

On Michael Najjar's Direction of *Scorched* by Wajdi Mouawad

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e Review by Torange Yeghiazarian

Arab Stages, Volume 2, Number 2 (Spring 2016) ©2016 by Martin E. Segal

l Theatre Center Publication

Civil war is complicated. It is by definition the rupture of a nation, the killing of brother by brother, turning neighbors into enemies. The Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) lasted fifteen years; it resulted in the deaths of 150,000, and the displacement of over a million. Artists have responded to the atrocities and loss of war, as well as hope for a peaceful future, for decades. But perhaps no other play captures the twisted insanity of civil war better than *Scorched* by Wajdi Mouawad. It is uniquely successful in telling the unwieldy and messy story of that war because of its laser sharp focus on one woman's story: Nawal, and her transformation from a village girl in love, to an assassin, to a mother silenced by her past. By tracking her journey and unlocking the secret of her silence, we come face to face with the bizarre and inhuman impacts of not-so civil a war.

In March 2016, I had the pleasure of seeing a production of *Scorched* directed by Michael Najjar at University of Oregon, in Eugene. Like the playwright, Najjar is of Lebanese descent. Mouawad is born to a Christian family and Najjar to a Druze family. Had their parents not emigrated from Lebanon, "It is entirely possible we would have been in opposing militias fighting, and perhaps killing, one another." says Najjar in his program note. It is a sobering realization and one that I imagine fueled his artistic vision in directing *Scorched*.

The play begins in the office of the notary, Lebel. He is reading the will and final wishes of Nawal, mother of twins, Janine and Simon. Lebel hands out a letter from Nawal to each. One is instructed to find the brother he never knew existed, and the other is instructed to find her father who contrary to their belief is still alive. The twins are shocked; the son in particular fumes in rage and threatens to ignore the final wishes of his mother, a mad woman he feels he barely knew. But Janine cannot. She sits in silence at Lebel's office holding on to her envelope knowing instinctively that it contains the key to her mother's secrets. Janine is a mathematician. She will approach this logically. And it will all make sense at the end. But as she will discover, Civil War has its own logic.

The play is presented in Hope Theater, a flexible black box. The stage is at the center and the audience is seated on two sides of the stage facing toward each other. Najjar's clever use of traverse staging provides a symbolic civil division creating two opposing sides watching the same narrative, and each other. The space is divided into three main playing areas on stage, bookended with two walls on either side that also serve as screens for video projections. The catwalk to one side up above, houses three chairs where the three actors that play each phase of Nawal's life preside over the unraveling of her tale.



"Scorched" by Wajdi Mouawad, directed by Michael Najjar at the University of Oregon.

The play is constructed as a puzzle. It moves back and forth in time and from location to location. To Najjar's credit, the complicated narrative clearly comes through in his fluid staging. Najjar successfully and selectively utilizes video and image projections to transport us to Lebanon, to visualize Nawal's awakening in a hospital room in Canada, and to foreshadow specific emotionally heightened moments. In one scene the Nawal's past and present are projected across from each other and we hear Nawal's voice as the three Nawal's watch the scene from above. In another instance, Lebel's office is to one side, as Janine holds a classroom at the opposite side, while Simon establishes a boxing rink at the center where he expresses his frustration. The three scenes occurring simultaneously compete for our attention the way

contrasting emotions of anger, logic and duty pull away at Simon, Janine, and Lebel. The minimally elegant and specific scenic design maximizes the use of space and supports the flexibility the play requires. A seven-member masked chorus dressed in post-apocalyptic gauze head wraps moves the scenery and helps shift the space. Their stark presence serves as a reminder of the universality of war and its horror. Costume design particularly shines in Najjar's production not only because of its sheer scope but also the detail and specificity with which each character is distinguished. From Lebanese village-specific embroidery patterns and regional scarf-wrapping customs to clear representations of urban fashion of specific eras, the costume design helps us stay on top of the moving target that is Nawal's life story.

This viewer was surprised by the range and depth demonstrated by the cast, predominantly made up of college students. This speaks to Najjar's skill to lead the cast towards embodying the characters and owning their truths in very personal ways, which in lesser hands could be represented as foreign, distant, and in patronizing ways. Viewed as an insider, *Scorched* is a story that should appeal to 20-somethings, the same age as Janine and Simon. Who doesn't have a crazy mother with a ton of secrets? This serves as our entry point. We immediately recognize and identify with Janine and Simon, and join in their quest to find the truth about their mother. We share in their struggle to make sense of the past, their questions and doubts reflect our own, and consequently, we are being educated about a very complicated historical event without it feeling like an education at all.

Najjar's staging navigates the personal and the universal equally well. The young Nawal and Wahab's doomed love story, teenage pregnancy out of wedlock, life-long devotion and friendship between two young women, the urge for self-improvement and lifting up of one's lot, the inexplicable bond between twins ...these are among the many personal threads that are staged with tenderness and depth, luring in the audience emotionally. While at the same time, Najjar never loses sight of the reality that encapsulates these personal stories.

The most difficult scene of the play in terms of staging is arguably the moment Nawal witnesses the torching of the bus packed with children. Najjar lets the incident itself happen off stage with little to no major explosion sound effects. We only witness the impact the incident has on Nawal and her friend, Sawda. We see a soot-marked Nawal bewildered, in tears held back by anger. We see Sawda fearing for Nawal's life. Each enters the stage alone and walks or runs across, then breathes, holds and pauses to digest the magnitude of the event. This provides the viewer with space for doing the same. Najjar doesn't hammer in the judgement against the brutalities of war, instead he helps us feel it and formulate our own opinion. The scenes between Nawal and Sawda are among the most impactful and well executed scenes of the production.

The universal is well represented in Najjar's staging. While the locations are specified in the stage directions, the dialogue makes minimal reference to them. Lebanon, for example is referred to as Nawal's home country. When refereeing to the refugees of war, their faction or nationality is not mentioned, they are only referred to as refugees. This broadens the scope of the play tremendously inviting connections to current civil wars, such as in Syria and the refugee crisis that is impacting the whole world.

This may be a spoiler for those who don't know the play, but when we realize that one plus one can in fact equal one, we understand that no matter the country, religion or language, we as humans are capable of committing the most atrocious crimes against each other. We understand what it means to give birth to

one's own torturer. As Nawal says in her letter, "...each people is responsible for their traitors and their heroes. Responsible for their executioners and their victims, for their victories and their defeats." As I watch the presidential election debates, I think about that. I am responsible for Trump, for Obama, for the drone wars in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and the destruction of Palmyra. This is our land, our planet, and we are all one people. We are responsible for each other. We need to take better care of each other. This is what I walk away with after watching Michael Najjar's deeply moving production of *Scorched*. I am reminded of my own power and vulnerability, and of the power of theatre to bring us closer to our own truths.

Torange Yeghiazarian is the Founding Artistic Director of Golden Thread Productions, the first American theatre company devoted to the Middle East. Torange's plays include *Isfahan Blues*, *444 Days*, *The Fifth String: Ziryab's Passage to Cordoba* and *Call Me Mehdi*. Her articles on contemporary theatre in Iran have been published in *The Drama Review* (2012), *American Theatre Magazine* (2010), and *Theatre Bay Area Magazine* (2010). She has contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* and *Cambridge World Encyclopedia of Stage Actors*. Born in Iran and of Armenian heritage, Torange holds a Master's degree in Theatre Arts from San Francisco State University.



Arab Stages

Volume 2, Number 2 (Spring 2016)

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