

# Dancing for Water

## Grantee

Nawel Skandrani – Performance Arts Grantee 2012

## Project

Eau Secours! Dance performance

*Story collected by Farah Merhebi  
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When did I start dancing? It was a long time ago. I couldn't have been over 5 years old. I suppose it was to follow my elder sister but I continued going to dance class even when she stopped. Actually, I was born and raised in a family that treasured the arts. Attending theatre performances and art exhibitions have always been part of my life, especially as my mother is a painter and my uncle a pianist. When I finished High School, I had to leave Tunisia because I felt it had nothing more to offer me in pursuing a career in dance. I struck a deal with my father: he agreed to send me to Paris for three years if I promised to come back and be a teacher should my career choice fail. He understood that it was a very difficult career choice and recommended I keep my options open.

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But I didn't give up on dance. There were many adventures in line for me and I ended up staying away from Tunisia for a long time, as I danced in Europe and the United State of America. In fact, I never thought I would come back. I was living in San Francisco when Mohamed Driss, a director who later became the director of the National Theatre in Tunisia, asked me one day to come back and work with him on a project. I never thought I would have an opportunity to work in my field back home, but things were changing and I seized the opportunity to begin something new. There was no choreography yet; I was working solely in theatre.

A cultural life was not the only priority embedded in my upbringing. Awareness of the environment and the health of our planet have also always been - and always will be - a priority in my life. My mom, a Swedish woman, raised us to care for nature and take note of all that it constantly offers us. We grew up watching the electricity meter and the water tank with a sense of gratitude and responsibility. Nature was our teacher – we didn't have a TV until I was 14! My life as an artist is deeply connected with my love for nature and I am passionate about creating experiential projects that imbues other professional artists with this deep connection to the natural world. It is a great source of power and inspiration for me and, potentially, for everybody.



I truly believe that, today more than ever, connecting to nature is a matter of utmost emergency. My involvement as a “Citizen-Artist” is far more than a duty and a personal passion. I am fully convinced that an “ecological culture” has a very important part to play in helping raise the awareness of people to take part in protecting their most valuable resources, while also maintaining an enjoyable, cultural and playful spirit. Art is an appealing form of education to people of all background and all ages. It is a way for change to start to happen in people's minds and hearts, so that they can carry that change out into the world.

My first AFAC-funded project happened in 2008, the year that Mahmoud Darwish passed away. He was a close family friend who used to visit us in the garden and sit by the one olive tree that we had there - it was really important to him. Trees took focus as a source of inspiration to land and history. I borrowed a friend's abandoned farm and turned the cow saddle into a studio where twelve actors and dancers from across the region came to participate. We worked for months around a creative self-expression project where each of the participants was asked to adopt a tree. They spent the whole duration of the workshop in relationship to that tree, exploring its history, naming it, dancing it, imagining its story through words and movement. At the end of my 2008 workshop, when everyone had left, I had all this material and put it into a performance I called “Warqat Zaytoun”, in honor of Mahmoud Darwish's poem titled “Awraq al-Zaytoun”.

When I went to present “Warqat Zaytoun” in Ramallah in 2010, the Israelis had decided to cut off the water from the water tanks used by the Palestinians. When Israelis say, “we're cutting off the water” it really means: There. Will. Be. No. More. Water.

It was an appalling situation and that's how the idea for “Eau Secours!” began. I met with Khaled Elayyan, the director of the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, and started



talking about making a dance performance centrally and explicitly focused on water, not only for Palestinians, but as an issue that is part of an emerging global crisis. I also wanted Palestinian dancers to be involved, since they have first-hand experience of politically-motivated water deprivation. Khaled thought it was a great idea and agreed to support. I, right away, began working on writing the project synopsis and raising the funds.

It has been a very demanding three years since. The Tunisian revolution took us by storm. I put my research and fundraising on hold and became one of the activists for freedom in Tunisia. It is still a sensitive subject to me personally, and to Tunisians in general.

Meanwhile, I applied to AFAC and my project was accepted in 2012. I really think we need more initiatives like AFAC; it's a pity that there are so few resources for artists. Despite the grant I was awarded, I still had to pursue several organizations to meet my budget, got 13 sponsors in total, and still had to reach into my own pocket to cover the costs.

"Eau Secours" was a big project that really changed everyone's perspective – both ours as performers and the audiences' that we reached. Conflict over water is a common denominator to everyone, especially in Africa and the Middle East. We've performed with dancers of different nationalities, including Palestinians in Ramallah and Tunisia, and will move on to other parts of different regions as well, such as Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, and Italy. When we performed "Eau Secours!" in a theater in Bejan (Tunisia), we were worried that no one would come, because it was known to usually host light entertainment, comedians and singers. The place ended up being packed with

farmers and their families, and people from international backgrounds. Within five minutes, the theater went silent, and we executed the performance.

At the end, people did not just clap and leave. They came up to us, the crew, and were full of questions like "How did you come up with this idea for water? We never knew that people who weren't from here could have the same problems we have!" This was a huge point of transition on the impact of our project. Water is a source of conflict that is shared by everyone. The idea simply needs to be presented to people in an inspiring way.