some sort kind of Saviour, to come and save us.

You want to be saved – you want finally to find the man or woman of your dreams. You are always waiting for someone to come and save you. So I said well – lets give this to these people – lets bring him in – let's open the door and there is this Christ who is using the two sticks because basically it's about duality also – I mean he comes from the East. It's also the songs, about the pilgrimage. So he comes with two sticks; whilst the Japanese dancer has one stick – which is more like the balance between the two and the other two sticks was for me the symbol right and wrong in a way – right and wrong, right and wrong – whatever.

But as he's there – and all these characters want to be saved by him – he is just one man – and so he is like I can only move you over here or over there – and what I can do is bring you where I came from – that's all I can do – so he pushes them all out – and he stays alone – but basically he's never alone – because even he has a shadow, so even he has the opposite of himself. So he has to deal with this shadow... we all you know... as it's part of who you are – so even in my eyes, even a Christ figure – if that's a symbol or an archetype that you believe in or that you stand for – or whatever, then I would say well that he also has a shadow – and it's also that shadow that he needs to deal with.

So that's kind of a quick way of explaining the reason why I fought for all of it to stay in – and afterwards in other pieces or like with *Zero Degrees* or *Sutra*... I've been much more listening. I really made it much easier to perceive one thing

at a time and not get so obsessed with the overflow of information.

But I do like it as an audience – maybe it's also my generation. I mean we grew up with MTV – with a lot of images and a lot of things – you know, you were watching MTV, being on the computer, doing your homework and listening to your mum at the same time – and so I feel that it's also part of who I am and what you like being is very alert and awake – and able to take in lots of stimuli at the same time – but yeah, it was a choice more than a flaw. I think it was really something that I chose.

**Quote:**

*"One of the intentions of a mythological system is to present evocative images, images that touch and resonate in very deep centres of our impulse system, and then move us from these very deep centres into action."* (Keleman 1999, p. 34).

**Guy**

We were trying to bring alive unconscious issues starting from the personal experience of the performers, but then for the audience to be able to recognise themselves in it. Unlike in a dream it's impossible to isolate one image, and also impossible to see the whole completely and it is a selective process. This quote in that particular book made me understand that what we were possibly doing was creating myths. As I told you I think, I discovered the book towards the end of the process.

And then I got at least one personal, very subjective confirmation that we were kind of able to do that and I think I mailed it to you afterwards. And I think also that it was not by accident that it was in Greece – as I had spent a lot of time there over the past 10 years – and they have a sensibility there that is more... I mean Greece is the most Eastern country in Europe.

After the performances there in Kalamata – this was 2 summers ago – I had to give an audience talk and I discussed some of the issues that we're dealing with today – and after the talk a woman came to me who had seen the piece before and she told me this personal and very touching story. She said that all of her life, in her dreams, she had this image coming to her and then she had seen this image literally being recreated in the performance... in the midst of all these other images. Whilst she hadn't dreamt about it for rather a long time... it had come back to her the same night in a dream, but she felt that it had changed its quality. And she was kind of unclear about what it meant for her – because the experience was yet too recent, it was something that had touched her – it was kind of a very, very touching moment for me to understand too.

**Larbi**

It was a very interesting journey because also we, in places like Greece where you would think like 'oh my god' – you

know if they know anything about mythology. These were actually places where it was most appreciated – because they recognise everything. Like from the moment that you have 3 wolves coming together and then suddenly they move together – and they know it's the Cerberus, the dog with the 3 heads that holds the door of hell. And so you constantly felt like they... each image they knew. They were grasping and just appreciating every single symbol. Same thing in Spain, which was more the Christian part which was appreciated – without them being like 'oh this is a piece about faith'. It wasn't like that, it was more like, no, we can appreciate the aesthetic of... the way of having all these characters... because we can see faith as a way, or Christian faith, as a way of dealing with God, which is one way of dealing with it. What I like, and what I find much more interesting, is the human part where you have all these characters – it's like a soap opera. You get all these characters interacting – it's just really exciting to see how they interact and how all of them have these colours and it's about them... and I think then you really get the sense of 'how do you feel today?' – do you feel more like Judas or do you feel like this? The god element for me, it's much less interesting; I find the people much more interesting and so in Spain it was as well. And the place which was the hardest was actually in France, which also makes a lot of sense because in France they hate religion, and so this ending it was for them it was like: 'we have nothing to do with religion; we are a republic and we don't believe' – and you know it all felt like they just did not want to talk about faith – they just felt like... 'Are you here to convert me or something?'

Also I have an Arabic name – so you could say I've been brought up Islamic – so there's, there's all these projections and fantasies on top of me which I'm just trying to get out of. And look this piece is me but it is also all these people working together and appreciating each other within this world. And it was, very tough in France (in Paris especially). But then what was nice was the belief of the dancers in the performance saying 'really, this is good, we wanted it, we wanted to work together; we did choose this music.'

I think that the element of humour that was in the piece is a very Anglo-Saxon humour. So for instance in England I could feel that those elements – people just picked it up – but then in France, because people don't speak English – they just didn't get those things – so the balance was wrong over there.

So for me, with all the touring that I'm doing now, I have realised how culture specific countries can be and how they, without knowing it, they are very connected to their roots, their norm is from their own roots. And they think they are global, but actually when you come to think of it, it's always from your personal and cultural background that you're looking at it.

### **Guy**

There was, for me, another strong confirmation of the

quality of *Myth* but also of the way how people look at things with a proper frame. Which was towards the end of the process we had a couple of previews, and I remember that almost all the professional colleagues from Toneelhuis [Belgium theatre where Sidi Larbi is an Associate] and others, they had problems with its complexity or said it's too much. Then we had all the fellow actors from Theater Stap (the company of mentally handicapped actors to which An and Mark belong) – and they had seen everything – every smallest detail. I mean, talking to them I saw things for the first time that were there but I hadn't kind of noticed somehow, and their kind of directness of looking without all these kind of pre-judgements or frames, was very special.

### **Larbi**

It's very personal for me. It's also a bit of a fight with your own pieces. So when you make a piece and you make another one, people compare and it feels very tough to be your own enemy. So when people say, or they give you a compliment which is like you know – 'I like this piece much more than the other one' even by saying this... you kind of feel like ok, look, it only says something about that person. It doesn't say anything about the quality of the pieces. Because for me they all matter, and they've all mattered and I don't think *Apocrifu* is better than *Myth* or better than *Sutra*.

For me they all matter, and they really matter, and so to hear people being selective by thinking that they can define quality as something other than what they perceive as quality...because when it's a personal choice it's very nice. When people say for me – coming from my cultural background, being who I am and liking what I like...I like this... because of this and this... this I love, because then I feel someone who shows me their hearts.

I can appreciate a thought. But when it becomes a professional conversation, when people say well, you know, you should know that as an artist you should learn to do this, do that, do this... then I feel that I'm back at school where people are telling me what you are supposed to do. And you're like well, I thought it was all about me expressing myself with these means and the piece is a framework, and the intentions, you could say well I didn't succeed in my intentions – and so the only judge really is yourself, as I didn't manage to do this but I got somewhere else. And this is interesting as well. I think it's hard to let yourself constantly be judged by another person – or not a person but more like some sort of value system that you just don't get – being in fashion or not in fashion. That's maybe the toughest thing as an artist is to understand the difference between personal criticism and un-personal criticism. Which is really not easy.

### **Guy**

I'd like to introduce the next video fragment. In the end of *Myth* we have the kind of librarian figure who is almost collapsing under the weight of the books and... in your next piece that you made – just after this one *Apocrifu* – there was a whole research about...

**Larbi**

... the book – the power of books...

**Guy**

... the written word like that...

**Larbi**

I mean probably this extract will not show it... but it was also about rejection – what was interesting in this piece. And we might perform it over here, it's a piece that I made last year which is a trio – very, very simple – the opposite of *Myth* really...

It's just 3 dancers – I myself am one of them. I worked around the Bible, and the Koran and the Torah. We were juggling around as three dancers with these three books and one of the things we discovered as we were doing research, was that some of the stories that are in the Koran are actually apocryphal.

I don't know if you know what the word apocryphal means. They are words, the writings that have not been accepted by, have not been introduced into, the Bible. So when the Bible was put together certain texts were not selected. The selected ones are the canon and the non-selected ones are apocryphal texts. So because of this word when I started to learn about it, I was like, something has been rejected... I feel rejected...

Because I have always been rejected in my life: only half Moroccan, only half Belgian, I'm gay – you know there are lots of things that just always pushed me kind of out of the system. And so I felt right, ok, what are these apocrypha. So I started to get into it. Then I discovered that some of the apocrypha ended up in the Koran – that some of these texts are literally in the Koran. The Koran which is supposed to be, you know, the Angel Gabriel who came from God and told Mohammed these words in his ear...

Basically 500 years before you could already find the same texts in some apocrypha, and so I was totally amazed to see there's a source of it. These books are usually considered to be the source and then you find that there's a source of the source that's connected to the myths you know. The stories before the stories, and that all of this is just retold. And what I found fascinating is the fact that by having being rejected out of the Bible it became another religion – it became Islam. It became part of something else. It got translated from, I don't know, ancient Greek to Arabic, through these 500 years it got suddenly over there.

And what was also fascinating there was the story. It was one of the stories around Abel and Cain. The story was that Abel kills his brother and the body was over there and he sees a bird. A crow going into the ground, so what he does is think, oh, I should bury my brother like I saw the crow doing. So this was kind of the inspiration for him to bury his brother.

It is a nice story that is not in the Bible but it is in the Koran and on top of that... I think it is Torah 5 and 31 and 32 and 32 is a comment on this, and it says "he who takes the blood of one, it's as if he takes the blood of all, and he who saves the blood of one, saves the blood of all." It is a comment and you think what does it have to do with this story? And it's about Abel. He wasn't supposed to kill Cain. And that's for people when they read this; you should know you shouldn't. Basically this was done in an apocrypha in which, let's say, an editor actually – had made this little comment saying "hey... Cain does this but people don't do it" Like he made this kind of extra comment...

But this extra comment became in the Koran just Sura 5 – it used to be a comment then it became a real Sura. It became a real teaching. So basically that person had written a comment that became a real teaching. And I found that fascinating, and I felt that I want to share this with other people. To make them think about how and where things come from, and how morality is being taken out of belief systems. Which in a way comes from other people – people just projecting. Well, I think people should understand that story doesn't mean you should kill your brother any time you have an argument, and so they kind of put it in there.

I felt it was fascinating and I just really wanted to share this with you.

**Guy**

Larbi actually also tells the story in the performance... Now I am showing the end again as somehow it reveals also to the themes you are researching...

**CLIP SHOWN****Quote:**

*"Whether we like it or not, we are incarnated. We are bodies on this planet, and all myth and all stories seek the origin and the end of our somatic structure. Myth as story is the life of our body in one or another of its forms. We are all making up stories, finding stories, finding facts to talk about our somatic origin, its growth and its end. (.) In telling your story, look for the somatic shapes."* (Keleman 1999, p. 68-68)

**Guy**

I'd like... two last questions then maybe we should open it to the audience a bit. Death is a very important theme in all your productions from the very first one to the present? Can you talk a little bit about that... if you want to?

**Larbi**

I'm just thinking from which angle to take it.

For instance with the solo, what I found interesting with the solo was actually it was about self control, like controlling your own body, but controlling it outside of yourself... so you can control but you can also... I can control it by being on top of myself... which I think most of us are doing.

We are not really ourselves. We are controlling ourselves, and self determination is like where to bring yourself... like guiding yourself – as if you would be a vehicle – that you are guiding from some place else.

And I was interested in old age or how to get heavier and heavier so the body gets harder and harder to control – so there are very simple manipulations you can guide yourself very easily and suddenly it becomes much more heavy, and more and more heavy, and you need more energy to be able to move the smallest thing.

I was inspired by an old lady who just needed to cross the street, and the time it took her was like an eternity. And I just felt this is a totally different life. I mean a different way of dealing with distance, with getting there and also the appreciation of life, or the appreciation of a goal. When you attain it, depending on the speed you have. I mean most people I work with have different speeds.

When I work with handicapped actors or differently-abled actors... they are, they have another speed... they have another way... another perception so things just... it's another gear... but you can get there at the same place... it just asks you more patience...

It teaches you patience – and you then think how to apply this patience to yourself in order to get somewhere. For instance let's say kung fu, I want to learn kung-fu and then I'm like I'll never attain it. Then I think if that old lady can get over the street. I can get to at least moving close to kung-fu and at the same time kung-fu is just movement and I'm a dancer – well I should think "it's kung-fu". Like my parents always told me you can't sing, you can't sing, you can't, because you didn't start when you were 6 years.... And then I'm like, well, I've been living for 32 years now so I think my life experience makes me able to learn things. And you know how people always get delusional by saying 'no – but you learn the most when you are younger and once you're older, it's harder?' – I think it's easier now.

I think it's easier because depending on which part of the brain you are using... you just transpose your knowledge. Then you just have to not get stuck to your own knowledge, you have to just learn the new rules within your own knowledge so that your mind broadens up.

But to come back to the subject of death – death was something that was always present in my family. My mum grew up without a father. So her dad had died when she was 3 years old. And I really think it comes originally from there, like even if this is not connected to me I know later on that this was a kind of theme in our family. When I was 14, my aunt, her sister (she had one sister) died of cancer and I remember visiting my aunt very often and seeing her being, you know, healthy, then deteriorating, going back, deteriorating, going back, deteriorating, then dying.

And it was really very... it had a big impact, because we

were visiting her every week – so I could see how it was going up and down, up and down. And also the way my mum was dealing with that, you know, because she was someone who didn't talk much or didn't complain much, but I know she was very affected by this. But she was educating us, so she was having kind of another responsibility, and we were very young so how can she talk to us about this? We were just alive, just getting into the world me and my brother. So I felt that she had no one to speak with. This was something that was unspoken, something which was rejected... which means it got somewhere, it usually gets to the children, so it really had a big impact on me on an unconscious level.

And then my dad died when I was 19, and this was also a big, big shock as it was something that... I didn't have a good relationship with dad at all. He was someone I didn't like, I didn't want to become like him at all. He was the total opposite of everything I wanted to become. And as I grew older I was more and more becoming like him, so I was like how can I not become like him. When actually I am a reincarnation of my mum and my dad, I am them, they made me, even if I'm an individual. And I can go to my left hemisphere, and go like "I'm an individual, I am something else"... so I had to accept that shadow side, that father side... even though... and it didn't have anything to do with the culture... because the Arab culture was something I accepted totally... and I was proud of being an Arab, but I wasn't proud of being the son of my father. Also because he wasn't really proud of me, so it was... there was this tension... But then when he died... it changed everything, because I was like God! Am I sad because I am an orphan, a very selfish sadness, or am I sad because he died? Because we can never talk anymore... I could never prove him wrong.

You know he was someone who always told me – you'll never make money while dancing. I can tell you I make money while dancing. Like I really make money now. And I'm living and living only from the dancing. And I can assure you it's possible as an artist to make a living.

So all these clichés that I was thrown as a child... I just felt that my whole life has been a building up of proving him wrong – and I think still today, I'm not beyond that fact of proving him wrong.

So I was 19 when that happened...

Then my mum had a new partner, which was a much older man... He was 20 years older than her and he also died in 2004 when I was making *Tempus Fugit*. And I remember making *Tempus Fugit* because *Tempus Fugit* is a really joyful piece, and very light and very kind of... a lot of people felt it was kind of superficial because it is such a musical... but again it was a clear intention. I really wanted it to be light because there was so much suffering in my entourage – that I felt like now we need to have joy for life – we need to cherish it, and enjoy transformation. And so I was really, I

was going extreme – I'm quite an extreme person – so I was going all the way for this... for this feeling...

And then 2 years later in 2006 my grandmother died – my mum's mother. So it just felt like death has always been extremely present and a very, very natural thing for me. For me but not for my mum. I could feel that she was always really affected by it, like when it happened and her sister died she got a hernia... the lower back, like an existential crisis – like she could hardly move anymore... she couldn't pick up anything. And when 18 years later when my grandma died it was the same thing – so I was trying to tell my mum 'look', I think there's a pattern, it's really just our body is responding to a psychological condition that you have to solve. You need to accept death as being a part of life... and people will die and I might die just going out, and it's not going to stop you from living. We have to keep on going...

And I had this really powerful feeling when my grandma died and I went to the funeral which was really sad – I mean if I really think about it makes me sad. And if I think about it makes me really emotional, also because the suffering of the people who were still living. So I saw my cousin – she was... her relationship because she had lost her mum very earlier like when she was 12...

My grandma became her mum. Like the functions in the family transformed. When you lose someone it's very important in the family to restructure, to be like "who does what?" Because if you don't restructure you lose a function, you lose the father element, which can be an energy. It can be done by anybody. It doesn't have to be your father. It just has to be done. And so the whole logically, sociological situation was blown apart again. So how to restructure? And so my grandma became her mum in a way, so when she died, my cousin felt it was just too much. When she could still say goodbye she didn't want to leave the bed of the dead body and she was really holding on to it, and it was really, really emotional. But at the same time when the coffin went down and I saw the ending of it. I also felt a lot of energy. I could feel like as if I had become my grandmother, and I felt like I am here, and my grandmother was always very strong, very strict, very practical, like she was a maid, all her life she was a maid. She always knew how to clean up the mess, and she didn't need a man. She never had another man other than the father of my mum, as she was too busy with these two girls. And so, I felt like "I am her now". I have to take up this, it's not that I have to, it just becomes me. And then it felt like energy I was given... not energy that was taken away from me... and I like to tell this story because I just feel like there are two ways... it's like the bottle is half empty or half full. And of course you don't have to go into some sort of delusion of saying: 'no, no, no it's fine that they died'.... Of course it hurts... and because you've been taught to make it feel like it hurts...

Our own education is about losing everything... and people always complain how they lose things. But they don't

understand that it's not losing – it's transformation, you're changing... you are gaining other things.

When you have a scar, it's new material. I remember this because also I've had a lot of operations when I was a kid, and these scars are... you know people always want when they want to heal they want to become back to what they were. But I'm like "no you have to go to what you've become" so you've become something else. And this scar tissue – it's really new tissue. And what's incredible like I have a scar when I was 15 years old... when I had a stomach... how do you call it? Not an ulcer... but a stomach perforation... so I really had a hole in my stomach because of too much acids... and they had to operate, they had to correct it... and so there's a big scar. But this tissue, this scar tissue is only 17 years old; this skin that I have over there it's just 17 years old, it was born when I was 15.

When you go to primitive cultures where youngsters scar themselves, or when you go to tattoos, or you know scarification in the African tribes, what are they doing? What are they doing? They are being reborn... they are making themselves be reborn... by changing themselves. On their 18th birthday they are like the Phoenix who comes out of the ashes – they want to have new skin. And they do it consciously. We have lost this but at the same time we haven't lost the urges of it. Why do some people need, I mean I had a tattoo on my back when I was 23 and why did I need this...? I remember when I was 13 I was like, I will never get a tattoo, then suddenly I'm around 20 I feel like I need something to feel like I've changed. And I did you know a tattoo on my back of a dragon... and I felt... yeah – I don't regret it because I just feel that that was what I needed. I needed this kind of ritual, this kind of sensation of transformation, and it needed to be a very physical choice, something that I could choose, something that I could determine – and that just was part of my physical journey.

And now to come back to death – because I'm always going around – but I think it's something that will never lose me because it's just so intrinsic to all of us. Something that really fascinates me, I mean, I think I'll be a happy dead man. Because I always think it's such a big transformation, and my whole life has been about wanting to change, like everything I'm doing is just to transform myself into something else. And maybe it's running away... maybe it's a scar that I can't heal... But I just really want to feel like we are changing when things are moving on and I'm not what I was just an hour ago... I feel different, I want to be different, I want to be different, and I think death is that ultimate transformation... and so I... yeah... I'm quite projecting on this.

### **Guy**

Also, having been a privileged witness of your work, there is a huge transformation of how you deal with these things. Because if you look at *Rien de Rien* there's an anger which is very much self projected towards yourself, and in *Zero Degrees* there's still this kind of fighting with yourself. But it's

much lighter – fighting with the puppets, the dummies, then it becomes a lamentation – so it's really the sadness.

And in the last piece *Apocrifu* is as about pulling yourself together and, yeah, for me both in maybe *Myth* and *Apocrifu* the message is also that we are masters of ourselves and that we don't need external things, and the way that the puppet liberates itself earlier in the piece... and the way that you identify yourself with it... is very much about this maturity that you have personally gained also as an artist.

### **Larbi**

I mean it comes with waves... I think there are days when I feel totally in sync with the belief system I chose for myself, then days when it makes no sense to me...

### **Guy**

Shall we finish?

Maybe we should open it up a little bit... also give you an opportunity to ask questions and for you to react... I'll choose one more quote...

### **Quote:**

*"To be embodied is to participate in a migration from one body form to another. Each of us is a nomad, a wave that has duration for a time and then takes on a new somatic shape. This perpetual transformation is the subject of all myth."*  
(Keleman 1999, p. 76)

So any comments or questions you like to have?

### **Question:**

I just find the identity of your pieces a very central point –and I was just wondering. I find it especially in *Zero Degrees* – there's that kind of evaluation of where you belong and your identity. I just wondered whether you can elaborate on the fact that you come from two very different places, Morocco and Belgium? I just wondered whether you find a sense of belonging even though you come from both places. Can you find it in both countries?

### **Larbi**

I think I can when I adapt – I think you can belong anywhere if you adapt. You know I felt really great in China when I adapted. So there's also a sense if you choose to belong, it's something you can choose. You can just say that part of my personality can now be the dominant part... and then I feel great in anything. I can, you know, feel great in a 'gay parade' if I really go into my gayness – and I just feel great there... because it just makes sense for me to be there, because of that because of that element of myself...

There's a book that I really think is important which is the 'Murdering Identities... I think it's in English?

### **Guy**

In English it's translated as 'On Identity'... by Amin Malouf.

### **Larbi**

Amin Malouf, who is a Lebanese writer writes about identity within us. He explains how we are all built up of many, many, many identities – so I could be you know... I'm the choreographer, I'm also a dancer, I'm Moroccan, I'm Belgian, I'm a male, I have brown eyes... So there's many ways of defining myself, and depending on with whom we are together, we can say – oh you also have brown eyes so both of us have brown eyes so we have a connection. So I can focus on that and be like, well we are similar because we have brown eyes or a certain generation or a certain experience... body experience or...

There are many ways of relating to people – and his book I think it's my Bible really, because it really tells you how to focus on the things you have in common with other people, and how you can then constantly relate to anything. Because there is always something to relate to... I mean he talks about the issues of immigration and how difficult it is to know how to deal with immigrants, but as long as you make them be something separate from you then of course it is a struggle to deal with, something which is other. But from the moment you understand that, well, actually they are also fathers with children or they are also workers, or they are also... when you focus on the other elements which are related then there is no struggle, you know there is no struggle... I get a lot of questions in Belgium about how to deal with immigrant students... and I'm like from the moment you don't make them immigrant students, but you just treat them like students, and you deal with them as 'students', then there is no issue and it's that simple. Of course there is all this knowledge, and you can go into the problematic, which is a very French thing, ...always creating the problem... but you can also just focus on, well, actually it's just the same thing, you know we are really just two human beings trying to understand each other's value system. And my value system is this and this and this and yours is this and this and this, and how can we get along? Well, we do value this the same way. Well, let's focus on this and let's go from this to go to the rest... And maybe you will change your mind about whether to not to wear a veil or things like this because you just explain, express and talk.

### **Guy**

And the other fact is that also because you have multiple identities... that you can focus on one identity and all this richness. I remember you very clearly talking about a piece like *Foi* was much more your Christian identity [LARBI – yeah] whereas *Tempus Fugit* was tuning into your Arabic roots, and the piece was kind of changed [LARBI: Yeah... it had another colour] and had another colour.

### **Larbi**

But the themes were totally the same I felt. Like I was saying the same thing. And so I felt like I'm always saying the same things. I feel like I'm totally into this kind of circle. I wish I could kind of say other things... I wish that I could go beyond myself and say oh I have now another vision... I feel

like I am turning to this place where the same things are said in different ways...

Maybe one thing that's interesting is because of having grown up in two cultures, I never had a norm – so I never like, you know, like when you have children who believe in Santa Claus – and they really believe in Santa Claus and they are so comfortable in believing in Santa Claus. And then when they are 8 or 9 suddenly they are like 'Santa Claus doesn't exist!!' And there is this disappointment. I never had that, because I never believed in anything, because I always had different opinions.

My mum thought Christ was the son of God; my father thought it was just a prophet, and he is not that meaningful compared to other prophets; and in school I was told that God doesn't exist because he's been killed by nature; and so you felt now there was this constant, constant different information and then on television I saw that success is what counts and being popular and famous and money, money is important so I felt ok, that's important... and then staying young is very important. Like different value systems but I could obviously tell because I had a lot of other baggage, you could say, well that doesn't... that value... it doesn't mean anything in that culture you know. Being able to go on pointe it means something when you are in the Ballet de Monte Carlo, when you are there and how very important it is there, in that value system. But you go to India and it doesn't... people look at you like... "what are you doing?!"

#### **Audience comment**

I think it's great the way you feel like you can absorb different identities and different beliefs... because being in London I know I've only been here since I've been at university... and the cultural diversity is just unbelievable... [LARBI: Incredible – yes!]... It's amazing, and I think it's really refreshing to have so many points of view from people... and the fact that you feel like you can take them from places is a great thing I think. But then a lot of people would reject the fact that you are not necessarily from a certain country, so you can't adopt their beliefs. I think it's great that you think you can do that and I think that it should be more widespread and you should be able to have the opportunity to choose what you really...

#### **Larbi**

Yeah... but I think the big dilemma is really, if you look at it on a philosophical level, about purity. What is purity? What is pure? If you go to a certain culture and say 'that's really Albanian culture' and then you really when you go into it well actually it's very much like... it comes actually from an Italian song... and you suddenly realise that etymologically everything comes from somewhere else. I had that with a song in *Zero Degrees*... the last song I sing. It's a hymn to Jerusalem which I thought was important to sing as an Arab because it's in Jewish and I just felt it was necessary for me to make that bridge, as to say that well I think it's a beautiful song, even if in certain ways you take it on a very...

... I remember my dad had always been like 'be wary of the Jews...' you know they are thieves and, so I always could relate because whoever he would demonise I would always be like, well, they are probably like me then. And I felt a relationship with anything that was rejected by him. I even had a Jewish boyfriend once, which was also really important in my life. I had that song, this hymn, it seemed like that in 2005... you can tell it. Because it would be really nice if you could...

And then we found the same song in Basque, and it's the same song, but just with other lyrics instead of it being in Basque it becomes about, you know, a hymn to Jerusalem. But the melody is totally similar, so whatever you think, is authentic from a certain culture, just comes from somewhere else. If you go into the dance etymology of Flamenco then you connect it to kathak or the pointe shoes, the red shoes being in China... those shoes that you really... there is so much to discover about the relationship between all of it, that there is no purity. So when, for instance, in Belgium when there is sometimes a lot of nationalism – like who are you kidding? You know Belgium is made up from everyone. You know we came from Holland, we came from Spain, we came from Austria, we came from Germany, we've been from everywhere... and what I think is interesting in Belgium is the fact that we were as much colonised, as we were colonisers. We had our own colony in Congo, and so there is this relationship between being the one suppressed or oppressed or actually you know belonging to a bigger thing or... kind of held or actually holding something else. So there is this duality between knowing what it's like to having a responsibility to another culture. And I think English culture should also be looked at from its colonial history. I mean a lot of people want to forget the past but I think it's there that it starts, it's there that it starts why I think London is the way it is. And it's just really important to understand history.

#### **Guy**

Maybe as a final thing and I think we have to round up, is that today you are rehearsing a site specific, one-time presentation for the new Museum of Immigration in Paris which used to be the Old Museum of Colonisation.

#### **Larbi**

Yes. It's fantastic. It was a museum that was there to highlight what France had given to the rest of the world – so there are these paintings of France being this woman who gives liberty to the Africans, who gives work to the Chinese, who constantly like this kind of giver and they are really beautiful frescos, it is actually really beautiful. And it's also scary to see how people perceive themselves as always being the generous one and then now... They kind of transformed this museum because they were a bit ashamed... and they made it the Museum of Immigration... so suddenly it was the opposite, it was all about the immigrants that had come, about all the artists that came from another country to seek sanctuary in France and it was all about how immigration really is. And this is something in

France that is mostly complained about, but actually then what they were doing was like no, no they are bringing in a lot of value and I believe in that totally...

... if you take away all the night shops and all the nice things totally out of Belgium, out of Antwerp I can imagine that if you take out everything that it would be a skeleton... like nothing would be left... it's really true this kind of trading and constantly being a flux of people going, like birds, I mean I like the image of the birds going from one country to another because the seasons are changing and they are just flying and this is an image of immigration, of migration that I really like... because it's a very biological one... it's not – there is nothing wrong with doing that. It's important and we should value it and understand it... and understand that it is necessary even if sometimes it is scary... because we feel overwhelmed by new information, but we can also take it as something that just teaches us a lot about life...

There's a lot to be said about it... also about the power of the passport. For instance in *Zero Degrees* the way we were glamorising the fact that if you have a British passport or you have a European passport – the doors you can open compared to if you have a Bengali passport or an Indian passport – the doors that are closed forever... it's very revealing...

**Guy**

Larbi – I would like to thank you personally very much for sharing this evening with me and with the audience – especially coming from Brussels to here while you were rehearsing. This talk is the first one of the series. Next Monday, I am going to have another talk with Akram Khan, and the week after it is Rosemary Butcher. The final one will be with Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion. So until next week.

*All quotes taken from: Stanley Keleman, *Myth and the body, a colloquy with Joseph Campbell, Center Press, Berkeley, California, 1999**

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