

Master presentations

4 – 5 September 2020

Akram Assam
Nahuel Cano

DAS
theatre

A couple of metres farther, a few moments later

It's late spring while I am writing these lines.

In the region I come from, it is the season of fireflies. They glimmer in early night hours, in fields and forests, and sometimes even in city parks.

From a human perspective, one of the most outstanding qualities of fireflies is their relation to visibility. They are pure appearances, manifesting in and from the darkness, lightening it with their soft and extremely fragile light. Darkness is necessary for us to be able to see them. In that same darkness they disappear, to then reappear again a bit farther.

This dance is their way of attracting female partners, an invitation for reproduction. Their appearance is not just seductive to their own species, but also for us human spectators. Indeed, we are enchanted by fireflies' precision and smallness, and fascinated by the mysterious forces that guide their movements in time and space.

As spectators of this beautiful and mysterious dance, there is only one thing that we know for sure. We have to keep watching

and cultivate our capacity to spectate.¹ We have to switch off the lights, let darkness take all the space. We have to wait and sustain the uncertainty (will they appear tonight? Is it too early? Too late? Will they come back this year too? Is the air too polluted for them?).

Once we see the first tiny light glimmering in the night, all we have to do is stay in suspense, keep our senses alert, and wait to see the next one, or maybe the same one lighting up again a couple of metres farther, a few moments later...

Multiple lessons can be learnt from the fireflies, and from us watching them. The most valuable, in the moment I am writing in, seems to be the value of invisibility and of waiting. Fireflies are loaded with the promise that if we don't give up, if we preserve the right conditions, if we keep watching, we will indeed see. We do not exactly know when or where, but the fireflies will come back, spring after spring, to lighten our dark nights and revive their promise of enchantment and seduction.

In her famous *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*², Peggy Phelan writes that

“performance becomes itself through disappearance”. Similar to the fireflies, performance can only be seen and caught by our senses in the moment it appears. Its volatile and ephemeral nature is so powerful in reason of its possibility – or rather its fate – to disappear. Same as the fireflies, the very possibility for performance to exist, is connected to the possibility to not be there, or not be visible.

The ontological negativity of performance, a vulnerability that is connected to the gaze of its spectators, and the promise that it always entails, are currently more crucial than ever. Theatre, as the broad field that also comprises performance, is about coming together. It is about staying in darkness. It is about trusting the invisible and waiting for something to appear.

Theatre is all about believing that our appointment will be met again. This is how the seven performative works were created by the graduating DAS Theatre participants: under the particular circumstances that forced their appointment to be postponed, doubted, dreamed about, cherished, and tended towards.

Each of these works propose a specific way for us to meet with art and with each other. Most of them renew the promise for an appointment that cannot be met now, but operates as a reminder to continue to watch and trust that the darkness will softly be enlightened again. There will we meet. A couple of metres farther, a few moments later...

¹ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, University of Minnesota Press 2018.

² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Taylor & Francis 1993.

AKRAM ASSAM

Cassettes



At DAS Theatre, Akram has been developing *Cassettes*, a work about how memory functions in two regions in the world – those suffering from wars, and safe areas – and about how war and violence affect changing human senses. *Cassettes* has been developed through the collecting of reflections and diaries from people from outside war zones who have visited war zones. What is collected is translated into a live solo performance, incorporating movement, video, and special lighting design.

Akram studied theatre directing and performing at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and at the Academy of Fine Arts Department of Theatre at the University of Baghdad. Since then, he has been working as a director and performer in the field of theatre.

WRITTEN BY
Chris Keulemans

The Green Zone and The Red Zone

He grew up in the perpetual war zone that is Baghdad. As he told us in the performance *Here I Am There*, the result of this never-ending violence is the numbing of the senses. Even his sweet little dog had stopped barking; she couldn't tell the difference between day and night anymore. At the Academy of Fine Arts, where he graduated in the theatre department, and the National Theatre, where he worked as a director, the result was: a stifling, traditional atmosphere ruled by authoritarian hierarchy.

So Akram Assam grabbed the chance to move to Amsterdam and enrol at DAS for a masters degree in the performing arts. He wants to create and present his work here, in Amsterdam and Europe, in order to develop a professional base that will provide him with the liberty to stay here or to return to Baghdad, on his own conditions.

His aim is clear: to create, as a director, stage performances that do not flinch, face to face with the violence, corruption, religious dogmas and social crackdown that

have worn down his city, and that find an artistic language to convey this drama.

Currently, he is producing the last performance in a trilogy about the effects of war on people and cities. *After The Turtle* (2018) and *Here I Am There* (2019), the corona virus is not stopping him from creating *The Visitors* in the summer of 2020.

He is working in freedom, finally, but the conditions are sober: he is the creator, director, lighting designer and performer all at the same time. For sound design, video and dramaturgy, he involves a few friends. His preparations are methodical. Starting with the original storyboard, he develops the performance layer by layer, studying the effect of each new sound, word or gesture.

The result: highly focused and carefully presented solo performances that have already attracted serious attention in the contemporary performing arts scene, both in Amsterdam and abroad. His work was shown at the opening night of the

RRReuring Festival at Podium Mozaïek. It will be presented by Rightaboutnow Inc. Performances at Frascati Theatre are being scheduled.

It appears that Akram is finding a way to translate the violent experiences he left behind to a Western audience that did not grow up in war. This is his main concern. Baghdad has been divided, since 2003, in the Green Zone – where the government and the embassies are based – and the Red Zone, the vast urban areas of chaos, poverty and decline that surround it. Akram has expanded this notion: in his mind, the

Red Zone is what lies behind him, the Green Zone is where he finds himself today. To create a steady base for his practice as a theatre director, but also simply to survive as a human being, he will have to bridge this gap.

The obstacles are obvious: the language, the lack of production facilities, being unknown in a new theatre landscape. But he is single-minded. He will overcome these obstacles. As the story of his fabled, damaged city deserves.

PROJECT UPDATE

I started collecting memories of people from European regions who had visited my home country.

I contacted them via e-mail. I did not meet any of them. I am trying to create a new perspective on my performance after what I did in the previous year (I had collected memories from people living in my country). I made a script from these memories to perform.

At the beginning of the coronavirus, trying to make a performance from home became difficult for me. Then, it seemed a Story Board must work for working out the performance: drawing the movement, the scenography, and communicating with the video maker and also my collaborators to find new ways.

Meanwhile, DAS started to open only for rehearsals. I began to transform the drawing that I made from paper to the studio hall.

As I'm writing this reflection, I am continuing rehearsals in the studio hall while social distancing in the corridors of the school, as well as everywhere, because I got used to it in recent months.

MUSICAL COMPOSER

Ata Güner

COLLABORATORS

**Chris Keulemans, Arthur Kneepkens,
Maria Röbler**

VIDEO ARTIST

Muha Nad Rasheed

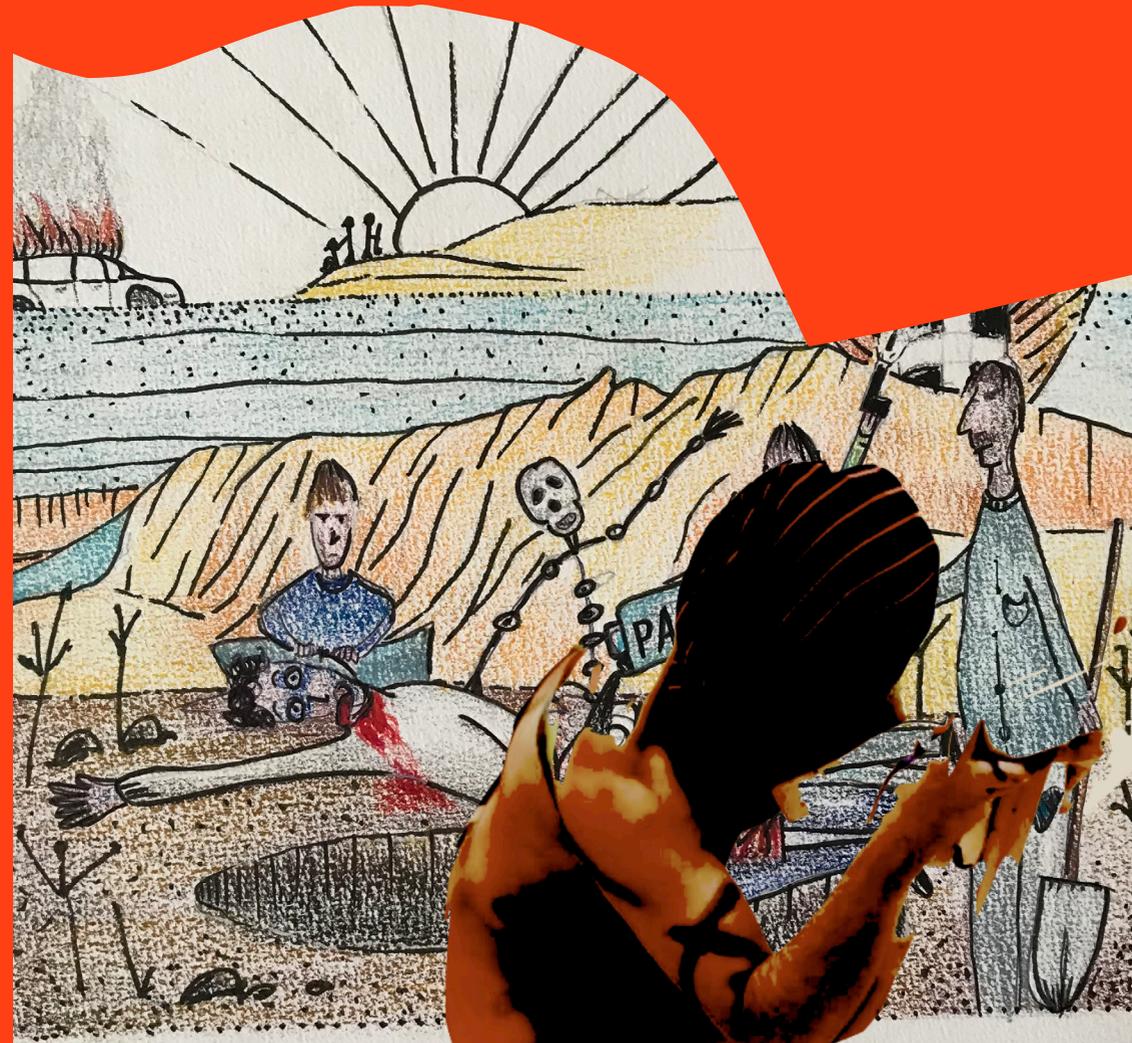
TUTOR

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Quiet Storms



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Quiet Storms is a stubborn attempt to make the invisible present. It is a clumsy nostalgic dance. An impossible song. An irreverent, hypnotic trip. A process of erosion. An open wound.

The work began as an exploration of Nahuel's native land, Patagonia – of a territory amid endless cycles of violence, memories of a distant landscape, and parts of a family history that have been hidden, denied. Oil, conquest, violence, desertion. Inspired by a practice of listening to both ancestral resonances and his constantly being out of place, Nahuel has built an opening to affect, vulnerability, and to the echoes of catastrophe.

Like a sensitive revolt, Quiet Storms offers visions against the suffocating realism that dominates the gaze on the painful. Like an intimate ceremony to summon what has been buried, it tells a story about other possible worlds. It is a performance, an experience, a gathering of sensual impressions, which, through constantly changing our perceptions of body and space, invites us to re-imagine how – and with what or whom – we come together.

How do we keep listening to the sounds of the unbearable? How do we prepare and surrender to the coming storm?

Nahuel Cano was born in Neuquén, Patagonia Argentina, in 1982. He is an actor, theatre-maker, and researcher. His field of artistic action is mobile, exploring the possibilities of performance, installation, cinema, and theatre. From 2010 until 2018, he developed his artistic projects together with his group El Cuarto. These works have been presented in important festivals and have received support and awards from national and international institutions. Nahuel is also a founding member of EscenaPolítica, an artistic and political collective that has organised actions, forums, performances, and protests. In 2019 he started developing a platform and subjective space to keep expanding his research and solo work: Kütral-Nahuel.

A carpet is a portal

Writing from a memory of a rehearsal for a performance that never became an event. Showing up to be present with a memory of a performance which is a continuous becoming.

[There is a figure, hiding themselves under a carpet. The carpet is old, not really beautiful, maybe dirty. The figure disappears and becomes a mountain, an old woman, a witch, a mole, a pangolin, a stone telling a story. Something is slowly transforming in the rehearsal room. The performer becomes undone, covering themselves completely, renouncing their face, their sight, their smell and their hearing in order to make space for other entities to enter. Performing becomes a trance, theatre becomes an opening to a different world. The speaking stone summons ghosts, they are sorry that they are many. They are many because of me, swept under the carpet, transformed into corpses, memories, hopes.. And I am here now, to hold space for them too. They whisper memories of destruction and surprise about the relentlessness of cruelty. The carpet is a

portal, the performer becomes a medium. A shift sets in and we surrender to separation and being enveloped by a darkness. We are isolated in a space inhabited by a multitude of invisible worlds.]

Nahuel Cano describes his research at DAS Theatre as an exploration of how fictional events 'produce' reality. He sees a transformative potential in performance, both for the audience and for the performers. But in the research for his newest work, he questions the fictional event as such, in order to explore process – as opposed to revolution or action – as a political happening. As audience we are invited to 'be with' the numerous voices and beings who start to inhabit the space. The act of performing becomes an act of opening a sensitive space, first of all in the body of the performer, so that they can then open up the perception of the audience. In this way Nahuel's work speaks of the urgency to learn to be otherwise. The listening, and noticing we can do in the theatre, becomes a prehearsal for a deeper listening and noticing that is needed outside the walls

of the black box, to voices that are too often silenced.

In the midst of the current COVID-19 crisis these attempts get yet another meaning. While Nahuel was looking for a radical presence as a performer – a presence that is completely open to others, both visible and invisible – to be present itself has become radical. From our isolation, in which ways can we be radically present to each other if we can not gather?

This question cuts to the core of our human existence, and the crisis of theatre in this exceptional moment. To gather is essential in order to feel belonging, but also in order to encounter dissonance and different perspectives than our own. Gathering is a prerequisite for empathy, democracy and society. The theatrical space is first

and foremost a place in which we come together and agree to be open to the unknown. What I keep reflecting on in these past weeks are the countless ‘others’ who already gather inside and outside of us. If performance as attunement, such as Nahuel proposes, can open us up to the invisible gatherings we are part of, we could learn how to extend this being-together beyond our physical boundaries. If I learn to listen to the ghosts of the place where I am, of the people I have encountered, of those making my livelihood possible (often through suffering). If I can show up to those ghosts. If I learn how to listen to the many other-than-human voices that constitute my body and my surroundings, I might start to hear you too, and become capable of opening up to the unknown anywhere, anytime.

PROJECT UPDATE

Amid the outbreak of the Covid-19 my dreaming became voluptuous and painful. During the day its images, and more usually its sensations, haunted me.

In the “everydayness” of living in a one-room apartment, those dreams accompanied me as I was experiencing other modes of co-presence, other proximities. Ghosts and dreams, screens and coding, ancestral and contemporary virtualities all mixed together. While the world was throwing itself into overwhelming discursive hyperinflation of the forecasts, my reality became quieter, slower, and for moments of a sad luminosity. The contact and the “little dances” between my partner, our plants, the changing lights of the day, and all these virtualities that accompanied us, became our survival strategy. A slow, intimate practice of care. First lessons, contact is not only what happens when skin touches skin, stillness is not always absence of movement.

How could we let this mode of radical co-presence that allowed us to navigate between, and be in contact with such different entities and flows, guide our movements beyond the confinement? The opening up of such a sensitivity, in order to create a sensitive space, and in this movement the attempt to make a sensual approach to the potentialities and virtualities present in the body and space, to allow others to explore it, to offer other modes of being in contact, to become tender, to become sensitive to what is going on, what has been going on. A mutual engagement in the formation of a more sensual and intense field: **To hold something fragile together.**

Holding space has been always a shared responsibility, a political attempt, and a risky business. Under the present circumstances, the ethical scope of gathering has become more relevant and urgent. We cannot take it for granted, we should re-learn how to be together in a closed space. We will build this together, I invite you to join with joy in taking care.

PERFORMERS

Amparo Gonzalez Sola & Nahuel Cano

LIGHTS

Vinny Jones

CONCEPT AND DIRECTION

Nahuel Cano

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Ezequiel Gatto

CHOREOGRAPHY ADVISOR

Amparo Gonzalez Sola

ARTISTIC ADVICE

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TUTOR

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John Meijerink

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TUTORS

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Amsterdam University of the Arts