

NOUR MOBARAK, “DAFNE PHONO” CRITIQUE

Critique by Jes Fernie
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The morning after I saw Nour Mobarak’s interspecies performance installation, *Dafne Phono*, I woke to a ghostly choir of dissonant angels. In that hazy space between sleep and wakefulness, I listened, head frozen on my pillow, beguiled, bemused, slightly concerned (is this real?) as a swell of voices glanced around my body.

The experience of listening, seeing, moving through the sculptures, soundscapes and provocations of *Dafne Phono* is an all-encompassing, dreamy, unhinged experience with long-lingering after-effects. It is hugely complex, madly ambitious, and impossible to detail in a short review, but here are some bones to frame the conversation. We are in a municipal theatre in the Greek port of Piraeus, a neo-classical interior with plush red velvet seats and tiers of gold-crested balconies. The stage is set with a tableau of sculptures that take the form of truncated columns, an enormous prism and clam shell, a skeletal spine, and a snaky, luminous green, amoeba-like form. Human voices, bird song, music and other sounds emanate from the sculptures, linked – we presume – to a screen that provides a scripted translation of the narrative. These bodies speak, sing and chime over each other, creating a lilting cacophony of polyphonic sound.

Mobarak has taken the world’s first opera, *Dafne*, composed and written in 1598 by Ottavio Rinuccini and Jacopo Peri, and translated each of the four main characters’ lines into fantastically distinct and distinctive languages. In search of the widest possible palette of human vocal sounds, her forensic research led her to some of the most phonetically complex languages still in existence. Each voice speaks or sings the myth of Daphne and Apollo, as told by Ovid in *Metamorphosis*, in which Daphne’s polite but firm rebuke to Apollo’s advances (“Other than my arrow, I do not want any companion; farewell.”) are met with the threat of rape. She morphs into a laurel tree to escape his will and remains forever trapped in this new form, while Apollo sits in her shade playing love songs on a lyre, with all the tone-deaf commitment of a romantic aggressor.

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Mobarak extends this metaphor of the silencing of Daphne to the eradication of thousands of languages, animals, insects, and plant species that has taken place over the last century under the sway of global capitalism and the machinery of extraction. The sculptures assume the language of nature in their live, rhizomatic form: Mobarak spent two years growing the mycelium (a network of fungal threads) from which they are made. Collaborating with a mushroom farm on Evia, an island near the Greek mainland, she spawned, dried, petrified and sculpted these strange hybrid shapes, making things that defy our entrenched view that animate things must at some point become inanimate.

It is a rhizomatic story in which artforms (music, art, poetry, literature), timeframes, and entirely divergent approaches to life, culture, modes of communication and thought are mobilised to investigate a rich spectrum of subjects including violence, translation, destruction, power dynamics, regrowth, and repetition. Things are broken down into their constituent parts – language into morphemes and phonemes, music into sound and noise, biological life into cellular matter, sculpture into its raw elements – and refashioned, ready to be made afresh.

All this promiscuous intertwining of elements and disciplines is steeped in Mobarak's life trajectory. She did seven years of classical voice training as a teenager; her great-great grandmother was an Ottoman court pianist; her mother was a Lebanese radio DJ and TV personality; and her father speaks four languages. Her sound work, *Father Fugue* (2019), is an achingly tender exploration of his long-term neurological condition which dictates that he can only sustain a line of thought for 30 seconds. She studied literature and media, is a costume designer, performance and voice artist, actor, poet, and musician. Through these multi-channelled forms of communication and modes of play, Mobarak examines embodied and spontaneous approaches to art-making that is driven by the understanding that metamorphosis is the underlying principle that propels the universe.

While I sit in this plush seat (the ghost of Susan Hiller hovering above me, her love letters to dying languages scattered at my feet), I understand that what I am looking at and listening to could never live up to its author's ambitions which seem too strange, unwieldy, and wild for our familiar three-dimensional world. The work requires a fourth dimension, of language, space-time and 'objectness' to do what it is striving to do, but it is this mode of experimentation, this generative and generous offering of and to multiple artforms, that is the thing that makes Mobarak's endeavour so rich and worthwhile.

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