Egyptian Theatre and Performance from an International Perspective

Marvin Carlson*

Foreword by Heba El-Abbadi**

Marvin Carlson's keynote speech offers a timely reflection on the evolving presence of Arabic and Egyptian theatre within Western academic circles and stages, as well as on the emergent Arab-American theatre and performance. His insights are both intellectually enriching and deeply relevant to the goals of the English Department at Cairo University.

Carlson begins by examining the reasons behind the historical global marginalization of Arabic theatre, attributing this "cultural blindness" to long-standing Western biases, and lack of translations. He then shifts focus to the field's more recent recognition at the turn of the 21st century, catalyzed by key publications—such as Modern Arabic Drama *by Jayyusi and Allen, and Dina Amin's translations of Alfred Farag's short plays—which contributed to the inclusion of Arabic theatre in American university curricula and sparked growing scholarly interest in the theatrical traditions of Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and Palestine. Simultaneously, academic conferences started to focus on Arabic theatre, further promoting the field, and leading to its inclusion in the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). Significantly, their conventions included papers on Egyptian theatre such as Lenin El-Ramly's* Masks Off! *and the works of Khaled El-Sawy and Marwan Hamed.*

Carlson's third focal point addresses the rise of Arab-American theatre and performance, notably among them is The Country Within (1991) by Egyptian-American Faiza Wahby Shereen, which explores themes of generational identity and diaspora. He explains that early Arab-American performances were mainly community-based, farcical, and centered on immigrant experience. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, Arab-American artists faced intensified scrutiny and stereotyping, prompting them to form networks and platforms to counter biased media portrayals, and present a more accurate representation of their hybrid identities to non-Arab audiences. Much commended is Rania Khalil's Flag Piece *and* Between the Shadows *as powerful examples of diasporic expression. Carlson particularly points out the domination of female voices, including Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, and Leila Buck, thus, challenging conventional gender narratives.*

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Carlson also highlights the efforts of The Arab-American Comedy Festival, founded in 2003 by Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid, as a vital platform for emerging talents. It particularly witnessed the rise of Arab-American stand-up comedians in the wake of 9/11, such as Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, and Maz Jobrani. Additionally, he refers to the establishment of the National Middle East Play Initiative in 2008, which supports emerging dramatists and promotes the translation of plays from diverse cultural traditions. Yussef El-Guindi, who is associated with the initiative, wrote Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith *and* Back of the Throat *to address post-9/11 Arab-American challenges.*

Carlson's ideas align with the vision, mission and strategic aims of the Department, which is committed to fostering high caliber academic research, innovative translation projects, and improving existing curricula. Carlson's speech is, thus, a call to action, and the Department is uniquely positioned to contribute to the long-sought global recognition of Arabic and Egyptian drama through its diverse academic activities. At the same time, the Department could have a leading role in enhancing the visibility of diasporic dramas and their production potential in the homeland through research, translation projects, and integrating them into its curriculum, as well as staging performances as part of its cultural activities—thereby fostering a meaningful rapport between the diasporic artists and their cultural heritage.

Egyptian Theatre and Performance from an International Perspective
Marvin Carlson (2009)

It is a very great honor and pleasure for me to return again to Cairo, one of my favorite cities, and to participate in this major international conference, devoted to expanding international awareness of the impressive theatrical tradition of Egypt and the rest of the Arab world which has so long been given so little attention by most Western theatrical scholars. My very great enjoyment in returning to Egypt and in having the opportunity to meet with so many international scholars gathered here for this common purpose is in my own case also marked with sadness however. In each of my former trips here a significant part of my pleasure has been once again meeting and spending some time with one of my oldest and dearest friends, Professor Abul-Aziz Hammouda. As many of you know, Professor Hammouda died two years ago, and his passing was not only a great personal sorrow to me, but a great loss to Egyptian theatre and Egyptian letters. I would like to dedicate my remarks today to the memory of this great man and distinguished scholar whose life and work has served as an inspiration to me and to many others.

My subject today, like that of this conference as a whole, is a consideration of Egyptian theatre from an international perspective. So broad a topic might be approached in a very wide variety of ways, but I propose to focus upon two

aspects of internationalism in particular. First I will consider the growing and positive awareness in recent years within the Western academic world of the contributions of the Arabic theatre in general and Egyptian theatre in particular to the world's theatre and drama tradition. Following this I will turn to a very different aspect of internationalism, the growing importance of diasporic Egyptian theatre, that theatre produced elsewhere in the world by Egyptian immigrants or the children of Egyptian immigrants. Such diasporic theatre has recently become an important part of the new American theatre and performance and in an era which has seen much tension between the U.S. and the Arab world has provided a very important area for the development of a better cultural understanding.

Turning first then to the world of scholarship, one must admit that, considering the significant contributions of the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular to the international theatre during the past century, it is quite remarkable that up until the past few years these contributions have gone almost without acknowledgement among Western theatre scholars. Even today if you consult almost any standard world history of the theatre published in either England or America you will find theatre from the Arab world not mentioned at all and Egypt mentioned only in respect to the ritual dramas of the Pharaonic period. The assumption and often the explicitly stated conclusion, was that nothing of any theatrical interest had taken place in Egypt since about 1850 B.C. Oscar Brockett, whose books have for the past forty years been the most widely read and respected theatre history texts in America, has concluded his opening chapter on the origins of theatre, with these dismissive words:

> The Egyptians maintained an advanced civilization for about 3000 years [...] and never progressed theatrically beyond the stage of ritual drama. Their failure, and that of the people of the Near East with almost as long a history, only serves to emphasize the enormous achievement of the Greeks.

Nothing could illustrate more clearly the traditional Western bias according to which all non-Western cultural achievement is necessarily and essentially inferior to that of the West and of academic use primarily to illustrate Western superiority.

In recent years, the international interest in the Iranian *ta'zieh* has caused a few Anglo-American theatre texts to recognize at least this one Islamic, if not Arabic, theatrical form. The 2006 volume from Routledge in London by Phillip Zarrilli and others called *Theatre Histories: an Introduction*, claims to be the first theatre history text in English to move beyond the Brockett model and "to treat the non-Western world with [...] elegance and seriousness." One

might hope that in the twenty-first century, this would lead at least one of the book's four authors to consider some aspect of theatre of the Arab world, but in fact there is not a word about it, even though the recently discovered Ta'zieh is discussed on several pages.

Fortunately, there are many signs that this cultural blindness is changing. One of the most encouraging, in my view, is the growing importance of scholarly work on subjects from the Arab world. Major professional journals in theatre studies in England and America have in the past few years for the first time offered scholarly essays on theatre in Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and Palestine, guaranteeing a wider acquaintance with the theatre of these countries among the many academic and professional readers of these journals. Equally encouraging is a closely related development, the growing number, size, and visibility of national and international conferences devoted in whole or in part to research on the theatre of the Arab world. The conference at which we are gathered today is a particularly impressive example of such activity, number among its participants scholars from fourteen different countries and five continents.

In the United States the two largest and most important organizations of theatre researchers and scholars are the American Society for Theatre Research and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Significantly, both of these in their past two conventions have offered panels of papers on Arabic theatre and performance, establishing an ongoing dialogue in this subject and bringing together an enthusiastic group of younger scholars interested in its development.

I am happy to have been involved in the first academic conference in the United States specifically devoted to modern Egyptian theatre, which was held eight years ago at my institution, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. On that occasion two short plays by Alfred Farag, *The Last Walk* and *The Person* were performed for the first time in America. Farag himself appeared as a participant in a discussion of the current Egyptian theatre, along with fellow playwrights Lenin El-Ramly, Gamal Maqsoud, and Atef Al-Ghamri. The event was sponsored in part by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Cultural and its Secretary General, Dr. Gaber Asfour, and in part by the City University of New York. For many people at this well-attended event, this was their first exposure to the lively theatrical culture of contemporary Egypt, and many more were informed about it through the proceedings of this conference, which were published and have been widely circulated. One of the reasons for the lack of knowledge of modern Egyptian theatre in the West has been the scarcity of translations. With the notable exception of the plays of Tawfiq Al-Hakim, many of which appeared in English in the 1980s and Mahmoud Manzalaoui's useful but poorly distributed anthology from 1977, there have been almost no translations of Arabic drama into English until the past decade,

heralded by Jayyusi and Allen's excellent collection, *Modern Arabic Drama*. The most recent contribution is the appearance this year of a collection of translations of short plays by Alfred Farag, the work of Dina Amin, who has been a major champion of Farag's theatre in America. Much work of course remains to be done, but there is now a substantial and growing body of Egyptian theatre in translation, with the result that during the past few years a number of American universities have begun offering courses in Arabic or Middle Eastern theatre.

A small but important ongoing series of international conferences devoted to the cross cultural study of Arabic and Western theatre was launched in 2003, organized by Dutch and Belgian scholars and held in at the University of Ghent in Belgium. There a group of approximately fifteen scholars from Europe, the United States, and Egypt presented papers on Arabic and European concepts of tragedy. Follow up conferences, each involving some fifteen or twenty international scholars, were held in Morocco in 2005 on the subject of comedy, and in Sudan in 2006 on ritual and theatre.

While this series of small conferences is planned to continue, with Syria and Egypt being considered as possible future conference sites, a number of scholars brought together in this small group began working in 2006 to develop an ongoing home for the study of Arabic theatre in the most important international organization for the study of theatre, the International Federation for Theatre Research. At the heart of this organization's operations are the working groups, official gatherings of scholars with similar interests who meet to share ideas at the conventions and often at other times as well, developing programs of research on their particular topic, often resulting in publication. There are currently seventeen such working groups, each normally involving ten to fifteen active members with similar interests from around the world.

At the IFTR Convention in Helsinki in 2006, forty-five members of the organization signed a petition to establish an on-going working group in Arabic Theatre. The group was approved by the Executive Committee of the organization and met officially for the first time the following year at Stellenbosch in South Africa. Twenty-four papers were presented at this conference on various aspects of the Arabic theatre, and four specifically on Egyptian theatre, one on street theatre in Cairo, one of the Hanager theatre, one on Othello in Egypt, and one on Lenin El-Ramly's *Masks Off!* The 2008 convention of IFTR was held in Seoul, South Korea, and despite the remoteness of the location, the Arabic Theatre Working Group continued to be well represented. Convened this year by Hazem Azmy, who has been a leader in this group from the beginning, Seventeen papers were proposed, five of them on specifically Egyptian subjects, ranging from Egyptian theatre under British occupation to the post- 9/11 Egyptian theatrical work of Khaled El-Sawy and Marwan Hamed.

The 2009 convention of IFTR will take place in Lisbon, Portugal, a site that should be especially attractive to scholars from the Maghreb, several of whom have been very active in supporting the working group, as well as to scholars from Egypt or with an Egyptian interest. Indeed just two weeks ago a preliminary organizing meeting looking forward to Lisbon was held here in Cairo. It is important to recognize that the IFTR activities, important as they are for raising awareness of the Arabic theatre among the international community of scholars and encouraging cooperation among scholars from many countries with an interest in this subject, also provide a location where publication projects can be planned for essays and books that will reach an even wider international public. Just one example is the current project of a special issue of the American journal *Ecumenica* on Islam and the theatre, scheduled to appear later this month. This special issue grew directly out of the Arabic Theatre Working Group and is the first of what will undoubtedly be many such projects.

There is clearly a steadily growing interest in and knowledge of Arabic theatre in general and Egyptian theatre in particular among Western academics, with a constantly expanding number of translations, scholarly articles, conference presentations, and university courses. The major next step, which has still not been taken, is the appearance of work from this tradition on Western stages. Given the artistic conservatism and the financial pressures of theatrical production, especially in the United States, I am not very optimistic about seeing an Egyptian drama in any major theatre or even in most minor theatres in the near future. I did see a production of Al-Hakim's *The Tree Climber* at a small experimental stage in New York some ten years ago, but that was clearly an odd and isolated case. I can remember no other Egyptian play offered in the New York professional theatre in the almost fifty years of my theatre-going there. I am less informed about other Western theatres, but the only significant production of a modern Egyptian play I know of in Europe was that of Farag's *The Caravan*, done in a production that toured in Germany and Austria, some twenty years ago. I know of no productions of Egyptian plays by professional theatres in England, despite Farag's long residence there, or France.

It is of course to be hoped that this will change, and the growing interest in this theatre in Western universities offers some hope, since this is where new audiences and new play producers are being trained and educated. Aside from the modest stagings of the Farag plays in our own university, I am aware of a number of recent university based readings and presentations of short plays by Farag and El-Ramly - at the Universities of Pennsylvania and Berkeley in the United States, and Hull in England. Such activities, I hope, are laying the foundations for a more serious engagement with Egyptian drama in the future in these countries.

In the meantime, a very different sort of theatre has recently made a much more direct and powerful influence on the professional theatre of the United States, and that is the theatre of Arab-American performers, immigrants or the children of immigrants, almost all of which is concerned with the negotiations of the cultural demands of the old country and the new.

The first major immigration to the United States from the Arab world began in the 1880s, but included almost no Egyptians. The first such immigrants were mainly Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinians, leaving from what was then the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the century a number of large American cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago had distinct Arabic communities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, immigrants of Syrian background were still the majority. Egyptian immigrants did not form a significant part of Arab-American immigration until the last third of the twentieth century. Within these communities, as in other immigrant communities, theatre was developed. Most of the early examples of such theatre were performed in Arabic and most sought to connect the community to its roots in the mainland presenting plays about Arabic history and culture. Later, Arab Americans presented farces about living in the new country, using comedy to explore the cultural challenges facing the immigrants. Most of these plays were amateur community-based performances, a tradition that continued all through the twentieth century. The relatively few Arab-Americans who became involved with American theatre or film tended either to ignore or even hide their cultural background or else to play film or stage roles that foregrounded their ethnicity, playing villains, terrorists, or comic "others" in accordance with the orientalist vision of most of the Western media. In 2006 Dr. Jack Shaheen, an internationally recognized media critic, produced a powerful documentary film, *Reel Bad Arabs*, which traces this ethnic stereotyping of Arabs and Arab culture from the earliest days of the silent films to the most recent Hollywood epics.

This orientalist aspect of Western theatrical and cinematic culture has of course long been familiar to Arab-American immigrants and their descendants, but it became of course a matter of special concern, and even of physical survival, after the events of 9/11, when the Arab other became not merely an amusing, grotesque, or sexually deviant Other, but a major cultural and even existential threat, the enemy that in the minds of many Americans replaced the long-hated and now passé archenemy, the Communist.

In the face of this widespread cultural misunderstand and even outright antagonism, Arab-American artists started to form groups and networks in part to provide support for each other at this difficult period, but gradually, and even more importantly to create platforms for their work to be seen not only by their fellow Arab-Americans and by a more general public who otherwise would have little basis for understanding the Arab world beyond the clearly

biased representations of the mainstream media. Thus a very different role was created for Arab-American theatre than that of the earlier and more private immigrant drama. Plays were now developed to explore and express the hybrid identities of this community in these new and tension-filled circumstances, but also to present to non-Arab audiences a more accurate picture of this community and of the tensions in its various homelands than was otherwise available. The result is that today, even though plays from the Arab world are not appearing on American stages, plays and performances by Arab-American artists have become one of the most prominent features of the current stage, especially in New York. These works have provided non-Arab theatre-goers with a rich and stimulating insight not only into the tensions and challenges today facing the Arab community in America, but also into the political and social concerns of their home nations.

The currently active Arab-American artists come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some are themselves immigrants, more are the children or even the grandchildren of immigrants. Their national backgrounds also of course vary greatly, reflecting the range of the immigrant population itself, but the majority of the best known and most active artists have their roots either in Egypt or Palestine, with Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq having a somewhat smaller representation. In the remainder of this paper I will concentrate on the considerable contributions to this movement by Egyptian-American artists. This will of course leave aside the work of a number of important figures, but will still allow me to trace the contours, the concerns, and the general development of this important new movement, since Egyptian artists have been centrally involved in each of its major phases, reflecting the ongoing pre-eminence of Egyptian theatre in the Arabic theatre world.

Although the full burgeoning of the contemporary Arab-American theatre occurs from 2001 onward, there are a few important precursors of this work. Particularly interesting is the 1991 play, *The Country Within*, by Faiza Wahby Shereen, a major contribution to Arabic diasporic literature tracing the history of three generations of Egyptian immigrants to the United States and exploring the ongoing process of forging a mediated identity and carrying on the legacy of the homeland. The play was presented with great success in Cincinnati, Ohio, its very large case made up of largely amateur actors drawn from the Arab-American community of that city along with their American spouses and children. Thus the company literally embodied the process they were presenting.

Shereen's play is important not only because of its theme and articulation, but also because it is an early example of an unusual feature of the contemporary Arab- American theatre. One of the most interesting and perhaps surprising features of this current flowering is that many of its most prominent artists, such as Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, and Leila Buck, are

women. There are male performers, and a number of important male dramatists, but the dominant voice overall is a female one. Thus, even on this most basic level, current Arab American theatre and performance is working to present a more accurate picture of Arab American culture by contradicting the standard Western stereotype according to which Arab women are widely if not universally oppressed and not allowed any voice or outlet for expression within Arabic culture. In fact, within the Arab world there are many important women authors, although they are most commonly writers of novels. Nehad Selaiha, probably the best known and most respected theatre critic in Egypt and indeed in the Arab world, has written an important essay discussing this phenomenon, suggesting that the scarcity of women dramatists in Egypt may be due to the fact that creating theatre involves a more public life than the normal housewife can manage. It is thus all the more significant that Arab American women are finding a stronger voice in the diaspora than in the home country.

One of the first Egyptian-American performance pieces to be presented after 9/11 remains both one of the most unconventional and also most moving of such productions. This is Rania Khalil's short solo performance *Flag Piece*, which is presented entirely without words. It is a response of an Arab-American woman to the ubiquitous flag displays and patriotic fervor following 9/11. The piece lasts only about three minutes and was inspired by the performer receiving the gift of a small flag from a store owner as a sign of "solidarity," assuming that she was in fact not an Arab but a "patriotic American" like himself. Khalil, with much more ambiguous feelings about such patriotic display, and feeling "in disguise" with the shopkeeper, took the flag back to her studio and created the piece. She begins the piece by removing her "disguise" as a Western woman, by pulling her sweater up over her body and wrapping it around her head as an Arabic headwear. In this costume she salutes a small American flag which she waves high over her head. She then gradually moves the flag closer to her face, first covering her eyes, then her mouth, serving as a veil that both conceals and silences her. At the end of the piece the pole goes through her face, pushing her lips and deforming her face, with its head forcing one of her eyelids to open. Khalil first performed this piece during the intense period of flag display in New York in various art galleries and performance centers and has continued to perform it at various arts festivals and universities in the United States and abroad. Its graphic presentation of the oppression felt by Arab-Americans after 9/11 to demonstrate their commitment to patriotic ideals has proven extremely powerful and effective.

Although claimed by the Egyptian-American performance community, Rania Khalil, like her countryman the filmmaker Ahmed Amer, has produced extensive work in both New York and Cairo, and at present is more actively

engaged in projects in Egypt than in the United States. In 2007 her most recent work, *Between the Shadows*, a collection of silent physical theatre vignettes inspired by German expressionism and film noir, made its debut at the HERE Arts Center in New York. She is the founder and artistic director of the new performance ensemble Rk Khalil and Co., based in Cairo, where she is continuing her experimental work on shadow performance.

In June of this year, 2008, an important step forward for Middle Eastern theatre in the United States was taken when the three groups in this country most visibly dedicated to the cultivation and development of Middle-Eastern-American playwrights and their plays formed a collaborative enterprise, the National Middle East Play Initiative. These three groups are the Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago, the Lark Play Development Center in New York, and Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco. The Lark is the oldest of these, dating back fourteen years when it was formed to encourage new American playwriting. Beginning in 1997 the Lark opened an international program and in the new century has given particular attention to bringing together actors, directors, playwrights, and audiences from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic communities under-represented in the American Theatre. Of the three, it has the least specific commitment to Arab-American work, but it has nevertheless provided important support to such dramatists. Golden Thread was founded in 1996 by Torange Yeghiazarian, a native of Iran and of Armenian heritage to produce high quality theatre from and about the Middle East. In addition to regularly offering a season of such plays, Golden Thread organized in 2002 a festival of plays by Muslim women, including one work by Alfred Farag's translator and promoter Dina Amin. In 2004 their production of *Pezvak* was presented in the Cairo Festival. The Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago is the most recent of these three, founded by Syrian- American Jamil Khoury in the wake of 9/11 in specific response to the backlash in the United States against people of Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds.

Until their recent decision to establish an ongoing collaboration, there has been little official connection between these groups, but one of the most important contemporary Arab-American dramatists, Yussef El-Guindi, has close ties to both Golden Thread and Silk Road. El-Guindi was born in Cairo in 1962 and graduated from the American University in Cairo before emigrating to the United States in 1983, where he began to write short stories, and then plays for both stage and radio. El-Guindi was at first so stunned by the post-Patriot Act atmosphere, with many Arab-Americans being arrested and imprisoned, seemingly almost at random that for a time he was unable to write. He began *Back of the Throat* as a depiction of this fearful new world, but was unable to finish it. He then came upon the whimsical and poignant stories of Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr and fell in love with them, adapting two

of them for the stage, *Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda's* and *Karima's City*. These plays were presented by Golden Thread and the second was taken to the Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival. The success of the Bakr plays gained El-Guindi a commission from the Cornerstone Theatre Company of Los Angeles, which specializes in theatre based in the city's various ethnic communities to create a new play for them. As a part of a series of works presented at Cornerstone about different religious communities in that city he created his first full-length play, *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*, which he called "a big soap opera of a family play" and "my sentimental American drama." Some Arab-Americans condemned the play for the unflattering picture it presented of a Muslim-American family, and the fact that the family son was a homosexual. El-Guindi admitted that with so few depictions of Arab-American life in the contemporary theatre he understood the importance of presenting affirmative pictures of this life. He responded however that in order to humanize a people you had to show them "warts and all. How can you affirm something," he asked, "without talking about everything?"

Despite, or perhaps in part because of its controversy, *Ten Acrobats* gained El-Guindi a national reputation. Silk Road presented it with great success in Chicago, where the company's executive director praised the work for "allowing a non-Muslim audience an inside peek at a Muslim-American family and a chance to see them as real people facing real challenges."

The success of *Ten Acrobats* encouraged El-Guindi to complete his long-delayed *Back of the Throat*, which has become the most widely produced Arab- American play dealing directly with the repression of this community in the wake of 9/11. It was accepted by Golden Thread productions who premiered it early in 2005. Although its chilling and ambiguous story was not to everyone's taste, *Back of the Throat* quickly became El-Guindi's best-known work. It is a dark Kafkaesque story about a very contemporary situation. A writer invites two government agents into his apartment to help them with their investigations, only to have his own rights taken away from him because of his suspected Arabic background. The play was first revived in Seattle, Washington, where El-Guindi was living at that time. It was voted best play of the year by the city's leading newspaper, the *Seattle Times* and awarded top prize in the Northwest Playwright Competition. Since that time it has been presented across the United States from New York to Alaska, and this fall it made the leap to Europe, opening with great success at the Old Red Lion Theatre in London. El-Guindi has now moved to San Francisco to become the literary manager for Golden Thread and thus moved to the center of the current burgeoning interest in Arab-American drama in the United States.

The Middle East Play initiation, with bases in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, provides an important new base for the production of Arab-American theatre, and since each of its participating members has stated as

part of its mission not only the development of new dramatists but the translation of work from other theatrical cultures, there is good reason to believe that as this project develops it will also provide the long-needed opportunity for modern dramas written in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world to be at last introduced to American audiences.

Middle Eastern theatre is not nearly so central to the work of the New York based Lark Company as it is to its partners in the Middle East Play Initiative, Silk Road and Golden Thread, and in New York, which is of course the major theatre center in America, there has recently developed another center for Arab-American theatre and performance which has gained much more visibility and provided production opportunities for a much greater number of Arab-American artists. This is the Arab-American comedy festival, to whose development and activities I will now turn.

In the wake of 9/11 there was a period of several weeks in which the entire New York theatre community was silent. As theatre and performance slowly and tentatively revived, the small community of Arab-American writers and performers obviously found themselves in a particularly difficult situation. On the one hand, concern for their own safety suggested that they should do as little as possible to attract any public attention, a professional death sentence for a performing artist. On the other hand, surrounded by a culture that was engaged in widespread demonizing of the Arab world in general, many Arab-American artists felt a compelling need to use their art to present an alternative and more honest view of themselves and their cultural background. This need was expressed in part, as we have seen, by the major increase in Arab-American plays created after 9/11, but another response, particularly strong in New York, was the emergence of an important new variety of comedy performance, the Arab-American stand-up comic.

Stand-up comedy has its roots in various traditions of popular entertainment in England and American in the late nineteenth century such as the English music hall, vaudeville, minstrel shows, and humorist monologues. In the early twentieth century some of America's most famous comedians, like Jack Benny and Bob Hope, came out of vaudeville to develop modern stand-up comedy. Here a solo performer, with a hand-held microphone and normally few if any properties, speaks directly to the audience, presenting them with a rapid sequence of humorous stories and jokes, and often engaging in direct response to the audience's reactions.

During the 1950s and 1960s stand-up comedians expanded both the language and the subject boundaries of their work, focusing on such formerly avoided topics as politics, race relations, and sexual humor. Women and black stand-up comics appeared for the first time, and their focus upon the tensions of their social status often formed the basis of their performances. These

provided the models for later stand-up comics representing ethnic or sexual minorities, including, especially after 9/11, the Arab-Americans.

The best known nationally and internationally of the Arab-American stand-up comedians is Ahmed Ahmed, an Egyptian-American born in Helwan and raised in California. He made his debut at one of the leading theatres in California specializing in stand-up comedy, the Comedy Store in West Hollywood. In the Spring of 2001, just a few months before 9/11, the managers of the Comedy Club decided to add Arab-American comedians to the performers regularly appearing there, and began to devote evenings to their work, called "Arabian Nights." Ahmed Ahmed was among the first artists featured in these programs.

He was also the first Arab-American to return to the stage of the Comedy Store, just a few days after 9/11 and to undertake the extremely difficult task of attempting to relate as a professional comedian to a non-Arab audience in this tension-filled period and to attempt to gain their sympathy and understanding for members of the Arab-American community such as himself. Not surprisingly his routines then and ever since have been strongly marked by his experiences as an Arab man, with a clearly Arabic name and Arabic features, in post-9/11 America. He would usually open his performances in the fall of 2001 with a joke that has become his most famous and often-quoted:

You have no idea how tough it is to be an Arab these days. I went to the airport to check in. The man at the ticket counter said "Are these your bags." I said, "Yes, sir." He said. "Did you pack them yourself?" I said, "Yes, sir." They arrested me.

Such bold humor in the face of such difficult circumstances soon made Ahmed Ahmed one of the best known of the new wave of Arab-American performing artists. Less than two months after 9/11 he was featured in a front page story in the *Wall Street Journal* which opened with the airline joke already mentioned. A few months later Ahmed Ahmed was given a profile in the national magazine *Newsweek*, giving him even further exposure. By the spring of 2002 he was surely the best known Arab-American performer in the United States and his reputation soon extended abroad. In the summer of 2004 he performed at the Edinburgh Comedy Festival in Scotland, where he received the first annual Richard Pryor Award, named in honor of one of the most influential stand-up comedians of the 1970s and a major pioneer in using stand-up comedy to explore the situation of ethnic minorities.

Ahmed Ahmed joined with two other Arab-American stand-up comics, Aron Kader, of Palestinian background, and Maz Jobrani, born in Tehran, to create the *Axis of Evil* Comedy Tour in November of 2005. The tour of course was named after George W. Bush's calling Iraq, Iran, and North Korea the "Axis of Evil." This tour attracted even more national and international attention to Arab-American performers, as they were interviewed by CNN,

National Public Radio, among others. *Time Magazine* offered a feature article on this entitled "Stand-Up Diplomacy." They also toured in several Middle Eastern countries in 2007 sponsored by Showtime Arabia, where their work was seen and commended by King Abdullah II of Jordan.

For most Americans, the new expansion of Arab-American performance is probably best known through the *Axis of Evil* Comedy Tour, which has appeared on the most popular comedy television show in the country, Comedy Central. For Arab- American performers themselves, however, the most important development in recent years has surely been the establishment of the annual Festival of Arab-American comedy in New York, which has become the major location for new and established artists to present their work and to begin to build a reputation.

The Festival was created in 2003 by Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid, both Palestinian-Americans, to provide a light-hearted but politically serious alternative to those misrepresentations of Arab-Americans so common in contemporary films and on stage. The first festival was a fairly modest venture, consisting primarily of the work of several stand-up comedians and a few short films and plays. The second festival, in 2004, attracted more attention and larger audiences, and incorporated the work of a number of better known and more established performers such as Yussef El-Guindi and Ahmed Ahmed as well as new performers such as Haythem Noor. Noor was born in Cairo and was inspired to pursue acting by watching Arabic movies including those of his uncle, the legendary Arabic film star Kamal El-Shinnawi. He made his acting debut at the University of Alexandria at the age of 17, moved to the United States and began working in TV and films before making his first appearance as a stand-up comic at the Festival

Even as early as its second year, the festival was becoming much more pan-Arab in its scope. While Palestinian-American artists dominated the first festival, artists with Egyptian and other Arabic backgrounds were distinctly more in evidence for the second, and since that time Egyptian and Egyptian American artists have been a major part of the performing community that has developed around the festival. In the remainder of this presentation I will offer a brief survey of this Egyptian performance community, in an attempt to give something of an idea of their concerns and their contributions.

Although Youssef El-Guindi and Ahmed Ahmed are among the best known of the artists presented at the Festival, their careers were well established before the Festival began and they have appeared at the festival more as guest celebrities than as ongoing contributors. Ronnie Khalil, born in Miami and raised by Egyptian parents, is less well known but has a similar background, having appeared as a stand-up comedian in numerous comedy festivals and in England on the BBC. He is also a film actor and screenwriter whose first major writing project, *Pharaoh* appeared in 2001. This was later made into a stage

play for the Festival and directed by Tracy Francis, another Egyptian-American artist about whom I will have more to say presently.

By 2006 the Arab American Comedy Festival had become widely recognized as New York and America's major platform for presenting the work of emerging Arab American theatre artists. This was clear in the number of submissions, exceeding twenty-five plays. Since time had been allotted for only five short plays, this led the organizers to change the format of the theatre nights, and in addition to the short plays, the festival also presented a collection of very short comedy sketches in order to present the work of a great number of writers. Ahmed Amer, who continues to work as a stage and film director and writer in both New York and Cairo, and who is presently creating a film in Cairo, first appeared at the Comedy Festival directing a short play *Train* in 2005. That same year he received a certificate of recognition from the Sakiet El-sawy Short Film Festival for his film *A Good Family*. In 2006 *Layla Leila*, which Amer directed and which he co-wrote with Palestinian-American Marie-Therese Abou-daoud, was one of the highlights of the festival. This followed the title character, an Arab-American girl, from her birth through her later unhappy childhood and youth until, after being harassed by the FBI as a possible terrorist, she finally decides to seize control of her own life and to "take back the hummous." Another play by Abou-daoud, *Next Year in Jerusalem*, a musical featuring an Israeli soldier, a young Palestinian, and an American Christian meeting in Jerusalem, with appearances by George Bush and Ariel Sharon, introduced another young Egyptian actress to the Festival. This was Dalia Badawi, born in Montreal, Canada, but most of whose family still reside in Egypt. She is now living and acting in the Off-Off Broadway theatre in New York.

Another Egyptian dramatist to make her writing debut in the 2006 festival was Sarah Abdallah, with her play, *The Panel*. Her background is an unusual one, in the arts but quite outside theatre and performance. Born in New York to Egyptian parents, she studied fine art and psychology, gaining an MA from New York University with an emphasis in gender studies and art therapy. During this time she became active in the New York City branch of the Network of Arab American Professionals (NAAP), a volunteer organization formed in Washington in 2001 to help counter the widespread antagonism against the Arab community and to expand their involvement in cultural, social, educational and political activities. She went on to earn a degree in interior design from the Parsons School of Design and to be hired by Perkins Eastman, a world-renowned design firm in New York. Her interest in furthering the role of the Arab-American community in the arts led her, not surprisingly, to the Comedy Festival, and to become a participant in their ongoing activities.

Among the Egyptian-American actors to join the comedy Festival in 2006 was Michele Rafic, who appeared in a short film that year. The following year Rafic's created her first major theatre part, a leading role in the world premiere of Naomi Wallace's *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of the Middle East*, which was presented in 2007 at the Norfolk Southern Festival of New Works Virginia. In this work by one of America's most important contemporary political authors, Rafic portrayed a Palestinian woman who confronts and exchanges personal histories with an Israeli soldier. She then returned to the New York Comedy Festival to take a leading role in the 2008 production of the play *Love Match*, a comedy based on the tensions between the families of a young couple who fall in love, one from an American, the other from an Egyptian background. The author of *Love Match*, Eman Ahmed, is another Egyptian-American, and like Sarah Abdallah has a major career outside the theatre, in Michele's case in law. Like Sarah she is an active member of the Network of Arab-American Professionals and currently serves as the Cultural Facilitator of the New York City Chapter, which naturally has brought her into close contact with the Comedy Festival as well as other theatrical events involving Arab authors and performers.

While many of the Egyptian-American writers and performers already mentioned continue to appear regularly in the Comedy Festival, which continues to expand and has become one of the major annual theatre festivals in New York, the Festival also continues to attract and provide a hearing for new artists every year. I will conclude this brief survey with a few comments on two Egyptian-American artists who made a particular impact at the most recent festival. The first, although new to the festival, is an already well established director Off-Off-Broadway with many productions to her credit. This is Tracy Francis, who directed *Pharaoh* at this year's festival. She served as the assistant director to Sam gold for one of the most significant recent productions by an Arab-American author in New York, Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2007. Francis has also directed in Cairo, where she presented Chekhov's *The Marriage Proposal* at the Falaki Theatre.

Sherif Hedayat also comes to the Festival with a substantial previous performance career. He began his career as a stand-up comic over a decade ago, in 1996, but he stopped performing in 2003 to work in radio, both as a disk jockey and account executive. In 2006 however he returned to comedy, appearing in clubs and at Comedy Central on television before joining the stand-up comedy section of the Comedy Festival in 2008.

Although I have here focused on artists of Egyptian background, these of course account for only a part of the many Arab and Arab-American artists who through TV programs like Comedy Central, the annual Comedy Festival, and in comedy clubs and universities across America have in the past few

years provided American audiences with insight into the Arab and Arab-American world that has never before been available in the American theatre.

In a quite different way, and through very different work, then, we can see that these recent developments in America's professional entertainment world share a common goal with the various international developments in the academic community. Within the Western theatre tradition, both as it has been created and presented to audience and as it has been studied and written about by scholars, the modern contributions of Egypt, and indeed of the entire Arab world have up until very recently been almost totally ignored. We live at a period when it seems to me that this unfortunate situation is beginning to change, with the forces for change coming from two quite different, but complimentary directions. Within the international scholarly community, as I sought to demonstrate in the first part of this paper, there is clearly a growing interest in this tradition, marked by publications in scholarly journals, presentations in scholarly conferences, and a growing body of translated work. In time, this steadily increasing amount of scholarly study and translations will surely gain the attention of actors, directors, and producers around the world who for the most part are still unaware of the attractive offerings of this dramatic tradition.

In the latter part of my presentation I focused upon that part of the actual world of theatrical production where the impact of Egyptian and other Arab artists has recently been most strongly felt. This is in the realm of diasporic performance. I have focused on the recent American theatre, with which I am most familiar, but diasporic Arab theatre artists have also made a strong impact in recent years in most of the major Western theatres, among them on the stages of England, France, Germany, and Canada. What has not yet occurred, but what seems to me the promising next step in this development is for these two still separated areas to begin reinforcing each other. There has already been some scholarly attention to the diasporic work, and more will doubtless come. On the other hand, the interest in Arab theatre and culture that the current diasporic artists have encouraged in theatre audiences, theatre producers, and other theatre artists will result, I hope, in a growing interest in the home theatres and home theatre traditions in Egypt and elsewhere. Considering how far the international theatre community has come in the past decade, the future for a far richer and deeper networking within this community looks very bright.

The Return of the Marginalised: Palestine and Humanism

Patrick Williams*

*Foreword by Pervine Elrefaei*****

Living through the ongoing genocidal moments in Palestinian history post October 7th, 2023, I find Patrick William's 2010 keynote speech, "The Return of the Marginalised: Palestine and Humanism," comprised in this volume, very timely. In his study of "the margins that matter" for the historical "urgency" they represent, Williams examines the question of Palestine, highlighting Palestine's political, economic, cultural and theoretical marginalisation. As he puts it, "At the political level ... Palestine constitutes one of the greatest scandals of the last hundred years, the continuation — and worsening — of its oppression and marginalisation, representing one of the very worst failures of the international community, especially in the shape of the United Nations." Williams explores the cultural production and living experiences of three representative Palestinian "humanist intellectuals" who, in speaking truth to power, constitute acts of political intervention that interrogate and deconstruct humanism as an imperial, Eurocentric, "exclusivist," "mono-cultural" concept; namely, Edward Said as "the intellectual-in-exile," the poet Mahmoud Darwish as the "present-absentee," and the cartoonist Naji Al-Ali. Foregrounding the "Right of Return" as explicitly denoted in the title, Williams examines the mobilising role of such a "rich legacy" bequeathed by the intellectuals in generating hope for the marginalised to "'return' with explosive or subversive power."

The article explores the marginalisation to which the selected intellectuals were exposed in the West, in Israel, and in the Arab world due to their cultural positionality, besides the marginality of the concept of humanism itself. Encompassing the collective in the individual, Williams, thus, raises the issue of the existential crisis of Palestinians, their displacement, exile, statelessness, memoricide and epistemicide, besides the resistance to all this through the lives and works of the intellectuals under study. As a space of intervention that is deliberately chosen by Said and Darwish, the margin foregrounds a transcultural, transnational, inclusive humanism, or as Darwish puts it, "a window on the world," or "a cell with no wall" that grants him the privilege of critical observation, an issue that is agreed upon by Said. Hence, the real meaning of humanism, Williams argues, is embodied by Said's emphasis on the oppositional role of the intellectual, his call for universalising the

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question of Palestine, the need for co-existence, and the importance of deliberate remembering of silenced, oppressed voices, and, hence, of counter storytelling. For Darwish, humanism means "shared humanity," and hence, the intrinsic feelings of empathy for "transhistorical" "human suffering," besides the need for transcultural hopes and dreams despite darkness. Williams rightly points out Darwish's exemplary "humanist poem of the Other," "a State of Siege," written following the 2002 Israeli attack on the West Bank. Acquiring an inclusive "transhistorical" dimension, the poem stretches to encompass the suffering of the people of Gaza, he adds. As for Naji Al-Ali, humanism is embodied in his works and words on Palestine and Handala as transnational symbols of a "just cause."

The article thus drives the reader to revisit the concepts of humanism and marginality in light of the ongoing historical transformations. The negation and cultural erasure to which Palestine has been historically and internationally exposed, whether in the fields of translation, music and film festivals, as highlighted by Williams in his 2010 article/keynote speech, are now being subverted through prolific translations of the cultural productions of Palestinians under siege and abroad. Williams likewise mentions Elia Suleiman's Divine Intervention as the first Palestinian film to be nominated in 2002 for an Oscar, yet rejected on the grounds of statelessness. Contrastingly, in 2025, No Other Land, the Palestinian-Israeli documentary on expulsion, demolitions and the violence of settler colonialism, wins the Academy Awards and the Oscar for best documentary, driving the reader to revisit Williams' "three modes of otherness" introduced in his article: "the proximate Other, the universal Other, and the radical Other."

Hence, as much as the ongoing moments are witnessing brutal, abusive humanism practiced by major Western policy makers, the hegemonic far right and pro- Zionists, negating and dehumanising Palestinians, the world is contrastingly witnessing the "resurgence and insurgence" (Mignolo and Walsh 6-7) of decolonial humanism, crystalised by the "return of the marginalised". The marginalised, I hereby contend, are not only the Palestinians inside Palestine and the diaspora, but peoples across the globe whose minds have been historically colonised by sustainable discourses on the dehumanised, brutal Palestinian Other propagated by hegemonic colonial/neocolonial/imperial powers. Acknowledging the reality of the ongoing genocide, global grassroots mobilisation and demonstrations centralise the question of Palestine, culminating lately in the global march to Gaza/Palestine, hoping for breaking the siege. I, therefore, find Darwish's lines from his poem "Identity Card," quoted by Williams in his article, pertinently resonating with the ongoing genocidal starvation in Gaza, and corresponding to James J. Zogby's words "History Didn't Begin or End on October 7th", and hence offer a decolonial closure:

I do not hate people.
I steal from no one.
However,
If I am hungry
I will eat the flesh of my usurper.
Beware, beware of my hunger
And of my anger.