



THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GARDEN

From ANDERSEN
OSSAMA HALAL
KOON THEATER GROUP

Création Studio Théâtre National 19/20
THÉÂTRE NATIONAL WALLONIE-BRUXELLES



The Other Side of the Garden

After the success of *Above Zero*, Ossama Halal, a Syrian director living in Lebanon and the Koon Theater Group collective are offering a loose adaptation of *Story of a Mother*, a Hans Christian Andersen story.

Echoing what life is like for families living in those Middle Eastern countries devastated by war, the artist tells the tale of a mother's initiatory quest after Death has taken her son. A journey punctuated by enigmas and ordeals where, at each stop she must leave behind something of herself, as a sacrifice or a renunciation. She leaves her eyes, her hair, her voice...

How many mothers and entire families have been torn apart and have had to throw themselves into a search for their dead? When war is a daily reality it takes existence away from beings and the communities to which they belong. It retains the lives to take them towards an unknown fate. Faced with so much violence, humankind is often incapable of acting and loses a bit of itself in this impotence.

To address sacrifice and deal-making as survival techniques, Ossama Halal uses a distancing technique of symbolic motifs, the puppet, and costumes in Sufi colors. In Natacha Belova he finds a partner of choice to create this universe.

Koon Theater Group

The Koon Theater Group is a collective of artists of different origins and identities who have joined together around innovative artistic projects. They work on developing their array of savoir-faire and assets in all areas to become multidiscipline performers and they look to renovate the theater's traditional forms, while staying close to what is happening on the street. They also want to facilitate the spread of cultural works, especially those from disadvantaged countries or regions that are lacking in cultural infrastructure.

Koon was founded in 2002. The collective's first shows were centered on the concept of alternative performance spaces. They are the first theater group in Syria to present street productions in order to bring the public into non-traditional theater spaces. Among the spaces they used were rooftops and tunnels.

After the 2011 Revolution, the Koon Theater Group presented the show *Cellophanes*, a wordless performance which got them banned in Syria. Ossama Halal and a few other artists then left Syria and settled in Beirut where they are joined by artists of various origins (Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians...) The war which then started in Syria literally reduced the artistic scene to rubble and forced them to confront an important question: why make theater? Of what use is theater in such times of crisis?

Thus they began concentrating on the substance rather than the form or the spaces used. They then started working on a new theme: the hero of legends compared to the contemporary hero. In the streets, Koon looked for answers to this question and presented projects that concern Syrians and other Arabs, trying to tell of the pain of people confronted with war.

How to deal with fear or violence? How to stay human and dignified in these circumstances? And what can theater do to respond to this? In 2014-2015 the collective created *Above Zero* which was presented numerous times with different casts based on the situations due to the war (death, exile, closed borders...)

This show speaks to the effects of war on human beings and of the descent into the vicious circle of fear and violence, from the persecutor and the victim. It was presented during the 2017-2018 season at Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

Why Koon?

Koon is a verb. In Arabic and more specifically in Syrian dialect it means *To be*.

To be happy, to be strong, to be spontaneous, to be confident, to be oneself, to be nothing but oneself...



Ossama Halal

Director

Ossama Halal started his artistic career in 1994 in Syria, as hip-hop dancer and choreographer. He then studied at the Damascus Higher Institute of the Scenic Arts, graduating in 2004 with a degree in dramatic arts. He directed his first street theater production in Syria during his second year at the Institute.

He founded the Koon Theater Group in 2002. Since then he has directed and choreographed numerous shows, street performances, site specific performances, theater-dance, as well as shows based on folklore, fairytales and legends. He was voted best director at the 2009 Cairo Independent Theater Festival.

Ossama Halal settled in Beirut in 2013 and in 2016 he founded the Koon Theater Group Studio at Beirut's Sunflower Theater. *The Other Side of the Garden* is the collective's second production since its move to Lebanon after the Revolution. Ossama Halal has also appeared in numerous Syrian and Lebanese TV series.

Ossama Halal – Interview video
www.theatrenational.be/fr/articles/519

A small garden from which life springs

In your interviews you insist that you are witnesses, not victims. Why?

Ossama Halal: I'm conscious of the stereotype foisted on us as people coming from the Middle East. There is like a fashionable trend: to work with artists coming from war torn countries.

I've been making theater since 2001-2002. I have traveled, participated in festivals and presented my shows all over the world. My research, my questions about theater were the same when I started. What has changed today is that I find myself at the heart of the problem and of pain. I dislike this view by others because I don't see myself as a victim but as a witness... maybe making sacrifices to survive, to exist. I'm not looking for compassion, rather I'm looking for action, the reaction I can provoke in others.

In 2001-2002 what themes did you develop in your shows, you who were already very committed.

OH: The first show (On Your Path) was an self-portrait of Syrian youth; Who are they, what engages them, what mobilizes them? The main question raised was why do the youth of our generation choose to travel, to leave?

Through this question arose the themes of repression, of the need for democracy, of the fact that we couldn't leave our mark in our country.

The second and third shows by Koon were based on personal questions. Through these questions we analyzed the living conditions in which we found ourselves.

The third phase of my work was to compare the classic hero, the mythical hero and the contemporary hero. For instance I revisited *Don Quixote* by asking myself, who is the hero of this story, Sancho or Don Quixote himself? In Aladdin's voyage, is Aladdin the hero or his companion? It is as if, in our society, we look for a real hero, and not the conventional hero whose official photo is posted everywhere.

Finally the fourth phase is about the revolution which has called into question all my artistic tools.

Doing theater is vital to you?

OH: Theater is not a decision we make. It's organic.

Andersen's *The Story of a Mother* is the basis of your show. Why that story? What is it about the story that attracted you?

OH: It's the third show that shows what we are living in Syria since the war broke out. First there was *Cellophanes*, then *Above Zero* and now *The Other Side of the Garden*. In Andersen's story: a mother follows a convoluted path to try to get her dead child back. All along the journey she has no recourse but to agree to the sacrifices Death imposes on her (she gives up her voice, her hair, her eyes...), she deals with negotiations, blackmail... This transformation that she undergoes is a reminder of the transformation we undergo as Syrians, at the individual level and at the societal level. It's as if they were trying to take everything we have just to be able to live in peace.

Through this mother's ordeal, it's our own death that we witness.

Today, we are continually sacrificing just to stay alive. So I used the mother's voice to speak of us.

You said that you quickly see precise images of your work. Is of work intuitive? Do you present a clear proposal to the rest of the team? How does creation happen for Koon?

OH: I work exactly like an author writes a theatrical piece, but I have a very visual style. I present it to the performers so that we can try it out together. This allows us the space to explore the ideas and the images. Then we get the feedback from the actors and the whole team. Here is where the importance of our work together is revealed. Within Koon we are lucky to have a large variety and diversity of experiences. The accumulation of all this experience create a collective language specific to the company.

But the impetus comes from you?

OH: Today, yes, because *The Other Side of the Garden* is my project to begin with. But if tomorrow, an other member of Koon proposes a subject for a show, he or she will be the impetus of the creation. It is truly a collective.

What is the music bring? What is its importance?

OH: The musicians are part of the rehearsals from the very beginning. The music is not just an accessory. It is part of the premise. The dramaturgical questions which we work on with the actors are the same for the musicians.

What does the wooden structure on which the play is performed represent?

OH: I started with a ritual. It can have many meanings: an altar on which a sacrifice is performed, a tomb, a little garden from which life springs or what ever the audience sees in it. I do not want to influence how the spectator interprets things...

— Interview by Sophie Dupavé September 14th 2018



Natacha Belova

Puppets, masks and props

Natacha Belova is a self-learned artist, having initially studied history and philosophy. She moved to Brussels in 1995, where she has been working ever since.

As a costume, set and puppet designer, Natacha often incorporates different techniques into her work : latex, images, synthetic materials, powertex, tissue printing...

She has received three nominations (2008, 2009 & 2010) and one award (2010) for costume and puppet design for various shows at the Prix de la critique du Théâtre Belge (Belgian theatre critics awards).

Becoming the mother - Video Interview
www.theatrenational.be/fr/articles/651

Past collaborations

- *Le Géant de Kaillass* (2010)
Directed by : Axel De Booséré - Puppet design
- *L'ombre* (2010) by Evgueni Schwartz,
Compagnie entre chien et loup
Directed by : Jasmine Douieb - Costume design
- *La tempête* (2010) by Shakespeare,
Directed by : Jean-Michel d'Hoop - Costume, mask and puppet design
- *Le Projet HLA* (2011) by Nicolas Fretel.
Directed by : Georges Lini - Costume design
- *Pinocchio le Bruissant* (2011) by Pietro Varrasso & Eugène Savitzkaya - Directed by : Pietro Varrasso - Costume and mask design
- *Le Signal du promeneur* (2012)
Conceived and directed by : Raoul Collectif - Costume Design
- *Le Mouton et la baleine* by Ahmed Ghazali, (January 2013)
Directed by : Jasmina Douieb - Set and costume design
- *Frères de sang* (2013)
Writing, directing, choreography and set design by : André Curti and Artur Ribeiro - Costume and puppet design
- *Richard III* (2014) based on William Shakespeare,
Directed by : Isabelle Pousseur - Costume design
- *Liliom* (2014), Directed by : Galin Stoev - Costume design
- *Cris* (2015)
Directed by : Artur Luanda Ribeiro & Andre Curti
- *La Brèche* (2017) by Une Tribu Collectif.
Conceived, directed and performed by : Natacha Belova, Noémie Vincart & Michel Villée

Natacha is a regular collaborator with compagnie Point Zéro, whilst also working with the Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Théâtre de Poche, the théâtre Océan Nord, Dragon productions, the théâtre de la Galafronie, the théâtre Le Public in Belgium, as well as with the following companies : Dos à Deux (Brésil, France), and Théâtre Oani (Chili).

The Other Side of the Garden

An initiatory journey

The Other Side of the Garden has as a narrative thread Anderson's fairytale *The Story of a Mother*. True to the storytelling tradition, *The Story of a Mother* is the story of an initiatory journey, a story that symbolizes the transition from one state to another. The mother in the story refuses to accept her child's disappearance and pursues Death to the ends of the world in order to retrieve her most precious possession. This woman is relentless, she bows before nothing to get back her lost child. The mother is nameless, she represents the universal mother, she who will sacrifice everything to try to save her child.

The puppet

For *The Other Side of the Garden*, the Koon Theater Group worked with Natacha Belova, with assistance from Loïc Nebrada. They created the puppet of the mother, the flowers of the garden of death and the costumes.

It's a head, the mother's head. It is carried and handled by each of the actors one after the other each with their own choreography and movement. The eyes, the mouth and the hair can be removed so as to become a universal figure that represents the anonymous crowd of the exiled. The head was modeled on the actors' faces so that in this archetypal figure, there was a bit of each of them.

In some particular aspects, the puppet has a hateful expression. Thus the head shows us, how, in a spiral of violence, a victim can become a persecutor. This mother is ready to steal the life of another child to save her own. It is when she chooses to let it go that her hate leaves her, the expression leaves the head and becomes neutral.







The Other Side of the Garden

Andersen
Ossama Halal,
Koon Theater Group

Arab speaking – 90'

Direction and scenography
Ossama Halal

From the story *Story of a Mother*,
Hans Christian Andersen

Dramaturgy
Alaa Aldin Alaalem & Hisham Hmedan

Puppet, masks & props
Natacha Belova & Loïc Nebrada

With
Hamza Hamadeh, Sara Mashmouhy,
Nader Abd Alhay, Grace Al Ahmar,
Shadi Mokresh, Stéphanie Kayal

Music direction and performed by
Singhkeo Panya

Costumes
Nicole Moris

Photography and video
Ziad Al Halabi

Technical direction
Fares Khleif

Assistant director
Muhannad Samman & Tamim Sabri

Interpreter
Awni Daibes

Stage Manager
Michel Ransbotyn

Light operator
Isabel Scheck

Sound operator
Pawel Wnuczynski

Stage director
Stéphanie Denoiseux

Administration
Koon Theater Group, Reem Khattab

Création Studio
Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

Production
Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

Set and costumes
Ateliers du Théâtre National Wallonie-Bruxelles

Co-production
Les ballets C de la B

With the support of
Zoukak Theater Company,
Institut français du Liban

Contact

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Professional webpace

Professional webspace access
www.theatrenational.be/pro

Login: diffusion
Password: TNBstudio

On tour

www.theatrenational.be/fr/pages/145-calendrier-des-tournees

Création Studio Théâtre National

The Création Studio is a project aimed at supporting artists: it is catered to the company's needs, provides them with a space in the theatre in which they can create, and gives them a multitude of tools and resources to work with.

This creative hub will breathe life into the Theatre by breaking up the season into periods dedicated to lab research, rehearsals, talks with the artists, and finally the performances themselves.

Each season, several artists will take turns to work in the Création Studio, our laboratory of creation. These artists head up theatre companies, they share a sense of the collective and team work which informs their work with a rigorous approach to stage craft, giving rise to the invention of a unique language which no longer sees any reason to separate form and content. Backed by a theatre company, these artists engage with their history and their questions, an initiative showcased by the Création Studio for the duration of a production.

**→ Interview and stories on
www.theatrenational.be/backstage**

THÉÂTRE NATIONAL WALLONIE-BRUXELLES CONSTRUCTEURS D'HISTOIRES/ VERHALENBOUWERS/ STORY MAKERS

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