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Contents

RONALD BLANKENBORG – <i>Rhythm for Situational Contexts: The Case of Ancient Greek Epic Performance</i>	5
MARCO DURANTI – <i>Iphigenia Taurica and the Narrative Artificiality of Euripides’ Prologues</i>	33
NIKOS MANOUSAKIS – <i>The Extant Rhesus and Its Two Supplementary Prologues: A Question of Affinity</i>	55
VASILIKI KELLA – <i>Plauti “somnia narratur”: Dreams in Plautus’ Comedy</i>	79
DOMINIQUE GOY-BLANQUET – <i>“Noble in body and judicious in mind like Homer”: Enacting Richard II</i>	99
DAVID SCHALKWYK – <i>Macbeth’s Language</i>	115
MARIN E. LAUFENBERG – <i>Laughing Bodies, Bodies in Pain: How Humour Approaches Torture in Two Works by Eduardo Rovner</i>	129
KATHERINE FORD – <i>Interrogating Cuban Womanhood in Norge Espinosa Mendoza’s La virgencita de bronce</i>	145
 Special Section	
GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>The Seven at War from Thebes to Aleppo. On Two Performances at the Greek Theatre of Siracusa</i>	163
ERIC NICHOLSON – <i>“La terra in palcoscenico”: Playing the Common Grounds of Aeschylus and Shakespeare</i>	175
RAPHAEL CORMACK – <i>Arab Arts Focus – Edinburgh: Review</i>	187

RAPHAEL CORMACK*

Arab Arts Focus – Edinburgh: Review

Abstract

In 2017, the Edinburgh Festival featured for the first time an Arab Arts Focus, which included ten separate performance pieces from across the Arab world. Soon, the critical responses began to focus more on the visa issues that the performers and crew had been having than on the performances themselves. However, for Arab artists at the moment (especially those performing in Europe), the work that they create is not detached from these issues of movement but, in fact, they resonate frequently through the pieces performed in this focus. Looking at six of the plays performed at the Festival, this article examines how artists engage with the idea of movement: from the refugee experience of the Palestinians and Syrians, to Youness Atbane's use of movement to interrogate the figure of the 'Arab artist' and Hanane Hajj Ali's fifty-year old protagonist jogging through Beirut.

KEYWORDS: Arab; Theatre; Edinburgh; Movement; Refugee; Migration; Levantine

2017 was the 70th anniversary of the Edinburgh Festival. After all this time there was still space for innovations and this year's expansive programme also featured the "first showcase of Arab arts at the festival": the Arab Arts Focus (Ellis-Petersen 2017; Burgess 2017). A selection committee of twelve cultural curators and 'operators' from around the world chose ten shows written by and featuring Arab artists and performers to show at the Festival. The programme aimed to offer "different and non-reductive discourses on the Arab World" and "[change] stereotypes about the Arab region; opening the door for mutual understanding at a time it is needed the most" (Arab Arts Focus 2017). The Artistic Director, Ahmed El Attar,¹ added to this, saying that "it's really no secret that the Arabs are being stigmatised all over the world right now. There is one-sided discourse about the Arab world all over the news; the bombings, the terrorism . . . It's very important that we can allow audiences across the world to hear these different voices in order for us to start this different dialogue" (Burgess 2017).

After the Festival started, however, the story became less about cultural dialogue than about the obstacles that had been raised against it, particularly by the British Home Office. Around a quarter of the performers had their visa applications rejected as did four of the production team of ten; one had their visa cut short by a week. An article appeared in the *Guardian* around half way through the

¹ I have followed existing transliterations of Arabic names where they exist, which leads to a little inconsistency but maintains the personal preferences of people discussed. Hence e.g. Ahmed El Attar but Mudar Alhaggi.

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festival reporting on the showcase and how it had been “beset by visa difficulties” (Ellis-Petersen 2017). One of the shows, a production of Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous’ classic 1969 play *The Elephant, Your Majesty* was cancelled totally. Other shows had to make considerable changes and overall the costs ran to at least £5,497. The Festival Coordinator, Sara Shaarawi, was quoted in the *Guardian* saying “I don’t think people realize how difficult it is for Arab performers to present their work here” (ibid.). An article in the *MailOnline* later appeared, also reporting on the visa difficulties, but mistakenly reporting that the whole showcase had been cancelled (Tingle 2017).

Arab artists and theatre practitioners are frequently forced to confront these kinds of restrictions to their travel and the imbalances of power which create them. It is not surprising, then, that so many of the productions in this Arab Arts Focus were concerned with movement, in its multitude of meanings. This article will look at a selection of the pieces that the Arab Art Focus brought to the Edinburgh Festival and show the approaches they took to this concept, which became such a central theme not only of the works themselves but of their experience of putting on their work in Edinburgh.

Palestine: Refugees, Prisoners and Walls

Modern Palestinian national identity has come to be defined, in large part, by movement of different kinds. The first, and foundational, way that twentieth-century Palestinian identity has been affected by movement is the experience of forced displacement and the refugeehood. This theme reappears in a large amount of Palestinian writing. Edward Said, who wrote frequently and famously about Palestine and the Palestinian diaspora, summed it up, saying that “Palestinians . . . know that their own sense of national identity has been nourished in the exile milieu” (2001: 178; see also Sa’di 2002; Schultz and Hammer 2003). The Nakba (‘catastrophe’) of 1948, understandably, hangs heavily over so much Palestinian cultural production and was most clear in Edinburgh in Amer Hlehel’s production of *Taha*, a play that he starred in and wrote based on the life of the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali. It was first performed in Arabic in Haifa and has also been performed in Ramallah and Amman (Quḍāh 2016). It was then translated into English by Amir Nizar Nuabi and, a few weeks before the Edinburgh performance, it had been part of the Shubbak Festival in London (Taylor 2017).

Much of the action, as are many of his poems, is dominated by the bombing raid on Taha Muhammad Ali’s village of Saffuriyeh and his family’s subsequent flight to Lebanon in exile, their secret return across the border and move to Nazareth. Taha, a teenager in 1948, is portrayed as a rather hapless victim of events. Despite what his father and other villagers are telling him, he does not believe they will be forced to leave their home so he spends his last money buying two lambs from the market to sell at Eid. His father is proved right and Taha’s shame is immense. He loses the two lambs, symbols of his naivety and innocence (and much more), in the family’s flight to Lebanon.

The themes of exile and movement are expressed in more oblique ways too. The climax of the play sees Taha Muhammad Ali go to an Arabic poetry festival in Europe. Surrounded by the great Arabic poets of the time, of whom he is rather in awe, Ali shyly gets up to read some of his own work. He slowly makes his way from his seat to the podium but does not realize that a bag has wound its strap around his feet and he is dragging it across the floor. The audience's laughs increase as Taha moves further along the stage but he cannot tell why. Eventually, when he does realize the source of their mirth, he is too humiliated to give the introduction that he has prepared and so skips straight to his own poems (which it takes him a long time to find in his bag anyway). It is not hard to read this scene as a metaphor for the Palestinian condition. As they travel the world they always drag behind them the shame of 1948, obvious to everyone else. Wherever a Palestinian may go, this stays with them.

The other side of the Palestinian experience in the West Bank and Gaza (as opposed to the diaspora) is defined by a lack of movement. The most powerful symbol of that is the West Bank Wall (exactly what this wall should be called is the subject of much debate). Hassan Abdulrazzak's play *Love, Bombs and Apples* features one story that makes use of the heavy symbolism of the wall. The first of three monologues performed by British actor Asif Khan is in the character of a Palestinian man, talking to a well-meaning NGO worker at a party. They go for a drive and he manages to convince her to have sex with him against the wall, claiming it is a political statement but actually motivated more by lust (if lust and politics ought to be separated thus). The character's subversive use of this symbol of Palestinian disempowerment is the centre of the play's opening vignette.

The other Palestinian play featured at the Arab Art Focus was *And Here I Am*, which was brought in as a replacement for *The Elephant, Your Majesty*. It is a one-man show based on the life of the main actor, Ahmed Tobasi, written by Hassan Abdulrazzak. Tobasi is a graduate of Juliano Mer-Khamis' Freedom Theatre in Jenin, whose life as an 'armed resistance fighter' followed by his time in prison and then his embrace of theatre is acted out on stage as he bounds excitedly from one corner to the other, tossing various props around. As Tobasi's story ends, he tells about how he was invited to a theatre festival in Belgium but ran off to Norway where he can seek asylum. In the final scenes, we see posters of Tobasi's dead friends lined up along the back of the stage and he himself is in Europe. The internal conflict between leaving Palestine to live safely in Europe and abandoning your friends who have died alongside you is, therefore, embodied on the stage. Again, the idea of movement and travel is foregrounded frequently in this play.

Given that all of these themes are so frequent and strong in Palestinian cultural production, it is no surprise to see the two Palestinian plays (and Hassan Abdulrazzak's play, *Love, Bombs and Apples* with a Palestinian story in it) dealt with issues of movement so prominently.² However, it was not only the Palestinian plays which engaged (or were forced to engage) with this idea in creative ways.

² There was a children's play called *Jihan's Smile* that also came from Palestine but it only played for half of the festival and I was not able to see it.

Your Love is Fire: Syrian Exile

Since *The Elephant, Your Majesty* was cancelled, *Your Love is Fire* [*Ḥubbak Nār*], written by Mudar Alhaggi and directed by Rafat Alzakout, was the only Syrian play to feature in the Arab Arts Focus. The title comes from a famous 1959 song by the Egyptian star Abd al-Halim Hafiz; in part, this title and its overtones of love and violence reflect the plot, in which a conscript in the Syrian army, Khaldoun, comes home on leave to his lover in Damascus, Rand. Rand's friend, Hala, is also there and is trying to convince them to leave for Berlin. The action eventually descends into arguments about fidelity, the dangers of staying in the country and the possibility of escape. However, the title of the play and the use of the song at the beginning of the show also have an ironic edge. This is a piece about the collapse of the old order represented by the songs of Hafiz and the nostalgia is tinged with violence. The lyrics replicate this contradictory pull of desire and pain: "Your love is a fire I don't want to extinguish or leave for a minute . . . you have worn me out with the sweetest torture" (Ḥafiz 1959).

Of all the plays in the focus, this was probably the most seriously affected by visa rejections.³ Two of the four actors in the production were refused visas and, therefore, they were forced to continue with half the cast. In one case, Mu'ayyad Rumiyya, the absence actually could be said to have contributed a new angle to a point of thematic interest in the play itself. The character that he was supposed to play was "the writer". As has been quite common in Arabic plays since the 1960s, the playwright is a character in this play who intervenes in the action itself.⁴ He is supposed to be guiding that action as he himself traces his own journey from Syria through exile in Beirut and then to Germany. However, in the action, the writer's detachment and his inability to engage with what is happening in his hometown of Damascus becomes a genuine block to the action. Several times the actors stop and sit still for a while as they demand the writer to give them something to do.

The Edinburgh production attempted to solve the problem of this actor's absence by projecting a recording of his lines over the speaker system. In many of the parts when he is supposed to communicate directly with the cast, the production introduced a mobile phone, through which they could interact with his recorded voice. Although it might take away from the impact of having the writer on stage, this solution only makes the detachment in the play more obvious and separation of the writer from the action. In a play about the mental difficulties of exile, the writer's ghostly presence seems fitting and the solution to their visa problems added something to the play.

The second absence, Amal Umran who plays Khaldoun's lover Rand, was a more significant loss, dramatically speaking. The apartment that Khaldoun appears at is supposed to be inhabited by Rand and Hala alone. So, Rand's absence from the stage is extremely noticeable. As we have with the part of the writer, we can attempt to read thematic interpretations into this palpable loss to the onstage dy-

³ The other particularly affected performance was a *Dance Double Bill* with performers from Egypt and Palestine who were denied visas.

⁴ Perhaps the most famous example of this trope is Yusuf Idris' 1964 play *al-Farāfir* but it also appears in many other places such as the Tunisian 'Izz al-Dīn al-Madani's *Dīwān al-Zanj*.

namic. For instance, we might note that a large part of the discussions between the two lovers, Khaldoun and Rand, is about leaving or not being present: Rand complains that Khaldoun is away all the time with the army, Hala tries to convince them to leave Syria and go to Europe, Khaldoun begins to learn of another man who has been visiting the apartment when he is away but who never appears on stage. To witness these arguments on stage through a disembodied voice reinforces the split in this relationship, the time they spend apart and their difficulties communicating directly.

However, unlike the writer and his mobile phone, this loss of this actor is not so easy to incorporate into the script and forces the audience to do a lot more work themselves, to become their own director and to assemble the action themselves. This was clearest in the final scene set in the apartment in Damascus. The two actors on stage sit down in silence and the audio of a fight between Khaldoun (who is present) and Rand (who is not) is played through the speakers. The characters argue and the fight ends with a gunshot. In the version with all the actors it is clear that Khaldoun has killed himself but in the Edinburgh version the audience is left in doubt about where the bullet have gone: into Khaldoun or his lover.

Some reviewers found this a difficult experience but ultimately rewarding. One said that the Edinburgh version of the play “loses something in dramaturgical clarity [but,] as a result of this, it gains political potency and emotional heft” (Kulvichit 2017). The inability of the actors to travel reinforced a central tension in the play, which was so focused on the difficulties of travel (both logistical and emotional) and how they affect a Syrian’s picture of the war.

Youness Atbane: *Second Copy: 2045* and ‘The Art Dynamic’

Second Copy: 2045 is a show that deals with movement in a very different way to the Syrian or Palestinian shows but it is still deeply involved with the concept. Youness Atbane is a Moroccan visual artist and choreographer who “lives and works between Casablanca and Berlin” (Atbane 2015). This performance is a re-enactment of a fictional documentary made in 2045 that documents that Moroccan art scene of the early twentieth century. Atbane plays one of the artists who is interviewed by the film maker and presents his artworks, though at times this framework seems largely forgotten.

The show begins, as Atbane explains, with a performance that played over the final credits of the (imaginary) 2045 documentary. In it, Atbane’s body has been occupied by two competing forces, his early twentieth-century self and his 2045 self. He moves across the stage with difficulty; at times, his arms must drag his legs along with his torso and, at others, he lies sprawled on the floor being pulled in different directions. Immediately the audience is asked to think about movement and its relationship to the figure of ‘the artist’.

Throughout this performance, Atbane has said, he is “trying to talk about the role of artists in a society like ours and to define it” (2017). One crucial way he does this in the performance is by thinking about movement. He does not use it primarily to think about exile or refuge but to interrogate what an artist ought to be

– specifically an ‘Arab artist’. During one part of this performance, a group of ‘Arab artists’ are set alongside each other. To represent these artists, he uses plastic cups with heavy stones placed inside them; these stones, the audience is told, are the artists’ ‘identity’. Atbane does not offer us an interpretation of this image but, if we keep the idea of movement in our heads, there are several possibilities. ‘Identity’, something so central to people’s conceptions of the ‘Arab artist’, is a heavy weight in the transparent and thin frame of a plastic cup. Is he saying that identity keeps the artist grounded and strong or that a focus on identity impedes their movement? Is he saying both or neither? This is another instance of Atbane using ideas of movement as a way of visualising artistic production and thinking about the contradictions and restraints imposed on ‘Arab artists’.

Second Copy does not only focus on the individual artist but Atbane also comments playfully on the wider art world. Atbane begins one segment of his show by holding up a square white sheet, which, he tells the audience, is ‘art’. Then he produces an electric drill and feeds the white sheet into the head of the drill. As the sheet repeats its spirals in front of the audience, Atbane tells the audience that this is the contemporary Moroccan art ‘dynamic’, punning with the movement of the drill and the ‘dynamic’ of art.

The focus of *Second Copy* is not primarily on the trans-national movement of Arab art across borders but it does not ignore it either. Atbane’s satire of the construction of the ‘Arab artist’ cannot ignore the role of European interest and funding, especially given the context of the performance in Edinburgh as part of an Arab Art Focus in Europe. Along with the white sheet that stands in for ‘art’, the performance also features an EU flag (the picture that accompanies the section in the Arab Arts Focus programme also includes this flag). Atbane lays the EU flag on a sheet of Perspex, which becomes ‘the European platform’ for the Moroccan art dynamic. Then, wraps the drill and white sheet in an EU flag and this becomes a European research project. His touch is light and none of the images are used to make crude points but there are layers of satirical intent. We can never ignore the presence of Europe, both showcasing and limiting the movement of Atbane’s theatrically constructed ‘dynamic’.

Jogging around Beirut with Medea

One of the stand-out pieces of the whole Arab Arts Focus was Hanane Hajj Ali’s *Jogging*. It is a show, ostensibly, about the jogging routine of a Lebanese woman in her fifties in Beirut, written and performed by Hanane Hajj Ali. In it Ali plays a version of herself. All of the issues surrounding movement that have been discussed in this article and more are present under the surface of this one-woman show. Like so many of the other plays, *Jogging* had its own problems with the visa issues surrounding the showcase. The Syrian technician was absent for the first few performances (including the one I attended) but was eventually given permission to come to the UK. Ali began the performance by making an audience member read out a prepared statement in which she compared the British visa process with the censorship that she had experienced in Lebanon. She also apologized for the problems that arose from this missing technician.

The action of the play begins with Ali in a tight black jump suit and a hijab doing her stretches and exercises on stage. As she does it, she recites Arabic words beginning with Kh-: “. . . Kh r f (senility) – Kh r k (violated) – Kh r m (penetrated) – Kh r a (shit)” (Ali 2016: 8).⁵ While reciting these words, she contorts her body into various different positions in the course of her warm-up. Then she sets off on her run through Beirut, a modern day *flâneuse* letting her mind run. The first incident sets the tone for the rest of the play: as she contemplates the beauty of the bird song she is reminded of the Quranic verse saying that every bird song is a prayer (Quran 24: 14). Shortly after, the exalted tone of the narrative is cut when “a piece of pigeon shit fell into [her] eye” (Ali 2016: 11). She asks herself, playing with the religious sensibilities of her audience, “Could a creature praise God while shitting?”. In an interview, Ali has said that the play is “really all about questioning the so called ‘sacred trio’ of taboos: politics, religion and sex” (Ali 2017). She sets this tone from the very beginning of the play.

As the only one-woman show in the Focus, it is hard not to draw some inferences about the gendered nature of her movement through the city. Moving freely through the city has, since the time of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, been constructed as a male activity. Ali’s work comes at a time when female interactions with the city are being increasingly interrogated and the concept of the *flâneuse* is being investigated (see esp. Parsons 2000). Although Ali does not explicitly broach this concept at length it is always under the surface of the play and is frequently hinted at. Part of this hinting is her frequent references to her desires as a woman. As Ali jogs through Beirut, she plays out her sexual fantasies:

God when I remember what I dream about I die of shame! Sometimes I stand in the middle of the road and ask myself: could it be right? How could such dreams enter the head of an upstanding lady like yourself, who is faithful and virtuous, a lady that loves her husband so dearly. Then I curse myself. (Ali 2016: 12)

As a performer too, she also physically unleashes many of the sexual properties of her own body, stressing, rather than concealing, her femininity. She also relishes confronting the audience with the sexuality of a fifty-year-old woman wearing a *hijab*, the kind of woman who is supposed to keep that sexuality hidden. In an interview, she has said that “the play also illustrates how free a veiled character really could be on stage, whether that’s regarding her body, the things that she discusses, or her dreams” (Ali 2017). The play exploits the perception that a *hijab* represents enclosure and oppression and gives free rein to the central character’s desires as she jogs through the city. The play is built around her movement.

Before long it becomes clear that the figure of Medea looms large in this play. It begins as a passing reference. As an actress, Ali has always wanted to play the classical roles, she says: Phaedra, Andromeda, Cassandra, Antigone, Hercules, Oedipus. Then she mentions Medea, “I’ve been obsessed for a long time with Medea” (13). The rest of the play is built on this train of thought and on Medea, the archetypal exiled woman.

⁵ The script of the play was published in 2016 as *JOGGING: Theatre in Progress*. It contains Arabic, English and French. In this article, I quote from Hassan Abdulrazzak’s English translation.

At first she tells the story of Medea (citing Pasolini's *Medea* as her main model but adding that "If Euripides was alive during Pasolini's time, he would have killed him", 13-15). Then three stories about Medea, each more detailed and involved than the next, make up the action of the rest of the play. The first story is Ali's own and is only a few lines; she thinks that her obsession with Medea began when her own seven-year old son got cancer. "I loved him so much I wished he would die so he would not suffer" (15).

From her story, she begins to think of other Lebanese Medeas. She thinks about a woman whom she had heard about called Yvonne. Her husband worked in the Gulf, training horses for a Sheikh. One day, Yvonne had

prepared a fruit salad with honey and whipping cream doused with a significant quantity of rat poison. She gave the salad to the girls. They fell into a deep sleep. She made a tape for her husband. She ate from the same salad and slept beside her daughters. The neighbours later found the four bodies. (16)

Ali is fascinated by the case and speculates what might have been on the tape. Was her husband in the gulf a Jason, sleeping with other women? What could have driven her to do this? She does not give an answer.

The final case is the longest, that of Zahra. She grew up through the Lebanese resistance movements, first Leftist and then Islamist. Through it she has been in love with a man called Muhammad and borne him three children. However, he does turn out to be a Jason and leaves her for the love of another woman. She does not kill the children herself but begs God to make her a mother of martyrs and her wish is fulfilled. Two of her children die in the 2006 war with Israel and the third dies in Syria after he refuses to kill innocent civilians. They died for the state. The play ends with Ali running round and round in circles after she has finished out reading Zahra's son's last letter from Syria.

Ali called this play "theatre in progress" and this points to its complexity and openness to interpretation. The concept of movement, as we have looked at in the previous plays, can give us a way in. Here, though, it is a movement that is connected to being alone. The final scene of the play reinforces this. Ali, alone on stage, runs in circles for longer than is quite comfortable. We see her just after she has read out an extremely emotional letter to a mother from her last son. The mother is now alone and Ali is alone on stage, running. Her jogging has been about being alone in the city and her characters are alone because of movement. Medea left Colchis and, now that Jason has left her, she is alone in a foreign land. Yvonne was left by her husband's emigration to the Gulf. Being alone is not always negative. As she jogs and exercises, Ali shows the power that being alone can give you but, by portraying Medea, she also shows the other side of that power. As a play about leaving – leaving the company of others, leaving your home, etc. – this is also a play about moving.

Conclusion

Putting on an Arab Arts Focus always invites questions. One of the biggest of these is what makes these arts 'Arab'? Should we really group together Moroc-

cans with Syrians, Egyptians with Palestinians or is this just forcing people into a mould? The nature of ‘Arabness’ is not a debate that is likely to be solved soon. However, this showcase has revealed that there are certain themes that recur across art and theatre from the region, which mean they can be productively put together, at least.

If the Arab Arts Focus has showed anything, it is that there is one collective experience that almost all Arabs share: denial of visas. The refusals from the Home Office were not limited to a particular nationality but included Egyptians, Palestinians and Syrians. In other words, merely coming to this showcase in Edinburgh forced these Arab artists to confront their collective lack of freedom of movement across the world.

It is not a surprise, therefore, to see themes of movement repeated in so much of their work. In the case of the Palestinian and Syrian plays this was seen in the themes of exile, refugees and restrictions in movement. In Youness Atbane’s *Second Copy: 2045* the play drew more literal comparisons between movement and artistic expression. In Hanane Hajj Ali’s *Jogging*, movement was used in several ways to work through ideas of both freedom and abandonment and the intersections of movement and gender. In almost every case, this was a productive lens through which to view these plays.

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