

**ALISSAR
CARACALLA**

MIDSUMMER

NIGHT'S

DJINN

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**LORD, WHAT FOOLS
THESE MORTALS BE!**

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**LIVING
SHAKESPEARE**

A collection of essays.

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FOREWORD

CIARÁN

DEVANE

What does it mean to be ‘moved’ by Shakespeare? Moved to emotion? Moved to change your views? If you are a dancer, it means of course movement, transposing Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry into a language beyond words.

Lebanese choreographer, Alissar Caracalla, believes Shakespeare’s works share with dance the quality of universality, a belief she illustrates here through the remarkable story of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* choreographed in the great cedar forest of Chouf during a summer of conflict in Beirut.

Caracalla’s experience is deeply rooted in the recent history of her country. In her essay *A Midsummer Night’s Djinn: ‘Lord, what fools these mortals be!’* she describes the attraction and connection she feels to a play in which the humans are helpless before the whims of fairies Oberon and Puck.

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare’s continuing relevance to today’s burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death.

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I ALWAYS

FEEL

SHAKESPEARE

CAN BE

DANCED

7

INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE

IN LEBANON

Shakespeare's plays have had a presence on the Arab stage since at least the late nineteenth century, when Syrian and Lebanese immigrants to Egypt performed French-language adaptations of Shakespeare — including *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* — to audiences in Cairo. Egypt continued to be the hotbed of Arab Shakespeare production throughout the early twentieth century, and later became the centre of film production of Shakespeare's plays in colloquial Arabic. However, Arabic translations of Shakespeare circulated throughout the wider region, and, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, a large number of Arab-language adaptations of Shakespeare have appeared in countries including Morocco, Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia, and Lebanon.

Abdel-Halim Caracalla, founder of the Caracalla Dance Theatre, produced two ballets based on Shakespeare plays in Lebanon, both of which went on to tour internationally. The first of these was *Black Tents* (based on *Romeo and Juliet*) in 1978. The second, which featured his daughter, Alissar Caracalla, and is the subject of this essay, was an *Oriental Night's Dream* (1990), his version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespearean productions continue to attract audiences throughout the Arab region. For the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival, several Arab Shakespeare productions were performed in Britain, including a Palestinian *Richard II*, an Iraqi adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and a Tunisian version of *Macbeth*.

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DJINN: 'LORD, WHAT FOOLS THESE MORTALS BE!'

by *Alissar Caracalla*

Chouf forest is majestic. Mysterious. It's alive at night; it meditates throughout the day. It leads you from one path to the next, it allows you to discover the unknown, it allows you to dream, to feel young again below the majestic trees. It puts you in your place, and its vastness can scare you. Chouf is the heartland of the Druze community in Lebanon. Despite the civil war, Chouf forest and the magnificent Beiteddine Palace escaped destruction. Today the Palace, preserved as it was in the Ottoman era, is home to the Beiteddine International Festival, a platform for the performing arts and Chouf forest is one of two great cedar forests which remain in Lebanon, the symbol of our country. For Shakespeare, the forest is a place of exploration and imagination. Characters go to the forest to reinvent themselves. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it is the heart of the play, a place of magical transformation. Shakespeare uses the forest to bring 'playfulness' into the story – magic, imagination, transformation – what better place, then, to recreate our *Midsummer Night's Dream*, than Chouf forest?

My story starts many years ago during a summer visit back to Lebanon. The civil war in Lebanon began when I was born and made me a foreigner in my own country as I went to live abroad. But from early childhood through school and on through university, I would return to Lebanon for the summer. My 'midsummer night's dream' took place when I returned to work with Abdel-Halim Caracalla – my father, my teacher, my hero – as his apprentice at the Caracalla Dance Theatre. At this time Beirut was divided east and west, the Bekaa Valley was under Syrian occupation and very few areas in the country seemed safe. Within a few weeks of my arrival the situation deteriorated; the country seemed to crumble. And – for an undergraduate studying in the US this was life-changing – the airport closed. Life as we knew it, ceased.

The Caracalla Dance Theatre is like a family; a 'safe house' for the artist. Some company members had lost family during the war, however they stayed with Caracalla throughout and the company became part of their identity. During those difficult times we were one of the few entities in Lebanon which had Christians and Muslims under the same roof. My father started the company in 1968 – he had a passion for the arts and a vision for the country. Caracalla Dance Theatre raised the flag of peace and unity and was recognised within the country for that. We were referred to as the 'Ambassadors of Lebanon'.

Title 'Lord, What Fools these mortals be!'
from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 3, Scene 2

That summer, when the situation in Beirut deteriorated and bombs were falling left and right, we had no choice but to relocate together as a company. Nora Jumblatt, a friend, a visionary and humanitarian, wife of the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, generously offered us refuge in a monastery situated near Beiteddine Palace and Chouf forest, a region unaffected by that summer's conflict. Only half an hour's drive from Beirut, this was another world.

When we arrived there we had no plans: we simply existed day to day. My father decided to use this time to create a new production in collaboration with the Beiteddine Festival, transforming a time of turmoil into a time of creativity. And so we started work on the adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That summer, our city of Athens was Beirut, and the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was Chouf forest, our playground. Shakespeare's characters became our heroes, the fairies and the tangled love stories kept our spirits up. The airport was closed and I was thinking, will I ever leave here? But we were all trapped by the war, and we found ourselves in the shoes of the hapless character Bottom when he is warned by the Fairy Queen Titania that he cannot leave:

'Out of this wood do not desire to go.
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.'¹

Chouf forest was our piece of heaven. We went into the forest for our morning dance classes and the trees towered over us. We spent whole days under the trees, which became our inspiration for the fairies. The different colours, the shades of trees, the sun, the shapes of small rocks, nature: all influenced the costume designs. The 'djinni' costumes emerged from the trees. Even the sound that we could hear there – the sound of silence – created movements and moods for our production. Artists mingled together, forgetting about the war, exploring the characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and bringing them to life in a dance coloured by the forest setting.

Dance features in Shakespeare's play as normal fairy behaviour and court entertainment. Oberon, for example, says of Titania:

'There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight.'²

But for me the relationship between Shakespeare and dance is far deeper. I believe Shakespeare speaks a universal language that touches upon every topic, emotion, and state of mind, culture, race and religion. Dance is also a universal language that sweeps away barriers of experience. I always feel Shakespeare can be danced. *Romeo and Juliet*, the three witches of *Macbeth*, the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and many other characters: they all evoke dance and can be evoked by dance. To transform Shakespeare's works into dance, you find the thread of the narration and then 'translate' this: narrate

¹ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 3, Scene 1

² *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2, Scene 1

it into the body. Words become movements. Just as Shakespeare can be translated into every language his works can also translate into every art form, into dance, into a painting, into a musical score.

For the Caracalla company there was an additional challenge: we wanted to adapt Shakespeare for our region. We wanted to create an *Oriental Night's Dream* – with our costumes, our music, our identity. We were claiming Shakespeare for the world! My father loves Shakespeare, recognising his voice in Lebanon. There are many characters here which you find in Shakespeare. My father first adapted Shakespeare when I was just a little child, locating the feisty Kate and domineering Petruccio of *The Taming of the Shrew* on the streets of Lebanon. He has this theory that in Shakespeare's 'missing years' he was in the Middle East. When we performed our *Oriental Night's Dream* in Beiteddine Palace somehow Lebanon's forest was transformed into 'the forest outside Athens'. Lebanon became a Shakespearean space.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare invites you to laugh at yourself. That love triangle – more like a love square! – between Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius is universal. There are 2000 students at my dance school in Beirut and when I speak to them they tell me this simple story, I love him, he loves someone else. It is present everywhere; no one learns anything. Puck, the master of ceremonies, glories in the chaos he creates:

Then will two at once woo one;
That must needs be sport alone.
And those things do best please me
That befall preposterously.³

The fairies Oberon and Puck have complete mastery over the human lovers in the forest. Having bewitched them, Puck says:

'Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be!'⁴

But while I see the confusion that results in my dance school today, for us Lebanese this is more profound. The helplessness of Hermia and Helen, Demetrius and Lysander – and even Titania – against Oberon and Puck's fairy power, expresses our sense of historical helplessness against external forces. In the 1990's, we were so overcome by what was happening. Nothing was by choice. We had no control at all from one political party or the other. For centuries, Lebanon has been occupied: the Ottomans, the French and now who knows who is controlling us. We feel we are toys in the game of the world. If we were to re-do this play today, we might show how we feel as people in this region – and now perhaps across the world – without control. We are just playthings for the djinn – politicians, extremists, media – external forces which we interrupt and disrupt our lives, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!'.⁵

³⁻⁵ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 3, Scene 2

Take Bottom, he is the 'fool' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there to make everybody laugh. Which passage best evokes his 'preposterousness' (to quote Puck)? The fairies give him a donkey's head and then Titania falls in love with him after another piece of fairy magic is performed – could there be any more ludicrous turn of events? Bottom is completely helpless before the forces that turn him into comic spectacle. It all hinges on a petty dispute in the fairy realm – it's funny, but it also shows capricious forces playing on us. We have taken that insight into all our productions. Whatever we do, we introduce a Shakespearean fool. However serious the production, we have a clumsy comic character who comes onto the stage and reminds us of the comedy of life, the folly of humanity.

No character in Shakespeare connects with Lebanon more powerfully than the fairies. Our folklore is steeped with stories of the djinn and stories of the night, told to us at bedtime by our grandmothers, buried in our earliest memories. Djinn tales are supposed to scare children to stop them from venturing into the unknown. Do not come home after dark: the djinn come out at night to play... Add romance into the mix and you have a classic Lebanese story. Traditional families used to arrange the suitors for the sake of the family – very similar to Hermia's experiences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – and those days if you rejected the family choice and fell in love with someone else, people would say you were haunted by the djinn.

I remember all those years ago that when the airport eventually opened my dream was suddenly over. I had to return to my studies in the States, even though the production was incomplete. I got on the plane back to my 'normal life' and only saw the finished production when *Oriental Night's Dream* opened at the Beiteddine International Festival. At the end, my father had choreographed the wedding as a traditional Lebanese wedding; it was so beautiful – bringing Shakespeare's peaceful resolution from chaos and comedy into a Lebanese context. The fairy dances were filmed in Chouf forest and projected onto the stage. When Beiteddine Palace opened its royal gates we felt that the world came to Beiteddine through the universal message of Shakespeare. Our performance announced the return of peace to Lebanon.

This experience was the start of my career as a choreographer. The civil war did not stop me from exploring my dreams and creativity; it triggered a yearning to create no matter what, and perhaps to see life as a comedy in the midst of the chaos and corruption. The pressure of war in Lebanon made us more determined to dream – to dream of the life we wanted to live, to express ourselves and to create our own reality. That summer I learned about politics, religion, war and turmoil. It was a crash course in the harshness of life which shifted my reality and made me who I am today.

Turmoil has kidnapped our society, yes that's the word: kidnapped. But creativity can change your reality too. Our latest production at the Baalbeck International Festival is taking place in the magnificent ruins of Baalbeck's Temple of Bacchus, the most spectacular Roman temple in the region. Baalbeck is a majestic cultural centre with 8000 years of heritage, and for us a family home, my father's birthplace. In Baalbeck today there is conflict on every side, and extremists within an hour's drive. One could easily feel insecure. Our performance there is a world premiere which celebrates 60 years of this great festival, a symbol of peace which reclaims the region from violence and fear. When we open any festival it is a healing process, it means the roads are safe, the villages are safe, the local businesses thrive, the country comes to life. This is Lebanon's history and pride, it's not just about the performance: it's about the people. We never want to give up on hope: we refuse to. Creativity is our means to change reality. We have learned to live through our creativity and through our creativity we dream of a better world.

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CREATIVITY

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ABOUT THE WRITER ALISSAR CARACALLA



Alissar Caracalla is one of the Middle East's leading independent choreographers, championing dance that blends oriental identity with modern techniques.

Born in Lebanon, she studied in London and Los Angeles, and graduated with an MFA from UCLA.

Upon her return to Lebanon, Alissar Caracalla founded the Caracalla Dance School, a dance institution home to over 1,500 students teaching an array of dance styles.

Her mission is to continue her work as a choreographer with the Caracalla Dance Theatre, a company founded by her father and mentor A.H. Caracalla.

Her education in the West, mixed in with her experience with the Caracalla Dance Theatre, has allowed her to become a dance figure in the Middle East, making dance more accepted. She has further popularised her distinctive style of dance as Creative Director of the high profile reality TV show *Star Academy Middle East Edition*, as well as in the role of lead judge on the popular TV show, *So You Think You Can Dance*.



The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

Living Shakespeare is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



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