

Iranians, Syrians, Chadians... These artists banned by Donald Trump

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Posted on 01/29/18



They are musicians, dancers or actors... A year after the first American “travel ban”, artists from countries “banned” by Donald Trump are having a hard time performing across the Atlantic. Sorry for them. And for the United States.

Arms raised, gaze ardent and feet striking the ground, Mithkal Alzghair performs on the stage of the Invisible Dog Art Center in New York a choreography that recalls both traditional Syrian dances and the bloody demonstrations that agitated his country at the beginning of the war. Based in Paris, the Syrian choreographer wrote his intense show for three dancers, but New York audiences will only see two

- him and his sidekick Shamil Taskin. The US administration did not give its visa to the third, without further explanation. The cultural services of the French Embassy, co-organizers of the event, moved heaven and earth to unblock the situation, but nothing helped. " *It was unimaginable for me to make this piece without the whole company*, Mithkal Alzghair said to the audience at the end of the performance, *but I did it so that you know what is happening to us.* "

For just over a year, the United States has lived to the rhythm of the inadmissibility bans (or "*travel bans*") that **Donald Trump has been** trying to impose on several countries considered to be problematic (Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Chad and North Korea). Applied, contested (in particular **by the cultural community**), suspended by judges, then amended and again applied... these presidential decrees give rise to a heated legal battle. And endless harassment.

Subscriber American museums expose their resistance to Trump
Reportage

The visa comedy

Last July, the play *When I was expecting* by Syrian Omar Abusaada, presented in 2016 in Avignon and scheduled for four evenings at Lincoln Center in New York, almost never got played. For weeks, the troop was caught in an administrative mess with Kafkaesque overtones. Who were they? Why did they want to come to the United States? Were they terrorists? " *I'm going to make a comedy out of it !* " », Quipped Omar Abusaada. Eventually,

eight of the nine on his team were allowed to enter the territory.

Others were less fortunate. In Minneapolis, known for being home to a large Somali community, an entire month of workshops and cultural events **had to be canceled** at the Cedar Cultural Center, following the never-before-arrived visa of the main host, musician Hassan-Nour Sayid. Many artists of foreign origin, residing in the United States, no longer dare to leave the country, for fear of not being able to return. Of Iranian origin, but living in the United States for many years, the artist Amir Fallah was arrested and questioned at length at Newark airport, while returning from Tel Aviv where an exhibition presented his works. A few months ago, the Syrian Cultural House wrote to the White House to express its anger. " *This ban deprives the United States of thousands of diverse and important contributors to the country's intellectual debate, its multiple culture and its innovative spirit* , "she said. In Los Angeles, the Getty Foundation has expressed concern about its exchanges with the Middle East, where programs attempt to preserve the region's cultural heritage. But do these mobilizations only have weight in the eyes of Donald Trump?

Artist residencies ... outside the United States

Some artistic institutions have already changed their mode of operation. Under the Institute of International Education (a large organization funded, among others, by the US government), the Artist Protection Fund helps endangered cultural actors around the world. " *We continue to support artists from the countries targeted by the travel ban* , explains its director Alison Russo, *but we offer them residencies outside the United States, in Canada, in Great*

Britain, in Italy... ” Same sound from bell on the side of the Sundance Institute, a foundation created by Robert Redford to support cultural creation, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa by welcoming playwrights to the United States. ” *The current climate reinforces the isolation of Arab artists, and that of the United States...* ” laments Jumana Al-Yasiri, in charge of the program.

Lawyer Matthew Covey may have just opened a breach in these increasingly thick walls. Specialized in the promotion and support of independent artists via **the Tamizdat association**, he was called to the rescue by the cultural services of the French Embassy for the performance of the Syrian choreographer Mithkal Alzghair, whose New York misadventure is mentioned below. -above. His idea: to use a provision of the “travel ban” which provides for its lifting in the event of “*national interest*”. “. The lawyer therefore pleaded with the consulate that this dance performance was of national and common interest, since it was supported by a cultural center in Cincinnati subsidized ... by public funds. The tactic paid off: the inadmissibility has just been suspended for the third dancer. “ *Too late for this show, but promising for the future!* Enthuses the lawyer.

On stage via Skype

In the meantime, some artists are trying to integrate the vagaries of visas into their creation. Performed last October in New York, the play *Three rooms* uses Skype video messaging to bring together on stage Syrian actors detained in France and Turkey for lack of visas. Initially planned in the flesh, the actors Amal Omran and Hatem Hadawe therefore appear on large screens to play this play live on the distance and the wait. “ *It resonates with the current situation in the United States,* ” explains director Kathryn Hamilton, “ *but in reality the play was created in Europe,*

where we were faced with exactly the same concerns. Sadly, this is an international problem. At the end of the performance, the faces of the two actors disappear to make way for their drawings, an allegory of the disappearance of their fellow Syrians during the war. " There are gaps that technology can fill , " says Kathryn Hamilton. And others in the face of which we can do nothing. "