



the dance current

Solitude and Urban Space

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Frédéric Gravel's Crooked Movement

OLYMPIC DANCE

Teaching the Canadian synchro team

Special Feature

In/Between Disciplines

Three perspectives on interdisciplinarity and dance



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Your Notes

Forcing entry into public space: Contemporary dance in the Arab world

Re: Naomi Brand's "Space, Time and a Body" (May/June 2016)



Beytna by Omar Rajeh, presented at the Fifth Arab Dance Platform / Photo by Toni Elieh

Naomi Brand's "Space, Time and a Body" examines the importance of creating dance spaces accessible to as many people as possible. Having just returned from the fifth Arab Dance Platform (*Moultqa Leymoun*) at the Beirut International Platform of Dance (BIPOD), I was struck by the intense politicization of the public spaces where dancing took place. The idea of accessibility takes on urgent meanings in societies in which the physical security of people and their freedom of expression has so long been threatened by dangerous forces.

Walking through Beirut, I came across the cycles of destruction and rebirth of the city's rich architectural heritage. The three theatres housing the festival were modest, utilitarian places. The Al Madina Theatre, the event's mainstage, was built within the core of a small shopping centre, while the unpretentious Theatre Beryte is an intimate black box in the basement of the Institute for Audiovisual and Cinematic Studies. On the second day, our contingent of twenty-five dance presenters and critics was driven into the surrounding Chouf Mountains for a short works program of younger dancemakers. It was presented in a modest dance studio built by the Maqamat Dance Theatre inside a historic library/archive building in the village centre. They took us to glimpse a cavernous ruin below the building, perhaps a future performance space ...

And so I realized that dancing is inevitably activism in parts of the world where the body's unrestrained expression – in both everyday movement and choreography – is tightly controlled by conservative, religious moral codes. (This is not constrained to the Middle East, of course, as closer to home, Québécois dancers, for example, had their own historical feud with the Catholic Church's corporeal morality before the *révolution tranquille*.) The festival and Maqamat founder Omar Rajeh told us how he has risked arrest when he has proposed performances that include nudity, references to homosexuality or critiques of the current political regime. But his determination is unwavering. Since 2002 he has succeeded in gradually building a wide net of international support and has won over a young and hopeful public that is fiercely loyal, even though the purchase of tickets likely poses a challenge for many of them (accessibility is also affordability).

Judging from these brief eight days of experiences and conversations with Arab world dancers, choreographers and festival organizers, I would say that the issue of giving access to dance spaces is one of cultural survival. A dance event is a political forum. The stated mandate of BIPOD is no less than moving and shaking a country's corrupted ideas to "look for light in this dark region," as Artistic Director Mia Habis voiced in the program's editorial. Here artists and audiences believe that by coming together in public theatres to witness this kind of sensual and radical form of physical expression, they are indeed transforming their society.

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We welcome your feedback

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