

## Towards a Crosspollination Dramaturgical Approach: *Blood Wedding* and *No Demand No Supply*



In the absence of a developed playwriting tradition, government support, and funding opportunities, and with the presence of prior censorship, theatre-makers in Lebanon find themselves using every accessible artistic method that would get the stories they choose to tell to their audiences. This ongoing exploration leads to creating synthesized dramaturgical approaches, or using the term of British theatre-maker and academic Liz Tomlin “productive cross-pollination.”<sup>[1]</sup> In what follows I will offer two examples of plays we produced at the Theatre Initiative at the American University of Beirut (AUB) that reflect this cross-pollination dramaturgical approach.

The first is Garcia Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* (which I directed and Robert Myers produced and was also the dramaturg) performed in a promenade site-specific style during April, 2018, in Hammana, a village on Mount Lebanon for a limited number of audience members. The production offers an example of a dramaturgical approach that combines two ostensibly binary positions: text-based classical theatre and innovative experiments with space. The second example is *No Demand No Supply*, a devised documentary play that offers a re-reading of Lebanon’s 2016 sex trafficking scandal using interviews, police reports, newspaper articles and sociological studies on prostitution, and joins all within the frame of the proscenium.

*Blood Wedding*, the first tragedy of Garcia Lorca’s rural trilogy written in 1932, dramatizes a true story that took place in 1928 Spain in a linear plot of 3 acts representing themes of feuds, repressive social

structures and suppressed bodily desires. The play opens with the bridegroom's mother lamenting her lost son and husband in a violent feud with the Felix family as her son reveals to her his wish to marry The Bride, a young woman who was previously engaged to Leonardo Felix. We are then introduced to Leonardo, who is now unhappily married to another woman, has a child, and is expecting another. The father of the Bride and the Bridegroom's mother seal the arrangements for the wedding by discussing merging their properties for their descendants' sake. Act two begins with a heated conversation between Leonardo and The Bride as she is preparing for her wedding. The couple declares their intense love for one another and they run away together in the next scene during the wedding ceremony. Leonardo's pregnant wife announces their escape and The Mother encourages her son, The Groom, to chase them. A surreal atmosphere in Act 3 breaks the realistic style of Act 1 and 2, where we are introduced to symbolic characters in a forest. Three Woodcutters speak about the scandal, offering three distinct societal responses to the events. The Moon appears, expressing its thirst for blood, joined by a Beggar foretelling death. The Beggar takes the Groom to his fate under the light of the Moon. Meanwhile The Bride and Leonardo are expressing their endless love and lust for one another. A duel with knives ensues where both men perish. The last scene in the play joins The Bride with The Mother both lamenting their fates and their losses.



The two Beggars joining the Moon on the stage of the Roxy. *Blood Wedding*, AUB Theatre Initiative, Hammana Village, April 2018. Photo Credit: Natalie Hindaoui.

Our own dramatization of the play was a faithful adaptation of Garcia Lorca's text in terms of characters

and plot, yet we chose to present it in a village instead of a proscenium. The audience arrived at Hammana Artists House and at the beginning of the play they were divided into two groups by two beggars. I doubled Garcia Lorca's Beggar whom we meet in Act 3 and gave them an extra function: the Beggars guide the audiences just like they guide other characters in the play. It was as if Lorca's Death character is taking us on a journey of life. The audiences are first greeted at Hammana Artist House by the two beggars at the beginning of the show and led to the houses of The Mother, Leonardo and The Bride, i.e., houses of the villagers of Hammana. The Beggars then take the audiences to the wedding ceremony and on to the manhunt at the end of Act 2. The last two scenes of the play took place in an old cinema house named Roxy, and a church, respectively. The audience members are taken to an old auditorium and asked to sit and watch as the play becomes surreal. In the 60-year old Roxy cinema, the Beggars stop being the guides for awhile and join the action on-stage to assist the Groom in finding Leonardo and The Bride. With the scenographer Ghida Hashisho, we chose the trees, one element common to the village and Garcia Lorca's forest, to create a surreal atmosphere in the Roxy. The forest where the men kill each other is flipped upside down. Being in an old movie theatre, the love scene between Leonardo and the Bride is projected on a large screen, reminiscent of the cinema, layered with grotesque trees. After they complete their mission, the Beggars guide the audience to the last scene in a church.



Audiences with their guide, The Beggar, leaving the Bride's house and on to the next scene. *Blood Wedding*, AUB Theatre Initiative, Hammana Village, April 2018. Photo Credit: Natalie Hindaoui.

Acting followed a realistic approach. The actors were immersed in their characters in tune with the realistic untouched scenic spaces (except for the Roxy). But despite the realistic acting and the ready-made realistic atmosphere of the village, the dramaturgical approach didn't aim to conceal the theatrical fabrication. What we aimed at was to create a fictional world within the context of the realistic setup of the village. The costumes belonged to a different era, the music to various different countries, and, most crucially, the translation of the play presented a familiar yet elevated language observing the spirit of Garcia Lorca's poetic text and Langston Hughes' equally lyrical translation to English (which is the English translation I used to compose a Lebanese Arabic version of the play).



A Woodcutter playing the flute as audiences are coming in to Roxy. *Blood Wedding*, AUB Theatre Initiative, Hammana Village, April 2018. Photo Credit: Natalie Hindaoui.

The difference between the staged scenes in realistic houses/settings, and the experience of the village in between the scenes, served as a central dramaturgic juncture. The village, its happenings and its "characters" served as another dramatic layer on top of our choreography of Garcia Lorca's story. The spectators were constantly invited to switch between two main channels, the plot line of the play and that of the village, both simultaneously presenting images and actions. It was left up to them to combine both channels in one vision. This prominent difference between the world of the play and that of the village presented the audiences with a complex puzzle. They not only had different perspectives into the scenes and the environment of the village, but they were also constantly aware of the presence of other audience members. It was up to them to create a synthesis of the various pieces, staged and un-staged, presented to

them. For instance, as audiences leave the church where the last scene in the play takes place and head back to starting point, i.e., Hammana Artist House, and as they are marching silently, a graveyard appears in their view, which simply happened to be on our way back to the initial meeting point. This ready-made set-up generated a powerful effect and gave audiences a much-needed closure after an intense last scene. Some thought it was choreographed.



The Father of the Bride left behind at the wedding ceremony, audiences on their way to the next scene. *Blood Wedding*, AUB Theatre Initiative, Hammana Village, April 2018. Photo Credit: Natalie Hindaoui.

The second example I would like to give of synthesized dramaturgies is that of *No Demand No Supply*. Unlike *Blood Wedding*, this work started with a personal reaction to factual news and ended up within a proscenium.

In early April of 2016, like many Lebanese, I woke up to the news of the special operation that the Lebanese security forces had broken up a human trafficking network and saved seventy-five Syrian women imprisoned in two brothels east of Beirut. The news outraged me and made me want to do something about it. In 2017, with the support of the Center of Arts and Humanities at AUB I decided to put the stories of the women survivors on stage, though I had no idea then about what exactly I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it.

When the story came out, it gained huge media attention as the women told horrifying stories about the

torture and abuse they suffered at the hands of one of the lead figures of the network, which was making more than one million dollars a month according to the police reports. A few weeks after the uncovering of the story, the media lost interest in it and slowly it started fading into oblivion. I started with the written and video reports of the mainstream media. It struck me that there were no comments about the sex buyers who frequented these brothels. Despite the fact that the Lebanese law doesn't criminalize the sex buyer, I found it inexcusable that there was no discussion in the mainstream media about the culture that entitles these men to freely purchase sex with no consideration of the situation of the women and no attention to the fact that they were trafficked. This became the focus of the performance and defined its dramaturgy.

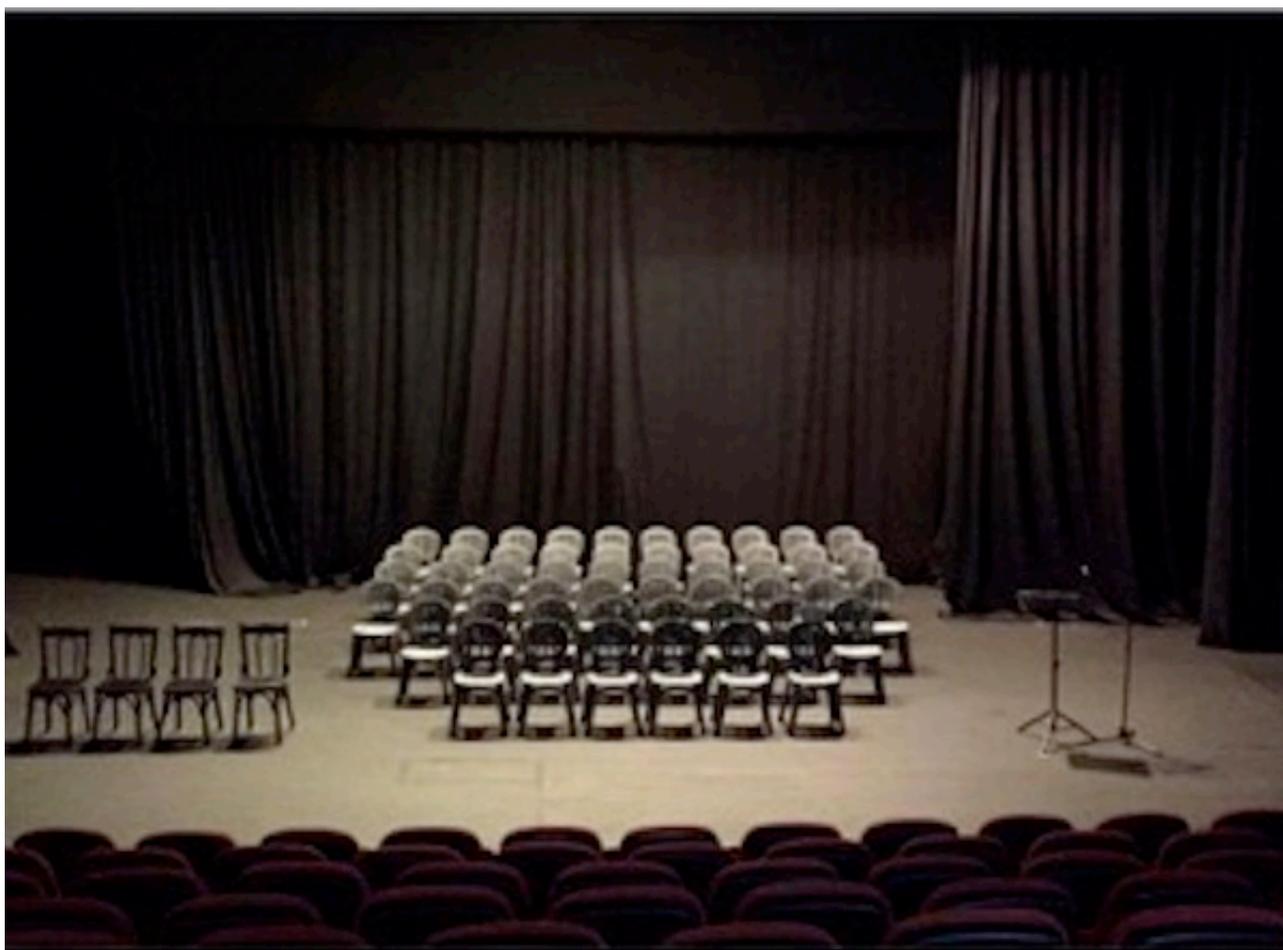
In the process of constructing the performance, I adapted the following material: (1) the video-recorded interviews with refugee women survivors conducted by investigative reporters (2) the audio-recorded interviews I conducted with women survivors, investigative reporters, the colonel who made the decision to raid the brothels, and the expert on sex-trafficking and prostitution at Kafa (a Lebanese NGO working for women's rights) (3) the Indictment issued seven months after the arrest of the ring and (4) Kafa's 2014 sociological study on the demand for prostitution.



*No Demand No Supply*, performed at LAU Irwin Theatre, May 2017. Photo Credit: Marielise Aad.

The dramaturgy of the theatre production was that of a performance lecture where I played the narrator and hired actresses to play the roles of the trafficked women. I employed Alecky Blythe's "recorded delivery technique" to deliver the testimonies of women survivors. In recorded delivery performances, actors on stage listen to live audio recordings through earphones and repeat exactly what they hear. They don't memorize their text. I hired male actors to audio-record the words of sex buyers I pulled from KAFA's study. These were played during the show as voice-overs juxtaposed with the testimonies of the women.

The staging of *No Demand No Supply* was minimalistic. The first stage image was a bare stage with a music stand on the left side. As the narrator, I took that music stand. Every time I introduced a woman survivor, an actress would bring a chair and place it on the right side of the proscenium. When I came to the part of the sex buyers, stage managers would bring a chair for each voice-over. At the end of this section there would be 55 empty chairs mid-stage fully lit representing the anonymity of the sex buyers and 55 because that is the number of interviewees that KAFA could reach in 2011. The last image of the performance was comprised of the narrator on the left, four actresses on the right and 55 empty chairs center stage. The lighting dimmed on the left and right and brightened on the center stage before it all blacked out. In my retelling of the story with the help of the actresses, I was presenting a quasi-news report on the case. However, it differed from all the reports that the mainstream media presented, which were purely sensational without any social or political observation.



*No Demand No Supply*, tech run at Al Madina, July 4, 2017. Photo Credit: Marielise Aad.

The performance achieved its most substantial impact thus far by bringing the demand aspect of prostitution and trafficking for the first time to the attention of the mainstream media. Rima Karaki, host of *Lil-nashr* program on NTV, one of the major local TV channels, attended the performance at Al Madina. After the show, she dedicated a 20-minute segment of her program in 2017, on prime time TV, to talk about the demand aspect in sex trafficking. Remarkably, her opening question was: “Why is this aspect [the demand for prostitution] totally out of our attention as audiences? Why did I have to wait to watch the play to comprehend that the buyer is a criminal somehow?”<sup>[ii]</sup>

To close, in the two examples I provide, the “cross-pollination dramaturgical” approach puts the spectator in a state of an encounter with the text or the performance. Rather than watching *Blood Wedding* through a virtual fourth wall in the safety of the proscenium, spectators were forced to physically move to encounter one scene after another, synthesizing the text with the production and the village as they went from one ultrarealistic location to another. Despite the stylization we maintained through various theatrical elements, for many audience members who didn’t know the play before and who weren’t familiar with Garcia Lorca’s works, the play was written for Hammana village today and not for Spain in the 1930s. *No demand*, on the other hand, negotiated through a theatre building a social event back into public consciousness. Although audiences watched the performance while comfortably seated in the auditorium of the proscenium, they were challenged directly to connect the theatre event with their social and political world. Both performances, through their “cross-pollination dramaturgical approaches,” drew their audiences into an experience rather than restraining them in a receptive role. They thus offered two different forms of the theatre of the real, the real being left to the audiences to create.

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[i] Boenisch, Peter M. “Towards a Theatre of Encounter and Experience: Reflexive Dramaturgies and Classic Texts.” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 2 (2010): 162–172

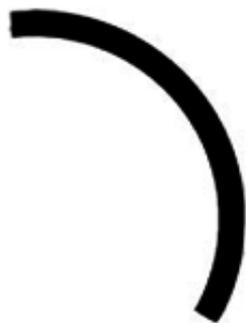
[ii] Rima Karaki in “Lilnashr- Al-che maurice aqfalaho birnamaj lil-nashr famen ‘aad fathoho? [Chez Maurice was closed by Lilnashr program so who reopened it?]. Aljadeed Programs. Youtube video. 29:29. Published on July 24, 2017. Accessed on August 20, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVI2niAwuU4>

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**Sahar Assaf** is an actress and stage director based in Beirut and an Assistant Professor of Theatre at the American University of Beirut. She recently co-established the AUB Theatre Initiative with playwright and English Professor Robert Myers under which she translated and directed Garcia-Lorca's *Blood Wedding* in a site-specific promenade performance and co-translated, co-directed and starred in Shakespeare's *King Lear* at al-Madina Theatre in Beirut, the first production of Shakespeare in Lebanese colloquial. She is a member of Lincoln Center Director's Lab (2014), a member of Directors Lab North in Toronto (2017), co-founder and artistic director of Directors Lab Mediterranean (2019) and a Fulbright alumna with an MA in Theatre Studies from Central Washington University (2011).

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[www.arabstages.org](http://www.arabstages.org)

[arabstages@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:arabstages@gc.cuny.edu)

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center  
Frank Hentschker, Executive Director  
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Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director

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