

El Attar: “We ourselves were afraid of Shakespeare”

Yesterday in Chur, Ahmed El Attar’s “Othello”-Montage has made its Europe Premier. The author and stage director moves the hero into the spotlight. The 36-year-old Egyptian sees the Insecurity as Othello’s motive for killing.

Oliver Berger spoke with Ahmed El Attar

Mr. El Attar, was it difficult for you following the production of several projects that you have written yourself, to tackle a play by William Shakespeare?

Ahmed El Attar: To be honest it was very difficult. “About Othello” is my first staging production of a text that I have not written myself since ten years. At that time I was working on the Oedipus Myth, based on texts of different authors from Sophocles to Jean Cocteau. Following four productions of texts that I had written myself, we have decided that it was time once more to embrace the classics. We quickly noticed that certain problems emerge.

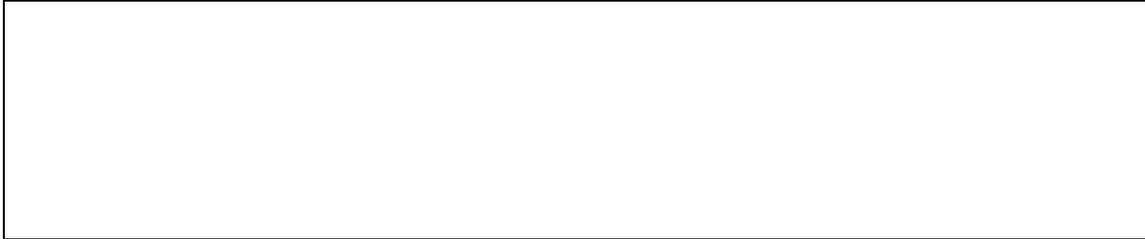
“It also concerns the Myth of Shakespeare.”

Which were the problems?

El Attar: It was not only a matter of the text, but also that it was William Shakespeare and his myth. It is not easy to deal with this. Therefore the play bears the title “About Othello or Who’s Afraid of William Shakespeare” – at start we were extremely afraid of him.

What did you fear?

El Attar: that what we are trying out might not become successful. From the very beginning we wanted to make of “Othello” something completely new. By the way, this process is not concluded yet; what is shown in Chur is extremely different from the performances in Cairo.



“To do something new”: Ahmed El Attar shows in Chur his latest work “About Othello or Who’s afraid of William Shakespeare”.
Picture: Peter de Jong

How different is your play from the traditional performance of “Othello”?

El Attar: Totally different. We view Othello as a kind of archetype and his relation to Desdemona as a symbol of the relation between the Arab World and the West. But the play also deals with the mechanisms that might take place in the relation of any couple – namely that one wants to make of the partner, what he actually is not.

A further parallel to the relation of the West and the Arab World?

El Attar: Exactly. As in the relation of a couple there is certainly also love in the relation between the West and the Arab World. But there is also possessiveness, violence and desire. We thought about it as a new analogy, a good approach for the staging production.

Has the interest in the Arab theater actually grown in the West following all the discussions on the relation of both cultures?

El Attar: Unfortunately not. The West accepts the Arab theatre now as in the past, not as something that could apply to its standards. This certainly also has to do with the story. In the Arabic cultural arena, theater started relatively late, around the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Since then things have changed enormously, yet the lacking acceptance has still remained. Can you imagine: the first time, that an Arabic play has been performed in the main program of a big festival in Europe was only two years ago in Avignon.

What is the reason?

El Attar: Acceptance was always the cause, how we approach the stranger, which expectations do we have.

Is the attitude which has been from the start an attitude of rejection towards the stranger, is it also a topic of “Othello”? Already at the start Jago...

El Attar: ...there is no Jago in our stage production. He does not appear.

“Othello” without Jago?

El Attar: I said yes: We turn the play into something totally new. We have characters which were not planned by Shakespeare: Othello’s father, his mother, a TV moderator. But no Jago. There is no need for him.

“There is no need for Jago.”

With all due respect, but Jago is the key figure in “Othello”.

El Attar: How so? You see, actually Jago does little. He does not need to do much to make Othello believe that Desdemona has betrayed him. That he kills her is not Jago’s doing.

Who is to be blamed then?

El Attar: Othello. That is what we want to show. Othello is a man who is a hero in another cultural circle, he becomes a star. Nevertheless, he experiences an identity crisis. He cannot tackle his own insecurities because he never dealt with it. It was this insecurity that also made him kill the woman he loves. This is the mechanism, that we want to show.

How did the audience in Cairo react to this radically different “Othello”?

El Attar: Very differently. The elderly audience had divided opinions about our stage performance. The young audience loved it.

Sunday, 5th of November, 20 hrs, Chur Theater