

## **Belgian-Moroccan artists co-create our plural society**

What challenges did young people from Moroccan immigrant backgrounds face, if they wanted to be artists? They dreamed of taking to the stage in the big theatres, and working in TV or film. But beyond mastering their art and knowing how to market themselves by displaying their talent, they also had to give a positive image of the young Maghrebis they were, promote their community and invite the general public to learn more about their families and working-class neighbourhoods. Fulfilling their dream went hand in hand with building their cultural community, which lent a certain nobility to their career. These young artists had to position themselves to be funny, entertaining and critical, while also, as citizens, taking public action, writing, and performing in shows that revealed them and gave a positive image of their community. A heavy responsibility on the shoulders of these young people, who had not intended to become spokespeople for all Moroccans in Belgium.

Among this first crop of “Maroxellois” artists were Sam Touzani and Ben Hamidou. Sam, at the age of 12, had agreed to recite some poems by Géo Norge at a public speaking competition. Ben, having earned his secondary school diploma, had dared to lie to his grandmother Fatima about his studies, in order to attend Henri Ruder’s acting classes. They were both fortunate to meet sensitive, generous and attentive teachers who were able to support and guide them, helping them to become emblematic actors in Belgium.

**A number of teachers, socio-cultural activity organisers and social action theatre companies did a great deal to help these young people from immigrant backgrounds** learn artistic practices, and encouraged them in their vocation.

Like so many others, these pioneers, Sam Touzani and Ben Hamidou, then Moustafa Largo in storytelling, and troupes such as La Compagnie des Nouveaux Disparus or Ras El Hanout, have grown into well-known masters of the stage. Through their work, they have nobly contributed to the successful integration of their Moroccan community into Belgian society. Although Sam and Ben have denounced racism and discrimination towards minorities, yesterday and today, they have also drawn attention to the tendency for communities to withdraw, and the excesses of political Islam in Belgium. This has led to them being heavily criticised and threatened within their own community. The construction of our plural and intercultural society is therefore still very much a work in progress.