

For Future Reference: Art and Politics (1999)

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In the Arab world, where repressive authoritarianism, in varying degrees of severity and one form or another, penetrates all aspects of life, and constitutes the ruling principle - informing the structures of thought, social relations and government - cultural events, and theatre festivals in particular, invariably have an air of crude political machination. Because theatre in the Arab world has always had an irreducible political dimension, and continues to be inextricably bound up with a critique of domination, official theatre festivals are often viewed by governments as effective means to divert attention from the many arrant abuses of human rights in this part of the world, and project a spurious façade of democracy, freedom of speech and conscience.

The partisan political base of such events, however well camouflaged, is hardly a secret. Over the years, Arab artists, critics and cultural activists, have had to learn how to manipulate it in their interests without compromising their visions. In this respect, bluffing has proved invaluable. By taking the establishment at its word, pretending to believe its glossy slogans, and threatening to embarrass it by calling its bluff if necessary, artists have been able, in some cases, to secure subsidies, spaces, media coverage and a bigger margin of freedom.

Foreign participants face a different challenge, particularly if they belong to formerly colonialist nations. Burdened by a sense of guilt, and a heritage they feel they have to apologize and make up for, they find themselves in the position of having to suspend all judgement and exercise the virtue of tolerance and respect for difference to a fault. This makes them a deliciously easy prey to autocratic regimes whose internationally acknowledged legitimacy is mere pretense. Caught in the guilt trap, they are rendered largely passive. Unwilling to interfere with what they regard as hallowed "internal affairs," and burdened by an exaggerated and overrated respect for otherness and cultural specificity, they are forced into a position which is the reverse side of the superiority coin.

Instead of holding their culture up as the norm and only model as they once did, Westerners now go to the other, equally reprehensible extreme of uncritically accepting repressive aspects and human rights abuses of formerly colonized countries, which are passed off as part of the cultural heritage. Admittedly, they are in an unenviable position; if they object, they will be branded as ethnocentric, interfering busybodies by both east and west. In any case, the same cultural sanctity plea will be trotted out to defend the indefensible against foreign interference or even observation.

"If people like it, who am I to judge" about sums up the foreign position. Never mind if what the 'people'

(read the natives) like is media-imposed, enforced, and popularized. Never mind if the free souls in these doubly oppressed countries (first militarily and then culturally) do not go along with the agenda of the new internal form of oppression. What the intelligentsia of the West have not yet realized is that many of the ruling establishments in previous colonies have decided to play on their sense of guilt to wangle a form of tacit validation for their new improved brand of oppression - all the more lethal because it comes from inside. One is asked, in the name of respect for 'otherness,' to condone dominant discourses that are held like an axe over the necks of the people, discouraging independent thought and leading to a herd mentality, as well as repressive laws that restrict people's freedom of action and sometimes physically mutilate them into the bargain.

At the last CIFET, I asked one of the honorees in a public meeting to show solidarity with Egyptian artists in opposing censorship; he looked pathetically flustered and stammered "this is an internal matter. I don't want to interfere." But even when they are not hampered by such considerations, foreign artists are often reluctant to air their views in public for fear of endangering the interests of their fellow Arab artists who find it necessary in many cases to pay lip-service to the regime's liberal nature and sustain the masquerade in order to be allowed to work. At the Amman Festival for Independent Theatre this month, a German theatre scout was deeply shocked and outraged by the sight of a policeman brutally kicking a frail old woman in the street. His first impulse was to complain in an open letter to the press. What finally restrained him was not knowing what kind of repercussions his action would provoke against the festival. "Mind you", he said, "there is a lot of police brutality in Germany; but when we find out about it we complain."

Nevertheless, compared to other Arab theatrical events, the Amman Festival for Independent Theatre has managed to create an open forum or discussion and genuinely democratic dialogue between artists across national boundaries. Moreover, it has succeeded, over six consecutive years, in guarding its independent status, widening its audience base and network of friends and associates, and creating a real sense of partnership with its many private and public donors as well as the local authorities, particularly the municipality of Amman. The financial survival of the festival hangs on the ability of its workaholic founders. Al-Fawanees and Al-Warsha troupes, to project a community-based vision of theatre which can convince artists, sponsors and the public that they have a stake in cultivating an independent theatrical movement and to articulate the needs and concerns of this movement in a way that enthuses the world of money and politics without entailing serious compromises. In this respect, the core function of the festival is not to present top-quality performances in theatres suited to the purpose, as is the case with most festivals, but rather to create encounters between artists of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds to exchange ideas and experiences and explore ways of collaborating on joint projects, making theatre away from governments and promoting intercultural understanding and creative freedom.

One such encounter was the two-day Second Arab-Euro Theatre Meeting hosted by the festival this year. Artists from Europe, Africa and the Arab world, including Iraqis and Palestinians living in Israel, as well as representatives of the Ford Foundation Arab Arts Project and members of the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) met to discuss their needs and share their visions and dreams. And the remarkable thing was the absence of the factious spirit and the empty, overblown rhetoric, which usually characterize such meetings. However enthusiastic the speakers got, the bottom line was always practical.

Summing up the meeting, Mary Ann DeVlieg, the secretary general of IETM said, "the atmosphere of the gathering was one of a group of people reflecting together on what needs to be done. It seems we have

reached the second big step (the first was last year's meeting, also during the festival) on a path which is going in a good direction."

Many practical matters were addressed: the need for an efficient information system; the crucial importance of creating spaces for artists to work in, create and perform, and the possibility to continue working for a long term without constant insecurity; the need for artistic and management training opportunities and structures which provide support for young theatre artists; the role of the European festival organizer who wants to invite Arab theatre companies and all the contradictions this involves; the pressures on the artists to be submerged in administration, and, of course, MONEY.

In this respect, the Tunisian model of getting state financial support without state control was particularly useful and I hope it will be adopted by other Arab ministries of culture. According to Izz Eddin Qanoon, founder and director of the Tunisian Theatre Organique, the company sells a number of performances to the ministry of culture to cover the production costs and depends for the rest of its budget on the box-office, touring contracts and sundry donations. Other practical models and concrete proposals were given, including an arts management course to be launched in Cairo this June by the Arab Arts Project, a trilingual periodical publication (in Arabic, French and English) to provide background and up-to-date information about theatres in the Arab world, a communication network, based in Europe, to facilitate contacts between Arab and European theatre people and promote a form of "pragmatic and productive solidarity" between them. On the issue of funding, serious questions were raised and debated, particularly the hidden agendas of some funding agencies and the criteria on which funding decisions are made. At the end of her report, DeVlieg emphatically states, "this second Arab-Euro Theatre meeting provided a rich if not definitive list of issues and questions within a positive framework of people who have the will and the experience to make the most of working together."

The reactions to this fruitful meeting, however, were not universally positive. On Sunday, April 11, the English-language *Jordan Times* reported : "The anti-normalization committee of Jordan's 13 professional associations on Saturday launched a boycott of the current Amman International Theatre Festival on the grounds that it is financed by foreign sources and foreign groups participate in it." Furthermore, the paper went on to say, "a statement issued on Saturday by the committee also asked the Amman Municipality 'to take the same stance on the issue, to keep in harmony with public opinion and hold local festivals that are purely patriotic'."

Foreign funding is often regarded with deep suspicion by xenophobic nationalist zealots all over the Arab world as a surreptitious form of cultural invasion and a threat to Arab cultural identity. But in Jordan, where the unions and professional associations are dominated by Islamists, the opposition takes a more extreme and virulent form and is bound up with the question of Arab-Israeli peace. Over the last year, according to the *Jordan Times*, the 'zealots' in the unions "have stepped up their campaign against seminars, conferences and other events organized in cooperation with foreign institutions, claiming they are part of a 'Zionist infiltration' of Jordanian intelligentsia and cultural life." This attitude, which brands all foreigners as spies and subversive agents in the pay of Israel, and any Arab who deals with them, or even talks to them, as a traitor, is, to say the least, unreasonable and can only serve the interests of bigots, fanatics and cultural isolationists. Equally unreasonable is the siege imposed by many Arab cultural bodies on Palestinians living in Israel whose only crime is that they did not leave their land and have to carry an Israeli passport. The anti-normalization campaign against the festival was fueled by the invitation to the festival of Al-Qasaba theatre, a group from East Jerusalem whose members, all

Palestinians, have never received support from the Israeli ministry of culture or cooperated with it.

However ugly and unjustified, this attack served to strengthen the credibility of the festival as a forum for genuine democratic dialogue. The organizers invited their opponents, supporters, and Arab Israeli guests to a press conference to openly debate the matter. It does not matter that many of the 'zealots' stuck to their guns till the end, turning a deaf ear to the Palestinians' anguished pleas for solidarity and support and their moving expression of the ordeal of being regarded as unwanted outsiders by both Israelis and Arabs. What matters is that the bomb was defused through democratic dialogue.

The festival continued as normal, proving every day, through its many workshops, foreign and Arab shows and collaborative events and activities, the value and validity of its agenda of open-minded cultural and human interaction. And as if to make it up to Al-Qasaba artists for the pain and humiliation they suffered at the ungracious hands of the 'zealots,' the Jordanian public gave them a warm and rousing reception.

Their adaptation of George Shehadé's, *The Emigrant from Brisbane*, in which the setting was transposed to Palestine, was a good specimen of the company's work. Proficient acting, efficient use of space, imaginative evocation of atmosphere and states of mind through movement and lighting, serious topics, a lavish use of humor and local color, and a tendency to cut deeper than the conventional surface of things and provoke reactions other than laughter define its style and explain its wide popular appeal. The ordinary life of simple Palestinians is vividly portrayed without sentimentality or false heroics. Racked by suspicion and torn between greed and honor, the village men who are told that one of their women (who is not named) once had an illegitimate child by a man who after years abroad has died - leaving the child a fortune - are alternately repellently brutal, ridiculously befuddled and endearingly weak and pathetic.

Equally vigorous and emotionally robust was *Abu Arab Trapped in the Corner*- a one-man show, improvised and performed by Ali Abu Yassin of Al-Bayader Troupe in Palestine. In the style of a *hakawati*, or itinerant storyteller, Yassin gave us a strong and pungent taste of the reality of daily life in Gaza as experienced by a simple Palestinian worker trying to survive. The narrative is episodic, anecdotal, and interspersed with sardonic remarks, satirical comments, and topical jokes. Like all good *hakawatis*, Yassin has a strong presence, ready wit, a talent for mimicry and the ability to engage the audience actively in the show. This last trait reached a peak at the end when the actor walked up to the audience and said: "Look, I don't know how to end this play. We tried one version in which the worker decides not to cross into Israel to find work and we were bitterly criticized for not being realistic and accused of stigmatizing the thousands of Palestinians who earn their living in Israel. So we changed it, and the worker went to Israel; but the intellectuals objected. 'Better starve than compromise,' they said. Now, I leave it to you to end it the way you like." Given with such stark directness and urgency, the problem puts the audience, rather than Abu Arab, in a difficult corner.

Palestinian daily life featured once more in the Jerusalem-based Theatre Day Productions revival of Sa'dallah Wannus's *The Glass Café*, but in a grotesque, metaphoric vein. The tomb-like cafe, with its ghostly visitors, demented clients, and eternal routine of backgammon, insect-hunting and coffee-drinking, ruthlessly exposes the apathy, cowardice, indifference, futility, and blind self-involvement of its inhabitants and ends with an apocalyptic prophecy of disaster. Palestine was also the theme of the Tunisian *Looking for Aida*, written and acted by Jalila Baccr and directed by Fadil Jai'ibi, with the accent this time on *al-Naqba* and the experience of the Palestinian diaspora. But despite the lyrical, elegiac mood

(which moved some to tears), Baccar's overpowering presence, touching sincerity, masterful control of tone and refined economy of expression, and notwithstanding Ja'ibi's sophisticated mise-en-scene and subtle use of lighting, many, including Palestinians, found this monodrama embarrassingly simplistic, uncomfortably sentimental, cliché-ridden and facilely romantic. I describe it as a cathartic script which romanticizes Palestine out of existence.

Dictatorship, tyranny and oppression came second on the agenda of Arab shows, providing the theme of the rambling, bombastic and coarsely self-indulgent Jordanian *Dreams of Sheherazade*, the figuratively complex and passionately outspoken Iraqi *Hollow Men*, and the Irbid Art Theatre Troupe's *The Tyrant and the Mirror*. Less directly, it informed the visually exuberant Tunisian *Love in Autumn* (where the conflict between two women over a man is resolved by giving the bone of contention AIDS); Alfred Farag's *The Last Walk* (competently performed by Vanya Exerjian) which centers on gender oppression; Jean Genet's *The Maids*, performed by Kuwaiti drama students; the Iraqi *Sidra*, based on a Sumerian legend and directed by Fadil Khaleel in a solid classical style; a Belgian production of Slawomir Mrozek's *Out At Sea*, where power takes the form of cannibalism; and the Tanzanian *Death of A Coconut Tree*, by the Bagamoyo Players, in which the tyrant (an ugly capitalist) is punished with sterility.

To provide relief from the pressure of politics, there were a joint Swedish-Jordanian concert from the Backa Theatre Musicians and the Rumm Troupe; the stunning *We Can't Hold Our Breath Any Longer* by the ALIAS Dance Group from Switzerland; Kris Niklison's *M/F* from the Netherlands, which won her the best actress award at the last CIFET; two delightful evenings of song, dance, and story-telling from the Egyptian Al-Warsha; the haunting Australian *The Descent* by The Chapel of Change group which was seen in Cairo at the last CIFET; and Enrico Labayen's *Puirt a Beul and Other Dances* program from the USA. (

For further relief, there was a lot of partying and some excursions to the historic sites of Jordan, and I spent a delightful day in the open air at Daret al-Funoon (House of Arts) observing the Image and Movement Workshop given by the Bonheur troupe from the Netherlands. Despite all the politics and heated wrangling, the festival managed to give Amman two weeks of vibrant cultural activity and a lot of food for thought. It also gave the city an appealingly dégage air, like a party tent pitched for just one night.



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