

# Dancing through walls

*Brussels-based choreographer Tarek Halaby uses dance to explore the links between cultural politics, personal politics and politics 'tout court'.*

*He talks to Georgio Valentino about his new multi-media solo project, premièring soon in the capital*

**T**arek Halaby is the author and performer of what is possibly the longest-titled solo dance in choreographic history: *An Attempt to Understand My Socio-political Disposition Through Artistic Research on Personal Identity in Relationship to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*. The piece itself is fairly long – it lasts roughly 45-minutes – but, funny and earnest, it doesn't feel that way. Halaby developed it in 2005 during his training at P.A.R.T.S., the Brussels dance school directed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. He presented it earlier this autumn in *Masarat Palestine*, the country-wide festival of contemporary Palestinian culture which kicked off at Brussels' Les Halles de Schaerbeek in October and continues at Bozar until January 11.

## *No rush*

The Palestinian-American dancer/choreographer's attempt to understand his socio-political disposition through artistic research continues in two new projects commissioned by Bozar: a photography exhibition,

*'I wanted to live and work as a dancer. That was all that interested me'*

*Actually, I am Someone*, and the debut performance of his second dance solo, *Finally I am no one*.

Halaby was born in 1980 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to an American mother and Palestinian father. When the First Gulf War broke out in 1990, the family moved to the United States, where they settled in Chicago. Halaby earned a degree in dance performance from the University of Iowa and then decamped to New York City, where he found work with various dance companies. But it wasn't enough. "I wanted to live and work as a dancer," he recalls. "That was all that interested me." Brussels' celebrated dance scene beckoned. Halaby had visited friends in the Belgian capital and was impressed: "Everything I was looking for was here."

That was five years ago. Halaby is now a rising star in Brussels, although he refuses to be rushed. "There is such a fierce drive for stardom in the dance world," he says. "There's little time for growth and experimentation." He welcomed Bozar's invitation not just as a career milestone, but as an opportunity to stretch himself artistically. He accepted it with the intention of experimenting with new ideas and media.

*Actually, I am Someone* is Halaby's first foray into photography. Last July, the choreographer visited Palestinian refugee camps in the company of French photographer Aurélia Berthe and returned with 60 portraits to mark 60 years of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. Prints of a dozen of those black-and-white images are presented at the entrance to the Bozar Shop; the



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**Tarek Halaby: Palestinian-American Brussels resident born in Saudi Arabia with a Jordanian passport**

remaining 48 – another symbolic number, recalling the year in which the state of Israel was established and the Palestinians were driven from their lands – are projected in an adjoining space. Halaby and Berthe used portraiture in answer to the anonymity which blankets most media representations of Palestinian refugees. “I wanted to address the loss of identity and individuality,” Halaby says. “These people are considered a faceless crowd by the world outside. They’ve become simply ‘the Palestinians.’”

### *Transcending particulars*

*Finally I am no one* was conceived as a choreographic counterpoint to the portraits in *Actually, I am Someone*. In this solo performance, Halaby breaks with the bitter-sweet optimism of the photographs and evokes the isolation and obscurity into which Palestinian communities have been pushed by Israeli domination. The defining feature of the piece is a physical barrier behind which Halaby performs, visible to his audience only through the mediation of surveillance cameras, which project his live image onto the wall. The live feed is mixed with pre-recorded videos of Halaby, masked, playing the roles of soldier, prisoner, bomb-assembler and YouTube confession-maker – characters perceived in different ways by different people.

Passionately reviled on one side of the wall, the suicide bomber, for example, is just as passionately admired on the other. While recognising that the phenomenon

has no direct analogue in Western European or American contexts, Halaby sounds the concept of celebrity for even the faintest resonance and discovers that “our society, too, glorifies destructive behaviour in its own way”. The pre-recorded sound-track, on which the dancer’s own voice can be heard singing along, is a compilation of pop songs by artist-heroes Elliott Smith, Donny Hathaway, Ian Curtis and others whose lives were cut short, and reputations increased, by suicide and other forms of violence.

“The wall,” Halaby explains, “is a very straightforward representation of the situation in Palestine.” It’s a situation which Halaby readily admits is not his own. He has seen the refugee camps first-hand but has never been forced to live in one. “How,” he asks, “can I build a piece around an experience that I haven’t shared?” He uses the dividing wall as his point of departure.

If the premise is bold and specific, the performance strives for universality. “It’s important for me that this work transcends the particulars of the Palestinian experience so that anyone can identify with it. Everyone builds walls,” Halaby says. The wall, then, becomes an allegorical figure, and *Finally I am no one* can be interpreted as a meditation on the many forms of psychological and emotional alienation that we practise daily.

### Shows

*Actually, I am Someone*, Bozar, 23 Rue Ravenstein/straat, Brussels, until January 4

*Finally I am no one*, December 12, 20.30; December 13, 22.00, tel 02.507.82.00, [www.bozar.be](http://www.bozar.be)