

A SYRIAN FABLE AT THE COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE

DESIGNER VIRGINIE GERVAISE REIMAGINES MIDDLE EASTERN
COSTUME AND EXPLORES POWER, GENDER AND MYSTICISM
IN SAADALLAH WANNOUS' *RITUAL FOR A METAMORPHOSIS*

INTERVIEW | CAMILLE ASSAF

PHOTOGRAPHY | PHILIPPE CHARLOT



| DOCUMENT



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For more than three centuries, the Comédie-Française has been the guardian of the French theatrical repertoire, and is today one of the last remaining troupes in the country. It was founded in 1680 upon a decree by King Louis XIV to regroup into one company the three existing troupes (including that of Molière) competing in Paris at the time. The august institution has since yielded a string of formidable actors, who have performed the works of Molière, Racine, Corneille, Marivaux and the like, for generations of theater-goers. Only in recent years has the company opened its repertoire to contemporary and international works. Last year marked its first production of a work written in the Arab language: *Ritual for a Metamorphosis*, the 1993 play by Syrian author Saadallah Wannous, in a production directed in French by Kuwait's Sulayman Al-Bassam.

Set in Damascus in the late 19th century, this fable of human power and frailty follows the fate of Mou'mina, a high-society woman who chooses the life of a courtesan. Becoming Almâssa, she frees herself from the chains of marriage and wreaks havoc in the balance of her society, while challenging the hypocrisy and contradictions of the men who dominate it.

A scenography graduate of the prestigious Central Saint Martins School in London, French designer Virginie Gervaise calls herself “a constructor and a painter.” With a self-professed wonderment at the serendipity of her own journey, she relates how she became a costume designer “by chance,” designing for the likes of Jean-François Sivadier, the celebrated director and re-interpreter of the French canon. She has worked with Sulayman Al-Bassam on numerous productions, and created for *Ritual*, a tightly woven world at the crossroads between historical accuracy and evocative imagination, achieving luxuriant imagery within a highly restricted palette.

In a conversation with *Chance* editor Camille Assaf, Gervaise discusses her designs for the production.

Camille Assaf: What were your first directions for *Ritual for a Metamorphosis*?

Virginie Gervaise: In the context of this play, the so-called “historical” costume seemed inevitable. It is not an option I like to jump to right away. We could have chosen a very abstract, almost minimalistic direction. But for this play, it seemed essential that the specific cultural environment of Damascus, with its social classes and hierarchy, be quickly identified. The text speaks of something political and religious, which we could not ignore.

However, we did not want to fall into a stereotypical imagery. The documents we had at our disposal were daguerreotypes, which are in themselves staged vignettes, theatrical displays with no relationship to reality. This allowed us to start off with a distance, without trying to write “Anthropology of world costume.”

I liked these representations. They reveal an incredibly mixed society. You can see people from different religions mingling on the same photograph, and you can imagine that there was a certain amount of freedom, that these societies were in fact quite open, to allow these representations where different religions, with their different costumes, can commingle. It is very rich. And furthermore, old photographs give us different textures and sensations, which make it possible to immediately take a leap, and interpret.

CA: How old are these daguerreotypes?

VG: They are from the 1880s, and come from traveling writers like Pierre Loti. There was also a family of Armenian photographers, the Abdullah Frères, who toured around the region in those years. Then Sulayman, the director, found this French book of photographs, *Les Costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1873* or *Folk costumes of Turkey in 1873*, and the texts that come with them are like a literary fantasy from the time, describing these societies from a French point of view. It is rather unorthodox, especially regarding the costumes – indeed when you do a bit of research on the period, the costumes can in fact be rather simple, but in these descriptions we are told a quantity of things which are quite mysterious and rather funny. For us, it was an interesting point of departure.

CA: You talk about westerners looking at the East, with somewhat of an Orientalist point of view. Did that become a question, or a problem when staging a Syrian text at the Comédie-Française?

VG: Yes, we asked ourselves a lot of questions – particularly the question of how to approach the historical aspect of the play. Here in France, we do not know the world depicted in the play, we will always have a very exotic point of view on the Damascus of that time. It is really far away. I myself would not pretend to present things “the way they were” -- I can only offer an interpretation.





LAURENT NATRELLA | IBRAHIM



DENYS PODALYDÉS | CHEIKH MUHAMMAD



HERVÉ PIERRE | HÂMID



DENYS PODALYDÉS | CHEIKH MUHAMMAD
NÂZIM BOUDJENAH | AFSAH



NAZIM BOUDJENAH | A CONSTABLE

CA: This tension between realism and interpretation appears to be at the heart of your work on this play. The realism of silhouettes makes it possible to know exactly where we are, yet the world you and your collaborators created is very singular, and shifts progressively further from realism. For instance your palette with its monochromatic grayscale: is that part of the distance you talked about?

VG: Absolutely. Keeping a distance was important, and we chose not to treat color. Of course, it is perfectly possible, through the study of pigments, to imagine how fabrics were dyed, and what the effect might have been, but it did not seem very interesting to reproduce the colored visuals we already know through the Orientalist imagery.

This grayscale allows this distance, but there is color in these grays. They are not cold grays; they are not made of black and white. And by the way, at first we had the idea of using sepia tones, but I found that reductive — had we done that, we would have been constricted to very warm, purplish grays. We wanted to give Marcus Doshi's lights the possibility of activating color in some parts of the play. So, at times the costumes appear colorful, and at times they are de-saturated. To tell this fable, it was important to be able to play on these two dimensions.

CA: You establish a convention using grayscale, blacks and whites. Then at some point you break from the pattern. What triggers this departure?

VG: There are metamorphoses of characters, particularly in the character of Mou'mina. I found interesting that at some point in the play, this character, who breaks away from this ancient imagery in which she was stuck, comes out with all of her color. And it turns out that Julie Sicard's hair is red, the same red as Sam Collins' set. This was total chance, it was quite magical — and it was very powerful that at the moment of her metamorphosis, her real color as a living woman appears. So her costumes remain colorless until the end, but her skin is shown in its full color.

CA: Her call to freedom and to independence, her breaking away from conventions, are like a rebirth — the rebirth of her hair participates in this transformation and this claim.

VG: Her physique appears truly, in its true nature. In the beginning, she is dressed like a little jewel, a small doll from Damascus. She is pretty like a doll, but once we lift the veil, her nature is revealed. Her costume is deconstructed in full view. I did not want this moment to just be about taking off a jacket. I wanted it to get chipped away, degraded like a toy would, like a doll, with an array of accessories, progressively eroded. The costume gets detached in pieces. This is not at all historically correct. A costume faithful to the historic detailing would be of one piece over a blouse. To undress would entail a rather complicated action of unbuttoning. But here, we have little pieces that come apart, in a rather playful way for her. This is not a violent metamorphosis, even though it is in fact the courtesan



NAZIM BOUDJENAH | SAFWAN

Warda who undresses her, and she lets herself be undressed. It is powerful, but not traumatic. And suddenly her skin, with its beautiful light, is revealed.

CA: When she comes back after joining Warda's house of ill repute, she wears a white dress, which is a complete departure from the Damascus silhouette.

VG: Sulayman and I were imagining that she was truly in charge of her own metamorphosis, and that she becomes the master and the builder of her own silhouette after that, with all of her freedom. So we are telling the story of a dress she would have made herself.

There are references to Frida Khalo's bandages: the dress is both "home-made" and lets the body be powerfully present. At the same time, it is not a sophisticated dress, even though, technically speaking, it is haute couture. It required very minute craftsmanship from the costume shop.

There is a great maturation of Almâssa's freedom and sexuality, and this dress comes in like a little thing she would have made herself, which lets her be extremely powerful. And it may appear very strange, because it is such a departure from the little costume plates of the beginning.

CA: Is there a form of pain expressed in this costume, through the reference to bandages?

VG: I am not sure. In Frida Khalo of course, this is what is evoked in her self-portraits, with this imprisoned body. But for Almâssa it is different. Her body is not mishandled. It is handled certainly, and it needs to be kept in one piece, one way or another. The bandage reference signifies care, which also speaks of a certain eroticism. But what comes out is a silhouette that is rather fragile. There is a constant struggle between the actress's performance and her silhouette, since Julie is extremely thin. She is both very light and very powerful. This is true of her body itself, with her Mediterranean, powerful legs and her very thin, fragile bone structure. We did this work together to let her body exist without exposing it excessively.

At some point, the director thought that the costume was not as sensual as he had perhaps hoped. When one reads the play, one recalls these Orientalist paintings, Turkish baths, women with curvaceous figures. But Julie is nothing like that, and thankfully so, or we could have lost ourselves in the illustration of a woman, with an explosive sensuality — something that, on the other hand, Sylvia Bergé brings to the character of Warda the prostitute, with her incredible body and goddess-like proportions. But Julie has this frailty, and it is ambiguous, because there is something very strong in the fact of accepting one's fragility. Julie brought this unexpected dimension to the character.

There was at some point, another idea — the idea that her transformation could take the shape of a man's suit. But this acquisition of freedom is by a woman who finds strength as a woman, so the dress was more pertinent.

CA: Her last costume is both magnificent and confounding: she has become, as she says "a tale," and you dress her in a knee-length metallic tunic.

VG: It is the result of conversations around the idea of marriage. She enters into a marriage with herself, an agreement with her choices throughout her transformation. She is consecrated to what she has done, wedded to this freedom, and no one can go against it. She comes from marriage in its traditional understanding, but now she has become an idol. So we looked at images of young brides from the Maghreb.

These are very confounding images, and very ambiguous even, because these young women are carried around on trays covered in flowers, like goddesses. This was a point of departure. But what is also strange is that it results in a silhouette reminiscent, at the same time, of Joan of Arc and of Paco Rabanne. This was also my response to the idea of marriage: I responded with metal.

CA: With her golden costume, she is like a statue. She seems to be beyond humanity, but her legs are uncovered. There is a real ambiguity: she has the breastplate of Joan of Arc, she is a warrior in her quest for freedom, but the fragility remains through her bare legs

VG: At first she is squatting and has neither legs nor arms. Then you see her stand up, her legs are being painted gold onstage and she has become an idol, with no arms. This silhouette reminded me of Egyptian statues, where what works is the step, the walk. What is strong in this silhouette is perhaps the potential of movement, in the sense that she no longer walks, but the possibility of walking still exists.

And it is an even further departure from the Oriental esthetic seen in the beginning. It is important to lose or to burn one's toys — the production itself is rich with the themes of games, toys, memory and the past. And history evolves and this time remembered is also an ancient past that no longer is, and we move towards something else.

There is sorrow in this story. For me, the entire first part of the play talks about childhood, of memory, of these archaic societies. And just as the set breaks apart, it was important that all this gets destroyed.

Abdallah is a man who becomes extremely spiritual and who starts writing a sort of poem everywhere, verses — he has access to light. His costume, traditional at first, progressively turns into that of a "tramp" in this big ragged coat. He writes everywhere, even on himself, prey to delirium.

Safwan we built a fable using this old imagery from Damascus, but some characters undergo a metamorphosis through which they step out the fable. It is the case with Safwan through his simple and beautiful act of claiming his homosexuality. His journey, in a play written by a man, directed by a man, is one of the most beautiful and powerful.



JULIE SICARD | MOU'MINA



JULIE SICARD
MOU'MINA HAS BECOME ALMASSA



JULIE SICARD | ALMASSA



SYLVIA BERGÉ | WARDÁ



JULIE SICARD | MOU'MINA



DENIS PODALYDÈS | ABDALLAH

“Here is a man who becomes extremely spiritual and who starts writing a sort of poem everywhere, verses – he has access to light. His costume, traditional at first, progressively turns into that of a ‘tramp’ in this big ragged coat. He writes everywhere, even on himself, prey to delirium.”



DENIS PODALYDÉS | ABDALLAH





NÁZIM BOUDJENAH | SAFWAN

For his transformation, I had drawn a very simple gown, half of a gown in fact, close to a monk's robe, but cut in half, lengthwise. But in the muslin fittings, it became clear that with his morphology, it would never feel like a gown. There was no escape from something very masculine, muscular, nervous. He himself told me something curious in fact: that every time a costume designer had tried to put him in a dress, he had ended up naked onstage.

This was not the point for this production of course. So I decided to try out a few dresses in rehearsal and decide. It is exhilarating to be able to work with an actor like this, directly in the rehearsal room. The costume shop pulled a million different things from stock, of all shapes and styles. And finally, we hit the jackpot with this dress, which worked perfectly with his bone structure. There was no way it could be misconstrued as anything but a gown. It was pure geometry. For me, it was just a matter of finding the right materials to reproduce it with. The actor was still interested in this idea of nudity, which transpired, through the use of translucent chiffon, and this cut-up design... akin to the original idea.

There is something rather violent in this gesture, and in fact, the blade is central to his problem, since what he does to claim his sexuality is shave his moustache. His dress too is cut-up, carved out.

VG: Absolutely – and it is ambiguous, because in this dress, he remains very masculine and sexy. I think it is a nice twist. In fact, in this play, we see much more male nudity than female nudity. We see the Mufti naked, and Safwan's lover Abbās shirtless.

CA: We see a lot of men's frailty, and of the irrational which throws things off-balance, the overflowing of drives, which threatens social order.

VG: Exactly – for instance, when the little merchant, played by Hervé Pierre, literally jumps on this young man who is in fact a prostitute, he is completely lost between his social position and his desire. These are not things that were necessarily anticipated, but they were important to show.

Soumsom is a transvestite prostitute. The choice of turning him blue through the play underlines the fact that he is already transgressive, he is a bit of harbinger of a new era inside the fable. The fact that he colors his skin is another way of claiming his identity. And it is also a reference to Krishna, and by extension, to the Hijra minority of transvestites and transsexuals in India, who are both necessary to society, but also sidelined, rejected, separated.

There is a playful aspect to the Mufti's transformation – in a completely opposite direction than most of the characters. He goes back in the other direction, back to the

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old books of the Topkapi museum. He starts in a contemporary Mufti silhouette, and he ends up like those seen in illuminated manuscripts, with a flame on his head. It is a reverse transformation towards the extreme. The costume becomes enormous, out of scale, back to the middle ages of the Middle East.

He is a political character more than a psychological one. He is caught in the middle of History. He goes through a phase of complete delirium, but after that, he belongs to History as a political figure. He will have to write this Fatwah, and he will have to accept entirely his Mufti position. And through this political journey, he will close on himself. And society will close on itself. And fundamentalism takes over.v

RITUAL FOR A METAMORPHOSIS

ADAPTED AND DIRECTED BY SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM

PICTURED ACTORS | THIERRY HANCISSE
SYLVIA BERGÉ, DENIS PODALYDÉS, LAURENT NATRELLA, JULIE
SICARD, HERVÉ PIERRE, BAKARY SANGARÉ, NÂZIM BOUDJENAH,
ELLIOT JENICOT, MARION MALENFANT, LOUIS ARENE

SET | SAM COLLINS
COSTUMES | VIRGINIE GERVAISE
LIGHTING | MARCUS DOSHI
ORIGINAL MUSIC | YASMINE HAMDAN
HAIR + MAKEUP | CÉCILE KRETSCHMAR
DRAMATURGY | GEORGINA VAN WELIE
CHOREOGRAPHY | I COULD NEVER BE A DANCER

PHOTOGRAPHY | PHILIPPE CHARLOT
COSTUME DESIGNER | VIRGINIE GERVAISE
HAIR AND MAKE-UP | CÉCILE KRETSCHMAR

A CO-PRODUCTION BETWEEN COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE / THÉÂTRE
DU GYMNASE, MARSEILLE