

## *Dancing the Self: A Dance of Resistance from the MENA*



In her book *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997), Ann Cooper Albright situates dance "at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation" (Albright 119). However, Albright declares that dance studies and its practices are still, to a great extent, "undervalued," "undertheorized" and "marginalized." She proposes that since the body is always mediated by culture, thus, dance research can utilize the "lived experience into our discussions of representation and cultural constructions of the body." Moreover, it can "further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement" (2). Albright also argues that contemporary dance can be extremely helpful in exploring how culture regulates the experiences of the body" (5).

With contemporary dance entering the cultural scene in the MENA (as is evident in the selected work in this paper in addition to the different contemporary art festivals in Egypt and across the MENA such as Contemporary Dance Night, D-CAF, Theatre is a Must, 2B Continued, and Breaking Walls) the need for dance research becomes very critical in the current time. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring Revolutions, the art scene in MENA has been drastically transformed, with intellectuals, artists, and activists, in their quest for bread, freedom and social justice, reclaiming public spaces as stages to declare their demands. Streets and public squares have become birthplaces of a new kind of activism through the use of arts. Thus, contemporary dancing has been utilized by young artists as a site of resistance to the different powers enacted upon their bodies in the MENA region as well as to the cultural legacies and social stereotypes discussed in Albright's book.

In this paper, I intend to discuss one of these artistic experiences in which I had the chance to be a participant to explore how dramaturgy and contemporary dancing can collaborate to create a space of resistance that empowers women. Discussed here are the *Dancing the Self* workshops that were facilitated

by Zosia Jo Dowmunt, a dancer and choreographer from England, from September 2016 to April 2017 in collaboration with Studio Emad Eddin in Cairo, Egypt. One hundred and thirty-two women participated in these women-only workshops and twenty-six of them had the chance to participate in a performance workshop that led to a performance entitled *(Un)Covered en Masse* that took place in Al-Falki Theatre in Cairo on April 27, 2017.

### Contemporary Dance and Dramaturgy

Helene Scheff et al. in *Exploring Dance Forms and Styles* defines contemporary dance as a modern dance genre that was developed during the second half of the twentieth century in Europe and the U.S. (86). It "includes a fusion of ballet, modern, and jazz moves" as it tends to "cross and blend" the different dance genres. Thus, Contemporary dance "does not have fixed or established movement patterns" -such as the classical ballet, for example, "but it is rather in a continuous search for new forms and dynamics. Therefore, it integrates other "aesthetic" elements such as "audiovisual technologies, visual or fine arts, lighting, architecture, music, circus and others" (87).

In addition to the dancing body, other basic components in contemporary dance are choreography, space, and most recently, dramaturgy. In "Making Space, Speaking Spaces," Carol Brown defines choreography as the process that "situates the moving body in time and space" (58). According to Brown, contemporary and modern dance appeared as a reaction to the traditional notion of space in dancing as static and "negative" as in ballet, and brought about a "rediscovery" of the space as a "performative" and "dynamic field of forces acting on and through the body"(59). Dramaturgy, according to Bojana Bauer in her paper "Propensity: Pragmatics and Functions of Dramaturgy in Contemporary Dance," is the bridge that connects "theory and practice" in contemporary dancing (31).

Exploring the relationship between dramaturgy and contemporary dancing, Heidi Gilpin in "Shaping Critical Spaces: Issues in the Dramaturgy of Movement in Performance" refers to the "multidisciplinary" nature of contemporary dancing and its practices as "differing disciplinary perspectives -none of which play a hierarchical central role" (qtd in Behrndt 185). Thus, according to Gilpin, dramaturgy and the dramaturg become "helpful terms and processes that can articulate 'how this multidisciplinary quality functions at the compositional level'" (ibid). Collaborating together, contemporary dancing and dramaturgy thus bring about negotiation and redefinition of all the components of dancing as they both share a view of a process that takes place away from the established hierarchy of powers.

### Women Theatre and Contemporary Dance

"Collectivity and Collaboration" is the title of the third chapter in Charlotte Canning's *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.* The two words represent the essence of the Feminist Theatre since the 1960s, when women felt the need to found theatres of their own. "It is probably impossible to talk about feminist theater, or indeed any alternative theater of the 1960s and after without discussing the collective," Canning writes (64-65). In the above mentioned chapter, Canning examines four feminist theatre's experiences in the U.S.A. where "collectivity in collaboration" was not just a theory but also a practice based on the concepts that "the personal is political" (63) and that "the means are the end" as Anita Mattos puts it (qtd in Canning, 67). The aim of the feminist theatre was the creation of space away from the hierarchy of power relations "that would empower women both in the process of creation and in the product of performance" (63-64).

When I tried to discover women's voices in the Arab theatre, there was hardly any information except for Nehad Seliha and Sarah Enany's article "Women Playwrights in Egypt". In their article, Seliha and Enany map out women playwrights' participation which was for so many years invisible. Seliha and Enany touch upon some important facts in the article. First: women's plays that were produced are limited. Second: it was very difficult for women playwrights to get their works published and produced. Third: It was not until 1982 that Egyptian theatre witnessed the first feminist play, written by Fathia El-assal. *Nisaa bila Aqniyah (Women Without Masks)*, was presented five years after El-assal wrote it. Fourth: "It was not until the early 1990s that women artists began combining the two activities; they wrote and directed their plays, and often designed, choreographed, and performed them as well" (Seliha & Enany 640). Finally, Seliha and Enany conclude their article stressing the fact that "The number of women playwrights and theatre-makers in Egypt is still very modest" due to the cultural, socioeconomic, and political situation; in addition to the lack of funding and production opportunities (643). Based on Seliha and Enany's article, it becomes obvious that the Egyptian Theater was predominantly a male theater.

However, with the eruption of the Arab Spring revolutions, people reclaimed the streets as open stages to show their indignation and call for their demands. Women next to men occupied the streets all over the Arab countries expressing that this was their revolution too. For many days and weeks, their bodies occupied part of this open stage. Indeed, the mere existence of their bodies all over the streets was a revolution.

### **From *Dancing the Self* to *(Un)Covered en Masse***

In 2016, Studio Emad Eddin, a Cairo-based independent art platform founded in 2005 with the mission of promoting the artistic and cultural scene in Egypt and the Arab region, announced on its Facebook page an event for a women-only contemporary dance workshop with Zosia Jo Dowmunt entitled: *Dancing the Self*. Due to the popularity of *Dancing the Self*, the workshop was repeated three times with three different groups of women and for three levels, which created a community of Dancing the Self participants that included about 132 women.

Celebrating the end of the three-level workshops; in April 2017, Zosia facilitated a performance workshop for *Dancing the Self* participants who would like to perform onstage. The performance, entitled *(Un)Covered en Masse*, was presented on stage in April 27th, 2017 at the Falaki Theatre, Egypt, by 26 women from the participants of Dancing the Self Program, myself included as one of the 26 participants.

### **Dancing: Reconciling in-between the Body and The Self**

According to Ann Cooper Albright and other dance scholars, Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" was the main reason why dance practices, performers, and studies were often overlooked and marginalized. This separation between the body and mind "divided the world into oppositional categories such as body/mind, nature/culture, private/public, spirituality/corporeality, and experience/knowledge. As a result, the body and experience were positioned "as the material other" of the mind and knowledge. Later on, this separation grew larger and "developed into a gendered separation of self and other" with women being also positioned as the "other." For Albright, this separation expanded to include wider groups of "people of color, gay men, the disenfranchised, as well as people with disabilities" as well as "others" based solely on the "material conditions of their bodies." Thus, contemporary dancing can be viewed as a site of resistance to Descartes' separation between the body and mind into a celebration of the unity and "the

complex reality of bodily being"(6-7) through opening the field to a counter and empowering discourse; "I dance, therefore I am".

Such counter-discourse of empowerment, according to Albright, becomes only possible from within. Albright suggests that:

It is impossible simply to shift the power dynamic within the somatophobic structures of Western culture in order to reify bodies, particularly women's bodies. Rather, we need to interrogate and deconstruct ideas that situate the body as precultural, as the "natural" ground onto which society builds its own image. (7)

Here, appears the need for activists who can negotiate with these dynamics. This is exactly the mission of the "committed intellectuals." According to Homi Bhabha, committed intellectuals "have a responsibility to intervene in particular struggles, in particular situations of political negotiation...by reformulating the concept of society within which certain demands are made" (qtd. in Rutherford 219-20). Bhabha states that this "intervention" takes place at the "third place" (220). The third space is defined by Bhabha as an "in between", "potentially productive space" where "the claim to a hierarchical purity of cultures untenable"(Cuddon 723). The third space, thus, becomes the "space of hybridity itself, the space in which cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities" (Ashcroft et al. 118).

In her Master's dissertation entitled: *Women In Motion - Transforming Female Experience Through Dance and Somatic Practice*, submitted to the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in September 2019, Dowmunt writes about her intentions for running *Dancing the Self* workshops, "[b]y offering a women's only creative space, where participants could connect to their bodies away from the male gaze (17). Dowmunt was clear about what she wanted to do; she wanted to create a creative space for women where they would feel more connected to their bodies, feel empowered and where they can express their resistance to powers that are enacted upon their bodies in the streets; harassment.

Combining the practice - as a professional dancer, a director, and a choreographer - in addition to the theory - as a feminist researcher - Zosia played the roles of the choreographer and the dramaturg in the performance workshop of *Dancing the Self*. However, it is worth mentioning that Dowmunt, in her dissertation about the project, never used the term choreographer or dramaturg to refer to her own position within the creative process and rather chose to describe herself as a "practitioner" and a facilitator. She writes:

As a practitioner, I am very interested in how my facilitation work feeds my creative practice and vice versa, and hold firm to the belief that this includes people from all walks of life, of varying abilities. The somatic dance movement, well underway and multifaceted, has contributed a great deal to community dance and is used in a variety of non-hierarchical dance practices and creation of feminist performance. (5)

**The interpretation of the position that Zosia occupied during the workshop might be terms by Synne K Behrndt as "a facilitator of dramaturgical thinking" (186). In her article "Dance,**

Dramaturgy and Dramaturgical Thinking” (2010), Behrndt tries to define the relationship between dramaturgy and dance. According to Behrndt, the image of the dramaturg as “the keeper of the grail,” the “articulate intellectual” who enjoys the upper hand in the creative process, has become the established image of the dramaturg in theatre. Thus, a new binary opposition between the dramaturg as mind/theory and the performers as body/practice was created. Nevertheless, Behrndt states that “the migration of dramaturgy into dance has invited discussion about how we can begin to re-articulate dramaturgy and the dramaturg” (186).

In her article "Making Space, Speaking Space," Carol Brown, an established scholar in dance studies and a professional choreographer, discusses how contemporary dancers "negotiate" with space during the process of dancing. Deliberating on the empowering possibilities resulting from the collaborative process - between the dancers, the choreographer, and we can add the dramaturg as well - of creating a contemporary dance performance, Brown states that "in working collaboratively to create performative spaces between dance and architecture we explore the possibilities of a third space" (qtd in Carter & O'Shea 65). Brown defines this third space as:

“a space of interaction, without hierarchy, where design is not a backdrop to action but a kinesthetic component of space and where choreography emerges through an unfolding between somatic awareness and sceno-architecture" (65).

Brown's third space of interaction is very closely connected to Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concept of the Third Space. Thus, in the light of Bhabha's concept of the "third space," choreographers, dramaturgs, and contemporary dancers' interaction and negotiation with the space their bodies occupy while creating the performance can be defined as an "intervention" in the third space, and consequently, they can be defined as "committed intellectuals." This process of intervention can be also defined as dramaturgical thinking.

In the introduction to her dissertation, Downmunt clearly states that she started the *Dancing the Self* workshop to explore how to “create a feminist choreographic intervention out of a transformative studio-based practice” and to “investigate how our methods of performance making can contribute to social change as well as the performances themselves” (4-5). In doing so, Downmunt made sure to start each session during the workshops with a dance ritual to eliminate any sense of hierarchy within the group. She describes that ritual:

In all sessions I began in a circle and passed a hac-y-sac ball around the group, in early sessions this is a chance to introduce ourselves, and it's also a chance for me, and the participants to check in with how they are feeling that day. I give my own offering and say my name to emphasize that I am in the group and facilitating from a more equal place rather than in a leadership role (19).

The ritual is one of the most important features in the feminist theatre. Hallie Iglehart describes the power of ritual within women's communities as a “powerful community-creating resource” that can be utilized “to raise and regenerate our power and direct it towards social and political action” (qtd in Canning 155).

With its migration to contemporary dance as a third space, a place without hierarchy where all the components of dancing -dancing bodies, choreographers, space, music etc.- negotiate on equal terms and

interact with each other, dramaturgy can be redefined as also an in-between space that takes place between the text – in this case, the dancing bodies – and the choreographer. Thus; according to Bojana Bauer, we can reach a view of the dramaturgy as a process of “becoming through practice” (qtd in Behrndt 187). This shift in the power dynamics, according to Andres Lepecki, Behrndt comments, enables the dancers to find a position to become “the work’s co-creators as well as its dramaturgical content” (188). Behrndt provides the example of Pina Bausch when she decided to engage the dancers in her company in the dramaturgical process of creating a performance “by asking them to respond to questions rather than choreographing ‘onto’ their bodies” as a “crucial dramaturgical decision.” For Behrndt, this meant that the dancers’ and the ensemble’s narratives, dynamics and imaginings, informed the shaping of a dramaturgy, and it also marked a distinct shift towards engagement with politics, so that the company’s performance dramaturgies often revolved around explorations of gender, power hierarchies, identity and human relationships. (188).

Playing the role of the facilitator of the dramaturgical process in *Dancing the Self* workshops, Zosia had to keep a place in-between being within the circle of the women and stepping outside to watch the process in the making. Commenting on the process of creation, she writes “I familiarized the performers with the score first within a safe private studio space, and then gradually introduced the performative. At first, I practiced with the group and then stepped out so that I was able to refine the material as an outside eye” (22). In her findings, Zosia describes her role as a facilitator of the dramaturgical process: “they had to experience the entitlement to space in their own way, and the challenge was mine to frame it in a way that read as powerful- a new image of feminine power” (qtd in Dowmunt 32).

None of the women who attended *Dancing the Self* workshops were professional dancers and most of them had never tried contemporary dancing before the workshop. However, allowing the participants of *Dancing the Self* to bring in their own stories and experiences with their bodies, providing them a space for expressing themselves away from the male gaze and away from hierarchy and judgments, in addition to that in-between position that Dowmunt choose to occupy within the workshop as a facilitator of the dramaturgical process, helped towards fostering a sense of ownership in each of the participants towards the performance in the making. The effect of this workshop was empowering for all the participants. In her article, “Dancing the Self: How movement for women became a women’s movement,” Zosia quotes a participant’s feedback on the workshop. The participant comments: “a connection between myself and each and every part of my body has been established and will continue to grow... an opening for endless conversation within my whole being is facilitated through *Dancing The Self*.” Dowmunt concludes her article commenting on her role as a facilitator and how this is connected to dance and empowerment:

*(Un)Covered – En Masse* has been a highlight of my career. It was true to the original spirit of the work to see such a diverse group of women, each so invested in their performance and empowered by the act of taking to the stage. These 26 women were all different shapes and sizes, from different religious and class backgrounds; some performing veiled, some in short dresses with hair down and flowing. Each was beautiful and spectacular. It felt like it had been too easy, like I’d barely done anything, simply provided a space and the women had blossomed into it in all their glory. It was humbling. I’ll never forget the sight of them shaking, twisting and punching the air, patriarchal control vanishing to dust in their wake. (32)

Being that night on stage within a group of twenty-five other women was not an easy decision to make;

neither for me nor for anyone of them. For all of us, it was a long journey of learning how to accept our bodies and defy the norms that have engaged us in fear and silence for many years. Although I was so proud of being part of that performance, I could not invite anyone of my family to attend. As much as I wanted to share the photos of the performance with the people I love, I could not. I had to keep these photos hidden on my Facebook profile, reset their privacy, and remove the tags that link them to my account as I hid my passion for dancing for so many years because of the fear of being shamed. Being on stage that night was a live protest against a culture of shaming women's bodies specifically, and dancing in general. Two years after the performance; it is just about time to (Un)cover.

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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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