

Arabs and Muslims on Stage: Can We Unpack Our Baggage?



When it comes to countering the implicit, and sometimes explicit prejudices that the larger society exhibits toward Arabs and Muslims, American theatres are not particularly ahead of the curve. While some theatres have bravely and commendably gone out of their way to address the deluge of negativity the mainstream culture exhibits towards most things Middle Eastern, those theatres are rare.

This is disappointing. One expects theatre to rise above the crassness that swirls through the currents of mainstream culture. You would hope that theatres espouse values that more commercial fare might shy away from. You want theatre, especially nonprofit theatre, to champion values that might interfere with the bottom line. Not that we want theatre to lose touch with a wide audience, lest it become perceived as being even more elitist than it already is. Crassness, after all, can be fun.

Theatre has some of its roots firmly planted in the mud — in the foibles and weirdness of human nature. “Rising above” mainstream culture doesn’t mean theatre should eschew any of the broad, popular memes currently in circulation in it. By all means artists should feel free to infuse their work with whatever is most fashionably current, in style, aesthetics, popular thought, songs, etc. But theatre should also have a critical eye; it should offer up critiques, contextualize, and provide some kind of critical framework through which to view the culture and politics of the day. Because most theatres are nonprofits, they should be more daring in terms of the subject matter they choose, staging stories and perspectives that might be hard to find elsewhere.

This is the ideal. And given this ideal, expressed by many theatre mission statements, I wonder why there

aren't more plays by and about people who come from the Middle East. Never has any one area of the world had more impact on the U.S. than the Middle East. Repeatedly. Every year for as long as most of us can remember.

In every decade of my life, Arabs and Muslims have made headlines in some capacity (almost always in a negative light). One gets a little punch drunk during some news cycles dealing with this (from my perspective) battery of biased reporting, in which Arabs and Muslims end up always coming across as seemingly genetically prone to mindless violence, wars, the oppression of women, etc. The go-to images are always large mobs of angry Arab men, veiled women, bearded Muslims in prayer, bombed sites, and so on. I have spent most of my life being gobsmacked by all this, contrasting what I see in mainstream American culture with what I live and know when I travel back to Egypt and hang out with friends and family and imbibe the culture around me.

Quite naturally, in a desire to make sense of all this, I turn to the arts as one potential source to put some of these Middle East happenings in perspective. I want to step away from the objectionable "objective news" and the biased pundit class with their conservative think-tank opinions, and see how the culture around me processes these events.

I hold out little hope that movies will give me the other side of the story. Black-and-white perspectives sell more tickets than grays, or rarer still, viewpoints directly from "the enemy." The best you can hope for in a popular movie that deals with the Middle East is something akin to the "cowboys and Indians" narrative, in which the vast majority of the "Arabs" are portrayed as menacing and hostile, except for the "good Arab" who sides with the West and aids its agents in fighting a particularly nasty leader and his fanatical hordes. In movies, money follows prejudice because simplifying the world into "us" and "them" is more satisfying than having to deal with all the ambiguities and qualifiers that are part of most people's daily lives.

I expect more from the stage. But in the American theatre over the past 15 years, for all its talk of wanting to be inclusive, I have rarely seen plays that address what's going on in the Middle East or what is happening to Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent here in the U.S. (leaving aside the almost total absence of such plays before Sept. 11, 2001). The Ancient Greeks made it a point to address their wars in their dramas. Why is it that American theatre, with rare exceptions, should fail so drastically in this regard?

It's an oft repeated observation of American culture that people don't like politics in their entertainment. It is outside the limited purview of this essay to explain this aversion to political theatre in the U.S. But the fact remains that a whiff of politics will expose you to the charge of having an agenda, of being too didactic or preachy.

It's odd that, by contrast, a small island like England can create big-canvassed plays that address their political culture and their standing in the world, while the U.S., a world power and a country that surely begs for ambitious plays, mostly produces small, insular plays that deal with matters of the hearth and heart. It is often argued that some types of navel-gazing can be deemed political. Or, to use a common phrase, the "personal is political." A domestic drama may be said to act as metaphor, encapsulating larger political concerns.

But most of the time, the politics are so deeply cloaked in metaphor that they can be safely ignored. It's a repeated oddity that the American protagonist rarely seems to care or understand his or her place in the historical and political forces at play. As a consequence, the default setting for American drama is generally warm (matters of the heart predominate), uplifting (dreams can be realized in spite of obstacles, and if they're not it's an American tragedy), and domestic (the individual is paramount), with just enough social commentary thrown in to give it a little bite.

The problem is that for most people outside of the West, active politics is part of their daily life and conversation. To self-realize, to pursue happiness, means having to pay attention to government policies and how they affect you. You can't do too much navel-gazing when bullets, tear gas, and arrest are real possibilities, or if you're simply trying to gain basic freedoms and human rights. Consequently the home life of a lot of Arabs and Muslims is filled with political chatter. To dramatize the daily lives of these two groups (and quite a few other non-Western peoples) is to unavoidably include the political element as part of normal domestic interactions. Here the personal truly is political.

Americans are so averse to politics in their entertainment that the simple act of including Arab or Muslim characters in a play exposes it to the charge of being overly political or didactic. And if the play is written by an Arab or a Muslim? The writer must surely then be peddling some political agenda. Even if, for example, the play revolves around an Arab or Muslim family preparing an iftar dinner, as in my play *10 Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* in which nothing political is uttered, the play is regarded as making some kind of statement. Or worse, the play gets dismissed as social activism rather than being judged on its artistic merits. The very act of rendering in a three-dimensional way a group of people usually depicted negatively is deemed a political act. Whether the writer intends it or not, they're seen as trying to "address" something, to right a wrong.

Such criticism has been leveled at some of my plays, even though I never have a conscious political agenda when I set out to write a play. Like most playwrights, I am focused on seeing to the needs of my characters. I am focused on craft and character passions, not on trying to sneak in some political agenda, or to have a character wield a political axe I'm grinding. Where's the fun in that? I'm always surprised when I get critiqued by a reviewer for having some calculated agenda, as if the play was written as a platform to express my political views.

Artistically speaking, Arabs and Muslims are in a predicament in the theatre. We can not walk onstage unburdened by the political framework in which we exist offstage. As a group we are fraught with all the accrued bad news heaped on us. As characters in a play, regardless of what we do, it's hard to shed the manufactured political narrative we've been assigned. Existentially, and dramaturgically, we've become politicized. While other characters can come onstage with a question mark hanging over them as we wait to find out who they are and what they want, with Arabs and Muslims our entrance sets up a set of expectations, usually all negative—which these characters will either subvert (at which point the political-agenda accusation might be brought up) or confirm (at which point the play might then be safely celebrated, since the audience's prejudices have been validated).

This scapegoating echoes the way other ethnic groups have been treated onstage in the past, and often still are. African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinx characters have historically made stage entrances carrying their share of political baggage. Baggage that is spilling over with other people's stuff, not their own. The political burden attached to these and other minorities has begun to

lessen as more varied depictions make their way into the mainstream culture. It takes a while, and the struggle to unpack that baggage is still ongoing. But for Arabs and Muslims, that unpacking has barely begun.

Arabs and Muslims—even in liberal, Western eyes—have come to embody the sins of patriarchy, sexism, religious fanaticism, mindless violence, and machismo of a kind that is seen as particularly dark and menacing. Never mind that these sins are as rampant in other groups all over the world. In Jungian terms, Arabs and Muslims are (currently) the groups upon which others get to project their “shadow” elements.

In theatre’s fitful embrace of multiculturalism, then, Arabs and Muslims have rarely been included, as we tend to fall outside the multicultural comfort zones. That’s because multiculturalism as it stands now often operates as a depoliticized zone, a place where “diversity” has been smoothed over to appeal to the greatest number of people, with the least amount of friction. Commonalities are sought, differences ignored or smoothed over. It’s a way to bring people out of politics and into a gentrified history. If you can’t be gentrified or depoliticized in this way, you can’t be welcomed into the multicultural fold. Arabs and Muslims, it seems, will have to wait in the wings until we can somehow shed the disconcerting political trappings that currently hang over us.

Or perhaps the trajectory of an ideal like multiculturalism is inevitably to open up to ever more inclusivity. I’m enough of an optimist to believe that the promise of diversity will eventually have to include the voices of the nearly two billion people that comprise Arabs and Muslims in aggregate around the world. I believe that more and more theatres will start to program plays by and about Arabs and Muslims, as some already have. But it’s only likely to start happening in our nation’s regional theatres when Arabs and Muslims can be seen as fully dimensional people, not as mere triggers or symbols of political controversy.

Yussef El Guindi Born in Egypt, raised in London and now based in Seattle, Yussef El Guindi’s work frequently examines the collision of ethnicities, cultures and politics that face Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans. El Guindi holds an MFA in playwriting from Carnegie Mellon University, and has worked as a playwright at Silk Road Rising; literary manager for Golden Thread Productions; and playwright-in-residence at Duke University. He is the recipient of many honors, including the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. El Guindi's most recent productions include "Hostages" at Radial Theater Project in Seattle, "The Talented Ones" at Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland (Santa Barbara Independent Indy Awards), "Threesome" at Portland Center Stage, ACT, and at 59E59 (winner of a Portland Drammy for Best Original Script), "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World" (winner of the Steinberg/ American Theater Critics Association's New Play Award in 2012; and the 2011 Gregory Award) also at ACT, and at Center Repertory Company (Walnut Creek, CA) 2013; and "Language Rooms" (Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award), co-produced by Golden Thread Productions and the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco; at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia (premiere), and at the Los Angeles Theater Center. Other productions: "Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat" was produced by Silk Road Rising and won the M. Elizabeth Oborn award. His play "Back of the Throat" (winner of L.A. Weekly's Excellence in Playwriting Award for 2006), "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World", "Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes", "Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda and Karima’s

City” have been published by Dramatists Play Service. "Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith", "Collaborator", "Threesome", "The Talented Ones" and "Hostages" have been published by Broadway Play Publishing Inc. "Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat" is published in the anthology Four Arab American Plays published by McFarland Books. In January, 2019, Bloomsbury published "Selected Works by Yussef El Guindi". Currently a Core Company playwright member at ACT in Seattle, 2018; and a Resident Artist at Golden Thread Production.



Arab Stages

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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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