

Arab World Contributions to the Avignon Festival, 2019



Henri Jules Julien's *Mahmoud & Nini*. Courtesy: Avignon Theatre Festival.

The 2019 edition of the leading international theatre festival at Avignon offered two contributions from the Arab World among its featured presentations. These were *Mahmoud & Nini*, written and directed by Henri Jules Julien, from the Tarmac Theatre in Paris, and *Place*, the first play by an Iraqi/French playwright and director, Tamara Al Saadi, which won first place in the 2018 Festival Impatience in Paris, devoted to ground-breaking new plays. Both works are intimately involved with themes central to the European theatre at the moment: the cultural and political tensions between Europe and the Arab world, especially as they relate to the immigration crisis.

Al Saadi herself, like many young dramatists in Europe today, is herself involved in these tensions. Born in Baghdad, she was on vacation in Paris with her family when the first Gulf War broke out in 1990. Travel was banned and her family forced to remain in Paris. Al Saadi was then five and lives in France still, growing up there dreaming of returning to Iraq and suspended between two nations, two cultures, and two languages, feeling that she has no true “Place” in either, a situation which is the base of her powerful and moving play. The action occurs in a location which immediately challenges the idea of “place.” The stage is a characterless void, with a few swirls of sand here and there on the dark floor. A few dark figures are seated at the edges—later revealed to be members of Yasmine’s family. Later the space is peopled largely by empty white characterless chairs (surely calling up memories of Ionesco to a French audience) and moving pools of light (scenic design by Alix Boillot, lighting by Nicolas Marie).



Tamara Al Saadi's *The Place*. Courtesy: Avignon Theatre Festival.

The autobiographical heroine, Yasmine, begins the play in a situation doubtless appearing in the nightmares of many immigrants like herself, and surely close to the actual experience of some. Coming out of the Metro in Paris, she finds herself surrounded by signs whose letters she cannot read and whose words she cannot understand. A mysterious girl offers to help her, perhaps her own unconscious, but serving as a kind of therapist. To cure her Jasmine's dissociation, the mysterious girl leads her through a series of scenes from her past, beginning with her childhood in Iraq. There she meets her double, Jasmine 2, with whom she attempts to communicate through most of the remainder of the show, since she speaks only French and the double only Arabic. The young girl must serve as translator.

The efforts to hold on to the old culture and to find a place in the new are played out in scenes that are sometimes painful, sometimes profoundly sad, sometimes bitterly ironic, and sometimes farcical comic. There is almost a naïve clown-like quality to memories of the child Yasmine in Iraq as the French Yasmine now recalls her, and her encounters with the French bureaucracy of the naturalization service are simultaneously depressing, funny, and all too realistic. Her complex relationship with her older brother and sister are played out against the struggles of all three to deal with their bicultural situation. Her father, actually left behind in an Iraqi prison, sits in silence for most of the production, and so makes a powerful impression when at last he speaks to his struggling daughter, recalling his own search for identity and stressing the loneliness and uniqueness of that quest.

Gradually Jasmine seems to find her unique place, and her ability to communicate with, if not blend with her other persona. At the end of the childhood sequence in Iraq, the disruption of the Gulf War is indicated by white chairs being tumbled roughly about the stage. There they remain, in disorder, until near the end they are lined up in rows facing the audience, and providing a peaceful and orderly place for Jasmine to sit. The image is a strong but ambiguous one. Jasmine seems at last to have found a place, but it is a highly regimented and organized one, and in it she sits alone. She appears to have found inner order and made her two selves one, but whether this means true integration into a larger society and culture, or whether this is in fact a desirable goal, remains unclear.

Interestingly, the other Arab offering in the main festival, *Mahmoud & Nini*, also had at its center two actors, one French-speaking and one Egyptian Arabic. As in *Place* they serve primarily as representatives of these two cultures, but instead of being alternative aspects of a single persona, they contrast in almost every way, one male one female, one white, one black, one younger, one older, one apparently straight, one apparently gay. According to the program they met by chance at a railway station, fell into a bilingual conversation, began sharing preconceptions and assumptions about each other's culture, and conceived the idea of developing a theatre piece out of such material. To shape the work they appealed to Henri Jules Julien, a well known French director, writer, translator, radio programmer and producer, living in Cairo, and frequently collaborating with stage artists from the Middle East whom he produces in Europe.

The resulting work is less personal than *Place*, but equally wide-ranging and memorable in its exploration of the operations of cultural difference. This piece consists only of the two named actors, actually Mahmoud Haddad and Virginie Gabriel, who begin the evening seated side by side, but perhaps two meters apart, facing the audience. They rarely if ever speak directly to each other, and rarely directly

respond to each other's lines, which are in any case in the two different languages. Behind them a back wall contains two rather elegant doors and between them a screen upon which translations of the lines appear for the audience, but not clearly for the actors. Even though their lines do not interlock, however, they tend to pick up and develop certain themes, most commonly expressing assumptions, often clearly false and demeaning, sometimes awkwardly close to the truth, about the culture of the other, but also complaining of the false and prejudiced opinions about their own culture that they know are common within the other's culture. Many of these are general and familiar, but from time to time each actor will recount a personal experience of cultural conflict, taking the play from a rather abstract social document to a much more intimate and specific one. The production, beginning with the actual names and nationalities of the performers, consciously makes it unclear the extent to which each is indeed speaking for themselves, creating a powerful Pirandellian ambiguity. Are these "personal" stories real? Or the emotions which the actors express? Clearly Mahoud is really black, but is he really gay? More and more we come to understand how negotiable and how fluid cultural differences can become in different contexts.

This ambiguity touches all aspects of the production. How much of the text is set down and how much improvised on the spot? How much was created by the playwright and how much by the actors? How invested are they personally in the various issues raised? And, very fundamentally, what is their relationship, in reality or in character? For the most part, as I have noted, they speak looking out over the heads of the audience, and do not directly respond to the other's words, but from time to time they leave their chairs and perform short dance sequences (both have been professional dancers as well as actors), which like the dialogue, is composed of different "languages" of movement, and which never works precisely like an integrated duet, and yet which seems to be woven together somehow, using threads of different textures and colors.

These were the only two productions in the major offerings that involved artists from the Arab world, but there were a number of others in the "Off" festival, the unofficial productions, over 300 this year, that take place in practically every available venue in the city, day and night, during the festival. I attended one of these as well, which, if a more modest venture than the main offerings, had its own distinct charm and interest. The performance space was a lobby of the Parvis d'Avignon, an eighteenth century chapel converted in modern times into a municipal center for the performing arts. This was a one-man show, *La Pluie Noire*, performed by a Syrian actor Anas Nassar with a text by Iraqi dramatist Talal Hassan. The play was produced by an international company formed in Paris in 2015, *Fan al-Hayat* (The Art of Life). The text consists of the interwoven stories of a number of victims of the ongoing wars in Iraq. Among the voices is a man whose home has been destroyed by bombing, and he, the only survivor, is living in the only room left standing. Another is an Iraqi soldier, captured during the Iran-Iraq wars and kept in an Iranian prison where he suffered torture and forced labor. Despite such loss and pain, however, both refuses to embrace violence or revenge, but vow to remain unbowed and trusting in the triumph of life over death. One tells the story of a young man who asks a sage why the dinosaurs disappeared. Because they ate each other, responds the wise man, and if humans continue to do so, they will disappear in the same way. The hour-long performance is simply staged, the expressive actor standing in an elegant hall at the foot of a staircase with a handsome rug its only furnishing. Two musicians introduced and closed the show, one playing a baroque flute, the other drum. During the performance itself, they improvised a most effective ongoing accompaniment.

Marvin Carlson, Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate

Center, is the author of many articles on theatrical theory and European theatre history, and dramatic literature. He is the 1994 recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism and the 1999 recipient of the American Society for Theatre Research Distinguished Scholar Award. His book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, which came out from University of Michigan Press in 2001, received the Callaway Prize. In 2005 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Athens. His most recent book is *Theater & Islam*, Macmillan, 2019.



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www.arabstages.org

arabstages@gc.cuny.edu

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