



Moroccan field trip for dance troupe part of 'Lila' story for PS21

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Set and setting for "Le sacre de Lila," from Montreal-based choreographer Ismaël Mouaraki.
Images: Sylvie-Ann Paré

When the Montreal-based choreographer Ismaël Mouaraki set out to make a work exploring brotherhood and group spirituality, he knew he had to take his dancers somewhere they could truly live those concepts. So he took them home to Morocco — one of his three homelands, along with France and Canada. Mouaraki wanted them to understand what it felt like to be in a culture where male friendships

can include physical contact, and where healing can happen through shared movement.

“I could say this 100 times in a dance studio, I could turn it into all kinds of choreographic ideas, but it won’t feel right until you fully immerse yourself in the Moroccan experience,” the choreographer says in a short documentary about that trip, during which he brought 12 Quebecois and Moroccan men together to dance on rooftops and in fields, beside the ocean and within a circle of musicians.

The journey led to the making of “Le Sacre de Lila,” which will be onstage Sunday at 6:30 p.m. at PS21 in Chatham. The 2022 piece was created collaboratively by the choreographer and eight members of his company, Destins Croisés, which he founded in 2003. The troupe’s name translates as “intertwined destinies,” and Mouaraki’s work focuses on human connection and the healing power of dancing with others.

“I love to gather together artists from different origins — different cultures and point of views, different fields and backgrounds and social ranks, this is what contemporary dance is to me,” the self-taught dancer and choreographer said through a translator in a recent interview.

“Lila” means night in Arabic, and the work is inspired by ancient rituals of spiritual healing among the Sufis of the Maghreb. These mystical rites of song, music and dance would last from sunset to sunrise, as the communities invited in the spirit world along with a collective sense of restoration and transcendence.

However, there's nothing traditional about the movement in "Le Sacre de Lila," the choreographer stressed. Set to a commissioned score by Canadian composer Antoine Berthiaume, which merges jazz, folk, classical and experimental music, the piece draws from Mouaraki's distinctive fusion of diverse contemporary styles, including street dance, circus arts and theater. For him, dance has always been about "joy and happiness." In Moroccan culture, he said, "everyone dances — dance is a part of life, with family, with friends, at gatherings."

He grew up in that milieu, and spent the later part of his childhood in France, where he discovered street dance at age 11. That eventually led him to contemporary choreography, and performing with Xavier Lot's Compagnie Ulal Dto for three years. In Montreal, he danced for a handful of other choreographers before starting his own company, which has performed at home and in cities around the world, including New York, Seoul and Düsseldorf, showing work that revolves around intimacy, touch and embodied spirituality.

In the duet "La question des fleurs," and the ensemble piece "Lien(s)," which translates as "Links," the dancers, both men and women, find fresh, unexpected ways to stay in physical and emotional contact. In "Phenomena," robot-like movement becomes gradually humanized through connection with others. "oZe" is Mouaraki's take on "The Wizard of Oz," in which the four characters become aware of their inner qualities and obstacles over the course of the dance.

In making work, the choreographer starts with exercises and improvisations, "to see what kind of alchemy the group creates, what kind of energy they have all together, how those individuals make sense together and what they want to say together," he said. "For me, everyone will come with something to say and I want to give them room to say it, using my choreographic language as a key."

As for what viewers take away, for Mouaraki, it's not about what audiences will understand, but rather about what they will feel. In touring "Lila" over the last two years, he's found that the work often catalyzes "a lot of emotion.

"Men are moved by the fact that the show gives them permission to go into their sensuality and openness, and for women, it's good to see men allowing themselves to share their emotions."