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How BLOCKS became a representation of my experience

Every once in awhile I put my search engine on and look out for residencies, call-out's for festivals or other forms of applications. Misiconi Dance Company is now registered as a foundation a little longer than 1 year. In 2013 I started with a small group and we grew into a community that is a professional dance company now. Besides doing performances we are working on many other things that has to do with disability, integration and inclusive dance . Such as providing workshops, events and community classes and platforms for dancers of all kinds.

All our performance opportunities I have found via these call outs I was talking about earlier. However, I notice that our network is becoming bigger and our position in the dance community is changing. Lately, we still apply but we are also asked to perform or make work. This was also the case with our latest work BLOCKS. It was produced during the D-CAF festival in Cairo. Via a call-out and via a choreographer colleague friend the artistic director of D-CAF got in contact with me and the company. During the D-CAF festival there are many things going on. It is the biggest contemporary and international art festival in the Middle-East. One of their focus points lies with dance and disabilities. To reach out to the citizens of Cairo and show a different perspective on disability. This is the main of the Downtown program, Urban Visions. This program invited several international artists and companies. Also it is outdoors.

The Urban Visions program brings performing arts to public and alternative spaces across Downtown. These events aim to engage and challenge the audience through outdoor acts that refuse to put a ceiling on their ambitions. The list for this year's urban visions program will be as tantalizing as it is varied. For that, we've decided to do something that we've never done before to give the program its due worth: This year, we've collaborated with Archinos to delve out of Downtown Cairo for performances in the legendary Qaitbay Complex in the City of Dead. UK-based Stopgap Dance Company will deliver an exhilarating performance featuring disabled and non-disabled dancers side by side. Holland-based dancer and choreographer, Joop Oonk, will bring his similarly engaging act to the streets of Cairo, while award-winning Hungarian

puppeteer, Bence Sarkadi, will delight festival-goers with his one-of-a-kind show.

D-CAF (Downtown Contemporary Art festival 2017)

After receiving the mail with the question to make work on the streets of Cairo I felt delighted and honored. Going to a new culture and to the biggest city of Africa was just very challenging. The trust of making something with a complete artistic freedom is rare for me. Of course we had to deal with some government and political issues. In that way it was not completely free, however I felt everything was possible. Even with budgeting the piece I felt everything was made possible. With our board members and dancers we decided it was better to go there with a male co-creator or someone that could assist me during my stay. This was the moment that Mark Ridder came in the picture. After delivering him the concept we sat down and discussed it. As a visual artist and being very technical Mark had very nice things to add. For example, working with controlled blocks. Blocks that could move on their own. For us it was also a great opportunity to finally work together. After saying it to each other for a long time we finally got the change. And this is when me and Mark started to manufacture BLOCKS and all the preparations.

Blocks is a collaborative project that brings together the visitors, citizens and spectators of the city. The objects, in collaboration with the dancers, represent the constantly changing city that builds, interrupts, destroys and rebuilds itself. The constructions within the public sphere change the self-organisation of a city that is endless, always moving towards innovative thoughts about space and time. The performance will be developed with local disabled and non-disabled dancers.

From home I scouted 3 professional dancers and D-CAF would provide me 5 other dancers with a disability. The 15 blocks made out of wood would be there when we arrived. In the Netherlands we ordered the 3 cars that would be converted to the remote-controlled blocks.

The time was there to leave Misiconi Dance Company to my dancers and work abroad with Mark. This was the first time I was not there leading the company and it felt difficult to leave my dancers back home. However, I also knew they could manage. They are just amazing! Nevertheless, on the 18th of March we took the airplane and arrived in the evening.

A summer breeze and some people from the festival welcomed us. Now the work could finally start getting shape. We had two weeks to finish BLOCKS. I strongly believed in the concept and the way I have been working the last 1,5 year. I felt

confident in going to Cairo. However, when you are in different cultures you always have to scan your group and of course prove yourself again. The things I have done and my C.V are not relevant. What matters is what we do in the studio and how we get to the final product.

On the first day, I Immediately felt that i had to do some steps back. I couldn't find my flow and the translation from English to Egyptian was definitely part of it. The next days i decided to do more improvisation. However, I work with a lot of images. My mind is like a child. I imagine that the floor is swamp or that i am balancing on a coord. In this case i tried to work with the idea of being an object, making shapes, making bridges where an object could go underneath. And also being part of this structure an umbrella organization. Thinks like construction and deconstruction. This because of our concept and of course as a preparation to the work. I felt that this imagination was difficult to reach. Of course this is difficult when a inner feeling and emotion is not addressed so clearly. I saw a struggle within the group. The next days I also tried to address things like shifting, yielding in the ground and in the object, grounded, floating, soft touch, using breat, being together, seeing each other, inner and outer focus, natural rhythm etc.

Likewise working with objects was a difficult thing. Especially i noticed this for the dancers in the wheelchairs. The blocks were heavy and not so easy to work with. They were very solid and fixed. Me and Mark hoped they were light enough to raise and lift. To construct and deconstruct. Unfortunately they were not. After i few days we noticed there was no progression in how the object was addresses. For me that was a sign to change things around.

Besides, there was not much experience in dancing within mixed groups. It is not a question of people (dancers) not willing to help, but more about how can I help within this setting. So it's more about feeling and experiencing your part within this group. I often not say much about it. Then you can see who is natural and who isn't. Everyone has to level with each other. Also I had to level with the group. Even though our language was sometimes a obstacle I could feel many things within this group. Words like hesitation, fear, suspicion and understanding come to me when i think back. I don't know if this was because of me being hard working and sometimes demanding or being a woman or being reckless and just doing things.

In the process there was always time to ask questions. Many times these questions were about outside factors or not even questions. For example: I think this is impossible. I think the audience perceive it in a different way? Do you think there is a disabled toilet on the venue? I don't think that would look nice Etc. These questions increased while the project was continuing. Now, I can see that it was a stress about things the performers didn't know, but also a trust issue in me as a choreographer and what I have been doing with them the last days. I would never put someone on stage in a uncomfortable way or not make them look good. During the process I was tensed and started to doubt about my choices and the way I was working. In the end we took some comments and advice from the dancers with us and changes the structure 3 days before the performance. This was the right thing to do, because things were flowing better and the dancers looked happier.

I see now that me and Mark didn't take the easy route. We worked with objects, remote-controlled objects, dancers we didn't know, locations we only saw once and a new culture. Nevertheless, I do think we did an amazing job. The Blocks and the dancers looked amazing in the space. Such a nice contrast the colorful blocks and the moving structure. All the dance material came from the dancers and it was their own embodied movement a little bit shaped and cleaned by me.

For me the piece related to how me and Mark experienced the city. Chaotic but at the same time structured. Open and friendly with lots of details. A city that always expands and keeps on moving. Where you can't really escape because there is a huge social control. The piece was strongly connected to public space. This public space and your personal space is not really existing in Cairo.

I remember our first performance venue was in a courtyard of a mosk. As our performance traveled from point A to B we needed more space and we made sure the surface wasn't made of sand or just a rubber dance matt. The venue itself was already a stage. Audience could stand around and on different levels. Also a mosaic was on the wall that kind of reflected our concept. It was beautiful. Our second performance was on a shopping street. Totally different venue and crowds. Because the Blocks were in front of shops, shop owners were not happy and made a fuss. This also showed me that occupying a place is not without discussion. that by entering a space and putting something there you make it yours. Or at least you can have a debate on that. This was an interesting observation.

In the future me and Mark would love to develop BLOCKS and see how we can collaborate better with the dancers and the city. Do same things or problems occur during the performance or the process? Hopefully we will find out soon in a new project.