

In the head of Enkidu Khaled: 'Theatre is more honest than cinema'



BRUZZ, Text Gilles Bechet Photo Sophie Soukias
28/02/2024

Established in Belgium for 15 years, the Iraqi performer and director has developed work based on collective intelligence and a very personal method. His latest show *Donja Hota* can be discovered at Kaaistudios. "Too often, we lock creativity deep within ourselves without having access to it."

At fifteen, Enkidu Khaled enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad. In the theater section. It wasn't his first choice. "I wanted to be a film director but due to the economic situation, we weren't making films and the entire film industry in Iraq was at a standstill. Students had to content themselves with poring over books in the library. »

His two brothers are already directors and they advise him to go to the theater section instead, since there at least they are working and doing something concrete. "I didn't know anything about theater. I had seen a play with the school, and I didn't like it. I must have been the only child who didn't laugh. I tried out and everyone told me I was terrible and had no talent for comedy. I then chose the direction. " And he was right.

Young theater students are making a name for themselves, they are praised by their teachers and invited to the stages of the capital. For Enkidu, it is the revelation. "I discovered that theater was more honest, more real than cinema. We are vulnerable there. It is a spiritual moment of sharing energy with the audience. »

"I was surprised to see people coming from small villages in Flanders to hear what we had to say"

Enkidu Khaled

In a city ravaged by war and violence, life becomes more and more difficult. We learn that the one who didn't come to the rehearsal was shot dead by a sniper. We risk being kidnapped at any time. Enkidu decides to leave Iraq for Europe. While he initially wanted to go to Great Britain, he arrived in Belgium, in Antwerp. He doesn't lose out. As theater is the only thing he knows how to do, he is directed to the Monty where he is offered a residency and where he learns other facets of his profession.

Making peace with war

In Baghdad, faced with the decline of artistic education, he dreams of a simple and reproducible learning tool that would awaken each child to the values of art. "The idea is not to make each child an artist but rather to pass on the values of art which help us to know ourselves better, express ourselves, share our emotions and say how we feel. Iraqi society is a group-centered society. There is no concern for the individual and even less for children. No one asks you how you feel whereas in the theater they ask you how you are. »

It was in Antwerp that he refined and developed what would become "The Working Method". "Too often, we lock creativity deep within ourselves without having access to it. The method gives you tips for opening this box. » Adaptable to all audiences, young artists or children, the method is exported and is available in the Netherlands, Romania, Louvain or Antwerp.

There was a moment when Enkidu Khaled no longer wanted and could not talk about the war so as not to be defined by the war. Then he understood that it was his experience, and that he had to share it. It was 2019. All the press was reporting on the protest demonstrations in Lebanon demanding more freedom and an end to corruption while a few months earlier young Iraqis were taking to the streets for the same reasons to be shot. "There were 800 deaths. No one was talking about it, what could I do? I asked the Pianofabriek to have a room. I invited Belgian journalists, specialists in the Middle East, to come and talk about it. It was Baghdad. I was very surprised to see that the room was full. People had come from small villages in Flanders, curious to hear what we had to say. »

If war is present in his work, it is not the subject but a light to talk about something else like in Tank Tink / One, created with Joachim Robbrecht where he diverted the concept of Think Tank from its military context. He addresses the environmental impact of the war with artists and activists from Canada, Kenya and Germany. "I believe this is the most powerful thing I have done because I combine a strong subject and individual talents. »

For his latest show, to be seen at Kaai, Enkidu Khaled brought together different artists to evoke the legacy of Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi, creating a collective identity, called Donja Honta." For Ghost 99, adapted in 2021 from a novel by Hassan Blasim, he asked Joachim Robbrecht to replace the Iraqi author who was unable to travel. "They met and he learned the book in ten days. And the funny thing is that part of the public, the Iraqis, thought that Joachim, the Belgian, was really Hassan, the Iraqi. That's the magic of theater. »

1 – 2 March 2024 / Kaaistudio's, 1000 Brussel