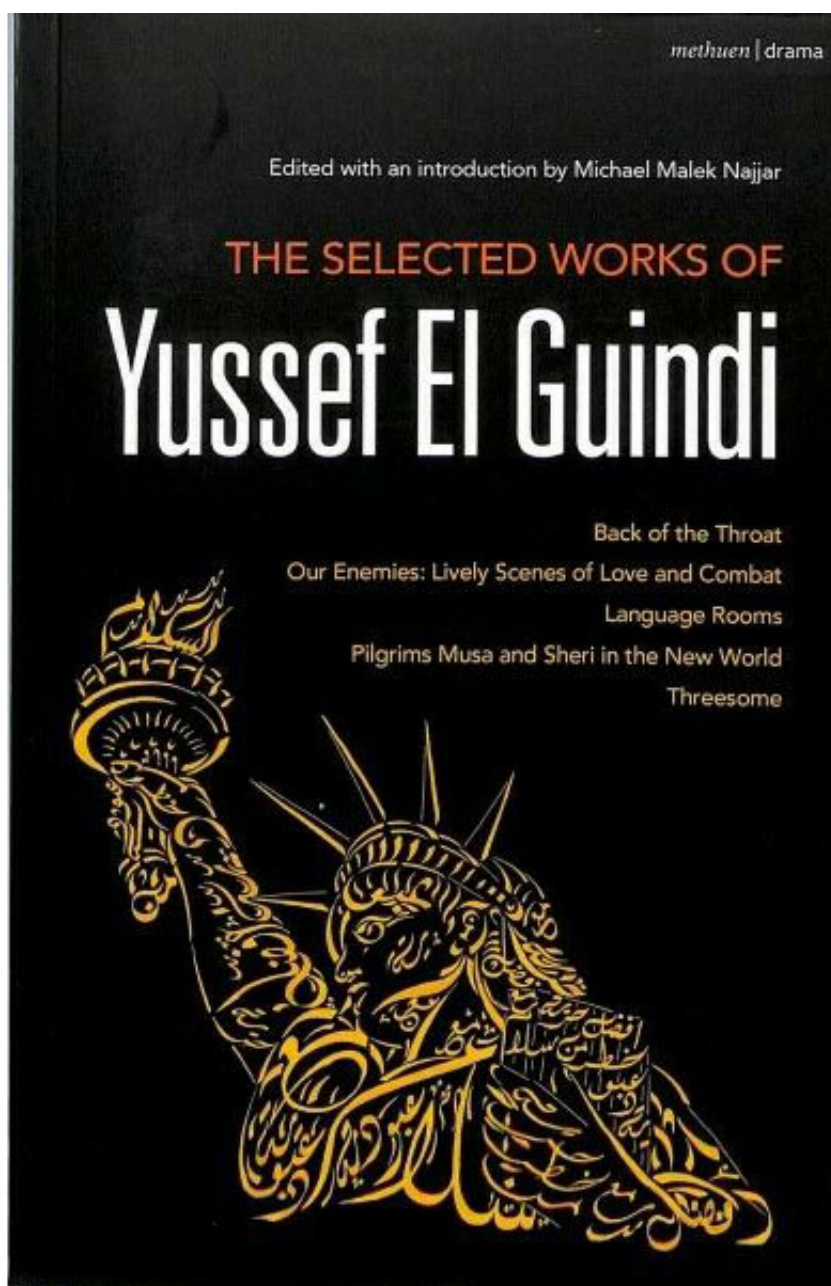


Review of *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi* edited by Michael Malek Najjar



By Areeg Ibrahim

There is a saying in many cultures that when it rains it pours, but we also cannot get enough of a good thing. I am referring here to a new book of Arab American plays. The publication of Michael Malek Najjar's anthology of El Guindi's plays (published by Methuen drama imprint – Bloomsbury Books) is such example when it comes to books about Arab theatre. Michael Malek Najjar's interest in Arab American drama predates this anthology as he wrote a critical study titled *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance* (published by Mcfarland). By the same publisher, Najjar also has *Six Plays of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* and *Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef*

El Guindi, and Lameece Issaq & Jacob Kader. Najjar who was also involved in directing many plays with the theatre companies of Silk Road Rising and Golden Thread Productions, is thus a champion of the cause of enhancing the visibility of Arab drama, and more specifically Arab American theatre.

Nothing is more expressive of the nature of this new anthology, titled *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi*, than the cover art, which is of Lady Liberty's shape created by Arabic calligraphy. This is symbolic of the intermixing of the Arab and American identities as an inevitable characteristic when dealing with Arab American theatre. The anthology begins with three commentaries, each representing an aspect about Yussef El Guindi. However, though engaging, the three pieces seem like an overload of introductory material before getting to El Guindi's plays. There is first a foreword by Torange Yeghiazarian, Artistic Director of Golden Thread Productions, San Francisco. Then, there is a preface by Jamil Khoury, Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising. In addition, there is also an introduction by Michael Malek Najjar, followed by five plays of El Guindi: *Back of the Throat*; *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*; *Language Rooms*; *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*; and *Threesome*. The book ends with El Guindi's essay "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet Abdallah and Ahmed: Musings about Arabs and Muslims in American Theatre." One wonders why there is a foreword, a preface and an introduction, but again one cannot get enough of a good thing. All three pieces are by strong figures in Arab American theatre; their work, along with the playwright's essay, shed different lights on the oeuvre of El Guindi and complement this nourishing meal of Arab American theatre.

In the short foreword, Torange Yeghiazarian relates her personal experience with Yussef El Guindi twenty years ago as a rising playwright looking for a theatre company that is interested in Middle Eastern voices in America, and finding home for many theatre productions of his plays in her company Golden Thread. As for the preface, Jamil Khoury describes El Guindi expression of the Arab American experience as both unique and salient. Accordingly, El Guindi's work gives voice to the hybrid nature of the times and of Arab American lives. "Like so many twenty-first century 'hybrid' Americans, Yussef embodies the spirit of hailing from both 'here' and 'there,' of belonging to both 'us' and 'them.' He defines the who, what, and where, and adheres neither to outdated binaries, nor borders, nor the dictates of a melting pot" (16). Khoury adds that El Guindi's theatre does not conform with the binaries of taking sides but is meant to "disrupt complacency." And that his "storytelling" is a way that helps us all discover ourselves.

According to the biographical chronology in the book, Yussef El Guindi who is originally an Egyptian that graduated from the American University in Cairo in the eighties, engaged in different positions as playwright and dramaturge at Carnegie Mellon University, Eureka Theatre and Duke University. Najjar's introduction explores more about the life and work of El Guindi, beginning with his formative years, when he became an American playwright and citizen, and then going through some of his seminal plays. El Guindi hails from an artistic family, with theatre director Zaki Tulaimat as grandfather, journalist Rose El Youssef as grandmother and novelist Ihsan Abdel Quddous as uncle.

According to El Guindi, he draws Muslim and Arab characters that defy stereotypes, not because he acts as a "native informant" but because he is trying to find his unique voice (29). Najjar describes El Guindi and the characters he draws as "transnational," that must exist simultaneously in their "home and adopted countries" (32). Such characters live the dilemma of carrying along their tradition yet being also always questioned about it and asked to reject it. Najjar then discusses the way in which El Guindi's characters in the five different plays -- *Back of the Throat*; *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*;

Language Rooms; *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*; and *Threesome* – represent different modes of existence in the American society. They are mostly Middle-Easterners grabbing with prejudice after 9/11.

Back of the Throat (2004) is a one-act play that was previously published in 2006 by Dramatists Play Service Inc. The title refers to the Arabic language, especially the first letter of the protagonist's name that is supposed to be pronounced from the back of the throat. The play is about the anxiety of Arab Americans because of the suspicion they face after 9/11. The innocent protagonist Khaled is paid a visit at home by two government agents: Bartlett and Carl. We later know that he was reported by someone with a score to settle: his ex-girlfriend, Beth. Khaled explicitly tells the agents that he is not religious after they rummage through his things and question him about Arabic calligraphy and the Qur'an. Khaled is not even an Arabic speaker but still the agents try to speak a few words of Arabic to test him. They start to interfere in his life and give him advice about not to overdo porn magazines. When they start to jump into conclusions because of the books he reads or the items he has, Khaled explains, "I'm sure you could come to all sorts of conclusions by what I have. As you would with anyone's home. Come to a bunch of false conclusions by what someone has" (77). The play ends vaguely and we can't help but have a sense of menace, similar to that in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, or remember witch-hunts and McCarthyism; people were judged and people with a score were encouraged to act as informants.

Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat (2008), which is made of two acts (one of which has 6 scenes and the other 4), was previously published in *Selected Plays of Youssef El Guindy* by Methuen Plays, UK in 2019. The play has three main characters with Arab origins: Noor, Gamal and Mohsen who is an aspiring writer being interviewed by Earl at the beginning of the play, and in the interview he has to rise to what they expect to hear. Earl is trying to show images of the Arab Spring and Revolution in order to bank on such popularity in interviewing Mohsen. The Make-up Man turns out to be Gamal who thinks that Mohsen's book reinforces negative stereotypes about Arabs. On the other hand, Noor is an aspiring writer whose work is examined by the editor Olivia in an attempt to mould it too. Olivia is more interested in what Noor represents rather than her work; Olivia says "we'd like to publish *you*. And we might even publish this book but not as it stands now" (193). Olivia is trying to turn Noor's book around to be about an immigrant woman (like Noor herself) rather than about an American woman called Melanie. The publishers reject Gamal's book as too angry. And Mohsen considers Gamal's type of "gatekeepers" as the enemy. Sheikh Alfani, a Muslim *imam* or preacher, is another type that gets invited to talk shows because he reinforces the expectations. The play thus shows the diversity of views among the Arab/Muslim immigrants even if to the West they seem like a homogenous group. The play also tackles an important issue about how American media prefers to reinforce only stereotypical representations of the immigrants.

In *Language Rooms* (2010) the Arab/Muslim American characters – Ahmed and Nasser-- are first introduced in an interrogation room. Ahmed has tried to be an exemplary citizen, but as Nasser says, "The pressure's on all of us" (343). Ahmed who is also an interrogator/translator now has his "loyalties" and "sympathies" questioned by Nasser. Ahmed is questioned because he does not socialize with them in major events like the Super Bowl or shower with others. Then he is called into his boss's – Kevin's – office and is questioned also. There, Ahmed discovers that Nasser may have been mangling with the transcription of the interrogations he undertook, especially of a subject called Khaled. In fact both Nasser and Ahmed are allowed to belong only because they can help understand the culture or language of the assumed terrorists. Arabic language becomes a weapon, particularly when only these two men are able to

use it. However, Nasser claims he was protecting Ahmed who showed sympathy towards Khaled. Meanwhile, there is news of interrogating a “home grown” suspect, Samir, a traditional man in “*gallebeya*” (or long traditional garment) who managed to come to the US because of the Green Card lottery, and who is brought in for connections with a character called Sheikh Al-Rawi. Ahmed, who turns out to be Samir’s son, needs to have Samir confess to win his supervisor.

Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World (2011) is a play in two acts and was published in 2014 by Dramatists Play Service Inc. It begins with an Egyptian taxi-driver for protagonist who pairs up with an American waitress, Sheri, and the first scene is set in his apartment where they discuss many Arab realities such as the *Hajj* (*holy pilgrimage*) and chapters from the Qur’an. Abdallah, his Sudanese roommate, comes back from a *Hajj* he could not perform because the boat carrying them was too small and sank (497). From a conversation with Tayyib, Musa’s friend, we know that Musa has a fiancée called Gamila who happens to drop by the apartment and finds Sheri who assumes she is Musa’s sister. The characters in the play are similar in reflecting their nature as in search of something, or pilgrims. The play successfully breaks what is typically considered to be a Muslim by presenting a variety of Muslim types who can be humanly flawed and who are interacting with typical American characters.

Threesome (2015) is a two-act play, published in 2016 by Broadway Play Publishing. The protagonists Leila and Rashid attempt to make their relationship work by involving a third party, Doug. Leila resists the way Rashid patronizes her, with his expectations that it is acceptable for a man to engage in a threesome but not acceptable for a woman. On the other hand, Doug is also stereotyping her as an Oriental woman (as this will also be quite obvious later on in the exotic photo shoot he prepared for her). She wants to think of herself as an example of an empowered woman, but she also finds herself unable to go through with the threesome; neither can Rashid. By the end of the first act, the whole idea falls through especially when they discover that Doug will be the photographer working on Leila’s book, not Rashid. The 2001 revolution is the backdrop especially when we know that they went to Egypt to support the people’s Revolution. The couple’s conversation hits more than skin deep about men/women relationships and about ideas of morality and moral responsibilities, as well as about Western fantasies and stereotyping of what the East should be. The play ends on sounds of protest and revolution, in a symbolism that unifies Leila’s rape at the police station with the woman in *abaya* on Doug’s Western hands. The play also seems to indicate that the 2011 Revolution was not only a revolution about a regime but about a way of thinking, or a “mind set,” as Leila had previously indicated (670). It is a play that starts lightly and humorously, then breaks many conventions about nudity on stage and sexual taboos for Muslims, to metamorphose into an audaciously feminist play defending Arab women against Eastern paternalism and Western imagination.

El Guindi's “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet Abdallah and Ahmed: Musings about Arabs and Muslims in American Theatre” is an essay about American theatre in relation to Arab/Muslim prejudice. El Guindi is expecting theatre to “have a critical eye” (704), but this is rare. He shows the predicament of Arab/Muslim theatre that it will always be deemed “political” (712). Plays of other minorities have gradually shed off their political designations, but this “unpacking” has not happened for Arab American theatre yet, according to El Guindi (713). Resonating with the essay’s title, El Guindi ascertains, “In this contrast to the Anglo/Western figure, Arabs and Muslims at their most prominent in these dramas are like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the West’s Hamlet: saddled with an agenda, politicized, unsympathetic, even sinister, and deployed in ways they can’t control” (717-8).

This anthology succeeded in being a compendium of El Guindi's thought. Despite that many of its plays were previously published elsewhere, Najjar succeeded in bringing them together and threading them with thoughtful commentary and background about the writer. El Guindi's theatre has shown itself to portray different instances of existence for American characters with an Arab background. In one interview, El Guindi assumes that representing the immigrant experiences creates "quintessentially American" plays (51). I agree because his plays represent character's whose backgrounds are Arab and Muslim cultures, but the plays are for and about American or hybrid audiences; they are written in English not in Arabic and they represent the experiences of an immigrant in America. The plays cannot be considered Arab plays though they include some Arabic words, culture and characters with pasts inked to the Arab world. The plays are neither solely Arab nor purely American. These plays are instead representing the existences of minorities and the immigrants or Arab Americans asserting their rights to also belong to America, just as early African American plays used to. The anthology thus reminds us that the US was originally made of immigrants and that these minorities are undoubtedly an integral part of the American societal fabric. They are as American as everybody else.

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Arab Stages

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