

## **BASHAR MURKUS - HAIFA**

### **What do you want to share on your current living and working conditions? What can you share on the broader situation of the city or country where you are?**

I'm writing the answer to this question on precisely the day when we get sight of a possible date when people will be allowed to gather together again in Haifa, the city I live in, and the surrounding region. It would be gradual, first gatherings of 20 people, then 100 people and so on, until all the restrictions on gatherings are removed in mid-June. This means that audiences will once more be allowed into theatres.

Gatherings being permitted once again! Goodness!

When I had just read the news, to be quite honest I wasn't relieved. My feeling can be described rather as unease.

Although the period of compulsory closure has lasted no longer than three months, I am truly afraid of a rapid return. I am afraid of ignoring what has happened and the effect it has had on our audience and on us. If there is one thing I don't want to happen, it is that we start work in our theatre again, the independent Khashabi Theatre in Haifa, just because we are expected to return to putting on performances.

I can't say exactly where this fear originates, but I don't want to resume theatre work before we can all once again enjoy our freedom of movement as normal. I don't want to organise any performances before we have lost our fear of standing less than two metres from others. I don't want to do any theatre work before we really understand what this ordeal means, an ordeal that seems like a rehearsal. A rehearsal in which we all play a part, all over the world. A rehearsal in which we are directed by states and regimes that want to drill us to live under a military authority that defines our lives in a constitutional state. A rehearsal in which we all play our part with utter conviction. I do not want to return to the stage and address the audience before we, humanity, have asked ourselves how we could allow old people to die all alone, how they could have been killed by a pandemic and loneliness in Italy, Spain and so many other countries.

### **What impact does the pandemic have on the production and presentation of your work?**

Like many other people, the epidemic has upset my work plans for a whole year, and to be honest that has made me extremely sad. Personally, this was a very important year in my career, because a new phase had been reached in international interest in my work. We were to have performed our latest production, *The Museum*, as part of the official programme at the 74<sup>th</sup> Avignon Festival in France. To be a part of that festival was one of my ambitions and dreams. The plan was also – for the first time – to perform a double Italian premiere of our productions *The Museum* and *HASH* at the Romaeuropa Festival. And we were also scheduled to perform for a whole week at the splendid Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. It is a long list. All these cancellations are truly saddening. Apart from the international tours by Khashabi

Theatre in France, the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium, lots of my personal work has been cancelled too: performances in Haifa, a new project in Germany and so on.

I hope with all my heart that these performances can be programmed again for next year and that we shall be able to continue developing these marvellous artistic links.

**As an artist, how do you look at the future and / or at your practice at the moment?**

Khashabi Theatre and I opted not to jump on the bandwagon of thinking up quick and digital reactions to the pandemic, because we believe that theatre needs a tangible space to come into contact with the audience that has chosen to come together in the here and now. So long as this is not possible, we find the whole idea of theatre impossible.

Our response to the future was to set to work and carry out research for our new theatre project, which we shall present in the middle of next year.

So it was with great pleasure that I sat down at my desk in the studio. This time I was even compelled to move from one table to another four times, with all my drawings and notes. I worked in four different rooms. First in Germany, when the rehearsals for a play were cancelled, then in several rooms here in Palestine, until I was finally able to return to my own workroom in Haifa. I am somewhat astonished that I am so enthusiastic about this new project. I am working on it with unprecedented diligence, taking advantage of the only positive aspect of this 'house arrest', which is the abundance of free time and peace and quiet. Our next play will be a modern tragedy, unlike any other. So far I have written down lots of provisional ideas and I can't wait to try them out on stage with the actors and the rest of the company, whenever that becomes possible again.

**Are there any ideas, thoughts, quotes, art works or books.. you would like to share?**

I am not a fan of giving advice, but if I have to answer this question, it is as follows: by chance, I started rereading Homer and Ovid during the lockdown. I read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* again, and I leaf through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* every day while having a cup of coffee.

Now I think about it, I really hope that writers and artists will not throw themselves into this new epidemic too hastily and unthinkingly and work on it so as to produce a rapid response. I hope they will try to understand more profoundly the impact of the last few months on art and culture.