

## In Memorium: Fatima Gallaire (1944-2020)



By Laura Chakravarty Box

Fatima Gallaire (née Bourega) was a remarkable woman of letters who has left a prolific body of work: short stories, screenplays, documentaries, novels for adults and children, poems, and over thirty plays for adults and young audiences. Born in 1944 in El Harrouch, a town located northeast of Constantine in Algeria, she came of age as the Algerian War of Independence was reaching its end. Having first pursued a course in the humanities at the Université d'Alger, she left Algeria at the age of 23 to do film studies in Paris. She crossed the Mediterranean again as a cultural attaché for the Cinémathèque d'Alger, and once more to earn her *licence* in cinema from the Université de Paris VIII-Vincennes. She settled in Paris, and began her writing career in 1975. She turned her hand to playwriting a decade later with *Princesses*, a piece that brought her international attention. Unable to return to Algeria during the 1990s because of the country's civil war, she nevertheless centered her homeland in her writing, which was, as it was for so many Algerians of her generation, conducted exclusively in French.

*Princesses* (1985, originally titled *Haou Jitou* and first published as *Ah! vous êtes venus... là où il y a quelques tombes*) is Gallaire's most translated play. It has a complex history, including a revision of the ending that she was planning as early as 1997, during the civil war, but did not complete until 2004, after the hostilities had ceased. The original version of *Princesses*, a meditation on Algerian village life,

emigration and return, the condition of women her native country, and the tragic cycle of violence spawned by cultural and religious intolerance, is modeled on a Greek tragedy. The revision has a more hopeful ending in which its protagonist, a woman of letters much like Gallaire herself, survives. Humor and unflinching optimism in the face of horror and cruelty are hallmarks of her work which, like the Algerian storytelling tradition she emulated, is filled with a luminous magical realism. Other notable plays include *Témoignage contre un homme stérile* (1986), *Les Co-épouses* (1988), *La Fête virile* (1990), and *La Beauté de l'icône* (2003). Her work has been translated into German, Dutch, English, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Russian, Uzbek, and classical Arabic.

Gallaire, a member of the Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques (SACD) and Écrivains Associés au Théâtre, was accorded a number of honors over the course of her career. She received the Prix SACD Nouveau Talent in 1987, the Prix Arletty in 1990, the Prix du Syndicat in 1991, the Prix Malek Haddad from the Fondation Nouredine Aba in 1993, and the Prix Amic from l'Académie Française in 1994. She is buried in the Parisian Cimetière d'Ivry, and is survived by her husband Claude, her twin children, Fabienne and Florent, and her sister, Myriam.

She said of herself, in 1997:

*I prefer to be an author who inspires the fear of power rather than to be an author with power. To be an author adored by power, to be an author applauded by power, to be an author who lives well, who doesn't reflect any more and who doesn't critique any more, I don't want that. So I stay in the margin with the marginal ones. I feel good.*

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**Table of Contents:**

[Young and Critical Voices of Turkey II: \*We are here as we are and even if we are somehow failing, we keep working.\* Conversation with Onur Karao?lu by Eylem Ejder](#)

[\*Refraction, against distortion. Recent tendencies on the Arab stage\* by Daniela Potenza](#)

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[Review by Khalid Amine of \*Le théâtre marocain a l’épreuve du texte étranger \(Moroccan Theatre: Experimenting with the Foreign Text\)\* by Omar Fertat](#)

[Review by Ashley Marinaccio of \*Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank: Our Human Faces\* by Gabriel Varghese](#)

[Obituary: Fatima Gallaire](#)

[Obituary: Leinin El Ramly](#)

[Obituary: Riad Ismat](#)

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