

Mari R. Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage: Performance, Politics and Resistance in Iraq*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2019, 249 pp., ISBN: 9781788318693.

In Kurdish studies, theatre has not exactly received the attention it deserves. Earlier discussions on the role of Kurdish culture in the development of nationalism, and on Kurdish – and other – cultural nationalism more generally, have tended to focus on poetry, and to assume that theatre has been a marginal factor in this process. Moreover, they generally focus on the contents of these works at the expense of questions concerning their performance, their intended audience, and so on. Thus, there has long been a disproportionate attention for the few chapters in the *dîbaçe* or preamble of Ehmedê Xani's *Mem û Zîn* that overtly discuss the author's innovative or heretic use of vernacular Kurdish for writing learned *mathnawî* poetry, and the plight of the Kurds under Ottoman and Persian rule.

Conversely, in drama studies, even works that deal with the Arab world have hardly if at all addressed the specific experience of Kurdish drama production in countries like Syria and Iraq. In recent decades, Arab theatre has increasingly, and deservedly, drawn the attention of drama scholars (witness, for example, Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson's masterly 2011 study, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia*); but the concomitant increase in interest in performance traditions among non-Arab ethnic groups in Northern Africa, like the Berbers in particular, has hardly been matched by an increased interest for Kurdish theatre in the Eastern Arab world.

For these reasons alone, the appearance of Mari Rostami's *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage: Performance, Politics, and Resistance in Iraq* is greatly to be welcomed. Rostami's study marks a major step forward in our knowledge of Kurdish theatre and its importance for the articulation and public assertion of Kurdish (national) aspirations. Her book is a revised version of a PhD dissertation defended at the University of Exeter in 2016, for which the current reviewer acted as an external examiner. Although she focuses on the cultural rather than the political expressions of Kurdish nationalism, Rostami argues that ultimately, "there was no divide between cultural and political nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan—this was a reflection of the fact that the ultimate aim of theatre artists was an independent and free Kurdistan" (p. 217). Especially during the 1975–1991 period, she concludes, the performance of Kurdish theatre plays definitely contributed to the collective mobilization of resistance to the Baathist regime.

The book does not pretend to be a general historical overview of Kurdish theatre. It deals almost exclusively with Iraq, focusing on plays and performances

in the Sorani dialect in the years between the establishment of a British mandate in 1919 to the emergence of de facto Kurdish self-rule in 1991. Thus, early efforts like Evdirrehîm Rehmî Hekarî's 1919 *Memê Alan* in Kurmancî – a play clearly indebted to Namık Kemal's *Vatan yahut Silistre* (1872) as much as to any French or Italian model – are discussed only in passing (pp. 7–8); and Kurdish drama production in the Soviet Union and its successor states is not mentioned at all.

Plainly, much more work deserves to be done in these directions, the more so as it is very well possible that there are substantial points of comparison, if not direct influences, between Kurdish drama produced in the Soviet Union and in Baathist Iraq, given the decades-long political and cultural ties, and given the strong structural similarities, between both one-party states.

After an introductory chapter on traditional performance forms in Kurdistan (including an all-too brief discussion of the recently revived *dengbêj* tradition in Bakur), Rostami zooms in on the development of modern theatrical performance during the British mandate period and in monarchical Iraq. The main protagonist of this period is Pîremerd (Tawfîq Mahmud Hamza, 1867–1950), who pioneered the popularization not only of poetry, but also of theatrical performances, in Sorani. Although initially performed in front of the more affluent local notables, this Sorani theatre soon developed into an art form that could also appeal to, or was in fact intended to reach, the poorer and often illiterate masses. In 1935, Pîremerd staged his theatrical version of *Mem û Zîn*, in a deliberate attempt to get a Kurdish public interested in theatre based on their own stories and traditions. Thus, theatre soon proved an effective instrument not just for producing Kurdish nationalism, but also for addressing women's rights and promoting working-class consciousness.

Despite the importance of Pîremerd's and others' efforts, it was only after 1970 that Kurdish theatre started to flourish, in the newly declared autonomous Kurdistan region in Baathist Iraq – suggesting that here as elsewhere, the development of local theatrical traditions requires particular political preconditions. The two final chapters present a detailed discussion of the two most important authors and directors of Kurdish theatre of this period, Talat Saman and Ahmad Salar. The former, Rostami argues, primarily expressed socialist and modernist ideals in his plays and stagings, whereas the latter tried to develop a purely Kurdish nationalist theatre in the face of increasing Baathist violence. Thus, Saman's theatrical adaptation of *Mem û Zîn*, written in 1968 but first staged only in 1976, shortly after the collapse of the Kurdish insurgency, reflects a critique of feudalism and tribalism in Kurdish society as much as an assertion of Kurdish aspirations. Even more remarkable was Salar's 1987

staging of *Nalî w xewnêkî erxewanî* ('Nalî and a Violet Dream'), which depicts a mythical 'Kurdish Golden Age' under the autonomous Baban principality. Following Moroccan theorist Abdelkarim Berrechid's call for a 'ceremonial theatre' (*al-masrah al-ihitfali*), which searches for specifically Moroccan drama forms, Salar aimed at creating a form of theatre based on Kurdish traditions, characters, and instruments rather than Western models. Although not overtly addressing Baathist repression, Salar's plays were recognized as clearly dealing with the Kurdish plight in Iraq by both audiences and authorities, and – surprisingly perhaps – well received by Arab as well as Kurdish spectators.

With their plays, Rostami argues, both directors not only helped to mobilize resistance against the regime, but also helped to create a sense of Kurdish nationhood. According to Salar himself, theatre artists actually replaced the peshmerga as the most prominent advocates of Kurdish patriotism and resistance after the 1975 collapse of the armed Kurdish insurgency. The fact that both theatre artists courageously continued their 'Theatre of Resistance' even in the worst years of Baathist repression makes their work all the more remarkable and worthy of attention, not only in Kurdish studies but also for students of theatre in conflict zones more generally. Rostami also devotes a number of particularly fascinating pages – partly based on Zangana's earlier study (2002) – to the 'guerrilla theatre' of the later 1970s and 1980s, which was performed clandestinely, and in part by Kurdish peshmerga fighters, in areas outside government control.

Apart from a few earlier studies on Kurdish theatre in Iraq, like those by Hasan Tanya (1985), Hawre Zangana (2002), and Ferhad Pirbal (2001), Rostami's book is the first major discussion of modern Kurdish theatre. Unlike these earlier works, it also devotes at least as much attention to the performance and to the conditions of production as to the textual content of the plays discussed. As such, it fills a huge gap in our knowledge, and at the same time raises new questions about periods, areas and dimensions not covered. For example, what exactly were the antecedents and inspirations of Kurdish drama in late Ottoman times? What forms of Kurdish theatre do we find in other regions and other dialects, and can we find any contacts, convergences and/or contrasts between them? Another set of questions revolves around the influence of Leninist party organization as a tool for both political domination and cultural production. In both Iraq and (post-) Soviet Armenia, for example, one would expect Kurdish drama to have been shaped by Soviet and Eastern German models – witness, for example, the enormous influence of Brecht's 'epic theatre' in the post-World War II Arab world at large. And finally, one would like to know in greater detail how theatre developed after the 1991 uprisings, and in

the wake of the quickly developing local Kurdish television and transnational television channels.

These are but a few of the many topics one would hope to see addressed in more detail someday. It is but one of the many merits of Rostami's superb study that it triggers such and other questions. It is greatly to be hoped that research into this fascinating but sadly neglected aspect of Kurdish cultural life can be continued and expanded.

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