

### *How did you come to dance and why?*

I come from a background in Literature: teaching, translating, poetry and writing. In 2012 I was working for the refugee agency of the United Nations: there were two million Afghan refugees that year in Iran, and our project was related to getting the stories of young people like me and to turn them into text, so that we can receive support from different countries. I thought that there I could change many things in the world, but I was spending eight hours behind a desk and after three months I said “No: this is not doing anything for humanity, it’s just putting nice clothes every day and coming to my office... we’re saving the world having our coffee!”. When I studied Literature I was very interested in drama, so during this period, because I was depressed and because I was not happy with my job, I said “Let’s try some performing arts: just for fun, just for understanding something new”. So I went: in six months I finished the intensive course, I realized that I loved drama, and that I could find something for me there. One month before my contract in the UN finished, I was sitting behind my desk and the teacher of my course called me to say “I’m writing a new theatre project on the theme of gender and there is a character that I think it’s you. Are you interested?”. I said “Yes, let’s do it”. In 2012 in Iran a project related to gender was very risky, but I really needed it, and the first night that we went on stage, suddenly for me everything became clear: I was looking for this all my life. To be here, to share this, was for me a more humanitarian work than working in the UN... When they offered me a three year contract, I refused. From then (this was almost 2013) I started focusing on performing arts, and I was especially interested in physical theatre. One day one of my friends told me that Atefeh Teherani was doing an audition for a new piece. She’s a really well-known director in Iran: in 2009 she did ‘Othello’ without words and received a lot of attention because it was the first work like this in Iran. That piece was invited to some European festivals (Germany, Holland, Poland...) and finally it arrived to a festival called ‘Dancing on the edge’ in Amsterdam, in which occasion for the first time the word ‘dance’ was associated to Atefeh Teherani’s show. When the team came back to Iran, all of them were arrested immediately and the director was forbidden to make any work for six years... It meant that they didn’t write her or tell her, but whatever she started, they would just stop! Exactly in that year Atefeh Teherani was looking for some male performers, so I decided to go even if I had no experience. She had a reputation of being very harsh: when I arrived I said “Hello, I’m here for the audition” and she didn’t say anything but “Go and change”. I was very confused, but it looked very interesting: like they knew something I didn’t know, and that I wanted to understand. I asked little by little what it was and they said “We’re using contemporary dance techniques”. So I started searching on the Internet, and suddenly the world opened: I knew Pina, and Forsythe, and Steve Paxton, and all this forty-fifty years of work in the West called ‘contemporary dance’. I didn’t know

it because dance became illegal when the Islamic revolution happened... So we started rehearsing for one year and a half without knowing if we would have had the permission to go on stage: in this time we studied, we worked together, and I with other people started going to the studios to work more. We learnt a lot of Western techniques and in 2015 we begun inviting people to Iran... but after some time I realized that even if I could do the perfect Pina technique or the perfect Forsythe technique, I didn't identify with it, because none of my ancestors moved like this: I could copy the movement maybe, but it didn't mean anything... So we started our own research practicing the old Persian dances: there are more than fifty different types, but at the time of the revolution many of these stopped from happening. Only few of them survived, and only in social occasions, not as art forms. We found dancers in different corners of Iran and we brought them to the studios, but most of them were "organic performers", so they didn't know how to teach their movements. They just showed us, but it was still better, because it helped us in finding our dancing way. One year and a half later, everyone had a piece: we decided to show them, but because it was illegal to perform dance on stage, we asked ourselves "What happens if we don't use the word 'dance' but we do what we do, using a different label?". I thought a lot because I had this fascination with words and vocabulary, and finally I decided for 'Body Movement', because it's the movement of the body, but it's also a movement, like an act of activism in bringing back the bodies on stage: it made a lot of sense. Everybody agreed and we did it: in march 2016 we collected our eight works and showed them. Whenever you want to show any kind of performing arts in Iran, first you have to get the permission from the Ministry of Culture: it was very surprising, because when they saw the pieces they didn't make a comment about the fact that it was dance (but of course it was), and said "We don't understand it very much and think that it won't be very interesting for the audience, but we can see that there is a lot of hard work behind it". That was incredible. So they gave us the permission, we organized the show and the newspapers wrote that Iran's first Body Movement Festival was held, the first one since the Islamic revolution. It received a lot of attention, a lot of people came... of course there were lots of people in different corners of Iran, and in Teheran mostly, doing this in secret, but never they thought that it would have been possible to do it publicly... so after the Festival this 'Body Movement' became a thing. A few time later, Fajr (that's the arts and music governmental official festival) also was held, and it was said "The successful artists of last year in every part of Iran are free to come and show their work again". So we brought four of our works in the official festival, and as the audience also came from abroad, some international programmers saw our 'body movement' and said "Well, there's contemporary dance in Iran!", and started inviting us. That's why we went to Beirut first, and there we met people from Germany, France, Italy, Spain... They saw our performances as the representation of Iranian

contemporary dance and many of these works are now travelling everywhere, but if you really want to categorize them, maybe they are something else... For me it's mostly movement research, plus something that might be dance, but that might also be ritual, or theatre sometimes... So I think it's a very specific thing that brings many elements together.

*How, in your opinion, dance can reply to your urgency? And do you have a feedback from the audience?*

There is a lot of interest about dance in Iran, because before Islam many things in Persia happened as body rituals. Probably dance is in the blood of people, who went on dancing in private in these forty years... So dance was alive: only as an art form and something performative it became illegal. And people are thirsty for it: they miss it, they want it, and when they see it they immediately drink it. During the Festival we overbooked the whole week, it was like "Something's happening", and now whenever there is a dance show in any corner of Iran it's full. With a theatre piece, or with a movie, you send the script to the Ministry and they read it, so if there's something they don't like, they cut: very easy. But with the living body on stage you cannot do anything: it's there, it's alive, and it's going to show its magic.

*You also do duets, with male and female performers...*

The reason why we made mostly solos in the Festival was because we were really trying to understand personally our movements... but yes, we did a lot of partner work in our practice together, and we made some group choreographies (especially in a private unofficial show called 'No. 3, Teheran', one year before the Body Movement Festival). It's much easier in Iran to do male and female works, while for man and women to do something together it's sometimes problematic. Did you see 'Zaafaran', the piece that Omar [Rajeh] made with Mitra [Ziaee Kia] and Mostafa [Shabkhan]? That piece is a trio of two dancers and one musician on a Persian carpet, and it's a story of passion, attraction, sexuality and love between a man and a woman. There is a part in the choreography in which the girl and the boy stand with their lips very close: they don't touch, they're just very close, but you can see them making love. To perform 'Zaafaran' in Teheran we had to show it first to the Ministry, so we created a different version, in which all the things that happened with the dancers coming very close, now happened exactly in the same way, but in distance, and the wonderful thing was that this second version became much more interesting! It didn't show the obvious thing: the girl and the boy were standing far, but there was an energy between them and this resulted even more attractive. So the limit became an element in our creative process.

*It's an evolution... I suppose that's much more interesting for us too, because it's not so obvious, as you told: in the middle there is imagination, and your traditions involve imagination a lot...*

A lot! A lot of images, sounds and senses... That's why in Berlin last January, when I went to do the audition for the university, they didn't give me the scholarship or the master. My project was about gender, and I wanted to do a piece that I could perform in Teheran and in Berlin without changing it. But they didn't like it, because I think they wanted me to get naked, which is not my artistic choice. It's the most obvious thing: the queer guy comes and takes off his pants... you know? So I thought "Can I do it in a different way? Yes, I think that's the challenge". For example in my new project I use a video from the time I was three years old, and I think that this choice is not very different from taking off your pants, because you're still exposing yourself, maybe even more.

*Two last questions. The first is about Zoroastrian religion: what importance have the ritual aspects in your creative process?*

A great importance, because the daily life of every Persian is full of rituals that we carry from the past. 'Damnoosh' represents a very simple daily act in my life which is tea making. Coffee here is a very specific ritual, but now it happens in a 'capitalistic way', while in the Eastern cultures everything's a bit more meditative: it's about going, finding the herbs, bringing them together... You need twenty minutes to make a tea, you have to wait for it, and there is a lot of passion in this ritual. There were a lot of Zoroastrian rituals in Persia before Islam, so they are in our d.n.a., even if we're forgetting them because we do them less and less and less. During my travels I saw that in Europe rituals became very fashionable in the performing arts. You find many shows in which somebody's doing a ritual, but most of these are personal, individual rituals, while in the ancient forms rituals are collective experiences, related to togetherness: you imagine something together and you transform together. So this is why rituals are fading away in a place like Iran, because they mean there's a lot of collective power to change, something like a revolution, so let's forget them, let's get rid of them... In my work I depend on rituals a lot, I believe in their power, and the performing arts, with an audience, are also a moment of togetherness. That's why in my performances I really try to do the rituals, but I also try to understand them. I often use the basic elements, like in 'Prelude', where the choreography develops on the ground for a very long time because it helps me connecting to the earth. I think rituals are very relevant today, because in the Western culture there is a lot of individuality, that brings a lot of loneliness too.

*The last question is about artistic residencies: what is for you an artistic residency, and the importance of it.*

The sensitive part inside me never liked the sentence ‘the dancer from Iran’, because maybe even if I made bad works I would be ‘the exotic dancer from Iran’... Sometimes during the residencies you feel a bit forced: they say “Now we put you here for two weeks: make a work, work with this artist from here, and show something”. So I’m being very honest here with you: for me a perfect residency is a time of reflection in a different context. In my city I know the trees, I know the mountains, I know the space, I’m working there and I’m making changes there... but there’s something in that space that doesn’t allow me to feel free in my creative process. So for me the perfect residency is a time outside my usual context with the freedom to do research without expectations of production or achievement.