

## Where Theatre Has Failed—The Syrians Omar Abusaada and Mohammad Al Attar

*Where Theatre Has Failed—The Syrians* Omar Abusaada and Mohammad Al Attar by Rolf C. Hemke

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“Can we talk about football?” Mohammad Al Attar’s ironic question at the beginning of our conversation pointedly sums up the situation. Author Al Attar, and his congenial director Omar Abusaada, obviously cannot stop themselves from reflecting on the conflict in their homeland Syria and its impact on their lives and art. But it is their mix of artistic endeavor, staunchly-formulated political opinion and *joie de vivre*, often turning into sneering, anarchical humor and loud laughter, that fills my encounter with these two extraordinary theatre-makers, and gives it its charm and depth—even if at times one cannot help feeling it is them laughing at the absurdity of life. It is exactly this foundation that gives dimension to *Intimacy*, which premiered at the Homeworks Festival in Beirut in May 2013.

The play outlines the life story of the main actor Yaser Abdellatif in snatches and by association, as well as providing us with a portrait of his character: following the 1989 military *coup d'état* the black Sudanese actor emigrated as a student from Khartoum to Damascus, where he became a star. More than 20 years later the conflict in Syria forced him to return to his former homeland as a stranger. For all this time he was considered a Sudanese in Syria, but in the eyes of his compatriots he has become Syrian.

Despite, or exactly because of such absurdity, *Intimacy* tells the story of an actor’s life as a comedy or rather as a life-farce. It could not be otherwise, given the mischievous and impish character that Yaser portrays on stage. He turns up drunk to rehearsals on more than one occasion, whether he is acting or directing. Whether the story of this unreliable, egocentric, but also charismatic and somehow lovable survival artist is a true representation of Yaser Abdellatif’s life, or whether it has been imaginatively fictionalized by Mohammad Al Attar, remains one of the secrets of this production.

At any rate, Omar Abusaada examines the various possibilities of interpretation in his staging of this (pseudo-?) biographical text. The play consists mainly of interviews and is structured through several dialogue scenes: on the empty stage the two actors—the interviewer Ayham Agha and the interviewee Yaser Abdellatif—start with a reading, as is commonplace at the beginning of the rehearsal process. A particular emphasis provides their reading of the stage directions with the necessary rhetorical quotation marks. The next scene is a conversation at a large wooden table in a workshop. The black curtains are

removed from the walls before Abusaada plunges us into yet another scene of a reading, only to put his actors at two microphones like pop singers.

What ensues is a litany of questions from Ayham without answers from Yaser. After another entertaining scene, Ayham lapses into a monologue: he asks questions and also provides Yaser's answers. This reduced and concentrated textual exercise stands in appealing, even provocative contrast not only to the flippancy of Yaser's lifestyle in Damascus, but also to the changeful, revolutionary events that force him to open new chapters in his life. The choice of form can be described as a conscious reduction of means, given the impossibility of a realistic depiction of events. The intensity of the actors, however, and the ironical force of the text, give even greater power to the pictures in the audience's mind.

*Intimacy* is the third project of this author/director team since the revolution started in Syria in March 2011. Their collaboration began in 2008 with a project about juvenile prisoners in Damascus. They presented the project *Look at the Streets, This Is What Hope Looks Like* in May 2011 at the Meeting Points 6 Festival in Beirut. It was based on a collage of Facebook entries of Syrian revolutionary activists and excerpts of articles from the Egyptian novelist and journalist Ahdaf Soueif, who reported on the events on Cairo's Tahrir Square for the *Guardian*.

Mohammad based their second production *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* on interviews with arbitrarily detained and sometimes tortured victims of the Syrian security forces. He dramatized them in the fictional story of a female Syrian documentary maker who is trying to make a film on the basis of corresponding victims' stories. The play had its premiere in April 2012 at the Bo:m Festival in Seoul, South Korea. In this context *Intimacy* represents a retreat into the private sphere. It is the reflection of the conflict within the framework of its impact on the life of an individual who stands at the edges of it. Yaser's life—like that of many Syrians—is turned upside down without his being directly involved in the political debate, let alone in any acts of war.

Omar comments, "The most important change in this conflict occurred a long time ago and is irrevocable. I mean the change in the minds of the people. All Syrians have changed." Mohammad continues, "As a Syrian you don't have the choice of ignoring the developments in our homeland. It would be nonsensical. We're trying to observe how the situation evolves, how our lives change. We try to reflect on it with our means, with the means of theatre. The theatre is one of the methods to observe from a distance what is happening to us. On the basis of the objectification through one's own work we can try to understand what changes have occurred and how the crisis is affecting us. Although we're just small pieces of a large puzzle, we can describe this puzzle much more accurately when going into detail. The theatre is also a means of survival, of staying productive, and of not despairing."

Omar Abusaada still lives in Syrian capital today—the summer of 2013. He explains, "Damascus is my city. I don't want to leave my hometown. All these disasters that are coming upon us are an important experience for me." Mohammad lived through the first year of the revolution in Damascus. Afterwards he would have been drafted in for military service but he refused. Today he lives sixty kilometers away from Damascus in Beirut. At any rate, the Lebanese capital is the Syrian bridge into the free world. The Assad regime will not grant him entry to his homeland. He says, "Our country will witness even more difficult situations if we are truly willing to throw out a regime that has been ruling us brutally for more than four decades. A new start will have to follow: this will not be the end of the story for the Syrians, they will rise up again."

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*Translation from German: Silvio D'Alessandro*

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