



LOUIZA ANIMI FOR TAR

DANCE FOR FREEDOM

For choreographer Tarik Bouarrara dance is an ethereal experience that has seen him through dark days

My mother is from Algiers and my father from Ghardaïa, a small town at the entrance of the Sahara where I grew up. My first memory of performing was in a choir at primary school. I liked the feeling of being on stage.

At high school we were asked to prepare a performance for the *fête de savoir*. I said: "Why don't we do a sketch?" We wrote it quickly, had one rehearsal and performed the next day. People were bent over laughing and we were immediately invited back. We started creating more sketches for various other festivities. It was great. But then we had a problem with the families of the girls. Ghardaïa being a small conservative town, the brothers didn't like the idea of their sister being on stage, so we had to play their parts ourselves. Later I found out this was quite thespian à la Shakespeare!

After school I moved to Algiers and worked in computers. I didn't enjoy it and was financially ripped off. So at 25 I quit. My morale was at a very low point. Inspired by the book *The Alchemist* [by Paulo Coelho], I thought: "I've been doing what my parents want. I want to do what I want." So I went back to Algiers to stay with my grandmother and applied for ISMAS [*Institut Supérieure des Métiers des Arts du Spectacle*]. When I was accepted I

was ecstatic. I'll never forget my first dance class. The teacher arrived, fat, short and sniffing with a cold. My dreams were crushed. But when she began to dance with an incredible lightness and grace, I was blown away. She ignited my flame for dance. Every evening I would return to the studio to rehearse. The next four years were an unforgettable adventure. We became family.

I graduated and began my professional career. Dancing for choreographer Nacera Belaza was a revelation. I discovered the philosophic side of dance, the movement of the soul. It was like going into another world then taking that magic back out to offer as energy to the world.

On a break after a show I was invited to see a friend in Brussels. I accepted as I had a French visa that included Europe. But when I landed, the authorities wrongly thought I was illegal and put me in a detention centre. Having grown up in the Sahara, I soon started to suffocate. They transferred me to another centre for *sans papiers*. There was a drug-dealer from Morocco, an asylum seeker from Tunisia who had arrived via Palestine, loads of Chinese, Africans. I remember stepping into the inner courtyard and for the first time getting a gasp of fresh air. I closed my eyes and my body began dancing. It was like a freedom. I danced in all directions, I needed corporeal relief. I felt my spirit lighten and fly higher and higher.

When I opened my eyes the other detainees had gathered around me in a circle, applauding.

I happily flew back to Algiers. I've since performed in Brussels and also Paris, Marseille and throughout Algeria. Today I really appreciate the freedom and opening of spirit that I have thanks to acting and dancing. ●

Interview by **Ruby Boukabou**