

## France's Théâtre d'al-Assifa: An Arab-based Alternative Theatre Model

**France's Théâtre d'al-Assifa: An Arab-based Alternative T**

**heatre Model by Magdi Youssef Arab Stages,**

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If every epoch has its own realities, it also has its own myths which it often establishes as evident "axioms." Among the myths widely accepted today as axioms, we may count the assertion that the theatre is a Western phenomenon. And this to such an extent that some specialists base their concepts of the "unity of European literature" on this myth. For them, the theatre is an exclusively European phenomenon, and if you want to make use of it, you must preserve its occidental form. It is only then that you can transport, by way of this form, that which appears valuable to you in terms of the "essence" and the cultures of the Orient.

It is rather surprising that among the apostles of this concept of theatre, based on a recurrent and obstinate myth, are some of the leading representatives of the sociology of the theatre, who should instead be expected to distrust such premises rather than to give them credence. These same specialists surely know very well that the Italian stage, for example, was created for no other reason than to satisfy a particular need which determined its design in a certain manner, the need of celebrating the power of the sponsoring prince within the etiquette and formal constraints observed at his court. Why then should we need, for example, this artificial stage with its settings and curtains, if we are dealing with a popular "entertainment", where there exists neither master nor subaltern, neither governing nor governed, and all the people are equal, no matter whether they are presenting or perceiving the performance. And where, even as "receptive" spectators, the latter wouldn't be any less creative than the former in their act of production, nor less enriching and thus contributing to the performance, thanks to their spontaneous and direct "additions."

Are not for instance the "halqa" (circle theatre) of the Arab Maghreb and the Egyptian "samer" closer to realizing an artistic pleasure where theatrical production and consumption are no longer severed but intertwined, in other words, where consumption is achieved as production (for the viewer), and production as consumption (for the actors), in order to attain the maximum of delectation, that is to say consumption, as the highest form of production, and vice versa? How could the Italian stage, with its artificial dissociation of the production of a play from its consumption satisfy this spontaneous need? Is it for this reason that traditional theatre scholars have been unwilling to consider such activities as constituting possible forms of theatre?

I don't really intend here to revolt against the traditions and concepts of theatre which prevail in the world

today, because they don't merit it, for the simple reason that they turn things upside down, so that they may conform to the norms of the dominant culture of our world. Consequently, do we not have the right to ask ourselves which of the two models sketched above really enhances the enjoyment of the theatre: the model which, at the formal level, due to the very rules of its performance, intimately relates the production to the perception? Or rather the model which, by cutting off and thus neglecting the reception, plunges itself only the more deeply into the immediate production of the text with the effect that the text is put into the center and fetishized, at the cost of a lively and dialectic interaction with the public. This is a simple question.

If the "occidental" theater, which constitutes one of the main supports underpinning the opinion of the champions of European literature, should be demystified and freed from the myth of its pretended universality, would the apostles of this idea still cling to what they consider the European "unity" with regard to drama? Or would they rather be inclined to turn to the experiences and the models of all the countries of the world, no matter whether they belong to the South or the North, in order to appreciate them on an equal footing, so that each one can learn from the difference of the other? The South has learned a lot from the experiences of the theatre as practiced in the North, and there is nothing wrong with that. But, has not the moment arrived to see the peoples of the North learning from that which has escaped them so far, concerning the experiences of the South, both with regard to the theatre and to life? I propose some examples of what sort of experience might provide opportunities for that kind of learning.

In the summer of 1975, while attending the Theatre Festival in Avignon, I happened to walk into a performance at the fringe of the festival that was dealing with the exile of the Turkish poet, Nazim Hikmet, in what was then called the Soviet Union. I had come from Paris in a packed train and was extremely tired. And as the play was basically a number of monologues, and I was sitting in the darkness of the small theatre, watching the actor the lamps were focused on, I soon fell asleep. Upon leaving the theatre, I saw, more or less by chance, that there was another performance going on, in the yard before me. An actor I had exchanged a few polite words which indicated his contempt for what was going on there. "They are just a bunch of North African workers," he said. "It's really not worthwhile." This made me curious, and so, this is how I discovered the ensemble "al-Assifa" or *The Tempest*.<sup>[1]</sup>

The "play" they performed, and that I saw once again later that week, was entitled *Ça travaille, ça travaille et ça ferme sa gueule*, which might be translated "It works, it works, and it keeps its gob [mouth] shut." The "play" was constructed in a serial manner, as a series of sketches, linked by what we might call a "red thread." At the outset, we see a man living in misery in his North African village. A so-called entrepreneur, in fact a recruiter of labor in contact with French enterprises, appears. He wears expensive spectacles, and his suit is *très chic*. He addresses the man in his misery, promising that a move to France will mean a lot of money, women, a beautiful flat, and so on. Next we see how the poor chap goes and sells his belonging and departs to find the realization of his dream in France.

At the border, the recruiter with his group of men recruited from North African villages happens upon a member of the frontier police he seems to know very well. He tells him, "These are sheep (*moutons*). Let us pass." The officer answers, "Yes, I see that" and demands a "*pot de vin*" which he obtains. The so-called *moutons* then pass the frontier. In France they are "distributed" to a number of French entrepreneurs.

Next, we see a worker working with a pneumatic drill in the street. The pneumatic drill, held shakily by

the man, pounds back and forth forcefully, almost dancing on the pavement of the street. And the entrepreneur addresses the working chap, “Ah you, you shaky one; can’t you control your tool any better, holding it firm and straight? You have to work a little bit more carefully, don’t you?” “Sure DO -Doing it . . .” the worker stutters. “Ha -YOU! You can’t even speak correctly,” says the boss, then adding sternly, “Every minute COUNTS!” And now, the worker turns to the audience and says, “He tells us every minute counts. But for the entrepreneur, the hours that I have worked do not count.”

Indeed, at the end of the month, we see him, he who has done so much overtime, in the office of the entrepreneur, asking for the agreed-upon wage. But the entrepreneur tells him that he can only give him half that sum because he has not worked intensely enough. When a second worker enters the office, he is told by his boss that he is “just not solvent at the moment” and will have to give him a check. “You can cash it in at the bank,” the boss says. But in the bank we hear the cashier asking for his residence permit. Otherwise, no cashing of the check. The second worker, with his check, returns to the entrepreneur who tells him, “Sorry, I am not solvent. Haven’t I given you a check? If you don’t like it, you may go to the police.” But the worker tells us how he knows that he’ll be jailed and deported should he go to the police.

Another scene shows him in the street. He is lost in the big city and, seeing a policeman, walks up to him, asking for directions. The police man, however, only retorts, “*Circuler! Circuler!*” [Get on, move on!] In order to have a place to sleep, we are shown how he has to share a decrepit domicile with his colleagues. They live in houses destined for demolition, fifteen or twenty in a room with several rows of beds, and the rent they are asked to pay by the landlord is exorbitant.

Thus we learn, from situation after situation, how these *travailleurs immigrés* are seen as subjects, as human beings, but are discriminated against, both by the state and the trade unions. And this because they are *sans papiers*, because they have no documents legalizing their residence and work in France. All the while, overt or implicit racism is apparent, as many ordinary French citizens treat them as “strange” and “an anomaly” because they look different. The police, on the other hand, incarcerate and torture them. Some, we are told, even die at their hands. The entrepreneurs we see in the act of ruthlessly exploiting them. Even among the French workers, a sympathetic understanding is rare. Quite a few among these French workers hate them and despise them as unfair competitors, selling their labor dirt-cheap and undercutting their own official wages. All this is shown in a sarcastic manner, in quick sequences of “sketches.”

The circumstances and concrete aspects should be mentioned as well. Each time I saw *Ça travaille*. . . , the stage was very brightly lit, and there were few properties. The audience confronted it frontally, sitting on long, wooden benches. Everything was rather spartan, reduced to the minimum. Even from a linguistic point of view, the actors were always directed to the concrete public in front of them. If the audience was French, they would use French, when it consisted of immigrant workers, they used their North African Arab dialect, and when it was a mixed public, they spoke a mixture of French and North African Arab dialect, even addressing individual members of the audience in an improvised way in French or in Arabic.

This Franco-Arabic aspect of some of their performances can, however, not be compared with Franco-Arab performances in Egypt during the 1930s which started out from an entirely abstract level, that is to say, the Western values dominating the theatre with an interest in formalist devices. The superiority of French, as a lingua franca of the Egyptian elites and a language of the theater, was then unquestioned.

Arabic began to play a role in the course of Arabization but also in order to portray the contradiction between privileged European foreigners and those subjected to discrimination in their own country. But it turned out that the contradiction was instrumentalized in an abstract, aesthetic manner, to achieve certain theatrical effects. Thus, the use of Arabic could be meant to produce a joke, and provoke laughter. This implies a completely different approach from that chosen in Avignon, which was a militant one. Whereas the one approach reflected a completely formalistic conception of the theatre, the other is materialistic; and whereas in the Egyptian example of the 1930s the performance would be “entertaining,” the contrasting one, of al-Assifa, was militant and directly intervening. Whereas in the first case, what we get is “only theatre,” the other is theatre as a means of communication of concerns and interests and as an appeal to our solidarity.

Before sketching my impression of another “play” staged by al-Assifa, I want to give here some background information on the historical context in which the group originated. Al-Assifa was formed as an integral part of the movement of North African immigrant workers in France, the *Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes* (MTA). It consisted mainly but not exclusively of North African militants. It sprang from a hunger strike.

After the death of Prime Minister Pompidou in 1974, thirty-seven members of the *Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes* confronted the interim government then in office with their demand that the *sans papiers* should be given work permits and that their stay in France should be legalized. They not only began a hunger strike but threatened to burn themselves alive if their demands were rejected. The French authorities at the time attempted to undermine this resistance by promising the thirty-seven participants in the hunger strike work permits and a legalization of their immigrant status, which they refused to accept. During the hunger strike, which lasted several weeks, they improvised songs on the basis of their North African musical traditions, attempting to describe and express their alienated and repressed situation. Finally, in the context of this hunger strike, various forms of communication were discovered by them, all destined to communicate their situation to the French and Maghrebini population. Thus, they began to produce their own newspaper, which ridiculed certain racist French papers like *le Parisien*, which they referred to as *Paris chien* (the Paris dog), or *le Méridional* (a racist paper in Aix-en-Provence), from which they quoted sarcastically to unmask its biased and demagogic reports on North African workers. Another medium used to present their situation was tape recordings. I remember one that critically tackled the French alphabetization program for immigrants. Finally, they decided to found al-Assifa, the theatre ensemble that was to serve as yet another form of communication with the public.

Within this “theatre movement,” as a medium among other media designed to communicate their cause, they have described themselves first and foremost as militants fighting for their cause, and only in second place as *gens du théâtre* (people of the theatre). In presenting their performances, they could draw on the support of Monsieur Clancy, who then held a chair as professor of dramatic arts at the Université de Vincennes (today Paris VIII). Playing the role of the French bourgeoisie in their performances, his wife, Madame Clancy, became a member of the ensemble. She was a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne who actively and with considerable solidarity supported them, as did a number of other French sympathizers who took on roles in their plays.

The cultural movement thus initiated has boycotted all the dominant festivals and cultural events, including the Festival d’Avignon, deciding instead to perform in alternative contexts (sometimes in theatres, and often at the fringe of festivals). In Aix-en-Provence, as well, they worked to bring about a

large demonstration where they presented North African popular traditions, and contributed to festivals of the North African population as an expression of shared joy, which was their alternative to the formalistic festivals in Aix which mainly serve to prop up the local and regional tourism business.

It was in Aix that they presented a performance called *Vive la France! Immigrés, Silence!* which I happened to see. The site of the performance was the main street of Aix-en-Provence, le Cour Mirabeau. As with the *halqa* or circle theater, the audience formed a circle around them. And while the audience thus “represented” the settings, the militants as actors vanished into these settings and appeared, again, from them to enter the circle. Just as in *Ça travaille . . .*, this play consisted of a series of sarcastic sketches. At the outset, there is an actor playing a tour guide, showing and explaining to a group of tourists what he takes to be the remarkable sights of Aix. A North African immigrant worker walks up to them, addressing a tourist and promising to show him something he should really be seeing. The tour guide warns the tourist, but the tourist says, “Why not?” and comes along.

Next, we see them walk to a house awaiting demolition. When they enter, the staircase is hidden in darkness, some of the stairs are broken. With difficulty, they reach a large room where several rows of beds have been lined up: the sleeping place of what seem to be perhaps a score of immigrant workers. The North African guide introduces the tourist to his colleagues, and the tourist asks: “Is this here a meeting, a sort of plenary assembly?” Whereupon the guide answers, “No, we live here, twenty of us, in this lousy joint.” And then, he adds, “I’ll show you something still better.” And he shows him their smelly, dirty kitchen. The tourist shouts, “No, I can’t even breathe here! I have to go now, immediately.” The North African worker retorts, “You see—you can’t stay here, not even for a minute. And we have to stay here all those years. Tell those other tourists what you have seen. This is our reality, which nobody wants to see.”

The Aix performance of *Vive la France! Immigrés, Silence!* was later followed by another, certainly not an identical performance of the “play” in Marseilles, in front of fishermen striking against the companies operating the large trawlers they worked on. After the strikers had seen *Vive la France...*, they immediately put on their oil cloth, took their nets, and improvised a play depicting their own, unbearable situation.

Even though al-Assifa performs its plays outside the framework of official theatre festivals, they have been praised by a number of the theatre critics. And it was in fact Jean-Louis Barrault who intervened in favor of their leader and director later on when he was arrested and tortured in Morocco where he had returned to visit his fatally ill father. The praise, however, did not do them any good. The group became divided between those who wanted to continue as militants using the theatre as a vital means of expression, and those who thought they should produce theatre as, above all, a form of “art.” In any case, praise for them has been far from universal. I have encountered, among colleagues teaching in Paris, much skepticism. The productions of al-Assifa appeared to them as simply “agitation.” In fact, it is true that the group’s political activism has far exceeded the involvement in their theatre, which represents just one of their several forms of intervention. It was not unimportant that they were lay actors for this made them search actively for creative forms of expression, drawing (as I soon recognized) on traditional forms like the *halqa* that they had come to know in their countries of origin (which for most of them was Morocco and Tunisia). But it also appeared that they were not unaware of Western street theatre even though perhaps they had not found spontaneously a way pointing in this direction. It is clear that they owed something to the “input” of Monsieur and Madame Clancy, but they owed at least as much to their

own theatre tradition in Morocco and even more to the concrete situation they suffered from in France—a situation which they wanted to react to, and to actively transcend. It is clear, then, that the social concerns which lay at the root of their reflection and their expressivity implied a strong impulse to communicate as effectively as possible with the audience, in order to involve them in their cause. Extremely expressive gestures—drawing on their Maghrebinian *gestic* fund, producing a certain strangeness, a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* for an educated, urban, French public—their body language, related to pantomime, were both integrated. There was no unity of time and space; scenes were added, sketchlike, one to another. And all this was in order to articulate, or rather, demonstrate—in a sense not identical with but also not completely unrelated to Brecht's *Lehrstücke*—different situations of immigrants, subjected to the difficulties of life in a foreign, often hardly understanding, and even racist, social environment.

I think that many of the situations presented in their performances, but also in other medial forms of expression that the group has chosen, referred to something which in sociological discourse is often referred to as *anomie*. This is apparent even in one of the tape recordings I obtained from them. In the form of a radio play, it presents to us the acoustic dimension of the sketches, pointedly adding one to the other, in order to construct a whole. One such sketch features a “class” of Maghrebinian youths subjected to an alphabetization program of the French government. The lady teacher tries to teach them French vowels and consonants; but they react with an expressive cacophony of sounds proper to the Arab language. In other words, they assert their identity, their autonomy. From the point of view of the dominant culture, this is simply deviant behavior—rooted in that sort of *anomie* which first Durkheim, and later on Parsons and Merton, have described—giving the State and its agencies a theoretical justification to deal with what was deemed to threaten law and order, either reacting with the tool of repression or that softer, subtler one of so-called social work.

In *Vive la France . . .*, the situation where the North African worker, at the outset of the “play,” addresses the tourist in the presence of other tourists as well as a guide, from the point of view of the dominant culture portrays at least bad manners, if not entirely impossible behavior. But for the person with a North African village background, to draw somebody—even a stranger—by his sleeves and whisper something to him may not seem that abnormal at all. From the dominant point of view, accessing the dorm where all the immigrant workers off duty at the moment spend their free time, would seem like an undue invasion of privacy, and thus an awkward situation. But the horrible housing situation of the immigrant workers is not seen as awkward or impossible, but rather, unfortunately, as normal. What is indicative of *anomie*, then? From the dominant point of view and from the subaltern, North African worker's perspective it is not the same that is abnormal and outside its *nomos*.

For the large body of illegal immigrants whose existence the lay actors refer to in their play, their entire existence is an anomaly, because their human dignity is permanently denied. In opposition to this, they assert their autonomy, their dignity, and they articulate their protest and their demands. But from the dominant point of view, their life in France amounts not to an unbearable denigration of human dignity—it is an *anomie* pure and simple that should be wiped out either by deportation or by integration. The remarkable thing is that in fact both from the point of view of Maghrebinian dominant social forces and from that of the French dominant social forces, it is an *anomie*. For the former because the Maghrebinian *sans papiers* in France have become exposed too much to French society, because they have been estranged from traditional, patriarchic, rural society, having turned urban, having said good-bye to patriarchal values, opting for a more or less outspoken revolt. And for the French dominant social forces, because they are “Arabs,” and illegally present Arabs at that. Accordingly, they are confronted by the

police as *sans papiers*, they are shut out of decent housing, becoming *sans abri* in Parisian *bidonvilles* or rotting, decrepit housing waiting to be torn down. They face their employers without legal rights, working as illegals, bearing his insults or attempts to cheat them out of their agreed wages. All of this, for the militants, constitutes an expropriation of their dignity, and of their rights as human beings; for the opposite side it contains an infringement of law and order, of “normalcy,” in short—an *anomie*.

But it is not only on the content level of the plays, by way of their subjects, that *anomie* becomes central. On another level, the performance itself as well as the actors constitute an *anomie*. To sum it up briefly: From a certain dominant point of view, the play is no play, and the actors are no actors. This kind of theatre, expressing concrete socio-cultural needs in an interaction with a public that is to be “awakened,” is no theatre to many a serious scholar of literature and of drama studies in the West. For to them, the play breaks the rules of so-called serious theatre; it does not pretend to be an autonomous work of art pointing only to itself. The group of actors uses all its energies, “liberationist” energies, as Edward Said would say, to present in a mediated, in an extremely expressive way, an extra-literary reality. The rapport, the relationship, is what is at stake for them, what they work on, artistically, in their own theatre language and with theatrical devices borrowed from two theatre cultures (the *halqa* and Western agitprop street theatre), because without the rapport, without the interaction with the public, their entire effort would come to nothing and be devoid of meaning.

That this was indeed the case could be witnessed not much later. For, as I have already pointed out, with a certain critical acclaim won due to the performances in Avignon and Aix, and after having received a number of subsequent invitations to perform, the group soon split along two lines—those who wanted to go on and become involved in theatre as art, and those who saw their performance as an expression of their militancy and political intervention. The result was that the group disintegrated. Perhaps this is not even to be regretted if groups, as Sartre pointed out, are emphatic and short-lived social phenomena, centering on a cause and disintegrating when the cause is achieved or disappears as an issue. The importance of their example is that they allow us to comprehend the vitality of a hybrid theatre form, borrowing what was felt to be useful from two different theatre cultures, and doing so according to the needs of the actors as well as the public. The beautiful thing about it was that this hybrid theatre form, arising out of an interaction between a Maghrebiniian and a French theatre experience, was so lively—so immediately in contact even with the French, non-working-class audience who desired to watch this performance. How much greater must have been their aesthetic and intellectual effect and the active response of the audience when performing before their most vital recipient, the illegal Arab immigrant workers in diverse French urban agglomerations!

But, let us not forget this: from the point of view of a canon shared by most educated French theatre critics, their performance was delegated to the sidelines of the festival; to them it constituted not theatre (which was seen to exist only in the so-called European tradition) but mere role playing, an amateurish effort, superficial political agitation without any aesthetic and intellectual relevance. It constituted an *anomie*, just like the illegal immigrant workers who continue to constitute an *anomalie* for *l'état français*. It will perhaps be thought that this experience is much too exceptional to devote attention to it in the context of a debate about models of theatre. But I think that as an expression of so-called *anomie* that in fact asserts the autonomy of socio-cultural subjects and sets free their creative, intellectual, and artistic energies, it indeed foreshadows a utopian counter-model of what a truly emancipative theatre could be. Of course, there will not be one model. There will be the specific socio-cultural needs of theatre producers and of theatre audiences, and they will not be identical regardless of time and space.

*Magdi Youssef initiated a program of contemporary Arabic literature and culture at Cologne University after intensive debates with German Orientalists still focused exclusively on classical studies (in 1962–65). Youssef taught the program from a comparative perspective from 1965 to 1971. Since 1971, he has taught this subject at Bochum University, focusing on modern Euro-Arab socio-cultural interactions. From 1983 to 1984, he taught methodology of research at the Institute of Art Criticism of Cairo's Art Academy, subsequently drama studies and comparative literature at the faculty of arts (for more than twenty years), and for three years methodology of research at the faculty of mass communication of Cairo University. Youssef was a visiting professor at Trinity College Dublin in 2000 and Bonn University in 2009. He is currently a research fellow at the International Research Center for Interweaving Performance Cultures, Free University Berlin. Youssef's works have been published in six European languages and Arabic. His epistemological critique of Euro-Western-centrism was influential in Italy and became part of the curriculum of La Sapienza University (Rome). His book Brecht in Aegypten: Versuch einer literatursoziologischen Deutung (The Reception of Brecht's Theater in Egypt: A socio-literary approach), Bochum 1976, refuted eurocentrism two years before Edward Said's Orientalism did, and was reviewed fifteen years in a row until 1990 in Germany, France, Canada, and the USA. For more information: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdi\\_Youssef](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdi_Youssef)*

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1. The original Arabic name of this troupe is Al-assifa, which is the equivalent to "La Tempête" in French. As this troupe used to perform predominantly in French, and rarely in Arabic, the French media used to refer to it with its French name: La tempête, especially as its Arabic name is difficult to pronounce for non-Arabs because of the guttural ? in ??????. This company has nothing to do though with the Tempête theatre set up during the early seventies at the Cartoucherie in Paris. As the latter, unlike the one of the Northern African Sans Papiers, is being subsidized by the French state, it has a repertoire and a theatre practice which reflects a fully different orientation.

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