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The Limits and Dimensions of Digital Theatre in the Arab World: The Algerian Theatre as a Model

Dr. Shadi Abdel-Rashid²

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Abstract:

The digital world which imposed itself, as a fixed reality we will live sooner or later in the Arab world, and which threw its shadow on all aspects of life according to the transformations of the age that make all the arts, including theater, go along with the culture of the media age. Many Arab researchers and theater people realized this importance; especially for how much digital theater swept the worlds of traditional theater, breaking the isolation that these ones live in their creations and productions. With the emergence of the effect of digitization in various fields of life, including literary and intellectual, it became an urgent necessity for the Arab world to deal with this development with all its significance, on all levels including the literary field in all its arts, realizing the keys and mechanisms of digital work. This dynamic that pushes towards expanding the digital space — and based on the fact that theater, as a performing art, will not be spared from this movement. Starting from considering theater is that live direct meeting between bodies and souls; which achieves the physical dimension in the spirituality of the act that has connection with emotional communication. Naturally, its relationship with the digital scene will seem as a relationship far to be realized and possibly daring at the same time. And here: the interactive/digital theater stands before big challenges to establish its own aesthetics and direct the taste that follows it in the required way to accompany this

¹ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

² Mohamed Boudiaf University, Algeria, Email: chadirachid136@gmail.com

new transformation, which builds itself with technology and literature together. The central question imposed in front of the worlds of digitization and the Arab creative situation is: Will digital theater take away or cancel the humanity of the theater as it depends on live and direct communication; and on the bodies of the actors? Can the real world and its interaction be replaced by the virtual world? And will digitization, as thematic topics, affect the theatrical text, thus making the show lose its luster? And is the Arab society basically prepared to accept this kind of theater which forces itself as a reality and practice? Therefore, is the Arab creator able to engage and practice digital theater; willingly or obliged? These are questions imposed before some Western experiences that have worked on networked/digital theater and used it in activating and stimulating the aesthetics of the theatrical show, in thought, form, and content. Accordingly, my intervention titled: "The Limits of Digital Theater in the Arab World and Its Dimensions - Algerian Theater as a Model"

Keywords: Theater, art and literature, interactive theater, image and performance techniques, dramatic act, creative art, cultural heritage, civilization.

Introduction:

Theater is a form of arts, and it is the soul of the nation and the title of its development, for it is the mirror of the society and the nation and the essence of its beauty. As for history, it is the soul of the nation and the pulse of its existence and identity, and the civilizational and cultural heritage that the successors inherit from the predecessors, so it becomes for them the fixed value from which these successors — within the extension of their nation's heritage — build their present and their current and future existence based on establishing the bond between the past and the present.

Therefore, the problematic that we will address in this study of this topic is as follows:

How has been the extent and the specificity of the historical material employed in the world and Arab theater first, then in Algerian theater secondly? And what is its effect on Algerian writers?

And to answer this problematic, many sub-questions arise, among them: How did both the West and the Arabs deal with their theatrical heritage? And did art have a share in both literature and script? And how did the theater people deal with its artistic material? And how did they utilize it in their plays? As a method of thinking about the past, and this artistic tradition that distinguished the movement of authorship by recalling these characters and reviving the bright pages of the nation's history and glorifying its loyal heroes, it did not depart from this tradition.

Chapter One: The History of Algerian Theater and Its Issues

First Section: The Artistic Framework for Algerian Theater and Its History

The relationship between art and theater is ancient and as old as the human himself, considering that man is the maker of history and art is an expression of that activity and its image, so both of them draw their material from the aspects of his different activities. It is the nerve which both this art (theater) and that science (history) revolve around, from it they start and to it they return, accompanying its journey, recording its history, and writing down its heritage.

In the same way as history remained a rich source for various arts and literary forms, art itself too became a source of knowledge for historians and archaeologists, who in many researches depended on what peoples left behind of drawings and remains. Did not many literary texts turn into historical documents, because they recorded many changes that affected a certain society in a specific historical period? Did we not often witness to many events and

situations with what was mentioned in pre-Islamic and Islamic poetry? Did not many critics and researchers repeat the saying: "Poetry is the register of the Arabs and the gatherer of their news," and other examples that clarify the relationship between art and history in Arab culture?

Owing to that deep relationship, history, whether real or mythical, remained the first source for dramatic writing to Greek theater writers, and this tradition continued with Roman theater writers. Because the well-known histories are in reality known only to a small group of people, nevertheless all viewers enjoy them (Aristotle, 1973, p. 28).

So, when those pioneers began, they did not find a theatrical legacy to lean on, nor examples to follow. Abd al-Qader al-Qat said: "Arab writers at first derived their topics from history when their early connection with this new form of literary composition started, for there was no one among them for the absence of the theatrical environment... so it was natural to resort to history, borrowing from its events and personalities what spares him the total invention." (Al-Qat, n.d., p. 51).

And why should not the return to history be driven by artistic and aesthetic considerations, mainly the ease of artistic composition, considering that history gives the writer the general structure of the text, with events prepared and characters ready, and the solution may be known and widespread, making the task of construction and composition less difficult, since the difficulty of the text lies mainly in conceiving the topic and method of composition, and history is the source that helps overcome this by providing the writer with raw material which he takes and reshapes and refashions so that it fits his intellectual vision and the cause he wants to express. Surely, this artistic factor is behind the tendency of many writers, in various literary genres, towards history and its events (since history provides the writer with much material which can be formed dramatically, and this material often appears in the characteristics of personalities and what was known about them historically... as the writer tries to reach a contemporary view, monitored through his linguistic composition by means of suggestion and analogy) (Abu Al-Rida, 1981, p. 43).

This justification (ease of composition) is repeated in many studies and on the tongues of more than one critic, and we are sure that the ease of composition (the artistic criterion) is behind the approach of a group of creators not only in theater, but in other literary genres as well. But we do not acknowledge it as the only explanation for the phenomenon. Why should not the motivation be the writer's feeling that this source can give his creative text (energies and expressive meanings without limit), for the givings of heritage have much holiness and veneration in the nation's soul, and the playwright, when employing heritage, is at the same time stirring the emotions of the nation, because heritage has a living and constant presence in their emotions (Ismail, n.d., p. 40).

The national and pan-Arab tendency was another factor that contributed to the return of a group of playwrights and novelists to history. The motivation for the first generation of playwrights was not to express social problems through historical disguise, but rather to revive the glories of the past and express the national and pan-Arab sentiment, as plainly declared by "Ali Ahmed Bakathir," one of the names who wrote poetic plays in an early stage—his texts go back to the first half of the thirties where he attributed his employment of history to this standard:

("Perhaps my interest in Arab nationalism had an effect on my passion for history and drawing upon it for many of my play topics") (Bakathir, n.d., p. 39), but he did not exclude the artistic standard or, as we called it, the ease of composition, as he admitted that history, artistically and suggestively, is more able to depict than the present.

We can read the return to history during that era as a manifestation of resistance and struggle, facing the colonial plans that sought to erase the nation's identity and melt its components, so the writers' recalling of its bright

pages and its well-known characters was a reaction against that policy and a feature indicating self-awareness, loyalty to the nation, and pride in it and in those of its loyal sons who defended it.

Publication of many plays whose content was derived from history coincided with a phase when the nation began to sense its past and present and aspire to the future. The spirit of reviving the glories of the past dominated the authors, thinkers, and men of reform.

Second Section: Harbingers and Landmarks: Algerian Theater

Since the feet of the colonizer stepped on the homeland's land, he has been tirelessly trying to erase its features and identity, replacing it with the history and civilization of France. He demolished mosques and turned some into churches; he prohibited teaching in Arabic, fought the Arab culture, and built an iron bridge over all Arab and Islamic activities.

The reformers realized those aims, so they worked to confront this colonial project that threatened the nation's structure. They established Arabic schools, built mosques, and started spreading education according to the association's policies and its principles based on the slogan, "Algeria is our homeland, Arabic is our language, and Islam is our religion."

Following this approach, a number of Algerian theater-makers resorted to drawing inspiration from history in what they presented from texts and dramatic performances on the stage, which added to their theatrical capital. Since history is a science that requires deep study, sharp thinking, and theatrical culture that enables the writer to know how to deal with history—what he should take, what he should leave, why he returns, and what is the relationship between theater and history?

Nevertheless, experiences appeared which utilized history according to their writers' culture and the outcome of their era's theatrical culture. Among the shared features in many dramatic texts that appeared before the liberation revolution or after—whether these were staged performances or texts written for reading—was their turn toward the depths and caves of history. The writers differed regarding the historical periods they took inspiration from for their works, as the authors of those works evoked many historical events and characters: some drew from ancient Algerian history, others dug into African history, while "Redha Houhou" was only interested in the Islamic period, from which he derived most of his historical plays (Mertaad, n.d., p. 89).

The leadership of this trend is attributed to the poet "Mohamed El Aid Al Khalifa," who in an early stage presented a poetic play (Bilal Ibn Rabah), which was his first adventure and last experience in dramatic literature. Through it, he highlighted the suffering of this great companion and his patience in the path of principle and faith (and its symbolic content is a call to resist the French enemy through patience and struggle along the path and footsteps of Islamic figures who faced the tyranny of the infidels and polytheists with patience, believing in the justice of their cause) (Lembarkia, n.d., p. 90).

"Mohamed Salah Ramadan" published two works: (Al-Nashi'a Al-Muhajira) and (Al-Khansa), the first recounted the incident of the Prophet's migration, and the second was based on the autobiography of this Arab poetess. Both are school plays composed for the association's schools to be performed in religious occasions (Lembarkia, n.d., p. 92).

Within the context of reviving the past glories and letting the youth see the shining pages of ancient history, came the play (Hannibal) by "Ahmed Toufik Al Madani," who revived the biography of this historic commander that won victories against Rome despite the difference in powers. "Ahmed Redha Houhou" issued a number of texts including (Anbessa) and (Ibn Al-Rashid), famous for (San'ee' Al Barmakah), and "El Bahy Fadlah" published the play

(Al-Jazira Al-Khadraa) or “Tariq Ibn Ziyad.” The scholar “Abdel Rahman El Djilali” contributed in this direction, issuing in 1948 the play (Al-Mawlid), his first attempt at playwriting, performed in the association’s schools and staged by the troupe “Mohyiddine Bach Tarzi” in 1951, and broadcast by Algerian radio at the same time.

Through these titles, we notice Algerian writers’ interest in Islamic history, and the scholars’ association authors were the fastest among intellectuals to emulate the righteous ancestors, as they evoked Islamic personalities and took them as guiding lights for reform purposes. (“Religious ideas played an active and prominent role in spreading awareness and saving Algerian society from the claws of colonial policy” (Lembarkia, n.d., p. 199)).

Chapter Two: The Nature of Algerian Theater and Its Artistic Contents

First Section: Algerian Theater between Reform and Renewal

Under the shadow of the Association of Scholars and its approach of reform, “Ahmed Toufik Al Madani” published the play “Hannibal”, his first experience which was considered the beginning of a new era in writing for theater and one of the honorable points in its history. It was the first theatrical text known to the printing press before the stage and to reading before acting, and he made good use of the biography of this African hero. When it was published in a book, Dr. “Abdallah Al Rakebi” mentions that it received much popularity among readers, attributing this to the content of the text itself (Manour, n.d., p. 17).

Shortly after its publication, the (Arab Drama Amateurs) troupe turned it into a dramatic performance presented on the stage of Algiers city theater and it achieved great success. “Hannibal” was the first Algerian presentation in writing, acting, and directing. Due to the great success and interest this play received, theater managers were motivated to re-stage it many times.

“Hannibal” is the first text in the history of Algerian theater that turned toward ancient African history and revived the glorification and sanctification of nationalism and struggle, as the conflict was intense in its era between Rome and Carthage (Lembarkia, n.d., p. 94). Its events revolve around “Hannibal” the Carthaginian leader, who was attacked by his enemies—they continued their war against his country, he was unable to resist and was defeated before their huge army in the battle of “Jama”, near the city of Al-Kaf in Tunisia, and he was subjected to harsh conditions he did not accept and insisted on achieving victory, taking the war against Rome as a principle for his life, so he emigrated to Syria and joined the Greeks in their war (Ahmed, 1985, p. 157).

“Madaoui” confirmed through it that trend initiated by “Ahmed Redha Houhou” and “Toufik Madani” in adopting ancient history and the use of Arabic as a tool for dialogue. This is what enabled those texts to be published and achieve fame among readers and to be presented as dramatic shows understood in most parts of the country and in other Arab countries, unlike previous experiences by Algerian theater pioneers such as “Allalou”, “Rachid Al Qasantini”, “Mohyiddine Bach Tarzi”, and “Mohamed Touari” (Massaif, n.d., p. 189), who used the local dialect in their performances, so they were more connected to the show than to documentation and recording.

A remarkable feature in the relationship of some texts with society is their lack of directness in treating and presenting topics. The plays that derived their material from the reality of contemporary life and its problems were few, as treatment continued through paths of history, its masks, and symbols that took the role of objective equivalents for issues of the present, since the aim of recalling history was not to treat it artistically or academically, but to use it as an artistic tool or mask to present contemporary problems on the social and political levels in an artistic and indirect manner.

Therefore, these works do not trace its events (not in a chronological way nor do they look at its details, particulars, and margins, but they take from it according to what sheds light on the presented artistic vision and according to what interprets events and characters and helps understand them) (Massaif, n.d., p. 188).

"Abderrahmane Madaoui" did not deviate from this artistic tradition that characterized the authorship movement, as he wore traditional costumes in this text, hid behind the curtains of history, and sought to surpass the historical event to remain connected to the concerns of the revolution (the present) and its issues (Ahmed, 1985, p. 157).

Second Section: The Symbolism of Algerian Dramatic Texts and Their Significations

Since the symbol—no matter its source (history, myth, or religion)—contributes to enriching the text, intensifying its significance and deepening its meaning, moving it away from directness and superficiality that may turn it into a resonant ideological statement, the writer thus enriched the text with secondary characters, significant incidents, and suggestive situations. These allow the reader to interpret an event or situation in more than one way, to look at one character from different angles. Among these significant situations, we point out that "Madaoui" was among the first writers who presented a bright picture of women in the history of Algerian Arabic-language theater, showing her in an unfamiliar manner in the creative writing trajectory.

Where (the conspiracies and backbiting among leaders, party chiefs, and the men who were planning for revolution and resistance to repel and defeat the enemy increased) (Lembarkia, n.d., p. 26).

The imagined woman is a symbol for Africa, which Jugurtha stabbed when he accepted to lay down arms and doubted its ability to resist, surrendering to the enemy (Massaif, n.d., p. 189).

And his wife Zubayda's suicide in the final scene of the play, came because Jugurtha doubted her loyalty to Africa. If he had continued to trust her, she would not have committed suicide; on the other hand, if he had not lost trust in himself and in Africa's ability to resist, he would not have signed the document putting it under Roman power (Massaif, n.d., p. 185).

As a symbol of resistance's continuity, the writer made Jugurtha's capture coincide with the passage of a small boy on stage—this boy is "Takfarinas," the Berber leader (Madaoui, n.d., p. 47).

No star fades for her in the east except another rises for her in the west... soon, the weak will inherit the earth, and then, O Sila, woe to the colonizers, woe to the tyrants, woe to the hypocrites and traitors (Massaif, n.d., p. 189).

One of the bright points in the text is the author's close approach to human nature in drawing the dramatic character, especially its hero. Despite Jugurtha's well-known courage, cleverness, strength, endurance, and intelligence, this did not prevent him from making mistakes or hesitating and being weak, such as falling into Bomilcar's trap and going to his father-in-law, which weakened his self-confidence. Where (Yokes) king of Mauretania decides to kill his daughter and hand over Jugurtha to Rome, all these situations do not deviate from human nature—Jugurtha, despite his qualities, remains, after all, a human, subject to error and weakness like all people. (Thus this hero falls not under the blows of Roman swords and strength, but under betrayal and conspiracies of his own people; it was the painful stab he never expected, pushing him into a world of slavery and humiliation he fought against with all his power and courage) (Madaoui, n.d., p. 34).

This is another historical mask about errors made by some leaders of the revolution, known for their competence and loyalty but who deviated with good intentions.

The author presented a model image of defeat tied to its objective causes, such as betrayal and deception, and kept the door of hope open, where victory is depicted as connected to loyalty and faithfulness (Al-Qat, n.d., p. 51), and he puts the hero as a courageous man defending his homeland, who wins then is defeated when he falls into the trap of treachery.

Through this multiplicity of dimensions—between past and present, general and particular, symbol and what is symbolized—permitted by the historical background, the author reaches a contemporary vision, by suggesting parallels between these circumstances and those in any other environment, understanding the present through what happened in the past and evaluating what happens now by comparing it to the past.

Based on this, recalling history in this type of creative writing is not meant for itself and is not an end in itself; it rather becomes like a bridge through which the writer crosses to the other shore to look over contemporary issues. So history in these texts “is not history and nothing more, it is the present through the past and the past explained by present logic, that is why events and characters in this kind of drama gain symbolic meanings the recipient has no difficulty linking to reality and its facts” (Ahmed, 1985, p. 157).

The past in these plays is like a launching pad for treating present-day problems, as what happened before is related and influential on the present and the future, on the basis that the past is the legitimate father (if we may say) of the present, and man today with his knowledge and experiences is the fruit of ideas and experiences of man since creation.

Not every writer who resorted to history and brought its events can sense contemporary issues through the historical mask adopted, seeing the present through the past and explaining the past with the logic of the present; this vision was missing in many plays whose authors failed to breathe the spirit of the era into those characters or events.

Giving a historical incident a contemporary dimension requires the author to go beyond literal handling of the event, taking only what sheds light on the intellectual vision of the play, and as much as some texts draw close to history (Manour, n.d., p. 45), we attribute that to their educational and cultural aim.

Conclusion:

From what has been discussed in this research, it was possible to reach a set of results that can be summarized as follows:

1- Since the play, in reality, comes out from a specific period and sometimes takes from those events and characters as a starting point—because the situation is one even if it differs in time—Algeria has suffered in the past and the present, which confirms that the aim is the same even if the forms and types differ and multiply.

2- It is noticed in many texts, especially those presented by “Al Madani” and “Houhou,” the absence of a contemporary intellectual vision for the event or character recalled from the depths of Algerian theater, and the links between the event’s past and the writer’s present are missing. Some plays are emptied from any excitement or suggestion that the writer seeks, through that historical mask, to express by allusion and analogy some contemporary issues and problems, and the employment stopped at reviving the event without giving it a contemporary dimension or loading it with a new meaning different from what is known about it, so that distant past turns into present. This failure in utilization is, for many theater-makers, linked to the aim of returning to history, which stops at the educational and cultural goal, mainly history teaching, through reviving the glories of the past, being emotionally influenced by it, and glorifying its heroes. Accordingly, those writers could not go beyond the events of history and express, through it, topics and issues related to the present.

3- The way “Al Madani” and “Houhou” handled history, affirms that they were more faithful and respectful to history—they did not suffice with sticking to the general lines of the recalled incident or character but also held to its details and particulars. This made some texts very close to history, which we attributed to the educational and instructive goal.

4- The contemporary playwright no longer pays great attention to the course of history itself except as much as it enriches the text and illuminates its idea. He draws inspiration from it and employs it to reshape and reconstruct it, taking it as a mask to look out from onto some problems of the present. This return is also evidence that some of our artistic and aesthetic problems might find a solution when we reshape and reconstruct that heritage.

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Conflict of Interest

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