

“Harvesting Thorns”: Comedy as Political Theatre in Syria and Lebanon

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s, political comedy grew exponentially in Syria and Lebanon. This phenomenon was represented mainly in the performances of three troupes: Thorns Theatre (Al-Shuk Theatre مسرح الشوك), Tishreen Troupe (Ferqet Tishreen فرقة تشرين), and Ziyad Al-Rahbani Theatre (Masrah Ziyad Al-Rahbani مسرح زياد الرحباني). These works met with great success throughout the Arab world due to the audacity of the themes explored and their reliance on the familiar traditions of Arab popular theatre. Success was also due to the spirit of the first Arab experimental theatre established by pioneers like Maroun Al-Naqqash (1817-1855) and Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani (1835-1902), who in the second half of the nineteenth century mixed comedy, music, songs and dance as a way to introduce theatre performance to a culture unaccustomed to it. However, this theatre started to lose its luster in the early 1990s, due to a combination of political and cultural factors that will be examined in this essay.

This thesis depends on historical research methodology to reveal the political, social and cultural conditions that led to the emergence and development (and subsequent retreat) of political theatre in the Arab world. My aim is to, first, enrich the Arab library with research material about this theatre which lacks significant critical attention; and second to add new material to the Western Library, which is largely lacking in research about modern and contemporary Arab theatre and culture. Lastly, this analysis is aimed at developing a theory of political comedy and its cultural relevance to Arab theatre as this form has contributed for many decades to a rise in social and political awareness in the Arab world.

DEDICATION

To my dear wife Amena Shehab and my lovely children, Aram, Ginin, and Alma whose patience, love, and support made my experience of going back to school an enjoyable and positive one.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Department of Drama, faculty, staff and fellow graduate students for their continuous support during my time in the program. A particular thank you to Dr. Stefano Muneroni whose insight and guidance helped me navigate the intricacies of graduate studies. I would like to extend my sincere thank you to the other members of my thesis committee: Dr Srilata Ravi and Professor Lin Snelling. I owe the largest debt of gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Donia Mounsef whose presence, care, and unwavering trust in me made this experience, research and thesis possible. I thank her also for the memorable conversations in Arabic and English around our shared passion for Arabic theatre and performance. Lastly, my deepest appreciation goes to my friends for all their support during the two years of studying, especially Michael Tilleard and Carmen Morgan. Also, a special thank you to Dr. Ajaj Salim, Abeer Wajdi and Mahmmod Orfali for their supporting letters that got me accepted into the program at the University of Alberta.

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INTRODUCTION

My basic desire was to write a study about the comic political theatre in the Arab world as a whole, however, any such research needs to be done in the Arab region to access the required references that are not available online. Available online resources are sparse and often lacking precision and credibility. Any research on this topic must be extensive to cover theatrical experiences in about 22 Arab countries over a relatively long period, which is beyond the scope of this essay. The question however is: "Why discuss the theatre of Syria and Lebanon together?" The answer to this question includes several factors:

First, the performances of political theatre in Syria and Lebanon have similar structures and traditions because they are based on the foundations laid by the pioneers of the Arab theatre in Beirut and Damascus before the two countries were separated by colonialism and the Sykes-Picot agreement¹ that divided the Levant into four countries (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine). Second: The common political, social and cultural history goes beyond traditional political interactions, intertwining political standpoints between Syria and Lebanon. Third, the audience is often mixed when it comes to Lebanon and Syria when talking about political issues that touch the lives of Lebanese and Syrians alike. In these two countries with intertwined daily reality, everything is linked to politics in some way. Regardless of the level of the belief of some Syrians and Lebanese in the slogan 'one people in two countries' launched by Arab Nationalists²

¹ The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a 1916 secret treaty between the United Kingdom and France (represented by diplomats Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot) to define their mutually agreed upon spheres of influence and control of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in an eventual partition of the Ottoman Empire.

² Arab Nationalism (القومية العربية, *al-Qawmiya al-Arabīya*) is a nationalist ideology that maintains that the Arabs are one nation calling for a union between them as they share a civilization, ethnicity, history, and culture. It developed in the early 20th century with the decline of the Ottoman Empire but lost its popularity after the defeat of Arab armies against Israel in the Six Day War, 1967. Among its prominent figures and proponents were King Faisal I of Iraq and Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

in the early 20th century, the Syrian public continues to receive Lebanese artists' works in the same way Lebanese artists receive Syrian art works. In addition, a major factor is also the geographical proximity between Syrian and Lebanese cities (the distance between Beirut and Damascus is 85 km, and therefore it is closer to Damascus than any large city in Syria). Further, high level of interaction between Syrian and Lebanese arts makes it impossible to study the theatre of these two countries separately. Those who note the extent of collaboration between Syrian and Lebanese artists will immediately realize that drama and art in general were the biggest survivors of the consequences of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, as many Lebanese artistic groups cast Syrian artists, or cooperate with them to produce musical works, plays, or TV drama. For instance, Ziad Al-Rahbani (1956-) declared to an Arab newspaper that the proportion of Syrian artists in his band is around 60 percent. At the same time, many Lebanese artists participate in Syrian dramas, whether plays or TV drama.

As for the reasons for excluding Jordan and Palestine from the research although they are also parts of the Levant, it may be due to the fact that there are no significant contributions to theatre and drama in these two countries. First for obvious reasons that the Palestinians are focused on survival under continuous occupation since 1948, which made it near impossible to produce significant art (besides singing). It could also be due to the fact that they fell under British rule which did not promote any cultural activity, unlike the French mandate. As for Jordan, it is only in recent years that the theatre saw its first development perhaps due to the more traditional orientation of Jordanian society. Notwithstanding the experience of Nabil Sawalha (1941-) and Zuhair Al-Nubani (1951-) whose performances differ from those found in Syria and Lebanon, the theatre in Jordan and Palestine took different trajectories. It could also be due to the fact that modern Jordanian theatre ceded immediately to television drama or broadcast

comedy without passing through a lengthy experimental stage phase. In addition, Jordan and Palestine witnessed very little theatrical activity in the era preceding the creation of the state of Israel. It was not until the 1960's that one can speak of the rise of theatre, especially in Jordan. It must also be noted in this context that, contrary to what happened between Syria and Lebanon, the cultural interactions between Jordan and Palestine were thwarted during the Western occupation of the Levant, due to Jordan and Palestine falling under British occupation, while Syria and Lebanon fell under French rule (known as the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon 1923-1946).³ Despite the return of Arab interaction with Jordan after its independence in 1946, the Israeli occupation of Palestine prevents any form of cultural exchange with the countries of the region.

On a different note, the other question that could face this study is the question of how comedy functions as a political genre. The answer to this question requires consideration on three levels:

1- The theatre in Syria and Lebanon is tied to close political commentary, particularly since independence (both Syria and Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943 while in the middle of WWII. However, it wasn't until 1946 when the French vacated the

³ The major difference between colonialism and "mandated occupation" is on the level of duration and structure where the colonizer is "mandated" by an international body (in the case of Syria and Lebanon, France was mandated by the League of Nations) to assume power over a country, a territory or a people. In this case the "colonizer-light" acts as a trustee until such point when the "mandated" is politically and socially "mature" enough to be eligible for self-government. In practice, the occupation and exploitation resulting from mandates is not very different than that resulting from colonialism. Mandates assert political, economic, and cultural dominance over the mandated and leave similar destruction and exploitation in their wake. The major difference is that mandates should have an end in time whereas colonialism can be and is often continuous and can include settler colonialism. Considering another difference is the way French colonialism exercises more cultural activism and dissemination of French culture in the colony (known in French as 'Rayonnement' or radiance). In general, comparative colonialism reveals that France uses its cultural influence to facilitate the tutelage in the colony more than Britain, especially in the MENA region and Indochina. Cultural activism takes the form of opening schools, doing archeological digs (while pillaging cultural artifacts), imposing the language, sending touring troupes, encouraging the writing of travel literature, etc.; all of which expands a sphere of influence as efficiently, if not more, than direct political and economic control.

area after the surrender of the Pétain regime). In Lebanon specifically, the tradition of the Théâtre de Dix-Heures (beginning in 1962) – inspired by the French cabaret theatre of the same name in the early 20th century Paris⁴ – dominated political comedy until today. These productions, with highly political satire, are watched by Lebanese and Syrians alike as they rely on critical sketches that mimic many of Lebanese and Syrian political and social characters. What distinguishes most of these works, except for the work of the artist George Khabaz (1976-) is the condescension and reliance on vulgar social and sexual jokes to provoke laughter.

2- The severe criticism that was directed at this theatre by the Syrian and Lebanese intellectual elite who advocate for a serious theatre, and who tried to belittle its populist value in their writings. Some Syrian critics, for example, have accused the works of Thorns Theatre and Mohammed Al-Maghout (1934 – 2006) of being simply cheap cathartic works. While most Lebanese critics ignore the theatrical works of Ziad Al-Rahbani (son of iconic Lebanese singer Fairuz and musical powerhouse Assi Al-Rahbani [1923 – 1986]). Further, and besides some recognition of his musical work, the intelligentsia ignores Ziad Al-Rahbani's work because of his political views and party affiliation (the Communist Party of Lebanon).

3- The great public turnout for this type of comic political theatre at a time when serious political theatre fails to attract an audience beside the one affiliated with the intellectual elite, or those who study or work in theatre.

With this in mind and with such a complex political context, in what follows and after a brief historical overview, I will turn to an analysis of specific works of political comedy in Syria

⁴ Théâtre de Dix-Heures started in Paris in 1904 at the Cabaret des Arts also known as La Lune Rousse in the 18th arrondissement (a northeast quarter of Paris). It was founded by satirist and comic Dominique Bonnaud who produced cabaret and stand-up comedy shows aimed at poking fun at prominent political and social figures. In the 1980s the theatre started producing plays by modern playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, Eugene Ionesco and Guillaume Apollinaire. In the 1990's the theatre returned to its cabaret and comedy roots by housing since 2007 the notorious stand-up comedy, "Juste pour Rire."

and Lebanon. The site of this inquiry is the work of the Syrian duo, Al-Maghout and Lahham and the Lebanese phenome Ziad Al-Rahbani. The thesis will also examine the forms, contents and methods used to achieve great popularity for such political theatre in a highly charged political and social context

CHAPTER ONE

Theatre of the Levant

An Historical Overview

The history and culture of the Levant may not be divided as easily as its geography. Even if the pens of the French and British diplomats were able to draw curved and broken lines on the map of the Middle East at the beginning of the twentieth century in blue and red ink, it is difficult to separate the common history of the countries of the region in the same way. Historically, the Levant⁵ (although disputed) is considered one geographical and political entity, and despite being subjected to occupation many times throughout its long history – no one occupying power succeeded at dividing it, with the exception of the French and British colonizers. Despite all the reasons given by the orientalist, the real aim of dividing the Levant was for the sharing of spheres of influence between the two victorious nations after World War I. The French-British conspiracy to control the Middle East was schemed many decades before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. France and Britain began to intervene in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire, which had occupied the Levant since 1516, as evidenced by the negative role played by Britain and France in the sectarian conflict that took place between the Druze⁶ and

⁵ There are no agreed borders for the Levant. Some historians say it comprises a larger Syria that includes the current Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, while others believe that Iraq and some areas of northern Saudi Arabia, southern Turkey and Cyprus are equally part of the Levant. The Arabic name is “Al-Mashriq” (the orient) also known as “Bilad Al-Sham”, which means land to the north and left (‘shamal’ in Arabic is left) – a name given by the Umayyad and later the Abbasid Caliphate to the area to the north and left of the Hijaz. Prior to the Islamic conquest, the Levant was the land of the Syro-Hittites, the Phoenicians, the Canaanites, the Arameans, the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, etc. Later invaded by the Persians, the Romans, the Seleucids, and many others until 636 AD when Arab armies invaded the area and declared it part of the Caliphate al-Rashidun.

⁶ The Druze are an Arabic-speaking esoteric ethno-religious group originating in Western Asia in the 11th century AD who self-identify as Al-Muwahhidun. It is a monotheistic and Abrahamic religion based on the teachings of

Maronite⁷ communities in Mount Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century. This resulted in the creation of more difficulties for the Ottoman state which started to collapse and allowed the British and French to gain a foothold in that important part of the world. In this context, Britain and France played the game of differing interests, with France supporting the Maronites, while Britain supported the Druze. In order to withdraw the pretexts that enabled Western countries to intervene in their internal affairs, the Ottoman Empire decided in 1860, to give Mount Lebanon self-governing status within the Ottoman Mutasarrifiyat system, and to appoint a non-Turkish Ottoman ruler to conduct its own internal affairs; they called this new division “Mutasarrifate of Mount Lebanon.” The point of remembering this history is to understand that when Maroun Al-Naqqash (1817 – 1855) made history by establishing the first Arabic theatre in Beirut in 1848, the Levant was not yet divided.

The same is true for the theatre of Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani (1833 – 1903), who staged his first performances in Damascus between 1871 and 1884. What is novel in this period is that the Ottoman Empire implemented a new administrative arrangement aimed at ensuring the control of the central state in Istanbul over the empire that had begun to show signs of disintegration, (it became known as “The Sick Man of Europe”). In 1864, The Ottoman Empire “[divided] The Levant into two vilayets: Syria, which expanded to include parts of the ancient vilayets of Tripoli and Sidon, and Aleppo, and expanded by annexing parts of Upper Mesopotamia and Anatolia”⁸

Hamza ibn-'Ali ibn-Ahmad and the sixth Fatimid caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, and Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.

⁷ The Maronites are a Christian ethno-religious group whose members adhere to the Syriac Maronite Church and who originated in Antioch (Syria), as followers of Saint Maron. They migrated to the mountains of Lebanon in the 4th century AD converting pagan Phoenicians to Christianity. Since the 5th century, the Maronites have, for strategic reasons and protection, followed the Roman Catholic Church.

⁸ All translations from Arabic are mine unless otherwise noted. I provide the original quotes in Arabic in footnotes. [بتقسيم بلاد الشام إلى قسمين أو ولايتين هما ولاية سورية، وقد اتسعت لتضم أجزاء من إيالتي طرابلس وصيدا القديمتين وولاية حلب، وقد اتسعت بضم أجزاء من الجزيرة والأناضول]."

(Awad 69). This situation continued until the year 1887, the date of the separation of the vilayet of Beirut from the vilayet of Syria. Thus, the administrative status of the Levant became as follows:

The vilayet of Syria, includes the following districts: Al Sham Sharif district, Hama district, Houran district and Ma'an district, and the vilayet of Beirut, which includes Beirut district, Acre district, Tripoli district, Latakia district and Baalbek district. The vilayet of Aleppo, includes Urfa and Kahramanmaras districts⁹ (Kawtharani 36).

However, all these regulatory procedures had no impact on the historical unity and strong cultural bond of the Levant.

The geographical separation between Syria and Lebanon took place in 1920 when France and Britain, began the actual implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed secretly between these two countries in 1916, which meant legacy-sharing of the Ottoman Empire in the Fertile Crescent. Under this Agreement, Britain was granted the areas of the south of the Levant, while France acquired the areas to the north. In the northern part, France immediately deducted land and cities from the vilayet of Damascus (Baalbek, Beqaa, Rashaiya and Hasbaiyya), and others from the vilayet of Beirut (Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli) and annexed them to Mutasarrifate of Mount Lebanon. They then announced the establishment of the Greater State of Lebanon. Although the Syrian National Movement (in Lebanon and Syria) unanimously rejected this declaration, the French demanded that the national movement recognize the Lebanese entity as an independent state in return for the withdrawal from the region and granting both Syria and

⁹ "ولاية سورية تضم الألوية التالية: لواء الشام الشريف، ولواء حماة، ولواء حوران ولواء معان، أما ولاية بيروت، فضمت لواء بيروت ولواء عكا " ولواء طرابلس الشام ولواء اللاذقية ولواء البلقاء. أما ولاية حلب، فضمت ألوية حلب وأورفة ومرعش."

Lebanon their independence, announced in 1943 and ratified in 1946. From this date onward, we can talk about a political separation and two separate histories for both Syria and Lebanon.

Not only the work of Maroun Al-Naqqash and Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani belong to the common history of Syria and Lebanon, but also the works of other artists such as Salim Bin Khalil Al-Naqqash (? -1884), Adib Isḥaq (1856-1885), Iskandar Farah (1851-1916), Farah Anton (1874- 1922), Suleiman Al-Qardahi (1882-1909), Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Mikha'il Na'ima (1889-1988) and others. This is in addition to the many theatre groups, most of which immigrated to Cairo, such as the troupes of Al-Qabbani and George Abyad (1880-1959). Perhaps the absence of a classification (Syrian / Lebanese) at that time is what made a respected professor such as Dr. Ali Al-Ra'i make a mistake when he counted in his book *Theatre in the Arab World* Damascene artists such as Iskandar Farah, as well as Adib Isḥaq, as Lebanese. It would have been better if Al-Ra'i had not divided the common history of Syria and Lebanon when talking about a Syrian and Lebanese theatre before the independence of the two countries – or at least before the establishment of the Greater State of Lebanon. Here I would like to make reference to the word 'Al-Shamia'¹⁰, which is usually used by Egyptian researchers when they say 'Al-Shamia (not Syrian or Lebanese) to describe the theatre groups that migrated to Egypt from Damascus and Beirut at the end of the 19th century, which is the most appropriate word to describe those artists and theatre groups for several reasons:

1- The Egyptian researchers use the old name for the Levant, 'Al-Sham', which was used by the Arabs to denote the area extending from the north of Al-Hijaz to southern Turkey, in

¹⁰ "Shamia" is the feminine form of the adjective "Shami" derived from the Arabic name of the Levant, Al-Sham, or Bilad Al-Sham.

contrast to Syria¹¹ the name that was used by the Greeks to indicate the same region. Thus, it is more appropriate if we use the Arabic names as long as we are talking here about a region that has a common civilization and an Arab cultural identity.

2- The use of the name of Syria raises the sensitivity of some Lebanese nationalists who assert Lebanon's full independence from current Syria, which they accuse of trying to re-annex Lebanon.

3- Using the name of the Syrian theatre groups instead of the 'Al-Shamia theatre groups' would lead to confusion between historical Syria (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine) and current political and geographical modern Syria. Then the reader may think that all the theatre groups that went to Egypt came from areas in current Syria, while the fact is most of them came from both the cities of Damascus and Beirut.

4- The use of the name of the Levant preserves the right of Jordanians and Palestinians to consider as part of their history what was accomplished in Damascus, Aleppo and Beirut in the time that preceded Sykes-Picot.

Comedy as Political Theatre and the Traditions of Popular Theatre

Some historians make a mistake when they give Maroun Al-Naqqash credit for bringing theatre to the Arab world. The historical documents show that Napoleon Bonaparte preceded Maroun Al-Naqqash by half a century. During a military campaign in Egypt, "La Campagne

¹¹ Syria is the name used by the Greeks. Some historians believe Syria was named after the Assyrian Empire, which was established in the Fertile Crescent in the 25th century BC until its collapse between 612 BC and 609 BC. Others maintain that it came from the name Tyre (a coastal town in the south of Lebanon dating back to Phoenician times) which is pronounced 'Sur' in Syriac-Aramaic and in modern Arabic.

d'Egypte", Napoleon requested from the government to send a group of actors: "The group arrived, and the acting started in the house of Karim Boulaq" (S. A. Ismail 13).

Before Al-Naqqash, Arabs did not know theatre art in its Western form. That's because, ancient and classical Arabic literature, as diverse and profound as it was, did not make room for the dramatic forms. The Arabs have known other forms of performances, which scholars do not classify as theatrical performances, such as oral performed poetry, Maqamaat (performed heroic poetry), shadow theatre, storytelling (Hakawati), puppets theatre and later on, wonder box, as well as Ta'zieh,¹² the closest form to a Western theatrical performance.¹³ But let's leave this unproductive controversy aside, since most of these performances are no longer practiced as independent performances in the Arab world today. Al-Naqqash remains the pioneer who laid theatre art in the Arab world on constant, stable foundations, since previous forms were and continue to be scattered and lack a central focus. They appear for a while, then disappear, then reappear again in a cyclical form. Not to mention the lack of theoretical and aesthetics considerations where each performance is based primarily on the artist's personal experience and practice, regardless of what their former or contemporary artists were doing. In this sense, Maroun Al-Naqqash aimed to establish Arabic theatre on solid ground, which guaranteed continuity and development of the 'newborn art' in the Arab world. If the Arab reactionary

¹² Ta'zieh means condolences or comfort. It is a religious ritual of the Shiite sect: a form of passion play in which the death of the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, Hassan and Hussein, are commemorated, replayed and re-represented.

¹³ It is often argued that the Arabs, especially at the golden age of Arab culture, from the 8th to the 10th centuries A.D. neglected Greek drama in favor of translating Greek philosophy and science. It can be argued that the Arabs did not develop an understanding of Greek dramatic forms. 10th century scholar, Abu Bishr Matta ibn Yunus (~870-940) translated the concepts of 'tragedy' and 'comedy' in Aristotle's *Poetics* as 'praise and 'satire'. This misreading endured well into the 12th century when influential Arab (Andalusian) philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198) equated tragedy and comedy with traditional Arabic poetry forms: madh' (praise) and hija'a (satire).

forces led him to frustration, those who witnessed his theatre refused to abandon his project and took it upon themselves to follow in his path.

Maroun Al-Naqqash was a Shami (Lebanese) artist, born in the southern Lebanese town of Sur (Tyr) on February 9, 1817. He moved to Beirut in 1825, where he learned, along with Classical Arabic, many other languages, including Turkish, Italian and French, as well as music and poetry. Like his father, Maroun Al-Naqqash was a merchant who traveled between Beirut and the cities of the Levant and Italy, where he learned about theatre and the opera. He was impressed by the performances he saw there and realized the importance to bring this art form to the Arabs, especially at a time when the Arabs began their Renaissance in literature (An-Nahda al-Adabiya).¹⁴ The Renaissance began with the tendency of Arabs to translate Western works in science and literature, in order to develop and advance the society with the intention of emerging from backwardness under which the Ottoman occupation had kept the Arabs for over four centuries. Sa'dallah Wannous (1941 – 1997), the known Syrian playwright and scholar, said that the appearance of theatre in that period was “part of the Enlightenment and Renaissance movement that accompanied the rise of the bourgeoisie in society, and its appearance met one of the cultural and social needs of this rising class”¹⁵ (Wannous 60). It seems that Maroun Al-Naqqash not only watched performances in Italy and France, but also read some plays and theoretical studies about theatre. This cultural influence was very clear in his speech in the opening of his first play, *The Miser* (Al-bakheel البخيل, 1848) when he tried to emphasize the

¹⁴ An-Nahda al-Adabiya means “awakening” or “literary renaissance” and refers to a period of Enlightenment in Arab culture, which started under Ottoman rule in the middle of 19th century in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt. An-Nahda produced a large number of works of literature with modern Arabic prose strongly geared towards modernity, with anti-colonial discourse, defense of women’s rights, and general resistance to Ottoman rule and later expression of Arab nationalism at a time when the Arab nation state was still a nebulous idea.

¹⁵ "كان جزءاً من حركة التنوير والنهضة التي رافقت صعود البرجوازية في المجتمع، وكان ظهوره يلبي واحدة من الحاجات الثقافية والاجتماعية لهذه الطبقة الصاعدة." "لهذه الطبقة الصاعدة."

importance of theatre and the role he can play in its renaissance. He noted: “When I noticed that the people of our country began to succeed – and they are advancing day by day toward that goal – I realized that the divine mercy looked to them with its eternal care [...] in order to restore their glory, and to return their dignity and well-being”¹⁶ (S. A. Ismail 22). Thus, he gathered a theatre group, wrote plays, composed music, directed plays, and taught acting. Although he showed considerable knowledge in all these areas, his real genius appeared in his understanding of the taste of the Arab audience, which was demonstrated by the selection of the kind of theatre that he had to present to an audience that had no history or knowledge of such an art form.

After explaining to his audience the types of drama that exist in the West, divided, according to his understanding into types of prose, comedy and tragedy “which are performed without verse and are unsung” (S. A. Ismail 24), Maroun Al-Naqqash clarified the reasons behind his aesthetic choices. He declared: “It is important and necessary to classify and translate the first not the second type [the opera] because it is easier and more likeable [...]. But what made me deviate from the norm and follow this course is that the second type [the opera] was to me more tasteful, desirable, splendid and delightful”¹⁷ (S. A. Ismail 24). He then added: “For this reason, my intention has finally been directed to the simulation of the beneficial musical theatre”¹⁸ (S. A. Ismail 24). Musical theatre is what suits the nature of the Arab viewer he believed, for this he wrote and directed five plays, all of them comedies and set against a musical background. In addition to the play *the Miser* which he borrowed from Molière’s *L’Avare*, the

¹⁶ "إنني إذ لاحظت أهالي بلادنا مبتدئة بالنجاح، ومتقدمة يوماً فيوماً إلى الفلاح، فأيقنت أن المراحم الإلهية، قد نظرتها بعين العناية الأزلية، وافقدتها بتلك المواهب الاعتيادية لأجل ترجيع مجدها وإعادة عزها وسعدها."

¹⁷ "فكان الأهم والألزم بالأحرى، أن أصنف وأترجم بالمرتبة الأولى لا الأخرى؛ [الأوبرا] لأنها أسهل وأقرب، [...] ولكن الذي ألزمني لمخالفة القياس، وممارستي هذا المراس؛ أولاً: لأن الثانية كانت لدي ألد وأشهى، وأبهج وأبهى."

¹⁸ " فلذلك قد صوّبت أخيراً قصدي، إلى تقليد المرسح الموسيقي المُجدي. "

two other plays were *Abul Hassan The Dupe and Harun Al-Rashid (Abou Al-Hasan Al-mouffal and Harun Al-Rashid, أبو الحسن المغفل وهارون الرشيد, 1850)*, and *The Rude Envious (Al-Hasood Al-Saleet, الحسود السليط, 1853)*. As he also directed two other plays written by his brother Nicola Al-Naqqash (1869-?), *Rabia ibn Zaid Al-Mukadem (Rabia ibn Zaid Al-Mukadem, ربيع بن زياد المقدم, 1950)*. The common factors between all these works is that Maroun Al-Naqqash identified three criteria that appeal to Arab audiences: comedy, music and singing. In this context, his choice of musical theatre was based on what Wannous called Al-Naqqash's prior awareness and knowledge of the mood and taste of the Arab spectator.

On the other hand, the works of those who came after Al-Naqqash, the other pioneers of Arab theatre, such as Abu Khalil Al-Qabbani, gave shape to similar concerns. Al-Qabbani's theatre, which he established in Damascus more than two decades after Al-Naqqash's, confirmed the vision of Maroun Al-Naqqash about the taste of the Arab public, especially considering that Al-Qabbani did not see the performances of Maroun Al-Naqqash.

Al-Qabbani is considered the pioneer of the musical theatre in the Arab world. He presented a large number of performances in Damascus before the religious extremists burned his theatre down, which forced him to emigrate to Egypt to join many artists of the An-Nahda who found in Cairo and Alexandria a sanctuary for incubating their artistic vision. Like Al-Naqqash, Al-Qabbani was a multi-faceted artist: a director, actor, composer, singer, and dancer. What distinguishes him from Maroun Al-Naqqash is that he presented his performances to a general public, while the audience of Maroun Al-Naqqash was comprised mainly of his family, friends and neighbors. In contrast to Maroun Al-Naqqash, Al-Qabbani performed a professional musical theatre, mainly operettas, and relied predominantly on local sources, using Arabic forms such as Hakawati, Karkuz and Iwaaz. While Maroun Al-Naqqash relied on Western sources to

write his plays, specifically Molière, who inspired him and his brother Nicola Al-Naqqash to rewrite the Western canon to suit Arab public taste.

The musical knowledge of the Al-Qabbani and his proficiency in the writing and composing Al-Muwashshahat¹⁹ contributed to attracting larger audiences to his performances.

His theatre was a sweet spring that attracted great people; princes, poets and writers who flocked to his performances. Most of the plays were penned by him, while his theatre was watched by many of the great rhetoricians and authors... and by the greatest musicians and composers. He perfected the range from light melodies to elegant and sophisticated compositions²⁰ (Al-Awani 17).

According to Mohamed Mandour: “[Al-Qabbani] was credited with establishing this art in Egypt, [...] a combination of acting, music and singing. He is the one who sowed the seed of the musical theatre in Egypt and paved the way for Sheikh Salama Hijazi, Sayed Darwish and others to develop musical theatre in Egypt”²¹ (Al-Awani 85).

Additionally, we must not forget the third pioneer in Arab theatre Yaqub Sanu (1839- 1912) who established a successful theatre in Egypt in the middle of the nineteenth century. Sanu, like Maroun Al-Naqqash and Al-Qabbani, had combined comedy, music and

¹⁹ Muwashshah (plural muwashshaat) is the name for both an Arabic poetic form and a secular musical genre. Usually consisting of five stanzas, alternating with a refrain with a running rhyme. It was customary to open with one or two lines, which matched the second part of the poem in rhyme and meter.

²⁰ "فكان مرسحه موردا عذبا يؤمه الكبراء والأمراء. والشعراء والأدباء، لمشاهدة رواياته وجلها من منشأته. شهد بحسنها الكثير من أئمة البلاغة. ومتقني صناعة الصياغة. كما شهد من قبل أكابر الموسيقين. وفضائل الملحنين. بما له من بديع التلاحين الرقيقة لأناشيد الطرب الأنيقة."

²¹ "صاحب الفضل في تثبيت أقدام هذا الفن في مصر، وربما كان ذلك لأن فنه لقي هوى وقبولاً في نفوس المصريين وذلك لأنه لم يكن فناً تمثيلاً خالصاً بل كان يجمع بين التمثيل والموسيقى والغناء. وكان القباني يجيد فني الموسيقى والغناء والتلحين، والراجح أنه هو الذي بذر بذرة المسرح الغنائي في مصر ومهد الطريق للشيخ سلامة حجازي وسيد درويش وغيرهما ممن اشتغلوا بالمسرح الغنائي في مصر."

singing in his performances, relying on the same magic recipe to attract the crowd. While Al-Qabbani was not aware of Al-Naqqash's theatre, and did not travel to Egypt until 1885, the time when Sanu went into exile in France in 1878, history does not mention that Sanu had traveled to Syria when Al-Qabbani was presenting his performances in Damascus. Consequently, Al-Qabbani and Sanu did not meet, nor did they watch each other's work. Without evidence of contact between these artists, the similarities may be explained, not by coincidence, but because of the mutual reliance on the traditions of popular performances that had prevailed in the Levant and Egypt in the period before the introduction of Western representation to the Arab world. These performances, in particular the shadow theatre, which were presented in cafés for the purpose of entertaining customers, were referred to in the Levant as Krakuz Wa Awawaz, which the Egyptians called 'Arajuz'. This proved that comedy, singing and music are among the most important elements that attract the masses. In his review of Al-Qabbani's experience Jean Joan confirms this fact when he says:

Various sources mention the fact that Al-Qabbani regularly attended performances of the shadow theatre, Karakouz wa Awawaz, in particular those presented by the artist Ali Habib at the cafe Al-Amara in Damascus. Shortly after seeing these shows, Al-Qabbani came up with the idea to replace the shadow puppets, which uses one performer's voice to present many characters, with flesh and blood characters, performed by trained actors. The choice was to write works that draw their themes from Arab history and traditional tales that are full of wisdoms and morals²² (Joan 42).

²² "وتذكر المصادر المختلفة أن القباني كان مواظباً على حضور عروض فنّ خيال الظل (كركوز و عيواظ) - 42- وبالتحديد تلك التي كان يقدمها الفنان علي حبيب الذي كان يقدم فصول خيال الظل الكوميديّة الناقدة في مقهى العمارة في دمشق.. وبعد فترة وجيزة من حضور القباني هذه العروض خطرت له فكرة تتلخص في تحويل دميّ خيال الظلّ التي يؤدي أصوات شخصياتها المختلفة مؤد واحد إلى شخصيات حقيقية من حلم ودم يؤديها مؤدون متدربون، فعرض الفكرة على أصدقائه المقربين الذين شجعوه وتعهّدوا بمساعدته على تحقيق هذا الحلم، وكان الخيار كتابة أعمال تستمد

The roots of performances of the shadow theatre in the Arab world date back to the Abbasid period from the 8th century to the 13th, as Ali Al-Ra'i opines in his book *Diyarat* (الديارات) of Al-Shabashti.²³ (الشباشاتي) Al-Ra'i explains that the poet Da'abl threatened the son of one of al-Caliphate Al-Ma'mun's²⁴ cooks, that he will lampoon him in a poem. In turn, the boy replied, "I swear to God, if you did I will make your mother a character of shadow performances"²⁵ (Al-Ra'i 33). In another place in his book, Al-Rai reveals "that the practice of the shadow theatre was known in his time, and was predicated on humor, ridicule and laughter"²⁶ (Al-Ra'i 33). Evidently, this art, which has a long history in Asia, has infiltrated the Arab countries from China or India through Persia during the rule of the Abbasids. The oldest Arabic texts of this shadow theatre date back to Ibn Daniel, also called in Arabic literature, Al-Babat, which is still preserved to this day, the most known being *Imagination Spectrum (Teif Al-khief)*²⁷, *Wondrous and Odd (Ajeeb wa Ghareeb)*²⁸, (عجيب وغريب), and *The Lover and the Orphaned Lost (Al-moutiem wa Al-Da'yea Al-yateem)*²⁹, (المتيم والضائع اليتيم)

Ibn Daniel was a doctor, poet and artist who lived in 11th century Iraq. He came to Egypt from Mosul after its fall at the hands of the Mongols. In Egypt, Ibn Daniel wrote and produced many performances of shadow theatre, the most popular and widespread entertainment medium

موضوعاتها من التاريخ العربي والحكايات التراثية المليئة بالحكم والعبر ... كما كان مدركاً أن مزج هذه الحكايات المليئة بالمواعظ بشيء من الغناء والرقص كان كفيلاً بتقريبها من كافة الأذواق."

²³ Abu Hassan Ali bin Mohammed Shabashti, a 10th century Arab writer.

²⁴ Al-Ma'mun was the seventh Abbasid Caliphate, who reigned from 813 until his death in 833.

²⁵ "والله إن فعلت لأخرجن أمك في الخيال."

²⁶ " أن اللعب بخيال الظل كان معروفا في عصره، وكان يعتمد على الهزل والسخرية والإضحاك. "

²⁷ *Spectrum of Fantasy*.

²⁸ *Wondrous and strange*.

²⁹ *The Lover and The Lost Orphan*

in that time. The performances of Ibn Daniel received great admiration from the Egyptians, described by the explorer Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) as a people “who love singing, joy and pleasure”³⁰ (Battuta 65).

The limited space in this thesis does not allow me to explore in details these types of art forms and performances and their influence on modern Arabic theatre and performance. What matters is that these performances, which merged comedy and singing, may constitute a reliable source from which the pioneers of Arab theatre gained their understanding of the performative and the taste of audiences. A long tradition of comedy and satire may have influenced political theatre in its later stages of development, which I will explore in the latter parts of this chapter and subsequent chapters.

The Emergence of Comedy as Political Theatre in Syria and Lebanon.

In Syria

The real theatrical renaissance began in Syria in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the intervention of the Syrian state in 1959 to support greater theatrical production. Syrian theatre scholar, Riad Esmat confirms that the renaissance of the Syrian theatre began with “Rafiq Al-Sabban and Sharif Khazandar, who returned to Syria from France after training with great artists like Jean-Louis Barrault and Jean Vilar. They started to present models of global theatre, laying the foundations for a conscious theatrical culture, ensuring at the same time large popular appeal”³¹ (Esmat 32).

³⁰ "ذوو طرب وسرور ولهو." ³⁰

³¹ "رفيق الصبان وشريف خزندار اللذين عادا إلى سوريا من فرنسا بعد أن تدربا على أيدي الفنانين الكبارين جان لوي بارو وجان فيلار فأخذا يقدمان نماذج من المسرح العالمي، محاولين وضع أسس لثقافة مسرحية واعية، تضمن في الوقت نفسه -إقبال الجماهير." ³¹

Al-Sabban formed a theatrical group called the “Thought and Art Symposium” which had a significant impact on the development of theatrical arts in Syria. Members of this group took the initiative to establish the National Theatre Group in 1959. This new group attracted many Syrian playwrights and artists, most notably Wannous who wrote several plays with political content during that period, the most important of which are *A corpse on the Pavement (Jootha ala Al-Raseef, جثة على الرصيف, 1964)*, *The Tragedy of the Poor Seller of Molasses (Ma’asat Ba’ea Al-Debs Al-Fakeer, مأساة بائع الدبس الفقير, 1964)*, *The Unknown Messenger at Antigone's Funeral (Al-Rasoul Al-Majhool fi Ma’tam Antigon, الرسول المجهول في ماتم أنتيجون, 1965)*, and other plays. Developing a national theatre was the main concern of Syrian artists in that period, but the defeat of June 6, 1967 (the Six Day War referred to in Arabic as An-Naksa or “setback”) shifted the focus from formal concerns to content, which has become largely and unavoidably political.

The defeat of the June War shook the Arab world to its core: a large swath of the public became profoundly disappointed and disillusioned with the Arab regimes. Before the war, Arabs believed that they could defeat Israel with their large armies capable of liberating Palestine “in one day”, as the common saying went. When the war started, the Arabs were very optimistic of victory. However, the loss by three combined Arab armies (Egypt, Syria and Jordan) in a mere six days, and the loss of more land (the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and the Golan) led to the shattering of Arab morale, the loss of trust in themselves, their political regimes, and the global order. In that period, Arab citizens, especially in Egypt and the Levant, went into a state of profound dejection and hopelessness. Arab intellectuals and artists had to intervene to heal the rift caused by the setback in the psyche of the Arab and to restore hope to the people by explaining the possible causes of the defeat. There was a unanimous opinion among the intellectuals that the Arabic political and social systems were broken and thus responsible for the

defeat. Revolutionary ideals were propagated to incite people's consciousness and call on them to change their political systems. In this period, most of the plays performed after the defeat were indisputably political. For example, in Syria, the works of Wannous, Mamdouh Adwan³² (1941 – 2004), Mustafa Al-Hallaj³³(1938 – 2002), and Ali Oqla Arsan³⁴ (1941) focused on topics such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the role of Arab dictatorships in the Arab military and moral decay. The play of Wannous *The Evening Party for the Fifth of June (Haflet Samar men ajal Khamisa Houzieran, حفلة سمر من أجل خمسة حزيران, 1968)* was the first of these types of provocative works. According to most critics, this play opened the door to a new era in Syrian theatre, and its impact extended to the rest of the Arab countries. It was after this play that Wannous started talking about the politicization theatre instead of political theatre,³⁵ which we will return to in a later discussion in chapter 2.

In Lebanon

According to Ghassan Salameh, “The Lebanese theatre, the national theatre, and the independent theatre, based on sound foundations, did not begin until 1960” (Al-Ra'i 213). In contradiction with many theatre theorists, Salameh believes that everything that was done in theatre since Maroun Al-Naqqash until 1960 was only nebulous attempts that have no real theatrical value. He argues that theatre in Lebanon actually started when

³² Adwan was a Syrian playwright, poet, playwright and critic.

³³ Al-Hallaj was a Palestinian painter and playwright, known as an "icon of contemporary Arab graphic arts." He spent his life moving between Cairo, Damascus and Beirut.

³⁴ Arsan is a Syrian playwright, and director.

³⁵ "مسرح التسييس بدلا من المسرح السياسي." "

a group of theatre trailblazers gathered in two or three groups to develop an amateur theatre and a theatre of moral preaching, that could be compatible with a culture that never knew the art of the theatre. These adventurers turned the selective theatre that was improperly looted from the West, into an instrument of affirmation, enlightenment and expression³⁶ (Al-Ra'i 204).

In this context Salameh mentions Mounir Abu Debs (1932 – 2016) as a true founder of Lebanese theatre, adding Antoine Moultaqa (1933-), Raymond Jabara (1935 – 2015), Issam Mahfouz (1939 – 2006) and Teresa Awad (?-) to the list of modern theatre pioneers in Lebanon. Ali Al-Ra'i dresses a list of troupes formed between the 1960s and the early 1970s, including the Contemporary Theatre Ensemble founded by Abu Debs; Beirut Theatre Professional Group by Roger Assaf (1941-) and Nidal Al-Askhar (1934-); The experimental Theatre by Anton and Latifah Moultaqa (1933-); 'the National Theatre', which was renamed Shoushou's Theatre by Hassan Alaa Eddin (1939 – 1975). In addition to the Popular Lebanese Group founded by Al-Rahbani brothers. All of these groups and artists, and others have contributed to the start of the modern theatre in Lebanon.

In the area of political plays, *Weizmann Ben-Gurion* (, وايزمان بن غوريون , 1968) by Jalal Khoury (1933- 2017) can be considered the first political play in modern Lebanon. Khoury's play, based on the famous Bertolt Brecht's play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), was presented in 1967. Khoury has contributed with a number of Lebanese playwrights such as Mahfouz, Jacob Al-Shadrawi (1934 – 2013), Assaf, Al-Askhar and Osama Al-Aref (?- 2012) to establish what is known as the political theatre in Lebanon. Khoury committed himself to this

³⁶ "أخذ فريق من المغامرين المسرحيين في لبنان يجتمعون في فرقتين أو ثلاث كي يقضوا قضاء مبرما على ظاهرة هواة المدارس، ومحبي الإلقاء الموعظ الأخلاقية في المسرح، ويحاولون خلق لون فني جديد يمكن أن يتوافق مع ثقافة لم تعرف قطفن المسرح. وهؤلاء المغامرون حولوا الفن المسرحي الانتقائي الذي نهب بطريقة غير سليمة من الغرب إلى أداة للتأكيد والتنوير والقول".

kind of theatre because of his belonging to the Brecht school. In a newspaper interview, Khoury declares: "I am a humble student of Brecht. I tried to apply his doctrine 100 percent"³⁷ (Wazen).

The October War (also referred to by Israel as the "Yom Kippur War"), which took place in 1973, marked a new chapter in the life of the Arabs and their episodic political despair.

Despite the relative victory of the Arabs in this war and the restitution of some of the territories occupied in 1967, the importance of this victory was not in its military dimensions, but in the positive impact it had on the psyche of the Arab public. Because this war could not change the balance of power in the Middle East, most Syrian and Lebanese playwrights continued to treat that victory as if it had not achieved substantial results. They continued to write plays against the background of the results of the 1967 war, considering that the Arab citizen is still defeated, and needs to re-shape his or her political consciousness. On this basis, no play related to the October victory was ever written in Lebanon. While in Syria, only two plays were written: one of them, a serious play, *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* (أيها الإسرائيلي حان وقت الاستسلام) Iyouha Al-Isra'aili Han Waqtou Al-Istislam, 1974) by Al-Hallaj, the other was *October Village (Day'et Tishreen, ضبيعة تشرين 1973)*, a comedy by Mohammed Al-Maghout.

Obviously, *October Village* was not the first play to talk about a political issue in a comic way. According to many theorists of modern theatre, "the political dimension is always in the theatre ... even if the play has no political or realistic content"³⁸ (Elias and Kassab Hassan 258). Theatre with a political content that expresses a certain ideological orientation is complex and thorny in both its orientation and efficacy. In this sense Thorns Theatre founded in Damascus in

³⁷ "أنا تلميذ متواضع لبرشت، حاولت اتباع تعاليمه مئة في المئة." 37

³⁸ "إن البعد السياسي موجود دائما في المسرح، وإن أي عمل مسرحي له علاقة بواقع ما وبالتاريخ، حتى لو لم يكن للمسرحية أي مضمون سياسي أو واقعي." 38

1969 can be considered the first political comedy theatre in Syria, followed by, Tishreen Group that was established in 1974 by some of Thorns Theatre's former artists. After the success of these two groups, and against the backdrop of rising popular demand for their performances, many Syrian artists tried to reproduce the experience. However, the works that they provided had no aesthetic value because of its predominantly commercial character.

In Lebanon, during this period, along with the serious political theatre, a low-level political comedy theatre emerged, which tried to exploit the June 1967 defeat to ridicule the Arab nation. For example, Antoine Kerbaj (1935-) withdrew his play *The Arabic Marseillaise* (*Al-Marseillaise Al-Arabi*, المارسييليز العربي, 1974) because critics considered it “offensive and humiliating to the Arab man” (Al-Ra'i 213). However, this theatre had lost its legitimacy with the beginning of the October war in 1973.

The most important event that affected the development of the Lebanese theatre was the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 (discussed in more details in chapter 3), which lasted until 1990 after the accord of the Taif Agreement was signed in 1989 that put an end to the hostilities.³⁹ In this period, the Lebanese theatre suffered a major setback. Most of the promising theatre groups formed in the 1960s ceased to produce performances due to the security situation and the partition of Beirut into two parts: East and West. The Israeli destruction of more than 20 theatres during the 1982 invasion of Beirut has further exacerbated the difficulties of Lebanese artists to produce theatre in a divided city in ideologically and politically charged environment. For example, the 1980s witnessed a major reversal in the political opinions of Khoury, who

³⁹ The Taif Agreement, also known as the National Reconciliation Accord, was signed in Saudi Arabia and sponsored by the Saudis on October 22, 1989. It brought together all warring factions in Lebanon and the Lebanese and Syrian Governments to put an end to the fighting and the Civil War. It asserted the authority of the Lebanese Army over South Lebanon, occupied by Israel since 1979. It also stipulated the withdrawal of Syrian troupes within two years (the Syrians did not withdraw until 2005).

shifted from left to right. His 1981 play, *Your Men, Boss* (Zelmak Ya Rayess, زلمك ياريس, 1981) which was sponsored by the Lebanese right, generated considerable controversy. Paradoxically, it is the same play whose plot Khoury borrowed from Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* that he presented in its leftist dimension in 1968.

In addition to some rare individual works, The Popular Lebanese Group (Rahbani Brothers) have continued to perform theatre performances despite challenging security conditions. This group produced four plays between 1975 and 1982; *Mais Al-Reem* (ميس الريم, 1975), *Petra* (بترا, 1977), *The Conspiracy Continues* (*AlMouamara Mostamera*, المؤامرة مستمرة, 1980), and *The Seventh Spring* (*Al-Rabai Al-Saba'a*, الربيع السابع, 1982), all in musical format featuring the quintessential Lebanese diva, Nouhad Wadie' Haddad (1935-) known in the Arab world by her stage name, Fairuz.

At this time the name of Ziad Al-Rahbani emerged in the field of political comedy. In this period Ziad Al-Rahbani presented three performances: *What About Tomorrow?* (*Bennesbeh Labokra Shou?*, بالنسبة ليكرة شو؟, 1978), *A Long American Movie* (*Film Ameriki Tawil*, فيلم أمريكي, 1980), and *A Failing Thing* (*Shi Fashel*, 1983), following his own independent path far from his artistic family in 1973. *What About Tomorrow?* was not the first political comedy play by Al-Rahbani. Before the outbreak of the war, Ziad Al-Rahbani presented *Happiness Hotel* (*Nazl el Sourour*, نزل السرور) in 1974 which is, in addition to *October Village*, presented in Syria, the same year, one of the most mature comedy plays in terms of form and content.

CHAPTER TWO

The Syrian Troupes

Thorns Theatre

Arab critic Riad Esmat writes: “When Thorns Theatre began in 1969, it was like a light bomb exploded in the sky of the first Damascus Theatre Festival”⁴⁰ (Esmat 71), adding that

Thorns Theatre was great because it was a surprise in a world of theatre stagnation. It did not only win admiration because of its daring political and social messages, but also because it was a new aesthetic experience based on simplicity and clarity. [...] It seemed at first glance, as if the solution for the dilemma of the Arab theatre was found:

combining the honest word of art and the taste of the public. Several attempts were made to inherit [this theatre] and link it to the legacy of the political cabaret theatre and its oldest origins in the history of popular theatre⁴¹ (Esmat 71).

Thorns Theatre was established by the artist Omar Hajjo (1931 - 2015) in 1969, joined by comedy stars in Syria such as Duraid Lahham (1934-) (known subsequently by his famous character name “Ghawwar”), Nihad Qala’i (1928 – 1993), Rafiq Subaie (1930 – 2017), Yassin Bakoush (1938 – 2013), Adnan Barakat (1935 – 2000), Talhat Hamdi (1941 – 2012), Najji Jaber (1940 – 2009), Ziad Mawlawi (1944 – 1997), Huda Sha'arawi (1938-), and many others. The troupe took on a critical political stance, performing sarcastic sketches that boldly criticize the

⁴⁰ " عندما بدأ مسرح الشوك عام 1969، كان قنبلة مضيئة تفجرت وسط مهرجان دمشق الأول للفنون المسرحية. " 40

⁴¹ "كان "مسرح الشوك" عظيماً لأنه كان مفاجأة في عالم الركون المسرحي لم ينتزع الإعجاب جرأته على الصعيدين السياسي والاجتماعي، فحسب بل استقطب اهتمام رجال المسرح، ونقاده لأنه كان تجربة فنية جديدة تعتمد البساطة والوضوح وتلعب في الوقت نفسه دوراً اجتماعياً وبدا لوهلة كأن حل معضلة المسرح العربي في اللقاء بين الكلمة الفنية الصادقة والجماهير قد تحقق... وقد بذلت محاولات عدة، لتأصيله وربطه بتراث مسرح الكباريه السياسي وبأصوله الأكثر قدماً في تاريخ المسرح الشعبي." 41

prevailing political and social situation, which made it a phenomenon in the world of the nascent theatre. This popular appeal came at a time when the serious theatre suffered from a lack of audiences because of its preoccupation with simulating Western theatre forms aimed at the educated elite. Hajjo explained the context for his theatre:

At that time there were two kinds of theatrical work, the first is the theatre of intellectuals, which produced works only intellectuals can understand, and another theatre that presented comedy just for comedy sake. I found myself in the middle amongst these two tendencies. Theatre must present something of the reality of the people and their daily lives in our country. It was in this context that I created Thorns Theatre, which brought together the two former theatres. Instead of presenting only one topic per play, we have presented theatrical 'sandwiches' where the spectator found himself widely reflected in this theatrical form⁴² (Safar).

Hajjo was born in Aleppo in 1931 and began his career by establishing a theatre group for amateur artists in the 1950s. The group produced two performances: the first titled *Colonialism in the Mental Hospital* (Al-Iste'amar fi Al-Asfouria, الاستعمار في العصفورية) and the second, *Eisenhower's Principle*, (مبدأ أيزنهاور) which was criticized and censored following objections from the US Embassy in Syria. Following this censorship, Hajjo turned to pantomime shows as a kind of circumvention of the various regimes of restraint. However, censorship returned to scrutinize even the content of pantomime scenes. He explained this frustrating censorship when he wrote:

⁴² "في تلك الفترة كان هناك نوعان من العمل المسرحي، الأول وهو مسرح المثقفين الذي ينتج أعمالاً لا يفهمها سوى المثقفين، ومسرح آخر يقدم الكوميديا من أجل الكوميديا، ولهذا السبب وجدت نفسي بين هذين المسرحين، المسرح يجب أن يقدم شيئاً من واقع الناس ويوميئهم في بلدنا، وضمن هذه الفكرة خلقنا مسرح الشوك الذي جمع بين المسرحين السابقين، وبدلاً من أن نقدم فكرة واحدة في العرض المسرحي قدمنا (سندويشات) مسرحية متعددة للمشاهد ضمن مساحة العرض المسرحي الواحد، وقد وجد المشاهد نفسه ضمن هذه الصيغة المسرحية."

Here we found ourselves in need of something new that would prevent censorship from interfering in our work. So, we moved to a form of pantomime theatre. We titled the texts that were closely watched by the censors, “Silent Musical Clips” When they asked us about these clips, we told them that they do not contain dialogue – the censors bought it. We presented several scenes criticizing bureaucracy and politics, but they figured out our trick. Thus, they began to insist on the need to clarify the content of these pantomimic scenes in writing ⁴³ (Safar).

Subsequently, Hajjo moved to Aleppo again to work with the Arab Youth Group. Likewise, he founded the Popular Theatre Group, which produced a number of performances that drew the attention of Damascene artists. However, the work of this group was far from the perceptions of Hajjo who believed that theatre must reflect the issues of the public and express their concerns and aspirations while speaking simply and directly. It was for all these reasons that he established Thorns Theatre. Regarding the choice of the name, Hajjo opined: “We sought to establish this group, starting from the popular Arabic proverb: He who has a thorn in his clothes will prickle him”⁴⁴ (Ramadan).

In 1969, Thorns Theatre presented its first play, *Mirrors* (*Maraya*, مرايا), on the stage of the Soviet Cultural Center in Damascus. The performance achieved great success, which led the organizers of the Festival of Damascus Theatre to invite Hajjo to its inaugural season held in the same year. The structure of the performance was based on critical political comic sketches, built in empty spaces, devoid of sets, or decor, using only simple props. The performance was very

⁴³ "وهنا وجدنا أنفسنا بحاجة إلى شيء جديد يجنبنا تدخل الرقابة في عملنا، فاخترنا صيغة مسرح 'بانثومايم' خاصة بنا، وسميناها في النصوص التي كانت تراقبها الرقابة بـ 'فاصل موسيقي صامت' وحين سألونا عن هذه الفكرة قلنا لهم هنا لا يوجد حوار. وقد انطلقت القصة على الرقيب، فقدمنا عدة مشاهد عن البيروقراطية، ولكنهم فهموا خطتنا فبدأوا يلحون علينا بضرورة توضيح مضمون هذه المشاهد على الورق."

⁴⁴ "سعيًا إلى تأسيس هذه الفرقة منطلقين من مبدأ معروف اجتماعيا يقول اللي فيو شوكة بتتخزو." ⁴⁴

simple in directing terms, and in terms of the relationship of the actor with the audience. Because of its artistic nature, Thorns Theatre, according to Esmat, served its purposes to connect the audience to real life in the context of café culture, which could easily be moved and implemented anywhere. Despite harsh political criticism, everyone was surprised by the honor that Thorns Theatre received from the government. Nevertheless, censorship returned to interfere in the work of the group by asking Hajjo to delete some lines about bureaucracy and the critique of some of the work of government ministers.

In 1971, Thorns Theatre produced their second performance, *Jerk* (جيرك). Although it was the best of the group's work in a box set stage, the performance faced criticism for moving away from popular theatre forms. Aesthetically *Jerk* was an amazing performance with highly charged comic bits, caustic wit, and a scathing critique of the corruption of some ministers, way intelligence agencies work, and the crisis of Arab media. Somehow, “mockery this time was acceptable, calling for laughter and ridicule more than for the revolution”⁴⁵ (Esmat 72).

However, Thorns Theatre has remained, according to Esmat,

a positive and effective tool despite all these minor transformations. It is true that it had lost a precious amount of the spirit and essence of its original experiment to become an ordinary theatre. On the other hand it supported its performances with new means of enjoyment, as well as attracting famous stars like Lahham and Qala'i to give an increased dose of comedy and mockery⁴⁶ (Esmat 72).

⁴⁵ "وكانت سخريته هذه المرة مقبولة، تدعو للضحك والسخرية أكثر مما تدعو إلى الثورة." ⁴⁵

⁴⁶ "ولكن مسرح الشوك ظل مستمراً، وظل إيجابياً وفعالاً رغم جميع تحولاته الصغيرة هذه، صحيح أنه أضع شيئاً ثميناً من روح وجوهر التجربة ليصبح مسرحاً انتقادياً عادياً، ولكنه من ناحية أخرى أغنى عرضه بوسائل الإمتاع وجذب نجومًا معروفين كدريد لحام ونهاد قلعي لإعطائه منحى أكثر كوميدياً وتهكمًا." ⁴⁶

In 1972, Thorns Theatre presented its last work, *Frames* *برايظ*, part of the 4th edition of the Festival of Damascus Theatre. Although the performance had a high public attendance, it was attacked by the press and the educated elite alike. Esmat confirms that *Frames* was not actually on the same aesthetic level as *Mirrors* and *Jerk* – here comedy became cheap while the content shifted from criticizing the government to criticizing people, culture and customs. All those severe criticisms of forms and content led Hajjo to cease producing work in this groundbreaking theatre.

Tishreen⁴⁷ Troupe

After the sharp criticism leveled at the performance of *Frames*, Hajjo decided to suspend the work of Thorns Theatre. However, some members of the troupe saw that this type of theatre, which people loved, must persevere. The new splinter troupe was founded with the main effort of the comedic duo Lahham and Qala'i, while Thorns Theatre founder chose to give up any other role except acting. Although Lahham and Qala'i were the original founders, Lahham's cooperation with Al-Maghout in writing almost all of the troupe's works pushed Qala'i to the fringe, especially after a sudden turn in his health in 1976. The troupe became best known as Lahham and Al-Maghout in the mind of Syrian audiences. From his position as a director, Lahham attracted a large number of prominent actors, such as Yasser al-Azma, Osama El-Romani, Malak Sokkar, Shaker Barekhan, Fadia Khattab, Hossam Tahseen Beik, Abdou Al-Salam Al-Taieb, and Ayman Bahnasy; in addition to several other actors, musicians and dancers who subsequently became stars of comedy and drama in Syria. The troupe performed its first work *October Village (Day'at Tishreen, ضبيعة تشرين)* in the year 1974. The success of this performance encouraged both Lahham and Al-Maghout to continue to cooperate, so they wrote their most famous play *Exile (Ghorbeh غربية)* in the year 1976, then *Toast to the Homeland (Kasak ya Watan, كاسك يا وطن)* in the year 1979. Then came *Poppy Anemone (Shaqaeq al-Nomaan, شقائق النعمان)* in 1987. After that, Lahham wrote *The Rainmaker (Sane'a Al-Matar, صانع المطر)* in 1992 on his own. However, the sharp criticism of this play led Lahham to retire from theatre and devote most of his energy to film and television. With this retirement, the work of

⁴⁷ "Tishreen" means October. The founders called the troupe "Tishreen" as a celebration of the Syrian-Egyptian victory over Israel in the October War, 1973.

Tishreen Troupe ceased for nearly twenty years until Lahham returned in 2011 to write in cooperation with Hajjo and Aladdin Kokash (1942-) the play, *The Fall (Al-Sokoot, السقوط)* which is based on the book *I Will Betray My Homeland (Sa Akhoun Watani, سأخون وطني 1987)* by Al-Maghout.

The duo Duraid and Nihad

Since the beginning of the sixties, the Levantine comedy has been associated with the names of the comedian duo Duraid Lahham and Nihad Qala'i. Despite the presence of great comedians, such as Abd al-Latif Fathi (1916 –1986) in Syria and Shoushou in Lebanon, people in the Arab world have been very fond of the two folk stock characters “Ghawwar Al-Toucheh” and “Hosni Al-Boorazan”, who were played by Lahham and Qala'i respectively in multiple works. It is interesting to note here that these two stock characters, the sly but somewhat naive servant (not unlike the Zannis of the Commedia dell'arte), and the artist, musician or genius lover who is misunderstood but can bring about revolutionary ideals – appealed to a general populace more than any other character from either television or theatre.

Lahham is a Syrian actor and director, born in Damascus (1945-) who started his artistic career in the 1950s with the University of Damascus Theatre troupe. With the opening of the Syrian Arab TV in 1960, Lahham moved on to work in television after Sabah Qabbani (1928 – 2015), the first director of Syrian TV, asked him to participate in one of his TV programs. There, he met the artist Qala'i and created a great comedy that continued until the mid-seventies. As for Qala'i, he was a Syrian author and actor born in Damascus in 1928. He started his artistic career in school theatre. He moved to the professional theatre when director Wasfi Al-Maleh (1897 – 1990) gave him a small role in *Leila's Mad Lover (Majnoun Leila مجنون ليلى)* by the Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi (1868-1932). In 1954 Qala'i joined the Oriental Club Troupe (Al-Nadi Al-

Sharqi Troupe, (فرقة النادي الشرقي), and with it performed several works, the most important being *Montserrat* by Emmanuel Robles. In 1959, Qala'i was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to establish and manage The National Theatre Troupe. With this troupe Qala'i functioned as actor/director in many performances, including the *Fakes (Al-Mouzayafon, المزيفون)* by Mahmoud Taymour (1894- 1973). *The Bourgeois Gentleman* by Molière and *The School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751- 1816). He also presented with Lahham several successful television series, which were greatly received in the Arab world, the most important of which are *Good Morning (Sah Al-Noum, صح النوم, 1972)* and *Salt and Sugar (Melh wa Soukar, ملح وسكر, 1973)*.

The powerful start of this duo in theatre was the production of Thorns Theatre's, *Jerk*, which was a very daring play in political terms to the point that made the members of the troupe believe that the censorship would not allow such work to be performed on Syrian stages. In an interview with Dima Al-khateb, published in *Tishreen* newspaper, in 2016, Lahham says: "when we realized that the censorship committees would never allow such work to be presented on the stage, we came up with the idea of the first Damascus Theatre Festival, which we thought may be the only way to sneak our ideas onto Syrian stages"⁴⁸ (Lahham, Goodwill). The play had particular resonance, but at the same time it sparked widespread controversy among the intellectual elite and the authorities to the extent that the troupe was accused of fomenting a counter-revolution. The echoes of this debate reached the Presidential Palace, which prompted then Syrian President, Nureddin Al-Atassi (1929- 1992), to want to attend the play himself. Lahham retells the story of the encounter in the same interview:

⁴⁸ "وحيث أدركنا أن لجان الرقابة لن تسمح أبداً بتقديم عمل كهذا على المسرح، خرجنا بفكرة مهرجان دمشق المسرحي الأول، لنتسلل عبره بمسرحيتنا."

After [the show] we met with the Syrian President and some of the members of the political leadership, including the Minister of Defense at the time, the soon to be President Hafez al-Assad. While they were competing in piling up accusations against us, arguing that we had presented destructive and subversive criticism, Omar Hajjo and I stood trembling of fear like chickens [...] waiting for our fate. When they finished speaking, President Hafez Al-Assad had not yet given his opinion, then he said to the politburo, 'I think you are all wrong. These young people are revolutionary artists, and we must hear what they have to say'⁴⁹ (Lahham Goodwill).

It was after this endorsement by the regime that the duo went on to present their last work, *Frames*, before founding Tishreen Troupe, or Tishreen's Family as they liked to call it. The duo was severed after Qala'i fell on the stage due to a stroke that paralyzed him while he was performing the second performance of *Exile*. Although he recovered, Qala'i did not participate in any new works before he died in 1993 from a fatal heart attack, leaving behind a great legacy of theatre, cinema and television works.

Ghawwar Al-Toucheh and Hosni Al-Boorazan

The characters of Ghawwar Al-Toucheh and Hosni Al-Boorazan's first appearance was in a TV series called *Bubbles (Faqaqiea, فقاقيع, 1963)*. While Ghawwar represents the simple Syrian man, who is struggling to achieve his goals, and does not give up easily, Al-Boorazan represents a simple, kind Syrian who is tolerant even with his enemies. The relationship between these two characters is in constant tension that generates a lot of comic relief. These two

⁴⁹ "بعد [انتهاء العرض] التقينا برئيس الجمهورية وأعضاء القيادة، ومنهم وزير الدفاع في ذلك الوقت الراحل الرئيس حافظ الأسد، وتبارى الموجودون في نقد المسرحية، وكيل الاتهامات لنا بأننا قدّمنا نقداً هداماً وما إلى ذلك، بينما أنا وعمر حجو كنا واقفين نرتجف من الخوف كصوصين [...] ننتظر مصيرنا، وحين انتهوا من الكلام، لم يكن الرئيس حافظ الأسد قد أعطى رأيه بعد، فقال: «أعتقد يا رفاق أنكم جميعاً على خطأ، وهؤلاء الشباب فنانون ثوار، ويجب أن نسمع ماذا لديهم ليقولوه."

characters etched in the Syrians' memory to the extent that they became part of the Syrian cultural and artistic heritage.

Some critics call them the Syrian “Laurel and Hardy” and give them credit for spreading the Syrian accent, making it understandable throughout the Arab world. Ghawwar's character is distinguished by his wooden shoes (exaggerated Dutch wooden clogs), his traditional clothes, and his Damascene accent and style of speech; while Al-Boorazan wears contemporary Western clothes with more refined taste. Although Qala’i abandoned Al-Boorazan without giving up the way of acting, Lahham chose to make some changes to Ghawwar’s character before he brought it to subsequent Tishreen Troupe performances. Since the first performance of Tishreen Troupe, Ghawwar appears like a Syrian Don Quixote who is poor, pitiable, down trodden but patriotic and socialist in the way he wants to fight corruption and oppression and lead the people out of ignorance.

Muhammad Al-Maghout

Al-Maghout is considered one of the most perplexing writers in the Arab world. His writing defies every critical norm, to the point that academic critics avoid approaching it. Al-Maghout is rebellious in every way; he wrote: “I'm tired of being committed to the schedules, etiquette of sitting, manners of conversation and traffic rules. How much I wish to make grammar mistakes, masculinize what is feminine, feminize what is masculine, define what is undefined, and undefine what is defined. I'm tired of right and I miss mistakes”⁵⁰ (Al-Maghout, “The Executioner of Roses” 314). Before writing for the theatre, Al-Maghout was one of the most important modern Arab poets and pioneers of prose poetry that abandoned classical forms,

⁵⁰ "لقد مللت الالتزام بأداب المائدة وآداب الجلوس وآداب المحادثة وقواعد المرور وقواعد اللغة... كم أتمنى نصب الفاعل ورفع المفعول وتذكير المؤنث وتأنيث المذكر وتعريف النكرة وإنكار المعرفة... لقد مللت الصواب واشتقت للخطأ."

their meter, tempo and rhymes. This new type of poetry was met with scathing criticism from classical critics who saw it a distortion of the aesthetics of the revered Classical Arabic poetry. Al-Maghout refused the invitation of these critics to adhere to the traditions of Classical Arabic poetry and traditional meter and defended the modern free verse with his well-known sarcasm: “Instead of wasting my time searching for a word suitable for the rhyme, I prefer to look for shoes to wear, bread to eat, and a roof over my head”⁵¹ (Al-Maghout, *Literature of Prisons* 00:24:26 – 00:24:35).

Al-Maghout was born in the town of Salamiyah (in western Syria) in 1934. When he was a teen, his father sent him to Damascus to study agriculture. He later fled the school in embarrassment when the principal posted a letter on the bulletin board from Al-Maghout's father explaining that he wanted his son to have a little more sympathy from teachers and other students due to the miserable financial conditions his family endures. Upon his return to Salamiyah, Al-Maghout joined the Syrian National Socialist Party before he read its principles. On that issue, Al-Maghout says that there were two important political parties in Syria at that time: The Syrian National Socialist Party and Al-Baath Party, which was far from his neighborhood. The former was close to his house and had a fireplace, so he chose to join this party mainly for the heat. His first poem “Beauty of Jaffa يا جادة يا جافة” was published in *Beirut Literature Magazine*. During his compulsory military service, he released his second poem “A Refugee woman Among the Sand لاجئة بين الرمال” in the Syrian Army Magazine, *The Arabic Soldier (Al-Jundi Alarabi, الجندي العربي)*.

After completing his military service, Al-Maghout returned to Salamiyah to settle. The accusation of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) of the assassination of Colonel Adnan

⁵¹ "بدال ما دور ع قافية تركب ع البيت، بدي كندرة البسها، بدي رغيفه أكلو، بدي محل نام فيه." ⁵¹

Al-Maliki (1918-1955) on April 22, 1955 (who was allied with the Baath Party in Damascus), turned the life of Al-Maghout upside down. That assassination led to mass arrests of members of the SSNP, Al-Maghout among them. He spent nearly eight months in prison before he was released. His literary experience began to take shape while incarcerated, especially after he got acquainted with the work of modernist Syrian poet, Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said Esber. (1930-), who was incarcerated in the opposite cell. After his release, Al-Maghout returned to Salamiyah, but the signing of the Unification Pact between Syria and Egypt in 1958 made him, like other members of the SSNP, a wanted man again, prompting him to flee to Beirut. In Lebanon, Al-Maghout joined Poetry Magazine Group (Majalat Shi'ir) founded by Yousef al-Khal (1916-1987) in 1957 which brought together many prominent Lebanese and Arab poets. When his name became famous and his condition changed from a wanted young man to a well-known poet, he decided to return to Damascus. Besides poetry, in this period he also wrote numerous plays, articles and screenplays.

Al-Maghout's golden period in theatre started when he met Lahham in late 1973. About his cooperation with Al-Maghout, Lahham declared: "When I met [Al-Maghout], we talked about the causes of the defeat of 1967, and the reasons for the bold confrontation in 1973, and we agreed to complete a theatrical work that tackles this period, we called it Tishreen's Village"⁵² (Lahham, Goodwill). The duo Al-Maghout-Lahham wrote together four plays, before they separated due to the sharp criticism of their last play *The Poppy Anemone*. About his dispute with Al-Maghout, Lahham explains "[When *The Poppy Anemone* was criticized], in one of his journal interviews, in a moment of anger, Al-Maghout said: 90% of the play is not written by me,

"حين التقيت به، تحدثنا عن أسباب نكسة 67، وأسباب المواجهة الجريئة في 73، واتفقنا على إنجاز عمل مسرحي يتحدث عن هذه المرحلة، وسميناه⁵² ضيعة تشرين".

but by Lahham”⁵³ (Lahham, Goodwill). This angered Lahham for two reasons: first, Al-Maghout’s admission that the play failed, and second blaming Lahham for this complete failure. After Lahham ceased writing with Al-Maghout, he wrote two plays in 1992, *Rainmaker* and *The Fall*, while Al-Maghout wrote only one play, *Out of Swarm (Kharej Al-serb, خارج السرب)*, in 1999. None of these plays received appreciation from either critics or audiences, which prompted Lahham to declare that neither of his solo plays nor those of Al-Maghout met the success that their joint work had afforded them. Al-Maghout died in April 2006 after a struggle with illness that lasted for more than a decade, leaving behind a great literary and artistic legacy in many fields such as poetry, short stories, theatre, cinema and television. Some of his works has also been translated into many languages, including English, French and Russian. If we exclude most performances by commercial troupes, or the works of Thorns Troupe, the plays of the duo Al-Maghout-Lahham constitute almost exclusively the sole plays of political comedy in the modern Syrian repertoire.

The Harmony of a Vision

Although Al-Maghout was the recipient of the Syrian State Medal of Excellence, which is the highest honor awarded by the Syrian state to any of its citizens, and that his fame could grant him immunity from arbitrary arrests, he nevertheless lived his life suffering from capiophobia or the fear of getting arrested. His experience of being imprisoned in 1955 left a deep wound in his soul and a debilitating fear, turning into a great source of creation and inspiration. He declared: “Oppression is the compassionate mother of poetry and creativity”⁵⁴ (*Literature of Prisons* 00:41: 12– 00:41:17). This point was in dispute between him and

⁵³ " وفي إحدى المقابلات الصحفية وفي لحظة غضب، قال الماغوط: إن 90% من المسرحية ليست من تألّفي، بل تألّيف دريد. "

⁵⁴ "القمع هو الأم الرؤوم للشعر... للإبداع." "

Wannous who believed that the most essential condition for creativity is freedom. For Al-Maghout, “prison is like tree roots, and these roots grow and extend to poetry, plays, or movies”⁵⁵ (*Literature of Prisons* 00:03:30 – 00:03:52). As usual, Al-Maghout knows how to reconcile contradictions, just as he knows how to justify their irrational coexistence. He combines fear, that requires silence, and writing, that requires a lot of courage. Just as his fear of being arrested at any moment was great, his courage, in contrast, was exceptional. No one was safe from his critique and mockery: his friends before his enemies, his lovers before those who denounced his writings, left wing and right wing politics alike, communists, capitalists, nationalists, ignorant people, intellectuals, statesmen and their opponents; he often even made fun of himself. With his typical poetic contradictions, he said: “if I write, I will die of terror, and if I do not write, I will die of hunger”⁵⁶ (Al-Maghout, “I will betray my homeland” 318). He could have lived securely and earned a lot of money had he chosen to flatter power. But, despite his fear, he was unable to write except the truth:

To be a great poet, you must be honest.

To be honest, you must be free

To be free, you must be alive

To stay alive, you must shut up.⁵⁷ (Al-Maghout “I will betray my homeland” 184)

⁵⁵ "السجن مثل الشجرة إلو شروش، شروش بتروح ع القصيدة، ع المسرحية، ع الفيلم." ⁵⁵

⁵⁶ "إذا كتبت، أموت من الرعب، وإذا لم أكتب أموت من الجوع." ⁵⁶

⁵⁷ " لكي تكون شاعرا عظيما، يجب أن تكون صادقاً
ولكي تكون صادقاً يجب أن تكون حراً
ولكي تكون حراً يجب أن تكون حياً
ولكي تحيا يجب أن تخرس." ⁵⁷

The main problem of Al-Maghout is not that he cannot shut up or that he is telling the truth, but rather that he wants to tell the truth clearly and without equivocation. Perhaps this is what he garnered with Lahham, who was in need of comic plays with good structure, while Al-Maghout was lacking in the experience of writing stageable plays. There was a kind of harmony between the two men not only on the level of content but also in style of writing and choice of language and register. This is an important feature of this theatre, its choice of “direct speech”. Although critics attacked their plays on the issue of language, Al-Maghout and Lahham insisted on continuing in the same manner. Direct speech⁵⁸ is Al-Maghout's writing style which gives a voice to clarity within complexity typical of popular characters. In his typical scathing tone, Al-Maghout announces:

Those who only talk about serious literature, serious theatre, serious bread, serious whiskey and serious movies are really the biggest clowns in the literary field [...]. Serious plays, from their point of view, are the kind that once they start push the spectator to search for the closest exit, [...] and the serious painting is the one in which each painting needs a policeman with a stick and a whistle to explain to the viewers from where lines start and to where they end”⁵⁹ (Al-Maghout “I will betray my homeland” 14).

Art for Al-Maghout must be understandable, relatable, plausible without being didactic.

Ambiguity is an intellectual luxury practiced by the elite who live in ivory towers away from

⁵⁸ What Arab critics have called "direct speech" is to address issues on stage without using aesthetic methods, or metaphors, but to address the problem itself, not its deep roots, also to explain to the audience in words that are clear and accessible. In other words there is a documentary quality to the work of the playwright who uses direct speech.

⁵⁹ "الذين لا يتحدثون إلا عن الأدب الجاد والمسرح الجاد والخبز الجاد والويسكي الجاد والأفلام الجادة هم في الحقيقة أكبر مهرجين في الساحة الأدبية " [...] فالمسرحية الجادة من وجهة نظرهم هي التي ما أن تبدأ حتى يبحث المشاهد عن أقرب مخرج للنجاة ولو من المدخنة [...] والرسم الجاد هو الذي "تحتاج كل لوحة منه إلى شرطي سير ليشرح للمتفرجين بعصاه وصفارته أين تبدأ الخطوط وأين تنتهي."

society. Those people are not for whom Al-Maghout writes; he writes for ordinary folks in the poor neighborhoods of Damascus and Aleppo. He says:

I write for those who do not know if Le Monde is issued in Paris or in Abu Dhabi; for those who are born and die without leaving their village, abandoning their friends, or changing the type of tobacco or the way they lie on the threshing floor or prison tiles; for the worker who finishes eating his breakfast on his bike; and for the stupid maid covering her pillow with her tears whenever a princess is captured in a radio series. (Al-Maghout "I will betray my homeland" 15).

In one of his television interviews, Lahham defends the use of direct speech in Tishreen Troupe's plays: "After 1967 we found that all great dreams collapsed in a single day. We were startled, and then we awoke from astonishment to find that there are many things that we must face directly and frankly as long as the mistake confronts us frankly" (Lahham. Egyption T.V. 00:06:09 – 00:06:27). He added, "when a bomb strikes you, it strikes you downright. That is why there is no need for symbolism and equivocation. The meaningful, frank and cruel word must be the means... the means of art. I hope we will one day become a nation without major problems. Then we can talk about what is called art for art"⁶⁰ (Lahham. Egyption T.V. 00:06:30 – 00:06:50). For example, in *Exile*, the playwrights talk directly about curfew or decisions taken by the authority when Al-Baik decides to ban demonstrations:

AL-BAIK: It is prohibited to gather – let me see, no more than two people, no, no, I tell you what, no more than one person. (*To the people*) Did you not hear the decision? Keep

⁶⁰ "عندما تنزل عليك قبيلة فإنها تنزل عليك بصراحة. لهذا لا داعي للرمزية والمواربة.. يجب أن تكون الكلمة الهادفة والصريحة والقاسية الوسيلة
وسيلة الفن. أتمنى أن نصبح يوماً أمة بلا مشاكل كبرى بعدها يمكن أن نتحدث عما يسمى الفن للفن."

distance from each other ... Abu Risha! keep away from yourself! (*Exile* 00:51:11-00:51:25).

Lahham believes that the government's decision to restrict freedom of mobility and assembly can only be faced with direct discourse, because it is an urgent matter that does not tolerate interpretations or symbolism as absurd as "keeping distance from oneself" may seem.

The Problem of Censorship

The troupe's artistic choices indicate clearly that the founders wanted not only success but also continuity. For them, success meant returning to expressing people's concerns and avoiding the mistake made in the last show of Thorns Troupe. As for continuity, it meant ensuring that the censorship will not stop the troupe's performances or interfere in the details of its work.

Achieving this delicate equation may seem difficult if not impossible, but Lahham, Qala'i, and Al-Maghout thought that the focus on common issues for Arab citizens could provide them with a cover to present local, social and political problems in a general context. Putting the local issues in a general Arab framework meant that criticizing Arab regimes as a whole allows Syrians to feel a sense of belonging to the plight of the nation. Such a theatre can raise political awareness throughout the Arab world without targeting any specific regime. Tolerance of this type of general criticism could also provide these governments with an opportunity to assert that they are democratic states that do not impose restrictions on freedom of opinion and artistic expression. On the contrary, the Arab state would benefit from such a theatre that is advocating for a better life, sovereignty, independence, and liberation, since they are the same objectives that Arab governments use as flashy slogans in the media. Objection to these ideals would show the falsehood of these governments' claims. Perhaps this was the reason why the intellectual elite accused Tishreen Troupe's performances of being apologetic of the regime, performing a great

service to the ruling class by giving them the opportunity to polish their image. In fact, no one can deny that Arab governments would seize the opportunity to achieve that goal after the historic defeat of many wars, but it is unfair to accuse the troupe of making itself an instrument in the hands of Arab dictatorships. It is true that most of those governments had allowed Tishreen Troupe's performances to be shown on their stages and television channels, and it is also true that the troupe presented a kind of criticism that Arab authorities can tolerate, it does not mean that these governments were satisfied with the political content of these plays.

For the founders, the theory in its simplest form is predicated on the principle of "putting poison into honey" (or water into wine in English). Whether or not they succeeded in achieving that goal, their vision was based on a set of ideas that critics had to understand, the most important of which are:

- 1- The reality of freedoms in the Arab world is one underlying multiple complex issues. Clashing with the censorship is a losing battle, while working in the relatively free zone that separates the boundaries of what is forbidden from what is permitted will be better than doing nothing.
- 2- Between a performance that satisfies the elite, while banned by censorship, and a performance that faces the criticism of that elite, but reaches a wide segment of people, the troupe chose the latter because it affords the artists an opportunity to pass their soft political message to the largest number of people.
- 3- The purpose of art is not to call for revolution, those attempts have often failed (even Brecht acknowledged that at the end of his life), rather art can plant the seed of revolutionary ideas in the minds of spectators. The social and political change occurs when these ideas ripen, whether in the minds of the current or future generation.

The Problem with Criticism

Surprisingly, some academic critics celebrated Al-Qabbani's Theatre, despite the fact that it was at times apologetic of Ottoman authorities, while they dealt with Al-Maghout and Lahham's theatre with harsher criticism despite its public criticism of Arab regimes. These critics know, or at least they had to know that Al-Qabbani had received financial and moral support from the Turkish governor of Damascus, Medhat Pasha, who had allocated him 900 golden liras to produce the play *Prince Mahmoud, the Son of Shah Al-Ajam*, (*Al-Ameer Mahmoud Ibn Shah Al-Ajam*, الأمير محمود، ابن شاه العجم). The governor attended the play with Sheikhs of Damascus and admired it greatly. Although Hosni Kanaan believes that "the governor had an ulterior motive, which is to distract the people from the need for a free life, that leaders of the intellectual revolution [...] Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdo had instilled in the mind of the country"⁶¹ (Al-Awani 17). Perhaps it is the intercession of history that makes us find justifications for our ancestors, while we deny understanding the justifications of our contemporaries. Berri Al-Awani argues that Al-Qabbani accepted the authority's support because he wanted to invest it in favor of dedicating and enlightening a social and aesthetic project. Awani asserts, cautiously that "we cannot consider Al-Qabbani as a mere oppression and purge instrument in the hand of rulers, or a mere opportunist, as much as a judicious cultural activist who fought for and sacrificed his reputation to accomplish and disseminate his vision to the general public in political, social and artistic circumstances that are different"⁶² (Awani 19).

⁶¹ "كان الوالي يهدف بهذه الفعلة إلى غاية سياسية وهي صرف الشعب المتوثب عن الحياة الطليقة التي أوجد نواتها في البلاد قادة الثورة الفكرية "الشيخين المصلحين الإمامين: جمال الدين الأفغاني ومحمد عبده."

⁶² "ولهذا لا يمكن لنا أن نرى القباني مجرد أداة قمعية وتنفيسية بيد الولاة أو مجرد انتهازي، قدر ما يجب أن نرى مشروعه المسرحي الثقافي " التنويري الذي ناضل من أجله، ودفع سمعته لإنجازه وتعميمه على الناس في ظروف مختلفة سياسيا واجتماعيا وفنيا."

Further, accusing Al-Qabbani of conspiring against the freedom of people because of his acceptance of support from the dubious political authority of the Ottomans in Damascus at that time entails a great misunderstanding of Ottoman rule. Had he openly opposed Ottoman authority, he would've been met with the fate of many other revolutionaries (death or hard labor camps, known as the infamous genocidal Safer Berlik). Additionally, Al-Qabbani would have most certainly been silenced, or been prohibited from producing any work of any significance or notoriety.

Nevertheless, to return to the modern period, Tishreen Troupe was not a governmental troupe, and there is no evidence that it had received any financial support from the government to force it to adhere to a particular ideology or ethos, while the serious theatre, which academic critics praised, was receiving direct support from the Syrian government. And if we go back to the period when Tishreen Troupe was most active, we will find that many of the performances of the serious theatre, such as plays of Arsan, Al-Hallaj, even Wannous, and Adwan, were produced by the National Theatre, which is funded directly by the state. On the other hand, if academic critics are accusing Tishreen Troupe of seeking to purge the feelings of revolutionary enthusiasm, then it will be a misreading of Al-Maghout and Lahham's plays, and at the same time underestimating the ability of people to judge politically inflected art for themselves. With the exception of some articles that attack the troupe's performances and accusations against Lahham personally of 'clowning' and using empty slogans, we hardly find any respectable critical study of these performances, except for two articles by Esmat. The first one about *October Village*: "Tishreen and the Theatre of War" published in *Knowledge Magazine (Majalet Alma'arefa, مجلة المعرفة)* of the Syrian Ministry of Culture in 1974. The other, about *The Poppy Anemone* titled "Duraid Lahham and Al-Maghout Sow Anemones and Harvest Thorns" – hinting

to the French expression: “qui sème le vent, récolte la tempête” (“he who sows the wind reaps a storm”). This article was published in his book *The Arab Theatre, The Fall of Social Masks* issued by the General Book Authority of the Syrian Ministry of Culture in 2011. Even though the second article was published 24 years after the play, most likely it was published at the same time as the play in one of the Syrian newspapers affiliated with the state because there was no private Syrian press at that time. In the first article, Esmat criticizes *October Village*, arguing that it did not express strongly the reality of the victory that the Syrian and Egyptian Arab armies achieved against Israel in 1973. As for the second, he strongly criticized *The Poppy Anemone*, saying that it was based on “tired slogans” and politically superficial reading, accusing Al-Maghout of not saying “anything new other than what people would like to hear as an outlet for their suffering”⁶³ (Esmat 77). As for the other works, we find only two articles about the play *Toast to the Homeland*: one by Nadim Mohamed in his book *Critical Articles on Theatrical Performance* published by Dar Al-Feker Al-Jadeed⁶⁴ (Beirut 1990), and another one by Lebanese critic, Paul Shaul in his book *The New Arab Theatre 1967-1989*. While we do not find any real study of the other two plays: *Exile* and *The Rainmaker*.

Recently, 25 years after the last performance of Tishreen Troupe, Mas'ud Hamdan published a chapter about its work entitled “Muhammad Al-Maghout (1934-2006) and Doraid Lahham (1934-),” in his book *Writing for Truth: Modern Arabic Theorization and Creations as a Critical Culture* (Dar Al-Farabi, 2017). In this chapter, the author analyzed the troupe's performances focusing in particular on the idea that Lahham and Al-Maghout used a ‘carnival’ strategy that enabled them to destroy the dominant narrative in favor of marginalized informal

⁶³ " لم يقل شيئاً جديداً غير ما يود الناس أن يسمعه كمتنفس ، عما يعانون منه." 63

⁶⁴ دار الفكر الجديد

pluralism employed to defeat empty allegations, and reveal hidden hypocrisies. But as is known with any carnivalesque literature, once the carnival is over, order is restored and the ruler is back to ruling with all the problematic exercise of power that carnivalistic reversals – or what Mikhail Bakhtin called “the dualistic ambivalent ritual” – were allowed to critique. Hamdan echoes this position when he writes, speaking of Al-Magout and Lahham’s work: “The use of the ‘carnavalesque sense of the world’ is essential for these works as tragi-comical satires, for it is an efficient and powerful art form for both dystopic and utopic expression. [...] As rituals of inversion, both Satire and Carnival are located on the thin borderline between life and art, play and reality” (Hamdan, 2004, 140)

The Tragic Reality in Al-Maghout’s and Lahham's Comedies

Everything in the Arab world provides grounds for tragedy: repeated military defeats, ignorance, corruption, suppression of freedoms, sectarian killings, poverty, hunger, fear, deteriorating educational and health systems. What fool thinks that theatre can fix all that? Neither Al-Maghout imagined that, nor Lahham. However, for twenty years, the two men did not stop writing and producing their political plays with the hope that they change the fate of the average Arab citizen. For Lahham the goal of his plays is not to call people to revolution over their ruling regimes, but rather to invite those regimes to assume their responsibilities and listen to the voice of the people: “All we do is we report the mistakes that were made against the people and which citizens can only critique in whispers. Our job is to say loudly what is being said inside the closed rooms in order for Arab authorities to listen to the suffering of the Arab citizen”⁶⁵ (Hamdan, 2017, 44). The optimism of Lahham who hoped that the authorities could

⁶⁵ "كل ما نفعله، هو أننا نرفع تقريراً حول الأخطاء التي ارتكبت بحق الشعب والتي حولها يتهاشم المواطنون. وظيفتنا أن نبوح بصوت عالٍ ما يقال داخل الغرف المغلقة لكي تصغي السلطة في الوطن العربي لمعاناة المواطن العربي."

grow ears, counter-balanced the pessimism of Al-Maghout who considered that everything he wrote was nothing more than chaos in a stagnant world. Despite this extreme divergence in perception, the authors agreed at least on sarcasm as a method used to, first, urge the power to reform itself and, second, to help the helpless and oppressed citizen endure their daily suffering. Between the romantic optimism of Lahham and the realistic pessimism of Al-Maghout, we find ourselves in a sea of contradictions: laughter mixed with tears, uncertainty with blind faith, victory with the bitterness of defeat, joy with loss. It is in many ways a form of dark or black comedy, set against the backdrop of a pastoral realm where good and evil co-exist, removed from the complexities of urban political life.

The mishmash of characters in *October Village* are subject to the corruption of their leaders (Mukhtars or Mayors) who left them in destitution while facing the prolonged land's occupation with cowardice. As I describe it in further details below, successive coups take place in the village bringing about the rule of one corrupt leader after another. The play ends when a good leader emerges and gains the confidence of the people helping defeat the enemy at the gates, regaining the stolen land and saving the great village of Tishreen. Speaking of black comedy and the pastoral in the context of Irish literature, Nicholas Greene writes in his essay, "Black Pastoral: 1990's Images of Ireland": "Comedy normally avoids the more painful dimensions of the human situation; black comedy makes laughter out of unhappiness, suffering's death, all the things traditionally ruled out by the comic mode. Black Pastoral involves a similar kind of travesty of the pastoral mode" (Greene 68).

In *October Village*, Al-Maghout and Lahham did not use fantasy elements to express the concerns of the citizens, as in *The Poppy Anemone*. There are no dead people rising from graves, nor a hot air balloon made by an illiterate man who just returned from captivity after he was

martyred in a previous play to carry those dreaming to emigrate. There are no scenes restored from history, nor depictions of non-Syrian or fantastical environments. In *The Poppy Anemone*, Al-Maghout and Lahham imagined that, by leaving the Syrian environment, they would carry their theatre from the narrow locality of the village to the wider Arabic rural space, which in that period had much larger demographics. Despite its localized environment, *October Village* was seen by the whole Arab world as a specimen “village” that may be transposed to any Arabic country, from the Mashreq to the Maghreb. It would not have been important for the Arab spectator if the events were taking place in Damascus, Beirut or Cairo. What is important is that these events and characters have verisimilitude and are relatable in the way they represent the characters’ experience of oppression and disenfranchisement.

October Village resonated widely in the Arab world because it addressed clearly the reasons for the shocking defeat of the 1967 war. The play covers a long period of modern Syrian history, from the period before the start of the military coups in 1949 to the end of the October War in 1973. It tells the story of a village ruled by an ignorant and corrupt mayor “Mukhtar”⁶⁶ One day a stranger comes and seizes part of the village land. The people of the village demand that the Mukhtar lead them in a war against the stranger to recover the stolen land, but the Mukhtar who is preoccupied with corruption and theft, constantly postpones the battle. The villagers feel that the leader is stalling by refusing to go to war, so they start protesting to remove him from his position, which drives him to use political maneuvering. Instead of declaring war, he pushes them to fight each other to distract them from protesting. After a while a new Mukhtar stages a coup d'état and assumes power before people realize that the new leader is more corrupt

⁶⁶ “Mukhtar” (or mayor) is a term to refer to a local leader chosen by the people of a village or small town. The term is used in several Arab countries, especially in the Levant.

than his predecessor and does not want to do anything about liberating the land. Many more coups occur in a very short time; with every new coup, a more corrupt, and dictatorial leader emerges. Freedoms become fewer and prisons fill up with dissidents and innocent people, until a leader emerges to decide to fight the battle to regain the land, but he wages it without planning or preparation. As a result, the village loses the battle and more lands, while Mukhtar's Radio broadcasts fake news about false victories the villagers are supposedly achieving. Raising expectations about the outcome of the battle, and the false hopes that the media gives the people makes the actual defeat even more resounding. People become profoundly disappointed, frustrated, and suspicious of the leadership. In the midst of this hopelessness and dystopia, a new leader emerges from the ranks of the people, silently planning a successful war to regain the stolen land, and the confidence of the populace.

This simple plot, which clearly mimics the events that preceded the defeat of 1967 and the victory of 1973, does not require much effort to understand. It is closer to the plot of a novel than to that of a play in the sense that it deals with long periods of time, with each period having its active characters (the leaders, who are all played by one actor, Qala'i), with one character remaining, a narrator representing the people. The reason behind choosing this type of plot is the desire of Al-Maghout and Lahham to pack as much as possible into one play and cover as much political ground. In addition to the main theme of this play, which is fighting the colonizer, other concerns are elucidated: the corruption of the ruler, fake news (before it was called that), blatant propaganda practiced by authorities to suppress freedoms, the oppression of women, blind subordination to the leader, the lack of education, the brain drain, etc.

On the other hand, plots such as these, which include time-spaced events, enable Lahham as a director to explore the vaudeville style in which various types of folklore, dancing, singing,

and music are deployed. Vaudeville in its most simple definition is a farce with music. Lahham tried to make these elements an integral part of dramatic structure. He largely succeeded in the first scene, which is a long operatic scene depicting in a comic way a literacy class that the men of the village are purportedly attending. In this scene, men gather in the village square to take math and Arabic lessons. At the very beginning of the class, a dispute erupts between Al-Mukhtar and the teacher over a simple math problem.

THE TEACHER: I am asking you what is $7 + 7$?

AL-MUKHTAR: Which 7 comes first?

THE TEACHER: It does not matter.

AL-MUKHTAR: Ok then, $7+7 = 77$. (*October Village*, 00:04:09- 00:04:37)⁶⁷

After hearing the answer, the men of the village start exulting, while Al-Mukhtar's guard shoots his gun up in the air, celebrating the genius of the leader. But the teacher shocks everyone when he announces that the answer is wrong, provoking Al-Mukhtar to pressure the teacher to accept his answer, because he is a Mukhtar, thus, it is not appropriate that he appears in front of his people as an idiot unable to solve a simple arithmetic problem. The main idea of the scene, which is performed entirely in a lyrical way (with dance and song), is to ridicule people's appreciation for the false intelligence of their rulers. On a dramatic level, the function of this scene is to reveal setting, character, and relationships in an entertaining and hilarious way that reduces the weight of moving toward the inciting action.

⁶⁷ *October Village* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w95fq2VJZkQ>

This distinct harmony between drama and other artistic elements loses its glory when Lahham tries to interpolate the beautiful Syrian sword and shield dance at the beginning of the subsequent wedding scene. Although this dance contains a conflict between dancers, early use of it weakened the possibility to link it to the funny conflict that takes place between the family of the groom and the family of the bride. The dispute erupts over the *Mahr* (the form of obligation money or possessions paid by the groom to the bride's family before marriage). As such, the dance seems as if it does not belong to the fabric of the drama, while it aims only to entertain the spectators. However, it may serve to pass an important message that the occupation of the land interferes in the day-to-day lives of the people. The reason of this is that the *Mahr* cannot be given because it is a piece of land located in the occupied part of the village, thus, the two young people who love each other may never be able to marry unless the land is liberated.

The importance of *October Village* lies primarily in the fact that it set the foundation for the Troupe's aesthetic. The great success it received when it was first shown in 1974 encouraged Al-Maghout and Lahham to follow the same style in subsequent projects. On this issue, Lahham declared: "We tried to establish a different type of theatre that had a wide audience, not only in Syria, but also in all the countries of the Arab world in which we performed our plays" (Lahham, *My Life*). Al-Mukhtar and his guard are a symbol of authority all too familiar to Arab viewers, while the teacher symbolizes knowledge and the will of the people to change their fate. As for the character of Ghawwar, he is the simple, but sly villager who sacrifices himself for the sake of the country, despite all the humiliation and oppression he endures. The stranger refers to the occupation, while the dreamy girl is the symbol of innocent love. As for the village, it is the Arab world, the vineyard is Palestine, and the three battles that the villagers fought are without ambiguity the Arab confrontations with Israel in 1948, 1967 and 1973.

Using all these symbols, Lahham and Al-Maghout reinvent the world further with the play *Exile*. As in *October Village*, *Exile* covers a long period of Syrian history. It is the period of the shift towards socialism after Al-Baath revolution in 1963. It deals with the issue of the foreignness of an Arab citizen in the homeland as a result of the oppression and exploitation practiced by the feudal lords who turned the nation into small cantons, each ruled by a lord called Al-Beik.⁶⁸ Al-Beik subdues people and builds his wealth at the expense of their daily misery. In the face of the inability of people to confront him, they are forced to emigrate in search of dignity and better means of subsistence. But the exile they face is worse than what they suffered in their village, where the capitalist system divests them of their land, resources humanity and identity. In one of the factories where the migrants work, a Syrian youth sits next to a Moroccan youth and asks him:

NUMBER 1: What is your name?

NUMBER. 5: I'm No. 5.

NUMBER 1: Back home, what was your name?

NUMBER 5: I forgot.

NUMBER 1: Which country are you from?

NUMBER 5: I am from Morocco.

NUMBER 1: What brings you here?

⁶⁸ Al-Beik is a given title to the rich people who have influence with the authorities.

NUMBER 5: I am originally from a village called Exile. In my village there was a Beik...

NUMBER 1: A Beik? Say no more, I can guess your story (*Exile* 02:19:19- 02:19:38).⁶⁹

Exile becomes a village in every Arab country or the entire Arab world. In this play, Al-Maghout and Lahham replace the character of Al-Mukhtar with the Al-Beik as a symbol of authority and coercion, while the teacher remains a symbol of knowledge and resistance, adding an ideological dimension to this character by making him the socialist who preaches enlightenment, equality and social justice. As for the dreamy girl, she appears here more powerful and liberated, while the Al-Hajja represents motherhood, authenticity, care, and heritage. The village remains a symbol of the battered and beaten homeland. Through these characters and symbols, Al-Maghout and Lahham reiterate in *Exile* the same theme of *October Village*: the necessity of confronting the occupier, but with a small difference, the occupier in *Exile* is one of their own countrymen who steals their lands and starves them, forcing them to emigrate. As in *October Village*, the two playwrights are keen to link the issues of concern of the average Arab citizen to the main theme of the play. In *Exile*, they emphasize the topics of bureaucracy and the opportunism of revolutionary intellectuals who participate in revolutions only to protect their own interests. It can be argued that *Exile* is superior to *October Village* in terms of drama, as Al-Maghout and Lahham benefited from their first experience to develop a stronger dramatic structure with impactful flow. On the comic level, the play generates humor from multiple sources: character, situations, slapstick and farcical situations, black comedy, absurdist situations, and dialogue, relying more on puns, clever repartee, and sharp socio-political commentary. The play also

⁶⁹ *Exile (Ghorbeh)* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BFLjphTuQ>

triggers various forms of laughter: laughter of superiority, incongruity, emancipation and relief. A typical example is found in the scene where the Teacher challenges the authority of the Beik:

THE TEACHER: What the hell does Beik mean? Who made you ruler over these wretched people?

AL-BEIK: The constitution.

THE TEACHER: Which constitution?

AL-BEIK: The constitution of the village! (*To The Guard 1*) Go get the constitution.

THE GUARD 1: Where is it?

AL-BEIK: In the saddle?

THE GUARD 1: Where is the saddle?

AL-BEIK: On the donkey.

THE GUARD 1: Where's the donkey?

THE GUARD 2: He got arrested.

THE GUARD 1: What did he do?!

THE GUARD 2: He ate the constitution.

AL-BEIK: You are telling me the donkey ate the constitution, huh!? Can you tell me how he managed to swallow such a constitution? (Exile 00:47:02- 00:47:14).

To “swallow” here also means to digest, to accept, to consent, to acquiesce to, referring of course to the fact that the constitution is indigestible even by a donkey, thus indirectly wondering how

the people accept their oppressive fate. This comic political critique is subversive in the context of the 1970s where people in the Arab world were often silenced, tortured, and coerced for speaking up. Many examples of this subversive politics through comedy can be found in a subsequent play *Toast to the Homeland* analyzed further in this chapter.

After three years, in 1979, Al-Maghout and Lahham venture away from epic structures to try their hand at a new form that combines the techniques of “a play within a play” and Thorns Theatre technique of presenting detached socio-political theatre. The play, *Ahlam (Dreams)* with its various scenes is a program and TV series broadcast by R.A.C, an abbreviation for an imaginary radio and TV station called Radio Arab Carlo (as a wink to Radio Monte Carlo). Using this technique, the varied scenes become mosaic pieces that make up one meaningful painting. Al-Maghout and Lahham used this station to criticize Arab official media and at the same time to mock the degradation of Arab regimes based on corruption and bureaucracy. This station offers a total of nine episodes of dramatic series entitled *Ahlam (Dreams)*, in addition to programs, songs, advertisements, seminars and satirical interviews with artists and officials. The episodes occupy the largest part of the play's scenes. The hero of this series is Ghawwar again, a poor man whose father was martyred in one of the wars in defense of the homeland. Ghawwar lives in the utopian world portrayed by the daily official newspapers that express the rosy points of view of the state. Therefore, he believes that the rampant corruption in state institutions is a result of violations by some employees, or a few bad apples. His first clash with reality occurs when his young daughter, Ahlam (the plural of dreams in Arabic) dies as a result of the delay in her treatment at a hospital. So begins a Kafkaesque nightmarish journey to search for the persons responsible for her death. When all his endeavors fail, Ghawwar addresses the United Nations and human rights commissions, which leads to his arrest for allegedly communicating with

foreign organizations. After torturing him to get him to confess who is the anti-state agent or agency behind his subversive ideas, he is released to find himself without a job and unable to provide for his family, thus compelling him to sell his remaining children to families who are able to feed them. The further melodramatic result comes when he uses the money gained from the sale of his children to buy alcohol and gets drunk in order to forget his pain. In the last scene, we see him inebriated, imagining that he is talking to his martyred father while raising a toast to the homeland.

In this play, Al-Maghout and Lahham seemed more confident in their work and bolder in directing political and social criticism at political institutions that blatantly neglect and oppress their citizen. In addition to the main theme related to the topic of persecution of poor citizens and the absence of laws and social safety nets that protect them, there is a clear focus on the state's failure to provide basic protections and necessities to its people, as well as the issue of torturing citizens during interrogation sessions. In one of the scenes after the arrest of Ghawwar, while the intelligence officers are torturing him by electric chair to extract a confession from him as to who is behind his correspondence with human rights organizations, Ghawwar starts laughing hysterically when the electricity goes through his body.

THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER: (*surprised*) Are you laughing instead of screaming in pain?!

GHAWWAR: Yes sir, I'm laughing because the electricity has reached my ass before it is reached our village (*Toast to the Homeland 01:23:43-01:24:27*).

In the same scene and after the electric torture failed, the Intelligence Officer tries to water board Ghawwar by putting his head in a bucket of water repeatedly. Every time this happens, Ghawwar

swallows the entire bucket of water while still laughing hysterically; at the end Ghawwar declares:

GHAWWAR: Oh how refreshing, I must thank you sir for this artesian interrogation
(*Toast to the Homeland* 01:27:03- 01:27:11).

Here we are in front of a theatre of witnessing, treating serious subjects such as torture and trauma with a light-hearted tone or dark comedy. As Donia Mounsef and Mai Hussein pointed out in their article “Performing Translocal Memory: Testament and Testimony in Contemporary Theatre & Performance”:

In giving voice to the trauma in performance, theatre engages a previously silenced witness, challenging our inability to fully digest and comprehend what has happened [...]. In other words, the experience of trauma operates at a complex juncture between knowing and not knowing in reaction to a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world (Mounsef & Hussein, 2014, 126-27).

This is perhaps the reason why Ghawwar cannot remember the events that led him to seek council with the higher commission on human rights as the trauma of the death of his daughter devastated his memory while his ability to comprehend the world around him has vanished. However, treating the theme of torture with comedy is a peculiar way to circumvent the trauma triggered by difficult subjects that are usually treated with a serious tone. Al-Maghout and Lahham invite us to reflect on the fate of the nation or the homeland as a place where one cannot protect the most vulnerable or provide them with basic necessities. The final scene is telling: Ghawwar imagines that he is talking to his martyred father in heaven. When his father enquires about the state of the nation, Ghawwar answers: “Everything is perfect. We only need some

dignity” (*Toast to the Homeland* 02:02:46- 02:02:55). This line became so famous that decades after the play, people continue to chant it as a scathing critique of the humiliation Arab citizens suffer at the hand of their rulers. After this play, popularity of Tishreen Troupe’s performances began to wane, as the play *The Poppy Anemone* was subjected to harsh criticism that led to the dissolution of the partnership between Al-Maghout and Lahham.

The Poppy Anemone and the Decline of Teshreen

The Poppy Anemone is considered a continuation of the play *October Village* and a balance sheet of the internal achievements of the October War. After 15 years, the character Nimr (Ghawwar previously) returned from captivity where everyone believed that he was martyred in the October War to discover that the opportunists of the families of the martyrs built wealth at the expense of the blood of their sons who sacrificed themselves for the sake of the homeland. One of these people was Shaker, Nimr’s brother who took advantage of the state’s recommendations that the families of the martyrs be treated exceptionally in appreciation of the sacrifice their sons made for the homeland. Shaker took advantage of those privileges and built himself a huge fortune. The money turned Shaker into a ruthless monster, to the point that he took over his brother Nimr’s house and expelled his wife. The wife had wandered aimlessly around the Arab countries looking for a shelter until she ended up in Cairo living in a graveyard. After a losing encounter with his brother, Nimr begins a journey to find his wife. From Damascus to Beirut to Cairo, the Arab capitals appear like a virtual horror show that reflects all that is wrong with the Arab nation. After Nimr finds his wife, he starts making a hot air balloon in which he carries those who want to leave the homeland. However, the revolutionary Marxist intellectual "Asma'i" convinces him that migration is not a solution. The solution is to fight an

all-out battle with colonialism⁷⁰ everywhere in the world. After a losing battle with external colonization, Nimr recognizes that Arab citizens cannot achieve any victory if they cannot win the battle against the internal enemies that embody corruption, sectarianism, and division. In this play Al-Maghout and Lahham focus directly on the issue of awareness, or in Marxist terms, class consciousness, by asking their audience to pay attention to the difference between loyalty to the ideology and loyalty to the homeland, the rights of citizen and the exploitation of their class. At the same time, Al-Maghout and Lahham satirize the great goals of Arab Marxist intellectuals who want to fight colonialism in the East and West but turn a blind eye to the rampant corruption in their own countries. Although rhetoric and direct speech are features of Al-Maghout-Lahham plays, they were remarkably prominent in *The Poppy Anemone* to the point that the playwrights' voice overshadows the voices of the characters.

In conclusion, Tishreen Troupe set the tone for a whole generation of theatre makers who looked to the potential of theatre to give hope to Arab citizens and try to change tragic realities into brighter and more just ones. Wannous says theatre should mobilize, not purge. Lahham seems to agree with Wannous but with his own view about the nature of mobilization. While Wannous wants a political mobilization, Lahham seeks to mobilize his audience with social justice. Wannous aims, in his serious theatre, to create a general state of political awareness through an integrated process he calls 'politicization' based on replacing the monistic discourse of political theatre with a dialogue that takes place between two spaces, the performance space and audience space. Its goal is to reveal to the popular classes the deep flaws of political systems that exploit them. In this sense, social and political awareness for Lahham means that everyone has to contribute to strengthening the Arab nation, understood in its larger socio-political and

⁷⁰ He meant capitalism

cultural context. For this reason, we find that most of Lahham's plays end with songs that emphasize the love of homeland and the need for unity, justice and solidarity. *October Village* ends with the song: "God Bless your Streets, our Victorious Homeland, الله محيي شوارعك يا بلادنا", *Exile* with the song: "With Joy, with Glory we Build our Homeland. بالفرح بالعز معمرة", *Toast to the Homeland* ends with "I write my Country's Name over the Ever-shining Sun بكتب باسمك يا بلادي ع الشمس اللي ما بتغيب", *The Poppy Anemone* with the song "Your Stamp is Thundering, خبطة قدمك ع الأرض هدارة", and *The Rainmaker* with the song "O Homeland, for your Eyes, by Fire and Light, we Protect the Land. لعيون عيونك يا بلد بالنار والنور منحميها". In one of his interviews, Lahham asserts that the demand for freedom, democracy and social justice is not a political matter but a matter of survival and freedom.

CHAPTER THREE

Ziad Rahbani Theatre

When Ziad⁷¹ (1956-) came to the world of theatre in the middle of the 1970s, the Lebanese theatre had reached the peak of its activity and diversity. Different kinds of theatre with high quality performances were creating new challenges for new generations of artists. Many groups were working alongside while competing to attract an audience at a time of uncertainty in the wake of the Civil War (1975-1990). Under these circumstances, as a young adult, Ziad imposed himself on the artistic scene as a playwright, director, composer, pianist, and actor. In a short time, his original theatre would become the center of attention for young people who found in it the voice of a lost generation caught in the throws of war and violence. If we go back to that period, we will find that all of these troupes – with the exception of the Contemporary Theatre Troupe founded by Abou Debs, which specialized in presenting classic Western plays, belonged to one of four types of theatre:

- 1- Experimental theatre, represented by the Experimental Theatre Troupe, founded by Antoine and Latifa Moultaqa.
- 2- Political theatre represented by Beirut Professional Ensemble Theatre and established by Assaf and Al-Askhar. In tandem with the duo Assaf and Al-Askhar, many works were presented by Khoury, Mahfouz, Chedraoui and Al-Aref.
- 3- Popular comedy theatre, represented by The National Theatre founded by ShouShou, and Abu Salim al-Tabel Troupe founded by Salah Tizani (1927-).

⁷¹ In this essay, I will refer to Ziad Rahbani by his first as is common in the Middle East and to distinguish him from his father and uncle, the Rahbani Brothers, who were prominent figures in Arabic music and theatre.

4- Musical theatre, represented by The Lebanese Popular Troupe founded by Assi and Mansour Al-Rahbani (Ziad's father and uncle, known as 'Rahbani Brothers') and featuring the iconic singer Fairuz (wife of Assi Rahbani and Ziad's mother).

Ziad was born on January 1, 1956, to this prominent artistic family who managed to rise to the glory of music, song and theatre with the voice of the quintessential Fairuz. Millions of Arabs, even today start their mornings by listening to her voice, which Lebanese poet Onsi Al-Hajj described as having "excessive purity, you'd think she comes to you like an abstraction, [...] but she sings with all her senses, with all her body"⁷² (Kordahi). Ziad began learning music and writing poetry at an early age. His first work was a prose poem entitled *My Friend God* (Sadeki Allah, صديقي الله, 1968) which he wrote when he was twelve years old. At the age of seventeen he composed his first song, *Keep Loving me Luzia* (*Dali Hebbini Ya Luzia* ضلي حبيبي يا لوزية), sung by his aunt, Houda Haddad (1944-). He began composing for his family's theatre troupe when his uncle asked him to replace his father who had fallen ill. Ziad composed a popular song, *People Asked me* (*Sa'aloni Ennas*, سألوني الناس) and the introduction music for the second act of a very successful musical play, *The Train Station* (*Al-Mahata*, المحطة 1973). As an actor, Ziad played his first role in the same play assuming the role of a policeman. The play was performed in , the same year Ziad wrote, composed, and directed his first play, *Soirée* (*Sahriya* سهريية), which remains his only play that does not belong to his political comedy cycle.

⁷² "لفرط صفاته تظنه أتياً إليك كالفكرة. تظنه مجرداً، روحاً تماماً بلا شكل [...] تغني بكل حواسها. (لا بل) تغني بكل جسدها." 72

***Soirée* and Unexpected Popularity.**

The events of the play *Soirée* take place in Nakhla Altinin's coffee shop, where men gather daily to listen to the songs of the singer wannabe coffee shop owner, Nakhla (Joseph Sakr) and his daughter Yasmeeen (Georgette Sayegh). However, the old singer, who fancies playing more live music in his coffee shop organizes a singing audition to choose a new singer. After a whole day of listening to applicants, he fails to find a good enough singer to replace him. At the last minute, a young man (Marouan Mahfouz) shows up and presents a very high level of singing, which makes the café owner jealous and reluctant to hire him. Moreover, he kicks him out asking him never to come back, even as a customer because no one should hear his voice and know that there is someone who sings better than the aging shop owner. However, the daughter, Yasmeeen, falls in love with this young man after she listens to him sing. After a fight between Altinin's men and the young singer, Altinin changes his mind and accepts the young man. The nature of the plot shows that Ziad was interested in music and songs more than in drama. In fourteen scenes, Ziad presented sixteen songs, most of which remain popular in the Arab world to this day. Ziad became a household name when these songs gained even more success by making it to the FM radios across the region. Songs such as: *I'm afraid I'm Falling for you* (*Khayef Kon Eshक्तिق* خايف كون عشقتك), *He Makes me Wait an Hour* (*Sa'a Natarny* ساعة نظرنى), and *Show me the Black Eyes* (*Dalloni al'a Ayoun Alsoud*, دلونى على عيون السود), continue to be played on Arab radios today.

Soirée was first performed in Bqennaya, a small village of Al-Matn district in the Mount Lebanon Governorate. It attracted very little media attention given that Ziad was new to the theatrical scene. However, the unexpected high quality of the musical composition and

performances surprised audience members, among them was producer Khaled Itani who loved the play and asked Ziad to perform it in the heart of the capital, Beirut. Itani says:

After the performance, I demanded to meet Ziad. He came, and he leaned over the stage and said ‘what?’ I told him; it is a beautiful play. God willing, we will take it to Al-Hamra,⁷³ to which Ziad sarcastically replied, ‘straight to Al-Hamra? Wouldn't we stop in Al-Dawra or Polycarp?’ I don’t have a bus fare to move the décor to Al-Hamra⁷⁴ (*Malla Inta* 00:28:28- 00:28:49).

After this encounter, Itani sponsored the process of moving *Soirée* to Orly theatre, one of the largest and most prominent theatres in Beirut at the time. The performance was so successful that “many spectators, upon exiting the show, were buying tickets for their family members for subsequent shows” (*Malla Inta* 00:29:14- 00:29:19). Assi Al-Rahbani and Fairuz were equally surprised by their son’s success, just as millions of Lebanese and Arabs who watched it, either in theatre or on TV after it was filmed and broadcast. Nevertheless, *Soirée* remains the work of a young and talented musical composer in search of his theatrical vision and aesthetic breadth.

Happiness Hotel and Failing Better

The time difference between *Soirée* and Ziad’s second play, *Happiness Hotel*, was only one year. With this highly political play in the wake of the Civil War, Ziad stunned the artistic and cultural circles of his time. With *Happiness Hotel*, Ziad had quickly cut the umbilical cord with his family's theatre and created a new theatre different in form, content, and style. This was even more surprising after critics expected Ziad to be the trustworthy heir to the Rahbani

⁷³ Al-Hamra is a prominent and trendy street and district of West Beirut. Al-Dawra is an industrial and poor working-class neighborhood of East Beirut.

⁷⁴ "بعد ما انتهى العرض طلبت مقابلته، إجي ولأح حاله هيك ع المسرح وقال لي أمور؟ قتلنو مسرحية حلوة كتير لازم ننقلها ع الحمراء، قلي ديريك ع الحمراء؟ يعني مثلا ما منوقف ع الدور على بوليكاربوس؟ أني أجرة طنبر انقل الديكور ما معي."

Brothers' legacy, especially after he proved his ability to compose music and write plays.

Perhaps the best expression of this surprise came from the correspondent of Lebanon Television (TéléLiban), who stated in his report about *Happiness Hotel*:

Orly Movie Theatre witnessed last week the birth of a new genius in Lebanon, Ziad Al-Rahbani, Fayrouz, and Assi Al-Rahbani's son who demonstrated an incredible energy in playwriting and composition. As a result, his work was one of the most beautiful and complete theatre Lebanon has witnessed thus far. Many will talk about this wonderful work for years to come⁷⁵ (*Malla Inta* 00:29:23-00:29:51).

While the Rahbani Brothers' musical theatre often avoided delving into political matters, Ziad, on the contrary, faced political and social issues head-on. Politics in a country like Lebanon is complicated and entangled in highly sensitive issues, such as religious sectarianism, tribalism, class struggle, corruption, occupation, espionage, and, in the 70s, the Cold War. Further, the attitude surrounding independence and relations with neighboring countries was and continues to be a minefield in Lebanon and the region at large. After the Cairo Agreement (1970), and the years following it, Lebanon plunged into civil war, in which the most prominent belligerents powers were the Palestinians and the Lebanese (especially the Christians) who saw in the Palestinian armed presence a threat to their existence and a menace to the independence of Lebanon. Moreover, the subsequent Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and the regional or international political interventions in Lebanese affairs provided additional fuel to the sectarian divisions between the Lebanese. Against this highly charged political predicament, the Rahbani Brothers wanted their theatre to sail safely and smoothly without political, religious, or social

⁷⁵ "شهد مسرح سينما أورلي الأسبوع الماضي ولادة نابغة نية جديدة في لبنان ألا وهو زياد الرحباني ابن فيروز وعاصي الرحباني الذي برهن هذه المرة عن طاقة واسعة في التأليف والتلحين حتى جاء عمله هذا من أجمل وأكمل ما شهده المسرح اللبناني حتى اليوم. سيتحدث الكثيرون عن نزل السرور وإبعاد هذا العمل الرائع."

controversies. Remaining sheltered from politics in a politically volcanic region is a luxury the Rahbani Brothers astonishingly afforded themselves. They insisted on creating musical theatre with indirect relationships to politics by locating their work in either fictional, fantastical, or epic historical world only obliquely referencing current events. Their most celebrated musicals such as *Hala and the King* (*Hala w al-Malek هالة والملك* 1967) *The Person* (*Al-Shakhes الشخص* 1968), *The Keys' Guard* (*Natoret Al-Mafateh, ناطورة المفاتيح*, 1972), vaguely hint to the powder keg that was Lebanon in the 70s and 80s, while they almost always end in a conciliatory manner without the adoption of any revolutionary rhetoric. This avoidance of reality earned the Rahbani Brothers' musical theatre a reputation for being oddly romantic, poetic and naïve albeit highly entertaining and popular. This formula also helped establish this musical theatre as a non-partisan, non-sectarian theatre bereft of class and political affiliations. Such a position was reinforced by the Brothers' concerted effort to stay out of the political spotlight by refusing to disclose to the media their political and ideological affiliations. Their musical plays were applauded all over the MENA region to enormous success – perhaps precisely because of their avoidance to take a clear political stance. Therefore, it was not expected that Ziad would ignore this 'Rahbani principle' and engage directly in the political quagmires of the time, while announcing publicly – to much shock and awe – that he is a Marxist and a sympathizer of the Lebanese Communist Party.

Perhaps it is not surprising that Ziad would rebel against his parents' success as a right of passage to forge his own artistic and political identity. However, it remains interesting to look at other influences that shaped his career. Many cultural factors contributed to shaping Ziad's aesthetic and politics including his familiarity with the works of Bertolt Brecht and French playwrights such as Eugène Labiche, Marcel Pagnol, Racine, and Molière. Talking about Pagnol,

Ziad exclaims: "I was so touched by Pagnol that I wished that someone could write in a language like the language in which he has written that resembles our street language"⁷⁶ (*Malla Inta* 00:30:54-00:31-13). Ziad went a step further by developing a language based on "innovation at the level of both syntax and terminology" (Elzeer 197). Thus, he represented a new kind of humor that differs from what was prevalent in the Levant. In her study of comic elements in Ziad's language, Nada Elzeer opines:

The elements of his humorous language range from the unusual pronunciation of common words to the use of unusual, sometimes previously unknown words. Other devices include changing the syntax of set phrases or idiomatic expressions, convoluting the syntax of regular sentences in order to produce sarcasm, juxtaposing different levels of register, and jumping back and forth between the colloquial dialect and the classical language (Elzeer 197).

Not only did Ziad seek to subvert the classical Arabic language with colloquial speech and slang dialogue, he also challenged the realistic language of drama with dislocated puns, absurdist repetitions, and rephrased clichés, imbuing the stage with linguistic and cultural anxieties of a society trying to make sense of its absurd fate. Not unlike Ionesco's or Beckett's characters, Ziad's characters become agents who degrade language while they are being degraded by it.

As for the content and political orientation of his work, it is likely that his reading of one of the French Communist thinkers and philosophers work, Roger Garaudy,⁷⁷ prompted his wider

" وكثير تأثرت فيه يعني بشكل إينو حسيت دغري إنو لو في واحد يعرف يكتب شي مثل هاللغة اللي عم يكتبها اللي هي بتشبه لغتنا بالشارع. " 76

⁷⁷ Roger Garaudy (1913-2012) was a French philosopher, Communist, and resistant fighter in the Second World War. In 1982, he converted to Islam after marrying a Palestinian woman. In the 1990s, he was accused of anti-Semitism due to his Holocaust denying positions. Consequently, he was subjected to a publication ban by the French courts.

interest in Marxism. Political factors also contributed to Ziad's ideological maturity, the most important of which is the growth of the Lebanese Left movement since the 1960s, the creation of labor unions coalescing around the CGTL (Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Libanais), which led workers in demonstrations calling for political, economic and social reforms. The student movement joined the labor movement with students from the American University of Beirut, the Lebanese University, and Beirut Arab University, in addition to high school students and other activists, teachers' unions, Communists and Arab Nationalists. The most noteworthy demonstration took place in April 1972 demanding better work conditions, better funding for schools and universities, political reforms, and increased freedoms. More than 20,000 students and workers took part in this highly publicized protest, but they were met by violent suppression from the government security forces who attacked the march and killed and injured many protesters.

Furthermore, features of sectarian conflict started to reappear against the background of discriminatory policies, systemic inequalities, the position on Arab Nationalism, and the presence of Palestinians in Lebanon, followed by the arrival of Syrian forces, first as peacekeepers mandated by the Arab league, then as collaborators with some of the warring factions. Most of the leftist forces were calling for a revolution against the regime including the Lebanese Communist Party with which Ziad was a sympathizer. In 1973, an armed operation carried out by three leftists led by a militant, Ali Shuaib, took over a branch of Bank of America in Beirut to protest the USA's financing of Israel in its war against Syria and Egypt. These events

may have inspired Ziad in writing *Happiness Hotel*.⁷⁸ In one of his television interviews, he talks about this incident: “Now, our work has started”⁷⁹ (*Malla Inta* 00:35:57-00:36:00).

*Happiness Hotel*⁸⁰ tells the story of a poor young man named Zakariah whose wife had expelled him from the house, which forced him to rent a cheap hotel room at ‘Happiness Hotel’. A few hours after his arrival, two armed men take over the hotel and take the guests hostage. It turns out that these gunmen (Abbas and Fahd) are nothing but poor workers who were fired from their factory job because they were organizing workers and inciting them to strike. Abbas and Fahd put hostages in front of two options, either death or participation in the revolution. To get rid of this predicament, hostages decide, in agreement with the daughter of the hotel owner (Sawsan), to seduce Abbas into marriage in order to give up his revolutionary ideas. Abbas gives in to this temptation and, to save face, uses the impostor revolutionary theorist, Raouf, to inform the hostages that the revolution will be postponed for better planning. He then leaves the hotel with Sawsan only to discover soon after that the seduction was just a ploy. That is when he decides to return to the hotel to kill everyone, but Sawsan precedes him there and alerts every one of the need to escape. When Abbas and Fahd reach the hotel, they find that everyone has fled, except for the dancer, "Tahyyat" and Zakariah, who was convinced of the necessity of the revolution and started to dream of it for the sake of the future of his children. Abbas realizes that the matter is over, so he accepts sex with the dancer as a consolation prize for the failure of the revolution. Fahd asks Zakariah to leave the hotel, but dismayed, Zakariah refuses and asks him

⁷⁸ Shuaib and his accomplices demanded the release of Arab Nationalists from prisons and demanded \$10 million to contribute to the war against imperialism. The group threatened to kill a number of hostages within a specified deadline in the event that their demands were not met. However, Lebanese security forces stormed the building and killed Shuaib and one of his comrades and arrested the two others.

⁷⁹ أيوا. هاد.. هلق الشغل

⁸⁰ *Happiness Hotel* sound recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAfMCIhD1q4>

sarcastically to slap him in the face – even just one slap to enable history to record that the alleged revolution had managed “to move its paralyzed hand” Even a slap, Fahd was not able to deliver.

The point of this political scheme is to condemn the failure of revolutionaries to carry out successful revolutions. This condemnation was not only directed at Abbas, who succumbed to cheap temptations, but also at the fear and indolence of the poor hotel guests who conspired against Abbas. It was not an accident that Ziad chose artists and intellectuals to be his main emissaries of this critical message of the Left. Aysar is a composer, Barakat is a singer, Tahyyat is a dancer, Raouf is "an intellectual". As such, Abbas had artists and intellectuals on the top of his list of hostages slated for execution. According to Abbas, it is the artists and intellectuals who are falsifying reality by making people live in a distorted world of false consciousness. Through these choices, Ziad wanted to reflect his position about the role of art and culture in society from a Marxist and socialist viewpoint. In a famous scene which revises the well-known Marxist saying: “religion is the opium of the people” Fahd declares:

FAHD: Aysar and Barakat. Composer and singer ... one and two

AYSAR and BARAKAT: (*together*) Why sir?

FAHD: You are the opium of society. The people are suffering, and you numb them with your songs. You are confusing the revolution, One and Two (*Happiness Hotel* 01:01:48-01:02:05).

We can track this attitude in later plays such as *What about Tomorrow?* through the character of the poet who recites abstract political poems no one understands while conspiring to keep people oppressed:

NAJIB: He is a great intellectual! Tell me, what did you gather from his poems?

RAMIZ: His poems are great. They are full of meanings and morals. But the problem is that people are not smart.

NAJIB: What are you talking about? Tell me, what did you understand?

RAMIZ: What do you want me to understand? Do you think I can reach his level of thinking?

NAJIB: We do not want to reach his level of thinking, but at least we want to understand what he says (*What about Tomorrow?* 1:28:20 - 01:28:37).

The idea of criticizing unrealistic artistic and literary rhetoric will turn into a major theme in the play *A Failing Thing* (*Shi Fashil*, شى فاشل 1983), which some critics considered a direct and frank criticism of Ziad's parents' theatre. In *Happiness Hotel*, Ziad had not acquired his father's experience of mixing music and drama yet. It was common in the early works to interrupt the play for 15 minutes musical interludes. In *What about Tomorrow?* Ziad seemed to better understand the role of songs and how to insert them efficiently into the texture of drama. Abido Bacha believes that Ziad's theatrical project is based on three primary plays: *What About Tomorrow?*, *A Long American Movie* and *A Failing Thing*. Bacha argues that in these three plays Ziad succeeded in shifting his theatre from a state of audio experimentation to a state of visual creation. However, Bacha considers *Happiness Hotel* as a totally immature experience in political terms since its only legacy is its new language and comedic style. Examples of these linguistic experimentations can be found in the scene where Zakariah, speaking to his wife on the phone, tells her how to get money to settle a debt he owes.

ZAKARIAH: Let Doomit pay him, and you “pay” Doomit, and then I will “pay” you
(*Happiness Hotel* 00:35:18-00:35:23).

In this short sentence, Ziad plays on three meanings in the Arabic semantic field of the word 'pay'. First, he asks his wife to ask her lover to pay a debt for him; in the second, he asks his wife to have sex with her lover for the money he needs to pay his creditors; and in the third, he threatens his wife for having ‘cheated’ on him even though he is well aware of this scheme.

Happiness Hotel remains one of the most politically charged plays of modern Arabic theatre because of the way it critiques politics and the state via a public social discourse carried by characters who as Beckett suggested, must “fail better”⁸¹ knowing that their attempts are always thwarted. Socio-political problems woven through dramatic forms do not always yield desired effects; this is perhaps the reason why comedy becomes a vehicle to pass complex messages that otherwise remain too didactic or superficial at a time when political theatre seems to be in retreat. Ziad’s next play will move away from the political spectacle toward its attending accomplice, the social spectacle.

What about Tomorrow? and Artistic Maturity

*What About Tomorrow?*⁸² tells the story of a young man named Zakaria (again, played by Ziad) and his wife Thouraya who were forced by poverty to leave their village to work in a shoddy Beirut bar called Sandy Snack. Most of the clients at Sandy Snack are tourists and drunks coming to waste time while the war rages on outside. Times are tough on Zakaria with a spike in the cost of living, while the bar manager refuses to increase the staff’s salaries, Thouraya, with her husband's knowledge, turns tricks with the rich tourists. When her side job is no longer a

⁸¹ Beckett wrote in his 1983 story, *Worstward Ho*: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail better.”

⁸² *What about Tomorrow?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQQbNYygvbg>

secret and starts humiliating her husband, Zakaria asks her to quit. Thouraya refuses as long as Zakaria does not have an alternative plan to provide for the family and pay their accumulated debts. The relationship between the couple worsens when Zakaria is suspicious that the relationship of his wife with one of her Johns had taken an emotional turn. Despite Thouraya assuring him that she only loves him, he insists that she quit her side hustle. When one of the customers interferes in the quarrel between Zakaria and his wife, Zakaria nearly kills him by breaking a bottle over his head. In the end, Zakaria is sent to prison, while his wife finds herself forced to return to turning tricks so she can pay his legal fees.

Ziad wrote this play after what is known in the Lebanese Civil War as “the two-year war” (1976-1978). At the beginning of the war, battles broke out between various Lebanese factions and Palestinians because of the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon, and the demand of the leftist forces to reform the political system based on sectarianism. Tensions reached a climax after the killing of the leader of the Nasserite Party, Ma’rouf Sa’ad (March 1975), during a demonstration in Sidon by fishermen angered by the government’s decision to grant exclusive fishing rights on the shore of Sidon to a company owned by former president Camille Chamoun. At the same time, tensions had been on the rise between Palestinian factions and Lebanese Christians leading to the infamous bus incident on April 14, 1975, considered the spark that ignited the 15 year Civil War.

In the morning of April 14th, unknown gunmen, suspected of being Palestinians, attempted to assassinate the head of the Kataeb Party, Pierre Gemayel (1905-1984), while he was inaugurating a church in Ain El-Remmaneh, an East-Beirut neighborhood, killing a body guard and wounding two others. In the afternoon, a bus carrying Palestinians returning from a demonstration was attacked in retaliation as it passed through the same neighborhood. The result

was the death of about 30 people and injury of many more. All-out war broke out between Christian factions on the one side, and Palestinian armed factions supported by predominantly Muslim militias, which led to the partition of Beirut into two parts: East Beirut with its predominantly Christian population with a small Muslim minority and West Beirut with its Sunni Muslim majority with small minorities of Shia, Christians and others. People were forced to flee from one side to the other based on their religion or sectarian affiliation, losing their jobs and homes in the process. Many people beheld the war as a sectarian war, while some leftists, primarily Communists, considered it to be a class struggle: a war of poor people for the benefit of rich people. Ziad tried to reflect this vision without addressing the sectarian feature of the crisis (unlike what he did in his next play). Instead, he preferred to focus on the class dimension, especially with the deterioration of the economic conditions as a result of the war. He tried to warn Lebanese society of the dangers that assail it in the absence of political reforms. The play's symbolism lies in the warning that Lebanon will transform into a sleazy bar, a client state for foreign powers. When Zakaria quarrels with an obnoxious customer, the bar manager rebukes him by saying:

BAR MANAGER: The customer pays out of his pocket, so, in exchange you have to pay out of your dignity (*What about Tomorrow?* 00:40:10- 00:40:13).

Zakaria reminds us of the Brechtian character who is unable to grasp the political dimension underlying the crisis facing his survival. Therefore, we see him snap at his wife, not at the employer who uses him and his wife, nor at the clients who exploit his wife, nor at the political system that perpetuates his subjugation. He is like Mother Courage in *The Mother Courage and her Children* who does not comprehend why the war killed her children one after the other. Or Galy Gay in *Man Equals Man*, a simple Irish porter who does not know that he has been used

and made into a brutal killer just that British soldiers in colonial India can cover up their destruction of a pagoda.

Zakaria, like most of Ziad's characters, is poor, oppressed, lost, and silenced; that's why he always answers his wife's question: "what about tomorrow?" with dead silence. For her part, Thouraya asks this question knowing that Zakaria is unable to answer; she only does this to remind him that the future is dark, that quitting work is not an option for the poor, and that he has to continue to turn a blind eye to what she does on the side. Here, the political symbolism of this relationship is hard to miss. Like Zakaria's and Thouraya's marriage, Lebanon's unity is disintegrating before our eyes, ceding to a fractured vision of a country (the bar) on the precipice of complete pandemonium. The comic relief comes from impossible situations Zakaria finds himself in, an example of which is found when he tries to ask the Manager for a raise revealing that class struggle is an excuse for comedy:

ZAKARIA: Mr. Antoine, I need to talk to you about something.

BAR MANGER: Yes, I know, I know, a pay raise.

ZAKARIA: Yes.

BAR MANGER: I know, because you have nothing else on your lips. I wish you would talk about something else that's more pleasant.

ZAKARIA: Mr. Antoine, believe me the cost of living has going up?

BAR MANAGER: Yeah, yeah, cost of living; it's going up for you and me, you're not the only one suffering from its brutal increase. You and I are in the same boat. [...] I know your plight, trust me my friend, we are both in this together. I'm not the one to

blame; there are those big capitalists that are exploiting both of us"⁸³ (*What about Tomorrow?* 00:15:06 - 00:16:30).

Zakaria proceeds to bluff by threatening to quit his job to which the boss remains indifferent. He accepts his fate and returns to work defeated. This class struggle expressed through light-hearted comedy and mundane exchanges is the way political theatre can pass messages through tense or overwrought relations between characters. The failure of Zakaria at securing a raise and the inability of his wife to quit her side hustle is the reminder that we do not exist in a grandiose political landscape of power, coercion, and injustice but in the micro-political practice of the everyday life with its small battles and humiliating defeats. This is perhaps what pushes Rahbanian characters to the brink of madness to the point that they may need a mental hospital, such as the one presented in Ziad's subsequent play.

A Long American Movie, the Play that Angered the US Government

Johnny Seddik says that this play disturbed the US Government to the point that the US Embassy in Beirut sent a letter to the Lebanese President at the time, Amine Gemayel (1942), to intervene to stop broadcasting excerpts of the play on the Radio of Lebanon. However, stopping the broadcast in 1980 did not prevent the play from spreading across the MENA region because Ziad enthusiasts in Lebanon and Syria had copied the play on cassettes and exchanged them

⁸³ "زكريا: مسيو أنطوان بدي أحكيك بشغلة، بس مش عارف كيف.

أنطوان: الزودة.

زكريا: نعم.

أنطوان: مفهومة ولك مفهومة. بشو معقولة تحكوا إنتو. إنتو أصلا ما بتحكوا إلا لما بيكون بدكن زودة. ياريت يعني تحكوا بشي هيك شي حلو يكون إلو معنى يعني.

زكريا: مسيو أنطوان صدقتني المعيشة غليت.

أنطوان: المعيشة غليت ع الكل يا زكريا. ما تحكي. غليت علي مثل ما غليت عليك. [...] أنا معك. بس شو بدنا نعمل؟ في عنا هالكم تاجر بالبلد هودي. هودي هالرأسالية اللي عم بيمصوا دمنا نحن الشعب."

covertly. What bothered the Americans is the talk about a conspiracy that the American administration (The Kissinger Plan perhaps) is carrying out against Lebanon and the Middle East. Although Ziad did not confirm any implied conspiracy in the play, its title connoted it to cast enough shadow. The play opens with the narrator explaining: “The events of this play take place in the month of October 1980, October 1979 or October 1978, where the overall political and psychological situation has not changed overall” (*A Long American Movie* 00:00:10 - 00:00:39).

The play, which premiered at the iconic Piccadilly Theatre in 1980, is set in a psychiatric hospital where nine patients rattled by the war, meet in one dormitory. There is Rashid (played by Ziad himself) a former militiaman and a thug who is fed up with the duplicity of people around him. His response is often aggression and violence towards anyone who disagrees with him. Edward is a Christian who suffers obsessional Islamophobia and sees a threat in anyone who he thinks might be a Muslim, all of whom he calls ‘*Mahmoudeit*’. Abdel Al-Amir is a university professor who previously taught logic and is currently writing a book to explain the nature of the American conspiracy in the region, that’s why he also repeats the word “mu’amara مؤامرة” (conspiracy in Arabic) everytime he speaks. Nizar is a member of the Lebanese National Movement. Hani is addicted to submission and fear of explosives everywhere due to the daily humiliation he suffers at checkpoints between the conflict zones in East and West-Beirut. There are also the cool-headed Abu Laila and Omar, two young men who the war has turned into drug addicts. In addition, there is the Armenian Zaven who suffers from an identity crisis because as a refugee in Lebanon he refused to take sides in the conflict.

Conversely, the medical staff tries to treat the patients through dialogue sessions in the hope of helping them abandon their violent and suicidal ideations. However, the therapists' lack

of logical answers to the complex questions posed by the patients and the quarrel that occurs between the therapists themselves against the background of their sectarian affiliations make the patients' situation even worse. This compels the medical team to resort to electroshock therapy to force patients to stop asking questions and adopt unrealistic ideas about the nation, conspiracy and peace and harmony between warring factions in Lebanon. The violent treatment turns the patients into mere parrots without a soul, repeating words that have no echo in their convictions. The conflict in this play takes an external form: the two parties to this conflict are the patients on one side and the therapists on the other.

A Long American Movie is considered the most daring of Ziad's plays because it raised the issue of sectarianism directly and unequivocally revealing the truth of what is going on in the hearts of those who were considered friends or belonging to the same intellectual or political camp. "It was one of the rare times that someone talked about the sectarian conflict between Muslims and Christians in areas that were still mixed"⁸⁴ (*Out of the Text* 00:02:49:00- 00:02:55).

When the play was performed in 1980,⁸⁵ it was widely accepted by all Lebanese people, especially the youth, because it addressed a contemporary reality that the art of the period tried to avoid. Furthermore, it revealed that the Lebanese, despite their involvement in this war, do not understand their reality and "fail to grasp it in its totality" (Haugboll 178). Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this play is its leaning toward absurdist dialogue, which hides a lot of double-entendre between its lines.

⁸⁴ " وكانت هي من المرات النادرات اللي بينحكى فياعن الصراع المسيحي الإسلامي في منطقة واحدة. " ⁸⁴

⁸⁵ In 2016, a film version of the play was released by M Media. The trailer can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoD5tCSPIsg>:

RASHID: Events of Lebanese incidents...Do not go far... Oh god...five years ... a new Lebanon... We found it... meat in dough (Meat pies) (*A Long American Movie* 01:13:57-01:17:07).

This is not a bad translation; even in Arabic this line does not make sense. Although this sentence does not follow grammar rules that make speech understandable, even in colloquial Lebanese, Rashid may have wanted to say that Lebanon is being turned upside down and that no one in the world is able to understand the reason for this crazy war. Rashid marvelously links this idea to the opportunism of one of the militia leaders (Abu Al-Jawaher, a famous nom de guerre) who sacrificed many Lebanese youth and looted and pillaged in the name of the cause, to only find out that he wants to open a restaurant in which he serves meat pies to his customers. This new language invented by Ziad became very popular among young people in the Levant where many use it idiomatically in their daily conversations to ridicule political figures or to express their revolutionary identity. The style became known as "ZiadSpeak". Sune Haugboll defines this language as “a cool, drawling accent that emulates Rahbani’s expressions and is often adopted by young Lebanese who wish to appear cool” (179). Thus, in this play, Ziad was not focused on the character's story as much as on its contradictions as a substitute for conflict in the dramatic theatre. Some critics believe that this play’s inspiration was the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which in turn is based on a novel of the same name written by Ken Kesey. The movie was produced in 1975, and featured Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher and Will Sampson in the main roles. However, other than the events that take place in a psychiatric clinic, there are no other similarities between the film and the play.

A Long American Movie remains today one of the most significant plays of the Lebanese Civil War using an episodic structure to frame an examination of the psychological aftermath of

the war on youth. Unlike Al-Maghout's and Lahham's plays, or even Ziad's previous plays, the humor is generated from the absurd and hallucinating situations the patients find themselves in. The reality in the hospital does not necessarily lead to sound political analysis but to a grotesque political spectacle that further alienates the Lebanese political subject. There is a clear departure from Brechtian concerns of Ziad's previous plays towards a return to expressionism or the representation of the inner reality on stage and making use of the monstrous and grotesque where the comic turns macabre, announcing the plays that follow.

A Failing Thing and the Role of Art

In 1983 Ziad returns with *A Failing Thing* to raise the issue of sectarianism again, but this time on the ground that it is one of the many variables in the life of the Lebanese people. Thus, it is no longer useful for the artist to hide behind the common cultural heritage of Lebanon, or resort to a world of romantic fantasy in order to delude the Lebanese that they are fine. Some critics considered that in this play, Ziad sharply ridicules the plays of his parents. Regardless of whether he specifically criticized his parents' theatre or any other artwork that does not deal with reality as it is, Ziad's primary aim was to bring the role of art and its relationship to society into public debate. This play, in which Ziad uses "a play within a play" technique, is set in one of West Beirut's theatres, where director Noor rehearses his new play (*Mountains of Glory*), which takes place in wartime. *Mountains of Glory* is a play that tells a story of a village where peace and harmony prevailed until a stranger came and stole the clay jar placed in the village square. This matter creates discord between the people of the village who exchange accusations of who stole the clay jar, until a beautiful young woman reveals the secret of the stranger, prompting the villagers to unite to retrieve it. The plot of *Mountains of Glory* ends here. However, the events of *A Failing Thing* continue to the point that the play almost failed due to sectarian quarrels among

the troupe members. But Nour's interference in resolving conflicts results in convincing actors that they do not have to love each other to represent love. In one of his television interviews, Ziad talks about the irony that the actors who were working with him on this play squabbled in real life, just like in the play. In addition to the occurrence of a number of sectarian problems among members of the public during some shows, and the discovery of many graffiti on the theatre's washroom walls that threaten some of the actors on the ground of their sectarian affiliations. The play fails as the title suggest in an unexpected way when a heritage character, Abu Al Zuluf, breaks into the theatre, intercepting the object of the play and inviting the Lebanese to face reality and stop living in the illusion of the beautiful past:

ABU AL-ZULUF: Who are you to talk about Sherwal?⁸⁶

NOUR: We are trying to get back to the aesthetics of beautiful ancient things.

ABU AL-ZULUF: Stop going back. You will not bump into us. We're moving forward and you're going back. At least look at what's behind you (*A Failing Thing* 02: 14: 34-02: 14: 43).

The play ends when Nour is forced to wear traditional costumes and leave with Abu Al-Zuluf to Kfar Nabrahk to see the real picture of the village today. However, Nour starts to implore Abu Al-Zuluf not to take him to the village because he is a Christian and the residents of that village are Druze and may want to kill him. In reaction, Abu al-Zuluf suggests giving him a sword and a shield (like the weapons he uses in his plays) to defend himself against machine guns and bombs. Abu al-Zuluf wanted to tell Nour that love, patriotism, and brotherhood among the Lebanese that he talks about in his play are false and deceptive, and that he, as an artist, has to deal with reality

⁸⁶ Traditional baggy pants men wore in the Levant. They are no longer worn by people today except for a very small number of elderly people in some villages or in ceremonial or traditional performances such as the Dabkeh dance.

as doctors do when they inform their patients the truth about their illness. At the same time, Abu Al-Zuluf criticizes the opportunism of artists who use symbols and ambiguous language that can be interpreted in many ways in order to appeal to both sides. Such as Nour's use of the word "stranger" and how it could be interpreted in two completely contradictory ways: either "the Palestinian" or "the Israeli"

Because of this play, some right-wing critics accused Ziad of declaring Lebanon "a failed state" and that he had taken this position in the wake of the crushing defeat that the Left suffered in Lebanon especially after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Unlike his parents, Ziad frequently speaks to the media and expresses his political stances boldly and frankly. However, he remains one of the avant-garde artists in the Arab world, whether in music or theatre, who never fails to surprise his fans with every new work. Perhaps the shift, in his last two plays, *Concerning Dignity and the Stubborn People (Bekhsous Al-karami wal-Sha'ab Al-Aneed, 1993)* and *Had it not Been for a Little Bit of Hope (Lawla Foshato Al-Amali, 1994)* – appears to be towards a form of a post-dramatic theatre. With these two plays, he uses multimedia for the first time to provide a wide range of sketches that ridicule social and political figures. In this way, Ziad has permanently abandoned the realistic approach in favor of theatricalized representation. Because of this noticeable shift and Ziad's tendency to tackle issues that belong to the critical social theatre more than they belong to the comical political theatre, we will not analyze these two plays at length.

In conclusion, it can be said that the political comedy theatre of Lebanon has remained confined to the plays of Ziad Rahbani. Despite new attempts made by George Khabbaz to revive this type of theatre, the experience of Ziad Al-Rahbani remains a unique one that contemporary theatre is not able to reproduce.

Conclusion

The emergence of the political theatre in Syria and Lebanon has been associated with the rise of the theatre movement in the early sixties on one hand, and political events on the other hand, especially the 1967 war, and the October 1973 war. In Lebanon specifically, the active political movement in the early seventies and then the outbreak of the civil war in 1975 played a major role in shaping a political theatre at the intersection of Brecht and vaudeville. While serious theatrical artists chose to link their political theatre to the forms and traditions of Western theatre, comedic artists preferred to rely on the traditions of the Arab popular theatre in order to restore the spirit of the first Arab experimental theatre of pioneers like Maroun Al-Naqqash and Al-Qabbani. The use of experimental theatre as an aesthetic framework to present contemporary political content led to the birth of the so-called political comedy theatre, whose features we analyzed at length in the works of Thorns and Tishreen Group in Syria, and Ziad Al-Rahbani Theatre in Lebanon. This theatre addressed the most prominent issues at the center of an Arab awakening in the 70s and 80s. Serious issues such as the state of war with Israel; failed progressive revolutions; corruption of Arab regimes; political hypocrisy; the fake media; oppression; humiliation; forced migration; opportunism, sectarianism; demagoguery of Arab intellectuals and artists; all of these can more easily pass through the filter of comedy than the serious, tragic or didactic art. In terms of comedy, this theatre relied on sharp satire and clever dialogue, a strange mixture of several styles of comedies such as vaudeville, black comedy, ideas comedy, physical comedy, and comedy of manners. On the other hand, it combined the methods of dramatic theatre, epic theatre, physical theatre, as well as occasionally early post-dramatic theatre. In terms of the dramatic structure, the comical political theatre in Syria and Lebanon resorted to creating simple plots to suit its popular audiences, while making sure that those plots

were flexible enough to allow a large number of issues to be raised in a single play. The focus was on political and social contexts and the nature of the relationships that govern people's lives instead of focusing on the narrative. Playwrights drew most of their characters from everyday reality, while taking care that some of them symbolize general enough concepts through which they affirm universal values such as love, goodness, homeland, co-existence, and progress.

The legacy of this theatre today is the emphasis on direct-speech, simplicity of thought, and a move away from ambiguity as a kind of intellectual luxury practiced by intellectuals who are separated from reality. At the same time, the use of non-codified local dialects helped to give the playwrights absolute freedom to deal with the language, which enabled an artist, such as Ziad, to develop a special language to use as a comedic device. The goals of political comedy theatre ranged between a call for revolution and a desire to communicate the voice of the people to governments so that they would assume their national responsibilities and carry out the required political and social reforms. This theatre achieved wide spread recognition in all Arab countries, however, the political and economic conditions have worsened in recent years leaving very little room for theatrical critique and experimentation. While the 1970s profoundly debated the meaning of the *polis*, the *demos*, and the people (*ethnos*) who share kinship, history, language, and culture, recent decades of multiple inner wars, foreign interventions, terrorism, fundamentalism, forced migration, diaspora, and further loss of territories has sent the political body into unprecedented crises. In Syria, the civil war of the last decade and the subsequent refugee crisis destroyed what was left of contemporary theatre. In addition to the departure of some respected artists and critics from Syria, such as Amal Arafa, Sulafa Muammar, Abdel Moneim Amayeri, Mary Elias and Esmat, (who recently died in the USA from COVID19), Syrian artists who preferred to stay are still suffering from harsh working conditions that led to a

significant decrease in the numbers of productions. The few plays were produced in Syria during the recent civil war are by Ayman Zidan, Ghassan Masoud, Samer Imran and Mamoun Al-Khatib. It could also be argued that the devastating war and the tragedies that accompanied it wiped out the desire of people of laugh or watch comedies. Current theatre in Syria has not seen a repeat of the experience of Ziad Rahbani, who produced his plays in the middle of the war. Similarly, aside from George Khabbaz, contemporary Lebanese artists such as Hanane Hajj Ali, Carlos Chahine, Ali Chahrour, Rabih Mroué, Hisham Jaber, and Chrystele Khodr have turned away from direct political theatre and intervention toward experimental forms, solo performance, devised theatre and conceptual concerns largely divorced from the political preoccupations of the pioneers.

Lastly, contemporary concerns in Arab theatre may not be entirely divorced of politics, rather a political aesthetic may no longer be tenable as the revolutionary optimism of the 70s and 80s and the clear political demarcation lines have become blurred, giving way to a nightmarish vision of failure and disillusionment that no amount of comedy can conceal. As British playwright, David Edgar said, when asked about the failure of political theatre:

I think the overall theme for me [...] is of coming to terms with the failure of Socialism to live up to the ambitions of its founders. Each new generation comes to terms with that in different ways. But also, why did the idea of a more equal society and – more and more – a society that enables people to emancipate themselves and discover themselves prove to be so unrealisable? How can one get over the waves of disillusionment and avoid the kind of retreat into cynical despair or the defector's march to the Right? (Edgar, *The Guardian*)

A possible answer to this question is perhaps what this essay tried to offer.

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