

Regards

32 | 2024

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility:

An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

The Homecoming Readings on Theater inside Syria

Mona MERHI

Edition électronique

URL : <https://journals.usj.edu.lb/Regards/article/view/1208>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1208>

ISSN : 2791-285X

Editeur

Editions de l'USJ, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth

Référence électronique

MERHI, M. (2025). The Homecoming Readings on Theater inside Syria. *Regards*, (32), 23-103.

<https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1208>

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

THE HOMECOMING READINGS ON THEATER INSIDE SYRIA

Mona Merhi

Résumé | Cette recherche met en abîme le théâtre local en Syrie au cours de la décennie qui a suivi la révolution Syrienne. Elle examine l'esthétique théâtrale d'expériences marquantes tout en essayant de comprendre l'impact des défis de la vie quotidienne et des conflits internes sur les modes de représentation théâtrale. Je soutiens que des défis similaires peuvent créer des formes théâtrales post-conflit qui sont informées par un certain sentiment d'allégeance à la ville et à la forme d'art de la scène. Tout en empruntant le concept d'allégeances multiples de Diana Taylor et les stratégies de doublement et « du maintien du même », la présente recherche examine la décision de rester en Syrie à la fois comme un cadre esthétique et un modus-operandi qui remet en question la polarisation politique.

Abstract | This research focuses on theater inside Syria during the decade following the Syrian revolution. It examines the theatrical aesthetics of prominent experiences while attempting to understand the impact of everyday life challenges and the internal conflicts on Syrian theater. I argue that similar challenges may create a post-conflict theatrical forms that are informed by a certain sense of allegiance to the city and the art form of the stage. While borrowing Diana Taylor's concept of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same, the present scholarship looks into the decision of staying inside Syria as both an aesthetic framework and a modus that challenge political polarization.

Keywords | Theatre, Syria, 2011, revolution, multiple allegiances, aesthetics of scarcity, directing, text

Research Introduction

The consequences of the Syrian revolution in 2011 led to the emigration of a significant number of Syrian artists, who left the country permanently. Others chose to stay in Damascus and other provinces, bearing witness to the radical change that shifted from a peaceful revolution to armed conflict, civil war, and finally a regional war. In the initial period after the revolutionary uprising, a number of artists chose to stop producing theatrical works. Conversely, after 2011, there were several attempts, sometimes intermittent, to produce theater. Parallely, research and study of local theatrical works were avoided due to the fact that those who decided to stay were forcefully aligned with the Syrian regime.

This research focuses on theater inside Syria during the decade following the Syrian revolution. It attempts to examine the theatrical aesthetics of prominent experiences and to understand the characteristics of daily life in Syria and its impact on Syrian theater, representing a theatricality that reflects the current momentum while equally being influenced by it.

There is a general assumption that theater as a practice in Syria has become limited after the departure of most artists from the country, or that if it exists, it is inevitably linked with the pro-regime standpoint. As a result, the local theatre practices in these times were excluded from the broader narrative of the artistic landscape, despite the significant presence of Syrian art internationally. In this context, the counter-narrative, which opposes the dominant view and seeks to offer an alternative history of the current period through the arts, inadvertently sets aside a group of artists who continue to work inside Syria without necessarily being aligned with the regime. This research responds to the above hypothesis as a preliminary attempt to challenge such dominant belief.

The general framework of the present research addresses the following main question:

“What is the initial production map between 2011 and 2021, and how does the decision to stay in Syria affect the creation of post-2011 theatrical aesthetics?”

Such inquiry invites a series of sub-questions, listed as follows:

- What are the aesthetic changes that have taken place and how have they been influenced by the present?
- What are the new frameworks of negotiation with the ruling authority? Is there a specific space for freedom and expression, and how does this space reproduce antecedent power dynamics (between the regime and the artists) or violate them??

- In the post-revolutionary era, how can the aesthetics of theater be read in a way that is not constrained by the dichotomies of inside and outside, allegiance and opposition?¹

In order to avoid the aforementioned dichotomies, we turn to the concept of multiple allegiances and the strategy of doubling and staying the same. This term, coined by scholar Diana Taylor, serves to frame how Indigenous performative rituals are transmitted and reproduced within the colonizing, oppressive, and power-holding system. This concept, which we will examine in greater detail in subsequent sections, offers a novel perspective on the work of Syrian artists who have chosen to remain engaged with the local scene inside Syria rather than retreating from the field.

The research, thus, uses the local productions as case studies to gain insight into the evolution of Syrian theater practices after 2011. Given the scarcity of studies focused on this specific aspect of Syrian culture during this period, our inquiry seeks to address the gap in research on theater in geographical Syria after 2011. With the exception of a few articles, such as Anna Akkash's piece published in Syria Untold website², and some information in Ibrahim al-Akel's article on Syrian theater in Europe, and the Madad (Damascus Center for Research and Studies) report by theater maker and journalist Samer Mohammad Ismail, research about the performance scene inside Syria was limited. While Ibrahim al-Akel's study highlights the rise of monodrama in Syria between 2010 and 2020 and some of the names of performances that took place in 2015, Anna Akkash employs the capital Damascus as a model for monitoring the theater movement over the past decade. The most important points highlighted by Akkash are listed as follows:

- the quasi-regular persistence of governmental theater productions across the various seasons.
- the risk taken by commercial theater in presenting certain shows.
- the impact of migration and low wages which kept many people away from the theater.
- the isolation of theatre works produced inside Syria from the Arab and international scene.

1- At the outset of the uprising, there was a paramount polarization between expatriate or exiled artists and their local colleagues "[...] which led to a sharp schism." Translated into "accusations of betrayal and rupture," such a divide caused multi-modal isolation: an internal seclusion of the artist from any connection beyond the geographical boundaries of Syria ending with limited opportunities for the locals to present their work internationally and to be exposed to the works of their compatriots living abroad. On the other hand, those who left the country experienced a great loss of connection with their local audiences, co-workers and colleagues while not being able to witness the social changes occurring inside the country which limits their ability to write about Syria from the inside.

2- A collection of research studies on post-revolutionary Syrian theater published between 2021 and 2022 through the independent Syrian platform "Untold Stories", which focuses on Syrian issues specifically, and provides a large area of its work to support feminist and queer issues.

However, Akkash notes that new names have emerged, and quickly mentions a considerable number of artists and shows that have yet to be researched and studied.

In the same vein, Dr. Marie Elias³ states: “Some local groups in Damascus and other governorates are trying to establish new frameworks under different titles”. In addition, she cites a few notable exceptions that continue to operate independently, such as the Damascus Theater Laboratory⁴, founded by Oussama Ghanam, and the School of Dramatic Arts⁵ in Jaramana, directed by Samir Othman. It is also worth mentioning Leish Troupe, founded by Noura Murad in 1999, which continues to perform despite the many obstacles it has faced.

In a different context, American academic and researcher Edward Ziter published a book in English in 2014 titled *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising*. Ziter conducted a comparative analysis of a number of theatrical works produced since the late 1950s that addressed the concepts of martyrdom, violence, and the Palestinian cause. He provided a concise overview, guided by the above-mentioned concepts, of the early years of the revolution while relying on Giorgio Agamben’s theoretical frameworks such as the state of exception and bare life.

The present research employs the material provided by Akkash, Al-Akel, Ismail, Elias, Ziter, and others as a point of departure to examine the ongoing theatrical experiences in Syria despite the numerous challenges. It endeavors to elucidate the post-revolutionary evolution of theatrical practice in the country between 2011 and 2021.

Following the completion of the interviews, some of the questions asked during the design and planning phase underwent modification. The study shifted to focus mainly on the aesthetics of theater in some of the key experiences of post-2011 Syria. The latter necessitated an examination of the artistic process and the interpretation of certain experiences while focusing on form and style, all of which may reflect a timely view of the world. This analysis equally takes into account the opinions of theater professionals themselves and their (re-) definition of their theatrical role as it was being impacted by the mundane changes of the daily life challenges amidst war and uncertainty, all of which may reflect a nuanced aesthetics on the stage.

3- Researcher, academe, and lecturer at Saint Joseph University in Lebanon and the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus. She is a cultural activist in the field of theater, including developmental theater. She holds a PhD in theater from France. Her bibliography includes: “Theatrical Dictionary: Concepts and Terms, Theater and the Arts of Performance”, “Anthology of Modern French Theater”, and “Exercises in Dramaturgical Writing and Improvisation”. Elias has also translated a large number of theatrical works.

4- It is an artistic entity created in 2010. The laboratory aims to create theater based on creative and artistic research within the framework of modern trends in theater production, and on the relationship between drama and acting.

5- An independent educational institution established in 2015 that offers curriculum and training in acting and performance.

As we explore further the bolts and nuts of theater in Geographical Syria after 2011, we are aware of the limitations of our study. It is important to note that the present research does not seek to generalize (although some conclusions may be drawn), but rather it seeks to document precise experiences in an attempt to ponder on the general through the specific experience without hastily drawing finite conclusions about the post-2011 era. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the scope of this study does not permit an exhaustive examination of all the theatrical and performance productions that have taken place in Syria. Despite the efforts to challenge the centrality of the capital Damascus by interviewing artists in Aleppo and Homs, there was insufficient space to cover all the theatrical and performance experiences that have taken place in Syria. It is equally essential to recognize our positionality geographically and politically. First, it is risky to conduct research on Syria from within the country while living abroad. My status as a Lebanese academe whose research interests are centered on Syrian theater does not fill certain gaps: While a certain academic familiarity with the scene from a distance is undoubtedly valuable, it is quite distinct from the perspective of an individual who has been immersed in the history, details, sensibilities, and the “know how” of local theater. It was therefore crucial to rely on an individual with an insider’s perspective in order to gain as much insight as possible into the subject matter. Dana Kraidy⁶ was engaged as a research assistant to facilitate the process of establishing contact with a number of the artists within the scene. I am grateful to her for suggesting contexts that were important to recognize through those who lived and approached the scene and its sensitivities. Aware of the need to include other points of view, which may be contradictory, I was assisted by several people with direct experience in the Syrian theater scene, whether before, during or after the revolution. In this context, I must mention the artists I interviewed and whose experiences were included in the research. Their contributions to the development of the Syrian theater scene in the research were essential.

The limitations of the research are listed as follows:

- The research does not cover puppet theater or children’s theater, despite the prolific production of the former.
- The interactive/community engaged theater are beyond the scope of this research.
- Despite the attempt to highlight theatrical works outside the capital center, it was limited to the governorates of Aleppo and Homs since they are relatively more active than the other governorates. This is due to the fact that they are two of the three largest and most populous governorates in Syria, along with the capital Damascus.
- The theatrical practice under consideration in this research is limited to the author/dramaturg and the director.

6- A Syrian researcher and journalist, she holds a BA in Media Studies from Damascus University and an MA in Theater Studies from Saint-Joseph University in Beirut.

Our initial effort to restrict the scope of our research involved a survey of theatrical performances in Syria between 2011 and 2021. We encountered significant challenges in collecting and defining the sample, and we will endeavor to identify the principal criteria by which we limited our sample.

First: Following the war, the term “Syria” in a geographical sense requires a moment of reflection. Our primary focus was on performances that occurred within Syria, which is still under the authority of the regime. Large areas were not included in the research sample. This is the case of the Eastern Province and the Idlib Governorate, two regions that were controlled for a significant amount of time by Isis and Al-Kaeda. It is also important to note that we did not cover all geographical areas under regime control. Many provinces and cities were severely destroyed and affected by the war, and as a result, they lacked a cultural or artistic life. Consequently, the governorates in which we were able to trace theatrical life were limited to five (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, and Tartous). This was due to the significant difference in theatrical activity between the capital and the rest of the governorates. The theatrical landscape was largely dominated by commercial productions and children’s plays, despite their relative scarcity.

Second: The lack of documentation and statistical studies that provide an inventory of theatrical performances produced in Syria in the post-uprising era represents a significant challenge. Consequently, we have endeavored to gather as much information related to performance as possible through the examination of recent scholarship, non-academic writings concerning Syrian theater, digitally archived performances accessible via online platforms, and direct interviews. Furthermore, we have consulted digitally published critical writings on theatrical performances.

Third: it is important to note that a significant number of theater artists declined to be interviewed for reasons related to security, as they have stated. On the other hand, it was challenging to communicate with the official institutions that are in charge of theater in Syria.

Fourth: We focused our analysis on Syrian theatrical experiences more expansively than others. This was due to the availability of sufficient materials that permitted a comprehensive analysis and reflection. These materials included, but were not limited to, the availability of videos of all performances. Furthermore, we considered the intensity and the sustainability of the case studies in question.

For example, the Damascus Theater Laboratory exhibits a clear organizational structure and production intensity, with occasional performances exceeding three hours. It also relies on free adaptations of world-wide theater classics, thereby allowing more space for analysis. We have equally conducted additional readings of certain experiences that stand out for their singularity. The apparent imbalance in the presentation of case studies is not a consequence of evaluative considerations, but rather the result of the availability of material that allow analysis and of the specificity of each case study.

Fifth: it would have been useful and easy to follow two experiments such as the Damascus Theater Laboratory and the Leish Troupe, given the diversity of their artistic practices (a theatre relying on a dramaturgical analysis of canonical dramatic texts, the second is dance/theatre soliciting different mediums and writing genres). Both of these collectives had an important presence in post-war theater in Syria in terms of intensity, availability, continuity and outreach. Both case studies are led by professors from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, who have had a significant impact on other young experiments that have emerged under the mantle of the workshops they have organized.

Theoretical framework

The present research draws on some of the concepts and theoretical frameworks associated with performance studies that focus specifically on the history of Western domination and colonization of indigenous peoples and their impact on and influence on indigenous rituals. Diana Taylor's scholarship, "The Archive and the Repertoire," serves as a foundational reference point particularly with regard to the concept of "multiple allegiances." This concept illustrates how indigenous performative rituals are transmitted and reproduced within the symbolic system designed to eradicate them. In this sense, there is a constant negotiation between apparent erasure and hidden preservation of ancestral legacies. In this context, we adopt and reroute Diana Taylor's term to refer to the margin of negotiation, evasiveness, and/or disavowal with the authority since the latter controls the majority of art production. We do so without falling into the trap of the dichotomy of either "being with" or "against" Syrian regime. We believe that the use Taylor's idioms helps in avoiding the polarization and divide between Syrian artists living inside Syria and those who are living outside of it, as the level of intricacies surrounding the process of theatrical production in Syria today is found to be more complex than the creation of annihilating binaries.

On the other hand, Taylor's taxonomy also offers a nuanced lens of looking at the Syrian theater inside Syria. It would be unjust to neglect or exclude certain works from the Syrian theater scene on the grounds that they are associated with the official establishment or because it is assumed that anyone who chooses to remain in Syria is inherently pro-regime. In this context, it is important to note that this research attempts to isolate this dichotomy between the inside and the outside as much as possible, while maintaining the author's awareness

of her stance against the Baathist regime. This is evident, as are the complexities inherent in a regime that has existed for over seven decades without a clear separation between the the state as an entity, the image of the ruler, the institutions and the production apparatuses.

The present research is, hence, divided into four sections. The first section offers an overview of the history of the theatrical practices prior to 2010. This analysis focuses on two main aspects: first, the institutions that sponsor theater, and second, the playwriting movement. In this context, the theatrical text is approached as a literary dramatic text preceding the production phase. This section provides a brief overview of dramaturgy as a modern practice that had a limited presence in the years before the revolution. It examines the processes of adapting foreign texts, as well as the phenomenon of the director as playwright. It also highlights the themes and aesthetics of some texts and performances. It allows for an understanding of writing as a practice of contested methods. These two foci on the historical context allow us to understand the post-2010 period and analyze the aesthetics of certain works or experiments that will be discussed in this research.

The second section introduces Diana Taylor's theory and the reasons behind its use. It prioritizes aspects related to directing, dramatic texts, and aesthetics that may be more prevalent than others, while also considering the challenges of post-2011 production.

This section presents a preliminary map of Syrian theater productions between 2011 and 2021. It examines the directing experiments of Farah Al Dbayyat, Orwa Al Arabi, Ibrahim Jumaa and others, as well as the works of Samer Ismail, Kifah al-Khous, Zainati Qudsia and others, whether written or adapted.

It explains the various frameworks through which pre-2011 aesthetics are reproduced. These frameworks will be categorized under the transitive level of multiple allegiances. For example, we will examine specific uses meta-theatre, Brecht's V-effect, the return to parables and symbolism while self-censoring any references to the political present, and/or other related topics.

In the third section, we examine the cross-cutting aesthetic themes of some of the shows that challenge the mainstream and fall within the transcendental level of multiple allegiances as we defined it in the second section. This section will examine the works of Damascus Theater Laboratory, established by Oussama Ghanam, as well as those of Leish Troupe of Noura Murad and Farah Al Dbayyat, among others.

Farah Al Dbayyat uses theater within theater, an aesthetic that was widely used in Syrian theater, but she diverts it from its often nationalistic political use to highlight feminist issues in an alternative space. Additionally, *Dādā Didd Al-dādā* (Dada vs. Dada) is discussed in the present section. This piece is more akin to a "happening" based on total improvisation and a deliberately subversive moment. Particularly evocative are the ways within which sexuality, corporeality and the representations of the body are addressed, in addition to the relationship to the public sphere and the audience.

The fourth and final section is dedicated to a comprehensive analysis of the Damascus Theater Laboratory and the Leish Troupe, two case studies that will be examined in detail. A critical analysis of select works by these two groups will be presented, focusing on the timing of their creation and their contributions to the fields of dramaturgy, directing, and physical theater.

Section One

The Theater Scene before the Revolution

1960-2010

Ninety years after Abu Khalil al-Qabbani inaugurated the first theater troupe in Syria, and during the period of unity between Syria and Egypt, the National Theater was established in 1960 following the invitation and patronage of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. The objective was to establish the theater under the auspices of state institutions and the Ministry of Culture. A preliminary meeting was held to replace theatre troupes that were active in the fifties and sixties, including the Sana'aa Troupe, which was productive in Aleppo since 1929, the Nadia Al-Ariss Troupe in Damascus, and the Isis Troupe in Damascus in 1931. These collectives, active since the early twenties, presented a diverse array of musical and dance performances between Syria and Lebanon. Considered the second birth of the Syrian theater, this era was a new founding moment that erased what preceded it. It linked the theater as an institution to the Ministry of Culture, hence allowing control over the Syrian theatrical process. Under umbrella of the governmental institutions, theater in Syria flourished and evolved across the subsequent decades:

“Today the situation has changed. The Ministry of Culture and National Guidance established four theaters for professionals: the National Theater, the Puppet Theater, the Musical Theater, and the Theater of Popular Arts. The Ministry of Culture initiated the Popular Theater as part of an experiment that has not yet reached its final stage. Furthermore, the Ministry of Information established the Dramatic Arts Troupe and the Television Troupe for Popular Arts»⁷.

With this sentence, writer and jurist Najat Kassab Hassan began his 1964 article, in which he wrote about his aspirations after the theater became state-sponsored.

The concept of culture in Syria has been linked to the official state policy since the establishment of the Ministry of Culture under the name of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance in the 1960s. This led to culture being strongly influenced by the political orientations of the state. As the Exploratory Survey on Cultural Policies in Syria shows, culture became inseparable from the political conflicts and the *sine qua non* of the state's ideology. When theater became part of the establishment, it adopted its values, which gave culture several definitions, most notably: “the culture of resistance,” “the culture of Arab nationalism,”

7- KASSAB HASSAN Najat, « Ba'ḍ Qadāyā Al-Masrah Al Sūrī », Majalat Al Ma'rifa, January 1964, n. 34.

“Syrian culture as a tool for raising public awareness of national issues,” and “culture for development”. Cultural practices were thus characterized by “the predominance of a centralized official culture and the gratuitous access to Syrian cultural products”.⁸

In terms of administrative structure, the Ministry of Culture “supervises a number of institutions and directorates that are administratively independent from it and technically linked to it, making the Ministry the decision-making center for all sectors of Syrian culture”.⁹

In addition to the Ministry of Culture, other official bodies and institutions were also in charge of adjacent cultural activities, namely the Ministry of Social Affairs, which serves as an administrative body responsible for supervising the activities of associations and NGOs; the Ministry of Tourism, which supervises the Tourism Promotion Directorate whose responsibilities include organizing art exhibitions and promoting Syrian antiquities and arts through local festivals, participation in international exhibitions, and sending folk and private art groups to international exhibitions. The Bosra International Festival was one of the festivals supervised by the Tourism Promotion Directorate, but it was the Ministry of Culture that managed it. The Ministry of Defense manages the Military Theater, which was already established when the Ministry of Culture was founded in 1958. It is in this theater that young Syrian art graduates do their military service.

The Ministry of Local Administration has an “executive office that deals with cultural affairs, celebrations and festivals, and administratively supervises the cultural centers in the governorates. However, these centers are technically linked to the Ministry of Culture, which leads to a duplication of work between these centers”.¹⁰

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research supervises the High Council for Culture and Arts and the Arabic Language Academy. The Ministry of Education has a special department for school theater, whose theatrical activities fall under the purview of the theaters of popular organizations. The latter are considered “organizational frameworks that attract the citizens according to the nature of their work. These frameworks are accredited by state institutions, but they adopt different systems that draw their general orientation from country-level and nationalist premises”.¹¹

The organisms affiliated with the Ba’ath party are the most numerous among popular organizations, and their theatrical activity is linked to education in its various stages: Al-ṭalā’i Theater is responsible for school theater, while the Al-shabība Theater is responsible for secondary school theater. There is also university theater, whose role began to decline in the late 80s, coinciding with the development of the role of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts.

8- YAZIGI Rana, AL-KHATIB Reem, KADDOUR Wael, *Exploratory Survey on Cultural Policies in Syria 2014, Cultural Policies in the Arab Region* [online], October 2015. Available at: <https://arabcp.org>.

9- Ibid.

10- Ibid.

11- Ibid.

Experimental Theater - Ministry of Culture

The experimental theater, founded in 1976 under the direction of renowned playwright Saadallah Wannous and the supervision of the Ministry of Culture is one of the most controversial and criticized experiments, along with the University Theatre, which ended three years after its establishment. In an article published in *Al-Aqlam* magazine in 1980, Riad Ismat, former Minister of Culture, author, and playwright, discussed the reasons for the failure of Wannous's experimental theater. He explicitly attributed the failure to the artists' lack of experience and knowledge, as well as their inability to distinguish between "formalism and form." He noted that "the new experiments are aimed at the elite, specifically the bourgeois class. In fact, some of the new experiments address the elite, [not from a classist perspective], but in the purely cultural sense. Culture in Syria, as in other Arab countries, adopts systems that are close to socialism, spread among different classes, and not limited to the rich only. This concept of the elite is the result of the limited space of the theaters and the lack of public interest in modern theater and literature, and is therefore a very realistic and sound concept. The theatrical theory must be based on the theatrical space and the capabilities of the troupes, and if it is not, it is just idle talk and leads to a loss of direction and communication."¹²

The experimental theater was the first to break classical theatrical conventions, including the rules of spectatorship. Its creators faced a number of challenges, including a lack of infrastructure, which prompted them to give the audience a written statement explaining the experiment and its goals. The statement reads: "If we want to reproduce and deepen our traditions of spectatorship, those traditions that allow the spectator to be spontaneous and open, we must, on the one hand, destroy the theatrical structure and, on the other hand, seek a new relationship between actor and spectator."¹³ The attempts at the experimental theater revealed the beginnings of a search for a genuine identity for theater in Syria, based on studying the evolving relationship between spectatorship and Arab subjecthood.

The performances of Saadallah Wannous, the founder of the experimental theater, were the subject of considerable controversy and debate. He was able to present *Rihlat Hanẓala Min Al-Ghafla Ilā Al-Yaqẓa* (Handala's Journey from Oblivion to Awakening) directed by Fawaz Al-Sajer, in the Federal Republic of Germany. The organizers presented a second statement to the audience, in which they elucidated their definition of the experimental theater and how it differs from the European experimental theater: "Experimental theater is often an elitist, formal exploration that aims to break through the dead end that theater has reached. For us, experimental theater means searching for a theater

12- ISMAT Riad, «Syria - Al Tajārib Al Jadīdah fī Al Masrah Al Sūrī», *Majalat Al Aqlām*, Issue 6, 1980.

13- ALIKSAN Jan, *Al Masrah al-Qawmī wa al Masāriḥ al Radīfā fī al-Qaṭr al-'Arabī al Sūrī*. Damas, Ministry of Culture, Syrian General Organization of Books, 2012, 263 p.

that meets our cultural and historical needs, it means creating an authentic and effective theater in the current socio-political climate.¹⁴”

Private Sector Theater

Regarding the role of the private sector and how it can be employed in Syria’s cultural sector, it is haphazard and doesn’t respond to any plan or strategy that incentivizes its contribution through bilaws and regulations. According to the 2014 exploratory survey of cultural policies in Syria, “there is no clear policy for the commercial private sector, and the contribution of the commercial sector is limited to timid material support for purely propagandistic purposes, without a clear strategy or vision, and the state does not provide any incentives, other than moral ones, to encourage the private sector to contribute to supporting cultural activities. The state is the main sponsor of the cultural sector in Syria and is able to develop mechanisms and policies for cultural work mainly through its five-year plan, which maintained the state’s vision of cultural work as a consumer service sector. Thus, cultural work and policies became dependent on government action, while the private sector and civil society organizations were not considered partners in the creation of cultural policies. However, the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), which coincided with the strategy of transition from a centralized socialist system to a market-based one, set out a new vision for the cultural sector. This vision strived to involve the private sector, it encouraged and supported non-governmental cultural work, and provided opportunities for civil society organizations to contribute to the formulation and implementation of cultural policies”. The new policies made it possible to rethink the work of certain existing institutions, to develop and restructure them, and to train their staff. In addition, existing laws and regulations governing the work of official institutions dealing with cultural affairs were developed and amended, and room was made for partnership with private sector institutions. However, despite the laws and regulations, observers believed that they have not been implemented in a way that would improve the climate for cultural work. This is evidenced by the fact that experiments with private theaters rapidly came to an end. In a 2008 article, Louay Hussein attempted to explain the role of the Syrian state in promoting culture, stating: “However, the cultural and political authorities of the time saw this role as centralizing or standardizing culture, or more precisely, producing a uniform culture. Any other culture was considered inferior or not Syrian. To achieve this goal, the state monopolized and nationalized culture, even during the year of ‘Damascus the Capital of Arab Culture’ [2008], along with other sectors such as the sports, media and industrial sectors. The goal of the state’s cultural activism is not to produce a culture that satisfies the diversity of Syrian society, but rather to fulfill the Syrian government’s duty to achieve

14- Ibid.

a renaissance of the cultural reality ¹⁵”. The sponsorship of the private sector is a relatively recent phenomenon, that emerged after 2000. Sponsors did not benefit from incentives, and support was often slow to materialize. Private companies were not the only entities that sponsored the private sector; civil and civic organizations were also involved in supporting culture in general, but they were relatively new when the revolution began in 2011, and most of them lacked clear plans for the cultural sector due to the absence of an institutionalized culture of civic work.

Arab and foreign bodies and organizations were investing in the cultural sector, and Syria was relying on them to implement its five-year plan. Syria sought to expand the channels of developmental cooperation and use the former to attract more foreign investments, which would then be used to finance the development process, as indicated in the Exploratory Survey on Cultural Policies in Syria. Foreign cultural centers have endeavored to provide support to the arts and culture sector, as well as to young, independent artists, in addition to some regional donor organizations.

As mentioned above, before the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, private and independent theater troupes conducted their own theatrical activities. Then, the Ministry of Culture merged several private troupes with the National Theater Group, namely the Oriental Club, the Free Theater, the Technical Club, and the Ansar Theater Troupe. Later, the Ministry of Culture added other troupes, including the Television Drama Troupe, founded by Rafik Al-Sabban, which introduced new styles to the repertoire of the National Theater Group, drawing inspiration from popular commercial theater forms.

Troupes were formed under the auspices and names of certain artists, such as the Firqat Al-Akhawayn Qanū‘ and Firqat Mahmūd Jabr, which presented social comedy shows. ‘Umr Ḥajū and Durayd Laḥām attempted to politicize comic theater with their troupe, which was popular and appreciated, but was criticized after its third performance for repeating artistic forms and content, according to reviews and articles mentioned at the time. This was followed by the Tishreen Family Troupe, which was founded by Durayd Laḥām with Nihad Qalai and writer Muhammad Al-Maghut in 1973. The troupe presented three satirical social comedies in colloquial dialect, which were later reproduced and presented on Syrian television. They became the only model of popular comic theater for amateur theaters and subsequent experiments. The influence of these works extended to television drama, in addition to the great popularity of the Thistle Theater plays, which were based on the Brechtian alienation technique and the

15- HUSSEIN Louay, *Thaqāfat al-Sūq al-Ijtīmā’ī. Alef* [online], Available at: <https://aleftoday.info/article.php?id=59>.

chansonner style.¹⁶ In these plays, the characters comment on their actions and address the audience directly, removing themselves from the context of the text. Under the aura of satirical socio-political comedy, these plays were able to criticize the behavioral patterns of the citizen as a subject rather than the system, which has become a technique used in TV comedy dramas to this day.

Troupes and Collectives in the 1990s and early 2000s

In the 1990s, as the number of graduates of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts increased and its departments and specializations multiplied, the creation of troupes and artistic collectives also increased. A series of experiments were conducted, including the Theater of the Room in 1990, which was established by director Muhammad Qarasli. The troupe presented three performances in Syria, Jordan and Tunisia. In 1996, the troupe founded the Mosaic Gathering for Artistic Production and presented its first play (*Liqā'*) in Japan, and then in 2003 *Mūnūdrāmā Imra'a... Nisā'* (Monodrama Woman...Women) in Syria and Canada.¹⁷

In 2002, the Koon Theater Group, an independent theater collective founded by Oussama Halal, was established with a particular focus on street theater and performances in alternative spaces. In 2006, Nawar Bulbul and Ramez Aswad founded the Autumn Theatre Troupe, which began performing in Damascus with *Hulm Laylat Eid* (Dream of Eid Night). Their play *Al-Munfarda* (The Soloist) was presented at the Apostron Festival in the Czech Republic, and the text of the play was translated into Czech.

In 1996, Tunisian writer Hakim Marzouki founded the Raseef Troupe with director Rola Fattal. The troupe performed three plays and then parted ways. Parallely, the first dance troupe was established by Noura Murad's Leish Troupe in physical theater, founded by the dancer and actress in 1999 and still active today. In 2000, the Inana Troupe was created by the artist Jihad Mufleh, and a year later, Lawand Hajo and Azza Sawah founded the Ramad Troupe.

At the beginning of the third millennium, with the policy of openness, the Syrian theater scene witnessed the emergence of numerous artistic collectives that were financially supported by private commercial companies. Two such collectives were Adad for Theatrical Creativity, headed by Abed Fahd, and Sama, which debuted with the play *The Exploding Man*, sponsored by the advertising company Ebla Group, headed by Zouhir Kanou.

16- The Thistle theater was founded by 'Umr Ḥajjū in 1969 during the first round of Damascus Festival for the Theatrical Arts. According to the writer, critic, and former minister of culture Riad Ismat, thistle theatre is a form of political cabaret theater that led to the production of three performances written by 'Umr Ḥajjū himself and involving acclaimed actor Duraid Laham.

17- AL-NASSAR Mohsen, *Tajribat Al Masrah Al Khāṣ fi Sūriyā: A'māl Tuḥāwīr al-Wāqī' wa Tantaqiduhu*. In: *Arab Theater Organization website* [online], July 2016, [Accessed February 2022]. Available at: <https://atitheater.ae>. /تجربة المسرح الخاص-في سوريا-أعمال-تحاو/.

Despite the openness of the cultural scene after the Tenth Five-Year Plan, many artists remained unable to produce their work. As a result, the artists' collectives that were formed during this period began to dissolve. This was the case with Sama, that declared bankruptcy after presenting their performances. A number of artists financed their work independently or received grants from Culture Resource and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) to support their artistic endeavors. Foreign cultural centers also provided logistical support for some artistic activities, including providing venues and permits.

A brief overview of the mechanisms of theatrical production in Syria allows us to understand the impact of this complex sector, which was monopolized by the state and its ministries, and created gaps in this system, which allowed for new types of production. This understanding allows us to better comprehend the subsequent stage and impact of these different production models on the form and practice of theater inside Syria after the revolution until 2021.

Playwriting

The first documented attempt at playwriting in Syria was by Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1833-1902). "Influenced by the plays performed by French missionaries in Damascus in the 1860s, Abu Khalil al-Qabbani presented his first play, *Nākir al-Jamīl* (The Ungrateful), which drew on popular tales and Arab heritage, in his grandfather's house".¹⁸ Al-Qabbani's plays as a whole are considered lyrical, they were created for the purpose of performance and were not intended for publication. Abu Khalil al-Qabbani was a prolific writer, composer, director, and educator who wrote approximately thirty plays. Among his most famous works are *Hārūn al-Rashīd ma'a al-Amīr Ghānim ibn Ayūb*, *Wa-qūṭ al-Qulūb*, *'Afīfa*, *Lubāb al-Gharām*, and other theatrical texts. He endeavored to create a new form of expression, integrating Arab heritage with contemporary artistic trends to align with the prevailing cultural taste.

The theater movement and troupes were active between the two world wars in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. This period saw the emergence of theatrical translations and attempts to break away from Al-Qabbani model of playwriting. These attempts were influenced by adaptations and Arabic translations of texts, and playwrights began to emerge, including Ma'ruf al-Arnaout, who wrote the play *Jamāl Pāshā al-Safāh* (Jamal Pasha the Butcher), which was performed in Damascus. Although the original text of the play is no longer available, it is said to have consisted of "three chapters with a special scene."¹⁹

Abd Al-Wahab Abu Saud, Ma'ruf al-Arnaout, and other writers were the first to write local texts in Syria that addressed contemporary political issues. One such

18- MUHABBAK Ahmad Ziyad, « Al Ta'lif Al Masrahī fi Sūriyā », *Majalat Al Thaqāfa*, March 1989.

19- ABU SHANAB Adel, *Bawākīr al-Ta'lif al-Masrahī fi Sūriyā*. Damas, Manshūrāt Ittīhād al-Kutāb Al 'Arab, 1978.

text is Abu Saud's *Tatwīj Fayṣal Li-'Abī Al-Su'ūd* (The Coronation of Faisal), which was published with other plays by Dar al-Yaqza in 1949. The first works of Syrian playwrights were essentially nationalist, with the majority of texts dealing with political themes. Social issues were rarely at the center of these texts, as the birth of playwriting coincided with the exit of the Turks, the French colonization, the two world wars, the rise of Arab nationalism, the Nakba, and the political coups in Syria. The prevailing atmosphere of the time encouraged a political orientation and slowed the emergence of theater addressing social or individual issues.

In the 1940s, there was a remarkable interest in playwriting that coincided with the emergence of theater and literary criticism. In 1949, the first playwriting competition was announced in *Al-Majallat Al-Nuqqād*. The competition included cash prizes and required the submission of theatrical texts addressing social issues. In his book, *Bawākir al-Ta'līf al-Masrahī fī Sūriyā* (The beginnings of playwriting in Syria), 'Ādil Abū Shanab mentioned that the two writers, Mumtaz Al-Rikabi and Hasib Kayyali, were the winners of the awards for their respective texts, *Al-Ḥāja Kamlā* and *Al-Ṣadiqān* (The Two Friends). In addition, after inviting playwrights to share their texts, the Damascus magazine *Al-Sabah* published five Syrian plays. Writers who would later become pioneers of playwriting began to emerge, such as Khalil al-Hindawi, who wrote the mythological play *Pygmalion*, previously written by Tawfiq al-Hakim. Al-Hindawi's experience was criticized, especially by Dr. Ahmad Ziyad Muhabbak, who, in his research on playwriting published in *Al-Thaqafa* magazine in 1989, considered Al-Hindawi's writings to be part of the emotional rhetorical movement that emerged after the Nakba: Al-Hindawi, dealt in his mythological plays "with intellectual ideas denying reality in a way that devalued realism, but after the Nakba, he began to focus on reality by dealing with history and myth, and created four short realistic plays, namely: *Ṭarīq Al-'Awda* (The Way Back), *Tis 'Banādīq Faqaṭ* (Only Nine Guns), *Al-Fidā'i* *Al-Ṣaghīr Ḥasan* (Little Fida'i Hassan), and *Innahū Sayā'ūd* (He'll Be Back) ".²⁰

According to Ahmad Ziyad Muhabbak, the humanist idealist movement emerged in the 1950s to address the political reality during a critical political period, and this movement emphasized individual heroism in the service of a humanist nationalist principle, most likely liberation, represented by the writer Mustafa al-Hallaj. One of the movements that emerged after the establishment of the Ministry of Culture is the critical realist movement. "In this movement, a burning issue is discussed with extreme frustration, exposing local political matters with courageous boldness, but with great despair. There is no hope for change, there is nothing to do but to witness injustice without seeking to confront and fight it"²¹. In his early years, Saadallah Wannous played a leading role in this movement, producing four short plays: *Faṣḍ al-dam* (Phlebotomy), *Lu'bat al-Dabābīs* (The Pins Game), *Al-Maqhā al-Zujāji* (The Glass Café), and *Bā'ī Al-Dibs Al-Faqīr* (The Misery of the Poor Molasses Seller).

20- MUHABBAK Ahmad Ziyad, « Al Ta'līf Al Masrahī fī Sūriyā », op. cit., p. 7.

21- Ibid.

Writer and critic Farhan Bulbul pointed out the tendency of Syrian cultural institutions, represented by ministries and directorates, to favor foreign texts over local ones until the end of 1968, and raised the question of the author-director that emerged at that time. During the first half of the 20th century, numerous playwrights staged their own shows and managed their own troupes, with some experiments proving successful, such as that of Murad al-Sibai. Nevertheless, subsequent attempts in the second half of the 20th century were not as successful, such as the playwright Saadallah Wannous's attempt to stage the play *Mughāmārāt Ra's al-Mamlūk Jābir* (The Adventures of Mamluk Jaber's Head). Wannous was severely criticized after presenting his play and refrained from repeating the experiment. He then collaborated with Fawaz al-Sajer on the project of experimental theater, with al-Sajer assuming the role of director for the plays. Likewise, Mamdouh Adwan tried to form "a partnership with Mahmoud Khdour with the intention of presenting his political and intellectual vision to the audience. However, the endeavor did not yield the desired results, and Riad Ismat tried to stage selected plays in different institutions, but his experiments remained limited and could not be continued".²²

The institutionalization of theater in Syria in 1960 was considered a transitional stage in terms of form, content, and production. It is noteworthy that in the first period of the work of the National Theater and the subsidiary theaters, the playwriting movement was active, whether by publishing in periodicals and magazines or by dedicating issues to theater and playwriting. The statistical study published by Dr. Ahmad Ziyad Muhabbak in *Majalat al-Mawqif al-'Arabī* in 1986 shows "that the number of plays written between 1945 and 1985 was 342, of which 96 texts were written before the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and the National Theater, and 246 plays were written between 1967 and 1985, which means that the number of plays written tripled".²³

After the Naksa, several leading writers, including Khalil al-Hindawi, Zuhair Mirza, and Ahmed al-Shibani, lost popularity, while others with new artistic styles came to the fore, such as Saadallah Wannous, Muhammad al-Maghut, Murad al-Sibai, Mamdouh Adwan, Jan Alexan, Walid Ikhlasi, Riad Ismat, Ali Uqlah `Ersan, and others.

In his book *Al-Masrah al-Qawmiyy wa al-Masāriḥ al-Radīfa* (The National Theatre and its Affiliated Theatres), Jan Alexan documented the theatrical productions of the National Theatre and talked about the activity of playwrights in the 1970s; four plays about the Tishreen Liberation War were written and performed in 1973, namely *Kafr Qāsim* by Jan Alexan, *Al-Ghurabā`* (The Strangers) by Ali Uqlah

22- BULBUL Farhan, *Min Maq'ad Al Mutafarrij - Maqālāt wa Dirāsāt fī al-Masrah al-Sūrī fī Thulth Qarn*. Damas, Ministry of Culture, Syrian General Book Organization, 2007.

23- HAMMOURIYA Muhammad, *Ḥarakat Al Naqd Al Masraḥī fī Sūriyā*. Damas, Manshūrāt Ittīḥād al-Kutāb Al 'Arab, 1998.

`Ersan, *Ayyuha Al-Isrā'īliyy Hān Waqt Al-Istislam* (O Israeli, It's Time to Surrender) by Mustafa Hallaj, and *Dimashq Intazarnāk* (Damascus We Waited for You) and *Al-Ḥubb Jā'a* (Love Came), a collaborative effort by a group of writers. Local plays included Wannous's *Al-Malik Huwa al-Malik* (The King is King) and *Sahra ma'a Abi Khalil al-Qabānī* (An Evening with Abu Khalil al-Qabbani), both of which were directed by As'ad Fidah, and *Masrahīyat al-Aqni'ah* (The Play of Masks) by Ali Uqlah `Ersan. Some playwrights presented their works for the first time, such as Farhan Bulbul, who presented *Al-Mumathilūn Yatarāshaqūn al-Ḥijāra* (Actors Throw Stones), directed by Youssef Harb. This experience was unique for the Workers' Theater in Homs, as it dealt with heritage in a contemporary way and was presented on the stage of the National Theater. It was a «theater within theater» experience that addressed the reality of working in a theater troupe, the question of national issues, and what the artist wants to present.

In addition to playwriting, adaptation and “texts prepping” (إعداد نصوص) activities were also popular. Alongside the classics presented by the National Theater, Mamdouh Adwan and Mahmoud Khmour presented Don Quichotte in Syria while Raymond Jabara presented Don Quichotte in Beirut theaters. It's worth noting that many artists used “theater within theater” during this period, such as Saadallah Wannous, Farhan Bulbul, and Mamdouh Adwan.

The 1970s also included new attempts at writing and directing, which were categorized and criticized under the name of experimental theater. These new attempts and private experiments were not well received by the press and critics, which in one way or another contributed to the demise of groups such as the Experimental Theater Group with Saadallah Wannous. Upon their return from France, the troupe presented *Ḥaflat Samar min ajl 5 Ḥuzayrān* (A Convivial Party for the 5th of June), which was well received by the public. However, Mughāmārāt Ra's al-Mamlūk Jābir, directed by Saadallah, did not succeed as described in Riad Ismat's article *Al-Tajārib al-Jadīda fī al-Masrah al-Sūrī al-Ḥadīth* (New Experiments in Modern Syrian Theater)²⁴. The University Theater presented new experiences after being limited to presenting classics within the Department of Literature. Students formed a troupe with members from different faculties, and presented plays such as *Fī Intizār al-Yasār* (Waiting for the Left), directed by Hassan Awiti, *Muhājir Brisbane* (Brisbane Immigrant) written by Lebanese author Georges Schehadé and directed by Khalil Tafesh, and texts by Mamdouh Adwan. Naela Al-Atrash directed Mamdouh Adwan's texts, and *Layl al-'Abid* (Night of the Slaves), which was cancelled by the bureau of censorship “who considered that it undermined the history of Islam through extremist interpretations that could be misunderstood and misinterpreted from a sectarian perspective, which cannot be tolerated at this stage [...]”²⁵.

24- ISMAT Riad, « Syria - Al Tajārib Al Jadidah fī Al Masrah Al Sūrī », *op. cit.*, p. 99.

25- *Ibid*, p. 100.

The 1980s saw a large number of adaptations of foreign texts, in contrast to the limited number of written plays. In his book *Al-Masrah al-Qawmī wa-al-Masāriḥ al-Radīfa fī al-Qaṭr al-ʿArabī al-Sūrī* 1959 (The National Theater and Subsidiary Theaters in Syria 1959-1989), Riad Ismat mentioned that the National Theater staged 33 plays in the 1980s, including 20 international plays, 5 Arab plays, and 8 local plays.

The 1980s were a period of stagnation, as described by many Syrian critics and writers, and this is what Riad Ismat pointed out in his 2002 article in *Al-Funun* magazine (The Arts Magazine) entitled *Buqʿat Ḍawʿ ʿalā al-Masrah al-Sūrī* (A Spotlight on Syrian Theater): “The situation of Syrian theater in the 1980s was neither favorable nor unfavorable, but a theatrical revival aimed at restoring past glories began in the mid-1990s, promising a new generation of directors and actors, although writers were a rare commodity”.²⁶

In this period, a number of experimental works were presented, and the creation of the Experimental Theater Group with Fawaz Al-Sajer and Saadallah Wannous (1976) had a significant impact on the performances of the subsequent years, such as *Qīsat Mawt Muʿlan* (The Story of a Foretold Death -1985), directed by Manuel Gígí and written by Saeed Houraniyeh, based on a novel by Gabriel García Márquez. Through this play, Houraniyeh presented a message from the creators about experimental theater and the experience of adapting a novel for the stage or innovating in the style of staging. In addition, Jihad Saad presented Albert Camus’ *Caligula*, which he adapted and directed.

In the 1980s, Fawaz al-Sajer presented two performances and directed the 1981 graduating class performance at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. At that time, he presented experimental performances. In 1980, he presented *Thalāth Hikāyāt* (Three Tales), three one-act plays by Argentinean playwright Osvaldo Dragún, directed by Fawaz al-Sajer, with the Experimental Theater Group. Riad Ismat described it as the best show in the history of the Experimental Theater: “It embodies the best of their artistic and intellectual works, using an experimental language suitable for communicating with a wide audience and breaking the traditional structure of theater and the interaction between the artist and the audience. It is the theater of popular spectatorship, where there is no separation between the stage and the auditorium, where there is no stage. The show takes place in the auditorium itself, in the corridors that surround the audience”. The performance was based on three short one-act plays by Argentinean writer Osvaldo Dragún dealing with the theme of human alienation in contemporary society from different perspectives.

It is important to note that the concept of experimentation at this stage was limited to innovation in terms of the form of the show, the relationship with the

26- ISMAT Riad, « Buqʿat Dawʿ Aala Al Masrah Al Sūrī », *Majalat Al Funūn*, February 2002, Issue 88-89, p. 48.

audience, and the implementation of the author's directorial vision. Innovation in terms of the theatrical text and playwriting was seldom to find.²⁷

In the 1990s, several new names appeared before becoming known in TV drama as actors but also as dramatists in charge of adapting or prepping texts, such as Ayman Zeidan, an actor who presented and adapted Dario Fo's *We can't Won't Pay* into *Supermarket* in 1992. He staged the play three times, including in 2021.

In his article in *Al-Funun*, Riad Ismat wrote about the experience of Ayman Zeidan, who turned to clownish comedy at the expense of theatrical art: "Comedy has been associated in the public mind with clowning and cheap entertainment by tickling political and sexual feelings."²⁸

Ajaj Salim, director of the National Theater Group, presented Mamdouh Adwan's two plays, *Safar Barlik* and *Al-Ghul* (The Ogre), and Saadallah Wannous's *Yawm min Zamāninā* (A Day in Our Time). Maher Saliba presented *The Silence of Speech* adapted from Chekhov plays and *Takhareef* by a group of writers.

In his book *Masrah Bilā Kawālīs* (Theater Without Backstage), Juan Jaan, director of the Directorate of Theaters and Music, analyzed the challenges that Syrian theaters faced at the beginning of the third millennium. He noted that "when looking at Syrian theater over the last seven years - from 1999 to 2006 - we notice a clear tendency to rely on local texts, and by local texts we mean texts written by Syrian authors, whether they are based on the written or oral Arabic heritage or on the theatrical literary heritage of other countries²⁹". Writing original texts declined considerably after the 1990s, and there were numerous attempts to adapt foreign texts, which were widely criticized for distorting the meaning of the original texts. Thus, adaptations took over the Syrian theater scene. It is important to analyze the nature of these adaptations, as most of them seem to be limited to canonical dramatic texts, while very few attempts were found to adapt documentary or other prose literary genres. Moreover, these adaptations were mainly of texts translated into Arabic, with a rare attempt to adapt a untranslated text.

These adaptations ranged from literal adaptations to attempts to localize texts by finding local and contemporary equivalents while keeping the narrative essence of the text. Adaptations of classical texts were often characterized by attempts to reduce the length of the text, and it was only in the last years of the post-revolutionary period that playwrights began to draw inspiration from certain texts and create their own plays.

After 2006, the concept of dramaturgy began to spread, although it was not widely known beforehand. This concept was introduced by some professors at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, such as Marie Elias, and by new professors

27- ISMAT Riad, « Syria - Three Experimental Tales », *Al-Adab Magazine*, June 1980, Issue 6, p. 74.

28- ISMAT Riad, « Boqa'at Daw' Aala Al Masrah Al Sūri », *op. cit.*

29- JAAN Juan, *Masrah bila Kawālīs: Theater Without Backstage - An Overview of the Syrian Theater Movement 1999-2006*. First edition. Syria, Ministry of Culture Publications, 2006, p. 13.

who returned to Syria after studying in Europe, such as Oussama Ghanam. During the first decade of the millennium, the role of the dramaturg emerged, although it was not mentioned in most references documenting Syrian theater before the millennium. The concept of dramaturgy began with popular shows such as Samer Omran and Oussama Ghanam's *Al-Muhājirān* (The Two Emigrants). The emergence of the profession of dramaturgy coincided with the return of some drama teachers to Syria after studying in Europe. The majority of those who worked as dramaturgs were necessarily graduates of the Department of Theater Studies. This department, which was inactive in the professional scene for a long time, increased its critical and theoretical role. Dramaturgy was a means of moving from the theoretical aspect of this department to the practical.

It is worth noting though that dramaturgy was practiced before this period, as directors, screenwriters and writers explored intellectual questions and historical contexts, and searched for the processes of meaning-making. However, the profession of dramaturg as a specialty and job title emerged relatively later, allowing students of theater studies to specialize in the process and participate in it. As the number of adaptations increased, the dramaturg's primary function was to translate the original text into localized contexts and everyday language. The process of adaptation thus became an essential part of his work.

Over the past decade, as the number of shows receiving financial support increased, graduates of the Department of Theater Studies had a large share and a significant presence, as most of the shows were adapted from foreign theatrical texts. Ibrahim Jumaa, Mohammad Istanbuli, Kifah Zaini, Yazan al-Dahouk, and others had the opportunity to receive funding for theater through cultural organizations, in addition to a large number of new theater graduates who settled in Syria. These grants enabled them to practice theatrical arts inside Syria. The lack of original texts written by Syrian playwrights and the tendency to adapt foreign texts during this period are attributed to a number of factors. One of the most important is the lack of incentives for playwrights to produce new works: "Incentives for playwrights to create new work are almost nonexistent, and it's well known that the pay playwrights receive barely covers the living wage³⁰." This factor led many to pursue careers in television, where drama production began to flourish with the emergence of private companies in the second millennium and the participation of Arab production companies. As a result, television became the main orientation for artists. The economic expansion did not affect the role of theater, while it helped television flourish. This led to the creation of numerous artistic groups, which quickly collapsed, either due to lack of funding, lack of success, or work difficulties in general.

It's also worth mentioning that the playwriting movement became active after a series of workshops were organized by the British Council since 2004 with students from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. These workshops

30- *Ibid.*, p. 14.

contributed to supporting the writing process, with dedicated workshops for students of the Department of Theater Studies that was significantly neglected since the establishment of the Institute, both in terms of its name and the specializations offered to its students. A series of workshops were held with the aim of developing scripts for plays by young writers. The first workshop, entitled *Sabr El-Ruh* (Soul Sounding), was led by the Scottish playwright David Greig, and was followed by the workshop “Damascus”, which was directed by Greig and performed inside Syria in 2009. The workshop was the beginning of an ongoing project that resulted in the production of nine texts by Syrian playwrights, and extended to six other Arab countries. The workshops ended with staged readings in Syria, and selected texts were performed at London’s Royal Court Theater. In 2008, the New Playwriting Project was launched, resulting in the publication of *Antūlūjyā: Masraḥiyyāt ‘Arabīya min al-Alfiya al-Thālitha* (Anthology: Arab Plays from the Third Millennium) by Mamdouh Adwan Publishing House in 2010, and “five of the Royal Court Project plays were published in English in collaboration with Nick Hern Publishing House”.³¹

This period was marked by a number of independent initiatives, such as the book *Ḥakāyā al-Rūḥ wa-al-Ismanṭ* (Tales of Spirit and Cement), which is a collection of four theater texts by contemporary Syrian playwrights, namely Wael Kadour, Abdullah al-Kafri, Mudar Alhaggi, and Soumar Daghestani. It was published in 2010 by Dar al-Farabi in Beirut and was considered to be the outcome of David Greig’s workshop.

The four writers presented four play scripts that Greig described as “disturbing and skeptical.” He was profoundly shocked by “the remarkable originality and emotional intensity of a series of scenes written by Syrian writers about love, anger and family. The young writers’ texts leave the reader in a state of wonder. However, the four plays featured characters who refused to describe the world as it is. These characters believed that there were two worlds in Damascus: the real and the imaginary.”

In addition, the Swedish Institute for Dramatic Arts, with the support of Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), supervised the Youth Theater Project, launched by Dr. Marie Elias, which aimed to develop theatrical experiments in Syria in 2008. The project focused on the production of plays by young directors. Omar Abu Saada, for example, presented Adnan Al-Awda’s text, *Al Mirwad wal Makhala* (Kohl tube and Stick), which he wrote as part of a playwriting workshop with the Royal Court Theatre.

A close look at the evolution of Syrian theatrical texts reveals a constant shift between adaptations of foreign texts and intermittent periods of writing of local original texts. Following the official institution’s preference for foreign scripts until 1968, new playwrights emerged after the Naksa. Because critics did not welcome experimental movements in theatrical texts attempting to offer an

31- *Arabic Plays from the Third Millennium*. Anthology featuring works by various playwrights. Syria, Dar Mamdouh Adwan for Publishing and Distribution, 2013, p. 7.

authentic Syrian identity, and because of the proliferate use of foreign texts over local texts in the 1980s, the attempts to adapt international texts were more recurrent than not, despite the emergence of a group of young writers who participated in writing workshops that began with the British Council and were followed by workshops organized by the Citizen Artists Foundation.

In this context, it is difficult to define the transitional stages of the Syrian theatrical text that build a distinct identity while transcending the influence of international theatrical movements. However, it is possible to identify certain characteristics of the intermittent stages of playwriting until the pre-revolutionary period, most notably the theme of political symbolism on the one hand, and the aforementioned critical realism, which seemed to be selective and tried as much as possible to avoid approaching modern history. The researcher Ahmed Ziyad Muhabbak, in his study of theatrical writing between 1945 and 1967, emphasized the playwrights' lack of connection with reality and their reliance on ancient history and myth in their writings, which changed, albeit slightly, with the post-Naksa playwrights, who approached reality with a critical, sometimes alienating, sometimes realistic approach, often resorting to allegory to refer to the political reality: In *al-Ghurabā'* (The Strangers), Ali Uqlah 'Ersan's refers to the 1948 Israeli-Palestinian war by describing villagers who allowed a group of foreigners to camp in their town. Similarly, in *Muḥākamat al-Rajul alladhī Lam Yuḥārib* (The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight, 1970), Mamdouh Adwan uses Hulagu Khan's occupation of Arab lands in the 13th century as an opportunity to discuss the failures of Arab leaders in the 1967 war, the state of the Arabs before and during the war, and the growing number of refugees in the Arab world. In the end, Hulagu Khan kicks out the original owners of the land.³²

In *The October Village*, Muhammad al-Maghut reflects on the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict by narrating the story of a wedding postponed following the theft of the groom's vineyard, despite "the promises of the village chiefs to recover the lost land³³".

In *Al-Mumathilūn Yarmūn al-Ḥijāra* (Actors Throw Stones), Farhan Bulbul uses a theater-within-a-theater style to narrate historical events that took place in Mecca with Abdul-Muttalib bin Hashim, the chief of the Quraysh tribe, at a time that coincides with the emergence of Islam, when Abraha al-Ashram invaded Mecca. Bulbul used a meta-theatrical style in which the circumstances and challenges of the actors' daily lives - including financial struggles and their emotional stories - are interwoven with the historical narrative³⁴.

When reading the texts published in the years before the revolution, we noticed that the writers of the third millennium had a similar tendency, albeit with slightly different tools, to avoid questions of local politics and modern Syrian history. In

32- ZITER Edward, *Political Performance in Syria: from the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 78.

33- *Ibid.*, p. 60.

34- *Silsilat Udabaa Mukaramun: Fi Takrim Al Fanaan Al Masrahi Farhan Bulbul: Dirasat Wa Shahadat* (Honored Writers Series, in honor of the theater artist Farhan Bulbul: Studies and Testimonies). Damascus, Arab Writers Union 44, 2003, p. 79.

2008, for example, the show *Teatro 1949* is an adaptation of Fawaz Haddad's eponymous novel, published by Riad El-Rayyes press in Beirut. *Teatro 1949* was classified as a political novel, and many websites described it as "a fiction with a political narrative that refers to the coups that took place in Syria during this period, such as Hosni al-Zaim's coup and Sami al-Hinnawi's coup. Coups continue as the conflict between politicians and the military goes on."³⁵

In an interview with *Al-Khaleej* newspaper, Bassem Qahar, the director of *Teatro 1949*, described the performance as follows: "The play was written in collaboration with writer Wael Saad al-Din and is about the defeat of 1948, the occupation and partition of Palestine, and the persistence of Palestine in the collective consciousness of the Arab world³⁶". In this sense, we can say that contemporary Syrian history was difficult to present in Syrian theatrical texts written in the years preceding the revolution, and was often replaced by the Palestinian cause or the historical nostalgia. The impact of the complex relationship with local political history, on the one hand, and the limitations of the freedom of expression create firm grounds for self-censorship.

Nevertheless, the works of a number of young writers paved the way for the emergence of a distinct type of theatrical text, where the plot places the self at the center of the worldview. In his play *Khārij al-Sayyara* (Out of Control) Wael Kadour tackles the issue of honor crimes through the character of Aziz, who embarks on a journey to find his sister Alia. The latter fled to Damascus with her husband. The plot, in addition to Aziz's journey, is paralleled with everyday incidents and disparate characters reflecting the Syrian social fabric of Kadour's times.

In Mudar Alhaggi's *Brūnz*, the plot is based on a series of past and present events that shortly reveal the link between officer Adham and his prisoner Hani, a poet. The initial scene shows the prisoner being subjected to torture by an electric wire. The violence of the prison space mirrors a violent love story in which the stories of the two characters intersect, ultimately uniting them in their common destiny of loss and rupture. After Adham tries every possible way to find Gulnar, a woman he fell in love with, and after he forces the poet Hani to compose a poem, the pace of the second act is accelerated through intermittent telephone conversations between Hani and Adham with Gulnar. This leads the reader to conclude that Hani found Gulnar and had a secret affair with her. Following the sequence of events, the author uses the metaphor of bronze to describe the color of Gulnar's body. What's remarkable about this short text is the intimacy of expression and the overlap between the image of bronze as a symbol of

35- HADDAD Fawaz, "Teatro 1949", *Nil wa Furāt* [online], [Accessed April 2022], Available at: <https://www.neelwafurat.com/itempage.aspx?id=lbb258215-241166&search=books>.

36- NO AUTHOR, « Teatro 1949: A New Play to Be Staged in Damascus on July 25 », In: *Al-Khaleej* [online], [Accessed April 2022]. Available at: <https://www.alkhaleej.ae/2008-06-03/-مسرحية-جديدة-تعرض-في-دمشق-25-يوليو/ثقافة>.

seduction and solidity, the representations of women in the text, and the city of Damascus. This magical realist approach is punctuated by scenes of exoticism, with a contradiction between words and deeds, leaving the reader wondering whether the story is really a tale of love or a description of the violence of the city. Most of these texts were not staged inside Syria, and most of the authors mentioned in this paragraph left the country.

Conclusion

This section presented a reading of the pre-revolutionary theater scene from 1960 to March 2010, focusing on three main themes: The role of governmental institutions in shaping the theater scene, private sector theater, and playwriting. We presented a model of cultural governance that considers the official institution as the primary catalyzer of the concept of culture, including theater, within the values that promote Arab nationalism. We also highlighted the centralization of theatrical practice under the auspices of official sector institutions operating within several ministries. The first Axis highlighted the experimental theater founded by Saadallah Wannous, under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, sought to challenge traditional norms within the theater industry. At the same time, it sought to distinguish itself from other experimental theaters by establishing a theater that was both authentic, original, and responsive to the needs of the local culture.

In the second axis, we discussed the lack of clear policies and strategies of the private sector theatre and non-governmental organizations. Although some decrees were issued, they were not implemented. The third axis touched upon the artistic groups and gatherings that were popular in the 1990s but did not last. The final axis focused on an analysis of the playwriting movement while not disregarding some significant directing tendencies. The 1960s witnessed a remarkable upsurge in playwriting (after the institutionalization of theater), despite the relatively short lifespan of the Syrian theatrical activity after independence. The 1980s saw a stagnation in the playwriting movement and an increase in adaptations of international texts. The 1990s were marked by the Higher Institute and its graduates, with performances in alternative venues and a relative diversity of experience, while adaptations of international texts continued to dominate the Syrian theater scene. From the 1960s until the pre-revolutionary years, there was a tendency to neutralize local politics and to prevent the representation of Syrian history on the stage.

These axes help in understanding the following sections, especially with regard to the question of aesthetic changes and the new frameworks of ambiguity and negotiation the authority, which also helps to link these two questions to the theoretical framework of multiple allegiances. It also serves as a reference upon which to build the second section. The coming pages will present the transformations of the theatrical scene in the first decade after the revolution, with a focus on the playwriting and directing movements.

Section Two

Syrian production continued uninterrupted throughout the revolution and armed conflict until 2021. A large number of Syrian artists chose to continue their theatrical and performance productions following the momentum of March 25, 2011, while others suspended their theatrical activities.

A review of archival documents, studies, and articles on theatrical performances inside Syria revealed two dominant production types over the past decade, with a few exceptions. The first type includes performances that received financial support from cultural organizations based outside Syria. The second type includes shows produced by the Directorate of Theaters and Music and a few independent shows.

In this context, researcher Ibrahim al-Akel presented a bibliographical survey that focused on Syrian theater in Europe, while not disregarding productions inside Syria. According to the survey, the first performance after March 2011 was Zinati Qudsi's "Abu Shinar," a production of the Ministry of Culture and the Directorate of Theaters and Music. In July of the same year, Samer Omran's play *Al Muhajiran* (The Emigrants) was restaged.³⁷ During the first three years of the revolution, some of the performances created by Syrian artists who left the country were characterized as youthful and independent, and included both professional and amateur work, such as *Al-Thawra Ghadān Tu'ajalu ilā al-Bāriḥa* (Tomorrow's Revolution Postponed to Yesterday) by the Malas brothers as part of the so-called "Masrah El Ghorfah" (The Theatre of the Room or Bedroom Theatre as coined by Edward Ziter).³⁸ The Malas brothers resorted to performing in one of the rooms of their apartment because they could not obtain the necessary permits to perform on the stages of the National Theater, so they decided to perform the play in their home in the Al-Tijara neighborhood in front of no more than twenty people. *Al-Jidār* (The Wall), a play inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *The Wall*, directed by Mahmoud al-Tawil and written by Kifah Zaini, was also performed in a house in Mezzeh, as were many other plays. Most of the above performances had clear political references. While the Malas brothers' play was based on an hypothetical interrogation between a Sunni officer and an Alawite protester, *The Wall* described mass executions and used the words freedom and revolution. These shows were not subject to censorship because they were performed outside the official theater institutions and without their approval.

37- NO AUTHOR, « Al-Muhajiran Play in Damascus », *Al-Ghad* [online], 25-7-2011, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: <https://alghad.com/مسرحيةالمهاجران-في-دمشق/>.

38- ZITER Edward, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

Other plays also had political references, such as *Jutha 'alā al-Raṣīf* (Corpse on the Pavement) (based on a text by Saadallah Wannous), directed by Ossama Halal, which was performed in a multipurpose hall at the Damascus Opera House after being staged in the Fares Khoury pedestrian tunnel in 2006. The play included political references that contributed to Halal's departure from Syria.³⁹

Before exploring the directing styles in various plays and examining the process of playwriting post-2011, it is essential to first discuss Diana Taylor's theory and her respective concepts of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same while elucidating the rationale behind their relevance in the Syrian context.

Multiple Allegiances and the Strategy of Doubling and Staying the Same

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor focuses on the repertoire of embodied memory, which is conveyed in performances, gestures, oral culture, movement, dance, and singing. She presents a wide range of performances and offers alternative perspectives to those derived from the written archive, which is particularly useful for reconsidering how to construct different historical and historiographical trajectories. Taylor returns to the concept of trans-cultured beliefs, which include religious pilgrimage rituals that combine elements of different belief systems. She notes that "Indigenous performances, paradoxically, seem to be transferred and reproduced within the very symbolic system designed to eliminate them: Roman Catholicism. Religion proved a vital conduit of social (as well as religious) behavior. The transfers occurred not just in the uneasy tensions between religious systems but within the religious systems themselves"⁴⁰. Although the priests succeeded in attracting new indigenous converts to Catholicism, the latter were able to worship their old gods yet in a new form.

In this sense, Taylor proposes the term "multi-coded performances": "In Mexico, where there is a hill called Tepéacac and the Spaniards call it Tepeaquilla, and now it is called Our Lady of Guadalupe; in this place they had a temple dedicated to the mother of the gods, whom they called Tonantzin, which means our Mother; there they made many sacrifices to honor this goddess and came to her from distant lands from more than twenty leagues, from all the regions of Mexico and they brought many offerings; men and women came to those feasts; there was a great gathering of people on those days and they all said let us go to the feast of Tonantzin; and now that the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe was built there, they also call it Tonantzin.... and they come now to visit this Tonantzin from far off, as far off as before, which devotion is also suspicious because everywhere

39- AL-TAL Samia, « Corpse on the Pavement of Damascus and Corpse on the Pavement of Beirut », *Third Bank* [online], October 2021, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: <https://diffah.alaraby.co.uk/diffah/arts/2021/10/18/جثة-على-رصيف-دمشق-وجثة-على-رصيف-بيروت/>.

40- TAYLOR Diana, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 44.

there are many churches of Our Lady and they do not go to them". In this sense, any act can show a double allegiance to a Catholic saint, while at the same time revealing a hidden allegiance to earlier deities.

According to Taylor, acts of transfer, in this case, involve duplication, replication and proliferation.⁴¹ Taylor uses the Virgin as an example of duplication, citing the multiple configurations of the Virgin that appear in a single painting. Through the "strategy of doubling and staying the same" that allows movement in the face of immobility, we can notice a very specific history of repression and reinvention. If Taylor's concepts are based on the transfer of knowledge and bodily codes between the world of text and the world of embodied memory, and between ritual performances and the worlds of the stage, then Diana Taylor's concept of "Multiple Allegiances and the Strategy of Doubling and Staying the Same" can help us explore and understand the position and experience of a large number of artists inside Syria who produced theater for ten years, albeit sporadically.

As mentioned earlier, we adopted and rerouted Diana Taylor's term to refer to the margins of negotiation and evasiveness with the authority that controls most of the frameworks of art production, without falling into the trap of the dichotomy of alignment with and opposition to the regime. We believe that this term may help us avoid polarization that further divides Syrian artists, while the level of complexity surrounding the process of theater production under a dictatorial regime is more complicated than creating annihilating dichotomies.

In his book *Revolutions Aesthetic: A Cultural History of Baʿthist Syria*, Levantine historian Max Weiss used the term Asadist-Baʿthist cultural revolution to refer to the conceptualization, dissemination, and (often haphazard) implementation of a "new aesthetic ideology that drew on existing modes of artistic engagement while charting new directions for Syrian and pan-Arab cultural and intellectual life {...}." State institutions and regime elites were enlisted to reshape Syrian culture through an aesthetics of power that hinged on communicative languages that Weiss characterizes as "speaking-to" and "speaking-for". Weiss adds, "Despite the substantial efforts dedicated to state- and nation-building, the Syrian regime could never completely capture the cultural and intellectual fields. Competing artistic visions, comprehensible in terms of the aesthetics of resistance and the aesthetics of solidarity, were articulated respectively through what I term speaking-against and speaking-with and therefore coexisted with regime power and state culture in uneasy but sometimes unexpectedly untroubled ways".⁴² According to Weiss, the three aesthetics co-existed leaving room for ambiguity, mixed messages, and subversive interpretations.

We will apply Taylor's theory to the specific political context of Syrian art referred to by Weiss. Here, the multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling

41- *Ibid.*, p. 46.

42- WEISS Max, *Revolutions Aesthetic – A Cultural History of Baathist Syria*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2022, p. 2.

between the conqueror and the conquered - or the colonizer and the colonized - are transformed into local tactics of internal negotiation between an oppressive authority that quasi-controls the means of production and is able to frame boundaries for utterance and self-expression in order to serve its interests on one hand, and between the artistic capacities that are able to produce art under the umbrella of the regime while attempting to break the boundaries and the hegemonic aesthetics of self-expression and creativity.

It is thus possible to understand “multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same” beyond the binary of the regime and the opposition by focusing on the aesthetics of the artworks themselves.

By comparing Weiss’s aesthetics, namely the Asadist Ba’thist aesthetic ideology and the other aesthetics that seek an escape, with the concept of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same, it is possible to derive multiple and contradictory interpretations of Taylor’s term. The use and rerouting of Taylor’s term should be distinguished at two main levels in the context of present research:

- The transitive level of multiple allegiances and the strategies of doubling and staying the same: this level includes allegiances that align themselves with the Asadist Ba’thist aesthetic ideology, and reproduces the same aesthetic tools on stage as an act of continuity of the discourse of authority. Weiss observes that with the rise of Hafiz El Assad into power, a new kind of aesthetic ideology-promoted in state-sanctioned periodicals and other media- was established hence aspiring to “be hegemonic, national-popular, and faithful to creative expression that would articulate such notions of cultural revolution.”⁴³ In such aesthetics, the “heroism of the leader” is emphasized, more so, heroism becomes a conceptual national virtue. An example of the Asadist Ba’thist aesthetic that Weiss foregrounds is Durayd Lahham’s film, *The Empire of Ghawar* (1982), where authoritarian leadership is both justified and satirized.⁴⁴ It is important to note that we do not consider the term “transitive level of multiple allegiances” to be a term that devalues the artwork or the artist’s efforts. Rather, we chose this characterization to refer to a congruence or intersection with the aesthetics of the regime, and in terms of that congruence, it is transitive.
- The transcendental level of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same: In this case, allegiances go beyond imitating the aesthetics

43- *Ibid.*, p. 62.

44- *Ibid.*, p. 156. In this film, two neighborhood leaders, Abu Anad and Abu Jamil compete over control. As tensions escalate, Abu Jamil asserts that both neighborhoods fall under his control and demands tribute from residents, amidst the resistance of Ghawar. The film ends with Ghawar becoming the leader who permeates the same autocratic patterns of Abu Jamil. According to Weiss, “Ghawar ascends to the status of untouchable *za’im* (leader) in what is (occasionally sardonically) portrayed as heroic fashion even as he continues to thunder in the name of the national-popular, in a manner that is strikingly reminiscent of the leader himself. While authoritarian power is softly lampooned, *the empire of Ghawar* also makes clear to the audience that the leader is—perhaps axiomatically—an everyman, a man of the people, an authentic reflection of national culture, perhaps an organic intellectual but at the very least a broadly relatable personality.”

of authority in favor of other types of allegiances, one of which can be allegiance to the place or city as a state that sets authority aside, or allegiance to the people of the place and to personal or artistic beliefs, which rarely appeared in Syrian theater before 2011. These allegiances do not necessarily align with the Assad-Baathist ideology nor its aesthetic, and at the same time they avoid as much as possible the dichotomy of allegiance and opposition, forming a double condition that imposes a tense, yet adaptable and in some cases frequent relationship with the apparatuses of the regime. On the other hand, the transcendental level of multiple allegiances can reuse aesthetic ideology in a different context based on the above, while presenting a distinct and different suggestion, as we will see in the following pages. The following pages focus on some of the directorial trends that are reproducing the pre-2011 aesthetics.

Directorial Trends: The Aesthetics of Scarcity

To create an exhaustive understanding of the directorial trends that emerged in the ten years after the revolution is a challenging task. While political upheavals sometimes lead to changes in theatrical conventions and aesthetics while paving the way for new theatrical forms, it may not be possible to probe such occurrence in the Syrian context due to the lack of documentation of performances during this period, the inability to track or document them, and the absence of studies devoted to the aesthetics of directing in Syria in general. Consequently, the cases studied in the second and third sections of the research are limited to plays that were videotaped, documented in full text, or mentioned in multiple articles that, when combined, allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of the performance.

In the following pages we will talk about: *Histiryā* (2014) (written and directed by Jihad Saad), *Masrahiya* (A Play) (2021) (directed by Farah Al Dbayyat), *'An Al-Ḥarb wa-Ashyā' Ukhrā* (About War and Other Things) (2014) (Orwa Al Arabi), *Laysat Anā* (Not Me) (2021) (Ibrahim Jumaa), and *Hunna* (Them) (directed by Anna Akkash). Most of these plays are professional productions, with the exception of Jihad Saad's play, which began as a graduation project for drama students and was later performed in front of large audiences in Syria, Beirut, and the United States.⁴⁵

A review of the video links to numerous plays and shows, shared by multiple artists or available online, reveals that the directors' work was largely dependent on the theatrical text as the primary basis for the production, whether the staging was realistic or Brechtian. Even in cases where the text was reinterpreted or adapted to convey alternative meanings, the textuality of the performance prevailed. Improvised theatrical performances were relatively rare, with the exception of Ammar Almamoun and Kifah Zaini's *Dādā Didd Al-dādā* and Anna

45- <http://syria-news.org/var/articlem.php?id=31168>

Akkash's *Hunna*, which were based entirely on improvisation. In addition to these works, there are Jihad Saad's *Histiryā*, in which Saad "abandoned" the text, and Noura Murad's improvisational dance performances⁴⁶. Nevertheless, a significant number of Syrian productions were generally based on theatrical texts from the international repertoire in an attempt to adapt them to the here and now.

If we look at the overall context of these shows, we find that most of them were produced in meager circumstances and lacked visual, auditory, and technical support, while text and acting remained the main pillars of the performance. Whereas performances in Syria can be generally categorized under two main pillars, Realist Theater and Brechtian Theater, the apparent austerity of the performances, takes the form of the "aesthetics of scarcity". While the "aesthetics of scarcity" responds to a certain aesthetic need, and austerity here becomes a factor of creativity catalyzing innovative tools, the "scarcity of spectacle" allows only for repetition, in which austerity is more visible.

"The aesthetic of scarcity" and "the scarcity of spectacle" cannot be separated from the economic and political circumstances experienced by most theater producers, workers, and theaters in Syria. Director Majdi El Moqbel⁴⁷ explains that the sets are shared between the shows, as it is not possible to design a specific set for each show. It is relatively simple to apply the costumes from a show that was performed in 2009 to a show that is currently being performed. However, this strategy does not meet the dramatic needs of today's productions. El Moqbel adds that the lighting equipment in Damascus has not been updated since 2005, and there is only one lighting mixer that artists borrow throughout Damascus.⁴⁸

In general, most of the grants from cultural institutions and organizations exceeded a few thousand dollars, while for the productions of the Directorate of Theaters and Music, the figures exceeded one thousand dollars. It was therefore not possible to stage big productions and shows. However, there were exceptions, such as *Al-Ṭariq ilā al-Shams* (The Road to the Sun) in 2015, produced on the occasion of the Syrian Army Day and directed by Mamdouh Atrash. The play relied on a huge production despite the poor quality of the work on the artistic level, as mentioned in an article in *As-Safir* newspaper.⁴⁹

The material examined shows that performances are still centered on the binary of Character development versus Physical Theater.⁵⁰ For example, there are differences between the theatrical work of Oussama Ghanam and that of Jihad Saad, as we will see in sections 3 and 4. If we compare "Damascus Theatre

46- Oussama Halal's experiences before he left Syria in 2014 are worth mentioning. His works were based on collective writing techniques such as *Cellophane*.

47- Syrian director and actor. He directed several works, including *Ana, Anta wa Hum*, (Me, You and Them), *Hal Taetaqid 'Anana Sanasil* (Do You Think We'll Get There) etc.

48- It is important to note that this information was reported on December 27, 2021.

49- MOHAMMAD ISMAIL Samer, « Al-Ṭariq ilā al-Shams li Mamdūh Al Atrash... Al Bahrajah Al Fā'iqa », *As-Safir*, May 2015.

50- There are a few exceptions outside of this binary, such as Ibrahim Jumaa, which we will discuss in the following pages.

Laboratory”, based on an in-depth analysis of the characters of the play and a long workshop involving actors, directors, and dramaturgs, with the “Theatre Laboratory” taught by Saad, and based on testing the capabilities and forms of the body, the voice, and the sensitivity of group interaction, we find a multiplicity of styles. Samer Mohammad Ismail describes this multiplicity of styles as a “brutal clash of styles” in his 2019 research article published by the Damascus Center for Research and Studies (Madad).⁵¹

In his analysis of Jihad Saad’s *Hysteria*, a 2013-2014 graduation project that was later performed in Beirut and the United States, Samer Ismail describes the play as a performance that focuses on body movement rather than a script. Nine actors occupy the entire stage and “run from the back of the stage to the front, in a conflict that reflects the national catastrophe experienced by a group of people lost in the place and time of such tragedy”.⁵²

This show was categorized under the “theater of cruelty” genre that has reappeared in the contemporary Syrian repertoire. The director used bold scenes performed by actors of remarkable physical skill where erotic rituals were introduced as the equivalent of the recurrent murder... The repeated physical embraces between the murderer and the murdered, and between the victim and the executioner, provided a space in which the director favored movement over conformity to the literary text”.⁵³

Ismail adds that the characters in the show look like “carbon copies of massacres committed by murderers at the rhythm of rap music as if the director’s intention was to fuse elements of Grotowski’s and Meyerhold’s theaters and combine violence and mechanics in a single production, relying on a dim lighting that allowed the actors to perform an extreme degree of contemporary tragedy, akin to a madhouse, in which the roles were mixed with characters simultaneously speaking Egyptian, Aleppine and Levantine accents,” He describes the former characters as humans from the Arab streets, with adjoining fronts and characteristics, who are united [as they watch the same TV] screens [creating] a collective awareness of tragedy, and where bodies move in unison in front of the sniper’s rifle.⁵⁴

In the only video excerpt of the play available on YouTube, which lasts a little over ten minutes, it is clear that the actors deliberately amplified and exaggerated the vocal performance at certain points. The scenography, which consists of war barricades at the back of the stage, leads to a kinetic performance based on repetition.

In addition to the directing style, which relies essentially on the physical abilities of the actors, the performance has traits of “Theater within Theater” or

51- MOHAMMAD ISMAIL Samer, « Al Masrah Al Sūri fī al Ḥarb: Jabha Maftūḥa wa Dā’ima ma’a Thaḳāfat al Mawt », *Madad - Damascus Center for Research and Studies*, May 2019, p. 5.

52- The graduating class consisted of Hassan Doba, Reham Sakr, Remi Sarmini, Kenan Hamidan, Walaa Al-Azzam, Moghith Al-Sakr, Mehran Nemo, Mai Al-Salim and Hala Badir.

53- MOHAMMAD ISMAIL Samer, « Hystiriyā mashhadiya ṣādima wa mustawiyāt mu’aqada min al-talaqī », *Al Hayāt Al Masrahiya*, 2014, n° 88-89.

54- *Ibid.*, p. 7.

“Metatheater”, which was a significant aesthetic before 2011. In fact, Farah Al Dbayyat’s *Masrahiya* (A Play) was characterized by a return to the basic principles of theater, which prioritizes the actor’s performance over the other elements of the show. She chose to work exclusively with female actors in all roles in order to empower women. The illusion is broken by the appearance of the director between certain scenes, and by the actresses pausing the show to give their point of view on the content of the scene. Al Dbayyat worked with the author from the start to define the basic elements of the text, and also worked with the actresses in improvised settings to finalize the show. The actresses performed on two levels: the first level is sharp and grotesque, where they exaggerate painful situations, and the second level is realistic, where the pain is emphasized. The difference between the two levels invites the spectator to feel the strangeness of the scene and invites them to think. The most remarkable scene in this regard is that of Nahla. This scene relies on the realism of the journalist’s performance as opposed to the exaggeration of the father’s performance, followed by a video of the tortured child, as we shall see in the following pages.

Farah Al Dbayyat’s *Masrahiya* (A Play) style of directing, in which the director’s voice is heard from backstage to guide the scenes, was neither new nor exceptional. This method of “Theater within Theater”, was present in Syrian theatrical texts and directorial choices since the 1960s with Saadallah Wannous, Farhan Bulbul and others, in plays such as (Actors Throw Stones), (A soirée for June 5th) and others. As mentioned earlier in section 1, “theater within theater” was a common practice after the Naksa, Saadallah Wannous used it to provoke the people and express timely content related to the Naksa, without mentioning it directly. “Theater within theater” was also used in the 1990s and early 2000s, such as in Muhammad al-Maghout’s play *Khārij al-Sarb* (Outside the Flock) 1999.

The plot of *Khārij al-Sarb* (Outside the Flock) is similar to the adaptation of Romeo and Juliet entitled ‘*An al-Ḥarb wa-Ashyā’ Ukhrā* (On War and Other Things, 2014). The performance’s director, Orwa Al Arabi, chose this title to “reflect on the current events from the now/here/us perspective”, allowing “the theme of war and its devastating effects to occupy a large part of the show”. He transformed Shakespeare’s love story into a narrative that attempts “to express the suffering of the present”. In Al-Maghut’s metatheatrical adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, a group of actors and a director attempt to perform Shakespeare’s text amidst the intervention of the Arab League’s High Authority for the Development and Liberation of Theatre. The latter proposes a “reconciliation” between the Montague and Capulet families, a double reference to peace talks and regime control and hegemony. In turn, Al-Arabi focused on the war through the space of the show, separating the scenography, as stage space from the dramatic action. Critic Abdel Nasser Hasso⁵⁵ pointed out that Al-Arabi used “Romeo and Juliet” as a pretext to talk about reality, and therefore worked on elements that serve this

55- Former professor at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, former editor-in-chief of Al-Hayat al-Masrahiya Magazine.

purpose”. In the first scene of the show, the director apologized to the audience for one of the actors being late, and then the show turned into a disrupted rehearsal: “The show began after the actors waited for two of their colleagues who were late because of the checkpoints, and after the costumes arrived late because the tailor was in a hot zone. The play started directly with the actors in the midst of the ruins, without any introduction or connection between Shakespeare’s adapted text and the set of demolished buildings.”⁵⁶ In his article, Hasso mentioned that the director constantly referred to the “destruction of the Verona community”. In the stage space, there were “dilapidated houses, a withered tree, exhausted souls. The actors didn’t interact with this scenography to show the effects of destruction or its consequences in movement and performance... all that was going on was the director’s talk of suffering, while visually nothing was seen on stage”. Deception and betrayal were present in the show, as the love story of Romeo and Juliet turned into a competition between Tybalt and Romeo, and a conflict between Juliet and her mother. These scenes were completely unrelated to the set that referred to the war in Syria without mentioning it.

It’s worth noting that “Theater within Theater” and physical and/or visual alienation are used to address the theme of war without the ability of naming it directly. Anna Akkash’s *Hunna* (Them) is a notable example of a show that uses various forms of alienation to address the subject of war. The following review excerpt written by Alaeddine Al-Alem will give an overview of Akkash’s directing style:

“Akkash used a strict directing style to present the discourses and stories of the text: the actresses’ movements were regular, moving, sitting, speaking and repeating certain phrases sequentially. This style reinforced the rhetorical aspect of the text and the actresses’ mechanical movements on stage, which seemed limited to specific gestures and actions. There was no particular dramatic space for the performance, the bare stage reflected loss and loneliness. The wooden walls behind which the women hid, and moved from time to time, referred to the obstacles that war added to women’s lives. The chairs moved from stage right to stage left and center, and a projection screen was placed in the middle of the stage. Images of Damascene neighborhoods were projected onto the screen and onto the wooden wall. Each actress appeared on the projection, in a scene distinct from the rest of the play”.⁵⁷

In addition to theatrical forms that challenge the suspension of disbelief—ranging from ‘theater within theater’ to Brechtian alienation, physical theater,

56- HASSO Abdul Nasser, « On War and Other Things: A Shakespearean Text That Simulates Reality », *Al-Hayat al-Masrahiya*, 2014, no. 88-89.

57- AL-ALAM Aladdin, « Anna Akkash’s “Hunna”: Syrian Women Deserve More », *Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed* [online], June 2017, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: <https://diffah.alaraby.co.uk/diffah/arts/2017/8/20/أنا-عكاش-المرأة-السورية-تستحق-أكثر-من-ذلك>.

and the theater of cruelty—a new style of nuanced realistic theater has emerged with “Damascus Theater Laboratory”, led by dramaturg and director Oussama Ghanam.

In most of his plays produced after 2011, Ghanam drew on dramaturgy to adapt the works of Harold Pinter, Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard before writing his last text, *Shams wa Majd* (Shams and Majd) in 2022. The tryptic rapport between dramaturgy, the subjective experience of both the director and the actor, formed the basic pillars that led to the crystallization of the performance after making an in-depth analysis of the original text. The former is developed while working with the actors to deeply understand the text and thus own it. The characters are analyzed after an in-depth study of the shows and films that previously produced or adapted the play. In addition, discussions and improvisations with the actors and actresses, which can last several months, are considered before reaching the final scene/s of the show.

The text is hence parallelly seen as a dramaturgical weaving process linking research to local lived experiences. In this way, the characters become flesh and blood, with a spontaneity and rawness that allow the theatrical act to show the almighty good, yet violent human kind.

Although the three plays he directed [*Al-‘Awda* (The Homecoming), *Zujāj* (The Glass Menagerie), and *Drāmā* (True West)] had living rooms and households as dramatic spaces, Ghanam succeeded in conveying the dynamics of the Syrian streets and alleyways while preserving what he calls “the complexity of the human kind” imbued with fleeting, indirect and invisible contradictions and immersion with the present moment. For example, the opening scene of *Zujāj* offers a scathing critique of funding organizations, particularly AFAC (although the show itself was funded by AFAC), and makes direct reference to the war when the daughter goes out to buy falafel and the mother hilariously says “we’ll keep going” at the end of her phone call. Despite the depth of meaning in these beats, they go unnoticed, while reinforcing the family “microcosm” that Ghanam insists on in his trilogy. Ghanam begins his play by focusing on the everyday, often insignificant. Yet, it is those fleeting miniatures of events, that, when connected together, create an ascending dramatic abrupt dimension that paves the way for the climactic moments in the text.⁵⁸

In addition to the realistic theater used by the Damascus Theater Laboratory, the multiple experiments in “Theater within Theater”, alienation and the “Theater of Cruelty”, the “Theater of the Absurd” appeared in Syrian theater in recent years. In fact, Ibrahim Jumaa directed *Laysat Anā* (Not I), based on three texts by Samuel Beckett (Not I, Passages from Happy Days and Rockaby), in an attempt to apply the Irish writer’s absurdity to the local Syrian context.

Ibrahim Jumaa’s vision of directing is inseparable from his experience as a dramaturg. . For Jomaa, directing involves a profound understanding of the texts’ meanings and enriching them with new layers, while also adapting them

58- For further details, check out the last chapter of the research.

to the Syrian stage and connecting the three works to the present moment. Beckett's texts resurfaced during the COVID pandemic, when the question of 'the individual's ability to tell their story' became more urgent. This central theme is explored in *Laysat Anā* (Not I), where Jomaa delves into the struggles of a sixty-year-old woman attempting to narrate her own story. Jomaa highlighted through Beckett's texts the failed attempts of three women to tell their stories while working on three different phases of the city and involving three types of women: the rural woman, a subject rarely addressed in Syrian theater, the urban woman and the woman who lives in the suburbs. Each woman's experience is unique. Jomaa presented scenes in the dark to highlight a number of absences, notably the absence of man in the city, which led to the removal of man from Beckett's two texts, the absence of place and the absence of the story. In his vision as a director and dramaturg, he worked on all these intersections through a minimalist visual work that returns to Beckett's textual guidelines and remains faithful to them.

The Text:

A review of artistic grants awarded to theatre and performance projects by cultural organizations such as AFAC, Ettijahat, Citizen Artists and Culture Resource reveals that many of the former draw on adapting international texts. This was the case with Majd Fada's shows *Min Ajl Na'am min Ajl Lā* (For Yes and For No) and *'Arḍ al-Baḥr* (Out At Sea) adapted from original texts by Nathalie Sarraute and Polish writer Slawomir Mrozek, respectively, Yazan Al Dahouk's *Al-Khazān al- 'Aẓīm* (The Great Tank), adapted from Peter Terson's *The Private Ear and the Public Eye*, Mohammad Istanbuli's *Al-Bayt Yafūz Dā'iman* (The House Always Wins), adapted from John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Ibrahim Jumaa's *Al-Firdaws* (Paradise), adapted from Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Ammar Mohammad's *Al-Ayyām Al-Khawālī* (The Old Days), adapted from Pinter's *The Old Days* and Kifah Zaini's *Al-Jidār* (The Wall), adapted from Jean Paul Sartre's eponymous work. In all these projects, the dramaturg worked alongside the director. Physical theater performances also benefited from grants, such as Hussein Khaddour's *Ziyāra Dhātiya* (Self Visit), adapted from Patrick Süskind's *The Pigeon*.

In general, most plays were created by graduates of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, particularly those who studied in the Department of Theatre Studies, which had a great impact in spreading the concept of dramaturgy. There were rare attempts at "Happenings" and "improvised interactive theatre", most of which were performed in alternative spaces, such as Omar Baqbouk's *I 'tirāfāt al-Qirada* and Kefah Zaini's *Concerto of Bullets* (2013), which was presented at the Nation Building Movement Center. No records of these shows exist, with the exception of a few newspaper articles. These plays had more explicit political messages than other shows of the time, as they were not subject to censorship and were performed without authorization which was a rare occurrence.

Outside Damascus, dramaturgy was practiced in Homs, in 2021, with the show *Al Ghanama* (The Sheep), an adaptation of Stanislav Stratiev's "The Suede Jacket",

directed by Zain Al-Tayar, and in Aleppo, with the show *Khilāf* (A Disagreement), an adaptation of Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol's "The Overcoat", directed by Omar Kharbatli.

Some canonical works were used to allude to the Syrian war, Anna Akkash noted in her article that this trend was common in the early years of the war, as in works such as (*Hamlet*), '*An al-Ḥubb wa Ashyā' Ukhṛā*' (About Love and Other Things) directed by Orwa Al Arabi and written by Zaid Al Zarif who inspired his text from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Dā'irat Al Ṭabāshīr* (Chalk Circle by Bertold Brecht), (*Fabrika*) an adaptation of Branislav Nušić's text, *Ikhtitāf* (Abduction by Dario Fo) by Ayman Zeidan, *Kuluhum Abnā'i* (All My Sons by Arthur Miller), *Nabaḍ* (Pulse inspired by Percival Wilde's Mothers of Men), by Mamoun Al Khatib and *Brāskovyā Ḥurrā* (Free Braskovia), prepared by Fouad Hassan and other acclaimed texts⁵⁹. Original works written for the stage were limited in number, including *Masrahīya* (A play) by Amir Abu Kheir (playwright) and Farah Al Dbayyat (director). Akkash equally mentioned *Ḥikāyat Bilād Mā Fihā Mawt* (Tale of a Country with No Death) and *Bār fī Shāri 'al-Ḥamrā'* (A Bar on Hamra Street) by Kifah Al Khous, *Taṣḥīḥ Alwān* (Color Correction) by Samer Mohammed Ismail, *Hudna* (Cease-fire) by Adnan Azrouni, *Hunna* (Them) by Anna Akkash, *Al Waṣīya* (The Will) by Faisal Al-Rashed, and *Al Murūd wa Al Mikḥala* (Kohl Tube and Stick) and *Zabīb* (Raisin) by Adnan Al-Awda.⁶⁰

In the early years following the revolution, a number of works produced by the Directorate of Theaters and Music addressed the reality of the war by using parables, allegories and symbolism, as in pre-revolutionary theater works. In 2012, Kifah Al-Khous presented his work *Ḥikāyat Bilād Mā Fihā Mawt* (Tale of a Land without Death), the text of which was published in *Silsilat Dhākirat Al Masrah al-Sūrī - Dimashq 'Āṣimat al-Thaqāfa al-'Arabīya 2008* (Syrian Theatrical Memory - Damascus" series, Capital of Arab Culture) (2008) and produced by the Directorate of Theaters and Music. While the plot of Al-Khous' fantastic story focused on Bahr's search for a land without death, the 2012 version of the play also explored an additional central theme of "death caused by bloody wars". Al-Khous edited his previous text, adding new dialogue scenes that illustrate the pervasive violence and suffering Syrians endure on daily basis. The work reflects Syrian events and debates. As his journey unfolds using storytelling, live music and song, Bahr, the protagonist becomes hysterical because of the many massacres and bloodshed he witnessed. This is evident in his monologue: "The death you speak of is present here while in other countries they speak with pride of immortality, I am leaving and do not wish to return to this place. In your country here, he who stands on his feet is slaughtered."⁶¹

59- AKKASH Anna, « Syrian Theater in the Last Ten Years - Damascus as a Model », *Syria Untold* [online], May 2021, [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://syriauntold.com/2021/05/24/-المسرح-السوري-خلال-السنوات-العشر-الأخ>.

60- It is worth noting that Adnan al-Awda and Wael Kadour left Syria for good.

61- A Country with No Death https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ikP5e_xzSI&t=10s.

In *Hikāyat Bilād Mā Fihā Mawt* (Tale of a Land without Death), reality blends with fantasy and myth, and song accompanies the storyteller and the actors' performance, representing the mass of the group against Bahr's solo monologues. Bahr is haunted by the idea of death, which forms a holistic whole in the world of storytelling. In addition, the tale's fairy (Raghda Sharani) accompanies Bahr on his journey in search of a land where there is no death.⁶²

In this context, the show's tools reveal the worlds of parable and allegory. The performance is reminiscent of the tales of *Kalila and Demna*, but in the context of the search for immortality in a poetic and fantastic atmosphere.

This avoidance of war narratives, while relying on mythology and immortality to broadly allude to the present moment, is a recurrent pattern that unfolds in different forms in Syrian performances. The return to the theme of Palestinian exodus and the narratives of the Arab-Israeli conflict was a way of escaping the representation of the present moment on stage. Zinati Qudsi's monodrama *Abu Shinar*⁶³, first staged at the Qabbani Theater in April 2011 and circulated several times over the past decade, represented the discourse of the official institution. The show, produced by the Department of Theaters and Music, was considered experimental theater and was performed several times in different governorates. It is centered on Abu Shinar's adventurous journey in search of his son, after he hears a voice in his dream informing him that Shinar is still alive and working for an oil company in Oman. Abu Shinar describes his journey, which began in Tangier, Morocco, and continued through Egypt, the village of Ijzim in Palestine, to Oman, in light of the removal of Arab borders and after the liberation of Palestine, "from the river to the sea."⁶⁴

The tendency to avoid mentioning the current momentum (of the Syrian Uprising) with all its controversies and implications while touching upon them through symbolism and allusion, is also evident in comic works which were proliferate following 2011. Farah Al Dbayyat notes that people "needed satire more than confronting reality", and Ahmed Shawa, a theater professional in Aleppo, claims that 60% of reruns are commercial comedy shows.

In Ayman Zeidan's "Supermarket," an adaptation of Dario Fo's text ("Can't Pay? Won't Pay!") produced by the Directorate of Theaters and Music, Zeidan changes the ending of Fo's text. The 2021 version of *Supermarket*, first staged in 1992 and then in 2008, concludes with a focus on the themes of survival and departure. Zeidan's narrative is based on the idea of loyalty to one's homeland, which is linked to the act of protection. In the play, for example, when Zeidan's Giovanni hears the police ordering him to leave the building over the loudspeaker, he shouts: "I'm not leaving. This is my home, to which I've dedicated my life and hard work. This is my country, and since I serve it, it must protect me". Following Giovanni, the other characters repeat the same phrase, eliciting applause from

62- ZARZAR Anas, « Kifah al-Khous: A Syrian Gilgamesh's Journey to the Land of Eternity », *Al-Akhbar* [online], April 2012, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: https://al-akhbar.com/Literature_Arts/68836.

63- The *Abu Shinar* show was presented intermittently in the following years: 2012, 2019, 2022.

64- *Abu Shinar Play*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PphaHDJKMjo>

the audience. This change at the end of Fo's text modified the socio-political dimension of the original text. The idea of staying in the homeland became an emblematic theme that alluded to the war and the repercussions of the revolution, and touched the emotions of the audience. In this context, an article in Al-Ghad newspaper stated: "Oddly enough, the critical tone has not reached the level delivered in television programs such as 'Spotlight', for example, although freedom of expression has increased in the country. Although theater, allegedly aimed at a limited audience, unlike television addressed to the masses, has the capabilities of being bolder."⁶⁵

The use of symbolism - whether a conscious artistic choice, an unconscious consideration of the limitations on freedom of expression, or a legacy passed down through generations of theater - is a recurring pattern in a number of Syrian shows before and after the revolution.

Although the use of allegory or parable, to which Ziter also referred, can be understood as a need for directors and writers to distance themselves from the political event, it is questionable that no theatrical text written and produced in Syria offered a direct narrative of local political events following the French Mandate - or, to be more optimistic, after 1950, more than seventy years ago. In this sense, when this symbolism is used to avoid mentioning the current political momentums, such avoidance ties back to an aesthetic of concealing that is aligned with multiple allegiances that comply with a transitive level of "strategies of doubling and staying the same". These texts and performances do not cross the limits of expression and criticism framed by the authority, and sometimes reflect the persistence of fear. Ideas of fear and betrayal are evident in a number of performances, as we shall see in *Tashih Alwan* (Color Correction) and *Hysteria*.

Fear and Betrayal on the Stage of the National Theater:

Samer Ismail's play *Tashih Alwan* (Color Correction) (2017), produced by the National Theater, is about a young female journalist conducting a video interview with Jaber, an acclaimed writer who is preparing to leave the country during the crisis, the latter was famous for a novel he published called "Fear". Tunisian director Hakim Marzouki described the show as follows: "This is how fear becomes the most terrible revelation and the hardest thing that generations can transfer to each other in whispers [...] The interview quickly turns into an investigation on the crimes, treacheries and betrayals committed and yet to be committed by this lying author, who [...] reveals that he stole the manuscript of 'Fear' from the girl's father and published a book with his signature on the Internet. He presents a series of justifications that may seem convincing to him, since the real author is in prison for twenty years because he reported him, in revenge for 'Selima', a love stolen from him. Selima the theater star of yesteryear

65- DEEB Manar, « Sübarmäkt li Āyman Zaydān: Al-Kūmīdiyā Al-Wāqī'īya », *Al-Ghad* [online], July 2011, [Accessed January 2022], Available at: <https://alghad.com/اول-ايديموكل-ان-ادي-ز-ن-م-ي-ال-ستغرام-ربوس>

is the mother of the young girl interviewing him”. Marzouki explains that “the young girl, who sought to revenge her betrayed and deceived father, is epileptic and symbolizes a generation torn apart. The author may be influenced by Freud and sought to draw parallels with the character of Electra in her victory for her father who was taken from her”.⁶⁶

What’s remarkable about Ismail’s plot is the use of fear as the title of the novel and as an introduction to the story of the betrayal of two friends, the theft of the novel and the attempt by two leftist lovers to win a woman’s heart. When Maya, the journalist confronts the renowned author who stole her father’s novel and denounced him for distributing leaflets, Jaber tells a different story and tries to put the perpetrator and the victim on equal measures. This is perhaps the most striking moment in the text, when Jaber attempts to tarnish the image of Maya’s father, imprisoned for 20 years for distributing leaflets, by portraying him as a leftist who seduces women, writes about his friends in his books, etc. He tells Maya about his relationship with her mother and describes it as a stormy love affair. She asked him to help her get rid of her husband and suggested they run away, but instead he denounced him. The show ends with Maya having an epileptic seizure and Jaber quickly tying her up, putting her in a suitcase and dragging her out of the performance space. Meanwhile, we hear the following recording of the father’s voice: “Put your foot of stone on my heart, sir. Crime knocks on the cage door and fear echoes like a Curlew. My daughter Maya, my friends, how cruel it is to see the country for which we paid our lives burn in one fell swoop. How cruel it was to see it burn.”

In a televised interview, Samer Ismail spoke of the political and social dimension of his work, explaining that the play is a revision of a phase in “the lives of Syrians, not just intellectuals”. According to him, the play equally reflects a “political and social phase and attempts to point the finger at certain elites who took the hand of the devil, which has unfortunately often happened in the current crisis”.⁶⁷

Looking at Ismail’s interview and his theatrical work, it seems that there is an attempt to conflate boundaries and to confuse the intentionality behind the father’s speech. It left the audience wondering: who’s the devil in this case? What crime is Maya’s father talking about when he says: “And crime knocks at the door of the cage and fear echoes like a Curlew”?

Fear is a recurrent disciplining affect in several Syrian plays. For example, in Jihad Saad’s “Hysteria”, there are attempts to escape the Syrian conundrum amid revelations that call into question any daring endeavor to break away from the mainstream, to dare to dream, or to be free. In the first part of the scene, a girl screams in an exaggerated manner and is interrupted by a man who storms in and says, “we’ve told you a million times to stay out of this, you’re crazy. You’ve always been crazy. What brought you here? Why did you get yourself

66- MARZOUKI Hakim, « Color Correction Argues Against Those Who Are Color Blinded by the Syrian Crisis », *Al-Arab Newspaper* [online], December 2018, [Accessed April 2022]. Available at: <https://alarab.co.uk/تصحيح-الوان-يجاجج-المصابين-بعمى-الوان-الأزمنة-السورية>.

67- “Color Correction” play <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUGdwUy9Pic>

into this mess? Ambition? Love of change? We've told you a thousand times... if you change your life, the world will change... you can't (swim?)". Then a young man enters and accuses the man of being a coward and a dog. At this moment, another young man appears, speaking in an Egyptian dialect, before a young gay man enters. The amusing scene turns into a comedy that draws its elements from sexual connotations caricaturing homosexuality. This part of the scene ends with the young man declaring, "I don't dream". Dreaming and the desire for change are key themes in the passage below:

"You want to dream, you animal... can you dream, you son of a dog? You don't know what's happening around you. The nightmare surrounds us on all sides and you want to dream. No one can dream while living in a nightmare bigger than his whole life."

The events of this passage will find similar reverberation in a series of scenes that both denounce the dream and defend it, the dream being the Arab Spring that some believe has turned into a nightmare. The focus on the conflict with/against the dream and the symbolism of this scene refer to a subject other than the consequences of war. All these "comic gags" reproduce the affect of fear as a coercive component which expands from the direct local political tension (between the opposition and the regime) to include the repression of gender identity and the body politic (two issues that became more important during the Arab Spring), all of which are represented on the stage to reinscribe clear boundaries to civil liberties.

Conclusion

In this section, we gave a brief definition of Diana Taylor's term while explaining the rationale of rerouting it, we presented a preliminary overview of Syrian theater from the start of the revolution in 2011 to 2021. This section focused on two main axes, namely the different styles of directing and playwriting. In studying the performances, texts and articles available at hand, it was clear that theatrical productions, particularly those produced by the Directorate of Theaters and Music, did not stop since 2011, although some artists chose to withhold productions for a short period.

Following 2011, theater artists were faced with a fundamental question: should they stay or should they leave? Within two years, the answer became clear, both for those who left Syria, willingly or unwillingly, and for those who stayed. 2011 was punctuated by a handful of shows that directly addressed the political reality. By analyzing the plays and reviews available over the past decade, we were able to make a number of key observations:

- Most performances were based on the theatrical text perceived as a classical starting point to create a production, with only rare cases of performing arts, physical theater and devised work.

- Most shows were austere, relying more on the skills of the actors due to budget restraints.
- Theatrical styles were mainly realistic and Brechtian.
- War was indirectly mentioned in most of the plays (either by showing its impact on people's daily lives, or by addressing abstract war-related themes such as death, survival and departure).
- Dramaturgs took part in the creation of significant number of plays, whereas such positions were rare before 2011.
- Many plays were based on the adaptation and localization of foreign texts.

Section Three

In Search of the Spaces that Break the General Scene

Transcendental Allegiances

In a chapter entitled “Afterword to Modern Tragedy,” Raymond Williams talks about the existence of trends in modern drama that present the social breakdown through the family: “Some tendencies in radical psychoanalysis have underwritten a newly conventional association between such breakdowns and violent struggles and a qualified condition of society: in fact, centrally, an emphasis on the repressive family, or a repressive form of family, as the nuclear element of a false and repressive kind of society. In this it is different from an earlier subjective expressionism, in which breakdown and madness were also related to specific social conditions; but these, more typically, were such general facts as war and exploitation”.⁶⁸

Williams’ concept of the family as a microcosm and as reflective of the subsequent breakdown of society is directly related to the experiences of Oussama Ghanam in the Family Trilogy. Ghanam’s plays offer a political perspective that can be revealed by tracing the social and historical effects on family relationships. In fact, there is no direct political symbolism in most of the plays, but the artists’ attempt to depict everyday life indirectly presented a political vision. Through Diana Taylor’s concept of multiple allegiances, we will attempt to explore the forms of alter-political commitment of certain artists inside post-revolutionary Syria.

As we will see in the following pages, the works of Oussama Ghanam, Noura Murad, Farah Al Dbayyat, and others presented the transcendental level of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same.

As mentioned in section two, we will adopt and reroute Diana Taylor’s term to refer to the “negotiation with” and “disavowal of” authority as it controls most of the frameworks of art production, without falling into the trap of binaries of “with/against the regime.” While we believe that this term can avoid a dichotomy that could further divide Syrian artists, we are also aware of the multiplicity of its interpretations.

68- WILLIAMS Raymond, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. London, Verso Books, 1989, p. 99.

The transcendental level of multiple allegiances can be seen as an attempt to maneuver with the regime, and in other respects it also refers to the allegiances in artistic style or content as we mentioned earlier. It represents an attempt that is not in line with the Assadist-Ba‘thist aesthetic ideology, and which tries to go beyond or repurpose the same old aesthetic styles within new dimensions of interpretation. The term “staying the same” can also be seen as an attempt to build a sense of self-coherence and harmony with the self despite the contradictions and complexities of life in an environment that reproduces the frameworks and tools of the authority against which people have revolted.

While Farah Al Dbayyat realized the importance of belonging to the artists’ syndicate in order to obtain certain logistical facilities, she equally found herself moving outside the conscriptions of the system: Whereas the syndicate is a governmental entity, the alternative space in which she presented her performance, her home in Bab Sharqi allowed a level of agency and maneuvering vis-à-vis state apparatuses.

As performance spaces belonging to official institutions were rarely made available, theatre in individuals’ households (Malas twins bedroom theatre) was a resort for some artists due the regime’s control of performance spaces. Such alternative space created room for freedom of expression.

In her play, Al Dbayyat used meta-theater often employed in politicized theater, as in the case of Saadallah Wannous. She repurposed it in a feminist political context, while adding her own personal concerns. In the case of Oussama Ghanam, we notice a different type of transcendental allegiance that begins with a worldview informed by the memory of the place and its inhabitants. Ghanam’s theatrical performances since 2011 were all adaptations of Western texts, which he brought together in the Family Trilogy. Although he drew on texts from different dramatic periods, notably those of Harold Pinter, Tennessee Williams, and Sam Shepard, the creation of the Syrian family drama reflected a timely momentum despite avoiding the topic of the Syrian war [even though it was presented very briefly in *Zujāj (The Glass Menagerie)*]. Ghanam’s strategy of doubling and staying the same can be reflected in different ways: First, the family and its everyday problems became an essential part of the plot on the Syrian stage, as opposed to the pre- 2011 period, where family drama was rarely highlighted. Although some texts by young writers pinpointed family dynamics in their plot, the former, remaining a closet drama, were rarely produced.

Second, the city has a significant presence in his performance, although the dramatic space of the original texts was confined to the living room with meager representations of the outside world in the diegetic spaces. Ghanam’s provincialism of Pinter, Williams and Shepard’s texts can be seen as an act of multiple allegiances. Although the city was less significant in the original texts, in Ghanam’s provincialism, it became an important character as we’ll see in the case study.

Third, Ghanam emphasized in his work “the density of the margin” which can be explained as the trivial secondary elements surrounding the worlds and dialogues of the original texts, hence adding to the latter a semiotic strand that inspires from the Syrian everyday life by exposing peripheral topics and spaces such as the Syrian streets and alleyways, pop culture, popular and commercial cinema versus independent cinema. Finally, in continuum to the the acting methods in Syria that relied heavily on Stanislavsky’s system taught at the institute, Ghanam’s work with the actor equally benefits from his multi-faceted experience as a dramaturg, director, and a professor of theatre studies. This led to the creation of intertwined layers in the adapted text following in-depth analyses that often involved the actor’s subjective worlds with those of the director which results in a realistic style of acting where characters are exposed to a level of authenticity that is often coupled with rawness.

While Ghanam’s work was based on allegiances to the impact of the local environment, memory, and relationship to the city, Noura Murad presented the inner self as a refuge from the external surrounding worlds in her two main shows presented after 2011: *Baqā’* (Survival) and *Mu’ānaqāt* (Embraces).

Understanding the work of Noura Murad and Leish troupe in the context of multiple allegiances differs from what we mentioned about the works of Oussama Ghanam and Farah Al Dbayyat. In Murad’s case, the transcendental level of multiple allegiances appears in the act of withdrawal. After the five-year suspension of Leish troupe following the outbreak of the revolution, withdrawal manifested itself as an aesthetic on the stage.

In January 2016, Leish Troupe published a manifesto in which they explained their decision to withhold their production activity, as the troupe’s principles did not align with any of the available options in wartime. Between “taking sides in an armed conflict through art” and “conveying the harshness of reality as it is, without distancing oneself from the harsh details of everyday life”, and between denying reality and working as if nothing were happening, and thus art would lose its sole reason for being, the group chose to “get as close as possible to the essence of art when it speaks to man, gives him hope even in the darkest moments” and ‘helps him realize the connection and bond that unites him with every human being in this world, even when he is alone, forgotten and abandoned to his fate, [it] inspires him to overcome his powerlessness and take the helm of his daily life and move forward’. At the same time, Leish Troupe’s statement emphasized the unity of Syrians “so no party will ever be able to erase the others”.⁶⁹

The shows *Baqā’* and *Mu’ānaqāt* were created with a multiple allegiance to the unity of Syrians perceived as individuals, isolated from the external world and having to deal with their emotions. Such focus on the inner-self stands in opposition to the Leish Company’s works preceding 2011. Between 2008 and 2010, two performances were presented as part of the “*Hawīyāt*” (Identities) project,

69- LEISH THEATER TROUPE, *Manifesto* 2016. Available at: <https://www.leishtroupe.com/who-we-are-من-نحن/manifesto/2016-2/>.

featuring physical performances based on ritual and communal ceremonies in Syria. In “Survival”, the body withdraws from the collective state into a state of exception, where it finds itself on the brink of the abyss. The body finds its salvation in “Embraces”, a second performance that presents the inner self and the conflict of emotions on stage, as we will see in the case study.

On the other hand, themes that were rarely addressed in Syrian theater emerged after 2011. However, they were limited in scope. Theater produced/directed by women tackling feminist issues had a significant presence. In *Hunna* (Them, 2017), Anna Akkash addressed the war from the point of view of five “war-weary” women: “One lost her son and fears losing the other, who is the only person she has left in this life {...}. Another hopes that her son, who disappeared for years in the war, returns. The third lost her lover in the war, with whom she dreamed of a rose-tinted glasses life. The fourth has no desire for love or children for fear that the war will take them away, while the youngest has never known peace; her youth began and almost ended in war, with no future ahead of her.⁷⁰”. Syrian women were equally the focus of *Masrahiya* (A Play), written by Amir Abu Kheir and directed by Farah Al Dbayyat. Relying on independent self-financing⁷¹, *Masrahiya* (A Play) highlighted issues rarely addressed in Syrian theater: exploitation, sexual harassment, early marriage, rape, and abuse of women in wartime. Among many feminist narratives, *Masrahiya* (A Play) dealt with the case of Nahla Othman, a six-year-old girl whom father locked in a cage and chained her hands until she died strangled in 2021.

Al Dbayyat approached the issue of abused women through a theater within theater approach. Her style of directing, which often sought to question the events on the stage, allowed for a narrative that is inseparable from the social environment where the show was performed, whereby the need for a feminist discourse takes into account the complexities of such an environment while questioning the cause of violence without justifying it. The below conversation took place between two actresses, one of whom chose to interrupt the scene to engage in a discussion that addresses the intersectionality of violence with poverty, social traditions, education and the consequences of war...:

- I feel like we're blaming one party... without knowing what the aim or objective is behind it all... is it just to make it look like a monster?
- When someone marries a minor how should we react?
- That's the question Does he know he's marrying a minor?
- Of course he knows.
- What makes you so sure? It's a marriage, a request and an acceptance, and we've seen that society approved it.... even if there's a law that might prevent it....

70- AL-ALAM Aladdin, « Anna Akash's “Hunna”: Syrian Women Deserve More », *op. cit.*

71- A number of friends provided Farah with financial support to complete her show, as well as support from the Roots Foundation.

- But here, it wasn't a matter of request and acceptance ... and the bride was forced to accept the groom
- Why should she settle for him, if not for the sake of her younger sisters.... or for support.... why does she need support?
- Why does she need support?
- Because they're poor... they have no support. Lots of girls. Lots of burdens.
- That's all... She offers herself to him... And he protects her and her family... either with his money, or his influence, or his power. it's either the shadow of a man, or nobody.
- It's a sale, not a marriage...
- It's just that there's a man at the end of the day. That means one reason, but not all.... He can be both aggressor and victim....
- How can he be a victim?

This discussion continued by unpacking the cycle of violence and linking it to the traditions of society and education. The actress who interrupted the scene stressed that the mere mention of this chain of relationships does not imply her approval. Her interrogation was part of an attempt to discover and address the causes of what's happening, rather than simply showing it. The use of meta-theatre and Brechtian didacticism tools seem to serve the complexities of the environment of the performance. There is more than meets the eye in *Masrahiya* (A Play)'s performance space. Chosen prior to the writing process, the text was written with spatial specificity in mind. As mentioned earlier, Farah decided to stage her performance in her home at Bab Sharqi. Stressing the importance of the performance space and its ability to attract a new audience, not necessarily familiar with theater, Farah was cognizant of the need to approach her text in a distinct way while maintaining the artistic standards.

"Dada vs. Dada - A Visual Evening" (2015), was a breakthrough when it comes to representation of gender, body politic and the relationship with the public sphere and audiences. There is no visual documentation of this performance, and it more closely resembles a Happening than performance (despite the use of the term performance when described by the makers of the Happening). It was primarily based on improvisation as the happening event was taking place, with the exception of a short ethnographic text documenting the experience, written by Ammar Almamoun, Kefah Zaini, and Hisham Khaddaj. The text can be seen as another performative material in which the spaces of documentation and performative intervention overlap, hence turning the ethnographic text in a performative material in addition to the performative aspect of the Happening that took place at Nassar Gallery.⁷²

According to Zaini, the idea started with "the intention of a group of young people to present a Luis Buñuel film", and ended with the sabotage of the event. Most of the performance was presented at the Nassar Gallery, but it began

72- Ammar Almamoun emigrated to France while Kifah remained in Syria.

with Hisham Khaddaj, who walked from Jaramana city to the gallery situated in Damascus. Dressed as an octopus, with his face painted and a chain with a phosphorescent penis in his hand, Khaddaj had to trespass checkpoints to get to his destination.⁷³ Inside the gallery, where the public awaited an evening of film screenings, Ammar Almamoun danced like a prostitute. Zaini dragged Rémy Noufal (a performer) with a metal collar. The latter walked on all fours, barked and attempted to bit her colleagues and the audience.

Khaddaj read a series of incomprehensible sentences from a red notebook, sharing private notes from October 15, 2014, about a lecture on neoclassicism in which names of plays abound.... He then threw away the notebook and addressed the audience, reading the following from a sheet of paper:

- Stop.

Stop. This is a leafy tree. These are breaths. And this skin still feels the stabs to draw nuances between news and new prophets.⁷⁴

Stop. Your voices are scattered in the mind like bullets.

And the fires that ...

Good morning, roasted neighborhoods, is it time for the sun?

Then we would cross the river again and again - not the Euphrates, of course - and again and again to say, "This is a loud neigh."

All the corners were dusty. Our tribe no longer has pegs.

Tell Imru' al-Qais to weep not at the ruins. No. But for all the scars left by the steel walls of our absence.

Good morning, plains in old maps⁷⁵."

Then, Al-Mamoun addressed the audience. A person from the audience asked to speak and Khaddaj shouted "Who are you? why do you want to speak?" and asked him to sleep with him. The latter refused, adding "I am straight". At that point, the audience began to leave and spitted on the performers. A member of the audience said: "They are gays". Soon after, Khaddaj dragged Nawfal along and they pretended to have sex, which "repulsed the audience even more."

Zaini noted that it was the worst show he had ever seen, but also the strangest. This artistic choice, which Zaini called a "happening" because it had no beginning, no end, no context, was also a performative attempt to address the devastation of reality, which Kefah considered a thousand times greater than what is represented in theater. At the end of the text written by Ammar Almamoun, Kefah Zaini and Hisham Khaddaj about the performance, it was noted that only three people watched the show until the end, including a woman who tried to applaud.

73- Jaramana is a city situated at the outskirts of Damascus (3 km away).

74- The arabic version plays on the juxtaposition of two words that are similar phonetically: أنبياء Anbaa' and Anbiya' prophets.

75- KHADDAJ Hisham et al., « Dada vs. Dada - A Visual Evening », *Anboub website* [online], January 2015, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: <https://anboob.net/2015/01/25/dada/>.

The ethnographic material concluded with the following passages:

“The most outrageous, rambling, mediocre performance in the history of theater is over, and so we officially declare Dada resurrected and then killed in one night, we danced a lot in its honor and got drunk. Only now can we once again mock all points of view while living in a geography so vain that a shawarma vendor gets shot by a customer who doesn’t want to pay!
In Damascus...

In this place that no longer has any connection to the city, an idea or a story, someone dies from a senseless bullet and another takes a dramaturgy exam!
Khaddaj (speaking in his own voice):

I went from Jaramana to Bab Sharqi in an octopus costume, with make-up on my face and a necklace with a penis. I was stopped at checkpoints and met people at 6:30 p.m. that day. I ventured as far as I could, looking crazy. Here in Damascus, in a city besieged by all means of death, there must be a cry against existing forms, there must be new norms, in *Dādā Didd Al-dādā*, we do not claim to have a solution, we do not offer art or a logical formula, we do not know who Saadallah Wannous or Mamdouh Adwan are, we only know how a bullet savors the taste of a living body.”⁷⁶

Dādā Didd Al-dādā is a chaotic performance that challenges all assumptions, and that melts immersively into a momentum marked by violence and into the affect of devastation. The intention of this performance was not to create a bond with the spectators, but rather to shock them with the the momentum of war, to challenge the limitations of the public sphere, while tackling taboos such as homosexuality. At the same time, *Dada vs. Dada* proclaimed the absence of any uselessness to the performance itself and to this “Syrian Dada moment”... Death was declared as soon as Dada was announced. In this context, the intentional sabotage of a cultural event such as the film screening, is a counter-mirror to the act of withdrawal represented in Noura Murad’s performances.

Conclusion

In the third section, we presented plays that stood out from the general theatrical performances of the time, some of can be seen under the transcendental level of multiple allegiances and the strategy of doubling and staying the same. In *Masraḥīya* “A Play,” Farah Al Dbayyat and Amir Abu Kheir used “theater within theater” approach to address gender issues paired with an engagement in alternative spaces and outreach to new audiences. The act of withdrawal as a physical aesthetic on stage was a choice derived from Leish troupe’s decision not to follow any of the political polarizations or artistic orientations that reflected

⁷⁶- *Ibid.*

the reality of war and revolution. In a 2016 manifesto, the troupe explained the rationale behind its choice to withhold theatrical works for a while. Such withdrawal can be seen as an aesthetic on stage and as a transcendental multiple allegiance to the unity of the Syrians represented as individuals isolated into their internal psyches and having to deal with abstracted situations and emotions. While “*Dādā Didd Al-dādā*” broke norms by presenting a completely improvised happening without necessarily aligning with multiple allegiances, Ghanam’s allegiances were evident in his attempt to represent memory, place/city, and the density of the margins, as we’ll see in the following pages.

Section Four

Oussama Ghanam and the Damascus Theater Laboratory

The Founding Moment... and the Decision to Continue

The idea of founding the Damascus Theater Laboratory was linked to four key moments Oussama Ghanam experienced during and after the Damascus Arab Capital of Culture (DACC) initiative in 2008. The experience he gained as a programmer of theatrical performances enabled him to organize a series of workshops for artists presenting their work during the proclamation of Damascus as the Arab Capital of Culture. Ghanam ensured that guest artists such as Árpád Schilling, Peter Brook, and others would give workshops to the Theatre Institute students while he played the role of the translator. Being in intimate contiguity with artists who showcased their artistic backgrounds and approaches, and who have different sensibilities, created an intense accumulation of “another form of theatricality and spectatorship” where one, in that case the workshop participant, finds amazement at the search for meaning and knowledge processes and the ways in which they are transmitted. The meaning of “a new form of theatricality and spectatorship” implied in these workshops could be described by Michel Vinaver’s famous phrase, which Ghanam loves: “Meaning is a point of arrival, not a point of departure⁷⁷”.

Oussama, the translator and spectator of these intensive workshops between professionals and students, was observing the processes of meaning-making as that which moves across mother tongues on one hand, and as that which shifts from the theoretical realm of knowledge into practice, on the other .

His aim at the Department of Theatre Studies was to break the isolation between the theater studies and acting disciplines within the Higher Institute of Dramatic Art, and to overcome the barrier of fear caused by theory, which can hinder or delay the move to the stage of artistic production.

77- GHANAM Oussama, *Damascus Theatre Laboratory Introductory Brochure*. 2021.

In parallel, Oussama Ghanam's collaboration with Samer Omran in mid-2008 on the play *Al-Muhājirān* "The Emigrants" was an extension and an important introduction to the practice of dramaturgy inside Syria. Ghanam mentioned that at the age of 34, he found a practical application for all the knowledge he had accumulated and began experimenting with dramaturgy as a real practice. At the end of DACC, Oussama Ghanam found himself programming a series of performances and progressing with dramaturgy as an institutionalized entity - in this case, we're talking about his experience as a dramaturg in "The Emigrants" produced by DACC and the workshops he organized as part of a year long celebratory initiative supported by the government .

The resounding success of *Al-Muhājirān*, an adaptation of Sławomir Mrożek's "The Emigrants", led to over sixty performances - the number of presentations was limited to five as part of DACC. The Play was performed in Beirut, Cairo and at the Sharjah Biennial, and turned into a film, which Samer Omran presented again in 2010. Oussama Ghanam considered *Al-Muhājirān* to be a defining moment in the history of Syrian theater, engraved in the public's memory in the same way that the 1980s play "The Cave Dwellers" was engraved in the collective memory. It was during this show that the profession of dramaturg became important to most students at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts.

The third moment - similar to the first - was when Roger Assaf came to the Institute in 2009 following the invitation of Dean Hanan Kassab Hassan, and gave a long series of workshops on Greek theater. As he was in close proximity to actor Bruce Myers and Hungarian director Árpád Schilling in the 2008 workshops where the idea of intertwining theatre theory with practice through the intensive workshop format grew on him, Oussama Ghanam equally found in Roger Assaf a source of inspiration for his subsequent ateliers.

The decision to move into directing following the DACC experience was motivated by his proximity to the practical levels of theatre-making he witnessed as a translator and organizer in the 2008 workshops, however, such encounter did not completely set aside the role of his position as a university professor. Ghanam worked extensively on the practical aspect of theater with an in-depth theoretical knowledge that was not necessarily limited to the performance as an outcome. In fact, his experience as a director led him back to several phases of research before and after the show, which attracted students, recent graduates and professionals. This phase of research included philological analysis of theatrical texts and epistemological analysis of the general theatrical landscape beyond the performance itself. Oussama, hence, emphasized the transmission and cross-pollination of knowledge through the concept of workshops that may also have its implications in the production phase, thus, inspiring the creation of certain scenes.

After staging Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (2009), Ghanam and a group of friends decided to announce the creation of Damascus Theater Laboratory. The official announcement took place during the staging of *Ḥadatha Dhālika Ghadan* (It Happened Tomorrow) (2010).⁷⁸

The "Beckett and Directing" workshop was the first workshop of the Damascus Theater Laboratory, which began on March 9, 2011, a few days before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. The Laboratory work was suspended and then resumed in June 2013, two and a half years after the start of the protests. "Working in the theater was impossible with all that was going on", contemplating the world was the only choice left according to Ghanam. The Laboratory work resumed in June 2013, and the decision to proceed further with productions was inextricably linked to his decision to stay in Syria, although he felt a loss of purpose over these two years.

Damascus Theater Laboratory: Open structure and back to square one

The Damascus Theater Laboratory is "an open structure for theatrical research and production based on the convergence of wills to make theater in Damascus". It is headed by Oussama Ghanam as director and research workshop trainer, assisted by dramaturg and translator Dima Abaza⁷⁹. The Laboratory sought to form a long-term theater troupe by working on a cumulative and relational process that brings together young theater practitioners in Damascus - particularly graduates and professionals from the Institute and that provides an set of workshops that are "freed from the perspective of making productions" as a necessity.

Ghanam brought together four founding members⁸⁰ of the Damascus Theater Laboratory, but they left the country in the early years of the revolution. This sense of loss, which he described as a practical challenge, was also a recurring theme in his work, as we will see in the following pages. It was hard for him to put much effort into the workshops, and to see that most of the young men and women who participated left the country or changed professions. Nevertheless, the Damascus Theater Laboratory managed to organize seventeen theater workshops and produce six shows in eleven years.

Although the Laboratory presented six performances to date, workshops were of equal importance, and most of the time they presented a pre-research space for the shows themselves.

78- The show combined "three very different styles of writing", from Francis Xavier Kruse's text "What the Audience Demands" (1974) to monologues by Dario Fo and Franca Rame from the 1970s, as well as an extract from Mark Ravenhill's play "Shopping and Fucking" (1993).

79- *Ibid.*, p. 73.

80- Actor Mohammed Al Rashi, who has a close friendship with Oussama since Al Muhājirān, dancer and choreographer Mey Seifan, and Shatha Bundakji, who handled administrative matters at the time.

Workshops:

Ghanam considered the workshops as a response to a “crisis in theater and imagination”, which he linked to the enormous production of TV drama series. He described them as “ärad,” an idiom in Arabic language signifying “accidental” and distinguished it from “ärd” the Arabic term of performance, creating hence a sharp distinction between theatre and TV dramas. The latter are seen as an invasion not only of the present, but also of a past to which Ghanam wishes to remain faithful:

“ We had to give a practical answer that would confirm the continuity of what the new generation is doing to preserve the legacy of Syrian theater, promoted since the 60s by men and women who accumulated a beautiful and fragile heritage, despite its unfortunate decline within the regression in the process of social progress. But we believe that theater is an art whose strength lies in its “fragility” and, in a way, in its “primitiveness” in the face of the development of digital technologies and communication, and this has led us to bet that our attachment to this practice, based above all on the presence of an actor and a spectator, is valid and precious. Over the past ten years, our workshops led many participants to present their first theatrical productions... These young theatre-makers were aligned with the workshop’s perspective, which did not require a direct end result ...and thus were the indirect result of a long period of accumulative work that insists to accumulate within the space (of its surrounding environment) ...”⁸¹

Ghanam’s emphasis on the absence of results is linked to a broader context witnessed by the former: At intensive local or regional workshops, which take place over a three-day period, results and conclusions are drawn, and these workshops are repeated and commodified without any modification, which didn’t allow for any real deepening of the workshop’s content, nor for the creation of connections between workshop participants. Ghanam organized long-term workshops that were specific in terms of space, place, language, and theme: workshop participants spoke a common language and had prior knowledge of the city where the workshop would take place, and its aesthetic codes. The collective research that results from the workshop is distanced from the burdening of “assessment” and “outcome” mechanics as required by university studies and local professional theatre work⁸², but rather it unfolds as an act of questioning the theatrical practice.

81- *Ibid.*, p. 79.

82- *Ibid.*, p. 74.

This questioning is a collective work. In fact, the workshop is a process of joint research that brings together the actor, set designer, director and playwright: it may focus on a theoretical or practical concept, on a playwright such as Beckett, or on a specific theatrical work, such as *Woyzeck*.

Each workshop lasts between ninety and one hundred and twenty hours - spread over two weeks - and is designed for theater graduates and new professionals. The workshop presents fundamental questions that practitioners may not be able to think about: What does it mean to intensively read a work of art outside of the learning process at the Institute? What is the profession today, what are its requirements, and what is my role as an actor or director?

These general questions are asked in very targeted and specific contexts⁸³, and above all, as mentioned above, they presuppose the absence of results. For Ghanam, the absence of results and the liberation from the idea of accomplishment guarantee a relaxation that allows for a greater accumulation of knowledge that is not limited to a framework, and establishes a relationship with the theatrical work through multiple formats. Ghanam emphasized the accumulation of knowledge that is not limited to a specific objectif, because he saw the cognitive act in theater as a bud that can blossom at any moment, and it is the participants who decide how to make it bear fruit.⁸⁴

The workshops are divided in two parts: The theoretical part and the practical part. The theoretical part involves an in-depth collective reading of the text and an analysis of all its aspects and representations. In addition, several productions and film adaptations are examined and studied, often leading to contradictions in presentation and meaning through variations in the directors' approaches and the aesthetic tools. The second practical part presents the complex question of meaning with a deep history through a practice that combines two theatrical components: acting and dramaturgy.

Beckett's Workshop as a Model: Building the Spectator

The decision to organize a workshop about Samuel Beckett- the first, as mentioned above - was prompted by the audience's reception of Beckett's text. After a number of audiences, including students at the Institute, rejected *Krapp's Last Tape*, Ghanam looked at the workshops model as a way to understand and address this dissatisfaction, at least as an exercise for the students. Ghanam took a particular interest in the students of the institute in an attempt of "Building the Spectator" within their sensible views, and developed a framework for understanding the contexts and sensitivities surrounding Beckett's theatrical texts.

83- What we mean here by focus and specificity are the very specific frameworks of the workshops. The following workshop titles are a case in point: Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*: Theatrical Research in Performance, *Dramaturgy Applied to Büchner's Theater and Expressive Aesthetics*.

84- Interview with Oussama on January 29, 2022.

Ghanam was equally interested in the spectator, the recipient and the future producer of theater, and saw the process of “building the spectator” as a mediator between the theater, the aesthetics proposed and the audience. For him, the artist’s relationship with the text or author is important and necessary for understanding the context of the text and its potential relationship with the local audience, which is also an attempt to understand and derive the aesthetics of the latter. In this sense, thanks to the workshop, the participant accumulates new details and sensibilities, contributing to a new exploration of his inner sentimental structure and aesthetic codes. At the same time, the workshop is a peer-to-peer learning process, during which Osama learns new details about the texts and the reception process. Through this process, described as laboratory work, Oussama also learns more about the audience, which he describes as hard to satisfy and very diverse in terms of social structure and tastes.⁸⁵

The first workshop was in March 2011 and lasted fifteen days. Jonathan Bignell, Professor at Reading University in the UK and author of *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*, was invited to give a two-day workshop on Beckett’s texts for television.

In an article entitled “Beckett in Damascus,” Bignell documented his experience in the Laboratory, which focused on “analyzing the spatial composition of Beckett’s plays for TV” and discussing “ideas of flatness and depth in TV images and theatre staging, visual composition, and the role of the camera’s point of view”. Bignell also focused on adaptations of Beckett’s texts by British and German television, noting that his “Syrian colleagues” in the workshops had a particular interest in this point “because of the different role of television there in comparison to Europe”. There was also a general desire to see Beckett presented on the Syrian screen in a different aesthetic from mainstream soap operas. In addition, three different television productions of *Krapp’s Last Tape* were discussed.

The Dramaturg:

In his workshops, Ghanam prioritizes giving different definitions of the practice of Dramaturgy while drawing on his personal experience and perceptions. The definitions of Bernard Dort and Patrice Pavis were the main ones he drew on. For him, dramaturgy is defined as the process of answering questions of meaning when moving from written text or improvised material to live performance in front of an audience. In these workshops, the participant is able to gain an intersectional and practical understanding of the profession of the dramaturg in its various definitions and practices. Between the model that finds in this practice a historical and political responsibility, as in the case of the German Dieter Sturm or the French Alain Badiou, or the British model that finds in the dramaturg a motivating expert for the playwriting or the collective development of the show,

85- Interview with Oussama Ghanam, January 30, 2022.

and the model of the contemporary dance dramaturg, as in the experience of Raimund Hoghe, the definition of the dramaturg is not limited to the dramaturgy of the performance, as mentioned above, but this concept expands to make this practice open to methods and paths of research. Ghanam⁸⁶ attributed this phenomenon to the diversity of sources he acquired as a student in Paris, which made it difficult for him to find a unilateral taste and an absolute definition.⁸⁷

For Ghanam, however, dramaturgy is a link between the intellectual as idea and the institution as authoritarian entity. This is the result of the Enlightenment, which established itself as a practice that led to the institutional acceptance of dramaturgy as a critical spirit that questions the assumptions of theatrical practice and isn't content with what's already at hand. This situation of controversy that the playwright creates with the apparatus of artistic production, and this search for equivocation, escape and modification, is a complex process.

The dramaturg's work is not limited to researching the historicity of the show or its social conditions, nor to adaptation - a wrong understanding that some might draw from "The Emigrants". The possibilities of the dramaturg's practice are infinite. Limiting the role of the dramaturg to adapting foreign texts or explaining the ambiguities in the text is a general ontological problem (not limited to a misunderstanding of the profession in the Syrian context). For Ghanam, dramaturgy is unlimited in its definitions, and he describes it in Dieter Sturm's phrase, which he finds to be its most beautiful definition: "Dramaturgy is a process of doubt".⁸⁸

The dramaturgical analysis here is not limited to an exclusively epistemological component, rather it is the result of the Brechtian era and also benefits from "the effective tools of the human sciences, in the perspective of the production of shows and the preparation of directorial choices⁸⁹".

Through textual questions linked to history, sociology, psychoanalysis, linguistics and semiotics, Ghanam paves the way for actors and actresses to explore the construction of their characters. Then, "future dramaturgs and directors deal with the impulsiveness, practicality, sensitivity, and vision of the actors as they explore these questions of meaning together. In this way, dramaturgy becomes an ongoing, dialogic, participatory process of doubt and certainty, a process that comes from the self as much as from theoretical knowledge. This process begins by questioning the written material as a text that belongs to the world's theatrical heritage, and ends by "always questioning the reality of local theatrical practice in all its details."⁹⁰

In the case of Ghanam, it is difficult to separate the artistic decisions and choices of Oussama the director and Oussama the dramaturg. The process of directing actors is based on dramaturgy, which relies on the convergence of research,

86- GHANAM Oussama, *Damascus Theatre Laboratory Introductory Brochure*. 2021.

87- Interview with Oussama Ghanam, December 29, 2021.

88- The dramaturgy is a doubting process.

89- *Ibid.*

90- *Ibid.*

dialogue with the actors, the construction of a character from their own complexities and those of the director, and the creation of multiple allegiances to the original text and the new environment.

Ghanam's Multiple Allegiances: Analyzing the Family Trilogy

Oussama Ghanam started the family trilogy with Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, two years and six months after the start of the revolution. In his adaptations of Pinter's, Williams, and Shepard's original texts, Ghanam delves into the complex layers of family dynamics that he finds both stimulating and relevant to Syria after the 2011 momentum. Ghanam's focus on the themes of homecoming, departure, and survival is no coincidence.

In *Al- 'Awda* (*The Homecoming*), Issam's temporary return to the family household from Dubai in 2009 and his wife's decision to stay in Syria are linked to Youssef's decision to leave home in *Glass* (Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*) as opposed to the fate of his sister and mother. In a related context, the struggle of the two brothers Adam and Mihyar in *Drama* (Sam Shepard's *True West*), which appears in their attempts to leave home for the desert but also in the tryptic rapport between the brothers' reality, the world of the script and the family's past, all of which are linked to the dilemma of staying or leaving a suffocating environment and space. In all three performances, the family dynamics is linked to the dilemma of staying or leaving, as well as to sensitivities that challenge the idealized image of the home as a felicitous space and as source of harmony and protection. As in the original works, all three plays show the fragility of the family as an institution.

Issam's return is similar to that of a tourist visiting Syria, while attempting as much as possible to recollect a perfect memory of home and family, however, such remembrance is a temporary act of nostalgia that constantly keeps comparing Dubai and Damascus. During a discussion with his wife Mariam, Issam suggests to leave Syria and return to Dubai, following that moment, Mariam asks her husband about his love for his family. The conversation reflects to which extent concepts such as place and family overlap. Here, the dynamic between the themes of staying and leaving, and between loyalty to family and loyalty to place, and the husband's disavowal of both, becomes particularly interesting:

- Issam: I think we have to go back (silence)... we have to go home.
- Maryam: Why?
- Issam: Because we've spent a few days here and I think we should cut it short.
- Maryam: Why? Don't you like it here?
- Issam: I do, but I just want to go back and see the kids.
- Maryam: You don't love your family.
- Issam: What family?
- Maryam: Your family here.

- Issam: Of course I love them... what are you talking about?
- Maryam: You don't love them as much as you think.
- Issam: Of course I love them, of course I love them. I don't understand. What are you talking about? (Silence) Do you know what time it is there?
- Maryam: What?
- Issam: It's 5 o'clock there...
- Maryam: Seriously?
- Issam: {...} The kids are in the pool on campus. They're swimming. Think about it. The pool there. That means we have to go back... we have to go back... the pool there is very clean...
- Mary: Clean?
- Issam: Yes.
- Maryam: Is it dirty here?
- Issam: No, of course not, but it's definitely cleaner there. (Silence) Maryam, I just brought you to meet the family and you met them.
- Maryam: Do you think it's dirty here?
- Issam: I didn't say it is dirty here. I didn't say that. (Silence) Listen, I'm going to pack the suitcases {...} you can rest, relax please...and then you can help me with my lectures when we get back. you can lay out my texts, I feel very happy when you lay out them for me. (Silence) We can swim there until January because there are no swimming pools here except for this one on the highway, but...you know what it's like, it's a shithole. A dirty shithole. (Silence) Maryam, my love, Sharm el-Sheikh.

While Ghanam's provincialized adaptation literally respects Pinter's dialogue, the reception of this passage inside Syria in June 2013 is inevitably affected by the reality of emigration and the dilemma of staying or leaving. These broader themes include Ghanam's other allegiances - to family, to the city and to the density of the margins. However, these allegiances are also characterized by contradictions and duplicities that go beyond the contradictions of the original texts as Ghanam's adaptation process is carried out with meticulous attention to detail.

The following passage from the Damascus Theater Laboratory booklet shows the contradictions of life inside Syria, including the idea of staying and leaving:

"Sometimes we laugh a lot, sometimes we cry a lot, we eat too much or love too much or eat and love too much for it to be a good day. Sometimes the rope of depression wraps around our neck and crushes it. Our friends travel forever, so we go to our usual place and find new friends. We listen, we watch, we develop illnesses and hope with the same devotion. We keep on making theater here, and we're happy with the time we have, even if it's much shorter than life as it really is. July 1, 2020."

The series of ambiguous duplicities mentioned by Ghanam in the Damascus Theater Laboratory booklet were present in the texts he adapted, as they included allegiances to family, place/city, the triad of cinema, television and

theater, and the density of the margins. Each of these allegiances included ambiguous and complex moments of love, hatred, or distrust of television, nostalgia for the city, and extreme disgust with it. They also resulted from Ghanam's techniques of adaptation, which frequently and rapidly move from one image or idea to another. These techniques rely on a series of digressions and ramblings linked to densely descriptive margins, before returning to the sentence of the original text.

These ambiguous duplicities equally apply to the multiple allegiances: in Pinter's case, the petulance and love that result from the complexities of family are inseparable from the abjection of place. There are a number of complex duplicities between Issam's happiness at being reunited with his family and his decision to leave early, and Mariam's discomfort with place upon arrival and her decision to stay in Damascus at the end of the play and work as a prostitute. The ambiguous duplicity of love and distrust in commercial cinema and pop music is also reflected in the dichotomy of family and place in *Zujāj* (Glass) and *Drama*. In these plays, Place is not a geographical component or a chauvinistic space; rather, it is a collection of struggling memories, beliefs, and worldviews. It is also a heterotopic space, a space of escape to the television and movie screen.

Family, Place, and City:

Ghanam's work cannot be subsumed in the representation of the middle-class family suffering from the effects of place and its changes. For Ghanam, home is a space for the dialectic of ideologies, perhaps best expressed in his adaptation of Tom's prologue in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. In the Syrian adaptation, this passage of a single page and a few lines is transformed into an extended monologue of twelve minutes by Youssef. The latter expands on what Tom summed up in short phrases such as "In Spain there was a revolution, and here there was shouting and confusion," to describe his life as a young filmmaker in Baathist socialist Syria, however, such political system is as hybrid as to allow nurturing neoliberal capitalist traits: this is shown by the fact that Youssef's apartment is located in the "14 buildings" area and by the graphic design of the packaging bags of the Ḥalawiyāt al-Bilsān store where he works. According to Youssef, the "14 buildings" complex consists of 400 identical apartments, "vertical, crammed together with the remnants of the lower middle class". Through this monologue, Ghanam attempted to define the system that controls the young artist who simply wants to make a film: the "14 buildings" where the family lives and the mall where Youssef works are manifestations of the neoliberal apparatuses equally present through the non-profit organizations that control art through diverse control patterns such as funding proposals. In parallel, the middle class has the same stereotypical practices following a consumerist logic, particularly the "consumerism of the poor." For example, satellite TV and soap operas are the only means of entertainment at home, and Fayrouz's song *Ya Mursal Al Marasil* is their morning companion. All of these houses lead to death, as evidenced by Youssef's modification of Fayrouz's line,

“Their house is the last of the houses, with a penthouse at the door, I reach the house, and with a heart attack to death I soar”.⁹¹ In this sentence, there’s an ambiguous duplicity that transforms Youssef’s sarcasm and anger into a deep immersion in the dynamics of family and place.

The great number of satirical images and characterizations of the middle class and Youssef’s position in relation to everything around him can be interpreted as a deep immersion in the dynamic he is attempting to escape: the family as middle class and its close link with place and the system that manages or controls it. The extended representation of this dynamic can be seen as veiled allegiance and can be interpreted in two ways: the more Youssef expresses his dissatisfaction with his environment, the more elements of the middle-class family appear, and the stronger becomes the family’s co-dependence on the system’s apparatuses. This strong presence of the middle class and its link to the system justify Youssef’s dissatisfaction and disgust with this place. His long monologue - similar to a bitter manifesto of an entire state of being - not only justifies Youssef’s departure, but also presents him with a different or desired individual memory that he tries to preserve, although he endeavors for an opposite image. On the other hand, the contemporary middle class seldom has the opportunity to be presented on stage, which shows Ghanam’s allegiance to all the particularities of place where the Syrian citizen’s experience unfolds in the third millennium.

In his adaptations of plays by Pinter, Williams and Shepard, Ghanam’s allegiances were also evident in his references to the streets and alleys of Damascus. He mentioned in his work the “14 Buildings”, a complex built in the 1970s in the Mezzeh district, and Ḥalawiyāt al-Bilsān, a sweet shop in the Kafr Sousa district that was shut down shortly before the premiere of *Zujāj* (Glass). Instead of a selective critical realism that resorts to symbolism, parable and imaginary spaces that refer to regional ideological conflicts in Syrian texts, Ghanam’s realism conveyed the Syrian streets in all their vitality within the complexity of the characters’ diaries while maintaining a somewhat faithful adaptation of the peripeties of the original text.

Faithfulness to Damascus is the ruling principle found in Ghanam’s Family Trilogy : if we go back to Williams’ original text, for example, we notice how much Ghanam tried to make the city a hidden character in his performances. In the second scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, in which mother Amanda confronts her daughter after discovering that she dropped out of secretarial school, Williams simply refers to the nature of the places Laura used to frequent: the park, the cinema, the zoo, etc.⁹² By adapting these decontextualized places, Ghanam adds what Una Chaudhuri calls “the particularity of place” and “the stage locality” while including a local, urban aspect.

91- The original Feyrouz lines are as follows: “Your house is the last of the houses, with a penthouse at the door, You reach house and come in, and you deliver the gift.”

92- There are a few exceptions to the specificity of space in Williams’ case, namely Jewel Box, a park in St. Louis, Missouri.

Ghanam went beyond Tom and Amanda Wingfield's "figure of home" which Chaudhuri defines within "the homogeneity of Western bourgeois culture" in realist theatrical texts by adding a series of external spatial elements, such as choosing El Sobky's Dirty Park for the park, including the Al-Taqwa mosque, commercializing the zoo by putting a "dog" slogan on the dog's cage and Cinema City for the cinema and mentioning the Al Kindi cinema, which plays "the DVDs Youssef loves". He posits the "figure of home: as a "intra mural problem" requiring Youssef's departure in order to realize his true self in accoutrement with a larger space, that of the city, where his story and that of his sister, Dima, can be told.⁹³

Similarly, in "Drama", Ghanam did not reproduce Harold Pinter's penchant for the "spatial metaphoricity" as Chaudhuri describes it.⁹⁴ In her book "Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama", Chaudhuri states: "the erasure of spatial particularity, one of the hallmarks of postmodernism, is presented in drama (and elsewhere) through the figure of America", which is radically linked to globalization and consumerism. "The America of the modern theater's imagination is a principle of dispersal, of dissolution⁹⁵. This is particularly evident in Pinter's text where Ted, a university professor, works in America. Chaudhuri adds: The America in Pinter's *The Homecoming* is an abstraction, almost a nonplace"⁹⁶.

Chaudhuri contends that "the figure of America, as it briefly appears in *The Homecoming*, evokes a peculiar kind of space: space that has not evolved- or cannot evolve- to the condition of place, that is local identity. America in Pinter's text includes no city or state names, it is a vast undifferentiated space that can only be described in naturalistic terms not cultural ones", as if America belonged to the "Geography of Nowhere," as Howard Kunstler put it.⁹⁷ Although Pinter compares some spatial determinants in London with the figure of America, they are characterized by a minimalist characterization of place.

While Ghanam adhered to the "Geography of Nowhere" in his characterization of Dubai, which was parallel to America, he completely avoided Pinter's minimalism in his characterization of other spaces. In *The Homecoming*, Ghanam's adaptation was focused on the provincialism of space within a local specificity that imposed a localized environmental condition. In the first scene, going back to Pinter's text, when Max was talking about his adventures with his friend McGregor, he remembered how when they were going somewhere, everyone in the room stood up to let them pass. In his adaptation, Ghanam eschewed Pinter's minimalism of space and made it condensed and mobile, from the Hammam market to the café to the barbershop. Similarly, the conversation about horse betting, devoid of any spatial particularity in Pinter's text, turned into a lively

93- CHAUDHURI Una, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 91.

94- *Ibid.*, p. 98.

95- *Ibid.*, p. 4.

96- *Ibid.*, p. 113.

97- *Ibid.*, p. 115.

scene in the Baramkeh neighborhood near the university, where he sometimes played the role of the informant and where the hamburger restaurant run by Abbas (Max) is located. In the next scene, the tension between Abd (Sam) and his brother Abbas (Max) escalates, and Abd, the cab driver, remembers Abbas's wife, Amal (Jessie):

- Abd: I'm hungry. What did you cook today? How am I supposed to find someone like your wife these days? A woman like Amal, there's no one like her. Do you remember how many times you took her in my car? Of course you don't. I'll help you remember. You took her in my car twice. But do you remember where you took her? (Abbas: To hell) Not at all. The first time was to the flower market. The second was to Zabadani. We picked up 'Asoumty' [nickname for Issam] at the pioneer camp. Those two trips were among the best of my life. But do you remember what she brought back from that trip? How can you remember? She bought a delicious cherry orchard from Zabadani. What did she buy at the flower market? (Shit) She bought a honeysuckle.

Pinter's dramatic view tends toward a "lack of particular knowledge, with regard to characters." Pinter clearly states that:

"My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say there lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which is compulsory to explore⁹⁸".

Ghanam repurposed Pinter's compulsory exploration to highlight the place/city as a central location for the movement of his characters, and here the city becomes a shadow figure for both the characters and the original places of the text, hence striving beyond the confinement of the living rooms. The city/place occupies a place in Ghanam's adaptations that can be seen as an additive value to the meanings of the original texts. This choice was not only functional, limited to the dramaturg choices in unfolding the world of the characters; it was also intended to compensate for the absence of the living, concrete, contemporary city on the Syrian stage, charged with social and political connotations. Denying the influence of the reception process by the momentum of some of these performances is unlikely. The reception of the phrase "Issam, don't become a stranger" in a hotel basement in 2013 is intersectional with the exodus of Syrian citizens from the city following the revolution and armed conflict.

⁹⁸- CHAUDHURI Una, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

The Triad of Cinema, Television and Theater:

While cinema is the focus of Shepard's plot and has a timid presence in Williams' text, the triad of cinema, television and theater occupies a significant place in Ghanam's trilogy. In *Zujāj* (*The Glass Menagerie*), Youssef compares cinema to drama series. He hates local drama series and adores Cinema"; he pirates films and buys pirated DVDs; he goes to cheap cinemas to watch Hollywood, *Criterion* and *Artificial Eye* as well as Buñuel, Ozu, Dreyer and ARTE films. Dima, likewise, a drama student, escaped from foreign language classes to go to the movies. Hazem, in *The Homecoming*, is working on becoming an actor and imitates the Godfather scene before returning to his role as a background actor in the popular soap opera *Bāb al Ḥāra*. In *Drama*, while the adaptation follows the plot of Shepard's play, with the two main characters trying to write a screenplay, Ghanam turns the film into a series to be sold to a Gulf production company. All these substitutions convey a strong relationship between cinema, television, and theater that did not exist in Western texts. Ghanam neutralized Tom's passion for poetry and literature in favor of Youssef's fascination with cinema, which becomes his refuge from a world in which he has no place. The cinema detail, important in the third and fourth scenes of Williams' text, appears in Amanda's surprise and disbelief when she discovers that her son goes to the movies. Tom's return to the cinema in the seventh scene symbolizes his escape from reality, whereas in Ghanam's text, cinema is the driving force behind Youssef's endeavors throughout the play. The entire play is centered on Youssef's attempt to make his own movie after AFAC refused to fund it, as shown in the adapted prologue and the following monologues in subsequent scenes.⁹⁹ At the same time, the reference to these films reflects a consumerist ideology that was challenged by the ARTE films and the attempts of piracy on torrent sites (as Youssef mentioned).

Television was equally a recurring theme in all three performances: Ghanam inserted small sequences to Williams' text, where the family was Watching *Arab Idol*. Following the *Arab Idol* scene, Umm Youssef (Amanda) discusses the *Saraya Abdeen* series with friends and compares it to *The Sultan's Harem*¹⁰⁰. She discusses the similarity of the novel *Nisyān Dūt Kum* (Nisyan. Com) with the film *My Dad on a Tree*, based on Ihsan Abdel Quddous's story.¹⁰¹ Similarly, "Blue Roses," Jim's nickname of Laura was transformed in Ghanam's adaptation to Gandal the character of Japanese manga series *Grendizer*, which was broadcasted in the Arab world in the 1980s and tickles the memory of a generation that grew up with the cartoon series.

99- At the end of the monologue, when he says he's going to make his own film while he's here, etc.

100- *The Sultan's Harem* is another acclaimed Turkish soap opera dubbed in Syrian dialect.

101- Nysian Com is a very popular novel written by Algerian novelist Ahlam Moustaghanmi.

In the fifth scene, Tom's description of a party at the Paradise Dance Hall turns into a different scene in Ghanam's work: Dima, her mother and Youssef are watching the results of the 2013 *Arab Idol final*, where Palestinian Mohammed Assaf wins over Syrian Farah Youssef.

Ghanam's distrust of TV series is evident in the play, where he compares certain cinema classics to the stereotype images shown in TV series and soap operas. Perhaps the most telling scene is when Hazem watches *The Godfather* in order to psychologically prepare himself to rehearse a scene in *Bab al-Hara*.

The continuous juxtaposition and dissonance between cinema and television, between Hollywood commercial cinema and independent cinema art, is not only a typical example of the ambiguous duplicities in Ghanam's adaptations, but it also reflects a juxtaposition of elements that is inhabited by both dissonance and harmony which conflates the boundaries between the commercial cultural practices and mainstream media, considered by some as inferior, and superior art forms. Ghanam criticizes the dominance of television and soap operas over other arts, while also mentioning lower-middle-class practices and referring to a personal memory that Ghanam (as middle-class) wishes to honor by including these practices in his work.

By focusing on television, Ghanam equally highlights the marginalization of theater due to the enormous production of series on Arab channels. According to Edward Ziter, "The growth of satellite television has put additional pressure on Syrian theatre. Actors accepted into the National Theatre, since its founding in 1959, are state functionaries drawing monthly salaries whether or not they are involved in a production. Many of these salaried actors have pursued more lucrative work in television, leaving the National Theatre without actors after committing much of its seasonal budget".¹⁰²

This is a recurrent situation faced by all the young theater artists who do not receive a monthly salary from the state and who either leave the profession or limit their stage productions because the revenue does not provide them with a minimum income. This situation became more frequent since the beginning of the third millennium. The cinema (independent cinema) became the ideal form of escapism, while theater remained a state of crisis between two worlds. The theater is the mediator of all these controversies that is present through its quasi-absence in the diegetic text, yet, it exerts its vibrance and rigor by its ability to represent through the characters' work on raw emotions the intertwined complex layers of these mediums and pinpoint their significance.

The Density of the Margin:

In Ghanam's case, the density of the margins is not limited to the adaptation's work on the intense Damascene spatial particularities added to the original

102- ZITER Edward, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

texts of Williams, Pinter and Shepard, but it extends to other components of the texts. The density of the margins, as already mentioned, implies a leveraging of the secondary semiotics surrounding the worlds and dialogues of the original text on the one hand, and the local Syrian street, popular culture, popular intellectual ideas and the worlds of pop, film, television and theater on the other. The concept of density appears in a simple expression, as when the mother refers ironically to one of her suitors as “Beethoven arteriosclerosis”, or when Youssef constantly combines one popular element with a highbrow element, as when he tells his mother that he is going to his friends’ house because they have a “62-inch screen” and tries to explain the meaning of this term to her, or when he talks about his job at the mall, describing it as “the adventure of selling assorted sweets” because it’s hard “to learn archery, swimming and horse riding” and adds to the former excerpt from prophet Muhammed’s hadith a line of Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry “the storm promised me wine and new toasts and rainbows” to describe the world of cinema.¹⁰³

The density of the margin is perhaps best represented by the mother’s description and mimicry of single women working in the public sector:

“It’s an Egyptian film, no, it’s an Indian film. Ola is tired. Her face is tired. She has gained weight. Her lipstick is cheap. Her heels are broken. she eats breakfast at home. Cheese, egg, and cucumber. She went to her brother’s house. She came back from her brother’s house. He has children. Women who have no support have a meaningless life”.¹⁰⁴

In the Arab idol scene we mentioned earlier, as opposed to Tom’s monologue in the fifth scene, Ghanam adds moments of escapism, joyful dance and laughter after the mother’s intense, melodramatic weeping over the loss of Farah Youssef. The few seconds of television entertainment that lead to the mother’s cries are the only opportunity for her to let off steam by screaming: “I’m sorry, I can’t...it’s a mockery...but it’s not a mockery to let the Syrian...there’s nothing left to do...oh my mother, I’m going to die of rage.”¹⁰⁵ This contrast between the event and the overreaction that follows is accompanied by Dima and her

103- “to learn archery, swimming and horse riding” alludes to an excerpt from the hadith of prophet Muhammad “Teach your children swimming archery, and horse riding”. The line “the storm promised me wine and new toasts and rainbows” is an excerpt from Mahmoud Darwish’s poem “Promises from the storm”.

104- Ghanem’s quotations should be compared with Williams’ original text, which we enclose below
 “I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South — barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife! — stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room — encouraged by one in-law to visit another — little birdlike women without any nest — eating the crust of humility all their life!
 Is that the future that we’ve mapped out for ourselves? I swear it’s the only alternative I can think of! [She pauses.] It isn’t a very pleasant alternative, is it? [She pauses again.] Of course — some girls do marry.”

Excerpt From: Tennessee Williams. “The Glass Menagerie.” Apple Books.

105- The mother reacts to the final results of *Arab Idol* where the Palestinian Muhammad Assaf wind over the Syrian Farah Youssef. Such event occurring in mainstream Arab Media 2013, reflects the mother’s disappointment of the results paralleled and amplified with the ongoing Syrian conflict.

mother singing and dancing, before Youssef calmly gets up and goes to turn off the music on the laptop. After the final moments of “Arab Idol” and following the mother’s collapse, Youssef puts on some techno music, prompting a new dance and a new burst of joy. He manages to make his mother and Dima dance, despite the reluctance of the former, amidst the Syrian loss. This scene elicits a spontaneous outburst of laughter. In his play, Ghanam added comedic elements to Williams’ text through the character of the mother. Comedy is evident in the dynamic relationship between Youssef and Dima and their mother: After Dima consoles her mother and begins dancing, the latter gives her instructions on “shaking,” as she transitions from a dance of grief over the Arab Idol results to one of joy. The mother’s sadness at Farah’s loss in Arab Idol turns to a dance of exhilaration and love as she orders her daughter to sway more before they hug with elation and love. When Youssef starts dancing, the mother is surprised at first, then asks her son if he’s happy. “I adore you,” she repeats over and over. After Youssef takes his mother in his arms while dancing, and after the mother and Dima fall to the ground from fatigue, Youssef steps forward and kisses his mother’s hand. This scene is followed by a return to the status quo - the mother’s authoritarian, controlling behavior.

Unlike Youssef’s TV-hating attitude, Ghanam does not seem to use Arab Idol to show his character’s dislike for the small screen. He is simply echoing the sentiments of a wider street that saw Farah Youssef’s moment of reaching the finals in 2013 as an opportunity to invent hope and to unite over the desire for some kind of redemptive victory amidst the Syrian Upheaval after 2011. This also reflects a behavioral trajectory that mimics the resilience of mothers and individuals who try to stay strong and are suddenly shattered without warning by an external trivial event that some may find absurd. It equally shows the complex family dynamic, with dramatic moments where the mother tends to apply a suffocating control and Youssef and Dima try to escape this dynamic through cinema and glass miniature animals. Such instances are paired with other pure and contradictory moments of joy and expression of love and the need for such moments. The density of the margin is also present in Youssef’s monologues. For example, in the first monologue, he uses phrases like “Eyes bias”. This phrase reflects Ghanam’s adaptation tactics, which are based on using a particular phrase from the adapted original text and layering it with additional elements from the everyday Syrian life, creating a whole atmosphere around Williams’ “Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes,” phrase, for example. Ghanam’s adaptation of the play includes stories of young men and women who move back and forth between “language classes”, as well as the opening sentences of Tom’s monologue: “I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion”.

Ghanam sets key points in each monologue and created around them intense situations and atmospheres from the local Syrian environment while being keen on reflecting the here and now of 2013 in its relationship with the nostalgic past.

Ghanam has also included in his play the father figure who, in Williams' text, is a telephone company employee who falls in love with a long-distance caller. He quits his job and runs out of town, then sends a last postcard from Mazatlán on the Mexican coast, with the words "Hello— Goodbye". In Ghanam's adaptation, the father figure appears in the prologue: "There is a fourth character who appears only in the engraving that hangs on our wall, engraved by our father, our father who left us very young, he graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts, class of '82, and was an intellect and a leftist for ten years just to sleep with girls. He fell in love with the Danube River in Budapest and was specialized in stone and beer engraving on its banks. The last thing we got from him was a postcard with two words on it: Memory for oblivion with no address."

This immersion in the parallel Syrian world emerging from the margins of Williams' text has more complex political connotations than it might seem. This immersion in everyday life, in the streets, in cinema and on television, carries ideological connotations that Ghanam includes in all his shows.

The Political and Ideological Connotations of the Family Trilogy:

Ghanam includes in his performances political and ideological connotations that interest him on the personal level. These connotations can be seen through the characters he creates within the provincialized local environment. Commercial cinema and television, always present in the background of all his performances, not only indicate another ambiguous duplicity that reflects the characters' fascination and aversion to cinema and television, but also refer to the cycle of commodification within an entire production system. In this context, Saul, the American producer in Shepard's text, is gender swapped into Diana, a female producer in Ghanam's play. Diana has ties with Production houses in the Arab Gulf Region that shifted the sensitivities of the Arab drama production. Political and ideological connotations are also present in the play "Drama", where Adam's "authentic love story" plot is replaced by an absurd script written by Mihyar, who has no experience of writing. His text speaks of a "contemporary desert" filled with cowboy-like pursuits.

In addition, satellite channels and dish networks, which facilitated the arrival of Hollywood movies in the Arab world and Syria, broke the authorities' control over media and communications, and also provided a haven of entertainment for the lower classes and the economically disadvantaged.

Youssef's reference to *Ḥalawiyāt al-Bilsān* promotional bag and Steve's attempt to craft an advertisement through phone messages in the opening scene of *Homecoming* both echo themes explored in Ghanam's earlier play *Ḥadatha Dhālika Ghadan (It Happened Tomorrow)*. Ghanam, by hinting at advertising, promotional tools, seems to critique the economic and political systems, a concern that often resurfaces in his work.

In addition to criticizing the apparatuses of liberalism that infiltrated the daily lives of Syrians, Ghanam created in his play a parallel image of the failure or ineffectiveness of the left wing. Youssef's satirical portrayal of his father, who was an educated leftist for ten years only to sleep with girls. The collapse of the left is amplified, even in passing, in the figure of the leftist father who founded a publishing house, was imprisoned, and became a drunkard.

There were also references to the Syrian war, particularly in the 2015 play *Zujā* (*The Glass Menagerie*) and in the 2018 play *Drama*. Ghanam hinted at the war without mentioning it directly, as we can see between the lines. Starting with the rush toward taking foreign language courses, to which Youssef refers in an angry, sarcastic tone, associating these courses for all kinds of languages with Williams "They failed their eyes, or their eyes failed them". This adapted beat cannot be read in isolation from the centrality of the Arabic language, which is an ideological cornerstone in the formation of Syrian Arab national identity, in contrast to the poor acquisition of foreign languages. This rush to learn languages is closely linked to the displacement caused by the post-2011 events.

When Dima told her mother that she used to spend her time walking outside the institute, and her mother replied: "Here? In the Levant? Under the mortars? Interestingly, the most direct references to the war were made by the mother: at the end of the confrontation scene (scene #2), she said to Dima: "What are we going to do with what's left of our lives? Watch war and TV series." During Youssef's confrontation with his mother, he said he'd rather be hit by shrapnel than go to work, referring to the comfort of all those who died. The mother's question as to whether the violent noise coming from outside the house - similar to the sound of a bomb - is "an earthquake, a volcano or a tsunami", is also a reference to war. Ghanam equally mentioned the war indirectly, with a fleeting, absurd reference in the final scene of "Drama," in which the mother says that Picasso is coming to Damascus and that she heard about it on the *Yawmiyāt Hāwn* (Mortar Diaries) Facebook page. The cover of the novel *Memories of Underdevelopment*, hung on the wall, displayed raised fists, reminiscent of revolutionary symbols later reused during the Arab Spring and other uprisings. Originally, the fist gained prominence in Europe after the French Revolution, it remained an ambiguous sign associated in the play with the hung cover of Cuban novel by Edmundo Desnoes. Although the fists refer to the revolution, this act remains incidental, especially since Ghanam avoided direct reference to the revolution when it was possible in Williams's text. For example, while Tom's monologue in the first scene referred to the revolution that took place in Spain in 1936 when America was shaken by the economic crisis of the 1930s.

Noura Murad and Leish Troupe

The Founding Moment:

Noura Murad finished her theater studies in 1995 before specializing in physical theater in France. Upon her return, Murad decided to create “Leish Troupe”. The decision to create a troupe was taken in 1999 for two reasons: The first was artistic, due to the absence of an artistic movement around dance and the fact that the practice was still very young. The second reason was administrative, stemming from Murad’s experience with the public sector and government institutions, which led her to believe that it was impossible to bring about change within these bureaucratic institutions, since they often ignore the needs and tools of art. Thus, the need arose to create an independent troupe outside the public sector.

The official founding momentum coincided with Murad’s work on the script for her first show, *Ba’d Kul Hal Waqt* (After All This Time) while she was finishing her graduate studies.

However, the first stages of the company’s creation were marked by difficulties, mainly related to the rejection of the physical theater and the belief of some that this genre was illegible by the public.

Murad notes that many actors and actresses apologized from joining, fearing that the project would fail. Following *After All This Time*’s opening at the Qabbani Theater and its participation in several festivals, including winning the prize for best scenography at the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theater in 2000, certain perceptions changed due to the show’s remarkable and unpredictable success.

This experience was followed by a long partnership with the French Cultural Institute to organize workshops to train performers, actors and dancers on Physical Theater.

Despite the success of the company’s first project and the partnership with the French Cultural Institute, the group faced challenges related to “the resistance to anything new and different” on two levels: resistance from governmental agencies and institutions, which often put obstacles in place of support, and resistance from the artists themselves, who at the time were unaccustomed to the working team’s culture and way of working, which required grueling rehearsals that could last six hours etc.

Leish troupe is considered a pioneer in physical theater in Syria. Since its inception in 1999, the troupe has sought to discover, practice and understand the unlimited capabilities of the human corporal expression, and has worked on the Arab kinetic code.

Physical Theater and the Troupe:

Opting for Physical theater is an intentional artistic choice for Noura Murad and the troupe. Using a distinctive approach to the body, Leish believes that such use is capable of reclaiming the value of words, which lost their meaning in recent times. In this sense, physical theater reorganizes the relationship between word and movement. Working on the relationship of text as a key driver of physical theater is a cornerstone of the troupe's *modus operandi* since its inception, and took many forms: sometimes the text was the result of a collective workshop by members of the troupe, sometimes the writing process was done by Murad herself, and she often ended up using texts by Bertolt Brecht, Eduardo Galiano, and Fatima Mernissi. Murad insists on the need to speak in words, despite the presence of the body¹⁰⁶.

In parallel to the space for experimentation between two parallel forces - the word and the body - there is a space for experimentation between the performer, the show, and the audience. One of the fundamental questions always asked is how to address each viewer individually. Noura Murad was always preoccupied with the question of reducing the distance between herself and the audience, sharing the performance space and the physical experience with them. This work on proximity and distance, which results in a different relationship with the text, also refers to Murad's constant effort to say that we are similar as human beings but also unique in our experiences and that there is a unity between us. Theater cannot be but this ideal space for unpacking the relationship between people who are similar in essence and different in detail.

Murad's preference for alternative performance spaces was thus driven by the desire to alter the spectator's relationship with the presented material. By situating the audience in unconventional settings, Murad sought to transform the passive receiver into an active participant, engaging with the presented material in a dynamic and interactive manner. Before 2011, the majority of the company's performances were presented outside the Italian-style stage (aka picture-frame stage or the Italian Box). In 2003, Bertold Brecht's poems were performed in *Ahlak al-Awqāt* (The Darkest of Times), which took place in Hammam Fathi in Al-Midan in Damascus.¹⁰⁷ The following year, *Momo*, an interactive play for children, was performed in UNRWA schools in Damascus and in the Ein Al-Tal and Neirab camps in Aleppo.

The troupe depends on external funding and is accustomed to working with cultural missions and non-governmental organizations. Since its inception, it collaborated with the Goethe Institute, the French Cultural Institute, the Hivos Foundation in the Netherlands, the Arab Fund for Culture and the Arts (AFAC), and others. In 2004, for example, the troupe presented its interactive children's performance commissioned by the Goethe institute, and continued to perform

106- Interview with Noura Murad, January 14, 2022.

107- Hammam Fathi is a Turkish bathhouse, known for its Ottoman architecture.

Aḥlak al-Awqāt, which celebrates Brecht's centenary by presenting a collection of his poems in the form of physical theater.

What's remarkable about Leish's work prior to the Syrian revolution is the strong proximity the company creates between theatre and social space. Here we should mention Mary Elias and Hanan Kassab Hassan's translation of Patrice Pavis' *Dictionary of the Theatre*, in which they define the term "theatre space" as "any place where a theatrical performance takes place (be it a theater, a square, a street, etc.), i.e. the theatre space ('lieu théâtral') in relation to a larger space (city, village, church, factory, etc.). The overlap between the theater space and the larger space is significant, whatever the nature of the "theatrical performance".¹⁰⁸ In addition to Brecht's performance, the *Identities Project* was staged in alternative spaces.¹⁰⁹ The latter was a study of socio-religious rituals and celebrations in the Levant, a trilogy of which two performances were performed before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. While the first performance, *Idhā Mātū Intabāhū* (Once they die, they'll realize), presented a physical study of Syrian mourning rituals, the second performance, *Alf Mabruk* (Congratulations) explored wedding and celebratory rituals.

The aim of the project was to "research the process of putting the socio-religious rituals of the Levant region, and the mixture of religions it accommodates (Islam, Christianity and Judaism)- in the form of physical theater performance. This aim was achieved by researching a ritual's movement vocabulary. [sic] its form, indications and symbols; and exploring its possibility of being turned into an integral movement language that can eventually construct an identity of the Arab body on stage."¹¹⁰

In the space of Mustafa Gallery, white sand was sprinkled on the floor to "reproduce a dramatic and playful space" in which the spectator/participant moved while watching a group of silent performers move to the rhythm of religious chants in a kinetic reenactment of the Ashura ritual. The participants were divided into two groups, men and women. The following excerpt from Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper gives an overview of the show:

"Each of them makes his own circular journey, passing in turn through a series of small rooms, each with his own story, only to return and meet again where the story ends in a shared dance. In this playful space, Noura managed to work on two main points. The first is [exemplified in] the moment when the men pass in front of one of the women's rooms, whose door is covered with a piece of cloth torn into two halves. Through

108- PAVIS Patrice, *Dictionary of the Theatre*. Trans. Dr. Mary Elias and Hanan Kassab Hassan. Lebanon, Librarie du Liban Publishers, 1997, p. 338-339.

109- Identities project was released in January 2006 in Damascus, within a conference entitled "Body and identity: the representation of the Body in Arabic Culture" organized by the French Institute of the Near East (IFPO) and moderated by Dr. Hassan Abbas. The company delivered a lecture entitled "Body between religious ceremony and contemporary dance", and a workshop for professional dancers, The project lasted for four years, its three main components were: theatrical recherche , workshops, and physical theatre performances.

110- <https://www.leishtroupe.com/projects/identities-2006-2010/>

this small hole, everyone becomes part of the performance, the women in their steady movement become an object of voyeurism for men as they move into the next room. The second point is the inevitability that separation creates, and it leads to serious conversations following the end of the performance, as men or women ask each other what they saw in their own space. This makes it imperative for the spectator to rethink and reconnect with what he already experienced, which is very important. The work is also complemented by the connection [created] between the visual presentation and the content of the dramatic idea that we women saw and which explores the theatricalization of social rituals of a religious nature. In the same context, Noura Murad used the angles of the space to serve the dancers, between two stone windows in the wall, where each [dancer] conceals seduction; these are bathroom windows, where sin and evil are washed away to restore purity to the body. Between the two [symmetrical windows], the space is small, cold, but intimate, as if it hides a secret that the women reveal to each other under the magic of the music that resonates in a successful remix of religious music with its variations between psalmody, adhan and prayer. The space of the performance is uncluttered, with few accessories limited to sound equipment, dim lighting and a small clay plate. This creates an ecstatic unity with the dancer, the other, and the supreme idea, which in this case is the dramatic idea, [where] a single body, that of the dancer, as his movements are complemented [and fused] with every detail of the performance. Noura Murad draws on the mechanisms of Islamic ablution and prayer, which she combines with contemporary dance technique and the specificity of the body”.¹¹¹

This convergence of the private and public spheres - despite the intimacy of the acts of voyeurism and ablution- simulates an event in an interactive space with the audience. This direct and real contact is referenced in Elias/Kassab Hassan's translation of Pavis's dictionary as follows: The relationship between the theatrical space and the wider space—the city, the church, the community—evolves from a realm of suggestion in Italian stage performance to one of action and practice. In this context, the city and the theater are inseparable. The city becomes the theater, and the theater becomes the city/public sphere. This correspondence is further evidenced by the transition of *Identities' Project* from the closed, urbanized alternative space (i.e., the gallery) to open, moving spaces. For example, *Alf Mabruk* (Congratulations) performance toured the Syrian provinces, from the Citadel of Damascus to Al Riwaq Art Space, then the archeological hall of the Cathedral of the Forty Martyrs in Homs, Al-Shibani Church in Aleppo, and finally the National Museum in Latakia¹¹². This expansion of

111- NO AUTHOR, « Idhā Mātū Intabihū: Jasad Ma'khūdh Bimawāḍī' Al-Ṭuqūṣ Al Islāmīya », *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, January 25, 2008.

112- <https://www.albayan.ae/our-homes/2010-07-11-1.263953>

physical theater in public spaces, with the aim of staging collective rituals dealing with abstract issues such as fear and concepts of masculinity and femininity, will be supplanted by a state of withdrawal and contraction in post-revolutionary performances, as we will see in the coming pages.

Noura Murad: The Allegiance of Returning to the Inner Self in Baqā' (Survival) and Mu'anaqāt (Embraces)

In the wake of the Syrian revolution, Leish made the decision to suspend all artistic productions until 2018. It was unethical for the company to present any of its work in the midst of raging violence and preferred to avoid aligning itself with any of the three choices back then: "One is to be prejudiced to one party and employ art in an armed-conflict, which would eventually result in nothing but more violence. Two, is to vividly portray the cruel reality without taking a step away from the painful everyday details; which would lead into mere drainage. And the third choice would be to deny reality, keep working as if nothing is happening, and thus art will lose its sole purpose."¹¹³ It wasn't until 2016 that the troupe produced *Baqā'* (Survival), the first post-revolutionary show, followed by *Mu'anaqāt* (Embraces) (2018).

And if the Leish troupe built its first allegiance by ceasing theatrical production, in line with the moment of war, this act of withdrawal turned into a performance aesthetic on the stage, with spiritual foundations, such that the body withdraws and loses its relationship with the material world, as we will see in the performances of *Baqā'* (Survival) and *Mu'anaqāt* (Embraces).

As the title suggests, *Survival* deals with the act of living in the momentum of war. The show stresses that it is possible to survive, but only by taking a long pause and reflecting on the different meanings and experiences stemming from the war and the pandemic times.

Based on the artists' subjective experiences, Murad made a distinction between acclimating oneself and learning to co-exist with the daunting circumstances of being in a battle zone.

For her, acclimation involves a degree of coercion and physical resistance, while co-existence offers an opportunity to "live with" things, opening a new window of understanding and self-knowledge. Facing a catastrophe - where one can give up for a while - teaches a level of "acceptance" that opens up a new possibility for exploration while avoiding falling into the "victim mentality".

The clear boundary that Murad created between co-existence (surrender) and acclimation or adaptation (resistance) is manifested on stage in the physical yet problematic work on corporeality, where the body explores its limits and defies all modes of control and subjugation in an empty space. Bodies are positioned on stage in an ambiguous theatrical space where there is a constant attempt to control them. The performers try to free themselves from the subjugating

¹¹³- LEISH THEATER TROUPE, *op. cit.*

patterns of the body. Hand and foot gestures are at the heart of Murad's choreography. This choice focuses on the hands and legs, which represent the boundaries separating the individual from his surrounding environment. Although the limbs are the point of contact with the stage, the bodies seem isolated from any external environment, so that the body's only conflict is with itself: the hand seizes the arm, the body shrinks, and the hand becomes an oppressive tool that violently pulls the hair and silences the mouth. The contraction develops into a series of hand gestures that lead to the act of confining the body. Forcing a smile on oneself and others is another form of bodily subjugation: the hand rises to transform the grimace on the lips into an artificial smile, but only for a short time. A choreography inspired by the spaces and edges of forearms, elbows and knees follows, before quickly moving into a fetal position and slowly crawling off the stage. The last ten minutes of the performance focus on the same pattern of hand and foot gestures where the body re-explores its boundaries. Although the movements related to hands and feet may refer to the body and its boundaries with the outer space, the communication with the external environment is very limited because it often returns to the self or the one body as a single and solitary unit on stage. The isolation from the external environment and the return to the inner self is a recurrent theme in *Mu'ānaqāt* (Embraces): The physical theater in *Mu'ānaqāt* relies on several texts by Eduardo Galliaano, as the piece begins with a screen showing excerpts from "Voices of Time: A Life in Stories".

The performance begins with a short story about how embracing is the first human gesture of newborn babies and the last act of the elderly before death. While Galliano's passages show a conversation between a woman and her therapist about the loss of love, the stage gradually reveals itself as a laboratory in which Paul Ekman's five fundamental emotions are embodied: anger, fear, disgust, sadness, and happiness.

Paul Ekman believes that emotions, although characterized by common and universal features, generate emotional expressions that are necessary for the development and regulation of interpersonal relationships. Ekman emphasizes the history of species in triggering specific emotional patterns in the autonomic nervous system, causing physiological changes that prepare the body to respond differently to various emotional states. However, environmental influences affect this overall evolutionary economy. Ekman identifies several characteristics that distinguish one emotion from another. The concept of "emotion families" is of particular interest in the context of this research.

In this spirit, Ekman and his daughter Eva created the Atlas of Emotions, an interactive tool that helps individuals "enrich their emotional vocabulary and understand their emotional world. By creating a graphic map of the mind, this atlas helps navigate "human emotions" and the "swamps of our feelings," all of which fall under the heading of emotional awareness.

In *Mu'ānaqāt* (Embraces), the emotional awareness that Ekman explains with detailed maps is turned into a science of emotions embodied on stage, in which the body uses all its capacities to project every emotion that is physically formed

by bodily interaction. Here, the body has no other function or identity than to project an emotion in opposition or harmony with another.

Working on the dimensions of the text is just as important as representing emotion through the body, which is why Galliano's extracts are included either through direct voice-over or screen projection: Here too, the body pulls in on itself, delving deeper into its physiological layers. The human voice describing a woman when she sees a man she loves is a case in point. The narrative space is devoted to explaining the woman's physical changes. She goes into tachycardia every time she sees her lover. Her thyroid dries up, her sweat glands overproduce, and she suffers from hypotension when he touches her.

While the bodies representing emotions are characterized by a series of repetitive, extremely slow bodily movements and gestures in the midst of anonymous characters, physical stasis is the element that characterizes both the therapist and the woman. By questioning their existence in the world, they seem to reject any desire to situate themselves in relation to space. Although the stage can only be seen as a physical entity surrounding the bodies, Galliano's passages give it another dimension. The lines below, uttered by the woman (in voice over) refer to the absence of belonging to a place, including the body itself:

I don't belong anywhere; I don't recognize myself in anything. Words don't resemble their connotations and don't match the sounds they make, I'm not where I should be. I leave my body and fly away. I don't have a destination and I don't want to be with anyone, not even myself. I don't want a name and I have no desire to have one. I lost the desire to connect with myself or to allow anyone to connect with me..."

At some point, the body is no longer capable of living as a physical entity and loses its significance, and this is where the process of a conscious body-self-dissociation begins. The desire to leave the body, not even have a name, is part of the attempt to rediscover the self by referring to emotions as an inner spiritual process that cannot be revealed, expressed or articulated through verbal and non-verbal forms. The artists' bodies are presented as having a single meaning, that of emotion itself. Murad chose not to define emotions by the semiotics of the performers' faces, rather her choreography emphasizes the relational network that links different emotions.

Murad pointed out that while *Mu'ānaqāt* (Embraces) allows a certain level of self-release, *Baqa'* (Survival) implies the right to collapse when the self resists and refuses to let emotions flow. The first performance (i.e. Survival) is inextricably linked to the first five years of the war, when fear and tension were omnipresent and death was a daily companion. Then, Murad realized that people can't face their fear, even for a brief moment. In order to survive, there seems to be a level of self-absolutism and self-violence that we impose on ourselves and in which we repeatedly deny our human feelings and fail to recognize that we are reproducing the tyranny we rebelled against within ourselves. On the other hand, Murad described *Mu'ānaqāt* (Embraces) as "a very personal, inner

and profound experience of surrender, of being at peace with yourself,” while acknowledging the different levels of emotion, including fear: “You have to look at your fears with your naked eye.” This painful process is as liberating as it is painful. Because then you can make fear a part of you: “It has become something inside me, it protects me, I hear it, it hears me, sometimes I laugh at it”.

Leish Troupe attempts to observe the body in its cultural, social and psychological contexts in a wide variety of spaces, trying to touch everyday actions and emotional body language, deconstructing them and then abstracting them again through decontextualized signs. Murad tries to find the emotional body, or the traces of death and love within the self, which is only truly revealed at the level of the body positioned in contradistinction to direct speech. While physical theater was an important part of the theatrical movement in Europe over the last century, its variations were largely focused on the gendered or mutilated body. Leish troupe sought to liberate the body from these markers. It tried to identify the body’s motivations and voice, far removed from local social contexts or ideological plans.

Thus, as mentioned above, the multiple allegiance to the unity of Syrians, far from political polarization, even if it is difficult to separate politics from everyday life, and the adherence to the essence of art, as mentioned by the troupe, are the constitutive elements of the *Baqā’* (Survival) and *Mu’ānaqāt* (Embraces) shows. Both are characterized by a withdrawal and an attempt to acclimate with the outside world by immersing oneself in inner worlds and trying to build an allegiance to the self and to grand narratives of steadfastness, resistance, victory and defeat. A comparison of these two works with the two performances from the *Identities Project* in 2008 and 2010, which sought a physical art whose initial elements were based on collective ceremonial rituals in Syria, reveals that the body retreats from the ritualized collective state towards a state of exception. While the performance *Baqā’* (Survival) defines the situation of being on the brink, *Mu’ānaqāt* (Embraces) is where the body finds salvation by creating a sense of allegiance to the self.

Conclusion

The present research focused on the following main questions: “What is the initial production map between 2011 and 2021, and how does the decision to stay in Syria affect the creation of post-2011 theatrical aesthetics?”

Through this question, we tried to track the possibility of aesthetic changes and their tools, without neglecting artists’ attempts to work under the auspices of official institutions, which sometimes lead to the reproduction of the same aesthetic ideology.

As a first step, we attempted to provide a brief overview of the history of pre-revolutionary Syrian theater since its inception, in an effort to define the framework of a Syrian theatrical identity and allow the reader to compare it to post-revolutionary theater.

At the start of our research, we were confronted with the scarcity of theatrical research material in the post-revolution period. However, by studying the articles and interviews we've collected, as well as several performances available in the virtual space, we've found that the theatrical movement took different forms and several directions. We tried to examine some of these experiences in order to draw a preliminary map of the reality of theatrical work under and outside the authority of the regime. In doing so, we employed analytical reading and worked with the theoretical concepts of scholar Diana Taylor in order to read the aesthetics of the performances and their impact on the present. We used the concepts of "multiple allegiances and the strategy of doubling and staying the same" as a theoretical framework that enables the observation of the transmission of and disavowal from the aesthetic codes aligned with the aesthetics of power promoted by the Assadist Baathist ideology, while simultaneously maintaining harmony with the self on the one hand, and as an indicator of a different creation and a different creative margin under the same political system on the other. We adapted Taylor's theory to the specificity of the Syrian context and added two levels of multiple allegiances: The first level is the transitive level of multiple allegiances and doubling strategies, which involves allegiances that mimic the discourse of authority and the aesthetic of the Assad-Baathist ideology, while reproducing the same aesthetic tools. The second level is characterized by a transcendental level of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same. In this case, allegiances go beyond imitation of the aesthetics of the regime to include alternative forms of belonging. One such form may involve a sense of loyalty to place or the city-state as a collective entity that challenges the very notion of power. This may manifest as a loyalty to the people of the place, as well as personal or artistic beliefs that emerged in response to the prevailing circumstances and that were not necessarily omnipresent on stage before 2011 where artists were not concerned with aligning themselves with the Assad-Baathist ideology and sought to maintain a distance from the polarization of the regime versus the opposition. This led to a state of ambiguity imposing certain level of tension and negotiation with the repressive apparatus of regime. Conversely, a transcendental level of multiple allegiances can reappropriate aesthetic ideology in a disparate context, building on previous iterations while offering a new and distinct proposition.

Our starting point was offering a historical context to the institutionalization of Syrian theater from 1959 until the beginning of the revolution. This period was dominated by political commitment to national issues and the monopolization of culture and art by the official institution, as is the case in many totalitarian regimes. This can be seen through censorship, surveillance and the formation of cultural institutions tasked with directing the theater scene towards issues promoted by the authorities, as part of what is known as the nationalization of culture. This period was also marked by the weak structure of private theaters and their decline in favor of commercial shows. However, many theatrical

attempts tried to break with the aesthetics of authority through experimental work and the search for fundamental questions in style and form.

Regarding dramatic texts, we found that most texts from the 1960s to 1980s were linked to nationalist issues. At the beginning of the millennium, collective playwriting workshops appeared, but they were few and far between. The majority of pre-revolutionary theatrical works did not attempt to develop approaches to modern political history or to deal directly with contemporary political events. Instead, they relied on myth and symbolism, allowing the audience to interpret and project political reality. At this stage, Syria's modern history was a challenging theme for theater artists.

Following the events of 2011, government-affiliated theatrical productions continued unabated. Some artists who decided to stay inside Syria decided to withhold their production plans. This was evidenced by the cases of the Damascus Theater Laboratory, founded by Oussama Ghanam, and the Leish troupe, founded by Noura Murad. It was notable that certain productions created by the Directorate of Theaters and Music and/or the National Theater conveyed the discourse of the official institution, which tended to privilege national issues and marginalize local current affairs. This was exemplified by Zainati Qudsia's play *Abū Shinār*, which was staged on multiple occasions between 2011 and 2022. The Syrian directors faced a variety of challenges, the first and most significant of which was the impact of war on infrastructure and the lack of funding. The "aesthetic of scarcity" was a unifying element in the majority of the mentioned performances. In terms of directing styles, we presented a diverse range of works, many of which used theater within theater or alienation techniques to reproduce pre-revolutionary forms of directing.

Through the texts we were able to analyze, direct representations of the momentum of the Syrian 2011 revolution and its aftermath were avoided, and war was mentioned either through symbolism, parables, or mythology. Some works were re-performed and re-adapted to vaguely reference the repercussions of revolution and war, such as Ayman Zeidan's *Supermarket*. Zeidan changed the ending of Dario Fo's text to refer to the insistence of staying in Syria. Worth noting is the presence of the idea of fear in a number of performances, such as *Tashih Alwan* "Color Correction".

In general, a number of works reproduced the same aesthetic tools while maintaining a small margin of reflecting the now moment through indirect allusions while avoiding addressing the local political history. This act reflects the transitive level of multiple allegiances.

Nevertheless, certain performances challenged the omnipresent theatrical scene of the time. The former can also be seen through the lens of the transcendental level of multiple allegiances. In the third section, we exposed the work of Farah Al Dbayyat and Amir Abu Kheir who used the concept of "theater within theater", a legacy that was often used to talk about the cause of Arab nationalism. In Dbayyat and Abu Kheir's work "theater within theater" was rerouted to address gender issues, while parallelly working in alternative spaces. The act of

withdrawal as a physical aesthetic on stage was also a deliberate choice made by Leish troupe to reflect the company's positionality, that refused to conform to the prevailing political polarizations or artistic orientations influenced by the reality of war and revolution. It is possible to interpret the withdrawal of the body, which is an aesthetic phenomenon on stage, as allegiance to Syrian unity that is not linked to political polarization.

While examining the research material available at hand, the Damascus Theater Laboratory and the Leish troupe were two prolific and remarkable experiences in the post uprising era.

The Damascus Theater Laboratory sought to present the concepts of family, memory, and the city in a contemporary context to address the city's transformation from a globalized perspective. The Damascus Theater Laboratory attempted to create a detailed image of the Syrian family on stage, while presenting the city and everyday moments of street life, both under a hybrid capitalist and Baathist regime. Damascus (or the city in general), with its alleyways, dialects and popular stores, appeared as an omniscient shadow-character in Ghanam's performances. The recurrent triad of theater, television and film, present in Ghanam's Family trilogy was significant in reflecting the political and social implications of such mediums, potent in shaping today's culture of the city and its struggles with the new rules of the market, authority and art.

Leish troupe, on the other hand, endeavored to isolate the self from its surrounding environment, while interrogating the body's functioning vis a vis socio-psychological concepts such emotion, affect, resilience, and denial. Noura Murad, the co-founder of Leish Troupe, attempted to observe the human body in various physiological states. Following purely emotional and psychological motives, the body was presented as an exhausted entity capable of recognizing its fragility in contrast to the discourse of "resilience and resistance". Such internalization toward a mode self-probing sets aside the imperative of political allegiances for artists living and producing theatre in Syria after 2011.

The present research equally touched upon some methodologies used while producing theatre. Significant in that regard the Damascus Theater Laboratory dramaturgical process combining theoretical and practical concepts. the Damascus Theater Laboratory drew on a long process of in-depth research while not disregarding the subjectivity of the actor/s and director to try to find the points of connection between intellectual concepts and personal experiences. This process begins with a long dramaturgical journey to find meaning and sensibilities linked to the reality of living in Damascus, far from any ideological proposals. The Damascus Theater Laboratory experience extends to workshops that do not aim to produce a final product. It is an attempt to engage in a human artistic activity despite the difficulties of life in Syria.

The research journey led us to various meanings and questions that attempted to explore theatrical experiences, some of which dealt with Syria's current

situation and deserve further study and critique outside the binaries of and the dualities of the inside and the outside. We have found that it is possible to analyze and read aesthetics and approaches to Syrian theater that are capable of presenting a vision of the world in its own specificity, through the theory of multiple allegiances and strategies of doubling and staying the same.

These experiments were based on complex interrogations involving political and social themes. They reflected the current challenges and the Zeitgeist of Syria from the inside after 2011, that is in line with or in opposition to the aesthetic established by the regime.

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ملخص | يركز هذا البحث على المسرح داخل سوريا خلال العقد الذي أعقب الثورة السورية. ويدرس الجماليات المسرحية للتجارب البارزة في حين يحاول فهم تأثير تحديات الحياة اليومية والصراعات الداخلية على المسرح السوري. وأزعم أن التحديات المماثلة قد تخلق أشكالاً مسرحية ما بعد الصراع تستمد قوتها من شعور معين بالولاء للمدينة وللمسرح المحلي. وبينما تستعير الدراسة الحالية مفهوم ديانا تايلور للولاءات المتعددة واستراتيجيات المضاعفة والبقاء على نفس الحال، فإنها تنظر في قرار البقاء داخل سوريا كإطار جمالي وطريقة نظر تتحدى الاستقطاب السياسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية | مسرح، سوريا، ٢٠١١، الثورة، الولاءات المتعددة، جمالية القلة، جماليات الإخراج، النص المسرحي.

Mona Merhi completed her Ph.D. in Theatre History and Performance Studies at the University of Washington. She serves as a lecturer at the James Madison University.

Her academic research was presented at the UCLA Center for Performance Studies, Maryland University “Revels and Rebels” Virtual Symposium, the Association for Theatre and Higher Education (ATHE), the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), Münster Summer School (Germany), Cultural Innovators Network (Greece), and SeSamo (Società Italiana di Studi sul Medio Oriente – Naples, Italy).

Mona received multiple awards, among which the ASTR fund for scholars with heavy teaching load (2024), the Michael Quinn Writing Prize (2021), the Graduate School Chester Fritz International Research and Study Fellowship, the Graduate School Presidential Dissertation Fellowship in Arts and Humanities, the Ashoka Fellowship for Social Entrepreneurs, and the Culture Resource grant for creative writing.