

The Interwoven History of Moroccan Theatre



The Interwoven History of Moroccan Theatre An Essay by Jaouad Radouani

Arab Stages, Volume 5, Number 1 (Fall 2016) ©2016 by Martin E. Segal
Theatre Center Publication

The interwoven history of Moroccan theatre is difficult to trace. Yet, thanks to endeavors undertaken by Moroccan as well as Western scholars interested in theatre and performance arts, mainly in the history of the field, it has become, at least since independence, achievable. Therefore, a number of studies could arise out of that history and pertinent issues interconnected to that theatre could be examined. The most recent and most complete of these was the 2012 *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb* by Marvin Carlson and Khalid Amine. Thanks to such work, the evolutionary history of the Moroccan theatre can now be accessed and approached from various perspectives.

This study considers Moroccan theatre history from the premise of an “interweaving performance culture,” as developed by a center by the same name at the Freie Universität of Berlin and sets as its main objective the tasks of investigating that history, looking for and highlighting the factors that historically

contributed to the making of modern Moroccan theatre and producing an interwoven theatrical culture and performance aesthetics. The main intention is to sketch out the major interwoven constituents that contributed to establishing Moroccan current theatre as a modern established institution and to unravel the culturally multi-layered system performance arts in Morocco.

Investigations that examined the local theatrical memory and archives conducted by Moroccan scholars has led to gradual revelation of evidence showing an interwoven loop in the history of the Moroccan theatre. Accordingly, the curiosity of theatre-archeologists researching the field of performance arts has uncovered numerous realities about the ‘diversified’ past of Moroccan civilization, culture, and thus theatre. However, eager as they were to understand the types of cultures that contributed to the formation of the Moroccan theatre, none thought of it “interweavingly,” since their interest was mainly focused on relationships between the “Self” and the “Other” and moments in which Otherness was imposed on Moroccan theatre. Nevertheless, more recent studies, employing more of an “interweaving cultures in performance” orientation have allowed new discoveries to be made. As Marvin Carlson explains in his “Introduction” to Erika Fischer-Lichte’s 2008 *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*:

Performance has proved so useful and stimulating a concept that today scholars around the world are exploring its possibilities for a better understanding of social and cultural processes. (1)

Part of the social and cultural processes this essay explores involves the general interwoven history of a nation, Morocco, which in this case, contributed to the production and development of a ‘miscegenated’ culture of performance. The “interweaving” project tries to disentangle the social and cultural processes that affects performance and those through which performance affects society in reverse. As Fischer-Lichte writes:

In this light, it is not surprising that the next wave of modernization – the process of globalization going on since the 1970s – went hand in hand with new forms of interweaving cultures in performance all over the world. Since the 1960s, which marked the end of colonialism, and even more so since the 1970s, processes of interweaving cultures in performances have been taking place in an unprecedented and so far unimagined way. No matter how ‘similar’ or ‘different’ cultures may be, how close or how distant, at any time different cultures may be interwoven in performances. Not only texts, acting styles, artistic devices, and artists travel and sometimes form multicultural theatre, opera, and dance ensembles; it has also become common practice for productions to travel from country to country, continent to continent, from one international festival to the next. [\[1\]](#)

In the same way, Moroccan theatre went through several stages before becoming what it is today. It started at the very beginning as diverse types of popular performances scattered around the country, and these date back centuries into the past. Later on, during the colonial era, it developed into a European-style theatre due to the colonialist project. Influenced by the imperial enterprise, it began to take on a new, hybrid shape that brought together local performance cultures and modern western theatrical traditions. André Voisin is considered the founding father of this movement, having established the first national troupe, Troupe al-Maamoura, in 1954 with Charles Nugues.

From 1950 to 1956, Voisin spent time in Morocco, becoming familiar with its traditions, customs and rituals, which he sought to link to a theatre developed in a series of workshops. The company he

established presented both adaptations of French drama and original creations based on Moroccan material. Voisin left behind a number of students who would become major figures of the next generation in Moroccan theatre, among them Tayeb al-Sedikki, Ahmed Tayeb L'Alj, Mohammed Said Affifi, Larbi Doughmi and Fatima Regragui.

Morocco developed a diversified background and civilization. From the Roman Empire to the present, Morocco's encounters with peoples and civilizations of different types promoted a mature and homogeneous experience and refined aestheticism. Even colonialism had its positive aspects, owed to agents like Voisin, who helped popular or pre-theatrical forms of art find a way to the stages and thus to history. His refusal to practice a purely western mode of theatre in Morocco, and his insistence on studying local performance cultures and bringing them to the stage, bred a new generation of Moroccan theatre professionals, a new type of performance art that was neither western nor eastern. It was thus a new form of theatre that was based both on the local and the global and transformed performance from a state of unity and centeredness into a transient phenomenon that ingested new forms of theatre, new cultures, and produced shifting representations. Herein lies what Fischer-Lichte has termed "the transformative potential of performance," leading to a potentially endless process of interweaving different elements.

The types of popular performance that existed before western theatre was introduced to Morocco were, socially and culturally speaking, of many different patterns and flourished in diverse shapes and styles across the country in small villages, towns, and cities. This contribution I hope to develop later, in a series of research papers which will try to track and mark the remnants explaining the interwoven history of the Moroccan theatre. In Morocco, nothing is certain, academically speaking, about theatrical practices that date back to the era before the beginning of the twentieth century. Although it is obvious that there was widespread awareness of different types of performance arts, few historical documents demonstrate this save for scattered references in history books and travel accounts that mention some performance-like entertainments and occasional manifestations such as. The first attempts to give the Moroccan theatre an official form, according to historical records available and studies pursued in recent times, date back to the beginnings of the twentieth century. Yet it is apparent that the colonizer clearly merely added a new element to an already complex and interwoven performance culture.

The official beginnings of the first Moroccan theatre were instituted by the colonial mission. However, Eastern theatrical traditions traveling west from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia toward the Maghreb also played a major role in the creation of a purely interwoven culture of performance in Morocco. Ultimately, to establish the modern Moroccan theatre, French colonial cultural desires led to the foundation of a 'Moroccanized' theatrical form that emerged during the years France took over Morocco as a protectorate in 1912. Although the French left the country after Morocco gained its independence in 1956, the Moroccan theatrical school, first founded by the French, continued to be inspired by French theatrical culture. Therefore, 'interweavingly' speaking, the Moroccan theatre went through two fundamental foundational periods on its way to become what it is today.



Moroccan street performers, Photo Credit: Katie Quine

The first era, the colonial era, spans beginning of the twentieth century to the year 1956, the year Morocco gained independence. During this period, Morocco was colonized by the France and Spain. The second phase, which is the post-colonial era, begins at independence and continues to the present. However, as mentioned previously, Eastern theatre had journeyed toward Morocco during early years of the twentieth century and encountered Moroccan theatre, reinforcing and inspiring it. During these two phases, Moroccan theatre developed its ancient popular forms into an independent theatre that socially, culturally, and artistically reflects the civilization and people behind it. It must be admitted that French culture had an undeniable hand in the process of formulating Moroccan modern culture in general, and that of the stage specifically, but the facts urge us to seek and trace the interwoven history of Moroccan theatre from its popular embodiment, impacted by both East and West, before arriving to its present state. Although African and Arabic folk traditions remain strong in local dances and music, these were heavily modified, especially in theatre, during the colonial period, especially by the traditions of France and Spain.

Thus, any attempt to approach the theatrical past of Morocco must take into account unearthing and exploring the delicate moments in which the cords of different cultures have been woven together. Only such an endeavor can reveal the significant and serious historical moments in which different cultures were knitted together and flourished in Morocco. Such an undertaking will help us to understand the interwoven past of Moroccan theatre and recognize the importance of cultural eclecticism in establishing

and designing the canvas of theatre cultures in the local theatres of other countries as well. The findings will help overcome essentialist notions and concepts and provide a solid basis for more democratic and sophisticated discussions.

Morocco, a country of strong contradictions and a rich and varied cultural heritage, began with its own strong tradition of popular theatrical arts. With the arrival of the colonist, Moroccan theatre received and adopted new, Western, modern and postmodern theatrical forms and techniques. Thus, it produced a hybrid form of theatre that brings together local heritage with modernized forms of Western theatricality. It neither gave up the traditions of popular performance arts nor fully adopted Western ways of production. Moroccan theatre positioned itself at a liminal point between heritage and modernity. This juncture, or “in-betweenness,” of the Moroccan theatre constitutes the core subject of every attempt to unravel stages and mechanisms of historical ‘blending’ (somewhat different from interweaving, but a part of the same process) that resulted in current Moroccan theatrical culture and continues to develop it, for the history of the Moroccan theatre has been, and will continue to be, essentially, an interwoven one.

[1] Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Interweaving Cultures in Performance: Different States of Being In–Between”. Article published on *Textures: An Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Culture* (August 11, 2010). (Retrieved 07/06/2015), p. 8.

Jaouad Radouani is a Moroccan postdoctoral researcher who holds a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies. He is an active member of “The International Centre for Performance Arts” organizing the yearly-held *Performing Tangier Conference in Tangier*. He participated in many conferences, study days, and workshops inside and outside Morocco (Europe, the Maghreb & the Middle East) and published articles and research papers addressing questions related to theatre, performance arts/studies, culture, identity, politics, and discourse analysis.



**MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
PUBLICATIONS**

Arab Stages

Volume 5, Number 1 (Fall 2016)

©2016 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Founders: Marvin Carlson and Frank Hentschker

Editor-in-Chief: Marvin Carlson

Editorial and Advisory Board: Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Dina Amin, Khalid Amine, Hazem Azmy, Dalia Basiouny, Katherine Donovan, Masud Hamdan, Sameh Hanna, Rolf C. Hemke, Katherine Hennessey, Areeg Ibrahim, Jamil Khoury, Dominika Laster, Margaret Litvin, Rebekah Maggor, Safi Mahfouz, Robert Myers, Michael Malek Najjar, Hala Nassar, George Potter, Juan Recondo, Nada Saab, Asaad Al-Saleh, Torange Yeghiazarian, Edward Ziter.

Managing Editor: Jennie G. Youssef

Assistant Managing Editor: Ash Marinaccio

Table of Contents

Essays

- The Development of Diegetic Practices in Iranian Indigenous Performances: a Historical View by Mohammad J. Yousefian Kenari and Parastoo Mohebbi
- Ab?l-?II? al-Sal?m?n?: the Rewriting of History in Egyptian Theatre by Tiran Manucharyan
- The Interwoven History of Moroccan Theatre by Jaouad Radouani
- Heather Raffo on *Noura* by Heather Denyer
- The Third Identity: An Interview with Tareq Abu Kwaik by George Potter
- Chasing the Gaze of the Killer: Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* by Mara Valderrama
- Conducting a Theatre Workshop for Syrian Refugees at Berlin's Tempelhof Center by Fadi Fayad Skeiker
- *The Village of Tishreen* by Ahmad Mahfouz

Announcements

- Tangier International Conference for 2016, "The Narrative Turn in Contemporary Theatre," by Marvin Carlson

Reviews

- Mohammad al Attar's *While I was Waiting* at Avignon by Philippa Wehle
- World Premiere of Arabic Drama at Cornell by Marvin Carlson
- Cairo in the '60's: Review of *This Time* by the Rising Circle Theater Collective New York City, May 19, 2016 by Michael Malek Najjar

Short Plays

- *A Crime on Restaurant Street* by Wajdi al-Adal, Trans. Katherine Hennessey
- *Firestarter* by Hassan Abdulrazzak
- *Before Dinner* by Yasser Abu Shaqra, Trans. by Faisal Hamadah

www.arabstages.org
arabstages@gc.cuny.edu

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center
Frank Hentschker, Executive Director
Marvin Carlson, Director of Publications
Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director