

A Dialogue about *Before Dinner*



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Between Playwright Yasser Abu Shaqra and Translator Faisal Hamadah May , 2016

Edited and Tran

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Editor's Note: Before Dinner by Yasser Abu Shaqra was developed, in part, at the 2014 Masrah Ensemble Playwright Residency Program. While the Arabic text is owned by Abu Shaqra, Masrah Ensemble holds the copyright for (and commissioned) the English translation of the play.



Faisal Hamadah (FH): When I began the translation of your play, you informed me that you began writing the text in formal Arabic (*fu??a*)... Why did you change it to the colloquial? With this in mind, I'm also saddened by the fact that this play has been published in Japanese, and now in English, but has not found publication in Arabic, and was hoping you could speak to this fact.

Yasser Abu Shaqra (YA): When I began writing the text, it had no relation to realism. The change in the language of the text came with the change in its written structure. What forced the transformation of its structure is the radical shift that occurred in Syria and around the world, which shifted my own vision of Syria, and my vision of the world. Following the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, I began to feel that the shape of the writing had to be closer to a certain kind of realism. It was the opposite situation in 2010, when Assad's state was suffocating us without there being anything to impede it. Back then, realism wasn't 'realistic' enough.

With the outbreak of the revolution, I think we saw the reality that al-Assad's regime was concealing and suffocating. This reality exploded over the course of the past few years. In a similar fashion, I wanted my own text to begin in realistic mode and explode. I don't know if I managed to achieve this.

In the way that I then wrote *Before Dinner*, I cannot imagine the characters conversing in *fu??a*. I'm concerned with the characters' language in relation to the circumstances and mechanics of writing, and sadly, this is one of the factors that create a handicap in Arabic publishing. I didn't try to reach out to Arabic publishing houses, but it's usually contrary to convention to publish a text in a colloquial dialect. With this in mind, I am generally optimistic about the possibility of its publication.

The real issue at hand in writing in Arabic is that convention requires that the language of literature be *fu??a*. There are numerous dialects that you can't publish literature in, but you can potentially write a theatrical text for performance in these dialects. This is one of my questions. Why can there not be serious attempts to write literature in our dialects?

Alternatively, what makes the publication of my texts difficult in Arabic is that they contain frank sexual statements, and my characters quite often don't respect religious, social and political mores, and this fact sadly goes against the protocols of a large percentage of Arabic publishing houses.

FH: That said, there is a wider ‘Arabic’ register to your plays, despite the fact that their dialogue is in a very lively and local colloquial. I’d say this comes from your utilization of broader Arabic culture, from poetry, to music, to cinema, and this plays out very centrally in *Before Dinner*. What were your aims in this utilization?

YA: The play, from a certain angle, revolves around a generational struggle, one that is construed in cultural terms. The successive Arabic disasters force a specific cultural and behavioral climate on each generation, and more often than not, this climate carries the taste of defeat. In reviewing the cultural products of each stage, we can draw out an expression of its spirit. I really like to delve into the relationship between the characters that I write and their cultural reality. To which generation does it belong? What is the scope of the characters’ cache of knowledge? What is the extent of the real revolutionary feeling of the characters in the situation of *Before Dinner*? What are the mechanisms for change that they use from their position within this culture?

In *Before Dinner*, the mother is a schoolteacher... she is also the wife of a martyred Palestinian *fedai*. Nasser is a student of theatre studies. As such, they both carry a cache of knowledge that cannot but appear in the text, as it is an integral part of each characters’ makeup.

FH: Similarly, the play is steeped in the discourse around Arabic theatre. There is, for example, the extremely moving reenactment of the *hakawati* towards the end.

YA: (*Laughs*) I have to tell you that the idea of the *hakawati* is laughable to me in a very personal way, because I had never seen one except in the televised serials set in a Syrian milieu, and these are very poor examples of televised Syrian drama. This was my image of the *hakawati* since childhood. When I was older, I visited a café in Damascus, and it was one of the only places where you could find a modern *hakawati*, and the place was swarming with tourists. I did not find this person as part of my culture or environment, neither close nor distant.

The other way that I encountered the *hakawati* was in the repetition of this phrase in the classroom when I was studying theatre, specifically in studying the Arabic playwrights and theatre makers and their attempts at finding roots for the Arabic theatre (*ta’sil*). Nasser’s a lot more declarative than I am. He raises the subject of the *hakawati* in the text with such vitriol from the perspective of young theatre maker. He links what the *hakawati* says to his life, which is substantially different to my life. What I can say about the subject is that the *hakawati* is a question for me and for Nasser... a question that isn’t just about theatre and its roots, or about the types of performance, but is about Arabic culture more generally.

The Mother’s position is much more romantic towards the *hakawati*, even if she only encountered the *hakawati* in the same way that Nasser and I know him. What makes the subject more complicated is Nasser’s revision of the *hakawati* and the story of Al-Zir Salem. The story is an old Arabic epic that is excessive in its violence from Nasser’s point of view, but that is full of noble values from the Mother’s perspective. The question is not simply about the *hakawati*, but also about the significance of cultural products that extend from Arabic culture.

FH: When I applied to translate the play I received a ‘test’ of the scene where Nasser recites Muzzafar al-Nawwab’s *Abdullah the Terrorist*, and the ensuing dialogue. I sincerely enjoyed the translation of this part, and the scene remains a central scene for me in the play as it is one of the few moments where

Nasser and the Mother share a cultural reference without any violence or anger. I also enjoyed it because I kept hearing Nasser mimicking Muzzafar's famous reading of the play at the Yarmouk refugee camp. Do you think that the performance of Arabic poetry, particularly the evocative and characteristic performances of the great modern poets, could enrich the Arabic theatre?

YA: In all honesty, Muzzafar al-Nawwab's *Abdullah the Terrorist*, a poem that at least three generations of Arabic speakers have memorized, is one of the landmarks in the text that demonstrates how each generation treats well-known Arabic culture. I understand your pleasure in the translation, I very much enjoy reading Muzzafar's poetry, but the irony is that this scene is one of the hardest in performance. When we tried to do a reading of the play with the Masrah Ensemble in Beirut in 2014, the scene was overly long for the actor who was delivering it alone, and he moved from performance to monologue within the poem. After this performance, I shortened the scene for the final draft of the text.

As for your question about utilizing the poets' modes of performance, I don't believe there are any more performance-oriented Arabic poets in the Arab world today. They're the offspring of a former epoch, or they're obscure youth, sadly. In the past, you used to see people like Mahmoud Darwish, who was a poet and a performer, Salim Barakat, Nizar Qabbani, the examples are endless. The 'star' poets today are manufactured by cheap television programs and as soon as they are two lines into their poem, you notice that they're mimicking one of the classic poets who are characterized by their unique delivery.

In this play, I personally prefer that *Abdullah the Terrorist* is performed in Nasser's way, and not in Muzzafar al-Nawwab's. Nasser has a position towards the poem that is very different from al-Nawwab's when he performed it in 1982 at the Yarmouk camp.

FH: In a certain way, your answer here touches on and explains Nasser's name. His martyred father wanted to name him Abdullah after al-Nawwab's poem, but he was named Abdunnasser, a name that he hates and revolts against. Adjacently, the Mother is simply 'the Mother' for the majority of the play, except for a crucial moment when we find out her name, Safa' (Purity.)

YA: Honestly, one of the most tiring things for me when I write is deciding on names and titles. If you can make a tale out of a name, then you can use it to enrich the text. As for Nasser, his father suggested Abdullah as a name for him after Abdullah the Terrorist, Muzzafar's character and the *fedai* father's role model. When Nasser was born, his father decided instead to name him Abdunnasser after the Arab leader Gamal Abdunnasser. The mother tries to hide this fact stating that Nasser's father named him so because he prefers anything that has the word 'nasr' (victory) in it. She does not lie when she says this, but she is concealing another truth, that he was named after Abdunnasser. She tries to avoid provoking Nasser further with this fact because Nasser loathes the Arab leader. In this way, the father is martyred like Abdullah but he does not immortalize himself as such because he sees another kind of role model. The *fedai* is sacrificed for the politician, and Gamal Abdunnasser is the star of a previous era in the life and martyrdom of Nasser's father.

As for the mother, I preferred that her name be 'The Mother,' as she preferred to have it throughout her life. Her name is Safa, and this name resembles her I think, but we do not notice that except once, when she begins discussing some of the most personal and private moments of her life. I wanted to mention her name, especially as it had always been absented between her relationship to her husband and her son. She was compelled to be just a mother in both their lives, especially in Nasser's life.

FH: When we were discussing the translation, you insisted, more than anything, that the rhythm of your dialogue be carried over to English, and this was a particularly difficult request, and a very interesting exercise for me. On my end, I had wanted the characters' English to sound foreign, as if they were forced into speaking a language that they were unfamiliar with. This was particularly the case in that I did not want them to sound English or American in their idiom, to hold on to their integral linguistic identity even as they are speaking in a tongue that is not their own.

YA: I am not proficient in English, and I don't know much about the translation of the text except in my faith in your as a good translation, and a theatre scholar and a reader as well. I do know that any attempt to translate literature is an attempt at disfigurement. Literature does not translate and a text becomes something else in its translation.... But, we receive a certain amount of what the writer intended when we read the translation, and the better read the translator is in theatre and the more knowledgeable he is about the, the closer the translation can come to accuracy.

FH: In this regard, one of the more challenging aspects was in translating the blasphemy (*kufir*) and cursing, seeing as English cannot really accommodate the Arabic discourse of cursing and blasphemy in a way that mirrors how powerful and effective these are in your Arabic, specifically that in the play, there is an escalation in the use of this language, and a specificity in how the two characters use it.

YA: In the Arab world, we excel at cursing, and so are very varied in it, and sometimes even use it in endearment. I personally see this as stemming directly from our political situations, which is what bears our articulated violence in the first degree. The curses seem singular if you look at them from the outside, but each one has its specific place, usage, and multiple meanings attached to it. For example, at one point, the Mother says "ya 'ar?", which is a curse that the Mother uses playfully in endearment, and this is how it is received in the Syrian dialect. However, when we did the reading in Beirut, this did not come across, because in Lebanon the word primarily carries its direct meaning of 'pimp.' This made me interested in learning what changes will happen to these phrases when the text is translated to another language, especially considering there is a difference in the reception between two Arabic-speaking regions even without any translation.

As for the blasphemy (*kufir*), people resort to it in that it's a form of delayed punishment, when you become so frustrated with the situation of your life, you curse God, but you don't curse the ruler or the government. When you are frustrated with your mother, you curse God in front of her but you don't curse her. Here, *kufir* cannot be considered as a lack of faith. The Mother blasphemes (*takfir*) even as she is faithful, but the continued pressure from Nasser leads her to go outside of her reverence for God.

FH: You speak of a violence in the language of the text that mirrors the violence of Arab realities, but the violence in *Before Dinner* isn't just linguistic. It's a brutal play.

YA: I think that what the world is seeing today, starting in Syria, throughout the Middle East and the whole world, clarifies the reason for the all the violence in my play. If you see Assad's crimes you can barely imagine the depravity of the human mind and its baseness. My characters lived in and matured under the shadow of this tyrant. I see the text as very pleasant when compared to the reality.

As we were preparing for this interview, I witnessed three events that competed in their brutality and ugliness in Syria... Al-Assad's planes were committing an unprecedented number of massacres on

schools, hospitals and mosques in Aleppo... Meanwhile, the Kurdish PYD forces displayed a number of corpses belonging to revolutionaries, desecrating them in a festive, carnivalesque scene as they paraded them through the streets of a town... Finally, a reporter for one of Assad's television channels took a selfie with more corpses and shared it on her social media accounts. I don't think that any writers' imagination is capable of predicting the violence constructed by tyrants.

FH: There's a scene in your play that I find to be very prevalent in modern Arabic literature and theatre, specifically, the scene of transformative drunkenness. In your play, this scene is excessively violent as it lifts all veils and displays the naked psychological and dramatic reality of the characters.

YA: Drunkenness is the one thing that eliminates differences between people, or at least shortens the distance between them. I personally grew up in one of the slums on the perimeter of Damascus, and the *sakarji* (drunkard) as they called him was the charge that no one wanted to be labeled by. They were considered aberrant by society's standards and were always portrayed as angry evildoers. It became clear later that they were the ones who carried the Syrian revolution on their shoulders, and defended it with their blood.

When I came to know the artistic and cultural circles in Damascus, the *sikeer* (drunk) was the most charming person. Whoever *didn't* drink was aberrant in this world that claimed superiority to that other one that I described earlier. However, while it might have been cultural and intellectually more advanced, it had never sacrificed more.

In extreme drunkenness, there is an equality between these two worlds, and they reveal themselves in the same subjects, even if the individual details were slightly different. In drunkenness, the facades disappear and people return to a 'pre-social state' that is built on emotions and drives. The moment when I pour drink for my characters is the moment I feel their desire for revelation most strongly, more than in any other time in the play.

Faisal Hamadah is a PhD candidate and teaching associate at Queen Mary University's Drama department. His thesis deals with the history of Kuwait's theatre movement and the movement's relation to the development of the modern Kuwaiti state and civil society. He also works as a translator, with an interest in cultural and literary translation.

Yasser Abu Shaqra is a Palestinian Syrian author born in Damascus in 1985. He is a graduate of the Higher Institute for the Dramatic Arts in Damascus, and currently resides in France. His play *Before Dinner* was translated into English, French, and Japanese. This work has been presented in Beirut, Baghdad, San Francisco, New York, Paris and Tokyo. His poetry collection *Ba'?' min Naz'f* (A Bit of Hemorrhage) has been translated into Danish. More recently, his play *The Final Month of the Fifth Year* has been in rehearsal in Istanbul as the first professional Syrian-Turkish theatrical production.



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