

ARAB-MUSLIM THEATRE DEFENDED

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Abstract

This article re-visits Greek and Arab-Muslim theatres from the avant-garde perspective to illuminate the aesthetics of theatre to which scholars in the School of Orientalism and the School of Arab Intelligentsia should return when evaluating Arab-Muslim theatre. Without this illumination, scholars, as this article shows, will fail to objectively read and correctly evaluate Arab-Muslim histrionic practices. Availing itself of Abdelkbir Khatibi's double approach and proceeding from the conviction that theatre is the achievement of both actors and spectators while drama is an artistic linguistic creation, the article critiques the findings of these schools and challenges Orientalist writing which is "after all writing and not reality." This article therefore deems it needful to unearth or more precisely to review avant-garde aesthetics of performance to explain the concept of theatre and to call into question the findings of the schools in question. However, before critiquing these schools, which delineated the subject matter from already disregarded perspectives, this article starts by investigating Greek tragedy in order to examine what theatre is or is meant to be in the hope of building a logical premise. It sheds significant luster on Greek tragedy from the avant-garde perspective to direct attention to the urgent epistemological task of reconsidering and deconstructing hegemonic European historiography which thrives with creating "gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses" in the cultures of others. This article is but an attempt to fill in these gaps and voids and to conceptually challenge Orientalist writing around Arab-Muslim theatre.

Parole chiave

theatre, drama, tragedy, performance, orientalism,
Euro-centrism, modernity, Avant-garde,
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Greek Tragedy Reconsidered

*The Aristotelian theatre is not the only form of theatre.
Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed.*

The enterprise of Orientalism perceives European performance traditions through the lenses of Greco-Roman heritage. Yet non-Western performative traditions and rituals are, however, simply called "non-dramas, manifested forms of folklore, and formulaic orality, or at best, as *pre-theatrical phenomena*."¹ Najib Bounahai rightly observes that "the whole 'Pre-Columbus World or the

¹ Khalid Amine, *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, (Le Club du Livre de la Faculté des Lettres et des sciences Humaines de Tétouan, 2000), pp. 8-9.

Oikoumene, from North Africa to South East Asia, ... was perceived in colonial and imperial cartography of performance as what [he] may call ‘the atheatrical arc’ because its histrionics did not fit within the pattern of the proscenium arch.”² As a result of this prejudice,

The fiction invoked by the great narrative of the Western tradition in order to assert itself as a founding presence has become a given reality through various strategies of containment, appropriation, and dissemination. A long-standing scholarship sustained the Eurocentric claim to dramatic presence erecting a hegemonic history concerning the birth of drama as a genre. The first European theatrical age became, somehow, unique in its kind and was thus transposed to other peoples all over the world as a site of presence.³

These succinct and perceptive statements made by two Moroccan scholars inform the thrust of this chapter. My contention therefore is to drive home the argument that Greek tragedy should in no way be taken as the origin of theatre and, by the same token, highlight its ritualistic aspects and the cathartic effects it exudes. Put differently, this chapter explores the anthropology of Greek tragedy and advances the argument that it is but a ludic activity that sprang from the worship of the dead. My ultimate goal here is to encourage scholars to look at their own theatrical forms from anthropological perspectives, which run counter to Orientalist theatrical modernity. The attempt thus is always worthwhile as it encourages filling the gaps and removing the eclipses created by historical writing around our theatre.

I start with the claim often made by scholars that Thespis is the first actor and playwright in the history of drama.⁴ Initially, Thespis performed in the city of Icaria (present day Dionysus, Greece) in early 6th century BCE, with a cast comprising a chorus of fifty actors. He “contrived a break in the representation, by coming forward in person, and from an elevated stand describing in gesticulated narration some mythological story.”⁵ Becoming a storyteller, he relates the adventures of a local hero. By moving away from the chorus and mounting an altar stone, situated at the centre of a circle, he becomes a hero larger than life. On becoming a protagonist, by dint of this switch, Thespis mobilizes a spellbound chorus to his advantage to act out the tribulation of suffering. Philip Wentworth Buckhman maintains that “this step was to add life and spirit” to the “monologues by making the chorus take part in the narrative through an occasional exclamation, question or remark.”⁶ The chorus, by means of mime, responds to his performance though dancing and singing, accompanying him with body and voice; “thus was the germ of dialogue.”⁷ Upon his death, they huddle around the altar bewailing and mourning. They then take up his body, and move around the circle in a sombre convoy.⁸

Thespis is believed to be the “inventor of drama.”⁹ He introduced acting, dancing, singing and “contrived a kind of rude mask made of linen” in order to hide his facial features and “produce a certain degree of histrionic illusion.”¹⁰ He also invented makeup when he “smeared his face with vermilion, then with a pigment prepared from the herb purslain.”¹¹ Thanks to his flair for drama, Thespis mastered his art¹² and wrote plays for his audiences. He travelled to Athens where his performances were a great success, earning him great praise and approbation. Mimicry was accepted to be the weighty form of praise or sycophancy for that matter, and Thespis’s art had now come to be known as *tragedy*. This tragic artform made such a great impression on the ruler, Pisistratus, who

² See Najib Bounahai, “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited” in Najib Mokhtari (ed.) *Decentering Patterns of Otherness: Towards an Asymmetrical Transcendence of Identity in Postcolonial MENA* (UIR Press, 2016), p. 46.

³ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, pp. 8-9.

⁴ See Philip Wentworth Buckhman, *The Theatre of the Greeks: Or, The History, Literature, and Criticism of the Grecian Drama* (Cambridge: J. Smith, 1827), pp. 12-13.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See for example Philip Wentworth Buckhman, *The Theatre of the Greeks: Or, The History, Literature, and Criticism of the Grecian Drama* (Cambridge: J. Smith, 1827); or, Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005)

⁹ See *The Theatre of the Greeks: Or, The History, Literature, and Criticism of the Grecian Drama*, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

started tragedy contests in 534 BCE. Such contests were entertained in the city Dionysia in a festival which commemorated Dionysus, god of wine, vegetation and fertility.¹³ Wentworth Buckhman concludes that “it was in these rude festivities that the splendid drama of the Greeks found its origin.”¹⁴ This Thespian art is now known as tragedy, an art believed to constitute the ‘origin’ of drama and theatre.

In order to deconstruct this glaring fallacy of European dramatic origin, I deem it necessary to return to the ritualistic ‘roots’ of Greek tragedy, which conservative students of Greek drama accepted as the ‘origin’ of this generic histrionic praxis. Looking at the subject matter from an anthropological standpoint, William Ridgeway maintains that Greek tragedy is an aesthetic development of dithyrambic enchantments hymned in praise of Dionysus around his hollowed altar. Ridgeway says that this latter was believed to be “an indigenous Greek deity, although there was a consensus of opinion among all Greek writers from Homer downwards to the contrary.”¹⁵ In this sense, Greek tragedy is a grave ritual originated as a result of the worship of the dead.¹⁶ In *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*, he further observes that “tragedy proper did not arise in the worship of the Thracian god Dionysus.” Rather, “it sprang out of the indigenous worship of the dead, especially of dead chiefs.”¹⁷

Aristotle provided a poetics of Attic tragedy, and gave us a full account of the various stages in its development. The first instances of development were enacted by the famous Aeschylus: he added the second actor, reduced the length of the dance performed by the chorus, and granted significance to the dialogue. Sophocles subsequently added the third actor and scene painting. Afterwards, the dramatic wont had it that short plots had to be supplanted by longer runs, and it was only late that tragedy escaped the grotesque diction by letting go of satiric drama and became utterly sublime. Finally, the meter was changed from tetrameter to iambic; for at the outset they used the tetrameter owing to the style of composition being Satyric and more appropriate for dancing.¹⁸ The cult of Dionysus was performed and celebrated in light of these developmental stages.

Amine quotes Ridgeway and relevantly observes that Greek tragedy along with its different and various stages of development were appropriated and foisted on as the rigid foundations of the theatrical art. “The presence structure allocated to the first European theatrical age has” thus “become hegemonic in academic circles.”¹⁹ The cult of Dionysus in which the Europeans glory is not of Attic origin, but is rather a product of ancient processes of interweaving performance cultures: “the cult of Dionysus was not indigenous in Sicyon, but had been introduced there by Cleisthenes (as it had been also brought into Attica and Naxos), and had been superimposed upon the cult of the old king.”²⁰ In a nutshell, the ritualistic cult of Dionysus was not Greek in origin, but was re-appropriated by the Greeks yet without giving credit to its originators: Is it a Eurocentric act amounting to artistic plagiarism or an ancient act of interweaving histrionics that exacerbates and renders origin an insoluble problematic?

I maintain that the Dionysian cult is not Greek in origin, nor is it exclusively proper to dithyrambic unison hymns. These facts blatantly disprove the fallacy of European dramatic origin, which was kept in vogue for millenniums, and consign it to the lumber-room of history in the teeth of European academics’ serious efforts, which hopelessly entertain and so tenderly sustain this fallacy.²¹ Ridgeway is critical of this erroneous belief. He correctly observes:

¹³ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁵ William Ridgeway, *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), p. 1.

¹⁶ William Ridgeway, “preface” in *Origin of Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910)

¹⁷ See *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*, p. 5.

¹⁸ See William Ridgeway, “Three Notes on the Poetics of Aristotle” in *Classical Tragedy*, vol. vi. (1912), pp. 242-5. These information are cited in the margins of *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*. See also Chapter I in *The Theatre of the Greeks: Or, The History, Literature, and Criticism of the Grecian Drama*.

¹⁹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 9.

²⁰ See *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*, p. 5.

²¹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 9.

In discussing the history of dramatic origin, all historians down to a few years since have, without exception, confined their attention to the rise of the Greek drama, to its imitation in Rome, to the Mysteries and Miracles of medieval Christianity, to the revival of the classical form, and to its splendid development in the plays of Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, Calderon, Corneille, and Racine. Moreover, all writers instead of seeking for the origin of the drama by a rigid application of a historical and inductive method have approached its study from a *a priori* standpoint of pure Aesthetics. But as even now the study of art with few exceptions is almost invariably based on a *a priori* assumptions, little regard being had to the anthropological method, it could hardly have been expected that writers on the drama would have followed other lines.²²

The above statement suggests that the “fallacy that had long been gone unnoticed, or rather deliberately circulated”²³ should no longer be taken as a postulate in the history of world drama, because the facts and particulars referred to by Ridgeway should perforce render this fallacy invalid and compel it to fall to the ground. The claims pertaining to European dramatic origin are thus diametrically de-centered by the vigorousness of the contentions propounded by Ridgeway in support of ‘his doctrine’ that tragedy initially came out of the womb of grave rituals, intended to commemorate the memory of a saint, who was worshiped with trembling and fear, thus morphing into a deity.²⁴ This ritualistic praxis of commemoration is not special to the Greeks alone. Quite the contrary, it is inherently human, and is common to all peoples and cultures including Arab civilization, for it is informed by intricate communal formulaic rituals. In the eyes of Amine, such reading foregrounds the anthropological vantage to the detriment of the long-standing and far-fetched metaphysical outlook.²⁵

An anthropological reading of Greek tragedy is also important here. Anthropologically minded, Greek tragedy is an aesthetic development of primeval formulaic rites and rituals of Dionysus. Yet within frameworks of avant-gardist theatre anthropology, they are “forms of inscriptions under erasure that escape the closure of logocentrism.”²⁶ From a Derridean perspective, these primordial rituals are in essence forms of writing that previously occurred before writing in the narrow scripto-centric sense. For Derrida, “the word is the cadaver of psychic speech, and along with the language of life itself the ‘speech before words’ must be found again,”²⁷ while the play is “a text already written, thought, or lived outside the stage.”²⁸ He therefore calls for liberating theatre from what he calls “the theatrical superstition of the text”²⁹ so as to restore “the creative and founding freedom” of the *mise en scène*.³⁰ In light of Derrida’s insights, I observe that the Eurocentric understanding of the notion of writing is limited and flawed, and is more than that directly linked to Empire Building. Therefore, any claim premised on this understanding must in the last resort be approached with caution and suspicion.

Remarkably, Derrida’s understanding of writing is shared by several prominent authorities and theatre critics. The editor of *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World*, John Russell Brown, perceptibly claims that in theatre writing means performance.³¹ Jean Paul Sartre also suggests that “the word is a certain particular moment of action, and has no meaning outside of it.”³² Brown is aware of the fact that the lack of a written text considerably liberates the performance from limitations and restrictions this text would impose. For Hans-Thies Lehmann, “Theatre is the site not only of ‘heavy’

²² See *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*, p. 1.

²³ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 10.

²⁴ See for example his book *The Origin of Greek Tragedy*.

²⁵ The ideas are taken from *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” in *Writing and Difference* Trans. Alan Bass (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), p. 302.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

³¹ Brown explains that: “*Theatre has its full life only in moments of performance before an audience. A dramatic text is only the bare bones of a play; an empty building gives no sense of a crowded audience; a photograph may represent a posed group and can never reproduce presence, timing, breath—all the vivid impressions actually received in a theatre.*” See John Russell Brown (ed), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1.

³² See J.P. Sartre, “What is Writing” in *What is Literature* (trans.) Bernard Frechtman (Philosophical Library: New York, 1949), p. 21.

bodies but also of a *real gathering*, a place where a unique intersection of aesthetically organized and everyday real life takes place.”³³ For her part, Ginka Steinwachs argues that theatre is “an oralic institution.”³⁴ In *The Empty Space*, Grotowski understands theatre as “a ceremony for those who wish to assist... It is a complete way of life for all its members... his actors have given up everything except their own bodies; they have the human instrument and limitless time—no wonder they feel the richest theatre in the world.”³⁵

This avant-garde conception of theatre liberates itself from the primacy of the text. As will thoroughly be shown in the next chapter, it is this conception that has emancipated Western theatre in the twentieth century from the subversive Eurocentric tradition of valorizing “speech over writing, drama over theatre, and dramatic script over its *mise en scène*.”³⁶ To show the primacy of performance over literacy, or in other words the true ‘origin’ of theatre, Oliver Taplin devotes an entire chapter to “the visual dimension of tragedy.”³⁷ For him, great dramatists have been theatre practitioners, never mere playwrights. They have written plays to be performed before an audience because “for them the play is realized, finds its finished state, in the theatre.”³⁸ Indeed, the text is a mere transcript, “a scenario,” lacking context:

The written quotation of any spoken sentence is a very incomplete transcript of what was conveyed by the utterance itself. On one level we miss the tone of voice, nuance, pace, stress; and we miss facial expression, gesture and the physical posture and positioning of the speaker and addressee. Even more profoundly, the transcript does not convey the roles and social or personal relationships of the real people involved, their past, their shared assumptions, the full circumstances of the speech-act. It lacks *context*. All these attendant circumstances conflow to turn a lifeless sentence, such as may be delivered thousands of times every day, into a unique and expressive communication.³⁹

Hence, to emancipate themselves from the myth of Greek dramatic ‘origin,’ scholars of Greek drama and their followers should understand that it was only after the flowering of Greek tragedy with a period spanning hundreds of years that reading plays started to replace performance as the primary mode of literary communication.

With the shift from the dithyramb to written drama, from the open space into the closed space, from religious to secular, tragedy began to be used for political purposes. Amine ascribes the transposition of this tragic art from the temple (the altar of Dionysus as a religious site) to the public space (Athen’s festival) to the ancient Greek anthropomorphism, which also helped “transform it, in the process, from a quasi-sacred formulaic space into a discursively semi-secular esthetic expression.”⁴⁰ These acts of transposition and transformation respectively had marked the birth of Greek drama. These acts have other implications, that is to say, “the birth of ‘signature’ as ‘the proper name’ and the inauguration of a long-standing subordination of orality to literacy.”⁴¹ These acts of transposition and transformation were carried out by notable playwrights such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Euripides, and others, who competed every year. However, these notable playwrights had wrought, not just written, plays. Their task ended with the performance, not with the script. In Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria*, a wife complains: “Euripides maligns us wherever there are theatres, tragedies, choral songs... so that as soon as our husbands come home from the auditorium they look suspicious.”⁴² “They look suspicious” because Greek tragedies were intended to educate, that is to say, to produce a particular effect.

³³ Ginka Steinwachs is cited in Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Post-dramatic Theatre*, Trans by Karen Jurs-Munby (Routledge: London and New York, 2006), p. 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁵ Grotowski is cited in Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Touchstone, 1996), p. 72.

³⁶ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 11.

³⁷ See Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 12. For more details, see “Greek Theatre,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 13-48.

⁴¹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 12.

⁴² Quoted in *Greek Tragedy in Action*, pp. 1-2.

In their attempts to study this effect, a legion of thinkers and philosophers since Plato⁴³ have at times defended and legitimized and at other times deconstructed and run counter to the hegemonic taxonomy of tragedy as a genre. These defensive yet deconstructive projects⁴⁴ culminated on the belief that “tragedy becomes the most hegemonic yet contested art form.”⁴⁵ In Georg Steiner’s words, tragedy is a “narrative of violence,” appealing to a re-enactment of “private anguish on a public stage,” thereby turning itself into a coercive political matrix of power controlled by the state. For the Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal, tragedy’s function is cathartic in nature. It is premised on the twin principles of fear and pity: fear because the tragedy could befall anyone of us, for we tend to identify ourselves with the hero whose misfortune is often foreseeable and inevitable; pity because we tend to admire the hero’s virtues. It is through the binomial system of fear and pity that “the worst, most evil ideas can be implanted into the inert audience.” Thus, “empathy falsified transforms itself to docile mimicry.”⁴⁶ In this sense, “tragedy, in all its qualitative and quantitative aspects, exists as a function of the effect it seeks, Catharsis,” which is both “correction” and “purification.”⁴⁷ Catharsis is *ipso facto* proven to be a moment of emotional purgation. This insight was laid out in *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*, a valuable study by Thomas J. Scheff: “the feeling of relief from tension and heightened fellow-feeling which follow collective catharsis gives rise to extremely powerful forces of cohesion and group solidarity.”⁴⁸ Thus, catharsis becomes the effect of a corrective apparatus. It aims at “restoring the natural equilibrium and along with it the socio-political cohesion that legitimizes authority and the exercise of power.”⁴⁹ It is a corrective apparatus because “it purges the audience from the previously accommodated disorder and chaos bringing about a dissolution of tension and conflict.”⁵⁰

In light of these psychological insights, Leonard Tennenhouse observes that “stagecraft collaborates with statecraft in producing spectacles of power.”⁵¹ I concur with Tennenhouse in this regard, and also find it pertinent to cite Jérôme Carcopino who maintains that “the Roman people ... made the human sacrifice, the *munus*, a festival joyously celebrated by the whole city, or come to prefer above all other entertainment the slaughter of men armed to kill and be killed for their amusement.” He adds that “the public had grown so greedy for” gladiatorial combats “that candidates

⁴³ These projects are cited and referred to in Amine’s *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*: Plato contends that “tragedy should not be taken seriously,” and thus he discards it altogether as an art form. See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by F.M. Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 325.

⁴⁴ These projects were conducted and inaugurated by Aristotle, through G.W.F. Hegel, A.C. Bradley, G. Steiner, G. Lukács, S. Freud, F. Nietzsche, W. Benjamin, René Gerard, Clifford Leech, to Raymond Williams, John Drakakis... and others. There are several approaches to the study of tragedy’s essence. For example, George Steiner describes this art form as a “narrative of violence,” calling for a re-enactment of “private anguish on a public stage.” This attitude Professor Brown shares with Steiner. He writes, “it remains true that almost all tragedies tell stories of suffering, of mental and physical anguish, and of the waste of life and prosperity. Tragedies incarnate the cruelties and horrors of the human world, and somehow face up to them.” [See *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World*, p. 21.] As for Georg Lukács, tragedy “can extend only in one direction: upwards. It begins at the moment when enigmatic forces have distilled the essence from a man, have forced him to become essential; and the process of tragedy consists in his essential, true nature becoming more and more manifest.” [See *Soul and Form*, Anna Bostock (Trans.) (London, 1974), p. 155.] However, Nietzsche ran counter to Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy. The former contends that “what distinguishes the Aryan conception is an exalted notion of active sin as the properly promethean virtue; this notion provides us with the ethical substratum of pessimistic tragedy, which comes to be seen as a justification of human ills.” [See *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, Francis Golffing (trans.) (New York, 1956), p. 64.] For Clifford Leech, “tragedy is a form of writing, not living.” [See *Tragedy* (London, 1969), p. 68.]

⁴⁵ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ See Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. Trans by Adrian Jackson (Translation: Routledge, 2006), p. 25 and p. 35.

⁴⁷ See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. & M.L. McBride (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 27 and p. 25.

⁴⁸ See T. J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 59.

⁴⁹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The politics of Shakespeare’s Genres* (New York and London, 1986), p. 15.

sought to win votes by inviting the people to witness spectacular scenes of carnage.”⁵² Indeed, in ancient Rome “the emperors, deliberately pandering to the murderous lust of crowds, found in gladiatorial games the most sure, if also the most sinister, of their instruments of power,”⁵³ in which the spectators’ sympathy was for the strongest and most barbarous gladiator.⁵⁴ Studying ancient paintings, Will Durant and Ariel observe that “gladiatorial spectacles of men and women in deadly combat with animals amuse gentlemen and ladies whose aristocratic faces, quietly alert, still live for us on the bright frescoes of the resurrected walls.”⁵⁵

I find it tempting to allege that the state or a political entity and the stage or an artform collaborate and reflect each other by means of a cathartic art form, which strengthens and secures complacency and eventually produces docile bodies. In this sense, the art form of tragedy or tragedy itself perforce tacitly becomes a means to an end, that is to say, indoctrination. In the fifth century B.C., the Greek aristocracy discerned such a means and its effect and thus deployed it to contain resistance through strategies of hegemony and consent.⁵⁶ It was later on re-appropriated by the Romans,⁵⁷ the Elizabethans and subsequent civilizations to yield hegemony and consent. In such an environment, the “tragic hero,” observes Boal, “appears when the state begins to utilize the theatre for political purposes.”⁵⁸ Boal also observes that when Thespis detached from the chorus, the protagonist came into being. In the words of Amine, this in itself marked the political utilization of “tragedy as an aesthetic coercive system of interpolation and the production of docile bodies.”⁵⁹ Indeed, tragedy was politicized with the invention of the protagonist: “In the beginning, the theatre was chorus, the mass, the people. They were the true protagonist. When Thespis invented the protagonist, he immediately ‘aristocratized’ the theatre, which existed before in its popular forms of mass manifestations, parades, feasts, etc.”⁶⁰

Boal gives us a new definition of ‘theatre.’ He is convinced that the rise of the protagonist after Thespis’s rupture from the chorus does not constitute the beginning of theatre since, as it were, theatre in its true sense pre-existed the birth of the protagonist. Taplin insists that “it would be neat to be able to claim (as many have) that the origins of theatre were derived from some primitive or primeval rite.”⁶¹ Taplin further explains in his significant study *Greek Tragedy in Action* that “the very word ‘theatre’ first occurs in the fifth century; *theatron* means a place where things are seen, the audience are *hoi theatai* -those who look on, the spectators. So too, the word drama: something that is acted out,

⁵² These information are taken from: Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, Trans by E. O. Lorimer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 231.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 232.

⁵⁴ See *The Gladiator* (2000), an epic film, directed by Ridley Scott in which, Maximus, a Roman general is betrayed and his family is murdered, a thing that drives the General to return to Rome as a gladiator to seek revenge. But before that, in a scene in Zucchabar, a Roman city in North Africa, he is bought by Proximo, and forced to fight for his life as a gladiator in arena tournaments. After subduing all his rivals to death in the gladiatorial arena, he throws his swords at Proximo, angrily shouting at everyone: “are you not entertained?”

⁵⁵ Will Durant & Ariel, *The Story of Civilization: The Life of Greece Vol. II* (World Library, Inc., 1935), p. 12.

⁵⁶ The Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argues that law, education, police, the media and government are instruments of class control labeling them Ideological State Apparatuses, which embody the principal façade of hegemony. He contends that these institutions govern society to accept a controlling ideology and behave the way governments want them to, conducing to a submissive, docile society which really accepts a capitalist ideology. Indeed, this society buys into the idea that its members are of an inferior status to the established hierarchy, and as a result it becomes a tool of its own oppression. In his part, Antonio Gramsci, delineates that the triumph of the capitalist ideology is parasitic upon one part of society owning the means of production, allowing them to dictate how much pay the workers earn; then the working class consents to this regime. Gramsci labeled his theory, ‘hegemony and consent.’ See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: The Penguin Press, 1969), pp. 127-128. Also see Luciano Pellicani. *Gramsci: An Alternative Communism?* (New York: Hoover Press Publication, 1981), p. 32.

⁵⁷ David Wiles, “Theatre in Roman and Christian Europe” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁸ See *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. 33.

⁶¹ See Oliver Taplin, “Greek Tragedy” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, p. 13.

a communication through action.”⁶² He depicts the dramatist as both director and producer, responsible not only for the script, but also for the performance by means of his instructions to both the actors and the chorus. For Allardyce Nicoll, “the word ‘theatre’ implies a performance given by one group of persons (who may be called the ‘actors’) before an assembled audience.”⁶³ As to Keneeth M. Cameron and Theodore J. C. Hoffman, it is

a wide range of human experience, to be sure, but one that is firmly supported on three points: *performance* (including such performance as plays, scripts, directions, and so on); *performers*; and *audience*. As Eric Bentley put it, in *The Life of the Drama*, “the theatrical situation, reduced to a minimum, is that A impersonates B while C looks on.”⁶⁴

For, Jerzy Grotowski, theatre “cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, live communion.”⁶⁵ In *Dynamics of Drama*, Bernard Beckerman maintains that “theatre...occurs. Theatre does not exist except when it is occurring...It is something happening.”⁶⁶ Beckerman establishes the link between theatre and happening, the Greek word for which is “drama,” meaning to do or to perform. For her part, the theatre critic Erika Fischer-Lichte maintains that wherever someone performs certain actions before a spectator, we finally have what she terms “the fundamental theatrical situation.”⁶⁷

It is thus wrong to claim that the non-presence of a stage as the Western theatrical building in other cultures and civilizations including our own renders these cultures and civilizations atheatrical and devoid of any sense of histrionics. Quoting Victor Turner, Marvin Carlson maintains, “Man is a self-performing animal—his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself.”⁶⁸ That is to say, the essence and spirit of histrionics is an act of representation within an allocated and designated space wherein both performers and spectators merrily partake in the making of performative spectacles. When an actor performs before a spectator, the result is a fundamental theatrical performance: therefore, actors and spectators can be seen as the principal elements of theatre, which can take place in any space, be it closed, open or empty. Along this line of thought, Brook argues that: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.”⁶⁹

Such ‘empty space’ should not inevitably be a closed space, for it is more inclusive as it can be a semi-circular open space or circular as in the case of Moroccan *al-halqa*. These empty and open spaces put at stake the disputable and palpable logocentric fallacy, which claims that there is no theatre outside the building, and eventually strip off the Eurocentric claim of its significance and deny it the basis for privileging certain performances such as tragedy and Opera at the cost of other peoples’ performance cultures. In Amine’s words, such logocentric fallacy emanates from “a misleading confusion of the theatrical building and theatrical space.” He adds, “Also, the idea of theatre as a constructed building, with a managed closure, plenitude and an environment of artificial lighting and conditioning, derives from Northern Europe. It is organized according to the very same hierarchical power structure of logocentrism.”⁷⁰ The theatrical building mirrors up and epitomizes the excess of exclusion proper to and inherent in the European logocentric system of representation. Indeed, its closed space reflects and exemplifies a mechanical exclusion of others outside the building. This

⁶² See Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, p. 2.

⁶³ See A. J. Nicoll, *The Theatre and Dramatic Theory* (London: George Harrap, Co. Ltd, 1962), p. 1.

⁶⁴ See K.M. Cameron & T. J. C. Hoffman, *A Guide to Theatre Study* 2nd edition (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc: New York, 1974), p. 4.

⁶⁵ See Jerzy Grotowski, *Toward a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 19.

⁶⁶ See Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama* (New York: Drama Book Specialist, 1979), p. 6.

⁶⁷ See Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction” in *History of European Drama and Theatre* trans. Jo Riley (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002), p. 2.

⁶⁸ See “Perspective on Performance: Germany and America” by M. Carlson in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York & Londres: Routledge, 2008) pp. 1-10. Quotation from p. 9.

⁶⁹ See *The Empty Space*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 17.

exclusion is no doubt opposed to Moroccan open spaces of performance and spectacle in which all the passersby are invited to join in and partake in the making of spectacle.⁷¹

This study suggests that all spaces are suitable for performance and could be called performative spaces, and warns of looking at stage as the only theatrical space in order not to be caught in the vortex of European stage nostalgia and drift along Orientalist ideas of theatrical modernity. Our performative traditions, which expressed themselves through festive formulaic spectacles, were relegated to the margin and subordinated as forms of festivity and folklore and kept ‘parasitic upon’ the Western modes of theatre making simply because they lacked the so-called dramatic script together with a stage similar to the proscenium-arch. Yet our festive performative traditions are in fact “anonymous inscriptions that ride deep in the collective consciousness of the performers. Moroccans are among those peoples whose traditions of making spectacle have remained unnoticed, subordinated, or even suppressed as *aḵka:l ma: qabl masrahia*’ (pre-theatrical forms).”⁷² Treated as mere festive ritualistic formulae, these performative traditions of Others were excluded under the pressure of European colonial presence. For example, in Morocco the Franco-Hispanic monstrous colonial machine, having recourse to its Manichaean language preached by its Prophet of Orientalism which rises to the plane of Universal Reason, eclipsed our performative traditions and consigned them to the periphery where, as Bounahai correctly observes, they “were frowned upon or left to willow on the sides.”⁷³

Yet what is striking is that when Morocco hailed Middle Eastern theatrical groups, this act of relegation was reinforced because these latter had already appropriated the Western model themselves before the Moroccans did; yet without critiquing its exclusivist tendencies. It is here that Bounahai comes to “a crunch” premised on his skeptical look at the scramble of what he calls “the disaffected loners in the West” into our geographies. These loners “were welcomed *a bras ouverts* as they were reversing the westward march of History, this time East and South, far beyond Asia Minor and far below the Mediterranean southern shore.” Bounahai thus sees this scramble as “a re-invented form of Orientalism and Africanism” because it convinced “the disfranchised lot in the East and the South”⁷⁴ of the urgent need of lifting the whole region out of cultural decadence yet with recourse to ‘the Great Tradition’ that harks back to Greco-Roman legacies. In this sense, the brave cause of the avant-garde is indeed to be suspected and challenged.⁷⁵

However, the avant-gardists are to be credited with returning theatre to its roots, to the people, to the festival – a fact which, instead of being the expression of a faith, is itself the source of a new faith and inspiration. Max Reinhart “looked beyond the conventional stage to realize his monumental concepts...his open-air productions dispensed with all the technology of the modern age to create an archetypal theatre of ritual.” He founded the theatre festivals in Malvern, and at Canterbury, and was “indirectly the progenitor of all festival theatres that have subsequently sprung up around Europe and North America.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Copeau’s purpose was to “to return theatre to its roots, strip the sage and revive ritual” in order to create true theatres “free of commercial pressures.”⁷⁷ In Albert Camus’ eyes, “in the history of the French theatre, there are two periods: before Copeau and after Copeau.”⁷⁸

Reverting to Derrida once again in a related context, one is compelled to ask: what is the implication of the institution of dramatic literature (such as writing)?⁷⁹ Amine propounds an answer to this question in a manner that shows his disavowal of European historicity of writing. He points out that the very notion of drama originated in a certain epoch of writing; that it was formulated as an artistic phenomenon and a project in a language signifying an aura of authority over a *mise en scène* or

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, pp. 17-18.

⁷³ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 56.

⁷⁴ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 51.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

⁷⁶ See Christopher Innes, “Theatre after Two World Wars,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 401.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 409.

⁷⁸ See Albert Camus, *Copeau, seul maître*, in *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* (Paris: Éditions de la Pléiade, 1962), p. 1698. Cited at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Copeau.

⁷⁹ See J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 27.

a performing event; that it was considered as a self-contained product, valorized as the script/text of all subsequent dramatic writings. Historicity is characterized by eclipses, gaps, and absences as it is strongly linked to the possibility of writing as a representation of something other than itself.⁸⁰ The palpable corollary here, which Eurocentrism shrinks from admitting, is that the presence structure of Greek tragedy as a dramatic art form/genre should not be taken as a postulate and posited within the history of world drama because it is originally allocated to the history of Greek drama. In other words, if the dramatic genre/form originated from the Greek religious Dionysian cult, then, by the same token, performing events and practices and ritualistic rites and revels in other cultures must have given birth to the same genre yet ostensibly dissimilar in form and practice.⁸¹ Pharaonic Egypt, Eastern Asia, India, China, Africa...are all exemplary instances of rich amorphous and multifarious amalgams of cults and rites, however primordial, erotic and callous they may seem.⁸²

Deconstructing dramatic history as laid out by the School of Orientalism and the School of Arab Intelligentsia is then of first-rate importance. This should allow us to expose Euro-centrism which hopelessly contrives to invest itself with controlling presence and originality and amplitude of scope, and also styles itself as a rear-guard action, to revise, re-interpret, and re-write the spaces eclipsed by the two schools. In *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Edward W. Said assures us that any successful criticism of subaltern performative traditions has to “supplement the existing narrative with a new narrative.”⁸³ It is in this sense that we should not take Greek theatre as the origin of human theatre entirely. As Amine suggests, “it is time to reconsider other forms of theatrical/performing traditions that have existed outside the grasp of logocentrism, or at best, on the borderline between drama and non-drama, theatre and pre-theater.”⁸⁴

Yet this epistemological task of reconsidering other performative cultures and of critiquing and deconstructing European hegemonic historiography is surrounded by a major snag having to do with filling “gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality.” Aware of the dynamics of colonial archiving, Said calls for a rereading of “subaltern history” because “historical documents are necessarily in the hands of others,” the colonizers, “who ran as well as wrote the history of,” their dependencies.⁸⁵ We must therefore convince ourselves that Bridgman’s operational concepts⁸⁶ are very useful tools in re-writing these

⁸⁰ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 18.

⁸¹ Man is the same everywhere, and he is not tailored according to Darwin. He behaves as a stranger in nature. His estrangement drives him to create fascinating ways of dramas. “By Ridgeway’s definition “theatre” becomes all of mankind’s emotions, experiences, beliefs and myths, dramatically re-enacted. Thus the rituals and ceremonies of the Eskimo, North and South American Indians, and the peoples of Asia and Africa come within the scope of his inquiry.” William Ridgeway, “Introduction” in *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), p. 1.

⁸² I am thinking here of the Neolithic peoples that associated the idea of sowing with the idea of human sacrifice. H. G. Wells in his *Short History of the World* writes that: “It was entanglement, we must remember, in the childish manner, dreaming myth-making primitive mind; no reasoned process will explain it. But in the world of 12,000 to 20,000 years ago, it would seem that whenever seed time came around to the Neolithic peoples, there was a human sacrifice. And it was not the sacrifice of any mean or outcast person; it was usually of a chosen youth or maiden, a youth more often, who was treated with profound deference and even worship.” “The Mexican (Aztec) civilization in particular ran in blood. It offered thousands of human victims yearly. The cutting open of living victims, the tearing out of the still-beating heart, was an act that dominated the minds and lives of these strange priesthoods. Public life, national festivities –all turned on this horrible act.” [See H. G. Wells, *Short History of the World*, Rev. ed. (New York: Pelican Books, 1946), p. 55-56.] Indeed, these rituals, practices and performances are typically human, and are not special to the Greeks alone. More than that, they always give birth to drama and theatre.

⁸³ Edward W. Said, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. vii.

⁸⁴ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 19.

⁸⁵ See *Selected Subaltern Studies*, p. vii.

⁸⁶ In his significant book *Man, the Unknown*, Alexis Carrel calls for the deployment of Bridgman’s operational concepts because they are scientifically based. He writes that these concepts have “been called by Bridgman operational concepts. An operational concept is equivalent to the operation or to the set of operations involved in its acquisition. The precision of any concept whatsoever depends upon that of the operations by which it is acquired...an operational concept will change only when new and more perfect techniques will be

absences, lapses, gaps, and ellipses and in dislocating the hegemonic and exclusivist Eurocentrism whose existence is reposed mainly on labels and tags which “could be instruments of tyranny.”⁸⁷ According to Amine, “there is a narrative missing from the official story of Arabic drama/theatre.” Yet, “this narrative could be recovered and supplemented through highlighting, re-interpreting, revising, and re-writing the space eclipsed by the Eurocentric historiography along with the Arabo-Islamic one.”⁸⁸

Instead of repeating the clichéd Eurocentric views promulgated by the Schools of Orientalism and the School of Arab Intelligentsia that try but in vain to convince us that drama and theatre are of Greek origin, we should as researchers shoulder the burden of laying bare the Eurocentric dynamics of subjugation in the fields of drama and theatre, dynamics that aim at emptying our brains and having us caught in their epistemic power matrices of coloniality. How could we accept their ‘myth of dramatic origin’ at a time during which everybody knows that nothing is fixed or static, including performance cultures that are but restored behaviors governed by the dynamics of ‘rites of transition?’ Should we recoil in silence and be satisfied with the findings of the both schools that clamorously harp on the dependence of Arabic theatre on its western counterpart? Is this not an act of pandering to the Hegelian idea of History as a westward march?⁸⁹ What would be our best response to this Orientalist claim?

Arab-Muslim Theatre and the Avant-Garde

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
William Shakespeare, As You Like It.*

An impressive body of theoretical writings has been produced on Arabic theatre. This chapter examines the major orientations of such writings and offers a reading of Arab-Muslim theatre in light of twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetics, which “does not aim to replace but to add established theories of the aesthetics of work, production and reception.”⁹⁰ I argue that Arab-Muslim theatre is best understood from the avant-garde angle. Thus, availing myself of Khatibi’s insightful concept of double critique, I take issue with both the School of Orientalism as well as the School of Arab Intelligentsia who fell in the snare of ‘colonial power matrix’ set up by the former in order to epistemically colonize the latter. Double critique must be applied in this case to deconstruct and critique this impressive body of theoretical writings. In the words of Bounahai, “one would have to decolonize not only theatre practice in the Arab world, but also the epistemological baggage dragged by Arab intellectuals themselves.”⁹¹

Though the avant-garde is declared defunct, this chapter takes up the debate on Arab-Muslim Theatre from this very perspective, concurring with Mike Sell that “the death of the avant-garde has proven, once again, to have been declared prematurely,”⁹² or simply arguing that avant-garde aesthetics continue to influence theories of drama and theatre. The other perspectives from which this topic was handled are now obsolete because they either started from false premises or built upon false conclusions. It did not strike me to learn of the circulation of these fallacies in the 1960s of the last

discovered. Operational concepts are the only solid foundation upon which we build.” [see *Man, the Unknown* (Harper & Brothers, 1939), p. 8.]

⁸⁷ See Anton Chekhov, “Introduction” in *Plays* (Penguin Books, 2002), p. xi.

⁸⁸ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 20. See Also Amine’s “Theatre in the Arab World: A Difficult Birth” in *Theatre Research International* · vol. 31 | no. 2 | pp: 145–162. pp. 145-146.

⁸⁹ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” pp. 49; 51.

⁹⁰ See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* trans. by Saskya Iris Jain (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), p. 181.

⁹¹ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 48.

⁹² See Mike Sell, “Introduction: The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized” in *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movements* (The University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 1.

century as the School of Orientalism in Europe was still clutching onto the dying canons of European philosophy which hitherto still recognized the deified notion of 'origin' and for millenniums viewed it as scripture. In this vein, Bounahai correctly observes that "one of the amusing ironies in cultural history is that the Arab world embraced the 'Great Western' theatrical tradition at a time when the Avant-garde in the west renounced its West and were heading south in pursuit of inspiration."⁹³

Indeed, before Charles Darwin, Europe lived in complete constancy as it viewed life, existence, God, society and relationships from this obsolete angle. Yet this had to change with the coming of Darwin who presented to Europe and to the world an unprecedented view which sees everything to be always in constant flux. Although Darwin's revolutionary ideas at first prompted a loud uproar in and outside Europe and were met with severe criticism, Europe later had to succumb and embrace these new enthralling ideas. Consequently, Europe started to view life and the world from this angle ever since. As to the notion of 'origin,' it was ridiculed by scholars in all academic disciplines.

What is striking in this instance is not the School of Orientalism's hopeless attempt to inculcate the notion of origin in European thought, but rather the credit of Arab Intelligentsia to Europe's obsolete notions. I suspect that this credit was an unconscious act as it was the direct outcome of the shock of the historical encounter with the colonizer Other who yet introduced himself outside Europe with terms already rejected at home, which made philosophers accuse Europe of "denying its own vision of Man."⁹⁴ Yet this excuse is itself now as obsolete as once were Europe's olden notions. This article thus proceeds from the conviction that theatre is the achievement of both actors and spectators while drama is an artistic linguistic creation, a conception wholly masked by those in the School of Orientalism for sheer vested interests and by their students in the School of Arab Intelligentsia for lack of understanding the theatre in its comprehensive form. In the following, I therefore deem it necessary to unearth or more precisely to review avant-garde aesthetics of performance to explain my understanding of theatre and to call into question the findings of both schools on Arabic theatre. After critiquing these schools which delineated the subject matter from already disregarded perspectives, this chapter will reread Greek tragedy to further examine what theatre is or what is meant to be. It also examines Greek tragedy from the avant-garde perspective to direct attention to the urgent epistemological task of reconsidering and deconstructing European hegemonic historiography which thrives on creating "gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses" in the cultures of others. This chapter therefore is an attempt to fill in these gaps and voids and challenge Orientalist historical writing which is "after all writing and not reality."⁹⁵

Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Performance

I am convinced that any discussion of Arab-Muslim theatre should begin with a review of the aesthetics of (neo)-historical avant-garde.⁹⁶ Without such a review, critics interested in Arab-Muslim theatre will not be able to do it justice and will just end up repeating obsolete fallacies promulgated by their predecessors who fell in the snare of the School of Orientalism which entertains the hope of eclipsing difference. Such review grants critics the privilege to be able to correctly evaluate the body of literature on Arab-Muslim theatre as well as Arab-Muslim theatre itself. Thus a plethora of questions can be asked: what is theatre? What is drama? Can we encapsulate theatre in drama and

⁹³ See "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," p. 50.

⁹⁴ Hichem Djait is cited in "Introduction: The Idea of Provincializing Europe" in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 5.

⁹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. vii.

⁹⁶ I am aware that avant-garde philosophy was heavily criticized and is seen as a subversive conceptual tool. For example, Christopher Inns maintains that avant-garde art "is characterized by a radical political posture. Envisioning a revolutionary future, it has been equally hostile to artistic tradition, sometimes including its immediate predecessors, as to contemporary civilization. Indeed, on the surface the avant-garde as a whole seems united primarily in terms of what they are against: the rejection of social institutions and established artistic conventions, or antagonism towards the public (as representative of the existing order)." See Christopher Inns, "Introduction" in *Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992* (Routledge: London and New York, 1993), p. 1. I am not concerned with avant-garde philosophy per se, but with its theatrical aesthetics.

drama in theatre? What is ritual? What is the 'origin' of theatre? Is it drama or ritual? What are the aesthetics of theatre? Does drama have aesthetics, too? How can we understand theatre and drama? Is the Aristotelian drama the only form of drama? Does Europe and the West in general still cling to the Aristotelian dramatic cannon? Why did Europe emancipate (the) theatre from writing and returned to the true springs of such a performance art? Must the Arab critic of Arab-Muslim theatre be aware of the history of European drama and theatre? Is Arab-Muslim theatre indebted to Western histrionic knowledge? What is the significance of this knowledge? Does it offer any insight into the nature of drama and theatre? Does it help us read Arab-Muslim theatre unerringly? Why must we be aware of the aesthetics of (neo)-historical avant-garde?

To answer these questions, I prefer to start with Richard Schechner's concept of 'restored behavior' which refers to a kind of human behavior that emerges whenever someone pretends to be someone else. The act of pretending is a conscious process, which enables the pretender (or performer) to create a sure distance between his/her 'self' and the behavior s/he is showing, which, in Marvin Carlson's eyes, is very "analogous to that between an actor and the role this actor plays on stage."⁹⁷ In *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Schechner explains his concept of restored behavior at length:

Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original "truth" or "source" of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is being honored and observed. How the strip of behavior was made, found or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition...restored behavior is used in all kinds of performance... in fact, restored behavior is the main characteristic of performance.⁹⁸

The restoration of behavior is a conscious act. It emerges during the shift from doing to performing. Doing may be unconscious, but performing, as Richard Bauman maintains, is perforce conscious.⁹⁹ Yet although actions of performers on stage are akin to ones in our real life, we tend to call the ones enacted on stage performed and the ones in real life merely done. Carlson correctly observes that David Roman, in his attempt to study the meanings of 'key words' in the theatre, maintains that a performed action or performance itself "stands in and of itself as an event."¹⁰⁰ A reading of Roman's statement suggests that doing becomes performance when it becomes a conscious act. Thus, events only acquire the attribute of performance when performed as conscious acts, which, owing to their ephemerality, "are [yet] never consciously repeated copies, and even their deviations are part of the dynamic of restored behavior."¹⁰¹ Performance in this sense has what Fischer-Lichte calls "a transformative power" as it destroys cultural patterns and traditions and fashions them anew. In Carlson's words, "performance can work within a society precisely to undermine tradition, to provide a site for the exploration of fresh and alternative structures and patterns of behavior."¹⁰²

I am aware that performance is "a contested concept" and refers to a wide range of human and nonhuman activities that involve the quality of consciousness. For example, we can speak of a sexual, linguistic, social or religious performance. We can also speak of performing animals in a circus; namely dogs, horses, elephants, monkeys or bears. This awareness problematizes the concept itself let alone its complex dynamics. Because my background is theatre studies, I share Richard Bauman's view that performance is "a consciousness of doubleness," through which "the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of action."¹⁰³ Thus, central to Bauman's 'doubleness' is the act of acting *for* and *before* a spectator. In

⁹⁷ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* 2nd Edition (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), p. 3.

⁹⁸ See "Restoration of Behavior" in Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia), p. 35.

⁹⁹ See Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance" in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. III (ed.) Philip Auslander (Routledge: London and New York, 2003), p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 5.

other words, neither Schechner nor Bauman associates performance with a written script, which was the backbone of traditional mainstream theatres in the past. Unlike dramatic theatres whose existence was mainly reposed upon “characters previously created by the artists,”¹⁰⁴ thereby condemning spectators to silent observation, performance arts such as theatre and dance rely upon the body (of actors), scenery, stage props, costumes and spectators. Of particular interest here is George Gurvitch’s relevant idea of “a simple reception or a gathering of friends”¹⁰⁵ which fairly amounts to a theatrical performance.

Instead of appealing to variegated approaches to the study of performance, this chapter limits itself to the aesthetics of the performative avant-garde; hence the reference to the first praiseworthy attempts which led to the creation of theatre studies. It was precisely with the rise of these studies as an independent academic discipline that the break with the previous obsolete notions of theatre occurred. Max Herrmann (1865-1942) maintains that “theatre and drama are... such extreme opposites that their symptoms will always reveal themselves; the drama is a linguistic-artistic creation by an individual; theatre is something achieved by the audience and its servants.”¹⁰⁶ Fischer-Lichte quotes Herrmann and observes that what he “emphasizes is not the drama which makes theatre into an art,” but “the performance;” and “that it is the performativity of theatre which fundamentally differentiates it from literature or the fine arts.”¹⁰⁷

Before Herrmann, Johan Wolfgang van Goethe (1749-1832) ridiculed the deception of German theatres that are but “boxes” full of both “painted” as well as “real spectators,” who, unlike the former, “took it amiss that anything so untrue and improbable was put upon them.”¹⁰⁸ For Goethe, theatre is viewed as performance. After Goethe came Richard Wagner (1813-1883) who similarly shared Goethe’s concept of theatre: “real art will never live until its embodiments need be subject only to the laws of Nature and not to the despotic whims of mode.”¹⁰⁹ In Martin Esslin’s words, Wagner viewed “drama and theatre as festive events of deep spiritual value” and wanted to renew them “on the model of ancient Greek tragedy.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, Wagner deified music and made it his bread and water. This had a great impact on Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), who wrote and dedicated *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* to Wagner. Nietzsche argued that Greek tragedy was born from music (singing) and dance. He saw Euripides and other playwrights as murderers of arts because they threw Dionysus out of tragedy.¹¹¹ He traced the origin of Greek tragedy to a sacrificial ritual. It was during this time that new impulses, as yet barely noticed neither by their contemporaries nor by the public, began to stir up on the fringes of the theatrical world of Europe. Yet unluckily, these new impulses appeared as no more than marginal aberrations, while in fact they contained the new seeds of development that were yet to germinate with the coming of Herrmann. As a result, the centrality of dramatic literature, which hitherto had to remain undisturbed, continued to thrive for a while. Central to Herrmann’s understanding of theatre, however, was the primacy of performance over the literary dramatic text: “the most important aspect of theatre art is the performance.”¹¹² He thus problematized the ‘text’ culture through which the nineteenth-century Europe understood itself. Herrmann in fact revitalized the olden ‘performative’ culture of Europe to which all great writers ascribed the origin of theatre.

Herrmann’s concept of theatre is central to the thesis of this dissertation. For him,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Cited in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre: A New Aesthetics* trans. by Jo Riley (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Johan W. van Goethe, *Essays on Art* trans. by Samuel Gray Ward (New York: James Miller, 1862), p. 118.

¹⁰⁹ See Richard Wagner, “The Artwork of the Future” in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works* Vol. I trans. by William Ashton Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & CO., LTD, 1895), p. 71.

¹¹⁰ See Martin Esslin, “Modern Theatre 1890-1920” in John Russell Brown (ed), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 365.

¹¹¹ See Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* trans. by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 37.

¹¹² Cited in Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Reconceptualizing Theatre and Ritual” in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Taylor: Francis & Francis Group, 2005), p. 19.

the original meaning of theatre was derived from the fact that it was a social game – played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player – participants and spectators [. . .] The spectator is involved as co-player. The spectator is, so to speak, the creator of the theatre. So many participants are involved in creating the theatre as festive event that the basic social nature of its character cannot be lost. Theatre always involves a social community.¹¹³

The relationship between actors and spectators is of central importance to Herrmann's understanding of theatre. When actors and spectators gather at a particular time and space in order to celebrate a game, the theatrical event comes into being. What distinguishes this game is the active participation of both actors and spectators. In other words, the spirit of theatricality is driven by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. In this sense, "the spectators are neither distant or empathetic observers of the actions unfolding in the scene, making sense of what they perceive," nor are they "intellectual decipherers of a message formulated by the actions of the actors."¹¹⁴ As Fischer-Lichte rightly observes, Herrmann's notion of theatre does not have to do with the "representation or expression of something which already exists elsewhere – like the text of a play," but with "something which is brought forth by the actions, perceptions, responses of both actors and spectators."¹¹⁵

Because theatre is a 'festival,' 'a game' –an event –which occurs "here and now *between* actors and spectators,"¹¹⁶ I can claim that real theatre is ephemeral and transitory; that is to say, it exists in performances that are transitory, not in texts that are the same without fail. Unlike dramatic theatre which relies on fictional characters portrayed by playwrights, and in which the actor is "a mere carrier of meaning, as a semiotic body – a text composed of signs for the character played,"¹¹⁷ 'post-dramatic theatre,' to use Hans-Thies Lehmann's phrase, is concerned with what Herrmann termed the "real body"¹¹⁸ of actors as creators of meaning. Indeed, nineteenth-century Naturalism in the theatre stressed realism in art and placed its trust in illusion. For example, when Henrik Ibsen (1828 –1906) started his new career in Bergen, "he was specifically hired to organize the scenic arrangements, including costumes, to arrange exits, entrances, and appropriate groupings, to ensure that an actor's physical expression was suited to the text and the character."¹¹⁹ Nineteenth-century theatre in Europe thus was fond of drafting an excessive number of rules for actors, who were treated as mere blank slates and easy puppets, a fact that problematizes Michael R. Booth's unsupported claim of the mastership of actors in nineteenth-century European theatre.¹²⁰

However, Herrmann's 'real bodies,' which are constitutive of the essence of performance, have emancipated themselves from the tyranny of nineteenth-century Naturalism which imposed upon them the dramatist's authority. Herrmann rejected the idea that the theatre is 'a work of art,' and emphasized the eventness of the theatrical process, which by the restoration of behavior, renders itself both collective and generative. By viewing theatre as an event driven by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, Herrmann thus "shifted the focus away from fictive characters in their fictive world...towards 'the real body' and to 'real space.'"¹²¹ Herrmann's notion of 'real space' entails the "the most important theatrical factor:"¹²² that is, by annulling the spell textually imposes upon the spectator, the latter becomes free to interact in the event unfolding. He strongly rejected Naturalism and Expressionism alike calling them "a fundamental mistake."¹²³ For him, "acting is the principal factor of theatre."¹²⁴

¹¹³ Cited in "Reconceptualizing Theatre and Ritual," pp. 22-23.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Herrmann cited in "Reconceptualizing Theatre and Ritual," p. 24.

¹¹⁹ See Michael R. Booth "Nineteenth-Century Theatre" in John Russell Brown (ed), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 328.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 329.

¹²¹ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, pp. 33-34.

¹²² Herrmann cited *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, pp. 35-36.

¹²³ Cited in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 33.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Due to the dialogue between theatre and anthropology and to the remarkably productive and rigorous ritual analyses of Schechner and Victor Turner, ritual studies emerged as a new academic discipline to emphasize the hierarchy of ritual over myth.¹²⁵ Influenced by William Robertson Smith's theories and lectures on sacrificial rituals and totemic practices of the Greeks outlined in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) as well as by James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), ritual studies emerged to place theatre in a context that is no longer in the service of the representation on stage of a primarily fictive world. These studies have emerged to define "man's 'roots' whether in the psyche or prehistory."¹²⁶ As Christopher Innes shows, the hallmark of ritual studies lies in what defines the avant-garde which "is not overtly modern qualities...but primitivism." This "primitivism" is reposed mainly on "two complementary facets:" "the exploration of dream states or the instinctive and subconscious levels of the psyche; and the quasi-religious focus on myth and magic, which in the theatre leads to experiments with ritual and the ritualistic patterning of performance."¹²⁷ Quoting Fischer-Lichte, ritual studies thus "advocated the reversal of hierarchical positions: from myth to ritual and from the literary texts to the theatre performance."¹²⁸

Ritual studies are indebted to a group of scholars known as the Cambridge Ritualists who were inspired by Jane Ellen Harrison's work on Greek rituals. In *Themis* (1912), Harrison traced the origin of Greek tragedy to a ritual. In his "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," which forms a significant chapter in *Themis*, Gilbert Murray argued in favor of Harrison's argument. In this vein, Fischer-Lichte rightly observes that,

Harrison's theory fundamentally challenged contemporary beliefs about Greek culture as primarily textual and thus paradigmatic for modern cultural values. The much admired texts of Greek tragedy and comedy suddenly deflated into belated results of ritual actions, originally performed to celebrate a seasonal god. Theatre as well as text developed out of ritual; furthermore, text was written in order to be performed.¹²⁹

Ritual studies thus emphasized the pre-eminence of performance over text and found in ritual the heart of the theatrical event. By elevating ritual, ritual studies abandoned the notion of an artwork for that of an event, which only rituals and rites could engender. Misreading the so-called Cambridge Ritualists as well as the findings of ritual and theatre studies, scholars split hairs on whether the theatre's origin lies in ritual; and by looking at rituals as religious spaces at which both the divine and the human meet, these scholars end up looking at ritual as religious and theatre as non-religious. Yet from the perspective of an Arab critic, this division is hard to swallow. Thus, I would contend that this division is conceptually restrictive.

Concepts in Arabic language differ from those formulated in other languages, though their shades of meanings may be proximate. For example, the concept of *al-deen* in Arabic, mistranslated as religion, shares only one aspect of meaning with the concept of religion in English. Yet translators and scholars regard them as the same. For this reason, we finally have distorted conclusions and distorted meanings on which others build their own arguments, which by necessity present distorted findings. Thus, if we understand the word *al-deen* and explore its different usages and meanings in Arabic, we will be able to safely examine the concept of ritual, which is associated, due to this misunderstanding and mistranslation, with religious practices.

Arabs used the word *al-deen* to refer to an entire way of life comprised of four factors: 1), sovereignty and supreme authority; 2), obedience and absolute submission to this sovereignty; 3), the thought and action system imposed by this authority; and 4), retribution meted out by the authority for

¹²⁵ William Robertson Smith emphasized the hierarchy of ritual over myth: "so far as myths consist of explanations of ritual their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshiper." Cited in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 30.

¹²⁶ See "Introduction" in *Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992*, p.3.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

¹²⁸ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 31.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

rebellion or transgression against such a system and reward given to those who obey it.¹³⁰ It seems *al-deen*'s proximate English word is not 'religion' but 'state.' Religion in European cultures is a word meaning "a belief" or "faith based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods."¹³¹ In this sense, it would be wrong to seek linguistic insights from European languages to define theatre from the perspective of an Arab-Muslim. Indeed, there are scholars who call into question the concept of religion when they debate the question of the origin of theatre. They maintain that the theatre came into being in a religious context, which they call a ritual. Thus, ritual in European cultures is associated with religious spaces in which believers learn "how to deal, accept, and move with the unknown." Daniel Deslauriers in this sense does not only look at ritual as a space of enacting and remembering the sacred but also as a space of reaffirming "personal, communal, and spiritual intentions and purposes."¹³² In a word, ritual is a space for psychological practices of healing and remembering, or, in the words of William Robertson Smith, "a bond of union."¹³³ Rite, on the other hand, is defined in Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as "a formal procedure or act in a religious or other solemn observance."¹³⁴ Scholars use these semantic variations between ritual and rite and between ritual and theatre to conclude that theatre and ritual are two different things. However, in Arabic it would be wrong to claim 'religious theatre' is but a form of ritual, because what is considered non-religious in European cultures falls within *al-deen* in Arabic cultures. Thus, nuancing hampers rather than helps in discussing the meanings of theatre.

While ritual unites between performers and spectators, this should not suggest that it is a religious art in the English sense of the word. Religious or not, ritual remains the womb that gave birth to the theatrical event. The two are tied to one another through an umbilical relationship. It is thus important to stress here that theatre and drama developed out of ritual. Studying Chinese theatre, Catherine Bell maintains that "if traditional Chinese theatre is full of ritual, it is not surprising to find that traditional Chinese ritual is full of theatre."¹³⁵ In his *A Concise History of the Theatre* (1971), Phyllis Hartnoll traces "the origins of the theatre ... back far into the past, to the religious rites of the earliest communities... to songs and dances in honor of a god, performed by priests and worshippers dressed in animal skins, and of a portrayal of his birth, death, and resurrection."¹³⁶ In *Five Thousands Years of Theatre* (1982), Jack Mitchley and Peter Spalding for their part stress that:

Theatre began in ritual. Ritual needed technique to become effective. When the artist of theatre began to practice technique for its own sake, then the ritual became an art. When it became an art it kept the same mainspring that it had when its function was purely ritual. The mainspring is the costumed actor and his resources.¹³⁷

Other distinguished scholars such as Oscar G. Brockett maintain that "ritual and theatre were viewed as coexisting modes in which the same elements might be used for differing functions within the same society."¹³⁸

Influenced by Darwin's revolutionary ideas on religion, some scholars end up regarding things religious unreligious. Religion for them has to do with what they call worship which they abhor very much. Because of their abhorrence of religion and love for the art of theatre, which was born from a religious ritual, they end up denying the religious origins of such an art. For example, Eli Rozik dedicated an entire study, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*

¹³⁰ See Sayed Abul-Ala Maududi, *al-Mostalahat al-Arbaà fi al-Quran: Ilah, Rabb, Ibadah, Deen* [Four Basic Quranic Concepts: Ilah, Rabb, Ibadah, Deen] trans. into Arabic by Mohamed Kadim Sabak Edition 8 (Dar al-Qalam: Kuwait, 1981), p. 120.

¹³¹ See Oxford Dictionary.

¹³² Cited in Khalifah Rased Alhajri, *A Scenographer's Perspective on Arabic Theatre and Arab-Muslim Identity* (A PhD Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The University of Leeds, The School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies, December 2007), p. 14.

¹³³ Cited in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 31.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹³⁵ Cited in *A Scenographer's Perspective on Arabic Theatre and Arab-Muslim Identity*, p. 16.

¹³⁶ Cited in "Introduction" in Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (University of Iowa Press, 2002), p. ix.

¹³⁷ Cited in *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*, p. ix.

¹³⁸ Cited on pp. ix-x.

(2002), to refute the umbilical relationship between theatre and ritual. For him, “theatre is a specific imagistic medium (i.e., a method of representation or, rather, an instrument of thinking and communication), and as such its roots lie in the spontaneous image-making faculty of the human psyche.”¹³⁹ Rozik here is not delinking theatre from ritual, but rather affirming the pre-existence of “theatrical elements” over “artistic theatre,” in our terminology, performance over text. Yet “ritual,” for him, “is a mode of action.”¹⁴⁰ Rozik believes that “ritual reflects intentions and purposes,” thus only paraphrasing others who look at ritual as a sacred space bringing together the divine and the human, while “theatre is neutral with regard to intentions and purposes and can be employed for any kind of action, including ritual.” Rozik thus sees theatre and ritual from the perspective of semiotics. He summarizes his argument as follows:

Even if theatrical elements are found in ancient or aboriginal rituals, the medium itself either preceded these texts or was created concurrently with them and therefore cannot be said to have originated in ritual. For the same reasons one cannot conceive the origins of natural language in ritual, although it was ritual’s vital medium.¹⁴¹

Despite his theoretical act of nuancing, Rozik is unable to delink theatre from ritual. He traces the roots of theatre to “innate imagistic thinking” and ritual to “action;” that is to say, only through “action” that this “innate imagistic thinking” can become tangible. The umbilical relationship thus is not destroyed even from structuralist and semiotic perspectives. It is thanks to this fact, as Rozik himself notes, that “prominent scholars... still explain the development of Western drama and theatre in terms of its supposed ritual origins.”¹⁴² This study therefore insists on the umbilical relationship between theatre and ritual and considers any attempt to destroy this relationship as a mere reading from a particular perspective. The relationship remains always intact despite the various scholarly nuances.

I now turn to briefly sketching the aesthetics of the avant-garde which critics must be aware of when they debate the concept of ‘theatre.’ I am convinced that without such awareness these critics will not be able to understand the theatrical process in its entirety. To explore these aesthetics, this chapter retrieves insights from German linguistic philosophy which problematizes theatre aesthetics and questions classical dramatic concepts. It must be noted that Herrmann’s conception of theatre briefly discussed earlier should have by now given us a heuristic idea about these aesthetics, which I reduce to three basic concepts: “mediality,” “materiality,” and “semioticity.”¹⁴³ Because semiotic aesthetics proceeds from the known assumption that theatre in particular or art in general must be understood as language, I forsake it in favor of highlighting mediality and materiality which create an aesthetics of atmosphere that direct attention to physical experiences.

1) Mediality refers to “the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” who “gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime.” In this sense, mediality, as demonstrated by Herrmann first, has to do with what we call ‘production’ and ‘reception:’ “the actors act,” while “the spectators perceive their actions and respond to them.” This means that Herrmann and twentieth-century dramatists and directors went against Naturalist and classical theatres which, not only valued textuality over performance, but also strove to discipline their spectators and expect ‘empathy’ from them in a bid to prevent “the theatrical feedback loop.” It is this feedback loop that encourages spectators to call into question the conventions of society, and renders the course of the performance “unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, with the rise of avant-garde theatres in the 1960s more freedom was given to the spectators whose “pivotal role...was not only acknowledged as a pre-condition” in the theatrical process “but explicitly invoked as such.” Thus, “the feedback loop as a self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process emerged

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. xi.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. xiv.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. ix.

¹⁴³ I am indebted here to Fischer-Lichte in particular. See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 37.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

as the defining principle of theatrical work.”¹⁴⁵ Mediality in this sense establishes an umbilical relationship between actors and spectators and celebrates them both as active agents consciously gazing and returning the gaze, creating “a *centrifugal* effect” yet all performing in “a space of *centripetal* dynamic.”¹⁴⁶

Reconsidering the problem of reception in theatre, Marco De Marinis looks at the spectator as “an autonomous ‘maker of meanings’ for the performance.”¹⁴⁷ Drawing on Umberto Eco’s ‘Model Reader,’ De Marinis proposes ‘a Model Spectator’ to show that “production and reception...are closely connected” and “in what way and to what degree a performance anticipates a certain type of spectator.”¹⁴⁸ According to him, performances are of two types: “closed” and “open.” In the closed performance, by which he refers to classical theatres, spectators react “in the desired way,” while “the normal practice” in the open performance “is to leave plenty of interpretive freedom to the audience, and not to impose fixed readings.”¹⁴⁹ In the open performance, the conventional subject-object relationship is thus redefined and is governed by “a scintillating ever-elusive negotiation.”¹⁵⁰ Though sweeping in its exaggeration, Anne Ubersfeld’s “The Pleasure of the Spectator,” agrees at some point with Fischer-Lichte’s notion of mediality in which Ubersfeld finds much pleasure for the spectators:

The pleasure of theatre is a thought-provoking one for us. Like any pleasure, it has an odor of sin about it: voyeurism is not a nice word; catharsis is a more refined one. But, clearly, something happens in theatre which satisfies the spectator while at the same time leaving him unsatisfied, something in which pleasure and dissatisfaction are conjoined.¹⁵¹

Yet for Schechner, the pleasure of spectators resides in their freedom “to enter the performance as equals,” all celebrating “the social event” yet “according to a democratic model.”¹⁵² They become thus “shared bodies” creating meanings in “shared spaces.”¹⁵³ In this vein, Georg Fuchs maintains that “according to their nature” these shared bodies and spaces “are not in opposition. They are a unit.”¹⁵⁴ If destroyed, Meyerhold laments, the theatre becomes “divided]...into two mutually foreign worlds: those who act and those who watch.”¹⁵⁵ Yet, if maintained, the theatrical relationship gives rise to “short-lived, transient theatrical communities of actor and spectators [that] are particularly relevant for an aesthetics of the performative,”¹⁵⁶ which entails “a condition of liveness” that makes “reversing roles, creating communities, or motivating physical contact”¹⁵⁷ possible.

2) Materiality refers to the transient nature of theatre. Excluding material objects such as props and costumes, the theatrical performance “does not consist of fixed, transferable, and material artifacts;” rather, “it is fleeting, transient, and exists only in the present” and “is made up of the continuous becoming and passing of the autopoietic feedback loop.”¹⁵⁸ This study insists on the fact that the theatrical performances are restored behaviors that are never consciously recurrent reproductions, and, as Carlson puts it, “even their deviations are part of the dynamic of restored behavior.”¹⁵⁹ In this sense, the specific materiality of the theatrical performance is lost once it is over. Yet if documented aurally and visually (on videos, films, photographs), the theatrical performance can

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁴⁶ See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Post-dramatic Theatre* trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (Routledge: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006), p. 150.

¹⁴⁷ See Marco De Marinis “Dramaturgy of the Spectator” in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. II, p. 221.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁵⁰ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 40.

¹⁵¹ See Anne Ubersfeld, “The Pleasure of the Spectator” in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. II, p. 244.

¹⁵² Cited in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 41.

¹⁵³ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁴ Cited on, p. 51.

¹⁵⁵ Cited on the same page.

¹⁵⁶ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 55.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁵⁹ See a previous note.

be preserved. To direct attention to the generation of materiality of performances onstage, the avant-garde dramatists of the 1960s developed a variety of useful methods which Fischer-Lichte reduces to three basic experimental strategies: “corporeality, spatiality, and tonality.”¹⁶⁰

Corporeality simply refers to the phenomenal role of the body as aesthetic material in the whole theatrico-dramatic process. I am aware that scholars have problematized the notion of ‘body’ in their attempt to examine the generation of materiality in performances. Within such attempt arose a tension whether to view the body as “the material of one’s own existence”¹⁶¹ as Helmuth Plessner puts it, or as a material representing the fictive character. Indeed, theories of theatre claim that there is a tension between actor and character driven by the doubleness of “being a body” and “having a body;” that is to say, actors exist both as characters in a fictive world and as performers on stage. For Fischer-Lichte, it is this tension between ‘being’ and ‘having’ that generates corporeality onstage and enables the perception of such corporality by the spectators. Yet “generating and perceiving corporeality...depend on two phenomena in particular: processes of embodiment and the phenomenon of presence.”¹⁶²

I am not concerned here with the traditional dichotomy in the actor’s existence which is fairly outlined by David Graver in “The Actor’s Bodies,” and which begs the question whether this “existence rests upon a questionable distinction between artifice and reality or between representation and presentation.”¹⁶³ In the words of Jon Erickson, I am here concerned with demonstrating that “theatre depends ultimately upon what is human”¹⁶⁴ to pave the way for critiquing the School of Orientalism and the School of Arab Intelligentsia in the next section. In their critiques, these schools, as will be shown momentarily, have recourse to olden theories of drama and theatre and thus end up looking at theatre as a fictive world. This study insists that theatre is the achievement of both actors and spectators, while drama is an artistic creation. It is an “independent art form no longer satisfied with expressing textually predetermined meanings,”¹⁶⁵ and exists in performance which “always occurs here and now, immediately before the eyes and ears of the audience which perceives and witnesses it.”¹⁶⁶ It is this very condition of the theatrical presence, which Elinor Fuchs defines as “the unique self-completion of the world of the spectacle, and the circle of heightened awareness flowing from actor to spectator and back that sustains the world,”¹⁶⁷ that avant-garde artists had become passionate with in the 1960s, as it constitutes the core of the entire theatrical process. I concur with Fuchs that the notion of theatrical presence assigns a positive value to improvisation, spectators, participation, myth, and communion and opposes the dramatic script “as a politically oppressive intruder demanding submission to authority.”¹⁶⁸

Spatiality refers to a space in which a performance can take a place. This space “opens special possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators and for movement and perception.”¹⁶⁹ A number of distinguished avant-gardists encouraged a radical break from the current model of theatre with its proscenium, which separated the actors from the spectators in the darkened auditorium. This avant-gardist reform reconsidered the actor-spectator relationship, and rethought concepts of movement and perception in light of which this study insists we should perceive the concept of theatre. The avant-garde performative space puts at stake what Lehmann calls “the structure of the *mirroring*,” “the stage frame functions like a mirror that ideally allows a homogenous world of the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁶¹ Cited on the same page.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁶³ See David Graver, “The Actor’s Bodies” in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. II, p. 157.

¹⁶⁴ See Jon Erickson, “The Body as the Object of Modern Performance” in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. II, p. 176.

¹⁶⁵ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 80.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁶⁷ See Elinor Fuchs, “Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Rethinking Theatre after Derrida” in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. II, p. 109.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁶⁹ See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 107. I know that by spatiality Fischer-Lichte means lots of things; yet for the purpose of this study, I reduce the different meanings of this concept to the performative space, to which all the meanings of spatiality return.

viewers to recognize itself in the equally coherent world of the drama.”¹⁷⁰ With an excellent comprehension of avant-garde theories and practices, Lehman quotes Grotowski to insist that theatre is “the proximity of living organisms.” This conception

reduces the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and the physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks the mental signification, then a space of a tense *centripetal* dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of shared energies instead of transmitted signs.¹⁷¹

Performances were organized in spaces such as “former factories, slaughterhouses, bunkers, street car depots, shopping malls, fair centers, sports stadiums, on streets, squares and subway platforms, in public parks and beer tents, on landfill sites, in auto garages and ruins, in cemeteries.”¹⁷² These spaces, being inclusive in nature, invite actors¹⁷³ and spectators to create atmospheres of presence and of *tonality* (mixed tones, voices, rhythms, time) which are masked in Orientalists’ analyses in favor of textuality.¹⁷⁴ Armed with these powerful avant-gardist insights, I now turn to an evaluation of the body of criticism on Arabic theatre produced by the School of Orientalism as well as the School of Arab Intelligentsia.

The School of Orientalism

Arab-Muslim theatre has been informed by two Eurocentric fallacies suggesting that (1) theatre was originated in old Greece and (2) that it is summed up in a drama; that is to say, in the representation of a closed-off fictional cosmos, the mimetic staging of a fable. In Frantz Fanon’s words, it was thus “over-determined from without.”¹⁷⁵ Amine adds that it was thus “transfixed and emptied as well as exploded in the ‘fetishistic’ and stereotypical dialectics of the gaze of the Other.”¹⁷⁶ As a result, the Arabs were turned into “object[s] in the midst of other objects;” and “sealed into that crushing objecthood,” they “turned beseechingly to others.”¹⁷⁷ My task therefore is twofold: (1) to criticize both the School of Orientalism headed by the regnant Jacob Landau flanked by his advocates who seem to have significantly influenced Arabic scholarship on Arab-Muslim theatre, and (2) also to criticize critics of Arab-Muslim theatre trained in the School of Orientalism. Though they had no axe to grind, they seem to have reached the same Orientalist conclusions. For this reason, this study neither makes allowances for these critics nor accepts their findings indiscriminately. In other words, this chapter aims to correct this perspective and at the same time encourage ways of seeing the theatre beyond Orientalist preconceptions of what theatre is or is meant to be.

Jacob Landau’s *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* has become a key reference in theatre studies today. Scholars from East and West alike quote it without bothering themselves with questioning the validity of its content. My concern here is to critique Landau and show the biased premises upon which he built his prejudiced conclusion that drama is alien to Arabic culture. He cites two strange reasons which he finds convincing enough. For him, Arabic culture was devoid of drama because “the people with whom the Arabs came into close contact had no well-developed theatre” and

¹⁷⁰ See *Post-dramatic Theatre*, p. 150.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² See *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁷³ This study regards the distinction drawn between ‘acting’ and ‘not-acting’, that is to say, between actor and spectator, unimportant and regards it a sheer act of nuancing that adds to philosophizing the conceptual labyrinth of the human. I say this because those such as Michael Kirby who establish this distinction satisfy themselves with the dogma of ‘be different, be famous.’ Difference has to be different, not just differently stated. See for example Michael Kirby, “On Acting and Not-Acting” in *Performance: Critical concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. I, pp. 309-323. For him, acting is a histrionic act, while performance is a conscious one.

¹⁷⁴ For an excellent analysis of these elements, see both Lehmann’s *Post-dramatic Theatre* and Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*.

¹⁷⁵ Cited in *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. see also Khalid Amine, “Theatre in the Arab World: A Difficult Birth” in *Theatre Research International* vol. 31 | no. 2 | pp145–162

¹⁷⁷ See Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness” in *Black Skin, in White Masks* trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), p. 82.

also because of “women” who, if unveiled, “were strictly forbidden to appear on the stage.” He places too much trust in “the combination of these two reasons” to account for the absence of drama in Arabic culture. Yet what is interesting about Landau’s “two reasons” is that he finally attributes them to what he considers “a fact:” “while a large part of literature, science and thought was translated into Arabic at various times, no item of the classical drama found its way into Arab translation until recent years.”¹⁷⁸ Landau considers theatre as a work of art.

Many would disagree with Landau on his three licentious statements. It is obvious that he thinks that theatre originated in Greece and that it was only through the medium of translation that Others became aware of such phenomenon. Today, this belief is relegated to the cold shade of obsolescence, because now we all know that theatre did not originate in Greece; and that it is not a work of art either. Landau published his book in 1958, a time during which significant studies in Europe had already arisen to address the question of origin. Thus, Landau’s study should not be taken seriously for it turned a blind eye on recent scholarships in the field it professes to have handled with the highest possible accuracy. His first reason in which he places all his trust makes him seem as a fledgling critic not well informed of the history of European theatre. Indeed, women as actresses were absent from most European theatres and more remarkably did not appear on stage in Greek theatre. Will this knowledge lead Landau to reconsider his thesis on Arab-Muslim theatre? Landau’s second reason is trivial by all standards, for it does not only empty Arabic culture of its dramatic contents but empties also the cultures of Others with whom Arabs established contact prior to the recent one in nineteenth century. Bounahai is critical of these headlong claims for they “carry a prejudice towards the history and performance, not only of the Arab-Muslim world but of the whole ‘Pre-Columbus’ world or the Oikoumene, from North Africa to South East Asia.”¹⁷⁹

Before the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Mecca as well as the other tribes scattered throughout their vast desert had widespread trade relations with the neighboring empires of Greece, and later Rome and Persia despite pitfalls in long, arduous, far-venturing and perilous desert routes and lines. We all know that the Greeks and later the Romans entertained a highly developed tradition of theatre in terms of playwriting and theatrical structures when Arabs used to enter their lands as merchants. Yet after the rise of Mecca to world mastership, Arabs began to promulgate their new message in areas that had until very recently been under Roman and Persian dominance. T. W. Arnold, though an orientalist himself, objectively captures this historical fact which Landau discards in favor of his unjustified fantasies:

[The Arabs] poured forth over three continents to conquer and subdue Syria, Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and Persia were the first to fall before them, and pressing westward to Spain and eastward beyond the Indus, the followers of the Prophet found themselves, one hundred years after his death, masters of an empire greater than that of Rome at the zenith of its power.¹⁸⁰

I can safely surmise that this grand conquest vouchsafed the conquerors an opportunity to see the gigantic theatrical buildings the Romans left behind. Amine interprets Landau’s “reasons” as “part of the dynamics of othering.”¹⁸¹ Thus, this leads me to say that it is difficult, if not impossible, for any one in Landau’s position not endowed with a spirit of sympathy, or the faculty of transporting the mind to the historical conditions and dramatic seeds of Arabic times, to do justice to Arabic drama, especially if the idea of drama is at odds with his own. Generally speaking, the attitude of the School of Orientalism so far manifested in Landau towards Arabic drama and its beginnings and ‘origins’ is akin to that of the critical Jew towards the Teacher of Nazareth, or of the philosophical Celsus towards Christianity.

Building upon Landau’s claims, Curt Prufer repeats the old cliché that “the Arabs... have never found their way to the actual drama.”¹⁸² He attributes “this curious failure to the Arab mind,” which

¹⁷⁸ See M. Jacob Landau, *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* (Philadelphia: U.P.P., 1958), pp. 1-2.

¹⁷⁹ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 46.

¹⁸⁰ See T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2007 with Funding from Microsoft Corporation), p. 2.

¹⁸¹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 35.

¹⁸² See Curt Prufer, “Arabic Drama” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4 (1911) pp. 872-878 –p. 873.

did not “produce anything really dramatic,” and “to the view of life, with its autocratic idea of God and fate that has absolutely no comprehension of individual conflict of rebellion against the external mover or any combat between will and duty.”¹⁸³ If Landau admitted the existence of drama or at least the shadow plays in Arabic culture and, though shyly, appreciated their dramatic merits,¹⁸⁴ Prufer fractioned this appreciation and insisted that these “can hardly be called drama.”¹⁸⁵ For him, drama and theatre are European inventions driven by artistic dramatic texts represented on a stage, which Arabic culture “completely” lacked. Similar to this claim is James Hastings’s terrifying Orientalist statement: “even today there is no Arabic drama; there is only a drama in the Arabic language.”¹⁸⁶ Hastings’s statement is not serious and therefore should be relegated to the cold shade of neglect.

Prufer further widens his list of false accusations to include “the Arab race and religious peculiarities that prevent [them] from finding the way to dramatic art.”¹⁸⁷ Even Arabic language did not escape his criticism as it constitutes to his mind another significant factor behind the absence of drama in the life of the Arabs: “The Arabic literary language is petrified—an artificially preserved corpse, which pleases only its preservers, the literary gild and the Ulama.” Thus, “the people hardly understand this language and do not recognize themselves or their feelings when so presented to them.” Should the Arabs produce dramas, they should listen to Prufer’s weird advice: “Before anything great can be created, either in the province of drama or in Arabic literature in general, the modern writer must cease to work with forms, words, and metaphors of the language of nomadic desert tribes of fifteen hundred years ago.”¹⁸⁸

H. A. Gibb elbows himself as another adherent of the School of Orientalism, which sees Arabic culture as stagnant and too “petrified” to allow a place in its system of thought for something like drama and theatre. Landau’s aforementioned book is prefaced by Gibb to support the thesis of the School of Orientalism and make it appear that there are others who agree with Landau. Gibb states that “drama is not a native Arab art.”¹⁸⁹ To account for this Eurocentric statement, he finds justification in “various sociological explanations;” yet to the reader’s surprise, he cites none and immediately proceeds to attribute such absence to the Arabs’ lack of understanding the genres of comedy and tragedy, an accusation already mentioned by Prufer in fact.¹⁹⁰ Like his mentor, “representation came in with the shadow play in the later Middle Ages, but the attempt to raise it above the level of popular entertainment was still-born.”¹⁹¹

Two other figures who added up to the estrangement of Arabic drama are John Gassner and Edward Quinn, editors of *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of World Drama*. Though they admitted the existence of “many dramatic elements in ancient Middle Eastern, Assyrian and Phoenician and religions and legends” and saw it as a “fact that cannot be contested,”¹⁹² they attributed to the Arabs an anti-dramatic bias due to the absence of a body of myths similar to those of the Greeks:

The ancient Arabs rather accurately and creatively translated, commented upon, and interpreted most of Aristotle’s works yet when it came to his *Poetics* Arab translators missed the whole point of the critical work. They were so perplexed with the contents of *Poetics* that the terms ‘tragedy’ and ‘comedy’ were translated with

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Landau says: “If Arab culture lacked drama in the European sense, it could certainly pride itself on a literary ‘genre’ that was unknown to other nations. The “maqama’ (assembly), undoubtedly has been considered the most perfect form of a literary presentation in Arabic literature since it came being in the 11th century at the hands of Badie Azzaman al-hamadani. The imprint he left on this genre has been imitated throughout the ages...the maqama has played a role in one of the forms of drama known by the Arabs as the Khayal ad-dil.” M. A. Al-Khozai, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900* (London: Longman, 1984), pp. 19-20.

¹⁸⁵ See Curt Prufer, “Arabic Drama,” p. 872.

¹⁸⁶ See James Hastings (ed), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. iv. (Edinburg, 1991), p. 872.

¹⁸⁷ See “Arabic Drama,” p. 872.

¹⁸⁸ See “Arabic Drama,” p. 878.

¹⁸⁹ See the preface by H.A.R. Gibb in *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema*.

¹⁹⁰ See Curt Prufer, “Arabic Drama,” p. 872.

¹⁹¹ See his preface in *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema*.

¹⁹² See John Gassner and Edward Quinn (ed.) “Arab Drama” in *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of World Drama* (New York: Crowell, 1969), p. 21.

the terms 'madh' (eulogy) and 'hija' (satire), respectively. The dramatic form being so alien to the Arab imagination, it is no wonder that the ancient Arabs had no dramatic literature of their own.¹⁹³

Also, "the spread of Arab Islamic culture brought whatever there was of dramatic performances to end."¹⁹⁴ Islam, as Gassner and Quinn see it, is a negative force. Yet they have to understand that Muslims today express no aversion for drama, and this is sufficient proof for their misleading attitude about Islam. Bounahai cleverly refers to the "accommodating" spirit of Islam which made it "traverse deeply iconographic fields."¹⁹⁵ Thus one can safely say that "neither Islam nor Arabic was inimical to this idea of theatre as Cambridge ritualists had suggested."¹⁹⁶

For his part, Peter J. Chelkowsky declares that Ta'ziya is "the only indigenous drama engendered by the world of Islam."¹⁹⁷ Amine vigilantly observes that this statement, though it admits the existence of drama in Islam, still "undermines and excludes" other performative traditions in Islamic performance culture. It thus replicates and "enacts the same dynamics of excluding otherness that is typical of Western representations of dramatic and theatrical forms coming from other parts of the world."¹⁹⁸ This exclusion is very clear in Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy's *History of the Theatre* which has now celebrated its tenth edition. It has become an international key reference in the history of theatre. Instead of shedding light on theatrical arts in Arabic cultures, Brockett and his collaborator repeated the false buzzword that Islam is to blame for the absence of drama in Arabic culture: "[Islam] forbade artists to make images of living things because Allah was said to be the only creator of life ... the prohibition extended to the theatre, and consequently in those areas where Islam became dominant, advanced [i.e. European] theatrical forms were stifled."¹⁹⁹

For his part, Atta Annan Mensah is unable to disassociate his conception from 'the idiocy' of Orientalism which rejoices in erasing the pasts of its victims though Don Rubin's "Introduction" to the Volume makes the reader believe that their knowledge of Arabic culture is quite wide. We later discover that their conception of such culture does not differ from those mentioned earlier, except for the fact that Rubin's tone is less exclusive.²⁰⁰ To his mind, the Arabs became acquainted with literary theatre very recently when Marun al-Naqqash and later Abu Khalil al-Qabbani and Ya'qub Sannu adapted plays from the Western repertoire: "Their plays and productions introduced the concepts of dramatic literature and spoken theatre to Egypt, Syria and Lebanon and through these countries to the rest of the region. Until their pioneering work, this type of verbal/literary art was all but unknown."²⁰¹ One does not have to be a sophisticated authority on Arabic culture to see a difficulty here. Indeed, the existence of Ibn Danyal's literary plays problematizes Annan Mensah's knowledge of Arabic theatre and compels his eclipsing Orientalist statement to fall to the ground as untrue. In the same concluding vein Bounahai correctly observes that:

Once we position the Arab-Islamic civilization into the wider regional configuration and in full view of its diverse communities, from the Copts with Nayrus and Nawruz festivals, Jews and Byzantine Christians, Zoroastrians; each boasting its own rituals and festive practices, we will then start to appreciate the extensive theatrical scope Arabs and Muslims had within their reach.²⁰²

The School of Arab Intelligentsia

¹⁹³ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹⁵ See "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," p. 49.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁹⁷ Cited in "Theatre in the Arab World: A Difficult Birth," p. 149.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Cited in See Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, "Islam and the Colonial Stage in North Africa" in *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb* (International Federation of Theatre Research, 2012), p.103.

²⁰⁰ See Don Rubin, "An Introduction: Of Nations and Their Theatres" in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary theatre Vol. 4: The Arab World* (ed.) Don Rubin (Routledge: London & New York, 1999).

²⁰¹ See Atta Annan Mensah, "Arabs and Africa: Shaping a Continent" in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary theatre Vol. 4: The Arab World*, p. 19.

²⁰² See "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," pp. 46-49.

A reviewer of the body of criticisms produced by Arabs themselves around Arab-Muslim theatre will observe that it is quite large due to the number of critics. Also, s/he will observe that some critics only repeat others, exactly the same way the regnant ones have repeated their teachers in the School of Orientalism. For this reason, this section deals only with the most important ones: Mohamed Ali Al-Khozai, Ali al-Rai, Mohammed Mustafa Badawi, Mohamed Aziza, Tawfiq al-Hakim and others.

In his most quoted study, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900*, Al-Khozai believes that there are five factors which precluded the Arabs from the invention of drama. Before citing these factors, he starts with an Orientalist confirmation that:

Drama, as a manifest European form, as a literary genre that describes life and characters, or tells a story by means of action and dialogue through acting on a stage, in the presence of an audience, was unknown in Arabic before the historic attempt made by Marun an-Naquash at his house in Beirut in 1847.²⁰³

He then comes to the mention of *his* five factors:

It was not feasible for drama to be developed by the Arabs for a number of factors that can be described as mental, aesthetic, religious, environmental, and historical. These factors interrelated and, complementary as they are assisted the hindrance, or rather the divorce, between Thespian arts and Arab civilization.²⁰⁴

Al-Khozai thinks that “the earliest contact recorded between the Muslim Arab world and the West took place in the eighth and ninth centuries when the Arabs became interested in Greek culture despite the absence of a living Greek dramatic heritage.”²⁰⁵ Like Landau’s thesis, this thinking stands guilty of ignoring the contact of early Arabic culture which its adjacent empires through jingling camel-caravans that moved between Mecca, Byzantium and Persia at the beginning of the fourth century. The Quran describes this contact as “a peregrination of winter and summer.”²⁰⁶ It would be impossible to claim that Arabs, who are known for their talent of observation, would not have seen the theatrical structures of the Greeks and the Romans and their performances. Al-Hakim problematizes this thinking because, as he says, even though Arabs might have seen both the structures and performances of the Greeks and Romans, they would not have thought of appropriating them for they had no stable home: “the home, which this art would be implanted in, is but a vast desert which is as extensive as the sea. The camels move in it with heavy loads, like ships, from an island to another, from one scattered oasis to another.” He adds, “Everything in this moving home did not encourage the practice of theatre, for theatre by necessity requires stability.”²⁰⁷

There are others who agree with al-Khozai and al-Hakim that the environmental factor played a significant role in the absence of drama in Arabic culture. For example, Ali a-Rai claims that the desert is not fit for the practice of drama: “[it] is a mere ocean of sands, burned by sun at day, frozen by cold at night. It is an appropriate climate for speculation and lyrical poetry. But, it is not fit for drama, which is the art of creating characters and moving them.”²⁰⁸ This line of thinking is unmistakably Marxist as it recognizes the influence of the environment on Man’s thinking. Indeed, it is reminiscent of Friedrich Engels’s famous saying, “Man is the product of his environment and his work.”²⁰⁹ Yet Alija Ali Izetbegovic comments on this Darwinian fallacy: “these ideas seem quite

²⁰³ See M. A. Al-Khozai, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 224.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁰⁶ See The Quran, Surah Quraish.

²⁰⁷ See Tawfik Al-Hakim, *Al-Malik Udib* [The King Udib] (Maktabat Misr: Dar Misr Littibaà, 1973), pp.24- 25.

²⁰⁸ Cited in Abdelwahed Ouzri, *Le théâtre au Maroc : structures et tendances* (Les Editions Toubkal, 1997), pp. 15-16.

²⁰⁹ Quoted in Alija Ali Izetbegovic, *Islam between East and West* (American Trust Publications, 1989), p. 6.

convincing, but it is less obvious that they are at the same time a radical negation of man.”²¹⁰ Indeed, cognitive and psychological studies have proven this thinking wrong and shown that it is scientifically invalid to ascribe Man’s intelligence to the environment which confers and bestows upon him reasoning or unreasoning beyond the imagination of a god. If this is not so, then how could one account for the rise of a marvelous civilization in the same place in subsequent years?

Many would disagree with al-Hakim’s claim that drama and theatre require stability.²¹¹ Al-Hakim ignores the fact that the majority of the Arabs lived in urban centers and cities, where traditions and dogmas rubbed elbows in such centers of cultural and mercantile intercourse. We know that desert denizens established, not mere villages of mud and straw, but towns walled with geometrically laid-out streets and houses, not only of beaten earth, but often of baked brick or stone. This, therefore, indicates that the nomads constituted only a part of these desert dwellers. Mecca, al-Madina and al-Taif are but examples one could refer to. After the rise of Islam, big renowned cities such as Damascus, Cairo and Baghdad came under Arab dominance. One cannot be serious to argue that because of the absence of cities, one cannot find theatre and drama, as if the existence of theatre and drama is perforce conditioned by the existence of cities. I am aware that those who put forward this argument equate theatre with the theatrical building and, thus, fail to imagine drama and theatre outside this very building.

What is truly surprising is to attribute the absence of Arabic theatre to the Arabs’ mentality and yet come forward and criticize those who say it. Al-Khozai seems thus unsure about his thinking as it is unstable and wavers between two opposite orientations: “Those who discuss the creative mentality of the Arabs are often inclined towards sweeping generalizations that only result in arousing heated discussion and creating an atmosphere of polemic that is not without occasional bitterness.”²¹² He cites legendary epics from popular Arabic culture to respond to these “sweeping generalizations” and rightly wonders: “If this were true, what would one say of the anonymous authors of such folk epics as Antara, Abu Zayd al-Hilali, not to mention tales like Arabian Nights? Did these writers not possess creative minds enabling them to produce or recreate in translation such works of fiction?”²¹³ Al-Khozai mentions that “some orientalists have sought to claim that the Arab mentality is abstract whereas the European’s is concrete.”²¹⁴ This led them to further claim that owing to this abstract nature of Arab mentality, it follows that the rise of individualism, which is the direct outcome of the practice of mental abstraction, does not help people to gather in groups, which is crucial for theatre to occur. It is true that the desert is a good home for speculation and individualism. It is also true that it was the desert that helped the renowned Arab poets to be pioneers amongst their fellow kinsmen. Yet it is totally untrue that individualism hampers the creation of arts. How could one therefore account for the splendid works of Greek dramatists who isolated themselves from others when they were playwriting their masterpieces?

Of central importance to al-Khozai’s ‘mental factor’ is al-Hakim’s similar attitude summarized in the Arabs’ misunderstanding of legend-based Greek poetry and tragedy. The Arabs, for him, were not acquainted with these genres,²¹⁵ an attitude that appealed to Gibb and won al-Hakim a very good

²¹⁰ Ibid, p. 6.

²¹¹ There are others who share this claim with al-Khozai. For example, Ouzri, “the nomadic life in the desert contradicts indeed the dramatic activity, which requires a minimum of stability.” See *Le théâtre au Maroc: structures et tendances*, p. 16.

²¹² See *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900*, p. 3.

²¹³ Ibid. The epic of *Antara al-Absi* is an exemplary instance of epic poetry typical to Arabic culture. It was written by Antara himself to express his suffering and feelings of inferiority prompted by his tribesmen’s antipathy to his black skin. He made up for his inferiority by proving his gallantry in lethal battles until his tribe deemed him a hero. Finally, the white daughter of the tribe’s chief, named Abla, fell in love with him. However, the two lovers then found themselves immersed in a long battle against their tribal customs until their love was finally recognized. *Taghribat Bani Hilal* is another epic, too. It was compiled in poetry and prose to recount the story of the tribe of Bani Hilal which emigrated from the Arab Peninsula to Tunisia under the leadership of a black slave called Abu Zayd al-Hilali Salamah, who, too, overwhelmed his feelings of inferiority through heroic deeds. These folkloric narratives with their dramatic elements remind us of the origins of some of Shakespeare’s dramas such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, or *Hamlet*.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ See *Al-Malik Udib*, p. 23.

title: “the founder of drama in Arabic.”²¹⁶ It is true that when the Arabs translated Aristotle’s *Poetics*, they misunderstood both comedy and tragedy and conceived them as *madeeh* (panegyric) and *hijaa* (satire) respectively. But this does not mean that their concept system lacked notions of comedy and tragedy as termed by the Greeks. Fond of al-Hakim, M. M. Badawi confirms this attitude that tragedy and comedy were not understood by the Arabs and were thus never discussed till the recent nineteenth-century Arab scholarship in the field.²¹⁷ However despite this apparent fondness, Badawi maintains that “dramatic representations or histrionic activities were not...unknown...even in medieval Islam.”²¹⁸ More than that, he admits that al-Hakim “writes of the difficulty faced by a modern Arab dramatist as a result of the absence of drama from classical Arabic literature.”²¹⁹ In his writings, Badawi observes, al-Hakim drew a picture of himself as a man who “confronts a void or near void consisting of a few insignificant attempts which are not yet deeply rooted in his language or literature” and “works with a frightful gap behind him which the efforts of previous generations have not filled.”²²⁰ Al-Hakim seems to have followed in the footsteps of Muhammad Taymour. Both of them went to France and studied the French stage. Badawi rightly observes that “in France their interest in drama was further developed, their taste refined, their ideas sharpened, their views of what Egyptian drama should be like formed.”²²¹

Like their predecessors in the School of Orientalism, the claim that Islam is inherently inimical to drama is often made by Arab intelligentsia. Al-Khozai claims that “because of the new monotheistic faith it was unlikely that Arab scholars would turn to what they considered a pagan art form.” He attributes the Arabs’ refusal of drama to their religion: “The appearance of gods in these plays, or, at least their invisible interference in most of their action was naturally repellent to Muslims. It was therefore unthinkable for Muslims to introduce obvious signs of blasphemy into their culture.”²²² Instead of showing at which place in the Quran where one can find Quranic rejection of drama, al-Khozai blithely includes Arabic language to his theory of absence:

Because of the extraordinarily high status accorded to the Arabic language, being the sacred language of the Quran as understood by the believers to be literally the word of God, the Arabs, who prided themselves on their tongue, seemed to feel no need to translate any foreign literature, since in their view, the highest degree of human eloquence could only be attained in Arabic.²²³

This claim excludes from the map other prophets as well as the languages through which their messages were delivered. Language has never been a barrier to dramatic activities. To the reader’s surprise, Al-Khozai admits that “there are no grounds to justify the view that Islam prohibits drama for one simple reason: namely that drama was unknown at the time of the advent of this religion.”²²⁴

It is true that when Muhammad appeared in Mecca as a prophet, he was sad at the sight of his people so sternly wedded to idolatry. Each tribe had a representative fat-buttocked god in Mecca; and when pilgrimage time arrived, each tribe would hurry to kneel with trembling and fear at the feet of its idol-god and offer gracious sacrifices. These pagan rites and rituals are among the irritating obscurities of Arabic culture. They exerted considerable influence on the Arabs before Islam and left upon them so varied tentacles that their dramatic history can hardly be understood without them. Yet the Arab critic is as mute concerning them “as a matron anxious to forget, publicly, the surrenders of her youth.”²²⁵ However, Muhammad’s sorrows were assuaged when he united under one banner the various tribes that had been until very recently warring foes. Muhammad thus worsted the pagan

²¹⁶ See M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 9.

²¹⁷ See M.M. Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp, 3-4.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹⁹ See *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, p. 8.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²²² See *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900*, p. 4.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²²⁵ This simile is taken from Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage* Vol. I. (World Library, Inc., 1935)

religious system of the Arabs and presented a new alternative full of rites and rituals. Yet there is no mention anywhere in Muhammad's new system speaking negatively about theatrical activity.

Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi have substantially critiqued this claim in *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy*. They maintain that "the Quran does not expressly forbid the representation of the human form. In fact, no single verse refers to it at all."²²⁶ In their quest for a verifiable proof from Islamic religion, Khatibi and Sijelmassi stumbled upon an unverifiable hadeeth, which "expresses the prohibition on figurative art straightforwardly: when he makes an image, man sins unless he can breathe life into it." They found out that it was not Prophet Muhammad who expressed his disavowal of theatrical activity, but rather it was "the *fuqaha* [Islamic religious scholars] and the orthodox" who "have twisted the allegorical meaning of the Quran the better to impose rules and prohibitions." They further add:

This alleged prohibition was directed against the surviving forms of totemism which, anathematized by Islam, could conceivably reinfiltate it in the guise of art. The principle of the hidden face of God could be breached by such an image. In one sense, theology was right to be watchful; it had to keep an eye on its irrepressible enemy – art.²²⁷

Khatibi and Sijelmassi also stumbled across Muhammad's approval of "one of his daughters to play with dolls, which are of course derived from the totemic gods." They also reminded us of the "numerous examples of drawing both of animals and human, as well as of figurative sculpture, as, we are told, the eighth century Caliph al-Mansur had in his palace."²²⁸ Citing Khatibi and Sijelmassi, Amine and Carlson thus conclude: "Islam's assault against totemism should by no means be extended to theatre, especially theatre utilized in the service of religion as was true of Maghreb performance in the 1920s and 1930s."²²⁹

Of the significant critics who argue in favor of Islam's dramatic hostility Mohammed Aziza elbows himself as an example. In his opinion, Islam, unlike drama, is conflict free. Aziza argues that Greek drama is reposed on four types of conflict: vertical and horizontal, dynamic and inner. The first conflict has to do with the will of God against the will of man as in the case of *Zeus and Prometheus* mythology. The second engages human instinct against society and its norms. The third and fourth have to do with human instinct vis-à-vis human fate. Aziza sees Islam itself as a real impediment to the adaptation of drama which is driven by conflict between man and God and even between man and his own self. He says, "Muslim Arabs could not have known drama for the simple reason that none of the four types of conflict existed in their faith or thought."²³⁰ He adds, "The Muslim could never think of himself as a challenger of Allah (God), nor could he defy His will. Allah is the origin and basis of everything and everything is derived from him and returns unto him."²³¹

Aziza's claim is biased by the Eurocentric discourse that eclipses difference. In Amine's words, "what Aziza was struggling to demonstrate is the absence of the tragic form in the Arabo-Islamic heritage, a fact that can be disapproved through the very existence of the Shiite ritual passion play *Ta'ziya*."²³² Put in other words, instead of shedding light on the aesthetics of performance arts such as the theatre in Islamic legacy as European critics did when they returned to Greek theatrical legacy and thoroughly explored its aesthetics, Aziza contents himself with the naive theory of absence and thus limits his thinking to illustrating the ostensible reasons of why the Arabs could not engender a drama similar to Greek tragedy. I support Amine's argument that instead of considering this Eurocentric question in a manner regarding and affirming Arabo-Islamic difference, Aziza has replicated the

²²⁶ Cited in Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, "Islam and the Colonial Stage in North Africa" in *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb* (International Federation of Theatre Research, 2012), p. 104.

²²⁷ Cited on the same page.

²²⁸ Cited on the same page.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²³⁰ See M. Aziza, *al-Islam wal-masrah* (Islam and Theatre) (Riyad: Oyoun al-Maqalat, 1987), pp. 21-45.

[My translation]

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15. [My translation]

²³² See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 37.

Western construction of otherness in terms of absences and eclipses.²³³ In the last resort, Aziza's critique stands guilty of eclipsing the missing narrative of Arabic drama which the Eurocentric discourse wishes to consign to the lumber-room of history. Aziza and others depict Arabic culture as a culture with a dawn shining on no heroic tragedies but on nightmares that make us scream in our sleep.

Bounahai is very critical of this claim made by these 'connoisseurs of the Arab world' who argue that: "in the last two or three centuries before the nineteenth century, the era of the development of the great national dramas of France, Italy and England, the majority of Arab writers of imaginative prose and poets, demonstrated a distinct lack of imagination and flair in their works: the creative spirit needed to found a literary theatre that was lacking."²³⁴ I agree with Bounahai that this Orientalist statement "inscribes [our culture] or tradition in a static mode and panders to the Hegelian idea of progress that the East did indeed settle into oriental repose and slept through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, only to wake up with a start when Napoleon was pounding on the Mamluks gates of Egypt in 1798."²³⁵

Al-Rai and Hassan Lemniai are such connoisseurs who not only emptied Arabic culture of its dramatic contents but also the Arab mind of its ability of understanding. Citing Lemniai, al-Rai strangely argues that the Arabs did not know theatre for two reasons: first, "the ancient Arabs did not read dramatic texts; thus, theatre, as an idea and as an art, was not known to them." Second, "the Arabs, the reputable, practiced theatre without knowing it was theatre."²³⁶ First, al-Rai's understanding of theatre is indebted to his Orientalist teacher, Allardyce Niccol, whom he calls: "the universal evidence of the art of drama and its history."²³⁷ Examining Nicoll's *An Introduction to Dramatic Theatre*, which al-Rai praises considerably, the reader will come across an opening terrifying Eurocentric statement, which underlines Nicoll's concept of theatre: "Dramatic theory is a subject which has occupied the minds of many of the most brilliant literary critics and philosophers from the very dawn of theatrical art in Greece to our present days."²³⁸ For his part, Lemniai claims that "theatre is a Western invention." To account for this claim, he cites Landau, who claims, too, that it was the art of gesture that helped the Arabs to import theatre.²³⁹ For him, Islam played a significant role in the absence of theatre,²⁴⁰ yet it seems that both have only repeated Landau. The influence of his Orientalist teacher²⁴¹ under whose eyes he did a PhD at Sorbonne is quite palpable. Thus, al-Rai's and Lemniai's main argument is Landau's: the Arabs did not know drama and theatre; however, their culture knew various 'early' dramatic aspects such as *al-maqama*, *khayal Azzil*, *al-hikaya*, *Taiziya*, etc. Badawi, too, repeats this same argument: the Arabs "did not know drama as it was conceived in the west from the times of the ancient Greeks to the present, namely as an art form in which an action is 'imitated' through dialogue spoken by human actors on a stage."²⁴² "Yet the Arab world did have certain indigenous types of dramatic representation at the time, some even going back to medieval Islam."²⁴³

Although Lemniai claims to "have reconsidered the concept of theatre" due to his "knowledge of new theories and orientations,"²⁴⁴ his second book maintains the opposite. He rather confirms the

²³³ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

²³⁴ Cited in "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," p. 53.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

²³⁶ See "Takdim: Ali al-Rai wa Fan al-Masrah" [Introduction: Ali al-Rai and the Art of Theatre] by Farouq Abdelqader in Ali al-Rai, *al-Masrah fi al-Watan al-Arabiyy* [Theatre in Arabic Culture] 2nd Edition (Alam al-Maarifa Adad 248, 1999), pp. 17; 62.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

²³⁸ See Allardyce Nicoll, *An Introduction to Dramatic Theory* (Brentano's: New York, 1900), p. 11.

²³⁹ See Hassan Lemniai, *Abhat fi al-Masrah al-Maghribiy* [Studies on Moroccan Theatre] 2nd Edition (Manchorat al-Zama: Matbaat al-Najah in Casablanca, 2001), p. 8.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 11; 20.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁴² M.M. Badawi "Arabic Drama: Early Developments" in M.M. Badawi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 329.

²⁴³ M.M. Badawi, "Introduction" in *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1.

²⁴⁴ See *Abhat fi al-Masrah al-Maghribiy*, p. 16.

dependency of Arabic theatre upon its Western counterpart,²⁴⁵ and repeats Landau's main argument outlined above. Although he quotes Edward Gordon Graig's famous definition of theatre,²⁴⁶ Lemniai disregards it in favor of Landau's. This indicates that Arab critics endorse the standpoint of the School of Orientalism without calling its system of thoughts into question.

Unlike these Arab critics, Hassan Youssfi explored "Eastern aesthetics in modern Western theatre" to show the plenitude and richness of the aesthetics of Eastern arts of performance, which were regarded as *mere* folklore arts.²⁴⁷ He cleverly points to the contradictions inherent in Eurocentrism adumbrated in Jean Duvignaud's thesis of "Double Illusion:" our understanding of drama is strongly influenced by two prejudgments. One, dramatic invention is cosmic; thus, theatre must be the noblest expression of every civilization. Two, interpretation of theatrical invention has to be carried out in light of a purported 'history of the theatre,' which traces its 'origins' to primitive wonders.²⁴⁸

Youssfi observes that this illusion was raised in the cradle of Enlightenment and later developed in Imperialistic thinking of the last century; hence the rise of theatrical Eurocentrism. Youssfi cites George Steiner as an example of this School of Orientalism. For Steiner, tragedy is cosmic and known to all peoples, but it remains special to the Greeks alone.²⁴⁹ Others in the West itself felt the need to explore the latent face of Western metaphysics and deconstruct and worst the Western Self. For this purpose, they appealed to the power of aesthetics of Eastern cultures²⁵⁰ not only to resuscitate their own dying theatres but also to acknowledge cultural differences which the Eurocentric trend denied in favor of its unjustified fantasies. Of the champions of the counter discourse on western metaphysics we find Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Antonin Artaud, Eugenio Barba, Bert Brecht and others. For these, the East is not "a void or near void" as claimed by the School of Orientalism and their followers, but rather 'a lesson in spiritualities,'²⁵¹ 'an embodiment system of things and practices,'²⁵² 'an empire of signs,'²⁵³ 'a school of the body.'²⁵⁴

Yet one should point to Bounahai's critical catechizing of the scramble of these "disaffected loners in the West"²⁵⁵ to Africa and the East to seek "solace" in these "outlandish geographies,"²⁵⁶ a catechizing that puts the entire avant-garde dogma in the hot seat and invites a diligent rereading of the history of colonial encounters. In his eyes, this scramble "was a re-invented form of Orientalism and Africanism" and that "the attraction to Africa and the Orient that these [directors] had shown re-inscribed these two regions in a discourse of stasis, or at best in a dizzying ritualistic cyclicality that led to the much sought trance of the dervishes of the East or the incantations of Voodoo deified saints."²⁵⁷ Yet one has to distinguish between avant-garde and avant-gardists, for the distinction is really huge. It is true that these unsatisfied loners scrambled and poured into these geographies motivated by Hegel's imperial prejudices around the East and Africa that the inhabitants of these lands were mired in repose and slumber, and needed joggle and rarefication, or, in the words of Bounahai, needed someone(s) from the West to help them "jump onto the bandwagon of modernity."²⁵⁸ In this sense, the avant-gardists are to be approached with caution and suspicion given that they were motivated by 'White

²⁴⁵ See Hassan Lemniai, *al-Masrah al-Maghribiy mina al-Taesis ila Sinaat al-Forja* [Moroccan Theatre from Construction to the Making of Spectacle] (Matbaat Mohamed al-Khamis: Fes, 1994), p. 5.

²⁴⁶ Graig writes: "the art of the theatre is neither acting nor the play; it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which are the body of the scene; line and color, which are; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance." Cited in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, p. 185.

²⁴⁷ See Hassan Youssfi, *al-Masrah wa al-Onthropologiya* [Theatre and Anthropology] (Matbaat al-Najah al-Jadida: Cassablanca, 2000), pp. 91; 94.

²⁴⁸ Jean Duvignaud cited in *al-Masrah wa al-Onthropologiya*, p. 92.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.93.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁵⁵ See "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," p. 51.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁵⁸ See "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," p. 56.

Man's burden' and 'the civilizing mission' which are both very colonial/political. Yet the avant-garde itself cannot be accused of complicity between West and East or North and South during colonial times, for it is a mere system of aesthetics and poetics. This system, Bounahai maintains, was effectively used to achieve "a complicity... between these disaffected theatre directors and the indigenous directors from the South"²⁵⁹ for it presented theatre to the South in the form of ritual, which made directors from these geographies feel "vindicated that theatre had been brought home in the form of ritual. It would be wrong, however, to say that theatre originated in ritual. To advance such a postulate is to make headlong fall into the trap of cultural Darwinism and provide fodder for Hegel's idea of history as a Westward March."²⁶⁰ Yet to view ritual as "a customary practice in its own right, with its own dynamics"²⁶¹ and to strip theatre of its ritualistic origin is to agree in some sense or another to Hegel's idea of progress and thus would only concoct an excuse to these loners of modernity to scramble to our geographies at will in search of the 'raw materials' that still have to be processed.

Unlike the Arab connoisseurs who fell in the snare of the School of Orientalism, and thus only repeated and promulgated its Orientalist gospels and unknowingly vindicated Hegel's idea of history as a Westward March, others run counter to this hegemonic discourse and attempted to show the reverse. Ignoring Mohamed Messkin's theatrical exegesis on the return to Arabic legacy, which to his mind was "a defensive act" originated as a result of experiencing "a feeling of civilizational frustration"²⁶² due to the shock of the historical encounter between Arabs and Westerners, others such as Ali Uglah Arsan followed a different approach and thus unraveled, though not comprehensively, the rites and rituals, dramatic and theatrical performances of the Arabs before and after Islam.

In his significant article "al-masrah al-Arabiyy bayna al-Acala wa al-Taesil" [Arabic Theatre between Authenticity and Rooting], Arsan goes into generous details in his criticism of Arab Intelligentsia who imagine theatre to be a Western invention. He maintains that Arabic theatrical arts were performed in the past with recourse to "movement, word, and tune, that is, dance, music, and singing."²⁶³ He thus referred to 'early' aesthetics of Arabic drama which others before him such as Badawi should have attempted to delineate. He argues that like other peoples such as the ancient Egyptians, Indians, Japanese and Chinese, the Arabs knew histrionic arts. He cites an early Meccan ritual from pre-Islamic times characterized with dancing around the *Kaabah* in worship of the 360 fat-buttocked gods and in tandem chanting the *talbiyah* [songs of obedience]. Arsan quotes a Quranic verse as evidence of this dramatic performance: "And their prayer before the house is nothing but whistling and clapping of hands."²⁶⁴ These rites and rituals were performed twice yearly. Remarkably, each tribe had its own *talbiyah*. In short, Arsan considers *Istisqa:e* [a prayer for rain], *Niyaha* [Mourning Rituals], *al-Qussas* [Storytellers], *al-Hikaya* [Narration], Ta'ziya, Shadow Plays and others as forms of drama actors performed in presence of spectators at a particular time, place and with recourse to singing, music, dancing, movement, gesture, makeup, acting and costumes.²⁶⁵ For his part, Bounahai maintains that "Arab-Muslim civilization had its own histrionics"²⁶⁶ no doubt, yet he warns of "invoking such festive practices in [the] debate around the absence of theatre in the Muslim world... in a clear attempt to defend one's native culture" for the endeavor "carries a myriad of risks:" first, nativism could aggravate in the process and would "betray a sense of insularity that could potentially lead to monologist cultural internalism, lopsided fundamentalism and ultimately to rabid Occidentalism;" second, the particular and the specific could become fetishized and the global excluded "not in the economic or cultural sense(s) of globalization, but rather in the sense of world

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁶² See Mohamed Messkin, "al-Masrah al-Arabiyy al-Hadeeth bayna Dayai al-Howiya wa Ghiyab al-Roeyati al-Tarikhiya" [Modern Arabic Theatre between the Loss of Identity and the Absence of Historicist Vision] in *al-Taesil wa al-Tahdeeth fi al-Masrah al-Arabiyy* [Rooting and Modernizing in Arabic Theatre] (al-Wahda Adad 95/94, 1992), pp. 6-21.

²⁶³ See Ali Uglah Arsan, "al-masrah al-Arabiyy bayna al-Acala and al-Taesil" [Arabic Theatre between Authenticity and Rooting] in *al-Taesil wa al-Tahdeeth fi al-Masrah al-Arabiyy*, pp. 46-47.

²⁶⁴ Quran, chapter VIII, verse 35. Cited in "al-masrah al-Arabiyy bayna al-Acala and al-Taesil," p. 47.

²⁶⁵ See the entire article.

²⁶⁶ See "Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited," p. 48.

history, or total or connected history;” third, “the simple act of inventorying these festive practices, without materially contextualizing them, is a self-framing act that further inscribes this very culture or tradition to the Hegelian idea of progress;” fourth, “judging how similar these festive practices were to their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere should lead us to believe that there is a universal dimension to act of *ludus*.”²⁶⁷ While all these risks are surely to be reckoned with in the process of revisiting the debate around Arabic theatre, it should be stressed that renouncing the aesthetic and poetic side of the avant-garde or reducing the entire theatrical avant-garde system to the politics of knowledge or politics of power would cut the debate short and would finally stick the debate itself in a time warp.

Tayeb Saddiki is also of the opinion that the Arabs entertained drama in their own culture. He finds pre-Islamic lyrical poetry very dramatic and invites playwrights to dramatize olden Arab literary sources.²⁶⁸ After consuming numerous plays from the European dramatic repertory, he returned to Arabo-Islamic dramatic traditions and found them fit for dramatization. Indeed, he returned to Maqama which “has all the characteristics of modern theatre.”²⁶⁹ Saddiki returned to Arabic legacy after he reconsidered the concept of theatre: “I asked the question: what is theatre? And I found its answer: it is a spectacle; and my culture is rich of the copious forms of spectacle.” He even goes further to claim that “Arabic theatre has been in existence for many centuries, though it lacked the so-called director. Arabic theatre in fact pre-existed French, English and American theatres.”²⁷⁰ While this claim is hard to accept as valid, it remains true that Arabic culture is full of drama and theatricality.

In *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, Boaz Shoshan traces the history of *Nawruz* festival in Medieval Cairo. He concludes that the tenth-century Egyptians and Iraqis were acquainted with acting, make-up and costumes:

There were also masks and masquerades. In 975, in celebrations which lasted three days, crowds marched in the streets of Cairo; masquerades (or masks), theatrical performances, and man-made imitations of elephants, possibly a means of mocking two (real) elephants which had featured in a procession presided over by the Fatimid caliph al-Muizz two years earlier, all were present. A medieval critic lamented the adverse effect of the holiday not only on the common people but on the learned as well. On that day, he tells us, schools were shut down and turned into playgrounds.²⁷¹

Convinced that theatre is an artwork, defenders of the School of Arab Intelligentsia became “incorporated within the western discourse as docile bodies ready to rehearse the colonial text.”²⁷² Unconscious of the Western desire to contain their ‘otherness’ and overshadow their arts of performance, they were also convinced that borrowing and appropriating Western literary texts were acts of modernity. I agree with Amine that these acts were “transplanted in the Arab body from without” with recourse to “a local intelligentsia”²⁷³ who, in Paul Bowles’ words, unknowingly wanted “to cease being themselves and become Westerners.”²⁷⁴ In this vein, Bounahai maintains that “the colonial discourse ... sought to shear a whole vibrant culture of its revels” when it convinced the first harbingers of the urgent need to use European dramatic legacies “as a fund into which [they] could tap at will.”²⁷⁵ Yet Speaking with strictest accuracy, there is not in the whole universe of known facts one so purely venerable, so wholly sublime in its grandeur as the fact that Arabs and Muslims have had splendid dramaland free performative spaces, age long indeed if measured by our common standards of time.

This article insists that Arabs were acquainted with playwriting before Marun al-Naqqash’s *al-Bakhil* (1847) (The Miser), an adapted text from Molière’s *l’Avare*, and that from 1847 until the 1960s

²⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 47; 49; 50.

²⁶⁸ See Hassan Habibi, *Tayeb Saddiki: Hayat Masrah* (Tayeb Saddiki: A Life in Theatre) (Matbaat Dar al-Nashr, 2011), p. 118.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ See Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 43.

²⁷² See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 44.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁷⁴ Paul Bowles cited in *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 43.

²⁷⁵ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” pp. 46; 53.

Arabic drama had been unable to emancipate itself from the European apparatuses of playwriting and drama making as it was blinded by the antagonistic Eurocentric discourse. Indeed, Arabic plays “were native appropriations of an alien medium though they strived to mirror an inner self”²⁷⁶ because in borrowing the western model, as John Mair maintains, “the shape of lives and the shape of narratives”²⁷⁷ transform in the process. Amine cleverly observes that “this period was characterized by native collaborations through various excesses of self-annihilation and the *othering* of the self” while “the western text” became “the model of all writing(s).” He adds,

The Arab subject, blinded by the Other’s discourse, has admitted (at least since 1847) that he had no dramatic text as a self-referential script that would develop a writing for the stage; thus, the western model became a dramatic origin of all subsequent inscriptions, and Arabic attempts to re-appropriate the western model are no more than Europe’s negative shadows and supplements.²⁷⁸

Yet the absence of a ‘self-referential’ dramatic text in Arabic cultures is another fallacy. It is “an effect of the western surveying gaze” of which the School of Orientalism takes avail in a bid to achieve epistemic colonization, or more precisely to prickle the Arabic body with the needle of European modernity. Such fallacy is founded upon “the very same logocentric tendency” that had influenced European drama/theatre “since the first European theatrical age through medieval liturgical and morality plays of the Renaissance, Shakespeare...till the well-made play of the late nineteenth century.” Yet as has been shown already, this ‘logocentric supremacy’ of literacy over the theatrical performance has been criticized and deconstructed by a train of notable avant-gardist dramatists and theatre critics since the second half of the twentieth century. Conscious of avant-garde theatre aesthetics, Amine maintains that “a performance has been conceived of as a text on its own, rather than a negative shadow of a dramatic script as its center.” The self-referential script was not absent before “appropriating the western model of textual practice, but rather it was *eclipsed, backgrounded, and dismissed* in favor of the western text.”²⁷⁹

Arab(ic) appropriations of European theatrical and textual practices were inaugurated in 1847. I am convinced that this date constitutes “the point of *rupture* not that of *departure*.” Those who claim otherwise insist that the first modern Arabic drama in the European sense came into being in Beirut when Al-Naqqash wrote *The Miser*. These critics pay no scholarly attention to the first modern Arabic drama published prior to Al-Naqqash’s: *nuzhat al-musta:q wa-rusàt al-uṣa:q fi: madi:nati torya:qi fi al-Iraa:q* [The Pleasure Trip of the Enamored and the Agony of Lovers in the Toryaq City in Iraq]. It was compiled by an Arabic-speaking Sephardic Algerian Jew named Abraham Daninos (1797-1872). S. Moreh and P. Sadgrove assert that “now it is clear from the texts published here that al-Naqqash had a precursor further afield in the far West of the Ottoman Empire in Algeria, Abraham Daninos.”²⁸⁰ Amine notes that Moreh and Sadgrove’s review presents Daninos as a pioneer in the field of drama in the Arab World, and that his play is an attempt at making the Arabs become acquainted with the making of spectacle and dramatic poetry.²⁸¹ Yet in a recent article,²⁸² Sayed Ali Ismael problematizes and negates Moreh and Sadgrove’s claim and argues that Daninos wrote his play after Al-Naqqash’s *The Miser*, not before it. Leaving aside the controversy raised by Ismael, Moreh and Sadgrove’s review of Arabic drama remains corrupted by a Jewish pioneering theatrical pride that does not exist.²⁸³ For others, what is important is the act itself. For example, Bounahai looks at al-Naqqash as

²⁷⁶ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 44.

²⁷⁷ John Mair is cited in *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 44.

²⁷⁸ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, pp. 44-45.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45; 47.

²⁸⁰ Cited in *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 49.

²⁸¹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 49.

²⁸² See Sayed Ali Ismael’s article “al-Johod al-Masrahiya Lilyahod al-Arab: Haqaik wa Akadib” [Arab Jewish Theatrical Efforts: Facts and Lies] –not published.

²⁸³ See P. C. Sadgrove, *al-Masrah al-Misriyy fi al-Qarn al-Tasi Ashar (1799-1882)* [The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century (1799-1882)] trans. into Arabic by Amine Ayoti (al-Markaz al-Kawmi Lilmasrah wa Lmosika wal Fonon al-Sharbiya, 2007). In this book, Sadgrove strives but in vain to demonstrate the role of the Jews in establishing Arabic theatre. If Moreh and Sadgrove attribute the pioneering role in establishing modern Arabic drama to Daninos in their collaborated book *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre*

“someone who was spoken by a discourse on modernity that was gaining further currency in the Mashreq in mid-nineteenth century.”²⁸⁴ Al-Naqqash commenced his histrionic experience with harping on ‘the civilizing influence of theatre,’ selecting a ‘refined’ audience before which he had staged an over-rehearsed drama in compliance with Greco-Roman histrionic patterns; in this sense, “he was not only reviving the didacticism of Renaissance Humanism, but was also venting out the Renaissance prejudice against licentious and farcical popular art forms that featured unruly jesters, clowns and the *samajas*.”²⁸⁵

Doubtless, many chapters of Arabic dramatic narratives lie silent under our crowded soil. Yet Arabic history has preserved, for the sake of posterity, many examples of age-long written plays of which Ibn Daniyal’s *Tayf al-Khayal*, a trilogy, is an example worthy of mention here. It was in the spirit of saving the shadow theatre which was losing popular appreciation that Ibn Daniyal compiled his plays. Though sharing certain artistic characteristics, each play has an atmosphere and a theme special to it alone. These plays treat the life of the downtrodden from the lower echelons of society.²⁸⁶

Yet despite the existence of Ibn Daniyal’s trilogy, it is still widely held that al-Naqqash’s performance of his adaptation of *L’Avare* constitutes the starting point of dramatic literature in Arabic culture. Al-Naqqash’s play was performed by male members of his family and entertained by an “audience consisting of his friends and acquaintances from the upper class;”²⁸⁷ in Amine’s words, it was “a westernized and liberal rising upper class, somehow a supplement or shadow of a deeply rooted European bourgeoisie.” Scholars in the School of Arab Intelligentsia consider al-Naqqash’s play as a “founding presence and a starting point of modern Arabic drama.”²⁸⁸ In Badawi’s words, “modern Arabic drama is an importation from the west” as “it was directly and consciously borrowed... by a Lebanese writer in Beirut Marun al-Naqqash, and two decades later by an Egyptian in Cairo, Yaqub Sannu.”²⁸⁹ In the eyes of Bounahai, this traditionally minded historiography is guilty of not “steer[ing] clear of the pitfalls of emotion in memory work.”²⁹⁰

Yet Amine observes that al-Naqqash’s adaptation “represents a moment of rupture rather than a moment of departure of a theatrical tradition.”²⁹¹ I am also of the opinion that this act of adaptation is an act of rupture between two periods (two mediums), the indigenous and the alien, and two narratives (two traditions), that is to say, between indigenous performative events, which, in Amine’s words, “might have been dynamized from within,”²⁹² and modern appropriations of European ways of drama and theatre making. This rupture is palpable in the play’s performance that took place in an improvised stage at al-Naqqash’s house which hailed only “esteemed masters and honorable possessors of sensibility” to whom he initially delivered a speech of high significance acknowledging the western sources of inspiration. He described the play as a “literary theatre and a European gold cast in Arab molds.”²⁹³ Thus it is safe to say that the play is imbued with a logocentric tendency manifested in “the text” which “is an adaptation of Moliere’s *L’Avare*,” “the performance” which “was conceived within the parameters of the Italian building with an artificial environment, a proscenium that brings about a division (a fourth wall) between stage and auditorium;” and in “an

(1996), Sadrove attributes this pioneering role in establishing modern Egyptian theatre to Yaqub Sannu in his *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century (1799-1882)*. Sayed Ali Ismael historically as well as critically negates their scientifically groundless claims.

²⁸⁴ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” pp. 55.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁸⁶ See Paul Kahle, *Three Shadow Plays by Muhammad Ibn Daniyal* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial, 1992). For more information on Ibn Daniyal’s plays, see Marvin Carlson, “Microhistory in the Middle East: The Case of In Dāniyāl” in *Theatre Survey*, 55:1, January 2014, pp. 81 - 95

²⁸⁷ See Lenin El-Ramly, “Highlight: The Comedy of the East, or the Art of Cunning: A Testimony” trans. by Hazem Azmy in *Ecumenica, a Journal of Theatre and Performance* volume 1.2, Fall 2008, pp. 75-87. p. 76.

²⁸⁸ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 51.

²⁸⁹ See *Early Arabic Drama*, p. 7.

²⁹⁰ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 54.

²⁹¹ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 52.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ Cited in Mohamed Messkin, “al-Masrah al-Arabiyy al-Hadeeth bayna Dayai al-Howiya wa Ghiyab al-Roeyati al-Tarikhia”, p.11.

elitist audience” which was “already incorporated within the fabric of the west as a local petit Bourgeoisie that advocates modernism.”²⁹⁴

In his second play, *abu al-hassan al-mughafal wa haru:n al-rachid* [The Fool Abu al-Hassan and Harun al-Rachid], al-Naqqash endeavored to emancipate himself from the epistemic grips of theatrical Eurocentrism preached by intrepid champions of European modernity and adamant adherents of the School of Orientalism. Yet in Amine’s opinion, such endeavor was a complete failure as it was restricted to the plot only which he appropriated from *The Arabian Nights* and *The Sleeper and the Awake*. His plays are caught within the paradox of the western model and their Arabizations. They would have been successful if al-Naqqash had remolded them in order to fit the Arabic taste, a taste oriented by our indigenous customs of free and adaptive festive performing events such as *al-hakawati*, shadow plays, *al-halqa*, *maqama*...etc.²⁹⁵ Having opted for Arab gold in European molds, his choice now is less surprising and is in fact more welcomed. This time he did not “driv[e] a wedge between the lay low-brow and the learned high-brow in the hope of dragging the whole region out of ‘the waiting room of history’ and right into modernity.”²⁹⁶

I conclude that the theory of absence adopted by both schools is lop-sided and mindless of any basic ‘roots’ or seeds of the art of theatre in Arabo-Islamic culture. It is premised on Eurocentric claims that strive to eclipse oriental drama with Orientalist fancies. No doubt, Arabs must have had pagan and magico-religious rites and practices which must have had theatrical features and characteristics with the potential for development and growth. Furthermore, the customs and traditions ubiquitous in every society as part of its popular cultural heritage contain theatrical elements capable of development. The pre- and post- Islamic Arab society certainly had specific customs and traditions which were performed during special occasions such as the harvest which was accompanied by singing and dancing. In the last resort, this chapter assumes that the theatre in its basic forms was not absent from Arabic culture neither before nor after Islam, but was eclipsed by Euro-centrism in a bid to overshadow and contain Arabic culture. In the words of Bounahai, “the biggest injustice of all is that this prejudice was ironically leveled at cultures that abound in a hoard of rituals, festivities, and spectacles; a hoard vast enough to earn some of these cultures the distinction of ‘theatre states’ in (post) modern cultural anthropology.”²⁹⁷

Indeed, it remains true that the Arabs have known manifold performative traditions such as the shadow play, *al-hakawa:ti*, *al-araguz*, *abidat r’ma*, *al-halqa*,...etc the deep significance of which has been overlooked by all historians excepting a few. The Arabs, then, were irreducibly *different* as to theatrical/dramatic art forms. “Blinded by the ‘miasma’ of the shock of encounter with the superior Western Other,” Arabic dramatic forms were passively predisposed to appropriate the Western model yet “without questioning its claim of universality and transcendence.” Thus, it is safe to say that before 1960s Arabic drama/theatre was “caught within the stereotypical gaze of the Western Other” which “reduces [it] to no more than an acclimatized art form that has been transplanted in the Arab world.”²⁹⁸ Indeed, “the Arab love affair with western theatre would prove to be the biggest assault on festive customs across the region” which “once provided the theatrical sense to the community were [now] frowned upon or left to willow on the sides. They were invariably considered as unwarranted ribaldry.”²⁹⁹

Leaving aside the political malevolency of the avant-garde, this article insists that the history of Arab-Muslim histrionics should be written in light of the aesthetics of this tendency which is, so to speak, the canon to which one should turn to evaluate whether an art is drama/theatre or not. Therefore, prudent scholars must not refrain from attempting such an endeavor or view for otherwise the probability of error would increase with the scope of the undertaking, and scholars who sell their souls to the School of Orientalism that respire through outworn political modernity discourses will, in the words of Will Durant and Ariel, be “a tragic target for a myriad merry darts of specialist

²⁹⁴ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, p. 53.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 53.

²⁹⁷ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 46.

²⁹⁸ See *Moroccan Theatre between East and West*, pp. 33-34.

²⁹⁹ See “Thresholds of Difference: The Arab-Muslim Theatre Revisited,” p. 56.

critique.”³⁰⁰ The rediscovery of our lost dramatic tradition is indeed one of the major tasks of modern anthropology and live theatre studies; and it must be expressed objectively otherwise “we may be expressing no objective fact, but only our fierce fondness for ourselves, and our timid shyness in the presence of alien ways.”³⁰¹

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³⁰⁰ W. Durant & Ariel, *The Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage* Vol. I. (World Library, Inc., 1935), p. 4.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

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