

## The Birth of Modern Iraqi Theatre: Church Drama in Mosul in the Late Nineteenth Century

**The Birth of Modern Iraqi Theatre: Church Drama in Mosul in the Late Nineteenth Century** By Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma Arab Stages, Volume 2, Number 1 (Fall 2015) ©2015 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Western-style theatre was introduced to Iraq in 1880, thirty-three years later than, and independently from, its first appearance in the Arab world in Damascus in 1847, and subsequent early development in Syria and Egypt.<sup>[1]</sup> Although the first Iraqi playwrights were primarily concerned with religion, interest in politics grew as the country entered the twentieth century. Most of the playwrights working in the period from 1880 through 1920 were residents of Mosul, adept at foreign languages, and in closer contact with the West, by way of Turkey and Syria, than those living elsewhere in Iraq. Many were members of the clergy who had been educated in Europe, where they were exposed to Western theatre practices. Although many plays written through 1908 focused on religion, drama that addressed social issues emerged as early as 1892, and the production of political drama grew during the early twentieth century in opposition to first Ottoman and then British rule. The attitude of early playwrights towards the Ottomans was, however, complex. Not all drama resisted empire. Translations of Shakespeare's tragedies that depict the negative consequences of challenging those in power were employed to support Ottoman rule; these included *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Julius Caesar* (al-Taleb, *Al Tarjama* 35). In addition to Shakespeare, early Iraqi dramatists translated and adapted Western plays and novels from French, Turkish, and English into Arabic.

The first play scripted by an Iraqi is a trilogy composed by the Dominican priest and poet Hanna Habash (1820-1882) in 1880.<sup>[2]</sup> It is not by chance that the pioneers of both Arabic and Iraqi theatre were members of the Christian minority, as the contribution of the Christian community to Arabic intellectual life was considerable. This was due to the Western ties enjoyed by some Middle Eastern churches. Since the first century A.D., Christianity has been present in Mesopotamia, the region that encompasses the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and is approximately bounded by modern-day Iraq. Two denominations emerged: the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church (Rassam 7). Beginning in the first half of the seventeenth century and concurrent with increased contact with the West, Catholic missions were established in Iraq by the Capuchins, Carmelites, and Dominicans. Missionaries provided education: the Carmelites opened the first primary school in Baghdad in 1721 and the Dominicans established primary schools in Mosul and the surrounding area shortly after their arrival in 1750. The Dominicans also brought the first printing press to Iraq in 1860. Christian thinkers were at the forefront of modernizing the Arabic language during the nineteenth century under Ottoman rule, leading the literary revival associated with *al-Nahda al-Arabia* (the Arab Awakening or Renaissance). One such linguist, Anastasius the Carmelite (1866-1947), held evening study circles in Mosul which were attended by Christians and Muslims alike, many of whom would become leading Iraqi intellectuals (Rassam 103-4). As Abdulrazzaq Patel chronicles in *Arab Nahdah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (2013), pre-modern Christian intellectuals laid the groundwork for the adoption of Arabic as a vehicle for both

Christian and inter-religious discourse through which, eventually, Arabic became a significant marker of identity that transcended religion in some instances (see Patel, Chapter 2).

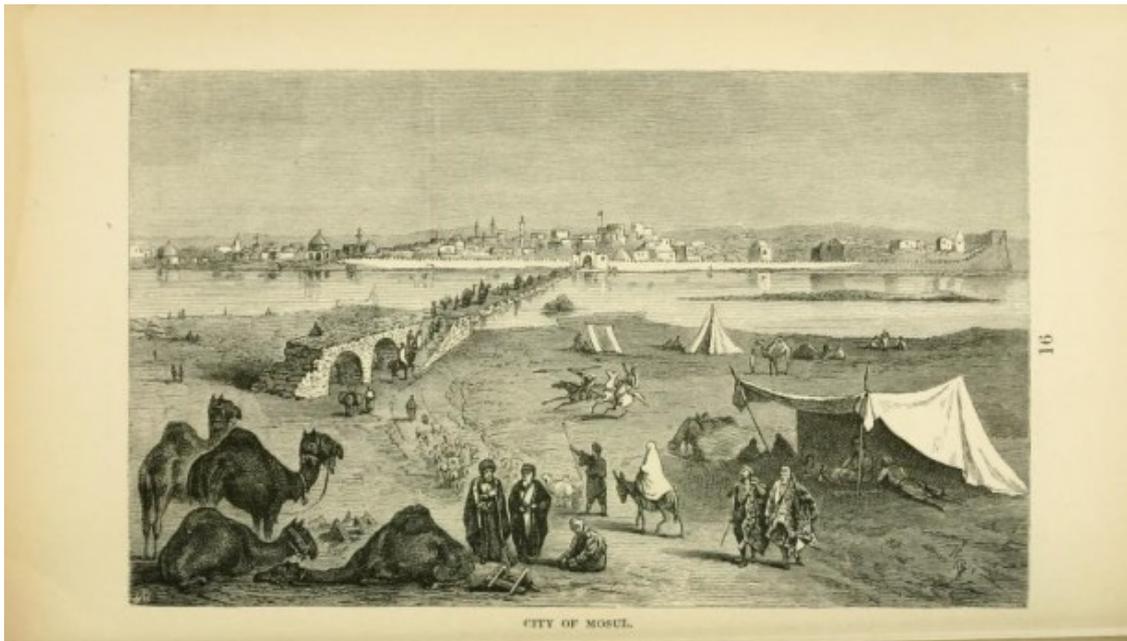
Under Ottoman rule prior to the establishment of the *tanzimat* (reforms) of the nineteenth century, Christians were regarded as second-class citizens even though, under Islamic law, they were granted certain privileges, along with the Jews as “people of the book,” as long as they paid the required taxes. What would become Iraq consisted of three Ottoman provinces centered on the major cities of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. In the provinces of Baghdad and Mosul, many Christians and Jews moved to the cities to partake of general education and pursue professions such as medicine, education, and law. Christians congregated in the north, especially in and near Mosul. Organizations such as the East India Company mostly hired Christians and Jews as traders and many of these became wealthy. Due to this employment and attendance at missionary schools, they were more likely than Muslims to encounter Western culture. The *tanzimat*, initiated in 1839, established Christians as first-class citizens entitled to participate in local ruling councils. Sultan Abdul Hamid reversed the *tanzimat* and reinstated pan-Islamic rule in 1878 in response to nationalistic movements in Turkey. Some of these involved Christian communities, in response to which the Sultan formed an alliance with the Kurds and systematically repressed Armenians and East Syrians. Armenian massacres occurred in 1894, 1895, and 1896. Following the Young Turk Revolt in 1908, further massacres occurred and many Armenians and East and West Syrian Christians fled to Iraq (Rassam 123-5).

The relationship between the Christian community in Mosul and the Ottomans was therefore complex. The Christians were granted full citizenship as a result of the *tanzimat*; however, those were reversed in 1878. Most Muslims and some Christians saw the Ottoman Empire as the best defense against European opportunism (Masters 176). The safest route for a Christian playwright would therefore be to limit oneself to relaying Christian parables. The first Iraqi plays appear to be simple morality plays without overt or covert political agendas.

Habash, Iraq’s first playwright, was a pastor in Zakho, a city located on Iraq’s northern border with Turkey, then later a priest at the Dominican Father’s Church in Mosul. Whether or not he was aware of the works of Marun al-Naqqash who introduced Western-style theatre to the Arab world in Beirut in 1847, Habash’s efforts seemingly owe nothing to his influence. Whereas al-Naqqash composed operettas inspired by contemporaneous French and Italian models, and most significantly Molière, Habash composed a trilogy of one-acts, in 1880, which appear to be inspired by medieval morality plays. Didactic and moralistic in nature, each of these one-acts is based on a story from the Bible, in this case the Old Testament. In each of them, Habash includes a hymnal chorus and begins with a moralistic speech delivered by one of the main characters. However, whereas medieval morality plays typically mixed serious and comedic elements, Habash’s material lacks humorous content.

Habash’s three plays are *Adam and Eve (Aadam Wa Hawwa’)*, *Joseph the Good (Yousuf al-Hasan)*, and *Tobiah (Toubiyya)*. The title of the first is somewhat misleading as it focuses on the story of Cain and Abel with Adam as narrator and Eve as a sort of peacekeeper (Al-Anbari). A bad angel encourages Cain to murder his brother; a good one reminds him that he will be excommunicated and damned if he does so. Abel clearly corresponds to (or prefigures, in the manner of Western medieval drama) Jesus, and his death, that of the Christ. The play consists of two parts. The first depicts the rancor between the brothers and ends in Eve temporarily reconciling them, and the second focuses on Cain’s wickedness and the murder of Abel. The work closes with a hymn. Indeed, the chorus in each of the three plays sings hymns

that comment on the action and express opinions, fulfilling a function similar to that of the chorus in Greek drama (Younis 30). The second play in the trilogy, *Joseph the Good*, consists of thirteen scenes that depict the story of the titular character. As in *Adam and Eve*, fraternal relationships are poisoned by hatred and envy as Joseph's brothers attempt to murder him. In this case, good triumphs as Joseph ascends to the throne of Egypt while his evil brothers are punished (34-5). (This differs from the Biblical and Quranic versions, in which the Pharaoh appoints Joseph his second-in-command in charge of the granaries). Unfortunately, little information is available about *Tobiah*, the final title in the trilogy. At the end of the play, Tobiah, who has buried the dead against the king's orders and patronized the poor, is doubly rewarded: previously blind, his sight is restored and he can now see his son; moreover, the oppressive ruler has died.[\[3\]](#)



Mosul in 1876

Habash was the first of a number of Iraqi priests and teachers to pen morality plays for staging in churches and schools. These plays undoubtedly served the purpose of educating their audiences about the Bible, but may have also functioned as enticements to convert. Muslims' conversion to Christianity was forbidden under the Ottomans, but churches were actively involved in proselytizing members of other Christian denominations. The presentation of theatre in schools in Iraq during this time period was not unique in the Arab world. Indeed, in Syria, the practice existed in parallel to the amateur theatre initiated by al-Naqqash. It was common for students to perform plays at the end of the school year, which had been composed or "freely translated" by their instructors, in Arabic, French, Italian, English, Turkish, and Hebrew. Performances of such plays in Arabic, at Christian, Jewish, and state schools, have been recorded as early as 1859. Most of these instructors were Christians. As Shmuel Moreh and Philip Sadgrove relate in *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre* (1996), the plays served a didactic purpose. They taught "the knowledge of history, religion, grammar, literature, rhetoric..., and patriotic values." They imparted moral and ethical standards and familiarized the students with European dramatic classics and deepened their appreciation of their own "religion, culture, and historical and

legendary past,” including the exploits of Arabic and Islamic heroes (69-71). Although Habash’s primary purpose would seem to have been to reinforce Christian morality through biblical parables, Iraqi dramatists that followed him would pursue other aims. Nevertheless, regardless of the focus of individual plays, it is likely that, in general, their goals paralleled those of teachers writing plays in Syria.

Early Iraqi playwrights, including the clergy, did not limit themselves to adapting stories from the Bible. The influence of French culture and, in the theatre, Molière, is easily discerned in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iraqi culture. A number of French novels and plays, including those of Molière, were translated into Arabic. Translations of Molière include *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, translated by Yousef Omi as *Sakban al-Nusab (Sakban, the Swindler)*; *L’Avaro*, translated by Hana Rassam as *al-Bakheel (The Miser)*; and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, translated by Father Jirjis Qindila as *al-Thari al-Mutanabil* in 1908 (Khudyer 126, 136). Iraqi critic and playwright Sabah al-Anbari detects evidence of Molière’s influence even in Habash’s works, although this influence is formal rather than substantive: Habash divides his plays into French scenes which begin and end with entrances and exits and provides a list of characters at the beginning of the play (al-Anbari). Indeed, it is highly likely that Habash was familiar with Molière given the influence of French culture on the well-traveled intelligentsia and clergy of Mosul at this time, even though he looks further back in European history for his dramaturgical model. Regardless, Molière provided a useful template for Muslawi playwrights after Habash who wished to satirize class distinctions and the bourgeois exploitation of the poor.

The first Iraqi play to be printed was, in fact, a work of social criticism. Na’oum Fathalla Sahhar (1855-1900) adapted *Lateef and Houshaaba (Lateef Wa Houshaaba)* from the French, and had it printed in 1892 (al-Mafraji, et al. 104-5). He was a student of Youssef Dawood Eqlimus, who was the first Iraqi to publish Arabic translations of French literature. Like Habash, Sahhar was a priest and teacher at the Dominican Father’s Church in Mosul and worked as a supervisor at the Dominican Publisher. He was fluent in French, English, Turkish, and Syriac, the language of his ethnic origin, and was the author of a number of Ottoman Turkish language manuals. *Lateef and Houshaaba* is an adaptation of the French writer Alexander Luis Rubino’s *Fanfin et Colas*. The play marks a shift in focus in Iraqi theatre from primarily religious concerns to sociopolitical ones. It features Lateef, a landlord’s spoiled son, who maltreats peasants, servants, and his tutors. In accordance with an educative plan advanced by his primary tutor, his father gradually convinces him that he was switched long ago for the son of Betu, a poor tenant farmer. Lateef ultimately reforms his ways, asks for forgiveness, and abandons his luxurious life to join Betu in poverty. Thus, the narrative implicitly criticizes the class system and also addresses the themes of the father/son relationship and forgiveness.

Moreover, the play seems to offer a veiled criticism of Ottoman land reform laws. In an effort to reassert control over its provinces, the Ottoman Empire embarked upon a series of reforms, as part of the *tanzimat*, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. One of the most relevant to the Mesopotamian provinces was the Land Law of 1858, the primary implementation of which was initiated in 1869 by the newly-appointed governor of Baghdad, Midhat Pasha. The law granted title to individuals in possession or occupation of land and prohibited collective ownership. In *A History of Iraq* (2002), Charles Tripp relates that, “Either through ignorance or suspicion... the great majority of the tribal cultivators failed to register and were thus transformed into tenant farmers” (16). Furthermore, those who obtained title deeds frequently had no connection to those cultivating the land. As Tripp notes, the consequence of this reform would be far-reaching. Lateef’s choice to transfer his allegiance in the play from his wealthy, land-owning father to the poor farmer may express sympathy on the part of the playwright towards those

disenfranchised by the reforms.

Later, Hana Rassam (1891-1959), a student of Habash and himself a teacher, wrote plays that address political and social injustice such as *The Murdered Innocent* (*Al-Baree al-Maqtool* [produced in 1911]; it was retitled *For the Sake of Allah, the Generous* for a 1912 production), and *The Resisting Palestine* (*Filisteen al-Mujahida*, 1936). *The Murdered Innocent* deals with the injustice of class distinction. Arabic playwrights must make the decision whether to write in Modern Standard Arabic or the colloquial. In *The Murdered Innocent*, Rassam chooses to have the educated characters speak in the former while the uneducated ones use the local dialect. The play is considered anti-Ottoman since it exposes the oppression and the injustice of the ruling system (al-Ani 10). *The Resisting Palestine* calls for armed resistance in Palestine. Sahhaar and Rassam may thus be situated as pioneers of Iraqi political theatre, diverging from the morality plays of the earliest Muslawi playwrights. [4], [5]

As in other Arab states including Egypt and Syria, Iraqi dramatists would maintain an ongoing engagement with politics (even as, frequently, they felt the necessity to veil their criticism in order to evade prosecution). Their successors would criticize, first, the Ottomans, then the British, then the series of Iraqi governments initiated with a coup against the British-supported monarchy in 1958, through the regime of Saddam Hussein, the American-led occupation of 2003-2011, and the birth and infancy of Iraq's fledgling democracy.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented on the panel on Middle Eastern and Middle-Eastern-American Theatre and Performance at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education 2015 Annual Conference in Montréal.

[2] Hanna is a man's name in Arabic; Hannah is the female version.

[3] The protagonist of this play appears to be Tobit, the principal actor of The Book of Tobit, rather than his son, Tobiah.

[4] "Muslawi" is the adjective form of "Mosul."

[5] Sahhaar also translated *Le Prince Captif* from the French; it was staged at the Dominican Father's Theatre in 1895.

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## **Table of Content**

### **Essays**

- The 2015 Egyptian National Theatre Festival by Dalia Basiouny
- Damascus Theater Laboratory by Waseem Al Sharqy
- The Birth of Modern Iraqi Theatre: Church Drama in Mosul in the Late Nineteenth Century by Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma
- Theatre as an Optimistic Political Act: Lebanese Theatre Artist Sahar Assaf by Michael Malek Najjar
- A Feminist Tuberculosis Melodrama: *Melek* by Painted Bird Theatre by Emre Erdem
- Much Ado About “Theatre and Censorship Conference” by Dalia Basiouny
- Mass Media Muslims: A Three Lens Theory of Representation by Jamil Khoury

### **Announcements**

- Issam Mahfouz’ *The Dictator* presented in New York by Marvin Carlson
- An 1868 Egyptian Helen of Troy play published by Marvin Carlson
- Nahda: Five Visions of an Arab Awakening
- *Malumat*: Resources for Research, Writing/Publishing, Teaching, & Performing Arts compiled by Kate C. Wilson

## **Book Reviews**

- *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theatre* by Karin van Nieuwkerk, ed. - A book review by Marvin Carlson
- *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present* - A book review by George Potter
- *Inside/Outside: Six Plays from Palestine and the Diaspora* - A book review by Michael Malek Najjar

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- *Out of Control* by Wael Qadour
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