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Political Mother and Babel (words)

Brighton Dome

Sadler's Wells, London



Luke Jennings
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Excoriating ... Political Mother by Hofesh Shechter. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

Following the scorching ascent of the Israeli-born choreographer [Hofesh Shechter](#), and the overwhelming critical success in 2009 of his first full-evening work, *The Art of Not Looking Back*, much was riding on **Political Mother**, which premiered at the [Brighton festival](#) on Thursday. The piece opens with a silent, searing image: a knight, standing motionless in the accoutrements of battle. Drawing his sword, he plunges it through his belly and sinks to the ground.

Cue the deafening scream of Shechter's electronic score and a series of tableaux which appear and dissolve in the smoky light. Prisoners, terrified and abject, capering like monkeys. Determined scraps of folk-dance: out-takes, perhaps, from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. A sinister line of drummers in military tunics, their faces invisible in the half-dark, the crash and volley of their percussion obliterating all thought and dissent. A ranting demagogue, screaming from on high, his words indistinguishable. A rock band, its thundering riffs seemingly born of the military percussion. A wild-eyed front man. Dances of adulation and abandon, men and women shuddering with idealistic excitement and loss of self. Primed for obedience, duty and sacrifice.

Shechter, who grew up in Israel, and has seen at first hand the effect that extreme political indoctrination can have on a nation's youth, has an unambiguous message for us: it's a lie. The nation state, the party, the advertiser – all are manipulating us, taking instincts relating to familial love, as the title suggests, and twisting them into specious notions of corporate and political loyalty. There are obvious victims of this process – we get fleeting glimpses of pitiful, Abu Ghraib-like scenes and a line of prisoners shuffling round in a circle, their nationalistic dance reduced to a weak-limbed tatter – but ultimately, Shechter suggests, we all end up victims of the lie, and none more so than those, like the knight, who subscribe most selflessly to it.

Political Mother isn't yet perfect, there's an oddly flat 10 minutes in the middle, but overall it's a fine, excoriating work, fuelled by real anger. The piece has a four-day run at [Sadler's Wells](#) from 14 July; dance-lovers should move fast.

The Disney cartoon *Aladdin* opens with a villainous-looking character riding a camel through the desert. He comes from a land, he sings, "where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric but, hey, it's home!" The stereotype of the cruel, depraved Arab has long been propagated by Hollywood, which has traditionally set the

supposed otherness of the east against the virtue and rightness of the west. When asked why US films are the most popular in the world, the French director Jean-Luc Godard replied: "Because Americans tell the best stories. They can invade a country and immediately construct a narrative justifying it."

It's in this context that Dash Arts, launched in 2005 by directors Tim Supple and Josephine Burton, has launched four commissions by artists from the Arabic-speaking world. The first of these is **Babel**, by the Flemish-Moroccan choreographer [Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui](#). It's the final work in a triptych, following *FOI* and *Myth*, which traces the links between ethnicity and identity.

First, Cherkaoui treats us to a whimsical disquisition on gesture, voiced by Ulrika Kinn Svensson, whose memorably weird performances lit up the triptych's earlier works. Here she appears as a kind of *Blade Runner* android in latex thigh-boots, rapidly approaching burn-out. A series of choreographic tableaux ensues in which the multilingual voices of the 13-strong company act as a soundtrack to shifting alliances, and Italian and Indian singers offer a harsh, restless, musical accompaniment. The set, by the sculptor Antony Gormley, consists of movable cuboid frames which the performers continually reconfigure, the resultant ziggurats sometimes uniting the group, sometimes fracturing it. The finest sequence resembles Michaelangelo's *Battle of the Centaurs*, with a frieze of bodies locked in boneless, slow-motion combat.

If a multiplicity of tongues can lead to conflict, Cherkaoui presents us with a darker alternative: a world in which all communication is standardised. "Shut the FUCK up!" bellows Darryl E Woods, as an out-of-control imperialist at the controls of a helicopter gunship. With a sustained burst of cannon fire, he obliterates the non-anglophones, who crumple at his feet. "Why would you want to learn another language?" he muses. "They're all so boring."

Unsurprisingly, this sequence plays well to north London's liberal elite. But to characterise Americans as bug-eyed, trigger-happy psychopaths is a cheap shot from an artist who claims to have stereotypes in his sights. Like *FOI* and *Myth*, *Babel* is badly in need of editing: after 90 unbroken minutes of performance only Svensson emerges as a distinctive character. The others, for all their undoubted virtuosity, come across as little more than the creations of a diversity committee.

Cherkaoui's regular choreographic partner Damien Jalet is on board for *Babel*, but so are an assistant choreographer and, dispiritingly, a dramaturg. Dramaturgs are the management consultants of the dance world, comfortably digging themselves into productions before toxifying them with theory and conceptual waffle. Shechter is said to be something of a control freak, micro-managing every aspect of his artistic operation, but he knows what he thinks, and *Political Mother* is a blade-sharp realisation of that thinking. In *Babel's* spongy tone and inordinate length you can hear the echo of far too many voices.

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