



KOULOUNISATION

Salim Djaferi

[Presentation]

"In July 2018, I was in a bookstore in Algiers. I couldn't find the section dedicated to the "Algerian War". I was about to give up when I finally asked for the bookseller's help, to which she answered: "All of the books on the Algerian War are in the 'Revolution' section". Yes, of course: it was a Revolution. Only I had never given it that name, and therefore never really thought about it as such. I immediately started to think about this key difference: who taught me to say "war", and who taught them to say "revolution"? This realization was the beginning of a journey and an investigation. Woven from anecdotes and encounters, *Koulounisation* is shaped by others' stories and the words that they use to tell these stories."

Salim Djaferi

What does it mean to speak of the "Algerian War"? How do you say "colonization" in Arabic? What is it that language does to us exactly? What are the histories, politics, and universes that it creates? As he discovers, digests, and chews on new narratives as well as his own, Salim Djaferi investigates, folds, and unfolds the words of colonialism.

[Statement of Intent]

I came to Algiers for the first time in July 2018. Because of my Algerian heritage, I had been curious about the colonization of Algeria and more precisely, about the years before independence. However, my knowledge of that period was superficial and limited. It came from French historians, snippets of family stories, and fragmentary textbooks. I decided that Algeria was the best place to start learning about this history in context and set off to buy books written by Algerians themselves. I went to a bookstore in the city center of Algiers and looked for the section dedicated to the "Algerian War" for some time. I couldn't find anything. I was about to give up, but I couldn't believe that there would be no books on the topic in that store. Confused, I asked for the bookseller's help, she answered without missing a beat that "All of the books on the Algerian War are in the 'Revolution' section". Yes, of course: it was a Revolution. Only I had never given it that name, and therefore never really thought about it as such.

I immediately started to think about this key difference: who taught me to say "war", and who taught them to say "revolution"? Did the words evoke the same historical facts on each side of the Mediterranean Sea? If it exists, what would the right word be? With this discovery came the revelation of my ignorance. I knew factual history alright – the dates, the stakes, the main actors – but I was ignorant of the semantics and their ideological function.

I didn't end up buying a book. This anecdote was a trigger and a spark. I came across the tip of the iceberg that hints at something much larger and unknown.

Ever since that day, I have carefully been writing down all the words that make up this iceberg and the ways in which I encounter them. There are many. Some I encounter randomly, some I look for with intention, and sometimes I find myself on an adventure like that of the bookstore.

Woven from anecdotes and encounters, *Koulounisation* is shaped by others' stories and the words that they use to tell these stories."

[Excerpt]

Excerpt of an interview about the play *Koulonisation*, with Sylvia Botella and Salim Djaferi (October, 10th, 2021, Brussels).

Sylvia Botella

Can you speak more about the essence of the play *Koulonisation*: language?

Salim Djaferi

When I started working on *Koulonisation*, I asked myself: how can I address the issues of colonization and the French–Algerian relations without speaking from the position of the victim? Sidestepping these issues could work. As an artist–researcher, I am interested in language. More precisely, I am interested by the word “colonization”. How do you say “colonization” in Arabic? *Koulonisation* isn’t a play about the historical experience of colonization as such. It is about the word “colonization”, and the experiences, life stories, and violence that are associated with it.

Sylvia Botella

Koulonisation questions our relationship to truth, memory, transmission, and history by questioning our relationship to language. What is it that language does to us exactly?

Salim Djaferi

My parents are born from Algerian immigrants. I have often witnessed conversations about what we call “the Algerian War”. Only recently did I hear the word “revolution” used for the first time. This shifted my thinking. What if “the Algerian War” wasn’t only a historical reality, but also a linguistic one? What if it were put in words? What words would that be? What meaning and what direction are determined by a word? To what end? Who decides? What does the choice of one word instead of another say of the person who speaks it?

I was intensely tormented by these questions. I wanted to listen to the sound of the world in the most obvious ways. I refused to settle for the exploration of familiar grounds, and I refused to only grow consensual ideas.

Sylvia Botella

What really strikes me in your approach is that it is both theatrical and aesthetic.

Salim Djaferi

I started by doing a lot of research and investigation. When the time came to work on stage composition, it became obvious that my work needed to exceed the authentic documentary matter that I had collected. It wasn’t enough to condemn the damage done to language nor the loss of imaginaries to colonization. I had to be brave and creative. I had to commit to a truly aesthetic approach. Perhaps this decision comes from my exposure to a certain kind of documentary theater; scrawny, sad, inaccessible, trapped under some sort of disembodied intellectualism.

Early on, it became clear to me and to stage designers Justine Bougerol and Silvio Palomo –both of whom taught me a lot–, that visual arts being center-stage would help us tremendously in developing a sensory and playful relationship with the audience. Some elements came to life very quickly, like using string to delineate space or polystyrene cuts as building blocks. Making thought into matter was the only

acceptable artistic choice for me. I didn't want to be completely isolated with my research. I didn't want to be in my own bubble.

Sylvia Botella

And indeed, something is being built in front of the audience's eyes, something layered that also produces critical thinking.

Salim Djaferi

I cannot bring research onto the stage without using the tools of theater. What can theater do? Theater can cause emotions that sometimes exceed the spectator's language or intellectual background. Something else is at stake when I break polystyrene on stage or when I hang everyday objects from the ceiling with a piece of string... something very powerful: emotional intelligence.

Sylvia Botella

How does the interplay between theater and visual arts function to emerge what remains unspeakable in terrible, unique historical events like the "Algerian War"? Or what is commonly called, in contemporary France, the "war of national liberation"?

Salim Djaferi

What is at work in this interplay is a form of intelligence that relies on metaphors accessible to all. A good example of that is the sponge soaked in red liquid hanging from a string. The image of the dripping sponge is enough to make the spectator understand what happened. The image alone is commentary enough. It signifies. No need to be of Algerian origin or to be a visual artist to understand it. All the remains on the stage produce the play's meaning, without it being spelled explicitly. The material traces map in physical space what has been said and what remains unspoken. Together, they become some sort of subjective and fragmentary museum of the colonization of Algeria, which the audience can visit after the show.

[Distribution]

Creation and performance Salim Djaferi

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Dramaturgic Advisor Adeline Rosenstein

Writing support Marie Alié and Nourredine Ezzaraf

Stage composition Delphine de Baere

Scenography Justine Bougerol and Silvio Palomo

Lighting design and stage control Laurie Fouvet

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Salim Djaferi's work is registered by Habemus Papam.

[Biography]

Salim Djaferi is a playwright, actor, performance artist, and director who graduated from ESACT in Liège, Belgium. After the performance/installation *Sajada/Le Lien* in 2019, *Koulonisation* debuted in October 2021. It is Djaferi's first show in the theater.