

PERFORMING COMICALITY IN MOROCCAN THEATRE

The postcolonial condition of hybridity and the third space

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"Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them" (T. Eagleton)¹

"Some performances are comic, some achieve comicality, and some have comicality thrust upon them" (Khalid Amine)

The current critical emphasis on self-referentiality brings to the fore an important component in modern theatre practice, namely its engagement in privileging representation and simulacra. Baudrillard's critique of representation articulates such celebration as, "no more mirror and appearances of the real and its concept... In fact, since [the real] is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyper real, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyper space without atmosphere."² The celebration of theatricality and performativity has become dominant not only in the Western tradition, but in the Arab theatrical scene as well. Such phenomenon has become a generalized feature of the so called postmodern epoch of writing -as well as the postcolonial- since our Global Village now is not only a hyper space of 'mobile objects' but also one of 'reflexive subjects'; not only one of global hyper commodification but of opportunities for enhanced social intelligence and cooperation. The degree of the ability to reflect upon the social conditions of existence is linked to the process of globalization and of accelerated de-traditionalisation of modern societies including developing ones like Morocco.³ Hence, reflexivity becomes a characteristic feature of our age embedded in our cultural processes; and theater is, indeed, part of these cultural processes.⁴

When the subject matter of a given drama happens to have a theatrical property that discloses theatrical semiosis, then this performance is theatricalized in the process, effecting a self-reflexivity by referring the medium (theatrical representation) back to itself as subject matter. Here the mirror of representation is held inside out to reflect art upon itself rather than reflecting an empirical presence from without. Nothing seems to escape representation since representation itself is represented. Such theatre practice is inherently informed by a sharp comicality that sometimes subverts the apparatuses of mise en scène and reception.

Liminal space

Moroccan theatre tends to privilege this kind of self-reflexive performances, since it is a theatre that is construed within a liminal third space⁵ and is informed by an intentional esthetic hybridity that juxtaposes different heterogeneous elements belonging to opposed performing traditions. The effects of this hybridity are manifested in its ironic double consciousness (a consciousness that is informed by the Western tradition -particularly the French Comedy- at the very moment of attempting a sort of rupture), as well as its location between Self and Other, East and West, tradition and modernity, orality and literacy. These negotiations are also informed by the postcolonial Moroccan condition of hybridity, a condition that is, itself, situated across diaspora and diglossia. Such theatrical practice emerges at the cross-roads as a continuum of intersections and negotiations; the result of these is a complex palimpsest that highlights the powers of the hybrid and the impure rather than a logocentric quest for presence and purity. In other words, theatrical practice in Morocco is part of the dynamics of modernizing the country, and as such it is trapped within the old and new paradigms.

The comic is indeed one of the main venues to cope with such a predicament. It is both a *redemptive* comicality that tends to mystify social tension and conflict, and a *subversive* one that forces the spectator not only to laugh at that which is unhappy (the mirthless laugh in Samuel Beckett's terms) but also to prompt him to act (a comicality with a Lehrstück quality in Brechtian terms). The redemptive tendency is manifestly present in popular comedies that deploy conflictual situations in order to simulate contradictions by way of laughing at them (the productions of the national theater company exemplify such tendency). However, the subversive tendency highlights conflict in order to force the spectator to take a decision, and not only to laugh at his miserable conditions. Nabil Lahlou's *Ophelia is not Dead*, and Abdelkrim Berrchid's *Othello and Gun Powder* are examples out of many.

In order to rehabilitate an underground performance tradition, Moroccan theatre becomes more and more improvisational and self-reflexive, for such retrieval is still negotiated within the paradoxical parameters of appropriating and dis-appropriating the Western tradition though it strives to construct its proper difference. This theatre deploys a twofold strategy of retrieval. The first one focuses on retrieving pre-theatrical performance behavior as a means of rehabilitating an underground performance tradition that lurks in the deeply rooted ritualistic formulae, ceremonies, masquerades... The main objective behind such retrieval is part of the quest for a lost tradition as part of a dynamic that started with the call for an original/autochthonous Egyptian/Arabic theater by

Youssef Idriss, and later on disseminated all over the Arab World. In Morocco the movement started in the late 1960s with Tayeb Sadikki's *al-Majdoub* (a masterpiece with an exceptional aura of authority that is still regarded as a reference text, or even a telos).

As to the second strategy, the focus is on establishing a dialogue with the current theatrical scene in Morocco and elsewhere. Such dialogue amounts to an auto-reflection whereby the mirror of theatrical representation is no longer reflecting an outside presence, but is rather reflecting its proper body, a fragmented and over-hyphenated body that is as much contested as Moroccan identity today. Comicality happens to be a common ground that brings the two tendencies together, yet, with slight differences at the level of functionality and reception. The first tradition sometimes tends to absorb conflict through a compromising and yet redemptive comicality designated to mystify the general public's inherent anger, whereas the second tradition that is more fragmentary and self-reflexive highlights conflict through a subversive comicality that uses comic effects as means of dismantling the complacent passivity of the audience.

Retrieval of a Lost Tradition

Such comicality is in itself a hybrid product that is informed by the rich repertoire of Moroccan orality as well as the implementation of the French comedy by the colonial administration through a *Molièrization* of Moroccan popular Theatre. In 1950, the colonial administration decided to render theatrical activity in Morocco more docile (or rather a-political, for Moroccan theater during the colonial period was generally a theater of resistance) so as to produce a perfect copy of the Western master model. Two professional theater makers were called from France in order to orient Moroccan theater toward the direction designated for it by the colonial administration. Thus, André Voisin and Charles Nugue assisted by two Moroccans, Abdessamad Kenfaoui and Tahar Ouaziz supervised theatrical workshops in the Mamora Center (Rabat). As a result of such theatrical training, the first professional Moroccan theater company was created bringing together Tayeb Saddiki, Ahmed Tayeb Laalej, Fatima Regragi, Mohamed Afifi and others...

The *Mamora* theatrical circle was created in 1956, yet still under the influence of the French colonial policy of containment and assimilation. The aim of such Francophone policy was to absorb the nationalist subversive actions that were manifested in the early theater of resistance, and to establish, instead, a mystifying theatrical apparatus that would smooth conflict and resolve social

tension through the implementation of a Moroccan version of the French Comedy. Thus the Mamora was established as an official theatrical company. Upon the independence of Morocco in 1956, the *National Theater Mohammed the Fifth* was created in Rabat, along with the *Moroccan Theater Research Center* under government auspices. From 1956 until 1974, a period covering postcolonial administration, the Mamora group (under the supervision of the ministry of Youth and Sport with the playwright Driss Tadili as artistic director) performed a series of adaptations from the Western repertoire, mainly from Molière as a landmark of French theatre. Shakespeare occupied a secondary position. In brief, the Mamora theater company that occupied a hegemonic space within the Moroccan theatrical map since 1956 exemplifies the collaboration that was effected between the State and the Stage, for theatre was utilized as a means of indoctrinating people and depoliticizing them.

Transpositions

The transposition of indigenous performance genres such as *al-halqa*⁶ and *l-bsa:t* into the theater building as a Western esthetic/cultural space has become a dominant feature in Moroccan postcolonial theater since the late 1960s. This transposition is not simply a transfer of a performance behavior from Jema' el-Fna⁷ into modern Westernized theater spaces, rather it is a cultural, social, and esthetic negotiation between two different performance traditions/locations. The result of such negotiation is the production of a third theatrical space that is liminal and hybrid through and through. That is to say, Moroccan theater fuses classical, modern and postmodern épistemes; and in doing so, it becomes a hybrid theater in its form as well as its content.

Tayeb Saddiki's theater is an exemplary first instance of festive hybridity. After consuming numerous adaptations from the Western theater, he inaugurated a new approach to theater making in Morocco. The play entitled *diwan sidi abderrahman al-majdub*⁸ / *The Collection of Master Abderrahman al-majdub* (to be abbreviated as *al-majdub* hereafter) represents the emerging festive theatrical enterprise in postcolonial Morocco; it is spaced on the borderline between Western theater and Moroccan 'pre-theatrical forms'. For the first time in the brief history of Moroccan theater Saddiki transposed *al-halqa*, as an esthetic, cultural, and geographical space, into a theater building as the space of the Western Other (transplanted in Morocco as a subsidiary colonial institution). *Al-majdub* is a play conceived in an open public place. Its opening refers us to its hybridized formation through its persistent self reflexivity, as a device of

projecting the mirror to the performance itself almost in the same way as the Comedia dell'arte. The play's structure is circular rather than linear. It is situated in *jema' el-fna* as an open site of orature and a space of hybridity itself. The first scenes of the *al-majdub* production attract our attention to the making of *al-halqa* and its circular architecture. On-stage actors transcribe the circular form of *al-halqa* through a series of comic acrobatic games and mimetic body language. They play audience to each other as the narrator (the story teller) gives space to his little *halqa*. The *halqa* of *al-majdub* represents the Moroccan popular poet like a Shakespearean fool, giving voice to wisdom in a corrupt social order. The effects of such an absurd situation are comic, yet redemptive leading to a collective catharsis.

Saddiki's *Al-fi:l was sarawi:l / The Elephant and the Trousers*⁹ is also a play that is conceived within the parameters of the 'Peoples' Theater', which is a moving theater in search of its audiences. In fact, Saddiki's appeal to the 'universal theater' at the outset of the play is part of the strategy of the writing-back-in of writing and the confirmation of Moroccan theater's differ(a)nce. In *Al-fi:l was-sarawi:l* Saddiki makes space for a new theatrical tradition in Morocco that retrieves *l'bsa:t*, as an old Moroccan performance behavior that incorporates much of the *halqa's* performative techniques, and transposes it not only into the present but also to the stage building. *Lbsa:t* is a performance event that is close to contemporary theater. It is based on a managed scenography, a stage, and most importantly it has archetypal characters, namely: *L-mssiyah*, *L-bouhou*, and *Neshat*. The origin of the spectacle of *l-bsa:t* is disputed between two traditional cities: Fes and Marrakech. Hassan Mniai writes: "*l-bsa:t* started in the era of king Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah (1757-1790) who used to see its spectacles and through them could observe the corruption of the state"¹⁰. The meaning of the word *l-bsa:t* is itself disputed. It means "a large plaid" or "carpet" and at the same time "entertainment" or "laughter". In the form of a social satire, *l-bsa:t* enacts a neurosis whose narrative symptoms are profoundly metaphorical. Its themes are politically sensitive and aim at touching the hierarchical power structure. Corruption and power abuse are major themes of *lbsa:t* that are ironically performed inside houses of *al-makhzen* (government). This very enactment constructs an "Other" in the very heart of the political establishment, as a fictitious self, made up of the confluence of the imaginary and the symbolic. It allows power holders to see their distorted images through the mirror of *lbsa:t's* representation which is fueled by comic aspects. It is in this sense that *lbsa:t* emerges as a melting of the conscious and the unconscious realms of Moroccan traditional society with all its hierarchical power structures.

Saddiki's negotiation of *l'bsa:t* is genuinely hybridized with other universal theatrical traditions. He invokes international theatrical traditions and figures bringing to the fore a universal theatrical genealogy wherein he incorporates his present practice of *l'bsa:t* that is based on dramatic action and epic narration:

"Offering our obedience
Offering our obedience to those who precede us
Offering our obedience to those who taught us
Hamadani's Maqamas, and the wise Majdoub
The ears attended to their melodious asset
Sophocles and Shakespeare
Gogole and Molière
From famous to renowned
They cleared up the pathway
we're following their footsteps
Partaking of their water
The brothers in charge of Peoples' Theater
The brothers in charge of *l'bsa:t* Theater".
(*Al-fi:l wa s-sarawi:l* : 9)

Here, Saddiki acknowledges the contributions of international figures who marked theatrical history; yet at the same time, he foregrounds *l'bsa:t's* tradition as a legitimate performance behavior that has been practiced by Moroccans since the seventeenth century. Of course, the hybrid formation of the play resists any claim of originality and authenticity even from the part of Saddiki himself, for the play is a hybrid fusion of Western theatrical methods and local techniques of *l-bsa:t*. The presence of archetypal comic characters such as *L-mssiyah* (who is very much similar to Arlecchino of the Commedia dell'arte) becomes a great source of entertainment, as they are transposed from popular culture to theatrical space. Such transhistoricality is fueled with sharp comicality. But, Saddiki's claim of originality, authenticity and the return to tradition sometimes runs the risk of falling into the trap of purity and essentialism.

Mise en abime

El-Meskini Sghir's *bu-jma' l-faru:j*¹¹ (Bu-Jma' the Rooster) is another play that makes use of the space of *al-halqa*. In this drama, we live with a group of *hlayqiya* (professional comic entertainers) in a square, or a medina gate, or any other imaginary place that is not specified by the writer. The whole *halqa* is

orchestrated by the famous *hlayqi*, *Imqadam bou-jma' l-faru:j*, who narrates along with the other *hlayqiya* the story of the multifaceted *Ghu:l* (an evil spirit that changes its form) and the story of the people of the village... the story of 'Azri *d-duwar*... the resisting hero ... The play's structure displays a quick development of the events in accordance with the rhythms of music and dancing that attract the audiences' attention to reflect upon different and differing contradictions that constitute the core of Bu-jma's story. El-Meskini makes use of a very simple story, yet within an intricate plot and a rather non-linear structure. It is the story of a village people who have been exploited, terrified, and robbed by a multi-faceted *Ghu:l*. Their major weaknesses are hypocrisy, fear and lack of team spirit. Yet, all these nuances are tuned in a comic way that ironically reflects the true vices of such a small community.

Bu-jma' l-faru:j is a play that is informed by a self-reflexive network that amounts to what is often termed as *mise en abîme*. Such mistrust of the very means of theatrical representation is manifested at the level of the play's structure, theme, and character delineation. It is also thematised through the deployment of a series of meta-theatrical devices such as: the play-within-a play, role-playing within the role, ceremony within the play, and literary and real life referents. The play's stage directions insist on playing different roles by the same actor. As a result, Bu-Jma' plays the role of the leader of the *halqa*, the main narrator of the story, and the policeman; Moulay Bi:h plays Zineb, one of the village people, a policeman, and the son of the buried; Al-hrash plays al-Ghu:l, the butcher, the respectful man, Abass, the judge, and the outsider; Mimoun plays 'azri Duwar (Ahmed Bou Shama), the disguised girl, the immigrant, and the tourist; as to Al-'aydi, he seems to play only one role, yet he is transformed and transposed to different settings as the story goes. All these devices draw attention to the mechanisms of playwrighting, acting, and directing in a self-reflexive, yet comic way. El-Meskini's play, then, insists on representing representation itself through foregrounding theatrical semiosis to the extent that the audience becomes implicated in the making of the representational act in a conscious way.

The play also manifests a subversion of conventional hierarchical structures in the theatrical mode of representation through the contrary effects of double distancing that is created between stage/auditorium, actor/character, illusion/reality, and dramatic/epic. Thus, the play as a whole strikes the receiver with a sharp self-referentiality that is informed by black humor. Throughout the text and the performance, fragmentary little dramas, clusters of images, and snatches of actions function as metaphors for a theatrical reality, access to which can only be granted subjectively. The most significant features of the play are its

subjection of theatrical representation to scrutiny: the use of theatrical space as an experimental body, and the disturbance of certain boundaries, namely those between artist and spectator, actor and character, spectator and performance, art object and artistic creation. The play becomes a festive event that demands a collective participation. Dramatic language in *Bu-jma' l-faru:j* is also permeated by a subtle obscenity and colloquial jargon of *Darb Sultan* (an over-populated poor neighborhood of Karyan Central at Casablanca). Such verbal wit constitutes a major comic element. However, the use of 'slang words' and 'jargon' is part of El-Meskini's strategy, to emancipate language and free it from everyday life's restrictions. This 'third language' (*'Arbadajiya*) that is constructed between the formal and informal variations, operates both as the most extreme notion of verbal abuse and also as the furthest reach of a desire to voice out an inner cultural violence against the language of the *halqa* performance. It is precisely because of this combination between abuse and desire that these words are irreplaceable, and any attempt at eliminating them from the text will not only restrict linguistic import but also emotions. Through the deployment of an in-between language, El-Meskini negotiates a new space for dramatic writing that strives to retrieve all that was used to be seen as inferior and low, exalting it into the realm of the sublime. It is another way of reconciling Moroccan public with theater practice, by means of rehabilitating popular comic performances.

Subversive desire

Zobeir Ben Bouchta's *Lalla J'mila*¹² is another play that deploys the folk heritage of the north of Morocco. It departs from a revealing preamble by the distinguished Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi that manifests the subversive desire of Moroccan women to reach beyond the inside-in inscribed upon them by the patriarchal mindset. Her Aunt's ingenious stories, and particularly that of '*the woman with wings*', represent moments of rapture wherein the male-dominated space is temporarily transgressed. Zobeir Ben Bouchta's play is all about this fleeting, yet subversive moments of flying over and beyond male domains and hegemony. The journey that the play chronicles reveals the stories of two sisters, Itto and Lalla J'mila, which they constantly trace/dramatise in the various pieces of experience, painfully recalled as they take stock of the suffocating situations in their present statuses as oppressed women. Their recollections are punctuated by extremely powerful moments of comic relief, a fact that incites black humor. Their narratives become a means of empowerment when other forms of power are denied or beyond reach, for stories are "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history". The play also

shows how struggles of national liberation and private battles of self-assertion are linked in a variety of ways.

Male presence is painfully incorporated in the two sisters' narratives. The character of Ould L'glassa is an exemplary first instance; he epitomizes a pathetic trauma in Itto's continuous movement in her mental journey across the terrain of her past, for he is "her brother, son of her father, who run away with her bird and cut her wings off". Bahadou, in his turn, is omnipresent in Lalla J'mila's narrative. He represents the authoritarian step-father who forced her to annihilate her femininity and adapt a phallogocentric identity as a runaway woman, so as to survive within the arena of men. Disguise becomes another source of comicality, as Lalla Jmila presents herself to the society as a man annihilating partially her womanhood. This narrativization of patriarchal violence and desire is not without its subversive comic moments, for it is permeated by black humor... And this is because Ben Bouchta has subordinated didactic simplicity to aesthetic complexity. Due to its strong effects at the level of reception, the play is mostly viewed as a tragi-comedy. In retrieving a lost or vanishing tradition, the above-mentioned theatrical experiments have succeeded in attracting a large number of audiences through the deployment of *al-halqa* techniques such as the criss-crossing of telling and showing, epic narrativity and dramatic representation, improvisation and memorised script¹³...

***Al-Murtajala* and the tremulous theatrical Body**

Improvised theatrical projects have chosen to temporarily revert the actual theatrical apparatus in Morocco, taking it sometimes to absurd extremes and refusing to compromise when it comes to the politics of reception. Mohamed El-kaghat remains the best representative of the subversive Moroccan *murtajala* (L'improvisation théâtrale/the improvised play). He is an academic, playwright, director, and actor who is well acquainted with the Western *Impromptu* and its comic yet ironic representation of theatre problematics since Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (1663), and *Critique de L'école des Femmes*, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search for an Author* (1921) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1929), Eugene Eunesco's *L'Impromptu d'Alma* (1956), or Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* (1982). El-Kaghat realized the intricate ability of such a theatrical genre to communicate the Moroccan tremulous performance body through self-reflexive comicality and performativity. In his prologue to *Murtajalat Fes*¹⁴ [*The Improvisation of Fes*, El-kaghat not only legitimatizes his practice of the *Impromptu*, but also our need for such a theater practice:

"Because our theatre suffers from all kinds of problems, I have adapted the *Impromptu* in order to expose them to the audience after I realized that discussing problems is not as effective as performing them on stage... Through Irony and Comicality and the exaggeration of comic situations I desire to create a dark comedy".¹⁵

Thus, the improvised play becomes a legitimate theater practice that is based on an unfinished dramatic script, full of holes which should be filled in the process of the performance event through the actors' improvisation. And this very fact enlarges the freedom of actors who contribute a great deal in the re-writing of the dramatic script every performance.

The *murtajala* is comic through and through, due to its hilarious witty dialogues, comic situations, and *dramatis personae*, formulating a sharp critique of theater practice within its social milieu. It is also considered a dark comedy as it foregrounds the old Moroccan saying "more sadness makes you laugh". In *The Improvisation of Fes*, for example, and through an ironic representation of the corrupt and ruthless judge *al-kadi Yazref*, El-kaghat reminds us of one of the most painful moments in Moroccan theater's brief history, namely the Fakih Ahmed Ben Saddik's *fatwa* against the practice of theater and acting at large:

"Ah... Ah... You don't know that acting is forbidden by divine law? Haven't you read the book of "Ikamatu dālili à la hurmati at-tamtili"? You don't know that the imitation of non-believers is forbidden..."¹⁶

Such statement sums up a whole mindset that still regards theater as an evil practice which should be eradicated from our deeply rooted Arabo-Islamic culture. El-kaghat's ironic reflection on the subject illustrates the true problems that hinder artistic expression in Morocco. Yet, in *murtajalat Chmisa Lalla*¹⁷, the general public's incessant search for trivialities and non-substantial laughter change all of a sudden into a state of deep sorrow. Lalla Chmisa, daughter of the sultan can no longer laugh or enjoy the beauty of life because of such sadness. So the sultan asks all actors and entertainers of the country to restore her smile and discover the causes behind her deep sorrow. The play critiques the reification of theater practice under government auspices (especially the highly disturbing amateur theater of the 1970s), and reveals the impotence of most of the selected juries in the National Festival of Amateur Theater. In *Lajnat al-hukàm al-hukamaa al-muhanàkin/ the Committee of wise and fat Jury* is supposed to be the savior of Lalla Chmisa. But what happens in the play is quite the opposite, they deepen her sadness. This fact illustrates their incompetence and inability to

appreciate substantial art. The representation of the committee's debates and suggestions reveal their theatrical illiteracy, a fact that creates ironic situations.

The Improvised of Casablanca (Arabic Version 2003/French Version 2005) by Masrah Adifa al-ukhra (The Other Bank Theatre Company) also stages the predicament of theatre practice in Morocco during the present period which is often called the period of change (with Mohamed El-Achàri as Minister of Culture since 1998). Through an intricate deployment of black humor, the play dismantles the hegemonic discursive structures that control theater practice in Morocco. Such predicament is manifestly related to the status of the Arts and Artists in a country that still regards Artistic expression as a luxury rather than being functional in the construction of cultural identity. The play's comicality invokes a bitter laugh, a laugh that laughs at the absurd situation wherein these trained young actors of the High Institute of Theatre (ISADAC) found themselves thrown into a social structure that in fact hinders art as a profession. More than that, through an ironic representation of the National Theater's previous director and his naïve understanding of the needs and demands of professionals, the play sharply critiques government policies regarding theater and calls for an urgent change. These young professionals have chosen the *improvised form* as a means to make a statement. Their message was underwritten within comic situations that are brought to absurd extremes invoking what I called before 'the bitter laugh'. Because their situation (and that of all other Moroccan artists in general) is so critical at all levels, they have chosen to laugh at it.

Implications

The transposition of traditional performance behavior to a theater building spells out a state of indecision. Such indecision is part of the predicament of the Moroccan postcolonial subject, a subject who found himself construed on the borderlines of different narratives: The Western and the Local. Postcolonial theater has boldly come to terms with the hybrid condition of the Moroccan subject who cannot exist otherwise due to the traumatic wounds that were inflicted upon him by the colonial enterprise. The transfer of *al-halqa* to the stage constitutes a positive oscillation between opposites insofar as it bridges the gap of bipolar opposites by marrying them. Saddiki's or El-Meskini's theatremethods exemplify this marriage between East and West, past and present, traditional and modern. In a related context, Edward Said openly discredits all kinds of essentialism that surrounds discourses of national cultures: "Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more foreign

elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude".¹⁸ And since culture is inherently hybrid, adaptive, and changing, performance itself is receptive to foreign elements. Tayeb Saddiki is perhaps the first Moroccan to be "suddenly transformed into a proponent of a Moroccan/Arabic theater that would benefit from the potentialities of Western theater, on the one hand, and construct its own form through an appeal to patrimony be it history or a theatrical form, on the other hand." Moroccan theater today is construed within a liminal space, on the borderlines between different tropes. It cannot exist otherwise, for it juxtaposes different heterogeneous entities only to emerge as a hybrid drama that is spaced between East and West. It is a fusion of Western theatrical traditions and the local Arabic performance traditions. The hybrid nature of Moroccan theater is manifested in the very transposition of the *halqa* (as an important paradigm of Moroccan performativity) from *jema-elfna* to modern theater buildings like The National Theater Mohammed the Fifth, a theater similar to Western theater buildings. Thus, the postcolonial condition of Moroccan theater today is characterized by hybridity as a dominant feature. Hybridity is not simply a fusion of two pure moments, but the persistent emergence of liminal third spaces that transform, renew, and recreate different kinds of writing out of previous models. And this what constitutes our theatrical difference.

Notes

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 8-9.
- 2 Jean Baudrillard, "The Procession of Simulacra", *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Paul Foss and Paul Patton (Trans.), Brian Wallis (ed.), New York: New York Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. 254.
- 3 For more details on 'Reflexivity Theory', see Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, London: Polity Press, 1994.
- 4 In this context, Richard Hornby writes in *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*: "Metadrama can be defined as drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, a drama itself. There are many ways in which this can occur[...]"
 - 1- *The play within the play,*
 - 2- *The ceremony within the play.*
 - 3- *Role playing within the play.*
 - 4- *Literary and real-life reference.*
 - 5- *Self-reference.*" (London & Toronto: Associated University Press, 1986, pp. 31-32).
- 5 By way of recovering a 'native voice', Homi Bhabha produces for scrutiny a discursive situation making for recurrent instances of transgression performed by the previously colonized Other from within and against colonial discourse. So the 'third space',

according to Bhabha, "which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensures that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." (Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory", in *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p.37.

- ⁶ *Al-halqa* is a public gathering in the form of a circle around a person or a number of persons (*hlayqi/hlayqia*) in a public space (be it a marketplace, a medina gate, or a newly devised downtown square). It is a space of popular culture that is open to all the people from different walks of life. *Al-halqa* hovers between high culture and low mass culture, sacred and profane, literacy and orality... Its repertoire combines fantastic, mythical, and historical narratives from *Thousand and One Nights* and *Sirat bani hilal*, as well as stories from the holy Quran and the Sunna of the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) along with local witty narrative and performative forms. The medium of the *halqa* also varies from storytelling to acrobatic acting and dancing.
- ⁷ *Jema' el-Fna* is one of the famous sites of popular culture in Morocco. It is a huge and open square in Marrakech wherein story telling and other performance behavior, which belongs to Moroccan popular culture, are practiced as licensed and free oral expression. In brief, the square is a site of popular Orality and ritualistic formulae.
- ⁸ Tayeb Saddiki, *Sidi Abderrahman Al-majdoub* (unpublished script, no date).
- ⁹ Tayeb Saddiki, *Al-fi:l wa-ssara:wi:l*, Kenitra: Editions Boukili, 1997.
- ¹⁰ Hassan El-Mniai, *Al-masrah al-maghrebi mina a-ttaassisi ila sinaat al-furan* (Moroccan Theater from Construction to the Making of Spectacle) Fes: Faculty of Letters, Dhar el-mehraz Publications, 1994, p. 7.
- ¹¹ El-Meskini *Sghir's bu:jma' l-faru:j* (Bu-Jma' the Rooster), Casablanca: The Center of Third Theater Publications, 2000.
- ¹² Zobeir Ben Bouchta, *Lalla Jmila*, Tanger: Ibn Khaldoun Publications, 2004.
- ¹³ For more details on the Moroccan *halqa*, see Khalid Amine, "Crossing Borders: *Al-halqa* Performance in Morocco from the Open Space to the Theatre Building", TDR (The Drama Review. The Journal of Performance Studies), Summer 2001, T170, pp. 55-69.
- ¹⁴ Mohamed El-kaghat, *al-murtajala al-jadida & murtajalt Fes* (The New Improvised Play & The Improvised of Fes) (Unfinished Theatrical Projects), Casablanca: Sabou Publications, 1991.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹⁶ Mohamed El-kaghat, *murtajalat Fes*, pp. 83-84.
- ¹⁷ Mohamed El-kaghat, *Chmisa Lalla* (unpublished script).
- ¹⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p. 15.

PERFORMING SIYAH BAZI / PLAYING THE BLACK Satire and Social Relief in Historical Iran

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There has been an increase of attention in Iranian society towards indigenous folk art and an increase in the number of theatre students and scholars in recent years. Both developments have also led to a growth in the number of *Siyah Bazi*' performances, the emergence of dramatic texts for the black-face shows based on contemporary social issues, and an accompanying scholarly research.

This article will introduce and explore the specific comicality of this very popular type of traditional Iranian performance *Siyah Bazi* - *Siyah* meaning 'black' and *bazi* meaning 'play'. The name *Siyah* applies to the main character, which has blackened his face because supposedly he is a black servant. After a general introduction to the genre, we will explore first the theatrical characteristics of the main figure *Siyah* and the themes of the performances. After that we will trace the discussion about the historical roots of the *Shiyah* plays and offer an outline of the history of the performances, from the Middle Ages up to the 21st century.

Siyah Bazi is a comic performance with a remarkable evolution process. Its fundamental principle is improvisation. It uses dance and singing for flavoring the show; thence, the actors especially *Siyah* should enjoy proper vocal abilities for chanting. The play starts and ends with a dance. A happy ending and a suitable, moral message are essential parts of the performance. Though there is no director to direct the play, there is an elder who has been a member of the troupe since its formation. He answers the players' questions and guides them, yet he avoids to define a philosophy for the performance or fix a direction or form for it. At this point, the reader has certainly perceived obvious similarities between *Siyah Bazi* and the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* and will continue to discover more, as the article expands.

Comical strategies

Siyah Bazi is deeply influenced by an Oriental fictional narrative-model, which is based on flight: escape from one tale to another.¹ The story is framed and cyclic like *Thousand and One Nights*, with sub-plots interwoven together, defining and