

## Tayeb Saddiki and the Re-invention of Tradition in Contemporary Moroccan Theatre: An Obituary

Tayeb Saddiki and the Re-invention of Tradition in Contemporary Moroccan Theatre

An Obituary by Khali  
d Amine & Marvin Carlson

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Tayeb Saddiki (1938- 2016) was a theatre director, actor, and playwright from Essaouira, a coastal city in southwest Morocco. In the course of his career as Morocco's most respected theatre figure since independence, Saddiki has not only dominated the Moroccan stage, he has in fact reconciled Morocco's traditional acting styles with Western methods. A product of the Mamoura training in 1954, Saddiki started off as an actor and spent some time in la Comédie de L'Ouest with Hubert Ginioux at Rennes, then another workshop in Jean Villar's Théâtre National Populaire (TNP) in Paris. Upon returning home in 1958, he founded *al-Masrah al-Ummali* (The Workers' Theatre) under the auspices of the Moroccan Union of Labor. He became artistic director of the National Theatre Mohamed V in 1964, then general director of the Municipal Theatre of Casablanca (1964- 1977), and founding director of *Masrah An-nass* (Peoples' Theatre).

During his artistic career he translated into Arabic 34 foreign plays, wrote 32 plays in Arabic and French (among them 18 pieces in collaboration), directed more than 80 performances, acted in more than 50 productions, directed and produced more than 30 TV dramas, and directed four short films and a long one under the title *Zeft* in 1984. Saddiki devised a considerable number of site-specific performances and outdoor epic performances sponsored by the state and commemorating national historical figures and events. Among these performances were the national epic entitled *Moulay Ismail* (1980) performed at the historical gate of *Bab Manssour* in Meknes (built during the reign of Sultan Moulay Ismail and *Aswa't wa Adwa'a* (1989)) performed at *El- Wdaya* historical site in Rabat. Saddiki received many distinctions for his leadership and outstanding artistic work. In 1976, he received the *Wissam al Massira* (The Green March) from King Hassan II, who highly esteemed Saddiki's theatre. In 2004, King Mohammed VI granted him the *Wissam al-Kafaâ al-Fikria* (intellectual merit), which is one of the highest royal distinctions in Morocco.

Saddiki's approach to theatre underwent a distinct change in the mid-1960s, reflecting his growing consciousness of the traumatic wounds that were inflicted upon the Moroccan subject by the colonial enterprise. His transplantation of the techniques of the traditional open-air circle performance *al-halqa* and particularly the dynamics of the more intimate social satires *L'bsat* to a theatre building created major experiments in postcolonial hybridity. Saddiki provided constant reminders of the potentials of such hybridity in re-examining and revising power positions between East and West. He was well aware of the fact that the introduction of European theatrical traditions had been utilized as a means to bring the East back to the West, and that theatre in the Arab world was from the start "deterritorialized," or rather trapped in an ambiguous compromise and confronted with the necessity to interpolate between different

performance cultures and discursive structures. His solution was not a return to any illusive authentic state, but rather a creation of what Homi Bhabha calls ‘thirdness’ as both a ‘desovereignizing’ and ‘aporitical’ space and an openness of ‘binarity.’ It is precisely this openness that made Saddiki’s project an urgent call for transcending the polarities East/West within a global environment.

In one of his first plays, *Diwan Sidi Abder-rahman Al-Majdub* (The Collection of Master Abder-rahman Al-Majdub, 1966) Saddiki deployed the acting strategies typical to Moroccan performances. In recovering the *al-halqa* tradition, Saddiki’s theatre became more and more inventive and self-reflexive, even as this retrieval was negotiated within the paradoxical parameters of appropriating and dis-appropriating the Western models of theatre-making that were introduced to the country at the turn of the twentieth century. *Al-Majdub* represents the emerging postcolonial theatre practice in Morocco. The transposition of *al-halqa*, as an esthetic, cultural, and geographical space, into a modern theatre building is in itself a political act that reflects the hybrid condition of postcolonial subjects. In speaking of its inspiration, he later wrote:

After adapting about thirty plays, I was overwhelmed by the idea that this is a transplanted theatre that does not reflect the inner self of Moroccans. Then, a new journey started along with people, their surroundings, and collective imaginary . . . I enjoyed people’s stories and myths . . . It was in this context that I discovered the 16th century poet “Al-Majdub.” His poetry was not written, but transmitted orally amongst people in every Moroccan home. Then, I started assembling his verses and re-writing them in a dramatic way. That was the birth of the play entitled Sidi Abderrahman Al-Majdub, a drama that won an exceptional success in Morocco.

*Diwan Sidi Abderrahman Al-Majdub*, dealing with a popular sixteenth century poet, is perhaps the best example of the re-invention of *al-halqa* in modern Moroccan stage. Like Dario Fo’s *Mistero Buffo*, *Al-Majdub* is primarily a storytelling performance wherein Saddiki acts out a series of popular stories from Moroccan folklore. It is situated in an open public space and holds up the mirror of theatrical representation to the performance itself almost in the same way as in Commedia dell’arte and other improvised theatrical projects. The play pays a particular tribute to the famous square in Marrakech, *Jemaa-el-fna*, as a place of living memory, intangible heritage, and a hybrid site of diverse performance cultures.

The text and theatrical production of *Al-Majdub*, then, are major indicatives of a paradigm shift that has occurred in Moroccan theatre practice since the late 1960s. In fact, 1967, the date *Al-Majdub* was first performed, marks the beginning of Morocco’s performative turn marked by a ghosting tendency to retrieve performance traditions from the Morocco that was. *Al-Majdub* is still a landmark of contemporary Moroccan theatre, as it has opened a new field of research possibilities and experimentation with a tendency to weave together elements from local traditions and other cultures.

Saddiki’s return to tradition was quite self-reflexive and informed by the desire to recover a vanishing tradition. *Maqamat Badia Ezzamane El-Hamadani*, in 1971, was another turning point in Moroccan theatre as it restored the performative qualities of maqamat’s narrativity back to the Moroccan and Arab stage. The maqama or assembly is a long narrative poem, first developed in the eleventh century. Though it has dramatic characteristics, the maqama cannot be regarded as a complete play destined for the stage, but Saddiki saw its dramatic possibilities, writing:

In my endless quest for an original Arab and particularly Moroccan theatrical form, I've found in Badiaa Ezzamane's maqama written a thousand years ago, dramatic structures, intrigues... As to dramatis personae, they are led by Issa Bnou Hicham... Abdul Fath who is all in one: the Arab Juha, the Turkish Nasreddine, Commedia dell'arte's Arlequi, Molière's Scapin, Plaute's Milphion, and even Beaumarchais' Figaro.

The play takes place in an open public square. At the outset, Saddiki's narrator announces that it can be any of the famous Arab squares: it can be Al-Halfaouin of Tunis, or Harun Arrachid's square in Baghdad, or the Green Ataba of Cairo, or even more our magical Jemaa-elfna in Marrakech. Then the two prominent bsat personae playfully call the attention of audiences. Other actors play audiences too while preparing to adapt one the roles. Like most halqa's of the bsat tradition, the performance lacks an organic thematic unity, for it is fragmented into little furjas or halqas that have only one common aspect: that is the master narrator. All of its stories are derived from the maqamas, yet theatricalized as fragmented little performances.

Before Saddiki's return to Morocco in 1957 upon the completion of his theatrical training in France, Jean Vilar (1912-1970), founder of the Festival d'Art Dramatique d'Avignon in 1947, had advised him: "forget all that you've seen in France, remember only the technique and learn the true art from your own people." Since then, Vilar's advice has deeply informed Saddiki's theatrical practice. Saddiki became a leading theatre producer not only in Morocco but in the entire Arab World. His theatrical practice was the offspring of a genuine hybridization of different modes of theatre production, as it was located between Western technique and the Eastern theatrical unconscious. Saddiki was an example of the cosmopolitan writer acquainted with Shakespeare, Brecht, Molière, Racine, Vilar, Stanislavsky, and Beckett among other seminal writers of Western theatre, and who at the same time has a wide knowledge of Arabo-Islamic artistic forms.

*Le Diner de Gala* [The Gala Dinner, 1990] exemplifies Saddiki's theatrical hybrid formation. The play can be seen as Saddiki's pathetic and alarming outcry about one of the tragic moments of Moroccan theatrical history, the ruthless decision to demolish one of a very limited number of theatre buildings in Morocco, Le Theatre Municipal of Casablanca where Saddiki himself served as artistic director for about ten years. The play represents Saddiki's poignancy and sadness and is a tribute to this theatre's history. It is also a histrionic reflection on Le Theatre Municipal's theatrical repertoire in particular, and a critical reflection on the brief history of Moroccan theatre and its present predicament in general. The whole action takes place at the last night of the theatre that will be demolished and the play being performed is Shakespeare's *Othello*. The famous "farewell" lines here take on a particular poignancy: "farewell peace of mind! / Farewell happy heart! Farewell plumed troops and great wars that make of ambition a virtue! Farewell! . . . Farewell, Othello's task is over."

Saddiki's trans-historical gala brings together some important artists who marked their societies with their artistic genius. With the exception of Shakespeare, all the rest of the guests were ignored, misunderstood, or even condemned during their lifetimes, and canonized after their death.... Together, they come to witness the demolition of another theatre, another "oasis of freedom." Their presence is significant as it is projected against the miserable conditions of the artists who will have nowhere to go after the destruction of their oasis of freedom. The miserable condition of the Artist is the link between most of these guests, in Van Gogh who lived in extreme poverty and neglect, Molière who, after falling from the king's favor, lived a miserable life yet was recognized after his death as the greatest dramatist of

French theatrical history, and Mohammed Al-Kouri, the martyr of Moroccan theatre of resistance, who gave his whole life to the theatre. The link between all these artists is the miserable conditions under which they lived.

Shakespeare is an important guest in the anachronistic gala, and fittingly, since it was the young Saddiki and his companions who were the first Moroccans to perform Shakespeare's plays, in Mamora where André Voisin and Charles Nugue presented their first theatrical training to young Moroccan artists. The use of Shakespeare in this play amounts to an appeal to an international theatre repertoire.

Shakespeare appears again in Saddiki's 1997 *Al-fil Wa S-Sarawil* [The Elephant and Trousers] this time not as a witness but as a theatrical presence. Saddiki's prologue brings to the fore a universal theatrical genealogy wherein he incorporates his present practice of *l'bsat*:

Offering our obedience

Offering our obedience to those who precede us

Offering our obedience to those who taught us

Hamadani's *Maqamas*, and the wise Majdub

The ears attended to their melodious asset

Sophocles and Shakespeare

Gogol and Molière

From famous to renowned

They cleared up the pathway

We're following their footsteps

Partaking of their water

The brothers in charge of Peoples' Theatre

The brothers in charge of *l'bsat* Theatre.

Here, Saddiki acknowledges the contributions of Shakespeare – among others who marked theatrical history; yet at the same time, he invokes *l'bsat* tradition as a legitimate performance behavior that has been practiced by Moroccans since the seventeenth century.

Not surprisingly for a Moroccan dramatist, Molière held a special place in the affection and the dramatic

work of Saddiki, and was a central figure in his last two major dramatic works, both written in French: *Molière ou Pour L'amour de L'humanité* (Molière or For the Love of Humanity, 1994) and *Nous Sommes Faits Pour Nous Entendre* (We were made to understand each other, 1997). In both of these slyly amusing but deeply felt hommages to the great French artist and the tradition he represents, Saddiki built entertaining but powerful arguments for mutual tolerance and respect between the two cultures that he devoted his life to blending for mutual enrichment.

In the fall of 2015, the Comédie française made a special tour of Morocco, and on November 1 in the sale Bahnini in the capital, Rabat, presented an evening in honor of this greatest of Moroccan playwrights, widely recognized as a major dramatist in both the French and Arab worlds. Although Saddiki was too ill to attend, his presence was celebrated on the stage by leading actors of both the Moroccan and the French theatre presenting selections from his two great Molière dramatic commentaries and other examples of his writing. This bi-national celebration by the leading theatres and theatre artists of these two countries provided a fitting tribute to this great dramatist in the closing days of his formidable career.

**Khalid Amine** is a Professor of Performance Studies in the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Interweaving Performance Cultures, Free University, Berlin, Germany (2008-2010), and winner of the 2007 Helsinki Prize of the International Federation for Theatre Research. Since 2006, he is a Founding President of the International Centre for Performance Studies (ICPS) in Tangier. Among his published books: *Beyond Brecht* (Meknes: Sindy Publications, 1996); *Moroccan Theatre Between East and West* (Faculty of Letters Publications, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco, 2000); *Fields of Silence in Moroccan Theatre* (Rabat: Union of Moroccan Writers, 2004); *Dramatic Art and the Myth of Origins: Fields of Silence* (International Centre for Performance Studies Publications, 2007). He has numerous publications in International Theatre Journals such as TDR, Theatre Journal, Documenta, Etcetera, Journal of Middle Eastern and North African Intellectual and Cultural Studies, FIRT Journal and others. Amine's recent contribution is an article entitled "Performing Postcoloniality in the Moroccan Scene: Emerging Sites of Hybridity" which appeared in the edited volume *Contesting Performance: global sites of research* (Palgrave, 2010). With Marvin Carlson, he is currently co-authoring a book project entitled *Theatre in North Africa: The Performative Turn in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* to appear in *Palgrave Series: Studies in International Performance* edited by J. Reinelt & B. Singleton.

**Marvin Carlson** is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Editor-in-Chief of *Arab Stages*. His research and teaching interests include dramatic theory and Western European theatre history and dramatic literature, especially of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He has been awarded the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the George Jean Nathan Prize, the Bernard Hewitt prize, the George Freedley Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been a Walker-Ames Professor at the University of Washington, a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Indiana University, a visiting professor at the Freie Universität of Berlin, and a Fellow of the American Theatre. In 2005 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Athens. His best-known book, *Theories of the Theatre* (Cornell University Press, 1993), has been translated into seven languages. His 2001 book, *The Haunted Stage* won the Calloway Prize. His newest book is *Four Plays From Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous* (Martin E.

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