

H2 – Hebron: Conflictual Theatre

Camille Louis

H2 – Hebron: Conflictual Theatre is a commissioned text, that has unfolded as a conversation between Camille Louis and Winter Family. Winter Family is based in Paris. It consists of the musicians and theatre duo Ruth Rosenthal from Israel and Xavier Klaine from France. *H2 – Hebron*, presented at Black Box teater during the fall 2019 season, is their third documentary performance.

Camille Louis is a dramaturg, co-instigator of the international collective kom.post and a philosopher. Her research explores notably the intersection of art and politics and takes a variety of theatrical forms. Louis lectures at universities including Paris VII, Paris VIII and Rosario Bogota and art centres and festivals around the world, including Festival d'Avignon, Tanz im August in Berlin, The Moskow Biennale and MIR festival in Athens. Since 2016, she is associated dramaturg at the Maison du Spectacle Vivant, La Bellone, in Brussels, and in 2018–19 she is taking up this role at the Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers. She lives and works between Athens, Brussels and Paris.

This exchange between the two artists who make up Winter Family (Ruth Rosenthal and Xavier Klaine) and the philosopher and dramaturge Camille Louis did not take place as a live journalistic interview. Since all three people were in different parts of the world, the conversation was conducted via correspondence over a longer period of time, leading to more developed reflections. Being already deeply knowledgeable of their work and especially *H2 – Hebron*, Camille Louis opened the exchange with an initial analytical question that allowed the two artists to talk more about the issues and the process of this theatrical production. They then proceeded with verbal discussion, with Ruth noting key terms, and Xavier being responsible for transcribing everything; Ruth then reread Xavier's transcript, modified and added to it, and Xavier sent the whole package to Camille.

This gave rise to new questions, and the process resumed: sending, discussing, transcribing, correcting, and final drafting. This procedure of shared speech, for which Xavier had to assume the role of "scribe", explains the use of the third person when Ruth is involved and also, more than a singular or plural "I", highlights an almost permanent "we". This corresponds to the Winter Family's method of composition: the "dissensual" (non-consensual) collaboration that permits disagreement and complex negotiation prevails over a reassuring and pacifying consensus, thus a requirement of sensitivity and reasonableness that sharpens and intensifies the entire process.

CL — Even though it deals with a very specific situation – namely, H2, the zone in the Palestinian city of Hebron, administered by Israel – your theater production can't be seen as arising out of just a desire to inform or educate the viewer about what might be the “reality” of this complex locality. You don't ask “*informed experts*”, but instead “*form a shared experience*”. You enable the audience to experience this conflict zone in a sensitive way by plunging us into the conflicting nature of narratives that purport to describe the situation *as justly as possible*, and end up covering the entire scope of the obscene *injustice* that rules in the city. Thus it is not a question of “representing” the war by having clearly chosen – “for us but without us” – the right camp to support. Rather, it's a matter of putting ourselves directly in conflict with this plurality of narratives – those of the Palestinians, the settlers, the Israeli soldiers, and then the international activists – and the resulting deranged political machine that we no longer have any control over.

Since it seems you've never been concerned with creating an attractive new version to paste over all of the existing ones, nor to provide us with a new Truth, could we backtrack and discuss the original impetus behind this piece? In the process of creation, what prompted you to not only speak about H2 but to let it speak for itself in all its violence and terrifying absurdity? What is the driving force behind your intuition and – since intuition is called “a thought that arises from a shock” – for you who know the

region quite well, what was the shock triggered so strongly by this situation in Hebron?

WF — It's true that it all started with an intuition, with this shock that you refer to. Ruth re-established contact with a very good childhood friend who became religious and then a settler. She now lives in the most heavily fortified settlement, a citadel in the Palestinian city of Hebron, with her activist husband and their 11 children, “protected” by 40 Israeli soldiers day and night. She makes soaps and skin creams. Ruth went to visit her and she was shocked. The absurdity and violence of the situation in Hebron is shocking even for us, who know Palestine but don't learn about the Israeli occupation. The radicality of existences in Hebron is shocking. It's a radicality chosen in the exaltation on the part of the settlers, and by ideological and humanist conviction on the part of international observers and activists. It's a radicality suffered cruelly, violently and so unjustly by the Palestinian inhabitants and radicality suffered in another way, of course, by the young Israeli soldiers serving in occupied Palestine.

The H2 zone in Hebron is a microcosm of this Israeli occupation in Palestine. All the ingredients are there: the theft of Palestinian properties, the principles of separation, the soldiers and settlers who work together, and so on – but there's a major element that also exists in Hebron: the tourism of the occupation. Each day many tourist groups,

accompanied by their multilingual guides, meet up with each other, usually pro-Palestinian but also ultra-Zionist, to visit the H2 zone. They're politicized tourists – often politically engaged, certainly, but tourists. The grand scenario that results from all these presences is absolutely astonishing, confusing and nauseating. Everyone is nauseous in Hebron, except for the settlers who find their own existence beautiful and incredibly stimulating. Instead, we wanted to dive into this situation and be confronted with what makes us sick, by the vertigo aroused by all these words that need to be heard in all their contradiction.

CL — How did you go about encountering and prolonging this contradictory polyphony? One can imagine that, in an occupied territory, not all the voices are entitled to the same space of visibility, nor do they deserve, officially, the same level of attention. However, we, the audience, hear everything and that allows us to experience this same vertigo even though many of us have probably never been there.

WF — In the beginning, Ruth kept going back to Hebron to record her friend – and then her children, her husband, their settler friends ... A show was already emerging despite us (as a project, we would have rather focused on recording our third album) and we both continued the process by not remaining in speechless shock caused by this horrible area (and which really took hold of us) but going

even further to confront it. We decided to record the Palestinian neighbors with Ruth's friend and then, in ever wider concentric circles, the Palestinian inhabitants on both sides of the checkpoints, the Israeli military serving in the zone, the Palestinian leaders of Hebron, and then young Palestinian resistance fighters, former Israeli soldiers, repentant or otherwise, UN observers, members of NGOs, and the war-tourism guides who work in H2. As the months went by, this gave us about 500 pages of raw material. Which, without a doubt, doesn't constitute a theater piece as much as the starting point for a dissertation on geopolitics.

CL — Now, theory is neither what you intend to do nor what you are doing in this, within the framework of what is anything but didactic theater or a problem play. How did you go about "translating" this mass of information into a real sensitive and political experience? One cannot help associating this capacity of composition (and note that experience is precisely defined as a "composition of the relations between heterogeneous elements") to your own practice as musicians, because in your dramaturgy there is a capacity to work the language not only in what is conveyed as sense, as meaning, but also as a true *material of sensibility*. You interweave statements by taking into account rhythms, variations of temporality, necessary breaks that suddenly stop the flow of discourse and reassemble an image, a memory ... Can you go over this

whole process that leads from investigation to performance?

WF — We indeed began spending several months dealing with this mass of testimonies. First of all, we made the painful decision to arbitrarily remove the words that kept us away from the H2 zone itself. We concentrated solely on the route taken by the war tourist groups, leaving aside the testimony concerning the H1 zone (officially controlled by the Palestinian Authority) and all the words spoken about the conflict and the occupation in general. Out of that, we ended up with a version of 120 very coherent pages that was very consistent but still too long in our view; and that length was still blurring the dichotomy between occupier and occupied, which we did not want to do. So, over the course of months of reading aloud, we slowly eliminated a sentence here, an adjective there, taking an empirical approach, concentrating on the musicality and phrasing of Ruth. This is at the heart of our documentary work, which is totally “subjective, sensitive” – as Vincent Baudriller, the director of the Vidy Lausanne theater, once told us – but therefore highly objectionable from an academic and activist point of view. To each their own. We had the impression that we were clearing the space around the words that were most essential in our view, with a brush, like archeologists respecting the precious nature of the material, to finally arrive at a 30-page version spoken in one hour.

During this selection process, we quickly realized that there was a problem with the nature of the testimonies. The settlers are in Hebron in order to respond to a specific political project, an effective one; their historical discourse is well-argued since it constitutes the grounds of their presence in the H2 zone. The discourse of the Palestinians who we interviewed at length in the zone, if they are also conditioned due to the ubiquity of journalists, war tourists and observers, they themselves are subjected to the cruel presence of settlers and soldiers, and so their testimonies were more pithy, sensitive, and in response to an emergency situation.

We have respected this dichotomy obviously because it is quite indicative, but we also wanted to return to Hebron to record Palestinian leaders there who, in reaction to Israeli aggression, are also supported by solid archaeological research and historical evidence to justify the Palestinian presence in Hebron. The balance of power between occupier and occupied must also absolutely take into account, for us, the only presence on the set, that of an Israeli Jewish performer from Jerusalem, Ruth, who takes charge of all the stories and destabilizes the report in spite of ourselves. We tried to always be aware of this during the selection of testimonials and to never consider this an invisible detail. We know that we cannot detach ourselves from this identity, from the point of view, from our gaze above all, and from that of the spectator.

CL — But perhaps it is this concern that has made you so aptly conceive that toward which, without wishing to influence our *point of view*, you direct our view, our gaze. That is to say, not only Ruth's meandering but also what she's walking around: the model, an exact replica of the H2 zone printed in 3D. In my opinion, this makes it possible to be at the same time both in the vertigo of the flow of words but also very concretely anchored, brought back to the violent, "radical" materiality of the existences that shape (and are shaped by) stories; and in doing so, inscribe them in the materiality of the walls, and in the symbolic relationship to the monuments. We are constantly "between": between what is said by Ruth and what we see; between what is visible, rendered visible, and what underpins this visibility (the stories, the beliefs) and it is essential, so that we experience it in the tension that we feel right up to the end.

WF — In our working procedure, the model quickly became necessary as the central element that we needed to rely on. Because ultimately, the city is the only tangible element of Hebron. The only Truth observable by all is this dead coral, destroyed by the pollution of the occupation.

Using a 3D printed plastic model, by its nature cold and distant, allowed us to emphasize by contrast the mad passion of the discourses and stories that animate human beings in the H2 zone. And we relied on a barely perceptible, simplistic color code: emptied

Palestinian houses were transparent, settlements in white plastic, monuments in stone color, and military infrastructures were the color of concrete. This accurate and detailed model was made by Quentin Brichet, a Geneva-based prop master, based on records he made in H2.

The monologue delivered by Ruth, composed of several voices, is the city itself. She embodies Hebron through her various testimonies and does not seek to personify human beings. The city is witness to the madness that gnaws at it; giving voice to it also made it possible to make visible, in a very direct way, this question that continually obsesses Ruth (whether in our music duo or in "Jerusalem Cast Lead", one of our previous pieces): how the narrative chosen by individuals can influence existences and how, conversely, the personal choices of individuals influence the writing of a History. In Hebron, where the Tomb of Abraham is also the location of the Ibrahim Mosque, where each stone has such imbedded, contradictory stories, with such disastrous consequences for the Palestinian residents, where everyone relies on a massacre to justify their presence, we are at the heart of this dialectic. There is the famous *Rashomon*, which has always profoundly affected us: how can the same story be lived, perceived, felt, told so differently by different human beings? Because they are still human beings. Monsters do not exist.

Ruth constructs the model while reciting the

monologue, house by house, from the starting point of the tourist groups near the Tomb of the Patriarchs / Ibrahim Mosque to the terraces of olive trees of Tel Romeida, the end of the guided tour. This enabled us, from a dramaturgical point of view, to offer the public an anchor and a visual respite, without being totally lost by the rapid monologue, except when we decided to lose them completely.

This model is the only “image” that we exhibit on the set – with the exception of the video clip that we project, two thirds of the way into the show, which was prepared by a musician friend, Olivier Perola. We had asked him to come film H2 with his GoPro, like a Red Bull downhill mountain bike in slow motion, without any pathos. Screening this video allows the audience to finally get a sense of the scale, before going back into the testimonials, and it offers a “reading” of the zone from a different perspective. Suddenly it’s more incarnate.

For a long time, we considered the possibility of a montage of the often wonderful original voices, playing recordings of them during Ruth’s guided tour. But we eliminated this dramatic yet aesthetically effective option in order to preclude prejudices that in our view would have prevented opening up the presentation to the speech of all human beings, which to us is an essential element.

All this allowed us to have immense political responsibility in Ruth’s interpretative work. She relied on

the memories of our feelings when we took these testimonials, in order to translate them, as you put it, to the audience.

We then worked the monologue the way we still work our music and in particular Ruth’s spoken text in our songs, which is based on an almost Baroque phrasing, rubato, literally “to steal time”. Each intention or emotion is based on this defined phrasing, worked, and repeated in a systematic way. This rubato allows us to render the sensibilities of the characters of this sad and cruel scenario by avoiding an attempt at romantic interpretation that would be futile and indecent here, especially since, again, Ruth as an Israeli is, despite herself, a stakeholder in this catastrophe. All this in a global accelerando which itself relies on the sounds we recorded in the city during our visits: with the city surprisingly calm in the morning until the arrival of the tourist buses, the Israeli surveillance drones in the sky increasingly present over the course of the day, then the sound level of the Palestinian riots in the afternoon followed by the fierce and deafening Israeli repression 50 meters away from the tourist groups. Finally the visit ends at nightfall, and again everything is calm. “We can go back to Tel Aviv,” and leave all these people to their very radical fate. Julienne Rochereau’s stage lighting provides simple accompaniment to this day; in this case as well, we have refrained from a play of light and shadow that would have been aesthetically effective, thanks to the model, but which seemed totally out of place to us.

Finally there is the audio playback, just barely perceptible by the audience, developed in collaboration with sound engineers Sébastien Tondo and Anne Laurin. Its function is to imperceptibly support each person's testimony as spoken by Ruth, and to help the audience understand which group the people interviewed belong to, out of the four groups present in the area – Palestinian, settler, observer-activist, military – by projecting each of these groups systematically, barely louder, from the loudspeaker dedicated to that group in the four corners of the two seating stands.

CL — In this choice, I sense more than a “technical” resolution but, as always in your work, the form and the device are chosen to give a tangible and incarnate consistency to your project. Here, in this instance, it brings the conflict to life, the encounter of multiple voices that must live together, which “go together” without being in unison and which for us embody neither a favorable resolution nor the desirable reconciliation, but “dissensus” as the aesthetic engine of political liveliness.

WF — We are always interested in what “creaks” and doesn’t go together. Just as we don’t try to give our good version, we don’t try to reassure or make the audience feel guilty by assigning them, for example, the place of passive tourists. In spite of ourselves, we are all considered to be actors of these absurdities and political violence and that is why, if the spectators are taken in the piece as tourists, Ruth also places

herself in a position to embody all the guides: the Palestinians, the military, the settlers. She plays them in front of the war tourists who, in spite of themselves, are played by the spectators of the theater, who are taken to task, just as we are taken to task as soon as we arrive in Hebron. Since theatergoers are often seen as cultural tourists from the misery of others who will go for a drink, more or less with nausea, to the theater bar. A bit like taking the bus back to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem after spending a day in Hebron.

By doing this, we do not try to educate the viewer. We trust the audience. We don’t really like didactic spectacles, those that take by you the hand then grab you by the neck with the authority of a teacher and squeeze you harder and harder until you repeat your catechism lesson. It makes us want to go ballistic – and finally it pushed us to do *No World/FPLL*, a satirical theater piece that dealt with the European white cultural elite, ultra-connected and indignant. I believe that all this is frankly related to the fact that we are musicians, that our adolescent musical encounters were with punk, noise, metal, minimal musics, dark and violent. We prefer when it creaks. And people are intelligent. Music trusts its audience – it has no choice. We want our theater to trust its audience too. And then we don’t really like effective mechanisms. Neither when we record an album here and there, or when we end up doing a theater piece. Obviously this can lead to confusion, to misunderstandings, so it means that we are not precise enough. For this production, however,

people who know Hebron have seen our show (e.g. activists, Palestinians from Hebron) and they told us how much they were moved at our having immersed them in the H2 zone to such a degree. We try to affect people more than to educate them. To affect in the sense of feeling emotional situations and, in this case, to make the public feel what we felt when visiting H2 Hebron. Political emotions through the testimonies, physical emotions through the recorded sounds of the Israeli repression of Palestinian rioters and resists and then through the overwhelming heat that is provoked in the stands, which adds further suffering to this area of suffering; emotions in the interpretation of the characters we encounter via a solo performer. How can a 40-year-old Israeli artist living in Paris play, for even 5 seconds, the role of a Palestinian child begging in the deserted streets of Hebron because of the Israelis, without being horribly indecent? This question, like all of the ones that have motivated us from the start of the investigation, are left in plain view. It is really essential for us to always deconstruct the drama, by exposing the elements of our shows in an obvious, unadorned way: the testimonies, the sounds, the heat, the audience, the plastic model, the lights, the smoke of the grenades. Because we refuse to manipulate the audience in the emotional drama, because we do not believe in the theatrical pact. This is the somewhat contradictory issue of our work but it is what puts us to work.