

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the silsila* of a skeptic in movement

By El Arbi El Harti, dramaturg

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui doubts everything. Everything that moves and everything that doesn't, the visible and invisible, belief and uncertainty, strengths and weaknesses. If you don't know him very well, it might seem like he doesn't believe in anything. But this isn't the case. The skeptic questions reality, the world and humanity because the skeptic freely and deliberately observes, considers and analyzes what they see around them.

Sidi Larbi sees the world like the philosophers, tirelessly searching for the truth. He knows that sometimes the privilege of doubt crashes up against the wall of dogma. Paradoxically, he understands and defends the existence of these dogmas, because he knows that this is how pluralist spaces express democracy and how dissidence manifests.

***Silsila* and the name**

Roland Barthes said that “a proper name ought always to be questioned carefully, for the proper name is, so to say, the prince of signifiers. Its social and symbolic connotations are rich.” One of the things that struck me most when I met Sidi Larbi was his name, which can be translated as “the Arab nobility that comes from the east.” That's what “Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui” means. From the very first moment, I had no doubt that he was the synthesis of a *silsila*, a chain of ancient secrets of kindness that can be translated here, unreservedly, as *lineage* or *tradition*.

Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *silsila* has its roots in Bejaâd, a village in the Atlas Mountains, in the Zawiya Cherkaouia, a centre of spiritual reflection and philosophical inquiry founded in the 15th century by the Sufi master Sidi Bouabid Charki. Like his distant Moroccan ancestors, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui doesn't imitate or copy, but rather calls everything into question. Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's family tree is full of challenging, courageous and persistent questions. The choreographer and humanist was born in Antwerp to a Flemish Catholic mother and a Moroccan Muslim father, who traded in his Tangier trumpet for the coveralls of an immigrant Belgian labourer. Sidi Larbi grew up hearing French, Flemish and Arabic all spoken at home, as his father and mother were locked in a tense and silent struggle against identity amnesia, trying to share what they could of their own cultures.

**Silsila* is an Arabic word meaning *chain*, *link*, *connection* and can also be used in the sense of “spiritual genealogy.”

Bible or Quran, Moses or Buddha, Heaven or Hell, femininity or masculine power, West or East, Belgium or Morocco, You or Me, family or freedom, village or globe... Clearly, Sidi Larbi, as he intensely explores all opposites, has always placed himself on the periphery. It's what gave him the agonizing luxury of existing in no man's land, being nowhere and everywhere all at once. A European by accident, an Arab and nomad without the language or the horse, a gay iconoclast, a vegetarian by choice—drawing from the spiritual tension and emotional cost borne by the landless, who have made exile their existential calling, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui asks questions about the meaning of life. Like his ancestor from Bejaâd who, in creating his spiritual lineage, also shifted the foundations of his *silsila*, Sidi Larbi interprets and reinvents his roots, instilling them with new values from the here and now.

Grief and reconciliation

I fully believe that *Ihsane* is a work of maturity, born precisely of this wisdom, *al-hikma* in Arabic, that Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui has and will always be seeking. *Al-Ihsan*, is the third ideal of Muslim spirituality: God has mercy. This word, which can be both feminine and masculine, can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, all sharing a mystical, intuitive sense that binds the one to the whole.

In this sense, the many layers of meaning in *Ihsane*, as a title and the dramaturgical backdrop to a work of choreography, is revealing. For the first time, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui is embracing the language of his father, Sidi Mohamed Cherkaoui, sensing that the time has come to make peace with his father's sentimental nature and to see himself as part of a living lineage. He may still be landless, but his roots run deep.

However, unlike conventional inheritances, Sidi Larbi found reconciliation through conviction, knowledge and dialectic. Very early on, he challenged the authority of a father who didn't know how to respond—but what father does?—to the avalanche of his fiercely intelligent son's dissenting sensibility. His father would wind up ending the conversation with a simplistic “God will punish you,” a sentence that only intensified his son's doubts. In *Ihsane*, Sidi Larbi has found part of his reply, 30 years after the death of Sidi Mohamed Cherkaoui.

Grief can be taken as an opportunity to move on from the past. But that's not what Sidi Larbi is doing. In *Ihsane*, he calls for a different way of seeing and experiencing grief. His father's feeling of loss, consciously cast out from the warmth of his son's love, extends to other lives and other deaths, ultimately becoming a framework for reflecting on sacrifice and atonement.

Ihsane is a dissenting cry for compassion for the three figures who make up the metaphorical thread of sacrifice that ties the whole piece together: Sidi Mohamed Cherkaoui, who died in the coldness of an immigrant's solitude; Ihsane Jarfi, a young gay man of Moroccan origin who was abducted and murdered in 2012 by a group of homophobes; and Shaaban Al-Dalou, a young man who was burned alive in Deir Al-Balah for being Palestinian. Who or what is being sacrificed? Father? Son? Divine mercy? Humanity?

Memory and loss, origins and difference, sexuality and the hope of transcendence, the “I” and the “we,” one's own desire and the desire of the other, justice and sharing, life and death, the obvious and the

mysterious, fear and celebration, absurd contradictions and paradoxes...All these themes, Cherkaoui through and through, are the narrative building blocks of a show steeped in the maturity of grief—one that invites us to reflect on the dangerous erosion of our humanity, trapped by a civilization incapable of solving its own problems, a civilization that prefers to run away from them, jeopardizing its own survival. But Sidi Larbi's perspective isn't a nihilistic one. He bites down on reality until he draws blood, invoking our deepest desires for love. Because he's convinced that love, as a value, force and vision, can help us find our way out of this modern abyss.

Sentimental geometry, pluralist artists

The theatrical space of *Ihsane* uses sentimental geometry, conveying a clear desire to exist in our ancestors' cosmic world. It's Sidi Larbi's way of reminding us that we are all part of the same universal existential journey. The choreography thus unfolds inside an immense overlay of geometric shapes, with a triangle at the centre, nested within a square, a pentagon, a hexagon and so forth, unto infinity, taking us back to Morocco, representing a synecdoche of the universe. It all begins with the triangle, with the Mother-Son-Father dynamic setting the stage.

In collaboration with Amine Amharech, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui showcases elements of Moroccan architecture and decoration, which he uses as a subtle metaphor about grandeur, balance and hospitable lightness, echoed in the poem by Ibn Arabi sung on stage (see page 13).

Defending his ideal of a universal and welcoming commons, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui has surrounded himself with a diverse, pluralist team of artists. The dancers are from 14 different countries across five continents. In addition to the intense energy they bring, they give the choreographer the chance to explore—from body to body, sensibility to sensibility, experience to experience—the constants and variables in the themes that preoccupy him. Happiness and suffering, love and love-lost, the father-son relationship and issues of justice, belonging and responsibility resonate with everyone, no matter their background, skin colour or social class.

For *Ihsane*'s costumes, Sidi Larbi partnered with Amine Bendriouich, an iconoclastic young Moroccan designer in a country boasting a variety of shapes and structures. Bendriouich champions a global vision of creation in which he designs "for free-spirited people who see the world as one." Bendriouich explores traditional Moroccan dress so he can take it apart, putting its essence in the service of dance—no doubt a heresy to his neighbours. Veils unveiling, fez hats worn by the upper class of the city for which they are named combined with the headwear of the Gnawa musicians of Sub-Saharan descent, deconstructed Berber petticoats, dresses mimicking skin tattooed with Arabic calligraphy, burnouses, babouches, teapots...

The lyrics and music have a special weight in the dramaturgy of *Ihsane*. The use of Arabic in its geographic and cultural diversity, as a structuring element, is a conduit for reflection on belonging to a world that is united by a single language, but rich in nuance, expressed here through the singularity of the artists and the culture of their homelands.

Tackling the complex challenge of bringing them together in a single space for a project, the choreographer surrounded himself with amazing musicians: Jasser Haj Youssef from Tunisia, Fadia Tomb El-Hage from Lebanon, Yasamin Shahhosseini from Iran and Mohamed El Arabi-Serghini from Morocco.

And isn't that what Sidi Larbi wants? To once again—on stage, through dance—embody both belonging and a heritage that has been torn into a thousand pieces? And can't this tug-of-war and tension be extended to the crises that are dominating humanity's present and holding civilization in an iron grip with no end in sight?