

A Step Towards Arab Dramaturgies



In a time where Arabs are at the forefront of news cycles worldwide, theatre plays a vital role not only in recognizing, but also in presenting and creating narratives for Arabs, about Arabs, by Arabs. In an effort towards identifying Arab dramaturgy, and stirring conversations about Arab theatre history and contemporary practices, the Martin E. Segal Theater Center, the Ph.D. Program in Theatre and Performance at The Graduate Center CUNY, and the Theater Initiative at the American University of Beirut (AUB) partnered to bring scholars, artists, researchers and theatre practitioners from all over the world to discuss Arab theatre and its dramaturgy.

During my years as a dramaturgy student and a professional dramaturg, I've been invested in the origins of Arab dramaturgy and how the western and Aristotelian form of theatrical storytelling played a major

role in the formal staging of a theatre in the Arab world starting in the late 19th Century, especially during colonization. Yet, it is rather important to recognize that long before the spread of western dramaturgy on Arab stages, indigenous and folk storytelling played an imperative role in Arab storytelling. In turn, post colonization, many Arab playwrights have denounced the western/Aristotelian traditional theatre form, and ventured on to write works that utilize folk and indigenous Arab traditions and practices, such as Al-Samir, Halqa, shadow puppets, etc., aiming to create a culturally faithful theatre alternative specifically for Arabs. What is intriguing and worth noticing, is that most of them could not separate from the Western influence, and still followed the footsteps of Western, yet, non-Aristotelian playwrights, such as Ionesco, Beckett, Brecht, and Pirandello. A byproduct of a post-colonial society, Arab playwrights responded to the Western theatrical form, as opposed to just focus on telling indigenous stories. Ultimately, this created a tension that may have affected their efforts of theorizing contemporary Arabic theatre. Perhaps that tension was created because not many of them delved into the theorization of ancient and classical Arabic storytelling, recognizing indigenous narrative as a type of “theatre” – one that is not necessarily Aristotelian.

As a Next Generation Fellow at the Martin Segal center last year, and an Egyptian freelance dramaturg in New York City, I was honored to have been given the opportunity to support curating and organizing the 2018 symposium *Towards Arab Dramaturgies*, namely because this provided a platform to explore the nature and core of the theatrical conversation between Western and Arab theatre scholars and practitioners. Additionally, It was an honor to work alongside renowned academic minds like that of Professor Marvin Carlson, whose expertise in the Arab theatre was vital to my graduate studies both in Egypt and in the US.

I was motivated by the symposium's mission statement that read: “Contemporary theatre and performance in the Arabic world is a diverse and contested set of practices that are unfolding in a fast-changing political and culturally complex region. In this situation, the performing arts are under pressure to independently produce new work, uphold traditions— and simultaneously to speak about contemporary lives, nationalism, class, race, religion, gender and new forms of theatre. In this symposium, we ask how theatre can continue to grow, develop artistically and continue to be a voice in the future of the Arabic world. How can the theatre in the region thrive?” I was thrilled to be part of the organizing team. For the reason that this mission fully aligned with my ongoing interest in defining (and possibly theorizing) Arab dramaturgy and practices that of the past, present, and future.

The resources provided by the partnering institutions paved the way to put together a successful academic event that explored theatre practice and process, presented by a diverse array of Arab, Western, and Arab-American voices. To meet our mission, we were adamant in creating programming that compliments both theory and practice. The sessions, panels, and papers presented at the convening were decided based on submissions by theatre academic colleagues, and through discussions held with contemporary Arab theatre practitioners that have thriving careers in the US, Arab world, and Europe.

Towards Arab Dramaturgies symposium, which took place on the 27th-28th of September, 2018 at the Graduate Center, CUNY, New York, had a line-up that was broken down over two days. The first day primarily focused on the academic aspect of the event. We were particularly honored to inaugurate the event with internationally acclaimed Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal’s keynote speech, [Participatory Art, Multiple Platforms](#). The international gathering also gave us the opportunity to take the time to make a tribute to Hazim Azmi, an Egyptian theatre researcher and critic, who had passed unexpectedly in the

July prior while attending an international theatre congress organized by the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR). The tribute was read by his colleague, Dalia Bassiouny, who also participated in the symposium's presentations and panels. The second day of the event was dynamic in its nature, as it incorporated both theory and practice conversations. Papers and panels presented discussed a wide range of subjects, such as *Theatre of the Real*, *Dramaturgies of the Revolution*, *Alternative Arab Dramaturgies*, *Arab Dramaturgy in Medieval Cairo*, *Arab Dramaturgies on the European Stage*, [Arab American and Arab Artists in conversation](#), and many more.

We aimed for this symposium to be a stepping stone towards creating platforms that put Arab Dramaturgy and Arab theatre on the forefront of theatre conversations in the academic and professional worlds. As an organizer, I gained immense knowledge by working closely with **Marvin Carlson**, **Peter Eckersall**, **Frank Hentschker**, **Sahar Assaf** and **Robert Myers**. As a professional and an academic I was exceptionally grateful to be in conversations with artists and researchers that I deeply admire such as **Khalid Amine**, **Eman Antar**, **Dalia Basiouny**, **Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi**, **Wafaa Bilal**, **Leila Buck**, **Yussef El Guindi**, **Rania Lee Khalil**, **Amahl Khouri**, **Ashley Marinaccio**, **Rashi Mishra**, **Rubén Polendo** (Theatre Mitu), **Heather Raffo**, **Betty Shamieh**, and **Sarah Youssef**.

In celebration of and recognition to the extraordinary works presented by the participants, this *Arab Stages* special edition aims to showcase some highlights from the successful two-day symposium. We hope that by publishing some of the works presented and panels discussed, that we plant a seed for further and deeper conversations that would contribute to the ongoing expansion of Arab theatre, storytelling, and its representation worldwide.



A tribute to Hazem Azmi. Photo Credit: Jackie Spaventa.

Videos:

[Keynote by Wafaa Bilal:](#)

[Participatory Art, Multiple Platforms](#)

Internationally acclaimed Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal discusses select projects from his extensive body of work including *Domestic Tension (aka Shoot an Iraqi)*, *Virtual Jihadi* and *the 3rdi*. Bilal's work blends technology and performance to pose questions about geopolitical and personal realities, with an emphasis on dynamic en- counters and relational antagonism as strategies to engage viewers in dialogue. He will narrate the evolution of his work alongside the personal experience of living between two worlds: the zones of conflict in Iraq and of comfort in the U.S.

[Arab Stages Advisory Board Session Opening Remarks](#)

Arab Dramaturgies: A Multiplicity of Options

by Marvin Carlson

[Arab Stages Advisory Board Session](#)

Conversation with Marvin Carlson and others (Sahar Assaf, Dalia Bassiuony, Betty Shamieh, and Robert Myers)

[Theatre of the Real: Dramaturgy in the Arab Context](#)

with Amahl Khouri, Rubén Polendo (Theatre Mitu), Sahar Assaf, and Peter Eckersall

[Arab American and Arab Artists in conversation](#)

Opening by Yussef El Guindi

Conversation with Sahar Assaf, Dalia Basiouny, Leila Buck, Rania Khalil, Amahl Khoury, Heather Raffo, and Betty Shamieh.

Moderated by Frank Hentschker

Salma S. Zohdi an Egyptian Dramaturg based in New York. She is a recipient of two international fellowship awards from the American Association for University Women. In Egypt, she was an Assistant Director in the feature film AL KOBAR (trans. THE BIGSHOTS), she then joined Alumni Community

Theatre as their PR & Marketing Manager. She worked as a producer, teaching artist, stage manager, playwright, dramaturg, translator, and assistant director. Highlights from her work in Egypt include: THE MARRIAGE PROPOSAL, JACK OR THE SUBMISSION, THE DINASOUR PLAY, ART, WAITING FOR GODOT, and EL GAW GAMEEL (trans. THE WEATHER IS NICE). Credits at Columbia University: THE NEXT WAR, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?, UNDROWN'D, THE LOVE SONG OF J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER, and DISPOSABLE PROMISES. NYC credits: NATHAN THE WISE, THE MECCA TALES, "ARAB CLASSIC PLAYS", AMERICAN DREAMS & ARABIAN NIGHTS, "RE-READING OPPRESSION", "TOWARDS ARAB DRAMATURGIES", THE YACOUBIAN BUILDING, and OPERATING SYSTEMS. **MA**: AUC - English & Comparative Literature. **MFA**: Columbia University - Theatre (Dramaturgy).



Arab Stages

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