

Refraction, against distortion. Recent tendencies on the Arab stage



By Daniela Potenza

While Egypt was still in revolt, especially in 2011, some plays emerged as a continuation of the revolution.^[1] Acclaimed performances, such as Dalia Basiouny's *Solitaire*, and Laila Soliman's *No Time for Art* were sincere expressions of the authors' feelings, playwrights who wanted to share testimonies of the recent past and indeed, these works evolved following the time and the context of their representation. Being protagonists of their own story reenacted on the stage seemed a necessity, as Basiouny explains about *Solitaire*:

I was in rehearsals for this production in January 2011 when the Egyptian revolution took place and altered our reality. I stopped rehearsals and participated in the revolution. When I went back to *Solitaire*, so much had changed, so the performance, as a living thing, had to change. I wrote a new section about the revolution that fit perfectly well with the theme of the Egyptian American woman dealing with the aftermath of 9/11 and growing her political awareness. This multimedia performance had visuals from demonstrations in New York in addition to footages and images from demonstrations in Cairo. I felt obliged to perform it myself, as I carry the visceral memory of these unique moments that I personally experienced.^[2]

At the same time, state-funded plays could be less concerned about showing truth, as Nehad Selaiha suggests in an article dating from October 2011, later reprinted as “*What Is Up, Egypt? Can Noble Intentions Excuse the Falsification of Reality?*”.[3] Plays like *What Is Up, Egypt? (Feeh Eeh Y? M??r?)* were simply the voice of the state, the same voice Egyptians could read in state-owned newspapers and hear on TV and which did not correspond to what they were living. Artists felt the need to share something, even if they did not want to give final form to impressions.[4] No matter if the play was staged abroad, its function could still be valid, as Soliman explains with regard to her play, *Lessons in revolting* (2011). In Egypt, her play would be “active resistance,” but in Europe, it could “create an alternative narrative to the media in the way they have portrayed events in Egypt,” says Soliman.[5]

I want to focus here on what I see as a countertrend to testimonial theatre and which consists, instead, of “embedding” others’ (real or fictional) stories within a play, using the device of the play-within-a-play to comment those stories. Popular in the Elizabethan period, with time, the play-within-a-play underwent changes, such as new forms suiting new dramatic purposes, as had already happened during the Renaissance.[6] After the Renaissance, the device of the play-within-a-play went out of fashion. It appeared again in the twentieth century with the new aim of providing “an explanation of the nature of reality.”[7] I will consider three plays, dating from 2013-2016, that have been written and staged in different contexts, maintaining that denouncing hidden realities is still an aim of the artists and a result of the 2011 revolts, but the aesthetics of the plays has changed as a result of distancing from those events. Through the dramatic exposition and the play metaphor, the artists explore facts and search for truth, inviting the public to do the same.

Embedding a drama

The Confession (al-I'tiraf, 2013, latest version 2018), by Wael Kadour^[8] is a one-act and nine-scene play based on the play-within-a-play structure. Kadour pays particular attention to the text, as he considers that the text has its own dimension and writing needs care and practice.[9] The main topics of his works emerge from the post-revolutionary context and include moral conflicts, internal struggles within Syrian society, violence and the ambiguity of the idea of morality.



The Confession, Beirut 2016. Photo: AFAC.

Set in a highly militarized Arab country and reminiscent of the last three decades in Syria, the play shows us five characters involved in the representation of an adapted version of Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1992). Kadour has taken inspiration for the plot of the outer play. Omar is an actor and director of the play, Haya is his partner and an actress, the third actor – Akram – is an ex-convict. Directed by Omar, Haya and Akram rehearse with the help of Radwan, a soldier doing his military service far from the field, as an accompanier of Jalal, a retired army officer who is also Omar's uncle.

When the actors are almost ready to represent the play, Jalal is asked to go back to the army, while Radwan is terrified at the prospect of returning to field service and Omar wants to represent his play in his country, despite the fact his uncle warns him that this is risky. Haya is afraid for her brother who has disappeared. *The Confession's* end suggests that, as in *Death and the Maiden*, a torturer has been found by chance by one of the protagonists and he is Jalal, who has been recognized by Akram. As in *Death and the Maiden*, we do not know if he is going to be killed. In the play within, the actors keep their names, which makes the story even more intricate.

Death and the Maiden is maybe the most famous of Ariel Dorfman's works. The time is the present, and the place, a country that is probably Chile, but could be any country that has given itself a democratic government just after a long period of dictatorship. Its characters are Paulina Salas, a former political prisoner, her husband – the lawyer Gerardo Escobar – and Roberto Miranda, a doctor Gerardo met by

chance and who Paulina identifies as her torturer, twenty years previously. Schubert's music, which the doctor has in a cassette tape in his car, is a hint for Paulina, who remembers that music from her prison time. A name that the doctor pronounces confirms to her that he is the torturer. Although Gerardo does not believe Paulina and the doctor firmly denies the accusation, Paulina is firm in taking justice into her own hands by killing Roberto, but the ending remains open.

Although *Death and the Maiden's* setting is Chile in the eighties, the play is effective in mirroring other similar realities, as its staging in many theatres all around the world up to the present day testifies, and as its author observes in a recent article expressing his regret that Paulina's story could still happen today.^[10] In this sense, metadrama is a key element in *The Confession* as it allows us to see that its topic is still relevant, as the general, Omar's uncle, suggests that Omar produce the performance abroad. But the topic of the inserted play is also an inspiration for the actors to discuss their own lives. Let us consider, for instance, Haya's point of view on Paulina's story, the story that she acts:

Haya [to Omar]: Paulina waited 15 years for justice. She lost everything while she waited in fear. I'm not going to be an idiot like her. Can you guarantee that one day there will be a committee to investigate those who were murdered, just them at least, let alone everything else, can you guarantee that? If you can then I'll shut up and be patient. (Scene 2)^[11]

The actress empathizes with Paulina to the point that, if one does not know by heart Dorfman's play, it is impossible to distinguish the moments she acts from the moments she talks with her partner, Omar:

Haya [to Omar]: How nice you are Omar. Do you know what? Do you know what I want? I want you. I want you to live inside me. I want to sleep with you without there being ghosts between us. I want you to be part of an investigation commission... to fight for the truth... I want you to be... I want you to be the air I breathe. I want you to be a note from the music of Schubert so I can hear it anew without thinking of my torturer. And I want us to have a child... one we adopt... yes. And I want to look after you... every second... every minute... the way you looked after me that night. (Scene 7)

In this case, for instance, Haya re-elaborates Paulina's situation, recalling the details of her personal story to renovate her own love for Omar. Haya reveals to him that she loves the part of the play where she asks him – to be precise it is her character who asks the character played by Omar – how many times he had slept with *the* girl while she was in prison. Then she comments that the same would happen to them, meaning that Omar would find a lover because she will always carry on her shoulder her brother's loss, she will link Omar to the past and the hate and so she will just become a worry to him. The two levels of acting interfere and the demarcation line between the play proper and the play within the play is blurred.

Mediated by her experience as an actress playing Paulina's role, Haya's reflections have an impact also on the outer play, where Jalal is Akram's torturer. Haya learns from Paulina's story and she wants hers to be different. And so, she is even more determined than Paulina in looking for justice and serenity. Haya-Paulina's relationship shows how the play within impacts the outer play, and by consequence, it also shows how the whole play (*The Confession*) could impact reality.

The discussions raised by the representation of the play lead to reflections about the roles one has not chosen to play in life, like Jalal being a general and a torturer, or Radwan being a soldier, or Akram being a victim, as Haya is because of her brother's disappearance. Thanks to the play-within-a-play form, *The*

Confession is not a play about sharing what has happened, but it provides a reflection on moral conflicts, violence and the ambiguity of the idea of the moral.



ZigZig, Paris 2017. Photo: DCAF Festival.

Embedding the past

A similar technique of embedding a narration and comment exists in the play *ZigZig* (2016), by Laila Soliman.^[12] *ZigZig* performs the forgotten story of fourteen Egyptian women who were raped by British soldiers in 1919 in a village called Nazlat al-Shobak and who reported their testimony in a British military court.^[13] The play consists of fourteen scenes. On stage there are only five actresses: one plays the violin while the other four read from official documents, telling, commenting, singing historical songs and acting the parts of some of the raped women as well as the soldiers interrogating them.

A selection of four women's stories is presented throughout the performance, whereas the names of the fourteen women who testified (or who died, and whose families testified in their place) are mentioned in turn by three actresses, in Scene 0, while a fourth interjects with comments. The modality in which the stories are told follows the same technique, namely quotations from the documents are accompanied by a reenactment of the events reported in the documents and each enactment is isolated in a scene (Scenes 5, 7, 9 and 11), where the actresses also directly address the audience, expressing their feelings about the story they investigate:

Zainab Magdy: The way I've thought about the investigations is to imagine every word and movement, and to imagine every single woman's face. Despite the fact those women exist in another time entirely, I feel like they're still here. (Scene 0)

This technique allows for showing the stories and studying archives at the same time. The juxtaposition of reenactment and reading of documents shows a discrepancy between the two and so it highlights the proceedings' partiality.

A reenactment of past events, the inserted play is a structural element in *ZigZig* since it is a cognitive act necessary for the investigation of the outer play. This artifice is essential to searching for the truth. At the same time, the numerous metadramatic devices break the dramatic illusion and provoke a 'v' effect. Together with the music and the dance occurring in the play, such reenactment intertwined with comments provides pauses from the gravity of the facts and prevent the audience from a full emotional involvement.

The actresses keep their names while acting or addressing the audience and they are able to improvise. Laila Soliman has declared that, in *Whims of Freedom*, the two actresses performing it (Zainab Magdy and Nanda Mohammad) were able to modify the work with their own personal reactions and improvisations. In the performance of *ZigZig* that I saw, in Montreuil in October 2017, [\[14\]](#) Magdy added a few words addressing the public "how do you say train in French? *Choo-choo...*" which clearly is an adaptation she felt appropriate given the (French) linguistic context. A space is left open for reflection, both for the public and the actresses.



Niqabi Ninja, Uganda National Theatre, 2020. Photo: Sunrise.

Embedding a comic

Niqabi Ninja is the first play of the Egyptian playwright, translator and actor Sara Shaarawi, who has lived in Glasgow for some years now. The play was first drafted in 2014 then the following year it was staged in Germany, South Africa and in several theatres in the United Kingdom. Set in Cairo, it enacts the dialogue between Hana, a young woman victim of violence during the 2013 Cairo manifestations, and a *niqabi ninja*, namely avenging Muslim superheroine wearing a niqab that Hana is drawing in a cartoon.

In this case, the cartoon. The creation of the cartoon, wherein the characters of Hana and Niqabi Ninja are transposed, allows for reflections that recall a within-play that, instead of being rehearsed, Hana and Niqabi Ninja create in collaboration after different trials and ideas. Within the cartoon, Niqabi Ninja also plays the roles of the different characters Hana meets. She knows everything about Hana and can complete her statements.

When Hana would prefer not to talk about an event, Niqabi Ninja persuades her to draw everything, because every fact is important and each detail counts. The violence Hana was victim of in 2013 is not isolated, but it is the last of a series of events that occurred throughout her life, discriminating her because of her being a woman, in Cairo and in London as well. Thanks to Niqabi Ninja's support, reenacting her painful moments within a cartoon – the place for introspection – is therapy for Hana, who can free herself from a part of this pain.

As in *ZigZig* and *The Confession*, the outer/within structure of the play provides space for comments. This time there is also some humor, distancing even more the audience from the emotional charge of the facts:

[Hana begins to hang her more recent sketches to the wall]

Niqabi Ninja: You know what I was thinking?

Hana: I probably do yes.

Niqabi Ninja: I think I should have a theme tune as well.

Hana: You're not a cartoon series.

Niqabi Ninja: But I could be.

Hana: I don't know anything about music.

Niqabi Ninja: It doesn't need to be complicated, could be something like the Spiderman theme tune.

[She hums the tune. Hana laughs]^[15]

Once again, the play within is not a pretext to invent facts or change factual details, on the contrary, it is an occasion to see clearly and give order to the facts. When Niqabi Ninja suggests Hana invent some facts, Hana reacts saying that that is not what happened, but Niqabi Ninja insists:

Niqabi Ninja: Who cares what actually happened? That was the scene, that was the moment where she should have grabbed that pencil and –

Hana: I want to tell the truth.

Niqabi Ninja: It's a fucking comic! No one cares about the truth.

Hana: I do. ^[16]

In this way, the play affirms its honesty. Moreover, in the cartoon, Niqabi Ninja acts only at its end, when Hana is trapped in “the circle of hell,”^[17] in that moment Niqabi Ninja appears up in the sky and encourages Hana to react. As if she were gifted by superpowers, Hana manages to free herself and runs away. From that day, she will look for every harasser, kill him and mark on his skin the word “muta?arrish” (harasser).

The fantastic presence of Niqabi Ninja is confined to the very end of the comic, appearing then as a sublimation of a tragic real ending that will not be shown. Her presence could not be a clearer confirmation that what have been drawn and discussed are real facts. The dividing line between reality and dramatic illusion is a neat one.

The reality presented by *Niqabi Ninja* does not involve only Hana, nor does it involve only Egyptian women. To make that point clear, as we have seen above, the text mentions an episode of harassment that occurred in London. The comments of the outer play highlight the importance of including this event. Moreover, during an interview, Sara Shaarawi has declared that if she wanted to write for Egyptians, she would write in Egypt.^[18] Likewise, the violence suffered by Nazlat al-Shobak's women in *ZigZig*'s outer play makes the actresses reflect on the violence women suffer, together with the social conventions silencing it yesterday as it does today. In *The Confession* Paulina's trauma is absorbed by Haya who sees some aspects of her character's experience in her own life and in the life of a friend. However, this trauma is even more general because, in the outer play, the victim of torture is a man, Akram.

Despite the fact that the three plays represent violence suffered by women, this topic is certainly a metaphor of the violence that, for one reason or another, remains hidden. The three plays reveal that violence but embed it in an outer frame. They introspect it and then render it in such a way that its meaning becomes more general, like a mirror's refraction. However, they are careful not to distort the original facts. In these cases, metatheatre acts as a multiplier of the meaning of the represented fact as it points up parallels with other stories. Reflections on the represented facts also allow the audience to think about their authenticity. Revealing an otherwise hidden violence is a social action of the plays that compensate for the misrepresentation of official documents, history books and media, but also for the silence imposed by social conventions or dictatorships. Thus by embedding facts in a play, in a past event or even in a cartoon, the three plays could not be more relevant to the present reality.

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[1] Nasreen Hussein, *Gestures of Resistance between the Street and the Theatre: Documentary Theatre in Egypt and Laila Soliman’s No Time for Art*, «Contemporary Theatre Review», XXV/3 (2015).

[2] Dalia Basiouny, *Performing and Rewriting Solitaire between Languages and Cultures A Practitioner’s Testimonial*, in *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre. Translation, Performance, Politics*, eds. Sirkku Aaltonen and Areeg Ibrahim, 2016, p. 107.

[3] The article can be found in Sirkku Aaltonen, Areeg Ibrahim (eds), *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre. Translation, Performance, Politics*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, pp. 201-218.

[4] See also Laila Soliman’s reflections dating from October 2018 on her blog: <http://lailasoliman.blogspot.com/2018/10/since-having-partially-failed-to.html>. Accessed 14 June 2020.

[5] Helen Stuhr-Rommereim, “‘Lessons in Revolting’: The revolution continues,” *Egypt Independent*, 20 August 2011. <https://www.egyptindependent.com/lessons-revolting-revolution-continues/>. Accessed 14 June 2020.

[6] Dieter Mehl, “Forms and Functions of the Play within a Play.” *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 8, 1965, pp. 41–61. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41913891. Accessed 15 June 2020.

[7] Richard Hornby, *Metadrama and Perception*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses. 1986, p. 38 and p. 45.

[8] Born in Syria in 1981, Wael Kadour is a dramatist, director, and journalist. In 2005, he graduated from the Dramatic Arts Institute in Damascus. Late in 2011, he co-founded Ettijahat, an independent Syrian cultural organization where he was in charge of communications. He has claimed refugee status in Paris since 2016. Many of his works have been translated and published. Recently he has been working on “*Waq?’i’ madina l? na’rifuh?* (2011, latest version 2019), co-directed by Mohammad Alarachi. He is also an artistic and literary collaborator on projects in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon and teaches and conducts writing workshops and is also the editor-in-chief of the Cultural Policy in the Arab World (ARCP) website.

On Kadour’s political theatre, see Monica Ruocco, “Théâtre et révolution en Syrie : le choix moral de Wael Kaddour”, *Théâtre/Public*, n. 233, 2019, pp. 78-81. On his artistic experience, see Kadour, Nahlé-Cerruti, “Entretien, Wael Kadour: écrire le theatre. La part du texte, de la formation à la scène,” *Théâtre/Public*, n. 233, 2019, pp. 82-85. I have written a forthcoming article (June 2020, *Illuminazioni*), “Wael Kadour e l’inconfessabile verità che solo lo specchio teatrale può rivelare” about the relation between intertextuality and truth in *The Confession*.

The play in Arabic (*Al-I'tir?f*) has been printed by D?r Mamd?? 'A?w?n, Damascus (2018).

[9] Kadour, Nahlé-Cerruti, op. cit., p. 85.

[10] Ariel Dorfman, “Death and the Maiden's haunting relevance”, *The Guardian*, 14 October 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/14/death-maiden-relevance-play>. Accessed 14 June 2020.

[11] English translation of the play by Hassan Abdulrazzak kindly provided by the author.

[12] Laila Soliman (1981) is a prominent Egyptian theatre director and playwright living and working in Cairo. “She is most interested in an independent, socially and politically aware theatre, and also in the role of art as a tool that can empower the individual and bring out modes of expression that are neglected and otherwise stifled.” (Laila Soliman’s personal blog, <http://lailasoliman.blogspot.com/>. Accessed 14 June 2020.) The title of the play, “ZigZig”, is a term from US military WWI slang, indicating copulation; the “signified” to use Saussure’s vocabulary, is so much charged with contextual references that it is untranslatable.

[13] As the actresses say, these facts are not mentioned in history books in Egypt. They were looking for archives for another performance – *Whims of freedom* – when they found the trial’s proceedings – 300 pages of investigations in the archives of the British Foreign Office.

[14] Nouveau Théâtre de Montreuil, during the Festival d’Automne à Paris.

[15] *Niqabi Ninja*, text kindly provided by the author.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] “Circles of hell” were gang sexual assaults on female and male protesters that occurred mostly during 2013 Tahrir protests.

[18] Tim Bano, Playwright Sara Shaarawi: “If I wanted to write for an Egyptian audience, I’d move back to Egypt”, *The Stage*, 27 July 2017.



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