

## "BADKE or Ethnography on the Stage"

Hasan Isikli<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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Badke is a performance which combines the dance forms of dabke; a traditional Palestinian folk dance with the diverse urban styles. Beyond of any arguments about Palestinian culture and western audience's Euro-central perception which may cause a complex issue in the representation or else, the mixed style which is pretended to be 'just a feel-good performance', Badke reveals many layers as it is unfolded on the stage. The aim of this article is to analyse how Badke manages an ethnography of Palestinian culture, specifically the festivities with the dance medium. While that mixed dance style is constructed to transfer not simply the structure but also the emotions of the festivities; joy and madness, it prevents to fall from an ethnographic dance into the commodification of a Palestinian culture. Moreover, the performance catches an intersection of heterotopia between its content; the festivities and its format; the stage. Finally, while it associates the ethnic elements with modern dance, hip hop, circus and capoeira that the westerner spectator is familiar, it creates a dialogue between the stranger (other) and familiar (common).

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**Keywords:** Badke, Palestine, Festivity, Ethnography, Dance, Heterotopia

### 1. Introduction

On the printed electronic ticket it is written "Feel-good mix van Palestijnse volksdans. Hedendaagse dans, hiphop en circus. Een heerlijk wervelende voorstelling." (Feel-good mix of Palestinian folk dance. Contemporary dance, hip hop and circus. A delightfully dazzling performance). I discovered this text after a few days of performance laying out creased on the table. I never read the crowd of advertisements and other announcements on the electronic tickets. I print out hastily and come last minute to the venue. This time, maktoub (fate) was astonishing; without planning, I had opportunity to watch the performance of Badke<sup>1</sup> two times, once in Koninklijk Vlaamse Schouwburg (KVS) (Royal Flemish Theatre), Brussels and four days later in Vooruit [Culture Centre], Ghent. My first impression was that some west European dramaturges discovered the festivity and daily life entertainment in Palestine along their travel to Mediterranean Basin. However, deeper than an experimental folkloric dance, while the performance unfolded with segments, it revealed an intersection of ethnography and performing art. In the context of urban geography, Palestine is a kind of grey zone in Mediterranean Sea which is habitually a destination for the summer; sea and sun tourism with an aspect of a lieu de memoire to study the previous civilisations. Regarding to this structure, Palestine connotes territorial conflicts rather than the memories of the past decorated with soft bright blue and turquoise sea, pale ochre coast washed by the sharp sunlight. When the spectators sat on their seats, they were infused from the beginning by the high rhythm of the Palestinian pop music with the arrangement of the deep sounds that increased between the sequences. The performance vibrated the theatre halls with a carnivalesque approach; within the darkness of foolish and the enjoyment of that culture and it provoked the spectator to review its own positioning. As De Cauter and Dehaene (2008) postulate, the space of stage became suddenly from fictive to real.

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<sup>1</sup>Affiliation: Doctoral Researcher of Arts, University of Ghent Department of Art, Music and Theater Sciences, Kwaadham 59, 9000 Ghent Belgium.  
E Mail: [hasan.isikli@ugent.be](mailto:hasan.isikli@ugent.be), Telephone: +32 499 24 51 64

Without using any decorative objects or let say authentic elements, the dancers reflected the figures from the weddings (rural area), modern dance, hip hop (urban) and daily life entertainment like making a band around of water gallon, hitting on it for tempo, singing and laughing. In one hand, reflecting the festivity of Palestinian culture on the stage seems a challenge. The eclectic dance construction and a remix of local music might have risked to fall into 'naive and kitsch cultural reproduction'. The reflection of a culture's festivity depends on predominantly to the dancers who were gathering for dabke<sup>2</sup> and decomposing into small autonomous groups with a dialogue of the music supplied by the changing lights and smokes on the stage. They used only their body and small supplying elements like the red scarfs. On the other hand, the position of western and westernized spectators become questioning regarding to represent the festivity of another culture. Van der Horst (2010) argues that the gaze of different culture may entail itself into a consumption object which may detach the cultural facts from its habitat and convert to a consumable elements. This article aims to analyse the layers of performance Badke embodying an ethnographic storytelling between the fictive construction and the real life on the stage which shifts similarly between fictive and real space. While the entire performance postulates a creative approach both the study of culture made by the social scientists with the visual artists and the representation mediums alternative to conventional ones such as the book, documentary and comics, the eclectic dance format emphasizes on the capacity of the performance which is able to use the stage as an object of heterotopia with the interpretation of festivity either simultaneously or following with the fragments.

## 2. Storytelling with Dance

### 2.1. The portrait of Badke

Both in KVS and Vooruit the performance followed a ritualistic approach. In the beginning the stage is dark and it is sounded only the calm and repetitive steps hitting on the ground. Gradually the light comes and the dancers are in the classical posture of dabke; a line in which the arms are on shoulders similar to sirtaki in Greece and halay in Turkey. While the dancers reinterpret dabke, the stage remains an entire surface. The following choreographies are decomposed: the dancers move separately either alone or in small groups between two and five. While a group or a dancer comes to the foreground with their movement, others supply them with a traditional semicircle form of dabke. The darkness and deep, calm sounds with standing bodies replace to the high rhythmmed constantly changing dance sequences. Parallel to this, the music varies between the club's deep sounds and kitsch wedding hall songs fostered by the singer. Palestinian young dancers reflect the dance forms attributed to the young worldwide population. The sources vary and come from beyond of the seas and oceans like Modern dance; Europe or capoeira; South America. By this view, while each dancer mixes its own style, one smiles and derives own pleasure and 'I-experience' (Ivanov, 1993) in the collective picture. Dabke is a traditional dance which is considered holy among the Palestinians. It is connected tightly with the wedding and similar community festivities in which 'mahalle' gathers. This word which refers to the neighbourhood connotes also the social and physical environment of the individuals. Like in a wedding, the dancers share the same space and moment while they enjoy in their uniqueness with a common cultural motif.

Naturally, the festivities don't consist of the wedding. The dancers reflect other aspect of life compiling with the forms of dabke. First one is the daily life entertainment, second the death. Both ends by generating two faces of life which is acted in the rituals and festivities, precisely hereby the performance is equivalent of carnival notion. In addition to this, Palestine reality in which the festivities following the conflicts might be accounted on a parallel structure to this concept. If the dance sequences are analysed with a scrutinize view, firstly some examples from the daily life can be captured. While a common entertainment is represented with among the young subjects playing capoeira and hip hop returning back dynamically to the dabke, there is 'electricity cut': Suddenly music stops, it becomes dark. The folly dance is suspended. The dancers are frozen in their place without any movement by inhaling deeply –after such a high rhythmmed dance perhaps it is not a representation figure but only the nature of their body, then slowly they move and gather around of water service which is seen usually at the backstage. They drink water, a male dancer takes one empty water carboy in his hands, reverse it and plays like a drum. The tension of silence is broken and the carboy-tambour's sound diffuses to the hall. The dancers relax, laugh and they make some sounds signifying their familiarity. It looks like a scene from a 'mahalle' in a Palestinian city where the young people gather in the evening to entertain. Subsequent takes give impression of a game: again by smiling or laughing face, the dancers make the semicircle of dabke. They surround a male dancer who transforms his costume to a zenne<sup>3</sup>. Not only in the dance, but zenne is a character that is seen in puppet and improvisation theatre of Ottoman Empire. (Kudret, 2005) Depending on this background, the male dancer adopts a sort of 'play of the play' being a zenne who plays a woman with a long skirt but remaining some forms of hip hop in his dance. Although the reference of 'zenne' is there, contradictorily he doesn't reflect conventional sexually provocative figures of a zenne.

By this 'play of the play' in which the dancer takes a pinch from the past, he associates that oriental gender role playing with "le monde à l'envers"<sup>4</sup> of European carnivals such as Aalst carnival that the local men become Jeannette for one day with an exaggerated women costumes. Another example of carnival(esque) is the 'sott' (fou or parvo in different cultures). After the 'electricity cut' the performance takes its own high rhythm with the contrast of figures between the sequences. While the deconstruction and reconstruction of dabke, the dancers take solo figures in the deconstruction parts. Similar to a parade in which the citizens are interacted with the fools, the spectators become in the role 'citizens' who gaze and are empowered by the challenge on the stage. A red dressed female dancer makes elastic movements separated from the group, two male dancers make acrobatic movements of capoeira jumping on the air, a trio make some circus choreography. In this crowd of deconstructed dabke, a male dancer begins to play the head frantically. He makes short movements, then these movements become sharper and extend to his body. He sits down and makes the gestures as if he wants to get rid of something. Maria José Palla (1999) analyses the carnival notion through the history. In her writing, she assumes that the carnival is the spectacle of the city and the moment of gaze is like on the stage: "Spectacle, par conséquent, le Carnaval donne à voir et se donne à voir." (Spectacle as a consequence, the carnival gives [an occasion] to see and it gives themselves [of the participants] to see)(p. 165, 1999) Ping-Ann Addo, (2009) who reviews a literature of the festivities in three different locations reveals similar assumptions reclining to a selection of the theorists:

"There are also anthropological approaches which codify ritual as an aspect of theatre, such as that of Richard Schechner (2003, Performance Theory) who has tended to pursue in-depth examinations of performance as ritual while emphasizing its repetitive, intensifying and liberating aspects. (...) In modern festivals -defined as organized sets of acts performed to commemorate an event, person, identity of the performers- audiences and performers often coincide in ritualized spectacle. (...) Carnivals are sites that centralize the fantastical, other-worldly, deified or otherwise marginal (if powerful) beings into contemporary reality." By this piece, Addo, gives a key to the viewer to comprehend better the concept of Badke. According to her, whatever the location and the context is, the festivities are the reflection of a community in which the fantasies, desires and fears emerge. Moreover, the modern performances who seem to be detached from traditional settings remain the ritualistic part on the stage with the repetitions and the reflexivity of the mentioned culture. Badke dancers expose a diversity unfolding their common ground. By this, they implicate their agency coherent with carnivalesque concept. By giving examples from Geertz (1980, Negara) and Cosentino (2004, "My Heart Don't Stop:" Haiti, The Carnival State) Addo underlines that the carnivals contain the themes of ambiguity -like playing with the gender codes, and these are the moments of ambivalence when "they become a context for temporarily revealing identities hidden throughout the rest of the year". (Addo, 2009) Lastly, the sequence of death might be also associated with the carnival. The dancers hold a line in front of the stage and continue to their individual dances. A male dancer makes his hand a revolver and he 'kills' one by one other dancers. In the end he kills himself and falls on the ground like others. The theme of death is a part of traditional carnival. The winter is dead and the spring is called with the bells and dances like les Gilles in Binche Carnival.

These dance sequences illustrate the foulness, in other words the fantastic and other-worldly construction of carnival. Palla (1999) explains that the reason for making the carnival the moments of fool is to play a mirror game with oneself. It is an open spectacle that one laughs to oneself and reverse the reality. The fool is the main participant of the carnival. He plays with his identity and creates a game between reality and its reverse. In this context, Badke dancers might be seem as the fools of the performance first on the stage against to the spectator, second as they are themselves Palestinian, they become the fools of their community. Hence, they associate the 'Feel Good' moment which is reverse of actual situation in Palestine to the carnival being the reverse of dull fast period.

## 2.2. Commodification of the Local Festivities

As Addo (2009) mentions, many carnivals and local festivities have become a part of city branding in which the cultural components are consumed. The visitors who are the outsider spectators, gaze and experience the 'other'. Considering that Palestine is a grey zone of the Mediterranean region, it mustn't be a coincidence to share the festivities of its culture instead of transferring the conflict as an international broadcast does. One reason might be revealed as, Palestine is tried to be more visible in the western scene. However, the performance doesn't offer a picture of how contemporary Palestinian people entertain during daily life and the festivities.

Apparently, it is not the case a representation of the last theory of the performing arts in Palestine elite milieu. Hence, it concerns not a carnival issue but a carnivalesque. A reason might lie on reversing the image of Palestine identity which is again appropriate to the context of carnivalesque. If there are still local elements, does Badke entail a commodification of the locality? Firstly, the performance consists of many layers which reveal the carnivalesque elements. Indeed, the dancers don't wear traditional dance costumes. Returning back their 'fool' positioning, Palla (1999) defines the latter as: "The fool worries, especially the possessed, raging, furious, dirty, dressed in rags, taken frenzy lover suspicion therefore all the vices and all the excess; the voila relegated to a corner of the house or in an isolated safe" (1999, p. 167) Regarding to this example, the dancers are not the figures of neither a traditional dance nor a contemporary dance that most of the time dancer might be naked or dressed with very simplified costumes. Different from the traditional and modern rituals, they have casual elegant outfits as if they go to a party which is again connected with the local entertainment culture of the location. Similar to the Palla's definition, the dancers become 'dirty' during the performance. Their shirts become wet because of the sweat. This image of sweated shirts might be construed as a visual of 'fool' an energy that a carnival reveals in a city. Secondly, if the stage is considered as an interactive graphic layout, it cannot be affirmed that Badke reproduces the local culture or it represents a unique composition of for example 'the festivities among the young citizens of Ramallah'. Both visually and acting, the dancers assume their autonomy. As Addo proposes, they are the subjects of carnivalesque that they accentuate their agency behind their 'Badke' carnival's mask. They have different artistic background and interest. They don't hesitate to show it on the stage while they discover to reconstruct a habitual element; dabke. Hence, the performance approach might be more determined as a new making sense process compiling familiar but differentiated elements and make a new eclectic layout.

Lastly, concerning the commodification of the cultural facts, Badke doesn't dependently consume the Palestine's festivities because in each sequence although the local festivity moments are reflected by palestinian dancers themselves, they don't construct a representation of the locality. While they have their local dance forms as a common ground each one expresses one self apt to the personality and the dance background. Hence they create an urban intercultural dialogue on the scene. The dabke figures, as it is mentioned above are unfolded with the capoeira, circus, hip hop and even modern dance figures. This dialogue creates not a consumption but as they imply, a connection of a isolated territory with the world. In this perspective, the entire performance becomes a production of an urban culture with the familiar globalized elements and less known local ones. This sort of 'glocal' attitude seems to gain indeed a connection and manages to avoid to make any cultural element fall into the commodification.

### 2.3. Dance as a Medium

Badke is affiliated with the ethnography. The viewer experiences the festivity culture of 'the other' from weddings to some casual life entertainment in a carnivalesque form . If Badke is deemed to be an intersection of ethnography and the art, then why to tell the story of a culture with the dance medium? In the context of graphic, or let employ the word visuality with a more extended connotations, dance is predominantly a sign system like the visual communication design productions. It helps to codify the knowledge and share among the community. Second step, it contributes to transfer the knowledge to the next generations. A toilet sign for the public space indicates stably abstracted man and woman's bodies in different scales on two dimensional layout. Furthermore, it is an artefact which signifies its function of space and later contains some knowledge about the life style of the location where it was used. Dance is distinguished from other visual sign systems from this point. It can be transferred with the participation and as Palla emphasizes involvement of the participant rather than a limited dialogue of gazer and the viewed object. In addition to these features, dance as a medium is not stable and concerns the series of movement. Therefore while the participant is involved into the dance, the cultural codes which are embedded into the movements are transferred to the body and followingly to the mind. The movements which carries the life form of that culture are then in the memory of the participant. Because of its active involvement and opportunity of sharing with a group, dance format is often used in the festivities and carnivals rather than a film which has got a tremendous potential to address to the mass. A film or an animation, specifically like *Avatar: the Last Air Bender* (2005, Nickelodeon Production) which contains asian referred dance and martial arts may affect the spectator. It may project the dance scenes of a community from past or it provides a discovery of a less known culture. It may harness a nexus between a lost or invisible local culture in the metropolitan city scale where a crowd of information surrounds constantly the inhabitants and the visitors. However the lack of the participant's body in the action may have less impact to create to conceive the codes and to feel a part of the community.

Moreover, the film and animation mediums which are also two dimensional storytelling forms like graphic signs and there is an interruption of the materials like the book, paper size of an illustration with the screen, camera and final cut of a film. Before being filtered by the participant's perception, the film director or in the case of an illustration book, the illustrator may manipulate the story regarding to the desired flow. It means some parts might be accentuated whereas other parts might be neglected or skipped. One more reason to comprehend the use of dance to interpret a locality's festivities is that dance is composed within the community, it carries naturally a longer connection with the festivity concept. Regarding to this connection, the latter remains more sustainable than other mediums to transfer especially the dance moments in which the dancers may spontaneously evolve their choreography within the flow of the movements. They interact with their inner questions, with each other, the dramaturges and the spectators. If it concerns to share an interaction of culture while diverse dance forms are evolved, any other mediator between the dancers and the spectators would lose the liveness of the dance's essential structure.

### **3. Returning Back to Heterotopia**

The notion of heterotopia which can be identified as the place which are hidden, penetrable but not always allowed during the daily life overlaps interestingly on Badke not only with its content but also with its context of the place on the stage that the content is told. If firstly the content is argued, the moment of festivities and the happening of carnivalesque is tightly related with heterotopia. The ethnography which is illustrated in front of the spectator focuses on a local culture's unique moments of out of daily life. Similar to other cultures, the festivities may not happen in the intimacy of home or market place which is already occupied by some functions. The spaces which remain in between the work and the daily actions of life become the meeting point for the community and sometimes like an old monument or a park which seem to be less connected but which are still common space adopt the role of humans' otherness: the fool, the character who is out of the regulation of home and work, who is other side of the mirror, as Palla postulates the dirty and reverse of the habitual form of concerning culture. This other place where the people still meet becomes a ground to share the moments of 'fool'. According to the performance there is not a tangible clue of that third place, presumably it can be assumed to be in the 'mahalle'; the space where the community circulates and gathers for diverse occasions.

Above it is already revealed that the heterotopian theoreticians assume the stage as an heterotopia. (De Caeter and Dehaene, 2008) It has merely a fuitive characteristic. It functions out of daily life like a part of an art festival's venue. It host a constructed actions which are fictive like theatre and dance performances. Addo, who argues that the carnivals are the spectacle of the city, turns her discourse to the performances assigning them as the rituals of the modern societies. Badke, as a case doesn't create a mimesis of the locality but emphasizes the fuitive character of the stage while the dance is evolved. Firstly there is any setting or costume giving reference to the Palestinian culture. The stage is 'naked'; it remains a stage. However, inside of this conscious simplicity the stage is produced in itself. Backstage which is the 'other' of the stage is represented on the stage itself. Instead of going to the backstage, the artists step back to the deepness of the stage and they gather around of water carboys to drink some water and to take a rest. When they don't dance they are as if in a rehearsal or almost in the backstage with an exception that they are still gazed by the spectators. A similarity of the content can be observed in this encountering of stage and backstage. There is a contrast between the sequences of 'death' that the artists are shot and lie down or they are stable with the sequences of 'live' when the dancers perform their mix dance with the high rythm. Parallel to these sequences, the backstage where the artists gather but hidden by the spectators is embedded into the stage, like associate the intimacy in the market place. The invisible one becomes visible whereas the visible one remains visible and generates a unifying composition based on the contrast like the carnival which happen in the regular spaces like the streets and the main square which is the market place of the city. Thus without a concrete division the fuitiveness of the stage as an heterotopia element is combined with the fool of carnival which is referred in the reconstruction of contemporary festivities in Palestine.

### **4. Conclusion**

As a conclusion, Badke embodies an ethnography of Palestine's festivity culture with multiple layers. Because of the political and geographical situation of the region, the content and the medium give reference to the carnivalesque and heterotopia notions.

In fact, dance which has been utilized in the rituals is a tool to transfer the local culture which clusters firstly the layer of the festivity understanding in which dance has a crucial role to enjoy and gather the community. Then the movements composing the dance codify that culture like the sign system and illustration asserting a function of expression. Inside of this cluster, the expressions hold the memory of the concerning culture. While Badke uses again dance to transmit the dance moments of the Palestinian festivities, it gives space to the dancers who combine their common ground, the traditional dabke dance with the globalized dance forms like modern dance, capoeira, hip hop and circus that they express themselves in their own festivities and daily life practices. Hence there are two aspects from this composition. One, the community identity faces with the agency concept that is seen often today in the urban zones. Similar to the festivities, rituals and carnivalesque concept the indigenous dancers reconstruct their local identity while they discover and share their personal taste of festivity. Second, related to this reconstruction, Palestine which has negative connotations in the collective memory and is isolated from other geographies is connected with the eclectic dance forms which reform constantly on the stage. Thirdly, regarding to the dialogue of individual and the community and local and global the performance manages to fall into the trap of making the local festivity a commodification of a culture.

Upon these layers which embrace each other, the content of carnivalesque festivity moments and the way that stage is used are associated with Heterotopia concept, because firstly the carnivalesque approach emphasizes the out of daily life and the otherness of the individuals and the locality recline the identification of Foucault who considers festivals and festival venues as heterotopias. Moreover, the stage's heterotopian feature is not denied; the dancers bring 'the other' of the stage, the backstage in front of the spectators. Regarding from this construction and seeing the desire of the dancers merging on the surface gazed by the Westerner spectator Badke can be considered as an ethnographic study of Palestine with dance medium. Without making itself a consumption production, it winks an eye to the cultural memory in which the carnivalesque moments of Mediterranean culture are unfolded. The traumas are implicitly spreaded between the high urban rhythm of hip hop and modern dance. The desire of being connected reveals the new code embedded into the dance moments of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern festivities. As Van der Horst observed already in the ethnic festivals in Holland, each local culture is being blended with the global trends and it has been producing new multicultural layers. In the context of carnivalesque and festivities, the phenomena such as hip hop and capoeira create different resonations among the new generation's identity construction and the new eclectic dance forms will involve in the dialogue assuming one's own locality with the connection of 'the other' which differs obviously in each positioning either westerner or oriental.

### Notes

1. Badke; the performance is a creation of Koen Augustijnen, Rosalba Torres Guerrero and Hildegard De Vuyst, created and performed with Samaa Wakim, Ashtar Muallem, Fadi Zumord, Maali Hamdan, Mohammed Smahneh, Samir Samahneh, Atta Khattab, Yazan Iwizat, Salma Ataya, Farah Saleh, produced by KVS, Les ballets C de la B and A.M. Qattan Foundation
2. Dabke is the name of traditional folkloric dance which is asserted to be very popular in Middle East.
3. Zenne is one of the titles of traditional male dancers wearing female costumes who dance in the Middle Eastern festivities.
4. See the exposition of "Le Monde à l'Envers" in Binche, Belgium:  
<http://www.museedumasque.be/fr/page.php?pageId=612> (last access: March 23 2015)

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### Useful Links

Badke, an overview of the performance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMmjr8deHis>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YW82PVk2Uqk>

<http://www.kvs.be/fr/productions/badke>

<http://m.lesballscdela.be/en/projects/in-collaboration-with/badke-kvs-a-m-qattan-found/credits/>

The Publications about Badke in the Media:

<http://www.degrotepost.be/e469/badke-14>

<http://mad.lesoir.be/scenes/76998-badke/>

<http://www.ruedutheatre.eu/article/2282/badke/?symfony=62f8c107e0bae21ce7693b17942a1e25>

<http://blog.mondediplo.net/2015-03-02-Danser-comme-un-grand-corps>