

**Review of *Le théâtre marocain à l'épreuve du texte étranger*
(Moroccan Theatre: Experimenting with the Foreign Text) by
Omar Fertat**



By Khalid Amine

In the weighty book under the title *Le théâtre marocain à l'épreuve du texte étranger*, Omar Fertat, writer and lecturer at the University of Bordeaux presents a palimpsestuous reading revising other texts and narratives on the birth and development of theatre in the Arab region with a particular focus on Morocco. The study is most welcome in its dazzling display of new interpretations of old texts as it is already suggested by its epigraph from Gérard Genette's *Palimpsestes*: "*Lira bien qui lira le dernier*" (Will read

well who will read the last). The book also features a wealth of brilliant readings of individual works and traces significant interconnections between foreign dramatic texts and their various transformations while being adapted for Arab stages.

Fertat's reading is premised on two fundamental assumptions: Arabic theatrical output is part of world theatre, thus it does not need a critical approach different from Western poetics; and the second task is to highlight the age-old eclipsed sub-canonic aspects of Arab popular performance cultures without falling into the trap of essentialism. Drawing on the historical poetics of Nietzsche and particularly his Apollonian/Dionysian formulations and Bakhtin's dialogistic carnivalesque element, the book makes an important contribution to the field of Performance Studies not only in the Arab World but elsewhere. If the religion of Islam is considered against conflict, representation, and mimesis, does it mean that the Arabo-Islamic civilization was devoid of performance phenomena, particularly festive theatricality? Indeed, Fertat, while revisiting this old issue, provides ample evidence that despite the circulation of ideas that oppose theatrical representation in an Islamic context, many theatrical aspects remained eclipsed in the spheres of Arabo-Islamic performance cultures. However, dramatic literature was left as one of the least developed forms of literary expressions in the Arabo-Islamic heritage.

Although human representation is considered idolatry in some interpretations of Islamic Sharia, human portrayals can be found in all Islamic art periods, especially in the more private form of Islamic pictorial illustrations known as 'miniatures'. These are small paintings by professional painters and calligraphers such as Yahya Ibn Mahmud Al-Wasiti, whose miniatures are strongly present in al-Hariri's *Maqamat* showcasing aspects of everyday life in the 13th-century. *Maqama's* miniatures are more allegorical than mimetic, wherein the events of a given story point at rather than resemble their meaning. Tayeb Saddiki's scenic designs and costumes are highly inspired by Al-Wasiti's expressive figures, and vivid but controlled colors. Thus, Islam's presumed opposition to totemism was by no means universal, nor should it be taken as implying a generally accepted condemnation of theatre. Fertat seems to stand in the opposite side of Mohammed Aziza, who concludes that "It was impossible for drama to originate in a traditional Arabo-Islamic environment."^[1] Fertat also revisits Averroes' mistranslation of Aristotle's key concepts 'tragedy' and 'comedy', but within the context of Jorge Luis Borges' palimpsestuous reading (pp. 39-40). Perhaps Averroes' failure, or rather defeat, in translating 'tragedy' and 'comedy' has often been taken as evidence of the non-existence of a theatrical context in Arabo-Islamic cultures. However, Borges's "la busca de Averroes" stages such a failure as a narrative of impossibility inherent within the task of translation.^[2]

The work is composed of an introduction, three parts, and a general conclusion. The first part critiques the carnivalesque aspects of ritualistic formulae and the most famous theatre genres (tragedy and comedy) that emanate from the same cultic origins, yet function as two distinct concepts of reality. Through the practice of *transplantation* (al-istinbaat), Fertat brilliantly explores the generic and conceptual resemblance between the non-canonical roots of Arabic performance cultures and the various processes of its *Molièrezation* since Marun Al-Naqqash. Such influences, as Fertat contends, worked as an appropriate catalyst to the renaissance of Arab theatre. The *Molièrezation* of Moroccan stage starting from the 1950s remains the most important section of Part I. Here, Fertat revisits both Moroccan and French archives in order to come out with a new and fresh reading of the beginning of professional theatre in Morocco. His rereading of previous narratives amounts to an archival excavation revealing different layers of Moroccan theatre history.

In the early 1950s, theatre became an important concern in the French Protectorate policies in Morocco. The colonial administration, then, decided to stick its oar in an emerging theatre of resistance, with the intention to reproduce a Moroccan copy of *Théâtre National Populaire* model. Professional experts were called from France to tune Moroccan theatrical activities with the original intents of the colonial administration. André Voisin, Charles Nugue, and Piere Richie, among others, supervised a series of theatrical training in the Mamoura Center near the capital city of Rabat (and other cities) between 1952 and 1956. Among these, André Voisin was considered a visionary spiritual father and founder of the first Moroccan Professional Company, *firqat at-tamthil al-maghrebi* the Moroccan Theatre Company (Literally the National Company). In Fertat's reading, Voisin came to Morocco searching for new aesthetics rather than imposing the established Comédie Française style. This is clearly explained by the fact that Voisin is a disciple of Antonin Artaud (p. 171): "Je ne suis pas arrivé là-bas en occidental."^[3]

Then again, given the colonial situation, the sublimating character of being exposed to another performance culture with all its startling differences, and the chaotic aspect of theatre activity in Morocco at that time, it was hard for Voisin to get rid of his occidental gaze. Shocked by the anarchic theatre activity, yet fascinated by the live performance cultures of Morocco, including basic orality and audiences' excitement for a wide variety of theatre productions of the time, Voisin's interventionist task was both innovative and problematic from the start. According to Fertat, Voisin realized that Moroccan theatre lacked a popular tradition, a repertoire and a national company, and he took programmatic measures to develop and expand theatre as a passion and a must for Moroccan general audiences. His attempts to articulate a popular theatre tradition sought to persuade Moroccan audiences, with remarkable success, of the reality and truthfulness of their everyday lives as performed onstage. However, his vision could not escape colonial politics and their various essentializing tropes despite his desperate undertakings. A decade after his departure from Morocco, Voisin defended his somehow essentialist enterprise as follows:

There is a general tendency in Africans to drift away from traditional performance forms, considering them as folklore with no future prospects, a cause of backwardness or conservatism that is of no use in a militant theatre of combat, a didactic theatre, etc. Personally, I don't see things this way. I think that we should not put the political evolution of a country and its performance on the same spectrum [...] because a performance is also a political act! It is even the best political action as it contributes to the evolution of the mental structures of a city.^[4]

Ironically, Voisin's performative turn in Morocco^[5] emphasizes the retrieval of Moroccan old traditions and performance cultures. Still, this vision is problematic within the context of French colonial policy and its outward civilizing zeal. Attempts at replacing Bourgeois theatre with ceremonial experiences that, according to Artaud, liberate the human subconscious, are out of place in a colonized country with a new theatre history and practically no Bourgeois theatre except European settlers' theatre. Fertat navigates through all these complexities with great success.

Part II explores key examples from Morocco that vary from the early adaptations and transplantations of the Moroccan Theatre Company, and the subsequent writing of original texts. Here, Fertat revisits the trajectories of Ahmed Tayeb Laalej and Tayeb Saddiki in order to test their experimenting with the foreign text. Inspired by Voisin's distrust of the literary approach to theatre and his focus on craft and performance the Moroccan Theatre Company embarked on a whole series of collective free adaptations, mainly from Molière, Beaumarchais, Shakespeare, and others. However, Ahmed Tayeb Laalej's popular

poetics and mastery of traditional comic style earned him the title of *Moroccan Molière* (p. 277). In May 1956, two of the company's productions – namely *Amayel Juha*, a collective adaptation of Molière's *les Fourberies de Scapin* and *A-Chatab* by Laalej were presented in the International Festival of Paris at Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt. The two productions presented a Moroccan Molière and were hailed with great enthusiasm by the French public and press reviews. Though they could not understand the language, the audiences were clearly delighted by the way their highly esteemed national dramatist was performed and negotiated, or rather translated by others. Since then, the name of Ahmed Tayeb Laalej has been associated with Moroccan popular theatre tradition. He adapted for the Moroccan stage and acted in many masterpieces from the French Comedy such as *Mrid Khatrou*, which is an adaptation of Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* and *Waliyu Allah*, which is another adaptation from Molière's *Tartuffe or the Hypocrite*.

Similarly, Fertat paid a special tribute to Tayeb Saddiki, who is a theatre director, actor, and playwright from Essaouira. In the course of his vocation as Morocco's most established theatre figure since independence, Saddiki has not only dominated Moroccan stage, he has in fact reconciled Morocco's traditional acting styles with Western methods. A product of the Mamoura training in 1954-56, Saddiki is often described as the epitome of contemporary Moroccan actor/storyteller. In the play entitled *Diwan Sidi Abder-rahman Al-Majd?b*, (The Collection of Master Abder-rahman Al-Majd?b) Saddiki denies the self-absorbed method of acting and deploys instead the acting strategies typical to *al-halqa* and *L'bsat*. It is not by coincidence that Fertat calls Saddiki as 'the Master of experimentation' in Moroccan theatre (p. 336). 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 cross-roads --a continuum of intersections, encounters, and negotiations.

The trajectory from Saddiki's *Al-Majd?b* and *Maqamat Badia Ezzamane El-Hamadani* to the new dramaturgies explored by Fertat in Part III reveals that the return to traditional storytelling is premised upon a progressive continuum at the levels of form and content. Saddiki's return, however, 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 along with Western styles. As to the new generation such as Asmaa Hourri and Naima Zitan, storytelling is much more an empowering and delinking instrument rather than simply a matter of retrieving an artistic tradition under threat. It is a site of voicing out Scheherazade's utmost desires, fears, passions, and depressions, yet for an open public, rather than the enshrined world of al-harem. The techniques of *al-halqa* are still 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"^[6] but that the narrative act itself becomes both the theme and object of theatre and "a means of ordering the world".

The third part of the book focuses on the theatrical transplantations of Mohammed Kaouti and the recent alternative dramaturgies. Kaouti is one of the most innovative playwrights in Morocco despite that he is less known in other parts of the Arab world. Perhaps this is due to the fact that he writes mostly in Moroccan dialect, which is less understood outside Morocco. Kaouti's *No Man's Land* is an exception though; it was written in classical Arabic over a period of three years (1982 to 1984). It was presented to the Moroccan public for four other years (1984-1987). The play is considered a historical document that portrays the socio-political conditions in Morocco during the years that followed independence. Fertat presents two major works by Kaouti that illustrates the practice of *transplantation* as a distanced type of

adaptation: *Sidna Kdar* (inspired by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) and *Bou Ghaba* (a transplantation of Brecht's *Herr Puntilla and His Servant Matti*). In the closing chapter of the third part, Fertat pays a particular tribute to the new generation of artists affiliated with the High Institute of Dramatic Art (ISADAC). Articulated around the notion of the narrator/performer as the main agent of the theatrical event and the use of 'mediaturgy', alternative dramaturgies in the contemporary Moroccan scene challenge dominant dramaturgical forms and allow new sites for spectatorship to emerge extending the boundaries of the aesthetic realm. Fertat's gallery of performances includes *Dmoue Bel K'houl* (Kolh Tears) that is written by Issam el Youssfi, directed by Asmae Houri, 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 that is a free adaptation of Safia Azzeddine's (confidences à Allah), written and directed by Jaouad Essounani; *Schizophrenia* as is a recycled project that re-enacts one of the most painful testimonies of Milouda, a single mother who appeared in a previous project (*Viol en Scène*) by the same director Abdelmajid El Haouasse.

Fertat ends the final section with a tribute to Asmae Houri as a unique talent not only in Morocco, but also throughout the Arab World, a harrowing voice, but one who felt the burden of human most extreme emotions and has bravely provoked Moroccan audiences with plays that expressed these intense emotions. Her productions such as Sara Kane's *Psychosis 4: 48* and Issam Youssfi's *Dmuu* demonstrate an uncompromising talent. Fertat also highlights Asmaa Houri's adaptation of *Winter* by Jon Fosse, the most innovative dramatist in Norway since Ibsen. The repetitive flow typical to the later dramas of Fosse may be laden with meaning if a sensitive director interprets it mediated by actors who love the kind of cunning play that Fosse's texts provide. Judging from Houri's previous works, she is a true demystifier of all these layers of hidden meaning, a stage writer herself with a poetic sensitivity rarely found in contemporary Arab theatre (p. 605). She challenges not only conventional Moroccan modes of 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 postdramatic representation, which creates fluctuating identities in a volatile time and space.

Fertat concludes that despite the specific circumstances that gave birth to different forms of theatrical adaptation in Morocco, such practice remains part of a general movement of interweaving fundamental to human exchange. Thus, "the history of theatre is itself intertextual, intercultural, and intertheatrical." (p. 629) Certainly, the book makes an important addition to the current debate on Arabo-Islamic theatre. The most significant contribution of the book is the study and appreciation of Moroccan theatre from the beginning until now. Still, the urge to re-write our theatre history highlights not only the uncomfortable reality of previous dominant histories, but also the political connotations of coloniality as manifested in hegemonic historiography.

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^[1] Mohammed Aziza, *al-Islam wal- masrah* [Islam and Theater] (Riyad: Oyoun *al-maqalat*, 1987), 21-45-211.

^[2] Jorge Luis Borges, “Averoes’ Search”, tr. James E. Irby, in Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, (ed.) *Labyrinth: Selected Stories and other Writings* (New York, New Directions, 1964), 148-55.

^[3] André Voisin, quoted by Omar Fertat, “le Théâtre Marocain: de la tradition a l’écriture”, 191. For more on André Voisin’s mission in Morocco, see also Omar Fertat, “Théâtre, monde Associatif et Francophonie au Maroc”, in Sylvie Guillaume (ed.), *Les Associations dans la Francophonie* (Publication de la Maison des Sciences de L’homme d’Aquitaine Pessac, 2006), 141.

^[4] André Voisin (interviewed by Cherif Khaznadar), *Jeune Afrique*, 513: 3 (November 1970), 62.

^[5] The spread of popular theatre in the Moroccan scene was also informed by Voisin’s vision, and by the impetus the term acquired with Roger Planchon and particularly Jean Vilar after World War II. Its project was the search for a frame and a repertory accessible to all classes. Vilar’s emphasis on the actor, detail, and appeal to large audiences are all features that inspired the young Voisin and guided him through his Moroccan adventure between 1950 and 1957. The inception of popular theatre in Morocco at this particular period was highly affected by the debate in France about the potential efficacy of *le Théâtre National Populaire* (TNP). In his defense of popular theatre and by extension the whole TNP enterprise. Vilar wrote, “To bring the populace to the classical repertory; to fight against bourgeois rituals; to search for an ever larger and more solid body of intermediaries in order to connect culture as it exists today and the popular public – these have been our objects over recent years from 1947 through 1960.” Jean Vilar, “Theatre: A Public service (1960)”, in Jeremy Aheame (ed.), *French Cultural policy Debates: a Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002) (39-45), 44.

^[6] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, (London: Routledge, 2006), 109.



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