Ziad Adwan

Imaginary Theatre

Professionalising Theatre in the Levant 1940-1990[1]

Abstract

This paper examines theatre education in the Levant, i.e. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine, between late 1940s and early 1990s. As a relatively new phenomenon in the region, Western-style theatre has always sought, but not always found, political, religious, social and artistic recognition. In addition to institutional and "professional" theatre initiatives, this era also witnessed the academic approaches to theatre in the region. Introducing theatre to the Levant was dependent on wealthy citizens who afforded trips to Europe and returned to spread theatre in their cities. Later in the 1970s, and influenced by Brechtian Epic Theatre, Social Realism and the Theatre of the Absurd, governmental and academic theatre practices and literature rebelled against the existing theatre models, including the theatre makers that were glorified as national symbols.

It is argued that theatre makers and theatre institutions in the Levant adopted an ideal description of theatre that was hardly recognised locally. Associating theatre to noble issues in order to promote "serious theatre," lessened the credibility of local experiences. The dependence on socialist and nationalist ideologies assisted in legitimising theatre in the region, but simultaneously, idealising theatre separated this new art from the existing practices, and consequently mystified it in the region.

Author

Ziad Adwan studied for an MA in Text and Performance Studies at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and King's College in London, and then took a PhD in Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London; his thesis was on "Mistakes and Making Mistakes in Cultural Representations". Ziad's work comprises acting, directing and writing for theatre as well as academic works. He taught at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus/ Syria 2009-2013. Ziad is currently based in Germany and is affiliated with the Global Theatre Histories Research Project, Developing Theatre (Building Expert Networks for Theatre in Emerging Countries after 1945) at LMU Munich, and publishes articles in several academic journals. Ziad co-founded TANWEEN Company for Theatre and Dance and has been directing theatre and performance projects in Germany.

Keywords: Theatre education, Levant, Socialist Bloc, star-system, serious theatre, Sa'adalla Wannous, Fairouz.

Introduction

The Lebanese actress Hanane Hajj Ali was studying biology and medicine at the wish of her parents,[2] but the shock of the Lebanese civil war in 1976 prompted her to begin thinking about Lebanon, resistance and the relationship to Palestine. Hajj Ali started to write, but she felt that she wanted to do more than solo work, so she applied to the Institute of Fine Arts and started studying acting, while continuing to study medicine. She had to lie to her parents about studying theatre. Two years later, her father discovered that his daughter was doing a second course of studies. He punished her for lying and for damaging the family's reputation by wanting to become an actress. Although Hajj Ali's parents were theatre-goers, they denied their daughter a theatre education and any involvement in the theatre. However, they changed their minds when they saw Hajj Ali's first play, which was highly political. While gender might have played a role in forbidding a daughter from studying theatre, the situation was, to some extent, the same for male actors. Syrian actor Jihad Saad, for instance, was sent to France by his family in the 1980s to study engineering, but he returned to Syria after a few years to surprise his parents with a theatre certificate from the Academy of Arts in Cairo.

As a relatively new phenomenon in the Levant,[3] Western-style theatre has always sought, but not always found, political, religious, social and artistic recognition. The first play to be staged in an Arabic-speaking country was presented in Beirut in 1847 (Wannous 1996, p. 67). Before the mid-nineteenth century, Molière, Sophocles and Shakespeare meant nothing to the Arab public and intellectuals. Arab philosophers had been aware of the theatre, but this art remained distant from the Arab passion for poetry, the literature with which Arabs are most familiar. In the centuries that preceded 1847, Arab translators and philosophers translated theatrical terminology in order to make it comprehensible in terms of literature and poetry. Thus, according to Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), tragedy was translated as مديح madeeh, literally, 'eulogy'; and comedy as هجاء heja'a, literally, "libel" (Abbas 1971, p. 505) 'Theatre' was called مرسح *marsah*, when it was first introduced to the Arabic-speaking world, but later people called it مسرح *masrah* (Kassab-Hassan 1997, p. 443).

The staging of the first Arab play in 1847 did not mean that theatre found a welcoming environment in the region in which it could flourish. Arabic literature on theatre mainly discusses how to legitimise theatre in an environment that represses it religiously, politically, economically and aesthetically. Up until the 1960s, it was hard to change the general public's understanding of artistic and theatrical terms. The loanword 'artist', for instance, connoted 'whore' for decades, and it was one of the problems the Syrian Ministry of Culture confronted when it attempted to bureaucratise theatre and professionalise 'artists' and theatre makers in the 1960s.[4] Up to the year 2000, the struggle to expand theatre in the Levant resulted in one autonomous theatre academy, a handful of acting departments at universities and a few theatre venues, most of which had originally been cinemas. Students, trainees and academics had no opportunity to watch plays relevant to their studies. Teaching theatre in the Levant proved problematic, as tutors had to teach an absent art, and students had to learn about an art they could not recognise and standardise.

In this paper, I examine theatre education in the Levant, i.e. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine between the late 1940s and the early 1990s. The new nation states in the Levant shared some common elements in terms of their historical, geographical, social and political dynamics. And at the theatrical level, they shared several aspects that made disseminating theatre in these counties, to some extent, different from in the other Arabic-speaking countries. Marvin Carlson suggests that Arabic-speaking countries are divided into three theatrical regions: North Africa, which has a close connection to French theatre; the Gulf States, which resist Western influences including theatre; and the Middle East, considered the centre of Arab theatre (Carlson 2003, pp. 42–47).

Don Rubin proposes a similar division in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, and divides the Arabic-speaking countries into the same "three theatrical segments" (Rubin 1999, pp. 12–13). Egypt, however, holds a special position in the Arab world, and it was the main influence not only in terms of theatre, but also in general political and social terms. Thus, one of the main differences that made theatre in the Levant different from Egyptian theatre is that the former was influenced by the latter. The Egyptian influence decreased when the nation states were founded in the region in the late 1940s. Gradually, Egyptian plays became rare on the Levant stages in comparison to the rise of international plays, Greek and classical tragedies and local national texts.[5]

Although Egypt had one of the first theatre academies in the Arab world, teaching of theatre in the Levant was directly influenced by Western-style theatre, i.e. by Europe, and in the context of the era this paper is examining, by the Socialist bloc. Certainly, the colonial period played a major part in this influence, but the dependence on local individuals who had direct contact with European theatre also reflects the demand for and interest in this European influence. Most of Egyptian theatre practices, therefore, were perceived by theatre makers in the Levant as insufficient models of theatre, a treatment that also included local theatre practices in the region.

This paper argues that theatre makers and institutions in the Levant adopted an ideal description of theatre that was hardly recognised locally. With the foundation of the new nation states in the region, many theatre makers attempted to create model(s) of 'serious theatre' (as distinguished from farces and private commercial theatre, which were commonly associated with Egyptian comedies that were broadcast on local TV channels). The dependence on socialist and nationalist ideologies helped to legitimise theatre in the region, but simultaneously separated theatre from existing practices, and consequently mystified this art, and Egyptian theatre was no different.

In the first section, I cast light on an ambiguous theatre scene that lasted from the late 1940s to the late 1960s in the Levant. I explore, through local literature on theatre and personal interviews, the processes of introducing theatre to a region that lacked theatre traditions. I argue that the countries in the region adopted, to a certain extent, an identical paradigm, in which learning about theatre was dependent on individual initiatives by wealthy citizens who could afford scholarly trips to Europe and returned to spread theatre among their circles.[6]

In the second section, I analyse how theatre movements in these countries created contrastive narratives in order to attain social, official and public credibility. When theatre found some social recognition in certain Levant cities, governmental and academic theatre initiatives rebelled against the existing models, in order to reflect the influences of European oppositional theatre movements such as Brechtian Epic Theatre,

Social Realism and the Theatre of the Absurd. I focus on Syria, as the theatre movement in this country faced fewer interruptions in comparison to Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine which were significantly disrupted by war. Aiming at achieving 'Serious Theatre', the new discourses accumulated ideal images of theatre that rejected local practices and therefore intensified the mystery of theatre in the region.

Individual Initiatives and Family Theatre

Scholars tend to explore theatre in the Arabic-speaking countries by describing its emergence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and then most studies skip to 1967 and the decades that follow. Lebanese playwright and theatre academic Jean Daoud, for instance, devotes only a few lines to the period between the 1940s and late 1960s in his eighty-page *Theatre in Lebanon* and chooses to call the initiatives that began in the early 1950s to 1975, the 1960s period (Dawood 2009, p. 14). In *The World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre: The Arab world* Don Rubin covers theatre movements in the Arabic-speaking countries, focusing mainly on the emergence of theatre in the Middle East in the nineteenth century and then on post-1967 theatre (Rubin 1999). The article covering theatre in Iraq, for instance, devotes only two pages to the period between the late 1940s and the late 1960s. Theatre maker Farhan Bulbul examines the development of Syrian theatre over the course of a century and ends his study in 1947 (Bulbul 1997). Edward Ziter's *Political Performance in Syria 'From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* focuses, as the title of the book implies, on post-1967 Syrian political theatre (Ziter 2015).

In the following, I give a description of the methods employed to disseminate theatre in the Levant between the 1940s and the early 1990s. I adopt the separation made between pre- and post-1967, but argue that the separation was made, in some measure, to create oppositional theatre narratives, where each narrative defines itself in contrast to the other. The oppositional standpoints resulted in distinctive approaches to theatre as well as distinctive techniques of writing, acting, rehearsing and directing. I focus on Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. Palestine, which was the central cause in most of the Arabic practices and discourses, remained largely dependent on the knowledge, theories and practices brought by other Arab theatre makers.

1967 was in fact an eruptive year in the Levant. Arab armies were defeated in the six-day war against the State of Israel, and Egypt, Jordan and Syria lost some of their lands to Israel. Palestine became a central cause for the Arab people, intellectuals and politicians. In the decade that followed the defeat, dictatorships, civil wars, warlords and fundamentalism dominated the region. The era witnessed the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, the rise of the Muslim brotherhood in Syria and the war between Iraq and Iran.

Intellectuals and politicians nostalgically celebrate the era between the establishment of the nation states in the late 1940s and the early 1960s, claiming that this period enjoyed a healthy political and social life. It was a time of convincing parliamentary representation and reasonable degrees of social freedom. It also witnessed the unification of Syria and Egypt (1958-1961). Iraqi theatre maker Sami Abdul Hamid celebrates this era for its openness to freedom and the stability of the existing political parties (Abdul Hamid 2009, p. 36). Yet, this era covers only nine pages of the 127-page book on Iraqi theatre. The nostalgia for the political and social life of the late 1940s and the early 1960s does not include its theatre, and academic scholarship seems to take no notice of its

existence. In contrast, the significant theatre movements are considered to be those that emerged after the defeat, in the time of dictatorships, civil wars, warlords and fundamentalism.

This attitude towards pre-1967 theatre does not go unnoticed by local theatre makers. Saadallah Wannous, a Syrian playwright, one of the founders of the Syrian National Theatre and co-founder of the theatre journal *Theatre Life* and the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus, emphasises this apathy:

Achieving the required efficiency, theatre needs to reach the ultimate freedom and pureness, exactly, in the time that only offers turmoil, oppression, horrible changes, and massacres. This is the contradiction, and from this contradiction the crisis arises (Wannous 1996, p. 77).

In his *Manifestos for a New Arabic Theatre* (بيانات لمسرح عربي جديد), Wannous undervalues pre-1967 theatre in order to admire late-nineteenth-century Middle-Eastern theatre. In these manifestos, he examines the relationship between theatre and Arabic culture, and discusses the means necessary to authenticate theatre in the Arabic region, arguing that, although the public has improved culturally and educationally, theatre audiences in the 1950s to 1970s do not respond to Molière, Racine and Corneille. In contrast, according to Wannous, late-nineteenth century theatre makers and theatre audiences were more able to comprehend these plays in terms of production and reception (Wannous 1996, p. 29).

These approaches do not specify why theatre between the late 1940s and the late 1960s is neglected. They ignore not only the processes of institutionalising theatre in the new nation states, but also the attempts to create civic theatre traditions in the Levant cities. It is in this era that a certain degree of knowledge of theatre was established in relation to Western Europe and the Socialist bloc. In addition to translation, this era established several sorts of contacts with European theatre, and it familiarised the locals with Shakespeare, the Greek Tragedies and contemporary European theatre, including Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd. This era also witnessed the first steps towards the academic study of theatre in the Levant.

Keeping in mind that theatre was foreign to the region, the methods of producing plays and introducing theatre to the public were, to some extent, educational tasks. In a region lacking theatre traditions and existing theatre performances, a new theatre production required several kinds of knowledge of theatre, including the history of Western-style theatre, famous international plays and acting techniques. Thus, actors were trainees, and they were simultaneously doing theatre, learning its techniques and its history. The association between making theatre and teaching it was not limited to teaching the volunteers how to do theatre; several Arab playwrights also attempted to teach the audience how to watch theatre.[7]

Practicing theatre in the Levant cities followed a roughly identical paradigm. It was based on personal initiatives by individuals who had travelled abroad and returned home to tell their communities about the art of theatre, and personally trained the actors with whom they worked. In the 1960s, Rafiq Al-Sabban's house in Damascus became a 'cultural centre'. While living in Paris in the 1950s in order to complete his PhD in Law at the Sorbonne, Al-Sabban was attracted to the arts and to theatre in particular. When he returned to Syria in the mid-1950s, actors and intellectuals assembled at his house to learn about theatre, to watch films and to practice theatre. The phenomenon was welcomed by the Damascene upper classes, and some of these families offered their

houses for the meetings. Women were present at the assemblies and were encouraged to participate in the plays directed by Al-Sabban. According to communist thinker Sadik Al-Azm, whose Damascene aristocratic family occasionally hosted some of these meetings, this hospitality was not only prestigious but also reflected the upper classes' belief that theatre had a role to play in modernising the country.[8]

The members of Al-Sabban's group were open to other forms of literature and art. They read and recited poetry, and they also watched films Al-Sabban had brought with him such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Iraqi musician Solhi Al-Wadi, who would become the Dean of the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts and Music in Damascus in 1990, gave classes in European classical music. These assemblies developed into producing theatre and Al-Sabban's house became a place to rehearse theatre too. Although unpaid, the attendees became a theatre group and they rehearsed and staged international plays, some of which were translated by Al-Sabban himself, and some of which, such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, were presented in English (Ismat 2013, p. 64). The group presented plays by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere and other European and North American playwrights.

Al-Sabban's performances were presented in classical Arabic and the actors recited the lines while keeping movement to a minimum. When staging ancient Greek tragedies, Al-Sabban kept the chorus, in order to harmonise with the Arab sensibility of poetry and rhetorical language. During the rehearsals, Al-Sabban used to interpret the play in front of the actors, then he blocked it and then he finally let the actors interact with the interpretation and the blocking of the mise-en-scène. On some occasions during the rehearsals, Al-Sabban would play a character to show the actor (or the actress) how to play his/her part.

The assembly moved from the homes of the bourgeoisie to venues that could hold larger audiences. Thus, while keeping the events free of charge, Nadwet Al-Feker wa Al-Fan ندوة الفكر والفن became an alternative venue in which the Damascenes could learn more about international theatre. Later, the members of Al-Nadwa became the main body of the Syrian National Theatre and the Television Dramatic Arts Company. Rafiq Al-Sabban was the first to direct a play for the Syrian National Theatre, and his play *Braksa* or *The Predicament of Ruling* (1960) (by Egyptian playwright Tawfiq Al-Hakim, based on Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*) was the first to be seen as a complete theatre production in terms of "light, costume, and trained artists".[9] When socialist ideologies spread in the region, Al-Sabban was informally accused of being a representative of bourgeoisie theatre and his plays and 'pedagogy' were ideologically rejected. He was the subject of several attacks, including personal slander. He left Syria and lived in Cairo from 1970, where he taught at several theatre and cinema academies until his death in 2013 (Ismat 2010, p. 66).

Jordanian theatre maker Hani Snobir represents another example of this model of private individual 'cultural institution'. Several scholars associate the establishment of Jordanian theatre with the return of Hani Snobir to Jordan. Snobir, who studied theatre in the USA in the 1950s and returned to Jordan in 1957, used his theatre knowledge in educational and governmental fields to establish a local theatre scene (Gannam 2003, p. 37). Snobir then helped to found the Syrian National Theatre in 1961 and directed several plays in Damascus. He also founded the Jordanian Theatre Family and initiated the university theatre scene in Jordan in 1970, believing that university students were the ones who could enrich the Jordanian theatre scene (Jormulti 2017). Jordan did not

embrace theatre academically until 1981 when Al-Yarmouk University in Irbid established a drama department at the Fine Arts Faculty. The Jordanian theatre scene remained limited to some venues and universities, as the flourishing of television series in the 1980s shifted attention from theatre to TV and Hani Snobir became the general director of the Triple Company for Television, Radio and Theatre Production.

Palestine is one of the main topics that Arabic theatre has tackled since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. In a sense, Arabism was inseparable from the Palestinian cause. Palestinian theatre, in turn, had to assume many responsibilities at once: to preserve Palestinian physical existence, identity and entity, while suffering from the exile and oppression by the Israeli State (Abdul Rahman 2009, p. 30). Many plays fused folk elements, such as music and dance, and promoted clear national and resistant discourses. The professionalization of theatre followed the same paradigm as the introduction of theatre in the countries of the Levant. François Abu Salem, (1951-2011) born as François Gaspar to a Romanian father and a French mother, spent his childhood in Palestine where his father worked as a surgeon and a poet. Abu Salem joined the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris and returned to Palestine in the early 1970s to work in the theatre. He communicated his knowledge of theatre to trainees in Palestine, while committing to the Palestinian theatre responsibilities of resistance and identity. He translated Dario Fo and Brecht, directed several local and international plays and introduced his trainees to comedy and clown works. Abu Salem helped to found the Balalin Theatre Company (Balloons) and in 1978 he founded Al-Hakawati Theatre ('The storyteller') in East Jerusalem, which became the Palestinian National Theatre. He continued working as a theatre director, actor and teacher until his death by suicide in 2011.

Baghdad approached acting and theatre more academically in the early stages of the establishment of the nation states in the region. Yet, the phenomenon of encapsulating a cultural institution within one individual continued to be the main criterion, and theatre institutions were associated with certain names that had had direct contact with European theatre. Iraqi theatre maker Hakki Al-Shibli, who worked as an actor with some visiting Egyptian companies and studied theatre in Paris (1934-1939), founded the Acting Department at The Fine Arts Institute in Baghdad in 1940. The department ran evening classes in acting, history of drama, make up and the techniques of diction that Al-Shibli had learned in France. A course of study at the department lasted for five years, and at graduation, students were given a diploma in acting, which was considered a technical certificate. In the first few years, Al-Shibli taught all the classes, and later he invited some colleagues to teach lectures which he had already translated. In the 1940s, the number of students at the Acting Department gradually increased and the classes became day classes. Responding to this turnout, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education created a decree to acknowledge the Acting Department certificate and to treat the alumni as professional actors.

The Acting Department at the Fine Arts Institute in Baghdad experienced several interruptions, as the changes in the ruling regime influenced Iraqi society at all levels. Student numbers decreased in the 1950s, and then increased again in the 1960s. Ibrahim Jalal, who studied at the Acting Department and then in the USA and did his MA on Brecht's alienation technique, became the Dean of the Acting Department and in his teaching he focused on the practical side of theatre. Students enjoyed the freedom of choosing the plays they wanted to stage. In 1967, another acting department was founded

at the Fine Arts Academy, which became the Fine Arts Faculty in the 1980s in order to Arabise institutional names. The Faculty was based at Baghdad University and therefore it offered academic degrees. The new Acting Department focused on text-based productions and staged plays by Arab and international playwrights. Many Iraqi actors, who had studied theatre at the Institute and the Faculty, travelled to Europe in the 1960s and returned to teach theatre at the acting departments in Iraq.

European alumni were not able to construct a steady curriculum, especially when officials and teachers changed according to who ruled the country. During the 1963 military coup, for instance, many Iraqi theatre makers hid or fled the country until another coup took place later in the same year. Also, many theatre makers and theatre groups separated because of ideological differences (Abdul Hamid 2009, 48–49) to the extent that students at the Institute Acting Department were forced to take sides between Hakki Al-Shebli and Ibrahim Jalal (Abdul Hamid 2009, p. 37).

Disputes among theatre academics is a topic frequently invoked by scholars of Lebanese theatre, and the disagreement between Mounir Abu Debs and Antoine Moultaka is one of the most cited anecdotes. Mounir Abu Debs studied at the National School of Fine Arts and then at Roger Gaillard's acting school in Paris in the early 1950s. On returning to Lebanon in 1960, he became the artistic director and stage director of the Modern Theatre Company at the Ba'albakk Festival. Abu Debs directed plays by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Brecht and Goethe. He believed that improving theatre is essentially dependent on preparing the actor academically (Sai 1998, p. 92). Thus, the Modern Acting Institute launched its classes in 1960, and then it was officially founded in 1961 as the first institution to approach theatre academically in Lebanon. Antoine Moultaka, who completed a degree in philosophy and was an old schoolmate of Abu Debs, studied at the institute in 1961. The following year he assisted in teaching, and became Abu Debs' partner at the institute and the company. The plays, which Moultaka acted in and Abu Debs directed, participated in theatre festivals. Abu Debs and Moultaka also staged plays to be broadcast on local Lebanese television channels.

Anthologies on Lebanese theatre and personal interviews both refer to Macbeth's curse as the reason for the falling out between Abu Debs and Moultaka. *Macbeth* was the first play they staged together and it was the last one too. Then they both started their individual careers with simultaneous stagings of *Macbeth*. Attempting to go deeper than an anecdote, scholars, journalists and students differ as to the reasons for their disagreement. According to theatre scholar Jean Daoud, the two theatre makers disagreed over the way they viewed the actor's presence on stage: while Abu Debs required more commitment from the actor to apply the director's vision, Multqa was searching for an acting style that provided more freedom and personal creativity (Dawood 2009, p. 17). Mohammad Bakri cited Abu Debs and Moultaka as follows: the actor for Abu Debs "should not perform to the audience or express his personal temper. Acting is not to prove oneself, it is a denial of the self" (langue-arabe, 2017)[10], while Moultaka intended to let the actor express all that s/he had and to explode the actor's unconscious energy Abu Debs plays down the theoretical debate, when he states that the separation occurred because he cast Antoine Kerbaj as Macbeth and Antoine Moultaka and his wife left the institute because he had not been given the part.[11] However, according to Moultaka, the disagreement occurred when the organisers of the Ba'albakk Festival refused to present a trilogy of ancient Greek plays (*Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*

and *Seven Against Thebes*)[12] and he therefore decided to work on his own and to establish his own theatre institutions.

Moultaka, together with his wife Latifa Moultaka, founded the Lebanese Theatre Ring, an informal institute to teach acting and to explore means of finding a Lebanese theatre identity. The couple used their house and the basement of their building to teach diction, dance, art history, psychology and yoga. Later, in 1964, Moultaka and his wife founded the Acting Department at the Fine Arts Institute-Lebanese University. The curriculum of the four-year course offered classes in diction, improvisation exercises, set design, make up and photography. In the beginning, 6–8 students attended the classes each year, but the number of students increased over time. The shortage of academic personnel also drove the department to accept any theatre maker with credible experience in theatre as a teacher (Dawood 2009, p. 69).

Abo Debs continued to work at the Modern Acting Institute and the Modern Theatre Company. He adapted theories and techniques from Stanislavsky and Edward Gordon Craig and attempted to strip the stage of set and props and to leave the actor solely in this "holy place" (Said 2010, pp. 131–133). The institute gave classes in acting and diction, and imposed strict regulations on the students. The "semi theological curriculum" (langue-arabe 2017)[13] prevented students from meeting with Abu Debs outside the institute, no one had the right to give an opinion on the work of a colleague, questions were answered on the following day, new students were not allowed to go on stage in the first few months, the group attended activities together as one group and no one was allowed to speak about the institute and the company outside the venue (Said 2010, pp. 49–50). Students were also not allowed to work outside the institute. This regulation was the very reason why the institute was closed. In 1970, Abu Debs got into a dispute with the organisers of the Ba'albakk Festival when a student received an offer to act in a Lebanese popular play. An exception was made, on condition that this should not be repeated. The condition was hard to apply, as actors could not reject prestigious offers to work in other popular plays. Abu Debs and the organisers of the Ba'albakk Festival disagreed on how to respond to this challenge, and Abu Debs stopped working with the festival, and the institute was closed (Said 2010, pp. 131–133).

The search for an identity in the Lebanese theatre was clearer in the experience of Lebanese theatre maker Roger Assaf. Besides studying medicine, Assaf studied and then taught at the Modern Acting Institute and at the Acting Department. He also studied acting at Strasburg University between 1963 and 1965. Assaf worked as an actor with Abu Debs, Moultaka and other Lebanese directors, staging plays by Brecht, Beckett and Ionesco.[14] Assaf considered Western techniques as unhelpful in localising theatre experience and believed that academic curriculums were an oppressive method that repressed the actor's gift. He intended to create a theatre and a discourse that opposed the 'foreignised' theatre activities in Beirut, especially the plays that were staged in French. Assaf founded Masrah Al-Hakawati (مسرح الحكواتي) to apply his socialist ideologies in theatre and collaborated with poor young people, especially those who came from South Lebanon. In line with his socialist ideas, he wanted to give the members of his group freedom and the group adopted the collective creation method. Assaf distributed roles to different actors on each day of the rehearsals. His rehearsals were open to all visitors and became a socialising space, where attendees narrated their stories, analysed them, distributed the parts of each new play and distributed the labour in the productions. Assaf's approach was to let his actors learn theatre by doing it.

Roger Assaf

Although academically systematised, the approach to theatre in Beirut and Baghdad was, as in Damascus, mainly limited to individuals who had travelled to Europe and returned to educate their social circles on theatre. Many members of wealthy families, who attended the classes of Sabban, Snobir, Shebli and Abu Debs, formed the nuclei of private theatre groups (Kassab-Hassan 1997, p. 337), such as the Syrian Jaber Theatre Company and Qnou' Theatre Company, the Palestinian Abu Armilah family who were members of Al-Shomo' Company. The Lebanese Al-Rahbani Brothers attracted many actors, such as Antoine Kerbaj, who worked with Abu Debs, and this was the main reason for the dispute between Abu Debs and the Ba'albakk Festival, as mentioned above.

The family members wrote and staged farces, comedies and operettas, using local dialects that conveyed humour. The performances of the private theatre kept some theatre traditions from the 1930s'-40s', such as the use of the microphone in the middle of the stage, facing the audience, and the dependence on monologists and stereotypes. Gradually, the family theatre groups expanded and attracted many actors in the region. Their plays were frequently broadcast on local television channels and, to a certain degree, those who did not reside in the Levant main cities learned about theatre from these broadcast plays.

Looking for national symbols was one of the essential tasks to achieve national sensibilities during the nation-building process. Commercial and popular plays were celebrated publically and officially to the extent that many of these companies were made national symbols and representatives of the collective identity, as was the case with the Al-Rahbani Brothers (Assi and Mansour Al-Rahbani), who presented plays that reflected the nostalgia for the Lebanese village and fused their stories with comedy sketches, folk dances and the songs of the Lebanese diva Fairouz, who was married to Assi. In "The Ba'albakk Festival and the Rahbanis: Folklore, Ancient History, Musical Theater, and Nationalism in Lebanon" Christopher Stone links the success of the Al-Rahbani brothers

to the interests of the Christian political agenda (Stone 2003, pp. 10–39). Drawing on the mutual interests of the Ba'albakk Festival administrators, Lebanese politicians, the remains of the French occupation influences, and the Al-Rahbani Brothers' plays, the 'Ba'albakk Festival and Ba'albakk itself had become potent symbols of Lebanon (Stone 2003). Stone then argues that the Ba'albakk Festival would not have achieved this symbolic prestige "if the local folkloric acts pioneered by the Rahbani Brothers and Fayruz had not been made an integral part of the Festival" (Stone 2003).

The public admiration of private theatre productions enabled many companies in the Levant to expand beyond family circles. Syrian Osrat Tishreen and Nihad Qali's Company was a conclusion of a professional collaboration that started between chemistry student Durayd Lahham, who used to perform comedy sketches at the university, and Nihad Qali, when they met at the launch of the Syrian-Egyptian TV channel and presented some comedy shows. Osrat Tishreen included many actors who had worked with Rafiq Al-Sabban. Their popular plays also contained comedy sketches, folk dances and songs, with attempts to engage in political discourse and to "highlight the discrepancies between official discourse and the political life experienced by most Syrians" (Weedan 1999, p. 93). The ruling Al-Ba'ath party in Syria could propagate itself in patriotic and poetic manners in Osrat Tishreen plays. The company was then celebrated as one of the national symbols, while being given a margin of criticism that was only allowed to be directed" at state institutions, without naming names" (Weedan 1999, p. 93).

The success of Osrat Tishreen and the Rahbanis reached Egypt, and the actors in these companies starred in Egyptian cinema. The companies toured around the world to present their productions to Arab communities. Enjoying commercial and symbolic success in several countries, the members of the companies became less interested in legitimising and familiarising theatre in the region and learning about the potential of theatre and the ongoing movements in the world. The trainees' curiosity and knowledge of theatre became limited to the style of theatre they already performed, i.e. fusing folk with comedy, while constructing a representation of the national identity through fable-like stories from village life.

While the stars guaranteed popularity, these companies were doomed to regression when the stage stars faded. By the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, Fayruz had stopped acting in the theatre, then in 1986 her husband Assi passed away. Nihad Qali became partially paralysed in 1976, and gradually stopped acting until he died in 1993. Practicing theatre at the private level was left to a few shallow plays that were of poor quality and were not popular. As the Levant stage stars stopped working in theatre, many of the actors from their companies left the theatre and shifted their careers to TV series, cinema and music. The approach resembled the treatment of depending on individual initiatives to circulate theatre in the region. In this way, when the "individual cultural institutions" were forced to leave the scene, either because of death or because of changing political factors and the wars, passionate amateurs either turned their back on the theatre or they sought other structures and institutional means to practice theatre.

The attempts to introduce theatre to a region that barely knew or appreciated it resulted in theatre groups being classified as national symbols. This achievement however, remained questionable, not only at the level of limiting the credibility of theatre dissemination to individual names, but also at the level of questioning their national collective representation. The rapid changes of political and social lives in the region did not guarantee the longevity of national symbols, including theatrical ones, and the rising

powers in the region also sought other national symbols that suited the new self-awareness.

Institutional Initiatives and National Drama

In his introduction to theatre in the Arab world, Dan Rubin states that when "the region is told to just be itself, when theatre people are asked to just show their own traditions, the problems of identity begin to emerge" (Rubin 1999, p. 11). In addition to the 1967 defeat, the 1960s also witnessed massive urban drift from the countryside to the main cities in the Levant. This migration was also associated with governmental and military efforts to stabilise the new nation states. The Al-Ba'ath party, which has ruled Syria and Iraq from the 1960s, operated on two levels when it was founded in the late 1940s and the early 1950s: it recruited villagers into the army and it operated in schools and cultural centres, encouraging education while spreading socialist ideas in rural environments. Villagers moved to the main cities with considerable knowledge of politics, history, liberation movements around the world and literature. Remarkably, the word "knowledge" was frequently associated with terms like "armed", "fortified" and "equipped". The clash with city life, which was expressed in much Arabic literature in the 1960s and 1970s, produced two opposing narratives. On the one hand, the movement to the city, accompanied by wide knowledge and socialist ambition, enriched the literature scene and the theatre scene in particular. On the other, the migration was perceived as "ruralising the cities". The middle classes in the Levant countries were eliminated to give rise "to the militarisation of the ruling power, ruralisation of the cities, rejection of diversity of political parties, rejection of peaceful devolution, and meaningless wars" (Hasan Fayyad 2008, p. 180).

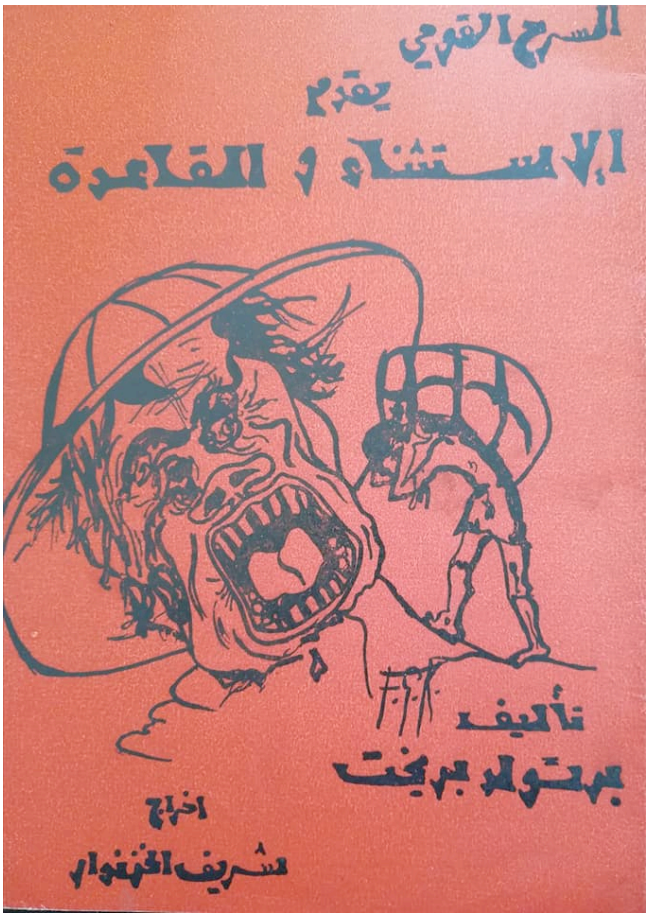
The private theatre scene, which was created by upper-class families, collided with nationalist and socialist ideas that rejected bourgeois values and practices. Roger Assaf notes that many of the young people who joined his group knew about theatre from commercial plays broadcast on local television channels and most of them joined his group to be stars like those who worked with the Al-Rahbni Brothers. According to Assaf, these students abandoned the idea of becoming "stars" in order to make "serious theatre".

"Serious theatre" (المسرح الجاد) is one of the most common terms used among governmental and educational circles in the Arab world. It is mentioned in articles, interviews (including the one I conducted for this paper), biographies and academic writing. 'Serious theatre' is not governmentally or academically defined, but it is commonly used to refer to text-based plays, written by local playwrights, or international plays staged in classical Arabic (Fusha), produced by governmental sectors and concerned with Arab political topics.

In fact, post-1967 Arab theatre makers and officials were also serious about their curiosity about theatre. Translations of international plays and literature on theatre increased. Students who came from marginalised districts and villages invigorated the cultural scene of the universities in the Levant cities. Theatre "experts" (meaning those who studied in Europe) were invited to participate in the theatre scene practically and officially.

The occupation of Palestine, the Lebanese civil war (1976-1991) and the instability in Iraq, which lurched from one war to another from 1980 onwards, made life unliveable in these countries. Many theatre makers who wanted to stay in the region resided in Syria

as it was the safe country in a war zone. Iraqi director Jawad Al-Assadi fled Iraq and lived in Syria, directing theatre and teaching at the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus in the 1980s. Palestinian-Jordanian theatre maker Hani Snobir helped to establish the Syrian National Theatre and directed some plays too. Sharif Khaznadar, who studied theatre in France and lived in Syria for a few years in the early 1960s, worked as a theatre director and was appointed as an "expert" at the Department of Theatre and Music.[15] He also presented the television programme "The Eminent(s) of International Theatre" on a local TV channel, introducing international playwrights such as Brecht, Shakespeare, Beckett and others. Khaznadar was sent to Berlin to learn about theatre and published articles covering the 1964-1965 season of the Berliner Ensemble.



The Exception and the Rule. *Directed by Sharif Al-Khaznadar. Courtesy Hanan Qassab Hasan*

Starting from the 1960s, the Syrian Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Higher Education initiated several trips for Syrians to travel abroad and learn more about theatre. Egypt was the main destination. Later, and through the strong connection between socialist Iraq and Syria and the Eastern Bloc, many students were offered grants to study theatre in UDSSR, Bulgaria, GDR, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous, who studied journalism in Cairo between 1959 and 1963, also obtained a grant from the Ministry of Culture to travel to Paris and learn more about theatre. This governmental initiative democratised the opportunities for learning about theatre and the luxurious experience of travelling abroad, and the transmission of knowledge to local assemblies stopped being limited to the bourgeoisie. According to Hani Snobir, "art should always be accessible to all sections of society, and therefore art should provoke reality and denounce it at the same time".[16]

Syrian actors became professionalised and paid, and the playwrights had an acknowledged role in the theatre scene. Syrian playwrights, who mainly studied at the Literature Departments in the Middle East, became another source of theatrical knowledge for young actors, trainees and 'professionals', not only in Syria but across the Arab world. Studying European theatre at the Literature Departments, Syrian playwrights learned about drama, plot, character development, tragic flow, catharsis and alienation, and they had the chance to read international plays and literature on theatre, sometimes in the original languages.

Post-1967 playwrights, specifically in Syria, became the new 'individual cultural institutions' and the core of the 'serious theatre'. The topic of knowledge hierarchized the playwright at the highest level in the theatre scene. Syrian playwrights used their knowledge of literature in their plays, and many of their plays featured characters from Arab history, with remarkable dramatic skills, strong use of classical Arabic and profound knowledge of the historic details. Syrian and other Arab playwrights also became the main theoreticians of Arabic theatre. Saadallah Wannous' *Manifestos for New Arab Theatre* became one of the most influential books in the Arabic-speaking countries, and many theatre makers, including the theatre makers I met for this paper, used this book as one of their main points of reference. Translations of Artaud's *Theatre and its Double*, Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* and the books of Stanislavski and Brook were available, but Wannous' book remained the main theatrical reference because it sought to authenticate theatre in Arabic culture, creating an Arabic theatre identity and politicising theatre.

Saadallah Wannous. *Courtesy. Dima Wannous.*

The defeat of 1967 had repercussions at the theatrical level, when local voices took priority over translated plays. Post-1967 discourses believed that "all the official propaganda were lies, and theatre is the only direct means to achieve adhesion to people" (archive-sakhrit 2017).[17] Thus, several poets, novelists and university students wrote plays and many of them were staged in Syria and in the Arab world. The governmental and educational institutions celebrated the new voices and when the Syrian Touring

Theatre Department was founded in 1971 it chose *Soiree*, written by Syrian poet and playwright Mamdouh Adwan, to tour in other Syrian villages and cities. The encouragement continued to the extent that the Ministry of Culture would contact playwrights, asking them for new plays to be staged in the following year (archive-sakhrit 2017).

Translations of Brecht, Social Realism and the Theatre of the Absurd were also staged, and sometimes local playwrights wrote the adaptations of these plays. Iraqi theatre academic Sami Abdul Hamid states:

In our times, Arab theatre has come under the patronage of the state, and this has created different theatre experiences and standards according to each country. And since theatre was produced experimentally, rather than being born naturally in our countries, it has always suffered an inferiority complex. If theatre intended to be Arabic and if theatre intended to express the Arab hopes and wishes, then theatre has to be avant-garde theatre. Theatre, in my opinion, will lose its position, as being an Arab theatre. The traditional Arab theatre does not exist in the first place. In its origins, the traditional Arab theatre is not Arabic, and if we want now to initiate an Arab theatre, this theatre has to be an avant-garde.[18]

The peculiar association between the theatre of Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd was problematized by Saadallah Wannous when he interviewed French theatre director Jean-Marie Serreau. Wannous questions the fundamental differences between the theatre of Brecht and the theatre of Beckett and Ionesco, while seeking a reconciliation between them. Serreau agrees and affirms that he does not see Beckett as in opposition to Brecht. The two share the same critical standpoint against their societies and, according to Serreau, the theatre of Brecht "helps to raise the awareness of audiences and leads them towards revolution and Socialism, while the Theatre of the Absurd raises this awareness by signifying what makes the audience and the society alienated, consumed and lost" (Wannous 1996, p. 187). Hence, the European theatrical ideologies that rebelled against city life and its bourgeois practices, including theatre, were imported to the Levant, and theatre makers, supported by their knowledge of European ideologies, rejected the local city life, including the unstable theatre scene that was only twenty years of age. According to Roger Assaf, there was "the bourgeoisie ambition" that Beirut would become a modern capital and open to the West. Influenced by Wannous' manifestos and plays, Assaf rejected this ambition especially when it was inspired by the bourgeoisie, army officials and the 'velvet society'. Assaf also states;

> In the 1970s, politics was my main concern. I worked in politics more than I worked in theatre. Theatre was a laboratory to apply my political ideas. Therefore I established my relationship with my students according to this approach. I emphasised the political role of theatre.[19]

The "serious" themes implied new approaches to the crafts of playwriting, acting, directing as well as the whole knowledge of theatre. New playwrights met with the governmental requirement that theatre should be written in *Fusha* (classical Arabic), so that it could reach more people nationally and across the Arab countries. This treatment was applied to translation too, where

> [...] historic, epic and translated plays, particularly dramas and tragedies, would be in *Fusha*, while the colloquial would be used for all comedies and plays with local themes. The justification for this division was the claim that colloquial Arabic with its meagre repertoire of vocabulary, particularly in the area of

> abstract ideas, was, unlike the rich *Fusha*, incapable of accommodating grand or culturally complex ideas (Rubin 1999, p. 21).

The ideological standpoint imposed restrictions not only on the language and the themes of the plays, but also on the acting style. Thus, and in order to make 'seriousness' serious, the formal language required respectful performance by the actors, who minimised their physical expressions and emphasised diction and rhetoric. Actors also avoided clichés to prevent laughter. Rehearsal mainly consisted of reading rehearsals and diction, focusing on not slipping into commercial acting styles or an "Egyptian" acting style, which was highly dependent on theatre stereotypes and clichés and exaggerated emotions.

Unquestionably, governmental and educational 'serious theatre' avoided comedies and farces, as the common objective was to use theatre to motivate a critical view of the social and political situation. In an interview with Saadallah Wannous, Syrian theatre academic Nabil Haffar tackles the topic of ignoring comedies and wonders if "social critical comedy, which becomes influential in critical and historic moments as Marx once said, would have some space in the local Syrian theatre scene?" (Wannous 1996, p. 116). Wannous, in his two-page answer, discusses Arabic novels and does not mention the word comedy.

Among "serious theatre makers" in the Levant, only Roger Assaf approached comedies and private theatre when he directed a play, working with Hassan Alaa Eddin (1939-1975), best known for his stage character Shoushou. In collaboration with Nizar Mikati, who studied theatre in Italy, Alaa Eddin founded the Lebanese National Theatre, which staged mainly comedies, written by Mikati or by canonised French authors such as Moliere and Marcel Pagnol. Shoushou became established in the beginning of the 1960s and was welcomed by the Beirut bourgeois class. Although he was not originally from Beirut, he was seen as one of Beirut's stars. According to Assaf, stage stars achieved a sort of authority over the members of private theatre companies and, working with the Lebanese star Shoushou, he attempted to change this structure. The collaboration produced only one play, which was a popular success. After this collaboration, Assaf went back to focus on the Al-Hakawati Theatre and Alaa Eddin continued his fame with Shoushou.

Comedies were not the only theatre practice that was denounced by "serious theatre makers"; needless to say, commercial theatre also was denounced. Amateur theatre was also of no interest, because of the lack of acting skills and theatre knowledge of the amateurs. Thus, "serious theatre" remained in opposition to the existing theatre scene, and became an ideal image of theatre. It constructed a myth-like pedagogy that imposed specific characteristics of theatre and simultaneously denied any local practice of this pedagogy. Consequently, stage directors were also denounced and the general dispute between the playwright and the director was intensified to the extent that Wannous stated that he "feels disappointed and tired when a play of his is directed away from him" (Wannous 1996, p. 111). Mamdouh Adwan also mistrusted local theatre directors, and used to attend the rehearsals of his plays.[20]

The concept of knowledge played a significant role in giving the playwright a prominent position in the Arab theatre. Playwrights possessed the literary text with its profound knowledge of history, literature, politics and language. They had also the writing skills to denounce productions of their plays in local journals and papers and in books and manifestos. When most of the productions of local plays were disappointing, local playwrights were rarely challenged. Many Arab playwrights however, devoted their

time to theorising their visions of Arabic theatre as well as to translating international plays and literature on theatre. Thus the literary aspect of theatre in the Levant endured and affirmed the playwright's position as the credible source for learning theatre, thus highlighting the paradigm of depending on individuals' initiatives to spread theatre, not only as a phenomenon, but as aesthetics.

In "The Re-Professionalization of the Theatre: Some Thoughts on Joining the Educational Establishment", John Horton examines elitism, knowledge, the star-system, and the economy in the professional, academic and commercial theatre scenes and states that "theatre cannot survive and flourish without patronage, and the primary patron of arts are the government and education" (Horton 1969, pp. 367–377). As the professional actor is established in the commercial theatre scene, the profession in the academies "can be more accurately interpreted not as the disappearance of the professional, but as his re-professionalization" (Horton 1969, pp. 367–377).

Horton examines the professional, the academic and the commercial theatre scene in the USA to discuss elitism and knowledge. The article was published in 1969, which is the same era in which theatre in the Levant pursued social, political and professional recognition. However, the relatively small number of theatre productions in the Levant reflects the association of knowledge with elitism, as described by Horton. Knowledge did not produce economic profit or stable academic power, but led to an accumulation of intellectual and epistemological prestige. Elitism through harsh criticism and even denigration reduced the credibility of the existing theatre practices, and students were prevented from working in and watching plays outside the academies, in order to prevent them from "deforming their reputation and deforming their artistic taste" (Abdilhamid 2009, p. 28). Trainees and students, therefore, were forced to imagine the art of theatre and remained dependent on specific "messengers" who had experienced real theatre in distant continents. The gap between the dominant theatre scenes intensified, and the inability to apply the theorised curriculums led "many students from different phases to describe the curriculum as a sort of imagination" (Dawood 2009, p. 68).

The tendency to avoid the familiar did not only mean rejecting comedies, commercial theatre, local dialects and local directors, but it also cast doubt on the existing "serious theatre practices", confirming that "professionalism of any kind implies elitism and exclusion" (Horton 1969, pp. 367–377). Wannous, when asked about Arabic theatre movements in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, which aimed to authenticate theatre in the region, views these attempts as insufficient. Although he acclaims Roger Assaf's ambition to change the inner structure of producing theatre and the star system and to associate theatre with politics, Wannous criticises Assaf for not being novel. According to Wannous, who is mainly associated with his theories of authenticating theatre in the Arab world, the tendency to utilise Al-Hakawati (the Arabic storyteller) is "repetitive and vulgar" (Wannous 1996, p. 119). He then criticises the attempts to involve the actor in structuring the play as utopian (Wannous 1996, p. 120). Wannous goes further, denying that there is a real theatre experience in the region, as the circumstances do not offer a live democratic and revolutionary environment that makes people enthusiastic about novel experiences (Wannous 1996, p. 120). This statement contradicts a previous statement in the same chapter of the manifestos in which he states that to achieve efficiency, "theatre needs to reach the ultimate freedom and pureness, exactly, in the time that only offers turmoil, oppression, horrible changes, and massacres" (Wannous 1996, p. 77).

John Horton's emphasis on elitism and professionalism does not stop him from using the term "star" to describe the theatre hierarchy even at the educational level (Horton 1969, pp. 367–377). The dependence on individuals to teach theatre in the Levant was the same in pre-1967 bourgeoisie family theatre and in post-1967 nationalist theatre and drama. But while post-1967 "serious theatre" aimed to undo the commercial star system, it created its own stars, sometimes making them untouchable, and each theatre maker claimed to possess knowledge of theatre that no one else had and no local experience could achieve. Students and teachers in the Levant theorised patterns of theatre that did not exist on local stages, but were imagined elsewhere.

References

Abbas, Ihsan. *History of Literary Criticism in the Arab World.* تاريخ النقد الأدبي عند العرب. Beirut: Dar Al-Thaqafa, 1971.

Abdilhamid, Sami. *Theatre in Iraq.* المسرح في العراق. UAE: The Arab Association for Theatre, 2009.

Abdul Hamid, Sami. *Theatre in Iraq.* المسرح في العراق. UAE: The Arab Association for Theatre, 2009.

Abdul Rahman, Fathi. *Theatre in Palestine.* فتحي عبد الرحمن في المسرح. UAE: The Arab Association for Theatre, 2009.

Al-Mada Paper, issue 1376, 23 Nov, 2008, http://www.almadapaper.net/sub/11-1376/16.pdf <2 Sep 2017>

Bulbul, Farhan. *The Syrian Theatre in one hundred years 1847-1946*) 1946 1847 المسرح السوري في مئة عام. Syria: The Ministry of Culture, 1997. http://www.bostah.com/غسان جبري مع ندوة الفكر والفن وزارة ظل ثقافية.html (2 Sep 2017).

Carlson, Marvin. "Theatre Festivals in the Arab World." In *Contemporary Theatre Review* 13.4. 2003.

Dawood, Jean. *Theatre in Lebanon.* المسرح في لبنان. UAE: The Arab Association for Theatre. 2009.

Gannam, Gannam. *Theatre in Jordan.* المسرح في الاردن UAE: The Arab Association for Theatre. 2003.

Hasan Fayyad, Amer. *Mind Narratives and the Misery of Democratic Change in Contemporary Iraq.* سرديات العقل وشقاء التحول الديمقراطي في العراق المعاصر. Baghdad: Al-Sabah Paper. 2008.

Horton, John. "The Re-Professionalization of the Theatre: Some Thoughts on Joining the Educational Establishment." In *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Dec., 1969.

Ismat, Riad. *Modernity and Authenticity.* حداثة وأصالة. Damascus: Dar Al-Feker, 2013. http://jormulti.blogspot.de/2011/07/blog-post_13.html <2 Sep 2017>

Kassab-Hassan, Hanan, and Elias, Marie. *Dictionary of Theatre.* Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1997.

Rubin, Don. *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Vol. 4 The Arab world.* London: Routledge, 1999.

Said, Khalida. *Theatre Movement in Lebanon 1960-1975. Experiences and Dimensions.* الحركة المسرحية في لبنان 1960-1975. تجارب وأبعاد. The Arab Theatre Comettee at Ballbeck Festivals, 1998.

Stone, Christopher. "The Ba'albakk Festival and the Rahbanis: Folklore, Ancient History, Musical Theater, and Nationalism in Lebanon." In *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 11/12, No. 2/1, Fall 2003/Spring 2004.

Wannous, Saadallah. *Manifestos for a New Arabic Theatre.* بيانات لمسرح عربي جديد. Damascus: Al-Ahali, 1996.

Weedan, Lisa. *Ambiguities of Domination*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Ziter, Edward. *Political Performance in Syria*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Figures:

Figure 1: Roger Assaf. https://ar.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title =%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81: RogerAssaf.jpg&filetimestamp=20081016120507&.

[1] Research for this article was conducted under the auspices of the research project "Developing Theatre: Building Expert Networks for Theatre in Emerging Countries after 1945" (funding ID 694559) funded by the European Research Council at LMU Munich. PI: Christopher Balme.

[2] Personal interview conducted for this research. October 2006.

[3] I use the term "Middle East" when I include Egypt in the discussion.

[4] Personal interview with Hanan Qassab Hassan. October 2016.

[5] Notably, the Syrian National Theatre, for instance, was founded in 1959, when Syria was united with Egypt (United Arab Republic, 1958-1961). The institutionalising process was completely independent from the influence of Egypt.

[6] I did not include the Damascus Higher Institute of Theatre Arts, which was founded in 1977, as this institute deserves a separate paper. Although the Damascus Theatre Institute had raised controversies that are similar to theatre initiatives in the region, in terms of mystifying theatre, the institute provokes further questions on theatre curriculums, intellectualism, and the market.

[7] In addition to Saadaallah Wannous, who I will discuss at length in this paper, Yusuf Idris discusses the theatre audience in the introduction to his play *Al-Fararir* (1964).

[8] Personal interview with Sadek Al-Azm. June 2016.

[9] See: http://www.bostah.com/غسان جبري مع ندوة الفكر والفن وزارة ظل ثقافية.html <2 Sep 2017>

[10]See: http://www.langue-arabe.fr/المسرح اللبناني الحديث في محطات أربع <2 Sep 2017>

[11] See: http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/21254 <2 Sep 2017>

[12] See: http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/Article.aspx?Type=np&Articleid=446270 <2 Sep 2017>

[13] See: http://www.langue-arabe.fr/المسرح اللبناني الحديث في محطات أربع <2 Sep 2017>

[14]See: http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/privatevisit/2007/11/25/روجيه عساف توظيف المسرح لقضايا الأمة <2 Sep 2017>

[15] Personal interview with Hanan Qassab Hassan. September 2016.

[16] See: http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat INT/2000/3/12/ رئيد المسرح اللاذي هاني صنوبر رحل بعد ابداع وانكفاء.html

[17] See: http://archive.sakhrit.co/newPreview.aspx?PID=2960352&ISSUEID=17996&AID=405645 <2 Sep 2017>

[18] Al-Mada Paper, issue 1376, 23 Nov, 2008, http://www.almadapaper.net/sub/11-1376/16.pdf <2 Sep 2017>

[19] Personal interview with Roger Assaf. October 2016.

[20] Wannous only acknowledged the works of Syrian director Fawaz Al-Sabjer, who studied theatre in Moscow in the 1970s and the 1980s. Al-Sajer died when he was 45 years of age. Wannous and Al-Sajer were among the theatre makers who founded the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus in 1977.