

Diana Ferrero

Fadela Assous: A Life Devoted to the Theatre.

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Fadela Assous, the greatest actress in Algeria for the last twenty years, lost both her job and her freedom when the atrocities started in her country.

I had the opportunity to meet her twice in Rome. The first occasion was when she was invited by the National Theatre Council to take part in the conference "Multiculture and Democracy". Her face framed by a black turban, her warm eyes lit up by the sun, she was proud to look a citizen of a Mediterranean with no boundaries, and she told her impassioned story in simple terms. Of how she was proud to be Algerian and yet also share the physical traits that an Egyptian, a Sicilian or a Spanish woman all have in common: "I believe I belong to all races" - she said with conviction, and she talked of universal love and tolerance, of human rights, of "respect for all religions, with just one condition, that they are not confused with politics". The second interview was about her. Of her experiences as a woman and as an actress in a country ravaged by civil war, that is Algeria today. After a few months in Turin hoping and waiting to receive a call asking her to tell her story and act again, she was leaving for home. The meeting took place in unusual circumstances: in Fiumicino airport in Rome, in the police compound. A brief interview, words snatched between the discomfort of a cold floor and the insistent demands of policemen irritated by the strangeness of the situation. With good spirits she started her tale ...

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Fadela discovered her vocation as an actress, or rather as a *tragedienne* (tragic actress) at a very early age when, in the 1950s during the War of Liberation from France, she found herself acting as interpreter for her mother, who only spoke Arabic, and for the French soldiers who were still occupying the city before Independence. "I was born in a tragedy", she recalls, "completely unintelligible times for a little girl, and it was there that I played my first role, played



out with a strong sense of responsibility.”

Even today, hers is a theatre felt as an urgency, a mission. It is also a political instrument by which a message can be conveyed, a civil conscience formed. “Above all the theatre is a place for education and a great responsibility”, she declares, “which serves to spread a message of love. It is a religion that helps whoever is hungry, which rescues whoever feels threatened, which knows how to stroke a child’s hair and smile at it. You can’t put on theatre just to entertain or be entertained: I appreciate intelligent comedy but not buffoonery or theatre simply for entertainment, like the theatre that has invaded television.”

After that initial role, the actress’ real stage debut came when she met Abdelkader Alloula, the playwright who discovered her in Orano in 1970. After three years with this great master, and later treasured spiritual father, she received an offer of work from the most renowned Algerian novelist and dramatist of the time, Kateb Yacine. It was thus that her turbulent theatrical adventure into political theatre started: twenty years of plays staged at home and abroad, in the universities, in public institutions, in squares and on the streets, in factories and in the most remote villages, in every corner of France in a six month tour and finally in Paris in 1975 at Peter Brook’s theatre, Les Bouffes du Nord. These were the years of the great rebirth of Algerian theatre and plays were staged everywhere. During these performances, Fadela interpreted every principal female role: she was La Kahina and the numerous other heroines of *The 2000 Year War*, then the lead actress in *Mohammed Get Your Suitcase*, the heroines in *Palestine Betrayed*, *The King of the West* and *The Voice of the Women*. The only woman in a company of ten actors, she states that she was very privileged and lucky with Yacine, given that in Arabian states

today theatre is for men only. “But it hasn’t always been like that”, she explains, “Maghreb, in centuries gone by, was ruled by women, it was a matriarchal state. It was the arrival of Islam that led to the role reversal, with society becoming chauvinistic and full of taboos.”

However, today in Algeria there are no more actresses: the few that were previously allowed to work have either been sent into exile or have given up acting because it has become too hazardous. In addition to the current political problem, there is another problem of an historical order, that Algerian theatre has never granted women any major roles - it has left them in the background, relegating them to secondary parts. “You have to realise that in Algeria theatre has been written by men for men”, the actress argues, “it’s the fact that the same male dramatists, loyal to the aberrant family code laid down by Islamic extremism, often don’t recognise the true value of women. Even though there are women today - lawyers, doctors and teachers - who do not wear a veil, you need to recognise that where obscurantism is felt more keenly and traditions still observed more rigidly, woman is considered handicapped, a second class citizen to be passed from the care of the father to the brother to the husband. Men consider her to be the incarnation of all evils, forgetting that they were born from her stomach. Thus women live with no power, in anguish. And the only thing left to do is to carry on creating life, while men stubbornly carry on killing”, she spells out with a crease of resentment in the corner of her mouth, revealing a maternal instinct felt deep down inside, and a universal humanism.

Over many years - she is now forty-nine - Fadela Assous has exposed herself to the dangers of large theatrical engagements, working for the Palestinian, Vietnamese

and West Saharan causes. With Kateb Yacine, who suffered both imprisonment and exile, she had her toughest and most difficult theatrical experiences, on one side censured by the authorities - one party, the FLN, has been in power for thirty years and "has created some monsters", while on the other side persecuted by the Muslims. In the seventies and eighties, the company was in fact the victim of attacks on stage and boycotts on both sides, and was ultimately expelled from Algiers and relegated to the provincial town of Sidi Bel Abbes.

Proud of the work she has done, the actress continues to do what she can. But the situation in Algeria is now deteriorating day by day.

Theatre there has always been a forum for discussion unpopular with the ruling party who, over the course of many years, have tried to neutralise its power without success. The daily terror inseminated by the FIS, the Islamic Front, has now succeeded. The victims of the civil war are now too many to count (and many more than the official count) and a long series of terrorist attacks against journalists and civilians have decimated and scattered the political and intellectual classes, forcing them into exile, foremost into Tunisia and France. All this, according to Fadela, poses a serious threat to the cultural development of the country as well as to its possibility of future renewal. Assous believes in the need for a political policy for culture, which lays and consolidates the foundations for a future democracy and for a culture of respect for women's rights. It is for this reason that she numbers among the artists that have decided to stay and resist. But, in these conditions, can theatre really help the democratic cause in any way? And can women have any political weight and get their own agendas heard?

"Perhaps peace and democracy aren't so

far off", says Assous, "if you consider that women brought about the defeat of the FIS, the Islamic Front. That happened because, while in the 1991 elections every man had the right to vote for each of the women in his family, now at last there is a law forbidding this, and women have defied male power by going to the polls, demonstrating that when women have a voice they know perfectly well how to use it and so the situation is changing."

After the death of Yacine and the law of liberalisation that, for the first time, permitted the establishment of Independent Theatres, together with her husband and director Ahcène, Assous formed her own troupe, the little company Lamalif, a tiny bastion of cultural resistance and independence, in 1992 in Sidi Bel Abbes. "But where can you act in Algeria? While beforehand there were the universities and cultural centres, now in the daily terror wreaked by the FIS, nobody wants to run the risk of putting on shows that could be denounced."

Then the vicious assassination of the primary schoolteacher Abdelkader Alloula in March 1994 was the alarming and unmistakable signal that artists were now on the killers' hit-list as well and, after terrible massacres of friends who were literally dismembered, whose throats were cut or who were left to die on the streets, (more than three hundred artists have now been murdered by the fundamentalists), Fadela decided to leave her own country. "We don't need martyrs for our revolution", she states, "No cause would justify these deaths. A future generation will need us artists to retrace our steps when all this has finished." She has therefore chosen to be "amongst those who fight to survive, not to die or to kill", but she is forced to live in fear, closed up at home as if in prison, witnessing the madness that keeps her people divided between the bars of the windows, in fear

that she may be killed at any moment. Refusing to give up to silence, closed away, she has found a way to express her nation's cry of pain and suffering: and thus, in secret, *El-Besma Elmadjrouha* or *Le sourire blessé* (The Wounded Smile) was born, the "home-made" monologue, written in 1993 in popular Arabic by Omar Fatmouche. "We all lived together for three months - my husband and I, the author, the choreographer, the set designer and my children - and the script came about like a son born out of this common love for the theatre that united us under one roof." More than sixty performances in Algeria, others in Morocco and Tunisia, and then the play, which she herself translated, went on tour - passing through Europe, with numerous performances in London, France, Belgium and various Italian cities: at the *Teatri di Vita* in Bologna, at the Volterra Festival, in Turin and Cagliari. The show has been received everywhere with great emotion and enthusiasm. An exceptional actress, alone on stage for an hour, Fadela has enthralled audiences everywhere with the commitment, the pathos and the sensitivity of her interpretation, the boldness and gravity of her tragic voice.

Le sourire blessé is the denunciation of a bloodstained regime. It sheds light upon the reality in Algeria today through its parallel portrayal of a woman who chooses separation and madness in order to shout out her rejection of violence and bring reason home to her people. In this one woman show, Douya, the protagonist, talks to herself, acting out the conflicts that afflict the various characters in a whirl of voices and figures that combine to reach a unison of opposites, the sum of the contradictions of women's condition and Islamic society today (amongst the characters represented are the demagogic political candidate, who promises public hot water baths and massages in return for female

votes, men who accuse the workers of being to blame for the unemployment, shantytown women and soldiers who revolt only to be punished with mutilation). Using just this one voice, two women talk, argue, fall out and then come together again. One is the alter ego of the other: Douya, the widow of a brutal and ignorant husband, is an illiterate woman who, to support her children, takes a job in the slaughterhouse where her husband worked (symbol of an Algeria soaked in blood), the other, Jasmine, has instead studied and has no children. They are the two faces of an Algeria split in half between the old and the new, between women forced to produce children and emancipated female intellectuals who produce ideas. Women who have studied and understood, and women who have understood but who dare not admit it. Around her, there is just an empty space which fills up with a mass of rubbish and newspaper cuttings, a metaphor for the degradation and the cruel invasion of the leftovers of Western consumerism.

The play has all the characteristics of participatory theatre, a spectacle and an event, staged on a tight budget but capable of gathering crowds of emotional spectators around it. Capable of analysing and denouncing social, cultural and political problems, awakening public opinion.

"How can you live when you are hungry for love and for freedom?" This is one of the questions of the play, a desperate cry. Fadela Assous is replying with her life: by deciding to hold out with strength and courage, waiting and hopeful that her country will return to reason and meanwhile looking for a way to express herself, to intervene, to pass over to somebody her experience as a woman and as an actress. Denouncing not only the tragedies of the Islamic war, but also the problems afflicting the West. "Because the youngsters in Algeria are not the only ones to

suffer and live surrounded by death: paedophilia and drugs for example are enormous problems in all Western countries, which also need to be confronted with culture and education."

Meanwhile, the North African actress has recently taken part in a theatre workshop in Sardinia, where she worked with a group of very young participants (15-23 year olds). It is an experience she says she would like to repeat as soon as possible, when she next stays in Italy or in another European country, where it is not always easy to find hospitality and work. "Why don't you apply for political asylum?" I ask her as we are about to say goodbye, at the airport, having read on her face the unease, disillusion and bitterness she feels in having to return to her home/prison, to the country which she loves but where she is ashamed to witness the terrible massacre. "I refuse to apply for political asylum because I want to preserve my independence and my freedom of speech. I am currently a kind of 'theatre emigrant' or ambassador; I have complete freedom of movement and embassies welcome me; while I fear that as a political refugee I might lose my voice. I am a bird and, like the protagonist of my monologue, *I am hungry for love and thirsty for freedom.*"

And so she flies off, waiting for the next call. Fadela will certainly continue to make theatre her political banner, making theatre and life come ever closer together.

Translated from Italian by Helen Whitehurst

DIANA FERRERO (Italy) was born in 1972. She graduated in Literature from the University of La Sapienza in Rome having completed a thesis on Writing in Italian Theatre. She is a theatre critic and writes for *Roma c'è*, *Metro*, *Hystrio* and *Etinforma*. She was assistant director to Diego Fabbri for the production of *Processo a Gesù*.

FADELA ASSOUS (Algeria) is an actress. She has worked for the late Abdelkader Alloula and Kateb Yacine, both victims of fundamentalist extremism. Since 1981 she has collaborated with Mohamed Bakhti taking leading roles. Currently touring *Le sourire blessé* (The Wounded Smile) by Omar Fatmouche. Fadela has been paid homage by the International Festival of Cairo and by the Festival of Carthage in Tunisia.