

Phantom Beard

MONIRA AL QADIRI

Ancestral Memories



Oonagh Duckworth
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Nothing about Monira Al Qadiri or her piece 'Phantom Beard' is as it seems. Or so it seems.

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The work opens with a blue blob, a huge, formless lump of ectoplasm hovering mid-air above the stage. It slowly begins to rotate. We see a face, a cloud, the inside of a malignant tumour magnified a million fold. It expands and expands; we could possibly be engulfed by it. But the next moment it seems we are inside Al Quadiri's head instead, and she's talking to its resident ghosts. She is centre stage, the backdrop is bejewelled with giant, elongated, viscous raindrops: the physical manifestations of those beings in her mind. Large mounds of earth have magically materialised. The aesthetic overtone is Japanese. What would it be like to be a man? we hear her query, and especially one with a beard? Through her pondering discourse she draws an admiring and envious portrait of maleness and how it is lived and represented in the Arab world: the vessel of all wisdom, spirituality and power, as opposed to the poor, weak, earth and flesh-bound female.

Next dream scene: an army, a chorus of maybe forty bearded men appear in retro-projection for a face off with Al Quadiri, who has luxuriantly donned the attire of a Sheik herself, but minus the coveted beard. The men recite an ancient ode that questions ancestry and compels Al Quadiri to defend her innocence and her lack of memory. The overlaying of the multitude of men and their dramatic gravitas next to the lonesome figure of Al Quadiri quickly takes on an oddly humorous, comic-book flavour. Is this poetry or is it retro pop-culture? The third act testifies that it's surely are strange mix of both. Al Quadiri appears again, clad in a tight, gold super-hero suit and enshrined in a plastic cube; the blob is back on the backdrop. A second face off, but this time literal, takes place. The blob turns into a sheik's head and a similarly small image of Al Quadiri's own face appears. The two portraits, the prophet and the profane, bounce around the backdrop in a typically maddening game of 'Pong' but set in the afterlife. Al Quadiri is repeatedly ordered to pay her debts for her life's acquisitive sins by the bearded bouncing ball, again she claims that her ignorance equals innocence.

Living with the past and dealing with the dead

Al Qadiri is a prolific visual and, more recently, performance artist, born in Senegal to Kuwaiti parents and educated in Japan where she researched the “aesthetics of sadness in the Middle East”. Right now she lives between Berlin and Beirut. This spectacularly multi-cultural CV is surely significant in her choice to explore two traditional, seemingly opposite ways of living with the past and dealing with the dead: that of revering and preserving the memory and remains of long-gone ancestors in Japan and the ephemeral nature of Arabian ancestral memory symbolized by the ever changing sand dunes of the Sahara desert.

The results are intriguing and there are many strands to follow, but, as someone who often feels alienated when screens and computer-generated images take centre stage to illustrate a point, despite the multi-layered amalgamation of ideas, issues and cultures, I read the work as over simplistic and unfinished. Somehow, despite the technology, we still can’t quite see clearly enough inside Al Qadiri’s head.