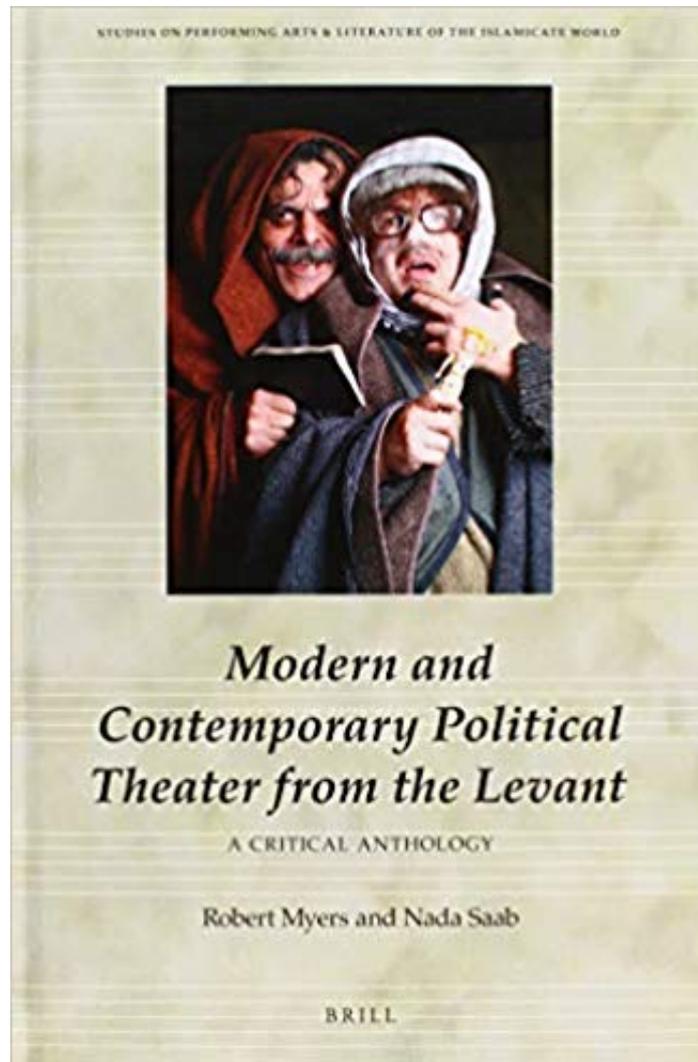
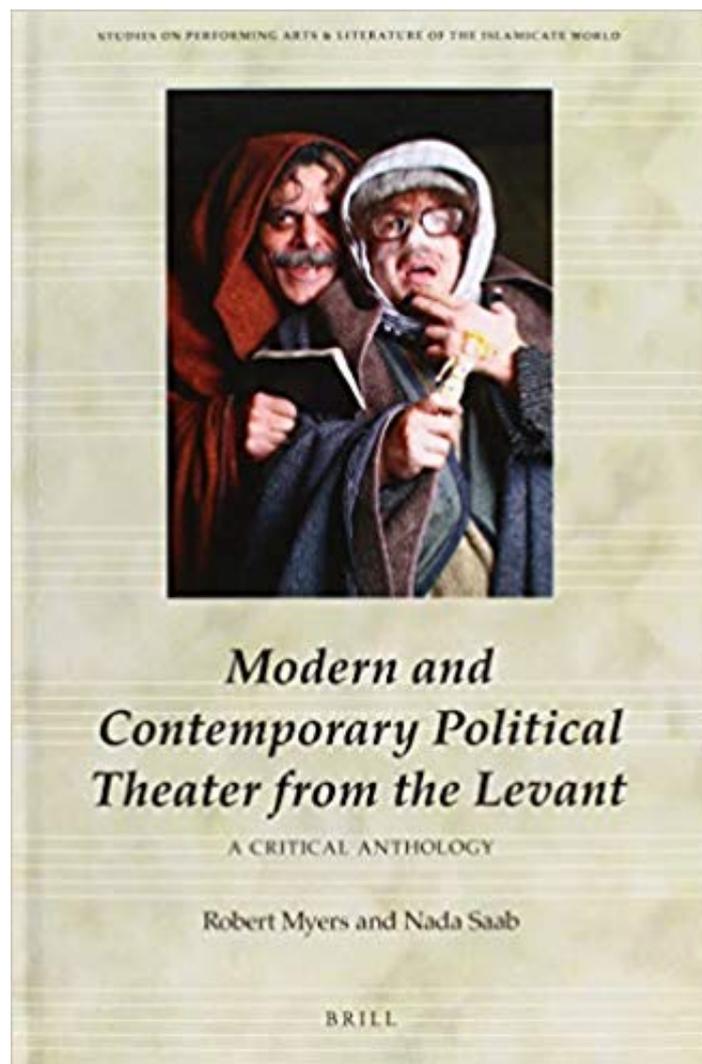


Review of Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant: A Critical Anthology





Cover of *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant*. Courtesy: Brill.

[1. *The Boatman: A Play by Sameh Mahran | Translated by Dina Amin*](#)

It is always refreshing when one finds in the market a new collection of translated Arabic plays. Recently an anthology of Arabic plays appeared, published by Brill as part of a series titled, *Studies on Performing Arts & Literature of the Islamicate World*. The series reflects the recent interest in theatre of the Islamic region, commonly referred to as Islamicate when not necessarily addressing Islamic issues. Nada Saab, from the Lebanese American University, and Robert Myers, from the American University of Beirut, edited, mostly-translated and commented on the collection of plays, titled as *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant*. As shown from the title, the common theme of the anthology is the political aspects of some theatre pieces that are specifically chosen from the Levant, or in Arabic *Ash-Sham*, considered to include Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. This anthology focuses on this particular region, rather than on the wider full range of the Arab world, and also specifies the modern and contemporary period, with plays chosen mainly from the 1960s until the present time. The plays are also marked by the editors as stage plays and this informed the translation approach. The narrower temporal

and geographic designations, as well as the specific type of plays and the more specific theme distinguish this anthology from previous ones that focused on the various Arab theatres; such as, for instance, the 1995 anthology, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, and the later anthology in 2003 of Salma Khadra Jayyusi; other works by 'Isam Mahfouz and Sa'd Allah Wannus were included in these previous anthologies. This present anthology features the works of five dramatists: 'Isam Mahfouz, Muhammad al-Maghut, Sa'd Allah Wannus, Jawad al-Asadi and Ra'ida Taha.

This anthology is described by its editors as a "critical anthology" because of their critical commentaries, particularly in the introduction that is followed by what is referred to as a "stage translation" of chronologically-ordered five plays by Mahfouz, al-Maghut, Wannus, al-Asadi and Taha. In the introduction, Myers and Saab delineate the readership of the volume as scholars, practitioners of theatre, and lay readers. They also outline the geographic scope of the book to include Iraq as part of the Levant. The purpose of the book is defined as providing the readers with a view of the "variety and complexity of political theater that has been produced in and around the Levant in the past 50 years" (1).

Most of the plays were written in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is a slightly simplified form of Classical Arabic (*fusha*), and not an exact synonym as maintained by the editors (1). Since this collection's uniqueness is in its declaration to present stage plays, these plays' original target texts in MSA may have presented an obstacle to their performability. However, the translations into English, a non-diglossic language, are able to overcome such obstacles. 'Isam Mahfouz's play is the only one originally written in vernacular Lebanese, with the author's intention to avoid such hindrance to performability.

One of the political aspects of this anthology is the Arab-Israeli relationship. Some of the plays presented Israeli characters. The editors' Introduction delineates the political events that were portrayed in each of the five plays. Most of them deal with events after the *nakba*, or the 1948 defeat and exodus of many Palestinians. Some plays dealt with the 1967 defeat or setback (*naksa*), and others with the Palestinian 1987 uprising. The Introduction clearly discusses some of the recurring themes of the plays such as "exile, occupation and defeat" (9), reflecting the political realities of the Levant. It is, however, not clear why the editors chose to limit themselves only to the Levant, whereas these political realities extend to the whole Arab world. The writers also noticed the common formal approaches of using traditional theatrical modes such as the story-teller (*hakawati*). In addition to the Introduction, each play is translated and placed in a chapter with preceding commentary from the editors. These commentaries shed more light on the plays in detail.

The first play, written in two acts, is by Lebanese playwright 'Isam Mahfuz (1939- 2006) and is titled *The Dictator* (1968); it was translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. It was originally written in Lebanese vernacular because the playwright thinks this register of informal language is easier to reach theatre audiences whose spoken language is not classical Arabic but colloquial Lebanese. Later on in his career, Mahfuz would prefer to use a more popularized form of *fusha* instead of the colloquial, so as to reach wider Arab audiences. The play, *The Dictator*, is the second of a trilogy, the first of which, *The China Tree*, was translated and published in the 1995 anthology by Jayyusi and Allen. *The Dictator* espouses many of the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd and appears to represent what is a failed revolution, to symbolize the 1967 defeat, while it is simply set, as delusions of two characters, Sa'dun and The General. Sa'dun, who is power-crushed by The General, agrees to join him in a revolution, while dreaming about meeting the King's daughter. The short altercations between these two characters are

humorously set in a “performable” translation, reminiscent of the conversations between Didi and Gogo in Becket’s absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*.

The second play, a farce titled *The Jester* (1969), is by Syrian playwright Muhammad al-Maghut (1934-2006) and is translated by Gordon Witty and edited by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. This three-act historical comedy draws parallels between modern Syria and the last of the Umayyad dynasty. Similar to Mahfuz’s play, *The Jester* is also a reaction to the 1967 war. The play is also metadramatic because it opens with a troupe of actor arriving at an unidentified Arab city in order to perform Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Such interplay between the Shakespearean world and other realities is reminiscent of some of Tom Stoppard’s experimentations. The playwright also introduced Shakespeare in order to have the chance to criticize Britain and its ally, America. The jester, who played Othello, also plays another Arab hero, Harun al-Rashid, and also the historical character of Saqr Quraysh, a heroic figure during the time of Al-Andalus, when the Muslims were in Spain. The Jester is called to travel to the past by the historical figure of Saqr Quraysh (‘Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil) who is angered by the parody of his portrayal. In the future of the Umayyad characters they are told that some of the Arab cities are no longer part of the Arab world and this is said to be the result of the abuse of power by the Arab rulers. In his future, Saqr Quraysh thinks he can liberate the Arab cities, but instead he is captured by the Spaniards as the invader of their country in the past. Such an ending is a tragic and sarcastic representation of Arab heroism.

The third play, which was written by Syrian playwright Sa’d Allah Wannus (1941- 1997), titled *The Rape* (1989) is an adaptation of a Spanish play by Vallejo. It was translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. In the editors’ introduction to the play, they contextualize Wannus’s play in relation to socio-political occurrences as well as to his previous dramatic works. This play is about the first Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in 1987. Despite its epic-like grandeur, this play was banned in Syria because it included a sympathetic Israeli character, Dr. Menuhin, placing Wannus in a critical political position in his country. The play represents one Israeli family (the torturer’s—Isaac’s) and one Palestinian family (the victim’s—Ismai’il’s). Ironically, the two names assigned by Wannus to these characters are Isaac and Ismail, who were both the sons of Abraham. The play begins with a prelude and has two narrators: one Palestinian and one Israeli; it is set in 10 chapters, rather than acts, of the Palestinian/Israeli books to tell their respective narratives; each of these chapters has two parts: once represents the Palestinian narrative and another the Israeli side; up until chapter 7 where each chapter represents only one side; such complex chapter division is perhaps indicative of the intertwining and yet divergent lives of the Palestinians and Israelis. In the final chapter, Wannus is envisioning a dialogue between himself as the playwright and Doctor Menuhin, in order to explain why he created such character.

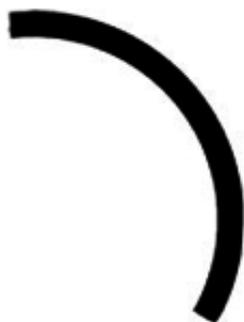
The fourth play, titled *Baghdadi Bath*, was written by Iraqi director Jawad al-Asadi (b. 1947) who is better known as a stage director than as a playwright. He is the sole Iraqi writer here but is reported to have worked in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. This short one-act play was also translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. The play draws on some autobiographical material and represents Hamid and Majid, two brothers. there is a representation of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 from the Iraqi point of view. The play deals with two brothers who reunite after a long separation in a Turkish bath in Baghdad. One of them is appalled by the invasion while the other considers it an opportunity to make money; their stands may be a satirical representation of Arab regimes that condemned or colluded with the US invasion of Iraq.

The last play is by a woman writer, the Palestinian Ra’ida Taha (b. 1965), titled *Where Would I Find*

Someone Like you, 'Ali? (2015), translated by Ismail Khalidi and edited by Robert Myers and Nada Saab. This play, which is made of 11 vignettes of story telling, is mostly autobiographical, based on the dramatist's experience as the child of a killed Palestinian freedom fighter, and is presented as a monodrama, with a lot of narrative (or epic qualities), embedded with few dialogues, and with many of the words of certain characters originally presented in a vernacular form of Arabic. In this play, there are several Israeli characters that interact with many of the Palestinian characters of the play. Deeply poignant, the play touches our lives and realities in many ways.

This anthology explored myriad aspects of political representation in plays from the Levant. The collection is an important addition to the literature on Arab theatre because of the new five "stage" play-translations. This in itself recognized that drama translation should be undertaken with an eye on "performability". The translations of the plays are enjoyable and the editors' commentaries thread the texts with salient knowledge about the dramatists' backgrounds, the region's history, and its socio-political realities. Many political events are manifest; such as the 1948 defeat (*nakba*), 1967 setback, the Palestinian 1987 uprising, and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq; the Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the common political backdrops of most of these plays. The reader, whether from the region or outside, will find rich commentaries that shed light on the complex politics of the Arab world. It was, however, disappointing that the plays were only from the Levant. The whole Arab region shares a common history and similar political events that could have been represented by plays from the rest of the Arab countries. However, perhaps the editors may still want to set off on a new journey to explore more political realities in the whole Arab world!

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