

## Contentious Dramaturgies in the countries of the Arab Spring (The Case of Morocco)



### Introduction

‘Alternative Dramaturgies’ in contemporary Moroccan theatres have become highly visible, re-framing our preconceived questions related to both classical and modern dramaturgies. In the present undertaking three case studies will be explored along with their public responses and their potential for dramaturgical intervention and devising processes. *Dmoue Bel K’houl* (Kolh Tears) was written by Issam el Youssfi, directed by Asmae El Hourri, and presented by Anfass Theater Group (winner of the best performance in the national festival of 2013). *Hadda*, a theatre-concert of the activist company Dabateatr, was a free adaptation of Safia Azzeddine’s *Confidences à Allah*, written and directed by Jaouad Essounani. *Schizophrenia* is a recycled project that re-enacted one of the most painful testimonies of Milouda, a single mother who appeared in a previous project (*Viol en Scène*) by the same company. Articulated around the notion of the narrator as the main agent of the theatrical event and the use of ‘mediaturgy,’ the three performances challenged dominant dramaturgical forms and allowed new sites for spectatorship to emerge, extending the boundaries of the aesthetic realm.

The growing tendency towards the interweaving of theatre cultures since the dawn of the twentieth century, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, has led “neither to the ‘westernisation’ nor the homogenization of non-western theatre cultures. Instead it created new standards of diversity.”<sup>[1]</sup> The new dramaturgies of Morocco, and by extension other countries participating in the “Arab Spring,” are offshoots of such creative tension rather than imitative westernized projects... They have developed at the

intersections between European modernism and postmodernism and postcolonial resistance to these. The political in these exemplary alternative dramaturgies from Morocco lies not only in the projects' hot issues pertaining to the Spring of Democracy but also and most importantly in disputing conventional theatrical forms, re-thematizing the dramaturgical operation modes and changing the relation to the audience... Their recourse to personal stories within the context of the revolutionary spring is also political: the personal is political.

There are many parallels between the failure of avant-garde art in Europe and America in the historical post-1968 moment and the refashioning of Arab Avant-garde aesthetics after the historical defeat of Jamal Abdel Nasser in 1967. The 2011 so-called Arab Spring has, indeed, intensified, or rather, radicalized the previous Arab Avant-garde critique of modernist regimes of theatrical representation, re-injecting more "worldliness, or 'historical actuality', 'figuration', and 'narrative' into modernist 'formalist' self-reflexivity'." (Breger, 5) If the retrieval of traditional performance cultures lies at the heart of Arab Avant-garde of the late 60s, the present aesthetics of narrative performance move well beyond that.

### **Contentious Dramaturgies in the countries of the Arab Spring**

Some of the questions which arise in the context of the present introduction to alternative dramaturgies involve the complexities between two different logics: performance and archive, disappearance and documentation. The archive logic explored by Derrida's *Archive Fever* invokes a dialectical oscillation between commencement and commandment; it combines the practice of storing and restoring. Unlike the museums' tasks of "archiving, categorizing and indexing", performance "challenges categorization, which was originally its point [...] It's not always an easy fit, but maybe what's interesting is the way in which the past is reframed in the present." The cultural urge to document the 'Arab Spring' — and by extension, the Years of Lead in the Morocco that was— explains a great deal about the desire for re-enacting the memory of the past/future. Arabic re-enactments of the Arab Spring render the pastness of the past 'both palpable and a very present matter,' in Rebecca Schneider's terms.

'Alternative Dramaturgies' in contemporary Arab theatres have become highly obsessed by memory politics, re-framing our preconceived questions related to both classical and modern dramaturgies. Dramaturgy is an inclusive category that refers to the 'composition of a play,' or its internal structure. However, the processes of analysis often called dramaturgical analysis are deeply rooted in the practice of dramaturgy. Ever since Hamburgische Dramaturgie the term has been broadly formalized in theatre circles. For Lessing, dramaturgy was framed according to a compositional logic based upon the supremacy of the text. It was conceived of as "the technique (or poetics) of dramatic art, which seeks to establish principles of play construction"[\[ii\]](#).

Contemporary theorists, on the other hand, seem to emphasize the non-literary composites of dramaturgy. Since the 1960s, performances "have repeatedly disconnected individual theatrical tools from their larger contexts."[\[iii\]](#) The re-appearance of what Fischer-Lichte calls 'emergent phenomena' further undermines the production of meaning through theatrical representation. Thus, alternative dramaturgies might also suggest new ways of interrogating theatrical presence and negotiating our roles as spectators and critics, just as they undermine the production of meaning through representation. They tend to disintegrate neo-classical notions of character-dramaturgy and unity by disrupting their underlying dualism within performance. Now the practice of dramaturgy is so vast and complex that attempts at redefining the field

have become a difficult undertaking. Dramaturgy is played out as “an exercise in holding things together.”<sup>[iv]</sup>

Alternative dramaturgies increasingly fuse contemporary performance cultures with elements from the multimedia landscape and visual-arts cultures, often with intense consequences for perceptions of the temporal, spatial and memorial dimensions of performance. The advent of new media has profoundly changed dramaturgical practice in the last decades. The interweaving between media composition and dramaturgy is more than a rupture with traditional drama and its textual overtones, for ‘mediaturgy’ signals a shift in critical perspective better attuned to network cultures. “Should we hope for a new Lessing, a new Brecht, so as to get out of a functional, sophisticated dramaturgy [...] closed in on itself”, asked Pavis in his opening keynote to Performing Tangier Conference in 2014. Can we return to the humanistic moment when theatre began to be conscious of its powers and invented dramaturgy?

Today, many theatrical performances from the countries of the so called ‘Arab Spring’ are contaminated by visual dramaturgy and digital workflows, which can hardly be subordinated to the spoken text. The tendency to privilege the turbulent reflection of liminal experience, where we are invited to become co-artists rather than passive consumers, becomes highly apparent in the theatres and performances of Jaàfer Guesmi and Radhouane El Meddeb from Tunisia, Asmaa Hourri and Youssef Rayhani from Morocco, Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué from Lebanon, and many independent theatre companies from Egypt and Syria (To state just a few from a long list that is growing everyday). By increasing the blurring between the performative and the everyday, dramaturgy can inform and strengthen the composition of contemporary Arab identity, providing access to its socio-political context. After all, alternative dramaturgies are shaped by political motivations insofar as form is in itself content.

### **Performing Autobiographies or a Return to Monologue**

Narrativisation has come back to the Arab stage after the spring. However, this return is less a return to the story and more to the very act of telling the story. It seeks a new relationship with theatrical representation far away from the return to the ‘drama,’ “one in which stories can be told, while the modes of telling, the tellers and even the stories themselves may be suspect, ambiguous and multiple.”<sup>[v]</sup> The present dramaturgies persist on interrogating the fabrics of theatrical representation by questioning presence even while “they heighten our awareness of its effects.”<sup>[vi]</sup>

Personal stories are employed onstage for various reasons: as symbolic witnesses to the past; as counter-agents to official historiography renegotiating its versions and exclusions (Hadda/Schizophrenia); as the source of an authentic presence (Dmoue Bel K’houl). The increasing body of contemporary performances in Post-Arab Spring countries that deal with autobiographic material focuses on the notions of dislocation and paradox, on the imaginative or the playful (as well as emotional) aspects of historical narratives and emphasizes the interplay between reality and fiction not only in performative displays of individual memories but also in the nature of historiography itself.

The narrativisation of personal stories in the three performances under scrutiny here is seen by many Moroccans as involving authentic presence by using ‘people’s actual words’ in a way similar to Verbatim Theatre or even Rimini Protokoll (though Moroccan companies use professional actors rather than experts of everyday life). However, recent displays of personal narratives onstage demonstrate quite a different urge to play with the notions of ‘authentic’ experience and to place the audience in the center

of the game as the main agent. The return of narrativisation in *Dmoue Bel K'houl* illustrates this. *Dmoue Bel K'houl* is about the intersecting paths of four characters who live very stressful and fragmented lives. They are united by fragmentation caused by a shocking miserable reality that is corrupt and rotten. These characters are destroyed along with their dreams; thus we discover Nada, the teacher of philosophy and a mother of two twins, who goes through pain and suffering because of her husband. Sofia, another character, is in relationship with Ahmed Senhaji, a married doctor and father of two girls. Nora is a Student who is being severely oppressed by her brothers and the society and a sexual harassment victim threatened by a man who has pictures of their sexual meeting. Last is Doctor Ahmed Senhaji, a man whose heart is swinging between his love for his two daughters and his love for his mistress. He seems to have devoted his life to partisanship and politics but gained nothing out of the game.

This play helps us follow the broken paths of very disappointed characters whose projects are aborted and dreams are shattered. Yet, those characters, all of them, try to find ways by which they can escape the realities they are obliged to go through. However, by the end of the play, the idea of escape is rejected by all the characters except Nada, who seems to have no other choice. In other words, Issam El Youssfi, the writer of the drama, gets us deeper into the psychology of some characters to uncover a Moroccan reality and question it in a subtle, tragic, but very expressive artistic way. Asmae Hourri, the director of *Dmoue Bel K'houl*, however, deepens the fragmented structure of the four narratives through a deconstructive dramaturgy quite similar to a post-dramatic style. For Asmae Hourri, Youssfi's dramatic script was only a starting point rather than a controlling presence with an aura of authority... The text was no more than one among other dramaturgical elements woven together without any hierarchical power structure.

Judging from Hourri's previous works, she is a true de-mystifier of all these layers of hidden meaning, a stage writer herself with a poetic sensitivity rarely found in contemporary Arab theatre. Hourri is a unique talent not only in Morocco, but throughout the Arab World, a harrowing voice, but one who has felt the burden of the most extreme human emotions and has bravely provoked Moroccan audiences with plays that expressed these intense emotions. Her other productions, such as Sara Kane's *Psychosis 4:48* and *Kharif (Autumn)* demonstrate an uncompromising talent. She challenges not only conventional Moroccan modes of theatrical representation, but perception, too, by inviting audiences to construct their own meaning of what is happening around them rather than on-stage. Her persistence on unsettling the traditional hierarchical representation inherent in Moroccan theatre is clearly apparent in her introduction of post-dramatic representation, which creates fluctuating identities in a volatile time and space. Hourri may thus be seen as simultaneously reimagining traditional performance approaches like narrativity, and exploring the most radical contemporary challenges to traditional modes of theatrical representation. She is clearly one of the central examples of the complex workings of "Postcolonial modernity" in the Moroccan theatre today. Thus, the four intersecting narratives are presented as fragmented pieces through telling and showing. The scenography of the performance itself is marked by a 'no Exit' closure of the backstage and a microphone fixed at the front of the stage, which is another medium used by the performers to reveal large units of the texts and disrupt full identification with the characters.

*Hadda*, a theatre-concert of the activist company *Dabateatr*, is a free adaptation of Saphia Azzeddine's first novel, entitled *Confidences à Allah* (2008). Azzeddine's narrative is presented in the form of a long monologue in which Jbara, a prostitute and later a house wife, addresses Allah directly after long periods of obstinance and objectification. The crudity of the monologues explicitly re-enacts the empowering recovery of women's voice within the context of a deeply rooted patriarchal structure. Perhaps this fact is what attracted Jaouad Essounani to stage the play as *Hadda* within the context of the rising Spring of

Democracy in 2012. Hadda was re-written and directed by Jaouad Essounani. The performance plays with pre-existing templates —myths, narrative frames of traditional historiography as well as images and elements from pop culture— in order to produce a double effect of emotional identification and critical distance. The effects of the multimedia landscape and live music are good examples. It seems that Hadda is telling her story in practically one breath... Telling the story in retrospect has the quality of mediating the events of the past through Hadda's present frame of mind. Hadda's past is filtered through the prism of the present situation. This allows her unlimited leverage to edit her past, modify it, alter it, reinvent it, comment on it, and interpret it to her own advantage... Jaouad Essounani seems to insist that every storytelling, even based on facts, maintains a very personal point of view. By revealing predominant patterns of perception, the performance points beyond the momentary and the actual events becoming a reflection on how we deal with truth; more specifically, how we deal with the dominated structures of truth within everyday reality and current political systems. By staging a personal archive live on stage, Essounani calls into question the Years of Lead memory in Morocco—for remembering is also a way of critical reflection on social tensions and political conflicts.



*Hadda*. Photo Credit: Khalili Abdelaziz.



*Hadda*. Photo Credit: Khalili Abdelaziz.

More often than not, the return to monologue in post-Arab spring theatres is occasioned by a crushing crisis in the life of the monologist, a bitter sense of embattlement, or a resounding defeat in the face of the rotten state. As such, Hadda's monologue is a carefully chosen fragment of retrieved personal (as well as collective) history narrated in retrospect with a will to vengeance and recovery. Her many defeats in the past are transformed into a cathartic verbal victory within the performance through the act of narrativisation in retrospect... The monologue has come a long way, and its journey from the early Greek period to our globalized world and the innovative ways in which it is now exploited is a testimony not only to the elasticity of the genre but also to the growing pluralistic character of our world. More than simply a conventional form of confessional discourse, the monologue in Hadda is primarily a critique of contemporary conventional assumptions about subjectivity and truth. Hadda is also "a solo show which uses the personal memories and recollections of Hadda, a woman who comes from an extremely poor economic background, to open up a larger canvas of political, social and religious questions."<sup>[viii]</sup> Hadda appears 'saintly,' both at the beginning of the performance and at the end, "covered from head to toe in white cloth, but sheds this outer layer as she takes the audience back through her life to reveal stories of violence, rape and prostitution."<sup>[viii]</sup> However, the ritual preparation of Hadda at the end of the performance along with her explosive bomb belt is received as a problematic ending: for some, it was a justification of terrorism, but others see Hadda as a personification of the 20 February movement as other voices of the repressed are heard in the background.

In Hadda, an intermediate zone between comic books and live performance is explored within the whole layout of the performance space. Equally, from an expressionistic imaging of female martyrdom (multiple black and white, filmic images of the actress playing Hadda accompany the live performer), the performance also makes use of idiosyncratic animations as a backdrop to illustrate the more profane episodes in her life. Elain Aston's compelling review of the performance she saw in Tangier reveals that visual signs of 'women and madness' translate easily across cultural and linguistic boundaries:

[P]resented with relentless images of damaged femininity without a sense of any kind of release makes, from a feminist point of view, for a rather painful viewing experience. This feeling was exacerbated by the design: a clinical, walled-in setting which reinforced the idea of no escape. On the other hand, the doubling of the schizophrenic female narrator with an actress whose 'text' was movement-based, composed, screened and projected live to create the illusion of repetitious ghosting, and at one point breaking through into the space to reach for her on-stage, other self, did provide arresting, beautifully composed moments— here at least a sense of female solidarity. I say doubling, but there was actually a 'tripling' involved: a puppet version of the doubled women also accompanied the performers (though the puppetry, or rather puppet master, arguably needed a little more skill to make this work!). [\[ix\]](#)

### **'Mediaturgy' in Contemporary Arab theatre**

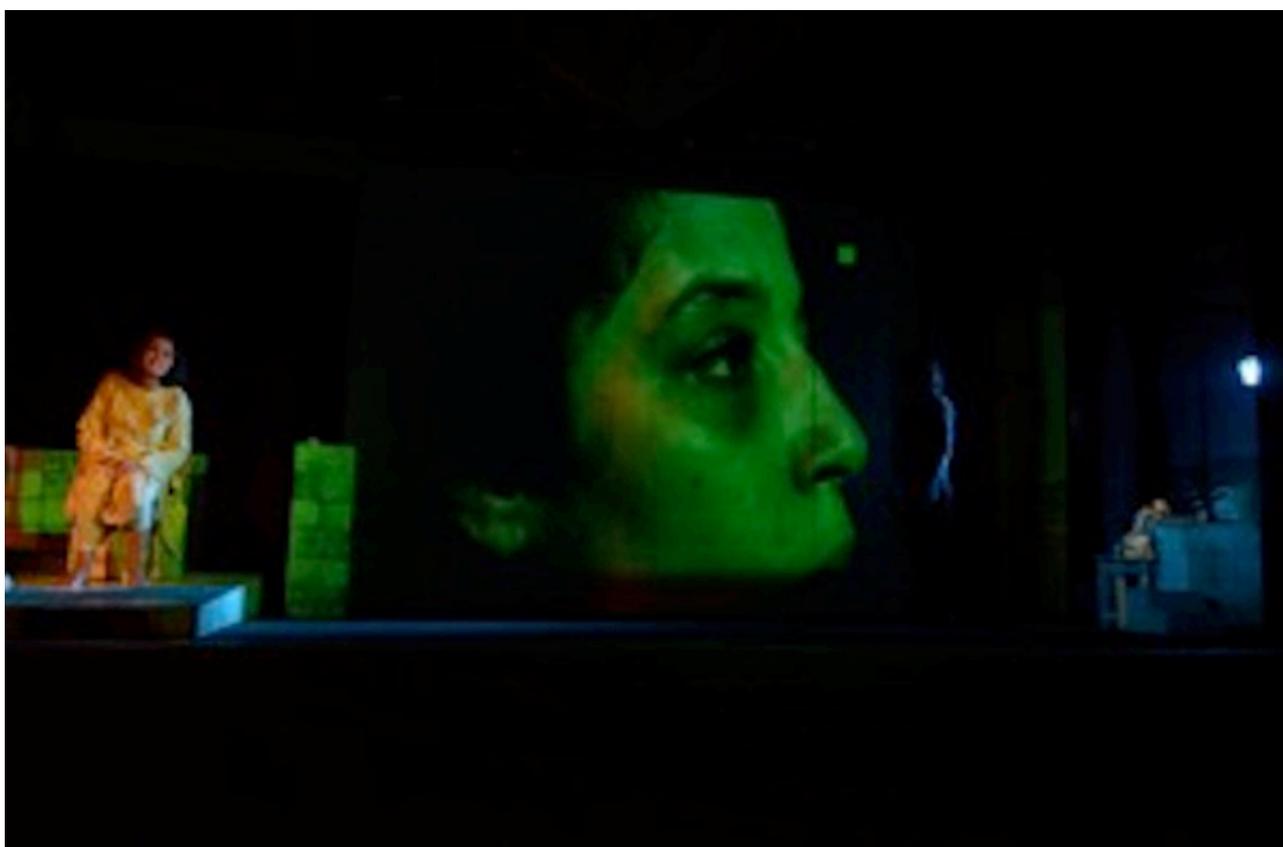
The revolutionary Arab Spring has been fueled as never before by a 'techno-imagination' —a powerful and ever evolving relationship between images and texts. Many of us have become spectators and even citizen journalists of public dissidence; and yet, we have also been connected to these unprecedented upheavals through mediated images and re-edited information for distanced audiences through the internet, mobile phones, satellite TV channels (such as Aljazeera, etc.). Filming and re-editing protests for others also requires social imagination and is highly contested ground.

The advent of new media has profoundly changed Western theatre practice in recent decades. Many contemporary theatrical performances are characterized by visual dramaturgy and digital workflows which can hardly be subordinated to classical or neo-classical dramaturgy. The process of remediation invokes "incredulity toward meta-narratives," and throws the audience into the abyss of representation, or what Bolter and Grusin describe as the "representation of one medium in another." [\[x\]](#) Hierarchies and differences between live presence and recorded versions, spatial and temporal coordinates, original and copy, are all destabilized, challenging the received assumptions about reality and unmediated presence. However, such "a change in perception," as Erika Ficher-Lichte puts it, "does not reduce the quality of liveness, let alone annul it. Rather it emphasizes the fact that live performance and mediatized performance are not so different from each other." [\[xi\]](#)

The current critical emphasis on 'mediaturgy' in contemporary Arab theatre investigates theatre's performative privileging of simulacra. Such a phenomenon has become a generalized feature not only of the so-called postmodern epoch of writing —but also of the postcolonial constituencies like most Arab World countries— since our Global Village now is not only a hyperspace of 'mobile objects' but also one of 'reflexive subjects.' The degree of the ability to reflect upon the social conditions of existence is also linked to the process of decolonization and resistance in the case of developing countries like most Arabo-Islamic ones. Media technologies are used in these three theatrical performances to critically reflect on

our mediatized culture in an attempt to deconstruct the staging of reality by the reality of staging.

Abdelmajid El-haouasse's *Schizophrenia* presents similar stories related to rape and patriarchal violence. The intervention of different media in *Schizophrenia* creates a tension in the perception of the physical body of the second female performer and her two-dimensional representations on the screen and the back stage that remains unseen by the audience until the moment she breaks into the front stage. The dance-technology interface application deployed by Abdelmajid El-haouasse creates the illusion of the performer dancing with her own Avatar. This disparity draws attention to the actual body of the performer and to the aesthetic role she performs, which is contrasted with the immateriality of the screened images of her choreography. With no appeal to post-linear temporality, what is projected on the screen is characterized by a temporal immediacy and simultaneity of both action and its reception. The performer's choreography is happening at the exact time of its screening.



*Schizophrenia*. Photo by Khalili Abdelaziz.

## Conclusion

Theatre in Post-Arab Spring countries continues to be a forum used to challenge dominant dramaturgies of coherence and consensus. Even so, the aftermath of the Arab Spring, with the rise of the Islamists and other conservative tides in the region, exposes conflicting 'communities of interpretation.' The public articulation of cultural conservatism and particularly its relationship with the arts has recently been subject to more thorough reflection in public debate. Questions related to Theatre's contamination by

visual arts and even more, obscenity in the new theatre, have been at the heart of heated discussions. The role of theatre and performance in the public sphere has also become a key issue along with the shifting terms of post-Arab-Spring public debates. The political motivations behind the excess of ‘mediaturgy’ in the Post-Arab Spring theatre productions and the perpetual interweaving between theatre and visual arts and media – whereby each feeds and contaminates the other – were all at the heart of heated discussions. As a decentralized network, social media (especially Facebook pages such as ‘Friends of Moroccan Theatre’) has ironically become the most efficient arena for the neo-conservatives to express their anger against the use of new media in theatre...

Many Arabs today consider theatre a sacred fortress to be defended against mediaturgy and any other contaminating dramaturgy. The re-invention of the storytelling tradition and other modes of artistic production in Moroccan/Arab Theatre today exemplifies the blurring of boundaries between constructed configurations. The hybrid nature of Moroccan theatre emerged as a result of cultural negotiations between self and other, East and West, tradition and modernity. It has marked a postcolonial theatre located at a cross-roads--a continuum of intersections, encounters, and negotiations. The trajectory from *Al-Majd* by Tayeb Saddiki in the late 1960s to *Hadda and Dmoue Bel K’houl* reveals that the return to storytelling is premised upon a progressive continuum at the levels of form and content. Saddiki’s return is more self-reflexive and informed by the desire to recover a vanishing performance tradition that was under threat. It is more informed by postcolonial denials, as it strives to make space for storytelling as a neglected performance culture and weave it into the western styles. As to Asmae Hourri, Jaouad Essounani, and Abdelmajid El-haouasse, storytelling is much more an empowering instrument than simply a matter of retrieving an artistic tradition under threat. It is a site of giving voicing to Scheherazade’s utmost desires, fears, passions, and depressions, yet for an open public, rather than within the enshrined world of al-harem. The techniques of al-halqa are deployed to create a forum event culminating in empowering Moroccan women and changing their worlds by changing their worldviews and languages. Thus, theatre has become not only “the place of a narrative act,”<sup>[xii]</sup> as Hans-Thies Lehmann puts it, but the narrative act itself becomes both the theme and object of theatre, and “a means of ordering the world”.<sup>[xiii]</sup>

[i] Erika Fischer-Liche, *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism* (N Y & London: Routledge, 2014), 12.

[ii] Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of theatre: terms, concepts, and analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 24.

[iii] Erika Fischer-Lichte, Saskya Iris Jain (tr.), *The Transformative Power of Performance: A new Aesthetics*, (London & N. York: Routledge, 2008), 140.

[iv] Christel Weiler, “Dramaturgy as Performance of Holding (it) Together”, in Khalid Amine and George F Roberson (eds.), *Alternative Dramaturgies of the new millennium in Arabo-Islamic Contexts and Beyond*, (Tangier: Collaborative Media International (CMI), 2015), 22.

[v] Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance (Theatre and Performance Practices)*, (London and NY: Palgrave, 2008), 187.

[vi] Cathy Turner & Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 188. 188)

[vii] Elaine Aston, <http://dramaqueensreview.com/2014/06/12/from-morocco-hadda-schizophrenia-and-larnes-au-khol/> (Last accessed July 30, 2016)

[viii] Aston, op. cit.

[ix] Aston, op. cit.

[x] Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. "Remediation." *Configurations* 4.3 (1996), 339.

[xi] Erika Ficher-Lichte, "Theatre Studies at the Crossroads", in Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins, and W. B. Worthen (Eds.), *Modern Drama: Defining the Field* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 56.

[xii] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, (London: Routledge, 2006), 109.

[xiii] Claudia Breger, *An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance: Transnational Theater, Literature, and Film in Contemporary Germany* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 3.

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**Table of Contents:**

### **PART 1: Toward Arab Dramaturgies Conference**

1. [A Step Towards Arab Dramaturgies](#) by Salma S. Zohdi
2. [A New Dramaturgical Model at AUB](#) by Robert Myers.
3. [Dancing the Self: A Dance of Resistance from the MENA](#) by Eman Mostafa Antar.
4. [Traversing through the Siege: The Role of movement and memory in performing cultural resistance](#) by Rashi Mishra.
5. [The Politics of Presenting Arabs on American Stages in a Time of War](#) by Betty Shamieh.
6. [Towards a Crosspollination Dramaturgical Approach: \*Blood Wedding\* and \*No Demand No Supply\*](#) by Sahar Assaf.
7. [Contentious Dramaturgies in the countries of the Arab Spring \(The Case of Morocco\)](#) by Khalid Amine.
8. [Arab Dramaturgies on the European Stage: Liwaa Yazji's \*Goats\* \(Royal Court Theatre, 2017\) and Mohammad Al Attar's \*The Factory\* \(PACT Zollverein, 2018\)](#) by Sarah Youssef.

**PART 2: Other**

9. [Arabs and Muslims on Stage: Can We Unpack Our Baggage?](#) by Yussef El Guindi.
10. [Iraq's Ancient Past as Cultural Currency in Rasha Fadhil's \*Ishtar in Baghdad\*](#) by Amir Al-Azraki.
11. [Amal Means Incurable Hope: An Interview with Rahaf Fasheh on Directing \*Tales of A City by the Sea\* at the University of Toronto](#) by Marjan Moosavi.
12. [Time Interrupted in Hannah Khalil's \*Scenes from 71\\* Years\*](#) by Kari Barclay.
13. [Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin, eds. \*The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine\*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2018. Pp. 417](#) by Rebekah Maggor.

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