

The Politics of Presenting Arabs on American Stages in a Time of War



There are two things that I know are true.

1. Theatremakers (which includes artists and audiences because you need both to make theatre) hunger for stories because we are so in love with life we are not content to simply live our own. We must know what we cannot know by staying within the confines of our own skin.

2. Theatremakers are our own tribe. As a playwright, I have had more in common with a playwright from any another culture than a person who did not care for words from my own ethnic background(s).

But, it's also true that culture is not created in a vacuum.

I'm a Palestinian-American playwright who creates images of Arabs on American stages in a time of war. One way you can make people less complacent about a war is by making them feel conflicted and confused about the reasons why you are fighting that war.

I was in New York on 9/11. It was a place of mourning, confusion, horror, sadness. But, the tragedy of 9/11 attack wasn't deemed enough to justify an immediate massive military response. Not right away and not by enough of the right people. The image of the "good" Arab or Muslim – victims who needed saving from their leadership – began to be part of the governmental discourse as well. Most notably, this took the

form of Laura Bush taking the extraordinary step of being the first First Lady to take over a President's weekly radio address in order to talk about the Taliban's brutal policies towards women in 2001. Instead of writing and art and theatre created in opposition to such pro-war propaganda, we got a spate of plays (the vast majority of images of Arabs in American theatre) presenting narratives that highlighted the human rights abuses under Saddam and the Taliban. These plays easily could have been set in Saudi Arabia, an ally of America, an act that would have punctured through arguments like those of Laura Bush and reveal the hypocrisy inherent in them. But, they were not. These stories of victims that clearly needed saving were set in countries we happened to be invading.

When human and women's rights are evoked as a justification for war, governmental officials are using the language of the left to cripple the ability of people on the left to mobilize. But, in the case of the Vietnam War, the left-leaning artists were not fooled. They didn't fill American theatres with images of the horrors of living under the Vietcong and Communism. Unlike the theatre artists of today, they resisted – rather than reinforced – the governmental narrative.

When I think about my contemporary theatre writers, some who claim the identity of leftists and/or Arab-American, I wonder if they are willfully ignorant or simply not up to the task of grasping the concept of Orientalism – the idea that creating distorted images of the Middle East serves as implicit justification for war and is inextricably linked to the colonial and imperial ambitions of Europe and the United States.

What might theatre that counters or even seriously questions “the war on terror” look like? Great theatre is not about teaching people about what they do not know, but rather it is about awakening within them truths that they already do. The most potent political theatre today would, in fact, not look like what we usually refer to as “political” theatre at all. Instead of maudlin stories that confine the Arab or Muslim characters to either solely victims or perpetrators of unimaginably horrific violence, depending on the political bent of the writers, truly revolutionary theatre would dare to show a reality that is harder to face.

Even in the worst of times, the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims are simply ordinary human beings. They work, have their hearts broken, dream of owning a slightly bigger house than they can afford, get aggravated by their family members, and struggle valiantly to be admired by those they admire. In short, their lives, deaths, hopes, fears, and fantasies are not that different from the vast majority of Americans and Europeans. When you confine stories about Arabs and Muslims to revolving exclusively around violence, it relegates the sum of the importance of a billion people to how they might affect or be affected by “us.”

What would it mean if there were more stories that sensitized audiences to the fact that, despite the myriad of superficially variant ways that human cultures have blossomed across the globe over the span of several millennia, there is a human essence that unites us and is utterly recognizable? In a world that is divided into nations that wage wars on one another, it is theatre's ability to humanize that makes it so politically potent. No one needs reminding that if some people – who possess all the nuanced human complexity and capacity for feeling that we do - have fewer rights, it is always tied to the fact that others have vastly more resources. We who are complacent with that imbalance of power and resources mostly stay that way, not because we are ignorant, but because we know full well that imbalance is in our favor. That political idea is the simplest to grasp and the hardest to swallow. It's much easier to tell ourselves stories that reinforce and solidify our conceptions about our “differences,” though the medium of theatre at its best is designed to reveal how much we actually always remain inescapably the same.



Betty Shamieh is a Palestinian-American playwright and author of fifteen plays. Her productions include *The Black Eyed* (New York Theatre Workshop), *Fit for a Queen* (Classical Theatre of Harlem), and *Roar* (The New Group). *Roar* was the first play by a Palestinian-American playwright produced off-Broadway. A graduate of Harvard College and the Yale School of Drama, she was named a UNESCO Young Artist for Intercultural Dialogue and a Guggenheim Fellow. Her works have been translated into seven languages. www.bettyshamieh.com.



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Table of Contents:

PART 1: Toward Arab Dramaturgies Conference

1. [A Step Towards Arab Dramaturgies](#) by Salma S. Zohdi
2. [A New Dramaturgical Model at AUB](#) by Robert Myers.
3. [Dancing the Self: A Dance of Resistance from the MENA](#) by Eman Mostafa Antar.
4. [Traversing through the Siege: The Role of movement and memory in performing cultural resistance](#) by Rashi Mishra.
5. [The Politics of Presenting Arabs on American Stages in a Time of War](#) by Betty Shamieh.
6. [Towards a Crosspollination Dramaturgical Approach: *Blood Wedding* and *No Demand No Supply*](#) by Sahar Assaf.
7. [Contentious Dramaturgies in the countries of the Arab Spring \(The Case of Morocco\)](#) by Khalid Amine.
8. [Arab Dramaturgies on the European Stage: Liwaa Yazji's *Goats* \(Royal Court Theatre, 2017\) and Mohammad Al Attar's *The Factory* \(PACT Zollverein, 2018\)](#) by Sarah Youssef.

PART 2: Other

9. [Arabs and Muslims on Stage: Can We Unpack Our Baggage?](#) by Yussef El Guindi.
10. [Iraq's Ancient Past as Cultural Currency in Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad*](#) by Amir Al-Azraki.
11. [Amal Means Incurable Hope: An Interview with Rahaf Fasheh on Directing *Tales of A City by the Sea* at the University of Toronto](#) by Marjan Moosavi.
12. [Time Interrupted in Hannah Khalil's *Scenes from 71* Years*](#) by Kari Barclay.
13. [Ola Johansson and Johanna Wallin, eds. *The Freedom Theatre: Performing Cultural Resistance in Palestine*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2018. Pp. 417](#) by Rebekah Maggor.

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