

CREATIVE EVALUATION *UNION BLACK*

Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi



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THE *UNION* *BLACK TEAM*

Directed by: Botis Seva (UK)

Circus Mentor: Gaëtan Lévêque with the support of Manu Debuck (France)

Lighting design: Botis Seva

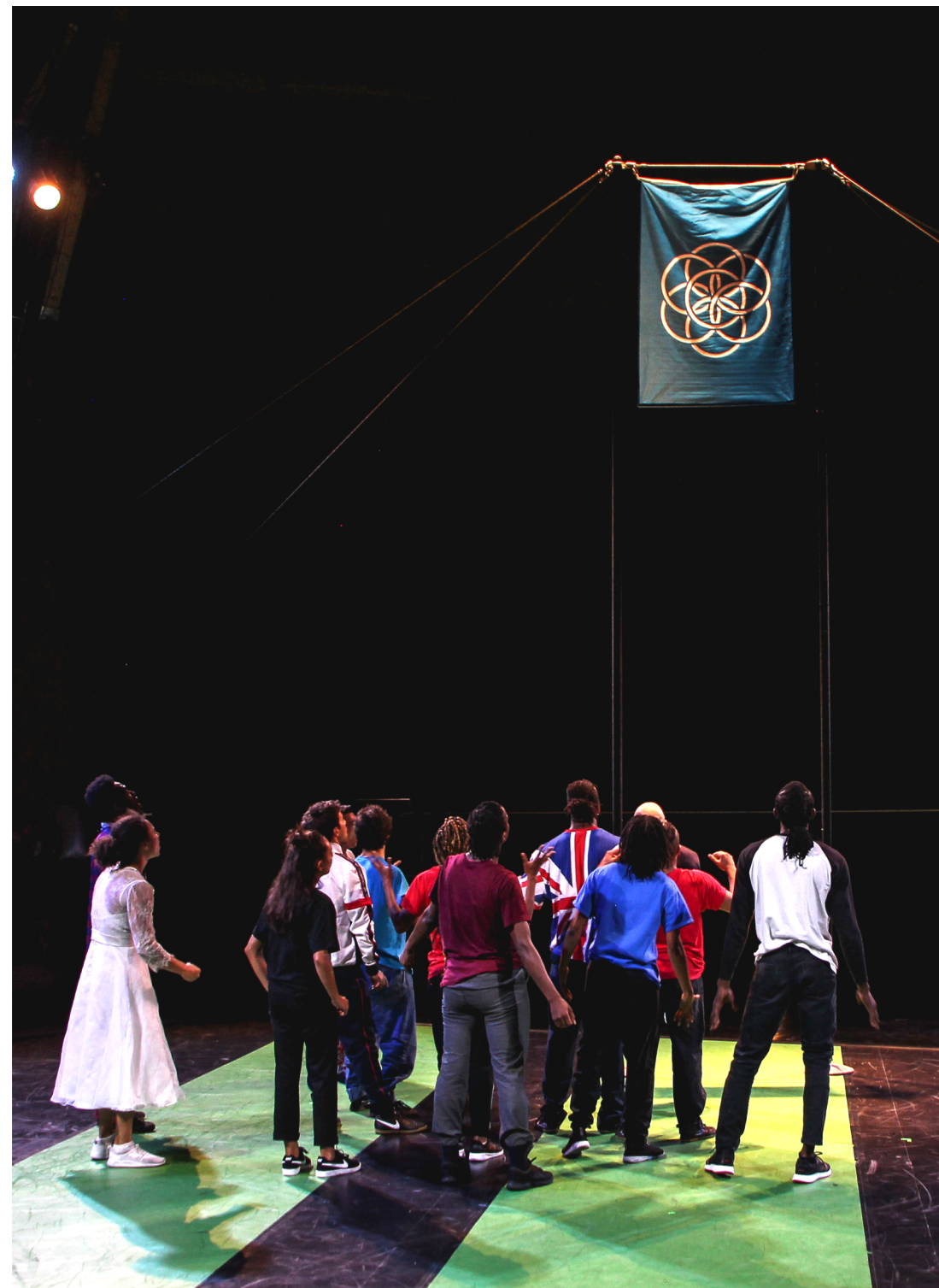
Music: Torben Lars Sylvest (UK)

Technical director: Björn Eriksson (Sweden)

Far From The Norm Artists: Jordan Douglas, Shangomola Edunjobi, Naïma Souhaïr, Joshua Nash, Ezra Owen and Victoria Shulungu, Lee Griffiths (Producer) (UK)

Lead Artists: Alessio Motta (Sweden), Mateusz Szczerek (Ireland) and Arthur Sidoroff (France)

Subtopia Local Artists: Anna Aro, Viktor Gårdman, Ronja Jansson and Matthew Horton



Cork Midsummer Festival Local Artists: Alex Allison, Karol Szarek, Davi Hora and Tony Mahon

Crying Out Loud Local Artists: Emma Houston, Francesca Miles, Jade Tye, Lily Riseley-Prichard, Nicole Nyemi-Tei and Peter Shirley

Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde Local Artists: Natty Montella, Amandine Saint Martin, Makerson François and Nora Bouhlala Chacon

Produced by Crying Out Loud (UK), Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde (France), Subtopia (Sweden), Cork Midsummer Festival (Ireland) as part of 'Circus 250: Diverse • Real • Physical' and in association with Far From The Norm, with the support of the Creative Europe programme of the European Union and the Institut français



PERFORMANCES & WRAP-AROUND ACTIVITIES

2017

PPCM, Bagneux

Residency

14-24 November

23 November: Open rehearsals in the framework of 'Soirée Premier Pas/ First Steps'

2018

Subtopia, Stockholm

Residency

23 January-2 February

Workshops & rehearsals

10,17 & 24 March: Workshops with Alessio Motta and local artists 11-22 April: Rehearsals

Performances

21 & 22 April

Wrap-around activities

7 April: hip hop and circus workshop for local young people

21-22 April Circus250 Touring Display

Cork Midsummer Festival

Workshops & rehearsals

1-4 June: Workshop with Mateusz Szczerek and local artists

6-14 June: Rehearsals

Performances

15-17 June

Wrap-around activities

15-17 June: Circus250 Touring Display

16 June: Panel discussion at

Devere Hall, University

College Cork - Union Black:

The Future of Circus and

Dance. Jools Gilson (Head of

UCC School of Music and

Theatre, Professor of Creative

Practice) Moderator with

Nedjma Hadj (Dance Curator,

Artist Evaluator for Union

Black), Rachel Clare (Artistic

Director, Crying Out Loud),

Mateusz Szczerek (Performer,

Union Black)

16 June: Juggling Workshop

with Alex Allison and Tony

Mahon

17 June: Dance Workshop

with Mateusz Szczerek and

Karol Szarek

Crying Out Loud at Somerset House, London

Workshops & rehearsals

30 June, 7 & 14 July:

Workshops with local artists

18-27 July: Rehearsals

Performances

28 & 29 July

Wrap-around activities

25 July – 7 August: Circus Original exhibition including Circus250 Touring Display,

Remember This by Rose English and Circus Post films

31 July: Screening of Even When I Fall plus Q&A with Co-Director Kate McLarnon

7 August: Rose English in conversation with Stine Herbert

Union Black was presented as

part of Circus Sampler, two weekends of free events at Somerset House, also featuring performances by Marawa the Amazing and her Majorettes, Gandini Juggling and Circa Tsuica

Plus Petit Cirque du Monde, Bagneux

Workshops & rehearsals

2-6 July: Workshops Arthur Sidoroff with local artists

19-21 September: Rehearsals

Performances

21 September: One Performance in the framework of 'Vendredi baraque of 250 years of modern circus'

29 September: One Performance for "Trans Europe Halles"

Wrap-around activities:

21-30 July: Circus250 Touring Display

19 September: freestyle football and hip-hop workshops for local children from Bagneux municipal sport centre led by Jonathan Moraleda (hip hop) and Mathieu Pierron (freestyle football).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This project created the space for artists to experiment with the fusing of circus and hip hop dance as well as sharing a final performance (four versions) of the work with audiences in four settings: a black box (Stockholm); a sports hall (Cork); an outdoor courtyard (London) and a circus venue (Bagneux). In order to track the creative experiences of the project, I documented the process through interviews and filming. This short publication, along with its accompanying film, records my experiences and thoughts. My summary observations are:

- A shared creation space was successfully developed and it enabled all the participants to address political and social issues and explore the merging of art forms.
- There was a clear and strong engagement by all the artists – they were completely open and supported the research for a collective voice and a singular work.



- The project and its participants questioned and re-shaped the usual forms of both circus and dance. They pushed boundaries, letting audiences and observers see the forms differently. The emerging vocabulary was full of promise, but still in its early stages.
- The process empowered the lead artists within the local cultural landscape of each country as they worked the most closely with the local artists within the structure of the performance.
- The collaboration between the choreographer and the circus mentor was complex due to their singular and different artistic conceptions. But this did not hinder the artists' practice and understanding of their differing physical capacities developed through the rehearsals and discussions.
- On a dramaturgical level there is much more that could be done; using space that is open to questioning and re-shaping artforms.



I presented the film (page 16) to the partners and guests in December 2018. I then joined them for their final meeting and discussion on the quality of the activities. The following are summary conclusions from this process:

- The final performances were of high quality, skilful, generous, authentic, thought-provoking and diverse.
- The wrap around activities made it multi-layered – shows, exhibition, talks, workshops.
- It was very helpful to the partners to have an insightful evaluation of the creative process.
- The project had clearly offered real opportunities for artists to develop their practice and was inspirational for the local emerging artists.
- The project felt like it had made significant progress on developing a merged language - but it was still just the beginning of something different.



WHAT COMES FIRST: THE PROCESS OR THE SHOW?

Union Black was a performance that fused dance with circus and drew parallels between current politics and football culture. With the power of an underlying rage, the British hip hop collective Far From The Norm, from London, has become famous for its extraordinary skill and visually captivating dance. With playfulness they decode the public conversation, the politics and the contemporary with their bodies.

The creative process used to develop *Union Black* can be seen in two ways:

- as an anchor for discussing the importance of professional development for young artists, including opportunities for training
- as an experimental creative space for merging two performing arts such as dance and circus



The process that I observed and documented through interviews and following rehearsals, workshops and shows, allowed me to perceive the 'emergence' of a space of creation that both addressed political and social issues, as well as working on the merging of the practice of two arts forms.

There was a clear and strong engagement of all the artists involved. They attempted to reveal a body of work and its singularity; they were completely open and supported the research for the collective voice.

This process seemed to be promising but certainly needed more time to achieve a relevant new vocabulary. The beginnings of new vocabularies from circus artists, dancers and choreographers were present, but still in their early stages.

On a dramaturgical level, there is a space that needs to be built when it comes to these two joined arts forms, a sort of no-man's land of references and tools. Here I would like to underline the value of an external eye or theory support that can let the process move forward. Its needs to be amplified with conscious choice and content wise languages.



This fragility - showing the limit or moving the borders for each of the artists - is something to share in the performance. To make this fragility visible and powerful at the same time

This process did move boundaries. The reference frames for each artistic discipline could move positively (or not) - but the process certainly let them be aware of their own limits as they worked on another discipline – it allowed them to get into the psychology of the other through sharing and listening.

Observing this group gave me hope. With all these diverse origins and backgrounds questioning Europe and what it represents today. We can still do things together and enjoy them, have pleasure. This process let them move away from a comfort zone – away from a usual way of moving, dancing, creating...

How can we question and reshape the usual practice in contemporary dance and circus?

This project pushed boundaries and let the artists audiences see these two forms differently as well as see their limitations.



A VARIETY OF APPROACHES



In Stockholm

Interview with Alessio
Motta for Subtopia
<https://www.facebook.com/Subtopia/videos/10156027499287808/>



In Cork

Audience reactions
<https://www.facebook.com/CorkMidsummerFestival/videos/10160598523705523/>



In London

Festival context,
Circus Sampler:
<https://youtu.be/fBuFSUzplLw>



In Bagneux

Foot freestyle & hip
hop workshop
<https://www.facebook.com/lepluspetitcirquedumonde.fr/videos/928653790667400/>

A VARIETY OF SETTINGS



Black box
in Stockholm



Sports hall
in Cork



Outdoors
in London



Circus Venue
in Bagneux

A VARIETY OF AUDIENCES



Stockholm



Cork



London



Bagneux

CIRCUS MEETS DANCE OR DANCE MEETS CIRCUS?



A film by
Nedjma Hadj
Benchelabi

available at
[https://youtu.be/
5ONNmXwFF4c](https://youtu.be/5ONNmXwFF4c)

TOWARDS AN ENSEMBLE

The artists who came together to create this work came from different backgrounds, had varying levels of experience and a variety of skills practice.

Looking back on the process, it is apparent that a greater amount of time would have allowed for more creative exploration. We should also note that the collaboration between the dance director and the circus mentor was complex due to singular artistic conceptions.

However, despite early challenges, this disparate group of artists throughout the 15 month process, eventually united to form a vibrant ensemble. They were playful, creative and formed a memorable bond.

Cork group



Dance and circus artists were able to have complex discussions about their differing physical strengths and explore new practices that enriched their vocabulary. This was the base for the creation of a new language that merged the two art forms, like when a crump artist used a Chinese pole in a never-seen-before way.

All the artists involved in the project benefitted from the experience on the show, and gave them the opportunity to step-up in their practice.

The lead artists were given the opportunity to gain new skills and share their knowledge with emerging talents and the wider sector from their home countries. For example, Matt in Ireland took part in the 1-day symposium *Union Black: The Future of Circus and Dance* at the Devere Hall, University College in Cork where he shared his experience with artists and peers.

For some of the local artists, it was the first time they were performing in a professional show and they were given the opportunity to be part of a high profile event in their country.

Natty Montella, local artist, PPCM



The core group of nine performers worked with fifteen emerging artists in four different countries.

The pressure of recreating the show in various locations, combined with a tight timetable, meant that the artists could only scratch the surface of a combined language between hip hop and circus.

However, what they achieved managed to touch on promising elements. With a greater length of time and support, they were capable of diving even deeper into this new movement language.

Emma Houston, local artist, COL



INVOLVEMENT OF THE LOCAL ARTISTS



Interview with Ronja
Jansson, Swedish
local artist
[https://youtu.be/Npc
PP1qWg18](https://youtu.be/NpcPP1qWg18)

ARTISTS' VOICES & THOUGHTS DURING THE PROCESS

Botis Seva, Director and Choreographer, UK

I think the dancers are all political. I mean, we have no control over something, no choice over Brexit - so everyone has this frustration about Europe or about his or her own country. That's how I fuel them to present the political side.

Normally I work a lot with imagery-based work. I see images and try to recreate them, or I read a book and try to make the dancers translate the book into a physical being. We also do a lot of research, task-based work. Because sometimes it takes long to find ideas, so we play with movement.

Because now, now we're using two different art forms of circus and tight-wire. It's quite hard because it sometimes becomes very limiting. I'm still thinking about how to use these things for them to make sense - to mean something to what we're doing. And I am struggling with that; it's a real struggle!

You know, sometimes there are two separate entities, which people are trying to bring together and I think sometimes it can be forced. Sometimes I wish there was just time to understand what it is and the potential it has - that relevant issue about crossing space.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Gaëtan Lévêque, Circus Mentor, France

I would say that everyone involved in the show is co-writing it: the artists, the dancers, the circus artists and myself. Botis and I are here to guide the devising process, give it sense and a clear direction.

We're also trying to find harmony between all the people on stage. Botis and I haven't really written a dance or circus script. It's a common process. We will guide them in their energy, their movements, the reasons why they're in this energy at that moment. We will also guide them to take them to other places.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.

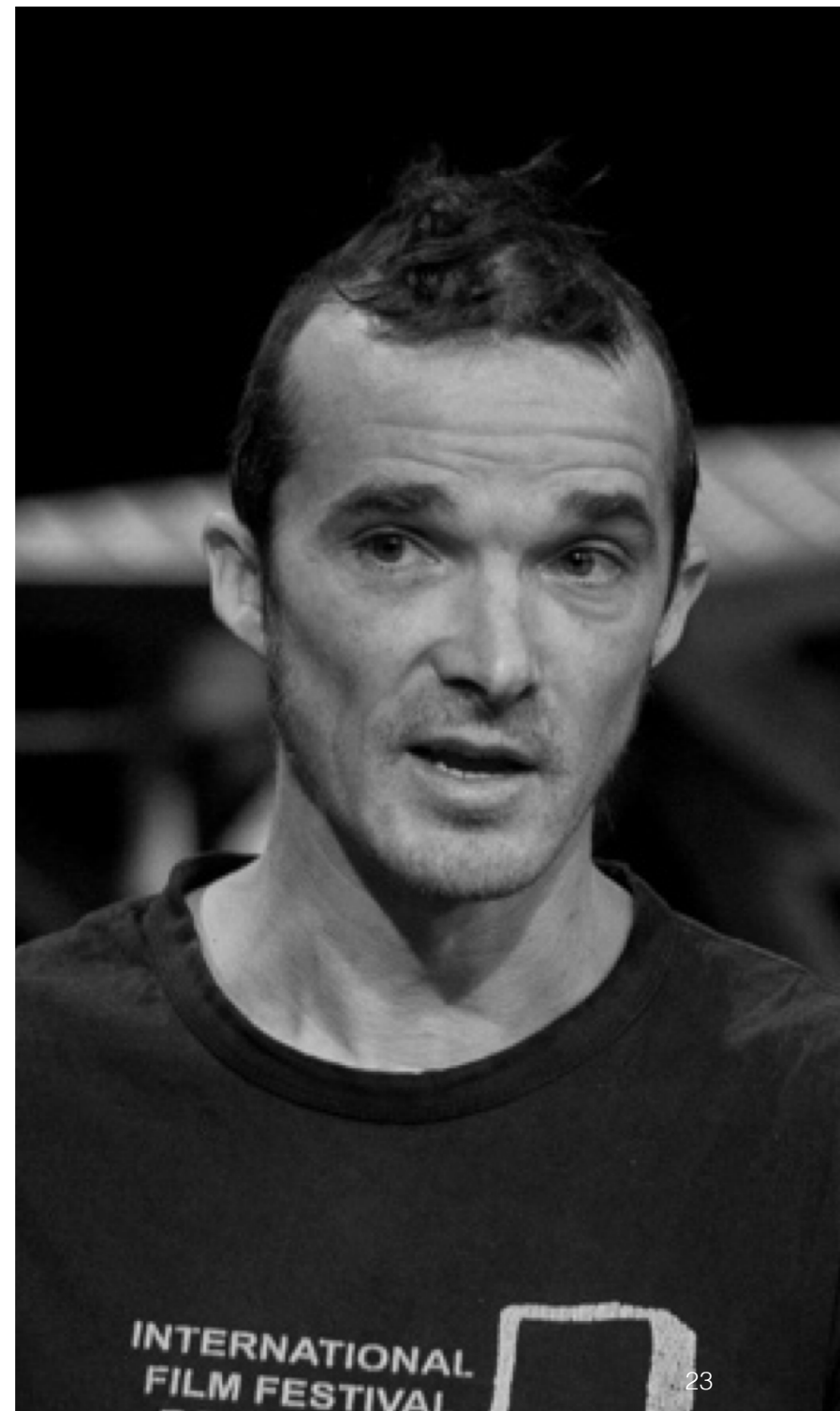


Manu Debuck, Circus Mentor, France

I think we mostly enjoyed the process, not only on stage, but also spending late nights talking about religion, politics, engagement, art in the society... we were having deep conversations during our residency in Subtopia: in the sauna, in the kitchen. We had a couple of nights where we debated about a different couple of general issues about the world and our own issues... opening up to each other and getting to know each other.

I have seen creative space between circus and dance when Arthur put this high structure and asked them to sit on it, Shango was very spontaneously trying to do something with this structure.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Victoria Shulungu, Rehearsals Director and Dance Artist, UK

When we started working with Arthur, we found that the way he likes to do his work is more of risk taking, he doesn't want to be so formal in his circus art. I think that for us worked because if you're open to take risks, we can create more work that is new because it's creating a new language from mixing two different languages.

It was good for us to see that there's potential to work with someone that isn't from the dance world. The difficult thing was the apparatus that he used was limiting... some of us could barely walk on the tight-wire, you're already limited in that sense. Just even from today's rehearsal, I could see how we were playing with two worlds using the tight-wire as what separates the two worlds... it works. The negative became the positive. The dancers got to be them using his apparatus without using it the way he does. To me it was almost like a jigsaw puzzle, and seeing how it was working at the moment, it doesn't look so separate; it looks like one new piece.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Arthur Sidoroff, Lead Artist, France

For me, the dancers are very creative, and I observe how they dance. I try to be inspired by the way in which they dance on the wire. I try to learn some little steps on the floor. It's like an exchange, because I'm not a dancer, but an acrobat and wireman. It's a meeting.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Ezra Owen, Dance Artist, UK

We've been asked from people to watch and not know whose dancer and who's doing circus, so we can switch in between the two. No one knows who's who, we're just people in the space. That blurring of the lines... you don't understand what's going on, who's doing what. It just works together.

For the majority of us, we just don't want to look like we've come to this space to do what we do. This is a process; it's not just creating a show for us. We're learning, and we have to try creating different things. Even if it's not so specific to circus or dance, it's still the training aspect, the discipline as a dancer or circus artist, you learn in a certain way and you develop your skills. You'll try to climb up the pole or going on the tight wire, going over every single routine. All our minds must be set aside to get this piece going. Not looking like individuals but like a unit.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Matt Szczerek, Lead Artist, Ireland

Every rehearsal is pushing your boundaries, pushing your stamina. And your physical possibilities to extend them for the next day. Everyday feels like growth, personal growth, on many levels; physical, mental. From the first time when I went for an audition with Botis I was certain that this was the kind of work I wanted to dive into.

We definitely built up trust during this period of time through movement, through connection. The physical connection reflects on the emotional connection.

Because we're such a diverse group, in terms of perspective, religion, what your beliefs are, surface-wise just race... we're looking at stereotypes and things we connect with. We're all different... that's where that came from. And people's experiences.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Naïma Souhair, Dance Artist, Netherlands

It's also a way of getting to know each other, because of course we're going through our boundaries, but it's also good to know what our boundaries are so that we can push them but also, we need to communicate with regards to our physical abilities are.

Finding that and communicating that and getting to know that through each other builds a trust between us and makes us know each other... a mental connection.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Jordan Douglas, Dance Artist, UK

Everyone's gelled really easy. When you've got a room where everyone's positive and wants to push forward, it's easier to let yourself go. Some of the exercises like standing and catching, where you have to stand on someone else's shoulders, if you don't trust that the person below has got you, you're too tense and it doesn't really work. In terms of boundaries, I'm being able to trust them straight away. We haven't known each other that long, but it's good to be able to just let go

I think that, because we have to go full out to make the sections and things, we have to try to explore how much energy we need to get through certain sections we are using in the piece. Once that is set, we will be able to adapt better to coming on and off and knowing when and where we need to apply that breath and energy. It is a part of the process.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Alessio Motta, Lead Artist, Sweden

They [Far From The Norm] are used to going up to 100% all day. I'm used to divide my energy into sections, so that I can pick it up from 9 in the morning till 8 in the night. I have to divide what I am doing. I can't work just on the Chinese Pole, even if it is my discipline.

In combination with the dance as well. I don't know how to explain. They go up to 100% all the time. It is mad. I try to keep up with that, and with my creating on the pole I try to be at 100% all the time. But my body cannot take it. Even with all the training I got.... It is challenging, but in a good way.

Now when I'm doing my solo, I'm creating with them, it is another sort of awareness that I think I still have to develop. For me it asks a lot of brainstorming with your body. From this point of view, coming from outside, you just start and somehow this (movement) can become choreography. This was very new for me. In circus, we or at least I think about where we want to bring the movement, what technique are we going to use? While for you it is more about having a concept or having a way of movement that you are going to explore. And then you go and then you repeat and cut something and add something. It is an interesting way of collaborating that I wasn't accustomed to.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



Shangomola Edunjobi, Dance Artist, UK

I think for me the first few days were pretty good. The energy was better.

I began to feel that my body was getting tired, the fatigue kicked in, the injuries and stuff. And now that we have made sections of very high energy. To go from lots of floor movements on to upgrade yourself on the Chinese Pole and on the wire is quiet challenging because you change muscle-groups and you change your mental approach. You have to be able to switch between the two. That is quite challenging, I think. It is a part of the process.

It has been fun and exciting. It is very interesting to learn from somebody else's skills. I've got that from this experience.

Transcription from group discussions recorded throughout the process.



ABOUT NEDJMA HADJ BENCHELABI

Born in Algiers and based in Brussels, Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi is a curator, dramaturg and documentary filmmaker. She performed as member of the theatre company Dito'Dito Brussels and worked as member of the artistic team of the Brussels City Theatre, KVS. Up until 2013, she programmed at the European Cultural Centre, Les Halles where she contributed to a program on Contemporary Literature and Performing Arts of the Arab world. In 2013, she was associate curator of 'Daba Maroc' the artistic contemporary Moroccan season in Belgium. Since 2014 she has been associate curator of "On Marche", the International Contemporary Dance Festival of Marrakech. She was involved as guest curator in 'Casablanca-Energie noire' at Mons 2015 - Cultural Capital of Europe, associate curator in the 'Arab Art Focus' at Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF, Cairo) in 2016, Arab Art Focus at Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2017) and Avignon Off (2018).

She is actively involved in projects involving young artists: dramaturgy, research and documenting, curatorship and publications.

She is regularly invited to debates and discussions for her expertise in Europe and the Mena region



CREDITS

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Documentary - page 16

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