

The Theatrical Work *Mchouga-Maboul*: A Plunge into Moroccan Memory



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oroccan Memory By Lalla Nouzha

Tahiri

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The author of this work is playwright Simon Elbaz, who is a native of Boujaâd in Morocco but has settled in France. Author, composer, and actor, he is the author of *Mchouga-Maboul: Theatre versus Matrouz*.^[1] The Matrouz genre implies an artistic creation based on the intersection of languages and music, Matrouz being an Arabic word that means interwoven. This genre is characterized by the association of poetry and music and the mixture of languages inherited from the traditions of Andalusia. Given the distance of the playwright Simon Elbaz, now living in France, from his native Morocco and, given also his contact with other cultures, his theatrical work represents a real plunge into a collective memory. The return to a Moroccan past—a recurring theme of this study—is only done from another country and after a long separation. The encounter with the other, the distance from home, even

the loss of the place of origin has made this work both a memorial and a dramatic performance, where the polyphonic indices contributing to its development, symbolizes the meeting between the past in the place of origin and the present in the host country.

Reading the work, one realizes the considerable work of memory which uses both the narrative and dramatic mode and which employs various constituent elements (singing, music, dance, story, trance, proverb, insult, the grotesque, parody) as well as various speaking modes (spiritual, political, historical, national). The author creates a dramatic atmosphere through which he manages to offer a dual aspect of his characters (the storyteller and Mchouga) and to draw first a sketch of Moroccan culture that is meant to be general, but also a more specific picture of the Judeo-Moroccan memory. One wonders then if memory is used here to reinforce the theatrical representation of the place or if it is the place, lost and imagined, which comes to the aid of the memory, since both evolve between memory and history.

The title is a charged one: *Mchouga-Maboul: Theatre versus Matrouz*. It is paratextual, to underline the obvious polyphonic constructions which stress the primacy of the tale with multiple voices: those coming from home and those of others. The story of Mchouga is told through the use of heterogeneous elements and various discourses that create references to the Moroccan background. Bakhtin's formula that a speech is a complex act because it is shaped through the contribution of other discourses that surround it is clearly applicable to this work. According to Bakhtin: "The social atmosphere of the discourse which surrounds its object puts into play the facets of its image."^[2] The Moroccan environment remains the enunciative source. Then, the discourses intersect and are elaborated in a remarkable plurality, a plurality producing at the same time the story, a mark of polyphony and a source of emotion. On the one hand, elements—or materials of Moroccanity—are clues attached to the recipient who lived in that environment; indeed, they are used to define that recipient. On the other hand, the speeches make possible the transmission of a Moroccan entity outside Morocco. The remembrances arising from temporality thus refer back to various forms of Moroccan socio-cultural inspiration.

Narration and the figure of the place: the distribution of roles and polyphonic construction

When I approached this dimension in the work (story, appeal to the listener, an argument supported by verbal exchanges), it was the concept of narration that I thought of. This is done in three languages: Judéo-Moroccan, Hebrew, French. The words and gestures used by the storyteller are complex. In other words, the storyteller is at the same time author or narrator reporting what the character says, the "speaking subject." Here this is Simon Elbaz, a character in the tale he tells Mchouga, who imitates him and creates his character. Thus, the storyteller and Mchouga are two characters making an act of language, under the tutelage of Simon Elbaz, author of the work. The storyteller becomes an actor when he plays the role of Mchouga. Mchouga, too, becomes an actor when he enters into dialogue with virtual people, that is to say, they too become "talking subjects," contributing to the polyphonic construction of the work. In short, Elbaz occupies all the roles. As Dominique Maingueneau has observed, the position of the dramatic author in relation to the statements of his characters is very different:

"Admittedly, it is the author who is responsible for all their comments, as in a novel, but the subjects who speak are not people whose statements would be contingent (...) All this device rests on an ultimate polyphony, by which one distinguishes the "speaking subject" (the actor who plays the role) and the "speaker" (the role) (...) The theatre is therefore a very singular mode of literary enunciation, which, despite the illusion it tends to impose, cannot be reduced to the ordinary use of language. It presupposes

the entrenchment of a set of enunciation situations within a single, global one.”[\[3\]](#)

The interactions of Mchouga with the characters as well as the situations of enunciation also take into account the presence of the spectators. The exchange between the characters and the different situations that the work puts on stage thus takes place in the halqa where the storyteller transmits the stories. Because of the scope of the halqa, a popular performance tradition encompassing both art and literature, the study of polyphony is more successful in this work. The halqa encompasses the role of the storyteller, the character Mchouga, the village witch, and the many themes that unite in the main narrative. All these elements contribute to highlight the cultural, historical, religious and linguistic registers of the collective memory. Polyphony is thus a component of the theatricality of the work that is based on this popular spectacle, directly related to the place of memory, Boujaâd. The evocation of this city does not suggest its distance, but invites us to reflect on the burden felt during this return to the place of memory. It gives many details about the importance of this place in the author's mind. The script states that “[T]he action takes place in Boujaâd, Morocco, around a typical character, Mchouga, the madman of the Mellah, the lunatic of the Maghreb, adopted by the three Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities and witness to their break-up in the 1950s, under the French Protectorate.” The place is clearly indicated, since the narrator gives a number of important details in his description of it:

“The setting is in Morocco, in Boujaâd (...) Boujaâd, a village not far from the mountains. The souk square resembles a stage set, with white arches all around. Under these arcades, cafes: Memnou 'echrab, El-khamr, forbidden to serve alcohol, but there, we used to drink only lyrics, different dialects, music (...) Yes, to Boujaâd. There is a whole corporation of carders, tinsmiths, barbers (...) There are even women who compete in the art of embroidery, al Matrouz.”

The effect of the points of suspension is accentuated by the repetitions of the name of the city, and the place of the souk as a place of assembly. The repetition of “Boujaâd” indicates the incantatory force of this place in the playwright's mind. It is significant because it supports what has just been stated in this reminder. Repetition as a “speech figure” is important in the emotional evocation of the place of memory. Remembrance, underlying temporality, is explained by the repeated use of the deictic “over there.” This explicit place also suggests an implicit “here” that shows that the playwright is outside his country. Between the implicit and the explicit, we feel an exchange signaling the spatial and temporal superimposition. The past expressed by “Once upon a time in Ifriqiya, in the Maghreb ... Over there” is introduced into actions in the present. On the other hand, the use of the word “Matrouz” is also significant, since the embroidery to which it refers highlights the linguistic interbreeding of Arabic and Hebrew, of the poem and song that run through all the scenes of the work. The value of this art, inseparable from the place of memory, makes it possible to study the polyphonic effects through the perspective of narrative and dramatic modes leading to the analysis of this production as a kind of collective catharsis.



Matrouz, the Narrator. Photo: Elbaz

The halqa: an aspect of the *commedia dell'arte* (entertainment and morality)

The restitution of the storytelling and storytelling tradition and the staging of cultural values ??are very important here. The playwright confirms this when he speaks of renewal with the oral tradition. Indeed, the halqa is a pre-colonial theatrical expression. It is a popular public spectacle of speech and play that the Jewish and Muslim collective memory knew how to preserve. Abdallah Stouky says:

“In Morocco, the theatre, whatever some specialists say, did not appear with colonialism. Centuries before the consumption of Franco-Spanish colonial rape, there existed in our country diverse and living forms of dramatic expression. Everywhere, in the weekly rural souks as well as in the public squares of the big cities, flourished the different types of storytellers, Maddaha, Immediazen and others, who gathered around them in the place Jamaa the fna, in Bab Guissa or in the moussems, dozens of faithful listeners eager to listen to the adventures of Jha, peasant finicky or badly sided, the epics of Seif Ibn di Yazan (Al Azaliat) and from time to time the tender love stories of princesses and charming princes. In turn, one drew from the rich popular repertoire or from Arab literature (*The Thousand and one nights*, *The Epic of Antar*).”[\[4\]](#)

The halqa is often related to popular festivals. It is a raw theatre whose halaiqi (the head of the halqa, that is to say the storyteller), without a pre-established canvas, produces the play and its text in the moment, partially improvised, under the gaze of the public. For his oral representations, he chooses public places of production, exchange, provocation, information and criticism. Public space has a resonance in popular culture. George Balandier evokes the importance of this space. In fact, according to him: “The public space is also that of provocations, dramas by which the radical rejection of society and its order is played out, devastating violence sparing nothing on its incendiary passage.”[\[5\]](#) The restitution of this art makes it possible to observe the relationship between the story of Simon Elbaz and the cultural context due to the

preponderance of the halqa in the elaboration of his speeches.

The iconicity of the halqa: orality and collectivization of discourse

The halqa has a plural function where the public is involved in a field of creativity, imagination and play. It is a popular means of entertainment among Moroccans. A conventional device for spectacular and memorable representations. It occurs in souks or popular places like, Djma-El Fna in Marrakech, Bab Fattouh in Fez or Sahat lahdim in Meknes:

“Nomadic evenings, whose sociological constraints have not favored the establishment of theatrical spaces or enclosed scenes specific to the Eurocentric tradition, suddenly reinvent conventional devices that often mark the space of a spectacular imprint, whether related, performed, or shown: the Djam El Fna square in Marrakech, an urban center during the day, is reinvented each evening by the actors of a permanent performance organized in the exhibition mode: in their specific spaces and according to their own rhythms of occupation, tightrope walkers, snake charmers, monkey trainers, water carriers dancing to the rhythm of the Gnawa rhythm, healers presenting their medicine shows.”[\[6\]](#)

Telling stories and performing, talking and inviting the spectator to participate in the show allows us to understand all this collective work. For this to happen, it is necessary to diversify the approaches of the show. This kind of popular theatre informs us about the plurality that Simon Elbaz chose for the presentation of *Mchouga-Maboul*. To analyze the genre of a show that consists of a variety of approaches, where storytelling, speeches and contradictory material, one should look to Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais and popular culture. This approach reveals how Simon Elbaz has revived the tradition of the halqa through the storyteller and the delusional yet rational wise fool. Bakhtin distinguishes in his study between the secular world of carnival and the sacred world of the rule of law. The carnival, which takes place in a specific time, is an opportunity for the daily roles to be overthrown: the secular becomes sacred and vice versa. In this carnival, liberating spirit and body, prohibitions are temporarily lifted. My study is not directly interested in the carnival, but in its similarities with the halqa. The two come together in the idea of “play and the game, that of temporarily deviating from everyday life and entering, in the open air, another realm, by means of a work of metamorphoses and grotesque disfigurements, both parodic and mimetic. In other words, it is a question of a game as a free yet regulated activity which depends on the conventions of popular spectacles. Roger Caillois specifies that “free” means an activity “to which the player cannot be obliged without the game immediately losing its attractive and joyful nature of entertainment,” and that “regulated” means “subject to agreements which suspend ordinary laws and which momentarily establish new legislation which alone counts.” Finally, this activity is fictitious, that is to say “accompanied by a specific consciousness of a second reality or a reality frankly unreal in relation to daily life.”[\[7\]](#)

Both diversion and regulation are also critical to the storyteller’s role. When he reports that Mchouga dances with Muslim women, he performs a reversal of roles, that is to say, Mchouga also sees himself as a woman. He repeats his magic formula: “Attention, attention, children. All together with me for the Program of the Celebrations, the rejoicings in their childish original form. Let's go, let's go, children. Sit down all around me. We will create the halqa.” Thus, he begins his performance and draws the attention of his audience: “listen” and “yesterday as today (sman la ikoun el-youm):

Come, come my brothers. Let's play at poetry. Let's enjoy life. Let's play the song before we fly away in

time. Sheikh Mess'oud Chekhna Mess'oud. Come and let us taste the notes of the oud/ O Mess'oud our master.”

The storyteller, in his character of the wide fool, presents the halqa as a space of encounter, evocation, delusion, insult, coarseness, mimesis, prophecy, trance, wisdom, song and music, information and education. This genre (based on the imperative call to listen directed toward the present audience, Jews and Muslims, asking them to understand and judge) is essentially polyphonic. It is based on the combination of two actions, auditory and visual (“watch” and “listen”)(“sing along” or “relax into a trance”) on local references (Chaoui-Mesnaoui), on contradictory adjectives describing the mystic himself (“wise fool”), on ritual and on conventional simulations used in oral literature, “this is not a matter of trivial details, of everyday matters. It is a strategy. A tactic. Coming from America . . .”

The heterogeneity of the actions and features of the character are part of the art of the halqa. Bakhtin describes tradition and popular culture as “systems of popular images.” The halqa is the source of images such as the brotherhoods, the shabbats, the spaces, the beggars and their ways of making a living, the language used to cause laughter, everything that is represented. The artistic exhibition of the halqa is based on inter-subjectivity, with links that are determined between the narrator-storyteller-Mchouga. That is to say, the talking subject/the speaker working with the listeners/spectators.

The tale: Orality and the meaning of telling

Mchouga-Maboul's is part of a theatre of speech that favors orality; and as such, it is a very rich example. The story-telling suitable to the halqa is, like any oral tradition of narration, linked to the culture to which it belongs. It is part of a social, cultural, and linguistic identity in which we interact and speak. The concept of “narrative identity,” advanced by Paul Ricœur, indicates that the enterprise of memory, through multiple elements and speeches constructed with a work, can only exist as narrative. In this narrative, “individual and community are constituted in their identity by assimilating such narratives as become for each their actual history.” Ricœur's idea can be adapted to the coming together of the individual and his community as found in theatrical works. Ricœur explains this alliance between the individual and the collectivity by “narrative identity” which according to him: “still shows its fecundity in that it applies as well to the community as to the individual.”^[8] It is interesting in this context to recall André Elbaz's remarks when he approaches this literature based on the sharing of language and a common way of life. André Elbaz draws us into a specific literary genre: the tale of Moroccan origins that is told outside Morocco. How did these bits of the original culture survive despite remoteness and acculturation?^[9] In her study on “Narrative Identity and Community,” Johanne Villeneuve describes perfectly what I think allows a Moroccan Jewish author to know that narrative involves action on two levels. “The narrative, we repeat, is rooted in the world of action. But this rooting may be conceived in two ways: the narrative tells the action, but in its turn, the narrative is an action in the sense that it performs. It is an exchange, a sharing between members of a community. It is therefore action by means of its own act of enunciation.”^[10]

According to this author, being rooted in a specific place and sharing and exchange between people in the same community represent the performance of narrativity: telling and having a meaningful tale to tell. This is felt in the first words of the storyteller, which refer both to anteriority and to distance. These words are remarkably interpreted by deictic forms of time “there,” the verb in imperfect time “once upon a time,” writing in italics, use of Judeo-Moroccan terms and repetitions of the archaic word “zman.” All

these heterogeneous expressions unite to reinforce the sense of the tale—which is a cultural heritage—and connect the people of the community. When the storyteller becomes the “speaker” interpreting Mchouga, he calls upon the audience to join his halqa:

“There is a moment of suspense! The suspense of Hitchcock, of MGM (Metro-Golden-Maghreb), in cinemascope, live technicolor, on the giant screen! (And he surges forth imitating the MGM's lion, but abruptly stops) That's all for today. The sequel? In the next installment. The next surprise of surprises, S.B.I.C. special. Saturday evening, here in the village square. By special invitation to the entire population without distinction of opinion, religion or tradition. All groups are welcome.”

Through its act of enunciation, the story is presented in a narration recognized by the whole population. The story, which is a recited narrative, is in fact an oral tradition that has the dramatic force of performance, an intangible cultural heritage where the storyteller becomes the “speaking subject,” master of the show, source of entertainment, information, but also wisdom. Pavis describes theatre narrative as “the way in which facts are recounted by a linguistic system most often, occasionally by a succession of gestures or scenic images.”^[11] Seeking to link the recited narrative and the theatrical narrative, Ricœur finds, according to Aristotle, that there are two modes of representation of the story by its author: “either the poet speaks directly: then he tells what his characters do; or he gives them the floor and speaks directly through them: then it is they who “make the drama.”^[12] Ricœur's words are perfectly adapted to the catalytic characters in the work of Simon Elbaz.

Thus, the story and the manner in which it is presented are closely related in the theatre technique employed in *Mchouga-Maboul*. As an important element of Moroccan popular culture, storytelling draws its importance from its ability to integrate individuals into their community and to teach them the communication codes of this community.

“The tales have different facets, they serve to integrate the individual into the collective, to make it possible to obtain an inner experience of the codes of the community. But is it also important to recognize that in the tradition, most of the time, each tale is anchored in the repertoire of a community, that in a community the storyteller participates in the foundation and the maintenance of identity references, that is to say in maintaining the coherence of the community.”^[13]

The tales in the halqa of Mchouga (the little linked stories of kessody, the little briny, Gad Gadya, the kid, etc.) are nourished by polyphonic manifestations: the performance, the anecdotes, the insults as elements of the grotesque; the songs, the Ta'amim (a tonic accent guiding the chanting of the Torah, the rhymes (Nqeb nqeb djaja, malha messoussa, fain kounti sarha fi jnane Essalha), the monologues, the vocal improvisations, burst of the irrational,, repetition of gestures, adjustment of words, vulgar words, puns.

Given the nature of the performance of the halqa which is intended to be both listened to and seen, audience-listeners are thus invited to contribute to the success of the shows. This is partly inherent to the participation of the spectators. The names of the characters are significant and remain an implicit reference to place, time, context: French generals, saints, rabbis, resistant forces, men, women and even children. Their evocation indicates not only the actions of the characters in the history and culture of Morocco, but also contributes to the narrative coherence of the work. It is the character who gives the story its authenticity and veracity through the storyteller and mystic Mchouga. By traversing the various

evocations peculiar to the Moroccan Jewish memory, filtered through various discourses: the figure of the prophets (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Eliahou); the messianic hope; memories of French colonization; General Residents (Lyautey and Guillaume); the resistance to colonialization (Sidi Mohamed). The storyteller of Moroccan-Jewish origin Oro-Anahory Librowicz, recalls the importance of this character in the fusion of the play and the narrative:

The storyteller must therefore find narrative strategies that rely at times on the spoken word, therefore on the direct style that is dramatic, sometimes on the spoken word or indirect style (...) the tale gains evocative power when it is rooted in the concrete, with names that link it to a place and have an evocative power, even if the public understands that the action could take place anywhere. [14]

The first task of the storyteller remains the transmission of stories to his listeners. In his theatrical work, he places himself in the middle of the crowd and undertakes to seduce the public, to inform and to entertain them. By telling and performing, he draws from the halqa his means of gathering and exchanging. Information and entertainment take on a particular character, along with memory, in the promise never to forget Boujaâd. This promise, written in italics, amounts to an oath against amnesia. The storyteller is fascinated by the main character. Inhabited by his madness, he switches into an “I in the game” and becomes Mchouga. In this union, the storyteller “speaker” is responsible for inspiring the playwright, who sings at the end of the work: “If I forget you, may my tongue stick to my palate. I will speak of you, I will sing of you.”

The monologues, the stage directions, the stories are presented in a narrative mode since Mchouga, the only body in the presence, appears in different fictitious contexts, thus giving a heterogeneity to his story while reflecting on the role of the storyteller who raises the questions: Who is telling us this? What are they telling? Who are we talking about?

Given that the presence of the storyteller is used here to reconnect with the oral tradition of the country of origin, it also means reconnecting with a narrative identity where several voices intersect (Muezzin, storyteller, mystic, king, saint and holy man, resister, Resident General-Colonizer). The place of the storyteller is important not only in the narrative construction of the text, but also in the different means of entertainment, silence, gesture, irony, costumes, parody, song, trance. All this makes it possible to maintain the unity of the different voices and the constituent fragments of the text-tale. The narrative set of the work is constructed upon the bringing together heterogeneous discourses (spiritual, historical, political, national) each contributing to a polyphonic ensemble.

First, there is a linkage between the characters when one attempts to understand “who is speaking,” since the personal pronoun “he” is confused with “we.” In a passage between the storyteller and Mchouga, the storyteller ends up sliding towards the plural without any break in the narration. I am using the example of the storyteller-mchouga duality to show how the art of halqa weaves the fabric of the work. More precisely, when the storyteller evokes the stories of Mchouga, imitating him by voice and gesture until he becomes his own character, we witness two contradictory actions: the attachment to the character and the detachment or the distance from the same character through a passage from theatrical play to narration. It is an artistic technique highlighting the multiplicity of the elements in this work, that is to say, the presentation of a narrative-narration-play-song in several languages. In this narrative-dramatic hybrid, the stage directions employed, allowing the passage of the story to the performance, is an index of a desire to connect the storyteller and its speaker. The narration here is the object of the action while the storyteller,

following the story, enters the performance without relying on the sets, however easy to move. His gestures, his movements in the circular space of the halqa, his cries and the costumes he changes in front of the audience and even the roles of the women he likes to play reinforce the polyphony of his role. Exchanges with the public are carried out by implication due to a sensitivity to the social tension arising from the threat of the colonizer. The union of characters and actions in an “enunciative heterogeneity”^[15] shows that the story of the storyteller's past is made more credible by the variety of discourses that support it. The creation of a space of relationship between the past and the present as well as a place of encounter between various discourses is all part of the polyphonic construction.

Translated by **Marvin Carlson**

Lalla Nouzha Tahiri recently received her doctorate from the University of Quebec at Montreal. Her thesis was on the Jewish-Moroccan theatre and how it has dealt with the transmission of cultural memory.

Footnotes:

[1] All quotations from the play in this essay are from Simon Elba, *Mchouga-Maboul Théâtre-Conte Matrouz*, (Paris, Les Patriarches, Éditions Dar al-Uns, 2008), 109. The word Mchouga means “crazy” in Hebrew. “Maboul,” a familiar word in French for a crazy person, from the Arabic mahbul, “crazy, stupid, stupid.”

[2] Mikhaïl Bakhtin, “Du discours Romanesque” in *Esthétique et théorie du roman*. Paris, Gllimard, 1987, p. 100-101.

[3] Dominique Maingueneau, “Le personnage comme ‘locuteur’” in *Éléments de linguistique pour le texte littéraire*, p. 73.

[4] Abdallah Stouky, “Où va le théâtre au Maroc?” in *Souffles* n°3, Revue maghrébine littéraire culturelle trimestrielle, troisième trimestre, Maroc, 1966, p. 23-31.

[5] George Balandier, “La théâtrocratie selon l’anthropologie” in Jean Duvignaud, *La scène, le monde, sans relâche*, Internationale de l’imaginaire, Nouvelle série, n°12, Babel, Maison des cultures du monde, 2000, p. 67.

[6] André Helbo, *Signes du spectacle: des arts vivants aux médias*, Bruxelles: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, Coll. “Dramaturgies”; n° 18, 2006, chap. 3, p. 38.

[7] Roger Caillois, “Définition du jeu” in *Les jeux et les hommes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1967, p. 42-43.

[8] Paul Ricœur, “Poétique du récit, histoire, fiction, temps” in *Temps et récit, Tome III : Le temps raconté*, Coll. “L’ordre philosophique”, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1985, p. 356.

[9] See André Elbaz, “Les influences arabo-berbères dans le conte populaire des sephardim canadiens d’origine marocaine” in *Juifs du Maroc: identité et dialogue*: Paris, CCJM, 1980, p. 62-63.

[10] Johanne Villeneuve, “Rimeur, conspiration et corps de société” in *Le sens de l'intrigue ou la narrativité, le jeu et l'invention du diable*, Les presses de l'Université Laval, 2004, p. 147-148.

[11] Patrice Pavis, “Narration” in *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, Paris: A. Colin, 2002, p. 228.

[12] Paul Ricœur, “Le cercle entre récit et temporalité” in *Temps et Récit*, Tome 1, Coll. *L'Ordre philosophique*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983, p. 62.

[13] Marc Aubaret, “La littérature...orale” in *Le conte, témoin du temps, observateur du présent*, sous la direction du collectif littorale, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2011, p. 26.

[14] Oro-Anahory Librowicz, *Les contes de mille et une ères*, Montréal: Planète rebelle, 2003, p.186-187.

[15] Dominique Mainguenu, “Discours et récit” *Éléments de linguistique pour le texte littéraire*, Paris: Dunoud, 2000., p. 38-39.



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