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Sixteen dancers stand on a patchwork of carpets placed center stage and illuminated from above, an island of warm colors in a darkened space. Before the crowd settles, there's a commotion in the foyer between a couple of staff members and four ticket holders — there's only one seat left for the premiere of Nicole Seiler's *Cactus Flower* in downtown Cairo's AUC Falaki Theater. But soon after the last audience member slips into the auditorium, the tension breaks as the performers' hands begin to twitch and bodies vibrate, their backs arc and feet scurry.

The soundscape, mixed with recordings of traffic noise and kitchen sounds, is borrowed from the score of Hala Elkoussy's upcoming film *Cactus Flower*, a closely-affiliated project after which the performance is named. The audio accompanies repetitive movements that echo throughout the group, slowly and precisely at first and then rippling and distorting like a rumor. As compelling as it is to watch their bodies both sense and react to one other like fine-tuned instruments, it's equally unsettling how the dancers' faces hardly emote and their eyes barely meet. Each person is an integral part of the group but remains staunchly insular. They've embarked on dynamic journeys inward and from the outside you

feel privy to an understanding that they're all navigating the same complex terrain, yet seem entirely unaware of it.

Despite the overall accord, the costumes couldn't be more eclectic. Like a visual cross-section of figures from the past, present and future, or maybe from alternative timelines altogether, one dancer stands wrapped in delicate tulle, another in gray long johns punctured with holes as if from gun fire, then billowing pantaloons in black and white stripes, a tracksuit, and over there a young man bare-chested in loincloth and tights. You see the miscellany but don't become distracted because it's the kind of optical discrepancy that makes sense in the suspended disbelief of a dream. And, similarly, *Cactus Flower* the performance does effortlessly evade the sharp focus of logic because its reality is untethered from any other.

The dancers' movements are persistently cyclic and rhythmic like unfolding chapters from recent or distant history, pausing for interludes in the time of machines, in the time of wonder. It's easy to zone out and consider the interconnectedness of it all. You might think of those science videos that compare vehicles on looping highways to blood cells pumping through our veins, or stellar constellations to the synapses in our brains. The dances tell of how everything changes and how everything remains the same, that we're a blip in the timeline of the physical world, and that we will last forever as the same particles we've been for hundreds of thousands of years, animated stardust. Or maybe *Cactus Flower* doesn't mean more than a pearl of sweat on a dancer's forehead and the soles of feet twisting on knotted fabric.

Despite this article, *Cactus Flower* isn't overly accommodating to words. In fact, it's a work that challenges any self-assuredness of language. And this isn't a coincidence. In a mixed-signal yet entirely honest way, much like the performance itself, Seiler says "I hate words," although in a tone that's in line with the exuberant opening night of her new work. A choreographer with her own theater company based in Lausanne, Switzerland, Seiler adds that reading to her is like a different world, and yet Elkoussy's script got to her. "I read it and was in the story, which is very, very rare. I told her 'this is not my thing but I was captured by what you wrote,' because somehow I could feel it."

It was as if Elkoussy had invited her into her world and vice versa, “with all the enrichments and complications that this causes.” Both artists have different ways of working and functioning, different tastes and references, but they connected. “And it’s really very interesting because in some ways we don’t understand each other at all,” Seiler says, “and some places we understand each other exactly.”

The courting phase between the two was more corporeal. It’s a simple fact that you can raise Swiss money when teaming up with Swiss artists, this “foreign element” being a circumstance that an overwhelming number of cultural projects in Cairo have in common and for the same reasons. This was transparent from the start and didn’t factor in more than it needed to. Seiler agreed to come to Cairo although she didn’t fully understand what Elkoussy had in mind, with either the *Cactus Flower* film or performance, but they soon established their complementary roles: “We’d have a first collaboration where it would be me collaborating as a choreographer in the film, and then we’d have a second collaboration and she’d contribute.” And this is exactly what happened, with a film shot last year and currently in post-production, and with Elkoussy designing the costumes for the subsequent live performance, which sold out when it was shown in Cairo on October 4 and 5, and at the Bibliotheca in Alexandria on October 10.

Maysoon Mahfoudh of Pro Helvetia in Cairo, the regional office of the Swiss Arts Council that funded the performance, says the foundation supported the dance part of the film *Cactus Flower*, but not the production of the whole film, because that wouldn’t fall under Pro Helvetia’s mandate. “Dance means live performance, so it was agreed that a second part of the project would be performances.”

When Seiler explains the casting process, you get a taste of how other parts of the collaboration must have worked. The shoot of *Cactus Flower* the film came first. “Hala did the casting, I didn’t choose. She asked me ‘What kind of people do you want?’ and I said ‘I don’t care about technique, I want people with a strong personality.’” The film’s cast was supposed to be whittled down for the performance, but very early on Seiler told Elkoussy that she couldn’t choose — it had to be all of them “who want to and who can and who will commit to it.” “And they did,” she adds. “It’s been rare that I’ve actually experienced that dedication

with a group of people. So it was obvious that that had to be the subject of the performance.”

Kanny Abdallah, the dancer in tracksuit, says he got his start in the streets 12 years ago, as a nine-year-old breakdancer who received additional training from his future brother-in-law. He first performed at weddings where “people liked me because I was the kid with the big hair.” Abdallah says he became Egypt’s first street clown and joined the theater group Al-Khayal al-Shaabi (The Popular Imagination). Then there was a fundamental shift that eventually led to *Cactus Flower*. “Six years or seven years ago I heard about contemporary dance and when I saw it I was like, what the fuck is this dance?” he says. “But when I tried it I felt it wasn’t about the moves, it was something that you feel. With breakdance, you know the moves, you know you’re going to show off for five minutes and then khalas. But in contemporary dance, you can do a show for one hour and won’t get bored.”

Basking the premiere’s afterglow, Abdallah says, “I’m so happy because we all had the same energy on stage but during the rehearsals it wasn’t like this at all. There we talked about some stuff, but tonight we were suddenly all like one. I felt this and I liked it. I thought, ‘What the fuck, I’m the leader of the group but everyone else is the leader too.’ And it was also the first time I wasn’t afraid of the audience. I love it because all the dancers listened to each other, without saying ‘you have to listen to me.’ This happened without words. I’m one part of this piece and, how can I say this — we’re sending a message, it’s something coming from inside.”

Seiler echoes this sentiment. “Something’s working with this performance, Hala’s script and her connection with the city,” she says. “I would say that *Cactus Flower* resonates with the audience because it comes from here. I didn’t impose anything. Of course I imposed my way of working, I imposed my decisions, my schedules, but I didn’t come here thinking okay, I’m going to do a piece about this and do that. I just arrived and was open.”

“I think that’s what I like about dance, it’s the gestures that become universal,” she adds. “Because words connect to your brain and the dance somehow connects to something else, something that you can’t link to the

intellect. It's something more unconscious. That's why I'm a choreographer. I am not a theater director. I feel with words, it's always limiting something."

Abdallah hopes *Cactus Flower* will go on tour in Switzerland. Seiler too hopes there will be more performances. "We could easily perform in Cairo again, not now but maybe for a festival." Mahfoudh says the performance was documented and a few minutes will be posted on Pro Helvetia's website. "As all performance comes to end after staging for the audience, this as well came to an end," she adds. "Yet the experience that Nicole, Hala and the dancers developed will always be there for them as artists."