

ARTE Y SALUD

ARAB THEATRE AND PLAYS: DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES AND CHALLENGES

TEATRO Y OBRAS DE TEATRO ÁRABES: ETAPAS DE DESARROLLO Y DESAFÍOS

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ABSTRACT

Arab stage plays took their time in the development and making their place in the world throughout the ancient times. The article shines a light on the phases and struggles Arab theatre went through in making such majestic art and performances that are a source of entertainment for people from all over the world. Mainly the struggles were because of religious issues that initiated many other issues like the censorship and not having enough popularity in the Arab states that put up a limit to the theatre establishments forcing the artists to make journeys in order to seek their audience as many things did not sit well in the mindsets of the religious Arabs. However, later on, the theatre started stretching its roots in the hearts of the audience. Performances like Shadow Puppetry and Passion plays took over many viewers and became an important part of the Arab culture. One of the most important eras in the history of Arabic drama development was that of the Egyptian era, which holds a reputation to this time and tells a lot of religious and historic stories through its innovative art play. The article also highlights the great contribution of Ibn Danyal Al-Khuzai to the plays through his three phenomenal theatre scripts that were enacted upon by many diverse cultures and ethnicities, furthermore, the influence Western drama culture made in Arab states and its impact that came with series of events.

KEYWORDS

Arab, Ancient, Drama, Theatre, Art, Egypt, Medieval, Stage

RESUMEN

Las obras de teatro árabes se tomaron su tiempo para desarrollarse y hacerse un lugar en el mundo a lo largo de la antigüedad. El artículo arroja luz sobre las fases y las luchas por las que pasó el teatro árabe para crear obras de arte y representaciones tan majestuosas que son una fuente de entretenimiento para personas de todo el mundo. Principalmente las luchas se debieron a cuestiones religiosas que iniciaron muchas otras cuestiones como la censura y la falta de popularidad en los estados árabes que pusieron un límite a los establecimientos teatrales obligando a los artistas a realizar viajes para buscar su público como muchas cosas. no sienta bien en la mentalidad de los árabes religiosos. Sin embargo, más tarde, el teatro comenzó a echar raíces en el corazón de la audiencia. Espectáculos como las marionetas de sombras y las obras de la pasión conquistaron a muchos espectadores y se convirtieron en una parte importante de la cultura árabe. Una de las eras más importantes en la historia del desarrollo del drama árabe fue la era egipcia, que tiene una reputación en este momento y cuenta muchas historias religiosas e históricas a través de su obra de arte innovadora. El artículo también destaca la gran contribución de Ibn Danyal Al-Khuzai a las obras a través de sus tres fenomenales guiones teatrales que fueron representados por muchas culturas y etnias diversas, además, la influencia que la cultura dramática occidental tuvo en los estados árabes y su impacto que vino con serie de eventos.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Árabe, Antiguo, Drama, Teatro, Arte, Egipto, Medieval, Escenario

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, plays have helped to understand and portray many ancient and present-day stories, as the centuries pass the theatrical art has aided in understanding many regimes, wars, and stories through its communicative language which is accessible to diverse humanity that passes and comes (Badawi, 1988). Theatrical art has been an important communicative language adopted by many civilizations including the Euphrates land in Iraq, the Pharaonic in the Nile Valley in Egypt, the Greeks in Greece, and the Romans. As the generations change, history is ignored and forgotten which is why the ancient Arab's theatrical art plays a significant part in capturing history and the eye of the audience.

In the 21st century's first decade, stage shows were forbidden due to the Arab world's conservative rules and regulations (Alhajri, 2019). However, when introduced, it initiated controversies and many other complications in the Persian Gulf. Along with the controversial mindset, some of the factors that created hurdles in developing the theatrical world were the different backgrounds, languages, and dialects of the audiences. Another factor that contributed to the complications was the rich middle eastern culture that came from every Gulf state's ancient times (Alhajri, 2019).

Despite the hurdles at the initial stages of arts and drama, different stages of plays thrived, as well as modified throughout Islamic history. The theatrical plays were often based on religious, seasonal, and occasional festivities; like weddings and celebrations of birth. The general plays developed a poetic and powerful nature of language which was communicated to the audience by the use of theatrical art (Cvitovich, 2015).

Aims

The aim was to shine a light on the phases and struggles Arab theatre went through in making such majestic art and performances that are a source of entertainment for people from all over the world.

Stages of theatrical art in ancient Arab

The very first stage of plays was introduced by an Iraqi eye doctor named Ibn Daniyal, called "**the Shadow Puppetry**". It is a form of tell-

ing stories using puppets made in the shadow figures created by a light source (Milwright, 2018). This was the earliest technique of art introduced in the 10th century, which was already familiar in Cairo, Egypt. "Khayal Al-Zil", the term given to this creative phenomenon of storytelling means "Shadows of fancy", which circles the beautiful nature of the play and its eye-catching nature of performance, they made the puppets dance, fly and sing as the puppet master pulled the strings behind the curtains and enlightened the audience through shadow play (Khalid, 2018).

The stories that were told through shadow puppets were interlinked to ideas and teachings of Islam and were ideally performed during the period of Ramadhan. Later on, another form of art was introduced in the domain of theatrical performances which was **Passion plays**, known as **Tazieh** a passionate form of art and drama that tells the story of religious figures. It was portrayed by the Shia community to elaborate the tragedy of Hussain the martyr and his family (Weber & Sturgess, 2021).

The play culture grew its roots in every state with time, the growth in the Arabic literature and the consideration of key factors to putting on a good performance helped reach the message of the plays performed, clear and loud to its audience. The plays consisted of three-pointers, language, impersonation, and the audience (Teeny, 2017). Language is the fundamental factor when it comes to communication, thus, in order to touch the hearts of the audience, the performances were put forth in the Arabic literature which was spoken and understood by almost all of the middle-eastern community.

Impersonation captures the attention of the audience for which the shadow puppetry was not enough to convey the depth of a historical event and awaken the feelings in the hearts of people therefore, the performances later modernized into the plays performed by humans playing the parts themselves, which contributed to another key factor of attracting the audience and capturing their attention (Albakry, 2014).

HISTORY OF DRAMA

In the late 18th century, theatre performances started taking birth in ancient Egypt and Greek, those theatre performances were naturally ri-

tualistic and religious. During the French revolution in 1869, the first performance of a play took place in order to celebrate the initiative of the Suez Canal. The theatrical shows started modernizing and gained a reputation for their creative and artistic stage shows during the British occupation rule, this reputation preceded and attracted many artists to migrate to Egypt seeking social and aesthetic freedom (Rahman, 2015). The theatrical growth reached many countries of Arab like the states of Lebanon and Syria where theatre was born between 1847 and 1871. Maroun an-Naqqash familiarized it in Lebanon. Later, it was stationary for 20 years to be born yet again in Damascus. Subsequently, the conclusion of World War I led the Arab playhouse in the phase, where it hit the deepest features and attained innovative features. In Syria, it started spreading from Damascus and Homs to the major cities such as Hama and Aleppo. It started to enter the Arab countries as well thanks to the Egyptian groups that explored these nations (Badawi, 2009).

Egyptian Theatre Era and Pharaonic Drama

The theatrical performances then replaced many other historical forms of arts in Egypt; classical texts were alternated by these performances, renowned scripts like Youssef Idris, Tawfik Al-Hakim, etc., made their ravishing appearances on the stage and put on the most heart capturing and original historical shows. Another center of attention in Egyptian entertainment shows was the vast Pharaonic art and monumental scripts that portrayed the Pharaonic identity. After all the successful plays and performances, another branch of theatrical performance set on its course, which was the Comic theatre (Zohdi, 2016).

Comical theatres soon captured the spotlight away from political, dramatic, and poetic shows as the viewers anchored towards comedic performances. The audience of Egypt habituated so much to these screenplays that they started attending on a regular basis, specifically the comical shows of Mohammed Sobhi and Adel Imam. However, these days of laughter did not last long, when in the 1970s, President Anwar Sadat introduced new policies of the economy the attention diverted from the theatrical shows and reverted towards the economic crises yet they did manage to make a comeback in the revolution of 2011 (Aravanis, 2020).

The Egyptian entertainment departments still aim to enhance the influence of arts and beauty and the unheard and unspoken voices through their efforts to establish a dynamic theatre experience that not only serves the purpose of entertainment but also plays a part in educating the generations of history over the centuries and attracting art lovers and art critics as an ultimate hub for festive celebrations (Salem, 2020).

The theatrical performances portrayed by the Egyptian performers and other Gulf state artists, face three phases of distinctive growth; interpretation, variations, and their innovative plays. The need for interpretation arose in the 19th century when audiences from different cultures and languages started attending these plays.

The phase of translation helped in understanding the vast Arabic literature to those who did not speak or understand the language, this factor evolved the language. The deterioration of foreign power and the appearance of political liberation reinvigorated inspiration, though much beneath European effect, possess some unique works to its acknowledgment. 20th-century Arabic playwrights, were Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, a delicate evolver of both public and representative dramas, and Maḥmūd Taymūr, an author and entertainment writer who collide within Egypt's societal difficulties (Salem, 2020).

ARAB ISLAMIC PLAYS AND THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Ahmed Bin Sadiq, a Moroccan writer, published a book against theatre and art where he criticized and opposed the initiative of these stage shows. His book came with a series of reforms and heavy opposition towards theatre drama specifically pointing out the women based on religious laws and imposed his opinions about how artistic performances will lead women in an inappropriate direction, he also stated that acting contains evil and would lead people towards a wrong path that leads to the European culture as he believed that the acting culture arrived from European states. In addition, the critics also raised fingers on the factor of creating images which is against Islamic rules and does not sit well in the Islamic concepts, with that several diverse opinions took birth and started the argument on the matter (McJanet, 2009).

The Salafi campaigners then played their important part in this debate by educating the generation into consciousness and inspiring the theatre activities with the help of the launch of an Arabic drama called “Staging of al-Haddad’s Salah El-Din Al-Ayoubi” in 1927 followed by the foundation of the first Modern Arabic School and made the artistic plays and theatrical performances the main course of the curriculum. Their three-act comedy worked in aspects of vitalizing the culture of Islam in the colonial situation. In the colonial time period, the initial blossoming of modernized Arabic drama theatre became a weapon and a means of raising their voice to broadcast their message against colonialism and their struggles that further gained the support of the Islamic community. The liberation after colonialism came with Arab countries undertaking their freedom and fronting post-independence catastrophes, such as injustice of social reforms, inequity of class, ignorance, and poverty (Meskell,2002).

Inclusively, Arab theatre then moved in another phase and found itself in front of the charge of reintroducing and defending a sovereign civilization. It subsidized variations throughout the Arab revolts demanding socialism. Finally, the conquest of June 1967 approached. The theatre survived this segment up until the mid-1980s, where it concluded in a despairing and swift decline. However, survival from severe criticism and, political and social setbacks enabled theatrical performances to earn a free pass and allowed them to progress and grow by satisfying the religious scholars and their opposition (Mikhail,1984).

MEDIEVAL ARABIC SHADOW PLAY

Despite the wide territory of Arab states in the world, only Egypt managed to continue the tradition of shadow puppets/play without any interruptions and served in the further development of these performances (See figure 1). Mohammed Ibn Danyal Yusul al-Khuzai contributed to shadow puppetry art by writing three shadow plays one of which is “Tayf al-Khayal or the “The Phantom”, well known in the medieval ages, tells a charade of a soldier named Amir Wisal and his way back to self-recovery and spiritual healing with failed matchmaking. His scripts are now scattered in different libraries in several parts of the world. His first manuscript is a library in Derenbourg, while the second one is in Istanbul and the third one is in Cairo in an Egyptian National Library. The fourth man-

uscript written by Ibn Danyal was also discovered in Cairo in the Azhar library (Boaz,1991).



Figura 1. Hadow Puppetry

His technique of art was the only tradition that followed scriptwriting in medieval Arab, it was more like a scriptural reservoir. Ibn Danyal’s very first play made a huge impact in the theatrical art considering the point that these scriptural resources were used into the dramatized framework of a play indicates a much later courting of the conclusion of the text and postures the question of art replicating life in Ibn Danyal’s fictional productivity. He still holds the reputation for being the sharpest and amusing Arabic literature poet known yet and what gives his scripts the importance is the fact that these are the only samples in the existence of Arab’s theatric poetry in the medieval ages (Buturovi,2003).

His work is mostly composed in the manner of Qasidahs (rhymed Arabic classics), which are enriched with trickeries making it difficult to understand for an average artist. His deep Arabic literature and scribes of manuscript often initiate many misconceptions and puzzling queries to orientalist as well. Ibn Daniyal’s era was the territory of the shadow theatre, however, it appears to have become the debris of humanity, appeals from the inferior strolls of life or the underworld, as he undoubtedly says in the preliminary interpretations to his first play(Kamaldeen,2012).

As for the concluding remorse, we can catch in all three plays, this must be linked to the total visualization of the Fool literature, to which these theatres validly belong, a dream that, while rejoicing the desires and the experiences of the skin with all their rawness, sensual and else, ‘the ferocity and the sludge of the human traces, is never entirely insensible for elongated

of the fact that the celebrations can never be anything other than an ethical break and that all breaks must reach to a conclusion which is explained in the scripts of Ibn Daniyal (Almu-jalli,2020).

Apart from these theatrical passion and shadow plays, the Arabs have known many other performing artistic traditions like their folk dances also referred to as the oriental dance, Middle-Eastern dance, and the traditional folk dances in the Arab world, between the best-known of the Arab traditional dances, are the belly dance, the "Dabke" the "Ardah". The art of dance raised many complications to which women were allowed to perform the dance shows in private, however, as in the harem (Hamilton,2004). Iran is conceivably the only Muslim state with a ritual of dance considered as an art custom, such occasions, dance performances, and theatrical pieces functioned their share sideways with fireworks, parades, music, imitation contests, and festival performances in one enormous, extravagant parade (Grabar,1974).

WESTERN CRITICS ON ARAB THEATRE

The very first Western critic, Jacob M. Landou, dedicated his energy and time to writing a book that only served the purpose of criticizing the Arabic theatrical art and plays. He pointed out by commenting on the religious and moral values of the Arabic drama culture, he believed that Arabs did not have developed theatres and established platforms for this kind of art shows, he further went on and blamed the restrictions on women in the theatre for not being established enough. According to Jacob, the blending of these reasons could justify the point that when a great part of the Greek traditional inheritance in the countless fields of science, literature, and ideas, none of the classical drama content set its course towards Arabic versions until (Landau, 2017). Landou blamed Arabic plays for not putting in enough effort and that lack of effort was offensive to other artists around the world (Sa'dallāh and Roger,1984).

His two explained parts of the changing aspects of his point of view, he stated that the Arabs came into communication with the Greek theatre through Christian Syrian versions, although they established an uncertain hostility concerning the genre. Then the same Arabs collided with the Turkish people, the Persians, and the Indians, who had advanced their act-

ing ethnicities before their encounter with the Western theatre(Landau, 2017). Another fact that bothered him for some reason was if women by the conclusion of the nineteenth century were prohibited to perform on the platform, then this lack obstructs the theatrical activity. Greek theatres were utterly dominated by the male society and women were banned to act on the stage until 1660, (the period of Renovation drama and the renewing of theatres in England).

Therefore, the nonappearance of women in the action of acting has never proven itself as an impediment to the theatrical activity. The criticism did not stop after Jacob's pointers, in fact, it arose a series of criticism towards the Arabic art culture and shows. The certain fact of the Greek theatre's reputation was intensely renounced by the ancient Muslims, majorly due to its classic polytheism concepts(Landau, 2017). The festivity of simulacra and encounter in the Greek theatre art created an actual threat to the recently recognized imperative of the omnipotence of God-believing concept of the Arab-Islamic arrangement, also to the common and administrative orders.

A scholar named Mohammad Aziza, of Arabic drama, made an argument about how Greek drama delivers conflicts. The first conflict starts up an issue on human liberty in contradiction of divine will. Another conflict is represented by the illogical struggle of a distinct individual against an entire social directive. The last conflict revolves around human nature and destiny. The scholar further sums up by stating how it was not possible for the Arab Islamic culture to flourish into theatre art (Hart,2010). Muslim Arabs could not have acknowledged drama for the unpretentious reason that none of these types of arguments occurred in their belief or thought. His struggles to answer the questions that were puzzling that why did the Arabs not possess a drama of their own was unfair by the Eurocentric discourse that darkens modifications (Carter,2010).

The complication Aziza was facing to validate was the nonexistence of the tragic form in the conservative inheritance. Similarly, as an alternative to examining operative theatricality and performances in the religious culture, Aziza tried justifying why the Arabs were unable to create a drama comparable to Greek tragedy (Privitera & Pretagostini,1997). He unintentionally replicated the Western structure of distinc-

tiveness regarding eclipse and absence of the factors. Hence, his evaluation itself concealed the absent narrative of Arabic entertainment in the almost similar manner that such description was deprived of and bottled up by Western scholarship.

Regardless of the spread of ideas that contradicted the presentation of drama and shows in the religious aspect, numerous bases remained unrecognized in the Arab domain of entertainment and celebrations. Anyhow, dramatic fiction was cornered as one of the minimum advanced forms of legendary appearance in the Arabic heritage. In the middle of the encroaching concepts that developed in the mental concepts of the Arabs as the result of the influence of foreign orientalist's propaganda and the overstated orthodoxy of Muslim theologians is that Islam prohibited the rehearsal of graphic arts entirely (Wiles,2007).

Arabs made attempts to seek out reasons for these alleged traditional unsatisfactory results, many of which are hypothetical and could not be further dealt with. The probability of that theatre not developing further more than its embryonic stages grew with these critical evaluations because of the disapproval upon the theatre by the religious and foreign commentators, and the displeasure shown by the critics of literature. This also became a setback to Ibn Danyal's work and prevented it from developing furthermore as the genre for which he worked reached its limitations precisely (Khali-fah,2007).

The scriptural comedies that arrived after his work seem to be either simple mockeries, or irregular sarcasm basically putting their emphasis on the fraud, brutality, and pride of the rich and the vulnerability of the unfortunate, naive and defenseless laborer. These summarized unrehearsed scripts provided a slight opportunity for a story or charisma development.

However, such performances did not vanish with the growth of European-eastern plays contradicting, and particularly in the states of Egypt, they remained as a common entertainment up until the twentieth century, even though the disregard seen for them by several sophisticated Arabs.

WESTERN INFLUENCE ON ARABIC PLAYS

The progress of Arab theatric dramas was influenced by Western culture as the theatres developed and gained their reputation. Arabs were encouraged to adopt western theatre traditions through foreign colonization and tourism from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon without comprehending, at least in the roughest early stages, their entitlement of diverse perspectives, their reduction of poetical, and their precise associations to the Westerners. Arabs were not happy with this influence, 'The impact of the West', as John Maier acknowledges, as a problematic burden all Arabic script authors who try to inscribe in narrative arrangements developed by the West (Al-Abdulla,1993).

Theatrical literature, however, impacted heavily on the Moroccan and Arabic intellectual content in concern with Western literary forms. The weight of such encouragement is touched through the Arab's assumption of representative forms that do not adequate the cultural constructions. The loaning practice was justified in terms of unlike 'aspects of modernism'(Albakry,2014).. Though the dialect relationship or argumentative economy did not play in favor of this modernization despite the foreigners' desire to adopt Arab culture and its distinctiveness Paul Bowles, composes about the dilemma of self-extinction faced by some Moroccan scholars as they believed that the culture of the west and their people were alien to them and were ravaging upon the hard work of Arabic civilization in manipulating the Arabs to replicate themselves as Westerners while they would claim the Arabic aesthetic and its diverse artistic nature of the theatre(Albakry,2014).

From 1847 to the 1960s, the drama and theatre in Arab were still under the influence of different non-Arabic cultures in aspects of European theatre-making and playwriting. The translation and nature of Shakespeare and Moliere scripts/poetry writing in its initial stages mostly came from the Middle East as it was far ahead in adapting Western theatre through Arabization. These native adoptions of an alien link endeavored to imitate an internal self, in the progression of pirating the overseas classical, the character of lives and the perspective of descriptions changed. This time was considered by an instinctive alliance with the help of different assets of self-eradication (Khalid,2018).

The Western text befits as a way in organizing and transforming theatrical script in the Arab domain. The first modern Arabic drama with European nature was introduced in Beirut by Marun al-Naqqash's *al-Bakshi* which got no scholarly attention in the modern Arabic theatre till now. It was entitled *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq* which is the Arabic name for "A pleasure journey to the pain of lovers in the city of Tiryaaq" (Albakry, 2014).

The play was comprised of Abraham Daninos and Algerian Jew who could speak and understand Arabic. Philip Sadgrove and Shmuel Moreh's revolutionary collection of these dramas assisted 19th Century Arabic Theatre. Syrian and Algerian plays put forth amplified versions of Daninos's theatrical compositions prior al-Naqqash's shows. Daninos's drama is deliberated as the first modern Arabic piece to have been transcribed with an alternative to the Other's medium. It is a 'European hybrid', for its hypotheses that involve two diverse cultures (Khalid, 2018).

This play, then, can be assumed an invention of the third space, the crossbred space of the collection. Its stretched dialogues in the section are repeatedly unrecognized extracts from *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (The Thousand and One Nights) and ('the revelation of secrets') by Izz Al-Din B. Abd al-Salam. The drama possesses a confined field of orientation besides its introduction to an alien medium. Daninos' play has a prologue, a list of atmospheres, and stage guidelines. Its prologue comprehends a summary of the entire drama. This might have been read by the name known as ('The Praiser of God') (Khalid, 2018).

This dramatic practice, which is representative of the Arabic shadow play tradition, demonstrates by Daninos's documented rehearsal. Present Arabic drama is an introduction from the Western territories, this drama was straight and intentionally hired in about the middle of the nineteenth century in Beirut by a Lebanese novelist, Marun al-Naqqash, and by an Egyptian in Cairo, named Yaqub Sannu, two eras later. Keeping in view of the plays Daninos's scripted, it is strong evidence about the early stages of Arab assumption of the Western model. However, understanding the regression of these dramatic stage shows would eventually problematize Marun al-Naqqash's experiment as a breakthrough of early development in the Arab regions, as these developments characterize a

moment of disagreement in contradiction to a moment of withdrawal for exaggerated tradition (Al-Abdulla, 1993). It has played as separation among a history of ethnic accomplishment of occasions. The level of artificiality fluctuates from one drama to a different one through the approach of spoiling from the inside yet the base stays always unfamiliar (Al-Abdulla, 1993).

Arabic theatre nowadays is interpreted within its limited platform, through dividing lines between different travelers and tourists. The theatre cannot otherwise remain in existence, due to its vast mixed pursuits in order to enhance as a fusion between Eastern and Western art culture. It is a combination of Western dramatic traditions and indigenous Arabic enacted traditions. The cross-environment of alike theatres is presented through the magnificent work of transposition of the play with the title, "Important Paradigms of Arabic Performativity" (Al-Abdulla, 1993).

Hence, this condition after the colonization of Arabic plays today is considered by many as a prevailing feature. This combination of two diverse cultures is not basically just a blend of two pure instants, but the persistent development of transformation that gives the opportunity to reintroduce and reconstruct dissimilar varieties of characters out of prior models. This is the factor that creates the theatrical variance (Khalid, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Arab world has made a lot of progress in theatrical art and performances exploring the scenography and surviving through all their stages of development and criticism. The art makes interval gaining the Western historical and theatrical knowledge in dramatic developments and artistic accomplishments. In general, the complication resides to this time due to insufficient educational knowledge on the environment of theatres. The complications that appeared in the ancient Arab are no more in existence, however, other economic and educational factors impact the growth of plays. Procedures of education in the performative arts in specific need to be looked over, and the stage needs to be transformed into an essential part of the schooling system. Certain methods engaged by the Institute are also in requirement of expansion as the program was recognized in 1973 yet no substantial innovation has been conducted in the organizational

or educational field. This makes it obvious that Arabian theatres need improvements and a lot more attention.

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