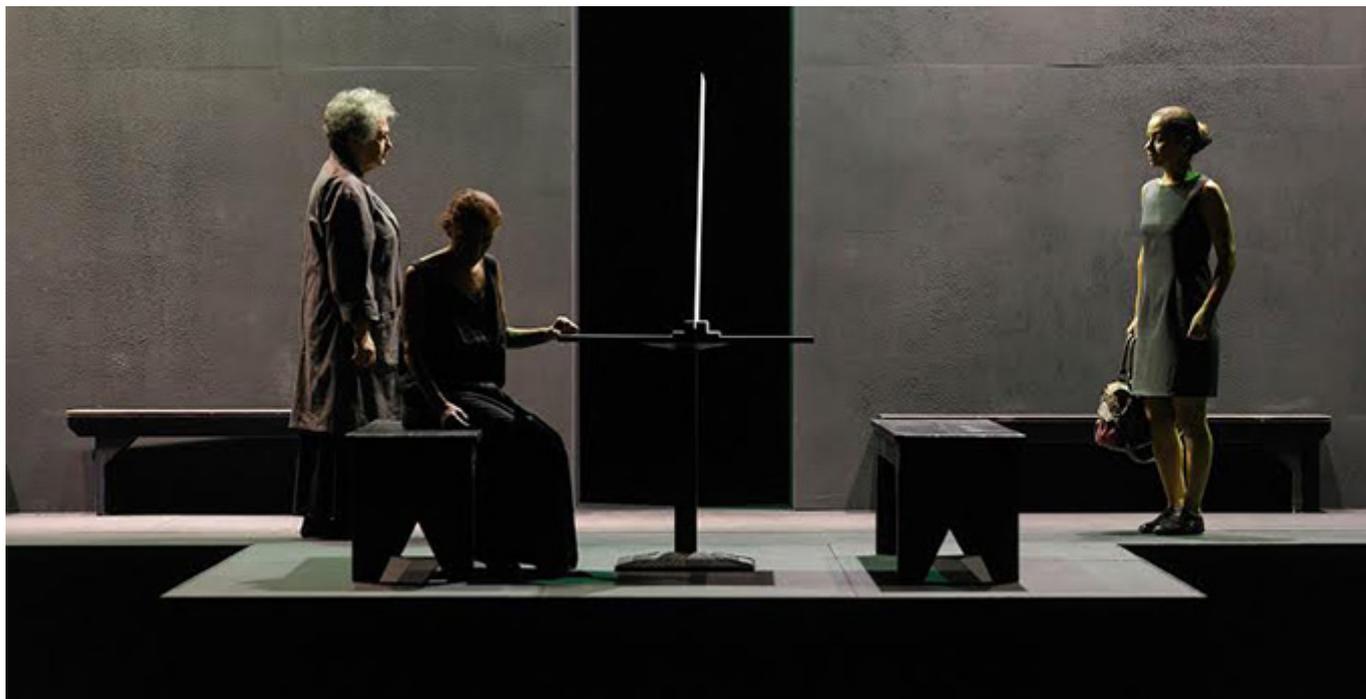


The 2016 Journées Théâtrales de Carthage



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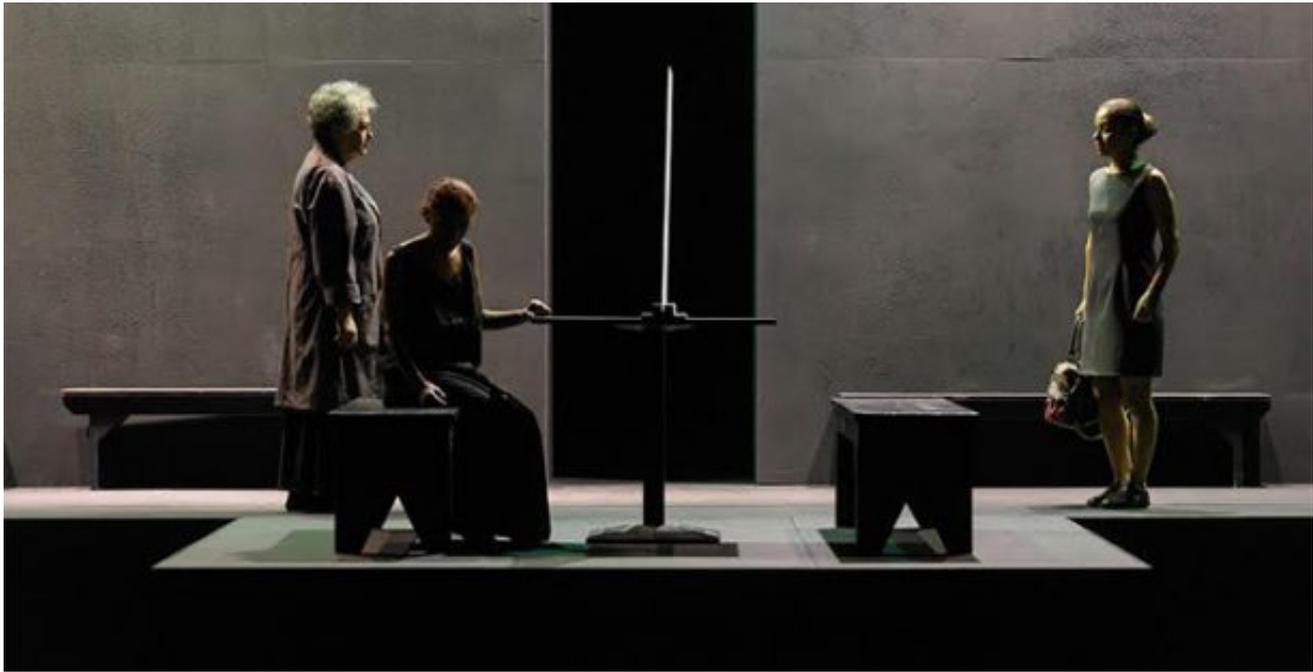
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One of the most highly respected theatre festivals of the Arab world is the Journées Théâtrales de Carthage, emphasizing Arabic and African theatre and held every two years in Tunis. The 2016 program was the 18th, and consisted of 47 productions from 24 different nations. Although nearly half of the productions offered came from the Arab world, the countries represented were fairly evenly divided, with nine from the Arab world, nine from sub-Saharan Africa, and six from elsewhere, primarily Europe. Although most of the productions were about an hour in length, most were presented from early afternoon to early evening, and so it was difficult to see more than two or three productions each day, especially since they took place at ten different venues, scattered over the central area of Tunis.



Le Radeau. Photo: El Hamra

The Festival opened, fittingly, with a production from the Tunisian National Theatre, the theme of which could not have been more timely or appropriate. The production was *Le Radeau* (The Raft), conceived by Cyrine Gannoun and Majdi Abou Mataren. The minimalist setting in fact represented a large inflatable raft, the floor of which was a trampoline so that the eight actors in the ramp were in constant up and down motion, suggesting their sea passage. The international cast, including Syrians, Lebanese, Tunisians, and fellow Africans joined together in the all-too-familiar mutual upheaval of fleeing violence at home in search of an uncertain future across the sea. Their negotiations of interpersonal conflicts and dedication to a common goal resonated strongly with the overflow audience, which interrupted the production with frequent applause, not for a particularly theatrical moment, but for some stirring sentiment. The topicality of this well-performed piece and its use of performers from a variety of Arab and African theatre cultures made it a particularly apt opening selection.



Viloence(s). Photo: Attilo Marasco

The outstanding event of the Festival was surely the presentation of a new work, *Violence(s)* by Jalila Baccar, the leading Arabic dramatist today in the Maghreb, and many ones say in the world. The production, directed by Fadhel Jaibi, had its premiere at the Tunisian National Theatre in August of 2015. The production continues to exploration of cruelty and inhumanity in Tunisian society despite the hopes raised by the recent Revolution. Three veteran actors headed by Baccar herself and four recent graduates of the National Theatre School each play both themselves and psychic doubles recounting and enacting a web of violence, personal and public, local and national experienced by themselves or others. The stage is almost bare, with six worn benches and a black table. They are converted into a street, a parlor, and interrogation room, a torture chamber, a criminal court by the skill of the actors, who fill these spaces with anxiety, fear, and desperation. Shocking scenes of casual sadism and violence, degradation and terror pile upon one another suggesting a potential for the cruelest acts in every one of us. The doubling of actors and characters, of reality and representation, both provides a necessary distance from this phantasmagoria of cruelty, but also keeps it intense and personal. This is one of Baccar's darkest visions, and also one of her lest directly political. As de Sade argues in Weiss's powerful play, the dungeons and torture chambers of the inner soul can be deeper and darker than the more public creations of totalitarian political systems.



Romeo et Juliette. Photo: Charlotte Sampermans

The Festival this year devoted special attention to Shakespeare, with a two-day academic conference concerning his influence in the Arab world, and with a number of the performances associated with him. Although I wanted to concentrate on Arab theatre, it seemed appropriate that I continue my festival-going with one of the more ambitious festival works, a *Romeo and Juliet* which was a joint production of Belgium, Burkina Faso, Benin and Guyana. This took place at the Mondial, an elegant small theatre in central Tunis that has been, since Independence, one of the city's major performance spaces.

The production was simply done, the only scenery on the capacious Mondial stage being a number of small flat platforms that could be placed on end to suggest barriers or walls, and two rolling masts with a rope between holding a curtain which served as a kind of backdrop, primarily to suggest rooms in the Capulet home.

All parts were performed by five actors, one playing Juliet (the only white performer), another Romeo, and the others the remainder of the cast. The language was French, but there were many unspoken dance sequences, and Juliet in particular would often be seen dancing quietly in the background even when not directly involved in a scene. The nuptial night of the lovers was depicted as a sensuous, but not erotic *pas de deux*, which gained well deserved applause from the audience.



Anbara. Photo: Theatre Babel

The Theatre Babel from Beirut, Lebanon, presented a powerful work on the ongoing struggle for women's rights. Their play, *Anbara*, concerns the real-life activist Anbara Sakam Al-Khalidi, who established the first women's organization in Lebanon at the age of 16 and was the first Islamic woman in that country to appear without a veil, in 1927. The play takes place early in her career, around 1920, when she defied the Ottoman ruler, Jamal Pacha, who executed her secret fiancé. The production, written and directed by Aliya Khalidi with Noura Al Sakkaf as dramaturg, effectively blends live action on either side of a central stage screen which provides shadow and scrim effects from behind, and projected film clips from the front, helping to situate the scenes historically and thematically. Naza Harb as Anbara provides a powerful and moving performance but she is strongly supported by fellow actors Sara Zein, Fadia Tannir, Hani Al-Hindi, Dana Dia, Abdel Rahim Awji, Najwa Kondakji and Ziad Chakaroun. The costumes, male and female, carefully reproduce the dress of the period, and the use of the various types of female concealment are masterfully woven into the imagery and movement of the production.



Chirine Hejazi, *Yaseem*. Photo Hirine Hejazi

Egyptian theatre was well represented in the festival, and offered the next two works I saw, *Yaseem*, a dance-theatre piece, and *Zay Ennes*. *Yaseem* was created by Chirine Hejazi, who was also one of the three performers, the others being Nagham Salah Othmane and Amani Atef. Accompanied by the rhythm of the table, the three dancers, with almost no words, suggested the life of the Egyptian women through history, struggling against a variety of social and cultural forces to repress them and reduce them to mere objects. The red and black costumes and even more the movements, suggested often the traditions of the belly dance, but here constantly altered to cut against its traditional operations of display and seduction to offer a statement of powerful self-expression and yearning for freedom. Each of the three dancers had a powerful solo sequence that won and deserved applause, but what really made the production memorable was the astonishing synchronization of the complex movements in this 45-minute piece.



Zay Ennes. Photo: Hussein abd al-Wahed

Zay Ennes (Like Everybody) was a much-elaborated interpretation of Brecht's classic *The Exception and the Rule*. The production was created by Hani Afifi, one of Egypt's leading young directors and dramatists, best known in the West for his Shakespearian based *I Hamlet*. *Zay Ennes* follows the outline of its original rather more closely, and deals with the same questions of class exploitation and the corruption of the judiciary, but Afifi has considerably added to the depth and complexity of the story by elaborating the narration and sharing in among various characters, and by adding additional actors who contribute to the Brechtian distancing by insisting upon developing variations on the story and alternative sub-actions. Most important of these is an actor who arrives late, quarrels frequently with the narrator/merchant, and insists on finding a place in the story for his star-struck but apparently totally untalented niece. His most important contribution to the basic story is to play the totally unacceptable judge in a parody of British robes and wig.



Zay Ennes. Photo: Hussein abd al-Wahed

The physical production is simple but effective, consisting mostly of two platforms at the sides of the stage, where actors not performing sit (but feel free to comment frequently on the action). There are also two musicians, a drummer upstage to the right and a bass viol player downstage left, who provide an ongoing musical accompaniment, particularly effective in the bridging scenes when the merchant and the coolie perform a mime-like walking motion crossing the desert.



Metamorphoses. Photo: Journées théâtrales

Matamorphoses, from the United Arab Emirates, directed by Mohamed Amri, was particularly impressive both physically and visually within a festival that offered many productions superior in both areas. The setting was a large rather constructivist warren of frames and open boxes, filled with puppets of varying sizes. At the opening, downstage, was a large box which contained a smaller version of this main set enclosing even smaller puppets, so that we were offered a very wide visual range of puppet sizes, from inches tall to human in scale.

When the production began, this front box was moved aside and the multiple puppets within the larger set began to move, all with jerky and erratic movements so that only gradually could the audience distinguish constructed figures from the living actors. These actors, although still bearing the remnants of their controlling ropes and continuing to move in the same marionette style, decided to break free from their puppet life and become real people. In fact, they soon discover that they have only traded one world of submission for another, and one equally brutal and violent.

The text is a straightforward one with a clear enough message, but the real power of the piece lies in the highly controlled movements of the puppet/actors. I was reminded of Arniane Mnouchkine's *Tambours sur la digue*, where her live actors reproduced the movements of bunraku puppets, with similarly impressively theatrical results.



Striptease. Photo: Journées théâtrales

The Comedy Theatre of Baghdad sent another dark view of contemporary life, *Striptease*, by Moukhaled Rassem, directed by Alaâ Kahtane. The title refers not to physical striptease, but to an emotional one, in which four members of a contemporary Iraqi family, a father, a daughter, and two sons, each try to carve out a different approach to the contemporary political and economic situation in that troubled country, leading them, despite the conciliatory efforts of the father, into more and more violent confrontations, until at last one of the brothers kills the sister.

The production is divided into three sections, the first and third carried out in silence, except for the continuing offstage electronic score, as the characters move across the stage in various configurations, meeting each other only to engage in or threaten the conflict which is developed in the center dialogue scenes. The empty stage, with a single row of differently colored spotlights at the rear and on each side, and with a very complex and well controlled use of down lights to isolate individuals and scenes, provided an excellent platform for the drama.

The only physical evidence of a striptease was a traditional stripper's pole located downstage left in a red light. At the opening, the father wrapped himself around it and beat his head against it in apparent frustration, while at the opposite upstage corner, the daughter watched, seated in a sharp downlight which hid her features. At the end, the positions were reversed, with the daughter, for the first time wearing a full hijab, wraps herself around the pole and then, like her father, beats her head against it.



Guerres. Photo: Journées théâtrales

A second Iraqi production, *Guerres* (Wars) a text by Hakiv Maliki, was a more abstract but equally dark meditation on the continuing upheavals in that troubled country. Here the focus was not on the family, but the society, where two white clad figures mobilized an anonymous chorus to engage in an ongoing and fruitless series of conflicts, first passing out rubber masks to conceal their features and later Islamic prayer beads to provide a religious subtext to the struggles. Whatever the pretext however, the meaningless and apparently endless chaos and destruction continues. As in *Striptease*, the power of the presentation was increased not only by the physical skills of the seven-member cast, but by the careful manipulation of lighting effects on a generally darkened stage.



Gala Dinner. Photo: Théâtre National Mohammed V

Alas, neither the acting skill nor the technical control was exhibited in the offering from Morocco of Tayeb Saddiki's *Gala Dinner*. I found this the weakest production of the festival and also the greatest disappointment, since this Saddiki play was the only one I saw that I had previously read and found it one of this Moroccan dramatist's most entertaining and moving works. The situation for American audiences would recall Sondheim's *Follies*, which also shows a final celebration in an historic theatre the night before its demolition, and which similarly evokes the ghosts of that theatre's past. In this case the theatre is a specific one, Ali Chater in Casablanca, of which Saddiki was long-time director. The play would seem an excellent choice for this festival, which is in part a celebration of Shakespeare, one of the spirits evoked for Saddiki's gala dinner.

This interpretation, by Ayoub Al Aissi, however, takes little advantage of any of this. The setting is a bit confused, but evocative, with very large portraits of Shakespeare and Saddiki to the left and right, flanked by somewhat smaller ones of Molière and Brecht (the latter not in fact mentioned in the play). There is also a large screen upon which are projected during the production three short and casual clips of the author in his study, smoking a cigar, looking at scrapbooks and singing the chorus of an American cowboy song. These, although not in the script, were by far the most interesting part of the evening. Although a long table is set up, nothing is ever seen of the dinner, but the evening is composed almost entirely of Arabic songs by one of the leading actors, very well delivered, and extended monologues by the other, with little sense of timing or gesture. Two lesser actors, a young man and woman, occasionally appeared on stage with little justification and less apparent talent. Within the first half hour of the

production, at least half of the audience left, but there was little reward for those who stayed, as the same lack of focus and direction continued. To be fair, there were clearly major technical problems, especially with the lighting, but that could hardly excuse the unfocussed acting, nor the long moments when the stage stood inexplicably empty.



L'Ogre et les sept pucelles. Tunisian National Marionette Theatre

After this unhappy evening, my spirits were revived the following morning by a delightful production at the Tunisian National Marionette Theatre of a Tunisian folk tale, *L'Ogre et les sept pucelles* (The Ogre and the Seven Little Girls). The majority of the audience were young schoolchildren, who were clearly delighted with the experience and whose enthusiasm was highly infectious. I was amused to see how many of them recorded all or much of the production on cell phones or small laptops held above their heads, so that from the rear of the theatre one saw the stage through a sea of small visual reproductions of it. Coming from a theatre culture with strictly prohibits any in-house photography, I was surprised to see how casually Tunisians photograph shows in process, but even so this carried the practice to an entirely new level.

The show was created and performed by Habiba Jendoubi, whose relation to the audience resembled that of the traditional Tunisian storyteller, his narrative engagingly supplemented by the simple, probably self-created puppets he used. The seven girls were each simple doll, with string-like bodies, small stuffed heads, skirts and shoes. They were really more dolls than puppets, and for the most part rested together in their "home," a table center stage, unless Jendoubi picked up one or two of them to "speak" their lines. The Ogre first appeared as pumpkin-sized ball of white woolen thread for a head and a body composed only of a speckled white sheet wrapped over the narrator's body. Later, after the Ogre has been driven off by the girl's small puppet dog, he disguises himself as an old woman, a scarf over his head and his

hunched over body portrayed beneath the sheet by the hunched over narrator.

Like a traditional storyteller and in the usual tradition of children's theatre everywhere Jendoubi continually engaged his audiences, encouraging them to applaud, laugh, and shout out comments and suggestions. At the end, he invited them all onstage, handed out the small dolls to delighted audience members and led them in tossing about and eventually tearing apart the Ogre's woolen head. One could hardly have asked for a more total theatrical experience.

I was unable to stay for the closing production, a Tunisian *Romeo and Juliet*, but even so, I felt my week at the Journées Théâtrales de Carthage had offered me a wonderful sampling of contemporary performance in the Arab world.

Marvin Carlson is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Editor-in-Chief of Arab Stages. His research and teaching interests include dramatic theory and Western European theatre history and dramatic literature, especially of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He has been awarded the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the George Jean Nathan Prize, the Bernard Hewitt prize, the George Freedley Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been a Walker-Ames Professor at the University of Washington, a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Indiana University, a visiting professor at the Freie Universität of Berlin, and a Fellow of the American Theatre. In 2005 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Athens. His best-known book, *Theories of the Theatre* (Cornell University Press, 1993), has been translated into seven languages. His 2001 book, *The Haunted Stage* won the Calloway Prize. His newest book is *Four Plays From Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous* (Martin E. Segal Center Publications, 2014).



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www.arabstages.org
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