

## My First Encounter with Nehad Selaiha

### My First

### Encounter with Neh

### ad Selaiha By Katherine Hennessey

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*I don't write reviews exactly; they're supposed to be reviews of the performances, but they are not precisely so because I try to introduce the political, socio-political, and economic contexts into the art. I don't believe that art, any kind of art, happens in a vacuum. —Nehad Selaiha, [2013 interview with al-Ahram](#)*

I remember the first time I came across Nehad Selaiha and her theatre criticism. It was 2011, and I was living in Sana'a, researching Yemeni theatre and attempting to get a handle on how different it was from theatre on the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. I'd found some useful materials in bookstores and libraries, but the unrest of the Arab Spring limited my ability to move freely around the city. So on days when I had to stay at home, and if the electricity and internet held out, I would pore over every reference I could find online, in Arabic or in English, to theatre and performances in the GCC.

Most of these, sadly, provided me little insight. English-language sources were scarce and tended to focus on expat-driven community theatre. Arabic-language announcements of upcoming Gulf performances were rarely followed by reviews, and when they were, the review often simply cited the names of the play, the playwright, the director and the venue, together with the names of important attendees or the sponsoring *shaykh* or (more rarely) *shaykha*. There was no plot summary, no commentary on setting or content or relationships between characters, not the glimmer of a suggestion of what the performance had been about. No engagement with the play's relevance to contemporary society.

Then, finally, I found [this](#): Nehad's reflections on the 2009 Gulf Theatre Festival. Here, at last, like spring water in the desert, was actual, substantive, pull-no-punches criticism of Gulf theatre productions.

Reading it you'll immediately notice that she was not one to mince words. She describes the 10th festival as a 'pale, emaciated copy and a faint, sorrowful echo' of the first one, held in 1988. The productions were 'modest to mediocre,' the accompanying scholarly roundtable 'shrunk and regionally self-enclosed.' Yet she extends to all of the roundtable scholars the courtesy of actively engaging with the ideas they presented, praising one who 'fiercely argued' against artistic censorship by religious authorities in Bahrain, and extensively citing another's exploration of the damaging effects on Gulf theatre of various unofficial forms of censorship.

The breadth of her knowledge of theatre, the sense of perspective that her long career provided her, is evident throughout. Having participated in the first Gulf festival, she comments sadly on ways in which the energy and the aspirations she remembers sensing there have declined in the two intervening decades. She compares the festival's Kuwaiti performance, of Jawad al-Asadi's *Insuu Hamlet!* [Forget *Hamlet!*] to

an Egyptian production she had seen fifteen years earlier, which, it seems, still remained fresh in her mind.

Her commentary is packed with tantalizing details, including encapsulations of the content of all the performances, like the ‘prosaic mime and dance reading of *Macbeth*’ (!) that opened the festival, and the Bahraini play featuring a charlatan who convinces people to venerate a saint whom he has invented for his own gain. And she was willing, even eager, to mine and discuss the sensitive socio-political substratum of the plays. She found in several a coded critique of contemporary religious conservatism and rigidity—a critique thinly disguised by, for example, the playwright’s decision to set the play in the years preceding the oil boom. Thus,

*the conflict between the 'Nawakhzas', the owners of the pearl-fishing fleets, and their employees was the dramatic substance and served as a vehicle for scathing political comments on modern life in the Gulf and the spread of rightwing, conservative religious dominance there.*

Even in a short piece like this one, her writing and her readings of the plays demonstrate courage, acuity, insight, and thoughtful evaluation.

But of all the elements of Nehad’s approach to theatre criticism, the one that impressed me most as I read this piece in Sana’a—and still does, as I re-read it today—is her generosity of spirit. She loved theatre, and she had a profound sympathy for those who practice it under difficult conditions. Even when the final product was flawed, she strove to recognize ‘noticeable and praiseworthy effort’. The sentences with which she concludes the piece have remained with me since I first read them:

*Throughout this festival, where women were conspicuous by their scarcity, you could not but feel that theatre was a tarnished outsider and suspicious intruder—an unwelcome guest, barely tolerated for God knows what reasons. What a terrible ordeal the men and women in the Gulf theatre face, and how truly brave they are.*

In her criticism, Nehad struck a remarkable balance between an objective evaluation of what she saw on the stage and a compassionate understanding of the struggles that go on behind the scenes. She characterized her written responses to performances as ‘not exactly reviews’, and she was right—they’re a compelling form of cultural commentary, by a wise and perceptive commentator.

I’m grateful to finally have met Nehad in person this past year, at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina’s *Shakespeare400* conference, and to have been in correspondence with her since. She was unfailingly gracious at every encounter, and though her voice continues to reach us through her writings, I know she will be sorely missed.

We shared a love of Shakespeare, and I’m sure she’d recognize Gertrude’s lines from *Hamlet 1.2*: ‘... all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity.’ May she rest in peace in the undiscovered country.

*Katherine Hennessey is a Research Fellow with the Global Shakespeare programme at the University of Warwick and Queen Mary University of London (2014-16), and a Moore Institute Visiting Fellow at the National University of Ireland, Galway (late 2016). From 2009 to 2014 she lived in Sana’a, Yemen,*

*researching contemporary Yemeni theatre. Her writing on Yemen has appeared in numerous publications including Middle East Report, ArabLit, and Arab Stages, and the anthologies Why Yemen Matters (2014) and Arabia Incognita (2016). Hennessey is co-editor, with Margaret Litvin, of the special 'Arab Shakespeares' issue of Critical Survey (28.3, December 2016), and author of Shakespeare on the Arabian Peninsula, forthcoming from Palgrave's 'Global Shakespeares' series.*

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### Table of Contents

#### Essays

- Editorial Note: Nehad Selaiha by Marvin Carlson

- A Place Under the Sun: To Be or Not to Be? The Question of the “Fringe” by Nehad Selaiha
- Women Playwrights in Egypt by Nehad Selaiha
- Bubbles and Balloons: The Amman Theatre Festival 1995 by Nehad Selaiha
- Great Art and Brave Hearts by Nehad Selaiha
- Home-Made Theatre by Nehad Selaiha
- Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker: *The Love of the Nightingale* at the Women and Memory Forum and *Our Country's Good* at the AUC by Nehad Selaiha
- For Future Reference: Art and Politics by Nehad Selaiha
- A Hair-'razing' Adventure: The Head of Mameluke Jaber by Nehad Selaiha
- Manifold Oedipus: Sophocles's Oedipus Rex at the National 2001
- Royal Buffoonery: *King Lear* at the National 2002

### Tributes

- ????? ?? ??????? by Sana' Selaiha
- ????? ?????? ?????? ??????? ??????? by Mohammad Samir Al-Khatib
- My First Encounter with Nehad Selaiha by Katherine Hennessey
- The One and Only: Nehad Selaiha by Nora Amin
- The Godmother, Obituary: Nehad Selaiha (1945-2017) by Ati Metwaly
- In Memoriam: Nehad Selaiha by Karen Malpede

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[arabstages@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:arabstages@gc.cuny.edu)

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