

# An Interview with Wajdi Mouawad

Jean-François Côté

Wajdi Mouawad is a Montréal playwright who won the General Governor's Award this year for his play *Littoral*.<sup>1</sup> Also an actor and a director, he has been appointed artistic director of the *Théâtre de Quat'Sous*, in Montréal, in January 2000. He was born in Lebanon in 1968. His parents left Beirut in 1978, fleeing the civil war, to Paris, where they lived for eight years, and from there moved to Montréal, where Wajdi went to cegep before entering the National Theater School. This interview is extracted from a larger series of interviews that I conducted with him to be published this year in book form. In this interview, Wajdi Mouawad reflects on his experience as a walker in the city in general, and in Montréal in particular. One will find expressed here thoughts that can be understood as an artist's relationship to his creativity, as it is mediated by this experience of walking in the city. What makes it singularly interesting, in my perspective, is that this experience does not have much to do with the usual way of understanding the artistic experience of the city—as Baudelaire so aptly described it in the middle of the nineteenth century, and that has been so commented on since, by Walter Benjamin or by more recent social theorists.<sup>2</sup> The image we have here is in no relation at all with the *flâneur*, or the dandy, or the artist deeply interested in witnessing the different aspects of city life in order to portray the variety of its scenes; on the contrary, walking in the city appears here to be somewhat like 'crossing the scene,' a more radical attitude of being deeply embedded into, but also somehow remoted from, the hectic pace of living the city life. What comes out is a dialectical relationship between personal anguish, walking as an action, the city as the scene to be crossed, and dreams that are looked for through and through. One could look at it, when we know more about the artistic and personal preoccupations of Wajdi Mouawad, as some kind of prelude to a cultural pilgrimage, situating the spiritual quest of a person in the midst of contemporary experience, this historical blend of deeply moving *déplacements*, open spaces of fantasies, and sudden intrusions of dire bits and pieces of city life. In a way, what is at stake here is the possibility of understanding how these multiple layers of experience coexist one with the other, and how this develops into a subjective reconstruction of the historicity of contemporary existence.



**Jean-François Côté:** Wajdi Mouawad, you are a walker. You walked on one occasion from Carleton, in the Gaspésie region, to Montréal—many hundreds of kilometres—in the company of your friend Jean-François Casabonne. Moreover, the image of the walker appears several times in your plays. What does walking represent for you, as an experience?

**Wajdi Mouawad:** I wouldn't speak of this experience as just a walk from Carleton to Montréal, initiated by Jean-François, because at that moment the idea was to reflect upon the meaning of prayer by taking the time to do it, and to see in what sense prayer can have a connection to people.

**JFC:** At that time, you were stopping at every church that you came across...

**WM:** Our points of reference were church steeples. Jean-François had done the journey by car to determine the distances in kilometres. Then, afterwards, we followed this route again on foot; sometimes we could see a church tower in the distance, and it would take us five hours to reach it... It was certainly an exhausting experience; we sometimes walked thirty-five kilometres a day... But for me, this was not a walk, as I live it, when I decide to go walking... A walk for me isn't—let's say 'athletic' either... I don't do it to get thinner... I would say that a walk is a way for me to plunge down into the heart of my identity itself. When I walk, I am myself. Really, this is closely connected to the inner activity that fills me. I realize that it's tough to wear me out; I need to walk a lot to become exhausted. It can take hours before I wear out. At this point, the walk becomes the space for exhaustion, the exhaustion of inner anguish. Then there's no limit to expressing myself, because when I walk, I do it without telling myself that I'm going there... You don't know where you'll end up. You know that you'll probably return home, but you don't know at what moment you'll make a U-turn. There's something like that in the body that makes you need to move. It's often uncomfortable to be in a city that's too small, if you feel like walking. In cities that are too small, you arrive at the extremity too quickly. You say to yourself: good, right over there I could exit, but then I'm getting involved in another affair; if I leave the city, that means I'm going to walk until the next one... I've walked cities like that, which were never long enough for me. Montréal—the City of Montréal and not the Island of Montréal—is not large enough. I've already walked starting from the St Lawrence River all the way to the Rivière-des-Prairies, along Boulevard St-Laurent. It's completely crazy, because it's a straight line, and you pass through an infinity of universes, and again, you arrive too quickly. It's a four-hour walk, and once you arrive at the end, you make a U-turn, you come back, and you go home

again... There's something... the anguish dries up. For me, a walk is perhaps the sole remedy for anguish. It's the place of fantasy. It's strange that you ask me this question because... in my life there will be two novels—I will write two novels. The first, which I'm in the process of completing, is called *Les visages oubliés* (*The Forgotten Faces*), and the second will be entitled *Architecture d'un marcheur* (*Architecture of a Walker*). And *Architecture d'un marcheur* will be an attempt to describe what happens inside a walker during a walk that lasts eight hours, but without making an ellipsis in the writing of the 'two hours later' sort... but, rather, by always being in the skin of the walker, and an attempt to describe what happens between the interior and exterior. Because when you walk, you fall sometimes into fantasy...

JFC: What do you mean by that?

WM: I'm very rarely engrossed in thought when I walk... I don't think. I fantasize, I become delirious, I imagine to myself that I'm here or there, I dream of a play that I'll write, of a story, I redo a *mise en scène*. I fantasize about glorious things... that I can save the world, for example, or that I am a superhero... And at the same time, I fantasize about more difficult things; that everyone around me is dying, or that it's me who's dying and everyone is crying a lot. They're really infantile fantasies, but infantile fantasies that are of an incredible playfulness... Walking while imagining that we are greater than ourselves... And all of a sudden you're taken into this fantasy: you imagine that you're fighting the dragon, that there is a woman tied up to a post, that you are going to free her... It's due to this that I say it's infantile... You imagine that you're fighting the dragon, all the while walking, but at the same time you're dealing with the red and green lights, but you can't remember the red or green lights. During this time, you're in the middle of battling a dragon with terrible wings, in an apocalyptic setting; you have a sword that was presented to you by a wise being who has recognized something in you, and you, you've been chosen among a multitude of others... And all of a sudden, there's a car that screeches to a halt, and you stop. You are at the corner of St-Laurent and Beaubien Streets; you look at the car that has stopped abruptly, and well... You say to yourself look, I'm going to buy myself a donut, you enter a Dunkin' Donuts, you buy two good chocolate donuts, you exit and take up your walk again while eating your donuts... And then you're trying to remember, you don't remember your dream anymore... All that you recall, all that you carry within yourself, is the sensation that it gave you.

JFC: In a certain way, you really walk more in your head...



**WM:** Not exactly. During a walk, there are anecdotes and fantasies, but I don't remember them; the very, very precious thing that I keep is the sensation that it gives me, a dream-like sensation. When you have a dream, you experience sensations for real. In the morning, when you wake up, you say to yourself: shit, I really felt what it's like to be an assassin, or to be a thief, or an ex-convict. During a walk, if the fantasies—from which life snatches us away—if they vanish, if in the end you don't remember anymore, you still carry the sensation that it gives you. For me, a walk is important because it locates itself continually in the domain of sensations. I don't get involved in anything 'natural' or 'esoteric' or 'athletic,' any more than the idea that "walking brings us into a different rhythm where we take time to observe"; I don't observe anything when I walk. Nothing at all. I am completely within myself. I am in a fantasy. It's the place for fantasy par excellence. For daydream, in which I navigate however it suits me, as I desire. Dreaming is unpleasant because you are carried along, but you don't know when you will wake up, and you would have wanted to go one way but your subconscious took you elsewhere... However, during a walk, you go wherever you want. And when everything jolts along, when everything is in movement—your heart beats, you breathe well, the walk feels good... There's no break, there's constant noise, the sound of the city is constant—there are no different sounds, and so you enter into a trance. It's for this reason that I can walk from one end to the other on the Island (of Montréal), and still be in my fantasy. And then I come back; at a certain point, fatigue gets the upper hand, you're no longer capable of fantasizing, you just want to get home again.

**JFC:** You say that the experience of walking in the city is a completely inward experience. But at the same time, what represents for you the act of walking in the city as such, seeing that you make reference to these multiple universes that you cross, to the constant sound of the city, like a background to your inward drift?

**WM:** For me, it's being in my place, that is to say, in a type of marginal situation. One has the impression that in a city everyone who walks is going somewhere; whereas walking just for walking in the city, and enjoying it as well... For me, walking in the country is not something I enjoy really, it bores me quite quickly, whereas walking in the city, that I like, I find it beautiful. One of the most beautiful places to walk is on St-Jacques Street. Once you've passed the Molson Centre, you continue towards St-Henri, at a certain point, you see the Métro Station Georges-Vanier, on one side you have the *autoroute* Ville-Marie rising on its pillars, and when you turn around, you can see the buildings of downtown behind you—and it's magnificent. It's magnificent savagery, concrete, uncon-

scious savagery, because people did not want to build according to a precise aesthetic, they built and this was the result. There's something crude in that. And walking there, for me, means being in a profound solitude, very, very profound. For me, in my spirit, I become someone who dreams in a milieu that doesn't dream, in a world that does everything but dream — "be efficient, work!" And I become the guy who dreams in this milieu. And I'm happy. There's something original for me there, I discover again a place for resistance, saying to myself, "in any case, I'm not joining your game, even if I do like your game." I'm not against the world, but I don't take part in that. I find this moving in the end, I find it beautiful. And I'm in the middle of this, not on the sidelines. For me, there's a sort of giving up in the act of going to the country.

**JFC:** Is this distance that you have towards the world of the city purely aesthetic? Is it simple contemplation?

**WM:** Yes. It's contemplative. But at the same time, I know perfectly well that no one accepts that someone is contemplative, that someone would choose this contemplative mode of life—it's not accepted anymore. And so there is a type of resistance mixed into contemplative life, which is not simply passive—in saying: I contemplate, I dream. I embark into my head, and I dream. When I walk, I don't dream that I am rich, I still dream that I'm a guy defending a belle tied to a post, that there's a dragon passing... like I was led to dream when I was young... Whether this dream is worthwhile or not, I couldn't care less, but it's the dream that makes me happy. I let myself drift to this possibility, to this illusion, to this delirium. I'm not accountable to anyone; it's at this moment that the anguish can let itself go, in a form of liberty, whether is worthwhile or not—I don't have a clue... On social occasions, when everyone holds in his or her stomach so as not to appear fat; in a situation where you're the only one, you relax your stomach, you say to yourself: "I'm fat, I couldn't care less." You release your stomach, you breathe, you're relaxed. These situations are like that: morally, ethically, you restrain yourself, and at a certain point you say, okay, I'm letting myself go. Then you say that you're really a valiant knight who's fighting a dragon, and who's going to seduce the belle. That's fantasy. And it's curious to see at what point it becomes fragile, at what point the parameters you need to enter into it and believe it become fragile. Sometimes it's enough that a bird flies by, or that a couple passes you, a differently coloured car, a voice that's a little bit higher reaches you from beyond this ambient and global racket—and then you don't believe it anymore. And then there is a hesitation, where all of a sudden you start to watch yourself, and you start to think for a few seconds; by giving yourself over to thought, everything becomes interwoven,

as you start to associate insidious ideas, and before you know it you don't realize that you're in another fantasy: you've become a great thinker, on a stage, giving a great conference, at the UN, in wartime, and that you've truly become someone, throughout the Second World War, you see yourself again, you're taking part in the Resistance, and you're the best mate of Jean Moulin. . . And then, you walk, and it begins again. . . And this desire for heroism, this desire to give a sense to life that's something greater in the end is very healthy. For me, walking is at the heart of all that. It's very infantile. It's as if you would say to life: "I'm going to play outside, but I'll be back"—and then you take eight hours. . .

JFC: What do you think of Montréal as a city?

WM: It's an ugly city. It's a city in the middle of a forest. There's a forest, we made a hole and built a city there. It's a city where one doesn't remember that it's an island. You don't see the water—or very little—very few things invite us to go see the water. It's a city that resembles its language; the language is spoken like the city is built. It's an insane city. I don't understand it completely, I don't understand it right away, I don't know where Montréal ends. Where does Montréal end? What's the last street? Where does Côte-des-Neiges begin, where does Outremont begin? I don't know; I don't understand this city. I don't know where the Plateau Mont-Royal starts and where it finishes. Here, at the Quat'sous, we're in the district Ville-Marie. . . I don't know where this part ends. I have trouble understanding it geophysically; for me, on the Island of Montréal there's the St Lawrence River to the south, the Rivière-des-Prairies to the north, and then that's okay. But in between there's Dorval, Lachine, Pierrefonds—what are these things about? . . . I don't understand these things; I don't know where Montréal starts or finishes. It's not a city that I particularly love because I find that it has things that are violent—I find the *autoroute* Ville-Marie violent, I find the *autoroute* Métropolitaine violent, the *autoroute* Descaries. . . But I do like the alleys of Montréal. . . it's the only thing that hasn't been. . . it's not an artificial thing. . . I don't know how to say it. . .

JFC: Do you have a favourite part of Montréal?

WM: I think that it's that portion that joins. . . that separates the downtown from the district St-Henri. I find that incredible. . .

JFC: It's a kind of no man's land. . .

WM: Yes. . . It really. . . On St-Jacques. . . Not on St-Antoine, not on

Notre-Dame... I don't know why... It makes me calm.

**JFC:** Do you have any experience with other North American cities with which you can compare Montréal?

**WM:** In Québec, no other city is similar to Montréal...

**JFC:** ... but other examples like Toronto, New York, Chicago...

**WM:** It's funny, because I learned to find my way around Toronto very rapidly, because I had a map of Montréal in my head. It was only necessary to understand that, for example, the artists' quarter is to the left of the downtown, instead of being to the right, the university quarter is to the west, instead of being to the south... But I knew that there was an artists' quarter, a poor quarter, a rich quarter, this quarter, that quarter, and the downtown. Once you've organized that, once you know where things are, that's it, you can locate yourself... But at the same time, Toronto has nothing in common with Montréal, because Toronto is a city where the cosmopolitan character is much less problematic than in Montréal—on the question of language, for many francophones, crossing St-Laurent Boulevard means going to Canada. There are psychological lines in Montréal: French, English, Russian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and they're clearly demarcated. In Toronto, you arrive in the Chinatown, but you don't see it coming, and you leave it in the same way. There's something there that's more integrated, I find.

**JFC:** And in relation to European cities, is there anything that strikes you, any points of comparison...

**WM:** Montréal makes me think of Brussels... Even on an architectural level... But for me, the city par excellence remains Paris. Maybe because I grew up there. It's a city of conquered and conquerors; it's a city that has been conquered, and that has conquered. And you can see it. It's a city that... it's funny, isn't it, I always find my way around again, I know exactly where I am... And maybe it's because I know where it starts and where it finishes. The psychological divide of the river is a more aesthetic divide, more an encouragement than a hindrance; when you arrive at the bank of the Seine, you don't want to stop, you want to cross it—in Montréal, when you arrive at the autoroute Ville-Marie, you do want to stop, you don't want to cross it. I always say that a tourist who arrives and who's going to visit Old Montréal, once he takes Boulevard St-Laurent and he arrives at the corner of Ville-Marie (St-Antoine), he can't imagine for one instant that St-Denis Street is just over there, in front of that hor-



ror—because it really is a horror. It’s a question of harmony, isn’t it? For example, one realizes that Paris faces the West; it’s something important: the two towers of Notre Dame look to the West; and after that all the churches are oriented towards the West; the imaginary line that connects the statue of Louis XIV, l’Arc de Caroussel, l’Arc de Triomphe, la Colonne de la Concorde, l’Arche de la Défense, all of these things look to the West. The entire city looks to the West. The tower of St-Jacques looks to the West, like the tower of Montparnasse. But you don’t notice it, you cannot notice it except if you look at the whole city. This creates a harmony. It’s as if... to the East, one knew what there was, but not to the West, and therefore the city is turned towards the West, like a vigil. How was Paris constructed, this harmonious space shaped like a snail... The fact that it’s not squared off... You take a street, you think you’re going straight, then you’ve gone in a curve... and the result is that all of a sudden there’s a mystery that’s preserved, something that is thought-out, it seems to me... It’s a series of parameters such that, for example, there are very few super shopping malls, so therefore there are still small stores that see to it that there is still a certain form of life in the district—like one can find on the Plateau Mont-Royal—but over there it’s throughout the whole city. Above all, there isn’t one single downtown. What’s the downtown of Paris? Is it the Champs-Élysées? Is it the Bastille? Is it Montparnasse? It can be all of them at once.

JFC: In which arrondissement did you grow up?

WM: In the 14th... For me, that city is a good example of a city where I feel comfortable. Because it responds to the language; it is constructed like the language is spoken. It responds as well to what I learned in school. There isn’t any discrepancy; when I go into the street, I see the discipline I learned in school... Here, when children go into the street, they don’t see the discipline that we attempt to teach them.

#### Notes

The interview was translated by Michael Darroch.

1. Wajdi Mouawad, *Littoral* (Montréal: Leméac / Actes Sud, 1999).
2. See Charles Baudelaire, “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 687–724. Also Walter Benjamin, “Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle,” *Oeuvres*, t. 3 (Paris, Gallimard, 2000), 44–66.