

basis for being □□□□

SINA SABERI

Sweet invitation



Oonagh Duckworth
Gezien op 26 maart 2025
La raffinerie/ Charleroi Danse, in het kader van het Legs Festival

Sina Saberi's performance 'basis for being □□□□' begins and ends as a party. In between, those moments the choreographer and dancer allows us to glimpse the hidden world that's teeming with life behind closed doors in Iranian society.

28 MAART 2025

As we enter, six dancers, clad mainly in white, are already nonchalantly swaying their hips, snaking their arms, smiling at us sometimes. We are offered tea and sweets at the entrance. Cup in hand we seek our place on one of the four sides where the rows of seats face the dance floor. It's clearly the beginning of a party and Sina Saberi, an exile from Tehran now based in Germany, says as much by way of welcome.

But as the lights dim, all the dancers bar Saberi leave, the suavely rhythmic Iranian electro pop music (Ali Phi) stops, pin-drop silence descends and Saberi sinks into a crouch. Spiralling his hands he begins to conjure up corridors of light, teasing them out of the blackness. (Light design: Sebastian Solorzano). White lines of light on the black floor appear, graphically demarking the space into oblongs and parallelograms: walls, separating interior and exterior? Saberi begins to shimmy along them, teetering between two blacknesses.

Still alone, Saberi's hands trace his own body, fingers flutter over his face, eyes closed, his demeanour exudes a sense of contained yet exquisite sensuality. He reaches out and draws one of the male dancers (Jorge De Hoyos) who's been sitting down in the audience with us towards him. Fingertips barely touching, their duet amplifies the voluptuous vibration that seems to be pervading the whole space. The concentration, restraint and interiority of their minimal movement is electric and reaches through and beyond erotism. Gradually their movements gain range —brotherly bear hugs, judo like holds on the floor, homoerotic clinches, childlike rollovers— but the sequences blur into one another never allowing the whole to become decipherable. All the while, on large screens on two sides of the space, a film of the sea is rolling, or is it smoke in close-up, feathering though the air? Then a white dot appears that then becomes a multitude of dancing dots, sometimes forming lines, sometimes undulating like 3D graphic waves. Again, nothing remains legible for long, but the atmosphere envelopes us like a blanket.

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Indeed, after a female dancer (Bita Bell) enters the space and performs a more conventional duet where touch is barely there but warmth is tangible. All three sit on the floor with Saberi's head nestling in the woman's lap. On the screens, the dancing dots flicker and give way to an old home movie of Saberi as a small child. Presumably it's his birthday: he's dressed in his best and is being egged on to dance by doting relatives. Shyly at first, the little boy begins twirling his wrists, and soon timidity gives way to pride and joy. It's a touching reveal as to the so far ungraspable core of the piece which now appears to be a candid invitation to witness what is flourishing within, but that is often hidden and private, not just in Saberi himself but in a whole culture and nation. I've never visited Tehran, but friends report how unshackled behaviour and mentalities are in comparison to the west, but all that phenomenal freedom of spirit is only revealed behind closed doors and drawn curtains. Private and public are naturally two separate realms.

Having been waiting on the sidelines, the remaining three dancers involved in 'basis for being □□□□' are, at last beckoned to Saberi's party. Claiming the space, they spin, spiral, sing and whirl, rapturously strutting and shoulder shaking. Just in time, just before we begin to feel like the wallflowers at the party, we are invited to join in. Many do, and the whooping and applauds for the sound team-DJ's are well merited. I slip away, stealing another delicious sandy textured sweet on the way out. I'm going to have to chew on this experience which, although undoubtably set up to be generous, leaves me with a disconcerting sensation of being simultaneously a privileged confident and an unwitting hostage of oversharing. This, we know, often happens at even the best parties.