

Obituary

Theatre icon Raja Ben Ammar leaves inspiring legacy

Roua Khlifi

Tunisia

Renowned actress and director and co-founder of the dance theatre movement in Tunisia Raja Ben Ammar has died following complications from heart surgery.

Ben Ammar's performances in Tunisian and international theatres over a 30-year career exhibited an experimental vision, using the stage as the ultimate venue for freedom of expression. She won the Best Actress Award at the Theatre Days of Carthage in 1987, 1989 and 1995.

Ben Ammar's death on April 4 at the age of 63 shocked many of her fans, hundreds of whom, along with friends and family members, attended Ben Ammar's funeral in Ariana. Speaking at the service, Tunisian Minister of Culture Mohamed Zine el-Abidine described the actress as "one of the pillars of Tunisian theatre."

“She has always considered herself a dancer.”

Tunisian dancer and choreographer Imed Jemaa

Taoufik Jebali, who along with Ben Ammar founded Théâtre Phou, wrote on his Facebook page: "How can we survive without Raja? Raja is a part of our youth, our impulsivity, our unity and our division. Even if she disappeared today, we will always go back to her."

Ben Ammar's first acting roles came in the local school theatre before she spent two years at the pres-

tigious drama school of Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich.

Ben Ammar joined one of Tunisia's first national theatre companies, El Kef Theatre Company, before participating in Nouveau Theatre company, which was led by Fadhel Jaibi, Fadhel Jaziri, Jalila Baccar, Mohamed Idriss and Habib Masrouki, who tried to put a contemporary touch on national theatre productions.

Ben Ammar helped launch Théâtre Phou in 1980. Along with Jebali, Ben Ammar's team included her husband, playwright and actor Moncef Sayem and actor Raouf Hendaoui. The company produced more than 20 theatrical productions in which Ben Ammar either starred or directed, most notably, "Al-Amal" (1986), "Saken Fi Hay Essaida" (1989), "Baghdad Cafe" (1990), "Bayaa-al-Hawa" (1995) and "Faust" (1997).

Théâtre Phou gained international acclaim and its performances were featured at international festivals in the Palestinian territories, Egypt, Venezuela, Colombia and Europe. The productions were awarded many prizes, including the Grand Prize for International Choreographic Meetings in France in 1992 for "Nuit Blanche" ("Sleepless Night").

"The body is the most important element on the stage. It opens space, explores doors of perception and opens horizons to other worlds," Ben Ammar once said.

In addition to directing and performing in plays, Ben Ammar is credited with launching dance theatre in Tunisia, which combined lyrical dancing and theatricality.

Imed Jemaa, a renowned Tunisian dancer and choreographer, recalled that Ben Ammar was the first person to support his career as a choreographer and dancer.

"She has always considered her-

self a dancer. In interviews, she often presented herself as a dancer and an actress and was helpful and supportive to young dancers. She was the only person who helped me when I started working in choreography back in 1989, back when no one believed in dancers as artists," Jemaa said.

■ Raja Ben Ammar was not only a talented and innovative artist but also a woman of convictions.

He added: "She was hard working and passionate. She was an icon not only in the world of theatre but also to dancers. I wonder sometimes, that if it wouldn't have been for her, dancers wouldn't have a future in the artistic scene. She gave the stage of her cultural centre, Mad'art, to dancers to train and perform when the ministry refused to support them."

On the screen, one of Ben Ammar's most remarkable appearances was in Ferid Boughedir's "Halfaouine: Child of the Terraces" in 1990. In the performance, she was said to have charmed moviegoers with her charisma and authentic performance. Remembering Raja's appearance in his movie, Boughedir commended the actress's humility and humbleness.

"Raja had her only cinema appearance in my movie, 'Halfaouine: Child of the Terraces.' I was surprised that Raja, who was a famous theatre actress and an icon of dance theatre, was nervous about her appearance in the movie. With the camera close to her face, she was transpiring. She was stressed," Boughedir said.

He added: "This is what makes her great. She is never arrogant and she is always looking for new ex-



Late theatre icon Raja Ben Ammar.

(Wikipedia)

periments and ways to challenge her. This was unforgettable for me as a film-maker. People like Raja Ben Ammar never disappear. Maybe she is no longer present physically but she will always exist spiritually. Great people don't die."

Ben Ammar was not only a talented and innovative artist but also a woman of convictions, known for her strong positions and visionary contributions. In 1993, she set up Mad'art in Carthage, a theatre and cultural centre that targeted youth from various neighbourhoods to offer a space for training and performance.

Mad'art became a cultural hub for the northern suburbs thanks to its versatile programme of cinema, theatre, dance and artistic workshops.

"Just like the name of her company 'Théâtre Phou,' the name of

her Cultural centre Mad'art played on the idea of madness like Raja wanted to convey that the artist had the right to madness and non-conformity," Boughedir said.

"She was generous and believed in the importance of training for the young people living near Mad'art especially in El-Kram. There was delinquent and jobless youth and she called on those young people to go on stage to take part in training and plays. Lotfi Abdelli, one of Tunisia's famous comedians, started with her in Mad'art."

Ben Ammar's last play, "A Window on..." a work depicting several portraits of human life, premiered at the opening of the International Festival of Hammamet last summer.

Roua Khlifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor for The Arab Weekly. She is based in Tunis.

Guerrilla theatre performance reimagines immigration

Nadine Sayegh

London

Literary history meets contemporary politics in a reinterpretation of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" at Kensington Gardens in London.

The script, published after the second world war, which caused the largest refugee crises the world has seen, is centred on two characters who are awaiting the arrival of an unknown figure called Godot.

Through the text there is idle chat, a sense of hopelessness and a lack of clarity on where the characters are and what they are waiting for – a message that resonates heavily today, particularly for the masses of displaced populations.

Sari Chreiteh, the Lebanese-Russian director of "Waiting for Godot", pointed out the continued relevance of the play.

“We are all waiting for something – a visa, a paycheck, a good or even just a simple answer.”

Director Sari Chreiteh

"In a way, it describes an aftermath of the war in which the characters are in no immediate danger yet they are stuck. They stagnate with nothing to do and nowhere to go," Chreiteh said. "Stripped to less than the essentials when it comes to food and shelter they somehow

keep on existing with hope being dangled like a carrot in front of them."

Since the script is somewhat timeless, due to the lack of clarity on the setting and time frame, Chreiteh manipulated the location and the form of the performance.

The actors perform one act of the two-act play per show, adding to the sentiment of never-ending nothingness. They return the following evening to continue the performance.

"I wanted to use the looming buildings, Kensington Palace and the line of embassies as the backdrop. It is for the audience to draw their own associations from contrast of the characters and their background," Chreiteh said.

"In this day and age with armed conflict around the world, displaced populations, economic instability and social intolerance, we are all waiting for something, whether it is a visa or a paycheck, a good or even just a simple answer."

Members of the audience approached the performance with curiosity as there was no clear indication that a play was taking place. A space within a park was used as the stage although there were no clear markings that this was a theatre performance. The troupe still drew a crowd for the opening show.

Dalia Yassine, a 29-year-old artist and writer, said of the performance: "A few political sentiments were present in the play, both direct and indirect: False power, senseless knowledge, constant suffering and a sense of arrogance and greed."

"I do find the current visa system to be a discriminatory one. Things



Insight into absurdity. The reinterpretation of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" performed in London's Kensington Gardens.

(Nadine Sayegh)

are becoming too confined and controlled," Yassine added.

Another audience member, Alethea Osborne, a 25-year-old researcher in Middle Eastern affairs, said she was surprised to see a performance so close to the embassies. "I think the play raised important concerns and gives insight into the absurdity that many refugees are facing today through the waiting stages of relocation," she said.

Stage manager Kalyl Kadri, a Lebanese-Brazilian national, said the most difficult part of the process was promoting the event.

"We are completing our degrees but took the initiative to start up a theatre production company

[Sweaty Palms Productions] so that we could discuss these sensitive topics on our own terms. This means that we do not have the funds or advantages of more established companies," Kadri said.

Chreiteh, who is completing a master's programme in theatre directing at the University of Essex, pointed out that the performance was an attempt to convey the emotion of making it through a very uncertain world.

"We have seen how sometimes people can wait endlessly, how people can be displaced for many generations, living without rights or perspectives in a foreign place that does not seem to really want

them," he said.

He said he recognises the topic is too large to handle in one play but hopes, at the very least, the audience shifts their perceptions on immigration and moves towards a more empathetic approach in dealing with the crisis.

With the rise in the level of social segregation across the world, initiatives such as Chreiteh's play offer an opportunity for much-needed dialogue and give hope in spaces in which populist politicians cannot intervene.

Nadine Sayegh is a freelance journalist focusing on society, culture and politics.