



TOLD BY MY MOTHER
LOVE AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE
IN THE DANCE OF ALI CHAHROUR
MAÍRA SANTOS

↑↻ TOLD BY MY MOTHER, ENC. ALI CHAHROUR, 2020 (LEILA CHAHROUR, ABBAS AL-MAWLA). [F] MYRIAM BOULOS.

TOLD BY MY MOTHER

CONCEPT, DIRECTION, DRAMATURGY AND CHOREOGRAPHY: Ali Chahrour

DIRECTION AND CHOREOGRAPHY: Ali Chahrour

PERFORMERS: Hala Omran, Leila Chahrour, Abbas Al Mawla, Ali Hout,
Abed Kobeissy, Ali Chahrour

MUSIC: Two or The Dragon – Ali Hout, Abed Kobeissy

PRODUCTION MANAGER AND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Chadi Aoun

PRODUCTION: Ali Chahrour, Chadi Aoun

ASSISTANT PRODUCTION: Christel Salem

SCENOGRAPHY: Ali Chahrour, Guillaume Tesson

LIGHT DESIGNER, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR: Guillaume Tesson

SOUND DESIGNER: Woody Naufal **PHOTOGRAPHY:** Myriam Boulos

LETTERING: Khajak Apelian **LAYOUT:** Chadi Aoun

COPYWRITING: Isabelle Aoun

PREMIERE VENUE AND DATE: Al Medina Theatre, Beirut, May 6, 2021

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The 78th edition of the Holland Festival featured, in 2025, the dance work *Told by my mother* by Lebanese choreographer Ali Chahrour. The piece, the second part of a trilogy^[1] on love, was created in collaboration with Syrian actress and singer Hala Omran and with the electroacoustic music ensemble Two or The Dragon, whose members Ali Hout and Abed Kobeissy^[2] also act onstage. The work further includes Leila Chahrour and Abbas Al-Mawla, relatives of the choreographer, whose presence lends a particular dimension to the narrative: it is not merely about interpreting characters, but about bringing to the stage experiences that directly concern them.

Born in and based in Beirut, Ali Chahrour belongs to a generation of artists whose work circulates internationally without loosening its ties to the city and to Lebanese society – ties that function both as material and as measure. Trained in theatre at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Beirut, and with a learning trajectory also shaped by experiences and European contexts, Chahrour has developed a practice in which the body – and the histories inscribed upon it – circulates internationally, yet always returns to Lebanon as a site of elaboration. For Chahrour, his creations are only fully realized when

[1] *Told by my mother* was conceived in 2020 and premiered in 2021, following *Night* (2019) and preceding *The Love Behind My Eyes* (2021).

[2] *Told by my mother* (Ali Chahrour) had its Portuguese premiere at the Alcantara Festival (Lisbon) on 24–25 Nov. 2021 (Teatro Nacional D. Maria II). Abed Kobeissy was also in Portugal at the Alcantara Festival (Lisbon), appearing with Stephanie Kayal in *Galactic Crush 2: Into the Cold* (22–23 Nov. 2025).

shared with Lebanese audiences, since it is this context that traverses them and endows them with meaning (A. Chahrour, personal communication, November 21, 2021). This return to Beirut is not merely a biographical detail: it is a way of situating the work within a conjuncture shaped by successive layers of collapse – wars, economic crises, everyday forms of violence, the Beirut port explosion, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the reverberations of the Israel-Gaza conflict, which have once again reached southern Lebanon. In such a landscape, theatre emerges as one of the few remaining architectures capable of gathering people in the same time and space, producing a commons that cannot be appropriated – necessary and potent.

Told by my mother centers on unconditional love – maternal love as a force that does not end, even when everything around it comes undone. Its dramaturgy unfolds from the true stories of two families: Fatmeh and her son Hassan, who has disappeared; and Leila and her son Abbas, pressured into becoming a soldier-martyr – with Leila and Abbas appearing onstage as interpreters of their own lives. Between the endless search for an absent son and the refusal of another to accept a destiny of martyrdom, a suspended present takes hold, in which violence continues to operate and resistance continues to insist.

The performance refuses the freezing of memory – the gesture that turns destruction into “completed history,” neutralizing its capacity to address the present. As Ariella Azoulay (2019) argues, imperial domination is not confined to territory; it also invents regimes of time. To resist such regimes is to insist that the past is not fixed: it can be reactivated as struggle in the present. *Told by my mother* reorganizes time precisely at this point: keeping memory alive, sustaining that what happened has not “passed,” and affirming that justice remains a continuing demand.

Among the works in the trilogy, this is the one that most strongly emphasizes the narrative dimension. The story unfolds through body and gesture, but it reaches its fullest expression above all through text and song. The performance opens with an invocation to bring back the disappeared, led by Hala Omran; her voice ushers us into these women's stories and establishes a regime of listening in which narrative and ritual are tightly interwoven. Alongside her – in dialogue with the piece's choreographic thinking and sonic landscape – Leila Chahrour also assumes the role of narrator.

Two stories are told – first one, then the other. At certain moments, they bleed into one another: we watch mother and son performing mother and son, in a fold between biography and representation that generates an ambiguous field, where testimony does not settle into individual identity but reverberates as a shared experience.

What unfolds here draws close to *orature* – a tradition in which memory, voice, and body are inseparable. In this gesture, the piece resonates with what Conceição Evaristo (2007) calls *escrevivência*: a mode of writing – here expanded to the stage – that emerges from lived experience but does not close itself off within the personal realm. The pain and struggle of one mother are singular, yet also collective; biographical, yet also political. Thus, the performance produces a kind of performative *escrevivência*: a dramaturgy that transforms embodied memory into shared narrative, displacing testimony from the private sphere toward a common dimension.

Over the course of an hour, the piece re-enacts death, pain, despair, but also strength, tenderness, joy, and maternal obstinacy. This re-enactment does not operate as illustration; rather, it functions as a translation of the event into gesture, dance, movement, and voice.

Contemporary dance vocabulary is mobilized through micro-movements (a focus on isolated parts of the body) and macro-movements (oscillation, leaning, the rocking of the bodily axis). At the same time, the work activates a distinct movement language drawn from Arab dance traditions – not as a superficial fusion of styles, but as a compositional structure that shapes how affect and narrative are carried by the body.

The mobilization of movement vocabularies associated with Arab dance traditions – frequently labeled in Western discourse as “belly dance” – also situates the work within the historical horizon of its reception. As Shay (2006) points out, European Orientalism contributed to the feminization of Arab dance. By working through this inheritance without reproducing it, the performance turns bodily materiality into a critical field – neither confirming feminization as stigma nor disavowing it, but moving through it to open a space in which gender, affect, and politics are reorganized in and as choreography.

Two moments make this especially palpable. In one, with his torso bare, Abbas reveals an undulating corporeal organization structured around a deep activation of the center. At several points, Ali Chahrour enters this same code, improvising waves that travel through hands, arms, and pelvis, without yielding to exoticism or to a sensualizing ornamentation. The result unsettles expectations of virility tied to heroism and martyrdom, shifting the body from a dance culturally coded as “masculine” toward a vulnerable, intimate presence.

Along the same lines, there is a scene in which Abbas dances with his mother, drawing on an improvised form of social dance rooted in domestic life and family celebrations. By bringing this repertoire onto the stage, Chahrour renders public an intimate, situated code

– an embodied knowledge that usually circulates within the private sphere. In this setting, the son who might otherwise be framed as a martyr refuses the logic of sacrifice: he emerges as his mother’s partner in a dance of proximity and lightness. What is staged is not heroism, but the possibility of joy – suspending a sacrificial grammar and reinscribing the male body within the realm of affect.

In many of the solos, movement stops – sometimes alongside silence, sometimes not. In these suspensions, what intensifies is not absence, but rather a kind of shared attention: the performers watch us in quietude, sustaining a regime of presence that shifts the scene from choreographic flow into the zone of vigil. Interruption functions as a dramaturgical operator: it cuts through time, renders audible what remains when gesture ceases, and above all, places the spectator within the field of a shared responsibility.

It is within this horizon that the gaze acquires the force of a summons. In one moment, Chahrour leans his entire body over Abbas’s kneeling body, composing a balance that is at once fragile and steady. The image takes shape as a transient sculpture: the weight and counterweight between them cause Chahrour to move like the leg of a compass – support, risk, and trust. Yet what anchors the scene is not only its corporeal architecture, but the gaze directed toward the audience. This gaze does not illustrate the action; it founds it as a relation, calling on us to bear witness and to recognize that we are implicated – or that we must choose to become implicated.

Through Hala’s singing, we learn that most of the songs belong to the repertoire that Fatmeh and her missing son, Hassan, used to sing together. We also learn that Fatmeh never ceased her search: an exhausting back-and-forth between Damascus and Beirut, between

cities and regions – Tartous, Homs, Bikaa, Daraa, Daraya, Saidnaya – as if the entire map became the concrete form of a question without an answer. The accumulation of names traces a cartography of war and displacement, producing the sense of an endless itinerary, a search that crosses internal borders. The piece does not merely narrate a disappearance: it makes felt the duration of this search, and how that duration reshapes the body, the voice, memory, and one’s very mode of existing in time.

Also noteworthy is the recurrence of a chorus that, at strategic moments, structures the scene. Performed by all the cast, this composition of voices articulates memory and affectivity as constitutive dimensions of both the present time and a more historically remote temporality that runs through the work. As Hala announces, the performance culminates in a Sumerian lullaby associated with some of the earliest musical traditions of Mesopotamia. By mobilizing this reference, Chahrour shifts maternal love beyond a strictly biographical sphere toward an expanded historical perspective: the voice that lulls a child is inscribed in an older memory of the eastern Mediterranean, one that predates Western tragic lineages. The gesture of rocking acquires historical thickness and political density – motherhood is presented as a persistent force, one that antecedes national borders and survives the wars that traverse the region. If the performance exposes “tragedies hidden in Beirut,” as Chahrour acknowledges (Baaziz, 2022, para. 1), the lullaby relocates these mothers toward a broader temporality, inscribing them within a millenary tradition of cradle songs – not as lament, but as a practice of care, attention and sustenance of life.

The backdrop of the piece also reveals a harsh dimension of Lebanon and Syria. Through the narrative, we learn that Hassan died in

a Syrian prison, kidnapped. We also encounter a structural condition: in Lebanese culture, when a woman marries a foreigner, she is not permitted to transmit her nationality to her child. Fatmeh was married to a Syrian man, and her son disappeared during one of his trips to Syria to renew his papers.

It is the woman who searches for her missing son, who confronts powerful politicians, who sings to the dead in funerary rituals, who carries grief and sustains mourning – who mourns – yet it is not the woman whom the state recognizes as capable of granting nationality to her own son. Ali Chahrour dignifies the woman not as a symbol, but as a political force: in it, it is woman who grants nationality to the piece, its right to belong, to speak, and to love.



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