

“Theatre—It’s Our Only Sanctuary” An Interview with Professor Sahar Assaf



By Michael Malek Najjar

Lebanon has been struggling with difficulties since the Taif Agreement (also known as the National Reconciliation Accord) was reached, effectively ending the decades-long Lebanese Civil War in 1989. Since that time, there have been several calamitous events that have destabilized the country including the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the 2006 July War with Israel, the influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees,[\[1\]](#) mass protests against draconian governmental measures, the devastating August 2020 chemical explosion at the Beirut port, the explosion of an arms depot in Ain Qana in September 2020, and an ongoing inability to form a government required to access desperately needed international funding.

The arts sector has also been devastated. The theatres in Beirut suffered extensive damage during the explosion. According to *The Daily Star*, the major theatre companies Zoukak Theatre, Theatre Monnot, Dawar al-SHAMS, Metro al-Madina, and Masrah al-Madina, KED at Karantina, Gemmayzeh Theatre, the Armenian Theatre in Bourj Hammoud, Mansion in Sanayeh, and The Actor’s Workshop in Achrafieh

all suffered extensive damage, financial loss, and theatre closures. Zoukak's space had doors ripped out, bricks and windows smashed, and walls collapsed. Theatre Monnot, an underground space, was also severely damaged with broken doors, collapsed ceilings, and destroyed lighting. Masrah al-Madina had all doors and glass blasted in, and a staff member broke his leg when the blast threw him down a flight of stairs. The 125-year-old Theatre Gemmayze suffered external and internal damage; doors, windows, the ceiling, stage, lighting, sound and electrical supply were destroyed.



The severely damaged Theatre Gemmayzeh, one of the oldest theatres in Beirut. Photo: Basma Baydoun.

Although some theatres were able to secure emergency grants from sources such as the Lebanon Support Fund and The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), those funds mainly paid salaries and maintained basic operations; much more is needed for physical structural repairs. Junaid Sarrieddeen, the co-founder of Zoukak Theatre, was quoted as saying “There are cycles of reconstruction and destruction in this country. People start up a project and then for no reason it gets destroyed. This is tiring. You feel like children building castles of sand on the seafront.”^[2] Illustrator and political cartoonist Bernard Hage wrote, “If you believe that suffering forges better art, then Beirut must have one of the best artistic communities.”^[3] The general feeling is one of resignation. Consequently, many artists are considering leaving Lebanon for anywhere that can provide safety and stability.

There have been several organizations created to assist artists. The Theatre Relief Group (TRG), created and organized by over 100 theatre artists who include Lina Abiad, May Adra, Hanane Hajj Ali, Sany Abdul Baki, Abdullah AlKafri, Sahar Assaf, Aliya Khalidi, Karim Dakroub, Dima Matta, Mona Merhi, and Alaa Minawi, has attempted to support artists who have been wounded, or lost their homes or their means of income.^[4] Their first fundraising event, titled *Beirut, No Show Tonight*, was described on their Facebook page in the following way:

We have lost people, we have lost homes, we have lost neighborhoods. This is where language fails us.

This is the time to take action, and that action will not be on the stage. “Beirut, No Show Tonight” is a performance that will not take place. It will not happen. There is no story here, only devastation.[5]

There have been several other online fundraisers for Beirut artists in the ensuing months following the port explosions including *Yalla! A Benefit for Beirut*, hosted by the MENA Theatre Makers Alliance and Noor Theatre; *Art Relief for Beirut*, an Instagram-led initiative that included artists from around the world; *For the Love of Beirut*, organized by Gulf Photo Plus in partnership with Beirut Centre of Photography; Artists for Beirut; *The Artists Fundraiser 4 Beirut*; and individual artists like Raphaëlle Macaron and Art Queer Habibi.

I last interviewed theatre actress, director, professor, and artistic director Sahar Assaf in 2015.[6] At that time we discussed issues regarding patriarchy, political turmoil, her work as co-founder and Artistic Director of Tahweel Ensemble Theatre, and her site-specific productions. Since that time Professor Assaf has created many new works as well as co-founding and working as Artistic Director of Directors Lab Mediterranean, which hosted its first lab in July 2019 at the American University of Beirut and is planning to host future labs in various Mediterranean cities.[7]

Given all she’s contributed to the Lebanese theatre both professionally and educationally, I wanted to gain Assaf’s perspective on the current crisis facing Lebanon today following over a year of political protests, the port explosions, the intractable political deadlock, and the dire situation facing theatre artists there today.

MMN: I am interviewing you a month following the Beirut port explosion, which occurred on August 4, 2020. Before we get to how things are now in Beirut for you, and for other Lebanese theatre artists living there, I’d like to ask you about your experiences with the anti-government protests that arose in October 2019. What was the feeling amongst the protesters who were against sectarian rule and for the ouster of the ruling politicians?

SA: This was the first time in my life I feel that the protests would lead to some concrete and positive change. There was some kind of collective conscience growing. In the last decade, anti-government protests were centralized in Beirut, but starting on October 17, all major cities and towns all over Lebanon witnessed demonstrations. This country wide expansion was so refreshing and so inspiring. People of all backgrounds were on the streets protesting peacefully with a unified demand for decent basic services and basic rights. Of course, the revolution grew, and it encompassed many avenues for various groups to voice their demands. Women groups for instance called for equality and called attention to gender-based violence, the families of the disappeared from civil war demanded the implementation of law 105/2018 which aims to uncover the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons during the civil war, the domestic workers called for the obliteration of the kafala system (i.e., modern slavery), the youth were very present in the revolution and demanded a brighter future detached from all the norms of their parent’s generation, i.e., the war generation that failed to bring about any positive change, etc. It was quite extraordinary to live this moment and see many social and political taboos being dismantled.

MMN: How did the protests manifest in the Lebanese arts community? In other words, what was the artistic response to the political protests?

SA: I was in the rehearsal room when the revolution broke. I received a text message from my mother

who was babysitting my child telling me to take a specific route back home as protests started in downtown. I thought this was another parade by one of the political parties who are so used to negotiating their disagreements on the streets through igniting violent acts using their followers as perpetrators. When I got home and listened to the news, I immediately felt that there was something different about the protest this time. The next morning, we woke up to the news that protests erupted in the south and the north, in the Bekaa, etc., it was overwhelming to say the least. It was a Friday and I had another rehearsal session scheduled, so I canceled it thinking perhaps we will go back to rehearsals the next week, but we didn't. The next time I saw the actors was after about two weeks of the start of the revolution. The meeting was designed to discuss a plan for the show but what we ended up doing was talk about the revolution and the experiences each one of us was living on the streets and elsewhere. We simply couldn't work. This was a common feeling amongst many theatre makers. Theatres closed in support of the revolution, as they should have. You know, as theatre makers, we spend a lot of time in the theatre trying to rehearse alternative realities where change is possible, so when change is actually happening on the streets this is where you want the audiences to go.

MMN: During that year of protests, what was the status of theatre in Lebanon? Were artists still able to create and produce theatre, or did the protests curtail theatre production at that time?

SA: Theatre tends to thrive here in times of crises. Before the revolution and although the economic situation was bad, it was hard to find a slot for a show at a theatre. All theatres were fully booked until late 2020. The October 17 revolution didn't affect the theatre negatively, but the economic situation did. Most theatres here are receiving houses, so when artists started canceling or postponing their shows the theatres suffered as they depend on renting their spaces out to pay their operation costs.

There was some kind of collective consciousness amongst theatre artists and managers of theatre venues that it was ethically unacceptable to do theatre during that time. So, performances confined to buildings and box offices stopped completely; however, other kind of performances or happenings took place in other places. For instance, there was a group of revolutionaries who "performed" demonstrations inside the banks to protest the corrupt banking system. What they did is reminiscent of the Guerilla theatre of the San Francisco Mime Troupe of the 1960s in the US. They would go into a bank, a group of 5 or 6 activists, sits on the floor creating a human chain and chant songs that condemned the banks and the bankers. Sometimes they would read manifestos addressed at the bankers. Many times, security would be called on them, they would be locked inside for hours but they refused to negotiate or budge.

MMN: You have been the artistic director of Directors Lab Mediterranean since 2019. What has that process been like for you?

SA: The process has been magical; it's quite unbelievable how fast the Lab came into being, from conception to birth it took less than two years. It only tells you how necessary the platform it creates is. We are hungry in this part of the world for such programs, especially ones that offer new perspectives in looking at our geopolitical region and allow alternative narratives to surface, other than the ones that are constantly being perpetuated by the mainstream media. So far, it has been a great experience that's bringing forth lots of inspiration. We launched the Lab at AUB hosted by the Theatre Initiative in July 2019 with 17 participating directors from the U.S., Canada, Australia, Germany, France, Greece, Jordan, Lithuania, Serbia, Mexico and Russia. Participating directors spent 10 days at the gorgeous campus of AUB which literally touches the Mediterranean. They shared sessions, met local and international guest

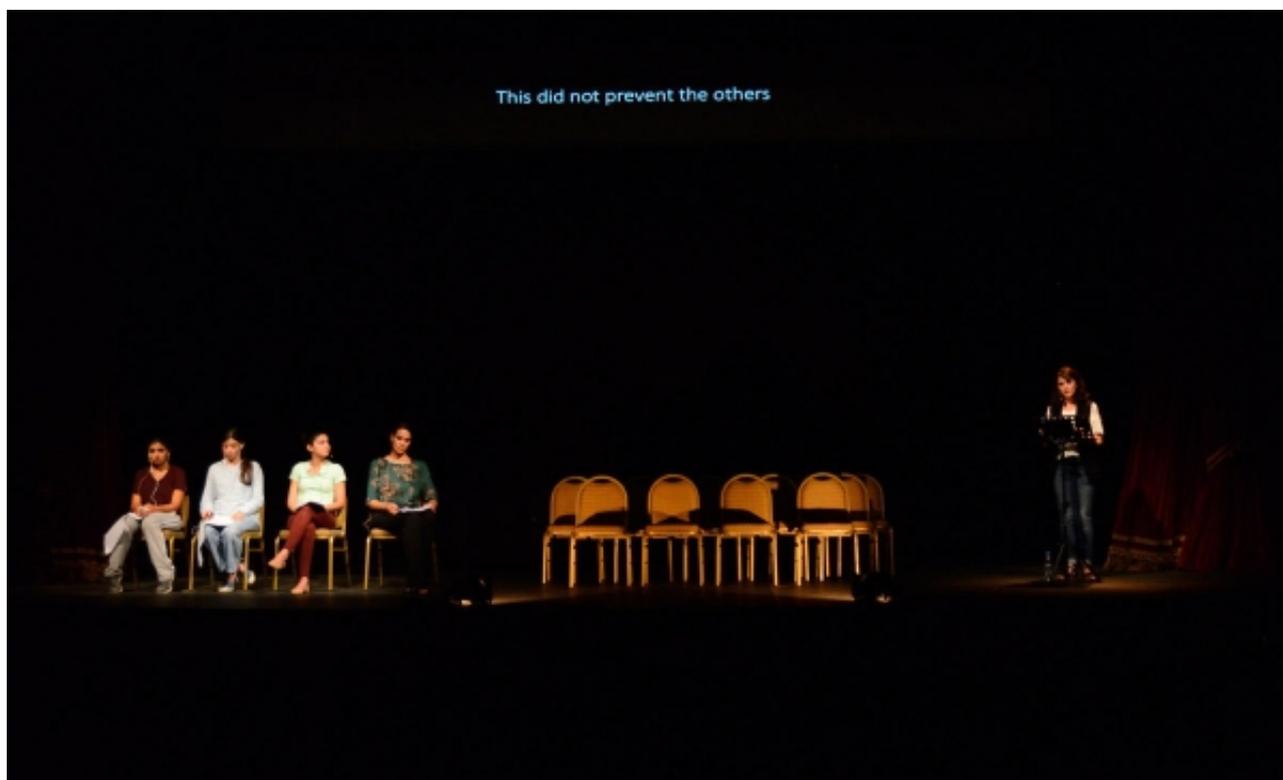
artists, and explored Mediterranean themes in the heart of the Mediterranean with the political and cultural backdrop that Beirut offers. Our next edition was supposed to take place at Teatre Lliure in Barcelona, the idea is that DLM would alternate around Mediterranean cities, but obviously we had to move the second edition online because of the pandemic situation and for the online edition we collaborated with Jasad for Performing Arts, a Jordanian-based theatre company. It was thrilling to see the 20 accepted directors connecting from Greece, USA, Panama, Australia, Bahrain, Jordan, India, Kuwait, Germany, Ecuador, Romania, Palestine, Tunisia, Italy, Peru, South Korea and France to create a virtual rehearsal room that allowed them and us to explore the theme of “surpassing physical and non-physical borders.” This theme was planned before Covid-19 and it proved quite fitting given the worldwide public health crisis. We are hoping we will be able to go back to Teatre Lliure in 2021.

MMN: What were some of the productions of note that occurred over the past year? Were there productions that really spoke to the political protest movement?

SA: To my knowledge, none yet on the October 17 revolution. But I recently watched Zoukak’s Ghalia’s *Miles* and loved it a lot. Here’s a synopsis on the play from Zoukak’s page: <https://zoukak.org/productions/ghalias-miles>

MMN: What about your own work during that time? What did you find that you were concerned with as a theatre artist during that year of protest?

SA: Just before the revolution broke, I was working on few projects; I had just performed *No Demand No Supply*, a documentary play on sex trafficking and prostitution, at Zoukak Studio in September and again on Oct 6, 2019 as part of Beirut Pride week.



No Demand, No Supply, a documentary performance on sex trafficking, conceived and directed by Sahar Assaf and produced by AUB Theater Initiative in collaboration with the Centre for Arts and Humanities and Kafa Organization at Zoukak Studio in Beirut, September 2019. Photo: Nataly Hindaoui.

We had a show scheduled for Oct 21 of NDNS part of the opening event of Cinorium, a new theatre that was supposed to open in Beirut in the Furn el Shebak area, the event and the opening clearly got canceled. I was also in rehearsals for *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornés in an Arabic translation that I have worked on. I was starting on a new play project with Tahweel Ensemble Theatre. All these projects got postponed. My attention shifted to the protest, when I wasn't on the streets with my toddler I was glued to the TV. I took my recording device to the protests and captured sounds of the revolution that I honestly until now don't know what exactly I will be doing with them, but I know they will find their way into my theatre work someday.

MMN: How did the COVID-19 situation impact theatre in Lebanon? Were there major shutdowns there, or were performances still happening?

SA: Just as we were starting to adjust to the effects of the revolution on our life and our work, Covid-19 hit. There was a series of several major lockdowns and curfews and theatres were shut for months. Many people lost their livelihoods in consequence including theatre artists. The free-lance theatre makers were the ones to receive the hardest blow. With the revolution it was the artists' decision to cancel the shows, but with Covid-19 it was imposed on us. The sense of loss we experienced due to this was doubled; we didn't only lose the work we've been doing, but we lost the audiences. Suddenly, one of the main pillars that are mandatory for our work to exist, i.e. an assembly, became a public health hazard.

MMN: Let's fast forward to the Beirut port explosion that led to 191 deaths, 6,000 injuries, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Can you describe where you were and what you and your family experienced when that explosion occurred?

SA: I was in the midst of an online class on Documentary Theatre that I was teaching to a group of Arab artists based in Kuwait as part of LAPA Second Theatre Retreat. At first I thought it was an earthquake so I said to my students "excuse me, there's an earthquake" and ran to where my son was sleeping to get him out, but before I could reach him and as I was calling on my husband, the whole building shook and we heard an extremely loud explosion. It was traumatizing. We live 9 miles away from the Port of Beirut and we still felt the blast as if it happened next street. Today when I think of that evening, I cannot remember anything except my screams, they're the only sound I can remember. It took me three seconds probably to get from my study room where I was giving the class to the bedroom where my son was sleeping but, in my memory, those three seconds feel like eternity. It was and still is very painful and I cannot begin to imagine what other people who lost loved ones or who lost their homes are going through. It's devastating.

MN: What did you experience in the days following the explosion? What was life like there for you then?

SA: A mixture of deep sadness and rage, those feelings seem to persist even today 40 days after the explosion. The government response to the blast and their indifference to the lost lives and the destruction

is just intolerable. Since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, the country has been run by the same warlords who actually fought against one another during the civil war. These warlords brought one corrupt government after another. So, for the last 30 years the endemic corruption debilitated every aspect of our lives, but we didn't expect their criminal negligence and corruption would literally destroy the city over our heads.

Mornings are especially hard, as you wake up to realize all over again that you lost your city, people lost their lives and many lost loved ones. We lost our Beirut, streets that are an integral part of who we are today are in total ruin, our city as we know is gone, it will live only in our memories. We are in a state of mourning and we cannot begin to heal without a closure first and with the current criminals in office we will never be given this closure. Everyone in office knew about the presence of 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut Port in the midst of the most crowded city in Lebanon for the past 6 years and did absolutely nothing about it. Today, 40 days after the blast that killed more than 200 people and injured 7000 others and left 300,000 people displaced, and still no official statement on what happened, not one resignation from the top offices, not one arrest. How will we ever heal without justice? It's outrageous and unbearable.

MMN: In the weeks following the Beirut explosion, I saw that there was a fundraiser for Lebanese theatre artists which was titled *Beirut, No Show Tonight* that was established by Theatre Relief Group (TRG) in Lebanon. How did that come about and what was the result of that effort?

SA: TRG came into existence within a few days after the explosion. Many of my international collaborators reached out to me as soon as they heard the news of the explosion and they were asking how they could help. It was hard to think even about the kind of help we need in those days. So I reached out on WhatsApp to a group of more than 50 theatre makers (basically I added to the group all the theatre makers in Lebanon whose mobile numbers I have) and invited them to brainstorm together on how we can bring in help to the theatre venues and theatre makers that were affected. People responded quickly and Hanan Hajj Ali suggested that we schedule a Zoom meeting, so we did and in that first Zoom meeting we decided to name our initiative "Theatre Relief Group in Lebanon." Within ten days the group had more than 100 members. It's a pure grassroots initiative, an artist-to-artist approach. Today we have three main subgroups working on outreach and support, communication, and fundraising. We aim to raise funds to support the theatre makers who were wounded in the explosion and those who lost their roofs as well as the theatre spaces who were hit. In the first phase of the project, we were able to support 28 artists and 6 venues, although modestly. Phase two continues until the end of September and we are hoping we will be able to extend support to more artists and venues.

We called the fundraising event *Beirut, No Show Tonight* because many of us felt that the show cannot go on. We are in a state of grief, we have lost our city, our theatres were destroyed, many fellow citizens lost loved ones, thousands lost their homes, it's a tragedy.

MMN: Lebanese theatre artist Hanane Hajj Ali created a moving video that was circulated on Facebook where she talked about "the death of young artists full of passion, talent and ambition, none of whom was spared death until after they had realized their dreams." She specifically discussed the Arab artists Shady Habash, Mariam Hammoud, and Hassan Rabeh, all who died young from different circumstances, but who died as artists speaking out against the injustices they experienced in their native homelands of Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria (respectively). Are there other Lebanese theatre artists we should

commemorate who died during this past year?

SA: [Abdo Atta](#), who worked as a technician at Theatre Gemayzeh, was killed in the Beirut explosion while at home. I didn't know Abdo, we never met unfortunately, so I can't speak about him but here's a video about him and his brother and family

MMN: In the last interview I conducted with you in 2015 you told me, "Practicing theatre in a country that's constantly in turmoil is an optimistic political act in and of itself, regardless of its genre... It's a constant call for life, for a prosperous humanity... it's the artist's way of not giving up, of not taking the status quo for granted, and her way to fight back using the most peaceful method possible." Do you still feel this way given all that has happened there over the past five years?

SA: I still do. Although we lack studies and data on the state of the arts in times of crises in Lebanon but from basically being active in the field for the last 15 years and being observant of the changes that are happening, I can tell you that it's usually in times of crisis that artists become more productive and inventive. Personally, I have always found refuge in the theatre. The last two years have been quite challenging though. The disasters seem unending, between the economic depression, Covid-19 and the Beirut explosion we found ourselves in a battle for survival.

SA: What has the experience been at AUB since the explosion? The university has faced tremendous financial pressures, leading to the dismissal of 850 of its 6,500 workers and the suspension of student loans due to the financial crisis. Are theatre classes still being held there? What are young theatre students experiencing there now?

SA: We had to move online mid spring term like all universities in the world and this fall term we are also teaching online. From my experience teaching non-theatre majors (as you know we only have a theatre minor at AUB) the theatre classes continue to be very helpful and therapeutic for students, even when given online, especially after the blast. Due to its very nature, theatre has the power to offer a safe space for those involved in it to express themselves in whichever way they deem appropriate and that has been extremely helpful for the students.

MMN: What is next for you? You are an assistant professor of Theatre at the American University of Beirut (AUB), the co-director of AUB's Theatre Initiative, and the co-founder and artistic director of Directors Lab Mediterranean. What do you see as your future in Lebanon not only as a citizen, but also as a theatre artist?

SA: The present is quite dark and uncertain so that it's rather difficult to plan the future. There is a lot of work to be done in Lebanon at all levels. Personally, I know that I will continue to do the theatre work that I need to do. Theatre is the only thing I want to do and my work in the theatre has always been inspired by a need, a need to understand, a need to reflect, a need to express anger, a need to challenge a status quo or a need to imagine an alternative reality. It has always been driven by a personal emergency. To use the words of Eugenio Barba, "I need theatre." In this past year I found myself using the words of Barba quite often. In 2018, I spent 10 days at Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark attending Odin Week Festival. during which we had daily meetings with the founder of Odin, legendary director Eugenio Barba. In our last meeting with him, he sent us off by saying "You need theatre, but theatre doesn't need you." With the rapid deterioration of the situation here, I only expect that we will resort to creating more

and more theatre. It's our only sanctuary.

Michael Malek Najjar is an associate professor of Theatre Arts with the University of Oregon. He holds a Ph.D. in Theatre and Performance Studies (UCLA) and an M.F.A. in Directing (York University). He is an associate member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society and Dramatists Guild, and an alumnus of the British/American Drama Academy (BADA), Lincoln Center Director's Lab, Directors Lab West, and RAWI Screenwriters' Lab (Jordan). He authored *Middle Eastern American Theatre: Communities, Cultures and Creators* and *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present*. He is the editor of *Heather Raffo's Iraq Plays: The Things That Can't Be Said, The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi*, and *Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef El Guindi, and Lameece Issaq & Jacob Kader*. He is also co-editor of *Six Plays of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* with Jamil Khoury and Corey Pond. His directing credits include productions with Golden Thread Productions, New Arab American Theatre Works, and Silk Road Rising.

[1] "Lebanon." *UNHCR Global Focus*.

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/lebanon#:~:text=Some%20914%2C600%20Syrian%20refugees%20were,over%201%25%20during%20the%20year>. Accessed 21 September 2020.

[2] Ghali, Maghie. "Theaters Struggle to Pen Future After the Blast." *The Daily Star*,

<https://www.dailystar.com.lb/Arts-and-Ent/Culture/2020/Aug-27/510868-theaters-struggle-to-pen-future-after-the-blast.ashx>. Accessed 18 September 2020.

[3] Hage, Bernard. "Beirut's Cultural Scene Gasps for Air." *Lebanon Chronicles*, 23 September 2020,

<https://lebanon.zenith.me/en/culture/lebanons-artists-danger>.

[4] Valentine Smith, Rachel. "'Each Day We Learn About a New Loss': Artists Unite in Blast-Hit Beirut." *The Guardian*, 21 August 2020,

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/aug/21/lebanon-theatre-industry-beirut>.

[5] Beirut, No Show Tonight. *Facebook*, 13 August 2020.

<https://m.facebook.com/events/3184350771648476#> = . Accessed 18 September 2020.

[6] Najjar, Michael Malek. "Theatre as an Optimistic Political Act: Lebanese Theatre Artist Sahar Assaf." *Arab Stages*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 2015),

<https://arabstages.org/2015/11/theatre-as-an-optimistic-political-act-lebanese-theatre-artist-sahar-assaf/>.

[7] <http://www.directorslabmed.org>



MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
PUBLICATIONS

Arab Stages

Volume 12 (Fall 2020)

©2020 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Founders: Marvin Carlson and Frank Hentschker

Editor-in-Chief: Marvin Carlson

Editorial and Advisory Board: Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Dina Amin, Khalid Amine, Dalia Basiouny, Katherine Donovan, Masud Hamdan, Sameh Hanna, Rolf C. Hemke, Katherine Hennessey, Areeg Ibrahim, Jamil Khoury, Dominika Laster, Margaret Litvin, Rebekah Maggor, Safi Mahfouz, Robert Myers, Michael Malek Najjar, Hala Nassar, George Potter, Juan Recondo, Nada Saab, Asaad Al-Saleh, Torange Yeghiazarian, Edward Ziter.

Managing Editors: Esther Neff and Philip Wiles

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](#)

[“Theatre—It’s Our Only Sanctuary” An Interview by Michael Malek Najjar with Professor Sahar Assaf](#)

[Review by Areeg Ibrahim of *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi* edited by Michael Malek Najjar](#)

[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](#)

[Nehad Selaiha \(1945-2017\): On Egyptian and International Theatre. Free PDF's of Five Volumes of Theatre Criticism + Sample Essays](#)