

## World Premiere of Arabic Drama at Cornell



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A Theatre Review by Marvin Carlson

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The Cornell University Department of Performing and Media Arts presented on September 22-24, 2016 the world premiere of a new drama, *Desert of Light*, by Palestinian-Syrian playwright Rama Haydar. The playwright was born and raised in Damascus, but her family, although all Syrian-born, were of Palestinian origin and therefore were never granted full Syrian citizenship. Haydar had to flee to Lebanon in 2012, where she began writing *Desert of Light*. She completed the play in Granada, Spain, where she is now completing her interrupted studies as a dramatist and director.

The production is the first mounted at Cornell by Rebekah Maggor, who joined the faculty there this fall. Maggor, who translated the work with Haydar, is not only a director and scholar but also a performer and voice and speech specialist. She has a special interest in theatre of protest and in drama from the Middle East. Her anthology, *Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution* was published by Seagull Books

in 2016. Maggor first read Haydar's work in 2014 while on a Fulbright to study theatre in Israel and Palestine. She was fascinated by Haydar's writing as representative of the work of young dramatists in that region coming to grips with the aftermath of the "Arab Spring," and seeking to move beyond the clichés of mainstream news sources who tend to see Palestinians as either victims or terrorists.



Photo Credit: Rebekah Maggor

The characters in Haydar's play, Guy A and Guy B defy such easy categorizations. They are complex human beings, trapped in a situation which brings out all the conflicts and contradictions of their characters. They are both Palestinian refugees, trapped in a huge and teeming refugee camp outside of Damascus. Shortly after the war began a number residents in the Yarmouk camp offered support and refuge to fleeing families from other besieged areas in Syria. The government opposed the Yarmouk residents' attempt to aid these people and, in retaliation, bombed the camp. Following this attack in late 2012, anti-government militants entered Yarmouk to fight the regime. Some of the Palestinian residents in Yarmouk joined these anti-government forces while others aligned with pro-government militant Palestinian groups. A state of siege followed, with a virtually complete blockade, government checkpoints, and constant bombardment. By early February 2013, when the play takes place, thousands had fled, hundreds had been killed or died of starvation, and some 18,000 remained trapped in the camp, among them friends of the playwright and the two fictional characters Guy A and Guy B.

Their conversation is bitter, angry, gritty, and wide-ranging, viewing with contempt politicians and rulers on all sides who have served their own interests, used the Palestinians merely as a rhetorical tool, and left the actual people to suffer in continually worsening conditions both at home and abroad. Thus the play is

distinctly in the powerful tradition of engaged political theatre, which has characterized much Middle Eastern and especially Syrian and Palestinian theatre for decades. Haydar's work, however, in its gritty realism of action and language, is very much representative of the approach to these topics found in the young dramatists of today, such as Syrian writer Mohamed Al-Attar and Palestinian-Syrian writer Yasser Abu Sharqa. The former now working in Beirut and the latter in Turkey.

All of the actors in this production were students at Cornell. The two characters in Haydar's play were created by Irving Torres and J. Michael Kinsey, but the play itself was embedded in an evening of related material, opening with a moving overture composed of a mixture of Middle Eastern motifs with American folk and jazz by Dara Anissi and Max Buckholtz and performed on a combination of Eastern and Western instruments. Following the overture, a chilling video presented several minutes of the first-person shooter game Counter-Strike clearly set in a Middle Eastern urban war zone where the object was to kill as many suddenly appearing jihadists or American soldiers as possible. Following this, ten actors appeared first in a striking silhouette, arms raised in gestures of defiance, and then moved down to occupy the stage and present excerpts from the epic collection of 122 short poems by Mahmoud Darwish, generally considered the national poet of Palestine. The collection, appropriately entitled "State of Siege," was composed while Darwish was under siege in Ramallah in 2002, and establishes many of the themes concerned with living under such conditions which will be explored in more contemporary terms, by the characters in Haydar's drama. The cast, all of them involved with Maggor in the creation of this rich and moving 25-minute prologue were Naomie Castin, Tatyana Carrillo, Jacob Hunter, Serena Lotreck, Danyal Motiwalla, Julia Shebek, Matthew Shortell, Mike Southworth, Mwangi Thuita, and Elana Valastro. Choreographer Byron Suber designed the movements for this sequence. Each performance (all sold-out) was followed by a panel with Haydar, Maggor and various guest scholars and faculty members helping to provide political and cultural context for the production.

*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 Universitat 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. Segal Center Publications, 2014).*

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