

Crossroads of Influence: Dialogues between Western Theatre and Contemporary Arab Stage

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Theatre is a created event, usually based on text excited by live performers and taking place before an audience in a specially defined setting. Also theatre uses techniques of voice or movement to achieve cognition and emotional release through the senses. Theatre comes usually based on drama, however not all drama will be changing as theatre.

Is theatre in the Arab world an imported art in all respects?

The search for the origin of the Arab theatre has been a major subject in criticism of the twentieth century Arab world. In fact many of the researches have engaged in the discussion of whether Arab culture knew a genuine form of drama before theatre activities were imported from the Western world. As a result, they were divided into two camps; the first thinks that Arabs throughout their history knew many forms which they considered as theatrical phenomena or in some cases pre-theatrical phenomena. For instance, Al-Hakawati (الحكواتي)¹, Al-Semaja (السمجة)² Shadow plays, (خيال الظل) Al-Taaziya (التعزية)³. The second camp's point of view⁴, it suggests that the Arabs never had theatre before they borrowed it from the French in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Drama and theatre activities were unknown in Arab-speaking countries for centuries before they were imported from Western culture during the first half of the nineteenth century. Anyhow, literary theatre for the Arab world seems to have been first brought to the region by European tourists, from Napoleon to colonial powers including Britain, France and Italy. For most Arab countries, the general pattern of the emergence of west inspired literary theatre was similar. The theater introduced firstly in this region for refugees at private clubs, its base later expanded as touring groups from Europe began to play in Arab capitals such as Cairo, Damascus and Beirut. Eventually Arab business people and government officials viewed theatre on travels to Europe or other part of the world and, as Arab students started to travel, they too began to be interested in such literary forms. In universities, adaptations of Shakespeare and Moliere were particularly popular. Later private commercial theatres came into being in some countries of the region. Others the state got heavily involved through ministers of culture, education and youth.

¹ Al-Hakawati : we can define it as a narrator who tells folk stories in public places, like traditional coffeehouses known in many cities around the Arab world (e.g. Cairo, Bagdad, Damascus, Marrakesh ... etc) Similar to al-Hakawati we find also the story-teller known as al-Gasas (القصاص), al-Rawya (الراوية) or the narrator,

² Al-Semaja : a group of comic performers appears first in the court of caliph al-Mutawakkil in the 9th century

³ Al-Taaziyy : literally means 'expressions of sympathy, mourning, and consolation'³. It is an annual religious ceremony of Shi'ite Muslims commemorating the tragic death of al-Husain, in which many rituals are performed during the ceremony, including a performance showing the arrival of al-Husain in Iraq and his brutal death.

⁴ - This is the point of view of (e.g. Taha Hussien; Tawfiq al-Hakim; Mohammed Mandor).

Even though, puppet theatre and passion plays were popular in the medieval Islamic world, There may have been a much longer theatrical tradition but it was probably not regarded as legitimate literature and mostly went unrecorded. There is an ancient tradition of public performance amongst Shi'i Muslims of a play depicting the life and death of al-Husayn at the battle of Karbala in 680 CE. There are also several plays composed by Shams al-din Muhammad ibn Daniyal in the 13th century. Theatre appeared in Egypt during the French campaign in 1789. In 1869 Khedive Ismail established the French Comedy Theatre and the Opera House to receive the delegations participating in the celebrations he prepared for his guests in the occasion of opening the Suez Canal. He also established another theatre in Al Azbakia Garden in 1870.

In February 1848, a Beirut merchant named Marun Al Naqqash (1817-55)⁵, put on in his own home a performance of 'Al Bakhil, written in the European style and based on Moliere's play L'Avare.⁶ When the curtain rose he stood before the audience and delivered a prologue in true eighteenth and nineteenth century European style. He promised to introduce his people to a new artistic form, "a literary theatre . . . which shall be Western gold in an Arab mould". This form, he added, was of two kinds: drama and opera. "It would have been much easier for me to start with the former but I decided to take the harder course . . . because it is more likely to meet with the approval of the audience and delight them. I trust that I have made the right choice . . . and that you will benefit from this theatre, for it teaches . . . proper manners, proffers good advice, polishes and refines."

Al Naqqash went on to develop his adaptive approach, after his death, his brother Nicola(1825-1894) and his nephew Salim continued his work, taking French theatre as their major source of ideas and material. Meanwhile another merchant, Sheikh Abu Khalil Qabbani (1836-1902)⁷, was doing in Damascus what Marun Al Naqqash had started in Beirut, although unlike Al Naqqash he was not versed in foreign languages and had not travelled abroad. He may have seen performances of Italian operettas by visiting troupes and plays staged by Turkish actors, but on the whole he was solidly rooted in the local tradition. His major source was The Arabian Nights.

Many translations were made of works by European dramatists such as Racine, Corneille, Shakespeare, Sheridan and Goldoni. Most of them were adaptations in which translators and directors "improved" texts or adjusted them to suit contemporary taste. Romeo and Juliet, for example, rendered as Martyrs of Love, ended happily and was full of song and music. During this productive period, Arab theatre professionals considered the world drama tradition as their own and used it freely, often shaping it to their needs. There were perhaps more theatres per head of population in the Arab world then than there are today and intense activity in the theatre generated widespread interest and debate about the objectives of drama and the forms of Arabic that should be used in it.

George Abyad (1880-1962) was one major figure in the history of the Arab theatre in this period. He became widely known for the formal style and eloquent literary language of his adaptations of

⁵ One of the Arab theatre pioneers, that is Maron al-Naqqash, would be technically and thematically closer to classical French theatre.

⁶ This first Arab written, European style play was mainly in fusha with some colloquial utterances scattered here and there in order to give local taste to the dialogue.

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Western plays, mainly French classics, but soon turned to Arabic plays. By virtue of his foreign training which dictated the kind of plays he chose and his exaggerated acting style helped to move Arab theatre away from its traditional popular audience to a more cultivated and more intellectual public.

Theatre historians credit the introduction of European style theatre in the Arab world to three pioneers- Marun al Naqash (1817-1855) Sheikh Abu Khalil Qabbani (1836-1902) and Yaqub Sannu(1839-1912)⁸. Their plays and productions introduced the concepts of dramatic literature and spoken theatre to Egypt, Syria and Lebanon and through these countries to the rest of the region. Anyhow by the end of the 19th century , hundreds of translated ,adapted or original plays some in fusha ,some in colloquial Arabic and some in mixture both- were staged. Many were adaptations from French and English classics, with Moliee, Racine and shakespeare particularly favoured.

Like Salim Al Naqqash and others from Beirut, Al Qabbani packed up and left for Egypt, where a young man named Yaqub Sannu' had launched a new theatre movement. As a young man Yaqub Sannu' had been sent to Europe, where he learnt languages and developed a passion for the theatre. On his return to Egypt he worked with European troupes, he drew upon aspects of local tradition that were conducive to the development of musical drama. His characters were deeply rooted in the social fabric and used the vibrant spoken Arabic of everyday life. With Sannu' the Western gold and the Arab mould merged very well - although one sometimes wonders which is the gold and which is the mould. The written text, the form, and the Italian frame stage were Western-inspired innovations, but everything else was deeply rooted in popular tradition.

The influence of west in the modern theatre history of Arab region is undeniable. As all the major initiatives of theatre movement in Arab world were connected directly or indirectly with European influence , during the first two decades of the 20th century, number of new theatre companies have established , all of them are linked with West, like George abyad's company (founded in 1912) which produced number of stage adaptation of world literature and translated western dramatic classics, the company of al – Rihani (founded in 1916)which was successful, producing comedies for the most part and what were called Franco-Arab pieces. And Ramsis Troupe (founded in 1923) also produced both original Egyptian melodramas as well as western classics in translation.

The women face of Arab theatre, Fathima Rushdie (1908-1997) was often called “Sarah Bernhardt of the East” also actively participated in the theatre field through ‘Ramsis Troupe’ and her own troupe ‘Fathima Rushdie Troupe (1927 -1935) for decades. She also brought the west in the Arabian soil with the adaptation of ‘Anna Karena’ and ‘The resurrection’ by Tolstoy. It is noted that, Fathima Rushdie explored the field of directing, thus becoming the first women director in the Arab theatre world. Also she played the roles of men in acting, like Hamlet, Mark Antony and

⁸ Nicknamed the “Moliere of Egyt” Yaqub Sanu (1839-1912), (ar: يعقوب صنوع Yacqūb Ṣannūc)also known as James Sanua, was an Egyptian Jew born to an Egyptian mother and an Italian father. He became famous as a journalist, an Egyptian nationalist and a playwright. He was also a polyglot, writing in French, English, Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, and Italian as well as both literary Arabic and Egyptian Arabic.

Qays⁹. Even the famous poet, Ahmed Shauqi wrote the verse play 'the death of Cleopatra' for her troupe. Another famous women theatre figure of the Arab, Huda wasfi (b.1942) is the artistic director of both 'National theatre' of Egypt since 1995 and 'al Hanajir' theatre since 1992. Huda worked as the professor of comparative drama and literary criticism and translated a large number of plays from and to Arabic, and conducted research in number of topics related to Arabic and French dramatic studies.

For much of the first half of the twentieth century there were two types of play in Arab theatre. On the one hand there were "serious" literary translations of Western plays and original Arabic "literary" compositions; on the other there were the situation comedies, mockeries and musicals which constituted the daily fare of the commercial theatre. With a few exceptions, notably Tewfik Al Hakim, there was very little creative talent at work in Arab theatre by the mid-1950s.

A new era in the history of modern Arab drama began in the late 1950s with the development of a type of communal drama which could contribute to the wider socio-political awakening. The entire Arab world was responding to the call of modernity by developing its academic and cultural institutions, interacting with the outside world and reacting to its challenges. The fifth of June 1967, marking defeat in the Six-Day War, brought home to many Arabs the need for political stability and transparency, democracy, dialogue and debate, objective analysis and freedom from rhetoric. It was thought that drama could contribute to this process by drawing on and contributing to national identity, without however excluding foreign cultural influences. Direct imitation of Western plays was to be shunned, but translation was encouraged and assimilation promoted.

The case of Algeria, the earliest recorded examples of European style in Algeria date to the mid nineteenth century when plays were done by armature actors in French for audiences almost totally composed of French soldiers. By 1853, the French government had built a large theatre for the purpose in Algiers. Even though the first Algerian theatre troupe came to reality only in 1919 through the "Widaadiyat at-Talaba al-Muslimeen" (society of Muslim students). The famous Egyptian theatre company George Abyad Company visited Algeria and presented dramas, like "fath al Andulus" and others, in coming years another Egyptian theatre company "Izz ud-Deen troupe also visited there and presented two Shakespearian dramas in classical Arabic- Julius Caesar and Romeo and Juliet. From there, number of theater troupes established there.. Rasheed Qasanteeni (1887-144)¹⁰ Maheddine Bachetarzi, Mohammed al- Touri (1914-1959) Hasan al Husni (1916-1988) Abdul haleem Rayis (1921-1975) Abdul Rahman Kaaki (b.1934) are the some noted Algerian theatre personalities who contributed much to the rise of the theatre culture in the nation with the adaptation of west or from the Arabic unique.

From 1885, amateur troupes and societies began to appear in Cairo and Alexandria presenting plays from the European repertoire that they themselves translated. Experimentalism in the Egyptian Theatre With the beginning of the dramatic revival in Egypt and the Arab world during the Fifties, Dramatic artists started experimenting with modern European formulae such as Socialist Realism, Absurd, Documentary and Coffee-shop Theatre. Later, so many Egyptian theatre companies appeared with adaption from European classics or original Arabic narrative.

⁹ The melancholic lover, in an adaptation by ahmed shawqi of the famous pre Islamic Arab literary tradition 'Majnun Laila'.

¹⁰ Known as the father of Algrian theatre.

George Abiad Theatre(1880-1959), al-Kassar troupe (1918-49) ,Ramsis Troupe (1923-43) Malak Opera Troupe, 'Fathima Rushdie Troupe (1927 -1935) Ismail Yassin troupe(1954-66), al-Rihani Troupe(1916-79) Arab Acting House, are some of them. Al-Mansoura Eden Theatre, Municipality Theatre, the Municipality Council Theatre now owned by the governorate.

George abyad, Youf Wahbi(1898-1982) Najib al Rihani(1889-1949)¹¹ Zaki tulaymat (1895-1982) ,¹²Sahad al –ddin Wahba(1925-1997)Mustafa Bahjat(1935-1980)Anwar fatah Allah(1915-1991) Fawzi Fahmi(b.1938) Jalal Al Sharqawi(b.1935)Mahmud Rida (B.1929) are the some distinguished Egyptian theatre personalities who walk with the theatre culture with the Arabic origin or adaptation of west. Like, Algeria and Egypt number of Arabic countries strolled with rich theatre culture in the 20th century as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Libya, Sudan, Djibouti and others.

In countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, specialist drama magazines were started, national or state-supported theatres were promoted and national theatre companies formed. Artistes were sent abroad for training and foreign troupes were warmly welcomed. In the universities student drama thrived. The coming of television brought performers an additional source of income which further consolidated their financial and social status. Cultural co-operation agreements with other countries, socialist countries in particular, opened important venues for the study of such arts as puppetry, ballet, folk dance, music, acting, directing and film-making. Altogether, the 1960s were a time of intense activity in the performing arts not only in Egypt but practically everywhere else in the Arab world.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, successive generations of theatre practitioners carried on where the pioneers had left off. The end product almost invariably appealed to local taste, speaking the language of the audience, which was often drawn into the action despite the increasing impact of the distance imposed by the Italian frame indoor stage - earlier traditional performances usually took place outdoors in courtyards. Starting in mid-Sixties, this phase showed an enhanced pursuit for an Arab dramatic formula, combining elements of both modernity and originality. This trend was upheld, by playwrights like Tawfeeq al-Hakeem, Yousef Idrees and Alfred Farag and critics and dramatic writers like Ali ar-Ra'ie, Naguib Sorour, Shawqi abdel- Hakeem among others. This phase was characterized by deeply delving into Arab heritage as well as objectively analyzing and criticizing the Arab personality.

At the end of the 20th century, the theatre forms performed in the Arab countries with good command over the contemporary issues by the support of wider audiences in different features of theatre, as Music theatre, puppet theatre, dance theatre, theatre for young audiences, national theatre community, criticism fields and training schools.

References

¹¹ He understood the importance of comedy as social criticism and used it to question new developments in culture and those middle class attitudes. Many appeared in operettas he drew from the thousand and one nights. also most of his critical social comedy adapted skillfully from French farce.

¹² manager of the Egyptian troupe for acting and music, he began the modern theatre troupe which he limited to graduates of the institute for dramatic art. This new and well trained company sought to present translations of modern world drama and western classics particularly those of Moliere.

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