

Mohammad al-Attar's *While I was Waiting* at Avignon



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A Theatre Review by Philippa Wehle Arab Stages,

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Mohammad al-Attar is among the best known young Syrian dramatists. Born in Damascus, he studied in London and now lives in Berlin. His first play, the 2007 *Withdrawal*, was widely produced in Europe and the Middle East. Subsequent dramas turned toward explorations of the upheavals in his native country. *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* Dealt with the experiences of political detainees in Syria. It was first presented, for one night only, on June 16, 2012, at the Sunflower theatre in Beirut and has been widely produced internationally. His play *Intimacy* was first presented at the Homeworks Festival in Beirut in 2013 today (see *Arab Stages*, volume 1). It then toured to Germany and Switzerland, where it won the Zürcher Kartonbank Prize for outstanding independent theatre and through much of Europe, including most notably the Avignon Festival. The following report, which is also appearing in our sister journal, *European Stages*, as a part of an essay on this year's Avignon Festival, was created by Philippa Wehle.

From Syria, Mohammad al-Attar's play *Alors que j'attendais* (*While I was waiting*), directed by Omar

Abusaada, gave audiences a chance to enter into the tragic lives and losses of a modest Syrian family. Set in Damascus between 2015 and 2016, the play introduces us to Taim, a young man who has been beaten into a coma and his family and friends who try to make sense of what has happened to him. The set is composed of a two tiered structure allowing us to be with Taim in his hospital room below with a bed and IV fluids as well as follow the young man on a platform above with a table and microphones. The lifeless body of Taim, a young Syrian of 30, lies on the bed as the play opens. Overhead a parallel world offers Taim's spirit the chance to tell what happened to him and to interact with his friend Omar with whom he had shared the heady days of revolution and hope in 2011. Omar has also left this world.

Dressed in the traditional chador, Taim's mother enters his hospital room. She sits next to his bed and recites verses from the Koran while Taim's alter ego overhead fills us in on his early days of resistance. In 2011, he had made twenty videos on his Iphone during the uprising and put them on Facebook and YouTube. He wanted to bear witness. Years later, on Jan 29, 2015, he was driving around Damascus looking for locations to make a documentary film about the 2011 demonstrations when he was stopped at a checkpoint and later found covered with blood and unresponsive.

Omar took a different path after 2011. He first joined the Al-Nusra Front before moving on to ISIS where he discovered that their methods of torture were just as terrible as in Assad's prisons. Taim's first film of hundreds of demonstrators shouting "Fuck off Bashir!" and "Assad traitor!" is projected on a wall and in a brief moment of joy, Taim and Omar happily belt out an Arab rock music number.

Taim remains in a coma for an entire year. His sister Nada arrives from Beirut to find out what happened to him. In contrast to her mother, she wears Western clothes and make-up. One wonders how she managed to leave Damascus and find a job and a life in Beirut. Inevitably there are scenes of her fighting with her mother about her choices. Now she wonders if she shouldn't stay in Damascus and try to get her brother's film produced.

Two other characters complete this family drama, Taim's girlfriend Salma and their friend Oussama. In a series of scenes played out either on a carpet or in a bedroom, Salma tells Nada that she has had an abortion and that she wonders if she should have kept the baby now that Taim is gone. Oussama plays the guitar and sings as he had always done when he and Taim were young together. He admits to being a junky, and the source of the hashish that provided pleasure to Taim and his friends in the face of violence and death in the early days of revolution. At times Taim observes the others from above. At others, he stands next to them and listens intently to their struggles as they confront the reality of their lives in 2016. Should they leave Syria or stay and work creatively to change current circumstances?

Taim's coma is a metaphor for today's Syria, a country hovering between life and death, in the words of director Abasaada, who has remained in Syria where he continues to produce his "theater of resistance" despite safety concerns and lack of electricity. It is the situation most Syrians find themselves in symbolically, he says.

Philippa Wehle is Professor Emerita of French Language and Culture and Drama Studies at Purchase College, State University of New York. She writes widely on contemporary theatre and performance and is the author of *Le Théâtre populaire selon Jean Vilar*, *Drama Contemporary: France*, and *Act French: Contemporary Plays from France*. She is a well-known translator of contemporary plays with a specialty in creating supertitles in French for emerging theatre companies. Dr. Wehle is a Chevalier in the Order

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