



Exiled Scene(s): Anchors and Displacements of the Syrian Theatre since 2011

Independent curator and researcher Jumana Al-Yasiri, holds a BA in Theatre Studies from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus, and an MA in Comparative Literature from the University Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint-Denis. Among her numerous local, regional and international collaborations, she was appointed curator for the urban and world music program of Damascus Arab Capital of Culture 2008; and she has held the post of Grants Manager at the Young Arab Theatre Fund since 2011. She is currently based in Paris, where she is a PhD candidate in History and Semiology of Texts and Images at the University Paris 7 Denis-Diderot. Al-Yasiri is also a regular panelist and writer on Middle-Eastern contemporary arts and cultural practices.

At this very moment, while we are here to talk about economic, social and cultural transformations affecting our modern society, the amateur theatre company Al Marj, is playing for the second time the interactive theatre performance *Our Tent* in the art's club Basma wa Zaitounah (A smile and an olive) located in the Shatila camp in the suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon. (Shatila is a very important place for the collective memory of the region. Built as a Palestinian refugee camp in 1949; in September 1982 it was the site of one of the bloodiest massacres ever perpetrated against the Palestinian civilians during the civil war in Lebanon. Currently the Syrian refugees outnumber the Palestinians in Shatila). Raafat Al Zakout, Syrian actor and director, now living in Beirut, wrote on the Facebook page of this event:

Today I attended the show *Our Tent* and witnessed the power of theatre and its capability to generate an enormous creative energy. Today I was touched. I was laughing and reflecting... I saw people who don't want to withdraw and give up. I saw hope... This is exactly where we should invest our energy.

The Syrian theatre continues to exist, regardless the disaster and, certainly, in order to resist it. Furthermore, it is probably going through a major turning point since it was created in the middle of the 19th century by sheikh Abou Khalil al-Kabbani, the pioneer of Arab theatre.

Today, the Syrians cannot move freely within the region, being confronted with the same restrictions as two other major Arab diasporas: Palestinians and Iraqis. Nowadays, Syrian drama is being written in Beirut, Amman, London, Paris, Munich, Berlin, and Brussels, in the refugee camps in Turkey... but also in Damascus and inside Syria. Since the

suppression of the uprising of the Syrian people on the 15th of March 2011, the number of the locations of exile is constantly growing inside and outside the country. The artists who were forced to stay, mainly live in Damascus, where – at least till three years ago – the cultural production of the country was concentrated, as well as in the free zones (free from the control of the regime), most of which fell into the hands of Islamists, even of the most radical fundamentalists.

The Syrian revolution turned into a political and humanitarian catastrophe. It became a religious revolutionary war influenced by the political Islam, which recovered all the popular Arab uprisings and thus diverted the focus from the real demands of these movements: individual freedom, democracy, rule of law, effective and fair solutions to stop the degradation of the national and socio-economic systems. This revolution, long-awaited since the Arab socialism and Pan-Arab nationalism of the years 1960 – 1970s, proved to be a failure and today divides the Syrian society into several groups: supporters of the dictatorship, which has been in power for more than four decades, pacifist activists, armed rebels, and the so-called “silent majority”, whose silence is caused by the repressions by the ultra-violent regime and the threat of a long civil war, like the one that destroyed Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, or the ongoing tragedy in Iraq.

Syria was founded after the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the region was divided between the French and British mandates. It became independent in 1946. On the 8th of March 1963 the Baath Party overthrew the government and has been leading the country until now. In 1970 a new coup d'état brought Hafez al-Assad to power, who till his death in 2000 ruled Syria with an iron hand relying on the Baath Party and the army of the Alawaite community. In June 2000 the Syrian Parliament by an amendment of the constitution, lowered the minimum age to run for president of the Republic in order to give a possibility to Bashar al-Assad to take over the position of his father. He came to power with some promises of economic and social reforms, and the Syrian population saw in this young ophthalmologist, educated in the West, the reformer, who would democratize the country. The regime seemed to become more liberal, hundreds of political prisoners were released, and forums were bringing together the intellectuals to talk about democratization and the end of the state of emergency, which had been in force since 1963. But then the young president put an abrupt end to what was called the "Damascus Spring", and many intellectual people were arrested again.

Despite a certain economic liberation, the intervention of the State is very strong, including in the artistic and cultural sectors - through the monopoly of the Syrian Ministry of Culture and affiliated agencies. As for the sector of the performing arts, the Directorate Theaters and Music is responsible for the private and public production, controlling all performances created across the country either through funding, infrastructure or censorship. This obviously doesn't hold for the liberated areas, where cultural activities are organized mostly to contribute to the social and cultural reconstruction of the country and to bring hope to the people who lost a lot, if not everything.

In March 2011 it was the act of transgression of the public space which provoked a revolt in the city of Daraa in the south of the country (the young adults of the city, taken by enthusiasm for what was happening in Tunisia, Egypt, Lybia, Yemen, tagged the walls of the city with slogans announcing the hour had come for Bachar al-Assad). During six month the protests in the form of shows – music, songs, performances, lighting, slogans and even role-playing - swarm across the streets with a lot of hope and unprecedented creativity. In the meantime, the repression of the regime became more violent: shooting and arresting people, torturing not only adults, but also children, bombing cities. These first waves of violence prompted the diaspora of 2,5 million refugees (the biggest since the beginning of the 20th century) not counting the numerous dead and missing people.

The majority of the Syrian refugees – nearly 2 million – moved to the neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, with a strong concentration in Lebanon, - a few thousand are in Europe - in Sweden, Germany, and Bulgaria; nearly five hundred in France, and a bit more than a hundred in the United States. The last three years most of the Syrian creation has been produced in this enlarging diaspora – also in theatre, transforming the world into a battlefield and splitting up the art scene already deeply wounded by the storms of history.

Today we can note the following general trends in the sector of the Syrian theatre:

- The repertoire of the National Theatre, which depends on the Syrian Ministry of Culture, has the function of giving the illusion of stability: during the last three years, 69 plays, 39 shows for children, and 6 big cultural events have been presented on the national scene, which is a lot for a country at war;

- Activities and shows of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus (HIDAD), where classes are held and where the number of students has not declined despite shooting and difficulty of access due to the numerous checkpoints, dividing the city for better

control. It continues to be one of the few creative spaces that escape from the absolute control of the regime;

- Independent companies, such as Theatre Laboratory in Damascus led by Osama Ghanam, professor at the HIDAD. These companies, whose members stayed in Syria, support the popular uprising, but cannot express their position in their creations. They work on the repertoire of the Euro-American theatre, or write their own texts that don't touch the current events, or at least not directly. These companies boycott the state funding; nevertheless, they need infrastructure (theatres, technical equipment, etc.) and the permission to show their performances. They are mainly supported by international NGOs, what is not very obvious, as today it is extremely difficult to receive funds from abroad in Syria without causing suspicion. To contribute to the maintenance of theatrical activity inside the country, Marie Elias, critic, professor, translator of the Syrian theatre, and co-author of the only dictionary of theatre terms that exists in Arabic, created an association in Beirut called *Citizens, Artists*, which supports local theatre through micro financing, organizing writing workshops in Syria and Lebanon, as well as through presenting opportunities for distribution abroad. The association is supported by – amongst others - the Tamasi programme, British Council, and Ettijahat a Syrian association directed from Beirut. During the last ten years, Marie Elias was also behind the development of the interactive theatre in Syria, which plays a crucial role in the most destroyed places and refugee camps in the neighbouring countries;

- We started this presentation by mentioning the spectacle *Our Tent* of Al Marj's troupe played at this very moment in the Shatila camp in Beirut. It is a piece of interactive theatre, which proves to be a tool for training, awareness and reflection. This practice originated from the work of the Brazilian Augusto Boal and was adapted to the Syrian context. In collaboration with the European and national partners, Marie Elias introduced this practice with an initial goal to integrate it into the poorest rural areas and schools. This initiative was carried out in consultation with the Syrian Ministry of Education and Pedagogy. Nowadays, many theatre practitioners have been trained to use these methods. They are working with survivors, refugees and displaced people, and also in the areas that fell under the control of extremist groups. Whether to give hope or to remind the true values of the revolution, they pass these methods to the local people and sometimes identify new talents, to whom they can offer the opportunity to reshape themselves outside the vicious circle of violence. Here theatre and humanitarian action are closely interrelated because of the need to respond to the historical urgency and to try to limit the burden of the disaster. Artists involved

in these initiatives encourage their public to reinvent themselves through drama and storytelling.

In regards to the professional Syrian theatre produced in exile: it freely expresses the real 'playwriting history'. This is a new form of documentary theatre that not only transcribes the news, but also reflects the particular esthetic and cultural changes that accompany current transformations in the region: through texts, images, videos, sounds, and the use of language, which resembles language used in everyday life and social networks. This is especially true for Syrian playwright Mohammad al-Attar, who is based in Beirut for two years now, and whose name became known on the international scene of the contemporary arts. Al-Attar now deeply involved in the artistic projects with the humanitarian focus, first of all stays an author for a theatre strongly rooted in the modern history of Syria, even though its receptions has changed since 2011. The works of Mohamad al-Attar, Modar Hajji, Abdullah al-Kafri, Wael Ali are now mostly seen by a non-Syrian public. (...) These authors and practitioners are themselves heirs of the actors from the independent scene, which was booming in the Middle East in the 1990s and which embodied an act of political and cultural resistance by its sheer existence against the will of the authorities.

By the way, contemporary work of Arab artists, especially Syrian artists, generate interest on global level nowadays, as is shown by its strong presence in social networks, media and at cultural manifestations. And the translation from and into Arabic. This repositioning on the world map of artistic creation does not only concern the theater. For example, the Sundance Film Festival organized in the state of Utah in the United States celebrated the Syrian documentary film in its 2014 edition. The Grand Jury Prize for the World Documentary Cinema was given to the film *Return to Homs*, directed by Talal Derki and produced by ProAction company which launched the first international documentary film festival in Syria in 2008, Dox Box. And the Grand Jury Prize at the World Short Documentary film, was given to the film *Of Gods and Dogs*, directed by Syrian collective Abounaddara. (...) Apart from the recognition of artistic qualities of these two films, these awards can be seen as a political statement.

I would like to conclude by a question posed in 2011 by the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, in the editorial of the sixth edition of the Biennial Meeting Points organized by the Young Arab Theatre Fund "In what ways are modes of contemporary representation advancing concepts of artistic and civic reflection that address the present interregnum?" I think our gathering here and the theme chosen for the meeting resonate with what seems to be an issue transcending all national, geographic and political borders. I invite you to take these

reflections with you, and perhaps even to question the notion of *contemporary* in our current period.
