

**A Scenographer's Perspective on  
Arabic Theatre and Arab-Muslim Identity**

**BY**

**Khalifah Rashed Alhajri**

**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**

**I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.**

**This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.**

*Dedication*

*To*

*My Parents*

*and*

*My Family*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr William Rea. His logical way of thinking has been of great value to me. His understanding, encouragement and personal guidance have provided a sound basis for this thesis.

I am also deeply grateful to Peter Coleman, Dr Hilary Coffey and Jean Goodier for their detailed and constructive comments, and for their important support throughout this work.

I wish to express my warm and sincere thanks to Chris Taylor at the Department of Fine Art, Joslin McKinney at the Department of Performance and Cultural Industries and Tim Skelly at the School of English. Their ideas and advice have had a significant influence on my practice work in the field of scenography and stage designing.

I am indebted to Dr. Dawood Alshimemry, Dr. Ali al-Anezi, Dr. Walid Sarab, Dr. Nadeem Mualla and Dr. Nader al-Qunnah for their valuable advice and friendly assistance. Their extensive discussions around my work have been most helpful.

My thanks are due to my colleagues at the Higher Institute of the Dramatic Arts in Kuwait for their kind support and guidance are much appreciated.

I wish to thank Dr. Bader al-Dihani and Mrs. Majdah at the Cultural Office of the Embassy of the State of Kuwait for their essential assistance and guidance in matters regarding my scholarship.

During this work I have collaborated with many colleagues for whom I have great regard, and I wish to extend my warmest thanks to all those who have helped me in the School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds and the School of English Literature at the University of Sheffield. I am especially the University of Leeds Library staff for their efficiency and kindness.

I owe my most loving thanks to my beloved mother, my patient wife, who has stood beside me all the way; my brothers, Bader, Mansour, Naser, Shu'iab, and Fahd al-Hajri, my sisters, Fatima, Maryam and Abrar; and my sons Issa and Yousef. Without their support and understanding it would have been impossible for me to finish this work. My loving thanks are also due to Muhammad al-Sobiri's family and Kamal Mahdi's family, who treated me as part of their happy families in England.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the issue of Arab-Muslim identity from the viewpoint of a Kuwaiti visual artist and scenographer who is also an academic and teacher. It focuses on the history and current condition of the Arabic theatre and on the nature and qualities of Islamic art and architecture. The thesis consists of an introduction, six central chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter one is a general introduction presenting the context, genesis and approach of the study and a number of questions pertinent to the researcher. It reviews the main sources used and outlines the organisation of the chapters.

Chapter two investigates the relationship between ritual and drama, with particular attention to the Athenian Dionysia, the Cambridge Ritualists and their influence, the *ta'ziyah*, and ritual theatre and the avant garde in the twentieth century.

Chapter three is concerned with the definition and typology of Islamic art and architecture, and with contesting views of the nature of this art. It goes on to discuss forms of Islamic ornament and the development of mosque architecture.

Chapter four examines the various arguments around the contentious issue of the apparent lack of an indigenous Arabic theatre tradition. It then traces the history of Arabic theatre from its medieval origins to the advent of European-influenced forms in the nineteenth century.

Chapter five first discusses the origin, development and significance of the *ta'ziyah*. It then examines recent attempts to present this unique phenomenon outside its cultural context, and considers the arguments concerning the validity of such experiments.

Chapter six is concerned with the development of modern Arabic drama from 1847 to the present day. Focusing particularly on three twentieth-century playwrights whose work was chosen for the practice part of this thesis, and ends with an examination of the current state of the Arabic theatre.

Chapter seven concentrates on scenography and its place in today's Arabic theatre. It comprises a number of parts and includes autobiographical material such as an account of the experience of a *ta'ziyah* performance in Syria, as well as, selected comments by individuals connected with the Kuwaiti theatre and extracts from a radio discussion. It concludes with a presentation of the practice work carried out as part of the study.

Chapter eight draws together the themes, discussions and arguments of the cultural chapters, considers these in the light of the current condition of the Arabic theatre, and suggests possible ways in which that theatre might be revived.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page No.
Abstract.....	iv
List of Figures.....	viii
Chapter One : Introduction .....	1
Chapter Two: Ritual and Drama .....	10
Introduction.....	10
Ritual and Drama.....	13
The <i>Ta'ziyah</i> .....	21
Ritual Theatre in the Twentieth Century .....	23
Conclusion.....	30
Chapter Three: Islamic Art and Architecture .....	35
Introduction.....	35
Characteristics of Islamic Art .....	40
Islamic Ornamentation .....	45
Architecture.....	52
The Mosque .....	54
Conclusion.....	58
Chapter Four: Early Arabic Drama .....	84
Introduction .....	84

<b>Early Arabic Drama .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Chapter Five: The <i>Ta'ziyah</i>.....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>The <i>Ta'ziyah</i> .....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Chapter Six: Modern Arabic Drama .....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries .....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Tawfik al-Hakim .....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>The Sultan's Dilemma .....</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Abdurrahman al-Sharqawi.....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b><i>Tha'r Allah</i> (The Wrath of God).....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Sa'dallah Wannous .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>The King's The King.....</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>The Later Twentieth Century and Theatre Today .....</b>	<b>178</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>Chapter Seven: Scenography and Arab-Muslim Identity.....</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>The Arabs and Scenography .....</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>A Scenographer's Journey: From Kuwait to Leeds .....</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>Theatre in Kuwait.....</b>	<b>217</b>

<b>A Syrian <i>Ta'ziyah</i> Performance .....</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>Scenography and Arab Identity.....</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>Scenography and the Practical Aspect of the Study .....</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>Designing to Making .....</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>From Canvas to Digital.....</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>Chapter Eight: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>262</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>270</b>



**List of Illustrations**

<b>Figure 1:</b> Old Yemen	<b>61</b>
<b>Figure 2:</b> Achaemenid architecture	<b>62</b>
<b>Figure 3:</b> Great Mosque of Córdoba, Córdoba, Spain.	<b>63</b>
<b>Figure 4:</b> Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, Syria	<b>64</b>
<b>Figure 5:</b> Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra, Granada, Spain	<b>65</b>
<b>Figure 6:</b> Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra, Granada, Spain	<b>66</b>
<b>Figure 7:</b> Friday Mosque, Na'in, Iran	<b>67</b>
<b>Figure 8:</b> Stucco Panel, 9 <sup>th</sup> .C. from Samarra, Iraq Museum, Baghdad	<b>68</b>
<b>Figure 9:</b> House of al-Suhaymi, Cairo, Egypt	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 10:</b> The Mosque of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad	<b>70</b>
<b>Figure 11:</b> Minaret of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan	<b>71</b>
<b>Figure 12:</b> Pair of doors, ca. 1325–1330; Mamluk, Egypt (Cairo)	<b>72</b>
<b>Figure 13:</b> <i>Mihrab</i> (niche) and <i>minbar</i> (pulpit) in sanctuary <i>liwan</i> .	<b>73</b>
<b>Figure 16:</b> Detail of calligraphy on dome	<b>74</b>
<b>Figure 17:</b> Interior, Detail of <i>mihrab</i>	<b>75</b>
<b>Figure 18:</b> The Ka'ba	<b>76</b>
<b>Figure 19:</b> Al-Aqsa Mosque	<b>77</b>
<b>Figure 20:</b> Great Mosque of Cordoba	<b>78</b>
<b>Figure 21:</b> The Great Mosque of the Aghlabids in Kairouan	<b>79</b>
<b>Figure 22:</b> <i>Miserable Dreams</i> : scene one. 1999	<b>214</b>
<b>Figure 23:</b> <i>A Room of One's Own</i> : first scene.1999	<b>215</b>
<b>Figure 24:</b> Design (1): <i>The Wrath of God</i> . Medina. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.	<b>241</b>
<b>Figure 25:</b> Design (2): <i>The Wrath of God</i> . The harbour in Basra. 80 x 60 cm, Gouache on paper.	<b>242</b>
<b>Figure 26:</b> Design (3): <i>The Wrath of God</i> . The camp of Hussein's army. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.	<b>243</b>
<b>Figure 27:</b> Design (4) <i>The Sultan's Dilemma</i> . City scene. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.	<b>244</b>

- Figure 28:** Design (5): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. Inside the city mosque.  
80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper. 245
- Figure 29:** Design (6): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. Inside al-Ghaniya's house.  
80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper. 246
- Figure 30:** Design (7): *The King's the King*. The interior of the King's palace.  
80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper. 247
- Figure 31:** Design (8): *The King's the King*. The alleys of the city.  
80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper. 248
- Figure 32:** Design (9): *The King's the King*. The *souk* of the city.  
80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper. 249
- Figure 33:** *The King's Elephant*. Design and construction by  
Khalifah Alhajri, 2005 251
- Figure 34:** Set model: *The King's Elephant*, scale 1:20.
- Figure 35:** Design (10): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. Designed by Khalifah Al-Hajri,  
90 x 60 cm, oil on canvas. 253
- Figure 36:** Screenshot: design (10): Animation design for  
*The Sultan's Dilemma*. 2005 253

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Of all the arts of Islam, it is architecture and, to a lesser degree, calligraphy and the miniature that are best known in the West. But while the Arab world, and the Islamic world generally, abounds in great architecture, its drama is far less well known, not only in the West but also among Arabs themselves. This is true of even the most important dramatists of the past fifty years, a situation inconceivable in the West.

While literature and especially poetry has been admired by the Arabs since before the time of the Prophet Muhammad, drama in the form evolved in Western Europe was completely unknown until Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. In pre-Islamic Arabia poetry assumed the role of the media (to use an anachronistic term) among other roles, and would be performed at social gatherings, but there was, as far as we know, nothing that could be called theatre in the Western sense. The *khayal az-zill* (shadow play) and other types of street performances developed in the medieval period, but neither these nor the crude farces that entertained unsophisticated audiences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were regarded as 'theatre' by either the Arabs or those European travellers who kept journals of their observations in the age of the 'Grand Tour'.



This is not to say that drama did not exist among the Muslims of the Middle East. The Shi'ite Passion Play or *ta'ziyah*, which evolved into its present form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, commemorates the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Hussein at the hands of Caliph Yazid's troops. It was this momentous event that marked the beginning of the later division of Muslims into Sunnis and Shi'ites. This study describes a Syrian *ta'ziyah* performance, and discusses al-Sharqawi's play *The Wrath of God*, which dramatises Hussein's martyrdom.

Drama inspired by the European models began in Syria in the 1840s and was developed in the more conducive atmosphere of Egypt, but it was not until the 1920s that Tawfiq al-Hakim succeeded in making it respectable as a literary form, and then only in Egypt. Since then, despite the contributions of many gifted playwrights, drama has always held a precarious position among the literary arts of the Arab world. For a brief period in the 1960s and early 1970s, this position appeared to have been strengthened when 'political theatre' flourished in the region, especially following the catastrophic defeat of Arab forces by the Israelis in June 1967. Despite the rule of tyrants and the ubiquitous power of censorship, this was a period of optimism for many radical playwrights. Because of the bitterness of the defeat, the Arabic theatre, hitherto generally content to copy European existentialist or absurdist models, became strongly politicised. It also became, for the first and only time, a recognised forum for debates on social and political issues of national and international importance.

After the stalemate of the 1973 October war, and owing to a variety of causes including the 'open door' economic policy which decisively reversed the socialist gains of previous decades and greatly increased Western cultural influence, serious theatre went into a decline from which it has not recovered. The modernist, collectivist project of social transformation collapsed, and by the late 1990s theatre in the Arab world consisted of two distinct types: the commercial theatre, which tended to stage popular comedies; and the theatre produced in the academies and for festivals of drama, which was often boldly experimental but which did not appeal to the broad mass of the Arab-Muslim audience. This division is still evident.

Now, in 2007, serious theatre has been marginalised, and graduates of academies such as my own work in the commercial theatre or, more usually, in the media, especially television. Except in Egypt and Syria, television drama in the Arab world largely consists of soap operas. Neither the commercial theatre nor the world of television offers much to the scenographer, and too few opportunities exist in the academies. Good work is sometimes done in children's productions, but the scenography tends to be technically proficient rather than innovative.

There is currently a gap between 'serious' theatre as it exists in the Arab world and its potential audience. Its actual audience consists of those in the educated urban middle class who are familiar with every form of Western culture and who are eager to sample ever bolder forms of experimentation, with the result that experimentalism has become a tradition at international festivals. It is important in this circumstance to consider whether a broader audience can be reached by making use of its common heritage without either retreating into a stance of 'defending Islam' or closing off the dialogue with the rest of the world in the name of a dubious 'Arab-Muslim identity', as if that identity were a fixed cultural entity threatened on all sides by a globalised entertainment industry.

This attempt to broaden the audience base is by no means a new idea in the Arab world. In the 'golden age' of political theatre Sa'dallah Wannous and many others sought to achieve this aim by incorporating traditional indigenous elements, such as the *hakawati* or story teller, into their dramas, with limited success. Another tactic was to make use of traditional or folk material, such as the *Thousand and One Nights*. However, these attempts always went hand in hand with an openness to the most recent developments in the West, although these were often poorly understood. As this study makes clear, the modern Arabic theatre has, for the past 160 years, been in continual dialogue with Western theatre, and I believe that, given the current condition of our theatre, we need to conduct a debate about the nature and identity than theatre.

This study was therefore undertaken out of a desire to understand the current condition of the Arabic theatre by gaining knowledge of its history and charting the course of its development. I approached this research as a practising scenographer, academic and teacher at the Kuwait Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. I was aware that I needed to clarify my own position with regard to all three roles, since it was obvious to me that in the Arab world generally and in my own country in particular the so-called serious theatre had been in decline since the late 1970s, scenography remained undeveloped, and theatre studies and scenography training especially were not being given the attention they deserved. I believed that I needed to confront the issue of Arab-Muslim identity, being both Arab and Muslim, in an attempt to discover possible ways in which serious theatre in the Arab world might be revived, and I believed that this could only be done by creating a theatre that would appeal to Arab-Muslim audiences, who at present are notably uninterested. The *ta'ziyah*, which I witnessed in Syria in 2001, made a great impression on me (as it has on many Western observers), and I found in this phenomenon, which is the only example in the Arab world of an indigenous tragic drama, a possible example of what might be achieved.

The *ta'ziyah* fired my imagination and aroused my enthusiasm, but I was also doubtful whether it could be imitated, since it is a form of ritual theatre which is deeply embedded in the history and culture of Shi'ism and is regarded with suspicion, if not hostility, by Sunnis. Moreover the Shi'ites themselves regard it as a ritual observance, part of the rites of mourning for the Prophet's martyred grandson, Hussein, and not as theatre as understood in the rest of the Arab-Muslim world. Nevertheless I, as a Sunni, saw in it an undeniably powerful and authentic manifestation of Islamic drama, and determined to explore its history and investigate its cultural meanings.

When I came to research the Arabic theatre for this study I decided that the *ta'ziyah* would be important, not least in its approach to staging, since the style of presentation is anti-illusory, minimal and symbolic. But I did not wish to write a study of Arabic scenography, for two reasons. First, Arabic scenography as such does not exist: its theoretical foundations, such as they are, were developed in the West, and its practice owes little to the Arab-Islamic visual culture. Moreover, as scenography is a disregarded



art in the Arab world and its practitioners are considered little more than technicians, there is no documentation, either verbal or visual, of stage design, and no scholarly or critical writing on the subject. Second, I wished to explore the phenomenon of Arabic theatre in such a way as would assist me in my threefold role. The research would have to be useful to me in my capacities as scenographer, academic and teacher. I realised that I needed to investigate a number of related issues in order to develop and to contribute to the practice of scenography and the education of future scenographers. I was sure that the research would benefit me as an academic, and I knew that it would be valuable to my readers, since no Arab theatre artist has undertaken such a project, and no study exists that seeks to draw together the various aspects of Arab-Islamic culture that can be regarded as important to the Arab scenographer's work.

There is one consequence of my focus on the documentary and empirical aspects of the research that is regrettable, however, and that is the lack of time I was able to devote to the practice part of this study, especially in the last two years. I originally intended to produce ten paintings and ten animated designs inspired by three dramas written in the mid-twentieth century, but while the ten paintings were completed, only one animation was made. This is unfortunate, since I considered the paintings less important than the planned series of animations as works of art, as the former are little more than detailed naturalistic studies from a single viewpoint. The work produced (and earlier work discussed) gives some idea of my approach, but I am very conscious that it represents only the beginnings of what could be achieved in this field. In this respect the research has been enormously valuable in expanding my appreciation of the possibilities open to the Arab scenographer. Not only that, but the scenography I was able to study first hand while based in Leeds (for example, that for Jude Kelly's production of *Macbeth* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse) expanded my conception of what scenography could be – if only the technical recourses and the funding were available in the theatres of my own region.

This study, then, explores those aspects of Arab-Muslim culture that are important to the Arab theatre artist. This entails, besides an investigation of the *ta'ziyah*, a study of the Arabic theatre from the earliest manifestations to the present day. As I am concerned

with the visual element of theatrical production above all, it proved necessary to research Islamic art and architecture, since an Arab-Islamic scenography must draw on that rich resource. Because the *ta'ziyah* is an outstanding example of ritual theatre, I needed to gain some understanding of theatre as ritual and ritual as theatre in ancient Greece (all Arab students of theatre are taught something about this, but not adequately) and elsewhere; and because ideas about ancient Greek drama influenced twentieth-century 'ritual drama' and some parts of the avant garde in Europe and the USA, which in turn have influenced Arabic experimental theatre, this area also required investigation. Finally, I needed to focus more precisely on contemporary concerns, and so, as well as documentary research, I drew on my own experience as a scenographer in an academic environment, besides taking part in discussions and interviewing colleagues and others connected with the theatre scene in Kuwait.

Many questions were either formulated before undertaking the research, or emerged as important during the course of it. Did the Arabs develop a theatre before the impact of European models in the nineteenth century? If so, what kinds of theatre? Could any of its manifestations be called Islamic? And if the Arabs did not develop a theatre, why not – and is this lack of theatre (always excepting the *ta'ziyah*, which is a unique phenomenon) a severe shortcoming of Arab-Islamic culture? Is the *ta'ziyah* itself a ritual or a drama or both? How and under what conditions did it develop? Is it capable of being used as a model, or an inspiration, for Arabic theatre generally, even in the Sunni community? Why did it not give rise to other forms of theatre among the Shi'ites? Can it be transported outside its specific religious content without losing its significance? What meanings does it have for its performers and audience? Can Islamic art be easily defined? Is it true that Islam forbids the making of representational art, and if so (or if perceived to be so) did this prohibition affect the development of Arabic theatre? What kind of theatre existed in ancient Athens, and in what ways did ideas about that theatre influence Western pioneers in the twentieth century? How and under what conditions did Arabic theatre develop after its European-influenced forms appeared in the mid-nineteenth century? Has it suffered a decline during the past three decades? If so, why was this, and can the decline be halted or even reversed? Why is scenography the 'silent partner' in the Arabic theatre? How can its status be raised?

What can be done in the domain of education? Is it possible to create a serious theatre that will appeal to Arab-Muslim audiences when there is strong evidence that they prefer, and have always preferred, the entertainments provided by the commercial theatre? How can the theatre, which in the Arab world has never enjoyed the high status accorded poetry and the novel, survive and flourish in a world of globalised entertainment? Must it forever be the preserve of a highly educated elite? These questions, and others that flow from them, are addressed by the study. They are not all important to the practising scenographer, but they should be considered by any theatre artist who is responsible for the education of the young, who, if their ambitions lie in the realm of serious theatre, must make their way in an environment that is often indifferent and sometimes hostile.

Because of the dearth of sources in Arabic on many of the topics discussed in this study, I have mainly relied upon works written in English. I have made use of articles in journals and on the Internet, and have consulted various theses on individual dramatists. My key source, however, are books, many of which are by eminent authorities in their field. In writing chapter two the main sources were: Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama* (2004); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (1987); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (2005); Christopher Innes, *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde* (1981); Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (2000) and Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller (eds.), *The Origins of Theatre in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama* (2007). The last of these provides illuminating examples of the latest thinking on the origins of the Athenian drama, and a most valuable discussion of the Cambridge Ritualists and their influence. Innes, Aronson and Fischer-Lichte are all informative and thought-provoking, and Nasr is perhaps the most important writer on Islamic spirituality and its expression in art.

Nasr was also an important source for chapter three, together with Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (1987); Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (2004); George Michell (ed.), *Architecture of the Islamic World* (2000). Grabar is a leading authority on early Islamic art, while Leaman subjects Islamic art generally to



philosophical analysis. Michell's book contains contributions by a number of eminent scholars.

Chapter four draws on M. M. Badawi's *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (1987) and Mohamed al-Khozai's *The Development of Early Arabic Drama, 1847-1900* (1984). The main source for early Arabic drama, however, is Shmuel Moreh's fascinating and comprehensive study of early Arabic live (as opposed to puppet) theatre: *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (1992). Also this chapter and others benefited greatly from Albert Hourani's magisterial work *A History of the Arab Peoples* (1991).

The main sources for chapter five are Malekpour's *The Islamic Drama* (2004) and a special issue of *The Drama Review* devoted to the *ta'ziyah* (49, 4: Winter 2005). For chapter six I consulted especially Badawi's *Early Arabic Drama* (1988) and *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993). Also useful were Roger Allen's *Introduction to Arabic Literature* (2000) and Philip Sadgrove's *Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century* (1996). It should be noted here that all translations from the Arabic are my own except where stated otherwise.

The thesis is organised into eight chapters including an Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapter two discusses the relationship between ritual and drama, focusing particularly on the Athenian Dionysia, the Cambridge Ritualists, the *ta'ziyah*, and ritual theatre and the avant garde in the twentieth century. Chapter three is devoted to Islamic art and architecture, being concerned with questions of definition and typology, and with contesting views of the nature of this art. It also considers the problem of Islam's apparent rejection of images. Finally, some forms of ornamentation are described and the development of mosque architecture is discussed.

Chapter four traces the development of Arabic drama, from its medieval origins to the advent of European-Influenced forms in the nineteenth century. It examines the various arguments surrounding the contentious question: why did the Arabs not develop theatre as a high art? The chapter then discusses various early examples, not neglecting the

*khayal az-zill* or shadow theatre, and goes on to examine the farces witnessed by European visitors to the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Chapter five discusses the origin, development and significance of the *ta'ziyah* as a unique phenomenon in the drama of the Arab-Muslim world. The second part investigates the various attempts that have been made to present the *ta'ziyah* outside its religious context, not only in Iran but also in Europe and the USA, and assesses the arguments concerning the success or failure of such experiments.

Chapter six is concerned with the development of modern Arabic drama from 1847 to the present day. It shows that this 'serious' drama has always been engaged in a dialogue with the West while striving to cater to Arab audiences, and that this tension is still evident in contemporary productions. The central section is devoted to the three dramatists – al-Hakim, Wannous and al-Sharqawi – whose work has been chosen as material for the practice part of this thesis. The chapter ends with an examination of the current state of the Arabic theatre.

Following on from chapter six, chapter seven focuses on my own discipline, scenography. It consists of several distinct parts: an examination of how scenography is understood, regarded and practised in the Arab world (with reference to two European pioneers, Appia and Craig); an account of my own experiences as a scenographer in Kuwait and Leeds; an investigation of the condition of theatre, and of the education of theatre artists, in Kuwait; an account of my trip to Syria in 2001 to witness the Muharram rites and a *ta'ziyah* performance; a radio discussion on scenography in which I participated in 2005. Finally, the practice work I executed as a part of this study is presented and discussed.

Chapter eight concludes the thesis, drawing together the themes, discussions and arguments of the preceding chapters, considers these in the light of the current condition of the Arabic theatre, and examines possible ways in which that theatre might be revived.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Ritual and Drama

#### Introduction

Since it is an important concern of this study to discuss ways in which the live theatre may be revitalised and made more meaningful to Arabs and to Muslims, this chapter will consider the possibilities of a theatre that could be said to be Islamic- in a broad sense- as well as Arabic. In order to understand certain aspects of serious Arabic theatre, especially the phenomenon of the *ta'ziyah* or Shi'ite Passion Play, an understanding of the nature of the relationship between ritual and theatre is important. Also, since many of the influential pioneers of theatre in the last century saw Ancient Greek theatre (among others) as in some ways a model for their own practice, it is necessary to consider the nature of theatre (specifically Tragedy) in Greece, and particularly the effects of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theories on these pioneers. The chapter will also discuss the attempts made by the heirs of the pioneers, especially in the USA, to create forms of 'ritual theatre' within the context of an oppositional and transgressive avant garde, since it is important to understand how the notion of an avant garde has influenced the development of the great variety of experimental theatre now being practised not only in the West, but at prestigious

festivals throughout the Arab world, despite assertions on all sides that the avant garde is dead.<sup>1</sup>

The *ta'ziyah*, which will be discussed briefly in this chapter and in detail in chapter five, is the Passion Play performed annually by Shi'ite Muslims, notably in Iran and Syria. It is the only significant theatrical manifestation in the Islamic world that came into being before European influence began to stimulate the pioneers of modern Arabic drama. This tragic drama, which is at once a religious ritual and a dramatic performance, recounts the martyrdom of Hussein, son of Ali the fourth Caliph of Islam and the Prophet's son-in-law. Although intensely controversial because Sunni Muslims do not accept the Shi'ite veneration of Hussein, the *ta'ziyah* can be regarded as in some ways an indication of one possible direction an authentically Islamic theatre could take. Certainly it cannot be emulated because of the unique circumstances surrounding its inception and development, but since it is beyond doubt the most important example of a native drama uninfluenced by Western models, it cannot be ignored. Moreover, the events surrounding Hussein's martyrdom by the forces of Yazid have been dramatised by one of the playwrights considered in chapter six.<sup>2</sup>

A renewal of the theatre is long overdue in the Arab world. Serious theatre scarcely exists outside institutes of theatrical arts and has been in decline since the late 1970s for a variety of reasons which will be discussed in chapter six. This is partly due to the lack of an Arabic or Islamic theatre tradition, which will be discussed in chapter three. In the Arab world theatre has never enjoyed the high status given to poetry and, later, to the novel. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, it was seen by some practitioners and critics as having the potential to become a powerful force for social change after the disaster of the Six-Day War against Israel, but this promise was not fulfilled. Never as popular as cinema or, later, television drama, theatre is now largely but by no means exclusively a matter of spectacular commercial entertainment. The dramatic tradition imported from the West, particularly the ideas, styles and modes of such very different playwrights as Ionesco, Sartre and Brecht, while it stimulated and diverted a relatively small intellectual elite, did not appeal to the majority of Muslims. Attempts were made to adapt these modes for Arab audiences, but without lasting success.



Apart from the *ta'ziyah* there is virtually nothing that can be called drama in the Western sense before the advent of a European- influenced theatre in the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> but since many critics have denied the status of drama to the *ta'ziyah*, seeing it instead as a religious ritual, it seems useful to consider here the relationship between ritual and theatre, which is a controversial one. And while the *ta'ziyah* is not central to Islam, and is religious rather than sacred, as the Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr asserts, it ' points to the nexus between Islamic spirituality and Islamic art '.<sup>4</sup>

Any discussion of Islamic art must involve a discussion of the nature of Islamic culture, and it is obvious that, depending on the viewpoint adopted, the term 'Islamic' has had, and can have, a wide variety of distinct though related meanings. This is too vast a subject to be thoroughly explored in this study, but it will be argued later that a theatre that can legitimately be described as Islamic as well as Arab is possible, and might even become popular. Many aspects of Islamic culture - or, rather, Arab culture - may be brought within the realm of the theatrical arts, including folk tales, and the daily life of Arab people. More specifically Islamic subjects might include clashes of religious opinion and their social effects and, more esoterically, the drama of the Soul's relationship with God. To give one example, Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, a celebrated Sufi text,<sup>5</sup> has been given a theatrical presentation albeit by a European director, Peter Brook.

Without seeking to imitate the *ta'ziyah* - an impossible task - a modern Islamic theatre can fulfil a useful social role by presenting experiences that will encourage spectators to become more aware of, and consider more deeply, their relationship with their religion and their society. It cannot be a sacred art but it can be a religious one, commenting on every social issue just as the imam may do in his Friday sermon. It does not, of course, follow from this that such a theatre must be tied to naturalism. Indeed, the theatre artist should be free to experiment boldly regarding text, acting styles, and scenography. The theatre must look forward, not backward. Islamic theatre is fortunate in that it has no golden age or canon of revered texts, always excepting the Qur'an. It may therefore confidently seek inspiration from its own heritage without rejecting the productions of other cultures as long as they are compatible with its purposes, and it should not fear to create new forms.

## Ritual and Drama

While the origins of the European dramatic tradition may be found in the rites of the ancient Greeks, it does not follow that the theatre itself involves ritual except according to a very loose definition. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to define 'ritual' with a formulation that is universally acceptable a rite may be defined strictly as 'a formal procedure or act in a religious or other solemn observance'.<sup>6</sup> To say that theatre is, or should be, a phenomenon of this kind is to distort the meaning of the word 'rite' or to entertain unrealistic hopes, if the intention is to unite performers and audience, though a sacred art, in a closer apprehension of the divine. Theatre of this kind cannot simply be willed into being, although a 'religious' theatre that draws on the faith of a community of believers is possible today, as can be seen in the *ta'ziyah* of the Shi'a Muslims. Sacred rites can be intensely theatrical, however, and this observation may have encouraged certain practitioners to seek to make of the theatrical experience a kind of religious or even sacred rite. Some critics and scholars, too, have attempted to equate theatre with religion, although such attempts are often founded on questionable assumptions. A rite requires a space in which to be performed. There can be no ritual without communal participation, whether of a small elite of initiates or the adult population of a city. Ritual spaces depend on contexts, cultures, and locations. Perhaps what these spaces have in common is that they are realms of power. The gathering of believers leads to a community sharing an event that often brings together art, architecture and people.

Jamsheed Chosky connects ritual spaces to individual desires and collective interpretations of communally held conceptions of and attitudes towards life and death: 'Notions of ritual space, and patterns of behaviour within such spaces, seem to be intrinsic to individual aspiration and collective resolution as sectarian groups organize means of rationalizing life and death. Ritual spaces are assembled so believers may be conditioned to comprehend a religious belief'.<sup>7</sup> They are designated as 'pure, holy, and sacred' and thus are intended to promote a sense of order. The world as imagined and the world as it exists may be bridged by the ritual space and the symbols contained within it; the ritual allows the human and the divine to meet. Chosky also regards ritual spaces as a means towards the accomplishment of an event of significance for the community. To phrase it another way, ritual spaces serve



as locales of forced dynamics in which spatial cues trigger a series of concepts and events directed at the hope of achieving an aspired goal.<sup>8</sup>

By performing in the ritual space, believers learn 'how to deal, accept, and move with the unknown.'<sup>9</sup> Rituals allow them to enact and experience sacred knowledge. A large aspect of this enactment is not merely the remembrance of the sacred but also how the 'personal, communal, and spiritual intentions and purposes and their sacred connection are reaffirmed'. One relives the revered and participates within the divine narratives. Crucial to rituals is how the person communicates and unites with others' intentions and affirms community; thus ritual spaces connect people and establish relationships, roles and positions. Through ritual, unity among believers is attained.<sup>10</sup>

In the Islamic tradition, or rather the tradition of Sufism, which its initiates regard as the heart of Islam, we find the esoteric practice of the *Sama* or spiritual concert, which Nasr explains as follows:

The *Sama* must be performed with a 'closed' audience where the members participate in the spiritual ambience created through the power of their own inner forces. To a mere onlooker without faith and spiritual discipline a session of *Sama* would turn into something else:

[...] we are faced with an important and basic principle related to the sacred: that is, to understand and fully appreciate the sacred in all its manifestations, including the artistic, man must believe in the sacred and participate in it. Otherwise the sacred hides itself behind an impenetrable veil that the man's carnal soul – the *nafs* of the Sufis – draws around the immortal core of man's being, thus cutting it off from the vision of the sacred.<sup>11</sup>

Theatre today, while not a religious ritual (allowing certain exceptions such as the *ta'ziyah*), has features which connect it to ritual. Certainly a theatrical performance may be an event of significance for the community it serves. It may address matters of life and death, but without necessarily seeking to bring about a resolution. It may be a space where intentions are communally affirmed, or it may seek to challenge the audience's assumptions, building and then undermining connections between individuals and the community in order to provoke critical thought, as in Brecht's Epic Theatre.<sup>12</sup> The great variety of possibilities

open to the theatre provides opportunities to create a theatre that seeks to reaffirm 'personal, communal spiritual intentions and purposes' and even 'their sacred connection', but in present conditions this attempt to return to the roots of the drama will only be successful if all the participants share common beliefs. An Islamic theatre would at least enjoy the advantage of speaking to the audience united by faith, however much their individual experiences and opinions might differ. In this loose sense such a theatre could become a ritual, uniting spectators and actors in celebration of one living experience. The *ta'ziyah* could be a model for this kind of theatre, but as it is a unique phenomenon in the Muslim world, the result of highly specific political, cultural and social conceptions, it cannot be imitated. As an example of a powerful theatrical experience that not only grips and educates the spectator but also helps unite and sustain the community, however, it may serve as an inspiration to the theatre artist. But it must be emphasised that a 'ritual theatre' such as the *ta'ziyah* (whose practitioners certainly do not conceive it in such terms) cannot be created by the will of the artist, but must emerge from, and be developed by, the community. Moreover, it would be impossible to attempt to create a 'ritual theatre' of the kind attempted (with a very limited degree of success) by the avant garde in the USA, because such a theatre, especially one incorporating elements of Islamic ritual, would inevitably be seen as an insult to Islam. Even if this were not the case, ritual theatre of the kind practised in the 1960s and 1970s has been proven to be a dead end, and so this study in no way advocates its revival in the twenty-first century.

Moreover, strictly speaking, theatre and religious ritual are not the same. Where the theatrical phenomenon is strongly ritualistic - or to put it in another way, when the ritual is powerfully dramatic, as in the *ta'ziyah* - there is disagreement about whether it is theatre or ritual. As we shall see later, many scholars and critics deny that the *ta'ziyah* is theatre at all. This controversial state is one reason why the *ta'ziyah* is such an interesting example of tragic drama, but it also helps to explain why it has as yet had little discernible influence on theatre in the Muslim world.

Religious rituals tend to communicate meanings that do not permit individual interpretation beyond an orthodox understanding, but drama is fundamentally characterized by the its



means of expression, which enable it to communicate to each individual within the audience, and allow the spectators, during their encounter with the play, to create meaning, their own meaning, the meaning of the play had – both intellectual and affective - for each of them.

In East Asian theatre ritual drama or dramatic ritual may be observed in 'magical plays' or 'shamanic plays'. In these, ritual is presented on stage, and involves the 'exorcisation' of evil spirits and demons. In one performance, an actor dressed as a white tiger chases a black-clad 'demon' away. The audience must keep its distance and not speak to the white tiger; otherwise they will commit taboo. These performances are clearly considered to be important rituals. As well as driving away demons, they may also lure good fortune; here the power of the dramatic ritual performances brings luck, wealth, and prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Such ritual performances, Bell notes, are always given in temple settings as dances, and in order to 're-enact sacred events' which may vary from the creation of the universe to the movement of ancestors, others being 'narrative tales presented to entertain the gods' and thus involving sacrifices as the bridge between the human and divine worlds.<sup>14</sup> We should note here that the *ta'ziyah* as drama, and the religious practises of which it forms a part, are centred on the self – sacrifice of Hussein as hero and martyr, and call on his devotees to sacrifice themselves in the cause of justice and for the sake of Islam.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in other cultures, the concepts of ritual and theatre are not as distinctive as in the Western perspective. Bell comments that 'If traditional Chinese theatre is full of ritual, it is not surprising to find that traditional Chinese ritual is full of theatre'.<sup>16</sup> In many traditions, such as these of Chinese theatre, the temple becomes a stage and a ritual precinct in festivals; the stage is even considered 'an extension of the temple' and so the actors and other performers see to it that they pay their respects to the deities by dedicating the performances to them: 'The whole acting troupe participates in the public offerings that accompany the temple festival.' Before the troupe approach the stage, they stop by a backstage shrine dedicated to their patron deity in order to pay their due respects.<sup>17</sup> It is not rare in Chinese culture to invite acting troupes to Daoist rites of the dead; the actors perform rituals to prevent demons and malevolent spirits from interfering in the journey of the deceased.

The two most celebrated forms of Japanese theatre – *nō* and *kabuki* – both originated in shamanic ritual,<sup>18</sup> but whereas *nō* developed as an aristocratic art that in no way challenged the ethics of fourteenth – century society, *kabuki* from the first was a theatre of social outcasts that scandalised the ruling elite of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). The aim of *nō*, according to its perfecter and chief theoretician, Zeami, (1363-1443) is to create in the audience ‘an enraptured forgetfulness of itself. The art of the performance will then have the quality of being inexhaustible in its depth and constantly elegant’.<sup>19</sup> The Master actor has the spiritual power to place the audience in a state of trance, for his mind has spontaneously ‘reached unity with *mu* (nothingness) and *Kū* (emptiness)’.<sup>20</sup> While the spiritual quality of *nō*, whose shamanic power operates ‘in the gray area between Shinto and Buddhism’<sup>21</sup> had a considerable influence on Yeats,<sup>22</sup> *Kabuki* had no influence on the later European or American avant garde, despite its association with violent contestations of the Tokugawas’ Confucian codes and embodiment of protest against the established order.<sup>23</sup> Its shamanistic features are evident in the figure of the *hito-kami* or ‘man-god’, a superhero possessed by a divine power. The audience would throw coins on to the stage when the great actor *Danjūrō* portrayed a divine being, as they believed him to be truly possessed by the spirit of the god.<sup>24</sup>

Having considered briefly the *ta'ziyah*, to which we shall return shortly, and other examples which demonstrate that in certain cultural contexts theatre and religious ritual can be so close as to be indistinguishable, or that theatre can be infused with religious and ritual elements, we shall now turn to discuss the case of ancient Greek tragedy, which has had an enormous influence on European culture and on its theatre, whether ‘ritual’ or not. Hugh Hunt remarks that ‘Aristotle’s explanation of the origins underline the principle that, wherever theatre appears, it does so as a development of a ritual’.<sup>25</sup> While Tragedy’s origins in the Dithyramb were undoubtedly religious, it is doubtful that by the time of the ‘classical moment’ of Tragedy in the fifth century BC witnessing a tragedy was not a ‘ritual’ in the strict sense given above. But it was certainly part of the rites of Dionysus, in which the god was honoured with music, poetry, dance, song, and poetic drama.

In Athens the festival reached its climax with the three-day competition among producers, performers and poets of tragedies. The victor gained instant fame, status and prestige. The



audiences would have known the titles in advance, and as Christopher Collard points out, the plot would have been taken from a familiar myth; 'but each fresh dramatisation nevertheless invited variations in detail and emphasis, with continuing scope for surprises to both emotions and intellect'.<sup>26</sup>

While the Dionysia was beyond doubt ritual in nature, the celebration being strongly formalised, besides being traditional it was 'political' in that it demonstrated the communal values of the *polis*, and through the middle of the fifth century 'the Great Dionysia came increasingly to focus and display the ethos of a proudly democratic but frequently self-questioning city'.<sup>27</sup> The three great tragic poets of the period - Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides - treated myth, politics, and social and moral issues differently, and Tragedy thus was, in this sense, more dynamic than the *ta'ziyah*, which we must nevertheless recognize as tragic drama. Moreover the Dionysia also presented comedy, which was a drama of political satire and travesty. Thus the Greek achievement was richer than the term 'ritual theatre' might imply today.

Tragedies became rituals of purification, an attempt to restore order and 'communal solidarity' as the audience shares the suffering of the character. Tragedy was indeed a 'collective and theatrical experience' which then become present and intervening in the lives of the Ancient Greeks. M.S. Silk further theorizes that the ritual of tragedies 'reaches out to the spectators in its inclusiveness' in order that they should take part in the lamentation that the ending inevitably brought about. Silk argues for 'a sense of closure' that did not involve an acceptance or a resolution, but audiences were able to feel sympathy for the tragic hero and might be moved to carry on his legacy;<sup>28</sup> this tragic effect is also found in the *ta'ziyah*. Thus solidarity was shared among the performers and the spectators as the theatre embraced the audience. At the end of the performance the spectators were enabled to reflect and contemplate on what they had witnessed.

Dionysus was clearly central to the Ancient Greek theatre, but thus centrality has been conceived in different ways during the past century. Ronald Vince cites the theories of Gilbert Murray regarding how the god Dionysus functioned in that theatre and how his rituals were translated to drama. Murray's argument is that the theatre's origin lay in ritual:

1. Tragedy is in origin a Sacer Ludus, a ritual dance, representing normally the action or the supposed historical cause of some current ritual practice.
2. The dance was originally or centrally that of Dionysus, performed at his feast, in his theatre.
3. Dionysus was the Eniautos-Daimon or vegetation-god, who, like Adonis and Osiris, represented the cyclic death and rebirth of the world, the tribe's lands, and the tribe itself.
4. Tragedy and comedy represent different stages in the life of this vegetation-god or 'Year-Spirit'; tragedy leads to his death and threnos (lamentation); comedy to his marriage feast and komos (celebration).<sup>29</sup>

As the anthropologists Eric Csapo and Margaret Miller point out, Murray was a member of the co-called Cambridge Ritualists, a diverse group of scholars mainly inspired by the work of Jane Harrison, whose *Themis* (1912) showed her 'genius for amalgamating the most disparate currents in the intellectual environment of her day'.<sup>30</sup> She combined, among others: Nietzsche, who traced the birth of tragedy to the ritual representation of the 'passion' of Dionysus, who was torn apart by the Titans; and Frazer, whose theory of the 'dying god' formed part of his ultra-rationalistic anthropology. The Cambridge Ritualists deserve mention not because their notions are still taken seriously by scholars, but because their ideas had an enormous impact on subsequent generations, and particularly on the development of theatre.

It is important to emphasise here that it cannot be assumed that drama developed out of ritual. Contemporary anthropology is, in any case, 'much more interested in the theoretical and synchronic relations between ritual and theatre than in any genetic or historical relationship'.<sup>31</sup> The Cambridge Ritualists, however, asserted that while ritual was universal, drama appeared to be a uniquely Greek achievement; and indeed 'Greece still maintains a privileged position in universal theories of the origin of drama. It is not yet possible to say whether this position is justified'.<sup>32</sup>

While the comparative approach of the Cambridge Ritualists was influential among the wider public, it was received coldly by Hellenists, who tended to see the notion of a close



connection between ritual and theatre – especially tragedy – as tarnishing their ‘pride in the unique splendour of the Greek miracle itself’.<sup>33</sup> Now, however, scholars have reasserted the ritual character, contents and function of Greek drama, with the result that it looks much less like drama as we know it. ‘This has implications for the broader exercise of cross-cultural comparison, opening the door to a less overtly Hellenocentric and Eurocentric approach to the comparative study of the question of drama’s origins’.<sup>34</sup> Csapo and Miller go on to articulate a general statement which is extremely useful for our understanding of not only the *ta’ziyah* but also theatre as a cultural phenomenon:

There is [...] no longer any question of “quantum leaps” from ritual to drama. The categories of ritual and drama are not so much divided as joined by a continuum, and, indeed, anthropology has generated a third term that marks the middle range of this continuum, namely, “ritual-drama”. It is hard to conceive of ritual without some element of drama or drama without some element of ritual.<sup>35</sup>

A detailed examination of the origins of drama in Greece lies beyond the scope of this study, which will therefore not consider the contribution of Aristotle to the debate. A few points can usefully be made here, however. First, it is hard to draw the line between religious and secular in any premodern culture, especially in the case of Greek drama, which was religious insofar as it was based on myth. Second, drama at Athens was participatory; most male citizens participated in the dramatic *choroi* at some time in their life. This ‘created a bond of community and empathy between audience and the majority of performers’.<sup>36</sup> Thus the choral function was both a ritual element within drama and a symbolic extension of the audience within the drama. Third, Greek tragedy seems to have been considered in terms of its ‘efficacy’ and not of its aesthetic value; Aristotle describes the pleasure of drama ‘either in ritual terms, notoriously as *Katharsis* [...], or it is a cognitive pleasure linked to moral and political education’.<sup>37</sup>

Eventually, the fall of Athens would bring about the demise of ritual theatre in Greece. As other city states were building their own theatres and drawing on the culture and tradition of Athens, Athenian theatre was transported outside Greece. The destruction of the civic pride that Athenians held dear also destroyed the faith in their gods, including Dionysus. ‘Faith in the gods began to give way to scepticism; patriotism and idealism degenerated into

materialism'.<sup>38</sup> This is seems that without 'faith in the gods' ritual theatre cannot survive or be created. As we noted, Nasr's view is that to fully appreciate the sacred, man must believe in the sacred and participate in it.

### **The *Ta'ziyah***

By far the most important manifestation of a truly Islamic drama is the *ta'ziyah*, which was the only form of serious drama to have developed in the Islamic world before the advent of a theatre inspired by European models. This drama, as we have mentioned, will be discussed at length in chapter five. Therefore we will here merely outline some of the salient features of the *ta'ziyah* as an example of ritual drama or dramatic ritual.

The *ta'ziyah* is a form of ritual theatre stemming from the mid-eighteenth-century fusion of ambulatory and stationary rites that had coexisted for over a thousand years. At first these plays were performed in market places and town squares, later in private houses among other places. Finally special buildings known as *takiyas* or *Husseiniyyas* were constructed for their staging. These buildings may certainly be categorised as 'ritual spaces'.<sup>39</sup>

The traditional attempt to distance the actors, who are both amateurs and professionals and are all male, even those playing female parts, from their roles in a manner that might, albeit anachronistically, be called Brechtian has been abandoned in many recent productions. Under the influence of styles of acting used in the cinema and television, the actors identify with their roles to such a degree that they become carried away, with potentially explosive results. This danger to the actors comes from the spectators, whose emotional involvement with the drama is extremely intense, especially on the final day of the proceedings, when the events of '*ashura*, the tenth day of the month of Muharram are enacted.

It was on this day in 680 CE that the Prophet's grandson Hussein was martyred by the force of Caliph Yazid at Karbala in present-day Iraq; his suffering and death are mourned by Shi'ites worldwide. In Persia the rituals of mourning came under royal patronage when Shi'ism was established as the state religion in the sixteenth century under the Safavid dynasty. More recently, after a forty-year period of eclipse during which the *ta'ziyah*



survived only in the countryside,<sup>40</sup> the revolutionary authorities in Iran encouraged performances and it is now well established.

The physical form of the *takiya* enhances the dramatic interplay between actors and spectators and makes of the *ta'ziyah* a true manifestation of ritual theatre. This is theatre-in-the-round. The main performing area is a stark, curtain-less raised platform in the centre of a sandy circle; the circle is used to portray battles, journeys and changes of scene. The action sweeps from the central stage into the surrounding audience and back from the periphery, enveloping and drawing in the spectators, who often become active participants in the drama.<sup>41</sup>

The core of the repertory is the plays devoted to the Karbala tragedy. The passage of Hussein from Medina via Mecca to his martyrdom and those of his sons and followers is represented in some ten plays in as many days. This extended period of performance can be compared to the three-day festival of tragic drama experienced by the ancient Athenians, but the experience of the devotees of the Shi'a ritual is perhaps even more intense, since it is charged with extreme emotion which reaches its greatest pitch on the tenth day. The re-enactment of Hussein's martyrdom is presented in such a passionate style that even a non-believer may be profoundly moved. Peter Brook was one of the more recent western witnesses of the drama, which he saw in 1970. He was greatly impressed by its dramatic qualities and wrote enthusiastically of its virtues.<sup>42</sup>

In order to understand the *ta'ziyah* it is necessary to understand the notion of *al-shahadah* (martyrdom), for it is *al-shahadah* that drives the characters to their tragic destiny. Hussein and his followers went to war knowing that victory was impossible and death was certain. Yet Hussein was shown as consenting to, even welcoming, martyrdom in order to protect the basis of Islam. His death made him a living symbol and role model for those who seek truth and justice in this world. In Iran his name is synonymous with such virtues as a self-sacrifice, purity and justice, and he is regarded as the peerless tragic hero of Shi'a Islam. Shi'ites consider the *ta'ziyah* to be a 'holy theatre' that reflects not only religious but also cultural and political life, especially in Iran.<sup>43</sup>

Despite Brook's enthusiasm, it is difficult to see how the *ta'ziyah* could be performed without some distortion or loss of significance outside its social, cultural and religious contexts, although this has been attempted, with controversial results, as we shall see in chapter five. Unlike Greek tragedy, it is unlikely to be able to travel outside the milieu that gives it meaning. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the eminent Iranian scholar, is adamant that theatre which has a religious meaning relating to sacred truths and events loses its power and significance when taken out of its context. He argues that

the *ta'ziyah* can have efficacy and meaning only in the traditional context for which it was meant. The audience is as much a part of the play as the actors, and both participate with all their body and soul in the events of sacred history that are retold on the stage. A sceptical audience, which because of lack of faith cannot participate wholeheartedly in the tragedy of Imam Husayn and his companions, already destroys through its presence the drama's spiritual climate. [...] destroys that unity between performer and onlooker that belongs to the very essence of the *ta'ziyah*. How much more would this climate be destroyed by directors and actors whose interest in these matters is purely external, people who have sufficiently fallen out of their own tradition to consider it as 'interesting'.<sup>44</sup>

Nasr, who is an authority on the spiritual and religious meanings of Islamic art and especially the art of Persia, is uncompromisingly extreme in his view of the value of tradition, yet in this case his words are powerfully persuasive and seem pertinent to the decline of ancient Greek tragedy. They may also give pause for thought to those who might seek to revive 'ritual theatre' according to their own lights in our own time. Such a project is fraught with difficulty, especially when it is based on ways of thinking and feeling which are not easily communicated to an audience used to the conventions of naturalism or who regard such experiences as no more than 'interesting'.

### **Ritual Theatre in the Twentieth Century**

In the last century many Western theorists and critics, playwrights and directors became dissatisfied with the condition of theatre and sought to revolutionise the naturalistic



tradition by abolishing the fourth wall, experimenting with other innovations, or creating a new type of theatre altogether on radically different principles. Some of these innovators sought to recreate a way of performing and receiving that might be called ritual theatre.

Whatever the particular conception, many contended that in the nineteenth century or even long before, with the decline of Greek theatre, something essential and of fundamental value had been lost. Some of these innovators de-emphasised the literary text or abandoned it altogether, viewing the body as the basis of a new language of theatre that could connect directly with the spectator. Some looked to dreams and visions, seeing in them a metaphysical reality transcending logic and reason. Where text was used, it often consisted of poetic utterances and eschewed plot development and characterisation. In all these cases naturalism is abandoned as inimical to the potential of theatre to bring together performers and spectators in a powerful collective experience. Their successors have continued this vision in a variety of ways.

Any discussion of ritual theatre in its recent or current manifestations must acknowledge that the term itself is conceived in such a variety of ways that any positive definition will be almost meaningless. It is easier, looking at the various manifestations of commercial theatre, musicals, spectacles and revivals of the drama of earlier periods, to say what it is not. Nor is it the same as 'experimental' theatre, which may contain few elements of ritual or none at all. It should not be confused with the ritual of the theatre, which concerns the particular pleasures, of the mind as well as the emotions, to be gained by witnessing a powerful drama. Hugh Hunt's comment could be applied to an Athenian audience as well as to a modern one: 'The ritual of the theatre is, then, a meeting- place between our imagination and our reason. Perfect harmony between those two aspects of our minds provides the greatest experience'.<sup>45</sup>

By contrast, some conceive theatre as a 'magical ritual' that will have a 'healing' and curative effect on the spectator. Theatre as ritual reconnects man with nature, which provides sustenance and replenishment. This view harks back to a time when theatre and ritual were indistinguishable, and 'man found himself indivisible with Nature and the so-called gods were natural subtle powers.' According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, ritual theatre has the power to heal a humanity suffering from the harsh, chaotic conditions of

rationalism, logocentrism and civilization. Banishing 'the gods' from the theatre and stripping the theatre of its capability to 'recreate life and humanity in the spectator' cause theatre to lose its essence and significance.<sup>46</sup> Many would disagree with Fischer-Lichte's formulation, but it seems that this twentieth-century phenomenon cannot be separated from a disillusionment with the ideals of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on progress, reason and civilisation; and it is undeniable the West in that century witnessed a great deal of retrogression, unreason and barbarism.

As we shall see in chapter six, theatre in the Arab world now consists of two main branches: commercial theatre and experimental theatre of the kind that is performed at international festivals. But while 'ritual theatre' is nowhere to be found, the experimentalism currently in fashion appeals only to an educated elite. It would not be true to say that challenging theatre is absent, but it is only challenging in the context of the political and religious conditions of the Middle East, where censorship is still a fact of life – although there are some reasons to hope that the more democratic societies are making progress in this regard. But experimental Arabic theatre, generally speaking, is without any kind of theoretical underpinning, and is all too often an exercise in style. In this respect it is similar to much that is produced in the rest of the world. As Aronson remarks, the avant garde has, in a sense, achieved its goal, since its 'visual style and rhythmic structures [...] have been absorbed into and permeate fashion, music, graphic art and a variety of media, which in turn feed back into multimedia performances, performance art, and the hybrid theatre of clubs and discos'.<sup>47</sup> This transformation has come about largely through the combined forces of technology and popular entertainment.

While Fischer-Lichte sees performance as a transformative process and even finds the possibility for tragedy in the exploration of the relationship between the individual and the community, she does not consider such a theatre as religious. Others see religion everywhere in the theatre.

As we have noted, the ideas of the Cambridge Ritualists had a huge impact on twentieth-century intellectuals. Jane Harrison's evolutionary scheme, which was based on the emergence of an individual as leader (*exarchos*) of the worshipping collective, emphasised, through a simplistic set of oppositions, reason over emotion, science over religion, and the



individual over society. The Cambridge Ritualists identified 'ritual' with the second term of these oppositions, but paradoxically, as Csapo and Miller point out, it was their ambivalence to 'the iconic values of nineteenth century anthropology (namely, rationalism, individualism, Western science, and progress)'<sup>48</sup> that accounted for their influence on those writers, directors and drama theorists who, disenchanted with bourgeois theatre, seized upon the primitive underside of the link they established between theatre and ritual. This trend culminated in the theatre of the late 1960s through the 1980s with the work of, among others, Grotowski, Brook and Schechner, but the impact can be seen much earlier, in the 1930s. The most important theorist of this period is generally considered to be Antonin Artaud.

Artaud's theories, if they can be so called since his writings are notoriously obscure, have had an enormous influence on theatre, whereas his practice has been neglected. We cannot discuss either in any detail here, but he was above all concerned with the primitive ritual function of theatre. He was not the first to emphasise this, but as Innes notes, 'with Artaud the focus on dreams and the primitive levels of the psyche becomes extended to include savage roots and primitive cultures'.<sup>49</sup> At first influenced by Alfred Jarry, he took the Balinese theatre (mistakenly) to be an example of the kind of theatre he was seeking to create. Artaud sought to reintroduce magic, thereby destroying logic and reason and replacing them with irrational spontaneity and delirium, which would bring about an emotional purgation analogous to catharsis in Greek tragedy. This was to be accomplished through a process of 'sympathetic magic', a concept borrowed from Frazer. This delirium would, like the plague, exorcise repressive behaviour patterns in society as a whole by affecting the tiny audience of Artaud's theatre and then infecting the population at large. Theatre would have to 'develop a ritual language by rediscovering universal physical signs, or 'hieroglyphs', while verbal expression became incantation'.<sup>50</sup> These are the basic elements of Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', which also inverted the values of good and evil – a characteristic of the avant garde since Strindberg. While Artaud's own practice exemplified a total control of all the elements of production, his theories have led to his being regarded as a prophet, tragic visionary and hero, and shamanic reinventor of theatre, principally because they are, in Innes's words, 'closely associated with our existential uncertainties'.<sup>51</sup>

Because Artaud was apt to exaggerate to an extreme degree, his writings promise something much grander than could ever be achieved in practice. It is their inspirational quality that influenced Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz in the 1960s, and his many self-proclaimed disciples in the USA, including Schechner, Beck and Malina. The fact that Artaud's audience, the sophisticated Parisian bourgeoisie, was rarely shocked and never transported to a state of delirium by his theatre in practice has not prevented his admirers from taking his ideas as a blueprint for their own creative work.<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that Artaud's work does not contain vital and imaginative elements, but its inherent weaknesses have been obscured by his power to create enormous enthusiasm among those who wish to abolish the bourgeois theatre and replace it with a liberating theatrical ritual. Brook, who presented Artaud's *Spurt of Blood* in 1964, and Grotowski, whose theatre is predicated on the self-transcendence of the actor, epitomise this approach. And yet, as Innes remarks, 'the basic problem facing all the inheritors of Artaud who seek to affect spectators directly by using rituals' is that they have no choice but to do this 'in the modern secular context where these have no religious significance and therefore no subjective value for the public'.<sup>53</sup>

In the Arab world, as we noted earlier, the problem is not that the context is secular but that it is religious, and so a ritual theatre that is imposed from outside is an impossibility, although there is currently a plethora of experimentalism which has failed to attract a broad public.

In the USA Artaud's theories, together with the work of Brook, Grotowski, Mnouchkine and others, influenced avant-garde creators and directors to embrace ritual ideas precisely for their revolutionary potential. Ritual theatre offered a means to change society through the building of a community that would come into being through 'the active sharing of collective emotions, group katharsis, and [...] the chance to experience other humans concretely'. It 'also implied the efficacy of performance, an efficacy which extended beyond the individual psyche and offered a tonic to society at large'.<sup>54</sup> In 1968 Richard Schechner (a trained anthropologist and a student of Victor Turner) presented *Dionysus in 69*, the key work of American ritual theatre. The play, a version of Euripides' *Bacchae*, was 'hyperritualized with such non-Euripidean extras as an initiation by the god of the



audience, a New Guinea birthing ritual, and a death ritual'.<sup>55</sup> Schechner's stated aim was to rediscover the efficacy of performance as a ritual experience.

*Dionysus in 69* influenced a host of theatre artists and Schechner's articulation of performance theory has had an even greater impact. Performance theory sees performance as fundamentally destructive of social norms and a form of popular empowerment, and while ritual theatre ceased to be a vital force at the end of the 1980s, interest in performance theory remains strong, and continues to influence avant-garde and experimental theatre. The idea that a community can be created through ritual theatre, however, has prone to be a false hope; or, at least, the nature of that proven 'community' has come to be conceived differently.

Erika Fischer-Lichte is concerned with the power of performance to transform an audience. Briefly, theatre can bring about this transformation through a reversal of the hierarchy between text (myth and drama) and performance (ritual, theatrical performance), and a community is created by the physical acts of the 'phenomenal body' of the actor rather than by his or her 'semiotic body'. The spectator experiences the actor as an 'embodied mind'. She thus contrasts a 'textual culture' with a 'performance culture', and finds in the latter a means of creating a community; but that community is an aesthetic one which will not cohere after the performance is over. Her theory rests not only on Turner's conception of 'liminal time' but also on the idea of the 'rite of passage' first formulated by Arnold van Gennep, another anthropologist who had a great influence on twentieth-century theatre.

Van Gennep's theory concerns the transgression of boundaries in the process of transformation. Fischer-Lichte summarises as follows:

This scheme consists of three phases: (1) the separation phase in which those who are about to undergo a change are alienated from their everyday life and their social milieu, i.e. are removed from their former place, time, social status; (2) the threshold or transformation phase, in which the people concerned are transposed between and betwixt all possible realms, between different worlds which allows for completely new, partly rather disconcerting experiences – the phase, Turner would later call 'liminal'; and (3) the integration phase, in which the newly transformed are reintegrated into society and socially accepted in their new status.<sup>56</sup>



Fischer-Lichte argues that although van Gennep's theory applies to ritual, there is no reason not to apply it to theatre, which is not a ritual experience but can be similar. The main difference is that in ritual, liminal experience is irreversible and socially recognised; in theatre, it is neither. Nevertheless a process of transformation has been undergone by the audience. Despite the attempts by Schechner and others to introduce ritual elements into the performances, Fischer-Lichte argues that these are unnecessary to create an aesthetic community. To demand more is unrealistic and, moreover, calls for sacrifice on the part of the spectator. In current conditions it is enough that the new performative culture of post-industrial societies should create temporary communities 'that do not ask for any longer-lasting commitment nor for a collective identity to emerge'.<sup>57</sup> Fischer-Lichte's view contrasts strongly with the ideals of Schechner and his contemporaries such as Beck and Malina of the Living Theatre, as well as with the evident aims and effects of the *ta'ziyah*, but it articulates a contemporary reality.

What of the avant garde in this situation? After the demise of ritual theatre in the USA figures such as Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman emerged, and both are still working, but according to Arnold Aronson their work has become so thoroughly assimilated as to have become classical.<sup>58</sup> Avant-garde theatre began as a radical movement influenced in the USA by Stein and Cage as well as Artaud and Turner, but the experiments of forty years ago are now part of cultural history. Wilson's hallucinatory productions can now be harnessed to fashion shows and rock videos, and Foreman, who wished to dissolve coagulated thought and feeling and unblock paradise through the sophisticated use of postmodern irony, has become an establishment figure. If, as Innes argues, 'the base root of all avant-garde theatre is an uncompromising rejection of contemporary civilisation and existing social structures',<sup>59</sup> then it appears that 'there is very little in today's theatre that can be considered avant-garde'.<sup>60</sup>

Norman Bert, Professor of Theatre and Drama at Texas Tech University, directly equates theatre and religious ritual as though both perform virtually identical functions and are similarly organised. Bert argues in a recent article, 'Theatre is religious', that 'theatre is best understood, practiced and criticized' as religions and not as poetry, rhetoric or entertainment.<sup>61</sup> Bert defines religions as 'the creation and re-enactment of myth for the

purpose of realizing - in both senses of that word as 'perceiving' and 'making actual' – and celebrating the relationship of human beings with superhuman, spiritual forces'.<sup>62</sup> This is fairly unobjectionable, but Bert goes on to explain that these spiritual forces include not only the deity or deities, but also 'the *Zeitgeist*, the organizational power we call natural law, the world-wide network of consciousness that Teilhard de Chardin called the *nousphere*, and perhaps even national and ethnic "spirits" such as "el Raza"'.<sup>63</sup>

One does not have to be a rigid rationalist to see difficulty here, and the article continues to find analogies for every aspect of religion, as he defines it, in every aspect of the theatre. He too looks back to the Greeks for the last true manifestation of 'the sacral nature of acting'.<sup>64</sup> There is much more in this vein, all designed to prove Bert's hypothesis. However Bert never raises the question of the differences between religion and theatre because in wishing to minimise them he assumes there are none or that they are, or should be, insignificant.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered the nature of the link: between ritual and drama, focusing particularly on phenomena in ancient Greece, the Arab world, and twentieth-century Europe and America. It discussed the meaning of the ritual space and the activities performed in such spaces, noting that the ritual allows the human and the divine to meet, thus creating unity among the believers. The ritual is only efficacious, however, when all participants share common beliefs. A ritual theatre such as the *ta'ziyah* must emerge from, and be developed and sustained by, the community. It cannot be created by individuals seeking to build a sense of community through exploiting theatre's perceived revolutionary potential. The destruction of social norms, as we saw in the case of Artaud and his successors, does not necessarily lead to the efficacy of performance as a ritual experience.

In the Arab world there is a community of believers united by faith, however much they may be divided in other aspects of their lives, and so it might be possible to develop a theatre that might be both Islamic and popular with an Arab audience. Such a theatre would address issues of social importance and encourage spectators to consider their relationship



with their religion and their society. It could seek inspiration from its own heritage without being enslaved by naturalism. The staging of the *ta'ziyah* could be a useful model in this respect, since it shows that an Arab- Muslim audience can respond to symbolic, anti-illusory drama. A theatre that could characterised as Islamic might also serve as an example to makers of experimental theatre, now ubiquitous at international festivals in the Arab world.

This theatre could not be a 'ritual theatre' of the kind created by Schechner, however, since to bring together elements of Islamic ritual with elements drawn from other cultures would be incomprehensible to a broad Arab- Muslim audience; moreover, such an attempted synthesis would be seen as an insult to Islam. Even a 'ritual theatre' restricting itself to the incorporation of elements of Islamic ritual alone would be condemned for the same reason. It would be more useful to consider Fischer-Lichte's notion of the performative as a transformative process when thinking about what an Arab-Islamic theatre could be. Although she is concerned with the experience of an audience who are not a community. The Arab-Muslim community is not so homogeneous and unified that her notion of a 'temporary community' does not apply. It would be one of the tasks of an Arab-Muslim theatre, whether or not it incorporated 'ritual elements', to bring together and help sustain the community it serves. It should be clear, however, that I am not advocating a soothing theatre that avoids contentious issues, since I believe that the theatre should challenge and educate as well as entertain.

We have shown that ritual and theatre are not identical, though they may be similar. The question for the Arab Muslim artist is whether Islam can be a fruitful source of themes for the contemporary theatre, and whether an 'Islamic' theatre – in a loose sense - can inspire not only forward-looking theatre artists but also audiences, and engage in the dialogue between the individual and the Muslim community, which is everywhere in need of such a theatre.



### Endnotes for Chapter 2

---

<sup>1</sup> The current domination of 'experimental' theatre in the Arab world will be considered in chapter six.

<sup>2</sup> In chapter six, al-Sharqawi's *The Wrath of God* will be discussed alongside works by Wannous and al-Hakim.

<sup>3</sup> This will be discussed in chapter six.

<sup>4</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Brook's involvement with the *ta'ziyah* is discussed in chapter five.

<sup>6</sup> *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 1973), p. 1837.

<sup>7</sup> Jamshid Malekpour, *Islamic Theatre* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Deslauriers, 'Dimensions of Knowing: Narrative, Paradigm, and Ritual', *ReVision*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992), p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> Nasr, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> For many of Brecht's statements on the Epic Theatre see John Willet, *Brecht on Theatre* (Great Britain: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001); see also Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), pp 86-88).

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Bell., *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 165. For a brief discussion of Arabic performances of this kind see chapter four.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte has written a study of ritual and sacrifice in the theatre of the twentieth century which is pertinent to this study but cannot be considered in detail here. See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Bell, p. 166

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165

---

<sup>18</sup> See Benito Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism* (Leiden & New York: E. J. Brill, 1990), pp 91-92, 163-165.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> See Christopher Innes, *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> See Ortolani, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 164-165.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Hunt, *The Live Theatre: An Introduction to the History and Practice of the Stage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, trans. and ed. by Christopher Collard (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. xv.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>28</sup> Michael. S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 157.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 14; Gilbert Murray, *The Classical Tradition in Poetry* (New York, Vintage Press, 1957), p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller, 'General Introduction' in: *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama*, ed. by Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Hunt, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New E.d / prepared by a number of leading orientalisers; edited by an editorial committee consisting of H.A.R. Gibb [and others]. Leiden: Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2005.

<sup>40</sup> The reason for this will be explained in chapter five.

<sup>41</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, pp. 406-7.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets* (London: Methuen, 1994), p. 38.

<sup>43</sup> Malekpour, p. 28.

---

<sup>44</sup> Nasr, pp. 79-80.

<sup>45</sup> Hunt, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Fischer-Lichte, p. 296.

<sup>47</sup> Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 211.

<sup>48</sup> Csapo and Miller, p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> Innes, p. 58.

<sup>50</sup> Innes, p.59

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>52</sup> See Innes, pp.62, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> Csapo and Miller, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> Fischer-Lichte, p. 36.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>58</sup> See Aronson, p. 211.

<sup>59</sup> Innes, p. 188.

<sup>60</sup> Aronson, p. 205.

<sup>61</sup> Norman Bert, 'Theatre is religious', *The Journal of Religious and Theatre*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fall 2002), p. 1 ([http://www.rjournal.org/vol\\_1/no\\_1/bert.html](http://www.rjournal.org/vol_1/no_1/bert.html)).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 9.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Islamic Art and Architecture

#### Introduction

Any Arab Muslim working in the theatre arts today is faced with the difficulty that not only is there no tradition of Islamic theatre apart from the *ta'ziyah*, but also the serious theatre has been in decline for the last thirty years. By contrast, Muslim visual artists are able to draw on an immensely rich Islamic heritage, as well as traditions from all over the world that can fertilise their practice, for art in the present century can be international as well as local. Thus, for example, calligraphy, geometric ornament and the miniature are all being used in the contexts of approaches that acknowledge the contributions of the recent art of the West.

For the scenographer or theatre artist generally there need be no boundaries, and he or she may consider ways of working that are practised in other cultures. But just as Muslim artists and architects are finding ways of reaffirming – sometimes with a critical eye – their own heritage through a synthesis with practices developed in the West, so

scenographers may incorporate elements of Islamic art and architecture in their designs without being enslaved by a particular view of their traditions. It will be useful here, therefore, to provide a brief survey of the most characteristic forms of Islamic art and architecture.

Such a survey cannot hope to be comprehensive, however, because of the tremendous range in time and space of Islamic art. As Oleg Grabar, an eminent authority on early Islamic art, points out, this art 'is found in Spain in the eighth century and in India in the eighteenth, and almost all countries and centuries between these two extremes have contributed to its growth'.<sup>1</sup>

Grabar's statement raises a question he attempts to answer in his study: 'what does the word "Islamic" mean when used as an adjective modifying the noun "art"?'.<sup>2</sup> This question is pertinent to the activity of any contemporary Muslim artist, and it is clearly one to which no definitive answer can be given. Grabar, for example, asserts that "Islamic" does not refer to the art of a particular religion',<sup>3</sup> whereas Nasr, by contrast, being profoundly influenced by Sufism, emphasises 'the intellectual, symbolic and spiritual dimensions of Islamic art', which he insists should be seen 'as the manifestation in the world of forms of the spiritual realities [.....] of the Islamic revelation itself as coloured by its earthly embodiments'.<sup>4</sup>

Nasr is a valuable and thought-provoking guide to the spiritual nature of Islamic art, but whenever we shall have occasion to quote him it must be remembered that he is a traditionalist steeped in the conceptualisations of Shi'a Islam, and his comments should be regarded with caution, since he is concerned with the art of Islam as fundamentally a sacred, or at the very least a religious art. As he says,

This art makes manifest, in the physical order directly perceivable by the senses, the archetypal realities and acts, therefore, as a ladder for the journey of the Soul from the visible and the invisible which is also Silence transcending all sound.<sup>5</sup>

Nasr is concerned with the 'eternal' nature of Islamic art while Grabar attempts an 'objective', historical analysis, with which Nasr would surely be unsympathetic. Grabar indirectly comments on Nasr's intellectual orientation:



Islam avoided visually perceptible symbols in its early religious architecture, just as it felt reluctant towards images.[...] Only much later, with the growth of a more pantheistic Sufism, of Shi'ism, and of cults of saints did Islam, especially in Iran, create a variety of architectural forms to which a religious symbolism and a mystical interpretation can be given.<sup>6</sup>

Thus at least two very distinct views of Islamic art and architecture are possible, and no definition can be formulated that could be universally regarded by Muslims as generally satisfactory or as offering prescriptions for the practice of Muslim artists.

Grabar considers the nature and identity of Islamic art to be a problem inseparable from a number of assumptions, one of which is that Islamic art is unique. He asserts that a vast proportion of 'Islamic' works of art 'have little if anything to do with the faith of Islam. Works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be described as works of Islamic art',<sup>7</sup> citing Jewish Islamic art, Christian Islamic art and the Islamic art of India: 'The important point is that "Islamic" in the expression "Islamic art" is not comparable to "Christian" or "Buddhist" in "Christian art" or "Buddhist art".'<sup>8</sup>

Arguing that there is no Islamic land or Islamic people, Grabar goes on to state:

If it exists at all, Islamic art would be one that overpowered and transformed ethnic or geographical traditions, or else one that created some peculiar kind of symbiosis between local and pan-Islamic modes of artistic behaviour and expression.<sup>9</sup>

Thus while not dismissing Nasr's narrower definition, it will be useful to keep Grabar's much broader conception in mind. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine either thesis in any detail, but the discussion so far suggests that contemporary Muslim artists may legitimately draw on a wide range of models and influences without doing violence to their cultural heritage.

This point is made by Oliver Leaman, who considers Islamic aesthetics from the point of view of the sceptical philosopher. He denies that there is anything unique about Islamic art and argues that the aesthetic criteria we should apply to such art are identical to those we apply to any other art. He also argues that the direction Islamic art took –



for example with regard to its so-called prohibition of the representation of living beings – was not fixed by religious considerations:

The idea that art had to go in a particular direction in the Islamic world, once the principles of the religion became clear, is entirely wrong. Examining the way in which art did go and suggesting that this was because of Islam is an obvious case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Islamic art could have gone in a whole variety of directions, and still may.<sup>10</sup>

Leaman's argument, as he makes clear in the Foreword, grows out of his conviction that the aesthetic features of any art are can be extrapolated from their main religious purpose, and that 'being in tune with the latter would be a distraction not an aid to aesthetic appreciation and understanding'<sup>11</sup> – He goes on to argue that 'The main problem is that Islamic art is constantly being explained in terms which are not aesthetic, terms which have nothing primarily to do with art. These may be political, or religious, or mystical, or economic [...] They explain away the aesthetic features of Islamic art and replace those features with something else [...].'<sup>12</sup> Yet Leaman acknowledges that 'All art requires interpretation'<sup>13</sup> and accepts that an aesthetic of Islamic art can be constructed. Indeed he criticises Grabar, whom he admires for his disinclination to generalise, for his refusal to attempt such a construction.

The foregoing discussion makes clear that the vast field of Islamic art is one that contains a great deal of controversy and continues to give rise to a wide range of opinions, many of which are based on questionable assumptions. This is quite apart from the issue of the state of knowledge about Islamic art. Even those who profoundly disagree with Leaman's position admit that research into Islamic art and architecture is still in its infancy. Grube, for example, discusses Islamic architecture in these terms:

The interpretation of it as a whole as well as the understanding of its specific parts can only be successful and meaningful if seen against the background of Islam as a cultural, religious and political phenomenon, and only in the precise relation to the specific circumstances that led to its creation.[...] It will still take many years of research [...] satisfactorily to 'explain' the phenomenon of Islamic

architecture, that is to say , to correlate the physical appearance of Islamic architecture in the various parts of the Muslim world with the 'spirit' of Islam as it prevailed in any given region and period.<sup>14</sup>

Bearing in mind the contradictory and often incompatible views of scholars and critics, the following necessarily brief discussion will consider certain features and forms of Islamic art and architecture, while concentrating on the most important of all Islamic 'ritual spaces': the mosque.

Perhaps the first thing to be said about the earliest Islamic art is that it is difficult to identify it as Islamic at all, except in hindsight. As Grabar points out , ' The Dome of the Rock, the mosque of Damascus, or many an early Islamic building or silver object from Iran have been considered as monuments of Byzantine or Sassanian art, and every manual of non-Muslim art treats them as such '.<sup>15</sup> In attempting to clarify this difficulty, Grabar proposes certain criteria:

It becomes evident then that an identification of the changes brought about by Islamic civilization in order to make an Islamic art possible requires an identification and explanation of three separate elements: the mind of the Muslim user and beholder, the meanings given to his artistic creations, and the forms utilized by him.<sup>16</sup>

Nasr has this to say on the origin of Islamic art:

It is by now well known how Sassanid and Byzantine techniques and models were emulated in early Muslim architecture and Roman ones in city planning [...] But the solution of the problems of links across centuries and cultural boundaries, despite their interest from the point of view of the history of art, does not reveal to us the origin of Islamic art, for Islamic art like any other sacred art, is not simply the materials used but what a particular religious collectively has done with the material in question.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the Umayyad mosque in Damascus Nasr directly contradicts Grabar. For him the mosque 'is filled with a presence and reflects a spiritual ambience which are nothing other than Islamic no matter what the historical origins of that building may have



been'.<sup>18</sup> Here we have two views which are not merely differing opinions but entirely different approaches to Islam and the art associated with it.

While Nasr is concerned with the inner dimension of Islam and finds the origin and essence of Islamic art in the religion's spiritual tradition, Grabar is interested in exploring local examples. He notes that 'there does not seem to be any clear way of deciding how, why and when a work produced under Muslim rule can properly be thought to be Islamic'.<sup>19</sup> It is obvious that Grabar considers the very term 'Islamic art' highly problematic, and he seeks to clarify the terms of this problem by 'looking for a classical phase in the Muslim world' although he recognises that the term 'classical' 'is obviously a dangerous and difficult one [...]'.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless his formulation, despite its being hedged around with all manner of qualifications, may be useful for the artist seeking to pin down the elusive nature of Islamic art. Grabar suggests that in this classical phase, which he sees as coming into being in the Middle East in the late ninth century, some 250 years after the death of the Prophet, 'there was developed a more or less idealized typology of forms that was utilized by the culture whenever it made an object or erected a building'.<sup>21</sup> It is this typology of forms and its subsequent developments that characterise what the non-specialist recognises as Islamic art.

### **Characteristics of Islamic Art**

If there is such a thing as Islamic art, what are its defining characteristics or common features? Arab art existed before the advent of Islam; important examples have been found in the remains of old cities in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and paintings and calligraphy have been discovered on stones belonging to the civilizations of Ma'in, Saba' and Himyar, located in present-day Yemen ( Fig.1).<sup>22</sup> But Islamic art developed in response to the cultures that confronted the Muslim conquerors of the empires that had

dominated the region until the advent of Islam, those of Byzantium and of the Sassanids in Persia (Fig.2).

For Muslims, however, the most important pre-Islamic structure remains the Ka'ba in Mecca. The Ka'ba, which means 'cube' in Arabic, is the centre of Islamic spirituality, being the point to which all Muslims direct their prayers, and around which pilgrims walk during the *Hajj*. Muslims believe that the Ka'ba edifice was built at God's express command by Abraham and Ishmael.

It became the pre-eminent ritual site for the Arabian nomadic tribes. Over time the original Abrahamic observances at the site became disturbed by pagan influences, and by 630 CE, eight years after Muhammad had settled in Medina, there were said to be 360 different idols housed in and around the Ka'ba. However the most important of the deities venerated there was known as Allah, who had no image. In that year Muhammad took control of Mecca and destroyed the idols, with the notable exception of images of Mary and Jesus. He established the city as a place of Islamic pilgrimage and dedicated it to the worship of Allah alone, restoring Abrahamic order to the sacred territory and making the Ka'ba and its sacred stone central to the Muslim religion.<sup>23</sup>

What meanings does the Ka'ba hold for Muslims, and is its cubic shape significant? Leaman argues that 'It is a Cube which is central, but it is not central because it is a cube'.<sup>24</sup> In fact it is not a perfect cube, since its height is fifty feet while its opposite pairs of walls are thirty-five and forty feet long. According to James Dickie, the Ka'ba

[...] in the *axis mundi* of Islamic cosmology. It is diagonally oriented, with its corners facing the cardinal points of the compass. Like the conical Omphalos in Delphi it is the centre of the world, because it is the primordial symbol of the intersection between the vertical axis of the spirit and the horizontal plane of phenomenal existence.<sup>25</sup>

While consenting to this view, which emphasises the liturgical centrality of the Ka'ba, Nasr goes further, speaking of 'an invisible set of 'lines of force' which attract all points in the periphery towards the Centre'.<sup>26</sup> He argues that the experience of space itself is



determined by the *Qiblah* or direction of prayer. Moreover he asserts that 'The geometry, form and proportions of the Ka'ba all play a crucial role in the rise of Islamic architecture [...]'. In the same footnote Nasr quotes Burckhardt, who writes that although the Ka'ba is not a work of art it might be categorised as 'proto-art' having an immensely influential spiritual dimension; and thus its 'inherent symbolism, in its shape and the rites associated with it, contains in embryo everything expressed by the sacred art of Islam'.<sup>27</sup>

So for Nasr and Burckhardt the cubic shape of the Ka'ba is important because the edifice itself is of supreme spiritual importance in Islam. However, Nasr in no way attempts to demonstrate the validity of his assertion that 'the geometry, form and proportions' of the Ka'ba actually have the significance he ascribes to them.

The story of the Prophet's destruction of the idols brings us to a discussion of what is perhaps the most widely held assumption regarding Islamic art: that Islam itself prohibits in all circumstances the representation of living beings and specifically of human beings. This is very misleading, however. Leaman comments, 'It is true that there were iconoclastic tendencies in Islamic art, but there are also many instances of animals being very realistically portrayed',<sup>28</sup> citing the painting of the Mughal empire (1526-1858) as evidence. Moreover the human figure is found in abundance in such paintings and in others not only in Persia and India but in the Arab world.

As Leaman points out, there is no ban on images in the Qur'an, although some *hadith* (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) condemn frivolous images. It is true, however, that in a specifically religious context images which could be taken to be aspects of *shirk* or idolatry are entirely forbidden. 'This presumably is the reason for the lack of images in mosques and places of worship'.<sup>29</sup> The question remains, however, why did Islam come to prohibit representation of living beings in a religious context? Both Islam and Christianity followed Judaism, whose tendency to hostility to the image originated in its fierce rejection of idolatry. Yet, as Leaman points out, Christianity embraced the use of images and Islam did not.<sup>30</sup>

Is the reason for this to be found in the peculiar nature of Islam as a religion, or are other factors at work? Grabar notes that 'Concern with a theory of the arts or even of representations was not central to Islam' but 'what did affect the arts was the existence of a social ethos - social being understood in a very wide sense here – rather than of religious or intellectual doctrines, not to speak of aesthetic ones'.<sup>31</sup> According to Grabar, certain Qur'anic passages which were intended to condemn idolatry were later used to oppose images.<sup>32</sup> Indeed questions of aesthetics do not arise in the Qur'an at all.<sup>33</sup>

There is evidence that the Muslims had a very strong reaction to the art of the conquered territories, especially that of the Christian world. As Leaman notes, the expansion of Islam largely meant expansion into the Christian and Greek cultural territories, and so 'it was the representational nature of the native art that stood in the way of the new religion, along with the ideas that accompanied that art'.<sup>34</sup> The strategy adopted was thus to develop a non-representational form of expression, this being more distinctive in its opposition to the native culture than a competing representational iconography. This does not mean, of course, that there was anything inherently Islamic in non-representational art at the time this strategy was formulated.

Thus it seems that the Islamic rejection of images was in part based on a desire to distinguish Islam from the religion of the conquered peoples. Grabar points out that images were seen as one of the most important and dangerous weapons the Christians possessed, and that the Muslim attitude toward the arts of the Christian world was 'a confused one, in which awe and admiration, contempt and jealousy, were uneasily mixed together'.<sup>35</sup> Be that as it may, it is true that in early Islamic art representation of living things are largely absent, and in religious buildings the avoidance of figural representations was systematic and deliberate. Non-representational forms were given symbolic significance and developed into the profoundly beautiful varieties to be found in 'classical' Islamic art. But, as Grabar argues, it was 'precise historical circumstances, not ideology or some sort of mystical ethnic character'<sup>36</sup> that led to the Muslim rejection



of images, or rather to the development of an alternative range of images, the most powerful being the mosque itself.

Before discussing Islamic plant and geometric designs, and what many regard as the quintessential Islamic art - calligraphy - we should consider another feature of Islamic art: horror vacui or fear of emptiness. It is true that Muslim artists developed ornament to unprecedented heights of richness and complexity, and in some cases covered artefacts, walls and domes with a wealth of fine detail. In the most successful examples this profusion does not lead to a loss of formal coherence, since each decorated element, while complete in itself, contributes to a unified whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Sometimes the effect is rich, sometimes restrained . This synthesis of variety and unity is considered by many to epitomise Islamic art and architecture. The impression is one of balance and harmony of the disparate parts. (Fig 3)

However, while much Islamic art seems to conform to this idea of a fear of emptiness, much does not. Many artefacts are restrained in their decoration, many paintings and miniatures are no more crowded with detail than the paintings of other cultures, and many buildings or parts of buildings are entirely plain, or their structure is articulated by severely restricted ornament. Here again, generalisations about the particular questions of Islamic art serve to obscure the realities and do nothing to enlighten us about its enormous variety. Just as it would be absurd to generalise about Christian art – to say, for example, that perpendicular Gothic and Bavarian Rococo share the same aesthetic features which somehow articulate Christian cosmology – so it is invalid to assert that every artefact produced by a Muslim society anywhere in the world is linked to every other by a common language of design that somehow expresses Islam as a unique faith with a unique aesthetic. Moreover, the various reasons often given to 'explain' the phenomenon of horror vacui - for example that it was prompted by the Arabs reaction to the emptiness of the desert, or that it arose from the Islamic tendency to exaggerate – do not bear scrutiny.<sup>37</sup>

It is also interesting to note that Nasr emphasizes the emptiness of Islamic art as well as its fullness and complexity. While he sometimes seems to be intent on subsuming all Islamic art into a single entity, his position is very subtle one and reflects a mind open to the religious experience of many cultures. For Nasr Islamic art, and particularly Islamic sacred architecture, offers an experience of the void that is the opposite of a horror vacui. This is not the place to examine his argument, which is founded on the metaphysical principle of unity, but he is concerned to connect Islamic aniconism, which rejects any representation of the divine, with the 'negative space' of Islamic architecture, which is defined by absence of corporeality and an emphasis on inner surface of form. He asserts that

to stand in a mosque that is empty and depicts unity either through its simplicity or its ornament yet whose very ornamentation is based on the importance of emptiness and the void and which depicts multiplicity in-unity, is to gain a spiritual experience of the void through art<sup>38</sup>

### **Islamic Ornamentation**

Nasr's view of ornamentation, not surprisingly, is that it expresses a specifically Islamic spirituality, and he considers Pythagoras a Muslim sage. For him the mathematical nature of Islamic art and architecture derives from the Qur'an rather than Greek esotericism. This 'spiritual mathematics' sacralises Islamic space, and the perfect forms it produces and provide an echo of the Islamic paradise through the experience of harmony.<sup>39</sup> Leaman rejects this symbolic and mystical view, although he acknowledges that Islamic geometrical ornament is balanced and harmonious: he accepts that the devices of repetition and rephrasing produce 'a subtle and harmonious pattern of sameness and difference' and that 'any attempt at decoding it or synthesizing the vast array of shapes has to be rejected [...]'.<sup>40</sup> He is not arguing that meaning cannot be found in such designs, but comments, 'The argument for a specific reading of these designs is not compelling'.<sup>41</sup>



Given these two strongly contrasting views, it seems useful to look at Islamic ornament in a general way, while bearing in mind the dangers of generalisation. Dalu Jones argues that 'Islamic art is an art not so much of form as of decorative themes that occur both in architecture and in the applied arts, independently of material, scale and techniques.'<sup>42</sup> Jones notes that 'the same ideas, forms and designs constantly recur' and that the intricate and complex overlay of the decoration bears witness to a 'close interdependence between Islamic architecture decoration and textiles'.<sup>43</sup> He agrees with Nasr that 'Islamic art is an art of repose intellectual rather than emotional, where tensions are resolved',<sup>44</sup> and points out that 'the decoration continually reflects and multiplies patterns to provide a 'cool' refuge for the eye and the mind, creating an art which is dynamic and yet changing'.<sup>45</sup>

Very much more could be said here about the vast variety and complex evolution of Islamic ornament, which 'inherited the geometric patterns common to the later Classical world, but developed these to a degree of complexity and sophistication hitherto unknown, transforming decorative geometry into a major art form',<sup>46</sup> but it seems more useful to present some particular examples.

### **Plant designs:**

The way in which plants are used as ornamental designs is considered to be the most obvious evidence that the Islamic architect avoids the direct imitation of nature by depicting it only in abstract ways. It is sometimes hard to distinguish stems and leaves from the lines which connect them. Flowers and leaves may appear, branches may spring from a tree trunk, and they may interlock or cross paths with each other. Designs tend to feature vines and vine leaves, pomegranates and clover leaves. We find plant designs everywhere in Islamic art, in architecture and ceramics - combining in the glazed monumental dome, in metal objects and in calligraphy. These designs have become known in the West as arabesques.<sup>47</sup>

Plant motifs can be divided into two types:

a. Pure plant motifs characterized by flat surfaces. (Fig.4)

b. Plant motifs designed to be the backgrounds on which the main designs were drawn. These could be either calligraphic reliefs or geometric designs on two levels.<sup>48</sup>(Fig.5)

An example of this is the stucco calligraphy in Islamic palaces, where the calligraphy stands in relief against the ornamental background of plant designs. These designs can be said to mark the birth of this style of Islamic ornament. (Fig.6)

There are several different types of plant design; some common ones echo ancient Egyptian designs of leaves and flowers. Archaeology has uncovered plant decorations which consist of single, bilateral or triple vine leaves, palm leaves and different types of fruit such as clusters of grapes. These units are organized within a geometric scheme.<sup>49</sup> Vine leaves were used as expressive ornaments in pre-Islamic Egyptian architecture and were a motif used by Coptic artists. Muslim artists used them as an ornamental element and derived a great variety of forms from them.<sup>50</sup> Palm leaves became an important element in Islamic ornamentation, and triple leaves carved in stone were considered highly decorative. The tops of the *mihrab* (prayer niche) and tombs were also surrounded by stucco palm leaves.<sup>51</sup> (Fig.7)

In the ninth century stucco ornament was used to cover walls at Samarra in Iraq and these techniques were then transferred to Egypt, which developed the art of stucco carving (Fig.8). We find this method of ornamentation in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.<sup>52</sup> (Fig.9)

We should mention that the cypress was used by the Turks in their art as the symbol of eternity because of its evergreen leaves.<sup>53</sup>

Mercury flowers were used in the Ayyubid period in Egypt, and nard was sculpted at the front entrance of schools and on the sills of rectangular windows. Mercury flowers and stems were carved on the gateways of palaces. Also, mercury flowers surrounded



the centre of the *mihrab*.<sup>54</sup> This flower also occurs in the Mamluk period in the balconies at the top of buildings, and in different locations in the ceilings.<sup>55</sup> (Fig .10)

In the tenth century plant motifs were distinguished by their association with domes, which were covered in geometric designs incorporating accurately observed though geometrically stylised plants. The architectural elements of the design, which consisted of columns at the entrances, were enriched by plant motifs. These can be seen in sultans' palaces and elsewhere, for example the triple plant leaves at the top of the lower front windows of the palaces and the flowers inside the star decorations of some mosque minarets. Plant stems also cover many parts of the minaret.<sup>56</sup>(Fig.11)

### **Geometric designs:**

Geometric designs consist of arrangements of basic shapes like the triangle, square, rhombus, intersecting star and circle; all of these appear in Egypt, especially in the Mamluk era. The elements of the designs are simple in structure, for example two squares separated by rhombuses, or small rhombuses among larger rhombuses. (Fig.12)

The line or stripe is the foundation of Islamic geometric design. Stripes are found in the carving of the *mihrab*, sometimes almost covering it from top to bottom. The upper stripes of the *mihrab* differ in length and are made of black marble interspersed with white marble. The alternation of dark and light stones is known as *ablaq* work. In addition there are upper stripes made of repeated differently-coloured marble plates. Horizontal red and white stripes cover the vaults of the windows of prayer halls. Individual stripes were used in the decoration of marble *mihrabs* in Cairo. Volute stripes are found in Syria in the Mamluk period. From the stripes, some types of arrow might emerge in the *mihrabs*. Also, the central area of the *mihrab* might be filled with these stripes. (Fig.13)

Designs incorporating circles are often found, for example in the upper part of the *mihrab*, which may be filled with stucco ornaments and coloured glass. Circles are also

found in floors; these designs may consist of many circles around a central circle and inside a square. These designs are relatively simple, but there are also compound circles, which have prominent ornamental stucco elements forming circles surrounded by smaller circles.<sup>57</sup> Some circles have two arches inside them; other circles contain inscriptions. A very similar shape is found on contemporary bindings of the Holy Qur'an and other books.

### Calligraphy

There seems to be a general consensus that calligraphy is the supreme Islamic art, rivalled only by architecture. For Nasr, calligraphy is intimately linked to the Qur'an and thus has a sacred function: 'Qur'anic calligraphy issues at once from the Islamic revelation and represents the response of the soul of the Islamic peoples to the Divine Message'.<sup>58</sup> Nasr makes the most ambitious claims for this art: 'It has come to occupy a position of special privilege in Islam to the extent that it could be called the progenitor of the traditional Islamic visual arts and the most characteristic feature of the visible aspect of Islamic civilization'. It is 'the central visual art with its numerous applications ranging from architecture to poetry'.<sup>59</sup>

Although it is true that inscriptions and texts of various kinds are found everywhere in Islamic art, Leaman, characteristically, is sceptical of Sufi claims regarding calligraphy, especially those that characterise the art as a 'visual sacrament'<sup>60</sup> and find esoteric meaning in the forms of the letters.<sup>61</sup> He points out that calligraphy can be appreciated aesthetically even if one knows nothing about the written words, which might be texts of beauty and profound meaning, or banal slogans.<sup>62</sup> Not only that, but often the inscriptions are literally unreadable, but no less beautiful for that. Thus for Leaman aesthetic judgement does not depend on knowledge about the text or the object on which the text is written. (Fig.14)



Leaman deliberately positions himself in opposition to the great majority of writers on Islamic art, but even he admits that ‘increasing knowledge [...] might [...] reveal additional aesthetic features [...]’.<sup>63</sup> As to the origin of calligraphy's importance, he comments: ‘To a certain extent the role of Islam as the newest monotheist faith may have led to the search for an alternative approach to representation [...]’.<sup>64</sup>

Grabar agrees with this, noting that Arabic writing on monuments was more than decoration; ‘it was a subject matter restricted to the Muslim or Muslim-ruled community and thereby expressing concrete meanings belonging to members of the faith. It can appropriately be considered as an invention inspired by Islam, and its manipulation on monuments was comparable to the ways in which images were used in Christianity’.<sup>65</sup>

What are the forms of this art, which has been used so extensively throughout the Islamic world and continues to be explored by Muslim artists? Jones notes that calligraphy, like all Islamic decoration, is based on geometry: ‘the proportions of the letters including the curved strokes are all governed by mathematical proportions. Inscriptions on buildings are generally written in an angular, sober and monumental scripts, *kufi* or in later more cursive style, *naskhi* and *thuluth*. The range of variations between these basic types is immense [...]’<sup>66</sup> *Naskhi* was used in many different contexts, for example for writing official letters. These three types can be found interwoven superimposed in the same inscription. On buildings, calligraphy appears in a variety of materials: marble, stucco, stone, mosaic and painting.

It is said that the *kufi* script was first developed in central Iraq and was then transferred to the Arabian Peninsula, then to other Islamic areas. *Kufi* script appeared at first very simple, its simplicity was marked by its ornamental nature and straight horizontal lines. The script was then developed and acquired new ornamental designs derived from branches and leaves, becoming known as the floriated *kufi*.<sup>67</sup>

The square *kufi* script with geometric shapes and right angles was probably developed in Iran and influenced by Chinese geometric ornaments. Its origin might also lie in the brick designs which were known in Iraq and Iran and were made by composing the bricks in horizontal and vertical lines to form geometric shapes. Other types of *kufi* scripts, which have different geometric shapes like triangles, hexagons, octagons and circles, are developed in later centuries.<sup>68</sup>

*Kufi* is used commonly on the fronts of mosques and tombs, above the windows inside the dome of the mosque and on the *mihrab*. (fig.15)

*Naskh* appears on the buildings of the Ayyubid era besides *kufi*, which continued to be used to write verses from the Qur'an. *Kufi* however, later changed when its letters inclined to the vertical; the leaves disappeared from the ends of the foliated letters.<sup>69</sup>(Fig.16)

In the Mamluk era *Naskh* script appears both inside and outside buildings and on the *mihrab*, however, it cannot rival the ornamental beauty of the *kufi* script. *Kufi* is used on the outside frame of the *mihrab* where the phrase 'God is great' is written repeatedly using prominent stucco letters, and below this frame, there was another in which a verse from the Qur'an was transcribed in wide ornamental letters.<sup>70</sup>(Fig.17)

The earliest Islamic buildings, such as the dome of the rock, already contain bands of inscription. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century calligraphy is organized in a multiplicity of planes and often become parts of arabesque compositions, the letters floriated, later tile-Mosaic and marble inlay allow refined effects. Repeated phrases in square *kufi* cover walls, domes and minarets, separated by bands of floral or geometric decoration, thus calligraphy gives an identifiable content to abstract patterns. In some mosques the inscriptions on the façade are of the same type as those on the *qibla* wall inside the mosque. in the Alhambra and the palaces and forts of Mughal India verses of poetry are rendered in *ta'liq* or *nasta'liq* scripts, and the rhythms decorations and its positioning perceived' not only visually but also intellectually and musically'.<sup>71</sup>



## Architecture

There is an argument that it is architecture, not calligraphy, which is the supreme Islamic art, or at least the art in which all the predominant features of Islamic art combine and cohere, and in which the 'Islamic' passion for geometrical mathematics is most fully expressed, especially in religious buildings. But the term 'Islamic architecture' refers to a bewildering variety of buildings and begs the question, considered earlier, whether such a phenomenon actually exists. If it does, and most scholars, whatever their reservations, agree that it does, what are the qualities that set Islamic architecture apart?

George Michel asserts that 'Islamic buildings express the religious beliefs, social and economic structure, political motivation and visual sensibility of a pervasive and unified tradition' whose 'cohesive unit of architectural conception testifies to the power and breadth of Islam'.<sup>72</sup> Grube attempts to define the particular qualities of this architecture, noting that it focuses on the enclosed space and does not provide specific forms for specific functions.<sup>73</sup>

Regarding the first of these, Grube cites the traditional Islamic house, which is organised around an inner courtyard, and 'presents to the outside world high windowless walls interrupted only by a single low door'.<sup>74</sup> Sometimes even monumental structures such as congregational mosques are completely hidden by secondary adjacent buildings. 'This 'hiding' of major monuments goes hand in hand with a total lack of exterior indications of the shape, size, function or meaning of a building'.<sup>75</sup> For Grube, this hidden architecture is main and dominant form of truly Islamic architecture, but this judgment leads him to classify many great monuments, including the Dome of the Rock and the Taj Mahal, as atypical and 'really un-Islamic in their formal expression'.<sup>76</sup> This seems a rather perverse opinion. Grube argues that most isolated visible structures that are 'truly Islamic' do not 'break the rules' by revealing their structures to the external observer, and that 'many, if not most, 'hide' behind high undecorated and unarticulated walls'.<sup>77</sup> Thus he excludes many buildings in India,

Turkey and elsewhere that do not have this 'hidden' relationship to the surrounding townscape.

Leaman acknowledges the aesthetic impact of extreme contrasts - between dramatic colour and monochrome plainness, exuberant decoration and severe restraint. Noting that the aesthetic principles of many classical buildings are balance and harmony, he argues that 'it is the interplay of these different features which makes many of the buildings in the Islamic world so satisfying aesthetically'. But he adds a note of caution: 'Whether these principles of design should be seen as having any wider religious meaning is moot'.<sup>78</sup>

Grube argues further that enclosed space 'is the most important element of Islamic architecture',<sup>79</sup> citing as evidence that most decoration is reserved for the interior. Moreover the main purpose of this decoration

[...] appears to be the creation of non-tectonic values, the dissolution of all those elements that in other architecture traditions emphasize the structure [...] Islamic architecture at its best, and at its most 'Islamic' is truly a negation of architecture as conceived in Europe [...]; it aims at a visual negation of weight and the necessary of support'.<sup>80</sup>

This statement is highly tendentious, as it applies to a small minority of buildings and even a minority of mosques, although it does apply to a certain extent to the Alhambra. One might expect Nasr to agree with Grube, but he does not, or at least not entirely: he argues that Islamic architecture

[...] refuses to create the illusion of an ideal which is not in the nature of the material and the space with which it is concerned. There are no created tensions, no upward pull to a heavenly ideal in Islamic architecture as one finds in Gothic cathedrals which are based on another spiritual perspective than that of Islam.[...] Islamic architecture ennoble matter not by making stone appear to be light and flying upwards but, by means of geometric and arabesque patterns which make material objects become transparent [...].<sup>81</sup>



It is clear that Nasr finds in medieval European sacred architecture the very qualities of 'a visual negation of the reality of weight and the necessity of support' that Grube thinks are characteristic of 'Islamic architecture at its best, and at its most ' Islamic' '. This suggests that we must be extremely cautious in accepting at face value any statement about the meaning of any manifestation of Islamic art. Such a realisation frees the artist to find his or her own meanings in the huge diversity of the Islamic heritage.

### **The Mosque**

As Nasr points out, 'The mosque in a traditional Islamic city is not only the centre of religious activity but of all community life'.<sup>82</sup> It is by far the most important type of building in the Islamic world and is that world's primary 'ritual spaces'. The English word is derived from the Arabic *masjid* (via the Spanish *mezquita*) meaning 'a place of prostration'. Since the founding of Islam religious and communal life has centred on the mosque, which is of inestimable worth to the Muslim community, locally, nationally, regionally, internationally and globally. As well as being places of worship, mosques also function as community centres, schools, colleges and law courts. In its early history, the mosque was also a place from where Muslim pilgrims would set out on the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and also where a *jihād* (holy war) could be declared. It remains the centre of the international community of Islam. When Muslims travel to or live in foreign country, the mosque is a vital link connecting them with their fellow Muslims and their religion and traditions. (Fig.18)

Mosques are built according to a pattern considered divine by Muslims, although few clear rules exist concerning what a mosque is supposed to look like, with the exception of a few essential elements, which include the *mihrab* that indicate the direction of Mecca. The mosque's *mihrab* is a niche in the *qibla* wall fronted by a roofed area. According to Grabar, the *mihrab* grew enormously in importance during the first centuries of Islam; in Cordoba it is actually a whole room. Moreover, since the first concave *mihrab* appears in the Umayyad mosque in Medina, it may be that the *mihrab*

grew to commemorate the presence of the Prophet as the first imam. Thus 'The *mihrab* is the first and perhaps only symbolic form that can be explained almost entirely through religious, indeed even pietistic, reasons'.<sup>83</sup> There can be no doors in the wall incorporating the *mihrab*; as for the other walls, there can be as many doors as the builders want. There are two kinds of mosque; the main type is called the *jamia* and is where the Friday prayer is performed. The *jamia* is often richly adorned. The other type is called the *masjid*, and is local and smaller. While it too may be richly adorned, it can seldom be compared to the *jamia*.

The first mosque is considered to be the one in Mecca, defined as the area that surrounds the Ka'ba, the most holy shrine in Islam; but the model of all early mosque was the courtyard of Prophet Muhammad's house in Medina, which was constructed in 622 CE. This had a *qibla*, which at first indicated the direction of Jerusalem. To the left of this *qibla*, the houses of the Prophet's wives were erected. There were three entrances to the courtyard. An area of the courtyard was simply roofed with palm branches, and here prayer was performed. In 630 the position of the *qibla* was changed in order to indicate the direction of Mecca. This Medina mosque had societal and judicial roles. its function as a place of worship was mingled with others. The rules concerning prayer were not yet fixed, being still in the process of revelation to Muhammad. Apart from the mosques at Mecca and Medina, we find in the sources indications of other near-contemporary mosques in other towns.

Mosques in the early Islamic period became more complex and uniform in their shape. A *minbar*, or pulpit, from where the Friday prayer is recited, was placed next to the *mihrab*. Within a few years after the death of the Prophet, mosques became such important symbols that when Muslim conquerors established themselves somewhere, a mosque was put up first, and then the military camp was built around it. This building process was inspired by the Medina example but in the cases where the Muslims conquered principal cities, they constructed their mosque in the place that was the centre of the former dominant religion.



The Dome of the Rock (687-692) was erected on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, on a site endowed in Jewish legend with a complex mythology, which was associated with the sacrifice of Abraham and Solomon's building of the Temple in commemoration of that sacrifice.<sup>84</sup> The dome is a fascinating building on many counts, and the reasons for its construction remain unclear, but it can be said with some degree of confidence that its builder, Caliph Abd al-Malik, 'wished to create a masterpiece capable of eclipsing the holy places of Arabia, then inaccessible except during rare periods of truce'<sup>85</sup> and that it was 'a symbol of the conquering power or faith within the conquered land'.<sup>86</sup> It demonstrated to the city's Christian population, 'which often still thought Muslim rule was a temporary misfortune, that Islam was here to stay'.<sup>87</sup> But the Dome and the whole Haram area soon became transformed into a purely Muslim sanctuary, and in 707-09 Caliph al-Walid built the al-Aqsa mosque to the south of the Dome.

By 707 the mosque had evolved from very primitive beginnings, such as the simple mud-walled enclosure at Kufa, built in 638, but very few traces of the original al-Aqsa Mosque remain today. The first great example of mosque architecture is generally held to be the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, built between 706 and 715 on the site of an ancient Roman temple precinct or *temenos*. Caliph al-Walid erected a vast triple-arcaded prayer-hall on the southern side of this enclosure, completed by double-height arcades of alternating piers and columns around the court. The general style is reminiscent of grand Byzantine architecture, like the Dome of the Rock.<sup>88</sup> Like the Dome, the Great Mosque was decorated with marble and mosaic, and unlike al-Aqsa, almost all of the Umayyad original has survived. (Fig 19)

Another early masterpiece is the Umayyad mosque at Cordoba in Spain, which has a long and complicated history including numerous Christian additions. Its last Muslim construction dates to 987-88; the mosque's final form contained 554 interior columns and 44 interior pillars. The naves are of varying widths, and the design of the whole is asymmetric, incorporating double storey arcades and sumptuous symbolic decoration with carved stucco work, marble and mosaic.<sup>89</sup> (Fig.20) The Great Mosque is the largest space of prayer in all Western Islam, and demonstrated the potential of a hypostyle

space. Here Islamic architecture reached 'the apex of a system which had previously been illustrated by the Amr Mosque in Fustat (present-day Cairo) or the Great Mosque of the Aghlabids in Kairouan'.<sup>90</sup> (Fig.21)

Although both mosques have their source in the simple shed-like structure built by Muhammad in Medina, they are 'a far cry from the house of the Prophet'.<sup>91</sup> Both are very large parallelograms, as are almost all mosques from the first three centuries of Islam, including the gigantic brick-built example at Samarra (848-52), of which only the foundations remain.<sup>92</sup> The system of construction was generally flexible and additive because a single space was required for the whole community, and there seems to have been 'no conception of the building as a physical, complete entity'.<sup>93</sup>

Dickie makes the point that 'the directionality of prayer is fundamental to the liturgical principles around which a mosque is constructed'.<sup>94</sup> He contrasts this 'radial liturgy' with the processional liturgy of the Christian church, which gave rise to long, narrow buildings, in contrast to the square or rectangular mosque. This is certainly true of hypostyle mosques, and to some extent of later, domed buildings such as those found in Turkey and Iran. However, these later examples are certainly conceived as physical, complete entities. Many of the most magnificent of all mosques are to be found in those two countries. In Iran, and especially in Isfahan, mosques such as the seventeenth-century Shaikh Lutfalla mosque are adorned with ceramic tile work of unparalleled brilliance and refinement and represent the pinnacle of the Savafid architectural. Nasr comments:

Islam, and before it Byzantine Christianity, adopted Sassanid techniques of dome construction and produced domed structures which, however, reflect different types of art. In Persia itself Islamic art adopted many art motifs of pre-Islamic Persia with its immensely rich artistic heritage swell as those of Central Asia, but they became transformed by the spirit of Islam and served as building blocks in structures whose design was completely Islamic.<sup>95</sup>



In Turkey the early mosque bore an Arabic imprint and have a hypostyle plan divided into aisles and bays, which was later modified by the Ottomans through the inclusion of a vast central dome. Later Turkish mosque architecture was influenced by Persian and Byzantine models; Hagia Sophia (built in 532) was transformed into a mosque after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and became the inspiration for the greatest Ottoman architects, Hayrettin and Sinan (1489-1588). The latter worked for Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) and his successor Selim II, and designed a splendid series of monuments including the Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul (1550-57) and the Selimiye in Edirne (completed in 1574).<sup>96</sup> The Sultan Ahmet Camii (the Blue Mosque, 1609-17), while undeniably impressive, marks a decline from Sinan's achievements, although it is an essay in Sinan's style. But its sheer scale, its six minarets and the wealth of polychrome decoration in its prayer-hall make it an Istanbul landmark.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored two aspects of the cultural landscape that concerns the Muslim theatre artist, who is faced with the problem of orienting himself or herself in the realities, constraints and opportunities of the twenty-first century. Central to this problem is the question of identity - social, cultural and political. Since the overwhelming influence of Western culture in all its various manifestations is everywhere evident, how is the Muslim artist to respond? Is he or she to become merely an imitator dazzled by Western models and experiments, or seek to draw deeply and exclusively on a purely Islamic tradition? The response is made more difficult as well as more potentially liberating because there is virtually no tradition of drama as a serious art in Islam, and the notion of an 'Islamic' art is contentious and lacking a universal definition, despite a host of marvellous examples that might be said to share a 'family resemblance'.

Thus Muslim theatre artists today are confronted by the need to define their own position in relation to these difficulties. Should they emphasise their Islamic heritage and look inwards, not seeking to be understood by the wider world? Or should they

embrace the opportunities offered by a globalised culture and risk becoming unrepresentative, isolated individuals who are in danger of losing, or even helping to destroy, their own heritage? Of course this is an extreme dichotomy, and in reality the choices are not so stark; but the dilemma remains.

Those artists for whom their Islamic heritage and identity are of great importance are sometimes discouraged not only by the 'globalised ' culture but also by hostility from within the Muslim community by the rejection of all the arts by those who insist that nothing is Islamic except the essentials of the faith (which require no embellishment) and the injunctions of the law. Nasr, who is an eloquent defender of traditional Islamic art and a vehement opponent of what he sees as the depredations of contemporary Western secular culture and its Muslim collaborators, also condemns the puritanism of these critics. He believes that the task of the contemporary Muslim artist is to attain self-knowledge 'in order to cure this abominable inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* the West and to overcome the lack of awareness of the full import and significance of the Islamic tradition. [...] Without it the effort of the artist will either be stifled or it will be yet more noise added to the clamour and disorder which characterize our times'.<sup>97</sup>

He argues that Islam may be most eloquently expressed by works of traditional art, and that such an art's spiritual character will combat the depictions of Islam 'as a violent, irrational and fanatical force'.<sup>98</sup> Nasr contends that the destruction of Islamic culture has actually been intensified and accelerated by those who are calling for a return to a supposedly 'pure' Islam: 'But this conception of a 'pure' Islam of necessity creates a vacuum in the soul of Muslims and destroys the very forces which could resist the debilitating effect of an alien culture'.<sup>99</sup>

It is not necessary to agree wholeheartedly with Nasr to appreciate the force of his argument, and he certainly articulates a view which raises painful issues. But Muslim artists may choose, without being any less Muslim, to engage in a dialogue with other cultures, even those which appear hostile to some Muslims. Moreover, no culture is a monolith, expressing itself without contradictions. And so the Muslim artist is now



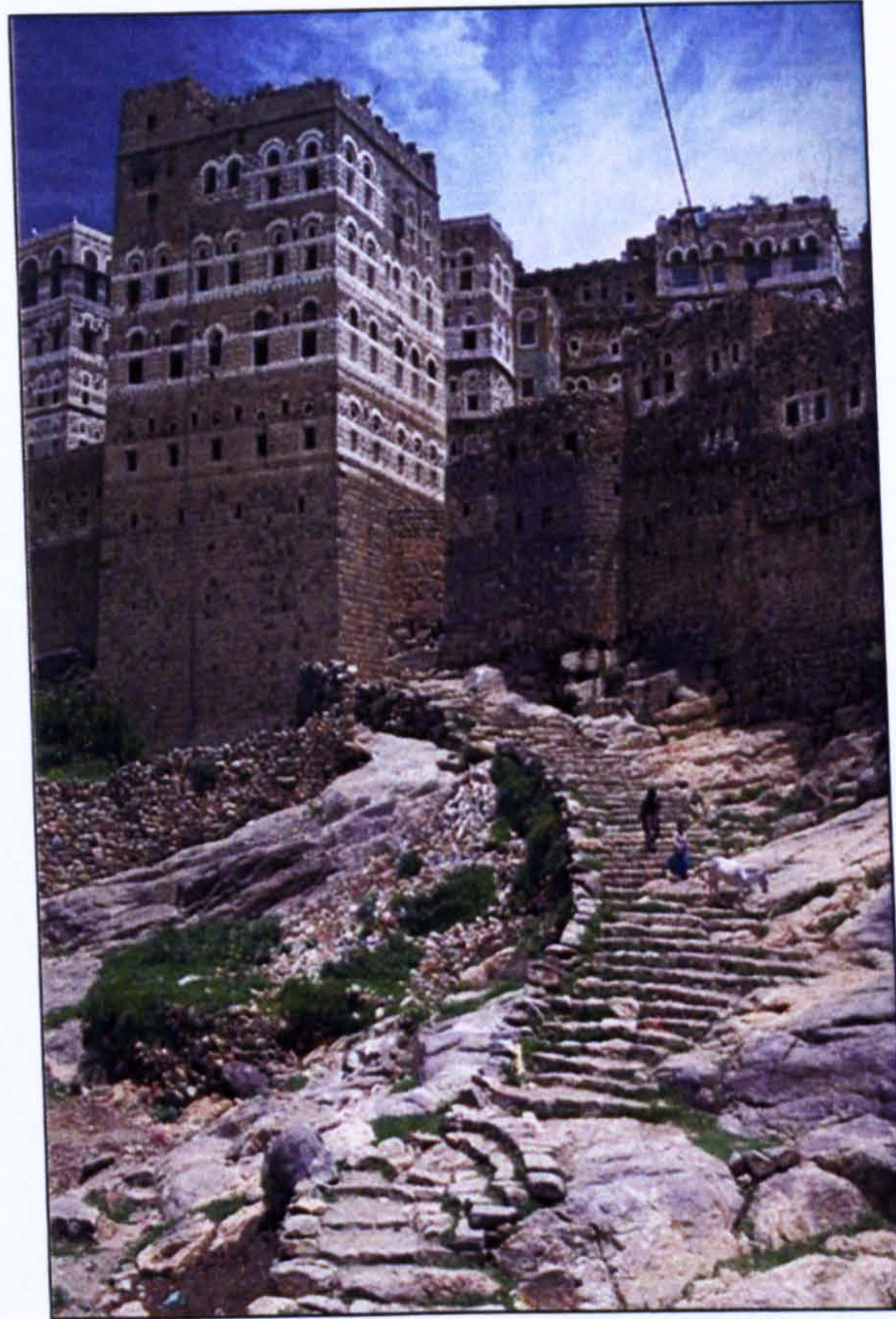
confronted by a bewildering variety of possibilities, like any artist anywhere, and may choose - perhaps intuitively, perhaps as a result of prolonged debate- any direction he or she may consider fruitful. The cultural heritage may be celebrated or questioned, but the forces acting upon it should not be ignored. In some ways the situation recalls that of early Islam. Grabar notes that the logic of the present threat to Muslim identity

requires that in these circumstances artist, architects, government and patrons look into a more or less clearly defined past for principles, possibly even forms, that would help maintain the integrity of the culture without requiring servile copies[...]. The objective of maintaining cultural identity when tempted by a Western art from a civilization with universal pretensions is comparable to the Muslim objective in the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>100</sup>

As he notes, the debate about the forms and values of Islamic art has been continuing for fourteen centuries. We are now witnessing an intensification and expansion of that debate.



**Figures for Chapter 3**



**Figure 1: Old Yemen**

<b>Year of photograph</b>	1983
<b>Photographer</b>	Christopher Little
<b>Copyright</b>	The Aga Khan Trust for Culture
<b>Source</b>	The Aga Khan Award for Architecture
<b>Image ID</b>	IGV0114



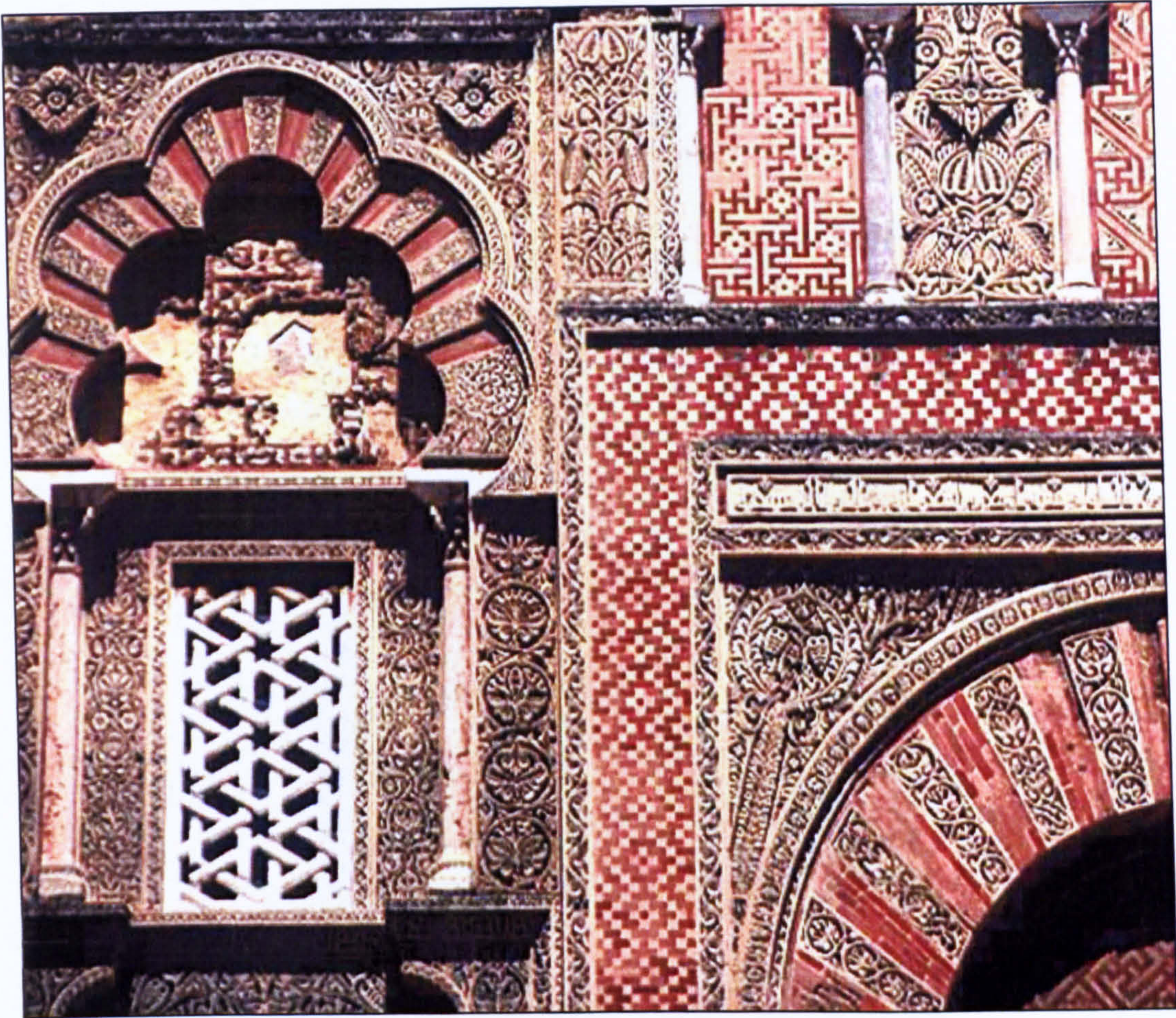


**Figure 2:** Sassanid fire temple at Naqsh-i Rostam. It is constructed as usual on a mountain top, a traditional place of worship in the Near East.

**Source:** [http://www.hp.uab.edu/image\\_archive/ugp/index.html](http://www.hp.uab.edu/image_archive/ugp/index.html)

**Access:** 17 December 2007





**Figure 3:** Great Mosque of Córdoba, Córdoba, Spain  
Detail, exterior ornament at portal.

<b>Site</b>	Gre ornament at Mosque of Córdoba
<b>Year of photograph</b>	1990
<b>Medium</b>	35 mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Kevin Low
<b>Copyright</b>	Aga Khan Visual Archives, MIT
<b>Source</b>	Aga Khan Visual Archives, MIT
<b>Image ID</b>	IHS0123

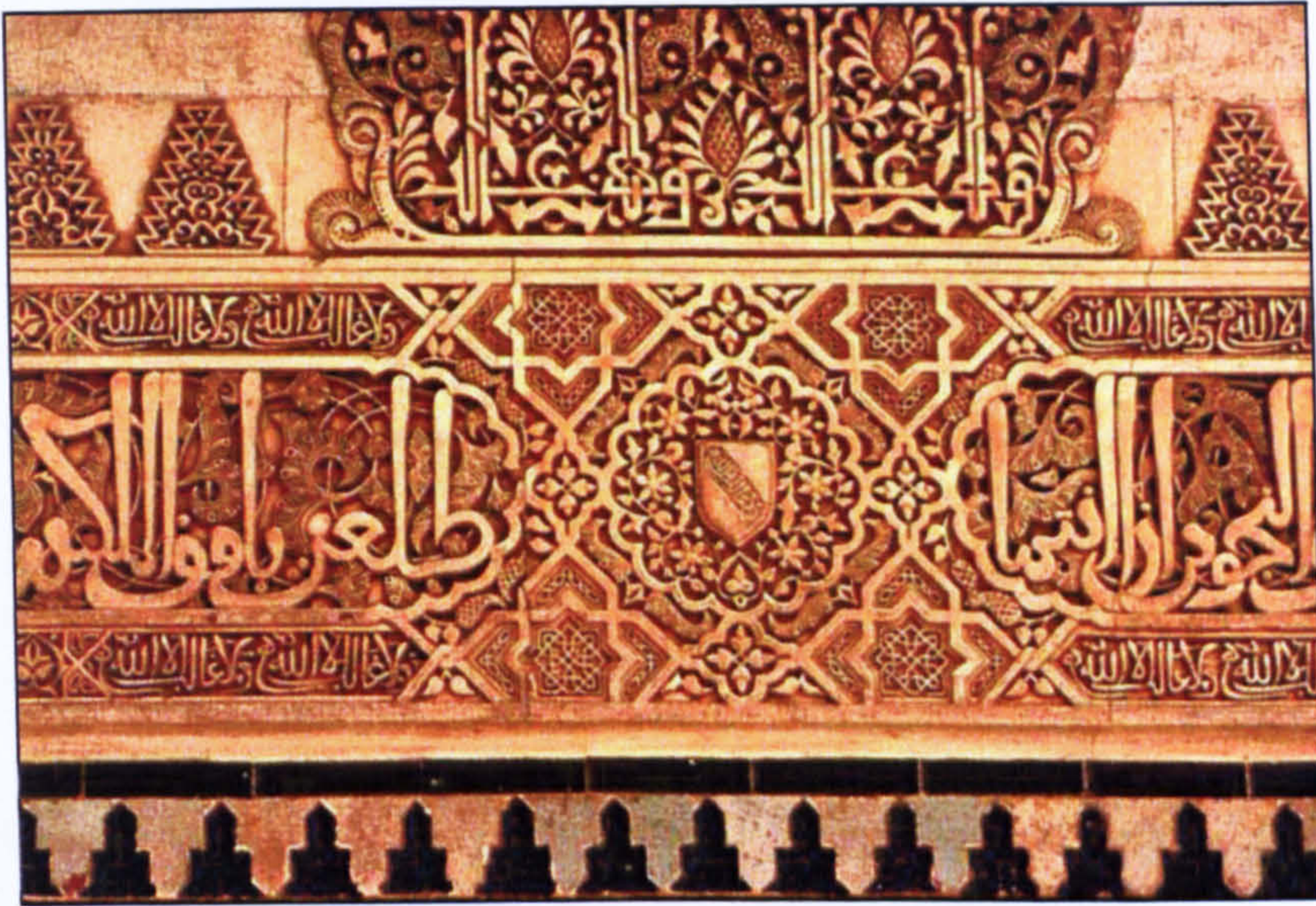




**Figure 4:** Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, Syria  
Detail, raised treasury building

<b>Site</b>	Umayyad Mosque
<b>Year of photograph</b>	1994
<b>Medium</b>	35mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Suha Azkan,
<b>Copyright</b>	The Aga Khan Award for Architecture
<b>Source</b>	Aga Khan Trust for Culture
<b>Image ID</b>	IAA2790





**Figure 5:** Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra, Granada, Spain  
Carved ornament and inscription of a poem by Nasrid court poet Ibn Zamrak, Hall of the Kings

<b>Site</b>	Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra
<b>Year of photograph</b>	1996
<b>Medium</b>	35 mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Asfour, Khaled
<b>Copyright</b>	Aga Khan Visual Archives, MIT
<b>Source</b>	Aga Khan Visual Archives, MIT
<b>Image ID</b>	IHS0042





**Figure 6:** Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra, *Granada, Spain*  
Hall of the Two Sisters, poetry inscription in carved stucco

<b>Site</b>	Palace of the Lions at the Alhambra
<b>Year of photograph</b>	1998
<b>Medium</b>	35 mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Copyright</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Source</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Image ID</b>	IHS0126





**Figure 7:** Friday Mosque, Na'in, Iran  
Detail view of the carved stucco *mihrab*

<b>Site</b>	Friday Mosque
<b>Year of photograph</b>	1999
<b>Medium</b>	35 mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Bagchee, Nandini
<b>Copyright</b>	Nandini Bagchee
<b>Source</b>	Nandini Bagchee
<b>Image ID</b>	IIR0231





**Figure 8:** Stucco Panel, 9<sup>th</sup>.C.  
from Samarra  
Iraq Museum, Baghdad

**Source:** Yasser Tabbaa, Department of Art  
<http://www.oberlin.edu/art/Iraq/Iraq7.html>

**Accessed:** 17 December 2007





**Figure 9:** House of al-Suhaymi, Cairo, Egypt  
Interior, Fatimid inspired dome.

<b>Site</b>	House of al-Suhaymi
<b>Year of photograph</b>	1985
<b>Medium</b>	slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Copyright</b>	Aga Khan Visual Archives, MIT
<b>Source</b>	Aga Khan Visual Archives, MIT
<b>Image ID</b>	IHC0257

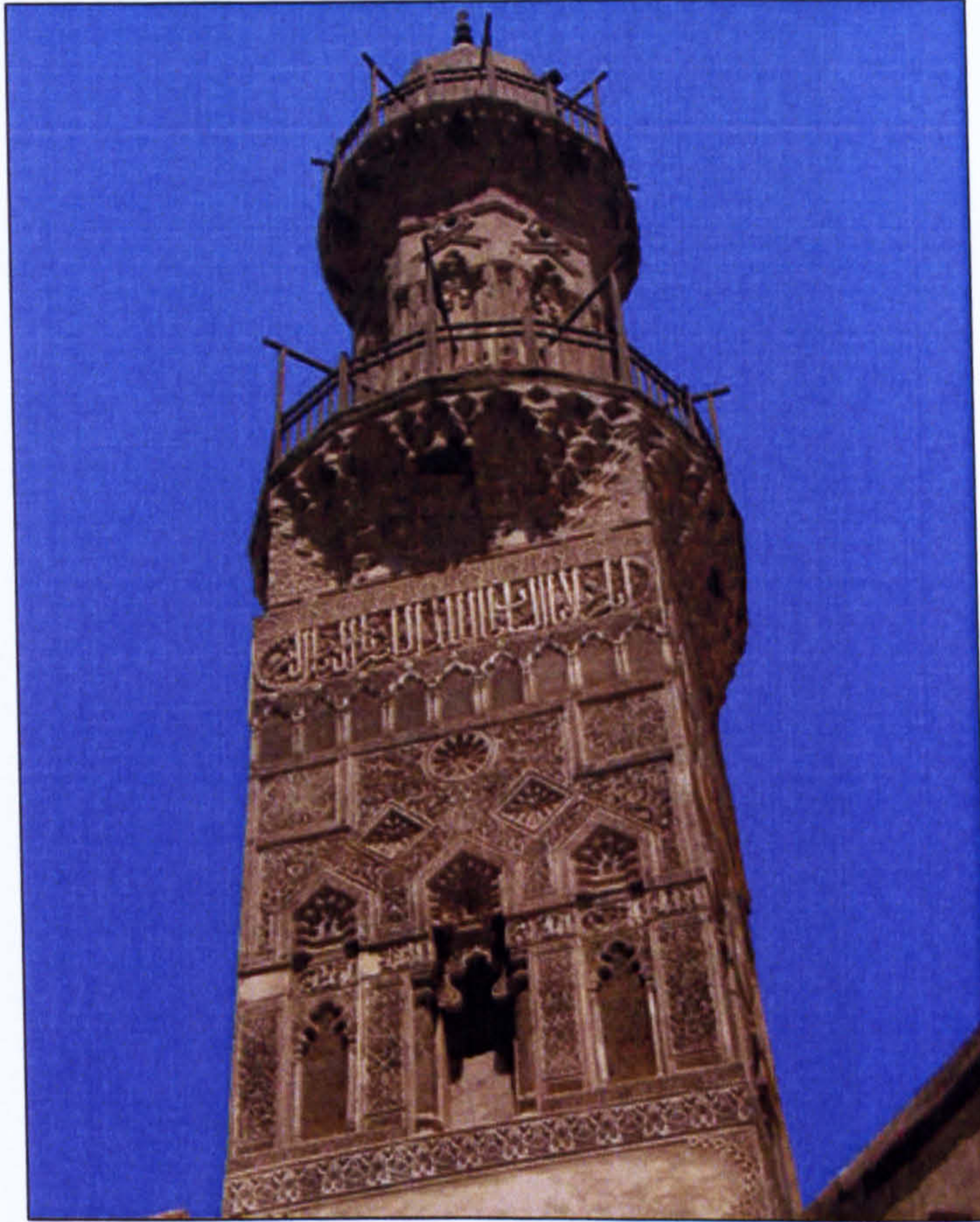




**Figure 10:** The Mosque of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad  
(1318-35 AD)

**Source:** [http://www.oldroads.org/pastblogs/archive\\_2006\\_june.htm](http://www.oldroads.org/pastblogs/archive_2006_june.htm)  
**Accessed:** 10 December 2007.





**Figure 11:** Minaret of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan, Egypt.

**Source:** [http://www.oldroads.org/pastblogs/archive\\_2006\\_june.htm](http://www.oldroads.org/pastblogs/archive_2006_june.htm)  
**Accessed:** 10 December 2007





**Figurer 12:** Pair of doors, ca. 1325–1330; Mamluk  
Egypt (Cairo)

Wood inlaid with carved ivory panels; 65 x 30 1/2 in. (165.1 x 77.5 cm)  
Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891 (91.1.2064)

**Source:** [www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/07/nfe/ho\\_91.1.2064.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/07/nfe/ho_91.1.2064.htm)

**Accessed:** 10 December 2007





**Figure 13:** *Mihrab* (niche) and *minbar* (pulpit) in sanctuary *liwan*.  
Sultan Hasan Mosque

**Source :** <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/egypt/cairo-sultan-hassan-mosque.htm>

**Accessed:** 10 December 2007





**Figure 16:** Detail of calligraphy on dome, Yamen.

<b>ArchNet Image ID</b>	IAP0183
<b>Photograph Date</b>	1987
<b>Medium</b>	Color Print
<b>Photographer</b>	Pascal and Maria Marechaux
<b>Copyright</b>	Pascal and Maria Marechaux
<b>Source</b>	Pascal Marechaux, 1987. Arabian moons: passages in time through Yemen. Singapore: Concept Media, See also the Studio Marechaux website ( <a href="http://www.studiomarechaux.com">www.studiomarechaux.com</a> )
<b>Caption</b>	Detail of calligraphy on dome
<b>Source ID</b>	page 93





**Figure 17:** Interior, detail of *mihrab*

<b>ArchNet Image ID</b>	ICR0426
<b>Photograph Date</b>	Early 20th c.
<b>Medium</b>	B & W print
<b>Photographer</b>	K.A.C. Creswell
<b>Copyright</b>	© Creswell Archive, Ashmolean Museum, neg. EA.CA.4098. Image courtesy of Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library
<b>Source</b>	Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library
<b>Caption</b>	Interior, Detail of <i>mihrab</i>
<b>Source ID</b>	161 Q 64 2M(i)4

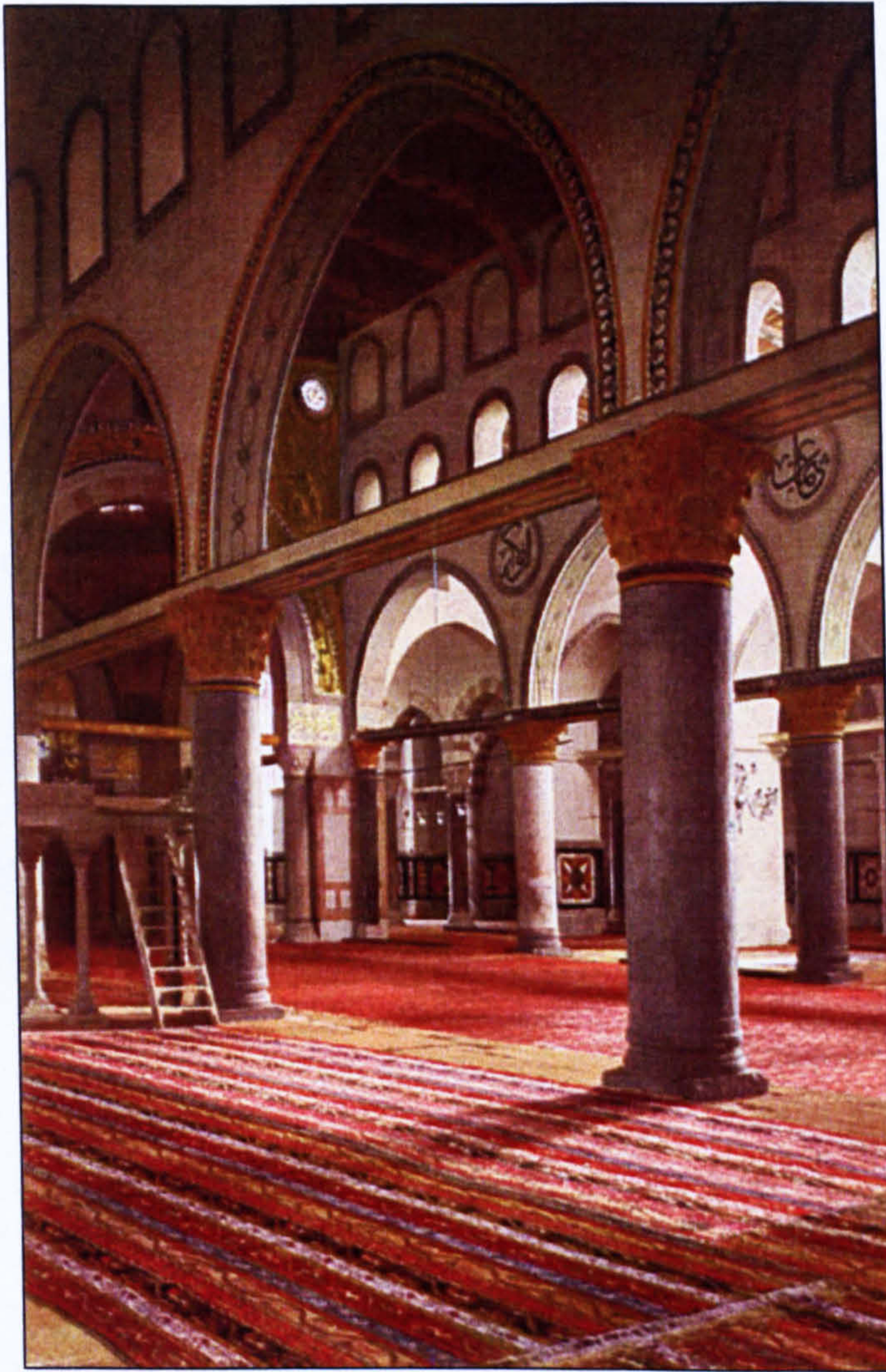




**Figurer 18:** The Ka'ba

<b>ArchNet Image ID</b>	IAP0238
<b>Photograph Date</b>	1974
<b>Medium</b>	Digital
<b>Photographer</b>	S.M Amin
<b>Copyright</b>	Aramco Services Company
<b>Source</b>	Aramco Services Company Public Affairs Digital Image Archive
<b>Caption</b>	Elevated view from south showing pilgrims encircling Ka'ba inside the Great Mosque of al-Haram courtyard
<b>Source ID</b>	3511_024

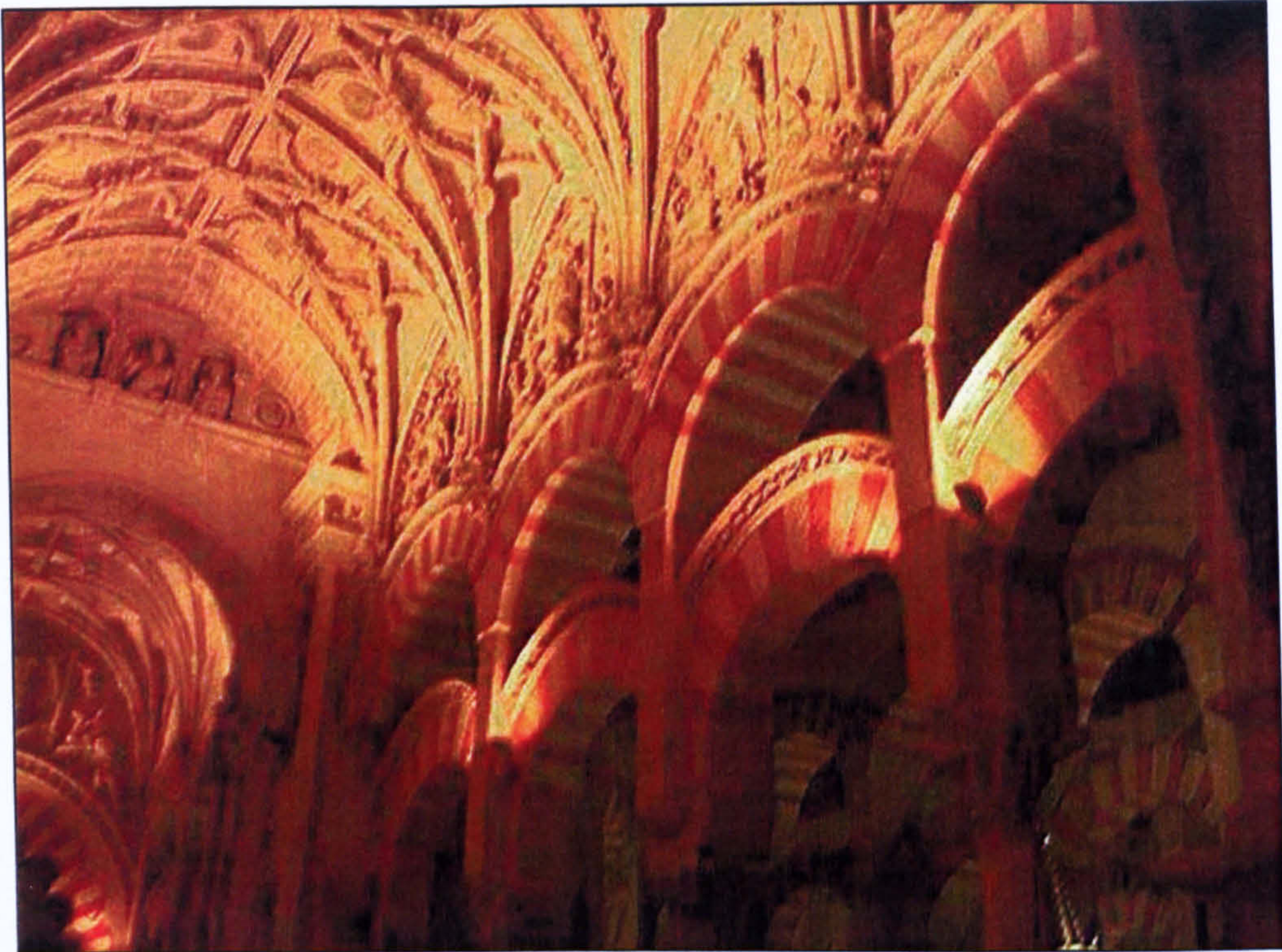




**Figure 19:** Al-Aqsa Mosque

<b>ArchNet Image ID</b>	IHJ0035
<b>Photograph Date</b>	Unknown
<b>Medium</b>	35 mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Unknown
<b>Copyright</b>	Reproduced with permission of the Fine Arts Library of the Harvard College Library
<b>Source</b>	Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library
<b>Caption</b>	Interior view from side aisle

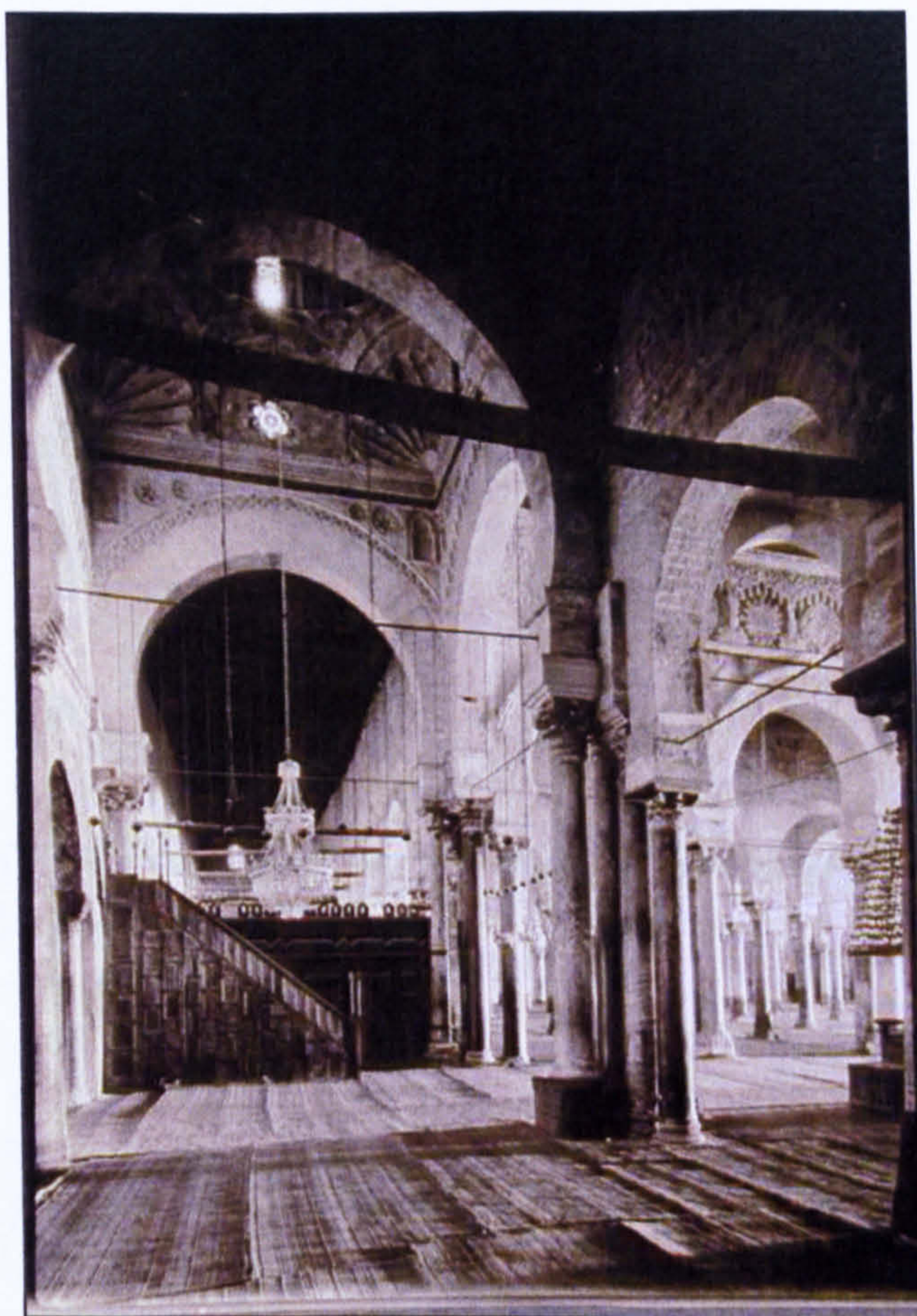




**Figure 20:** Great Mosque of Cordoba

<b>ArchNet Image ID</b>	IMG13777
<b>Photograph Date</b>	1990
<b>Medium</b>	35 mm slide
<b>Photographer</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Copyright</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Source</b>	Nasser Rabbat
<b>Caption</b>	Interior view of the sixteenth century chapel, showing Gothic vault carried on Umayyad arches





**Figurer 21:** The Great Mosque of the Aghlabids in Kairouan

**ArchNet Image ID**

ICR0498

**Photograph Date**

Early 20th c.

**Medium**

B & W print

**Photographer**

K.A.C. Creswell

**Copyright**

© Creswell Archive, Ashmolean Museum, neg. EA.CA.259. Image courtesy of Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library

**Source**

Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library

**Caption**

View towards *minbar*

**Source ID**

162.1 K 123 2S(i) 2



### Endnotes for Chapter 3

---

- <sup>1</sup> Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. xv.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Ipswich: Golgonooza, c1987). p. ix.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Grabar, p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 64.
- <sup>11</sup> Leaman 2004, Foreword
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 187.
- <sup>14</sup> Ernst J. Grube, 'What is Islamic Architecture?' in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, ed. George Michell (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 14.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Grabar, p. 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Nasr, p. 3.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Grabar, p. 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 11.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 12.
- <sup>22</sup> See all figures at the end of the chapter, p. 60.
- <sup>23</sup> Leaman, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> James Dickie, 'Allah and Eternity: Mosques, Madrasas and Tombs' in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, ed. Michell, p. 16.
- <sup>26</sup> Nasr, p. 45.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>28</sup> Leaman, p. 15.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 17.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>31</sup> Grabar, p. 73.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 79.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 81.



---

<sup>34</sup> Leaman, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Grabar, p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> See Leaman, pp. 41-42.

<sup>38</sup> Nasr, p. 188.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>42</sup> Dalu Jones, 'Surface, Pattern and Light' in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, ed. Michell, p. 161.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 148-151.

<sup>49</sup> R. Lewcock, 'Materials and Techniques' in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, ed. Michell, pp. 138-139.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Za'bi, Za;bi. *Al-Fonon Abra al-O'sor ( The Arts Though the Centuries)* ( Kuwait: Mktabat dar al-Orba , 1999) p. 148.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>52</sup> Grube, p. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, p. 154.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>57</sup> Grube, pp. 106-108.

<sup>58</sup> Nasr, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 30; Leaman pp. 12, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Leaman, p. 37.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>65</sup> Grabar, p. 128.



- 
- <sup>66</sup> Jones, p. 168.
- <sup>67</sup> Grube, p. 10.
- <sup>68</sup> Michell, ed., *Architecture of the Islamic World*, p. 220.
- <sup>69</sup> Grube, p. 100.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- <sup>71</sup> Jones, p. 169.
- <sup>72</sup> George Michell, 'Preface' in *Architecture of the Islamic World*, ed. Michell, p. 7.
- <sup>73</sup> Grube, pp. 10-14.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- <sup>78</sup> Leaman, p. 131.
- <sup>79</sup> Grube, p. 13.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.
- <sup>82</sup> Nasr, p. 57.
- <sup>83</sup> Grabar, pp. 114-115.
- <sup>84</sup> See Grabar, pp. 50-51; Henri and Anne Stierlin, *Islam: Early Architecture from Baghdad to Jerusalem and Cordoba* (Cologne and London: Taschen, 1996), p. 30.
- <sup>85</sup> Stierlin, pp. 31-34.
- <sup>86</sup> Grabar, p. 63.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- <sup>88</sup> Stierlin, p. 46.
- <sup>89</sup> Lewcock, p. 127; Grabar, p. 106; Stierlin, p. 92.
- <sup>90</sup> Stierlin, p. 92.
- <sup>91</sup> Grabar, p. 106.
- <sup>92</sup> Andrew Petersen, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 250.
- <sup>93</sup> Grabar, p. 108.
- <sup>94</sup> Dickie, G.W.J. 'Indonesia: Mysticism and Activism' in *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, ed. von Grunebaum. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956) pp. 35-36.
- <sup>95</sup> Nasr, p. 69.
- <sup>96</sup> See Henri Stierlin, *Turkey: From the Selcuks to the Ottomans* (Cologne and London: Taschen, 2002), p. 33.
- <sup>97</sup> Nasr, pp. 81-82.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.



---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>100</sup> Grabar, p. 212.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Early Arabic Drama

#### Introduction

In the preceding chapter we examined the notion of Islamic art through a discussion of its various manifestations, particularly in the realm of architecture, and concluded that the phenomenon has been so differently understood and defined by authorities on the subject that the Islamic artist is free, within certain limitations, to formulate and practise his or her own 'Islamic art' as he or she thinks fit. This chapter examines the question of the Arabic or Islamic drama (the two are not necessarily synonymous) as it existed in the pre-modern period: that is, in the centuries from the birth of Islam in the seventh century to the rise of theatre inspired by European models in the nineteenth. The chapter is in the nature of a companion to chapter five which is devoted to the *ta'ziyah*, and chapter six, which will discuss the development of modern Arabic drama from the nineteenth century to the present, and will focus on the three twentieth-century dramatists whose



plays have inspired the practice work that forms a part of this study. This is not to suggest that traditional Arabic drama suddenly ceased with the advent of European plays in the Arab world, since popular theatre survived through the nineteenth century until it succumbed to the challenge of the cinema in the first decades of the twentieth.

It is essentially with popular theatre that this chapter is concerned, since the absence of an indigenous tradition of theatre in the Western sense is an issue that has occupied a number of critics and scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, for many years. Unfortunately, as in the case of Islamic art, many of the arguments adduced are unconvincing or misleading, but it is undeniable that the Arab Muslim world, despite its great achievements as a civilisation, did not develop a tradition of theatre as a high art such as emerged in Western Europe during the Renaissance, and the chapter will consider the reasons most often given for this apparent failing. It would be wrong to conclude that the Arab world had no theatre at all, or that Islamic culture was incapable of producing a tragic drama, although the solitary example of the latter, the Shi'ite ritual drama of the *ta'ziyah*, remains controversial on several counts.

### **Early Arabic Drama**

It is generally agreed that modern Arabic drama began in 1847 when Marun al-Naqqash (1817-55) wrote and produced, in his own house in Beirut, the first modern play in Arabic, *Al-Bakhil* (The Miser), which was influenced by Moliere's *L'Avare*. Al-Naqqash felt the need to explain his motivation and ideas to his audience, who were totally unfamiliar with this type of production, by reference to the nature and function of European drama, and to describe the various kinds of theatrical entertainment available in Europe. One of the key points of his famous speech, given on the evening of the first performance, was an emphasis on 'the civilizing influence of the theatre, the moral functions of drama and its attempt to promote virtue and discourage vice through the examples shown on the stage'.<sup>1</sup>

Al-Naqqash's insistence on the theatre's civilising mission is understandable when we consider the low esteem in which the traditional, popular Arabic theatre was held by those interested in serious literature and by the devout, who regarded its manifestations



as trivial and obscene. These short satirical farces were often performed at weddings and other ceremonies, and other popular entertainments included shadow plays and puppet shows, and the gross antics of jesters. Since these were considered beneath contempt by scholars, our sources of information in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are mainly European travellers and residents, who were generally either shocked or bored<sup>2</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that al-Naqqash and many of his contemporaries and successors should have largely, although not completely, ignored or deliberately rejected the indigenous tradition and turned to Europe in order to create a theatre that would seek to win the respect of scholars and the approval of the religious authorities; to create, in al-Naqqash's words, 'a literary theatre and a European gold cast in Arab moulds' for 'the most intelligent and noble people of this country'.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that in the mid-nineteenth century the traditional Arabic theatre could not provide a model for those ambitious to create a 'literary theatre'. Was this because there had been a theatre in the Arab-Muslim world that had declined from substantial achievement? The answer must be that there was no such model, although certain short-lived manifestations could have been developed; but they were not. Moreover, the only traditional Muslim tragic drama, the *ta'ziyah*, was restricted to Shi'ite communities and, although it was flourishing at exactly this period, had no influence in the majority Sunni society. Nor did it give rise to a secular dramatic tradition among the Shi'ites, since its very being was centred on highly specific religious observances and rituals.

Is it possible to discover, then, why the Arabs, or, more generally, the Muslims of the Middle East, did not develop their drama? It should be emphasised here that by 'drama' we mean drama in the western sense. M.M.Badawi gives the definition 'the imitation on a stage by human actors of a story or situation through action and dialogue in verse or prose'.<sup>4</sup> Mohamed al-Khozai offers 'a literary *genre* either in poetry or in prose that describes life and characters or narrates a story by means of action and dialogue through acting on a stage'.<sup>5</sup> It is not our purpose here to attempt a universal definition, and these are broad enough for our purposes; but we should note that Badawi refers to human actors, thus excluding the *khayal az-zill* or shadow play, and al-Khozai includes the



notion of a literary genre, thus ruling out all popular improvised work and even those attempts that aspired to literary status but failed to establish a tradition.

Before considering such manifestations as did exist before 1847, it will be useful to discuss the various reasons advanced by scholars and critics for 'the absence of drama from classical Arabic literature', to use Badawi's phrase.<sup>6</sup> Why were only 'embryonic forms', literary genres containing dramatic elements but insufficient 'to be recognised as theatrical works' produced before that date? As we shall see, this negative view has been challenged, but for the present we shall assume it to be broadly correct.

First of all it is necessary to recognise that the early Muslims had no knowledge or experience of drama. Pre-Islamic literature was poetic, and although it contained dramatic elements the poetry of the pagan era knew no drama.<sup>7</sup> With the spread of the Islamic empire and Muslims' contact with the Byzantine and Sasanian (Persian) civilizations, new learning began to make its mark on Islamic culture. In the ninth century particularly, many Greek works were translated, but the translations were mostly made not from Greek but from Syriac; and no ancient Greek dramatic works had been translated into Syriac, because the Syriac scholars, who were mostly Christians, Jews or Zoroastrians, were either uninterested in or hostile to pagan literature. Thus works of philosophy, medicine, the exact sciences, mathematics and astronomy were translated into Arabic, but no drama, poetry, belles-lettres or history. The intense curiosity of Arab scholars such as al-Kindi (c.801-66) embraced Greek scientific learning and even elements from the Persian and Indian traditions, but did not extend to the imaginative literature of other cultures.<sup>8</sup>

The early Arab Muslims' lack of experience of drama explains the total absence of references to it in the Qur'an. In Western Europe the theatre had been closed in the sixth century, and in Byzantium nothing seems to have survived of classical tragedy and comedy by the time the new Islamic state established its contacts with the old empire. By al-Kindi's time that relatively primitive Islamic state had been transformed, and had achieved 'the self-confidence of an imperial culture resting on worldly power and the conviction of divine support'.<sup>9</sup> That self-confidence certainly included a conviction that



the Arabs had nothing to learn from other cultures when it came to literature. Badawi takes the view that this was due not only to the great achievements of Arabic classical poetry but also to 'the extraordinarily high status accorded to the Arabic language, it being the sacred language of the Koran understood by believers to be literally the word of God'. Thus the Arabs '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. [...] psychologically they were conditioned to feel self-sufficient where literary expression was concerned'.<sup>10</sup>

It is not certain whether the Arab translators deliberately refrained from rendering Greek drama into Arabic; it is more likely that they were unaware of its existence, since there was no living Greek dramatic tradition. They were, however, aware of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and since Aristotle was strongly influential on Arab philosophers it was felt that the *Poetics* could not be ignored. But it is clear from the translation by Abu Bishr (d.939) and the commentaries on it by the eminent philosophers al-Farabi (879-950), Avicenna (980-1036) and Averroes (1126-98) that the Arabs could not make sense of the genres Aristotle was discussing. 'Tragedy' and 'comedy' were usually rendered as *madih* (panegyric) and *hija* (satire or invective) respectively. These were two recognised genres of Arabian poetry, and their meanings were quite different from the Greek terms.<sup>11</sup>

By the tenth century the Arabs had developed a popular dramatic art of their own, so why was this misunderstanding not rectified? Shmuel Moreh, whose work on early Arabic popular theatre remains an excellent introduction to this subject, argues that the question was not examined for several reasons. First, as was still the case 800 years later, the religious authorities and serious literary men regarded the theatre as a low art unworthy of attention. It was considered *sukhf* (scurrilous material), *mujum* (impudence) and *junun* (folly). Second, the primary aim of the Muslim commentators was to comprehend Aristotle's method of criticism and apply it to their own poetry, especially that of the pre-Islamic period. One great Arab poet of the ninth century, al-Jahiz (c.776-868) wrote an 'Epistle on the Crafts of the Masters', which may have been influenced by the *Poetics*, and certainly al-Jahiz was known to be an admirer of Aristotle,<sup>12</sup> but he is



not concerned with the dramatic art of the Greeks, only with poetic practice in his own time.

Moreh argues that the Arab world was not devoid of theatre 'in the two millennia between the spread of Hellenism and the impact of modern Europe. [...]on the contrary, the Muslim world had a well-established tradition of live theatre, if only at a popular level'.<sup>13</sup> If this is the true, then why did this popular theatre not develop into a high art? One reason may be that advanced by Moreh: that the popular theatre was despised by the literary and religious elites, who believed that nothing good could come of it. This factor may well have been significant; other explanations, as Badawi points out, 'belong to the realm of speculation'.<sup>14</sup> Badawi and al-Khozai generally agree in their discussion of these speculations, and it will be useful to briefly consider their arguments here, making use of the work of other commentators where appropriate.

Al-Khozai criticises Landau's argument, made in his *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* that no Greek classical drama was translated because, first, the Muslim conquerors had no contact with peoples having a well-developed theatre, and second, women, particularly if unveiled, were strictly forbidden to appear on the stage. While the first point is defensible, the second is certainly dubious, since women did not perform either in classical Greek drama or on the Elizabethan stage, and this does not appear to have inhibited the development of drama in either case. Al-Khozai goes on to consider five factors related to the Arabs' lack of interest in, or failure to develop, drama as a high art, and we shall discuss these in turn; they are the mental factor, the aesthetic factor, the environmental factor, and the historical factor.<sup>15</sup>

The arguments brought forward in connection with the first factor are perhaps the least convincing of all, positing as they do the unsuitability of the Arab mentality for the creation of drama. As Badawi points out, this generalisation is 'the product of nineteenth-century views on race'.<sup>16</sup> There seem to be two main strands to this view: that the Arab mentality is abstract while the European is concrete, and that the Arab mind is atomistic and excessively individualistic. Al-Khozai refutes the former by referring to the creative power of the anonymous authors of folk epics such as '*Antara*, not to



mention the *Thousands and One Nights*.<sup>17</sup> As for the latter opinion, it is argued that the Arab mind 'was best expressed in the structure of the pre-Islamic ode, *Qasida*',<sup>18</sup> which was essentially a lyric form dominated by declamation and description. Al-Khozai insists that this picture is false, and that dramatic elements are to be found in pre-Islamic poetry,<sup>19</sup> while Badawi cites the large-scale structure of Islamic jurisprudence and architecture in denying that the Arabs were incapable of the kind of organised thought necessary to the production of drama.<sup>20</sup> It is important to realise that these disparaging comments have been made not only by Western Orientalists but also by Arab Muslims. For example, in 1933 the eminent Egyptian novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim (1899-1989) wrote a letter to his friend and compatriot Taha Hussein (1889-1973) in which he accused Arabic literature of being 'mosaic-like' and 'lacking in structure'.<sup>21</sup> In the same letter, however, al-Hakim writes of finding 'a dialogue similar to dramatic dialogue' in the work of al-Jahiz. He evidently changed his mind later, for in an article written for *The Theatre* magazine in January 1963 he argues that both the Pharaonic and Arab civilisations were built upon highly structured forms of artistic expression and were therefore capable of creating a theatre, but 'they had found a more structured and productive form of artistic expression than theatre; and that was poetry'.<sup>22</sup>

In discussing his 'aesthetic factor', al-Khozai addresses the issue of the Arabs' misunderstanding of Greek drama and reaches much the same conclusions as those of Badawi and Sadgrove, discussed above. He emphasises the oppositions of the Orthodox Church in Byzantium to Greek theatre, and the Arab translators' inability to see beyond the categories of the *qasida* when attempting to grasp the meaning of the terms 'tragedy' and 'comedy': 'The translators can hardly be blamed for this misinterpretation since their culture was devoid of dramatic poetry and as a result their language had no equivalents for these completely new terms or expressions of ideas'.<sup>23</sup>

Al-Khozai's 'environmental factor' concerns, not surprisingly, the Arabs' failure to develop a theatre owing to the exigencies of living in an environment which

is nothing but desert as extensive as the sea, where camels move like ships wandering with their loads from one island to another, these islands being scattered oases [...] everything in this moveable



homeland kept itself aloof from the theatre. Because the theatre requires in the first place stability. The Arabs' want of the notion of stability, to my mind, is the real reason for their neglect of dramatic poetry required by the theatre. The amphitheatre revealed by excavations in modern times is a strong firm edifice, an establishment owned by the State [...] He who looks at the hugeness of this construction with its relics and paintings, will immediately judge that a thing like this must need a stable civilisation and a fixed standard of social life.<sup>24</sup>

Al-Khozai points out, citing the Tunisian scholar Mohammed 'Aziza, that such arguments ignore the fact that life in the *Jahiliyya* (time of unenlightenment) was far from universally nomadic and that the nomads constituted only part of the population; the majority were settled in urban centres, such as Mecca, famed for their advanced economic activities.<sup>25</sup> The explanation has still less force when we consider that the Muslims, after the diffusion of Islam, lived within a vast empire ruled from Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo. Al-Khozai disagrees with Badawi in asserting that the Arabs and indeed the whole Islamic world suffered from 'the absence of the mythology essential for the inception of drama'.<sup>26</sup> According to al-Khozai, the range of mythology available to the Greeks made possible the achievement of the three great Athenian tragedians, but he thereby ignores Aristophanes; moreover, he neglects the mythic dimension that imparts such great dramatic power to the *ta'ziyah*. Badawi comments drily '[...] as if drama of necessity could only grow out of myth'.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the religious factor, al-Khozai notes that, unlike the ancient Greeks, the pre-Islamic Arabs were not united by any single religious belief, and that their incoherent and naive paganism hindered the growth and the development of religious rites of the kind from which Greek drama grew. What, then, of the influence of Islam? Al-Khozai asserts that 'the quintessence of drama lies in conflict, which was manifest in Greek drama',<sup>28</sup> and goes on to examine four types of conflict, each grounded in a belief in human freedom, and each derived from a tragic work by a classical Greek dramatist. These four types comprise a scheme proposed by Muhammad 'Aziza, and are vertical, where human freedom is in conflict with the divine will; horizontal, where the individual revolts against laws imposed by a society; dynamic, where the conflict centres on human



instinct and fate; and internal, where there is a conflict of contradictions within the individual.<sup>29</sup>

We do not need to discuss these types in detail; what is important is that 'Aziza concludes that drama could not possibly have originated in a traditional Arab-Muslim environment. First, no Muslim could conceive of himself as challenging God's will, let alone defying it. Although mankind has freedom of choice, we have no will of our own, since God, the supreme power, determines all that occurs in the universe. According to 'Aziza, the traditional Muslim's view of the problem of free will and predetermination leads him or her to adopt an attitude of complete acceptance of things as they are, an attitude which is incompatible with the type of tragic conflict we find in Greek drama. But as Badawi points out, this explanation represents a simplistic distortion of Islam, and furthermore equates drama with one type of Greek tragedy, ignoring comedy altogether.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, while the devout Muslim may regard rebellion against the divine will as inconceivable, such a rebellion was undertaken by Satan; and many human beings have rejected the message delivered to Muhammad, or failed to live in accordance with the ideas of Islam. The conflict between human obduracy or weakness and those ideals is surely a fit subject for drama.

'Aziza's 'horizontal conflict' is seen when a Muslim rebels against the government or mores of his or her society, but any Muslim engaged in such a rebellion will be branded an unbeliever, and the rebellion itself remains an individual matter unsuitable for dramatic treatment. This view is surely misguided, since Islam itself was born from conflict within the city of Mecca, and conflict marked the years after the death of the Prophet, culminating in the death of Hussein at Karbala and the beginning of the division of the faithful into Sunnis and Shi'ites. 'Aziza, while accepting that the Shi'ites developed a theatre in the form of the *ta'ziyah*, claims that they would not have done so if they had not deviated from the Islamic religion, separating themselves from the majority community. In his view the Shi'ites were ultimately responsible for the conflicts and schisms that wounded and divided the community of believers, and the *ta'ziyah* is a ritual of expiation of guilt and a means of expressing Persian nationalistic and political agendas.<sup>31</sup> Here 'Aziza shows his hand as a Sunni apologist and sectarian



propagandist. The truth is surely that the history of Islam provides countless examples of conflict among individuals, between individuals and the state, among factions within states, and between states, all of which could provide material suitable for dramatic treatment.

'Aziza's third and fourth types of conflict - the dynamic and internal, relate to the Muslim's perception of history, which, he argues, is not dramatic but inherently conservative and based on an acceptance of a pact between God and the believer, who responds to this dispensation by accepting every occurrence as inevitable because willed by God Himself. Thus the world, and specifically Islamic history, is organised in accordance with a divinely instituted harmony, whether or not this harmony is perceptible to the believer, and thus the right-minded Muslim does not conceive the world in terms of contradictions or conflict.<sup>32</sup> 'Aziza's view of the pious Muslim as a naïve fatalist is a gross oversimplification that is contradicted by the complexities of Islamic theology as well as by the vicissitudes of fourteen centuries of Islamic history. The fourth type of conflict, that between the individual and his or her fate is linked to the third and can be criticised on the same grounds. Moreover, in attempting to forge an absolute distinction between the Muslim and what could be called Promethean man, particularly of the kind that emerged in the European Renaissance,<sup>33</sup> 'Aziza seems to be in danger of merely putting a positive gloss on the pagan Arabs' belief in *dahr*, the power of malignant fate, a belief that persisted well into the Islamic era.

Badawi and al-Khozai address the issue of whether Islam itself, or at least Islamic civilisation, is inherently inimical to drama. There is an argument that links theatre with the figurative arts such as painting and sculpture. Even if such an argument were well founded, which it is not, we have already shown in the previous chapter that Islam did not, and does not, interdict such images except in the context of the mosque. As al-Khozai remarks, 'the figurative arts were not only tolerated but encouraged when the danger of paganism had disappeared';<sup>34</sup> nevertheless the Muslims did not develop such theatre as they had into a high art, and al-Khozai, in discussing the last of his factors, the historical, advances a number of reasons that, taken together, might explain why 'the seeds of drama did not germinate within this monotheistic religion'.<sup>35</sup> First, the medieval



Arabs who were interested in Greek thought were dissuaded by the Christian Syriac translators from developing an interest in pagan literature. Moreover, there was by that time no trace of a living Greek dramatic heritage. Second, the culture of the Islamic empire was built on the basis that the Muslims would dominate the civilisations of the conquered, and that therefore the heirs of the Hellenic heritage in the East had to convert to Islam and be influenced by Arabic. Third, the Arab world had little contact with, and no interest in, the Christian religious drama that was developing during the European Middle Ages. Thus no tradition of drama could develop within the Muslim world, and even before the Mongol invasion of 1258 a decline in the Abbasid empire's economy had begun so that later the Islamic system was unable to integrate itself with the European Renaissance and be influenced by its drama.

Al-Khozai's arguments are thought-provoking and contain some truth, especially with regard to the early centuries of Islam. They are less convincing, however, when applied to later Islamic, rather than specifically Arab, cultures, since the three great Islamic civilisations that flourished at the time of the European Renaissance - the Ottomans (1281-1922), the Safavids in Iran (1501-1732) and the Mughals in India (1526-1858) were by no means inward looking, and it is not difficult to trace European influences in their visual art and architecture. In the realm of imaginative literature, however, the picture is different, particularly when we consider the later pre-modern period and the condition of Arabic-speaking cultures. As Sadgrove notes, by the sixteenth century Arabic literature had suffered a decline from the glories of its inspirations in the pre-Islamic and medieval periods:

In the two or three centuries before the nineteenth century, the era of 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 was lacking. [...] Arabs for centuries had remained conservative in their literary life, sustaining a limited number of literary genres, partly because it was felt the Arabic language was sacrosanct, that it was the sacred language of the Qur'an and should thus be preserved from innovation and foreign influences. Imitation prevailed in what literary works there were.[...] Literary works rarely reflected the true feelings of their



author, nor did they mirror the political or social situation of the country.<sup>36</sup>

Bearing this in mind, it is important to realise that the conservatism of the Arab literary elite militated against the development of drama in the Arab world, and that that conservatism was reinforced by the political, economic, social and cultural stagnation of the declining Ottoman empire, so that Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798 had an enormous impact, its cultural effects being far more important than its military failure.<sup>37</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that theatre, a genre despised by the guardians of literary correctness and abhorred by the pious, failed to win a respected place in Arab cultural life. This apparent cultural flaw has prompted many writers to explain the alleged absence of drama from Arabic literature before 1847, but as we have seen, some of these attempts have been naïve and unconvincing. As Badawi points out, they have sometimes been 'at best no more than well-intentioned apologetics often inspired by a feeling of inferiority'; but he goes on to affirm that 'The absence of drama is in no way an indication of cultural inferiority and the fact is that the Arabs did develop their own dramatic writing as well as their own epics, even though the form that these products took was different from the western form'.<sup>38</sup>

What forms of theatre, then, existed in the Arab world before the nineteenth century? Can any connection with Islam be discerned? Leaving the *ta'ziyah* aside for the moment, we shall consider the broad range of popular theatrical manifestations that appeared in the Near and Middle East during the centuries between the birth of Islam and the production of the first modern Arabic drama in 1847. Moreh finds examples of live theatre among the pre-Islamic Arabs, both Jews and Christians, but these need not detain us, as they had disappeared by the sixth century, being replaced by 'games, mimes and other lowbrow performances'.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless it is worth mentioning that theatrical performances associated with the Coptic festival of Nayrus or Nawruz, and the Persian practice of employing court entertainers - jesters, singers and buffoons - continued into the Islamic era.<sup>40</sup>

If, as the general opinion has it, modern Arabic drama began in the nineteenth century, why should we be concerned with traditional popular theatre? Badawi argues that



Any account of modern Arabic drama which ignored such activities would suffer from serious deficiencies, not just on grounds of incompleteness but also because it would fail to provide the necessary historical background. More importantly it would not be capable of explaining certain features of modern Arabic drama, both on the structural and dramatic levels, which are clearly the product of some deeply rooted attitudes and tendencies inherited from the past history of indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic entertainment. The knowledge of such history is essential in order to see the manner in which the imported form was conceived and how it subsequently developed, for the imported form was in several ways determined by the local histrionic or theatrical tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Badawi's point is well made, and even in the mid-twentieth century we find a committed modernist like Wannous combining Brechtian elements with features drawn from the indigenous tradition. In this brief discussion, however, we cannot consider every manifestation of that tradition, although we will not neglect its important features.

We have already noted that nothing in the Qur'an prohibits dramatic representation, but the *hadith* (traditions) of the Prophet take a hostile attitude to entertainment, which was considered a distraction from the real business of a Muslim's life: a concentration on religious benefit in this world and the hereafter. The early Muslims would have been familiar with impersonators, clowns and buffoons, musicians and dancers, and there is evidence that Muhammad himself appreciated mimes and musicians on certain occasions.<sup>42</sup>

Other entertainers were not so well regarded, particularly the *mukhannathun* (having the meaning of 'infamous', 'effeminate man', 'homosexual', and 'actor') who often performed astride a *kurraj* or hobby-horse. Moreh notes that little is known about *kurraj* performances, which may have originated in Persian and Central Asian fertility rites and shamanic ceremonies. The second Caliph, 'Umar (634-44) 'reputedly said that he would have expelled them from Medina if he had not seen comparable entertainment in the time of the Prophet himself'.<sup>43</sup>



Other performers included the *samaja* or masked actor, who participated in the *nayruz* festivals, among other celebrations, and in customary entertainments dating back to pre-Islamic times. The masks usually represented animals or demons, and were an integral part of dramatic rituals among many nations besides the Arabs.<sup>44</sup> In Egypt the *samajat* were associated with licentious behaviour and were sometimes prohibited by the Mamluk sultans. It is interesting that *samaja* in the sense of 'comic mask' is found in Avicenna's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*.<sup>45</sup> Jesters and buffoons were also enormously popular, and not only among the people; the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs enjoyed their company. For example, al-Mu'tasim (833- 42) made a certain Ibn al-Junayd his boon companion because of his 'amazing appearance and talk', although the jester's chief accomplishment seems to have been as a *darrat* or fart-maker. We are a long way from serious theatre here, but other jesters seem to have been comedians who gave improvised performances or recited absurd compositions which Moreh compares with Dadaist provocations.<sup>46</sup> Jesters and buffoons of course continued to perform well after the Abbasid period, and Moreh cites an account by a British traveller, Alexander Russell, who witnessed such an entertainment in Aleppo in the mid-eighteenth century, finding the mummery insipid and the wit bordering on the obscene.<sup>47</sup>

Moreh notes that another way of representing everyday life in a quasi-theatrical form was through pageantry. Spectacular entertainments were mounted to celebrate the weddings and circumcisions of sons of caliphs, sultans and other grandees and even those of ordinary citizens. The spectacles were mainly provided by artisans demonstrating their trades on floats drawn by horses, and it seems that plays both comic and serious were sometimes performed on specially built structures.<sup>48</sup> The theatre historian Ali al-Ra'i describes the procession of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (786-809) on his way to the Friday congregational prayer:

The procession is led by a group of men on foot carrying banners, followed by groups of musicians and strong men carrying bows and brandishing their swords. Then the Caliph appears wearing a black cloak, riding an Arab stallion of fine pedigree; behind him is a group of ministers and government officials mounted on horses decked in lavishly decorated cloths, and following them come government men and guards. This procession is essentially a theatrical performance



organised with great precision. The streets of Baghdad are its stage, and the performance moves from the Caliph's palace to the mosque. Its principal hero is the caliph, the public crowds are its audience; its aim is to impress and awe the public and to show them the strength and wealth of the government.<sup>49</sup>

Al-Ra'i goes on to describe an even more magnificent pageant which the Caliph al-Muqtadir (908-32) organised in honour of the Byzantine diplomatic mission that had been sent to negotiate a truce with the Abbasid Empire. The reception of the visitors was surely designed to impress, involving as it did over 160,000 mailed horsemen, 7,700 armed eunuchs, a fleet of superbly equipped and decorated warships on the Tigris, and, within the palace, fountains and a tree made of silver and gold whose branches held golden and silver birds.<sup>50</sup> But most pageants were more modest, and many involved some kind of theatrical performance, which might consist of a play, or a display of horsemanship. In the eighteenth century it was not unusual to see riders simulating battles among the Bedouin. Other guild pageants might include jugglers, acrobats, strolling players, conjurers and snake-charmers.<sup>51</sup>

What of theatrical performances that come closer to our idea of drama? Is there evidence of entertainment that went beyond buffoonery or pageantry and was created in a more literary style, or perhaps with a religious purpose, to provoke thought as well as laughter? In order to understand some later developments we should first consider the art of the storyteller. In the pre-Islamic era the storyteller would narrate 'the battles of the Arabs',<sup>52</sup> but with the advent of Islam his role became that of admonisher of the faithful. Some scholars argue that the practice of admonition began with the encouragement of the second caliph, 'Umar, while others hold that it did not begin until the early years of the Umayyad dynasty.<sup>53</sup> The early storytellers were often scholars or jurists and delivered their admonitions in the mosque, but later practised outside the mosque without changing the character or purpose of their performance. During the Umayyad period the style was that of a lecture combined with a sermon, and was usually elegant and rhetorical.<sup>54</sup> In the Abbasid period, however, a new type of storyteller appeared. He was not a *wa'iz* or admonisher but a *haki* or imitator.



A well-known account of a *hakiyya* (impersonation) is given in al-Jahiz's *Bayan*:

We find that the impersonator is able to imitate precisely the pronunciation of the natives of Yemen with all the special accents of that area. [...] when he imitates the speech of the stammerer, it seems that he has become the ultimate stammerer, as if all the peculiarities of every stammerer ever born have been rolled into one. When he imitates the blind man, copying the distinctive features of his face, eyes and limbs, [...] it is as if he has synthesised the peculiar features of all blind men in one complete character.<sup>55</sup>

This performer is clearly a professional, but his impersonation does not seem to have been combined with any kind of plot or dialogue with other performers. Moreh, however, provides evidence that *hikayat* (imitations) were sometimes incorporated into short satirical sketches, and that some of these were based on written texts. Judges and scholars were among those subjected to ridicule.<sup>56</sup>

The most important surviving text written to be performed by live actors (as opposed to the puppets of the *khayal az-zill*) in the Abbasid period is, however, not a satirical sketch involving imitation but a monologue intended to admonish, and having a similar purpose to the sermons of the *wa'iz*. But it is not a lecture; its form is dramatic, as its subject is a trial, and it clearly formed the nucleus of al-Jahiz's later *Risala Fi Bani Umayya (Treatise on the Umayyads)*. Moreh argues that plays formed the nuclei of several works of this period.<sup>57</sup>

The play was performed in the reign of the third Abbasid caliph, Al-Mahdi (755-85) by a Sufi mystic who pretended to be a fool (or mad) in order to fulfil the Qur'anic command to enjoin what is right and prohibit what is disapproved. It took the form of a trial of the caliphs of Islam, who are called before the 'judge' – that is, the Sufi - and consigned to Paradise or Hell. The caliphs were played by young men, who had no dialogue and were brought before the judge by members of the audience. The performance took place on a hilltop, and was, to put it mildly, critical of the Abbasid caliphs; hence the need for a possible defence of insanity, were the Sufi to be apprehended by the authorities. A few excerpts will give the flavour of this piece. After asking the audience 'What have the prophets and messengers done? Are they not in the



highest Heaven?’ and receiving an affirmative response, the judge would ask for each caliph in turn to be brought before him, beginning with Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s first successor. The first four caliphs, known as the *Rashidun* or Rightly Guided, are to be taken to the highest heaven. This is the Sufi’s judgment on the fourth caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, the father of Hussein, the martyr of Karbala:

May God reward you for your services to the *Umma* [community of the faithful], abu’l-Hassan, for you are the legatee and friend of the Prophet. You spread justice and were abstemious in this world, withdrawing from the spoils of war instead of fighting for them with tooth and nail. You are the father of blessed progeny and the husband of a pure and upright woman. Take him to the highest Heaven of Paradise.<sup>58</sup>

Most of the subsequent caliphs are condemned, with special vituperation being reserved for Yazid, who ordered the killing of Hussein:

[...] you are the one who killed the people of the Harra and laid Medina open to the troops for three days, thereby violating the sanctuary of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace. [...] You killed Hussein and carried off the daughters of the Prophet as captives on the camel-bags Take him to the lowest Hell!

Upon finally reaching the Abbasids the judge would fall silent. He would then be told, probably by another actor placed among the audience, ‘This is al-Abbas, the Commander of the Faithful’ and would reply ‘We have got to the Abbasids; do their reckoning collectively and throw all of them into Hell’.<sup>59</sup> It is obvious that the Sufi, unlike the jesters and buffoons at the Abbasid court, ‘played the fool in order to fulfil a religious injunction, [...] and [engaged] in the despised activity of play-acting in order to humiliate himself (though there was nothing humble about the role he took in the play itself)’.<sup>60</sup>

The Sufi’s play is unusual in being truly Islamic in both its purpose and subject-matter. Another and very different play, whose text has survived in full, is *Hikayat Abi’l-Qasim al-Baghdadi* (*The Impersonations of Abi’l-Qasim al-Baghdadi*), which is a repertoire of theatrical scenes played in tenth-century Baghdad, assembled by Muhammad al-Asadi to



mock Shi'ite piety and depict everyday life in the city. Abi'l-Qasim, pretending to be a pious man, gatecrashes the party of a person of rank and unleashes a tirade of obscene and scatological remarks directed at the guests. The play is composed for recitation by a live actor or actors, and the text takes the form of a continuous dialogue between Abi'l-Qasim and his guests, although Abi'l-Qasim does most of the talking. In his respect the play resembles the *Trial of the Caliphs*. Moreh also argues that the play 'was not only meant to depict the repertoire of buffoons and mimes, or to give a realistic representation of Baghdadi society, but also to provide material for dramatic performance. Bits of it were certainly used by later dramatists'.<sup>61</sup> Among these dramatists was Ibn Danyal, the foremost author of shadow plays.

The art of the individual storyteller survived into the twentieth century, and both Wannous and al-Hakim incorporated the *hakiyya* (or its modern form *hakawati*) into their dramas to give them a more authentically Arab character and to appeal more directly to the Arab audience. The reciters of the popular medieval romances, such as those describing the exploits of Baybars or 'Antara, were known as *Sha'ir* (rhapsodies), and we have an account of such a performance by the early Victorian scholar Edward Lane. While he dismissed the satirical farces he witnessed as 'low and ridiculous'<sup>62</sup> he thought the public recitation of romances 'attractive and rational entertainments'. Composed in a mixture of prose and verse, the romances were 'half narrative and half dramatic' and were chanted from memory in a 'lively and dramatic manner'.<sup>63</sup>

According to Moreh, the *hikaya* was well developed before the emergence of the shadow play, and even before the appearance of the *maqama* and *risala*, and had a great influence on those genres, both of which made extensive use of dialogue.<sup>64</sup> But since the *maqama* had particularly strong links with the shadow play, we shall ignore the *risala* in this discussion. The *maqama* ('assembly') was, as al-Khozai points out, a genre unique to Arab culture, and while it did not lack the dramatic elements of character and dialogue, it depended 'more on linguistic sophistication than on the relatively thin plot'.<sup>65</sup> It was elaborated by al-Hamadhani (968-1110) and further developed by al-Hariri (1054-1122), and the genre remained popular in Arab literary circles until the twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> Moreh describes the *maqama* as



A short and ornate 'picaresque' work in rhymed prose, couched in the first person singular. It usually contains a narrative element consisting of an amusing or surprising, real or true to life scene, and it is formulated in the present tense. In every *maqama* there is a narrator [...] called 'Isa Ibn Hisham, and a hero, Abu'l-Fath al-Iskandari, who generally appears as disguised beggar [...] trying to earn a living by his wits, his linguistic virtuosity and talent.<sup>67</sup>

Moreh cites the scholars Yunis and al-Ra'i in arguing that the *maqama* was 'a written composition imitating the dialogue and structure of the *hikaya*'. It was 'composed for mimetic declamation and used a harangue style with a prodigious store of sophisticated rhetoric and eloquent turn of phrase'. These features endowed it 'with the seriousness Muslims sought and admired in Arabic literature'.<sup>68</sup> Moreh argues that live drama was used as a model for the *maqama*, but what is more certain is that the *maqama* influenced the art of the *khayal az-zill*, of which a very few texts have survived, most notably three outstanding examples, the earliest we have, by the Mosul-born Egyptian oculist, poet and wit Shams al-Din Ibn Danyal (1248 -1311).

The shadow theatre is thought to have been imported into the Arab world from the Far East, but by Ibn Danyal's time the entertainment had been thoroughly assimilated and was an accepted part of Muslim society. The *khayal az-zill* should not be confused with the short comic dialogues of the Turkish *karagoz* (black eyes), although the method of presentation could be similar. The *karagoz*, which was very popular in Egypt until the mid-twentieth century, was a Middle Eastern equivalent of the Punch and Judy show, and was characterised by 'uproar, violence and sexual innuendo'.<sup>69</sup> Nineteenth-century travellers were sometimes scandalised by these performances: Lane called them 'extremely indecent' while Sir Gardner Wilkinson observed that 'the licentiousness [...] was so gross, that it would have shocked an ancient Greek audience, though accustomed to the plays of Aristophanes'.<sup>70</sup>

While obscene passages permeate Ibn Danyal's plays, his purpose was to create 'a mirror that reflected the social reality of the time'<sup>71</sup>. Before briefly discussing his work, we should explain how the shadow plays were performed. In Badawi's words,



The action was represented by shadows cast upon a large screen by flat, coloured leather puppets, held in front of a torch, while the hidden puppet master, *al-Rayyis* or *al-Miqaddim*, delivered the dialogue and songs, helped in this by associates, sometimes as many as five persons including a youth who imitated the voice of women.<sup>72</sup>

Ibn Danyal attempted to revivify this genre, which had flourished in the Egypt of the Fatimids (909 - 1171). At that time it probably presented moral, religious or historical themes and had an admonitory or educative purpose. Many saw in such performances an analogy between the shadow theatre and human life in this world. The earliest such comment is the remark attributed to the Egyptian Imam al-Shafi'i (767 – 820), an eminent religious scholar and jurist: 'I see the shadow play as the greatest admonition to those who are advanced in the knowledge of Ultimate Reality. I see figures and spirits passing by departing, all perishing while the Mover remains'.<sup>73</sup> Later, the Egyptian mystic Umar Ibn al-Farid (1182- 1235) wrote a major poem in which he found mystical significance in the shadow theatre.<sup>74</sup> Besides giving a detailed account of the themes of the shadow play, Ibn al-Farid describes the audience's deeply emotional reaction, which would not have been evoked by stereotyped mechanical conventions.

Ibn Danyal's introductions to all three plays make clear that the shadow play's convention of buffoonery was being used by him as a means to an end: the production of good literature, not cheap and vulgar writing. The plays were addressed to men of breeding and literary taste, and were a mixture of seriousness and levity. The characters are drawn from the lowest strata of society, but the aim is not crude mockery, for as the Presenter (*al-Rayyis*) says, 'Underlying every shadow [character] a truth is to be found'. The plays, Badawi notes, 'are a rich source of information for the social historian'<sup>75</sup> since, although they focus on certain aspects of medieval Egyptian society, they are more deeply rooted in social reality than the *maqama* literature that influenced them (Ibn Danyal was especially indebted to al-Hariri's rhetorical interpolations of poetry within the dialogues).<sup>76</sup> Ibn Danyal's is a sophisticated art rich in vividly portrayed characters, who are so concretely realized that, Badawi claims, their types could be readily seen in Cairo until the early twentieth century.<sup>77</sup>



Unfortunately we cannot go into details of the plays here, but a full discussion can be found in Badawi;<sup>78</sup> some idea of their content and style can be attempted, however. The first, *Tayf al-Khayal* (The Shadow Spirit) is the longest and the most developed with regard to plot and characterisation. It centres on the character of Prince Wisal, a clownish soldier who speaks in a mock-heroic style, reminiscing about his youthful erotic adventures with both sexes in the most uninhibited language. He is attended by a mock secretary and a mock poet of panegyrics, and thus seems to be an Arabic Lord of Misrule presiding over a topsy-turvy court. The plot, which concerns Wisal's failed attempt to turn over a new leaf and find himself a wife, is much less important than the emphasis on characterisation – especially in the creation of the matchmaker, Umm Rashid – on description and on satirical observation of Cairo life. Despite its rudimentary dramatic technique, farcical elements and obscene passages, *The Shadow Spirit* is much more than a crude example of popular entertainment, not least because of Ibn Danyal's mastery and sensitive handling of the Arabic language. The play ends with Wisal's decision to make a pilgrimage to Mecca as a penitent seeking to purify himself of all his past sins.<sup>79</sup>

The second play, *'Ajib wa Gharib (The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger)*, is very different in structure from the first and has an obvious relationship with the *maqama* literature, as it consists of a series of vivid sketches of the various roles adopted by the Banu Sasan or Confraternity of Tricksters, who have been forced to lead a wandering life, 'living by their wits and resorting to trickery and deception in order to survive'.<sup>80</sup> The Stranger speaks of the trickster's life and introduces the professions he has assumed. An extensive gallery of these characters is then presented, each using the appropriate language; these include the 'amazing preacher', a snake-charmer, an ophthalmic surgeon, an astrologer, a lion-tamer, a rope dancer and a conjuror. There is no plot, and no interaction between the characters, who are almost all aspects of the Stranger. Badawi remarks that 'the whole show has many of the qualities of a *danse macabre* with the ending underlining the need for repentance and purification from the sins of this world'.<sup>81</sup>

The third play, *Al-Mutayyam (The Love-Stricken One)* has a story and a plot. It deals comically with homoerotic infatuation, being concerned with Mutayyam's obsession with a beautiful young man whom he has seen at the baths. The play contains a parody of the



conventions of Arabic love poetry, and examples of the medieval debate form in passages comparing the charms of different men and the fighting abilities of cocks, rams and bulls. The play ends with a party given by Mutayyam during which every type of homoerotic activity and excessive behaviour is presented and explained by its practitioner, and which is then interrupted by the awe-inspiring figure of the Angel of Death. He rouses the drunken guests from their stupor; Mutayyam has time enough to repent and humbly asks God's forgiveness before he dies. The play ends with his funeral.<sup>82</sup>

Badawi argues that Ibn Danyal's use of Arabic in these plays is remarkably flexible, 'ranging from the classical to the colloquial with an admixture of obscure jargon and even gibberish when the need arises',<sup>83</sup> and that their value resides in their literary achievement, and particularly in the delineation of individual characters through the skilful employment of the registers and even the rhythm appropriate to each. They are related to the *maqama* tradition in several ways, mainly because they are concerned with the lowest strata of society and people who live by their wits; and because each ends with a final act of repentance which characters make after a lifetime of devotion to worldly pleasures. This, Badawi argues, places Ibn Danyal's work in the category of Fool literature, which emphasises that the pleasures of the flesh are transient and that all holidays must come to an end.<sup>84</sup>

No texts of shadow plays between Ibn Danyal and the seventeenth century have survived, and later examples show a decline from Ibn Danyal's achievement. His work seems to have had little influence on subsequent development, and the opportunity to develop a live theatre from the tradition of the *khayal az-zill* was missed.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless the shadow theatre in general served a useful purpose; according to Landau

The great service of the shadow theatre to the Arabic history of civilisation is in its having preserved, for the future, precious information about little-recorded ideas and customs of past generations. Artistically, it prepared the ground, along with the story-tellers' mimicry and the Passion players' performances (being more important, in this respect, than either of them), for the arrival and acceptance of the Europeanized amusements – the theatre and the cinema.<sup>86</sup>



The question remains, why did Ibn Danyal, with his literary ability and gift for characterisation, choose to devote his talents to the crude and limited form of the shadow theatre, a genre that was in decline, rather than to the live theatre? No scholar seems to have addressed this question, probably because any attempt to answer it would be speculative, but one possible reason may be that, as we noted earlier, whereas the shadow theatre had once been respectable, and had been admired by poets and scholars, the live theatre was associated with immorality and indecency and made no pretensions to literary merit. So, even though it is evident from Ibn Danyal's poems that he was very familiar with the world of the actor, and indeed he is the only author to have left us a first-hand description of the environment in which actors lived,<sup>87</sup> he probably felt that his work would be better presented in a form that he must have known could not be developed.

In the final part of this discussion we shall briefly consider some examples of live theatre, or quasi-theatrical presentations, of the seventeenth century and later, a few of which survived until recently. In Morocco theatre in the round is still popular: an audience gathers around a group of actors who present folk tales and legends in the open air, and sometimes members of the audience are invited to participate.<sup>88</sup> Other performances might take the form of a domestic quarrel, or a debate on social, political and economic issues which is made comical by the 'chairman's' use of a harmless whip on the team that goes beyond what he deems appropriate.<sup>89</sup> These performances were witnessed in the 1960s.

The *talabah* (students') drama first appeared in Morocco in the seventeenth century. University students helped Sultan Rachid to regain the throne from his brother, and in return he organised a small victory celebration on the banks of the Fez River, which developed into a theatrical celebration involving the crowning of a student 'sultan', who 'rules' for seven days over his student 'court'; finally he meets the real sultan or his deputy, to whom he relinquishes his authority. If he refuses to renounce the throne, the students of his court beat him and throw him in the river as a sign that his authority is at an end.<sup>90</sup>



Another example from the Maghrib is the *bissat* drama, which was performed in Morocco and was first described in the eighteenth century. The *bissat* actors were supported by the sultan, who would sometimes participate in the performance, in which they would present the people's grievances to him by acting them out. The leading role of al-Bissat, who represented strength, courage and adventure, was taken by an actor who was masked so that he could criticize the sultan's administration in an impersonal way. Supporting characters included al-Yahu, a greedy hypocrite, and Hadidan, who embodied purity and self-sacrifice. The performance relied on al-Bissat's eloquence and acrobatic skills. During the Eid festival (held after performing the rites of pilgrimage) the actors would prepare by gathering donations and support for their performances. They would go in groups to the sultan's palace, where they would present their serio-comic performance, which would end with prayers and blessings upon the Prophet, prayers for the sultan, and requests for a financial reward.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

We conclude our discussion of popular Arabic theatre by considering the kinds of farcical entertainments witnessed by European visitors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These were performed by *muhabbazun* or strolling players; the word seems to date to before the sixteenth century.<sup>92</sup> We have already noted Lane's reaction to one of these farces, and he provides a lengthy description of the action, despite commenting that the performances 'are scarcely worthy of description: it is chiefly by vulgar jests, and indecent actions, that they amuse and obtain applause'. Lane saw this farce in about 1834; it concerned the abuse of a poor peasant, who, it is alleged, owes the *na'zir* or district governor one thousand piastres. Since he cannot pay, he is beaten (with an inflated piece of intestine), all the while making absurd appeals for mercy such as 'by the honour of thy wife's trousers, O Bey!'. The peasant's wife then bribes a local sheikh and gives herself to the *na'zir* to obtain her husband's release. (It should be remembered that the players of such farces would have been all male.) Lane comments 'the farce was played before the



Ba'sha<sup>93</sup> with the view of opening his eyes to the conduct of those persons to whom was committed the office of collecting the taxes'.<sup>94</sup>

The earliest account of such farces by a European is that by Alexander Russell, who saw one in Aleppo in about 1750, as we have already mentioned. In 1763 (the date is uncertain) a Danish traveller, Carsten Niebuhr witnessed a farce performed by a company composed of Muslims, Christians and Jews. At that time, and up to the 1900s, the Egyptian farce player was often known as Ibn Rabiya, and the group as *Awlad Rabiya* (the Sons of Rabiya); they were also called *arbab al-mala'ib* (actors), and it is their performance Niebuhr describes. They performed in the open air, in the courtyard of a private house, changing their costumes behind a screen. The Europeans were not amused, as the play was long, stereotyped and tiresome, involving a string of identical robberies of travellers by a woman (the actor had difficulties in concealing 'her' beard). The audience eventually tired of this 'insipid repetition' and the play was stopped in the middle.<sup>95</sup>

The last example of an account provided by a European traveller is that by the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Belzoni (1778- 1823), who described two comedies performed at wedding feasts near Cairo in 1815. The first concerned the deception of a man wishing to go on the *hajj* (the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca performed by Muslims). A crafty camel-driver deceives both the pilgrim and the beast's original owner by selling a sickly beast at a high price. The pilgrim discovers the trick when he tries to mount the camel (represented, as in European pantomime, by two actors concealed under a cloth 'skin' and carrying a wooden camel head); he beats the driver, who runs off. According to Belzoni the audience was greatly diverted by this simple drama, as it taught them to be on their guard against dealers in camels.<sup>96</sup> The other play described by Belzoni was a short comedy poking fun at Europeans. Here the European traveller serves as a sort of clown; he is tricked by a poor Arab and his wife, who pretend to be rich but eventually serve him only sour milk and dhourra (sorghum) bread, the only provision in the house.<sup>97</sup>

We have seen that the Arabic theatre certainly existed before 1847, but it is clear that for a number of reasons the various manifestations were never developed into a high art, as happened in Europe during the Renaissance. Certain scholars, both Muslim and non-



Muslim, Arab and non-Arab, have attempted to find reasons for this perceived cultural failing, most of which are speculative and do not bear close examination. It is probable that drama did not develop beyond embryonic forms for two main reasons: the opprobrium heaped upon the theatre by the men of religion, and the contempt shown it by the men of literature. Ibn Danyal's work could not develop because the genre for which it was written was limited technically, and the *Trial of the Caliphs* remains an isolated example of Islamic theatre, which can be seen as merely a development of the art of the admonisher. The later comedies tended to be either crude farces, or rough satires usually emphasising the corruption, cruelty and arrogance of the powerful and the helplessness of the poor, naïve and vulnerable peasant. These short impromptu pieces gave little scope for plot or character development. This does not mean, however, that such plays disappeared with the rise of European-inspired theatre; on the contrary, and especially in Egypt, they continued to be popular until well into the twentieth century, despite the disdain felt for them by many educated Arabs.<sup>98</sup>

There is one Islamic drama that we have not yet considered. It remains controversial in the majority Sunni community, and some critics see it as a religious ritual rather than a theatrical performance. But these controversies are not driven by the contention that Islam is inherently hostile to drama; we have shown that this is not the case. As Moreh points out, 'There is nothing in Islam as such to preclude dramatic development of intrinsically Islamic themes'. He further argues that there is nothing in Islam as such 'to preclude dramatic development of non-Islamic, un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic themes'.<sup>99</sup> Yet the *ta'ziyah*, which we will discuss next, never developed into secular drama. But it remains the only form of tragic drama created by Islamic civilisation without external stimulus.



Endnotes for Chapter 4

- 
- <sup>1</sup> M.M.Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 44.
- <sup>2</sup> Philip Sadgrove, *Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century*. (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996) pp. 11-25.
- <sup>3</sup> Mohamed Al-Khozai, *The development of early Arabic drama, 1847-1900*. (London; New York: Longman, 1984) p. 33.
- <sup>4</sup> Badawi, p. 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Badawi, p. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> See Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 76; Sadgrove, p. 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Hourani, p. 77.
- <sup>10</sup> Badawi, p. 3.
- <sup>11</sup> Badawi, pp. 3-4.
- <sup>12</sup> S. Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p. 116.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup> Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>15</sup> See al-Khozai, pp. 3-17.
- <sup>16</sup> Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>17</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 3.
- <sup>18</sup> Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 4.
- <sup>20</sup> Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Masr byna Asrin (Egypt between Two Ages)*, (Egypt: The Literature Library 1983), pp. 216-220.
- <sup>22</sup> Al-Hakim, 'Internal Characteristics', *The Literature Library* (1982), p. 82.
- <sup>23</sup> Al-Khozai, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>24</sup> Al-Hakim, *Al-Malik Audib (King Odious)* (Cairo: Dar al-Matha, 1977), pp. 25-6, in al-Khozai, pp. 6-7.
- <sup>25</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 7, see also M. Aziza, *Le théâtre et l'Islam* (Algiers, n.d.), p. 11; Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 8.
- <sup>27</sup> Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 9.
- <sup>29</sup> See Mohammed Aziza, *Islam and Theatre*, trans. Rafiq al-Saban (Cairo: The Cultural Library, 1997), p. 21.
- <sup>30</sup> Badawi, p. 4.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Aziza, pp. 40-50.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Aziza, pp. 29-31.
- <sup>33</sup> See al-Khozai, p. 10.
- <sup>34</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 11; see also Badawi, p. 4.



- 
- <sup>35</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 12.
- <sup>36</sup> Sadgrove, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>37</sup> See al-Khozai, p. 14.
- <sup>38</sup> Badawi, p. 5.
- <sup>39</sup> Moreh, p. 9.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- <sup>41</sup> Badawi, p. 7.
- <sup>42</sup> See Moreh, pp. 21-22.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 28.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 45.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 51.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-68.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 72.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.
- <sup>49</sup> Al-Ra'i, Ali. *Al-Masrah fi Al-Watan AlArabi (Theatre in the Arab World)*. (Kuwait: Alam Alm'rfa Journal, 1980) p. 40.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 44.
- <sup>51</sup> Moreh, pp. 77-78.
- <sup>52</sup> Ali Uqla Orsan, *Az-Zawahir al-Masrahiyyah Ind Al-Arab (Theatrical Manifestations amongst the Arabs)*. (Damascus: It'had al-Kot'tab al-Arab, 1981) p. 105.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 108; Rikabi, Jwdat. *Tarikh al-Adab al-Arabi ( History of the Arab Litruture)*. (Damascus: Maktba`at al-Mufid, 1955)p. 123
- <sup>54</sup> *Tarikh al-Adab al-Arabi*, p. 443.
- <sup>55</sup> Al-Jahiz, *Al-Bayan wa'l Tabyin* (Cairo: 1969), vol. 1, pp. 69f in Moreh, p. 87.
- <sup>56</sup> Moreh, pp. 87-91.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 91.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 92.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-93.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 93.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 99.
- <sup>62</sup> Edward William Lane, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (Everyman's Library, n.d.), ch. viii, in Badawi, p. 8.
- <sup>63</sup> Lane, pp. 397-98.
- <sup>64</sup> Moreh, p. 104.
- <sup>65</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 19.
- <sup>66</sup> Hourani, p. 53.
- <sup>67</sup> Moreh, p. 105.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-8.
- <sup>69</sup> Sadgrove, p. 14.
- <sup>70</sup> See Sadgrove, pp. 14, 16.
- <sup>71</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 22; see also al-Ra'i, p. 45.
- <sup>72</sup> Badawi, p. 12.
- <sup>73</sup> S. Nua'man, *Al-Usul al-Deramiyah li-Nash'at al-Adab al-Arabi (The Dramatic Roots of Arabic Literature)* (Beirut: Dar al-Ohud, 1973), p. 80.
- <sup>74</sup> Badawi, p. 13.



- 
- <sup>75</sup> Badawi, p. 15.
- <sup>76</sup> See al-Khozai, p. 22.
- <sup>77</sup> Badawi, p. 15.
- <sup>78</sup> See Badawi, pp. 14-24.
- <sup>79</sup> Badawi, pp. 15-19.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 20.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 21.
- <sup>82</sup> See Badawi, pp. 21-23.
- <sup>83</sup> Badawi, p. 23.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 25; al-Khozai, p. 23.
- <sup>86</sup> Landau, *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 47, in al-Khozai, p. 24.
- <sup>87</sup> See Moreh, pp. 138-39.
- <sup>88</sup> Jom'ah Qajah, *Al-Masrah wa al-Hwiyah al-Arabiyyah (Theatre and the Arab Identity)* (Egypt: Dar Almoltaqa. 2001) p. 225.
- <sup>89</sup> Al-Ra'i, pp. 226, 230.
- <sup>90</sup> Qataya, Ibrahim in Qajah, p. 236.
- <sup>91</sup> Al-Ra'i, pp. 233, 243; Qataya, p. 227.
- <sup>92</sup> See Moreh, p. 152.
- <sup>93</sup> Lane is referring to Muhammad 'Ali, the viceroy of Egypt.
- <sup>94</sup> Lane, pp. 395-97; for the full text see Moreh, pp. 156-57, and Sadgrove, pp. 19-20; see also Badawi, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>95</sup> (Niebuhr – see Moreh, p. 164) in Moreh, Shmuel. *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab world*. (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1992) p. 154; see also Sadgrove, pp. 17- 18; M. Najim, *Al-Masrahiya fi al-Adab al-Arabi al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafah, 1980), p. 19; Badawi, p. 11.
- <sup>96</sup> G. Belzoni (see Moreh, p. 164 for ref.) in Moreh, p. 155; see also Sadgrove, p. 18.
- <sup>97</sup> Belzoni (see Moreh, p. 164) in Moreh, p. 155; also Sadgrove, pp. 18-19; Badawi, p. 11.
- <sup>98</sup> See Moreh, p. 157; Sadgrove, pp. 23-24; Badawi, pp. 28-29.
- <sup>99</sup> Moreh, p. 163.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### The *Ta'ziyah*

#### The *Ta'ziyah*

We introduced the *ta'ziyah* in previous chapter, noting its origins and its key features including the theatrical space, the style of performance and the intense emotional involvement of the audience in the tragic events of Karbala. We also quoted Nasr's opinion that the *ta'ziyah* 'can have efficacy and meaning only in the traditional context for which it was meant'.<sup>1</sup> Nasr's argument is powerful one, but others have taken a different view and have presented performances in Europe and the United States. These performances will be discussed later, but the attempts to introduce the drama to Western audiences show that the isolation of Arabic or Islamic drama is not inevitable, even though Arabic drama generally is scarcely known in the West outside academic circles. This is an unfortunate situation, given the pressing need for dialogue. As we shall see, however, opinions differ greatly about the quality and the nature of the Western audiences' response to the *ta'ziyah*. We cannot avoid the question, is a phenomenon such as the *ta'ziyah* bound to remain an exotic curiosity in the West, when even more apparently accessible works, such as Wannous's late plays, have hardly ever been produced there? It may be that how we think about this question will be affected by the disparity between the cultural influence of the West – particularly the USA – on the developing world and the negligible cultural impact of the developing world on the West. It is also undeniable that what impact there has been has been mediated through the cinema and music, rather than through literature (despite some notable exceptions) or theatre, which even in the West remains a minority interest. Moreover, it should be remembered that theatre in the Arab world



currently means commercial theatre, serious drama being confined to marginal activity and productions mounted by academies and at festivals of drama, and that the *ta'ziyah* itself is regarded with suspicion by Sunni Muslims and remains controversial even within the Shi'ite community, especially among the clergy.

It is impossible to understand the importance the *ta'ziyah* has for the Shi'ite community without some knowledge of the historical circumstances that gave rise to it. This does not mean that its dramatic qualities cannot be appreciated by a non-Shi'ite audience, but it will be useful here to explain the context, not only to shed light on the Shi'ite audience's intense emotional involvement, but also to provide a background to the discussion of al-Sharqawi's drama on the death of Hussein, *The Wrath of God*, which will be considered in the next chapter. We shall also discuss the development of the *ta'ziyah* but shall confine our presentation to the Middle East, although it is worth mentioning that some form of Muharram procession occurs among Shi'ite communities in the Indian subcontinent and the West Indies.<sup>2</sup>

Etymologically 'Islam' might best be translated as 'unconditional surrender'. The Qur'an demands that human beings should surrender to the One God and obey His commands. Muslims, both Shi'ites and Sunnis, believe that in 610 a man called Muhammad, from the tribe of Quraysh in the Hijaz (present-day Saudi Arabia) was chosen by God to be his Prophet. This was revealed to him by the angel Gabriel, who also dictated the Qur'an (recitation) to him at various times over the following two decades. At first Muhammad was careful to speak of these revelations to only those closest to him, including his wife, Khadija, and his son-in-law, Ali, but after three years he began to reveal his prophecies to the pagan inhabitants of his city, Mecca. Their reaction was to persecute him and his growing band of companions, and in 622, at the age of 52, he migrated to Yathrib, an oasis settlement 200 miles to the north, which was to become known as Medina (the city). After a series of holy wars Mecca surrendered to him in 630, and when he died in Medina in 632 a large part of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam, either through conviction or by force.<sup>3</sup>

Muhammad had combined both political and religious leadership, and after his death the question of who was to be his successor centred on these aspects: to some it was



more political than religious, to others it was more religious than political. The majority favoured the Prophet's father-in-law and close companion Abu Bakr, placing more emphasis on the customary procedure of choosing an Arab chieftain, while others held that the caliph (successor) should be chosen from among the Hashimites (Muhammad's family); moreover, for them the question of succession was above all one of great religious significance, and Ali was by far the most worthy candidate. Eventually this dispute was to lead to the division of the Muslims into Islam's two main branches, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Today the Sunnis form about eighty-five percent of all Muslims, while the Shi'ites dominate Iran, Iraq and Southern Lebanon and constitute significant minorities in many other Muslim countries. The Shi'ites believe in the right of Ali and his sons Hasan and Hussein to succeed the Prophet.<sup>4</sup> *Shi'a* means 'partisan' or 'follower' and thus the Shi'ites are the partisans of Ali and his successors, and support their claim to the caliphate.

Ali did not accept Abu Bakr's caliphate, but remained silent for the sake of Islamic solidarity. Abu Bakr held office for only two years, and before he died, in 634, he designated as his successor another companion of the Prophet, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab.' Umar ruled for ten years, during which time wars of expansion extended the frontiers of the Muslim domain, incorporating all of Arabia, part of the Sasanian empire, and the Syrian and Egyptian provinces of the Byzantine empire. Thus Persia, whose faith had been Zoroastrianism, was brought into the Islamic world, but conversion to the new religion proved to be a long process, and Persian Islam had from the beginning a special character.

When Hussein was in his late teens 'Umar was killed by a Persian slave for private vengeance, and so in 644 two candidates, Ali and 'Uthman ibn Affan, declared themselves willing to succeed to the caliphate. A six-man council, appointed by 'Umar before his murder, favoured 'Uthman, who ruled until 656. His election did not pass without protest from Ali and other powerful Hashimites, but they agreed to abide by the council's decision. It was hoped that 'Uthman would reconcile the factions, but his rule was marred by his policy of promoting the interests of his own kinsmen, a policy that led to his assassination. Although Hasan and Hussein had fought on his behalf, when their father again claimed the succession he was opposed



by 'Uthman's kin, prominent among whom was Mu'awiya, the governor of Damascus, who sought the caliphate for himself, and who accused Ali of complicity in 'Uthman's murder. Their rivalry led to a split in the community and to civil war. Ali established himself as caliph in Kufa, one of the new cities built by the Muslims in Iraq, and defeated the dissidents, who were based in Basra, but Mu'awiya challenged him and the two forces met inconclusively at Siffin in northern Mesopotamia. Ali's party claimed that victory would have been theirs had not the Syrians cunningly called a halt to the fighting by raising Qur'ans on their lances, thus signalling that the dispute should be put to arbitration. Ali's acceptance of arbitration, a process which lasted several months, divided his party; some dissenters left his camp and eventually one of them assassinated him. Mu'awiya, unopposed by Hasan, proclaimed himself caliph in 661. He is regarded as the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to see the civil war as more than a purely political conflict, even though it involved no disagreement over religious doctrine. As Crone points out, 'it went to the heart of religion as understood by Muslims at the time in that it confronted them with a fatal uncertainty over the whereabouts of the path to salvation. [...] The early Muslims saw life as a journey through a perilous desert in which one could all too easily go astray and perish'.<sup>6</sup> The caliph or imam (religious leader – at this time the two were indivisible) gave legal existence to the *umma*, building it into a community, and lead the way to salvation. An imam of guidance would lead the community to Paradise; an imam of error would lead the caravan of the *umma* to Hell. But how could one be sure that one's allegiance was not misplaced? The Shi'ites are absolutely sure that Ali was the true imam of guidance, a revolutionary and renewer of Islam, and that Mu'awiya's imperial style and ostentatious way of life mark him out as an imam of error. Thus the conflict between the sons of Ali and Mu'awiya was not simply a struggle for political power; Shi'ites regard it as an elemental clash between Good and Evil.<sup>7</sup>

Mu'awiya's seizure of power marked the end of one phase and the beginning of another. The first four caliphs, from Abu Bakr to Ali, are known to most Muslims as the *Rashidun* or 'Rightly Guided'. From Mu'awiya onwards the caliphate became



virtually hereditary. He was ruthless in dealing with his enemies or those who might become dangerous: although Ali's elder son Hasan had renounced all claims to the caliphate in 662, Mu'awiya bribed Hasan's wife to poison him in 669. Hussein, meanwhile, remained in Jeddah, eschewing politics and instead devoting himself to study; he became an inspiring teacher of religious jurisprudence. Tabari notes that Mu'awiya seems to have respected him, for he urged his son Yazid to show magnanimity towards Hussein if ever he had him in his power.

When Mu'awiya died in 680, Yazid desired above all to receive homage as Caliph, especially from those who, like Hussein, had some claim to the caliphate. He wrote to the governor of Medina, where Hussein was then living, and ordered him to force Hussein to take the oath of allegiance. If Hussein refused, the governor was to cut off his head and send it to Yazid. Hussein's response was reported to be defiant: 'I am ready for martyrdom because Yazid's becoming the caliph of Muslims is the death and disintegration of Islam'.<sup>8</sup> At about this time some citizens of Kufa sent a letter to Hussein pledging their support and insisting they were ready to die for him. Hussein dispatched his cousin Muslim bin Aqil to Kufa to discover whether the letter expressed the general attitude of the citizens. In Kufa Muslim was made welcome and twelve thousand citizens pledged their loyalty to Hussein.

As soon as Yazid heard of these events he ordered his henchman 'Ubeydullah bin Ziyad to go to Kufa as Governor and end the rebellion; he was also to kill Muslim on sight. Disguising himself as Hussein, 'Ubeydullah made his way to Kufa, where the people welcomed him enthusiastically as grandson of the Prophet. In this way he was able to ascertain the people's support for Hussein. Meanwhile Muslim wrote to Hussein urging him to declare his challenge to the Umayyads.

'Ubeydullah bin Ziyad began his mission. He gathered all the city officials who were responsible for the different districts and ordered them to report all strangers, dissenters and disobeyers of orders. Muslim had the opportunity to kill 'Ubeydullah but his scruples prevented him from carrying out the assassination. When Muslim saw that the situation was worsening, he ordered one of his followers to call upon the others by way of an agreed secret password in order to put an end to the predicament.



It is said that four thousand men responded to his call; however their numbers gradually declined as they deserted along the way so that by the time they had reached the palace there were no more than three hundred men.<sup>9</sup> Muslim did not act quickly enough, and so he gave ample opportunity for the men to lose heart. According to Tabari, the women would approach their sons or brothers and say: 'Leave them – others will take your place' and the men would approach their sons or brothers and say: 'Soon the Syrians will invade, then who will defend us?' So they continued to desert until he was left with less than ten men.

Muslim was forced to become a fugitive; he was betrayed, captured and brought to 'Ubeydullah. Despite being a captive, Muslim managed to send a messenger to inform Hussein of what had happened and to request that he stay away, but unfortunately the messenger reached Hussein after his departure for Kufa from Mecca, where he had been staying. During his journey Hussein passed a place known as Thu Hasim where the first meeting took place between him and the leader of the Umayyad scouting party, al-Hurr al-Riyahi. Al-Hurr and his forces were thirsty and had run out of water, so Hussein ordered his men to give them and their horses water from their own diminishing supplies. When the time came for prayers, Hussein led the congregation with his men and his enemies together behind him. He then continued on his way to Kufa where he, his family and his small force were surrounded by Yazid's much larger army at Karbala, some 70 kilometres from his destination. Yazid's force, commanded by 'Omar bin Sa'ad and Shimr bin Jaw'than, cut Hussein, his family and his followers off from provisions for eight days, denying them access to water. Although Hussein's half-brother Abbas managed to reach the river and return with a few waterskins, Hussein's family, especially the women and children, suffered badly for three days.<sup>10</sup>

On the night of the ninth day, when Hussein realised that a battle between his force and that of the Umayyads was imminent, instead of urging his men to fight he told them that he could offer them nothing but death and martyrdom. He ordered the lights in the tent to be extinguished and said 'I think that tomorrow is our day with the enemy. You are free from all obligations towards me so I recommend that you all leave. It is a dark night, so use it to your advantage and disappear without being



seen'.<sup>11</sup> A few did leave, but most stood by him to the end. To his sister's grief-stricken lamentation Hussein responded calmly: 'Sister, put your trust in God, and know that man is born to die, and that the heavens shall not remain; everything shall pass away but the presence of God, who created all things by his power [...]'.<sup>12</sup>

At sunrise on the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year, the battle began. Muharram is a sacred month, and a period when, by tradition, truces are observed, and the tenth day is known as *Ashura*. Before dawn Hussein addressed his family and followers in words which now constitute the core dialogue of any *ta'ziyah* play:

Yazid made me choose one of the two: either I draw my sword and defend my honour and religion or surrender to shame [...] I am obliged to choose the first way [...] Death is the beginning of our joy. There is only one bridge between this world and the other world and that is death. If we are victorious it will not be anything new for us, and if we are killed, the world will know that we are not defeated.<sup>13</sup>

As the battle started, al-Hurr al-Riyahi realised that he was party to a vicious crime and left the Syrian ranks to join Hussein; he fought by his side until he was killed. The male members of Hussein's family continued to fight and were killed one by one during the afternoon; they included his half-brother Abbas, his son Ali Akbar, and Hasan's son Qasim. At last only Hussein, the women and Hussein's small sick son, Ali Zainul Abideen were left alive. It was then Hussein's turn to fight, whereupon he fought long and bravely, meeting his death at the hands of Shimr bin Jaw'than. After having killed Hussein, Shimr dismounted from his horse and severed the head of the Prophet's grandson.' Omar bin Sa'ad then ordered one of his companions, Ishaq bin Haywa, to ride over and trample Hussein's body.<sup>14</sup>

Yazid's soldiers then set the tents on fire and made the women and children captives. The headless bodies of Hussein and his warriors were left to be consumed by carrion eaters, and on the morning of 12 Muharram the army left Karbala for Kufa, and thence to Damascus, bearing 72 heads on the points of their lances, and taking the captives to be humiliated before Yazid. It is said that Yazid mutilated Hussein's head but was rebuked by an old man, a former companion of the Prophet.<sup>15</sup> The final resting-place of Hussein's head is not known, but his tomb at Karbala, and his father



Ali's at An-Najaf - both south of Baghdad - 'are holy places of pilgrimage for Shi'as, many of whom feel that a pilgrimage to both sites is equal to a pilgrimage to Mecca'.<sup>16</sup>

As we noted in the previous chapter, a key element in understanding the philosophy and psychology of both Shi'ism and the *ta'ziyah* is *shahadah* (martyrdom), which drove Hussein, his family and his followers towards their tragic destiny. Hussein knew he had no chance of defeating Yazid's forces, yet he willingly consented in order to protect the basis of Islam. His death has made him a living symbol of righteous self-sacrifice and a role model for those who seek truth and strive for justice. His actions show that he was aware of the temporary nature of military victory, but that 'a victory achieved through suffering and sacrifice is everlasting and leaves permanent imprints on man's consciousness'.<sup>17</sup>

In Persian language and culture Hussein's name has become synonymous with martyrdom, self-sacrifice, purity and justice; he is regarded as a religious, national and mythical hero. As Crone remarks, his martyrdom became to Shi'ites 'an event of almost the same importance (though not the same meaning) as the crucifixion of Jesus to Christians'.<sup>18</sup> The meaning of the persecution of Ali's house for Shi'ites, and particularly for Persians, is explained by William Haas:

The Shiite creed itself must be interpreted as a defensive measure which does credit to the instinct of self-assertion and self-preservation of the Persian mind. The Persians adopted and developed Shi'ism because its mystic character struck a congenial note and offered a wide field for theological and metaphysical speculations, as well as for varied emotions. No doubt in the recesses of their soul the Persians, at least those of the first centuries after the Islamic conquest, identified themselves with the persecution and martyrdom of Ali and his house. They, too, were a defeated and humiliated people whose rights and deepest convictions had been violated and trodden upon.... The great psychological function of the Shi'a Schism was defence and self-protection against the new religion.<sup>19</sup>

Such a view seems to give support to 'Aziza's opinion, discussed in the first part of this chapter, that the *ta'ziyah* developed as a ritual expressing Persian nationalistic and political agendas. Nasr takes a different view, arguing that Shi'ism is integral to



Islamic orthodoxy and that the main difference between it and Sunnism is psychological.<sup>20</sup> But it is undeniable that the two main branches of Islam are different in terms of both religion and politics, especially with regard to political leadership and the social system. The first civil wars split the *umma* into rival communities; 'each was seen by its members as a vehicle for salvation, each was a potential sect, and its members would certainly do their best to insulate themselves in social terms'.<sup>21</sup> It was not until the end of the ninth century that both 'Uthman and Ali were accepted as rightly guided caliphs by the majority of Muslims. This was a political decision designed to prevent further bloodshed. But the particular nature of Shi'ism continued to develop, and this, together with an emphasis on protest, revolt and martyrdom, none of which have been salient in Sunni Islam, combined to make of the *ta'ziyah*, especially in Iran, a 'holy theatre' that 'has been able to address the metaphysical and psychological needs of Shi'a believers to this day, reflecting not only the religious but also the cultural and political life of the country'.<sup>22</sup>

The origin and development of the *ta'ziyah* are fascinating in themselves, and deserve a brief discussion here. '*Ta'ziyah*' is a verbal noun derived from the Arabic verb '*azza*', meaning 'to mourn', 'to console' or 'to express sympathy with', and so means 'consolation' or 'offering condolences'. While the *ta'ziyah* did not attain the form in which we know it today until the mid-eighteenth century, it seems that the expression of guilt and grief began almost immediately after the return of the women and children of Hussein's household to Kufa. Caliph Yazid had allowed them to leave his court in Damascus shortly after their arrival there, presumably because he did not consider them a threat to his power. The Kufans, confronted by the suffering of these women, and especially by the dignity in grief of Shahrbanu and Zaynab, Hussein's wife and sister, responded by demonstrating their penitence in an extreme version of '*azza*, including displays of physical self-punishment. That this demonstration developed into the annual ritual of the *ta'ziyah* can partly be attributed to the social status of the women and their relationship to the Prophet.<sup>23</sup>

Following the battle of Karbala, elegies for the martyrs were composed and recited.<sup>24</sup> Poetic compositions were not the only reaction, however; many of those who had invited Hussein to Kufa soon sought to avenge his murder. Because they wished to



atone for their sin through action, they were known as *tawwabun* ('Penitents'). In 684 they attempted to make a stand against the Umayyads, but their revolt was easily crushed by the forces of Caliph 'Abd al-Malik. Before undertaking their doomed rebellion they visited the grave of Hussein at Karbala, 'where they gave themselves up to wild and unprecedented expressions of grief, weeping and wailing for the suffering and tragic death of the grandson of the Prophet'.<sup>25</sup> Their suicidal mission and the elegies composed for the martyr show that the tragedy of Karbala very soon acquired a religious and devotional significance.<sup>26</sup>

It took almost three centuries, however, before this significance became institutionalised into some form of ritual commemoration, partly because it took so long for Shi'ism to develop into a coherent body of dogmas, practices and values. During this period Sunnism also evolved, largely in response to Shi'ism and other heterodox movements of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. By the mid-Abbasid period the caliph's power was limited in geographical extent and largely nominal, and power was exercised in Iran and Iraq by the Buyids (932-1062), under whose protection Shi'ism flourished and was able to develop. In 963 the Buyid ruler Mu'zzu'd Dawla ordered that Hussein's martyrdom should be officially commemorated during the first ten days of Muharram. The next year the mourning included the recital of elegies, the beating of the head and the face, and the bringing of mourning processions into the streets, but no recitation or dramatic presentation of the events of Karbala had yet evolved. The mourning ritual, however, continued until the fall of the Buyids.<sup>27</sup>

Little is known about the development of such rituals over the next few centuries, since it took place in isolated communities under the patronage of local Shi'ite rulers. Then, in 1501, the Safavid dynasty established a powerful Shi'ite state centred on the Iranian plateau. This was to prove a turning-point, since it provided the conditions in which the *ta'ziyah* could be developed as a form of ritual drama. The initial cultural impetus was provided by a book written by the religious orator Hussein Vaiz Kashafi, *Rawzat al-Shuhada (The Garden of Martyrs)*. This seminal work, written in the first years of the Safavid period, synthesised 'historical accounts, elegiac poems, theological tracts, and hagiographies into a chain of short narratives that together



formed a much larger narrative'. The book also articulated a complex set of canonised doctrines, which 'stressed the courage, piety and sacrifice of Hussein and his followers of Karbala'.<sup>28</sup>

The *Rawzat* initiated a genre of pious narratives which were read aloud in mourning rituals called *rawza-khani* by specially trained speakers, whose objective was to move the audience to tears through their recitation of the tragic events of Karbala. This ritual continues today, and has been viewed by Shi'ites as a means of achieving salvation; through it the mourner develops what might be called a spiritual empathy with, and sympathy for, the martyrs – hence the often-repeated sentiment 'Anyone who cries for Hussein or causes someone to cry for Hussein will go directly to Paradise'. In the early years of the *rawza-khani* many mourners would leave the mosques after the recitation, singing lines from the poems and beating their chests. Malekpour argues that 'this para-theatrical event, with its use of voice and movement, was the first theatrical representation of the Karbala stories'.<sup>29</sup>

The *ta'ziyah* as a passion play evolved from the amalgamation of the *rawza-khani* and the mourning processions. The language of the stories was developed by a number of writers from Kashefi's original, whose form was already close to the dramatic and theatrical. The elegiac style became richer in visual imagery and colloquial language, elements that were to become important elements of the *ta'ziyah*. By the nineteenth century a form of poetry had been developed, notably by Qa'ani (1807-53), that was highly theatrical and needed only to be spoken by separate characters rather than by a single narrator to become 'theatre' in the full sense :

What rains down? Blood! Who? The eye! How? Day and Night! Why?  
 From grief! What grief? The grief of the Monarch of Karbala!  
 What was his name? Hussein! Of whose race? Ali's!  
 Who was his mother? Fatima! Who was his grandsire? Mustafa!  
 How was it with him? He fell a martyr! Where? In the plain of Mariya!  
 Karbala!<sup>30</sup>

At first the *rawza-khani* was purely an act of devotion, but gradually the performers became professionals and performances became commercial enterprises as well as religious events. The form also changed: at the end of each *rawza* a *maddah* or



eulogist would sing religious verses relating to Hussein's martyrdom and be answered by the mourners in a 'call and response' pattern. The evening processions of mourners, noted above, began to include symbolic props such as coffins, flags and animals including a man in a lion skin beating his head in mourning, indicating that the king of the beasts grieved for the martyr. The lion was the emblematic animal of Iran, and so this demonstration symbolised the mourning of the entire country as well as the natural world. The processional form became even more dramatic through the introduction of actors impersonating the central characters of the Karbala story. For example, 'Hussein' and 'Shimr' would ride their horses the length of the procession, brandishing their swords and challenging each other.<sup>31</sup>

The *rawza-khani* was not the only form of story-telling to influence the developments of the *ta'ziyah*. In the Safavid period there were two main groups of story-teller: the *hamla-khan*, who told of the battles of Ali, Hussein's father; and the *Shah nameh-khan*, who recounted the epic stories of Ferdawsi's *Shah-nameh* (*Book of Kings*). Ferdawsi's epic has been compared with the *Iliad*, and one of the stories included in it was the death of Siavush, which some scholars have claimed was important in prefiguring the passion of Hussein. We cannot examine this argument here,<sup>32</sup> but it is certainly possible that some elements of the *ta'ziyah* were derived from pre-Islamic rituals performed in Iran, which had certain features in common with other rituals performed in ancient Mesopotamia. Siavush is related to Tammuz (Greek Adonis), the god of spring and flowers, green plants and young animals of the herd. The mourning ritual for the Babylonian god's death and the celebration of his resurrection involved procession and recitation, two elements important in the *ta'ziyah*.<sup>33</sup>

Another ritual of death and resurrection that incorporated theatrical elements but never developed into drama proper was the ancient Egyptian *Abydos Passion Play*, which was performed in honour of Osiris. His Mysteries were performed once a year at Abydos, and although little is known about the rituals, he is another figure martyred by a scheming adversary. In Osiris' case the rival is Seth, the god of darkness; Siavush is killed by Garsivaz, and Hussein is martyred by Yazid. It is difficult to deny the resemblance between Siavush and Hussein. Both are innocent



victims; both are symbols of goodness and mercy; both are brought low by a jealous antagonist, defeated in battle and decapitated. Malekpour is sympathetic to the argument that the *ta'ziyah* as a ritual mourning festival has clear precedents in pre-Islamic Persia: 'The passion of Siyavush bears too close a resemblance to the Ta'ziyeh of the Imam in ritual, imagery and emotive understanding to be ignored in an explanation of the emergence of the genre'.<sup>34</sup>

The parallels between Tammuz, Osiris, Siavush and Hussein are indeed fascinating and deserve further study, which may reveal that the *ta'ziyah* has very ancient roots (the Zoroastrian mourning rituals for Siavush were held by early Islamic scholars to be based on myths three thousand years old). As for the *ta'ziyah* as an Islamic drama, it had developed into a fully theatrical form by the beginning of the Qajar period (1796- 1925). History has not been kind to the Qajar shahs, but they were great supporters of the *ta'ziyah* and enabled it to expand rapidly in scope and popularity. By the second half of the nineteenth century the original subject-matter, Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala, had been elaborated and broadened. The plays were increasingly performed not in the open air but in a purpose-built theatre known as a *takiya* or *Husseiniyya*, which encouraged the development of stage craft. Shah Nasir al-Din (1848-98) was inordinately fond of the *ta'ziyah* and sponsored many performances. The genre's popularity increased and every small town had at least one *takiya*; Tehran had over 200.<sup>35</sup>

The most famous *takiya* of all was the Takiya Dawlat (Royal Takiya), a huge and magnificent circular playhouse built by Nasir al-Din after he had seen the Royal Albert Hall while on a visit to London in 1873. The building was some 25 metres high and 60 metres across, topped by a large dome. Ordinary spectators sat on the ground around the raised circular stage, 18 metres in diameter, and were separated from it by space 4 metres wide. The Shah, his court and other dignitaries occupied three stories of boxes. A pulpit was used in the *rawza-khani*. Other theatres were much simpler, having evolved from the caravanserai; many were constructed in the courtyards of houses, with a temporary stage built over the pool. The immense popularity of the *ta'ziyah* in the latter half of the nineteenth century is attested by the



enormous number of these theatres – even moderately large villages would have one – but the twentieth century saw a sharp decline in the fortunes of the *ta'ziyah*.<sup>36</sup>

While the people saw the *ta'ziyah* as means of fulfilling their religious duties, the government and aristocracy saw it as a tool they could use to protect their power and control the people. The association of the *ta'ziyah* with the corrupt rule of a despised autocracy led to its decline, which continued after an alliance of Iranian nationalists, intellectuals and bourgeoisie overthrew the Qajars in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and established the first National Parliament. In 1925 they supported the installation of the Pahlavi regime, which combined nationalism with a pro-Western stance. The new regime adopted a policy designed to radically transform Iranian society on the European model, and it and its allies desired to weaken the country's religious traditions, which they regarded as reactionary and primitive. For this reason, the first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah, discouraged the *ta'ziyah* and the *rawza-khani* in 1928 and a few years later banned them altogether.<sup>37</sup>

Although the Royal Takiya fell into disrepair and was demolished in 1948, the *ta'ziyah* did not disappear completely. Performers sought support from the lower classes, who still had faith in the religion and its traditions, and found it in the small towns and villages, where the police were sympathetic and unwilling to enforce the law. The *ta'ziyah*'s survival was more seriously threatened during the 1960s, when the Shah, with the support of the United States, implemented a policy of rapid westernisation. Iranian theatre was dominated by the work of Western playwrights, and few paid any attention to the traditional and folk forms. In 1967 a *ta'ziyah* performance, *Hurr*, was presented at the first Festival of Arts in Shiraz owing to Peter Brook's petitioning of the Queen, but in the opinion of many this performance, directed by a well-known television director, was not a success. It seemed as if the *ta'ziyah* was in terminal decline and was doomed to extinction.<sup>38</sup>

Its fortunes were revived by the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which established a regime that promised the Iranian people the creation of a society based on Islamic values. The new government started to support the *ta'ziyah* through the Dramatic Arts Centre of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and other organisations,



despite the reservations of some of the clergy who disapproved of music and the performing arts, and especially of the extreme displays of grief that were a feature of the mourning processions. The regime realised that the popularity of the *ta'ziyah* could not be ignored and decided to use it to publicise the Shi'a faith and to aid in the mobilisation of the people during the war with Iraq (1980-88). Needless to say, Saddam Hussein was identified with Yazid, and 'the heroism depicted in the *ta'ziyah* was enlisted to increase the fighting spirit of the Iranian combatants and to bring solace to those who had lost their loved ones'.<sup>39</sup> Today, throughout Iran and in other Shi'ite communities in the Middle East, it is possible to see *ta'ziyah* performances during the month of Muharram as well as at the many festivals held throughout the year.

As al-Khozai notes, the *ta'ziyah* is more than the dramatic representation of the events of Karbala, as it comprises the *majalis at-ta'ziyah* (mourning assemblies), the *mawakib al-'azza* (mourning processions) and *mashahid 'Ashura'* (presentations of *Ashura*).<sup>40</sup> The first of these are held twice a day, every morning and evening, throughout the first ten days of Muharram. In these assemblies, as we noted above, a *Qari* (reciter) narrates the story of the martyrdom of Hussein and his companions in a dramatic manner designed to move his audience to tears. The processions are essentially demonstrations of grief during which the mourners may chant lamentations, beat their chests with the palms of their hands, lacerate their backs with chains, or cut their foreheads and allow the blood to flow freely. Parts of the *Ashura* drama may be enacted in pageants. The presentations of *Ashura* are the various productions of the passion plays, and it is these with which our discussion is mainly concerned.

We know very little about the authors of the *ta'ziyah*, since they considered their involvement an act of devotion and hence preferred to remain anonymous; nor do we have a good estimation of how many were composed, or even how many are extant. We can say, however, that all the plays 'share a basic plot which depicts the conflict between good and evil'.<sup>41</sup> The confrontation takes place between 'Olya', the good characters, and 'Ashghya', the evil ones. The plays can be divided into four groups on the basis of structural features and subject matters: prologues, episodes, sub-



episodes and comic episodes. Prologues (*pish-vagheh*) do not have independent or complete plots and are often connected to episodes, which are always about a Karbala event, although prologues need not be. The connection is made through a digression (*guriz*) from the Karbala event.<sup>42</sup>

The episodes (*vagheh*) are the main plays of the *ta'ziyah*; in them the plot and characters are connected to the Karbala events, and they are mainly concerned with the migration of Hussein and his family from Medina; the murder of his delegation to Kufa; the capture of his youngest sons; the surrounding of his camp at Karbala; the cutting off of access to water; the martyrdom of Abbas when he goes to fetch water for the women and children; the martyrdom of Qasim immediately after his marriage to Hussein's daughter; the martyrdom of Hussein's eldest sons; the martyrdom of his 72 followers; the martyrdom of Hussein himself; and the capture and deportation to Damascus of the women and children. Other characters may take centre stage; we have noted the performance of *Hurr* at the 1967 Shiraz Festival. All these plays are usually performed during the first ten days of Muharram, and in no particular order, the exception being *The Martyrdom of Imam Hussein*, which is always performed on the tenth, Ashura, since it was on that day that Hussein was martyred.<sup>43</sup>

Sub-episodes (*gusheh*), like episodes, have complete plots, but present both religious and non-religious subjects and characters taken from history, mythology, literature and daily life. Particularly after the fall of the Qajars, the *ta'ziyah* developed secular and even comic subjects, although it did not give rise to a separate secular genre. Most sub-episodes mix reality and fantasy, past and present, and tragedy and comedy. Subjects include Cain and Abel, Job, Joseph and his brothers, Layla and her obsessed lover Majnun, Timur (Tamburlane) and Nasseredin Shah (a contemporary character). One of the most famous sub-episodes is *Moses and the Wandering Dervish*, which was adapted for a performance in 1988 at a small New England college, Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. We shall consider this production in due course, together with some others mounted outside the Middle East. Comic episodes grew out of the mockery of Ashghya (Hussein's enemies), and while they refer to the events of Karbala the emphasis is on humour. Here the subjects include the jests of Ali's sly and cynical Ethiopian servant, Qanbar, and the wedding of



Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Interestingly, the latter includes masked actors impersonating animals, with whom Solomon discusses details of his wedding.<sup>44</sup>

The most elaborate plays were written during the Qajar period by a number of collaborating, anonymous authors, but these scripts were often substantially modified during the performing process, by poets (both professional and amateur), copyists and performers, and above all by the Master of the Ta'ziyah, the person in overall charge. How were (and are) these plays performed? We should bear in mind that they were constantly changed by performers who responded to particular situations and audiences, and that as they are essentially performance pieces, they 'need to be seen rather than just read if we are to understand their true worth and power'.<sup>45</sup>

The *ta'ziyah* developed from ritual mourning processions, and even when it moved into enclosed or roofed spaces and became more elaborate it did not lose the powerful interaction between stage and audience, since it was able to retain its ritualistic qualities and impose its own 'open space' style on the architecture of the playhouse. The use of an open space not only determines the style of performance but also has an effect upon every element of the production, since the focus is on the living relationship between actors and audience. The style is (or has been until very recently) anti-illusory. As Malekpour remarks, the players

[...] distance themselves from a detailed psychological approach to the characters and create a stylized method by which they can communicate the essential elements of their characters to a huge number of spectators in an immediately recognisable fashion. This type of theatre asks actors to create the essence of their characters quickly, [...] and to distance themselves from their roles in a manner that allows them to participate in the performances not only as players but also as spectators. This makes it possible for the actor playing Shimr, the killer of Imam Hussein, to cry for his victim, since he is, at one and the same time, an actor and a spectator. The audience is able to distinguish between these two elements of the stage performance.<sup>46</sup>

The anti-illusory character of the acting is most manifest in the behaviour of the director, the Master of the Ta'ziyah, who is prominently visible on stage during the whole performance. He will regularly interrupt the action in order to draw the audience's attention to a particular scene or encourage them to voice their sorrow and grief. He carries the script of every role and directs the action, and the actors also



carry their own scripts, which they consult without concealment, even when they know the role by heart. This style emphasises movement and gesture over the words of the text, though these are by no means unimportant. There is no need for realistic scenery or props, since this is symbolic theatre. The action is preceded by an address by the narrator or *rawza-khan*, who recounts the tragic events to be portrayed by the actors. The actors are, as we have mentioned, divided into Olya and Ashghya: the former present their characters in a serene and dignified manner, both in their facial expressions (where these can be seen, since they are not visible when the male actor is playing a veiled female) and their gestures. They sing their parts in the classical Persian modes, while the antagonists speak theirs. All parts, whether heroic or villainous, are in rhymed prose. The Ashghya declaim their lines in an extremely histrionic way, often making clear that they are not to be identified with their characters; this is necessary for reasons of personal safety, and has not always been effective in preventing violence. All the actors remain on stage, even during scenes in which they have no part.

Everything in the production is directed towards the realisation of a communal religious performance. For this reason the style of presentation is minimalist and symbolic. The actors indicate the glare of the Sun by placing a hand over the eyes, and darkness by moving slowly and carefully. The Euphrates is represented by a bowl of water, a grove of palms by a branch. An awning stands for the encampment; a riderless horse is always a sign of its master's death. When a protagonist drapes his shoulders with a white cloth representing a shroud (*kafan*), the gesture indicates that he is prepared to become a martyr and will soon be killed. Hussein's death and decapitation are symbolised by the freeing of a dove. Historical accuracy is not taken into account in the design of costumes. The male actors playing women are enveloped in baggy black garments and are veiled; as for the male characters, the Olya dress predominantly in green, symbolizing Paradise, the family of the Prophet and Islam, while the Ashghya wear red, indicating bloodshed, cruelty and oppression. Hussein and the male members of his family may wear white costumes with green accents, while his enemies may wear sunglasses to emphasise their villainy. Music is provided by drums, cymbals, trumpets and other brass instruments,



and *nay* (reed flutes). Throughout the performance the audience participates vigorously, calling out, striking their chests, weeping, and waving green banners at key moments; as we have mentioned, physical attacks on the leading Ashghya are not unknown. The unified expressions of grief shared by the actors and the spectator-performers and the flexibility of representation serve to reinforce the connection between the action and everyday life and emphasise that between the Karbala tragedy and contemporary political conflicts. Thus during the Iran-Iraq war Saddam Hussein was identified with Yazid, and in Lebanon the Shi'ites of Mount 'Amil identify their Palestinian neighbours with Hussein and Israel with Yazid's oppressive rule.<sup>47</sup>

Attitudes to the *ta'ziyah* have varied widely both within and outside the Islamic world. As al-Khozai remarks, it 'is practised by one sect only and for sectarian reasons it is ignored by the majority of Muslims, who take the passive part of unwelcome onlookers'.<sup>48</sup> Within Shi'ite communities, and especially within Iran, a distinction should be made between the ordinary people, who are generally devoted to Hussein and the rituals of the *ta'ziyah*, and those who view the mourning rites, and particularly their more extreme manifestations, as retrogressive. There is also the question of the attitude of the Iranian clergy, which we mentioned earlier. Besides being opposed to music and theatre generally, many religious critics condemned the public portrayal of imams on the stage and, after 1979, sought to impose their views on the Islamic government and the public. They may yet succeed in suppressing the *ta'ziyah*.<sup>49</sup> Badawi's view is that 'in the study of the Arabic theatre the *ta'ziyah* remains of very limited relevance',<sup>50</sup> an opinion that al-Khozai would endorse. Badawi claims that 'the form did not develop beyond the stage of crude and disorganized representation' and that it should 'more properly be viewed as an extension of religious ritual than as drama'. He acknowledges, however, that it is a dramatic spectacle of a tragic nature and emphasises that 'it explodes the commonly held fallacy that Islam as such, and not 'puritan' Islam, is incompatible with dramatic representation'.<sup>51</sup>

The *ta'ziyah* was virtually unknown in the West until recently; although the processions of self-lacerating mourners in Iran and Lebanon have been occasionally



seen on television screens since 1979, few Westerners have witnessed, or even heard of, the *ta'ziyah* as a form of dramatic representation. In the centuries before 1970 only two Europeans paid it serious attention. The Comte de Gobineau saw a performance in the mid-1860s and considered it to be 'a great and serious affair, engaging the heart and life of the people who have given birth to it'. This quotation is taken from Matthew Arnold's translation of Gobineau, which he included in a lecture published as one of his *Essays in Criticism* in 1871. Arnold disagreed with Gobineau's argument that the *ta'ziyah* should be ranked with Greek drama, comparing it instead to the Ammergau Passion Play.<sup>52</sup> After Arnold's essay, which is not without Victorian prejudices concerning Islam, the *ta'ziyah* disappeared from the view of Western scholars for a century.

In the twentieth century theatre pioneers such as Artaud and Brecht took an interest in Oriental theatre, but this did not extend to the theatre of the Middle East, and indeed interest generally centred on China, Japan and South Asia. One reason for the attention paid by pioneers and scholars to non-Western forms and traditions has been their belief that the vital element of the close and interactive relationship between spectators and performers, evident in Greek and Elizabethan theatre, had been weakened by the introduction of the proscenium arch and the advent of naturalism.

Important twentieth-century theatre artists such as Artaud, Grotowski and Brook have called for the re-establishment of this relationship. Malekpour argues that the *ta'ziyah* is always performed in an empty space, whether inside or outside a *takiya*. Its form of theatre in the round reminds us of its origin in ritual:

This round empty space creates a sense of holiness for the Ta'ziyeh that cannot be achieved in a formal space that divides the audience from the performers. This is holy emptiness has been created in the Ta'ziyeh to reflect the atmosphere and the architecture of the Islamic mosques, which, unlike Christian churches, have very little decorative embellishment.<sup>53</sup>

Malekpour emphasises that this empty space 'is filled with the creativity and imagination of both the players and the spectators, and this in turn reflects the sacred nature of the *Ta'ziyeh*'.<sup>54</sup> He agrees to some extent with Nasr in being sceptical that a



theatre that exhibits such a unity between players and performers can retain its power and significance outside its original religious context. As we noted in the previous chapter, Nasr argues that a sceptical audience 'destroys that unity between performer and onlooker that belongs to the very essence of the *ta'ziyah*'.<sup>55</sup> Nasr is fearful that such performances may relegate the *ta'ziyah* to the realms of the merely exotic and 'interesting'. Similarly, Malekpour considers that the performance of *Hurr* given at the 1967 Shiraz festival 'had a negative effect on the Ta'ziyeh and hindered its revitalization'.<sup>56</sup> This, he argues, echoing Nasr, was because it 'was performed in a Western-style festival for an audience who did not share the faith that is required to experience fully this kind of tragedy'.<sup>57</sup>

If Nasr and Malekpour are right, it follows that performances presented in a secular or alien context must diminish the power and meaning of the *ta'ziyah*. And yet Malekpour praises Peter Brook for 'introducing the Ta'ziyeh as a form of theatre to Western theatre scholars and, more importantly, to theatre performers'.<sup>58</sup> Brook was profoundly affected by Iranian culture and directed Mahin Tajadod's *Orghast*, based on ancient Zoroastrian religious writings, at Shiraz in 1971. He was also directly and indirectly responsible for bringing the *ta'ziyah* to Western audiences. The open space of the *ta'ziyah* resonated with his conception of the 'empty space' in which truly creative theatre can occur, and he was forcibly struck by the ways in which the performance brought out the mystical nature of the *ta'ziyah* through a simple yet totally effective *mise en scene*. After attending a performance of a *ta'ziyah* in Avignon in 1991, Brook recalled his first experience of *ta'ziyah* performance in a village setting:

One of the most important experiences of my voyage was to see a Ta'ziyeh performance in a village near the holy city of Mashad. It was then that I understood the correct meaning of the theatre. [...] The fire of life between actors and spectators is not produced unless the relationship between these two is the right one. [...] There were three hundred people there who were deeply involved with the death of Imam Hussein. When he overcame his enemies, they were all overjoyed as if they were really fighting themselves. And when he was targeted by the unjust arrows of the enemy, they began to cry together. [...] I have always been in search of such theatre, and I think everyone else has been searching for it in the theatre. It is interesting to note that when all the elements are placed in the right position, there is no need for the assistance of realism and technical



elements such as setting. There the theatre becomes 'the mirror of the invisible'.<sup>59</sup>

Brook implies that it would be difficult but not impossible to create a theatre that would be 'the mirror of the invisible'. But it does not follow that the *ta'ziyah* itself can be presented to Western audiences, or even to non-Shi'ites, without a damaging loss of 'the fire of life between actors and spectators'. Seeking to present this apparently culture-bound theatrical phenomenon to Westerners, a number of individuals have mounted productions, which are documented in an issue of *The Drama Review* devoted to the *ta'ziyah*.<sup>60</sup> The number is guest edited by Peter J. Chelkowski, an authority on the *ta'ziyah*, and the articles discuss a variety of topics including the few performances presented in the West in the last twenty years. Although some of these productions were generally agreed to be successful, the public profile of the *ta'ziyah* was virtually unaffected, despite Brook's advocacy.

The key figure in the presentation of the *ta'ziyah* to Western audience has not been Brook himself but his associate, the Iranian director Mohammad B. Ghaffari. He became interested in theatre as a boy, and later worked with the Theatre Workshop of Tehran. He first met Brook in 1969 and took him to see a *ta'ziyah* in a village in his native province of Khorasan. After the 1967 *ta'ziyah* performances at Shiraz had been judged failures, there was a universal feeling in the mid-1970s in Iran that the *ta'ziyah* was moribund if not actually dead. Ghaffari, however, believed that it was still alive in remote villages and travelled all over the country for a year, at the end of which he brought performers who had retained a knowledge of the art of *ta'ziyah* to Shiraz, to prepare to perform at the 1976 Festival. Ghaffari trained and rehearsed the performers intensively for three months, and the result was acclaimed by the media and created a sensation among *ta'ziyah* performers throughout Iran, who believed that the Shiraz performers had been extravagantly rewarded. Ghaffari himself strongly believes that the seven 1976 performances saved the *ta'ziyah*.<sup>61</sup>

After the success of Shiraz, Ghaffari was awarded a scholarship to travel to the United States. He met Chelkowski in New York and worked at Michigan, but after nine months the Islamic Revolution occurred in Iran and he decided to stay in the



USA, eventually returning to New York to work at Columbia. After some years there he was asked to teach and direct a play at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. This was to be the first production of a *ta'ziyah* outside the Middle East, or perhaps it should be called a play based on a *ta'ziyah*, since Ghaffari, inspired by the ideas of his mentor Peter Brook, departed from tradition in several ways.<sup>62</sup>

Ghaffari was invited to direct a *ta'ziyah* at Trinity by Milla Cozart Riggio, Professor of English at the College, in the spring of 1988. Riggio, a medievalist, wished to change Trinity's practice of performing a Christian medieval play every year and to step outside the Christian tradition. Ghaffari chose the sub-episode (*gusheh*) *Moses and the Wandering Dervish*, which contains a digression (*guriz*) from the Karbala story. When performed separately the emphasis is on the Sufi aspect of the *gusheh*. The Trinity play was based on a text from northern Iran, but much of this was replaced by lines by Rumi, the great Persian mystic poet of the thirteenth century. The play concerns a dervish living in a desert hermitage who cannot reconcile the existence of Hell with the notion of a compassionate and merciful God until Moses shows him, through a *guriz*, the tragedy of Karbala. The play was staged in English and the *guriz* showed not only the Karbala scene but an image from the Vietnam War.<sup>63</sup>

The introduction of contemporary politics was not the only innovation; Brook's influence on Ghaffari was evident in the cosmopolitanism of the production. American gospel songs were performed by the angel Gabriel and by Moses, while a Korean singer and dancer played the dervish. Indian flute music was specially composed by the American Steve Gorn. Riggio comments that the play was thus 'a parable of our times, possible only in a world that simultaneously encodes and erases identity, a world at once more global and more local than at any other point within modern memory'.<sup>64</sup> Ghaffari chose this *gusheh* to avoid a narrow religious interpretation and because a production of a major *ta'ziyah* would have required specialist performers, especially singers.<sup>65</sup> For Riggio the main motivation was political; it was important to create a theatrical event that would take a stand against a world 'where religious belief coalesces with and helps to create a sense of identity



grounded in insularity and opposition. At Trinity in 1988, we found it impossible to separate aesthetics from politics'.<sup>66</sup>

The production appears to have been a success, despite Ghaffari's initial misgivings. He still believes that a non-Muslim audience 'would miss the religious dimension of the drama' but argues that 'theatrical forms are constant and have a great impact on the spectators'.<sup>67</sup> In the case of the Trinity production, however, the impact was not communal in the way it would have been in the Middle East. In Riggio's words, the traditional play designed for interactive performance was transformed

into a modern drama celebrating the power of art and the role of the artist in a world characterized not by community but by the alienated isolation of exile [...] with each silent viewer isolated in a moment of private catharsis rather than raucous community.<sup>68</sup>

The Trinity production was to prove an exception in Ghaffari's involvement in bringing the *ta'ziyah* to Western audiences, since from then on his work in this area would be with Iranian performers staging major episodes. In 1991 a group of 20 musicians and actors gave three major *ta'ziyahs*, in Avignon, as part of a group of over 100 Iranian artists. Ghaffari was a guest director, and the Director of the Festival d'Avignon considered the event to have been a landmark: 'The *ta'ziyah* was a great success in Avignon and the performers were able to build bridges with the audience. The French press wrote rave reviews'.<sup>69</sup> Ghaffari's main reservation was that the Tehran performers contained only five good singers and were not skilled horsemen: 'I think it is very important for *ta'ziyah*, especially the epic *ta'ziyah*, to have horses – horses give a completely different dimension and life to the performance. Without horses, the play doesn't have the same power'.<sup>70</sup>

In 2000 the Festival d'Automne in Paris, under Alain Crombecque, who had been Director at Avignon in 1991, invited Ghaffari to direct Iranian performers in a *ta'ziyah*. He engaged some of those he had worked with in Shiraz in 1976; again about twenty actors and three musicians were involved. Five *ta'ziyahs* were performed, to good press reviews. Ghaffari prevented the use of microphones, which, together with electronic keyboards, have become common in Iranian performances:



'Nowadays in Iran they have a bad custom of using mikes which ruin the movements of the actors'.<sup>71</sup> Ghaffari explains this innovation as being due to the influence of television, and television and melodramatic films are also blamed for the corruption of the traditional anti-illusory acting style:

Paradoxically too much exaggeration in the acting style will lessen the intended effect of the drama. The most evocative acting allows the spectator to inhabit the space between actor and role with his or her thoughts and emotions. Therefore the simplest style is nearly always the most effective, even if it is broadly drawn with large vocal and physical gestures. The finest actors achieve maximum effect from minimal materials.<sup>72</sup>

The corrective for melodramatic overacting is to reinstate the values of *ta'ziyah* productions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in order to re-establish the performing standards of an earlier, more disciplined time. Ghaffari succeeded in accomplishing this by taking a firm hand with some of the actors, and Crombecque as well as the press was enthusiastic: 'The *ta'ziyeh* proved that its theatricality and drama could overcome religious, linguistic and cultural differences'.<sup>73</sup> The production transferred to Parma but poor public relations and bad weather resulted in low attendances. Lessons were learned, and when Abbas Kiarostami staged *The Martyrdom of Hussein* in Rome in 2003 the production - on one night only - was a great success, partly because Kiarostami had placed six enormous screens around the stage on which were shown black-and-white documentary footage of *ta'ziyah* spectators filmed in Iran by the director.<sup>74</sup>

Encouraged by the successes in Avignon and Paris, Ghaffari returned to New York, determined to bring the *ta'ziyah* to the Lincoln Center, in a much bigger production than the one in France. He intended to use 35 actors and musicians, but after the September 11 attacks the budget shrank. Ghaffari returned to Iran, travelled around the country and chose the actors, and after a great many difficulties 18 men and children performed three *ta'ziyahs* in July 2002. Audience and critical reaction was extremely varied, but there were standing ovations and full houses every night. Ghaffari and the performers were moved and gratified, especially as they had not expected such a warm reception, which showed that New Yorkers were mature



enough, even after September 11, to differentiate between the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and the 'martyrdom' of bin Laden's operatives.<sup>75</sup>

The *ta'ziyah* cannot be separated from contemporary politics, and in the Middle East, as we have seen, direct comparisons are drawn between the key figures of the Karbala events and individuals and nations acting in today's world. Some, ignoring the religion's quietist aspect, see Shi'ism as essentially a religion of protest, and for that reason argue that the *ta'ziyah* is essentially a mourning ritual, performed in a variety of forms, that expresses protest and cannot legitimately be used to consolidate the power of a repressive theocracy, as was done in Iran during the war with Iraq. According to this view, Shi'ism 'can only speak truth to power and destabilize it. It can never be "in power". As soon as it is "in power" it contradicts itself. Shi'ism can never politically succeed; its political success is its moral failure'.<sup>76</sup> Hamid Dabashi argues that Imam Hussein is essentially 'Hussein- e Mazlum' (Hussein who was wronged) and that his moral and political power lies in his passivity and his historical and cultural meaning as a figure of permanent revolution. In other words his charisma depends on his deliberate refusal of political power. We cannot discuss Dabashi's development of this paradoxical argument here, but it leads him to anathematise not only the current Iranian regime ('a discredited state apparatus, held together by [...] militant repression [and] an entrenched clerical clique')<sup>77</sup> but also any attempt to present the *ta'ziyah* outside its Islamic and Shi'ite context, since it is located integrally 'in the entirety of its immediate cultural universe'.<sup>78</sup> This view leads him to identify the current Tehran regime with Yazid, and to characterise attempts to anathematise and theatricalise the *ta'ziyah* as corruptions of its essential nature. Needless to say he has little time for the Shiraz Festival or for Ghaffari's efforts to introduce the *ta'ziyah* to a wider audience, to 'theatricalise' it.<sup>79</sup>

However unjust Dabashi's judgments of Ghaffari's work may seem, it brings us back to the central problem of the *ta'ziyah*: is it ritual or drama? How is it to be understood? The answer seems to be that its power as drama is drawn from 'the entirety of its immediate cultural universe'; that is, its drama is a ritual and its ritual is a drama, and both are deeply embedded in its nature as a Shi'ite cultural and political phenomenon. Others may appreciate its dramatic qualities, but it belongs to



the Shi'ite masses and not to the state, however assiduously the state may use it for its own purposes. This identification of the *ta'ziyah* with the revolutionary fervour of the oppressed is evident in the behaviour of the Shi'ites of the Mount 'Amil region of Southern Lebanon, and especially in Nabatiyya, an overwhelmingly Shi'ite city of some 35,000 people, where the mourning rituals feature self-flagellation and bleeding.

Augustus Norton notes that these (predominantly male) rituals

have proven to be remarkably persistent despite the disapproval of otherwise highly respected Shiite *mujtahids* (clerics qualified to independently interpret Islamic law). In addition, the ceremonies are an occasion for competing political organizations to contend variants of the rituals in order to exemplify piety and mobilize further support [...]. In this sense, the rituals offer no less than a public performance of ideology. For the past two decades or more, the rituals explicitly cast Israel in the role of Caliph Yazid [...].<sup>80</sup>

The competing political organisations mentioned by Norton are Amal and Hezbollah, and in 2004 the latter emerged decisively victorious in the local elections. During Ashura the Karbala tragedy is presented with great intensity in Nabatiyya, where bleeding is an important aspect of the ritual for many of the participants, who consider such practices *mustahhab* (commendable). Despite condemnatory *fatwas* by clerics of the highest rank, the blood rituals of Nabatiyya survive robustly. One resident told Norton in 2000 'What you see here is the real Islam. Islam is not found in books, it is here'; above him banners proclaimed 'Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala'.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

We saw in chapter four that although the Arab world did not begin to develop drama as a high art until the mid-nineteenth century, various manifestations of popular theatre flourished in the era between the revelation of Islam and Napoleon's campaign of 1798, and some survived into the twentieth century. The vast majority of these forms, however, were decidedly 'low' theatre, scorned by the gatekeepers of literary excellence and condemned by the clergy. Only one playwright, Ibn Danyal,



aspired to produce literature, and he chose to work in a genre, shadow theatre, that was technically limited and unable to develop. The quasi-monologue *Trial of the Caliphs* remains the only example of a truly Islamic play, and had no successors. As for the farces and satirical squibs, they persisted long after the introduction of European-influenced drama, and constituted the indigenous theatrical environment that surrounded the nineteenth-century pioneers, whose work cannot be understood without a knowledge of the history of these relatively crude entertainments.

We also argued that most of the explanations adduced for the Muslim Arabs' 'failure' to develop a literary theatre are no better than speculations produced by apologists seeking to compensate for a perceived cultural flaw; and that there is nothing in Islam itself, as opposed to 'puritan' Islam, that is incompatible with dramatic representation. Despite Sunni reservations, this can be seen most clearly in the phenomenon of the *ta'ziyah*, which remains the only indigenous theatrical genre that can be confidently regarded as both profoundly Islamic and intensely dramatic. It is, however, a tragic drama *sui generis*, which many believe cannot be presented outside its immediate cultural universe without severe distortion of its meanings, which are fully apprehensible only by the Shi'ite communities of the Middle East. Even in that context the *ta'ziyah* and its associated mourning rituals remain controversial among the clergy. Can such a phenomenon be introduced to non-Shi'ite audiences? Can it cross the cultural divide and find appreciation in the West? It seems that it can, though not without some loss of religious significance. Mohammad Ghaffari and Kiarostami have shown the way, although their work has provoked strong criticism. The *ta'ziyah* should be regarded as a cultural resource of great value, to be treated with the utmost respect but not confined by ideology to a narrow interpretation of its significance. As one Shi'ite admirer of Trinity College's unorthodox production of *Moses and the Wandering Dervish* told Milla Riggio, 'the artist is free'.<sup>82</sup>



## Endnotes for Chapter 5

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Nasr, p. 79.
- <sup>2</sup> See *Encyclopaedia of Islam, ta'ziyah*, p. 405.
- <sup>3</sup> See Malekpour, p. 20; Hourani, p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> See Malekpour, p. 20; Hourani, pp. 22-23; for a detailed discussion of the process of this division see Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> See Hourani, p. 25; Crone, p. 20.
- <sup>6</sup> Crone, p. 21.
- <sup>7</sup> See Malekpour, p. 23; Crone, p. 23.
- <sup>8</sup> See Malekpour, p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Al-Tabari, Abu Ja'far, *Tarikh Al-Tabari* (Cairo, 1989), Vol. 5, p. 369.
- <sup>10</sup> See Malekpour, p. 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Al-Tabari, p. 41.
- <sup>12</sup> Malekpour, p. 26.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26-27.
- <sup>14</sup> Al-Mas'oody, *Muruj Al-Dhahab (Meadows of Gold)* (Beirut, 1983), Vol. 3, pp. 71-72.
- <sup>15</sup> See M. Farough, *A Comparative Study of Abraham's Sacrifice in Persian Plays and Western Mystery Plays* (Tehran: Ministry of Culture Arts Press, 1952), p. 17.
- <sup>16</sup> Metz, <http://leweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/r?frd/cstdy> (23.03.07 at 2.40 pm).
- <sup>17</sup> S. Husain Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London: Longman, 1979), p. 202, in Malekpour, p. 28.
- <sup>18</sup> Crone, p. 24.
- <sup>19</sup> William S. Haas, *Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), pp. 133-34, in Malekpour, p. 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 147.
- <sup>21</sup> Crone, p. 25.
- <sup>22</sup> Malekpour, p. 29.
- <sup>23</sup> Mona Knio, *Towards a National Puppet Centre for the Lebanon*. PhD Thesis. (University of Leeds, Department of English, 1994) p. 10.
- <sup>24</sup> See Kamran Scot Aghaie, 'The Origins of the Sunni-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the *Ta'ziyah* Tradition', *The Drama Review* (New York: New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology), 49,4 (t. 188), Winter 2005, p. 45.
- <sup>25</sup> Jafri, p. 231.
- <sup>26</sup> See Johan G.V. ter Haar, 'Ta'ziye: Ritual Theatre from Shi'ite Iran', *Theatre Intercontinental*, ed. C.C Barfoot and Cobi Bordewijk (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Radopi, 1993), p. 159.
- <sup>27</sup> See Aghaie, p. 45; ter Haar, p. 159.
- <sup>28</sup> Aghaie, p. 45.
- <sup>29</sup> Malekpour, p. 52; see also Aghaie, p. 46.
- <sup>30</sup> See Malekpour, p. 53.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-57.



- 
- <sup>32</sup> Interested readers are referred to Malekpour, pp. 38-51.
- <sup>33</sup> See Malekpour, p. 38.
- <sup>34</sup> Ehsan Yarshater, *Persian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 3, in Malekpour, p. 45.
- <sup>35</sup> Ter Haar, p. 165.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165-67.
- <sup>37</sup> Malekpour, p. 156; ter Haar, p. 173.
- <sup>38</sup> See Malekpour, p. 157; ter Haar, p. 173 .
- <sup>39</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam, ta'ziya*, p. 408; see also Malekpour, p. 158.
- <sup>40</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 25.
- <sup>41</sup> Malekpour, p. 73.
- <sup>42</sup> For an example of a prologue see Malekpour, pp. 74-76.
- <sup>43</sup> Malekpour, pp. 76-78.
- <sup>44</sup> See Malekpour, pp. 84-85; ter Haar, p. 170.
- <sup>45</sup> Malekpour, p. 94.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-03.
- <sup>47</sup> See Malekpour, p. 103; ter Haar, p. 171; Knio, M. *Towards a National Puppet Centre for the Lebanon*. (PhD Thesis: University of Leeds, Department of English, 1994) p. 13, E.I., p. 407.
- <sup>48</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 28.
- <sup>49</sup> See Malekpour, p. 18.
- <sup>50</sup> Badawi, p. 9.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>52</sup> See Malekpour, p. 3; Badawi, p. 9.
- <sup>53</sup> Malekpour, p. 113.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- <sup>55</sup> Nasr, p. 80.
- <sup>56</sup> Malekpour, p. 157.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- <sup>59</sup> *Namayesh*, (Tehran), No 47, 1991, p. 49, in Malekpour, pp. 117-18.
- <sup>60</sup> See *The Drama Review* 49, 4 (T188), Winter 2005.
- <sup>61</sup> See 'Mohammad B. Ghaffari, Ta'ziyeh Director: an Interview by Peter J. Chelkowski', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, pp. 113-17.
- <sup>62</sup> See Ghaffari, pp. 117-18.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>64</sup> Milla Cozart Riggio, 'Moses and the Wandering Dervish: Ta'ziyah at Trinity College', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, p. 101.
- <sup>65</sup> See Ghaffari, p. 119.
- <sup>66</sup> Riggio, p. 100.
- <sup>67</sup> Ghaffari, p. 118.
- <sup>68</sup> Riggio, p. 106.
- <sup>69</sup> Alain Crombecque, 'Ta'ziyeh in France: the Ritual of Renewal at the Festival d'Automne' in Peter J. Chelkowski, 'Time out of Memory: ta'ziyah, the Total Drama', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, p. 18.
- <sup>70</sup> Ghaffari, p. 119.



---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>72</sup> William O. Beeman and Mohammad B. Ghaffari, 'Acting Styles and Actor Training in *Ta'ziyeh*', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, p. 49.

<sup>73</sup> Crombecque, p. 18.

<sup>74</sup> See Anna Vanzan, '*Ta'ziyeh* in Parma' in Chelkowski, 'Time out of Memory', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, pp. 24-25.

<sup>75</sup> Ghaffari, pp. 121-27.

<sup>76</sup> Hamid Dabashi, '*Ta'ziyeh* as Theatre of Protest', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>79</sup> See Dabashi, pp. 98-99.

<sup>80</sup> Augustus Richard Norton, 'Ritual, Blood and Shiite Identity: *Ashura* in Nabatiyya, Lebanon', *The Drama Review*, 49, 4 (T 188), Winter 2005, p. 141.

<sup>81</sup> Norton, pp. 145, 147.

<sup>82</sup> Riggio, p. 110.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Modern Arabic Drama

#### Introduction

This chapter surveys the range of modern Arabic drama from its beginnings 160 years ago to some of its contemporary manifestations. It is divided into three sections: first, a study of the pioneers in Syria and Egypt through later developments in the first third of the twentieth century; second, a discussion of the three playwrights whose work has been chosen for the practice part of this study and an examination of the three plays for which pieces have been made; and third, an exploration of Arabic theatre in the period between the end of the Second World War and the theatre world of today, which is dominated by an experimentalism fostered by the festivals of theatre held in the region's main cultural centres.

Although the story begins in Syria, it has been dominated by Egypt, which became virtually independent of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and continued as the Arab world's cultural centre until relatively recently. The emphasis on Egypt is also due to the fact that theatre did not develop elsewhere in the region until the achievement of independence and the withdrawal of the European powers, but in the decades after



this liberation of energies several playwrights and directors of great distinction emerged outside Egypt. Today, the theatre struggles to survive in a globalised world of mass entertainment dominated by the cinema and television.

It may be argued, and with good reason, that elsewhere in the world the situation is much the same, but theatre in the Arab world, despite great achievements, has never enjoyed the status, or the critical attention, given to poetry and the novel. This chapter, then, charts the development of an art form that began by borrowing from European models and ever since has carried on a dialogue with the West while attempting to express an Arab, or more narrowly nationalist, identity. It has never been an Islamic art (with the exception of the controversial *ta'ziyah*) and indeed its relations with Islam have often been fraught, today perhaps more than ever before. And as we shall see, its very first practitioner was not a Muslim but a Maronite Christian merchant in Beirut.

### **The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

By the end of the eighteenth century the Ottoman Empire was no longer the equal of the great powers of Western Europe, as it had been fifty years before. There had been no advances in technology and an actual decline in the level of scientific knowledge. Now Europe, of which the Ottomans knew little, was widening the gap through the expansion of trade, accumulation of capital and development of industry and manufacture, while the Empire was stagnating and its countries were becoming mainly suppliers of raw materials and buyers of finished products. Powerful interests opposed the belated attempts of Selim III (1789- 1807) to improve Egypt's defences and create a new model army, and in 1798 a French expeditionary force commanded by Napoleon defeated the Egyptian army at the Battle of the Pyramids and occupied Egypt as a strategic action in the war with Britain.<sup>1</sup>

The French ruled Egypt for only three years but the occupation, while it ended in military defeat, had profound and far-reaching cultural repercussions, since the new



rulers, and particularly their accompanying scholars and scientists, greatly impressed the local elites, who could not but admire the occupiers' superior knowledge and powers of organisation. But the French brought more than technical and scientific knowledge and expertise; they also introduced the theatre to Egypt. Although this was largely intended to entertain the conquerors, there is some evidence that the Egyptian elite knew of the theatre, built on Esbekieh Square in Cairo, and some probably attended productions.<sup>2</sup>

After the capitulation and departure of the French forces in 1801 there appear to have been no further performances of French drama in Egypt until 1829, and even then the players were amateurs. In the 1830s French dramas were performed at theatres in both Cairo and Alexandria, again by amateurs, and Italian troupes also visited both cities. Italian theatre and opera were popular among both Europeans and educated, urban Egyptians, although the mass of the population were excluded from, and would have taken no interest in, such performances. They went on delighting in their own diversions, such as the shadow play and the farce.

By 1847 Egypt had seen many changes in the fifty years since the French invasion. Links with Europe, and especially with France, had been forged. A number of social reforms, and the building of an educated Egyptian elite, were due to the vision of Muhammad 'Ali (1805-48), a Macedonian Turk who had been sent to Egypt in 1798 to oppose the French. Having seized power from a derelict government he reformed the army and consolidated his authority not only in Egypt but in parts of Sudan, Syria and Arabia. But the European powers combined to force him to withdraw, since they did not wish a strong Egypt to threaten the unity of the Ottoman state. In return for this concession, he obtained in 1841 recognition by the Ottomans of his family's right to rule in Egypt, taking the special title of *Khedive*. His successors duly ruled the country until 1952.<sup>3</sup>

Muhammad 'Ali recruited European experts to staff his new military and technical schools. By the 1830s officers, teachers and technicians were being sent to France, whose influence on education was to remain predominant until about 1920. The most



important of these early emissaries was Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-73), whose description of Paris, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz (The Purification of Gold in the Summary of Paris, 1834)* was the only account of a European city to appear in Arabic until 1855. He was intrigued by the theatres and gives detailed descriptions of these exotic places of entertainment, his favourite being the Opera. He explained the plays he saw as 'serious matters in a humorous form', and complimented the actors and actresses on their 'great grace and eloquence'.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1840s Egyptian audiences, especially for opera, could include the Islamic elite, although the more puritanical Muslims still regarded theatre as an abomination. Moreover, there was as yet no local theatre in Arabic. The Egyptian court spoke Turkish in deference to the Khedive, and so it was elsewhere in the Arab world that the Arabic theatre began. The pioneer was not a Muslim but a Maronite Christian merchant from Beirut, who presented an adaptation of Molière's *L'Avare* on an improvised stage in his own house in 1847 (some say 1848).<sup>5</sup>

Why did this innovation take place in Syria and not in Egypt? In the mid-nineteenth century Syria comprised today's Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Since the beginning of the century American Presbyterian missionaries had vied with French Catholics in educating the nation's youth; both established printing presses and instructed teachers. These efforts, among others, paved the way for an Arabic literary revival to flower in the middle years of the century. Beirut, like Alexandria, was an important gate for European cultural penetration, as well as the centre of missionary education. It is not surprising that the first Arab dramatist should have been a traveller in Europe and a product of missionary education, since Christians were more susceptible to Western influences than their Muslim neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

Thus it was that Marun al-Naqqash (1817-55) can claim the distinction of being the first to present a drama in Arabic. The audience for *al-Bakhil (The Miser)* was select, consisting mainly of foreign consuls and local dignitaries. Al-Naqqash was born in Sidon but moved with his family to Beirut in 1825. His father became a prominent



citizen, and al-Naqqash also became a trader. His business took him to Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo and Alexandria, and his interest in the theatre is said to have been kindled on a trip to Italy in 1846 and especially by the visits he made to the opera in Naples. On his return he was inspired by the cultural openness of the times (the *nahda* or renaissance) to try his hand at writing plays, or rather musical plays, since music was an integral part of the entertainment. After *al-Bakhil*, whose favourable reception encouraged him to persevere, he wrote and produced, again in his own house, *Abu'l-Hasan al-Mughaffal (Abu'l Hasan the Fool, 1849-50)*, inspired by a tale in the *Thousand and One Nights* and generally considered the best of his three plays. The success of *Abu'l Hasan* prompted al-Naqqash to apply for an Ottoman decree that allowed him to have a theatre built close to his house, in which he presented his last play, *al-Salit al-Hasud (The Sharp-tongued, Envious Man, 1853)*. His career was cut short by his early death at 28; while away from home he succumbed to a fever in 1855.

*Al-Bakhil* is important for its use of music, a feature that would characterise Arabic drama for decades. In his speech on opening night al-Naqqash drew attention to his deliberate choice of those dramatic forms that rely upon singing, partly because of his own personal preference for opera and musicals, and partly because he was convinced that the Arab audience would find the musical theatre more to their taste. The subsequent history of Arabic drama was to prove him correct. We should also note that male members of the playwright's family acted the female parts, since Muslim members of the audience would have been scandalised by the appearance of unveiled women on a public stage.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Khozai comments on *al-Bakhil* that its author was a versifier rather than a poet and that it is 'a product of an age of decadence',<sup>8</sup> but he goes on to praise al-Naqqash's second play, *Abu 'l-Hasan the Fool*. Al-Naqqash turned for inspiration away from Europe and to his own heritage, in the form of the fantasies of the *Thousand and One Nights*. In so doing he was setting an example which Arab dramatists have followed to this day, among them the eminent Syrian playwright Sa'dallah Wannous, whose work will be discussed in the central section of this chapter. The original tale, *an-Na'im wa 'l-*



*Yaqzan (The Sleeper and the Awake)* is one of the most sophisticated in the *Nights*. Briefly, the plot is as follows. Caliph Harun al-Rashid overhears a merchant wishing aloud that he could be made caliph for a day so that he could reform the world and revenge himself on all those who have brought about his financial ruin. Harun al-Rashid has him drugged and brought to the palace, where he is duped into believing that he is the real Caliph. After a series of misadventures the foolish merchant is drugged once more and returned to his house, where he is unable to tell dream from reality.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Naqqash's brother published his plays, and his nephew Salim formed a troupe and performed them, as well as his own plays, in a new theatre in Beirut. He took this troupe, which included actresses, to Egypt in 1876, partly because he was persecuted by the reactionary religious authorities in Damascus, and partly because Egypt offered official encouragement and patronage. His troupe was followed to Egypt in 1884 by that of Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1833-1902), the other notable pioneer of Arabic drama in Syria. He enjoyed two fruitful decades of work in Egypt, where he directed many plays by himself and others until his theatre was destroyed by an act of arson in 1900.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Qabbani first worked not in Beirut but in Damascus and it is fairly certain that he was inspired by the example of Marun al-Naqqash to establish Arabic theatre in his own city during the 1870s. Unlike al-Naqqash he had received only a traditional Islamic education and knew no European language. He produced plays by Marun and Salim al-Naqqash, and also plays of his own, from his Arab-Islamic heritage – mainly folk tales and Arab history. The total number of his works is disputed, but only eight are extant; all are written in classical Arabic. He was an able musician and a better poet than al-Naqqash, but his dramatic technique was no more developed than his predecessor's. At first he was encouraged by the Ottoman ruler Midhat Pasha, but it was not long before the Damascene puritan religious establishment, which was more zealous than that of Beirut began to harass him. They particularly objected to the representation on stage of Harun al-Rashid. The ultra-conservative sheikhs regarded drama as heretical and a deplorable innovation, and eventually succeeded in obtaining a decree from the Sultan not only ordering the closure of al-Qabbani's theatre but banning all acting in Syria.



This first phase of al-Qabbani's career was dramatised by Wannous. Although al-Qabbani was compelled to seek audiences elsewhere, his emigration to Egypt was beneficial to his career and he did his best work there, producing his own plays and adapting foreign works such as Racine's *Mithridate*.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1870s Khedive Isma'il (1862-79) sought to create the institutions of a modern society and to transform Egypt into a part of Europe, and Egypt became virtually independent of the Empire. The Suez Canal was opened in 1869; a great Opera House was built in Cairo to celebrate the occasion, together with other, smaller theatres. But the Egyptian exchequer had borrowed heavily from European financiers and by 1876 it was unable to meet its obligations. Burdensome taxes were imposed by the Khedive, who was opposed by a movement with nationalistic overtones. The creation of a Chamber of Deputies in 1881 did not silence the opposition; on the contrary, the Chamber sought to assert its independence, and this provoked diplomatic intervention by Britain and France, who were already exercising financial control of the Egyptian economy. British military invasion followed in 1882, and from then onwards Britain virtually ruled Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

Isma'il was sensitive to criticism, and his suspicion of the Arabic theatre was provoked by the activities of the third important pioneer, a young Egyptian Jew called Ya'qub Sannu' or, as he often styled himself, James Sanua (1839-1912). In several ways he is the most interesting of the three. As al-Khozai observes, 'His reputation not only rests on his being the founder of the Egyptian theatre but also for his inauguration of satirical journalism and his part in the Egyptian nationalist movement'.<sup>13</sup>

We know more about Sannu' than about either al-Naqqash or al-Qabbani; a substantial literature exists in Arabic and other European languages, but since he himself was the source of much of the information we must be cautious, especially as he was renowned for exaggerating his achievements. For example, he claimed to have written and produced thirty-two plays and produced the works of many other writers. But his dramatic career lasted barely three years, from 1870 to 1872, and only seven of his



plays are extant.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, an examination of the literature reveals that scholars are often in disagreement about the details of his career.

Sannu' was determined to write in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, not the classical language, which would not have been understood by his intended audience. In this he was an innovator, and the initiator of a controversy that would be argued about by playwrights for generations to come. He is said to have trained himself to write drama by studying the works of Goldoni and Moliere, and perhaps Sheridan, in the original language and translating and adapting foreign plays into Arabic, although none of these adaptations have survived. In 1870 he formed a troupe consisting of a number of his former pupils and sought the Khedive's permission to perform a play at an entertainment attended by a large and distinguished audience. We do not have either the title or the text of this play, which included many songs, but apparently it was meant to explode the popular Western myth of the moral depravity of the harem system. Its enthusiastic reception prompted Sannu' to reorganise his troupe and to include two actresses, both non-Muslim Levantines; thus he was the first to take the daring step of introducing women on to the Egyptian stage. Four months after the first successful performance Sannu's company presented three of his plays at the Khedive's palace at Qasr al-Nil. It was on that occasion that Isma'il dubbed Sannu' 'our Egyptian Molière'.<sup>15</sup>

Sannu' must have displeased the establishment and especially the Khedive, however, for Isma'il withdrew his patronage in 1872 and Sannu' was forced to close his theatre. It is not clear why Isma'il should have done this. The British seem to have complained about being criticised in one of Sannu's plays; another play, *al-Durratyan (The Two Rival Wives)*, an outspoken attack on polygamy performed at Qasir al-Nil, may have irritated the Khedive; and Dravcht Bey, the Minister of Education, was hostile to Sannu's theatrical activities. Moreover, the whole enterprise was financially insecure, and the actors and actresses complained that they were not receiving regular salaries. The liberal ideas promulgated by Sannu', and the presence of women on stage, also appalled devout Muslims.<sup>16</sup>



The forty years or so until the outbreak of the First World War saw the consolidation of the theatre in Egypt. This was achieved not by innovative playwrights but by competing troupes of actors who vied for the attention of a broadly constituted theatregoing public. The theatre was no longer the preserve of a small Westernised elite, and the new public dictated the standards to which the troupes conformed. As Landau remarks, 'Most troupe directors put material considerations over and above artistic ones'.<sup>17</sup> Thus the same plays, usually adapted from the French, were revived again and again, or the same subjects were used. Some actors wrote plays on popular subjects, but the public demanded that above all the actor should possess a fine singing voice, and so melodramas and musical comedies became the most favoured forms. Actresses, usually Jewish or Christian girls from Syria, began to appear regularly on stage, to the horror of pious conservatives. The efforts to establish an Arabic theatre in Egypt were supported by Syrian journalists; their newspapers, most notably the weekly *al-Ahram* (*The Pyramids*), published articles praising theatre as a beneficial requisite of society.<sup>18</sup> Theatre would soon become a more generally popular, though still hardly respectable, entertainment; but Muslim actresses would not appear on stage until after the First World War.

In the fifty or so years since Marun al-Naqqash's first production the Arabic theatre had undergone a difficult development, which had occurred alongside that of the traditional popular farce or *fasl mudhik*, which had made its way from the countryside to the cities, where it found an appreciative audience among the uneducated citizens of Cairo and Alexandria. This audience was bemused by the entertainment provided by the musical theatre, and preferred the rough mixture of satire and buffoonery offered by the farce. But a growing number of Egyptians were being educated in a system based on the European model and were coming to appreciate the efforts of talented individuals, theatrical troupes, amateur ensembles, dramatic societies, and school and community theatres. All these activities were encouraged by an independent Arab press at a time when Egyptian society was becoming accustomed to the free expression of opinion, and sometimes the theatre fell afoul of censorship (and there was never enough official



support, especially in the form of financial assistance). The early decades of the twentieth century saw a consolidation of these trends and the emergence in Egypt of a new generation of performers and playwrights whose efforts created a mature Arabic theatre for an increasingly sophisticated public.

The First World War brought European armies and their auxiliaries into contact with the inhabitants of the Arab Near East. The contact of large numbers of the population with Europeans of various nationalities broadened the horizons of the Arabic-speaking people and, Landau argues, 'probably made them more receptive to the theatre in general'.<sup>19</sup> At any rate, all classes began to be better represented in the audience, and writers and poets began to realise that the drama could be a new means of expression. On the stage, the most important advance was the appearance of a growing number of Muslim actresses, some from highly respectable families. This was one result of the impact of the West on Near-Eastern society, and an aspect of the campaign for the emancipation of Muslim women, which gained momentum after the War, especially in Egypt, and amounted to a social and moral revolution among the middle classes.<sup>20</sup>

What of those who would have described themselves as serious dramatists, and who were concerned with the search for Egyptian identity? Our discussion has concerned Egypt (and Ottoman Syria) because, despite the visits paid by Egyptian troupes to other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Iraq and Morocco, there remained, as Allen notes, 'much to be learned about the drama genre in all of these countries, and the complexity of the process was such that many decades were required to bring Arabic theatre in these regions to genuine fruition'.<sup>21</sup> Badawi argues that modern Egyptian Arabic drama came of age in the teens and twenties of the last century with the works of such playwrights as Ibrahim Ramzi, Ahtun Yazbak and Muhammad Taymur.<sup>22</sup> Another figure who deserves brief mention is Farah Antun (1874-1922), whose *Misr al-Jadida wa Misr al-Qadima (Egypt New and Old, 1913)* addresses a wide variety of problems besetting Egyptian society and criticises particularly the aping of Western bourgeois manners and values. The play's lively dialogue and observation of Egyptian life are marred by an overt didacticism. Antun adopted an anti-fatalistic, rationalist approach to



social problems, believing that the theatre should above all reflect contemporary social reality.<sup>23</sup>

Badawi thinks very highly of Ibrahim Ramzi (1884-1949), although neither Allen nor Landau mention him. Ramzi was a prolific writer: a dramatist, novelist, philosopher, historian and translator of Shakespeare, Sheridan, Shaw and Ibsen. As a playwright he produced six historical dramas, four social comedies and two serious dramas. According to Badawi, Ramzi's two most accomplished plays, which show his dramatic powers most clearly and demonstrate the extent of his contribution to the development of Arabic drama in Egypt are both early works, written about 1915: *Dukhul al-Hammam mish Zayy Khuruguh* (*Admission to the Baths Is a Lot Less Difficult Than Coming out of Them*) and *Abtal al-Mansura* (*The Heroes of Mansura*).<sup>24</sup>

About *Admission to the Baths*, Badawi remarks, 'it can safely be said that Ramzi produced the first fully-fledged truly Egyptian comedy'.<sup>25</sup> Written in Egyptian colloquial, the play is set in Khedive Isma'il's Cairo, but clearly refers to conditions during the First World War, when the cost of living had soared and the poor were badly affected. Very briefly, the plot concerns the misadventures of a village chief or 'umdah at a public bath house in a poor quarter of Cairo. The 'umdah is carrying a great deal of money, the proceeds of the sale of his cotton crop. Despite his fears of being conned by the proverbial tricksters of Cairo he is fleeced of all his possessions by the seductive wife of the manager. As the 'umdah and his bailiff flee, the tricksters sing 'in such hard times the poor have to live off fools'.<sup>26</sup>

Badawi also credits Ramzi with the authorship of the first fully mature Arabic historical drama. *The Heroes of Mansura* is written in classical Arabic, and although set during the Sixth Crusade of 1248 it again clearly refers to contemporary Egypt. Badawi comments that 'it is an eloquent and subtle expression of Egyptian nationalist feeling and democratic aspiration. It is no accident that its production was banned by the British Censor for several years'.<sup>27</sup> The play's two main themes, the heroic struggle of the



Muslims against the Western invaders and the successful attempt to curb the Sultan's autocratic rule, are relevant to the Egypt of 1915.<sup>28</sup>

Allen considers Muhammad Taymur (1891-1921) to be the most important figure of the period. Taymur was a playwright of promise who completed three full-length plays before his early death. He set himself the task of identifying the criteria for good drama and effective performance, arguing for the composition of original dramas that might replace the plethora of translations used by the troupes of the time. His best work is generally considered to be *al-Hawiya (The Precipice)*, a bourgeois tragedy, which addresses the problem of drug addiction and is a plea for responsible relations between husband and wife. These characters are vividly portrayed. Amin, a rebel against traditional values, succumbs to his addiction to cocaine, while his wife Ratiba develops from a frivolous, spoilt, Westernised girl into an assertive and responsible woman. Badawi comments that 'Here Taymur certainly struck a blow for women's emancipation in Egypt'.<sup>29</sup>

Badawi considers Ahtun Yazbak's *al-Dhaba'ih (The Sacrifices)* an even better play than *The Precipice*, calling it 'the most tragic work written in the colloquial in the first half of this century'.<sup>30</sup> It was first performed in 1925, when it received enormous acclaim. It is concerned with the triangular relationship between Hammam, a retired Egyptian general, his ex-wife Amina and his second wife, the European Noreska, with whom he has been living for twenty years. According to Badawi, '*The Sacrifices* is a carefully constructed and sensitively written play.[...] permeated by tragic irony'.<sup>31</sup> The characters are complex and credible, and the play is much more than simply a study of a mixed marriage; it is about human relations, particularly those between the self-absorbed older generation and the impressionable and sensitive young.

At this point, before discussing the three playwrights for whose works the study's designs have been produced, we should briefly consider the drama of the great neo-classical poet Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932). Shawqi, regarded as the supreme poet of the Arab world in the first decades of the century, turned to writing verse plays during the



last four years of his life, and in doing so helped to make drama respectable in the eyes of those who had hitherto denied it the status of literature. He wrote six historical dramas and one comedy of contemporary life in Egypt, and if these works are more lyrical than dramatic and more successful in their monologues than their dialogues, they established nonetheless an example that would later be followed by others including al-Sharqawi, whose plays on the martyrdom of Imam Hussein will be discussed later. Shawqi's example, and the advocacy of the eminent author, critic and educationalist Taha Hussein, raised the status of drama, and in 1935 the Egyptian government set up the National Theatre Troupe composed of the leading actors and actresses of the day under the directorship of the poet Khalil Mutran. Unfortunately but perhaps not surprisingly the government stipulated that all plays should be in classical Arabic, thus legitimising the rift between the colloquial and the literary Arabic theatre. Drama in the colloquial would not achieve official approval for almost twenty-five years.<sup>32</sup> The first play performed by the National Theatre Troupe was Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Ahl al-Kahf* (*The People of the Cave*), and it is to the plays of al-Hakim that we now turn our attention.<sup>33</sup>

### **Tawfiq al-Hakim**

Al-Hakim had a remarkably long career as a dramatist, during which he wrote more than eighty works; although it is important to note that, like the great majority of Arab playwrights, he also wrote novels and other prose works (Wannous was unusual in devoting his energies entirely to the drama and journalism). His half-century of activity, from the 1920s to the 1970s, 'witnessed the full flowering of Arabic drama'.<sup>34</sup> After receiving his licence as a lawyer, he was sent to Paris in 1925 by his irate father, who wished to remove him from any contact with the Egyptian theatre. But while ostensibly studying for a Doctorate in law, he neglected his studies, preferring to immerse himself in European culture and especially in drama, which he learnt to regard as a serious form of literature.



When, after three years in Paris, al-Hakim returned to Egypt without completing his thesis, he found the theatre reduced, for a variety of reasons, to performances of sensational melodramas and titillating farces. This shrinkage was aggravated by the global economic crisis, but al-Hakim was determined to revive and advance the serious Egyptian theatre while working as a deputy prosecutor in Alexandria and later, from 1929 to 1934, as public prosecutor in various rural communities, he continued to write, producing both novels and plays. He recognised that the time would soon be ripe for a renaissance of serious theatrical activity, even if for the moment there was virtually no chance that any of his dramas would be performed on stage. Two of his best-known works of this period are *Shahrazad* (written in 1927 but published in 1934) and *Ahl al-Kahf* (written in 1928 but published in 1933).<sup>35</sup>

Both these plays, which may have been revised before publication, demonstrate what Badawi calls 'al-Hakim's major contribution to Egyptian Arabic drama, namely the philosophical dimension he has added to it and for which he was partly indebted to the avant-garde European dramatists whose work he came to know in Paris'.<sup>36</sup> The story of 'the people of the cave' is to be found in the eighteenth *Surah* of the Qur'an as well as other sources, and is based on the Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, who, fleeing Roman persecution, take refuge in a cave. They sleep there for three hundred years and, without realising it, awake in a different era. Its themes of rebirth into a new world and the desire to return to a reassuring past touched on issues that were of concern to thoughtful Egyptians. The play shows how love can triumph over time while reason fails, and contains philosophical and metaphysical discussions composed with a delicate fantasy and humour. Influences as various as Maeterlinck and Pirandello have been cited with regard to al-Hakim's manner of expression here.<sup>37</sup>

As we have noted, when the National Theatre Troupe was formed in 1935 its first production was *The People of the Cave*. The performances were not a success, however, mainly perhaps because audiences used to the lively action of the popular theatre were puzzled and unimpressed. Disappointed by the public's response, al-Hakim developed the notion that his drama constituted a 'theatre of the mind', works to be read rather



than performed. Throughout the 1940s he continued to produce plays with philosophical themes drawn from a variety of cultural sources.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Hakim's drama entered a new phase in response to the social transformations brought about by the military Revolution of 1952. He was seen as having combined the popular theatre with his 'theatre of the mind', and many of his plays were now performed on the stage. At first he enthusiastically espoused the cause of the Revolution: *al-Audi al-Na'imah (Soft Hands, 1954)* is an amusing, if somewhat didactic, parable in which two apparently useless individuals set about finding new roles for themselves in the new socialist dispensation. In 1960 al-Hakim published *al-Sultan al-Ha'ir (The Sultan's Dilemma)*, which marks a degree of disillusionment with Nasserism on the part of the playwright (and the Egyptian people).<sup>39</sup> As part of the study's practice work is concerned with this play, it will be discussed in more detail shortly.

During the 1960s al-Hakim continued to experiment with new forms. His second sojourn in Paris, as Egypt's representative to UNESCO (1959-60), brought him into contact with the Theatre of the Absurd, and *Ya Tali' al-Shajara (The Tree Climber, 1962)* shows its influence clearly. His disillusionment with the political situation in Egypt is expressed in works such as the full-length plays *Masir Sarsar (The Fate of a Cockroach, 1966)* and *Bank al-Qlaq (Anxiety Bank, 1967)*, but his last full-length play was to be a light pastoral fantasy, *al-Dunya Riwaya Hazliyya (The World Is a Farce, 1971)*.<sup>40</sup> Al-Hakim made a sustained effort to achieve a highly polished style which, though literary, is always easily comprehensible.<sup>41</sup> He was a social reformer and, especially in his late years, a writer concerned with matters of religion. Of his large output, in which drama is predominant, the scholar and translator William Maynard Hutchins writes:

The main theme throughout has been the importance of the role of the artist, together with his allies, women and scientists, in the creation of values and dreams for a society (in his later works, clearly a world society) in which human truths and emotions are honoured and where



the heart and the intellect (in other words, religion and science) cooperate.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Sultan's Dilemma* (1960)

Al-Hakim wrote *Al-Sultan al-Ha'ir* (*The Sultan's Dilemma*, 1960) when he was a little over 60 years old. The play belongs to his Objective Theatre, in which he discussed the state of contemporary Egyptian society. It comments on current realities and values by making use of a tale from the past to illuminate the present, as Wannous and al-Sharqawi were to do in *The King's the King* and *The Wrath of God* respectively. In *The Sultan's Dilemma* the conflict animating the drama is that between the sword and the law or unaccountable autocracy and enlightened rule, or, in more contemporary terms, between despotism and democracy. Al-Hakim had become critical of the revolution of 1952, which he 'saw as presaging an Egypt that was a product of the state rather than of herself';<sup>43</sup> *The Sultan's Dilemma* was written to help Nasser understand al-Hakim's view, and the playwright claimed that Nasser did indeed read and understand what he intended.<sup>44</sup>

The play is set in the Mamluk era (1250-1517). The age of the Mamluks, who ruled Egypt and Syria, was characterised by the prevalence of the institution of slavery.<sup>45</sup> Al-Hakim makes use of many historical details pertaining to the education and training of the Mamluks. Their Islamic education began in the palace schools, where they were taught recitation of the Qur'an, Arabic script, the demands of the Islamic Shariah, prayers and supplications. When a Mamluk became a youth, the legist would teach him some parts of Islamic law. On reaching the age of discretion, a Mamluk received lessons in the techniques of horsemanship and thus was manumitted and could attain high rank. Their devotion and discipline were given great attention.

The play begins with an argument between an executioner and a man condemned to be beheaded. This sentence has been ordered without due process of law. Al-Ghaniya, a woman whose windows overlook the place of execution, enters and tries to have the



execution postponed, as she feels compassion for the condemned man. The Vizier – the Sultan's chief adviser and superintendent of his treasury – then arrives, bringing news that the Sultan himself is coming, having ordered that a fair trial be held before the Chief Justice. The trial reveals that the condemned man used to be a slave trader, who had sold the present Sultan, when he was a little child, to the former Sultan. The late Sultan had died without manumitting the present Sultan, who therefore according to the law is still a slave and as such cannot hold the title of Sultan. The Sultan discovers to his consternation that the Vizier has concealed this omission from him. He discusses his dilemma with the Vizier: should he use his power to silence those who threaten his position, as the Vizier was attempting to do in having the slave trader executed, or should he submit to the law and risk losing his power?

In the second scene the Sultan is displayed for sale; he has decided to submit to the law. Al-Ghaniya, who is a rich widow, buys the Sultan but refuses to abide by the Chief Justice's stipulation that she should manumit him immediately; she wishes to have the honour of conversing with him for one night before manumitting him. The Sultan accepts this situation, disagreeing with the Chief Justice and insisting that the law be obeyed. He tells al-Ghaniya that she is free to choose either to keep him as her slave, in which case he will give up the throne, or she may manumit him and thus allow him to occupy the throne lawfully. Al-Ghaniya, pleased with the Sultan's trust in her and his high principles, promises that she will keep her word and manumit him the following morning. The Vizier plots against al-Ghaniya but in vain, and in her house she and the Sultan converse; she realises his importance to his subjects, and although she would like to keep him and he is prepared to stay with her, she determines to show that her moral principles are equal to his and signs the document for his manumission willingly.

The play criticises the ruling authorities and corrupt administrations of the Arab world by making use of folk material which al-Hakim interprets to point his moral. The Vizier abuses his power, the Chief Justice is inconsistent in applying the law, and the executioner extorts money for drink from the slave trader. The Sultan, a noble character, is matched in moral excellence not by his high-ranking officials but by al-Ghaniya, a



woman of ill repute. El-Ham points out in her study of al-Hakim's female characters that al-Ghaniya is to some extent a symbolic figure representing the nation, and notes that al-Rai sees al-Ghaniya as combining the characteristics of Scheherazade and Shahrayar in the *Thousand and One Nights*. She is prepared to sacrifice her own interests for the public good, and her character embodies the struggle between love and duty.<sup>46</sup>

Although al-Ghaniya is a striking and unusual character in both al-Hakim's own work and the Arab drama of the period, it is not her dilemma but the Sultan's that is the focus of the drama and of the play's argument. While the play retains elements of its source, for example the coincidence of the old Sultan's death and the arrival of the trader - a typical folkloric device - al-Hakim emphasises the crucial nature of the choice confronting the Sultan, and the need for the ruler to uphold the law whatever the personal consequences.

Although the play is relatively short al-Hakim presents a broad range of characters. The Sultan, the Vizier and the Chief Justice are commonly found in Arab-Islamic folk tales, as is the executioner; al-Ghaniya is a rich widow, while the slave auctioneer, the vintner and various other minor characters represent the other social strata. The three main characters, however, are those who represent authority, and the character of the Sultan is used to criticise the behaviour of the other two, who are shown to be unscrupulous and unworthy of their office. The Vizier is depicted as a self-centred opportunist and deceiver – a characterisation common in the folk tradition – who seizes any chance to secure and protect his personal interest.<sup>47</sup>

While the Vizier represents ruthless power, the law is represented by the Chief Justice, whose endeavour to enforce it develops the conflict. His solution is to offer the Sultan for sale so that he can be manumitted. He points out the limitations of naked force, but is prepared to distort the law in order to secure the Sultan's manumission, and the Sultan himself criticises his instrumental attitude to the law.<sup>48</sup>



Thus the ruler stands for the rule of law and justice, and his legitimacy is strengthened by his abiding by this principle. The Sultan's sense of justice also reveals al-Ghaniya's virtuous character. She is at first sight a stereotypical figure drawn from Arab folk tales who employs 'the instinctive cunning and deception of woman in addition to other traits used by woman to achieve her goals'.<sup>49</sup> The executioner calls her a 'liar, trickster, and swindler.'<sup>50</sup>

However, al-Hakim frees her character from its stereotypical nature and allows it to develop dynamically in relation to the events. On the other hand, she is an important agent of plot development and it is through her that the solution is found. She is regarded by the people as a dissolute woman, yet the Sultan's destiny is linked to her. She is the Sultan's inspiration and teacher, and the play, in Badawi's words, 'is really about the education of the ideal ruler, just as much as it is about the choice between the sword and the law'.<sup>51</sup> *The Sultan's Dilemma* calls for the establishment of justice in the Arabo-Islamic world, castigates the use of naked force and expedient solutions, calls upon rulers to submit to the law, and suggests that the people should strive for the right and not be deceived by appearances. It is a meditation on the problems inherited from the past and on the complexity of life.

### **Abdurrahman AL-Sharqawi**

Abdurrahman al-Sharqawi (1920-87) was of the generation between al-Hakim and Wannous and, like them, could not fail to be deeply influenced by events in the Arab world after the Second World War, which accelerated the process of independence from Western colonialism. Syria and Lebanon achieved independence in 1945, Libya in 1950, Egypt in 1953, Tunisia, Morocco and Sudan in 1956, Iraq in 1958, Kuwait in 1961 and Algeria in 1962. The exception – crucially and shamefully – was Palestine. The Arab writers of the period were concerned, as spokesmen of their people, to address the social and political issues confronting them, often in the face of political and religious opposition and censorship.



After 1945 the pre-war tendency to individual revolt which found expression in an Arab romanticism often coupled with a nationalist stance made way for a greater political commitment. The Arab world in general, and literature in particular, entered a new phase of ideological clashes amid profound internal and external changes. Britain and France ceased to be the region's dominant powers and were gradually supplanted by the USA and the Soviet Union, whose opposing ideologies strove for supremacy. The most important event, which was to have far-reaching and long-term repercussions, was the creation of Israel in 1948. This catastrophe and the series of wars it generated, especially the 1967 defeat, had an enormous impact on Arabic literature and drama.<sup>52</sup>

As the Arab states achieved independence some of the energy which had been devoted to resistance against the external enemy was redirected at the privileged and the feudal rich, and the ruling elites, who were accused of corruption and mismanagement. Angered by the growing gap between rich and poor, many in the Arab world placed their faith in either Marxism or the religious extremism of the Muslim Brotherhood. Novels of social protest had begun to appear as the war ended, and the themes of social injustice and class struggle were added to that of national independence. In Cairo and Beirut in the early 1950s acrimonious debates erupted about commitment in literature, and the Arabic word for commitment, *iltizam*, became an essential part of the vocabulary of literary criticism and generally denoted a nationalist stance and message which was underpinned by Marxist ideology or an existentialist position, or sometimes both. This cause was taken up by Suhayl Idris's Beirut monthly periodical *al-Adab*, which more than any other helped to determine the course of modern Arabic literature, publishing creative work from both inside and outside the Arab world, and criticism of contemporary literature (the young Sa'dallah Wannous was an avid reader and occasional contributor). This development, as Badawi notes,

was understandably prompted by a growing painful awareness of the harsh political and social realities of the Arab world, an awareness that was later reinforced by subsequent developments ranging from the horrors of the Arab-Israeli wars, the plight of the Palestinians,



oppressive Arab regimes, and the Iran-Iraq war, to inter-Arab strife and the civil war in the Lebanon.<sup>53</sup>

Because of this awareness no Arab writer of the past sixty years has been able to live in an ivory tower, and al-Sharqawi is no exception to this rule. Like al-Hakim he was deeply interested in Islam, and like Wannous he was leftist in politics; Badawi calls him a Marxist.

Al-Sharqawi began as a poet concerned with the plight of the peasantry and the nationalist cause, but his first substantial literary achievement was a novel, *Al-Ard* (*The Land*, 1953). We should note that al-Sharqawi was only one of a number of Egyptian novelists who took as their subject the plight of the poor and oppressed; these included Yusuf Idris (1927-91) and Fathi Ghamim (b.1924). As Badawi remarks, the populist aims of the 1952 Revolution encouraged writers to portray Egyptian society much more realistically, and indeed 'it became fashionable to write in the socialist realist mode during the 1950s and the early 1960s',<sup>54</sup> although al-Sharqawi cannot be accused of courting popularity.

The events of the novel do not take place in the 1950s but during the autocratic government of Sidqi Pasha in the early 1930s. Despite its melodramatic characterisation *The Land* was acclaimed as a success, partly because of its publication soon after the enactment of the new regime's land reform laws, but mainly because, in describing the villagers' heroic but fruitless efforts to defy the government's plan to limit their irrigation for the benefit of a powerful landowner, it gives a panoramic view of village life incorporating vivid detail and lively dialogue in the colloquial language. As Badawi observes, *The Land* 'is a novel in which the protagonist is the Egyptian village itself; for the first time we find a wholly convincing and sympathetic portrait of a village'.<sup>55</sup>

Al-Sharqawi's concern to portray the local reality of his country and the characteristics of the Egyptian village led him to consider the importance of the cleric to the



community. In doing so he differentiated between the cleric who stands up for the oppressed in defence of the values of truth, justice<sup>56</sup> and freedom, which are religious values, and the cleric who, hoping to earn a few short-lived *dirham*, makes oppression seem beautiful to the oppressors. Al-Sharqawi was keen to explore and display the character of the rebel cleric in many of his works, most notably in his treatment of Hussein in his play *Tha'r Allah (The Wrath of God, 1969)* which I have chosen as a subject for my practice work.

The emphasis on political freedom recurs in al-Sharqawi's dramas, and can be seen in the character of Jamilah in *Ma'sah Jamilah (The Tragedy of Jamilah, 1962)*, the writing of which was a form of resistance against the French occupation of Algeria. The play was written in 1959 but was not presented on the Cairo stage until 1962 (shortly after the French withdrawal), when it made a strong and immediate impact. Despite its many merits, which include moving scenes, dramatic suspense and complex characterisation, Badawi finds this chronicle play lacking in dramatic structure and far too long. Indeed he considers, not without justification, that all al-Sharqawi's dramas are 'the work of a novelist used to employing a large canvas, and despite their dramatic content they are, as it were, verse novels in dialogue form'.<sup>57</sup>

The theme of revolt in the cause of freedom was continued in *Al-Fata Mahran (The Boy Mahran, 1966)*. Mahran's revolt against the Sultan's oppression is surely intended to be read as a stinging criticism of President Nasser's dictatorship, under which the dream of justice had been lost. After *The Boy Mahran* came *Timthal al-Huriyyah (The Statue of Liberty, 1967)*, after which he produced *Watani Akka (My Country Akka, 1969)* about the tragedy of Palestine and the steadfastness of the Palestinian freedom fighter. He then completed both *Hussein Tha'iran (Hussein as Rebel)* and *Hussein Shahidan (Hussein as Martyr, 1969)* which interwove his two dreams of justice and freedom. This was followed by another play in two parts, *An-Nisr al-Ahmar (The Red Eagle, 1976)* which recounts the valiant struggles of Salah ad-Din al-Ayyhbi (Saladin) against the Crusaders. His last theatrical work was *Ahmad Urabi Za'im al-Fallahin (Ahmad Urabi, the Leader of the Peasants, 1982)*. In this final play, which dramatises



the nationalist initiative of 1881 that led to military intervention by the British in the following year, al-Sharqawi came full circle, returning to the issue of the peasants and using them as a symbol of the country and the entire Arab nation.

Al-Sharqawi's emphasis on Islam began early in his life, germinating in the 1950s in a series of articles that were published under the title *Thawrat ul-Fikr il-Islami (The Revolution of Islamic Thought)*, which were later published in book form as *Readings in Islamic Thought*. He knew from his reading that the Orientalists had launched a violent attack against Islam in the 1930s. Their attack caused his generation of Arab Muslim writers to agree among themselves to rewrite Islamic history in a way that would bring it closer to the people so that their understanding of it would not be confused by non-Muslim writers. This was what was known as 'the project to rewrite Islamic history' that Taha Husayn promoted. He and his collaborators thought to create a means to connect the present with the nation's past on the one hand, and on the other, to refute the lies and claims of the enemies of Islam. Al-Sharqawi committed himself to defending the values and principles of his religion, among which he emphasised social justice. Throughout all of his work, he was concerned to demonstrate the humanitarian aspect of Islam as a divine religion, which was revealed for all people, and portraying it as the heritage of all humankind, no matter to what extent they might hold differing views.

It should be added that al-Sharqawi was concerned to explore the essence and spirit of historical subjects, as opposed to their events and details. Thus when he writes about one of the great Islamic figures such as Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Messenger, he presents an imaginative recreation not a documentary historical work. Thus his works are those of a creative artist who takes his inspiration from history.



### *Tha'r Allah (The Wrath of God)*

The *Wrath of God* dramatises the events around the martyrdom of Hussein, the Prophet's grandson, at Karbala in 680. Its subject is thus the same as that of the *ta'ziyah*, which we have discussed in chapter 5, and so there is no need here to reiterate the historical events, which al-Sharqawi follows closely. The play focuses on the conflict between Hussein and Yazid, the son of Mu'awiya, ignoring events prior to Mu'awiya's death and omitting the carrying off of the household of the Prophet, together with Hussein's head, to 'Ubeydullah bin Ziyad, in order to concentrate on their treatment at Yazid's hands. Al-Sharqawi divided *The Wrath of God* into two distinct plays due to its length: there are 19 scenes covering over 400 pages of text. The events of the play take place in several cities that have been the focus of Islam's religious, social, political, and civil transitions.

The first part, entitled *Hussein as Rebel*, comprises 13 scenes. Its events take place in various settings in Mecca and Medina, on the way to Kufa and within Kufa, and it dramatises Hussein's journey to martyrdom. Hussein refuses the Governor of Medina's demand that he should pledge allegiance to Yazid, despite the threats of Yazid's messenger. He meets some citizens of Medina, who offer him their allegiance; he replies that he does not seek power for himself but desires only the nation's welfare. He prays before the grave of the Prophet; his sister Zaynab tells him that the Governor has sent soldiers in search of him. Hussein travels to Mecca; while there he learns that Yazid has put a price on his head. He refuses to flee, and dispatches his cousin Muslim bin Aqil as a messenger to Kufa. He determines to travel to Kufa himself once he is assured of the people's allegiance; there he will confront Yazid. Muslim secures this assurance and sends the pledges of allegiance to Hussein in Mecca. Hussein decides to respond to the invitation sent by the Kufans and reaffirms his determination to meet his destiny although he knows that it will mean his death. Yazid's agents in Kufa undermine the Kufans' loyalty through bribery and threats; Muslim is taken captive. On the way to Kufa Hussein, his family and his companions suffer from the blistering heat. Hussein advises and encourages them, refusing to heed Zaynab's warnings and pleas



not to enter Iraq. Muslim escapes, is betrayed and recaptured. He contrives to have a message sent to Hussein warning him not to come to Kufa, but the messenger is intercepted and killed. Ubeydullah bin Ziyad orders Muslim's death and sets out to do battle with Hussein. As Hussein and his group travel to Kufa, they are informed that the people of Kufa have turned their backs on him, and also come to hear of the murder of Muslim bin`Aqil. Hussein tells them clearly that he is going to meet his death and he gives his companions the choice to accompany him or to go back in peace with no blame upon them. Many of the group turn back. At this point Zaynab appears, reminding the people of the reality of death and encouraging them to refuse humiliation, but no one takes heed. Hussein is pained and expresses his sorrow when he sees that only a small number of trustworthy, sincere men remain with him; he then calls those who are with him to go onward in the name of Allah.

The second part of *The Wrath of God*, entitled *Hussein as Martyr*, portrays the killing of Hussein and the capture of the women of his family by the army of Yazid bin Mu'awiya under the leadership of Umar bin Sa'd Abi Waqqas at Karbala, near Kufa. It tells the story of how Yazid's army kept water from him, killed the men of his family and then Hussein himself – later carrying his head to Damascus. Finally, we see how Yazid becomes lost in the Levant desert, and how he dies alone. This part comprises six scenes and revolves around the events at Karbala, as well as those in Damascus and the desert of the Levant.

Hussein's procession comes upon al-Hurr ar-Riyahi, the leader of a small expedition, which Yazid has dispatched to force Hussein to pledge his allegiance to him. Al-Hurr's men are suffering greatly from thirst, they ask Hussein for water. He graciously provides them with food and water and requests them to perform the prayer with him and his people. Hussein addresses al-Hurr's men, who are citizens of Kufa, reminding them of their letters to him in which they summoned him to the city. `Umar bin Sa'd, the Governor of Kufa, arrives.



ʿUmar orders his troops to send a storm of arrows down upon Hussein's men, fight them with spears, and burn the women's tents. Hussein's warriors begin to fall, and he joins his sister Zaynab and his daughter Sukaynah to console them. Hussein stands alone, with no aid or support, and his enemies rush to assail him. Soon the grandson of the Prophet falls. Although ʿUmar orders them to sever his head the soldiers refrain from carrying out this awful deed. Shimr, an officer, volunteers and goes to sever the head and as he returns he drives the women ahead of him with a spear as they lament and wail. It is announced that the head of Hussein has been put on a spear and sent to Damascus where it is to be displayed in the public square. Yazid commands that the captive women be brought to him. The women enter crying and lamenting in their sorrow and grief. The Lady Zaynab confronts Yazid, and prays that Allah afflict him with destruction and perdition. A servant rushes in with the news that the head of Hussein has disappeared. Yazid is terrified.

Yazid appears alone in the desert of the Levant three years after the martyrdom of Hussein. He has gone out ahead of his companions on a hunting trip and become lost. Unable to find his companions, he is overcome with thirst, which brings back memories of the thirst suffered by Hussein. As he remembers Zaynab's words and Hussein's head, he grows afraid. Hussein seems to appear before him, causing him to tremble in terror. He requests a sip of water, then collapses. Many men appear calling for the avenging of Hussein's death; Hussein appears to them and after a long speech, he asks that they remember him by supporting truth and justice, not by shedding blood; and by helping the poor and the oppressed. He tells them that they should do their utmost to establish justice and truth, for if they do not, it will be as if he is being slaughtered over and over again, and his death will never be avenged.

*The Wrath of God* is, of course, not the only Arabic drama to make use of historical events to comment upon contemporary problems. Al-Hakim, Wannous and many others have used this strategy, which is by no means confined to the Arab world. Three catastrophic events have been favoured above all others by Arab writers: the loss of Andalusia, the heroic struggles against the Crusaders, and the depredations of the



Mongols. But we very rarely find plays that dramatise events from the dawn of Islam, especially when those events are controversial. The *ta'ziyah* is a notable exception, but as we have seen it has been subject to attacks by Shi'ite clerics. The ostensible objection is that the main personalities are endowed with holy characteristics and surrounded by religious awe. *The Wrath of God* was denied a performance by the religious authorities in 1972 and has never been presented on the stage. Before the planned 1972 performance the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs intervened.

Al-Azhar banned the performance on two basic grounds: that it is not permissible to portray on stage (or screen) Islamic personalities who have a highly respected position, and that the play would exacerbate the already tense relationship between Shi'ites and Sunnis. *The Wrath of God* was considered to be seditious, divisive, disrespectful to the Companions of the Prophet and critical of the Umayyad dynasty; to undermine respect for the great figures of early Islamic history; and to give ammunition to the enemies of Islam. This last point is particularly significant, since it was made in the bitter aftermath of the 1967 defeat. That the play refers to contemporary events was made very clear by the playwright:

The inspiration that drove me to write about al-Hussein was always the current situation that existed in Egypt and in the Arabic world at that time. Al-Hussein is a hero who believes in his mission and revolts for its sake. Because of this, he does not bargain and he does not make peace treaties, even though the outcome of the tragedy is obvious from the very beginning.<sup>58</sup>

The play's political implications have not faded with time. At the turn of this century the personality, ideals and mission of Hussein were considered too dangerous to be placed before the theatregoing public.

*The Wrath of God* is an interesting work despite its excessive length and many longueurs, which are mostly in the form of theological debates which would not be out of place in a novel but which impede the action and weaken the dramatic tension. It is a unique attempt by a Sunni to dramatise the events culminating in the tragedy of Karbala



and moreover to adhere closely to the conception, embodied in the *ta'ziyah*, that the struggle was between the forces of light and darkness. Al-Sharqawi's purpose was, as he admitted, political; as a socialist as well as a Muslim he wished to criticise the leaders responsible for the defeat of June 1967 by building a drama around a hero who believes in his mission and revolts for its sake, who does not bargain and does not make peace treaties. The play is an example of the widespread practice of drawing on history to comment on the present and extract lessons for the future, and testifies to the enduring appeal of Hussein as rebel and martyr.

### Sa'dallah Wannous

If the birth of a truly modern Arabic drama began with al-Hakim's *People of the Cave* in 1933, elsewhere in the Arab world the process of development began much later. Lebanon's National Theatre was founded in 1960, and - surprisingly given that the Arabic theatre had its beginnings there, Syria was devoid of any serious theatrical activity until the foundation of the National Theatre Troupe in 1958. The 1960s saw institutes and festivals begin to flourish in North Africa, Jordan and Iraq, and it was in that decade that Syria's outstanding dramatist, Sa'dallah Wannous (1941-1997) began to make his mark in the theatre. As Allen remarks, he 'managed to make a major contribution to the advancement of drama not only in his own country but also on a much broader scale'. He 'succeeded in his plays in combining classical themes and modern techniques in order to create works that possess immediate contemporary relevance'.<sup>59</sup>

Wannous's generation were the first Syrians to be able to benefit from newly introduced educational opportunities. In 1959 he chose to study journalism in Cairo, but during his time at the university he became increasingly interested in theatre, especially in the works of European and American playwrights, including the Existentialists and practitioners of the Theatre of the Absurd. He was also an avid reader of *al-Adab*, the most influential Arab literary journal, which translated and published works by Camus and Sartre, and, like many others, he admired Tawfiq al-Hakim. In the early 1960s he



began to write plays in which Absurdist, Symbolist, Expressionist and Existentialist elements can be found.<sup>60</sup> The eclecticism of these early works cannot disguise their unifying feature, however; as the Arab-American critic Manal Swairjo points out, they 'are focussed on the "social condition" of the individual, rather than the issues of the self that mark existentialist literature'.<sup>61</sup>

In his later writings, Wannous himself disparaged his achievements in these early works, not so much for their deficiencies as drama as for their uncritical and undisciplined absorption of these new influences. Above all, he criticised his own inability to take a clear intellectual line on this confusion of influences and speak directly to a real audience about contemporary political realities. In his *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*,<sup>62</sup> published in 1986, he wrote that before the defeat of 1967, he, and Arab playwrights generally, eschewed an overtly and consciously political theatre designed to educate the audience and rouse it to action. They imagined that a theatrical experience could be created 'by presenting random and irrelevant examples from the repertoire of world theatre'.<sup>63</sup> He criticised the 'superficiality and triviality'<sup>64</sup> of the Arab theatre of those years and admitted that the defeat of 1967 forced playwrights to confront the need for 'a close relationship between the theatre and politics'<sup>65</sup> and to align themselves with the forces of 'progressivism'.

In 1966 Wannous left Damascus to study theatre at the Sorbonne, where he continued to broaden his knowledge of recent and contemporary drama, becoming particularly interested in Brecht's theories of the 'epic theatre'. His studies were suddenly and rudely interrupted by the catastrophe of the Six-Day War of June 1967. The defeat of the Arab armies by Israel was a profound shock for Wannous as it was for most Arabs, and it coloured his views until the end of his life. In a documentary film made in 1996 by his friend and collaborator Omar Amiralay, he recalled 'I felt this was the end; history and time had stopped. Everything connecting me to life, to being itself, had collapsed'.<sup>66</sup>



At first Wannous was too stunned to think of writing a play on the subject of the defeat. He returned to Damascus but went back to Paris after a few months to complete his studies, convinced that socialism was the solution to the problems afflicting his people.<sup>67</sup> The French capital's rich cultural and intellectual life began to revive him, a process suddenly and drastically accelerated by the 'May events' of 1968. This political and cultural upheaval radically transformed his views on the function of drama and on politics generally: Brecht and Marx were now the key influences. The result was Wannous's first great success, *Haflat Samar min ajl al-Khamis min Huzayran* (*Evening Party for the Fifth of June, 1968-69*).<sup>68</sup>

*Evening Party* was a prominent example of *al-Adab al-Naksa* (the literature of the setback), which sought to analyse the causes of the defeat and discuss its effects, both psychological and social, on the Arab world with a view to learning lessons for the future.<sup>69</sup> More a confrontation than a conventional play, *Evening Party* was, in Roger Allen's words, 'a searing criticism of the attitudes of Arab society that were so cruelly exposed by the June War'.<sup>70</sup> The authorities in Damascus were disturbed and banned performances for two years, but this did not deter Wannous, who over the next decade developed his concept of *al-Masrah al-Taysis* or 'theatre of politicisation', writing a small group of plays embodying this concept that culminated in *al-Malik huwa'l-Malik* (*The King's the King, 1977*), the play chosen for the practice part of this study. Wannous hoped that the theatre of politicisation would incite the audience to some kind of revolutionary action and stimulate fruitful interaction with the performers, but his audiences were not persuaded to abandon their inhibitions. Nevertheless he continued to believe that theatre should be a means of political education and could only be effective if it engaged with social, political and economic questions.<sup>71</sup>

The plays constituting the 'theatre of politicisation' reflect Wannous's concern to cater for the peculiar needs of an Arab audience. Brecht remains the key influence, but Wannous realised that his theatre needed to draw on the Arab folk heritage and to reinvigorate the techniques of the early pioneers of Syrian theatre, al-Naqqash and al-Qabbani, though he did not include songs.<sup>72</sup> However, in *The King's the King*, which



appeared after a gap of five years, Wannous makes no use of the Arab heritage in his technique, although the plot is taken from the *Thousand and One Nights* tale of Abu'l-Hassan which had also inspired al-Naqqash. Nor does Wannous expect any interaction between actors and audience. Apart from *The King's the King* and the short didactic play *Almalik wa Alfil (The King's Elephant, 1972)*, the canon of the theatre of politicisation consists of two large-scale works, *Maghamarat Ra's al-Mumruk Jabir (The Adventure of the Slave Jabir's Head, 1970)* and *Sahra ma'a Khalil al-Qabbani (Soirée with Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, 1972)*.<sup>73</sup>

Wannous wrote *The King's the King* in a mood of desperation. The October War of 1973 between Israel and the forces of Egypt and Syria had proved inconclusive and had produced no literature or drama of lasting merit. The stalemate, seen as a victory by the Arabs, who were, however, bitterly divided, led to an increase in confidence but also to a lack of engagement with the problems confronting the Arab world. As the Syrian critic Ghassan Ghuneim has remarked, 'theatre became commercial; that is, lacking in seriousness. Politics were treated comically on stage. Instead of rousing the people to act, theatre became a means of discharging emotions'.<sup>74</sup>

The increasing power and influence of the USA in the region, and the opening of Arab economies to the West as a result of the *infitah* ('open door') policy, depressed Wannous profoundly, and after the peace overtures between President Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel, which occurred soon after the completion of *The King's the King*, he attempted suicide. It would be more than ten years before he returned to drama.<sup>75</sup> Wannous's seven late plays are very varied in character, ranging from savage satire on global capital and the consumer culture (*The Mirage Epic, 1995*) to meditation on family history, memory and the relativity of truth (*Drunken Days, 1995*). In them he attempted, without abandoning history or politics, to free himself from the illusions of his middle period and from the self-imposed duty to write only about issues of national or international importance. His themes now were personal courage, integrity and responsibility, and he turned to exploring more intimately the relationship between the



individual and society. Though still a Marxist, he no longer saw the struggles and sufferings of individuals as unworthy of serious attention.

In 1992 Wannous was diagnosed with the cancer that would end his life five years later. Death is a constant theme in these last plays, but he did not despair. In 1995 he was honoured by UNESCO and delivered an address on the theme 'The Thirst for Dialogue', in which he calls on the world theatre community to halt the current decline. He sees the theatre marginalised, trivialised, and in dire economic and moral need. He attacks globalisation, which he sees as producing isolated, depressed individuals by ruthlessly destroying all forms of solidarity. Against this bleak picture Wannous sets an optimism of the will and proclaims himself a humanist: we are 'doomed to hope' for a better world, and theatre must rise to the challenge of accomplishing the necessary critical and creative tasks.<sup>76</sup> Wannous remains the most significant Syrian dramatist of the last century. As Allen remarks, 'In confronting questions of language, of theatre semiotics, of acting technique, and of production through both his plays and his critical writings, Wannous fulfilled an invaluable role in the continuing process of developing an Arabic drama that is both lively and relevant'.<sup>77</sup>

### *The King's the King*

*The King's the King* was written as a response to the political and social conditions obtaining in the Arab world after the 'victory' of 1973, and in particular to the state of drama, which Wannous and others saw as failing to confront the Middle East's most pressing problems. Wannous was aware of the betrayals and compromises that had allowed the leaders of Egypt and Syria to consolidate their power. The play, like others in his 'theatre of politicisation', draws on history or folktale to comment on contemporary events. In subverting the original tale of Harun al-Rashid and Abu'l-Hasan, Wannous attacks not only dictatorial military states but all societies divided into classes. The only possible solution to the social and political problems besetting



mankind, the play argues, is to sweep away hierarchies of every kind and substitute for them a truly classless community.

The original tale, dramatised by al-Naqqash<sup>78</sup> restores the status quo, assuring the ruler that he is secure on his throne, since the wise and prudent monarch cannot be threatened by the ambitions of his inferiors.<sup>79</sup> Wannous's play radically contradicts this comforting moral, suggesting that the personal merits or faults of a ruler cannot secure his power or legitimate his rule; the ruler himself is faceless, and he is nothing without his 'crown and gown'. In *The King's the King* the dupe is immediately accepted as ruler despite the real king's bewildered protest and assumes absolute authority as if 'to the palace born',<sup>80</sup> becoming even more tyrannical than his predecessor, who is rejected by his vizier, his Queen, his courtiers and officials and all who only the day before had obeyed him unquestioningly and showered him with praise and flattery.

The structure of the play is relatively straightforward. There are nine narrative or dramatic scenes, framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue and interrupted by four interludes, in which Wannous attempts to hammer home the 'message' of the play, which for all its humour is a strongly didactic work. There are thirteen characters in all, two of whom - the young revolutionaries Zahid and 'Ubayd - have the role of *hakawati*, orchestrating the action and commenting on its significance (Wannous would later reject this device as having outlived its usefulness). Abu'l-Hasan becomes Abu 'Izza the bankrupt merchant, and Harun al-Rashid becomes the mighty King Fakhreddin. Posters are used throughout the play to indicate the substance of each scene. The first of these reads *THE KING'S THE KING: A THEATRICAL GAME ANALYSING THE AUTHORITY STRUCTURE OF REGIMES OF DISGUISE AND OWNERSHIP*.

A dialogue on the words 'forbidden' and 'allowed' ensues, and the characters speak about their hopes and dreams, which are 'allowed' as long as they are never translated into action. In the following scene the bored King decides to have some fun at the expense of one of his poor subjects, and the theme of the disguise is introduced. The King must take off the trappings of his power, much to the discomfiture of his Vizier,



who knows that they are not merely symbolic but in a sense actually constitute that power. In the interlude that follows 'Ubayd insists that the King will have to resort to more terror and repression in order to hold on to his throne.

After Abu 'Izza and his servant 'Urqub are transported to the palace by the disguised King and Vizier, 'Ubayd is given a long speech in the second interlude articulating the Marxist view that the earliest human communities practised various forms of primitive communism, subsequently destroyed by the ruler, who adopted a disguise and instituted a destructive form of social relations 'Ubayd calls 'the masquerade'. The only solution is to kill and eat the king, thus sharing his power equally in a classless society. The universality of this solution was indicated by Wannous in *Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre*: 'In *The King's the King* 'disguised regimes' and ownership mean class societies, especially contemporary bourgeois ones, whether the ruling system is military or civilian. It is wrong to think that I'm only criticising despotic Eastern societies'.<sup>81</sup>

When Abu 'Izza awakes he is at first bemused, but once attired as king he takes to his new role with relish, believing that he has always been king and that his old life was merely a dream. This transformation is handled with great panache and black humour by Wannous. While everyone except the Vizier and the real king, and 'Urqub, who has become temporary vizier, is completely taken in, the new king behaves with exemplary ruthlessness, ordering more terror and repression, as 'Ubayd predicted.<sup>82</sup>

The play proceeds inexorably to its conclusion. Even Abu'Izza's wife and daughter do not recognise the King (although the daughter is suspicious), while the Queen merely admires her husband's newly acquired vitality. The ex-king is humiliated and becomes a broken man; the real Vizier, who finds cruelty erotic (as does the King), regains his position and 'Urqub flees; Abu 'Izza's daughter, who loves 'Ubayd, is given to the Vizier; the King orders Abu'Izza's punishment (although of course no one will be able to find him); and the revolution will have to be postponed. The play contains an important flaw: the fact that Abu 'Izza's character does not change when he becomes king, since power merely allows him to realise his fantasies. He was always potentially



a tyrant, and this contradicts the play's central idea: that anyone can become a despot given the 'gown and crown'.<sup>83</sup> Despite this inconsistency, the play remains one of Wannous's most successful works, which manages to marry pace, wit, irony and black humour with a compelling political message. Unfortunately its audiences did not understand what Wannous was intent on telling them, but this is a testament to its richness and complexity rather than a criticism of its failure as propaganda.

### **The Later Twentieth Century and Theatre Today**

The two decades from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s witnessed a remarkable revival of theatre in the Arab world, and particularly in Egypt, where a new generation was inspired by the mood of euphoria and optimism created by the 1952 Revolution. But playwrights throughout the Arab world saw the new Egyptian regime as a source of hope until the image of President Nasser was tarnished by the defeat of 1967. Even so, for some years after the Israeli victory dramatists wrote works which in various ways commented on the defeat and sought to rouse the people to act against their corrupt and despotic rulers, or at least implicitly criticised those rulers, with the result that their plays were often banned or heavily censored by the authorities. After the inconclusive war of 1973, hailed as a victory by many in the Arab world, serious theatre began a long period of decline, and while many writers suffered from political censorship the influence of Islamic fundamentalists began to intensify and expand, with severe consequences for drama, while at the same time the commercial theatre continued to flourish.

This period was exceptional in that writers turned to drama rather than other genres as the most suitable form in which to express their preoccupations and impart their message, and this continued until the mid-1970s. Drama became a forum for debates on social and political themes, and playwrights felt that they could be influential in public life. The new dramatists were young men eager to experiment with form and language; the only older writer to keep pace with them was al-Hakim. The generation of socially



and artistically committed playwrights who achieved prominence in Egypt in the late 1950s and early 1960s included Yusuf Idris (1927-91), Alfred Faraj (1929-2005), Salah `Abd al-Sabur (1930-81) and Mahmud Diyab (1932-83). These writers were fervently attached to Egypt's historical past and to its political present, and their works were increasingly embraced by segments of society that had hitherto shown little interest in serious drama, partly because these younger playwrights were asking fundamental questions about the nature of drama and the role of theatre in society and searching for a specifically Egyptian and Arab form of theatre. They were influenced by European drama, especially Pirandello and Brecht, but they mingled these influences with folkloric elements and the shadow theatre<sup>84</sup>

The 1960s saw dramatists beginning to probe the glaring contradictions in Egyptian society and its weakness, injustice and corruption whether in the family or public life. Al-Hakim produced *The Sultan's Dilemma* in 1960 and many important plays followed, including Alfred Faraj's *Hallaq Baghdad (The Barber of Baghdad, 1963)*, Yusuf Idris's *al-Farafir (The Flutterbugs, 1964)*, Mahmud Diyab's *al-Zawba'a (The Storm, 1964)* and Salah Abd al-Sabur's *Ma'sat al-Hallaj (The Tragedy of al-Hallaj, 1965)*.

According to Badawi, Idris's *The Flutterbugs* (the title is untranslatable: it has been rendered variously as *The Lost Ones*, *The Flipflaps* and *Little Mousey*) had seminal effect upon Egyptian drama. Idris is best known for his short stories and novels, but his work as a dramatist goes back to the mid-1950s, when he produced social realist plays supporting the 1952 Revolution. By 1964 his opinions had changed, and the play 'mounts a remarkable critique of authoritarian political power, oppressive social structures, and individual complacency'.<sup>85</sup> It was also an attempt to transform theatre from what Idris regarded as mere imitation of European dramatic forms into a more authentically Egyptian drama. Idris drew on native performance genres such as the shadow play, *maqamat*, and *samir* entertainments (the village evening gathering for singing, dancing and story telling), but the play owes at least as much to the experiments of Pirandello and Brecht. It presents the relationship between a master and his servant (Farfur), who bicker, quarrel and exchange roles under the watchful eye of



the Author, who eventually dwindles and vanishes. The play suggests that God may have deserted the world, but the roles of master and servant are eternal.<sup>86</sup>

Alfred Faraj sought his inspiration in Arab popular and folk literature such as the *Thousand and One Nights* and the medieval romances, which he used to comment on contemporary social and political reality, satirising the abuses of Nasser's state. *The Barber of Baghdad* first brought him to popular attention, which was sustained by later pre-1967 plays, but by common consent his most accomplished drama is *'Ali Janah al-Tabrizi wa-tabi'uhu Quffah (Ali Janah from Tabriz and His Servant Quffah, 1969)*. This play, adapted, in a manner slightly influenced by Brecht, from the *Thousand and One Nights*, tells the story of a young, carefree and impoverished prince who, aided by an itinerant shoemaker, pretends to be a rich merchant awaiting a treasure-laden caravan. The merchants rush to lend him money, which he gives to the poor so they can start businesses, and he marries the King's daughter. Discovered and condemned to death, he is saved by Quffah, who announces that the caravan has at long last been sighted. Ali and Quffah escape, together with the Princess, who finds Ali's qualities more valuable than material wealth. Allen remarks that the play's audience would have seen more than a wonderfully entertaining and well-structured piece of drama; they would have seen 'this picture of an idealist dreamer surrounded by greedy opportunists and yes-men [...] as an allegory of their own contemporary political realities'.<sup>87</sup>

While we have chosen to focus on al-Sharqawi's contribution to poetic drama because of *The Wrath of God's* connection with the *ta'ziyah*, critics agree that 'Abd al-Sabur was not only a far better poet but a superior playwright. His first play, *The Tragedy of al-Hallaj*, is based on the story of the famous mystic and martyr al-Hussein ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922), who was crucified for heresy. 'Abd al-Sabur's interpretation is that al-Hallaj was not executed for religious reasons but for his political commitment to the cause of the poor and hungry, whom he has been encouraging to rebel against the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. The general theme of the relative power of the pen and the sword is expressed symbolically, often through stylised gesture and ritualistic action. This theme recurs in 'Abd al-Sabur's four other plays.<sup>88</sup>



Mahmud Diyab is best known for his second play, *The Storm*, written in 1964 but published in 1967. It concerns the terrified reactions of a village to the rumour that a man from the village, wrongfully imprisoned for robbery with violence, has been released. After his conviction he swore that he would return to take revenge, and now the real culprits and the perjurers are afraid, as are those who have ill-treated his family and stolen his property. The prisoner never appears, although he is blamed for murders that are committed to prevent the truth being discovered, and eventually the villagers find that the rumour was groundless, the prisoner having died in prison some years before, after giving up all thoughts of revenge. Diyab writes in an intensely expressive colloquial and, unlike most of his contemporaries, does not preach political or moral lessons. The play focuses on the drama of human relationships and in a confined setting explores large questions relating to justice and conscience, and individual and collective responsibility.<sup>89</sup>

It is clear that from 1967 to the mid-1970s most serious drama in Egypt focused on the Arab-Israeli war and its social and political consequences. Writers of this generation, who were, after 1967, afflicted by a profound despair, sought to address issues of social justice and affirmed the right to resist oppression and the need for ideals. They were also concerned to portray the difficulty of adapting to social change, and indeed social change accelerated in the years following the October war of 1973, when the implementation of the open door policy brought about profound transformations, first in Egypt and soon afterwards in most Arab countries. In Egypt especially, private enterprise enjoyed a wider scope in agriculture, industry and commerce, and the 1970s saw a rapid dismantling of the state socialism of the 1960s.<sup>90</sup>

In Egypt the *infitah* led to the domination of consumer values over arts policy (even before 1973 the state had diverted public expenditures on the arts into military budgets) and a general lowering of artistic standards in order to attract a broader audience, since popular interest in theatre was waning. Private commercial troupes attempted to regain the attention of older playgoers, while the more experimental groups sought to engage



the young. Many stars of the theatre deserted the stage, preferring to make films and television serials in both Egypt and the region's oil-producing states. The 1970s also saw an intensification of censorship as all plays were required to obtain state approval. In an attempt to encourage creativity, the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre was established in 1988; it is held annually in early September, and sixty to seventy plays from about thirty-five countries are presented. This is in many ways a positive development, but the result has been a marginalisation of the literary drama.<sup>91</sup>

Theatre in Syria has suffered a decline similar to that found in Egypt, and for much the same reasons. In the 1990s the number of performances diminished and few new companies emerged. The National Theatre rarely stages more than two or three productions a season, and stagnation is evident. As in Egypt, many popular actors have devoted their energies to television serials, and television and cinema thrive while theatre audiences dwindle. Wannous's death in 1997 marked the end of an era and 'added to the general diminution of an already weakened theatre community'.<sup>92</sup>

Lebanon, though part of the Arab world, has a large Christian population, and many of the plays written during the period of the Arab renaissance (between about 1898 and 1939) were composed by Christians, including a number of clerics. The subjects were mainly religious and historical, and the plays not particularly distinguished. In the 1950s, as elsewhere in the Arab world, the focus shifted to politics and social problems, but there was little activity and audiences transferred their attention to the cinema. This coincided with attempts to consistently utilise a more colloquial form of Arabic and with the desire of actors to break away from classical plays and the grand manner of acting. By the early 1960s the language of drama had changed considerably, and classical literary Arabic had virtually disappeared from the stage by the 1990s.

In 1975 Lebanon was stricken by civil war, which was to last fifteen years, during which time theatrical activity at first ceased entirely, then occurred fitfully, mainly in the Christian areas outside Beirut. (The Israeli invasion of June 1982 provoked Wannous to write *Historical Miniatures* in 1992, making use of the fall of Damascus to



the Mongol armies in 1403.) This activity consisted mainly of light comedy and vaudeville, and after 1990 the audiences for such entertainments began to dominate theatre life. Ticket prices rose, and those who could afford them wanted only easy laughs. By the mid-1990s there were hardly any serious or experimental theatres in the country. As the new century dawned a few companies were beginning to mount productions, but despite the visits of foreign companies there are few signs of a revival.<sup>93</sup>

Yusuf al-Ani (b.1927) is without question the most important Iraqi dramatist. As a law student in Baghdad he formed an amateur troupe as a vehicle for his belief that theatre should address the real problems of the people. Most of his mature work was written for the company he founded in 1952, and in 1998 he travelled to the German Democratic Republic, where he discovered Brecht's epic theatre, an encounter which had a lasting influence on his stagecraft. His most celebrated work is *al-Miftah* (*The Key*, 1968), which was an unprecedented experiment in Iraqi theatre. It is a haunting fable that tells the story of a young married couple, symbolically named Hayran and Hayrana (the masculine and feminine forms of the adjective meaning 'perplexed'). They have determined not to become parents until they have discovered a fulfilling role in life. They are in quest of a key to a magical box but are continually thwarted. Al-Ani makes use of popular traditions and folklore, interspersing the tableaux that constitute the action with political commentary and folk song. The play calls for a courageous commitment to solid goals and criticises the folly of pursuing empty dreams.<sup>94</sup>

This discussion should not neglect the theatre of my own country, Kuwait. While the various folkloric performative traditions have been encouraged by the government since the 1950s, and their study was formally introduced into the educational curriculum in 1982, the state has also subsidised theatre groups, both amateur and professional, since the 1960s. In that decade there emerged a number of remarkable theatre practitioners in writing, production and acting, notably the playwright 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Surayyi', whose *Tara'l-Dik* (*The Bird Has Flown*, 1971) has been performed in many Arab countries. Originally written in Kuwaiti dialect and subsequently revised for a wider Arab



audience, *The Bird Has Flown* is a social drama on the theme of the great difference between Western (here British) and traditional Arabic culture. The conflict centres on the behaviour of the son of a wealthy old man's second marriage, contracted in his youth with an Indian woman who has brought the boy up in Britain. The son visits his Kuwaiti family for the first time and his values clash with those of his conservative relations, bringing about a catastrophe. The play raised the question, can the younger generation embrace the West without abandoning their cultural heritage and alienating the elders?<sup>95</sup>

The Institute for Dramatic Studies was founded in 1964 to train students for the profession; in 1973 the Institute became the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. The Institute holds a cultural festival at the end of each academic year, at which plays from both Arabic and world literature are publicly staged.<sup>96</sup> Kuwait's encouragement of drama has been instrumental in bringing the work of the young playwright and director Sulayman al-Bassam to international attention. His contribution to twenty-first-century Arabic drama will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

As we have seen, politics dominated the Arabic drama of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. As Badawi notes, 'More than any other literary form perhaps, even more than the novel and the short story, drama affords incontrovertible evidence that Arab writers have been the political conscience of the Arab nation'.<sup>97</sup> Allen, however, points out that the popularity of serious drama 'has rarely, if ever, rivalled that of the comic tradition'.<sup>98</sup> He acknowledges that Alfred Faraj and Sa'dallah Wannous, for example, have tried to attract a popular audience by endeavouring to transcend the cultural and attitudinal boundaries set up by the two extremes of 'serious' and 'popular' drama; but these efforts have achieved only limited success. Today practitioners face not only state and religious censorship, although this is arguably not the problem it once was in many countries, but also a widespread indifference to serious drama caused by the rival attractions of other media. Writing at the turn of the century, Allen observes:



Arabic drama has a modern performance tradition that in certain countries is barely thirty years of age, and the process of creating *ab initio* a space for itself within a cultural environment that is daily bombarded by modern media in the form of soap operas and films that can be watched in the home is nothing less than daunting.<sup>99</sup>

The views of the pioneers of experimental drama are not encouraging. Yusuf al-Ani, for example, laments the demise of the Arab theatre in an interview given to *Al-Ahram* in 1999. Of the work of academies of drama he notes that 'their efforts are confined, the audience is tiny, and there is a persistent danger of falling out of touch'. More broadly, he remarks that:

Theatre has deteriorated because of the political and economic disturbances through which the Arab countries are passing. Most shows aim to make the highest possible profit at the expense of theatrical values. Most of our theatres contain cabaret shows, better suited to nightclubs. Not one show is without dancing, singing and heap upon heap of crude, even obscene, jokes.

The only standard of judgement is to laugh and make others laugh, at anything and everything. Levels of culture have themselves fallen. Economic and psychological decline, in the course of our contemporary history, have also affected individuals, exhausting [...] the stability that permits an appreciation of theatre or art which, rather than flattening human experience takes the form of a sustained creative effort that seeks out the new and the beneficial.<sup>100</sup>

Al-Ani's words echo those delivered by Wannous three years earlier in his keynote speech to UNESCO celebrating the International Day of Theatre (9 March 1996). After claiming an essential social role for theatre as 'an ideal forum in which man ponders his existential and historical condition', he draws a gloomy picture:

Wherever I look, I see cities losing theatres, forced to isolate themselves into dark and neglected margins, at a time when we are witnessing the creation of a growing nightlife, coloured by screens, and packaged trivialities. I am aware of no other period in which theatre was in such dire economic and moral need. The funds used to nourish it are declining year after year, and the attention by which it was once surrounded has been changed to negligence equivalent to disdain, although often this negligence is cloaked in hypocrisy. The



crisis of theatre, regardless of its particularity, is part of a crisis that encompasses culture in general.<sup>101</sup>

Alfred Faraj also spoke of the decline of the theatre in an interview with Dina Amin of *Al-Jadid* magazine in 2002, but struck a more optimistic note: 'In my opinion, theatre can flourish under dire circumstances and can attain far-reaching goals in both prospering and declining social and economic conditions. [...] Theatre is a call for resistance; it does not just reflect social conditions, it challenges them'. Faraj refers to a number of factors he considers important in the decline. First, the greatly diminished influence of intellectuals in cultural life. In the past, intellectuals 'had actual power and leadership over our cultural development. [...] I say that the role of Arab intellectuals has shrunk drastically in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'. Second, Faraj argues that theatre festivals 'have not generated any new artistic or philosophical currents. They have not influenced the development of theatre art'. Third, he attacks the state of criticism: 'As it is today, criticism is just bouquets of flowers bestowed on all artists equally, regardless of the quality of the art they present'. Fourth, there is the matter of the poor state of theatre buildings, their undistinguished architecture, low level of comfort, and 'total backwardness of stage technology'. Fifth, there is neither planning nor vision with regard to programmes and schedules. Sixth, Faraj complains that masterpieces of world drama are no longer presented and that there is no attempt to establish an Egyptian repertoire.

Faraj deplores the government's recent banning of literary texts and the fact that in Egypt plays by Arab dramatists are not taught at any level in schools. He notes that the level of theatre attendance is very low in the Arab world, and observes that in the 1960s theatre was successful 'because it fulfilled the people's need for social justice by projecting the various social injustices' and so became a necessity. 'Theatre has now lost its touch with reality and with its audience; it has lost its power to communicate'. Finally, Faraj comments on Arab governments' fear of the theatre: 'Strong governments support and appreciate theatre because they realise that social and political criticism is the role of theatre. Theatre aids in the development of society. [...] Therefore I say that governments that fear theatre are weak; they fear social and civic development'.<sup>102</sup>



Is the pessimism of these eminent pioneers justified? Since there is a surprising dearth of material on contemporary Arabic theatre, I decided to conduct interviews with two colleagues at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Kuwait: Dr Nadeem Mualla, a Syrian critic of theatre, and Dr Nadir al-Qunnah, a Palestinian critic and journalist. Both are professors in the Department of Criticism. The interview took place on 8 August 2007.

When asked about the increasing dominance of experimental theatre, especially at festivals of drama, Dr Mualla commented that since about 1990 the serious theatre has indeed been increasingly dominated by the experimental approach, which has moved beyond small independent troupes to include government-sponsored theatres. But the response of the Arab audience has not been positive, since for them the theatre is not an essential part of society. Dr Mualla went on to explain that in the early 1960s Western models such as the Theatre of the Absurd and Brecht's epic theatre were influential, but often those who were influenced did not master the style or understand the context that had produced those works. This superficial attitude to Beckett and Ionesco, for example, has its parallels today in the kind of work often presented at the Cairo Festival of Experimental Theatre.

One aspect of this trend that can often be negative, according to Dr Mualla, is the attempt to get rid of the word, to 'kill the playwright'. Sometimes the director creates the performance on the stage, or the actors may compile a text collectively through improvisation, or the director, and often the actors, may re-write a well-known text by deconstructing and reconstructing it, even if in so doing the artistic and intellectual vision is transformed. Thus the director becomes a new writer of the text.

As for the awareness of the actor, Dr Mualla made the rather surprising and contentious assertion that too great a cultural awareness will spoil an actor's performance because it will deprive him of his spontaneity by 'putting him under the pressure of analysis before



the event and self-supervision'. The actor's performance must be harmonised with all the other elements of the production, no matter how talented the actor.

When asked about technology in the theatre, Dr al-Qunnah talked about the experiments of the so-called Plastic Theatre, whose exponents include Tawfiq al-Jabali in Tunis, Salah al-Qasab in Iraq and Entisar Abdul-Fallah in Egypt. These experimenters make imaginative use of technology and the visual arts, in a better way than we usually find in theatre. Now the use of video and other technologies has moved to the mainstream, and lasers are often used in the commercial theatre.

When asked whether experimental theatre is a revolution against traditional theatre, and whether tradition can live with experimentation or inspire it, Dr al-Qunnah responded that a new movement known as Celebrating Anti-Theatre was attempting to do away with craftsmanship in the name of truthfulness and spontaneity, drawing on popular folklore: he mentioned in this regard Hasan al-Geraty in Egypt and al-Fadil al-Jazeri in Tunis. He distinguished between the 'dramatisation' of folklore and folk theatre, and 'anti-theatre' experiments that are admired by foreign tourists but fail to communicate with the young Arab audience, who are eager for a theatre that has something to say to them about social and political issues.

Dr Mualla agreed that experimental theatre can become a stereotype, noting that after ten years or so forms that once seemed quite new will feel outmoded and be replaced by others. Once a form has become established and 'safe' through boring repetition it will attract the unadventurous middle-class audience whose 'good taste' supports this kind of art. Experimental theatre tries to destroy the ordinary and prevalent so as to introduce something more daring and differently expressive, and is always keen to achieve a deeper integration between form and content, as the pioneers of the Theatre of the Absurd realised that the expression of the irrationality of life demanded irrational forms. But when the experimental loses its justification and aim, it will become a burden on theatre art and will only be able to achieve temporary, artificial and



fabricated new developments; and so it will become not only stereotypical but 'traditional'.

It would be misleading and unduly pessimistic to assert that Arabic theatre in this century is in terminal decline, despite the gloomy pronouncements of Wannous, al-Ani and Faraj, and the criticisms of many of today's commentators. While it is true that theatre – even the most popular comedies and musicals, let alone 'experimental' theatre – cannot hope to reach the mass audience available to practitioners in film and, especially, television, theatre can contribute to cultural life in ways that the other media cannot. An outstanding example of current possibilities can be found in the work of the young British-Kuwaiti director and playwright Sulayman al-Bassam, whose controversial and innovative productions have brought him international recognition.

Although al-Bassam stands at the cutting edge of contemporary Arabic theatre, it is striking that in several ways he represents a continuation of the concerns of modern Arabic drama: a dialogue with the West, the utilisation of the Arab heritage to comment on contemporary events, and an obsession with politics. Al-Bassam has adapted Shakespeare ('*Shaikh al-Zubair*' in Arabic) in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002) and *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (2007) and has returned to his cultural roots in *Kalila wa Dimna or The Mirror for Princes* (2006).

Al-Bassam's work is intensely political, not least in his reworking of Shakespeare. This reworking can be radical; in an interview with Shirley Dent in 2003 he remarked that the script of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was written from a contemporary Arab perspective. The play takes Shakespeare's tragedy and transposes the action to an undefined Middle Eastern state on the brink of war, besieged by its neighbours and attacked by politicised Islam from within, and in thrall to US dollars and the arms trade. According to al-Bassam 'the production takes major plot strands and elements of tone from Shakespeare, but the text of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, being entirely original, stirs very different cultural responses than the Shakespearian text'. Characters are also reworked; Claudius is a ruthless Westernising tyrant and Polonius is a manipulative courtier.<sup>103</sup>



Noting that in the Arab world 'political theatre is fiercely monitored by the state', al-Bassam recalled that when the piece opened in Cairo there was a riot for tickets outside the theatre; however, it was performed in English – a stipulation of the authorities – and so 'any potential threat in its content was neutered by the language barrier'. Since then, the play has been performed in Arabic across the world, but never, within the Arab world'.

Although al-Bassam's concerns, sources and methods place him in the mainstream of modern Arab theatre practitioners, he also suffers by comparison to his predecessors, since his international success cannot obscure the fact that in the Arab world his work has had little impact. Plays performed in English cannot reach more than a tiny minority of the Arab audience. Using the mask of Shakespeare's world to avoid censorship is a ploy that has had limited success, since even in Kuwait, where, al-Bassam acknowledges, 'there is a large berth for freedom of expression that is guaranteed by the constitution'<sup>104</sup> there are limits to what can be said. Moreover, al-Bassam, though grateful for what Kuwait has given him, is critical of the country's 'lack of cultural and artistic infrastructure'. He observes that 'the nonchalance of cultural authorities means that producing work here is a very difficult thing. [...] Whereas in Europe much support for the arts is derived from the public sector, in Kuwait there is little incentive or, indeed, public demand'.<sup>105</sup>

Nevertheless al-Bassam is hopeful: 'There is so much room for the development of the art and science of theatre in Kuwait, which is living in a vacuum, as the only interest of society is that of short-term gain'. He believes that Islamic militancy in the region will force Arab countries to re-examine themselves and look to art to assist in that process. There is a great potential to see art as a vehicle for the exploration of ideas, and to inspire the young. Al-Bassam is convinced that a significant level of artistic talent remains untapped in Kuwait, and that 'such talent cannot be kept down forever'.<sup>106</sup>

It is significant that al-Bassam's work should strongly reject the 'marginalisation of the text' or 'killing the playwright' apparent in much contemporary experimental theatre.



His practice is not as destructive as the comments of Dr Nadeem Mualla, quoted earlier, seem to imply. The script is paramount in his reworkings of Shakespeare. He sees ‘a thematic and formal overlap between Shakespeare’s world and today’s Arab world’, arguing that both are ‘turbulent, uneven worlds of Ruler and Ruled in which religious authority and corrupt oligarchs reign supreme over a largely feudal and tribal social fabric’. Both, according to him, are pre-modern cultures ‘in which the power of language, poetry and storytelling are imbued with incantatory, transformative powers – in the case of Arabic this power has sacred roots anchored as it is in the Holy Qur’an’. This has the greatest importance for the language of theatre; ‘it gives enormous tools to the theatre maker. Because you can rouse and you can depress and you can cut, you can destroy with words’.<sup>107</sup>

Words can, of course, be censored, and al-Bassam sees the various forms of state censorship as responsible for ‘the drying up of significant Arab dramatists’ voices in the last twenty years’. However, ‘these forms of censorship are the single most potent indicator of the subversive power of theatre in the Arab world’ and, echoing Alfred Faraj’s words quoted earlier, al-Bassam concludes that ‘Live performance is a threat, the Theatre of Ideas is a threat: governments fear it’. In the face of a globalised politics’ vacuous ‘world views’, culture and theatre can play a vital role: ‘They permit complexity and difference and they permit the weak to be other than pitied and the cruel to be other than hated. Theatre challenges the accepted world views and breaks the mirrors of authority’.<sup>108</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that modern Arabic drama has been largely but by no means exclusively an Egyptian phenomenon. Indeed it is arguable that without Egypt, Arabic theatre would have remained a folk art of farces and rough satirical entertainments. But the peculiar conditions obtaining in Egypt allowed theatre to develop through the activities of playwrights and troupes, even though it would take many decades to



become respectable and established, and many more for a similar development to occur outside Egypt. We have seen that Shawqi and al-Hakim, and their illustrious supporter Taha Hussein, were crucial to this process.

From the beginning Arabic drama was inextricably tied to European culture – and later to that of the West as a whole – and reflected in its aspirations, its forms and its subject matter the difficult relationship between Arab civilisation and those nations which first exercised colonial power and, later, economic and cultural hegemony. Arab playwrights have always seen themselves as the spokesmen of their people, ‘the political conscience of the Arab nation’, as Badawi puts it, and have consequently always been concerned with social and political issues. We can see this concern clearly in the work of writers as different as al-Hakim, al-Sharqawi and Wannous. For this reason dramatists have always been a thorn in the side of autocrats, and particularly so in the ‘golden age’ of political drama, the 1960s and early 1970s, when theatre became a kind of unofficial opposition which was taken very seriously by the authorities, especially after the 1967 June War. But it must be admitted that drama had very little effect on either public policy or the political consciousness of the mass of the population, who continued to prefer the commercial theatre and television soap operas, and who, as the effects of the ‘open door’ policy began to transform life in the Arab world, turned to the globalised entertainment industry dominated by the United States.

The ineffectiveness of theatre as a means of social and political change did not prevent totalitarian regimes and, increasingly, militant Islamists from seeking to control dissent and criticism through intimidation and censorship. This is still a problem, as the case of al-Bassam’s *The Al-Hamlet Summit* demonstrates. The many criticisms levelled at contemporary experimental theatre, as well as the general cultural decline and fragmentation of the Arab world, do not offer much hope that the theatre will be a significant cultural force in the near future, notwithstanding the profusion of festivals in the region. While commercial theatre thrives, serious theatre has not yet recovered from the decline that set in in the mid-1970s, even if it is not yet ‘at the point of extinction’, as one commentator would have us believe.<sup>109</sup> But without state support it is difficult to



see a future for serious theatre, and even where this is forthcoming and there is a degree of freedom of expression, as in Kuwait, the problem remains how to communicate with a wider audience, especially the young, who are capable of being distracted from their usual entertainments by powerful and thought-provoking theatre.

Theatre cannot be separated from its visual dimension, and the next chapter will discuss my own field, that of scenography.



Endnotes for Chapter 6

- 
- <sup>1</sup> See Hourani, pp. 259-62.
- <sup>2</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, p. 29; Sadgrove, p. 29.
- <sup>3</sup> See Hourani, p. 273.
- <sup>4</sup> See Sadgrove, pp. 34-36.
- <sup>5</sup> See Sadgrove, p. 39; Landau, p. 56.
- <sup>6</sup> See Landau, pp. 56-57.
- <sup>7</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, pp. 44-45; Landau, pp. 57-58; Al-Khozai suggests that all the dialogue may have been sung, p. 46.
- <sup>8</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 47.
- <sup>9</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 243.
- <sup>10</sup> See Allen, p. 197.
- <sup>11</sup> See Allen, p. 197; al-Khozai, pp. 80 f; Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, p. 57.
- <sup>12</sup> See Hourani, pp. 283-84.
- <sup>13</sup> Al-Khozai, p. 124.
- <sup>14</sup> See al-Khozai, pp. 124
- <sup>15</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, p. 32; Sadgrove, pp. 94-95.
- <sup>16</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, p. 33; Sadgrove, pp. 94, 105-11.
- <sup>17</sup> Landau, p. 74.
- <sup>18</sup> See Sadgrove, pp. 125-137; Landau, p. 74.
- <sup>19</sup> Landau, p. 75.
- <sup>20</sup> See Landau, p. 76.
- <sup>21</sup> Allen, p. 201.
- <sup>22</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama* pp. 249-254.
- <sup>23</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, p. 73; Allen, p. 199; Landau, p. 78.
- <sup>24</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, pp. 74-76.
- <sup>25</sup> Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 249-50.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- <sup>27</sup> Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 250-51.
- <sup>28</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 250-51.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252; see also Allen, p. 199.
- <sup>30</sup> Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 253.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Hourani, p. 395. Hourani comments on the characteristics of the classical and colloquial languages: 'The classical language lends itself to static declamation rather than dramatic action; it is a public language which cannot easily become the voice of an individual temperament; it is abstract, without reference to a specific environment. The colloquial language, on the other hand, may lack the resonance needed to rise to the height of a dramatic or a tragic moment.'
- <sup>33</sup> See Badawi, *Early Arab Drama*, pp. 138-140; *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 255-56; Landau, pp. 125-138.
- <sup>34</sup> Badawi, *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 256.
- <sup>35</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 257.



<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Landau, p. 144; Allen, pp. 201-02; Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 257-58.

<sup>38</sup> See Allen, p. 202; Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 258.

<sup>39</sup> See Allen, p. 203.

<sup>40</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 259; Allen, pp. 203-04.

<sup>41</sup> Badawi, *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, p.147.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Hakim, *The Return of Consciousness* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1985), p. x.

<sup>44</sup> See Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Maqrizi, *Al-Mawaiz wa al-I'tibar fi dhikr al-Khitat wa al-'Athar (Relics and Races)*, 2 volumes, (Cairo: Bulaq Press, 1270 A.H.), vol. 2, p. 215.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 210-211.

<sup>49</sup> *A Glance at Our Contemporary Literature*, (Damascus: the Arab Writers' Union, 1974), p.44.

<sup>50</sup> Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *The Bewildered Sultan*, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*, p.73, quoted in Hutchins, p.107.

<sup>52</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.17

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.151

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Samiyah Habib, *Dilalat al-Moqawamah fi masrah abdurahman alshqawi ( The Resitance sighns in Abdyrahaman al-Sharqawi Theatre)*. (Egypt: Alhay'ah al-Masriyah al-Amah lil Kitab.1997) pp.12-13

<sup>57</sup> Badawi, p.273

<sup>58</sup> Samiyah. p.24

<sup>59</sup> Ibid p. 33

<sup>60</sup> See Ali al Souleman, *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'allah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*, PhD thesis (Oxford University, 2005), pp. 23-24.

<sup>61</sup> Manal Swairjo, 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre', *Al Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996), p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> See Sa'dallah Wannous, *Declarations for a New Arab Theatre* (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1986), p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-44

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 66

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 56

<sup>66</sup> *Une Mort Ephémère*, dir. Omar Amiralay (France: TV5 production, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> See Swairjo, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> The Six-Day War had begun on 5 June 1967.

<sup>69</sup> See Abdulaziz Al Abdullah, *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allah Wannous*, PhD thesis (Manchester University, 1993), p. 42.



- 
- <sup>70</sup> Allen, p. 210.
- <sup>71</sup> See Swairjo, p. 17; Allen, p. 210.
- <sup>72</sup> See Swairjo, p. 16.
- <sup>73</sup> Badawi, *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 277; see also Allen, pp. 210-11.
- <sup>74</sup> Ghassan Ghuneim, *Political Theatre in Syria, 1967-1990* (Damascus: Aladdin Publishing House, 1996), p. 210.
- <sup>75</sup> See Hourani, pp. 422-3, 426, 436.
- <sup>76</sup> See Sa'dallah Wannous, *The Thirst for Dialogue* (World Theatre Day address), trans. International Theatre Institute (UNESCO), <http://iti-worldwide.org> [accessed 11 May 2007].
- <sup>77</sup> Allen, p. 211.
- <sup>78</sup> See p
- <sup>79</sup> For a discussion of the 'separate world' of the prince and the devout Muslim's view of its moral and spiritual dangers, see Grabar, p. 164.
- <sup>80</sup> Allen, p. 211.
- <sup>81</sup> Sa'dallah Wannous, *Declarations*, p. 117.
- <sup>82</sup> *The King's the King* in Jayyusi and Allen, p. 111.
- <sup>83</sup> See Sa'dallah Wannous, *The King's the King*, fourth edition (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983), p. 119.
- <sup>84</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 262-63; *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*. ed. Don Rubin (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), Vol. 4, p. 76.
- <sup>85</sup> Clarissa Burt, 'The Tears of a Clown: Yusuf Idris and Postrevolutionary Egyptian Theatre', *Theater, Dance, Music and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*, ed. by Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), p. 50.
- <sup>86</sup> Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 264-65.
- <sup>87</sup> Allen, p. 206; see also Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 266-67.
- <sup>88</sup> Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 274; see also Allen, p. 208.
- <sup>89</sup> See Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 267-68.
- <sup>90</sup> Hourani, pp. 417-423; *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, p. 77.
- <sup>91</sup> *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, (Routledge; 1998) pp. 77-81.
- <sup>92</sup> *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, p. 241.
- <sup>93</sup> *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, pp. 146-47.
- <sup>94</sup> Allen, p. 213; Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature*, pp. 286-87; Jayyusi and Allen, p. 254; Youssef Rakha, 'Stages of Development', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 441, 5-11 August 1999, <http://www.weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg/> [Accessed 21 July 2007].
- <sup>95</sup> See Jayyusi and Allen, p. 214; *World Encyclopedia Of Contemporary Theatre*, p. 134.
- <sup>96</sup> *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, p. 135.
- <sup>97</sup> Badawi, *A Short History Of Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 288.
- <sup>98</sup> Allen, p. 214.
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.



---

<sup>100</sup> <http://www.weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg/> [Accessed 21 July 2007].

<sup>101</sup> Elie Chalala, 'Sa'dallah Wannous Calls for Restoration of Theater, The "Ideal Forum" for Human Dialogue', *Al-Jadid*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June 1996) <http://www.aljadid.com/theatre/0208wannous.html/> [Accessed 06 July 2007].

<sup>102</sup> Dina Amin, 'Egyptian Playwright Alfred Faraj Analyses Decline of Arab Theatre', *Al-Jadid*, Vol. 8, No. 38 (Winter 2002) <http://leb.net/aljadid/theatre/> [Accessed 21 July 2007].

<sup>103</sup> Interview: Sulayman al-Bassam (Culture Wars) (2003)

<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-01/albassam.html> [Accessed 22-2-2006]

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> '*Hamlet bin Hamlet*' *Emerging in Kuwait*. 2006 Oxford Business Group (Kuwait: Annual Business Economic and Political Review, 2006) p.25

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> BBC Radio 3 Night Waves.

<sup>108</sup> 'Culture Wars' interview.

<sup>109</sup> See Youssef Rakha, 'The Empty Stage', *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo, 7-13 September 2000), Issue No. 498 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/498/cu2.html> [Accessed 21 July 2007].



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Scenography and Arab-Muslim Identity

#### Introduction

This chapter, while it consists of several distinct parts, is essentially concerned with my own discipline, scenography. It explains how the Arabs became acquainted with it, and discusses the importance of scenography in the Arab-Islamic theatre context. It should be noted at the outset that, unfortunately for the researcher, there is a lack of Arab-Islamic sources devoted to scenography. Only four books concerned with scenography in general are available, and these have no bearing on Arab-Islamic identity. Three are translations of Western books.<sup>1</sup> The fourth is a doctoral thesis published as a book. It consists of artistic impressions relating to the Arabic dramatic scene in general with little detailed discussion of scenography.

Given the dearth of Arabic sources this chapter cannot present a historical overview or analysis of scenography as practised in the Arab world; and as for theory, this has been entirely imported from the West. For this reason, much of the chapter is devoted to empirical research, to my own thoughts on this subject, and to an account of my



experiences as an academic and specialist in scenography. This account will chart my progress from my first college stage designs until now. The journey will explore the academic environment in which scenography is taught and practised in my home country, Kuwait, and will examine the condition of theatre in Kuwait as an example of a theatre aiming to serve an Arab and Muslim audience, addressing the issue of whether it is part of that audience's heritage or remains an alien element in our culture. I will also discuss the problems and concerns associated with the decline of theatre in Kuwait with various people associated with the Kuwait theatre.

Since in several respects the *ta'ziyah* is important to this study, the chapter includes an account of my visit to Syria, which portrays in detail and explores this unique manifestation of ritual theatre in the Arab world. The visit, which took place in 2001, was an important factor in determining the aim and purpose of my research. Another means of research available to me has been my participation in discussions with theatre personalities concerned with the Arabic theatre generally and Arabic scenography in particular. Thus the chapter includes extracts from a radio discussion. Moreover, many of the ideas developed in this study have been drawn from cultural symposia on Arab theatre and Arabic identity in general which I have been privileged to attend. Finally, the chapter discusses the designs I have produced during the course of the research, especially those for dramas by the three selected playwrights al-Hakim, Wannous and al-Sharqawi, whose work was discussed in chapter six.

It must be admitted that an 'Arab-Islamic' scenography hardly yet exists. Such a scenography, however, cannot simply turn inwards to concentrate exclusively on its own heritage; it must be acknowledged that Arabic theatre is now in dialogue not only with the West (as it has been since 1847) but also with theatrical manifestations from all over the world. For this reason the question of the definition and expression of Arab-Islamic identity has become crucial. In the realm of scenography the practical possibilities may be inspired by religious practice, Islamic art and architecture, and what remains vital in Arabic theatre and even the experimental 'tradition'. We will begin by examining the development of scenography as discussed in the works of Arab writers and translators.



### **The Arabs and Scenography**

To have some idea how Arab theatre artists today understand the concept of scenography, the best approach is to look at a few readily available Arabic translations of texts from other cultures, meaning those of the West in particular. Although the term has only recently become current in the Arab world, scenography has for several decades been widely used in Western theatre. Whenever theatre, theatrical performance and scenery are discussed and debated and the problems of this theatre with all its dramatic, artistic and technical components are mentioned, issues are raised as to how the use of these components is to be coordinated, harmonised and integrated in a theatrical structure.

Researchers, theorists, stage-directors and theatre critics in the West all acknowledge the existence of some confusion in assigning a specific meaning to the term 'scenography'. In view of the problematic nature of this term, we shall briefly attempt to place it in its artistic, literary and historical contexts so as to elucidate the functions and roles which have determined its significance in modern theatrical usage, beginning with the concept of scenography in the ancient world and concluding with the results of production experience in the West, these being the fruit of social, economic and cultural transformations, rapid technological change and artistic experimentation.

Scenography has tended to remain an independent, separate world, concerned on the one hand with the ideas and concept of theatre held by the stage-director, and on the other with the operational means used to transfer the dramatic text to the theatre stage. Critical writing has scarcely concerned itself with this artistic field except by occasional self-conscious references and allusions to some aspects of it without attempting any deeper specialist study like that made of the theory of drama, like.

Leon Chanswil Ril, in his *The History of Theatre*, notes that in the ancient Greek theatre:

the play was presented in a natural setting on the slope of a hill. The sun was the only form of lighting, a semi-circular stony incline



surrounded the smooth stage area, and the altar of Dionysus formed its spiritual and architectural centre-piece. This was where the chorus moved within an area of around twenty metres square. The performance area was divided by a wooden barrier with doors. This barrier was a kind of two-storey wooden structure used as a back stage and as rooms for the actors. The rare elements of décor used were restricted to what was essential to the dramatic action. This concept of décor enables the audience to see at a glance all the places of the dramatic action before it begins.<sup>2</sup>

This division of the performing space determined the way the poet-producer designed his writing, embodying the textual space in the performing space and bringing together the spoken text, the visual aspect and the fixed perspective.

Marcel Freydefont argues in his *Scenography Today* that the function assigned to scenography in the ancient world was an aesthetic one, using scenery to depict the significance of the events which the text imposed upon the production. This function required the scenery to follow the text and the theatrical instructions with their descriptions of characters, place and time. This type of function accentuated the proficiency of the dramatic poets in stage-managing their plays with the aim of suppressing the boundaries between the two concepts of the written text and the performed text. These aesthetic concerns

motivated the scenery artist in the classical, baroque, romantic, naturalist and symbolist traditions, especially as regards technical items of décor, as for a long time the chassis (a wooden frame to which cloth was attached) remained the basic raw material on which scenery depended. The task of perspective in the appropriate scenography for the theatre stage was an exact imitation of volume and empty space, and lighting was normal, its role not exceeding that of illumination. The theatre building itself including the stage and the auditorium was subject to this spatial form.<sup>3</sup>

Perspective played an important part in activating the imagination of the spectator and bestowed on the term 'scenography' a theatrical meaning indicating, to be precise, the art of perspective, whether architectural or natural. The use of the term 'décor' or 'scenery' was revised in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in the nineteenth



century a differentiation was made between the words 'décor' and 'scenery'. The word 'décor' is a technical term concerned with the use of apparatus in the theatre and indicating all the material elements which bear painted decorations, such as the chassiss. As for the word 'scenery', it is an artistic term indicating the place in which the action takes place and all the devices such as tableaux, furniture and accessories which are used in presenting the performance. Both décor and scenery play a role when the curtains is raised and should make a direct impression, but as soon as the dialogue begins, the actors gain the priority and the performance becomes of primary importance whilst the décor steps back to become merely a background to the text.<sup>4</sup>

In the early years of the last century attempts were made to revolutionise the concept of scenography and reorganise the theatrical space. Two pioneering stage-directors and theorists were Adolph Appia (1862-1928) and Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), who paved the way for a new generation of theatre designers, as regards both the concept of décor and the nature and function of movement and music. Appia and Craig are credited with defining a philosophy of theatrical space in its two dimensions of time and place, and with revealing the aesthetic and poetic values inherent in structural form. They were, as Martin Esslin notes, pioneers in giving new artistic dimensions to the role of the stage-director through the utilisation of the powers of modern technology (such as hydraulic apparatus and electric lighting) in structuring a performance space.<sup>5</sup> With Appia and Craig, scenography established itself as 'a spirit of the theatrical performance', and production became characterised by its clear lines and emphasis on fundamentals, which aimed to supersede the domination of painters and designers of décor and scenery. The ordering of theatrical space took precedence over a reliance on the charisma of the star actor. Appia and Craig asserted that 'the art of theatre is not a game played by actors and is neither a text nor the histrionic spirit'.<sup>6</sup>

Appia's vision of the function of the stage-director led him to conceive a new architecture which would allow for movement, music and lighting to create a magical atmosphere laden with psychological and sensory suggestion expressive of dramatic conflict. In his discussion of some components of Appia's theory, the Egyptian actor and stage-director Saad Ardesh notes that



The actor's movement should be subject to the law of music (harmonisation of time and place) and empty theatrical space with its horizontal and vertical dimensions, whereby the lighting should transform this empty space into a unified sensory world.[...] Appia does not concern himself with the drama of the word.[...] Performance is structured without any décor. Music is a major element in theatrical performance, being no less important than the actor and the symbolic abstract décor.<sup>7</sup>

Ardesch comments further:

For Appia décor is a philosophical conception springing from two structural elements: on the one hand, light and shadow (representation), and on the other, cubist blocks which form vertical levels in space (sculpture). To give the movement of the actor (character) more opportunity to develop, he should not move on a flat surface but within a combination of ladders, cubes (levels) and slopes, which may be considered the valuation of the vertical dimension in the theatrical space. Thus he resorts to representation, but only in variations of the one colour, without going beyond this to depict units of scenery of any kind. This he called the play of shadow and light.<sup>8</sup>

By means of these theories, Appia was aiming to realise the lyricism of the theatrical performance in a new way, eschewing classical lyricism, which he saw as dependent on theatrical illusion and the passive reception of the performance by the spectator. He stresses the establishment of a harmonious relationship between acoustic and kinetic form so that the theatrical performance's dynamism and movement prevent this passivity.

Craig, as stage-director and décor designer, transformed the characteristics of production predominant in Europe. He famously stated, 'In order to save the theatre we have to destroy it'.<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Zaki remarks in this connection:

Craig entered the theatre stage in a project aiming to gather together all the expressive elements in order to create a theatre in which movement creates the scene. Thus he rebelled against a theatre laden with words, giving back to dance and gesture their justification, thereby strengthening the importance of the visual aspect. He



abolished many traditions and freed theatre from the system of wings, all background additions such as curtains and traditional pieces of decor, completely dispensing with painted scenery.<sup>10</sup>

Craig also introduced variations to the arts of theatrical costumes, décor, theatrical accoutrements and lighting which were designed to constantly make the spectators visually rather than acoustically aware, eager to enjoy the development of the production's structural symbolism through their creative and imaginative abilities.

Craig's concept of theatrical performance is not based on the meanings of words but on 'symbolism'. Thus Craig calls for the theatre to be freed from curtains and scenery and calls for a revolution against realism so as to discover new means of creating magical, suggestive worlds. To realise this revolution, he created designs embodying the grotesque, the strange and the unique. He wished to stimulate the emotions by means of movement, light and design, rejecting the stardom of the actor, who he considers should be a pawn in the stage-director's hands. The actor was to become like a puppet. For Craig saw the use of the actor as 'a burden and a difficulty [...]. They have to cease speaking and restrict themselves to movement [...] and if they want to return to the art in its original form, acting is action and dance is the poetry in this action'.<sup>11</sup> The notion of impersonation, of replicating nature, is replaced by that of the 'Uber-Marionette', a controversial term which Craig never adequately explained. Craig's theatre is one of abstract configurations in which line, mass, colour, texture and mood create the dramatic action. He perceived stage design as visual imagery articulating the inherent significance of the play, generating a theatre of atmosphere not appearance, and was an important pioneer in his recognition that lighting could have a powerful effect on the audience. For Craig all components (theatre, actor, space, lighting and colour) are equally imperative, but he sought to construct a harmony between all of these, a harmony created by a solitary figure conducting and managing the performance: the director.

Appia and Craig have been discussed here because their work is studied by students in Kuwait, but while their historical importance is acknowledged, their ideas have little



influence on contemporary practice. As for the work of other eminent and influential scenographers such as Caspar Neher, Josef Svoboda and Vsevolod Meyerhold, it is virtually unknown in the Arab world and has no place in the curriculum. The absence of critical writing on these pioneers and their successors, and indeed the general lack of any substantial documentation in Arabic, means that students have a poor understanding of scenography as an art and have no intellectual resources to raise their discipline to the status of an equal partner in the creative collaboration that should exist in the making of a performance. Most directors would be very unwilling to give serious consideration to the ideas of someone generally regarded as an artisan, a mere craftsman, and the respect Brecht had for Neher, for example, would greatly surprise most Arab theatre artists. The situation is no better in the experimental theatre, where budgets are extremely tight, performances are restricted to one or two evenings, and 'scenography' is confined to a few props in the manner of Grotowski's 'Poor Theatre'. It is hard to see how this state of affairs could be remedied; certainly it will be a slow process, but a beginning can be made in the educational institutions. I am convinced that it is possible to improve the quality of scenographic studies so that they will no longer be regarded as the 'poor relation' or 'silent partner' of the more prestigious departments.

Appia's and Craig's theoretical and practical contributions gave rise to tensions between various artistic, technical and structural specialities and to a questioning of the relationship of these specialities to new realisations of the theatrical space and to contrasting scenographic conceptions. These differing definitions and contrasting concepts of scenography, as well as affecting theory, influenced those who wanted to be liberated from the authority of the classical stage-director and from the domination of literal, blind adherence to the playwright's text.

As a result, the functions of this new scenography began to be clearly defined and to take root in theoretical writings. These functions have now begun to centre on ways of ordering space and using décor. Scenography now includes the visual arts as well as photography, lighting, sound technology, décor and costumes. These are all vital components endowing scenography with that harmonious vision which gives it its function and unity in spite of the different sources from which it draws its practices.



According to Patrice Pavis, scenography is 'the art and the science which orders the theatre stage and the theatrical space'.<sup>12</sup>

While scenography can be practised outside the theatre as 'the art which draws images to impart meaning to a space',<sup>13</sup> within the theatre the function of scenography has begun to be clarified increasingly as it has gained a unique, independent character. According to Pamela Howard, scenography does not exist as a self-sufficient art work, nor is it whole until the actor marches into the playing space and connects to the audience.<sup>14</sup> The art of scenography has become a co-operative activity combining different occupations and specialities, and the performance is the result of efforts uniting the contributions of the designers of décor and costumes and mixing the dreams, motivations, aims and experiences of the playwright, the stage-director, the atelier staff, the lighting designer, the sound engineer and the architect. The infinite variety of scenographic work, beginning with an empty space, is concerned with the variation of spatial forms and the extension of areas of movement within it, and creates for the spectators possibilities which make them think about what they see and hear and so fill the 'empty space' with the dynamic of their imagination.

Thus the art of scenography is no longer essentially concerned with decoration, scenery, painting, creating impressions or suggesting the time and place of events, but has become a dynamic element with numerous functions in theatrical creativity, from the architecture of the theatrical space to the scenography of the décor to the construction of the stage and the involvement of the spectator in active participation in the living theatrical performance. Scenographers now require to a knowledge and understanding of theatre history and the growth of the drama, and should also be well versed in art history and in the periods and styles of architecture, painting, sculpture, furnishing, and costume in addition to the historical contexts in which these pieces were produced. Similarly, an acquaintance with philosophy, methodologies, and materials in pictorial and three-dimensional design is also desirable. A familiarity with stagecraft and theatrical production methodologies and materials, including the technicalities of the stage and an appreciation of the basic standards of stage lighting



is essential. And lastly, the scenographer should be proficient in basic drafting processes, in carrying out mechanical designs, and in at least the basics of computer graphics.

Unfortunately it must be admitted that while scenographers in the West are trained to meet these standards and are often presented with challenging opportunities in the commercial as well as the serious theatre, in the Arab world's four main centres of scenographic training (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Kuwait) both training and opportunities are deficient in many respects. As we noted earlier, students learn little about the history of modern scenography in Kuwait, apart from a few references to Appia and Craig: This is hardly surprising given the lack of material on twentieth-century scenography in Arabic. As for practical training, it consists largely of learning the skills of carpentry and scene-painting and producing designs in the tutor's style that are rigidly subservient to the demands of the script, in a way that will not challenge the imagined audience's conservative expectations. Given the condition of theatre in the Arab world, perhaps this is merely bowing to practicality, and in any case most graduates – if they are fortunate enough to find a job where they can utilise their skills - will go on to work in television rather than theatre; but it is regrettable that, generally speaking, sights are set so low, and the potentialities of scenography as an imaginative art are ignored.

### **A scenographer's journey: From Kuwait to Leeds**

My feeling of responsibility towards theatre in general and Arab-Islamic theatre in particular developed gradually. My first ambition was to be a painter, and even my enrolment at Kuwait University to study Applied Physics in 1988 did not prevent me from indulging in my first love during my studies, and my great passion for painting engaged so much of my attention that I abandoned my studies in the Faculty of Sciences in my third year. At this time a friend who is now a teaching colleague encouraged me to join the Department of Stage Design at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Kuwait. He pointed out that this department specialised in stage design, and that painting, sculpture, lighting, costume design, architectural styles and stage engineering



were studied as well as the theory and history of art. As I had had no connection whatsoever with the theatre before joining the Institute, apart from attending some commercial plays, the reason for my interest in it was that I would be able to pursue my artistic ambitions. It was only when I started the first year that I began to become acquainted with this art-form – ‘the art of theatre’ – which was new to me, and I began to enjoy reading plays, painting their outlines in my imagination, then translating these into designs on paper and then into small models.

Before I joined the Institute, I had worked with two-dimensional space, but now I was working with three dimensions, learning to create ‘sculpture in space’. Stage design can be seen as sculpture in a darkened area of space, and my paintbrush is the coloured lighting which reveals the secrets of this space. Whenever this brush of light falls on an area of this space, it independently reveals its shapes, which have form and dramatic function in creating a world which connects with the text but which may or may not correspond to the vision of the dramatist; it is another reading of the play from the viewpoint of a painter and designer whose tools combine with those of the writer and the stage-manager in realising this world.

My studies at the Institute did not begin to satisfy my artistic desires until the third year. I was plagued by a feeling that I lacked practical experience, as I had not engaged in real stage work. The reason for this was a serious shortcoming of the teaching method employed at the Institute, arising from the fact that it consists of three departments: the Department of Performance and Directing, the Department of Literary Criticism and the Department of Stage Design. It would seem obvious that the students of these three departments should come together in the third or fourth year to collaborate on a shared project before graduation, but in reality this is not the case as each department works on its own secluded island and the students only meet to work on some general theoretical subjects which they have in common. Thus there is no opportunity for co-operation in a complete theatrical work to test the students’ practical capabilities and make full use of the Institute’s resources in a stage production which would add to their experience, increase their confidence and equip them for real work outside the walls of the Institute. And so I had no option but to turn to the commercial theatre, although to do so was



contrary to the Institute's rules, which state that students should not undertake any work outside the educational establishment. I tried to side-step the regulations by working in children's theatre.

My first work, in 1994, was for the musical play *The Lion King*, inspired by the animated movie and produced by Abd al-Aziz al-Haddad, who had been an actor in the 1960s. The scenographer was Musa Arti. I worked as first assistant scenographer. Arti was a teacher at the Institute, and this gave me a cover for my disregard of the Institute's rules. This production helped me to acquaint myself with an important aspect of theatrical work – music – and to see how music enriches stage production, sometimes far better than the spoken word. The supremacy of music in this production was a driving factor for the scenography crew, and we were able to master the architectural aspect of the production by showing the moods of the forest in a very convincing way, expressing both stability and states of fear and insecurity. The forest scenery was realistic for the most part, except that the lighting played an important role in creating an atmosphere suited to the dialogue and the movement of the actors on the stage. In this production I learned how to work as a member of a united team, and greatly benefited from the encouragement, ideas and methods of Abd al-Aziz al-Haddad, with whom I worked continually to find solutions to the problems of the production.

I also worked in co-operation with the construction team consisting of carpenters, painters, electricians and welders. This crew is normally recruited from outside the theatre and has no connection with the dramatic side of the performance. Thus my task was to bridge the gap between them and the production so as to profit as much as possible from their artistic skills in achieving our dramatic goals in accordance with the vision of the production team. I also worked in co-operation with the actors, as I saw the actor as the living, moving element in the stage space, and as an integral part of this space, which I was helping to design; and so I would sit with them at the rehearsals, explain the stage exits and entrances, show them how to deal with the stage scenery and help them add something to the stage set so that it should not be an obstacle to their



movements or a hindrance to their performance. This meant that we had to find a way of establishing an 'understanding' between the actor and the stage space.

It was an overwhelming moment on the first night, when I saw my work and that of my colleagues work presented to the audience, who were the crucial, decisive element in this effort, and who were mainly children no older than twelve years of age. This is the most difficult audience for any theatre artist to face, as children do not flatter, and if they feel that the stage production is boring or monotonous there is nothing to stop them sleeping, playing or even crying. They are very hard to satisfy. But the production was successful, at least in the sense that we were able to hold the attention of the children for the two hours of the performance, and my experience convinced me of the importance of working in a team united in pursuit of a single goal. After the performance we had to face the reaction of the press, which is generally not slow to criticise. We were also aware that many Kuwaiti newspapers have no specialist critics, most of them are amateurs, and their theatre criticism, except in a few cases, is based on their limited experience, not on academic expertise. However, they pointed out my mistakes and raised points which I and the production team had missed, so my attitude towards their criticism was positive in that I was able to gain from it.

This experiment having been successful, Musa Arti suggested that I start work immediately on another production, *Snow White*. However, I excused myself and returned to my studies, as the main aim of this experiment had been realised and my involvement in another production of the same type would not have given me the new experiences I needed. When I returned to the Institute, my view of scenography had changed, as all my designs had begun to take into account the positioning, grouping and movement of the actors, and I realised that the design should be flexible enough to accommodate the instructions or changes made by the production team. My ability to execute my design on the stage was much improved as the small pieces of scenery at the Institute and the enormous pieces on the real stage of the commercial theatre are not to be compared. This gave me an edge over my colleagues.

After my graduation in 1995, I was accepted as an assistant professor at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts and was granted a scholarship. I began to search for a suitable



place to do my Master's degree. The Arab world has, as noted earlier, four institutes specialising in theatre; these are in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Kuwait. Some of them do not offer postgraduate programmes. At that time students with scholarships were only sent to Arab institutions, although there was no reason for this, and in 1997, after emphatic demands made by my colleagues, we were able to persuade the government to extend the opportunities for study to include all countries of the world. I was the second assistant professor to be sent abroad, and enrolled at Leeds University School of English in 1999 to take a Master's degree in Theatre Studies. I had found what I was searching for: a programme enabling me to cooperate with members of a theatre production team in an academic context. My colleagues in the programme had a variety of artistic backgrounds and interests. Amongst them were stage-directors, actors and critics; I was the only scenographer.

Besides the theoretical academic studies in the Master's programme, I extended my critical perception of the theatrical text, beginning to work with it in more depth. The choice to study in England was not coincidental: it is the land of Shakespeare and considers the theatre part of its literary heritage. Thus I was able to appreciate the richness of its cultural legacy, contrasting it with Kuwait, where the theatre is relatively undeveloped and its forms and facilities are still simple. In Britain, theatre is part of the state educational system, unlike Kuwait where theatre is a secondary matter which is presented as a form of activity not included in the student's academic development or its evaluation. There are theatres everywhere in Britain: in large and small towns, in universities and schools. Moreover, theatrical productions take place throughout the year, theatre troupes seem to spring up every day and theatrical experiments are shown at almost any time and place.

The picture does not represent the triumph of serious theatre, however. The main impression is one of a great variety of entertainment in which serious theatre plays an honourable but minor role. There is a great deal of experimental theatre, especially in university towns, but in the West End musicals are flourishing as never before. In any large provincial town or city the theatregoer can see ballet, opera, stand-up comedy, new and experimental theatre, adaptations of the classics, farces, children's theatre,



contemporary dance, and pantomime at Christmas (this list is far from exhaustive). The finest actors often appear in television dramas, the best of which are the equal of any in the world, and many take leading roles in British and Hollywood movies. However, unlike in the Arab world, these actors return to the theatre, which continues to enjoy a high reputation. But the theatre is no longer the universal training ground it once was, the avant garde is an obsolete concept, and serious theatre remains a minority interest. Even on television the challenging single drama is a rare event. So I can say, from my own observations, that although theatres are flourishing and there is no lack of dramatists (another contrast with the Arab world), serious theatre in the UK plays only a small part in the cultural life of the people; but this does not mean it has no influence.

As for Kuwait, most of the theatres are school theatres, for although theatre is not part of the educational curriculum, one can find a theatre in every school. This is a phenomenon which can be credited to the state despite its superficial interest in culture. A great degree of freedom of expression is guaranteed in the European theatre: it seems that everything is permitted (although there have been protests by religious groups in England), whereas the theatre in Kuwait and the Arab world in general is bound by culture, customs and politics, and by the incorrect understanding of the role of theatre to which some men of religion adhere. Many plays have been banned for religious and political reasons, and others for reasons connected with culture and customs.

European theatre is also characterised by its willingness to experiment, especially in the field of scenography. This means that the immense capabilities of technology and the great number of well-equipped auditoriums ranging in size from the intimate to the enormous provide the scenography designer with fertile ground for almost any conceivable idea. The historical accumulation of experience in theatre production creates a stock of scenographic solutions for any play. This became clear when I attended a performance of *Macbeth*, produced by Jude Kelly, at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 1999. The production was set in our times and effects such as the roar of aircraft and rain falling from steel mesh, as well as the brutal, military starkness of the set, surprised me as such bold and inventive interpretations are rarely found in serious Arabic theatre; the dominant school holds the classical view which completely



ignores the theatre space so that the scenery is fixed, whereas in the production of *Macbeth* the scenography was an important factor, even an actor in the production.

While studying at Leeds I was able to persuade the MA project supervisors to make me responsible for the scenographic design for two plays. The first was Wannous's *Miserable Dreams*, a work from his last period, directed by Ali al-Anezi. The play is a drama of cruelty, longing and frustrated hopes and dreams. Wannous's proposed set is a house whose ground floor is divided between two unhappy couples, with a room for a young male lodger upstairs. The action is sometimes realistic, sometimes surreal (there is a bizarre and disturbing dream scene) and it is hard to tell where 'reality' ends and 'fantasy' begins. The two women dream of the young lodger as a son who has returned to life after dying as an infant, and as a lover and husband. The play ends with the tragic death of the younger woman's son.

After reading the play I decided that its atmosphere of grief, menace, uncertainty, frustration and anxiety could be expressed by decay eating away at the house. The design, following Wannous, showed part of the house with two rooms at the sides and stairs in the middle leading to the attic, but. I painted a large black zigzag line up the facade, giving it the appearance of decay eating away at the walls and climbing from the ground floor to the attic. I solved the problem of changing scene by means of lighting changes. As there was only one performance, it was important to avoid many obstacles by making it smooth and simple to move parts of the set and reducing the entrance and exit of props, especially as the production team was small. (Fig.22)



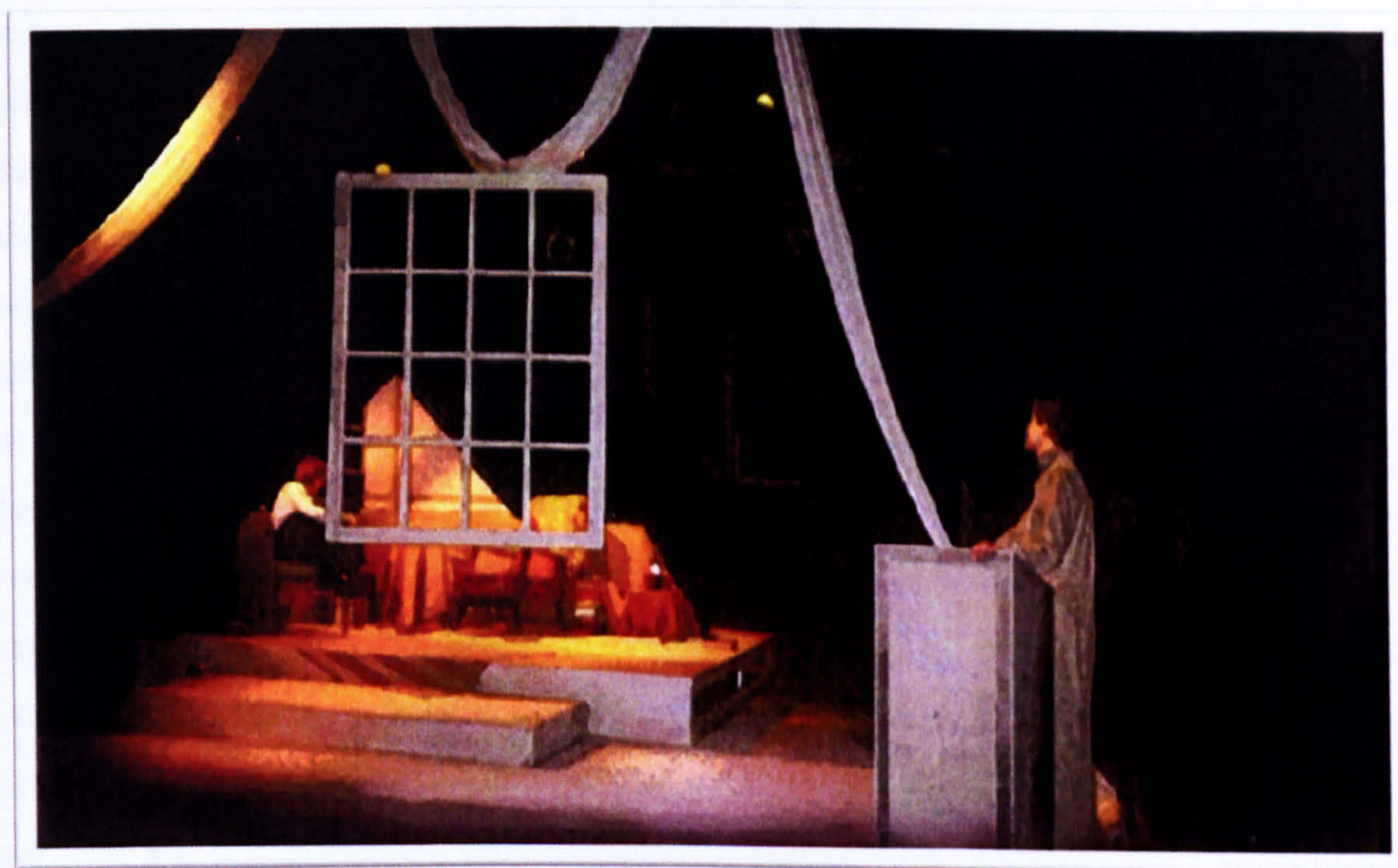


**Fig.22:** *Miserable Dreams*: scene one, designed and making by Khalifah Alhajri, 1999

After this, I proceeded to work with a fellow-student, Kate Filhartly, on another project, *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), adapted by Kate. The play was based on a series of lectures given by Woolf at Girton College and Newnham College. Her lectures shed light on the issue of a woman's ability to write a novel as a literary creation without her rights to education and creativity having been acknowledged. The author postulated that her literary works would reach the standard of those of William Shakespeare if only women were fully emancipated, and that she would then have 'her own room', that is her own world, which I believe to be the significance of the title of the play. Woolf invents an imaginary character, Judith, 'Shakespeare's sister', suggesting that even if a woman possessed Shakespeare's talent she would not be able to achieve the same creative standard if her freedom were restricted and she were not able to enjoy the same space that Shakespeare enjoyed as a man. Besides this, Woolf included a group of nineteenth-century women writers: Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters – Charlotte, Emily and Anne, and George Eliot.



Working with Kate as stage-director, I was granted freedom regarding the overall conception of the stage scenery and design. This increased the responsibility placed on my shoulders. However, frequent meetings with the production team and constant attendance at rehearsals enabled me to easily visualise the scenes. The set was divided into two parts: a room, and a platform like that used for academic lectures. (Fig.23)



**Fig.23:** *A Room of One's Own*: first scene, designed and making by Khalifah Alhajri 999

Judith's room was conceived as a room full of books. At first I imagined a room made of books; that the room would be constructed of books piled up so densely that they would form the walls. But I abandoned the idea as I realised it was excessive. I found another solution: part of a room with incomplete walls covered part of the stage space, set against a black background. A ladder and old curtains separated this room from the lecture hall. This separation meant that the only means of moving from one scene to another was changing the lighting. Fortunately for me, we were unable to find a lighting designer, so I was able to take on this role too and observe the effect of the lighting on the stage-set. As far as I was concerned, it was a satisfactory production, and it was a



new experience to work with a complete team with no Arab members. The language in which I communicated with the team was not limited to words but was a language of colours, objects, and lighting. I was able to convince the entire production team that my conception would work and we realised it on the stage.

This experience showed me that making serious theatre, even in an academic context, is not as easy as working in the commercial theatre. In serious theatre, finding a scenographic solution is a more complex process because educational and cultural aspects have to be considered as well as the audience's visual enjoyment. Moreover, the lack of material funding for the Leeds productions forced us to find ways of managing with minimal resources. The greatest problem facing such productions is that they are generally limited to one to three performances, so the décor has to be easily removable as other productions are waiting. In contrast, commercial theatre productions usually last for a long period so as to make a profit after all production-related costs have been recovered. Thus, décor and scenography are generally constructed and designed to last, and it is also possible to deal with problems relating to the décor throughout this performance period so that the scenographer's work does not end when the theatrical production begins, but continues until the last performance, so that the décor can be adjusted and mistakes dealt with; this process develops the scenographer's capabilities and provides many moments of discovery.



## **Theatre in Kuwait**

When I returned to Kuwait in 2000 after completing my Master's studies, I tried not to fall into the error of comparing the European and Arab theatres too glibly, as the accumulation of theatrical experience in Europe makes such a comparison difficult if not invidious. Having gained a wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge in England, I wished to understand why serious theatre in the Arab world was not as it could or should be, and so this section explores the views of a number of people involved in various capacities with the theatre in Kuwait in order to analyse the condition of Arabic theatre (taking Kuwait as fairly representative) and possible ways it might be revived.

Despite the limitations of its geographical boundaries and sparse population density (the number of inhabitants does not exceed one million according to the latest census undertaken by the Kuwaiti Planning Ministry in 2006) the theatre in Kuwait is one of the most active in the Arab world. This activity is, however, notable for its quantity rather than its quality, as there is a profusion of productions, but content is poor. Most theatrical performances are intended to entertain, and neglect the intellectual and cultural enrichment of the audience, in contrast to the heyday of Kuwaiti theatre in the sixties, seventies or even early eighties of the last century. For the past twenty years or so, the theatre scene in Kuwait has been dominated by the so-called consumer theatre, which is not concerned with the artistic and intellectual aspects of stage performance. The few exceptions have been produced by self-important groups of theatre enthusiasts who try to balance form and content. Generally these groups content themselves with one-night performances or participation at local theatre festivals under state auspices.

The development of the theatre in Kuwait accompanied the social changes which the country underwent in the sixties. Indeed, the flourishing of the theatre was one of the most prominent examples of the artistic activity of that period. However, just as social changes at that time motivated the theatre's development, the social changes which Kuwaiti society is experiencing at present are reflected in a cultural stagnation that includes theatrical production, despite the fame in the Arab world of celebrated Kuwaiti



theatre stars born in the mid-century, such as Abd al-Husein Abd al-Reda, Saad al-Faraj, Saqr al-Rashud, Abd al-Rahman al-Duwaihi, Suad Abdullah and Hayat al-Fahd. Most of those stars are still on the scene as well as younger generations of renowned artists. Why have the great stars of the Kuwaiti theatre stopped participating in new stage productions? The plays of stars like Suad Abdullah, who for a long time played alongside Abd al-Husein al-Reda, still give great pleasure when shown on television, yet she has not participated in any theatrical performance for nearly two decades. The theatre has declined to such a degree that the great stars distance themselves from it in order to preserve their artistic reputation, even if 'the matter is tempting' as Suad Abdullah says in explaining her reasons for leaving the theatre. Abdullah, who now concentrates on television and radio productions, says that 'theatre is no longer what it was in the past. This time is not our time, so leaving the theatre is the best option for us'. She explains that texts, interests and even audiences have changed and their taste is different.<sup>15</sup>

The causes of the decline of serious theatre in Kuwait are many, but the main cause, according to the President of the Arab Theatre Council, stage-director Fuad al-Shatti (b.1940), is 'the lack of the substantial material means which theatrical performances in general require, as the public relations, advertising and marketing budget which private companies spend to publicise their performances is many times the budget of the national theatre companies, which perform a different type of play'.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, 'the majority of the stars of the national theatre companies have moved into the private sector and other areas of artistic production such as television and radio as a result of material enticements, great prospects and the wish to gain stardom quickly'.<sup>17</sup> However, al-Shatti does not criticise the artists, even if he wishes they would balance their legitimate ambition to become wealthy and popular with giving part of their time to the national companies which helped form them and polish their talents.<sup>18</sup>

The 'reduction in moral support (such as the encouragement of truly creative artists and the provision of facilities and the necessities of stage performance) accorded to national theatre companies at the height of their productivity in the sixties, seventies and eighties of the last century by the official authorities responsible for culture and art has



contributed to the theatre's decline.' The reason for this, al-Shatti says, is that the success of stage productions other than the consumer-oriented ones which at present dominate the Kuwaiti artistic arena requires 'that the government encourage quality stage productions and give them preference over popular performances whose only aim is to provide entertainment. Quality stage productions will not be able to fulfil their mission without comprehensive government support providing all the means necessary to present quality performances'.<sup>19</sup> The art press should play an important role in supporting theatrical activity and in righting any distortions as the press is the mirror in which artists observe themselves. However, the art press in Kuwait no longer contains theatre criticism except for a small amount written to publicise performances by private companies, whilst ignoring the activities of national theatre companies and not giving them the coverage they deserve.<sup>20</sup> The national theatre companies concerned with presenting quality stage performances cannot afford to advertise their productions on radio and television, as they did previously, because of the large sums of money demanded by the Ministry of Communications to air these advertisements.

There are four national troupes (the Popular Theatre Troupe formed in 1957, the Arab Theatre Troupe formed in 1961, the Arabian Gulf Theatre Troupe formed in 1963 and the Kuwaiti Theatre Troupe formed in 1964) but more than 60 commercial theatre companies. The national troupes are semi-official, as they work under the umbrella of the law governing general welfare associations and are supervised and subsidised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. However, not all that is presented by the national troupes is of good quality, just as not all that is presented by the commercial companies is bad. As al-Shatti says, 'Attempts by the Arab Theatre Company have failed, achieving neither of their two goals of entertaining audiences and raising educational issues'.<sup>21</sup> This problem does not only affect the commercial theatre companies but also the majority of the other national troupes, most of whom have failed to present productions harmonising form and content. Most of the productions in which they tried to achieve this difficult balance were of the consumer-oriented category, in no way different from the entertainments produced by private companies, which neither discuss issues nor propose solutions to social problems.<sup>22</sup>



Al-Shatti rejects the way in which the national companies have countered the wave of consumer-oriented performances which dominate the local scene, as they have not achieved the popularity they need amongst the masses nor have they preserved the status of serious theatre. What is required is that no one type of production be allowed to dominate the theatrical scene and that both the commercial theatre and the national companies serve the reality of the theatre movement in Kuwait.<sup>23</sup> Al-Shatti calls at the same time for a healthy cultural environment with the necessary material and moral means for continued work and productivity.<sup>24</sup> He states that the Kuwaiti theatre possesses all the components necessary for continuity and vivacity as long as the national theatre companies are supported and enabled to work by the provision of the necessities of theatrical production.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the critical state of the theatre generally in Kuwait, there is a lack of new, modern playhouses with a high degree of mechanisation and technological development. Stage productions are still shown in theatres built in the late fifties and mid-sixties of the last century, although modern developments demand the use of advanced technology in theatrical performances so as to draw the public and also as one of the tools of stage production. At festival and holiday times, playhouses experience feverish competition and rivalry between national troupes and commercial theatre companies to book halls for their productions as it is only at these festivals that theatrical works are presented in Kuwait. Some theatre companies, moreover, have been forced by the lack of playhouses to perform in school theatres and the halls of sports centres and clubs. Moreover, theatre companies face not only the problem of the lack of playhouses, but also that of the age and dilapidated state of existing ones, which are sadly lacking in technical resources. However, the head of the Kuwaiti Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, Khalid Ramadan, considers that the existing halls satisfy the needs of theatrical production because they stand empty virtually all year, and so it would not be reasonable to demand the establishment of new playhouses. He regards the creation of new playhouses as a waste of state finance, especially as they require servicing, maintenance and administrative and supervisory staff.<sup>26</sup>



I would argue that Ramadan fails to appreciate that we are not so much in need of playhouses to satisfy increased demand as we are in need of facilities with equipment which reflects present-day developments in theatre technology. The existing theatres in their outdated form can neither take advantage of new developments nor cater for increased audience numbers, particularly at special events. It would be more economical to build new theatres than to develop the existing ones. It is unfortunate that the head of the only academic theatrical institution in the country belittles the problem and seems to have no accurate view of the situation. It is clear that he either has not seen these existing theatres or does not recognise the importance of modernisation and development, contenting himself with a poor stage and ignoring the fact that the Ministry of Information has annual budgets for the development of theatre buildings. These sums could be spent on creating new theatres, and it would be better to stop developing and preserving those that are in such poor condition as to be unsuitable for development. As for the production teams serving these new theatres, whom Ramadan considers another problem, I am of the opposite opinion: most of the Institute's students do not find suitable work after graduation, and it would be better for them to join new theatres so as to use their training and at the same time raise the standards of Kuwaiti theatre and enhance its reputation.

Does the Kuwaiti state, then, deliberately neglect theatre? In recent years, responsibility for culture has been entrusted, as al-Shatti says:

to people who are not concerned about cultural and artistic activity, and this is reflected in a negative way in the theatrical and cultural movement in Kuwait. Although the leaders of the cultural movement have good intentions, these do not create quality theatre. The theatre movement will not progress without a true belief, especially on the part of the state, in the role of culture and arts in the development of societies and the education of nations.<sup>27</sup>

Was this lack of belief in theatrical activity the reason why the Kuwaiti National Theatre Company, formed in 1993 to create an official state company, presented only two theatrical works, after which it ceased its activity, although it was formed with the



aim of providing continuity of performances throughout the year?<sup>28</sup> Is the government of Kuwait opposed to theatre?

When I phoned<sup>29</sup> Hamad al-Raq'i, the director of theatre administration in the National Council for Culture, the Arts and Literature, which is the authority supervising the theatre in Kuwait, he said that the state is not opposed to theatre, as it has created a large organisation, the National Council, one of whose main responsibilities is the administration of the theatre; however, he pointed out that the Council cannot impose the presentation of certain productions upon the theatre companies, and that the responsibility for theatrical production is on the shoulders of the national and private companies. He assured me that the Council is in the process of reviewing the work of the Company with the aim of again presenting serious theatrical performances. The National Council has borne general responsibility for overseeing Kuwaiti theatre companies since 1993, when these areas of competence were transferred to it from the Communications Ministry and the Ministry for Social Affairs and Labour. The Council subsidises the national troupes financially, but this subsidy is insufficient, especially in view of inflation and the rise in artists' salaries and the total costs of theatrical production. The increase in the annual subsidy granted to the national companies needs to be subject to the introduction of new legislation determined by the government and submitted to the Kuwaiti Parliament for its approval before implementation; however, al-Raq'i insisted that the issue of subsidies is unrelated to the decline in theatre standards.<sup>30</sup>

Two questions arise here. First, how can the national troupes overcome the problem of the rising cost of theatrical production whilst the government subsidy has been fixed since theatres were established although prices are rising in every area? Al-Raq'i stressed that there can be no comparison between commercial companies and national troupes because the goal of the commercial companies is profit, whereas the national troupes aim to spread culture and awareness in society.<sup>31</sup> But I would argue that this somewhat complacent view has had negative consequences: although the Kuwaiti theatre is still one of the most active in the Arab world, probably coming in second



place after Egypt as regards productivity and mass participation, the standard of productions remains low.

Second, how can theatre be in crisis in a country where there is a dramatic arts institute with hundreds of graduates specialising in the fields of acting, stage-management, theatre stage design, criticism, dramatic literature and drama studies? What are the causes of the decline of the theatre in Kuwait in spite of this large number of theatre experts? Ramadan says that the Institute of which he is Director plays an important role, having a substantial influence on the artistic scene in Kuwait both as regards the theatrical performances presented as well as through working with the private and national companies and the visual, auditory and printed media. The Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts was founded in 1973; its establishment came as the climax of previous stages which began in the early sixties with the establishment of the Centre for Theatre Studies, which developed to become the Institute of Theatre Studies. Approximately 20-40 students study in each of the Institute's departments, and the average annual number of graduates can be estimated at about 60-120. The Institute has trained a number of academics who have spread over the theatrical scene in many Arab regions, particularly the Arabian Gulf countries. The impression that the Kuwaiti theatre is in decline is due to several factors, Ramadan explains, including the general decline of the Arabic theatre. During the renaissance which began in the Arab world in the fifties at the outset of independence and liberation from foreign occupation as an attempt to achieve self-determination and enlighten the individual as to his rights by means of cultural and artistic works, the theatre played a vital role which led to its revival. Now, however, the general state of stagnation in Kuwait is not limited to artistic and cultural activities, but includes amongst others the fields of sport and politics. But the most important influence is the dominance of the consumer-oriented theatre at the expense of serious theatre.

What of the productions of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts and their prospects of enriching the arts in Kuwait as long as the consumer-oriented theatre dominates the theatrical scene? Ramadan says that the Institute, as an academic body, presents works that have a limited appeal, as they attract fans of dramatic art and a connoisseur elite



who watch these productions once or twice only, whilst continuity in theatrical production calls for an educated and aware audience large enough to fill the auditorium and arouse the actors' enthusiasm.<sup>32</sup> He adds that the Institute cannot itself transform theatrical activity locally, but by means of the creative works of its students which are presented annually and draw audiences who are connoisseurs of serious performances, it contributes to the preservation of the serious type of theatre. Ramadan emphasises that the Institute teaches, trains and polishes the talents of its students, but when these students graduate and enter the theatrical arena, they are ruined by the consumer-oriented companies and forced to adapt to the dominant state of the theatre. He thinks that if there were some companies which respected the art of theatre and snapped up these graduates, we would find that the Institute's sons and daughters would enrich the theatre movement and contribute to its development and renaissance. Although he admits that the dominance of the profit motive at the expense of form and content has had a noticeably deleterious effect on the theatre scene, he goes on to say that the best performances presented at stage festivals are produced by the Institute or one of its members or students. He points out that festivals in Kuwait and the Gulf region are the best proof of the Institute's role and influence on the theatre. Ramadan directs hard criticism at the national companies, which in his opinion have abandoned their role and left the dominant position on the local scene to the private companies; these have gained control over the formation of the theatre audience's taste and have imposed new customs on them through the type of light, consumer-oriented performances they offer. Although the private companies' standards were once high because their founders were the giants of the Kuwaiti theatre, in the course of time the standard of performances declined and they started to gravitate towards the consumer-oriented type. The written and visual media's encouragement of the consumer-oriented type of stage performances has contributed to the decline of serious, quality theatre.<sup>33</sup>

### **A Syrian *Ta'ziyah* Performance**

While studying for my Master's degree at the University of Leeds, I was always concerned to go beyond the Arab context to a larger one, that is, the Islamic world. I



became concerned by the question, why have we, as Muslims, not established a theatre that represents simultaneously the Arab and the Islamic identity given the fact that we undeniably possess the potentials for such an art? To find an answer, I investigated certain theatrical and quasi-theatrical manifestations which Muslims are still performing as religious rites, some of which occur weekly such as the Friday congregational prayer while others occur annually like the Pilgrimage (*hajj*) and the rituals of mourning performed by Shi'ite Muslims.

I concluded that the ritualism of the Friday congregational prayer and the Pilgrimage rites barely qualify as dramatic manifestations for they both remain within their purely religious context. In addition, the parties to the conflict or concord in this process are the Muslim and the Creator; it is prohibited to portray their relationship in an overtly ritual-dramatic manner since the ritual concerns the Divine Being. As a Muslim, I was forced to reject the possible transformation of such rites into ceremonial drama, for it would have entailed finding links between the function of the Friday congregational prayer and the Pilgrimage as rites and a ceremonial theatrical performance that would be acceptable by Islam, and converting the religious rite into a drama that would present a valuable message to Muslims while preserving intact the religious context of the rite. The alternative would be to give the theatre a spiritual and ceremonial character so that it can address the same moral and religious issues in a modern manner.

The *ta'ziyah* points to a possible solution to the problem, for the conflict here is between Muslims; that is, between Hussein's party and the party supporting Yazid, around the question of the caliphate and who was entitled to rule. For this reason the sensitivity of the religious question is diminished, although as we have noted, Sunnis generally regard the *ta'ziyah* with suspicion if not outright condemnation, and it remains controversial among the Shi'ite clergy.

In 2001 and ahead of the advent of the month of Muharram I made up my mind that I would attend these Shi'ite ceremonies. I live in Kuwait where the population is predominantly Sunni. Yet there is a substantial population of Shi'ites in Kuwait who perform their ceremonies in *Husseinyya* but not under the patronage of the state. Owners build these *Husseinyya* at their own cost or depend on donations offered them



by devout Shi'ites. The *ta'ziyah* is not performed in Kuwait, perhaps because the degree of freedom afforded to this branch is limited as opposed to the case in Iraq, Iran and Pakistan, where the Shi'ite population is huge and enjoys greater freedom in performing their ceremonies.

I considered my options. Iran was my first choice, being the state that represents Shi'ism; however, I rejected this option as I can neither speak nor understand Farsi and it would be difficult to find safe transportation from Tehran, the capital, to the city of Mashhad, the centre of *ta'ziyah* performance. The second option, Pakistan, was dismissed since the relationship between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites is very tense there and many performances have been sabotaged. Iraq was out of the question because of the siege imposed by the alliance states, and access to southern Iraq, where the mass of the Shi'ites live, was impossible, particularly for a Sunni Kuwaiti. Bilateral relations between Iraq and Kuwait were tense after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, since the country remained a vital base for alliance armies. For all these reasons Iraq was ruled out despite its adjacency to Kuwait. The two remaining options were Lebanon and Syria. Lebanon was a 'hot spot' where the *ta'ziyah* is performed under the supervision of Hezbollah. Moreover, in southern Lebanon, where the Shi'ite community lives, the Israeli-Shi'ite conflict over the Shab'ah Farms area prevented travel. Syria therefore was the best option. Moreover, Syria has a shrine to Zainab, sister of Hussein, which is considered the second most important shrine after the Prophet's shrine in Medina and the shrines of the Prophet's family in Iraq.

I travelled to Syria on the sixth of Muharram; that is, four days ahead of the day of the *ta'ziyah* performance on the tenth. At Damascus airport, I noticed multitudes of Iranian, Pakistani and Indian men and women pilgrims dressed in black. I wondered where all these people were going and a tourist guide told me that they were bound for the Zainab district southwest of Damascus where the tomb of Zainab is located. After Hussein's martyrdom in Karbala, his family were transferred to Damascus, where they lived under the patronage of Zainab until she died. The Shi'ites established a shrine for Zainab where they go on pilgrimage and ask for blessings. The shrine is increasingly visited and paid homage in these first days of Muharram. This was one of the important reasons



for selecting Syria: I would be able to observe closely and meticulously the performance of the *ta'ziyah*.

Having arranged my accommodation in Damascus, I went immediately to the Umayyad Mosque, in whose eastern side, I seemed to recall, the head of Hussein is said to be preserved; the mosque has become another shrine for the Shi'ites. To reach the mosque, I had to go through an ancient market called al-Hamedeyya, where antiquities merchants were displaying their merchandise. This market, with its purely oriental atmosphere reminded me of the tale of Aladdin and the magic lamp. Shops lined the street leading to the mosque. The impression was one of 'organized chaos'. When I reached the mosque, I took my shoes off to show respect for the purity of the place. I went directly to the main court, where there is a place for ablution, consisting of a pentagonal water tank made of concrete, approximately two metres above the ground and supported by five columns. The tank has taps for drinking and ablution before the prayers. I made my ablution and went into the mosque to perform the mosque greeting prayer and the *duhr* prayer (noon prayer). Numbers of gigantic chandeliers, now lit by electric bulbs instead of candles as in former times, were suspended from the ceiling. The pulpit was ornamented with geometrical figures in the form of stars and plant designs. Qur'anic verses were carved in marble along the sides of the *mihrab* or niche, the place where the imam or leader of the prayer stands. The floor was covered with red Persian carpets. The mosque was poorly maintained, understandable perhaps in a country like Syria with a struggling economy.

Having performed the prayer, I went to the shrine containing the head of Hussein. I must admit that I felt awe when I saw the wooden cart outside the shrine, which allegedly carried the head of Hussein from Iraq to Damascus. The cart was shabby and obviously old, with its front bent backwards as if it were ashamed because it had carried the head of an Islamic martyr, the dearest to the Prophet Muhammad. I entered the shrine and was first met by a man asking for contributions to maintain the shrine. To the left was a niche for the son of Hussein, Zain al-Abidin, the only male survivor of the battle of Karbala; he was ill and hence did not fight. Zain's niche was protected by a glass through which one can see his footprint in the stony ground. Muslims believe that



because of his devotion and piety, Zain's feet miraculously imprinted the stone. While I was about to enter the chamber containing the head of Hussein I could hear a large group of Shi'ites, mostly Iranian, crying, lamenting and reciting some supplications in Farsi of which I only recognized the name of Hussein. Both men and women were dressed in black and weeping bitterly. I tried to peep into the shrine, which was enclosed by a glass partition and found no head but a green turban that is said to have belonged to Hussein. I asked the attendant whether Hussein's head had truly ever been in the shrine. He answered that the head used to be in the shrine a long time ago and then was transferred to Iraq to be buried with the martyr's body. At the end of the day, I returned to my lodgings in the centre of Damascus.

On the second day, the eighth of Muharram, I headed for the Zainab district where the tomb of Zainab, sister of Hussein, is and where the *ta'ziyah* is staged. I entered the district and the first thing that caught my eye was a number of pale yellow derelict buildings. Unlike in Damascus and other cities, here there were old houses and streets without pavements, indicating lack of care on the part of the state though the district is regarded as an important tourist destination, as it contains a shrine visited by Shi'ites from the four corners of the world.

I was looking forward to the moment when I would view the shrine of Zainab. The numbers of cars increased the closer we approached the shrine as if everyone was going to the same point. Everywhere there were black banners and flags, some bearing the name of Hussein written in fine, delicate Arabic calligraphy while others carried the name of Abbas, brother of Hussein, and the names of other members of the Prophet's family. These banners and flags also displayed imagined portraits of Hussein, Abbas and the other male members of the family. At the sides of the road shops were selling similar banners and flags for the shrine visitors. The dome of the shrine was visible in the distance: a blue dome, decorated with Islamic ornament made of mosaic in the Persian Islamic style. Next to the shrine stood a grand mosque whose main entrance is attached to one of the shrine gates. A religious school or *madrakah* is located at the northern entrance of the shrine and supervised by the grand ayatollah Muhammad Fadl



Allah, one of the most popular Shi'ite ayatollahs, ranked with al-Sistani, Khomeini and al-Sherazi.

I reached the shrine and entered through the western gate, which is the main entrance leading from the public street. The shrine has four main entrances: one on to the main street, the second facing the alleys, the third opening into the mosque attached to the shrine, the fourth designated for women. Before entering the mausoleum, I had to pass through an enormous *sahn* or court where huge numbers of visitors sat in circles on the ground, led by a reciter of supplications, which the visitors reiterated. Visitors in other circles beat their chests and wept. It was an overwhelming experience for me as a Sunni Muslim. Visitors speaking different tongues, Arabic, Persian and Urdu, raised their voices in supplication.

There were many clergymen in the court, directing visitors. They are noted for their black and white turbans. Those in black turbans belong to the Prophet's household; those in white turbans are students at the *madrrasah*. The gates were gilded and silvered. Some visitors entered the mausoleum crawling on their knees while lamenting and crying, moved by the majesty of the place and paying homage to the person buried in the mausoleum. At the door of the mausoleum, I took off my shoes; it is forbidden to enter with shod feet.

On entering the mausoleum I noticed a cubic structure, similar to the Ka'ba in shape, which is the tomb itself, enclosed with a grille made of silver. Visitors were pressing against the grille, rubbing their bodies and faces upon it to seek benediction, crying and making supplication. The mausoleum's dome, twelve metres in diameter, is decorated with Islamic plant ornamentation. Its interior is inscribed in Islamic calligraphy with the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of Allah and the names of the Prophet and his household. A great chandelier, about seven metres across, is suspended from the centre of the dome. The windows are made of dovetailed glass upon which verses from the Qur'an are engraved, mainly in blue hues. Some plaques are affixed to the columns; they are inscribed with special supplications to be recited during one's visit to the mausoleum.



The entrance designated for women was the most crowded; here, women were lifting their children and asking them to touch the mausoleum to receive a blessing. The place was becoming increasingly congested and so I decided to leave, plagued by many questions about the reality of these Shi'ite religious ceremonies. I went out of the mausoleum in search of a bookshop where I hoped to find answers to my questions. I bought *Mafatih al-Jenaan (Keys to the Heavens)*, one of the most prominent of the Shi'ite books that explain the features of the visit to the mausoleum and the reasons for weeping, lamentation and supplication. Unfortunately, the book was not as impressive or enlightening as the spectacular interior of the mausoleum.

It being the eighth of Muharram, I decided to return to Damascus and come back on the tenth, when the mourning would reach its climax. However, a taxi driver advised me not to go back to Damascus if I intended to come back to Zainab on the tenth; the crowds would make such a journey impossible. He suggested that I stay in Zainab district and I realised his advice was sound, but it proved very difficult to find suitable accommodation and I had to pay double the usual price.

Loudspeakers reverberated throughout the entire district, where mourning gatherings were being held. At these gatherings, a mullah sits on a pulpit and gives a lecture addressing contemporary issues. Concluding the lecture, he skilfully draws comparisons between these issues and the incidents of Hussein's martyrdom at the battle of Karbala, giving examples of sacrifice, loyalty and solidarity amongst the Muslim community in addition to other lessons that may be drawn from this historic event. The lecture could be characterised as a dramatic monologue or storytelling performance. The audience respond with cries and weeping and by beating their chests. I chose to watch the mourning on the ninth of Muharram from the hotel balcony. The streets below were densely crowded with black-clad mourners.

On the morning of the tenth, visitors poured into the streets, which were thronged by processions. I went down into the street and mingled with the multitudes of mourners, who were dressed in black, holding black banners and wearing rags around their heads upon which were written the name of Hussein and the names of the noble family. Some mourners fervently beat their chests, others slashed their backs with iron chains till



blood gushed forth; others struck their heads with swords. The processions of mourners proceeded to the nave of the shrine as if offering condolences to Zainab for the tragedy of her brother's martyrdom. They entered the nave, where each group stood for a while, becoming ever more emotional, beating their heads and chests with even greater force and reciting enthusiastic chants of allegiance to the household of the Prophet. Eventually, they left by the northern door and headed for the dusty arena dedicated to the performance. There they formed a large circle in anticipation of the dramatic recreation of the battle of Karbala. Other mourners gathered atop the buildings surrounding the net fence encompassing the arena. Gradually their numbers increased.

In the arena tents represent those of Hussein and his family. The performance begins: armed horsemen dressed in red –Yazid's colour - enter the arena, followed by a corps of drummers who herald the army of Yazid. The audience immediately participate and curse Yazid's army.

Now a mounted knight appears who drags a dummy corpse around the arena, riding around the circumference many times. The audience shout at the knight to stop. I ask someone about the corpse and he answers that it represents the corpse of Hussein's messenger to Kufa, Muslim bin Aqil. The moment the knight stops, a mobile throne is wheeled into the arena. This is the throne of Yazid; it is surrounded by servants and by men dressed in monkey costume; Yazid was known to be fond of playing with monkeys. Yazid starts to converse with his subjects and declares that either Hussein pays homage to him or he will be killed. The throne is wheeled out.

Two armies march into the arena. Hussein appears with his small force, and a conversation begins between him and the generals of Yazid's army. Hussein reminds them that he is the grandson of the Prophet and that they paid homage to him but did not honour their pledge. As he starts to censure them, one of the generals orders his men to loose their arrows, whereupon Hussein's companions rush to him and ask for permission to fight. Hussein orders his companions not to face the enemy all at once; rather they must fight one by one. In this way his army will not perish so quickly. Hussein's household, one after another, go out to fight Yazid's army, which brutally kills and dismembers them all. Likewise all Hussein's companions are slain.



Hussein goes to carry the corpses of his companions off the battlefield while the women weep and lament. Now he is the only man left to protect the women and children. He carries his infant son and asks Yazid's army to show mercy and give him a mouthful of water from the Euphrates, for he and his men had been denied access to water. Yazid's generals refuse Hussein's request and order their archers to shoot the infant. Hussein fills his hand with the dead infant's blood (a piece of sponge saturated with red liquid), which he bitterly throws skywards. He supplicates his Lord and complains of the injustice of his enemies and his lack of supporters.

Hussein, realising that he is the last remaining warrior, goes to bid his family farewell; his sister Zainab consoles him and saddles his horse. She is distraught because she knows for certain that her brother is going out to die. Hussein starts to fight Yazid's army and kills a considerable number of soldiers. The generals order that the army be divided into three troops to encircle Hussein and simultaneously to shoot him with arrows and beat him with staffs to dismount him before dispatching him with their swords. Hussein falls, but his horse defends him. It kicks away his enemies, rubs its head against Hussein's bloodstained body and sinks down as if asking him to remount. The soldiers beat the horse away and then cut off Hussein's head (a dummy is again used) and carry it atop a spear. They strip him of his armour and garments but spare him his loincloth. The women are taken as captives to Kufa and the tents are burned. At this moment, the audience shrilly cry, lament and strike their heads and chests in sympathy with the murder of Hussein and censure of the treachery of his enemies. The fire is quenched. The tragedy concludes with this horrendous scene. The arena is filled with blood, corpses are scattered over the battlefield and severed heads are raised upon spears.

When I returned to Damascus to fly back to Kuwait the next day my mind retained this horrible image, which surpassed my expectations. If I had been so powerfully affected, what could be said of the Shi'ite audience, who released their emotion through weeping, lamentation and striking heads and chests? I regretted I could make no photographic record of these ceremonies for all photography is banned.



Written descriptions have not been able to convey the reality of this phenomenon, which despite its long tradition remains an impressively contemporary theatrical experience. Since the audience knew the story some details were omitted, such as the protracted discussion between Hussein and Yazid's army and the reasons why Hussein left Medina in Arabia for Karbala in Iraq. The costumes were rudimentary and did not reflect historical reality. What mattered was that the soldiers should wear the correct symbolic colours: red for Yazid's army, green for Hussein's. Furthermore, the tents were old and worn out; unlikely, since Hussein's family was of a noble lineage. The *ta'ziyah* is both a public theatrical presentation and a religious rite that evolved from mourning gatherings to dramatised performances. It remains a public work that many contend cannot be removed from its religious context. It is not produced by specialists in theatre, but by the clergy, who are not concerned with drama as an art form but with directly touching the hearts of the Shi'ite faithful and carrying them to the peak of emotional arousal. The audience's open weeping and lamentation cannot be found in the modern theatre of any country. The *ta'ziyah* is definitely not recreation or entertainment, unlike so much modern theatre. And while such intense participation may not be desirable, there is little doubt that the *ta'ziyah*, though simple and unsophisticated, remains the only example of a truly indigenous Arabic tragic drama.



## Scenography and Arab Identity

Radio Seminar

Date: 23 January 2005

Presenters: Dr. Nader Al-Qunnah and Faisal Al-Qahtani

Guests: Dr. Walid Sarab and Khalifah al-Hajri

This section quotes extensively from a radio discussion in which I participated as a guest, together with my colleague Dr Walid Sarab from the Higher Institute's Department of Criticism and Dramatic Literature. Joining the programme's regular presenter, Faisal al-Qahtani, was another colleague, a professor in Dr Sarab's department, Dr Nader al-Qunnah, whose views (together with those of Dr Nadeem Mualla) were explored in chapter six.<sup>34</sup>

After Faisal al-Qahtani's introduction, the discussion, which occasionally grew heated, began with a debate on the role and function of scenography. Dr Sarab began:

Firstly, we should understand the function of scenography and so form the basis on which we can build our identity. If the stage design doesn't have an immediate impact on the audience and merely serves to focus them on the linguistic message of the production, then scenography will become just a marginal and complementary component, because it's acting as a means of moving the audience from its own realm to that of the spoken message.

I made the point that the identity of scenography in the Arab world should have a direct association with Arab history and its visual and architectural heritage, and went on to say that scenography must be regarded as more than just a background; it must be an integral part of the production as a whole, but with its own means of conveying or expressing ideas or values.

Dr al-Qunnah raised the issue of the scenographers and scenography:



Let us first agree on the main issue. Now, who is responsible for the neglect of scenography and the scenographer and the current domination by the director, actor and playwright? I've seen performances in Europe and I discovered that the scenographer was the real 'star' and so was the costume designer. So, what makes you appear to be in the background as stage designers? Is it due to the domination of the director? Is the scenographer lacking in creative ability? Or is it due to his inability to read the text carefully, professionally and wisely?

Dr Sarab insisted that scenography must 'know its roots' and that only then can we establish a national (or any other) style. After giving an example from California he went on to discuss responsibility for the current low status of scenography:

I wanted to comprehensively discuss the issue of identity. As for the responsibility for the setback, I want to say that we, here in Kuwait, know that the director is the master of the work and we give him our suggestions. But he always prefers his own opinions and has his own ideas on the design; that is, he's totally involved with the action of the play and doesn't tell us what message is to be portrayed in the production.

I then spoke about how a scenographer reads a play script:

In a previous seminar, I discussed the subject of how a scenographer reads a script. In fact, script reading comprises three types of reading. In the first reading you read it as though you were the audience; that is, reading the script as an ordinary person and enjoying its contents because you see it as an entertainment. The second reading is the dramatic analysis and the understanding of the conception of the script. The third reading is the technical reading, which attempts to visualise the script on the stage. These techniques are concerned with the meanings conveyed by the colours, the shapes and the entrances and exits. Sometimes, the scenographer controls the action. For instance, if the set is a certain room and the stage design scenographer puts the entrances and exits into his plan, in this case the scenographer will be the one who controls the action, but there is a missing link between the Arab director and the scenographer.



Dr Sarab then spoke of the relationship between the scenographer, the director and the actor:

In the drama academies, they always tell us that the scenographer is the one who creates the actor's world on the stage and the role of the director comes later. However, I'd like to suggest that a common language should exist; that is, the scenographer must try to liaise with the director who clashes with him on substantive issues. He must convince him by explaining his own view. But the creation of the theatre set is essentially the responsibility of the stage designer; that is why there must be a common language. So, when the script is read special attention should be given to the interaction of the words with the potential audience so that the stage design enhances the role of the actor, because the design has to involve and envelop the action rather than just be an inactive stage design piece, and the actions of the actor should be encompassed within our design.

After remarking that the scenographer is the 'silent partner' in the process of production, I talked about the scenographer's role and responsibility:

There is a small problem. I think, [...] that the scenographer, due to the technical nature of his task, doesn't pay attention to the theoretical side although it isn't entirely neglected. But on the technical side, even if we start with the very beginnings of theatrical design among the Greeks, we find that it began as a craft, and then this craft was properly refined and understood. And so now, we're beginning to see specialists and creative professionals in this field who are academically qualified. But this doesn't absolve us, as scenographers and as a community, from blame because the identity of the stage scenographer is not yet mature; and I myself always seek to clarify the scenographer's role and make it a priority in my work for the stage.

Dr al-Qunnah spoke of the 'chemical interaction' between all the aspects of scenography, including set design, lighting and costume, and asked why the relationship between the scenographer and the director was not closer.

Dr Sarab responded:

[...] We should be aware that we're working in the artistic field. Consequently, the mutual relationship should be close and intimate and the conflicts between them should be positive. The director is an



essential figure because he is the one who's shown the scenographer's ideas, but he has to organise these effects and make them consistent and compatible with the whole; the scenographer should adopt a certain strategy when dealing with the director.

I observed that a good director is one who achieves a strong and clear relationship between the various elements of the work, and a little later expanded this point:

[...] The emphasis of one element may be a cause of the weakness of another, but we should take the theatrical work as an integrated unit, the failure of any part of which may lead to the failure of the other elements; and so it's wrong to look at and speak of the theatrical work as though its elements can be considered as separable from the whole.

Dr Sarab responded:

Usually, there is a production meeting or a similar meeting between the director and the scenographer to decide the essence and form of the production. This meeting isn't just for analysis but for understanding each other.

After I had emphasised the importance of the scenographer's cultural awareness, Dr Sarab stressed that the scenographer must understand communication and be able to use all its theatrical means:

Communication is the air that is breathed by the scenographer, who must transfer this communication to the stage or his contribution will be merely intellectual from the beginning. When I teach my students, I don't only teach them the design approach but also how to implement and utilise the visual instruments so that they'll be able to achieve the desired result. Now, we are all striving towards this result.

Dr al-Qunnah responded:

We, in Kuwait, are in need of an inventive, creative scenographer who is capable of providing suitable solutions to any problems that may face the director. So, the scenographer doesn't think only of the stage design but also assists the director to achieve results through collaboration.



I expanded on the phrase 'silent partner':

[...] I believe that the task of the scenographer is a very heavy one. In practice, you'll see that scenographers keep themselves out of sight among the other groups who are working in the theatrical field. We are the silent partner, and so it's difficult, living as we do in an Arab society where the one who speaks out is listened to. Even so, we as scenographers have to build a strong basis for a technically integrated theatre.

After a slight altercation about the stage design scenographer's lighting skills, Dr al-Qunnah turned to the 'unidirectional' tendency of the Kuwaiti theatre:

We shouldn't blame our colleagues, because the responsibility is not restricted to the current generation of scenographers; it's the responsibility of the institutions, because these large institutions don't provide enough opportunities to this generation to manifest their creativity in an appropriate way. [...] I would like to clarify something that relates to the charges directed against our colleague scenographers. In fact, the Kuwaiti theatre is falling under a unidirectional school which is adverse to change or alterations. And so all designs and visions are forced to conform to one ideology and one direction, and I believe that it will take some time to get rid of this school of thought.

I responded:

It is true that the Kuwaiti theatre was prejudiced for a while. The classic, realistic school was dominant for a long time and we were embedded into it for so many decades that it's become very difficult to get out of it; as if we've grown accustomed to being captives of this school in such a way that it's nearly impossible now to get rid of it. There are certain issues raised here regarding general specialisation and specific subject specialisation, and this is the calamity of theatre, when a non-specialist director directs the work. The same thing can be said of scriptwriters and scenographers, among others. Unfortunately at the moment the scenographer is treated as a carpenter. This concept is now changing with the new generation of theatre people, who are trying new schools and styles of directing and staging our work. Research is going to be an excellent solution to the problem of getting out of this unidirectional school in Kuwait, and we can count on this generation to pursue this. This is already beginning to prove successful.

After a short digression into the use of masks, we returned to the matter of identity. Dr Sarab was clear on the issue:



I know that you're looking for an identity but that can only be attained by stratifying an apparent need. So, when our needs are met, the identity will be achieved.

I responded:

Now we are focusing on the issue of identity. In fact, if we worked, today, each within his specialisation and position, respected the other's specialisation and gave everyone the right to the consideration he deserves, we would discover that we have created a clear identity. If we did some research on the Arab pioneers who sought to create an identity for the Arabic theatre, we'd find many of them had their own opinion regarding this issue. Some of them adapted Western ideas and tried to combine them with the Arab heritage, which we might call arabising theatre. Others rejected Western forms and concepts and aimed to create their own theatre. All these efforts must be reconsidered and studied. Theories alone will not make an identity. Theories combined with practice are the solution. Experimentation must continue.

And Dr Sarab replied:

We need to identify our work through our enthusiastic participation and presentation, our interaction with the audience, finding creative solutions to our problems and not implementing minor changes that may lead to partial identity loss. All this can be attained through the interaction between the scenographer and his peers and colleagues. In this way identity will be created.

The last words were spoken by Dr al-Qunnah:

How can we form this identity without feeling a responsibility towards the present day? And you, as scenographers, should be a driving force in the formation of this identity.

### **Scenography and the Practical Aspect of the Study**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, two first-hand experiences impacted on my work in scenography: the situation of Kuwaiti theatre as an example of Arabic theatre and



second, the ritual theatre of condolence (*ta'ziyah*) practised by the Shi'ite community in Syria. These two experiences motivated me to attempt practical projects exemplifying an Arab-Islamic scenography. Thus this doctoral thesis took two directions: theoretical research and practical work. Besides applying myself to the research, I made designs for three plays by Arab dramatists: Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi's *The Wrath of God (Tha'r Allah)*, Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma (Al-Sultan al-Ha'ir)* and Saadallah Wannous's *The King's the King (Al-Malik huwa al-Malik)*. This work occupies an important place in this study in view of the fact that practical stage design is one way of attempting to present solutions with an Arab-Islamic character to the design of plays belonging to one environment and one culture. This also relates to the theoretical aspect of the study and corrects the serious lack of concern with the practical aspect from which most Arabic books and studies suffer. To be clear in relation to these design examples, what we are proposing here is not a new Arab-Islamic form of 'ritual theatre' but rather an approach to scenography that remains within the bounds of the Arab-Islamic heritage – as broadly conceived - and attempts to develop the art, while not falling into the trap of cultural isolation.

I began working on the designs for the three plays at the beginning of my doctoral studies at Leeds University in 2003 so that they would form part of the practical aspect of the study. The work on these designs took 13 months and involved nine designs measuring 80 centimetres by 60 centimetres in gouache and one of the same size in oils.



*The Wrath of God*

Design (1): Hussein in Medina. (Fig.24)



**Fig.24:** Design (1): *The Wrath of God*. Medina. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

Hussein's refusal to swear allegiance to Yazid marked the beginning of the revolt against the tyranny of the Umayyad Caliph. His departure from Medina was the first step on the journey towards the fateful battle of Karbala. In this city the first mosques in Islam were built and in it the Islamic state was established and the mosque ensured and expressed its religious and political stability. I therefore chose the door of the mosque as the background for the design in order to give an indication of the fact that the decisions which Hussein made emanated from a religious source, not a secular one.



Design (2): The arrival of Muslim ibn 'Aqil in Kufa. (Fig.25)



**Fig.25:**Design (2): *The Wrath of God*. The harbour in Basra. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

The arrival in Kufa of Hussein's cousin and messenger, Muslim bin Aqil, is an important scene as his arrival marks the discovery of the plot which was being hatched in secret against Hussein and of the people of Kufa's betrayal of Hussein. This was the incentive which hastened Hussein's departure to confront Yazid's forces at Karbala.



Design (3): Before the battle of Karbala. (Fig.26)



**Fig.26:** Design (3): *The Wrath of God*. The camp of Hussein's army. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

This scene takes place the night before the battle in the camp of Hussein and his small army. The importance of this scene lies in the meeting of Hussein with his companions when they know that they and their families will be killed by Yazid's army the following day. Hussein asks his companions to leave the camp by night so that the enemy will not see them, but they prefer to face the inevitable and die as martyrs with their noble commander. The scene shows Hussein's tent and in the background are the spears and banners of Yazid's army.



*The Sultan's Dilemma*

Design (4): The city. (Fig.27)



**Fig.27:** Design (4) *The Sultan's Dilemma*. City scene. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

The Sultan is going into the city without his retinue to search for an answer to his confusion as to whether he is legally sultan or slave. In the background a mosque in Mamluk style is to be seen as well as al-Ghaniya's house on the left with its Arab-Islamic lattice windows.



Design (5): Mosque interior. (Fig.28)



**Fig.28:** Design (5): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. Inside the city mosque. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

The Chief Justice stands on the steps of the pulpit (*minbar*). It is to him that the Sultan turns to learn the truth and ask his advice on what religious law decrees regarding his right to rule. The conflict between force and the law is an important theme of this play; the Sultan must choose between religious law, personified here by the Chief Justice, who represents legality, and civil law, personified by the Vizier, who represents political power and expediency. The Sultan chooses to submit to religious law and thus to being sold in the slave auction with no guarantee of being manumitted.



Design (6): Al-Ghanyia's house. (Fig.29)



**Fig.29:** Design (6): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. Inside al-Ghaniya's house. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

This scene is set in the house of the beautiful but notorious woman al-Ghaniya. She talks with the Sultan after buying him in the public auction; he must spend a night at her house, after which he will be released and will then be free and qualified to rule. This scene represents the meeting of opposites: a ruler representing the state and a woman representing the people of the city, including its lowest social classes. Although the woman's house appears to be luxurious and secure, this magnificence is fragile and weak in view of people's suspicions regarding the honour of this woman, whose eloquence convinces the ruler that she uses her house for the exchange of culture and knowledge and not as is rumoured. Moreover, she speaks to the Sultan from behind a wooden screen, not revealing anything of herself apart from her shadow. I tried to express the significance of the shadow in this work. After the Sultan has spent the night in this house her true image is revealed to him.



*The King's the King*

Design (7): Interior of the King's palace. (Fig.30)



**Fig.30:** Design (7): *The King's the King*. The interior of the King's palace. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

In this scene the bored monarch Fakhreddin decides to amuse himself by tricking a bankrupt merchant into believing that he is the ruler of the city. Fakhreddin does not realise that the 'foolish' merchant will become king in reality, depriving him of his 'crown and gown' and his throne. The design shows a crooked throne with an asymmetrical and distorted background behind it, expressing the precariousness of the King's hold on power. The colours are dark. The design uses Islamic ornamentation and the domes of mosques to give the throne room an Arab-Islamic identity, and to show that the religious authorities are part of the 'power behind the throne'.



Design (8): City Street with 'Izza. (Fig.31)



**Fig.31:** Design (8): *The King's the King*. The alleys of the city. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

This design shows a city street where 'Izza, the daughter of the merchant, Abu 'Izza, wanders alone, thinking of her love for the young revolutionary 'Ubayd. The design is inspired by the play but does not depict an actual scene. The Islamic style is again present in the architectural details, which are decorated with Islamic ornamentation; Arabic calligraphy is also used on the pillars.



Design (9): The *souk* (market). (Fig.32)



**Fig.32:** Design (9): *The King's the King*. The *souk* of the city. 80 x 60 cm, gouache on paper.

This design is also inspired by the world of the play. No scene takes place in the *souk* according to the stage directions but there is clear connection with the business of merchants and many important events take place there. Moreover a director might choose to set the first interlude, in which 'Ubayd and Zahid discuss their plans, in a *souk*, since Wannous's directions merely refer to 'a darkish secluded corner somewhere in the city'. The Arab-Islamic style is evident in this image of the Arab bazaar. The al-Hamedeyya Souk's well-preserved Arab-Islamic style inspired me during my visit to Syria to attend the Muharram events, and so I used this memory to create my design.



## **Designing to Making**

### *The King's Elephant*

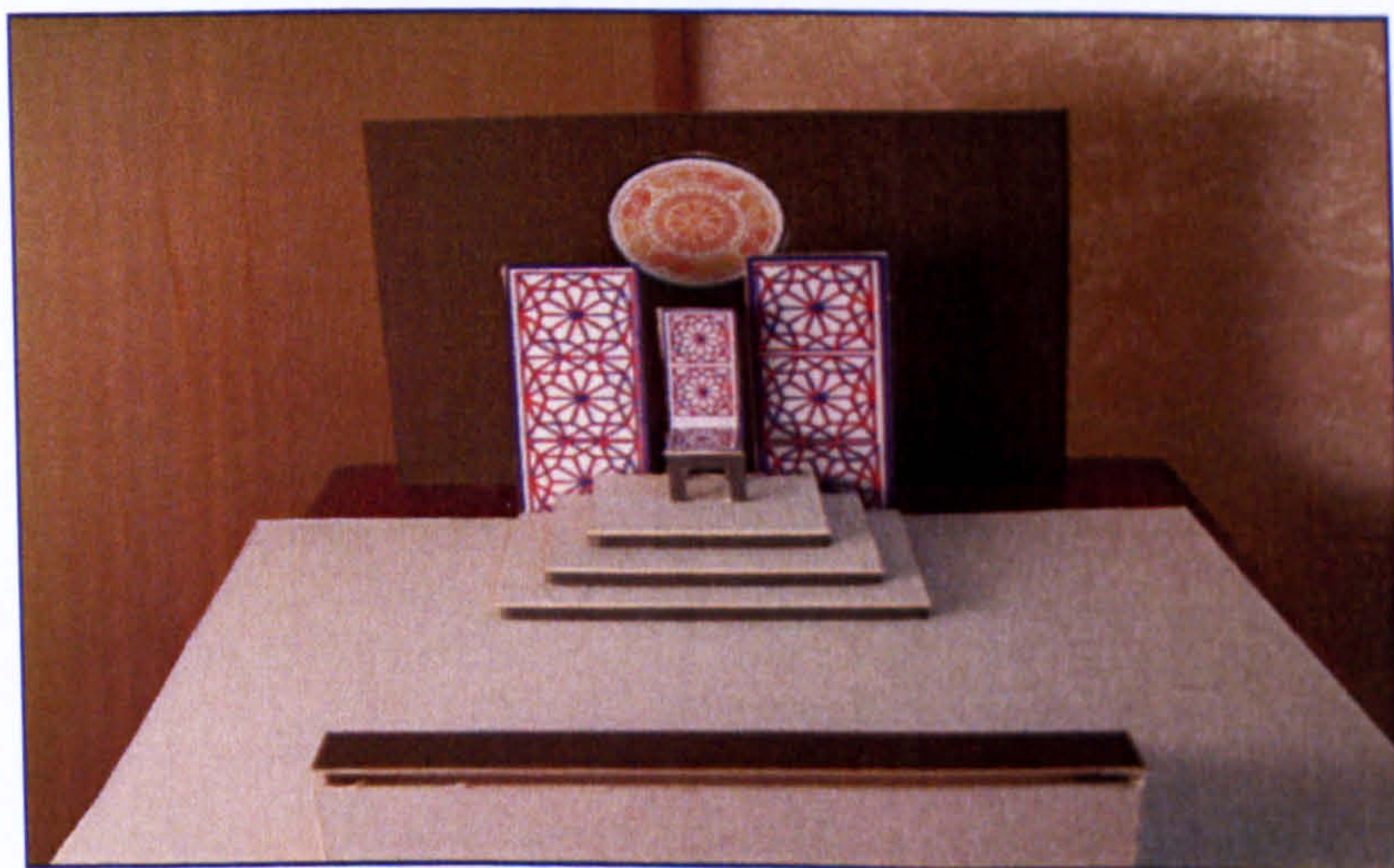
In 2004, my second PhD year, I was invited by the University of Sheffield to design the scenography for Wannous's short didactic play *The King's Elephant*. The director of the production was a doctoral student, Ali al-Anezi, and the cast consisted of Ali's supervisor and students from the University's School of English Literature. The theatre was a small space normally used for rehearsals and was not fully equipped, and the budget was modest. However I took on the challenge to overcome these conditions, and designed the scenography, lighting and costumes. Briefly, the play concerns a king who dotes on his favourite elephant, which he treats as a pet, letting it roam freely in the streets of the city under strict guard. The animal rampages through the poor districts, eventually trampling a child. The poverty-stricken citizens are at a loss what to do until a young, well-educated outsider encourages them to join forces and to address their complaint to the king. He rehearses them in what they are to say, but when they meet the king they are tongue-tied. To save his skin the young man betrays the poor petitioners. Instead of complaining about the elephant's destructive acts, he reverses the case, claiming that the presence of the elephant is a great asset to the city, and is rewarded for advising the king to procure a mate for it. The play not only attacks the Arab world's dictatorial regimes but also speaks about human duplicity and warns against the exploitation of the Arab masses by self-serving and opportunistic intellectuals. (Fig.33)





**Fig.33:** *The King's Elephant*. Designing and constructing by Khalifah al-Hajri, 2005

Although the props were necessarily minimal and the costumes simple, I managed to achieve some interesting effects with what lighting there was. After the performance, spectators' comments particularly mentioned the use of a gauze screen that half-hid the movements of the petitioners as they made their way to the palace. The movements were slow and exaggerated, and expressed the citizens' apprehension. This interlude, which is not included in Wannous's directions, showed that where resources are lacking, much can be achieved with little. (Fig.34)



**Fig.34:** Set model: *The King's Elephant*, scale 1:20.



## **From Canvas to Digital Graphic**

Because painting as a fine art is important to me, I have become accustomed to treating my designs for the theatre as self-contained works of art rather than as works which are incomplete unless realised on the stage, though they are made with the constraints of the stage in mind. Thus the design takes the form of a painting which can be shown to any audience, not just a theatre audience, as an independent work of art capable of being presented in an exhibition or on the wall of a room in a home or elsewhere. This orientation is rare amongst stage designers, most whom create designs that are fully realised only on the theatre stage. If the work is successfully shown in an exhibition, this is a matter of secondary importance. My approach, however, is to bring the aesthetic and practical aspects of the design into harmony so that it can be appreciated as a painting as well as a stage design. I also believe that scenographer needs to be familiar with the latest developments in stage scenery technology. Moreover, the traditional methods of representation are becoming obsolete. While artists may still use paint, digital technology has broken into the world of design and in many theatres worldwide the computer has become the essential tool. A traditionally rendered stage design is not accepted nowadays without a copy on a design programme such as Auto Cad, 3D Max or Maya. (Figures, 35, 36)





**Fig.35:**Design (10): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. 90 x 60 cm, oil on canvas.



**Fig.36:** Screenshot: Animation of design (10): *The Sultan's Dilemma*. 2005



These programmes are mostly used for architectural design and animated designs. Through them one can also be transported to a 'parallel world' rendered in three virtual dimensions. Thus the design can be realised on screen before its physical construction. Technically, this helps to eliminate many design faults at an early stage. Moreover, the three-dimensional animated graphic gives the production team a clear conception of the design. Some programmes enable the viewer to move virtually within the design.

As some skill in this area has become an absolute necessity, I have taken the opportunity to experiment with a traditional, painted design by transforming it into a three-dimensional animated design. This method will also save me making a miniature model of the stage scenery by hand, replacing it with a three-dimensional computer-generated model. This technique will be of use to my future students at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts.

The painted design in question was inspired by al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma*. I treated the design as an independent artwork, not as a scenographic design in the technical sense of the word.

I tried to achieve a breakthrough in two different ways: the first was to reject a naturalistic interpretation and to experiment with a more imaginative approach to scenography; the second was to attempt to practise converting the design from canvas to the computer by transforming it into an animation graphic.

In this design I departed considerably from al-Hakim's directions for this scene which indicated that the set should depict in a naturalistic way the centre of an Islamic city of the Fatimid period. The design is a scenographic interpretation of the play from a non-realistic viewpoint and contains symbolic elements. I placed the character of the Sultan in the centre of the stage. His figure consists of a number of Arabic letters and sentences, the sense of which is incomprehensible and incomplete; this can be read as representing the incompleteness of the concept of the legality of the Sultan's rule. The perplexing atmosphere of the play, with its arguments and counter-arguments around the difficulty of selecting the correct solution, creates a sensation of instability. For this



reason, I painted intertwining lines at the right of the stage-set to represent the intertwining of civil and religious law which the dramatist represents by the characters of the Vizier and the Chief Justice and also to represent the dramatic entanglement of the Sultan's dilemma. Another aspect is the tranquillity which characterises the Sultan's meetings with the Chief Justice and al-Ghaniya. This calmness of mind is symbolised by the fish swimming in the air over the stage. At the back of the stage are two minarets; these are based on the famous spiral minarets built in Samarra in the ninth century, which influenced the minaret of the Ibn Tulun mosque in Cairo. These three remain the only examples of this type. Their origin does not lie in the ancient ziggurats of Mesopotamia but in certain towers of Sasanian Iran.<sup>35</sup> In the design the suggestion is that the Sultan must climb laboriously upwards to attain wisdom, repeatedly viewing the terrain of his dilemma until he is able to make a decision. The symbolism of the minaret relates to the religious emphasis of the play. Leaning against this minaret is a wooden ladder, the shortcut to an expedient solution proposed by the Vizier. This route is precarious, however, in contrast to the solid and stable foundation of the minaret. The ladder is a temporary structure that overrides the law, whereas the minaret's spiral stair represents the Sultan's difficult path to reach a solution acceptable in religious law, in which he shows more judgement than the Chief Justice.

The floor of the stage consists of different levels which represent the fluctuations in the situation. Practically, these levels would enable the audience to see groups of actors clearly without one group hiding another. There are also two other ladders that appear to lead nowhere. They can be read as suggesting that the individual (here the Sultan) can never be certain of the consequences of any decision: the 'solution' exists but the result is unknown. As for the crescent moon which hangs to the left of the stage, it suggests the changeability of legal opinion on the issue of the Sultan. These are my interpretations, given the nature of the design they are in no way definitive, and the viewer is entirely free to discover other possibilities.

This scene was first painted in oils on a canvas measuring 60 x 90 cm. Then it was transformed into an animation graphic by means of 3D Max; this process took forty-one



hours. The viewer moves virtually through the stage space and amongst the design elements.

## **Conclusion**

The various parts of this chapter are connected by their focus on scenography and particularly by my own experience as a scenographer. The chapter has explored scenography as it is understood and practised in the Arab world, noting that 'scenography' is a term imported from the West and that Arabs have not developed a scenography of their own. The art lags behind that of the West in theoretical and historical awareness, technical development and artistic achievement. More generally, the problem lies to a great extent in the deficiencies of the education system and of the theatrical environment. In Kuwait, which I took as an example since it is, besides being fairly representative of the Arab world, the environment with which I am most familiar, we face an academic and methodological problem as regards the theatre, starting with the early stages of education and ending with the advanced level at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. I argued that it is illogical for us to have an institute of this type on which the state spends large sums of money and which is practically the only specialised theatre institute in the Arabian Gulf region, whilst in contrast we do not find any educational method at primary and secondary levels in Kuwait to prepare students to join this institute. Methods of education in the dramatic arts in particular need to be reviewed, and theatre needs to become an integral part of the education system. The methods employed by the Institute are also in need of development as the curriculum was established in 1973 and no significant modernisation has taken place in the administrative or academic field. This means that the student graduates with incomplete and out-of-date historical knowledge, theoretical understanding and practical experience. The old-fashioned methods also too often limit the thinking of the Institute's academic staff. The Institute needs to pay more attention to the practical aspect of education in the dramatic arts and to begin to involve all three departments in the complete theatrical equation so that they no longer all work in insular isolation. There needs to be a cross-fertilisation of ideas between the academic theatre and the



commercial theatre on a theoretical level and on a practical level by involving the student in the production of commercial plays. I am able to recommend this on the basis of my own experience. Also, the student should reach a point where his studies at the Institute, the demands of the job market and audience taste meet.

I then went on to describe the Kuwaiti theatre scene in order to acquaint the reader with my theatrical background, which influenced my development as a scenographer. This was done through reporting meetings with some of those responsible for the current state of Kuwaiti theatre and statements on theatre matters by them and others. I found not only a degree of pessimism but also disillusionment and a regrettable complacency. Contemporary theatre in Kuwait seems no longer to have room for many of the most distinguished actors and graduates of the fifties and sixties, according to their own statements. It has declined to a level where some of them consider that any connection with the theatre would detract from their reputation. At the same time, some of those in responsible positions complained about the massive expansion of commercial theatre at the cost of serious theatre. They proposed numerous causes for this, including the general taste of the audience, the ambition and greed of the commercial institutions and the lack of playhouses. Some pointed the finger of accusation at the state's negligence, others at the national theatre troupes; this refusal to accept responsibility does nothing to halt the theatre's decline.

In 2001 I left Kuwait, which has a large Sunni majority, to experience the broader Arab-Islamic context and went to Syria to attend the Shi'ite *ta'ziyah* rites. I wished to study this phenomenon as a form that might confirm the direction I was taking towards the creation of a relationship between theatre and cultural heritage. I was seeking a theatre that embodied and expressed a clear identity, a theatre that might convince the Arab-Muslim audience of our need for this type of art as a means of entertainment and education and of improving Arab artistic taste in general. I discovered that the great numbers who attend the Muharram events in Syria gather spontaneously on the tenth day of the month every year. They are moved by intense religious emotion towards Hussein and his companions, responding to the actors, the plot and the scenographic setting of Karbala by weeping and beating their breasts and heads. They stroke the



horses of Hussein's companions with sympathy and kindness and throw eggs at his enemies. They sometimes enter the battlefield to defend the martyr's followers and his family, extinguishing the fires burning in the tents and seeking blessing from the tent-poles and the warriors' banners, creating a sympathetic relationship with the scenography of the *ta'ziyah*. No theatre artist could wish for a more impassioned and active interaction of the audience with the drama. Although the basic motivation for this interaction is religious and ritual emotion in the sense that the events of Karbala represent a basic constituent of Shi'ite doctrine, the *ta'ziyah* has lessons for us. We need to discover from our heritage, and from our current situation, stories and themes that touch the hearts and minds of the audience, and present them in ways that only the living theatre can.

During an academic debate on Radio Kuwait my colleagues and I were able to identify some of the deficiencies in Kuwaiti scenography and to suggest some ways of remedying them in our search for an identity. The scenographer is no less important than any other element in the theatrical production, and this has to be understood in Kuwaiti and Arab-Islamic theatre circles. If an understanding of theatrical space and the work of the scenographer is lacking, we shall not be able to complete the elements of the theatrical equation. Of course, this is true of all theatrical elements, not just scenography.

In this chapter I have charted my scenographic experience from the beginning of my academic studies, through the Master's stage and concluding with my present doctoral thesis. My practical experience has been given an important part in the chapter as it has prompted and accompanied my research presented in the earlier chapters of this study. That research, in its various aspects, has broadened my horizons and deepened my understanding so that I now feel able to develop my practice as scenographer, academic and teacher.

I have begun to ask myself many questions before putting brush to canvas. What colours suit the spirit of the dramatic events? What objects suited to the events and appealing to the audience are to be built on the stage? I have learned not to distribute the elements of décor around the stage in a blind way, as everything on the stage has a



meaning and an aim. What is the exemplary way to design stage scenery which will be a major player on the stage, a player interacting with the actors? What is the artistic and architectural culture of the audience attending the performance? I have begun to understand that my imagination can be freed by asking such questions.

During the course of the research I realised that in certain respects I had also been blinkered by the limitations of the theatre scene in Kuwait and the Arab world generally, and particularly by the nature of scenographic studies at the Higher Institute. I discovered that we scenographers in Kuwait are in need of theoretical research as much as academic practical research. This type of research will be a great help in developing our outdated programme as the Department of Stage Design has suffered from this crisis since the nineties, when development virtually stopped.

The next chapter will reflect on the research as presented in this and earlier chapters, draw conclusions and consider possible ways in which Arabic theatre might be revived.



## Endnotes For chapter 7

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Louis Malikiya, *Al-Dikur al-Masrahi*, al-Hai'a al-Misriya al-Ama li'l-Kitab, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1990, Cairo; and another book by myself, Dr. Sabri Abd al-Aziz, *Al-Qiam al-Tashkiliya fi al-Sura al-Mar'iya al-Masrahiya*, al-Hai'a al-Misriya al-Ama li'l-Kitab, 2001, Cairo; Dr. Kamal Aid, *Sinugrafia al-Masrah abra al-Usur*, Dar al-Thaqafa li'l-Nashr, 1998, Cairo)
- <sup>2</sup> Leon Chanswil Ril, *Tarikh al-masrah (History of Theatre)* trans. Khalil Sharaf al-Din and Nu'man Abadhah, Manshurat Awidat, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, December, pp. 20-21.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 14.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin Esslin, *Majal al-Drama*, Ministry of Culture, Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festival, trans. Al-Saba'i al-Sayid, introd. Ahmed Sakhsukh, revised by Nasim Majali, p. 34.
- <sup>6</sup> Saad Ardeh, *Al-Mukhrij fi al-Masrah al-Mu'asir*, 'Alam al-Ma'rifa Series, No. 19, July 1979.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Dr. Ahmed Zaki, *'Abqariyah al-Ikhraj al-Masrahi: al-Madaris w'al-Manahij*, al-Hay'ah al-Misriya al-'Amah l'al-Kitab, 1989.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid..
- <sup>11</sup> Patrice Pavis, *al-Masrah fi muftaraq al-Thaqafah*, Ministry of Culture, Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festival, trans. and introd. al-Saba'i al-Sayid, p. 348.
- <sup>12</sup> Marcel Freydefont, *al-Sinugrafia al-Yawm*, p. 8.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Pamela Howard. *What is Scenography?*(London: Routledge, 2002), p.34
- <sup>15</sup> Fadi Abdullah, Interview with Suad Abdullah (Kuwait: Aljarida Newspaper, 3-10-2007) Vol 107.
- <sup>16</sup> Fuad Alshati, Article: *The Decline of The Kuwaiti Theatre and The Climate of Other Cultures.* ( London: Alhayat Newspaper (Arabic) 3/6/2006) [http://www.fuadalshatti.com/news\\_details.aspx?id=33](http://www.fuadalshatti.com/news_details.aspx?id=33).
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Alalam Alyoom. Article: *Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival 2007* ( Kuwait: Alallam Alyom Newspaper, 3/9/2007) Vol. 144.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Alshati, Article: Article: *The Decline of The Kuwaiti Theatre and The Climate of Other Cultures.*
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Abu Lafi, Niven. Article: *The Theatrical Activities without Identity* ( Kuwait: Alqabas Newspaper,26/10/2006) Vol.12357
- <sup>27</sup> Alalam Alyoom, Article: *Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival 2007*



---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Telephone interview, 28/6/2006 @ 11:30 AM

<sup>30</sup> Abu Lafi Vol. 12357

<sup>31</sup> Ahajri, K. Phone call

<sup>32</sup> Aid al-Rmizan, *The Kuwaiti Theatre: Massive productions and low Values*. (Rayadh: Amajlaha Magazines, 2005) Vol.385.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> See chapter six, p. 81.

<sup>35</sup> See Grabar, p.113.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Conclusion

This study has explored various aspects of the Arab-Muslim heritage in theatre and the visual arts – notably architecture – from the viewpoint of an Arab Muslim scenographer who is also an academic and teacher, with the aim of understanding the current condition of Arabic theatre and discovering possible ways it might be revived and made more accessible to a wider audience. This concern has not been touched in academic studies previously, especially with regard to an alternative perspective. I have argued that if theatre is to be more than ephemeral entertainment catering for an undemanding popular taste, theatre artists of all kinds, but especially those also entrusted with the education of the young, need to be aware of the history of the Arabic theatre as well as the requirements of their own speciality, and that scenographers in particular should have a thorough knowledge of Islamic art and architecture. From this base they will be



able to formulate their own ways of creating and of addressing their audience. But while this is important, it is equally important to recognise that the Arabic theatre cannot rectify its many failings by turning inward and closing its eyes to the outside world. The Arab world and its theatre is now inescapably part of a complex globalised culture and its serious theatre must adapt or perish by slow decline. Faced with a popular commercial theatre and, more importantly, with an ever more powerful range of other media, of which the Internet is changing our world perhaps more radically than any since the invention of printing, serious theatre must find ways to reach a wider audience by understanding and exploiting its unique character as a living experience different from any screen-oriented activity.

Many would say in response to such an assertion, why strive to reach this audience and undertake such a thankless task? The conditions for such a project to succeed are absent. Why not accept that the world has changed, that serious theatre is a minority art of interest to only a small educated elite? Hasn't this in any case always been true, and isn't it true even in the West? Let the commercial theatre continue to entertain a mass audience (or at least those able to afford the price of a seat). Let television produce its soaps, which are what the people want. It is now too late to create a serious theatre that will be as culturally significant as was the case in the very different conditions of the 1960s and 1970s. This insistence on the importance of heritage is a blind alley and a fantasy that will prevent Arabic theatre from taking its place as a respected player on the international scene, mire it in the swamp of the past and prevent further developments. In any case, in a postmodern world it is unnecessary to intensively research one's cultural history or to learn from it, since we can now take our material, if we choose, from any culture or historical period. What matters is what is happening now, in our globalised culture. We need to transcend cultural boundaries, not seek to emphasise them.

These objections and anxieties have some force, but I would argue that theatre should not reject any possibility of connecting with a broader audience. I am certainly not arguing that theatre should retreat into an Arab-Islamic parochialism, finding its subjects only in history and folklore, since this study has made clear that Arabic theatre



has always used history and folklore to engage with contemporary realities, and it has always conducted a dialogue with the West. In doing so, it has continued a practice that began long before 1847, since Islamic civilisation itself first developed out of a fruitful synthesis with the cultures conquered by Muslim armies after the death of the Prophet, later spreading both eastward and westward and enriching itself by a similar process. While bearing in mind Nasr's warning of a dilution of meaning, I accept that theatre cannot ignore contemporary global culture. But nor am I willing to abandon the possibility – though current conditions may be unpropitious - of addressing the great majority of Arab Muslims, who continue to have a strong religious commitment that shows itself in their daily lives, and to whom their Islamic identity is important. At present, however, that sense of identity is problematic and its assertion is fraught with social, political and cultural anxieties and insecurities. Where, arguably, it should be based on cultural pride and confidence and a consciousness of a history which produced many remarkable achievements, it is all too often corroded by a consciousness of political fragmentation, military and economic weakness and cultural stagnation. Many Arabs today feel, especially after the reaction of the USA and its allies to 11 September 2001, suffocated between domestic repression on the one hand and external vilification on the other. The result is, evidently, growing resentment and bitterness and a susceptibility to the propaganda of the extremists.

It is obvious to all that there are no easy or quick solutions to these problems, but it seems clear that in order to understand where we are now we should make an effort to understand our history. This also applies to the small world of the theatre. While not claiming a specialist's knowledge, I have benefited greatly from the research conducted for this study in areas that impact on my own work, and I am confident that my students will also benefit, given the right conditions. But, as this study has indicated, reform is necessary in the field of education if theatre artists are to produce exciting, innovative work. That at least we can control, and measures such as the integration of theatre studies into the education system, greater co-operation between departments in academies, and students' experience of work in a real theatrical environment would surely prove to be beneficial. Larger questions concern the funding of theatre by



governments and the physical condition of playhouses, including their technical resources.

These questions, of course, exist in a national, regional and ultimately global context upon which theatre cannot hope to have any significant direct influence; in that respect the dreams of Wannous and his contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s have been well and truly laid to rest. But the theatre, which was once 'the political conscience of the Arab nation' may aspire to have an influence, if only in helping to stand against political censorship, and the growing power of puritan Islamic radicals who see the religion in terms of an essentialist conception and a fundamentalist reliance on narrowly interpreted law, and who suspect that all forms of art may be un-Islamic. The other threat lies in the ideology and actions of adherents of 'political Islam' who are prepared to use any means necessary to establish their vision of a 'pure' faith and subjugate every Muslim to their absolute political authority. In contrast, this study has shown that Islam prohibits neither visual representation nor theatrical performance, and concurs with Nasr's view that Islam may be powerfully expressed through art.

As a liberal Muslim fortunate enough to live in a country which, despite its imperfections, is advancing towards democracy and where freedom of thought and expression is far greater than in many other states, I wish to speak to others of like mind and reach out to those who may disagree. As a man of the theatre I naturally seek to do so through my chosen profession and encourage others to do likewise, since I firmly consider Islam to be a dynamic ideology of political and social transformation. Just as Islam is not a monolithic entity incapable of reinterpretation, so our heritage as Arabs and Muslims can be used to create a culture which embraces modernity with confidence and pride. Heritage, on this view, is not a fossilised and fixed relic, a refuge from the complexities of the world, but a means of engaging creatively with others. It is in this spirit that I believe we should seek to make a theatre that will engage the Arab-Muslim audience as well as make an impact on the international scene. This, needless to say, is going to be a long and difficult process, but the rewards of even a limited success would be great.



There is a limit, of course, to what theatre can do. First of all it must simply be good theatre. At the moment, as chapters six and seven made clear, there is a pervasive stagnation and complacency. Even the experimental theatre, which provides some examples of innovative and thought-provoking work, has become 'classical' or 'traditional'. The avant garde has long ceased to be transgressive and has been thoroughly assimilated into mainstream Western culture. This can be seen as a success, but at international festivals in the Arab world a 'safe' avant-gardism predominates, and every production, no matter how incoherent, is praised, as Alfred Faraj noted in chapter six. Where a work appears to threaten the status quo, as in al-Bassam's case, the authorities simply insist that the work be performed in English, thus preventing it having any impact outside the elite audience who attend such events. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, while 'consumer-oriented' theatre is usually and not unreasonably identified with the commercial theatre, the term could equally be applied to experimental theatre, since it is generally created with a particular audience in mind, to whose taste it conforms.

My experience of the *ta'ziyah* in 2001 made a great impression on me and, like Peter Brook and others before me, I was convinced I had witnessed 'the real thing' in the relationship between actors and spectators. As I was dissatisfied with the state of Arabic theatre and its division into superficial entertainment and an experimental theatre isolated from the mainstream of Arab life, I began to wonder whether it might be possible to create a theatre where 'the fire of life' (Brook's phrase)<sup>1</sup> could be created between actors and spectators. It seemed unlikely, because the *ta'ziyah* is a unique phenomenon in the Islamic world whose efficacy as ritual and effectiveness as drama are deeply embedded in Shi'ite history, culture and politics. Moreover, this phenomenon presents a black and white view of history which is strongly contested by Sunnis, and thus serves to unite only one segment of the Muslim community. It is not only divisive along sectarian lines, but is also fiercely combative, calling on Muslims to imitate their martyred Imam, by blood sacrifice if necessary.

---

<sup>1</sup> See chapter 5, p. 116



Yet the power of the experience was undeniable, and I recognised that the *ta'ziyah* was doing what Arabic drama has always done: to make the past relevant to the present. Where Arabic drama has drawn on history or folklore it has usually done so in order to comment on the present. Although Hussein's martyrdom is too contentious to be acceptable to orthodox Sunni opinion, as al-Sharqawi discovered, there are many other examples that would resonate with the community of Muslims as a whole. These could include even material from the earliest years of Islam; but a cautionary note needs to be sounded here, since the dramatisation of such material would only be acceptable to Sunnis in modernising, relatively democratic states such as Kuwait. Shi'a Islam has no difficulty with such representations and has developed a different cultural tradition, which we find most cogently expressed today in Nasr's writings. This tradition is based on *ijtihad* or independent reasoning that allows for the creative interpretation of Islam. Some scholars believe that the decision of the Sunni leadership to close the gates of *ijtihad* in the fourteenth century had the effect of preventing Sunni society from adapting to historical change and realising its full potential. Whatever the truth of this, Sunni conservatism has tended to be not only intensely suspicious of Shi'ism but also of the West and its cultural values.

In countries where conservatism is not so powerful there is, I suggest, the potential to engage the Arab-Muslim audience by learning from the *ta'ziyah*. This would be a challenging task, but the community already exists (as it did not for Schechner's attempt to create a ritual theatre in the USA) and the material is abundant. The life and death of the Prophet, his battles against his enemies, the death of his daughter Fatima from grief a few months after his own, and the tragic events associated with the early history of Islam, for example the murder of the Caliph Omar, the second Caliph, and Ali, Hussein's father – all these still have the power to move a Muslim audience. The subject is important, but the presentation is equally important. Here writer, director and scenographer can fruitfully collaborate, and 'experimental theatre' can take on a new meaning.

It may be objected, quite reasonably, that conditions in the Arab world today do not favour the success of such an enterprise, but I would argue that the experiment is worth



trying, since serious theatre is so conspicuously failing to engage with its potential audience. I offer this tentatively as an opportunity to be grasped, not as a magical solution to the theatre's problems. Others will have different ideas of how to make the serious theatre once again relevant to a broad audience. Sceptics will argue that failure is inevitable and that we should accept that theatre appeals to a tiny, educated minority and can only be sustained by its Western connections at international festivals. But what is important is to intensify the debate on this issue within the theatre community, among those concerned for the theatre's welfare, and in the wider society.

Theatre in the West continues to thrive because Western societies consider it important. In the Arab world generally the powers that be have tended to regard it as an optional cultural extra, useful for gaining a little prestige with the West but of little or no social importance. As a result it has become an 'endangered species' in the cultural ecosystem. But I would argue that theatre is important, since it can offer a communal experience that television and the cinema, with all their immense technical resources, cannot provide. More than any other medium, theatre can be a ritual space where a living experience is shared between actors and spectators, who both create 'a meeting-place between our imagination and our reason'. Theatre may not be a ritual experience but, as Fischer-Lichte argues, it can be similar, transforming the spectator through the experience of performance.

This experience, creating an aesthetic community within a broader society united by religion but riven by schisms, fractures and social and political inequalities, may promote dialogue among Muslims. It may help to spread tolerance by changing how the audience thinks and feels. Theatre, given the right level of government support in areas including but not limited to finance, could once again become a significant cultural influence, a respected forum for debate and a force for reconciliation as well as a source of delight. It would be firmly rooted in its culture while welcoming, engaging with and learning from the manifestations of other cultures. A revitalised theatre would be better able to oppose political censorship and promote freedom of thought and expression. Knowing and respecting its audience, it could be critical and thought-provoking.



innovative, and subversive. The Arab world's many problems should not be a reason to turn away from that audience, but should drive our theatrical activity.

These are a few possibilities. Are they achievable? Given the current conditions it seems unlikely, but I am nevertheless in agreement with al-Bassam that theatre can play a vital role in the Arab world. For it to do so, however, government must take its responsibilities seriously. He stresses the idea that we also need playwrights, or at least writers able to use the transformative powers of the Arabic language, which has sacred roots anchored in the Qur'an. In my own discipline there is much untapped talent that is at present wasted in the commercial theatre and television. The potential of scenography must be recognised, and scenographers must receive a proper education. As long as scenography remains the 'silent partner' among the theatre arts, scenographers will not be able to make the contribution that they aspire to make and that the theatre needs.



## Bibliography

### Books

#### Books in Arabic

- Abu Diab, Salahaddin. *The Presence and Absence of Sa'dallah Wannous*. (Kuwait city: Sua'ad AlSabah Publishing House, 1997).
- Al-Bayati, Basil. *Community and Unity*. (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).
- Al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *Al-Malik Audib (Oedipus the King)*. (Cairo: Dar al-Matha, 1977).
- Al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *Al-Mu'allafat al-kamilah (Collected Works)*. (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 1994-1996).
- Al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *Al-Sultan al-Ha'ir (The Sultan's Dilemma)*. (Cairo: Maktabat al-'Adab, 1965).
- Al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *Egypt between Two Ages*. (Cairo: The Literature Library, 1983).
- al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *Masr byna Asrin (Egypt between Two Ages)*. (Egypt: The Literature Library, 1983).
- Al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *The Return of Consciousness*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1985).
- Al-Hakim, Tawfiq. *Usfur min al-Sharq (A Robin from the East)*. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab, 1938).
- Al-Jahiz, O. *Al-Bayan wa'l Tabyin*. (Cairo: Makta'bat Al-Khanji, 1969).
- Al-Khozai, Mohamed. *The development of early Arabic drama, 1847-190*. (London: New York: Longman, 1984).
- Al-Maqrizi, A. *Al-Mawaiz wa al-I'tibar fi dhikr al-Khitat wa al-'Athar (Relics and Races)*. (Cairo: Bulaq Press, 1270 A.H). 2 volumes
- Al-Mas'oody, A. *Muruj Al-Dhahab (Meadows of Gold)*. (Beirut: Dar Alandalus, 1983).



- Al-Ra'i, Ali. *Al-Masrah fi Al-Watan AlArabi (Theatre in the Arab World)*. (Kuwait city: Alam Alm'rfa , 1980).
- Al-Sharqawi, Abd al-Rahman. *Al-Husayn tha'iran, tha'r Allah (Wrath of God)*. (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1971).
- Al-Tabari, Abu Ja'far. *Tarikh Al-Tabari (History of al-Tabari)*. (Cairo: Mo'asast Iz Al-din, 1989).
- Al-Za'bi, Za'bi *Al-Fonon Abra al-O'sor ( Arts Through Centuries)*. (Kuwait city: Maktabat dar al-Orba, 1999).
- Daghir, Y. *Dictionary of Arabic Plays*. (Beirut: Ahl al-Qalam, 1956).
- Dawarah, A. *Tawfiq Al-Hakim's Theatre*. (Cairo: Egyptian Community Press, 1985).
- El-Said, Issam. *Issam al-Sa'id bayna al-'ilm wa al-fann (The Geometric Art of Issam El-Said)*. (London: Issam El-Said Foundation, 1989).
- Ghuneim, G. *Political Theatre in Syria, 1967-1990*. (Damascus: Aladdin Publishing House, 1996).
- Habib, Samiyah. *Dilalat al-Moqawamah fi masrah abdurahman alshqawi (The Resistance Signs in Abdurrahman al-Sharqawi Theatre)*. (Cairo: Alhay'ah al-Masriyah al-Amah lil Kitab, 1997).
- Najim, M. *Al-Masrahiya fi al-Adab al-Arabi al-Hadith (The Play in Modern Arabic Literature)*. (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafah, 1980).
- Najim, Mohamed. *Al-Masrahiya fi al-Adab al-Arabi al-Hadith (The Play in Modern Arabic Literature)*. (Cairo: It'tihad Al-Arab Press, 1997).
- Nua'man, S. *Al-Usul al-Deramiyah li-Nash'at al-Adab al-Arabi (The Dramatic Roots of Arabic Literature)*. (Beirut: Dar al-Ohud, 1973).
- Orsan, A. *Al-Siyasa fi Al-Masrah (Politics in Theatre)*. (Damascus: Manshorat Ittihad al- Kitab Al-Arabi, 1978).
- Orsan, A. *Az-Zawahir al-Masrahiyyah Ind Al-Arab (Theatrical Manifestations amongst the Arabs)*. (Damascus: It'thad al-Kot'tab al-Arab, 1981).
- Qajah, Jom'ah. *Al-Masrah wa al-Hwiyah al-Arabiyah (Theatre and the Arab Identity)* (Cairo: Dar Almoltaqa. 2001).
- Putensiva, T and Al-Mu'azin, Toufiq, Trans. *Alf 'Am Wa 'Am 'Ala Al-Masrah Al-'Arabi (A Thousand and One Years of Arabic Theatre)*. (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1981).



Rikabi, Jawdat. *Tarikh al-Adab al-Arabi ( History of the Arab Literature)*. (Damascus: Maktba`at al-Mufid, 1955).

Saqr, Ahmad. *Tawzif al-Turath al-Sha'bi fi al-Masrah al-Arabi (Applying Arabic Culture in the Arabic Theatre)*. (Alexandria: Sami Press, 1998).

Tuluamat, Z. *Al-Tamthil, al-Tamthiliyyat, al-Fann al-tamthili 'Ind al-Arab (Acting, Plays, and Arabic Dramatic Arts)*. (Kuwait City: Mu'assasat al-Masrah wa al-Fann, 1965).

Wannous, Sa'dallah. *E'itrafat le Masrah Arabi Jadid (Declarations for a New Arab Theatre)*. (Lebanon: Alfekr Algadead Publishing House, 1986).

Wannous, Sa'dallah. *The King's the King*. (Beirut: Al-Adab Publishing House, 1983).

Wannous, Saadallah. *The Complete Works, Volume One*. (Damascus: Alahali Publishing House, 1996).

### Books in English

Aronson, Arnold. *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

Aziza, Mohammed and Al-Saban, Rafiq, trans. *Islam and Theatre*. (Cairo: The Cultural Library, 1997).

Badawi, M. M. *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Badawi, M. M. *Early Arab Drama*. Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Bahari, Ebadollah. *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1996).

Barfoot, C.C. and Bordewijk, Cobi, ed. *Theatre Intercontinental*. (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Radopi, 1993).



- Barry, Michael. *Colour and Symbolism in Islamic Architecture*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1996).
- Barry, Michael. *Design and Color in Islamic Architecture: Eight Centuries of the Tile Maker's Art*. (New York: The Vendome Press, 1996).
- Behrens, A. *Beauty in Arabic Culture*. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999).
- Bell, C. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Bianco, Stefano. *Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
- Bloom, J, and Blair, S. *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 1250-1800*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).
- Bosworth, C. E. *The Islamic Dynasties*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967).
- Brend, B. *Islamic Art*. (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- Brend, B. *Islamic Art*. (London: British Museum Press, 1991).
- Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd; New Ed edition, 1990).
- Brook, Peter. *There Are No Secrets*. (London: Methuen, 1994).
- Burckhardt, T. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. (London: World of Islam Festival Pub. Co., 1976).
- Burt, Clarissa. 'The Tears of a Clown: Yusuf Idris and Postrevolutionary Egyptian Theatre' in: *Theater, Dance, Music and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*. (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001).
- Clay, James. *The Theatrical Image*. (Lanham and London: University Press of America, 1985).
- Clévenot, Dominique and Degeorge, Gérard (Photographs). *Splendors of Islam: Architecture, Decoration, and Design*. (New York: Vendome Press, distributed in USA and Canada by Rizzoli International Publications through St. Martin's Press, 2000).
- Collard, Christopher, trans. and ed. *Aeschylus: Oresteia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- Critchlow, Keith. *Islamic Patterns: an Analytical and Cosmological Approach*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).



- Crone, Patricia. *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).
- Csapo, Eric and Miller Margaret, ed. 'General Introduction' in: *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Diba, Layla, and Ekhtiar, Maryam. *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785 - 1925*. (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers in association with Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1998).
- Dickie, James and Michell, G, ed. 'Allah and Eternity: Mosques, Madrasas and Tombs' in: *Architecture of the Islamic World*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).
- Dorn, Dennis and Shanda, Mark. *Drafting for Theatre*. (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).
- Drewes, G and Grunebaum, V, ed. 'Indonesia: Mysticism and Activism' in: *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956).
- Elbouri, Tarek and Critchlow, Keith. *Islamic Art and Architecture*. (London: Garnet Publishing Ltd. 1993).
- Elbouri, Tarek and Critchlow, Keith. *The System of Geometric Design*. (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1993).
- Ernest, Kirby. *Ur-Drama - The Origins of Theatre*. (New York: New York University Press, 1970).
- Ernest, T. *Dionysus: A Study of the Bacchae and the Origins of Drama*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Int., 1982).
- El-Said, I and Damluji, S, ed. *Islamic Art and Architecture: The System of Geometric Design*. (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1993).
- Ettinghausen, R and Grabar, O, ed. *The Art and Architecture of Islam (650-1250)*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).
- Ettinghausen, R. and Grabar, O. *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 650 - 1250*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).
- Farough, M., *A Comparative Study of Abraham's Sacrifice in Persian Plays and Western Mystery Plays*. (Tehran: Ministry of Culture Arts Press, 1952).



- Fischer-Lichte, E. *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*. (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2005).
- Gibb, H.A.R. et al. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
- Gonzalez, Valerie. *Beauty of Islam*. (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2001).
- Goodwin, John. *British Theatre Design (The Modern Age)*. (London: Phoenix Illustrated 1998).
- Grabar, O. and Mitchell, G, ed. *The Architecture of Power: Palaces, Citadels and Fortification in Architecture of the Islamic World*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).
- Grabar, Oleg. *The Formation of Islamic Art*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).
- Grotowski, Jerzy, *Towards a Poor Theatre*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).
- Grube, Ernst and Mitchell, G, ed. 'What is Islamic Architecture?' *Architecture of the Islamic World*. (London: Thames and Hudson 1994).
- Haar, Johan and Barfoot, C, ed. *Ta'ziye: Ritual Theatre from Shi'ite Iran' in Theatre Intercontinental*. (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: :Rodopi, 1993).
- Haas, William. *Iran*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946).
- Ham, Roderick. *Theatre Planning*. (London: Architectural Press, 1972).
- Hambly, G. *Cities of Mughal India*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968).
- Harrison, Jane. *Ancient Art and Ritual*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1951).
- Hattstein, Markus and Delius, Peter, (ed). *Islam: Art and Architecture*. (Berlin: Konemann, 2004).
- Hayes J. R. *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance*. (New York: New York University Press, 1992).
- Hill, Jonathan. *Action of Architecture*. (London: Routledge, 2003).
- Hoag, John. *Islamic Architecture*. (Milan: Electra Editrice, 1975).
- Hodgkin, Howard. *Stage Designs*. (London: Anthony Doffay, 2002).
- Hogget, Chris. *Stage Crafts*. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1975).
- Holod, R and Khan, H. *The Contemporary Mosque: Architecture, Clients and Designs since the 1950s*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1997).



- Holt, Michael. *A Phaidon Theatre Manual: Stage Design and Properties*. (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1988).
- Holt, Michael. *Costume and Make-up*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1988).
- Hourani, Albert. *A History of the Arab Peoples*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).
- Howard, Pamela. *What is Scenography?* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- Hunt, H. *The Live Theatre: An Introduction to the History and Practice of the Stage*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- Hutchins, William, trans. *Plays, Prefaces and Postscripts of Tawfiq al-Hakim*. (Washington: Three Continents, 1981).
- Hutt, A, ed. *Arab Architecture: Past and Present. An Exhibition presented by the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce at the Royal Institute of British Architects*. (Durham:University of Durham, The Centre for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, 1984).
- Ingham, Rosemary. *From Page to Stage: How Theatre Designers make Connections between Scripts and Images*. (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998).
- Innes, C. *Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- Irwin, R. *Islamic Art*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1997).
- Izenour, G. *Theater Design*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- Jafri S. *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*. (London: Longman, 1979).
- Jairazbhoy, R. *An Outline of Islamic Architecture*. (India: Asia Publishing House, 1972).
- James, Thurston. *Mask-Making Handbook*. (Ohio: Betterway Books, 1990).
- Jayyusi, Khadra and Allen, Roger, trans. *'The King's the King' Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology*. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- Jayyusi, Salma and Allen, Roger. *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- Jayyusi, Salma. *Short Arabic Plays: An Anthology*. (New York: Interlink Pub. Group Inc., 2003).
- Jones, Dalu and Michell, G. *'Surface, Pattern and Light' in: Architecture of the Islamic world*. (London: Thames &Hudson, 1984).



- Landau J. *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958).
- Lane, E. W. *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. (New York: Everyman's Library, 2005).
- Leaman, Oliver. *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).
- Lewcock, R and Michell, G, ed. 'Materials and Techniques' in: *Architecture of the Islamic World*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984).
- Malekpour, Jamshid. *The Islamic Drama*. (London: Frank Cass, 2004).
- Meen, V. B. and Tushingham, A. D. *Crown Jewels of Iran*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).
- Michell, George, ed. *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
- Miller, Judith. *God has Ninety-Nine Names*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
- Moreh, S. *Jewish Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Arabic Theatre*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- Moreh, S. *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).
- Mostyn, Trevor. *Censorship in Islamic Societies*. (London: Saqi Books, 2002).
- Moynihan, E. *Paradise as a Garden in Persia and Mughal India*. (New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1979).
- Murray, G. *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*. (London: Oxford University press, 1927).
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971).
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987).
- Nunn, Trevor. *Ralph Kottai*. (London: Lund Humphries Publishers, 1997).
- Okada, Amina and Joshi M. *Taj Mahal*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993).
- Ortolani, B. *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism*. (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1990).
- Owen, Roger. *State Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. (London: Routledge, 1992).
- Papadopoulos, A. *Islam and Muslim Art*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979).



- Petersen, Andrew. *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*. (London: Routledge, 1996).
- Raby, Julian. *Occidentalism*. (London: The Nour Foundation, 1997).
- Ridgeway, William. *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1915).
- Sadgrove, Philip. *Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century*. (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996).
- Said, E. *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- Scerrato, U. *Islam: Monuments of Civilization*. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976).
- Serajeldin, I. 'Space for Freedom: The Search for Architectural Excellence' in: *Muslim Societies*. (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1989).
- Silk, M.S, ed. *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Simpson, Marianna. *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's Haft Awrang*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1997).
- Soudavar, Abolala. *Art of the Persian Courts*. (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992).
- Stierlin, Henri. *Islam: Early Architecture from Baghdad to Jerusalem and Cordoba*. (Cologne and London: Taschen, 1996).
- Stierlin, Henri. *Islamic Art and Architecture from Isfahan to the Taj Mahal*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).
- Stierlin, Henri. *Turkey: From the Selcuks to the Ottomans*. (Cologne and London: Taschen, 2002).
- Stoddard, R and Morinis, A, ed. *Sacred Places, Sacred Spaces*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1997).
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974).
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. (New York: PAJ, 1982).
- Vince, R. *Ancient and Medieval Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984).



Von Grunebaum, G, ed. *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

Walters, Graham. *Stage Lighting*. (London: A. & C. Black, 1997).

Willet, John. *Brecht on Theatre* .(London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 2001).

Willett, John. *Caspar Neher: Brecht's Designer*. (London: Methuen in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1986).

Wolfe, Welby. *Materials of the Scene*. (New York: Harper and Row Publisher, Inc., 1977).

Yarshater, Ehsan. *Persian Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

Zuhur, Sherifa, ed. *Theater, Dance, Music and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*. (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001).

### Journals

Aghaie, Kamran Scot. 'The Origins of the Sunni-Shi'ite Divide and the Emergence of the Ta'ziyah Tradition' *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005):6-8.

Al Souleman. 'Sadallah Wannous: His Last Five Years; His Greatest as Playwright' *al-Jadid*. 7 (Winter 2001). 34.

Beeman, William and Ghaffari, Mohammad B. 'Acting Styles and Actor Training in Ta'ziyeh' *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005):44-46.

Chelkowski, J. 'Time out of Memory: ta'ziyah, the Total Drama' *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005):20-21.

Chelkowski, Peter. 'B.Mohammad Ghaffari, Ta'ziyeh Director' *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005).12-14.

Crombecque, Alain. 'Ta'ziyeh in France: the Ritual of Renewal at the Festival d'Automne' *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005): 1-4.

Dabashi, Hamid. 'Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest' *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005):55-57.



- Deslauriers, Daniel. 'Dimensions of Knowing: Narrative, Paradigm, and Ritual' in: *Revision*. 14 (1992):4
- Moreh, S. 'The Shadow Play in the Light of Arabic Literature' *Journal of Arabic Literature*.18 (1987):46-61(16).
- Norton, A. 'Ritual, Blood and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Nabatiyya, Lebanon' in: *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005): 26-28.
- Riggio, M. Cozart. 'Moses and the Wandering Dervish: Ta'ziyah at Trinity College' *The Drama Review*. 49(Winter 2005).9-10.
- Shair, I.M. and Karan, P.P. 'Geography of the Islamic Pilgrimage' in: *GeoJournal*. 3 (1979): 599-608.
- Swairjo, Manal. 'Sa'dallah Wannous: A Life in Theatre' in: *Al Jadid*. 2 (June 1996):8.
- Vanzan, Anna. *Ta'ziyeh in Parma* 'Time out of Memory' in: *The Drama Review*. 49 (Winter 2005):30-32.

### Theses

- Al Abdullah, Abdulaziz. *Western Influences on the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allah Wannous*. (Manchester: Manchester University, 1993).
- Al Souleman, Ali. *From Staging the World to Staging the Self: Sa'dallah Wannous and the Question of Theatre*. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005).
- Al-Anezi, Ali Ali 'Ajil Naji. *An Analytical Study of the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannous, With Particular Emphasis on The Plays Written After the 1967 War*. (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 2006).
- Al-Shalal, E. *The Image of Women in Tawfiq al-Hakim's Works: a Critical and Analytical Study*. (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2004).
- Knio, M. *Towards a National Puppet Centre for the Lebanon*. (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1994).

### Radio and Television



An Interview with Al-bassam' Narr. Gbadamosi, Gabriel. *Night Waves*. BBC Radio 3: 8 May 2006.

'Discussion and Various Dialogues on Literature' Narr. Alqanah, Nader. *Radio Seminar*. Kuwait Radio. 23 January 2005

### Internet

'Sa'dallah Wannous Calls for Restoration of Theater, The "Ideal Forum" for Human Dialogue', *Al-Jadid*, Vol.2, No. 8 (June 1996)

<http://www.aljadid.com/theatre/0208wannous.html/> [Accessed 06 July 2007]

'Sa'dallah Wannus, The Thirst for Dialogue' (World Theatre Day address), trans. International Theatre Institute (UNESCO), <http://iti-worldwide.org> [accessed 11 May 2007]

'The Empty Stage'. September 2000. *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo, 7-13), Issue No. 498 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/498/cu2.html> [Accessed 21 July 2007]

'Theatre is religious', *The Journal and Theatre*. Vol. 1, (Fall 2002) (2006) [http://www.rtjournal.org/vol\\_1/no\\_1/bert.html](http://www.rtjournal.org/vol_1/no_1/bert.html) [Accessed 23.03.06]

Al-Ani, Yusuf. <http://www.weeklyweb.ahram.org.eg/> [Accessed 21 July 2007]

Amin, Dina 'Egyptian Playwright Alfred Faraj Analyses Decline of Arab Theatre' *Al-Jadid*, 8(Winter 2002). <http://leb.net/aljadid/theatre/> [Accessed 21 July 2007]

Arts Network Japan. (2006) <http://tif.anj.or.jp/en/program/slayman.html> [Accessed 27 September 2007]

Metz, <http://leweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/r?frd/cstdy> [Accessed 23.03.07 at 2.40 pm]

Sulayman Al-bassam, Culture Wars (2003) <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-01/albassam.html> [Accessed 27 September 2007]

Sulayman Al-bassam, <http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsA/al-bassam-sulayman.html> [Accessed 27 September 2007]



Youssef Rakha, 'Stages of Development', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 441, 5-11 August 1999, <http://www.weeklyweb@ahram.org.eg/> [Accessed 21 July 2007]