

Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant

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Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant

A Critical Anthology

By

Robert Myers

Nada Saab



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Cover illustration: Fayiz Quzuq as Majid and Nidal Sijari as Hamid in *Baghdadi Bath*, written and directed by Jawad al-Asadi. Performance at Babel Theater, Beirut, 2005. Image courtesy of Jawad al-Asadi.

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A Note on the Translation, Transliteration and Performing Rights

Since this is a collection of stage plays, all of which were written with the intention of being performed, our approach to translation, in both those plays that we translated and in those we edited in this volume, has been to create works that are ready to be produced on stage in English. Several of these plays have already been produced in English. Frequently, we have substantially changed the syntax and chosen English equivalents that are not necessarily the first, second or even third meanings found in standard Arabic-English dictionaries, but we believe they give the best sense of the original Arabic while simultaneously functioning well in the vernacular English that is the principal linguistic medium of the stage in the English-speaking world. Occasionally, as in the case of the word-game that appears in *The Dictator*, in which the text is based on puns that assume a sophisticated understanding of Arabic, we have substantially changed the literal meaning of the text and attempted to substitute analogous text that gives some sense of the original Arabic in English. Since many of the readers of this work will be scholars of Arabic literature and language we have utilized a simplified system of transliteration which maintains similarity with the Arabic spelling of words with the exception of words that are already found in English dictionaries or are Anglicized. We have maintained the difference between the letter *hamza* (ء) and the letter *ʿayn* (ع) but have foregone bars and dots above and below letters. All translated plays included in this volume—*The Dictator* by ʿIsam Mahfuz, *The Jester*, by Muhammad al-Maghut, *The Rape*, by Saʿd Allah Wannus, *Baghdadi Bath* by Jawad al-Asadi and *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, ʿAli?* by Raʿida Taha—are intended for scholarly use and general readership. Performances must receive prior approval from the respective playwrights or estates, as well as the translators. The translation of *The Dictator* by ʿIsam Mahfuz is intended for academic purposes only and has not been authorized by his estate for performance purposes.

Introduction

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

One purpose of this volume is to provide scholars of Arabic literature and culture and scholars of modern and contemporary theater, as well as other scholars, theater practitioners and lay readers who have no background in the Arabic language, a sense of the variety and complexity of political theater that has been produced in and around the Levant in the past 50 years. The Levant has historically been understood to mean Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, which are all represented by significant works in this volume. Since many historians have understood greater Syria to comprise Iraq, we have also included a work by the Iraqi playwright Jawad al-Asadi. His play *Baghdadi Bath (Hammam Baghdadi)* (2005), the fourth play in this volume, appears here not only because it dramatizes one of the most recent upheavals to severely disrupt the region—the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq—from the point-of-view of the occupied, but also because al-Asadi worked primarily in Lebanon and Syria, in the latter of which he collaborated closely with both the Palestinian National Theater and the Syrian playwright Sa'd Allah Wannus, whose play *The Rape (al-Ightisab)* (1990) also appears in this volume. Moreover, several of the themes that are central to *Baghdadi Bath*—defeat, occupation, war, forced exile and the toll on families of the continuing strife in the Middle East—constitute five of a number of topoi that recur in these plays and mark them as constituting part of a clearly discernible tradition.

All of these plays were written in Arabic and first produced in Arabic-speaking countries, although as is made clear in the introduction to the first play in this volume, *The Dictator (al-Diktatur)* (1969), by the Lebanese playwright 'Isam Mahfuz, modern Arabic theater has historically been presented in Modern Standard Arabic, or *fusha*, the formal written form of the language, whereas people speak a variety of very distinct vernaculars in different parts of the Arab world. Particularly for non-Arabic speakers, it may be difficult to grasp the linguistic complexity of Arabic theatrical texts written in *fusha*, especially when performed. An imperfect analogy might be audience members and actors who are speakers of Italian, studied Latin extensively in school and who read it in their daily newspapers and in works of literature, attending or appearing in plays that are in Latin, although in their day-to-day lives they speak Italian, whereas the action being portrayed on stage, especially contemporary material, that would generally be said in real life in Italian, is instead spoken in Latin.

One aspect of the trajectory this volume traces is the transition in the second half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries from the

almost universal use of formal to an increasing use of vernacular Arabic in the theater. There are obvious political implications related to the decision a playwright or director makes about what form of the language is used in a play. For example, Sa'd Allah Wannus, from Syria, who was a Marxist and an ardent Arab nationalist for most of his life and career, and who keenly wished his work to have the capacity to communicate with audiences throughout the Arab world and beyond, wrote exclusively in Modern Standard Arabic. His contemporary, 'Isam Mahfuz, from Lebanon, however, not only theorized extensively about the problems associated with writing in formal Arabic—such as the fact that using it creates an unintentional or unconscious “alienation effect” on stage—he wrote plays such as *The Dictator* in Lebanese vernacular. Furthermore, he created a kind of inter-lingua, between vernacular Levantine Arabic and formal Arabic, the form in which the plays were published, with the hope that theater artists from elsewhere in the Arab world who spoke other vernacular forms would perform his work in their local vernaculars. Not surprisingly, the final and most recent play in this collection, *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali? (Ala'qi zayyak fin, ya 'Ali?)* (2015), an autobiographically-based monologue by Palestinian playwright and performer Ra'ida Taha, about the death of her father, a Palestinian freedom fighter, in which she adopts the voices of her mother, her aunt, herself as a child, Yasir 'Arafat and several others, is written and performed in a variety of vernaculars.

This collection contains no plays by Arabs living in Israel. However, Israeli characters appear in Wannus's play *The Rape*, about the first Palestinian Intifada, which began in 1987, including one who is sympathetically portrayed, an Israeli psychiatrist, Doctor Menuhin, which caused the play to be banned in Syria and, according to Wannus, also led to his being transformed for a time into a pariah in his native country. In Taha's one-woman play, the characters she plays include a progressive Israeli lawyer and a female Israeli soldier, and when Taha's family members return to Palestine to visit her father's tomb, they are, because of the way they are dressed, mistaken for Jewish settlers. Since much of the action turns on the attempt by the character of her aunt to recover the body of Taha's father, a martyr to the Palestinian cause, the presence of the Israeli state and authorities loom large in the play. Obviously, since all of these plays were written in the post-1948 period, after the Palestinian *nakba*, or catastrophe, in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to flee their homes, Israel, whether in the guise of occupier, military enemy, torturer or governmental authority decreeing the exile of Palestinians, is a pervasive presence, both latent and manifest, onstage and off. It is not a coincidence, for example, that Jawad al-Asadi, who was forced into long-term exile when his brother was murdered by the government of Saddam Husayn in the 1970s,

worked for over a decade with the Palestinian National Theater while he was living in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world. In an interview with Lebanese theater artist Sahar Assaf for her 2011 study of his work, he explains his motives for working on theater with Palestinians and his affinity for the Palestinian dilemma by saying that “The Palestinians’ impossible homecoming [i.e. return to their homes] is similar to mine; despite the lucid [i.e. a clear] difference. The Palestinians are fighting the Israelis who are occupying their land but we are fighting the son of our own land [Saddam Hussein].”¹

Since the last military conflict that is generally characterized as a victory for the Arabs in the twentieth century occurred in 1956, when Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir prevented an alliance composed of French, British and Israeli forces from seizing the Suez Canal, it is not surprising that other pervasive motifs in these works are failure, dissolution and defeat. In plays like *The Dictator*, written shortly before the June 1967 War, Mahfuz dramatizes a failed revolution, which the viewer may ultimately conclude is no more than the delusions of two mad characters playing roles in an asylum. Mahfuz disavows any relationship between the play and Peter Weiss’s 1964 *Marat/Sade*, also about a revolution gone awry, that is put on by inmates in a Parisian asylum shortly after the French Revolution, and one could certainly argue that the Arab world provided more than enough raw material of demagogues, deranged politicians and coup plotters from which Mahfuz could draw without borrowing from the Weiss play. As is elucidated in the introduction to Mahfuz’s play in this volume, most observers, including Lebanese censors at the time the play was written, interpret *The Dictator* as derived in part from the historical case of Antun Sa’adi, founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, who was executed shortly after calling for a revolution in Lebanon in 1948, and General Fu’ad Shihab, the Lebanese president at the time. There is little doubt that Sa’d Allah Wannus, whose first theatrical success, *An Evening’s Entertainment for the Fifth of June (Haflat Samar min ajl Khamsa Huzayran)* (1968), a play that dismantles the hypocrisy of Arab leaders and the Arab elite that was written in the aftermath of the disastrous June 1967 War, is informed by his having seen Weiss’s play in Paris. Wannus knew Weiss well and considered the German playwright a mentor. Al-Asadi’s play *Variations on the Ward (Taqaṣim ‘ala al-‘Anbar)* (1993), based on Chekhov’s “Ward Six,” a story about a psychiatrist in an asylum who eventually decides to become one of the patients, is, like Weiss’s and Mahfuz’s plays, set in an asylum.

1 Sahar Assaf, “When Theatre Becomes Home: The Exile and Theatre of the Iraqi Playwright Jawad al-Assadi” (M.A. Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty, Central Washington University, 2001), 50.

The second play in this volume is Muhammad al-Maghut's *The Jester (al-Muharrif)* (1973). Although wrapped in the guise of a historical comedy that sometimes devolves into slapstick, the play contains a tacit acknowledgement that the Syria of the time was, if not a psychiatric ward, nevertheless thoroughly ungovernable. The remedy in *The Jester*, which is no more successful than any other cure offered up for the ills of contemporary Arab society, is the importation to modern Syria of the last Umayyad ruler from Cordoba, who went into exile in Andalusia (*al-Andalus*) in the eighth century as the only surviving member of the Umayyad dynasty when all of the other members of his family were massacred at a wedding banquet outside Damascus by the 'Abbasids. Taha's play, a bittersweet memoir written and performed by the child of a martyr taken under Yasir 'Arafat's wing and later hired as his press secretary after her father's death, looks back at the heyday of Palestinian freedom fighters (*fida'iyyin*) from the perspective of a cosmopolitan, middle-aged Palestinian woman living in exile. Since the only victory Taha and her family are ultimately able to achieve, wresting her father's body from the Israelis many years after he dies in a hijacking in Israel in 1972, the play holds little hope for the ultimate victory of the Palestinians beyond familial solidarity and a tenacious memory of the homeland. This latter theme, of a determined effort not to forget anything about the precise places from which Palestinians were expelled as a means of resistance, is addressed directly in her most recent play, *36 Abbas Street, Haifa (36 Shari' Abbas, Hayfa)* (2017), about the return of a Palestinian to an expropriated house in Haifa. The plays al-Asadi has written and directed, although aesthetically stunning and occasionally leavened by flashes of dark humor, are likewise almost universally grim and generally forgo even the consolation of memory. Instead, they tend to end in defeat, failure, and, in the case of *Baghdadi Bath*, the hallucinatory image of a character burying himself alive in the desert.

The plays in this volume are presented in chronological order. In addition to being read as literary and performative texts employing particular forms as means of manifesting social and political dilemmas and telling stories with clearly ideological components, each can also be seen as a snapshot of the culture in which it was produced at the moment of its making. *The Dictator*, by Mahfuz, is part of a trilogy and was written in 1967 during a period of shifting political alliances and persistent coups in the Arab World. Although the play, as suggested above, seems to allude to the failed coup called for by Antun Sa'adi in 1948, it also draws on a general atmosphere of coups and counter-coups in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir came to power in a coup in 1952 in which he and his confederates overthrew the notoriously corrupt King Faruq. In 1958, Syria and Egypt created a union, becoming

one country, the United Arab Republic, but the union was dissolved three years later after a coup by Syrian officers who were angry at the excessive control of Syria by Cairo. In 1963, there was another coup led by military supporters of the Baʿth Party, including Hafiz al-Asad, along with the architect of the Baʿth Party, Michel ʿAflaq, and others, and that same year a failed counter-coup, led by Syrian supporters of ʿAbd al-Nasir. There was yet another coup in 1966, in which ʿAflaq and other members of the old guard Baʿthist movement were replaced by Salah Jadid, a Syrian general whom Hafiz al-Asad in turn jailed for life after he came to power in a coup that replaced Jadid in 1970. In Lebanon, there was, in addition to the failed 1948 coup, a political crisis in 1958 that took place partly as a result of the brutal and successful coup that same year in Baghdad—itself inspired in part by ʿAbd al-Nasir’s revolution in Egypt. Lebanon’s Christian president, Kamil Shamʿun, fearing he would be removed by pro-Muslim political forces that wanted Lebanon to join Egypt and Syria in their new union, called for American intervention. U.S. President Eisenhower, fearing ʿAbd al-Nasir and his Soviet supporters had had a hand in the Baghdad coup, obliged by sending in U.S. troops.

As mentioned above, *The Jester*, by al-Maghut, written in 1973, soon after Hafiz al-Asad seized power, treats the dysfunctional Syrian political landscape in comic terms. As al-Asadi does in his 1993 play *Forget Hamlet*, a re-writing of Shakespeare’s play set in 1980s Iraq under Saddam Husayn, al-Maghut in his play makes direct allusions to *Othello* and its troubling rendering of an Arab leader who would have been victorious had it not been for jealousy. One character even absurdly suggests that “jealousy ... is one of the most pressing dangers facing our motherland today.” More significantly, the play’s title is also an implicit allusion to the fool in *King Lear*, who is referred to in the standard translation by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra as “*al-Muharrij*” and who in the play is the only one who can tell Shakespeare’s ruler unpleasant truths without inspiring rage in him. Hafiz al-Asad, who was frequently displeased by the overtly ideological works of Saʿd Allah Wannus, which were sometimes censored and often exported as examples of the country’s ostensibly open and thriving culture, and thus prevented from widespread domestic exposure, was a well-known fan of al-Maghut’s work. Although *The Jester* and other of his works may be read as critiques of Syria in the 1970s,² something about their form made them not only palatable to Hafiz al-Asad but amusing in the same way the fool’s harsh truths wittily delivered are to Lear.

2 Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 22–23.

The Rape, as discussed at length in the introductory essay to that play, is an adaptation of the Spanish play *The Double Life of Doctor Valmy* (*La Doble Historia del Doctor Valmy*) (1964), by Antonio Buero Vallejo, which is set during the 1960s under Franco's dictatorship. In Wannus's rendering it is transposed to the West Bank during the first Palestinian Intifada. The insurrection, an organic grassroots uprising that caught both PLO officials in Tunisia and Israeli authorities almost completely by surprise, represented one of the most heroic moments of resistance to colonial repression by a civilian population in recent Arab history. Not only did it lead to a later, less spontaneous eruption of discontent in the occupied territories, it is arguably the principal model for the large-scale demonstrations against corrupt, authoritarian police states that erupted across the Arab world during the so-called "Arab Spring," beginning in Tunisia in 2010.

Wannus, who had abandoned playwriting for more than a decade after a psychological breakdown in 1977 that he attributed in part to what he saw as the capitulation by Anwar al-Sadat, and, by extension, the leaders of the entire Arab world, to Israel, created a hybrid adaptation in which he borrowed liberally from Buero Vallejo's play about authoritarianism but also added specific local elements. More importantly, for the first time in a play in Arabic by an Arab playwright, he created fully-wrought Israeli characters, including a sympathetic Israeli psychiatrist who, after the play has seemingly concluded, engages in a conversation about Arab-Israeli relations with a character who comes out of the audience named Sa'd Allah Wannus. The play was, however, almost universally denounced in the Arab world when it was written, although positive portraits of Wannus appeared in a piece written in the 1990s by Judith Miller, a writer for *The New York Times* and an unabashed Zionist. In the current environment, in which the Oslo Accords have completely collapsed, Yitzhak Rabin—murdered by an Israeli Jew for even proposing peace with the Palestinians—has been dead for two decades, the U.S. president has supported moving the capital of Israel to Jerusalem, there is no American pressure whatsoever being placed on an extremely reactionary Israeli government that continues daily to expand settlements and deprive Palestinians in the occupied territories of their most basic rights, and in which there seems no reasonable hope for a Palestinian state, the play might seem even less likely to find a receptive audience. Nonetheless, a recent production of the translation included here that was presented in English in Beirut in 2015, produced by Robert Myers and directed by the Lebanese director Sahar Assaf with a Lebanese cast, received several extremely positive reviews, and audience members repeatedly expressed their gratitude to the artists and producer for presenting the play.

Baghdadi Bath, as will be further elaborated in the introduction to the play, was produced in numerous venues in the Arab world, where it received excellent reviews. The playwright, Jawad al-Asadi, received the prestigious Prince Claus Award the same year he wrote the play and the same year it was first produced. The work, which dramatizes a reunion between two estranged Iraqi brothers who meet at a Turkish bath, or *hammam*, that they used to visit with their now deceased father when they were children, is one of the first responses to the terribly misguided U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and is certainly the first written, directed and staged by an Iraqi playwright. There were presentations of the work and discussions about it presented by the New York Theater Workshop almost immediately after it was translated into English, at Dartmouth College, and later at Vassar College, and there was a production in Arabic with English subtitles from the translation published here that was produced in New York at La MaMa Theater, directed by Zishan Urgulu, a director and professor of theater at the New School.

The play is a chillingly prescient portrait of an Iraq descending into chaos. The senseless slaughters alluded to by the two brothers, the intermittent reports of extreme violence and the horrific experiences of wanton cruelty recounted by them are presaged in the play's opening moments when they discover all sorts of foul detritus in the abandoned bath, and one of them assures the other that this desecration and disintegration is "normal." It is almost a cliché to state that plays like al-Asadi's offer a microcosmic portrait of the larger society in which they take place, but here the playwright's understanding, much of it derived from personal experience, of the violence, trauma and division that existed in Iraq in 2005, and was exacerbated by the U.S. invasion, is frighteningly prophetic. In retrospect, the play can be read as a dramatic harbinger of the increasing havoc and seemingly indiscriminate slaughter wrought by the insurrection and the brutal attempts to squelch it, the horrors of Abu Ghraib and the emergence of ISIS and a host of other groups whose ideologies were forged in the cauldron of violence of contemporary Iraq.

Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali? by Ra'ida Taha, written and produced in 2015, represents a new turn in political theater. Like *The Jester* the play looks back at an earlier period of Arab heroism with a somewhat jaundiced eye, in this case that of a middle-aged woman recalling her younger self, who does not fully comprehend the ideological meaning of her father's heroism and martyrdom during the 1970s heyday of Palestinian activism. Taha, in a much more direct manner than al-Asadi, draws on autobiography and individual stories to chart the cost of political and military struggles—even those that appear or once appeared just and praiseworthy—on the vulnerable and the relatives of political fighters. This theme also appears in *The Rape*, by

Wannus, which dramatizes the suffering of relatives of resistance fighters, who in Wannus's play are themselves drawn into an ever-expanding vortex of violence. One of the other clear sources of Taha's play is, of course, the tradition of the *hakawati*, or storyteller, a dramatic performer who has existed for centuries in the Arab world and whose arena is often a café. Although the stories told by a *hakawati* are not necessarily overtly political, in the 1970s the form began to be used in a number of political plays such as *The Adventure of the Head of Mamluk Jabir* (*Mughamarat Ra's al Mamluk Jabir*) (1969), by Wannus, and *The Jester*, by al-Maghut. Clearly one of the trends that informs Taha's play is a general global tendency that began in the 1980s with autobiographically-based performance art and accelerated in the 1990s with the proliferation of memoirs, confessional television shows and one-person plays focused on individual identity, including gender, ethnicity and sexuality. This trend, which, especially in the theater, and especially in Western countries, provided groups that had heretofore been marginalized or largely excluded from participation in mainstream cultural institutions new forums and modes of representation, expanded exponentially around the globe in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the spread of social media, which reinforced a de-historicized and de-ideologized focus on personal experience and the individual as the principal frames of contemporary experience.

Influence of Traditions of Western Political Theater

One might argue that, because of historical circumstances, all theater written in the Arab world from 1950 to the present should be seen first and foremost through an ideological lens. Nevertheless, as Edward Ziter and others have pointed out, there are certainly strains of theater in the Arab world that consciously foreground political, ideological and critical historical concerns in ways that effectively foreclose readings that fail to see these works as principally political interventions as well as cultural artifacts.³ As elaborated above, political theater in the Arab world, and more specifically the Levant, in the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries

3 For Ziter, "[L]abeling a specific body of work "political" is problematic if only because it presupposes a body of normal, nonpolitical theatre. One could argue that all theatre (like all expression) either supports or challenges the existing political order, but making such an argument renders the word "political" meaningless. We are then left with the subjective task of deciding which plays most directly address the powers and authority granted [by] states and so merit the label political. I further narrowed my pool by focusing on works that examine the idea of state powers to ideas of national identity." Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 12.

has a number of pervasive themes such as preoccupation with exile, occupation and defeat. One also sees an array of shared formal approaches that are informed by both traditional Eastern theatrical modes such as the *hakawati* and by the complexities of the Arabic language itself. Nevertheless, since all of the playwrights in this volume who wrote in the twentieth century, especially Wannus and Mahfuz, had direct and indirect exposure to various theatrical traditions and theories, it is important to ground notions of Arab or Levantine political theater in historical notions of political theater that clearly informed their work, many of which evolved in Europe and elsewhere in the West.

As Graham Holderness has written, the critique of ideology inherent in political plays “has entailed more than anything else a politics of form.”⁴ One of the first and most obvious examples of political theater is in fact the first extant Greek play, *The Persians*, which, one could argue does not fit easily into either an exclusively Western or Eastern tradition of drama, especially if one considers the proximity of the play’s action and production to the Levant. Although in Edward Said’s treatment in *Orientalism*, Aeschylus’s play is analyzed as a representative metaphor of the tendency of Western writers to attempt to control the East through discourse, the political aspects of the play are in fact grounded in precise historical circumstances that antedate the period analyzed in Said’s study by centuries, and the play’s ideology as such is manifested above all in its singular form: it is a Greek play devoid of Greeks. The play dramatizes the defeat of the Persians solely from the point of view of the “other.” As Edith Hall has observed, Aeschylus not only used the term “barbarian” for the first time in the play, he created an Eastern, Ionian Greek which the Persians speak.⁵ Following the Greek convention, the “action,” the Battle of Salamis, at which the Persian fleet is destroyed, takes place offstage. The climax of the play is the arrival at the court of Xerxes of a messenger, who not only describes the defeat, he performs this catastrophe through storytelling. Many of the audience members were, like Aeschylus himself, war veterans for whom the dramatization of this defeat, even of an enemy, was cathartic and traumatic.

In *The Rape*, Wannus not only dramatizes the enemy, the Israelis, he creates particular forms of speech for them to differentiate them from their Palestinian adversaries, which are infused with Biblical allusions and the rhetoric of historical Zionism. Thus, one of the significant formal innovations of the play

4 Graham Holderness, *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 9.

5 Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 11.

is writing Arabic as if it were Hebrew. Moreover, he daringly envisions a politically progressive Israeli who speaks the language of psychoanalysis, a discipline historically linked to Freud and other European Jews, and employs discourse in part derived from it to denounce the Zionist basis of Israel. Wan-nus's most influential play, *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, actively engages the audience in the performance through the inclusion of actors placed among them who take part in the action. *The Adventure of the Head of Mamluk Jabir* is based on a military confrontation drawn from Arab history, and a principal character is a *hakwati* who recounts the play's events to the patrons of a café, who constitute an audience onstage. In *The Jester* the title character is also a storyteller, a theatrical performer within al-Maghut's serio-comic play, and the protagonist who visits 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil, nicknamed Saqr Quraysh, or the falcon of Quraysh, a hero from the glorious Arab past in Andalusia, in an attempt to explain to him how Arab society has in the intervening centuries gone so terribly awry. Ra'ida Taha, in both *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* and *36 'Abbas Street, Haifa*, takes on the role of a *hakawati* performing the various characters in the stories she is telling.

The Rape, An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June and other of Wan-nus's plays participate in another important historical strand of political theater, the Schillerian tradition of drama as tribunal, in which audience members serve as a sort of historical jury who view a dramatization of the past and must actively engage in an interrogation of its meaning and political implications. For example, in *Wallenstein*, Schiller's trilogy about the Thirty Years War, which is one of the dramatic sources for Brecht's *Mother Courage*, Schiller, who was a professional historian and a Protestant, also dramatizes the war from the point-of-view of his historical enemy: the enigmatic Catholic general Wallenstein. In Saranpa's study of Schiller's late historical plays, she points to the pre-occupation of various critics with Schiller's inventions and modifications of the historical record. She cites Goethe, who, in explaining Schiller's approach, says that viewers should "engage in active discussion of what they remember about the history of the Thirty Years War ... In so doing, they begin to differentiate between the poetical and the historical and to see the difference between the playwright as historian and as creator."⁶

One sees a far more radical version of this sort of interrogation of history in *Danton's Death*, the 1835 play by the German playwright and revolutionary

6 Kathy Jo Saranpa, *Schiller's Wallenstein, Mary Stuart and Die Jungfrau: The Critical Legacy* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), 18.

Georg Büchner about the French Revolution.⁷ As Khuri-Makdisi points out, a whole spate of plays based on the French Revolution—and, soon after—the revolution by the Young Turks were written and performed in the Levant around the turn of the century.⁸ Büchner's play, which was forgotten for half a century after it was written, is a precursor of the two most prominent European practitioners of political theater, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. These two German playwrights and directors are themselves the most significant precursors of Peter Weiss, also German, who is renowned as the principal creator of the post-World War II documentary play and the author of *Marat/Sade* (1963).⁹ Weiss, as discussed above, was one of Wannus's most important mentors and friends when the Syrian playwright was studying at the Sorbonne in the late 1960s. *The Dictator*, by Mahfuz, which is included in this volume, is also frequently linked to *Marat/Sade*, although Mahfuz, as discussed above, has disavowed any direct link between the two plays.

Historical events as source material are used frequently by Wannus, as in *The Adventure of the Head of Mamluk Jabir*, *The Rape*, with its rendering of the first Intifada, and, perhaps most notably, in his 1992 play *Historical Miniatures* (*Munamnamat Tarikhiyya*). Set principally during the fourteenth-century siege of Damascus by Timur, or Tamurlane, and constructed from a series of historical sketches that radically undermine received notions about significant events in Arab history, the play is, among other things, an interrogation of historiography and the role of the historian that critiques the disinterested stance of the renowned Arab historian Ibn Khaldun. History itself is a recurring theme in Wannus's work as it is, albeit in fantastical form, in *The Jester*, when the protagonist travels through time and finds himself discomfited to explain to his medieval interlocutors how Arab history has gone so terribly awry. As Schiller suggested, historical plays are inevitably more about the time in which they are written than about the time they dramatize,¹⁰ and historical plays that are not simply costume dramas or focused on the individual psychology of the heroes they portray inevitably engage in critiques of history and power that are

7 See Haya Bassam Yahya, "Büchner in the Arab World" (M.A. thesis, American University of Beirut, 2015).

8 Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 82.

9 The complete title is *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. It is commonly referred to as simply *Marat/Sade*.

10 Richard Palmer quotes Schiller's remark that "All dramatic forms turn the past into the present." Richard H. Palmer, *The Contemporary British History Play* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 10.

necessarily ideological. This tradition of political theater, which also begins with *The Persians*, reappears in the history plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe in the Elizabethan period, is continued in Schiller's historical plays and extensively developed in the plays of Shaw, Brecht and others, is one in which, at least in the twentieth century, the dramatization of historical events becomes a means to lay bare the mechanisms of dominant and oppressive ideologies. Peter Weiss's documentary plays, especially *The Investigation* (1965), developed directly from the transcripts of the Frankfurt Auschwitz war-crime trials, utilizes this mode to force the audience to confront the extent of the horror of Germany's Nazi past. Attilio Favorini, in his volume *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theatre*,¹¹ a study of documentary plays, draws a direct line from *The Persians* to this play by Weiss. Richard Palmer, in *The Contemporary British History Play*, analyzes the various contemporary manifestations of this tradition of historical and documentary plays in the U.K., which he divides into categories such as social history plays, oppositional history plays, Marxist and Socialist history plays and feminist history plays.

According to Schiller and Büchner's contemporary, Georg Hegel, the paradigmatic political play is *Antigone*, by Sophocles, because it pits two forms of law, natural (i.e., family), represented by Antigone, against civil (i.e., societal), represented by Creon. Hegel's formulation suggests a genealogy of political plays that focus on ideology in terms of the struggle for power, which continues in Roman master/slave plays, especially those by Plautus, *The Tempest*, by Shakespeare, and in the modern theater in *Doll's House* and other plays by Ibsen, *Saint Joan*, by Shaw, and *The Crucible*, by Miller, among others.¹² The master/slave relationship and shifting power dynamics are obviously key elements in Mahfuz's play *The Dictator*. As in the case of *The Tempest*, in which Caliban uses the language he has been taught by his colonial captors to curse them, facility with language is an essential means for characters to assert agency, especially those who are seemingly powerless. In *The Dictator*, as the General awaits news of the coup that is supposedly taking place offstage, he continually demands that his assistant, Sa'dun, tell stories, recount his dreams and en-

11 *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theatre*, ed. Attilio Favorini, (New York: Ecco, 1995).

12 This link between theater, especially political theater, and the struggle for power is elaborated in more recent works of theatrical criticism by, for example, Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt. In the introduction to their book, they write that "[T]heatricity as metaphor, or analogy, accommodates the materialist perception that there is a 'playing out' of power relations, a 'masking' of authority, and a 'scenario' of events. In other words, power is spectacle." Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt, *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1991), x.

gage in word games. It is, above all, through these games and stories that the audience begins to perceive that it is in fact Sa'dun, the ostensible underling, who is the holder of power in the relationship.

The contemporary term “political theater” derives in large measure from a 1929 book of that title by the German playwright and director Erwin Piscator, who joined the Communist Party after the murder of Rosa Luxembourg and who lived to see another generation of German playwrights that included Peter Weiss, Heiner Kipphardt and Rolf Hochhuth produce political works in the 1960s that built on the techniques he had pioneered four decades earlier. As C.D. Innes observes, in Piscator’s plays such as *Hoppla*, *We are Alive* and *In Spite of Everything*, his 1925 epic history of the German Communist Party, Piscator “returned the stage to its Schillerian position as a moral tribunal.”¹³ To do so, Piscator developed a number of insights and initiated a range of formal innovations that have been key in defining much of what is thought of as political theater in the contemporary world and, one could argue, of mass media more generally. Although, as Innes points out, the work of Piscator has been overshadowed by that of his compatriot and follower, Bertolt Brecht, “his work provided models and standards for all *théâtre engagé* ... [H]is experiments were responsible for the major modern stage-forms of ‘Agitprop’ plays, ‘Documentary Drama’ and ‘Total Theatre.’”¹⁴ Among his many significant contributions to the development of political theater are his use of film, imagery and projected documents in conjunction with live actors, and his use of recorded speech. “This led to a reassessment of the part played by the audience, exploring the different possibilities for imaginative receptivity, objective distancing or emotional participation.”¹⁵

In *The Playwright as Thinker*, Eric Bentley describes a production of *Hoppla*, *We are Alive*, by Piscator, in Berlin in 1927 in which, when one of the characters, the mother, says: ‘There’s only one thing to do—either hang oneself or change the world,’ the youthful audience burst spontaneously into the ‘*Internationale*’ and kept it up ... till the end of the play.”¹⁶ As Wannus makes clear in his essays about the role of the audience in his own theater,¹⁷ it was precisely this sort of

13 C.D. Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 5.

14 *Ibid.*, 2.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946), 253.

17 As Wannus puts it in his essay “It All Begins with the Audience,” “[T]he most appropriate and important point of entry for discussing theater in relation to its formation and the resolution of its problematic aspects is the audience.” Sa’d Allah Wannus, *al-A’mal*

revolutionary reaction from the audience that he was hoping to evoke with his play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, which included actors planted in the audience who participated in the performance. He employs a similar technique in *The Rape*, written two decades later, when, as the house-lights go up at the end of play, one of its principal characters, the psychiatrist Dr. Menuhin, calls out to the crowd, asking whether the playwright is in the audience, and an actor, playing a character called Sa'd Allah Wannus, stands and discusses with the actor how he was created as well as what the political implications are of Wannus having created a sympathetic Israeli character. Although this *coup de théâtre* owes as much to Pirandello as to Piscator and Brecht, it is clearly employed here in the hope that by directly involving the audience the theater will be transformed into a moral tribunal, and the discussion the "playwright" and actor are having, as well as the story of the Palestinian Intifada and the use of rape and torture by the Israelis as means to quell it, will spread out beyond the walls of the theater and effect political change in the larger society.

The shadow of Brecht obviously looms large over all discussion of political theater in the twentieth century. As playwright, director and essayist Brecht offered theater artists who followed him a model based in large measure on the tension produced by the dialectic he embodied of creator/practitioner, on the one hand, and theorist of the theater/ideologue on the other. As Holderness's observation would suggest, Brecht's most significant contributions to what is generally conceived of as political theater are not ideological so much as formal. In dramaturgy his most notable innovation is Epic Theatre, with its rejection of Aristotelian plotting and the Wagnerian model of the *gesamtkunstwerk* (i.e., total work of art) that he asserted lulls the audience into a passive dream-like state. His most notable contribution to acting style is, of course, the *verfremdung*, or so-called alienation, effect, which derives from the acting style of the Chinese opera and Shlovski's theory of defamiliarization. The alienation effect is an overt rejection of Stanislavskian immersion and Aristotelian empathy and catharsis, in which drama depends upon emotional identification by the members of the audience instead of intellectual engagement with the ideas the characters embody.¹⁸

al-Kamila (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2004), vol. 3, 18. English translation of the text in Sa'd Allah Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, eds. and trans., Robert Myers and Nada Saab (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

18 Marvin Carlson points to the decisive influence of Marx and Hegelian dialectics in the creation of Brechtian aesthetics: "In 1926 ... Brecht began studying Marx's *Das Kapital*, and found Marx extremely helpful in systematizing many of the concerns he felt—the search for a pattern and direction in human effort, an explanation and even a cure for the

In the present volume, Wannus is the only representative of a style that can be called primarily Brechtian, although even he employed it only in his works from the late 1960s until the late 1980s, and by the time he wrote *The Rape* he was already searching for other models that, among other things, would allow him to evoke empathy and dramatize what he had earlier disparaged as the “bourgeois” concerns of individual psychology.¹⁹ Al-Maghut also employs a number of techniques that are clearly informed by Brecht. *The Jester* utilizes folk theater and the serio-comic figure of the fool as a means to import and to some extent camouflage what is clearly an ideological critique of Arab political leadership. Interestingly, the Brazilian Augusto Boal, creator of the Theater of the Oppressed and arguably the most significant Brechtian theater artist in the second half of the twentieth century, utilized a range of folk theatrical forms in his works and included the figure of the *coringa*, literally the “joker” from a deck of cards, as a sort of omniscient narrator mediating a range of disparate theatrical styles. *The Jester*, which includes time travel across centuries, is, as Brecht prescribes, radically disjunctive in terms of both time and space, thus thoroughly ignoring Aristotelian notions of unity, and it mixes the high—references to *Othello*, heroes of Arab history, and Arab literary figures—with the low—the opening performance at a café, the traveling troupe and puns and slapstick humor. *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, ‘Ali?* likewise employs Brechtian techniques such as foregrounding the play’s own artifice and breaking-the-fourth wall, which can be most easily perceived in performance when the storyteller engages in banter, which may or may not be improvised, with the play’s director, who is seated in the audience near the stage, about an episode or anecdote that the storyteller has supposedly left out of that particular performance.

One does not necessarily think of the Theater of the Absurd as belonging to a discernible tradition of political theater, but as is obvious in Mahfuz’s *The Dictator* and a number of other plays from the Arab world written shortly after mid-century, both the forms and thematic concerns of the Theater of the

corruption in modern society, and in the Hegelian dialectic a stimulating tool for dramaturgical exploration.” Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 383.

19 In an interview by Mary Ilyas, entitled “For the First Time Writing is a Form of Freedom,” and published in the journal *al-Tariq* in 1996 Wannus comments, “I used to feel that individual strife or personal idiosyncrasies were inessential, shallow bourgeois matters that should be set aside. I was exclusively focused on the comprehension of history, so I mistakenly believed that my consideration of the process of history must transcend individual considerations and the traps of bourgeois writing.” See Mary Ilyas interview with Sa’d Allah Wannus, “For the First Time Writing is a Form of Freedom” in *al-Tariq* vol. 1, Jan-Feb 1996, 99. English text in Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, forthcoming.

Absurd informed these works. Within the Western tradition, the Theater of the Absurd is generally defined in terms of both Martin Esslin's seminal 1962 article in which he coined the term, and the 1958 debate between the British theater critic Kenneth Tynan, a proponent of realistic, politically engaged theater, and Eugene Ionesco in the British newspaper *The Observer*. Tynan asserted that Ionesco's plays, specifically *The Chairs*, had no social relevance because Ionesco was focused exclusively on the on-stage world he was creating. Ionesco, for his part, "insist[ed] on the autonomy of the theatre and its independence from the world outside the theatre" and "adamantly refused to concede that it was his duty to teach anyone in the off-stage world anything."²⁰ This polemic and Esslin's article and later book on the Theater of the Absurd, in which he groups together the works of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov (in a later edition he includes Pinter in the group also) and focuses principally on their formal innovations, has led many scholars and others, especially proponents of Brechtian theater, to conclude that works by these writers are necessarily apolitical. Even so, Esslin in his study suggests that what unites these playwrights is an implicit acceptance of a post-World War II worldview informed by a philosophical sense of ontological absurdity best exemplified by Camus's essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." Wannus, whose early plays were heavily influenced by French existentialism, the allegorical and highly philosophical plays by Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim and the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd, attempted, at the beginning of his career, to write pointedly political plays in an absurdist style. The most obvious example is his 1963 play *Corpse on the Pavement* (*Juththa 'ala al-Rasif*), a patently anti-capitalist allegory, in which two beggars are seated on the pavement on a freezing night. One dies, a policeman arrives and orders them to move on and then discovers one is dead. A rich man arrives with a dog and offers to buy the corpse to feed the dog on the condition that the beggar's corpse has not begun to putrefy.²¹ By the early 1970s, however, Wannus had explicitly rejected absurdist models in favor of Brecht's Epic Theater precisely because he believed engaged theater was a means to promote social change in Arab society whereas absurdist theatre was apolitical and alienated.²² Mahfuz also abandoned the allegorical and ab-

20 Austin Quigley, *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 30.

21 See Ali Ali 'Ajil Naji Al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study of the Theatre of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannus, With Particular Emphasis on the Plays Written After the 1967 War," (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, UK, 2006), 36–37. Al-Anezi claims that "*Corpse* might be described as Brechtian, although Wannus never mentioned Brecht in relation to his early plays." Ibid. 38.

22 Al-Anezi quotes Wannus as saying, "It is not enough for a playwright to declare falsely that he is writing for the downtrodden working class and then do nothing except presenting absurd works [...] before fifty or a hundred of the elite." Ibid, 68.

surdist form of *The Dictator* for a more direct documentary approach to theater in response to the June 1967 War.

Nevertheless, the plays included in this volume by Mahfuz and al-Asadi, which are both obviously influenced by the European Theater of the Absurd and which are both clearly political works, reinforce the fact that such rigid distinctions, especially when applied to contexts outside of Western Europe, can be profoundly misleading. There are obvious political subtexts in plays by Beckett, who chose to remain in France during World War II and join the French Resistance. More importantly, as Marvin Carlson points out, one could argue, as Theodore Adorno does in his 1962 essay “Engagement,” that works “like Beckett’s ‘compel a change of attitude instead of merely calling for it, as traditional ‘committed works’ do.”²³ According to Adorno, Beckett, like Kafka—another writer who employs the absurd and grotesque—is an important source of contemporary political theater. One could argue that what makes contemporary absurdist works from the Arab world such as *The Dictator* and *Baghdadi Bath* inherently political is that, as Adorno suggests about the works of Beckett, they “[explode] from within the art which a committed approach subjugates from without and thus only in appearance.”²⁴ Not only, for example, is Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* almost universally read as an allegory of European fascism, its form presents challenges that require new representational strategies. Genet, who was marginal in almost every conceivable sense—gay, a political radical and a convicted criminal raised in penal institutions—was an ardent supporter of the cause of Palestinian liberation, and his works, which are clearly linked both to his own biography and ideology and to the tradition of master/slave plays discussed earlier, employs radically new strategies for dramatizing power relations. As discussed earlier, Hegel identifies the dynamics of power as being at the core of what he asserts is the first political play, *Antigone*.

For playwrights writing in oppressive and totalitarian societies, absurdist theater—in which embedded allegories can be decoded by those for whom they are intended without necessarily attracting unwanted attention from censors—is sometimes one of the only available means by which to engage in political critiques in the theater. One obvious example of a contemporary playwright who adopted such a strategy is the Czech playwright Václav Havel, who later became the first president of the Czech Republic. For example, in his 1965 play *The Memorandum*, a Kafkaesque fable about a functionary who receives a memorandum in an invented language about an impending audit, manifests the inherent absurdity of Eastern bloc bureaucracy by reducing language to

23 Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 426.

24 Ibid.

seemingly indecipherable gobbledygook. In *The Dictator*, as in many of the plays of the European Theater of the Absurd, language—especially miscommunication, incommunicability and the sometimes funny, sometimes frightening malleability of words—is both a key subject and formal element that has clear ideological implications.

In the case of Mahfuz, both Ionesco and Beckett seem obvious interlocutors. *The Dictator*, which is the second part of a planned trilogy, is cyclical, full of repetition, verbal and otherwise, and structured around a series of stories and games that sometimes involve brutality and seem as if they may at any moment veer into actual violence. Although the play ostensibly dramatizes a political coup engineered by the General, which takes place offstage, its political content derives not so much from its supposed subject matter nor from the historical material on which it draws, but from the ideology inherent in the verbal and gestural relationship between the General and his assistant, Sa'dun.

In the case of *Baghdadi Bath*, the two brothers clearly suggest an Iraqi Vladimir and Estragon picking through the rubble of post-invasion Iraq, trying to salvage anything they can from the desolate, apocalyptic landscape. Al-Asadi's play also makes obvious reference to both Beckett's bums and to their dramatic precursors, the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. Moreover, al-Asadi's earlier rewriting of Shakespeare's play, *Forget Hamlet*, includes a scene in which the gravediggers discuss the voracious sexual appetite of Claudius, who, in al-Asadi's version, is clearly a double for Saddam Husayn. Although these allusions to Shakespeare in contemporary political plays from the Levant serve a variety of functions, one is obviously to invoke Shakespeare's name and works to make pointedly ideological statements. As Margaret Litvin suggests in her study *Hamlet's Arab Journey*, rewritings of Shakespeare in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century are necessarily imbued with ideological perspectives that are products of the cultural, historical and political moments in which they are composed and staged.²⁵ As she writes:

Hamlet is most often invoked to argue about a perceived existential threat to a valued collective identity. This pattern tends to draw on four basic themes: nonbeing versus being, madness versus wholeness, sleep versus waking, and talk versus action. Each of these themes hangs on certain key lines from Shakespeare's play; each also resonates with Arab political debates going back at least to the nineteenth century. These polemical

25 Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 15.

deployments of Hamlet are built on both a meaningful relationship with Shakespeare's text and a consistent reading of Arab history.

Other Shakespeare plays that have frequently either been rewritten or staged in translation as means of making political statements include *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Othello*, but none has been so frequently invoked or rewritten as *Hamlet*. Litvin suggests, however, that by the 1990s "the obvious failure of political drama on Hamlet's terms ... to spark concrete change in Arab regions or societies ... had pushed some younger Arab playwrights away from Hamlet's instrumental view of political theatre. In a comic or ironic mode, their work dramatized its own inefficacy as political art."²⁶ Al-Asadi's 1994 *Forget Hamlet*, which foregrounds Hamlet's complete impotence and presages the hopelessness of the two brothers in *Baghdadi Bath*, is a prime example of this trend in political theater in the Arab world. However, as is clear in al-Maghut's invocation of *Othello* for comic purposes in the 1970s in *The Jester*, Shakespeare's plays were deployed and alluded to in plays from the Levant as means to make a range of ideological statements, including emphasizing the futility of political struggle, at various points during the second half of the twentieth century.

In the 1990s, for example, after Wannus wrote *The Rape*, he turned away from Brechtian dramaturgy in favor of approaches that foregrounded the struggles by characters within traditional Arab societies, especially women, to attain liberation and fulfillment. In *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (1994), he weaves together a historical incident about a feud between prominent clerics in 1880s Damascus with a plotline informed by Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* as a means of dramatizing individual revolution through sexual rebellion, including overt displays of male homosexuality, public prostitution and female sexual liberation. As Jonathan Dollimore asserts, "[I]n the Vienna of *Measure for Measure* unrestrained sexuality is ostensibly subverting social order; anarchy threatens to engulf the State unless sexuality is subjected to renewed and severe regulation. Such at least is the claim of those in power."²⁷ By transferring the action of Shakespeare's play to nineteenth-century Damascus and including elements of an actual dispute between Islamic clerics who themselves become embroiled in a public scandal involving sex and prostitution, Wannus both reveals latent content related to power, ideology, sexuality

26 Ibid., 12.

27 Jonathan Dollimore, "Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*," in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 72.

and religion already in Shakespeare's play and utilizes the text to make implicit statements about social and political constraints within twentieth-century Syria. Recasting works by Shakespeare in a variety of ways has been another strategy employed by dramatists from the Arab world in their creation of modern political dramas. This general trend has particular resonance as it relates to political plays produced in the Levant since, as Khuri-Makdisi points out in her study of political radicalism in Eastern Mediterranean in the late nineteenth century, "Shakespeare became part of a radical canon ... as he became associated with reformist and radical causes."²⁸

Another obvious source of the political theater produced in the Arab world and the Levant in the second half of the twentieth century were the street theater, political demonstrations, happenings and teach-ins occurring on the streets of Western cities in the 1960s. These demonstrations—in favor of civil rights, against colonialism and the Vietnam War, etc.—and organic political theater were, in turn, employed and appropriated by theater groups within more traditional settings or performed in public places by members of existing theatrical troupes like the Living Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Wannus, for example, was a student at the Sorbonne during the 1968 student demonstrations in Paris and became involved in political organizing. Since he also worked as a cultural journalist for publications in the Arab world, he attended plays such as the Living Theater's Artaudian *Paradise Now*, an improvisational piece that involved nudity and audience interaction that was performed in 1968 at the Avignon Theater Festival and, later, elsewhere in Europe and the U.S. He was also aware of works like Peter Brook's *US*, an experimental play produced in 1966 by the Royal Shakespeare Company that had as a goal the raising of consciousness by engaging audience members in questions and responses about the morality of the American war in Indochina. Wannus's 1968 play *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June*, which utilizes actors planted in the audience as a means of denouncing official lies by Arab leaders about the recently concluded June 1967 War, is clearly informed both by the street demonstrations in which he participated in Paris and by theatrical works like those by Brook and the Living Theater. Obviously, this Western tradition of street theater also dovetails with Eastern traditions of storytelling and folk theater. For example, the action in al-Maghut's *The Jester* is initiated by the arrival of a traveling street troupe that engages the customers in a discussion about the artistic merits of theater and street performers and then launches into a comic version of *Othello*, a choice that has clear political overtones.

28 Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*, 79.

Finally, as discussed above, a significant source of Ra'ida Taha's *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* is certainly Western, one-person plays that treat political themes principally by focusing on personal stories related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality and identity. One of the most emblematic and impressive examples of this form of political theater in the 1990s was the play *Fires in the Mirror* (1991), by the American performer and playwright Anna Deveare Smith, who interviewed dozens of participants associated with the racial disturbances in 1991 in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. Utilizing an ethnographic research model focused on different forms of speech, Smith tape recorded conversations with participants and then edited the tapes and herself created a range of characters—a black male political activist, an Israeli religious student, Angela Davis, a local Hasidic woman, etc.—using different hats, wigs, clothing and speech patterns to provide a kaleidoscope of varying perspectives on the racially charged events. Smith's play provided a paradigm for a number of one-person plays created in the U.S. in the 1990s and afterward. Like Smith, Ra'ida Taha, in *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* plays a range of characters such as her mother, her aunt, an Israeli soldier and Yasir 'Arafat. She also creates the characters principally through gesture, idiom and speech pattern as Smith does, although she does not utilize changes in costume.

Theatrical Forms from the Modern Arab World

As recent scholarly work has made clear, theater in the Levant and the Arab world did not begin with the production of the first Arabic-language adaptation of a European-style play, Moliere's *The Miser*, directed by Marun al-Naqqash, in Beirut's Jummayzi neighborhood in 1848. In addition to the tradition of *hakawati* discussed above, there are a range of ritualistic, religious, folk, storytelling, dance and other theatrical forms that have been prevalent in the Arab-Islamic world for centuries. Clearly the frame tale of storytelling employed in works like *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Kalila and Dimna*, *The Decameron* and *Canterbury Tales*—i.e., the story-within-a-story form—is an oral performative mode of Eastern origin and has informed numerous literary and theatrical works. Wannus not only alludes to it directly in works like *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, it has been consciously employed to create modern and contemporary political plays from the Arab world. These works use metatheatrical structures that participate simultaneously in Eastern storytelling traditions and modernist theatrical traditions developed as means to foreground multiplicity and undermine reductionist, received truths.

Among other important traditional forms of Arab theatricality that have been employed in modern and contemporary political theater are religious rituals including dance, theater, gesture and costumes, especially those utilized in heterodox forms of Islam such as Sufism. Arguably the most significant such form and the one most frequently appropriated in political theater has been the *ta'ziya*, the dramatic re-enactment by Shi'i Muslims of the murder of Husayn, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, in Karbala in 680 CE, which has been a prevalent theatrical mode throughout the Islamic world for over a dozen centuries. 'Isam Mahfuz, who grew up in the south of Lebanon, in areas with a large Shi'i population, witnessed as a child various versions of *ta'ziya* being performed and has written about the extent of the influence of Shi'i rituals and the *ta'ziya* passion play in particular on his own theater. Likewise, Jawad al-Asadi, who is a native of Karbala, the Mecca of the Shi'i world and the site of Husayn's slaying, has suggested that the fact that the city would be transformed through a series of pageants, mourning rituals and elaborate dramatizations of martyrdom for ten days every year both informed his decision to become a theater artist and helped to define the visual, ritualistic and histrionic style associated with his own theater.

Sufism, an overtly oppositional religious tradition that developed within Islam, has elements of gnosticism, mysticism and eroticism, and is well-known for liturgical rituals that involve trances, frenetic dancing and free-flowing robes. Moreover, Sufism has an elaborate symbolic lexicon related to individual enlightenment, mendicant strains that entail vows of poverty and a literary tradition focused on wine-drinking, erotic love and ecstasy, all of which have inevitably caused its adherents to suffer from persecution by religious authorities. The persecution has predictably led to a tradition of martyrdom that mirrors the experience of Husayn, Christian martyrdom and the suffering of contemporary political and social opposition figures. In *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, Wannus appropriates the Sufi lexicon, the exploration of eroticism, the theatricality inherent in Sufi rituals and the tradition of martyrdom to craft a political play focused on individual transformation and enlightenment as means to broader social change.

Another traditional popular form of the theater in the Levant was *karagoz*, or shadow-puppet theater. *Karagoz*, a source of popular entertainment that has existed in various forms from China to Turkey, was, for example, popular in Cairo as early as the thirteenth century, when Muhammad ibn-Daniyal, an Iraqi who was also a court poet who wrote panegyrics in high literary styles, produced shadow plays that he had written, apparently for additional income,

in the Egyptian capital.²⁹ Wannus appropriates the *karagoz* in his play *Drunken Days* (*al-Ayyam al-Makhmura*) (1995), set in Lebanon in the 1930s, about a Muslim woman who leaves her husband and family when she falls in love with a Christian man. Like *Rituals*, the play focuses on individual sexual liberation by a female protagonist as emblematic of social and political change. She is literally confronted with her own sexual desires by a *jinni* who appears and taunts her and by the *karagoz* plays she continually sees out her window in the street that treat love and desire.

Several recent historical precursors of the writers represented in this volume clearly served as sources and models for political theater in the Levant in the period covered by this study. In both his theoretical writings and in one of his Brechtian plays from the 1970s, *Soirée with Abu Khalil al-Qabbani* (*Sahra ma' Abi Khalil al-Qabbani*) (1972), Wannus emphasizes his connection with the theater and figure of Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, a nineteenth-century Syrian theater director whose theater was shut down by religious authorities because of its supposed immorality. One of the troupe's alleged sins was to present plays with male and female performers, and eventually the theater where they performed was burned down, and al-Qabbani and his group were driven into exile in Egypt. Although Khuri-Makdisi's study is an additional corrective to the myth of theater in the Arab world beginning in the nineteenth century, she does emphasize the extent to which Marun al-Naqqash's 1848 production in Beirut of *The Miser* was part of a much larger cultural, literary and political movement that had as a goal the betterment and ostensible progress of Arab societies. Khuri-Makdisi indicates that in al-Naqqash's introductory remarks to the production he contrasts what he sees as the individualism of the Syrians (i.e., Lebanese and Syrians) with a supposed European sense of the commonweal, which he believes is most clearly manifested in the habit of theatergoing. As Khuri-Makdisi writes: "Naqqash thus equated progress with transcending private interests for the common cause of public interest. What better way to promote and enhance public interest than through the theater?"³⁰

Al-Naqqash's nephew, Salim, was an equally significant figure in the development of a tradition of political theater in the Levant and the wider Arab world. In an influential 1875 essay in *al-Jinan*, he praised the "benefits [or mer-

29 See Li Guo, *The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Daniyal's Mamluk Cairo* (Leiden: Brill, 2012) and Muhammad Ibn Daniyal, *Theatre from Medieval Cairo: The Ibn Daniyal Trilogy*, trans. Marvin Carlson and Safi Mahfouz (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, 2013).

30 Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*, 64.

its] of plays or theaters”³¹ as institutions that promoted “progress” and “civilization” by gathering people from various classes, families and other groups together and appealing to their moral sensibility.³² More significantly, Salim al-Naqqash associated the theater not only with so-called civilizational benefits, he explicitly tied its work to the *nahda*, the reformist cultural, social and political movement then taking place in the Arab world in social thought, literature, education, women’s rights and a number of other areas. Khuri-Makdisi asserts that al-Naqqash was much more radical than many of the reformers in this movement, and he linked theater to a newly burgeoning class consciousness, support for redistribution of wealth and to the ideas and followers of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, one of the most radical figures of the *nahda*: “The discourse linking the theater to social responsibility, reform, and civilization ... contained seeds of radicalism, and in the 1870s and 1880s a strong association emerged between the stage and the radical core composed by al-Afghani’s disciples.”³³

The emerging theater movement, which was but one component in a reformist movement in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean that encompassed labor unions, newspapers, intellectuals, and educational institutions, “created a new public that could ... (at least in theory) communicate across class and ethnic divisions in a space that was not defined by state or religious institutions.”³⁴ Other “subversive” elements Khuri-Makdisi points to include the fact that both professionals and amateurs participated in these theaters, the theaters were private and the spaces where performances took place were also used for extra-theatrical events that included political rallies (in one case for striking workers), and a transnational network of theater artists emerged during this period.³⁵ Clearly, this latter development presages the experiences of the artists included in this study such as Jawad al-Asadi, who was born in Baghdad, studied in Sofia, worked in Damascus where his collaborators included the Palestinian National Theater, directed plays all over the Arab world and in Europe and the Ukraine, spent time as the invitee of cultural foundations in Berlin and Paris, and eventually founded a theater in Beirut. Also, Mahfuz and Wannus spent years working and studying in Paris and traveling elsewhere in Europe, and Ra’ida Taha lived in Lebanon, Tunisia and the U.S., and traveled all over as the press secretary for Yasir ‘Arafat.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 65.

33 Ibid., 67.

34 Ibid., 72.

35 Ibid.

Since Khuri-Makdisi's study deals with the Eastern Mediterranean and focuses especially on Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria, a number of examples of the relationship between theater and political activism she offers come from Egypt. Nevertheless, as her study makes clear, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Eastern Mediterranean, networks of workers, political radicals and theater artists and intellectuals in the region were instrumental in redefining societies in the region, and Beirut, Damascus and Syria (meaning Syria and what later became Lebanon) were vital centers in the dissemination of ideas that provoked change. Theater, in turn, was one of the principal media for disseminating those ideas and effecting change. Inevitably the subject matter of theater—the French revolution, education, the role of women in Arab societies, and works by Shakespeare, Dumas and Zola translated into Arabic—as well as the structures and settings in which they were produced helped to define political theater that was produced later during the second half of the twentieth century in the Levant. One obvious example of a contemporary work that simultaneously employs modes of Western political theater and Eastern performance and acknowledges the seminal role of nineteenth-century theater artists and their milieu in laying the groundwork for contemporary political theater in the Levant is Wannus's *Soirée with Abu Khalil al-Qabbani*. A metatheatrical work par excellence, the action of Wannus's play takes place at al-Qabbani's theater in late nineteenth-century Syria the night of the production of a play based on a story from *The One Thousand and One Nights* during which the theater is burned to the ground by religious zealots and political reactionaries.

One of the most intriguing episodes exemplifying the ways in which early twentieth century political theater in the Levant both charted and defined cultural and political history at the time and prefigured the medium's role later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries involves the Lebanese reformer and writer Amin al-Rihani. Not only did he write one of the most influential histories of the French Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, which served as the basis for both theatrical adaptations and provided historical models and political and dramatic personae for activists and reformers trying to effect change within their own societies,³⁶ al-Rihani wrote a play entitled *The Prisoners or 'Abd al-Hamid in Athens (al-Sujana' aw 'Abd al-Hamid fi Atina)* (1908) about the fall of the previous colonial ruler of Syria, the Turkish sultan, and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. However, al-Rihani "encountered great opposition from Unionists in Beirut" and argued before the Beirut Commercial Court that "Abdulhamid is today like any other prisoner. Why can't we

36 Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean*, 81–82.

perform his role on stage, so that people in the future will know about his bad deeds.”³⁷

Shortly after 1900, theater artists, in addition to presenting performances dramatizing revolution, began to stage performances based on contemporary events, both locally and nationally, commenting on incidents such as the Italian invasion of Libya and the 1911 bombardment of Beirut by the Italians during the Italo-Turkish War.³⁸ Khuri-Makdisi quotes a witness to a packed production of *The Incident of the Wounded in Beirut (Hadithat Jarih Bayrut)* in 1911 in Damascus, about the bombardment, that the police prevented from being staged. When they did so the furious audience erupted in speeches demanding the play be performed and “the police intervened, and the troupe spent the night in prison.”³⁹ “Many of the plays treating contemporary events—those celebrating the Young Turks’ Revolution and Abdulhamid’s exile ... were censored, banned, or interrupted in mid-performance by the police. In some cases, troupe members risked serving time in prison.”⁴⁰

Perhaps the most emblematic example of a political play from the period that Khuri-Makdisi mentions is the performance of a work in Beirut in October 1909 celebrating the life and work of Francisco Ferrer, a Spanish socialist and educational reformer from Barcelona who had been executed several days before by a military tribunal. Cobbled together in a matter of hours and performed by the well-known Syrian actor ‘Aziz ‘Id, among others, the play included a ten-page speech by the actor playing Ferrer, who appeared draped with a banner that said “Liberty, Fraternity and Equality.” During intermission there were speeches about current political events including the Spanish intervention in Morocco and a poetry reading, and the performance provoked an altercation between soldiers and audience.⁴¹ Khuri-Makdisi’s diligent unearthing of the history of recent cultural and political events in the Eastern Mediterranean—and their direct link to the theater—provides a number of intriguing clues that should lead to further inquiry into the relationship between culture, politics, history and the theater in the Levant in the twentieth century. Although much more study still needs to be done on political theater in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean in the twentieth century, especially the period from 1920 to 1960, the translations of plays by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and

37 Ibid., 83.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 84.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 60–61.

Roger Allen,⁴² the translations by Carlson and Mahfouz,⁴³ our forthcoming collection of translated essays and plays by Wannus,⁴⁴ Margaret Litvin's *Hamlet's Arab Ghost*, Edward Ziter's important study of Syrian political theater, *Political Performance in Post-1967 Syria*, and this volume, as well as Khuri-Makdisi's pioneering work, have laid the groundwork and begun to trace the contours of the tradition of political theater in the Levant for future scholars. The five very different plays contained in this collection should give the reader a sense of the diversity, complexity and craftsmanship of political theater in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq since the 1960s and some inkling of the depth and breadth of similar material that still awaits investigation and translation.

42 Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, trans. and eds. *Modern Arabic Drama* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1995).

43 Marvin Carlson and Safi Mahfouz, trans. and eds. *Four Plays From Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous* (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, 2014).

44 Sa'd Allah Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, Robert Myers and Nada Saab, eds. and trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming)

‘Isam Mahfuz

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

The Lebanese writer ‘Isam Mahfuz, a dramatist, poet, literary critic and political analyst was one of Lebanon’s most influential and inventive intellectuals during the period from 1960 to the end of the twentieth century. As a cultural journalist, he wrote a weekly column for the culture section of the newspaper *al-Nahar* that influenced generations of readers for nearly three decades. His columns dealt with topics such as literary trends, the works and lives of acclaimed writers, controversial historical figures and medieval philosophers from both the East and West. Using a rich and inventive narrative style that combined dramatic and journalistic forms, he created imagined dialogues between iconoclastic intellectuals and other contentious figures from Arab history, atheists, philosophers and poets such as the skeptic Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri. The variety and complexity of the texts he produced illustrate both the breadth and eclecticism of his education and his view of human activity as constituting a web of material and intellectual connections among various historical and geographical spheres.

‘Isam Mahfuz was born in Marja‘yun, a village in southern Lebanon near what is now the border with Israel, in 1939. His interest in theater was aroused early in his life, especially through his relationship with his uncle who founded a theater troupe that performed folk tales about the epic heroes al-Zir Abu Layla al-Muhalhil, and al-Zinati Khalifa. Mahfuz has written that as a child he became intrigued by the props he saw stored in the upper floor of his house and decided to form a troupe composed of fellow adolescents in his neighborhood.¹ “I remember the plays I wrote during that period”, he explains, “[T]hey all dealt with a hero from the common people whose love for the king’s daughter made her rebel against her father to defend the interests of the people.”² These imagined stories of his youth suggest his preoccupation with freedom and social justice, and the themes one finds in them were further developed and presented in much more complex forms in the plays he wrote in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the interrelated themes of his early plays, a character seeking to woo the rebellious daughter of a king as a means of saving the

1 ‘Isam Mahfuz, *al-A‘mal al-Masrahīyya al-Kamila*, (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2006), 542.

2 Mahfuz, *Masrahi wa al-Masrah* (Beirut: Dar 2002 Publishers, 1995), 122.

people from tyranny are simultaneously dramatized and satirized in the dialogue of Sa’dun, one of the two characters in Mahfuz’s absurdist political play *The Dictator (al-Diktatur)* (1968). Sa’dun, who has grandiose illusions of being a revolutionary who will bring justice to the people and save the world, is also enthralled by a recurrent dream he has when he dozes off of pursuing the daughter of the king.

Mahfuz’s early years in Marja’yun were seminal in defining his political ideas. It was during this period that he became aware of what he refers to as “*al-haqq al-maqtul*,” or the “murdered justice” of Palestinians who were displaced from and denied a homeland. Living in Marja’yun, which is also next to the Shi’ite town of Nabatiyya, afforded him the opportunity to witness the festival of ‘Ashura, during which another form of injustice and murder is reenacted annually, the killing of al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, by Umayyad troops in the Battle of Karbala. Witnessing the annual commemorations of ‘Ashura provided Mahfuz with an understanding of the power of performance and of its ability to engage the audience and raise its consciousness. Moreover, the tragic recreation of the killing of al-Husayn deeply affected the ways in which he reimagined and reshaped his own dramatic work, as evidenced in the central conflict of *Why Did Sirhan Sirhan Deny What the Leader Said about Faraj Allah al-Hilu (Limadha Rafada Sirhan Sirhan ma qalah al-Za’im ‘an Faraj Allah al-Hilu)* a play about three contrasting and controversial personalities from the mid-twentieth century Sirhan Sirhan, Antun Sa’adi, and Faraj Allah al-Hilu, who pay, either with their freedom or their lives, for their support for the Palestinian cause.

In the late 1950s Mahfuz moved to Beirut, became involved in the city’s vibrant intellectual and artistic scene and began his literary career as a poet. He soon became one of the most significant figures in the movement to modernize Arabic literature and the Arabic language, which was spearheaded by the poets Yusuf al-Khal and Adunis, who were founders of the Western-influenced, avant-garde poetry journal *Shi’r* (Poetry). Mahfuz joined the journal’s editorial board and published essays on surrealist poetry and free verse prose poems, which, like those written by his companions at *Shi’r*, broke with traditional poetic forms. Mahfuz’s poetry, for example, drew extensively on the formal device of dialogue. This dialogic aspect of his poems was further developed and became the basis for his writings for the theater. Although *Shi’r* did not have a direct impact on the development of drama in the contemporary Levant and elsewhere in the Arab world,³ as it did in poetry, some of its contributors ex-

3 Mahfuz describes the various theater related activities of his colleagues in *Shi’r* in an interview in 1982. In it he addresses the relationship between poetry and theater as it relates to his own experiences. See Mahfuz, *al-A’mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 552–56.

perimented with playwriting and translated poetic plays. This cross-generic work by his colleagues at *Shi'r* was also beneficial to Mahfuz's development of a more profound understanding of the intrinsic relationship between theater and poetry.

The experiments in modern poetry effected by the *Shi'r*'s writers investigated the relationship between tradition and the nature of language, which is particularly complex in Arabic. This relationship was an especially contentious one in the 1960s, since in Arabic, *fusha*, or Modern Standard Arabic, was—and largely still is—seen as the only acceptable medium for writing literary texts. Thus, literary Arabic was and continues to be a rigidly prescribed traditional form with inherited norms that resist change. Clearly, Mahfuz's participation in this initiative to modernize Arabic poetic language heightened not only his awareness of language as a medium of dialogue, which is at the heart of theater, but also as a powerful means of shaping and expressing political consciousness and cultural identity. As will be elaborated in greater detail below, it is in part because of his innovative use of language that his highly charged political plays remain relevant and influential and continue to be presented in Beirut, the Arab world and, more recently, in New York.⁴ Although Mahfuz distanced himself from theater in the face of the violence wrought by the Lebanese Civil War, which began in 1975, many of the issues he raised in his plays continued to resonate and were later developed or reshaped in cross-genre writing. He taught dramatic writing at the Lebanese University from 1970 to 1975, when he left the country to live in Paris. He returned to Beirut in 1981 and died in 2006 after suffering a debilitating stroke.

Mahfuz's first plays were written in the late 1960s and performed soon after in Beirut and Damascus. In these plays, he shifts from *fusha* to the Lebanese vernacular in defiance of the generally accepted notion that only *fusha* was an appropriate medium for serious drama. At that time, many of the works labeled "serious" dramas that were performed in theaters in Beirut were adaptations of Western plays or echoed experiments in dramatic form from the West, whereas any play written in Lebanese vernacular was necessarily viewed as "non-serious," regardless of the literary quality of the text. These so-called "non-serious" plays included comedies and musical theater, which were seen to portray local culture in a more authentic manner because they used the language spoken by the people. Mahfuz, who was intellectually sophisticated, well-informed about Western literary trends, and knowledgeable about Arabo-Islamic cultural and

4 The translation of the play that appears in this volume was presented at the Wild Project, Off-Broadway in New York, in September, 2015, as part of the Between the Seas Festival, directed by Sahar Assaf and produced by Robert Myers, with Sany Abdul Baki as Sa'dun and Raffi Feghali as the General.

literary production in both medieval and modern times, was, however, affected by the sensibilities, everyday struggles and the language of the common people, and, by his own admission, he found himself “spontaneously driven” to write in the vernacular for the theater. Two convictions appear to have guided much of his writing. First, he believed that theater had the power to engender change and create awareness, and, second, he saw language as a manifestation of cultural development. In the case of Arabic, he saw *fusha* as presenting a false image of reality. For him, diglossia, the two forms of Arabic language, *fusha* and vernacular, was a symptom of stagnation and presented a crisis which could only be overcome through a conscious and intense effort. Only through such an effort, he asserts, would a true Arab renaissance take place.⁵ Thus, Mahfuz’s engagement with language was two-pronged. On the level of dramatic writing, he reshaped the vernacular to create a new type of high literature, which had heretofore been restricted to texts written in formal Arabic, out of his belief that theater could play a pivotal role in bringing the future form of the language into being in the present. On another level, he created a practical plan for an alternative, “new *fusha*,” a future and present living *fusha*, which incorporated elements of the various living Arab vernaculars and, therefore, was better able to express what he perceived to be the current Arab reality. He believed that any cultural or political conception of Arab unity which did not take into consideration the crisis of language, or “schizophrenic diglossia” as he described it,⁶ was a “miserable” conception, a self-inflicted failure that was “hardly in need of imperialism” to become reality.⁷

Furthermore, Mahfuz’s perception of Arab identity was not necessarily related to political unity, which is imposed from above or confirmed by the imposition of a single language that belongs more to the realm of artifice than the real world. For him, Arab identity and unity were related instead to common concerns and a shared political predicament. In spite of his desire to reach a wider Arab audience, Mahfuz’s choice to write plays in the Lebanese vernacular necessarily limited his audience and restricted the distribution of his texts to readers in other Arab countries where they were most relevant. Since the political and cultural dilemmas addressed in his plays, which were written in vernacular and which seemingly addressed local content, constituted part of an Arab—and perhaps global—context, he concluded that for his theater to be truly active and effective, it needed to move beyond performance and focus on the printed text. For him, the textual form was open to multiple readings and

5 Isam Mahfuz, *al-Masrah Mustaqbal al-‘Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1991), 37.

6 *Ibid.*, 36.

7 *Ibid.*, 37.

interpretations and might affect change in different contexts through a cumulative process. Mahfuz's ingenious solution to the shortcomings of the vernacular and of his seeming inability to reach a wide audience in the Arab world by writing intermediary texts in Lebanese vernacular was the creation of a new middle ground Arabic that lay somewhere between the vernacular and *fusha*. The primary function of this "in-between" Arabic, which he called *al-fusha al-sha'biyya*, or commonplace *fusha*, was to be faithful to the vernacular, which is deeply rooted in the individual psyche, while also remaining recognizable to speakers who also knew *fusha*, which is accessible to a wider Arab public. Writing in this form of the language requires a nearly acrobatic ability to combine syntactic elements and shape sentences in a manner that diverges from the usual characteristics of *fusha* that have disappeared from all contemporary Arab vernaculars, such as, for example, the case endings and conjugations of verbs with dual and plural feminine subjects.

The early plays of Mahfuz that appeared in print are in fact "translated" editions of the original vernacular texts he created for performance, which were later rendered by him into *al-fusha al-sha'biyya*. He asserted that although these "translated" texts lack the spirit of a truly spoken language, they are nonetheless more productive in the sense that they can be performed anywhere in the Arab world regardless of the version of vernacular spoken there. His desire, he writes, was for these printed *fusha sha'biyya* texts to be "retranslated" into the vernaculars used by audiences where the plays were performed,⁸ especially since they addressed themes and concerns that were also common to them. Translations of his own works into *fusha sha'biyya* thus provided the possibility, at least in theory, of dramatic productions of Mahfuz's works in other, non-Levantine variants of the Arab vernaculars. The principles he developed so that other Arab dramatists who wished to could write in *fusha sha'biyya* were not adopted by other dramatists. However, the use of vernacular in theater, which was revolutionary at the beginning of Mahfuz's career, has now become the norm in theater in the Arab world. His ideas on language manifest a belief he shared with many other intellectuals at the time, that a new, more just and humane world required the creation of new cultural and literary forms. The political underpinnings of his experiment, which entailed a close relationship among cultural production, language and literature, remained solid throughout his career as a playwright and as a writer of other genres.

⁸ Mahfuz, *al-Masrah Mustaqbal al-'Arabiyya*, 89.

Mahfuz wrote his first play, *The China Tree* (*al-Zanzalakht*), in 1963.⁹ It is the first play of a trilogy written between 1963 and 1967, which includes *The Dictator* (*al-Diktatur*), translated into English here, and *Sa’dun the King* (*Sa’dun Malikan*), which was never completed. *The China Tree*, which premiered in Beirut in 1968, five years after it was written, provoked negative responses in his own country and faced opposition by theater institutions and practitioners in Lebanon, which delayed its production. The play appeared in a theatrical landscape which can perhaps best be gauged by an examination of the development of the kinds of works that were being presented at the time at Lebanon’s Baalbeck Theater Festival.

Launched in 1955, the festival was part of a national project to foster the arts that was espoused by the government of Lebanon, a country which had gained its independence only a little more than a decade before. The plays presented by the festival were almost exclusively from the Western repertoire, ranging from classical works to the most contemporary and were performed in French or translated or adapted into *fusha*. The only Lebanese plays staged as part of the festival were folkloric musical plays by the Rahbani brothers, ‘Asi and Mansur. In addition to the Baalbeck festival, two other important institutions were established with the support of Munir Abu Dibs,¹⁰ a Lebanese director who had been educated in Paris and who returned to Lebanon in the late 1950s to take part in the renaissance of Lebanese theater. These institutions, the Modern Institute for Acting (*Ma’had al-Tamthil al-Hadith*) and the Modern Theater Ensemble (*Firqat al-Masrah al-Hadith*), also presented works that were overwhelmingly from the Western repertoire. The Modern Theater Ensemble, for example, offered plays from classic Greek to modern and contemporary dramas that included works by Brecht and dramatists of the Theater of the Absurd. The goal of these institutions was to introduce methodologies in acting and dramaturgy that were being utilized and developed in Western countries. Thus, modernization in Lebanese theater, as Mahfuz noticed, took place through a process

9 *Al-Zanzalakht* was translated to English with the title *The China Tree* by Sharif S. Elmusa and Thomas G. Ezzy. It was published with a short introduction by Salma Khadra Jayyusi in *Modern Arabic Drama, an Anthology*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 21–53.

10 He is described in one history of Lebanese theater as “captivated by the theater, ambitious and emerging from the center of various trends and investigations in European theater, ... and enchanted by the Arabic *fusha*, by its music and celebratory presence.” See Khalida Sa’id, *al-Haraka al-Masrahiyya fi Lubnan* (Beirut: Baalbeck International Festival, Beirut, 1998), 57.

of emulating the Western experience with little concern about the relationship of Western elements to life in Lebanon.¹¹

Simultaneous with these changes in theater and the arts, Arab states had, in the political sphere, almost all come to be ruled by governments that had seized power in coups d'état. Paradoxically, these regimes engendered and helped to expand active political parties with nationalist or leftist ideologies that ultimately, turned against them. The displacement of the Palestinians that had taken place as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 also shaped the political consciousness in the Arab world, especially when the support for the Palestinians was solidified in a political and militant structure through the creation of the Palestinian National Liberation Organization (*Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*). For Mahfuz, who as a child and young man had lived in a town adjacent to the occupied territories, the plight of the Palestinians constituted a stark reality, and he was especially concerned with the increasing political and social tensions that followed the expulsion of Palestinians into Lebanon.¹²

The trilogy composed by Mahfuz in the 1960s was clearly written in reaction to this social and political turmoil. More importantly, these plays, which were written in the language of that reality, constituted a drastic shift from the prevalent dramatic activity of the time, which, as has been described above, was derived from and focused on a Western experience and set of aesthetics that had very little in common with contemporary life in Lebanon and the Arab world. Mahfuz's writing, as he asserts in the introduction to *The China Tree*, moves away from what he called "literary theater" (*masrah adabi*), which drew on "conservative methods," and displayed "intellectual sophistication, rhetoric, oratorical expressions, lyricism, thought [meaning the incorporation of large political ideas], and all that kills actual life in a play."¹³ Moreover, the new formal approaches he created in Lebanese theater offered the basis for further innovations during the 1960s, 1970s and after in a milieu that was already open to engage in dramaturgical experimentation.

Mahfuz gave *The China Tree* to several directors for consideration but was unable to put it on stage until 1968, a year after the June 1967 War, which is commonly known in the Arab world as the *Naksa* (setback). He gave it to Munir Abu Dibs to read, but his commitment to the Baalbeck International Festival, "which tended to the concerns of the bourgeois elite," Mahfuz asserts, prevented him

11 Mahfuz, *al-A'mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 599.

12 Civil strife and instability that had developed in the political and social spheres as a result of the expulsion of Palestinians from Palestine into Lebanon erupted in civil war in 1975.

13 Translated by Salma Khadra Jayyusi in Jayyusi and Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama*, 22.

from taking up the challenge of directing the play despite his recognition of its significance.¹⁴ Both *The China Tree* and *The Dictator* required directors and professional actors willing to work outside the confines of established theatrical institutions. Actor Raymond Jbara left the Modern Theater Ensemble to play Sa’dun in *The China Tree*, as did Antoine Kirbaj and Michelle Nab’a, who played the General and Sa’dun in *The Dictator*. The June 1967 War was key in helping theater professionals see that one of theater’s primary functions was to serve as a mirror of contemporary society. It was a catalyst that allowed the deep-seated desire to establish an “independent” theater with a clear and more authentic Lebanese and Arab identity to be realized. The success of Beirut productions of *The China Tree* in 1968 and *The Dictator* in 1969 nearly tempted Mahfuz to write a final draft of *Sa’dun Malikan*, but the new political atmosphere after the *Naksa* hindered him from such a task because it would, he asserted, have required a revision of the work that he believed would have betrayed or undermined the perspective of the historical moment in which he had originally written it. He asserted that after 1967, the historical moment called for immediate political writing rather than symbolic allusions; nevertheless, these two plays, both of which he wrote before the June 1967 War and both of which utilized symbolic and allegorical elements in lieu of direct reference to particular historical events and figures nevertheless retain their relevance as dramatic portraits of the political sphere in the Arab world.

The Dictator was first produced in Beirut in 1973, and again in 1983, and in Damascus in 1970 at the Second Festival of the Dramatic Arts, where it received the first prize. The 1983 Beirut production, directed by Pierre Abisaab, downplayed the absurdist overtones of the play. Instead of the two characters imagining themselves directing a revolution and communicating with the outside world via a phone whose cord is cut, Abisaab turned it into a more realistic play, with a real revolution taking place outside, and the two characters communicating with participants in it via a phone that is connected. According to Abisaab, his alterations made the work more relevant to the atmosphere outside the theater, in which the Lebanese Civil War was taking place. *The Dictator* was also staged at the Jordan Theater Festival in 2012, which had as its theme “Drama of the Arab Spring,” and was directed by the Jordanian Muhammad Khayr al-Rifa’i. That same year it was staged in Beirut, in a production directed by Lina Abyad, who modified the text by changing the gender of the two characters, the General and Sa’dun, to female. This same production was performed in 2012 in the United Arab Emirates at the Sharjah Theater Festival, where it received the award for “Best Arab Play of 2012” (the Sheikh Sultan Bin Muhammad Al-Qasim

14 Mahfuz, *al-ʿamal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 599.

Prize). More recently, in 2016, it received productions in Saida, a city in southern Lebanon, and in Beirut commemorating the ten-year anniversary of the death of Mahfuz. Both productions were directed by Sahar Assaf, who changed the title of the play back to the original, *The General*. She played Sa'dun alongside Raffi Feghali who played the General. Again, as in Lina Abyad's production of the play, gender was foregrounded in that Sa'dun was played by a female performer. However, at moments in the production, Assaf appeared to step out of character, suddenly speaking in the feminine, which apparently confused the audience since the play on gender was not incorporated throughout the production nor did it appear integral, as it had in Abyad's production, to the creation of the character of Sa'dun. The set suggested a government office, apparently a reference to the Arab Spring as a historical and societal event. In 2016, *The Dictator* was presented as part of the Between the Seas Festival in New York in the English translation presented in this volume.

Despite the play's continuing relevance, its malleability to changing social and political circumstance, and the fact that it did, in part as a result of the June 1967 War, attract attention as both political statement and formal achievement, Mahfuz describes the period in which it was first produced as "a boundary separating two historical moments."¹⁵ As discussed above, these changed historical circumstances prevented Mahfuz from completing *Sa'dun the King (Sa'dun Malikan)*,¹⁶ the third play in the trilogy, because "many of the beliefs that had guided us changed, and it was inevitable that this change was reflected in my dramatic writing. I focused on direct political writing, beginning with the play *The Killing (al-Qatl)*, which commemorated the first anniversary of the June 1967 War in 1968."¹⁷

Throughout his career, Mahfuz was obsessed with the intertwined themes of liberty and justice, which guided much of his writing for the theater. A single character, a hero, who generally symbolizes the struggle for these causes, appears constantly in his plays, as do certain settings in which the struggle for liberty and justice take place, such as trials, either real or imagined. Thus, the trials of personalities such as Socrates, Jesus, al-Hallaj, Galileo, Sirhan Sirhan, Antun Sa'adi and countless others who ultimately paid with their lives or liberty in defense of freedom and justice are dramatized in works by Mahfuz.¹⁸

¹⁵ Mahfuz, *al-A'mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 181.

¹⁶ Jayyyusi and Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 52.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mahfuz recreated eleven seminal trials of world history in a book entitled *n Cases Against Liberty*. Presented in dialogue form, the trials begin with Socrates and Jesus and

The world in which Mahfuz inserts the hero Sa’dun in *The China Tree*, the first play of his trilogy, is infused with despotism and absolute autocracy. Sa’dun is trapped in this Kafkaesque nightmare, the defendant in a trial for a murder that may or may not have even taken place of a woman who it is unclear he even knew. The witnesses who are asked to testify against him appear to know him at times, and then seem not to recognize him at all. A woman who is identified as his mother appears not to know him either. Presiding in court is a judge, not a general. Prior to delivering a death sentence against Sa’dun, the General concludes the trial in an absurd diatribe of absurd catch phrases and terms strung together without verbs or even a semblance of meaningful sentence structure. The following constitutes only part of his statement:

On the basis of the Prosecution’s decision for distinguishing the absurdity of life by honoring the terminology appeal profoundly and justice behavior by Fate the High Court in place and consideration of the liberty to inquire about testimony of any fees liberated to socialism we the conferees in case and because of the people’s solidarity people and masses coming close to the holy battle on the pathways freedom justice the crises situation ...¹⁹

The General and the Clerk then amusedly speculate whether Sa’dun is to die by gunfire, by the guillotine, by hanging, stoning, in a gas chamber, being beheaded, buried alive, etc. The dialogue in the play is disjointed and characters speak in an overlapping manner without actually communicating with one another. Though the world of the play seems hazy, certain constants can be discerned in the characters of Sa’dun and the General. The first is the absolute autocracy and control the General has over this world. The second is Sa’dun’s inability to live in such a world without forging a connection with it based on love. Sa’dun’s dilemma is his inability to forge any connections with any of the people around him. Moreover, he is unable to make sense of his world, which leads him to repeatedly try to escape by knocking on a door that will not open to let him out. The play ends as a nun walks in with a male nurse to announce that it’s time for dinner. We therefore conclude that the characters, who rush out to wash their hands before their meal, are inmates in an asylum. They end their game quite naturally, casting away the characters they were playing, but Sa’dun is incapable of stepping out of character. He has believed the game was real and finds no

end with Sirhan Sirhan. See ‘Isam Mahfuz, *n Qadiyya did al-Hurriya*, (Beirut: Dar al-Quds, 1975).

19 Jayyyusi and Allen, *Modern Arabic Drama*, p. 52.

way to escape his pain except by withdrawing and transforming himself into a china tree, which is cold and bears bitter fruit. In so doing he is unable to move or feel love, and he is carried offstage horizontally, appearing as stiff as a tree, by two male nurses.

The theater of Mahfuz as exemplified in *The China Tree* clearly suggests a significant influence from the Theater of the Absurd and bears similarities with other movements prevalent in the theater and literature of the West around the middle of the twentieth century. Badawi's comments on this first major play by Mahfuz allude to the wide range of Western influences:

Sa'dun's desperate attempt to get access to the inside of the palace, his bewildered helplessness as regards a murder charge leveled against him, and a wealth of sinister and haunting imagery make *The China Tree* a cross between a surrealist, nightmarish variation of the Oedipal situation and a strikingly Kafkaesque brand of "absurdist" drama. The play has many remarkable features, such as its sophisticated technical devices, its stichomythia, its impressive Ionesco-like style of dialogue, and its rich political, psychological, even metaphysical implications. But it is more the work of an elitist Arab intellectual thoroughly at home in the latest Western vogue than a truly Arab play that can appeal to the average Arab reader or audience.²⁰

Other critics noted similarities with Peter Weiss's 1964 *Marat/Sade*, written around the same time as *The China Tree*, in which inmates of an asylum also stage a play, under the direction of Marquis de Sade, about the assassination in 1793 of one of the French Revolution's most fervent radicals, Jean Paul Marat. Weiss's play, unlike Mahfuz's, is grounded in documentary theater, a kind of theater in which Mahfuz began to employ only after having written the plays in the trilogy. Khalida Sa'id also places the play within the tradition of the Theater of the Absurd as represented by Beckett and Ionesco. Madness, according to Sa'id, is a "magical mirror that discloses what lies beyond the social mind, beyond conceptualizations humans have agreed to. When the madmen in *The China Tree* are left unattended, they play a game and reinvent authority. They display bizarre violence and lack of empathy toward each other, but when the nun enters they regroup and become gentle and peaceful again. These opposing states add another dimension of absurdity to the play."²¹

20 Badawi, introduction to *Modern Arabic Drama*, 17.

21 Sa'id, *al-Haraka al-Masrahiyya fi Lubnan*, 477.

While Mahfuz asserted that the theater movement and literary culture he contributed to in Lebanon should be appreciated as an embodiment of world theater and literary movements, he was vehemently opposed to interpretations that removed the trilogy from the immediate political context it portrays, albeit symbolically, i.e., Lebanese and Arab.²² The period during which the trilogy was written, as alluded to earlier, coincided with the spread of coups d'état, most of which were military, that swept Arab nations in reaction to incapacitated regimes or monarchies. The takeover of Palestine by Zionism in 1948 was a catalyst that generated the 1949 coup of General Husni al-Za'im in Syria. Countless others followed in the 1950s and 1960s, most notable of which were in Iraq (1958, 1963, 1968) Syria (1961, 1962, 1963, 1966, 1970), and Egypt (1952), not to mention coups in Algeria, Libya, Sudan and Yemen. In the midst of this upheaval, some Arab states sought to unite, such as Egypt and Syria, which formed the United Arab Republic, a union that lasted from 1958 to 1961.

The establishment of the Arab League, which was ostensibly formed to promote the common interests of Arab nations, often became a forum for expressing disagreements among them. The 1960s also witnessed the creation of a range of leftist political movements and the rise of parties that espoused Nasserist, socialist, and nationalist ideologies. The June 1967 War was, as elaborated before, cataclysmic, and resulted in further annexation of Arab land and a new exodus of Palestinians. Mahfuz obviously drew on this tumultuous political context as background for his trilogy. He wrote that Arab individuals prior to 1967 had willingly or unwillingly ceded their individual freedoms to the regimes that ruled them in the belief that such a sacrifice was ultimately in the national interest and the interest of Arabs more generally. "This acquiescence helped consolidate oppression in the mentality of Arabs on all levels, causing the oppressed to employ oppression on those below them."²³ Sa'dun, who is the principal character in the trilogy, represents the individual at the bottom of this hierarchy. In *The China Tree* he acquiesces to the game of power.

In the second play, *The Dictator*, Sa'dun attempts to escape this game by becoming an aide to the General leading a revolution, or coup. This play also ends in a form of Sa'dun's sacrificial death. In the third play, *Sa'dun the King (Sa'dun Malikan)*, which was never completed, Mahfuz envisaged Sa'dun alone on stage held in a room locked by two doors, one on the "Right," which he had himself locked from inside to stop those knocking outside from breaking in, and another on the "Left," locked from outside and through which he wishes to escape.

22 Mahfuz, *al-A'mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 182.

23 Ibid., 183.

In the planned ending to the play, Sa'dun is trapped in this purgatorial world, unable to escape.

According to Mahfuz, Sa'dun is the character who most directly expresses the author's own convictions and psyche.²⁴ He describes Sa'dun as "a person in search of love, freedom and justice who became too involved in the game. He decided to sacrifice himself, that is, assuming sacrifice is capable of creating the society of his dreams. In the end, Sa'dun presents the eternal conflict that exists between the personal [interest] and the general [interest], between materialism and spirituality."²⁵ Mahfuz adds, however, that Sa'dun's mistake is that he is unable to consider that to struggle to reach an end is an end in itself, "I stand by the desires of Sa'dun but I am opposed to his final despair."²⁶ One could argue that this dialectical relationship between the author and his character ultimately allows Sa'dun to develop into an individual who more keenly desires freedom. Although superficially he may appear to be an anti-hero, he begins to acquire characteristics of a revolutionary leader. These facets of character are the ones Mahfuz would develop later in other characters in plays and other works that were markedly more realistic than those in the trilogy that he authored in the aftermath of the June 1967 War. Sa'dun, in *The Dictator*, is more attuned to his political surroundings than in the previous play. The absurd and frightening ambience in which he finds himself mirrors the actual one in which both viewers and authorities found themselves and from which they could likewise not escape.

The play was not approved for performance by censors until some sections were omitted and the title was changed from *The General* to *The Dictator*. Authorities clearly believed Sa'dun was an allusion to Antun Sa'adi, founder of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, who called for a revolution in Lebanon in 1949, and they believed the General alluded to the president of Lebanon at that time, General Fu'ad Shihab. Almost immediately after he called for a revolution, Sa'adi was captured, tried and executed, all in less than forty-eight hours. *The China Tree* was also believed by some critics to have similar allusions,²⁷ although other readings interpreted Sa'dun's condition as that of "all citizens and victims in Arab societies" whose madhouse was "(...) the Arab world in its entirety."²⁸

24 Mahfuz, *al-A'mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 540.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Mahfuz, *al-A'mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 184.

28 Ibid.

The Dictator condenses the world of Sa’dun to a single room he shares with his master and savior, the General, who is under the illusion that he is leading a revolution or a coup d’état to overthrow the King. Sa’dun and the General are inexplicably locked in the room they occupy and follow news about the revolution outside through phone calls they receive. They can neither leave nor can they make calls using the telephone they have, whose cord, ironically, is visibly cut. The setting is obviously illogical from the onset. The room is empty except for some broken pieces of furniture and an old ladder. Through a mirror with a frame containing a few remaining shards of broken glass, the General attempts to admire himself and insure himself of his stature. Obviously, a shattered mirror is only capable of portraying a Picasso-like reality. The play opens by dramatizing a power game played by the characters as Sa’dun kneels to put boots on the General’s foot. Sa’dun has bought them with the few piasters the General’s mother has sent to pay for the room’s rent.

The concept of “game” extends itself well beyond the sphere of power and finds manifestations on multiple levels in the play. It is conceptually embedded in the plot itself, for if we are to believe that these characters are playing the game of staging a revolution that will bring them salvation, their game is not supposed to end until it reaches its goal. That goal, the capture of the king, has been established early in the play by the General. But within the logic of the play and the world in which it evolves only two characters are ever seen, the General and Sa’dun. Understandably, Sa’dun slowly turns into the King, surrendering himself to the General and to his fateful death. He dies, or acts as if he dies, believing himself to be a savior of the world, which the General admits in the final words of the play “doesn’t want to be saved.”

On a more direct level, the two characters often play actual games with each other such as the game of names in which the General directs Sa’dun to choose names, which he rejects or accepts based on various rules he imposes. Sa’dun first chooses his own name, which is rejected. His second choice is Nayrun, i.e., Nero, which seems to allude to the General and demagoguery more generally, and which rhymes with Sa’dun. The General imposes a new rule—no names that follow the pattern *fa’lun*. Sa’dun chooses as the next word the grammatical pattern *fa’lan*, which the General rejects because it is not a name per se. They complete the game with names that are complex puns which they generate from verbs meaning “grateful,” or “thankful,” for example, which sometimes simultaneously refer to important groups from Arab history. Finally Sa’dun generates a non-existent name *na’san*, meaning “sleepy,” yawns and ends the game. Since these sorts of complex puns are difficult to render in English, we elected to give a sense of the game by finding suggestive equivalents in Latin.

Another direct game they play is one which concludes Act I and brings Sa'dun to the realization that the General's revolution will not save him. It foreshadows Sa'dun's later transformation into the King:

SA'DUN: ... What do we do now?

THE GENERAL: We wait for the King.

SA'DUN: Wait for the King?

THE GENERAL: Wait for the King.

SA'DUN: Let's play the game of the bee and bumble bee. I carry you, then you carry me.

THE GENERAL: You go first. (*Sa'dun carries The General on his back. They are back to back*)

SA'DUN: Your turn.

THE GENERAL: (*Angrily*) Whose turn, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: My turn. (*The curtain closes while The General is on Sa'dun's back looking at the audience with a wicked smile on his face*)

Sa'dun's transformation has justifications beyond the need to end a futile game since the King he imagines is not the despotic ruler the General seeks to overthrow. He imagines the King smiling, crying in empathy with a child who has lost a ball, and laughs when he listens to politicians' speeches. At other times the image of the Messiah, who is king and savior, is evoked. The General gives orders on the telephone that all his adversaries be killed—members of the cabinet, parliament, political parties. Even people's thoughts, he says, should be seized. Sa'dun objects and makes one of several allusions to the Messiah as a revolutionary hero who changed the world with love.

SA'DUN: What if they didn't do anything wrong?

THE GENERAL: Who?

SA'DUN: Your adversaries.

THE GENERAL: (*Correcting.*) *Our* adversaries. The loser is always wrong.

SA'DUN: That's true, but ...

THE GENERAL: But what?

SA'DUN: The Nazarene ...

THE GENERAL: Which Nazarene?

SA'DUN: The one who was crucified.

THE GENERAL: They crucified him.

SA'DUN: But he didn't lose.

THE GENERAL: If he comes back he will certainly lose, unless ...

SA'DUN: Unless what?

THE GENERAL: Unless he disguises himself in a uniform like mine.

The first play Mahfuz wrote after *The Dictator* was *The Killing (al-Qatl)*, which he composed in 1968 to commemorate the first anniversary of the June 1967 War.²⁹ Mahfuz asserted that after the 1967 debacle, Arab society had entered a new and entirely distinct historical period. The play, which recreates the seizure of Palestine in 1948 based on documentation of the roles of various Arab and Western states, was censored and not allowed to be produced. This new style of dramatic writing that Mahfuz used for its creation, which he refers to as *al-masrah al-tasjili*,³⁰ i.e., documentary theater, is also employed in his next play, another politically charged drama entitled *Why Sirhan Sirhan Denied What Faraj Allah al-Hilu Said About the Leader in Pub 71 (Limadha Rafada Sirhan Sirhan ma Qalah Faraj Allah al-Hilu 'an al-Za'im fi Stiryu 71)*. In it, Mahfuz recreates the stories of Sirhan, who killed Robert Kennedy, ostensibly for aiding Israel militarily; Faraj Allah al-Hilu, a leader of the Lebanese Syrian Communist party who was seized by the Syrian regime and killed under torture in 1959; and Antun Sa'adi, killed by the Lebanese government under the presidency of General Shihab in 1949. Constructed as a play-within-a-play, the stories of these characters are played by patrons of a pub in Beirut in 1971, highlighting the ironic divergence between the three characters who sacrificed their lives and liberty for the sake of their causes, and the heedlessness of patrons. *Limadha* combines the allegorical with the documentary in that all of these stories have at their core the larger question of the Palestinians. It also draws on the *ta'ziya* tradition, which recreates the killing of al-Husayn, and connects performance with memory in a new and equally relevant context. In this case the contemporary context that is presciently dramatized is political heedlessness, which in Lebanon erupted in a civil war that began only four years later.

Mahfuz's writing for the theater lasted for a little more than a decade, but as evidenced by recent and continuing productions in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Arab world and in Arabic and English, his plays continue to speak to the current Arab world. In 1975, after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, he stopped writing for the theater after having come to the alarming conclusion that theater, in such a context, could not affect change and a new medium of expression needed to be found. From then on, through his Saturday column in *al-Nahar* newspaper, he discovered a direct, continuous means of

29 Mahfuz, *al-A'mal al-Masrahiyya al-Kamila*, 181.

30 Ibid., 333.

communication and dialogue that helped to shape intellectual and political life in Lebanon. Mahfuz's works published in book form, many of which are collections of individual essays or works he had already published in *al-Nahar* or elsewhere, gives a sense of his artistic and intellectual stature and influence in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Arab world, and of the prodigious breadth of his writing, which includes political essays, critical writings and various forms of creative literary production.



FIGURE 1.1

Sahar Assaf as Sa'dun and Raffi Feghali as The General in *The Dictator*, by 'Isam Mahfuz. Performance at Monnot Theater, Beirut, 2017, directed by Sahar Assaf.

IMAGE COURTESY OF SAHAR ASSAF. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXY FRANGIEH.

The Dictator

Isam Mahfuz

(Translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab)

Act One

The set: A room which is empty except for some broken pieces of furniture and utensils on a table in the corner, an old ladder, a mirror with a few pieces of glass at the edge of the frame and a telephone with a cord that is cut.

(The General is sitting in a chair alone with his eyes on the door)

THE GENERAL: *(Calling out in a voice that sounds tired, as if he has been calling for a long time)* Sa'dun ... Sa'dun ... Sa'dun ... When I get my hands on you I'm going to hang you upside down. *(Silence)* How dare you run away from me? Aren't you afraid? The whole world is afraid of me. If the world still exists, it exists because of me. It's afraid because of me Sa'dun. Sa'dun ... *(The door opens suddenly and Sa'dun enters carrying a pair of boots)*

SA'DUN: Yes, my General.

THE GENERAL: *(Softly)* Where were you, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: I bought the boots for you.

THE GENERAL: What took you so long?

SA'DUN: Look, boots fit for a king.

THE GENERAL: Fit for a king?

SA'DUN: Sorry, for a general.

THE GENERAL: Good for you, Sa'dun. You brought salvation to the world, you brought the boots.

SA'DUN: Long live the General. *(He kneels)* Give me your foot. *(He takes the General's right foot)*

THE GENERAL: (*Shouts*) The right, Sa'dun? (*He pulls his right foot away and extends his left*) One should always start with the left. (*Sa'dun puts the General's left foot in the boot*)

SA'DUN: Does it fit?

THE GENERAL: It's hard.

SA'DUN: Of course it's hard. You're hard. (*Sa'dun puts the other boot on the right foot*) How's that?

THE GENERAL: Ouch! My toe hurts. (*He kicks Sa'dun onto the ground. He looks at the boot*) Shine it, Sa'dun. (*Sa'dun gets up and kneels over the boots, shining them with his sleeve*) Can you see yourself in them?

SA'DUN: Yes, my General. I see my face pale with hunger. We haven't eaten for two days. Instead of buying bread we bought boots.

THE GENERAL: Freedom is more important than bread.

SA'DUN: What freedom? If one of us leaves, the other one has to stay here as a hostage. We haven't paid rent for two months. Instead of buying our freedom with the two piasters your mother sent, we bought boots.

THE GENERAL: One needs boots to knock on the doors of freedom.

SA'DUN: I understand, my friend.

THE GENERAL: Your friend?

SA'DUN: My master!

THE GENERAL: Your master?

SA'DUN: My boss!

THE GENERAL: Your boss?

SA'DUN: (*Thinking*) My General.

THE GENERAL: Shine my boots. (*Sa'dun kneels and shines the boots with his sleeve. The sound of a cannon can be heard. The General rises suddenly*) Did you hear that?

SA'DUN: I did.

THE GENERAL: A cannon.

SA'DUN: A long way off.

THE GENERAL: That's a cannon. A cannon. The whole world heard it.

SA'DUN: The world's hard of hearing, my General.

THE GENERAL: Especially your friends.

SA'DUN: I have no friends. You're my only friend.

THE GENERAL: Don't get casual with me. Get up and hang the map on the wall. (*Sa'dun hangs the map on the wall in a place he is apparently used to hanging it*) How far have they advanced?

SA'DUN: The last we heard they were at the gates of 'Ishtar.

THE GENERAL: Mark it with a pin.

SA'DUN: I have no pins. (*The General takes a pin off the collar of his jacket just as a tailor would. Sa'dun takes the pin and sticks it somewhere on the map*) I've marked it.

THE GENERAL: Good for you. Mark all the states that have fallen. (*He gives Sa'dun a few pins*)

SA'DUN: The State of Murjan. (*He sticks a pin in*) The State of Rihan. (*He sticks a pin in and hesitates*)

THE GENERAL: You forgot the state of Ansar.

SA'DUN: The state of Ansar. (*He puts a pin in*)

THE GENERAL: How many more?

SA'DUN: (*Counting*) Four, plus the capital.

THE GENERAL: If the capital falls all the other states will.

SA'DUN: Oh, if only the capital would fall, if only the capital would fall, my General.

(The General walks towards the mirror. He looks at himself in the mirror)

THE GENERAL: (*Suddenly*) The cap. (*He looks at Sa'dun*) The cap, Sa'dun, didn't you have anything left to buy the cap with?

SA'DUN: One *lira*.

THE GENERAL: Give it to me.

SA'DUN: I bought chocolate.

THE GENERAL: Chocolate? Hand it over. (*Sa'dun takes out a few pieces of chocolate from his pocket and gives them to the General*)

SA'DUN: Give me one.

THE GENERAL: No. That will teach you not to be late when I send you on a mission.

SA'DUN: I've learned my lesson.

THE GENERAL: And it will teach you not to take a nap every afternoon.

SA'DUN: Ah, sleep, how sweet sleep is, my General. Sleep. Last time was in front of the King's palace. There was a huge commotion, dancing and singing. The King's daughter appeared in the window. She saw me. I waved to her. She laughed. She disappeared and came back with a rope, a long rope knotted with flowers. I climbed the rope and was near the window. Then you shook me.

THE GENERAL: So that you'd answer the phone. It rang twice. You were asleep though your eyes were open. (*Suddenly*) Did you search the room?

SA'DUN: Of course, as I do every day.

THE GENERAL: Your top button is shiny.

SA'DUN: Because I've been rubbing it a lot.

THE GENERAL: Maybe they switched a microphone for it at the cleaners.

SA'DUN: I haven't changed my shirt in two months.

THE GENERAL: Two months?

SA'DUN: Since the beginning of the coup.

THE GENERAL: The revolution.

SA'DUN: Sorry. The revolution.

THE GENERAL: What about the door?

SA'DUN: It's locked.

THE GENERAL: Open it and lock it again. (*Sa'dun opens the door and relocks it*)
What about the window?

SA'DUN: Thank God, we don't have any windows.

THE GENERAL: The revolution is our only window.

SA'DUN: Long live the revolution.

THE GENERAL: So you believe in it?

SA'DUN: The revolution?

THE GENERAL: No, the King. The King who deceived you?

SA'DUN: Deceived me?

THE GENERAL: Of course he deceived you. He deceived everybody. If people get hungry he throws biscuits to them. If they get bored, radios, televisions, refrigerators and cars. He ties their hands with payments. And they think they're free, the dogs! Of course they're free. Free to bark, free to eat the leavings from the table. I came to save them, the dogs.

SA'DUN: You're a magician, boss.

THE GENERAL: Of course I'm a magician.

SA'DUN: In the *Thousand and One Nights* when the magician became angry with someone he changed him into a beast or vice versa.

THE GENERAL: Back to the *Thousand and One Nights* again.

SA'DUN: Its stories are beautiful, my General.

THE GENERAL: What a waste, the time and effort I spent on you. (*Sternly*)
Sa'dun, you're fired.

SA'DUN: Boss!

THE GENERAL: Your boss?

SA'DUN: My General.

THE GENERAL: You're fired, discharged from service. Take your stuff and leave.

(Sa'dun walks to the bag in which he keeps his things and puts it on his back. He walks toward the door, and then turns toward the General)

SA'DUN: Don't desert me, my General. Did you forget that you saved me?

THE GENERAL: Of course I saved you.

SA'DUN: Then save me again, please save me! If you leave me they'll eat me alive.

THE GENERAL: Save you from whom?

SA'DUN: People.

THE GENERAL: Which people?

SA'DUN: All people.

THE GENERAL: Write their names for me.

SA'DUN: All of them?

THE GENERAL: All of them.

SA'DUN: Is that possible?

THE GENERAL: A nice game.

SA'DUN: Which game?

THE GENERAL: The game of names. Come, let's play it.³¹

SA'DUN: How?

THE GENERAL: Say the first name that comes to your mind.

SA'DUN: Sa'dun.

THE GENERAL: That's your name. Find a name of someone else.

31 The "game of names" is a very complex game that utilizes puns and characters to think of proper and made-up names derived from the Arabic trilateral root system. The General is first displeased at Sa'dun's use of his own name and asks him to change it. Sa'dun thinks of a name that rhymes with it, Nayrun, i.e. Nero. The General is again displeased at Sa'dun's indirect reference to the General's demagoguery and requests that Sa'dun find names that, instead of *fa'lun*, sound like *fa'lan*. Both of these are not names but grammatical patterns of nouns with a specific succession of vowels and consonants. Since a literal translation of the names cannot render the game's linguistic and semantic sophistication nor can it deliver its humorous character, we opted to utilize Latin, which in our translation, mirrors Mahfuz's use of noun patterns in *fusha*. The names we created bear a resemblance to the meaning of the names in the original Arabic. The footnotes below give the original Arabic for further reference.

SA'DUN: Nero.³²

THE GENERAL: Your names always rhyme with "hero."³³ Change.

SA'DUN: Natus.³⁴

THE GENERAL: Is that a name?

SA'DUN: Gratus.³⁵

THE GENERAL: Bravo.

SA'DUN: Your turn.

THE GENERAL: (*Thinking*) Pacificus.³⁶

SA'DUN: Beatus.³⁷

THE GENERAL: Aridus.³⁸

SA'DUN: Tractus.³⁹

THE GENERAL: Receptus.⁴⁰

SA'DUN: Lassus.⁴¹

32 Nayrun.

33 Your names always follow *fa'lun*.

34 *Fa'lan*.

35 Hamdan, which is a proper name meaning "thankful".

36 Salman, which is a proper name meaning "peaceful" or "passive".

37 'Adnan, a name of a historic Arab tribe which is also derived from the root *'dn*, which means "bliss".

38 Qahtan, a name of a historic tribe which is also derived from the root *qht*, which means "aridness".

39 Sahban, an adjective, not a proper noun, referring to someone who is dragging or being dragged along.

40 Qablan, an adjective, not a proper noun, referring to someone who is accepting or acquiescent.

41 Ta'ban, an adjective meaning "tired".

THE GENERAL: Taediosus.⁴²

SA'DUN: (*Yawning*) Somnolentus.⁴³ (*The phone rings. Sa'dun picks it up*) Hello, this is the General's summer palace. Who? Masrur? Yes. (*To the General*) This is Masrur, my General. The rebels are tired because the siege has taken so long.

THE GENERAL: Tired? The bastards, the traitors! Do they think revolution is a game? The eyes of the world are watching them. Tell him to bribe them with whiskey. The King's palaces are full of whiskey, caviar and cigars.

SA'DUN: And dollars.

THE GENERAL: Don't embellish. Give him the message.

SA'DUN: (*On the phone*) The King's palaces are full of whiskey, caviar and cigars.

THE GENERAL: And cars and television sets.

SA'DUN: And shirts and underwear. He hung up. Masrur hung up, my General.

THE GENERAL: You're fired. Get your stuff and leave.

(The same game, Sa'dun at the door with his bag)

SA'DUN: I'm your only servant.

THE GENERAL: My only servant? The world is 99.9 per cent full of servants.

SA'DUN: I served you loyally.

THE GENERAL: Discipline comes before loyalty.

(Sa'dun tries to open the door but then turns towards the General)

SA'DUN: What about the telephone?

42 Zahqan, an adjective meaning "bored".

43 Na'san, an adjective meaning "sleepy".

THE GENERAL: The telephone. Ah, yes, the telephone.

SA'DUN: This is the last time, my General. Forgive me. (*He approaches the General and kisses his hand*)

THE GENERAL: Oh, for shame. There's no need for that, Sa'dun. (*He gives him his other hand and Sa'dun kisses it*) I'm kind and humble.

SA'DUN: Just like the King.

THE GENERAL: The King? Do you think the King is kind and humble?

SA'DUN: That's what people say.

THE GENERAL: Have you met him?

SA'DUN: I've seen his picture.

THE GENERAL: How does he look?

SA'DUN: Not bad.

THE GENERAL: Like whom?

SA'DUN: Like you.

THE GENERAL: Stop kidding. Is he tall?

SA'DUN: Maybe.

THE GENERAL: What do you mean maybe? What about the picture?

SA'DUN: He was sitting in the picture.

THE GENERAL: Sitting? Where?

SA'DUN: In the middle. The Queen was standing, and his daughters were around him. The youngest girl was in his lap, and he was smiling,

THE GENERAL: How impolite. Did he have dimples?

SA'DUN: Dimples?

THE GENERAL: Did you forget?

SA'DUN: I spoke about dimples?

THE GENERAL: Yesterday.

SA'DUN: Maybe.

THE GENERAL: Maybe? Don't you remember?

SA'DUN: Of course, the dimples, dimples like yours.

THE GENERAL: God rest her soul, she used to love my dimples.

(Silence)

SA'DUN: Are you thirsty?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: Hungry?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: It doesn't matter, we have nothing left to eat.

THE GENERAL: The boots.

SA'DUN: What about them.

THE GENERAL: Polish them.

SA'DUN: Yes, sir. *(He bends down in front of the General's feet and spits on his boots to shine them. The General kicks Sa'dun, causing him to fall on his back)*

THE GENERAL: You spit on the boots?

SA'DUN: I spat to shine them.

THE GENERAL: On the boots, Sa'dun? (*Sa'dun puts his bag on his back and walks toward the door*) And the revolution?

SA'DUN: Right, the revolution. (*Sa'dun puts down his bag*)

THE GENERAL: They're late. My men are late.

SA'DUN: Maybe he bought them.

THE GENERAL: Bought them?

SA'DUN: With biscuits and chocolate.

THE GENERAL: Is it possible they sold me out for chocolate?

SA'DUN: They'd sell you out for a lot less, my General. Peter sold the Messiah out for supper.

THE GENERAL: Back to the Messiah!

SA'DUN: Thank God for your mother. If it weren't for her help from time to time we'd have died of hunger.

THE GENERAL: And the revolution would've stopped.

SA'DUN: That would be the end of the world.

THE GENERAL: And I'd have had no boots.

SA'DUN: May God be praised for that.

THE GENERAL: What, my mother?

SA'DUN: No, the boots.

THE GENERAL: Imagine me appearing in front of my men without boots!

SA'DUN: That would be scandalous.

THE GENERAL: Especially since the King ...

(The phone rings)

SA'DUN: *(On the phone)* Hello, Masrur. Yes, the capital, my General, the capital has fallen and the tanks are in the palace grounds. Masrur wants to talk to you in person. *(The General jumps up to take the phone but then he backs away)* Go ahead, say something. The General is busy. Who am I? I'm his right hand. No, I don't lick his boots, I polish them. Hello. Hello. Masrur hung up, my General.

THE GENERAL: *(Angry)* Call him back.

SA'DUN: How? You know this telephone only receives calls.

THE GENERAL: He hung up. He really did that, the traitor?

SA'DUN: *(Happy)* The capital fell, my General.

THE GENERAL: It's about time.

SA'DUN: Does that mean we won?

THE GENERAL: Of course we won. Did you ever doubt we would?

SA'DUN: Never, my General.

THE GENERAL: Bravo. Take a piece of chocolate. *(He throws Sa'dun a piece of chocolate and paces back and forth. He then stands in front of the mirror looking at his own reflection)*

SA'DUN: I'm happy, my General.

THE GENERAL: *(To himself)* Can it be true?

SA'DUN: Of course it's true, my General. I heard it with my own ears.

THE GENERAL: It's true. He's my Mas'ud. I raised him myself.

SA'DUN: It's Masrur, my General, Masrur. Like the executioner in the *Thousand and One Nights*.

THE GENERAL: Who?

SA'DUN: His name is the same as the executioner of King Shahrayar.

THE GENERAL: Back to the *Thousand and One Nights*. (*Sa'dun picks up his bag and stands by the door waiting before the General speaks*) You're fired. Discharged. Pick up your stuff and leave. I can't stand you anymore.

SA'DUN: Do you need anything before I leave?

(The General looks around)

THE GENERAL: The Marshal's baton, where's the Marshal's baton?

(Sa'dun puts his bag down on the floor and begins to search for the baton)

SA'DUN: Where did you last give your speech?

THE GENERAL: On the ladder. (*Sa'dun goes towards the ladder and finds the baton. He brings it to the General who holds it in front of the mirror and begins to wave it*) Was the King taller than me, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: Probably two inches taller.

(The General tries to stand up on his toes)

THE GENERAL: How do you know?

SA'DUN: From the picture. The picture of the King with the little girl sticking her tongue out.

THE GENERAL: Who was she sticking her tongue out at?

SA'DUN: Perhaps the photographer.

THE GENERAL: Why the photographer?

SA'DUN: Or the people.

THE GENERAL: Which people?

SA'DUN: The people at the photo shoot.

THE GENERAL: Were you among them?

SA'DUN: General!

THE GENERAL: Well, how did you know then that there were people at the photo shoot?

SA'DUN: I imagined it.

THE GENERAL: Your imagination is very accurate, Sa'dun. Sticking out her tongue at people, he says. The daughter of a King. How shameful!

SA'DUN: She's young, my General, young and thoughtless.

THE GENERAL: Are you in love with her?

SA'DUN: Me, in love with the King's daughter? A wretch such as myself! I'm the General's servant. Long live the General.

THE GENERAL: Bravo. (*He gives Sa'dun a piece of chocolate*) And the King was laughing?

SA'DUN: He was smiling.

THE GENERAL: And?

SA'DUN: I'm tired.

THE GENERAL: Tired!

SA'DUN: Tired and sleepy.

THE GENERAL: The capital has fallen and the revolution has succeeded and you're sleepy. Sa'dun, you're ...

SA'DUN: (*Interrupting*) ... discharged from service, fired.

THE GENERAL: Sa'dun!

SA'DUN: I thought ...

THE GENERAL: Don't think.

SA'DUN: I meant.

THE GENERAL: Don't mean. Execute my orders. Mean what I mean. Think what I think. Understood?

SA'DUN: Understood.

THE GENERAL: Who's greater than I am?

SA'DUN: No one, my General.

THE GENERAL: Who's taller than I am? (*He stands on his toes*)

SA'DUN: No one, my General.

THE GENERAL: Who suffered more than I did?

SA'DUN: I did, my General.

THE GENERAL: That's correct. Bring a pen and paper. (*Sa'dun brings a pen and paper. He squats on his heels and puts the paper on a piece of cardboard between his knees. The General climbs two steps up on the ladder*) Declaration number one. Write!

SA'DUN: (*Writing*) Declaration number one.

THE GENERAL: Fellow citizens, wretched of this new world.

SA'DUN: Wretched of this new world.

THE GENERAL: You who seek salvation.

SA'DUN: You from whom salvation is sought.

THE GENERAL: You who think about life.

SA'DUN: You who do not think.

THE GENERAL: You who do that of which you do not speak.

SA'DUN: You who speak of that which you do not do.

THE GENERAL: You who've toiled endlessly for nothing.

SA'DUN: But nothing.

THE GENERAL: (*Suddenly*) Sa'dun, your words are different from mine.

SA'DUN: No, my General, your words are my words.

THE GENERAL: Bravo! Write! You who reap the sins of your fathers.

SA'DUN: Reap and reap and reap.

THE GENERAL: You who dine on your fathers' acceptance.

SA'DUN: And it sticks in your craw.

THE GENERAL: You who drink your fathers' illusions.

SA'DUN: They stick in your craw.

THE GENERAL: You who die for the King.

SA'DUN: You who die.

THE GENERAL: You who are deceived, miserable and wretched, my friends and beloved ones.

(The phone rings. Sa'dun rushes to pick up the receiver)

SA'DUN: Hello! Who? Masrur! It's Masrur, my General.

THE GENERAL: Ask him about the King.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Where's the King, Masrur? Yes. (*To the General*) Masrur says the King has fled, my General.

THE GENERAL: Tell them to rip the King's pictures from the walls, the squares, the houses, the shops, the public and private places.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Rip the King's pictures from everywhere. Yes, (*To the General*) Masrur says the orders were given and the pictures were seized, my General, but they were put up again. They seized them again, but they were put up one more time. They kept ripping them down, but the pictures kept reappearing like magic until the soldiers finally started to cry.

THE GENERAL: Forget about magic. Put a soldier in front of every house and tell him to do battle with the pictures and go find the King.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Attack the pictures. Go find the King. Long live the revolution.

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution. (*Sa'dun hangs up. The General paces nervously. He stands in front of the mirror*) Pictures! The people, those dogs, they love pictures.

SA'DUN: (*Approaches the General*) Speaking of pictures, your image in the mirror is wonderful, my General.

THE GENERAL: (*Rises suddenly, dismayed*) The most dangerous thing in the world is pictures. Where are we with the declaration?

(*Sa'dun goes back to his papers*)

SA'DUN: (*He reads*) Friends, loved ones!

THE GENERAL: Tear up the paper. The declaration needs to be tougher.

SA'DUN: Why not just start from "Friends, loved ones?"

THE GENERAL: No. Being casual from the beginning is a dangerous thing.

SA'DUN: That's a good strategy.

THE GENERAL: It's an old strategy.

SA'DUN: Alright. Why don't we just flip the sentence around: Loved ones, friends?

THE GENERAL: Never begin with "love."

SA'DUN: But had it not been for our love of the world ...

THE GENERAL: (*He interrupts*) Love? Of course, love. But what matters is how you express yourself.

SA'DUN: All those who changed the world showed love.

THE GENERAL: The world changed more than it should have, Sa'dun. Write!

(*Sa'dun prepares to write. The telephone rings*)

SA'DUN: (*On the phone*) Hello, Masrur ... Yes ... (*To the General*) Masrur is awaiting orders, my General.

THE GENERAL: Decree number one: One color and cut of clothes for everyone, women and men.

SA'DUN: Which color? Red, my General?

THE GENERAL: No. Red is passé.

SA'DUN: What about black?

THE GENERAL: I'm against black.

SA'DUN: Yellow?

THE GENERAL: It's the color of disease.

SA'DUN: Blue?

THE GENERAL: The color of the heavens! I'm a general, Sa'dun.

SA'DUN: Purple, my General. Purple.

THE GENERAL: Purple! Excellent. Purple.

SA'DUN: Decree number one: Make purple a universal color for everyone.

THE GENERAL: Decree number two: Nationalize emotions for the good of the state.

SA'DUN: Nationalize emotions for the good of the state.

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution.

SA'DUN: Long live the General. (*Sa'dun hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: The idea of purple was wonderful. How did you come up with it?

SA'DUN: I remembered the color of the dress of the King's little girl.

THE GENERAL: Ah women. They're the source of evil in the world. Money and women. We should make that universal ...

SA'DUN: (*Interrupting*) You apparently haven't experienced love, my General?

THE GENERAL: Love! You say love. If I asked you what the cause of people's misery is, Sa'dun? What would you answer?

SA'DUN: Poverty maybe.

THE GENERAL: I've known many who were rich and miserable.

SA'DUN: Freedom?

THE GENERAL: I've known many who were free and miserable.

SA'DUN: Then you tell me.

THE GENERAL: The reason is ... (*He points to his heart*)

SA'DUN: The heart? (*The telephone rings. On the phone*) Hello ... Yes ... It's Masrur, my General. They captured the royal family.

THE GENERAL: And the King?

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) And the King? Yes. (*To the General*) He's escaped, my General. It's as if the earth split open and swallowed him.

THE GENERAL: Turn the earth upside down and find him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Turn the earth ... Yes ... (*To the General*) Masrur says it's not a good time to turn the earth, my General, because the crops haven't been harvested yet.

THE GENERAL: Then turn the season.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Turn the season. Long live the revolution. (*He hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution.

SA'DUN: Speaking of love, my General.

THE GENERAL: Love ... (*The telephone rings*)

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hello ... Yes ... (*To the General*) Masrur is asking for instructions about members of the government and the prime minister.

THE GENERAL: Hang him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hang him ... Yes ... (*To the General*) On what charge, my General?

THE GENERAL: On the charge of governing.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) On the charge of governing. Yes ... (*To the General*) And the finance minister?

THE GENERAL: On financial charges.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) On financial charges ... Yes ... (*To the General*) And the secretary of justice, my General?

THE GENERAL: On judicial charges.

SA'DUN: Why is justice a crime?

THE GENERAL: I'm not discussing it.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) No discussion. Hang him on judicial charges. (*To the General*) The communications minister?

THE GENERAL: Hang him for communications.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hang him for communications. (*To the General*) The minister of education?

THE GENERAL: Hang all the ministers for communications.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hang all the ministers for communications. Yes. (*To the General*) What about the members of parliament, my General?

THE GENERAL: Have them issue a proclamation unanimously supporting the revolution.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Tell them they will unanimously support the revolution.

THE GENERAL: And the King. They must arrest the King.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Don't forget about the King! Long live the revolution. (*Sa'dun hangs up*) The King. The King.

THE GENERAL: It's not time for the King yet.

SA'DUN: Ah, time, time. I always imagined time as a monster with canine teeth as big as a minaret who eats a thousand men for breakfast and two thousand for supper.

THE GENERAL: Why two thousand for supper?

SA'DUN: A heavy supper is good for sleep. When I find it difficult to sleep, my General ... (*The phone rings. Sa'dun speaks into the phone*) Hello, yes. (*To the General*) It's Masrur, my General. The members of parliament support the revolution by a vast majority, all except one.

THE GENERAL: I said unanimously and I mean unanimously. Seize the parliament, arrest all of them.

SA'DUN: But, my General, it's only one vote.

THE GENERAL: That one vote is more dangerous than all the rest. Close the House of Parliament.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) The General orders the seizure of Parliament.

THE GENERAL: Put the members in cages and parade them in the public square.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Put the members in cages in the public square.

THE GENERAL: Let the people have a good look at them.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Let the people have a look at them.

THE GENERAL: Obtain a declaration from the people saying they support the revolution.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) The unanimous support of the people is required. Long live the revolution. (*Sa'dun hangs up*) In cages, like animals. (*He laughs*)

THE GENERAL: Political animals.

SA'DUN: Who?

THE GENERAL: Your adversaries.

SA'DUN: Our adversaries.

THE GENERAL: Predatory animals with big appetites and bad teeth. (*The General goes to the mirror and looks at his good teeth. He smiles*)

SA'DUN: Do you think what we did was right, my General?

THE GENERAL: (*Rising*) If we're good people then our deeds are always right. Are we good people or bad people?

SA'DUN: Good people, of course. (*The phone rings. Into the phone*) Hello, yes. (*To the General*) It's Masrur, my General. He says the political parties opposed ...

THE GENERAL: Suspend all the parties. Arrest their members. Destroy their houses. Seize their thoughts.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Arrest the parties. Seize their thoughts.

THE GENERAL: Hang the leaders. Seize their thoughts.

SA'DUN: Hang the leaders of the parties. Long live the revolution.

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution.

(*Sa'dun hangs up*)

SA'DUN: What if they didn't do anything wrong?

THE GENERAL: Who?

SA'DUN: Your adversaries.

THE GENERAL: (*Correcting*) *Our* adversaries. The loser is always wrong.

SA'DUN: That's true, but ...

THE GENERAL: But what?

SA'DUN: The Nazarene ...

THE GENERAL: Which Nazarene?

SA'DUN: The one who was crucified.

THE GENERAL: They crucified him.

SA'DUN: But he didn't lose.

THE GENERAL: If he comes back he will certainly lose, unless ...

SA'DUN: Unless what?

THE GENERAL: Unless he disguises himself in a uniform like mine.

SA'DUN: Your uniform is our savior, my General. Allow me to kiss its buttons.
(*Sa'dun rushes to kiss the brass buttons of the General's uniform*)

THE GENERAL: You missed the bottom button.

SA'DUN: The top and the bottom. Oh, we've done it, my General. I feel like I'm
in a dream. Who would have believed it? We were lost.

THE GENERAL: You were lost.

SA'DUN: Here but not here.

THE GENERAL: Alive but not living.

SA'DUN: Believing, believing, believing.

THE GENERAL: You were waiting.

SA'DUN: Waiting for whom?

THE GENERAL: Your faithful savior.

SA'DUN: Whose savior?

THE GENERAL: The wretched.

SA'DUN: General, my General.

THE GENERAL: Either live with your head up high or die like a noble man
among the waves of spears and sword-wielding soldiers.

SA'DUN: Where are our soldiers?

THE GENERAL: In the field turning seasons and changing places.

SA'DUN: And men. (*The phone rings. Into the phone*) Hello, yes. (*To the General*) Masrur says the merchants are withholding their support.

THE GENERAL: Arrest the merchants. Eliminate trade. Decree number four: Adopt the barter system, exchange only the necessary.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Cancel commerce ... Yes. (*To the General*) Masrur says the newspapers ...

THE GENERAL: End newspapers, arrest the journalists.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Cancel journalism ... yes. (*To the General*) Masrur says the writers and artists have distributed a statement of opposition.

THE GENERAL: Put them under house arrest. Destroy all means of literature and art.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Arrest the writers and artists.

THE GENERAL: Find the King.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Find the King. Long live the revolution.

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution.

(*Sa'dun hangs up*)

SA'DUN: I didn't object to any decree.

THE GENERAL: Good for you.

SA'DUN: And I won't object to any decree in the future.

THE GENERAL: Good for you.

SA'DUN: I do have an observation concerning the writers and artists.

THE GENERAL: Keep it to yourself.

SA'DUN: It's unfair.

THE GENERAL: Unfair? Tell me what the meaning of literature is, what's it for?

SA'DUN: To better the world.

THE GENERAL: Excellent! And when the world becomes better there'll be no need for writers. What is more important, literature or the world?

SA'DUN: The world, of course.

THE GENERAL: Apologize!

SA'DUN: I apologize.

THE GENERAL: Say you're sorry!

SA'DUN: I'm sorry, my General. I always ranked last in my class. Things were often unclear to me.

THE GENERAL: And now?

SA'DUN: Now it's worse.

THE GENERAL: Give me an example.

SA'DUN: Your desire to kill a king who no longer rules.

THE GENERAL: You'll know the reason when the revolution ends.

SA'DUN: When will that be?

THE GENERAL: When the King dies.

SA'DUN: And when does the King die?

THE GENERAL: When he appears before me.

SA'DUN: Before you?

THE GENERAL: Of course, before me.

SA'DUN: I don't understand.

THE GENERAL: His fate is connected to mine.

SA'DUN: What if he doesn't come to you?

THE GENERAL: I'll go to him.

SA'DUN: You can't even get out the door.

THE GENERAL: I can't, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: If you had the courage you'd have gone out, you would've heard.

THE GENERAL: Heard what?

SA'DUN: The people cursing.

THE GENERAL: Cursing the General?

SA'DUN: And the General's soldiers.

THE GENERAL: The dogs, the traitors. They're nothing but lackeys of the King.
Why didn't you answer them?

SA'DUN: I did. I told them the General was here to save them. From whom, they asked. From the King, of course, I said. Then they laughed.

THE GENERAL: You should've said he's here to save you from yourselves.

SA'DUN: Themselves?

THE GENERAL: Themselves, of course, the bastards.

SA'DUN: I told them the General suffers so that they might live happily. Instead of thanking him they curse him.

THE GENERAL: Good for you, Sa'dun. Here. *(He gives Sa'dun a piece of chocolate)*

THE GENERAL: The people are never in awe of amazement itself. Prophets always complained about people. That's how the world is. (*He paces nervously*) The King's daughter lacks nothing and yet she sticks her tongue out at the world.

SA'DUN: Maybe ...

THE GENERAL: Shut up. (*Sa'dun continues to chew his chocolate*) When she stuck out her tongue did her father laugh?

SA'DUN: No. The King only laughs at big things like the ministers' speeches. The little things make him cry like a child losing a ball or failing an exam. His tears fall ... (*Sa'dun wipes his tears*)

THE GENERAL: Excellent acting. I no longer know which is acting and which is true.

SA'DUN: True what?

THE GENERAL: The truth, Sa'dun ...

SA'DUN: The truth, the truth ... is that you're the General and I'm your servant.

THE GENERAL: Good for you, Sa'dun. Here. (*He gives Sa'dun a piece of chocolate*) If only he'd appear before me.

SA'DUN: On a silver platter.

THE GENERAL: You're full of riddles, Sa'dun. I can no longer follow you. Are you with me or against me?

SA'DUN: I'm your servant and secretary.

THE GENERAL: Where are we in the declaration, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: I tore the paper up.

THE GENERAL: Fine. From the beginning. Dear people ...

(*The phone rings*)

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hello, yes. (*To the General*) It's Masrur, my General. The referendum was unanimous.

THE GENERAL: Of course it was unanimous. Did you hear that? Give the order to keep the people under tight surveillance as long as the King is at large.

SA'DUN: All the people?

THE GENERAL: All the people.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hello, Masrur, here are orders from his highness the General: Arrest the people. Long live the revolution.

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution. (*Sa'dun hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: Write. Where were we?

SA'DUN: At "Dear people."

THE GENERAL: Of course, people. They're a mass with no color or shape, that takes the shape of leaders and influential ...

(*The phone rings*)

SA'DUN: Hello. Hello. Hello. (*He hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: Who was that, Sa'dun? (*Sa'dun shakes his head—makes a gesture indicating that he doesn't know*) Where were we?

SA'DUN: At "the people."

THE GENERAL: In order to arrive at their future, the people first must go through their present.

(*The phone rings*)

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hello, Masrur. Why did you hang up, Masrur? Yes ... Who, Mansur! Yes ... (*To the General*) It's Mansur, my General. He says that because Masrur committed such terrible deeds against the revolution ...

THE GENERAL: (*Interrupting*) Dispose of him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) The General gave the order to kill him. Yes ... he's already killed?

THE GENERAL: Bravo, Mansur. Ask him about the King.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) The General wants information about the King. Yes ... The King was seen in the suburbs of Mizrara walking and reading, my General.

THE GENERAL: Capture him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Capture him. Long live the revolution. (*He hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: Where were we?

SA'DUN: At "the people."

THE GENERAL: Speaking of the people, Sa'dun ...

(*The phone rings*)

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hello, Mansur ... Yes, Mashhur! Where's Mansur? (*To the General*) Mashhur says, my General, that because Mansur has committed such terrible deeds against the revolution ...

THE GENERAL: Kill him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) An order from the General ... Yes ... he's already killed, my General.

THE GENERAL: Bravo, Mashhur. Ask him about the King.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) The General wants information about the King ... Yes ... Mashhur says a pedestrian saw him on Main Street in the capital, my General.

THE GENERAL: (*Excited*) Go after him. Go after him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Go after him. Long live the revolution. (*He hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: Long live the revolution. (*Silence*) Where were we?

SA'DUN: We're still at "the people."

THE GENERAL: The people, the people ...

(*The phone rings*)

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Hello, Mashhur ... Yes. (*To the General*) This is Mandur, my General. He says that Mashhur ...

THE GENERAL: Kill him.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) He's killed. Yes. (*To the General*) The King was seen near Shabib Palace with the mayor.

THE GENERAL: Go after him. Arrest the mayor.

SA'DUN: (*Into the phone*) Go after him. Go after the mayor. Long live the revolution. (*He hangs up*)

THE GENERAL: We were ...

SA'DUN: ... at ... (*The phone rings. Into the phone*) Hello, Mandur ... Yes, Hassuna? Some peasants saw the King on the road to Harjul, my General.

THE GENERAL: Follow him. Follow him.

SA'DUN: Follow him. Long live the revolution. (*The phone rings again. Sa'dun puts his hand on the receiver and doesn't lift it. To the General*) How many are left on the revolutionary council? (*The General holds up two fingers*) One more. (*The ringing stops. Silence. The phone rings again*) They're all gone. (*Silence*) The people are seized. The soldiers are wreaking havoc. What do we do now?

THE GENERAL: We wait for the King.

SA'DUN: Wait for the King?

THE GENERAL: Wait for the King.

SA'DUN: Let's play the game of the bee and bumblebee, I carry you, then you carry me.

THE GENERAL: You go first. (*Sa'dun carries the General on his back. They are back to back*)

SA'DUN: Your turn.

THE GENERAL: (*Angrily*) Whose turn, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: My turn.

(The curtain closes while the General is on Sa'dun's back looking at the audience with a wicked smile on his face)

Act Two

(Sa'dun prepares food in the corner. It smells of fried sausage. The General paces anxiously. He turns the telephone around. He walks toward the door and comes back. Finally, he stands in front of the mirror and looks at himself)

THE GENERAL: The telephone no longer rings, Sa'dun. (*Silence*) Sa'dun.

SA'DUN: (*Without looking at the General*) Yes.

THE GENERAL: What day is it?

SA'DUN: (*He thinks*) It's Tuesday.

THE GENERAL: Yesterday you said it was Thursday.

SA'DUN: If yesterday was Thursday then today must be Friday.

THE GENERAL: Didn't I ask you to count the days?

SA'DUN: Yes, you did. I counted them and I got tired of counting. The days are all the same.

THE GENERAL: How can the world be changed by someone who doesn't care about days? Do you know anything about what happened to the world?

SA'DUN: Of course I do. The revolution succeeded. The General succeeded.

THE GENERAL: The King is at large, Sa'dun.

SA'DUN: The food is ready.

THE GENERAL: I don't feel like eating. Clean my boots.

SA'DUN: Before eating.

THE GENERAL: Before eating and after eating. Remember, you're my servant.

SA'DUN: What if the sausages get cold.

THE GENERAL: I'm thinking about the world and he's thinking about food.

SA'DUN: I'm thinking about you, my master.

THE GENERAL: Your master?

SA'DUN: My General.

THE GENERAL: I'm distressed.

SA'DUN: So am I. But why am I distressed? The revolution succeeded. The world has changed. The General is at my side. I'm the General's servant. The General is master of this world ...

THE GENERAL: Then why are you distressed?

SA'DUN: Because the General is distressed.

THE GENERAL: And why is the General distressed, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: Right, why?

THE GENERAL: Think.

SA'DUN: You think for me.

THE GENERAL: The General orders you to think. Think.

SA'DUN: I thought in the past, and I suffered because of it.

(Silence)

THE GENERAL: Think.

SA'DUN: I thought.

THE GENERAL: Think out loud.

SA'DUN: If only she would stick her tongue out at the world. Her tongue was like a reed hanging in the wind. She stuck her tongue out at the world, and I thought of the world. I hadn't met you then. The world was in ruins. People were living in chaos. And the parties ... the parties. When I first met the president, he was still a cell commander. It made me think of honey. It's been a long time since I had honey.

THE GENERAL: Honey! *(He laughs)*

SA'DUN: The image of a beehive always came to my mind. We were in a meeting once and the president opened a book and started reading. I said I wish we could get honey from the party. Everyone fell silent. They remained silent. I was afraid they were angry at me. I said the party has become like honey, brothers. The owner of the house suddenly frowned at me. He left the room and came back with a plate of honey. He put it in front of me. He said, eat. I was happy at first but looked into their faces and realized I was being tested. I knew what they were thinking. There was saffron in the honey. Bitter honey. They told me, this is the party. They picked me up and threw me into the street. *(Silence)* When they let me join the party I said, God has created the world upside down so that men can be happy when they straighten it out. The president laughed and gave me a piece of chocolate.

THE GENERAL: And the King was handing out chocolate. The people are arrested because they ate the King's chocolate.

SA'DUN: By the way, do you still have chocolate?

THE GENERAL: I'm going to ban chocolate and all kinds of sweets.

SA'DUN: You're hard on me, my General. You used to be different. When I first met you things were calm and the weather was nice. You put your hand on my shoulder and said, "Are you happy with your life?" I answered, "no," and began to cry. I couldn't do anything. I thought of doing many things but wasn't able to do them. I was alone when you put your hand in mine and told me, "Walk with me so we can save the world, Sa'dun." I looked at you and didn't know that you had an army. But when I found out I followed you. I followed you like a dog. I loved you, my General, as much as I loved the whole world. When you're distressed, I am distressed.

THE GENERAL: Really?

SA'DUN: Of course, my General, but why? You're with me. The whole world is with me. If you're with me, then why am I so distressed, my General?

THE GENERAL: Think.

SA'DUN: I have only bad memories now. A long time ago when I was small and the world was large, it made me happy to discover the world.

THE GENERAL: What did you discover?

SA'DUN: When the world got smaller I got bigger. When I no longer expected anything, I got sad.

THE GENERAL: What did you discover, what did you discover?

SA'DUN: Disasters, my Master, disasters. People above people. People below people. Houses on top of houses. Houses without people. Strange things. *(They hear knocking on the door. Sa'dun goes and opens the door, but there's no one there. He shuts the door)*

THE GENERAL: Who was it?

SA'DUN: No one.

THE GENERAL: Was there knocking on the door, or wasn't there?

SA'DUN: I think there was no knocking.

THE GENERAL: What do you mean there was no knocking? Did you hear knocking or not?

SA'DUN: I heard, my friend.

THE GENERAL: Your friend?

SA'DUN: My General.

THE GENERAL: If you heard the knocking then there must have been someone there who knocked. If the person who knocked does not exist, then you don't exist either. Is that logical or not?

SA'DUN: It's logical, my General, logical. But I do exist.

THE GENERAL: Prove it to me.

SA'DUN: You're talking to me.

THE GENERAL: Talking is not evidence enough.

SA'DUN: I wrote your memoirs.

THE GENERAL: Writing is like talking. There are so many writers who don't exist.

SA'DUN: But I exist, my General. I'm your servant.

THE GENERAL: That's true. If the General exists, then my existence is beyond any doubt because the servant of the General exists.

SA'DUN: Is that true, my General.

THE GENERAL: Who else is with me?

SA'DUN: No one, only me.

THE GENERAL: Then you're my servant. What's your name?

SA'DUN: Sa'dun, my General.

THE GENERAL: Sa'dun what?

SA'DUN: Sa'dun, your servant.

THE GENERAL: Have you been my servant for long?

SA'DUN: Since I was born.

THE GENERAL: Good for you, Sa'dun. *(They hear knocking on the door again. Sa'dun pretends he doesn't hear. The General looks at Sa'dun)* Did you hear that?

SA'DUN: No.

THE GENERAL: I heard knocking.

SA'DUN: I didn't.

THE GENERAL: If I heard knocking then the whole world heard knocking. Open the door.

SA'DUN: You open it.

THE GENERAL: That's an order.

(Sa'dun walks toward the door then stops)

SA'DUN: Are you sure you heard something?

THE GENERAL: Of course I did.

SA'DUN: Your enemies may have discovered your hiding place.

THE GENERAL: I have only one enemy.

SA'DUN: Who?

THE GENERAL: The King.

SA'DUN: How did the King know?

THE GENERAL: His heart led him. He caught my scent just as I caught his.

SA'DUN: General!

THE GENERAL: Shut up. I can smell him. Open the door for him.

(Sa'dun opens the door, and there's no one there. Sa'dun looks at the General with malicious joy. The General is bewildered. The phone rings. Sa'dun shuts the door and rushes to answer the phone)

SA'DUN: Hello. Hello. Hello. Hello. *(He hangs up)* That's strange. No one's at the door or on the phone.

THE GENERAL: That is strange. *(The General goes to the door. He opens it suddenly and finds no one. He shuts the door)* Strange.

SA'DUN: What sort of game is this?

THE GENERAL: His game.

SA'DUN: Is it possible?

THE GENERAL: What do you mean possible?

SA'DUN: He's like God, he's everywhere.

THE GENERAL: There, you see! You yourself are admitting the King exists.

SA'DUN: I said he exists everywhere.

THE GENERAL: That means he may be with us.

SA'DUN: That's strange.

THE GENERAL: I don't find it strange. I know his game. He may have sneaked in and ...

SA'DUN: General!

THE GENERAL: I smell him. *(He looks around the room and begins searching)*
Search with me. *(Sa'dun and the General search around the room. The General bumps into Sa'dun and stops suddenly. He stares at Sa'dun)*

SA'DUN: I smell him as well, my General.

THE GENERAL: You're a liar.

SA'DUN: Me, my General?

THE GENERAL: Take off your shirt.

SA'DUN: My shirt?

THE GENERAL: I said take off your shirt.

SA'DUN: Why?

THE GENERAL: Take it off, now. *(Sa'dun takes off his shirt and gives it to the General. The General sniffs it and throws it away)* That's strange. Didn't you tell me your name is Sa'dun? *(Sa'dun is silent)* Why have you followed me all this time? *(Sa'dun is silent)* Where are you from? *(Sa'dun is silent)* Answer me.

SA'DUN: From Hereabout.

THE GENERAL: You said you were from Thereabout last time.

SA'DUN: I said Thereabout? Maybe.

THE GENERAL: What do you mean, "maybe"?

SA'DUN: My memory became much worse in prison.

THE GENERAL: Who got you out of prison?

SA'DUN: You did.

THE GENERAL: Who stood by your side in court?

SA'DUN: I'm innocent, my General. They confused me with someone else. I had lost my ID card and they told me, "You did it." I said, "No." They beat me. I said, "No," and they beat me more. They dunked me in piss, pulled out my fingernails. (*Sa'dun shows the General his fingers*) I've been declawed, my General. I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

THE GENERAL: Who told you to say, "yes"?

SA'DUN: I forget.

THE GENERAL: Think. (*The General points to himself*)

SA'DUN: You?

THE GENERAL: Of course, me.

SA'DUN: What a magical word! I was supposed to say, "yes." I wish I'd known from the beginning. I thought the matter was for real. I thought the case ...

THE GENERAL: Which case?

SA'DUN: The court.

THE GENERAL: Which court?

SA'DUN: The government, the state.

THE GENERAL: Why did I save you?

SA'DUN: Because I'm innocent. And because ... because I'm another person. It was supposed to be me, but it turned out to be him. I didn't understand.

THE GENERAL: Why didn't you understand? Who are you?

SA'DUN: I'm ... I'm.

(The General walks away toward the mirror and continues glancing furtively at Sa'dun)

THE GENERAL: (*To himself*) How clever, cunning. (*To Sa'dun*) Where did we first meet?

SA'DUN: I forget.

THE GENERAL: Remember ... on a street with an "S."

SA'DUN: Husayni?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: Hassan?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: Hasanayn?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: Muhsin, Hassun, Hasan, Mahasin ...

THE GENERAL: At the fork in the road to our friend's house. What was his name ... It had an "H?"

SA'DUN: Muhammad?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: Ahmad?

THE GENERAL: No.

SA'DUN: Mahmud, Hamid, Hamada. Anyway, he was already dead.

THE GENERAL: Dead?

SA'DUN: When I pulled you out from underneath the car ...

THE GENERAL: What car?

SA'DUN: The car you were underneath.

THE GENERAL: Me, underneath? On the bottom? I was on top.

SA'DUN: One was under the other. Blood came out of your nose. Blood with no wound. You told me, "Let this country bleed."

THE GENERAL: That's strange.

SA'DUN: Someone was crushed. Only his hair remained on his head.

THE GENERAL: He died?

SA'DUN: He was dead but kept moving.

THE GENERAL: What a scene!

SA'DUN: I carried you on my shoulders.

THE GENERAL: Why did you carry me?

SA'DUN: Your friend turned out to be my friend as well, and we laughed.

THE GENERAL: I have no friends. You were following me, watching me.

SA'DUN: I didn't know you.

THE GENERAL: Yes, you knew me. You knew I'd planned a coup d'état.

SA'DUN: You had no soldiers. You were retired.

THE GENERAL: On which fork in the road did the accident happen?

SA'DUN: On the way to the palace.

THE GENERAL: The palace? I see you. Admit it. You're him.

SA'DUN: Who?

THE GENERAL: The King.

SA'DUN: Strange.

THE GENERAL: Everything about you is strange.

SA'DUN: Me, the King?

THE GENERAL: Admit it, you're him.

SA'DUN: My father used to say, "If the King's well, we're all well." Had I been the King I would've known what well is.

THE GENERAL: Stop beating around the bush.

SA'DUN: Is this a joke?

THE GENERAL: Imposter!

SA'DUN: I never thought about deceiving you. Me, deceive you? Is that possible? In school they used to call me ...

THE GENERAL: (*Angrily*) Enough. (*To himself*) He's a good actor but I'm better than he is. (*Silence*) There's knocking on the door.

SA'DUN: I didn't hear anything.

THE GENERAL: Neither did I. (*To himself*) The phone no longer rings and no one knocks on the door anymore. As if bygones were bygones. All that remains is his voice and mine. (*To Sa'dun*) You were the one who knocked on the door, Sa'dun. Why did you stop knocking?

SA'DUN: I didn't knock.

THE GENERAL: Yes, you did. You were the one who was knocking, Sa'dun, so I'd be confused about the truth. (*He walks toward the mirror and talks to himself*) Capture him, General. It's time. Is it possible that now is the time? (*Loudly*) What day of the month is it, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: Maybe 13.

THE GENERAL: (*To himself*) That's the number. (*To Sa'dun*) Thirteen what, Sa'dun?

SA'DUN: May. Maybe April.

THE GENERAL: (*To himself in the mirror*) April. April 13. April, the month of birth. It's time, General. Give me a sign. I wait for a sign from no one else but you, not from above or below. (*Loudly*) Slogan, Sa'dun.

SA'DUN: Long live the General. Long live the revolution.

THE GENERAL: Good for you. (*He looks for chocolate but doesn't find any*) Vicious. But you're more vicious than he is, General. (*He approaches Sa'dun*) Sa'dun.

SA'DUN: Yes.

THE GENERAL: I know you.

SA'DUN: You've known me for a long time.

THE GENERAL: Do you have a rope?

SA'DUN: A rope?

THE GENERAL: A rope. Any rope. (*Sa'dun looks around the room. He finds a rope and gives it to the General*) Stretch out your arms. (*Sa'dun stretches out his arms and the General ties them together*)

SA'DUN: Is this a new game, my General? In prison we used to play the game of flies. One cigarette for five flies.

(*The General takes two steps backward*)

THE GENERAL: In the name of the General. In the name of the revolution.

SA'DUN: In the name of the General. In the name of the revolution.

THE GENERAL: Shut up.

SA'DUN: Okay.

THE GENERAL: I command you to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

SA'DUN: Which truth?

THE GENERAL: Your truth.

SA'DUN: My truth?

THE GENERAL: That you're the King.

SA'DUN: You're mistaken, my General.

THE GENERAL: (*Angrily*) Mistaken? Me, mistaken?

SA'DUN: No, never, my General.

THE GENERAL: Then confess.

SA'DUN: I did.

THE GENERAL: You confess to being the King?

SA'DUN: I confess, I'm the King.

THE GENERAL: Good for you. It would've been better if you'd said so from the beginning.

SA'DUN: You said I was the King.

THE GENERAL: And so did you.

SA'DUN: No, it was you.

THE GENERAL: Don't raise your voice to me. Have you forgotten who I am?

SA'DUN: No, I haven't.

THE GENERAL: I sacrificed in order for the revolution to succeed. You knew the state the world was in.

SA'DUN: I knew.

THE GENERAL: Had it not been for me ...

SA'DUN: Had it not been for you ...

THE GENERAL: Was it possible for the world to change it ...

SA'DUN: They say they've gone up to the moon.

THE GENERAL: So what? Does that make them less miserable?

SA'DUN: No, my General.

THE GENERAL: And why is that? Because the King is in their heads.

SA'DUN: God damn the King.

(The General bursts into tears. He kneels at Sa'dun's feet)

THE GENERAL: Confess. Confess you're the King.

SA'DUN: My General!

THE GENERAL: Are you afraid?

SA'DUN: I'm afraid for you.

THE GENERAL: For me?

SA'DUN: I'm afraid you'll regret that you believed me.

THE GENERAL: I do believe you. I believe you if you're the King.

SA'DUN: Is it possible for you to believe me?

THE GENERAL: That you're the King, of course.

SA'DUN: You said ...

THE GENERAL: That means you're him.

SA'DUN: I no longer know who to believe, myself or the General?

THE GENERAL: The General. Of course, the General. (*Sa'dun does not speak*)
You're a good man and the world is anxiously waiting. Don't you feel pity for the world?

SA'DUN: Yes, I do.

THE GENERAL: That means you're the King.

SA'DUN: No.

(The General rises angrily)

THE GENERAL: Clean my boots. (*Sa'dun kneels down to clean the boots, but the General walks away and then comes back*) What time is it?

SA'DUN: I don't have a watch.

THE GENERAL: Where's your watch.

SA'DUN: Which watch?

THE GENERAL: Your watch.

SA'DUN: I never carried a watch.

THE GENERAL: I saw you look at it an hour ago.

SA'DUN: You're mistaken, my General.

THE GENERAL: You're saying I'm mistaken again.

SA'DUN: I'm sorry, my friend.

THE GENERAL: Your friend?

SA'DUN: My General.

THE GENERAL: You hid it because your initials are engraved on it. Where did you hide it?

SA'DUN: You are confusing me with someone else.

THE GENERAL: Someone else? Don't play games with me.

SA'DUN: I would never do that. I swear on your life.

THE GENERAL: Don't swear on my life. You're my enemy. You're the enemy of the revolution. You thought that if you were with me ...

SA'DUN: I was with you because I ... Because my existence with you ...

THE GENERAL: Your existence negates the revolution.

SA'DUN: My General!

THE GENERAL: Your existence negates the future.

SA'DUN: I'm ready to withdraw from the game.

THE GENERAL: The game? The revolution is a game?

SA'DUN: Fine. Fire me, or kill me if you like.

THE GENERAL: Get out of my face.

(Sa'dun puts his bag on his back and walks toward the door. He puts his hand on the doorknob and the General attempts to say something. Sa'dun looks at him, but the General looks away and continues glancing furtively at Sa'dun. Sa'dun puts his bag on the floor. He comes back and stands up straight in front of the General)

SA'DUN: General sir, I confess I'm the King. I'm the King of this land and its people.

(The General's face gleams with happiness)

THE GENERAL: So you're the King.

SA'DUN: I'm the King.

THE GENERAL: And you've come to surrender.

SA'DUN: Yes, I've come to surrender.

THE GENERAL: Don't expect me to show you mercy.

SA'DUN: Let justice take its course.

(The General walks away. He stops and stands prepared. He walks toward Sa'dun with firm steps. He stands up straight in front of Sa'dun)

THE GENERAL: You are charged with high treason.

SA'DUN: So be it.

THE GENERAL: You must officially surrender.

SA'DUN: Certainly.

THE GENERAL: But since we're only enemies on a theoretical basis and you were my friend there's no need for formalities. It's enough to document this for the purpose of history. Write: "The King surrendered to ..."

SA'DUN: You write. *(The General looks at Sa'dun aghast and confused. Sa'dun takes out a pen and paper and begins to write)* The King surrendered to ...

THE GENERAL: ... the General on the 13th of April at ... What time is it?

SA'DUN: I don't have a watch.

THE GENERAL: Why don't you have a watch? That's okay. Write, "At dawn on April 13th."

SA'DUN: It's still night.

THE GENERAL: Dawn is more suitable for revolutions.

SA'DUN: (*Writing*) At dawn on April the 13th.

THE GENERAL: He was charged with high treason and sentenced to death by hanging.

SA'DUN: (*Stops writing*) Hanging?

THE GENERAL: Of course.

SA'DUN: Your conscience is clear about this accusation?

THE GENERAL: My conscience belongs to the people.

SA'DUN: What if I ask you for clemency?

THE GENERAL: The case is no longer in my hands.

SA'DUN: Are you determined to carry out this sentence?

THE GENERAL: (*Softly*) You know what the situation is. If the sentence isn't carried out, it will be as if I did nothing. Can you imagine? Think of the thousands of victims. It's impossible.

SA'DUN: Are you certain my death is necessary?

THE GENERAL: As certain as I am that I'm the General.

SA'DUN: I agree, but with one condition, that ...

THE GENERAL: I don't know if I can.

SA'DUN: You can. You can.

THE GENERAL: Granted.

SA'DUN: Since I voluntarily surrendered, allow me to choose the way I die.

THE GENERAL: I have no objection to that.

SA'DUN: I don't like hanging.

THE GENERAL: It's the easiest way.

SA'DUN: No. A bullet is easier.

THE GENERAL: You know we don't have any guns. Wait, do we have a knife?

SA'DUN: Of course.

THE GENERAL: Get it. (*Sa'dun does not move*) I told you to get the knife. Did you hear me?

SA'DUN: I heard you. Is the person in front of you Sa'dun or the King?

THE GENERAL: The King.

SA'DUN: Then treat me like a King.

THE GENERAL: Your highness, the King. Your highness, the King. (*The General's voice becomes deeper and more suitable to his role, i.e. subservient to the King*) Your Royal Highness. Your Royal Highness. If only you knew. I asked to see you a long time ago. There were so many things on my mind that I wanted to tell you. Oh, your highness ... it was in early summer when I requested an audience. I waited three months for the approval to go from the supervisor to the secretary. It took another two months to go to the administrative office, and that's where my request sat. I used to invent a new lie to my wife every day. She was the one who'd requested I see you. As soon as I did, she began calling me, "The General." She could foresee the future. She was a great woman and had great hopes for me. She was ill, so I lied to her. One time I said you were traveling, another time you were too busy or you were ill. I knew it was impossible to meet with you. Our lives turned into waiting. She was afraid she'd die before you came to visit us. Your picture was always in front of her eyes. She lived by hope. When the doctor last visited us he was surprised to see she wasn't dead. It was probably hope that made her live longer. We had more children, and they, like us, lived on the illusion of hope. Every day she would speak of the food she was going to cook when the King honored us with his presence. Every day she changed the positions of the chairs. Once she said it would be better to receive you under the trellis where we'd roll out the only carpet we had. She'd talk to you and ask you questions and you'd respond. She memorized all your answers by heart. She

had one request for each child. She wanted a suitor for the elder girl, a blue-eyed officer from the cavalry. She pictured all officers with blue eyes. She loved blue. *(Silence)* Only when she was about to die, or maybe when she had lost hope, did she realize she'd been living an illusion. The children were seated around her, I beside her head. Even now I can't forget the distress that appeared in her eyes. She knew. She knew I had lied to her. She probably knew she had lied to herself. She forgave me because I believed the lie and, like her, I have been living an illusion. When I shut her eyes it was like shutting the eyes of all those who, like her, have lived in an illusion. *(He stops talking. He has an absent-minded gaze. He walks away from Sa'dun. Suddenly he stands in front of the mirror and talks to his reflection)* Here he is right in front of you. He's going to his death. Are you satisfied? Are the people satisfied? Is the world relieved? *(He walks toward the ladder and climbs up two steps to where he usually gives his speeches)* Comrades, the past is dying in front of you. The old illusion, the old hope. I will ban hope in the future, affection and hope. I will ban the illusion, I will cancel the King. Every person will become a king. I'll abolish government. Every person will become a government. There's no place for affection, brethren, no place for illusion. There is no place for hope or disappointment. I'll build our system. *(The phone rings)* Sa'dun.

(Sa'dun looks at him calmly to remind him that things have changed between them. The General understands and steps down from the ladder. He walks toward the phone and picks up the receiver. Into the phone) Hello. Hello. *(He hangs up angrily)*

SA'DUN: Are you certain my death is necessary, General?

THE GENERAL: It is as necessary as life.

SA'DUN: Your life?

THE GENERAL: The lives of all people.

SA'DUN: Untie this rope for me.

THE GENERAL: What if you escape?

SA'DUN: Untie the rope.

THE GENERAL: Swear that you won't escape.

SA'DUN: I swear on my honor.

THE GENERAL: You swear on your honor.

SA'DUN: On the King's honor. Untie the rope.

(The General unties the rope from Sa'dun's wrists. The General takes a few steps back)

THE GENERAL: You swore on your honor. You surrendered. You confessed in writing. Where are you going?

SA'DUN: I want to look at myself in the mirror. I want to see what the King looks like.

THE GENERAL: The mirror is the King. Believe me.

SA'DUN: I believe you. Get out of my way.

THE GENERAL: I'm your friend. We were the best of friends.

SA'DUN: We were different. I was Sa'dun, and you were the General. *(Sa'dun arrives in front of the mirror, pushing the General out of his way. Admiring himself)* I look just like him.

THE GENERAL: I told you so.

SA'DUN: I thought of myself as anyone but the King.

THE GENERAL: And today?

SA'DUN: I am the King.

THE GENERAL: Thank God.

SA'DUN: *(He admires himself again in the mirror)* A real King. I never in my life ...

THE GENERAL: How old are you?

SA'DUN: Thirty-three.

THE GENERAL: That's strange. When I asked you two days ago, you said you didn't know.

SA'DUN: There was no time then, but now I've changed. Time and I are now tied together.

THE GENERAL: Your time is up, Your Highness.

SA'DUN: Choose the most horrible death for me.

THE GENERAL: Your Highness, please.

SA'DUN: A death with suffering.

THE GENERAL: You said something different before.

SA'DUN: Time has changed, General. No matter how large the King's suffering is, his sins will remain larger. I want to do penance for everyone's sins.

THE GENERAL: Don't make things difficult for me, Your Highness. I'm willing to swear that you suffered.

SA'DUN: You'd perjure yourself? (*Silence*) Clean my shoes.

THE GENERAL: What? I'm the General.

SA'DUN: And I'm the King.

THE GENERAL: You're my prisoner. You're condemned to death.

SA'DUN: The final wish of a condemned man is sacred. Clean my shoes.

THE GENERAL: Yes, Sir. (*The General kneels down and cleans Sa'dun's shoes*)

SA'DUN: Since everything is going to end, sing me the song you were singing when we first met. (*The General attempts to rise, but Sa'dun holds him down*)
Don't get up.

THE GENERAL: (*Singing*) "All my life I thought I was fine, nothing was wrong with me. I was walking with time, it pulled me along. My friends asked what happened. Nothing, I said, my happiness darkened and died. When I saw you, destiny, giving to some and taking from others, I told the fire in my heart to go grey and my eyes to go blind."

SA'DUN: There's more.

THE GENERAL: It's finished.

SA'DUN: Everything is finished. (*The General starts to rise and Sa'dun keeps him down as before*) Don't get up. Since everything is finished, taking strolls, eating, singing, loving, playing chess ... By the way, I'm an excellent chess player. What about you?

THE GENERAL: I didn't have time for play.

SA'DUN: All I had was time. The only thing I ever owned was time. I'm the king of time. (*The General tries to rise and Sa'dun pushes his shoulders down*) Don't get up. As long as I have time and since I'm losing everything else ... memories, blue rooms, drinking in orchards, love, anger. Since everything is going to disappear: glory, fame, singing, music, poetry, pictures, waiting, window shopping, swimming in pools, lanterns, candlesticks, tents, palaces. (*Again the General tries to rise*) Stay. Since everything is disappearing: slavery, freedom, hope, disappointment, treason, fidelity, sacrifice, betrayal, love, hate. Since everything is disappearing, since the dream is disappearing, I'm disappearing, since my death will bring happiness to the people, bring the knife.

(*The General rises suddenly to get the knife*)

THE GENERAL: Since ... Since ... (*He returns holding the knife*)

SA'DUN: Allow me one last question.

THE GENERAL: Go ahead.

SA'DUN: Did you love her?

THE GENERAL: More than you can imagine, Your Highness.

SA'DUN: Since you loved her, clean the knife.

(The General cleans the knife with his clothes)

THE GENERAL: I've cleaned it.

SA'DUN: Since everything is disappearing, clean it again. *(The General cleans it again)* Since the people are happy, stab me. *(The General tries to stab Sa'dun but his hand freezes. He tries again, and he is unable to stab him. Fear is apparent on his face)*

THE GENERAL: *(In a broken voice)* Help me.

SA'DUN: Help you?

THE GENERAL: Help me. Please help me. I'm afraid.

SA'DUN: You're afraid of me?

THE GENERAL: I'm afraid of killing.

SA'DUN: You killed thousands on the telephone.

THE GENERAL: Killing on the telephone is easy, Your Highness.

SA'DUN: Are you certain that killing me is necessary?

THE GENERAL: Of course it's necessary, your Highness. Of course.

SA'DUN: Are you sure?

THE GENERAL: *(Pleading)* Please. *(He hesitates)* Help me.

SA'DUN: Strike me. Remember that it was I who ruined the world. I'm the citadel of the old world. Remember the imprisoned people. Don't you want to free them? Remember yourself. Remember all the years you've lived waiting for this moment. Remember her eyes. Remember the eyes of all those who lived as she did. Remember the suffering, the misery, the disappointments. Remember the world. Remember the woman you loved, remember her.

(The General gets irritated and stabs Sa'dun. Sa'dun falls slowly to the ground. The General throws the knife down and stands, screaming)

THE GENERAL: I killed the King. I killed the King. *(The General looks at Sa'dun who signals him to come closer. The General walks to Sa'dun and kneels above him)*

SA'DUN: Tell the world.

THE GENERAL: The world, of course, the world. *(The General leaves Sa'dun suddenly and rushes to the door, then comes back to Sa'dun)* Don't you have anything to say?

(Silence)

SA'DUN: *(Softly)* I loved you, my General. I loved the world. I loved the girl who stuck her tongue out at the world. *(Sa'dun shuts his eyes. The General looks at him and lets Sa'dun's body down slowly. He rushes to the door and tries to open it, but it will not open. He tries to open it again)*

THE GENERAL: *(Knocking on the door)* I killed the King. Open up. Who locked the door? I killed the King. I killed the King. *(The door doesn't open. He rushes to the telephone. Anxiously, into the phone)* Hello. Hello. *(He angrily throws the receiver down and goes back to the door, knocking on it with both hands)* Let me out. Let me out. I killed the King. I saved the world. Open up. Let me out. *(Sa'dun, who has a little smile on his face, lifts his head. The General tires of knocking on the door and looks at Sa'dun. Sa'dun lies down again and shuts his eyes. The General walks to Sa'dun, he shakes him, but Sa'dun does not move. The General rises. He walks slowly to the mirror and looks at himself)* You saved the world, my General, but the world doesn't like being saved. *(He strikes the mirror with his fist with all his might)*

—The End—

Muhammad al-Maghut

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

Muhammad al-Maghut, who was born in 1934 and died in 2006, is an acclaimed Syrian poet, dramatist, screenwriter and political analyst. Like Nizar Qabbani, he achieved substantial notoriety in the second half of the twentieth century in his own country and elsewhere in the Arab world among both cultured intellectuals and a wider public. Armed with a sharp wit, biting sarcasm and an unrelenting rebelliousness, he transcended his humble background to become a mouthpiece for the disillusioned and downtrodden among his countrymen and others in the Arab world. The prose poem, which he pioneered, went solidly against the grain of the Arab poetic tradition. His works were simultaneously accessible to the general public and lauded by contemporary poets and intellectuals, who saw in his poetry evocations of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. He was a popular figure, in part due to his partnership for many years with the Chaplinesque actor Durayd Lahham, who played a trickster character named Ghawwar. Together they wrote and created plays, screenplays and a widely popular weekly television show which people anticipated so as to see the latest ruse Ghawwar had devised to trick his comrades during that particular episode.

Muhammad al-Maghut was born to a poor Isma‘ili¹ family in the town of Salamiyya in the Syrian province of Hama. His father was a poor farmer who was clearly not devoid of irony. According to one anecdote about him, when an officer demanded to see his identity card, he displayed his electricity bill. Al-Maghut says he inherited his sarcasm and sharp wit from his mother.² He manifested his rebelliousness against class divisions and condescending displays of power at an early age. He is said to have thrown stones at a feudal lord of his hometown Salamiyya after the latter had thrown money and candy to the children of his neighborhood during a feast.³ Dramatizations of the conditions of

1 Isma‘ilism is a sect of Shi‘i Islam.

2 Interview with al-Maghut, part of a documentary by al-Jazeera Television. Accessed December 15, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpmz6EooCIM>>.

3 This incident is mentioned by the nephew of al-Maghut in two interviews, one with al-Jazeera Television and another by Surya Drama. Accessed December 15, 2017. Link to al-Jazeera: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpmz6EooCIM>>. Link to Surya Drama: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBQv8hJqHfo>>.

his early life and the setting of his hometown Salamiyya appeared frequently in his later writings.

Al-Maghut attended primary school in Salamiyya, and then at the age of fourteen began studying agronomy at a boarding school in a Damascus suburb but quit before receiving a degree. When he returned to Salamiyya, he joined the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which called for the unification of the Levant including Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Its ideology transcended both religious (Islamic) and ethnic (Arab) lines as bases for the national identity of that region. Its secularism and more progressive ideology were widely attractive to secular progressives and religious minorities. Al-Maghut later downplayed his political affiliation in his usual style of hyperbolic satire and attributed it to the fact that during the cold winters in Salamiyya the party's office was heated. The other political option that was available to him was the Ba'ath Party which, he asserted, he did not affiliate with because its office was farther away and it was not heated.⁴ As a result of his political affiliation, however, he was imprisoned when Syrian intelligence cracked down on SSNP members in 1955 following the assassination of 'Adnan al-Maliki by an SSNP member. Al-Maliki was the deputy chief of staff of the Syrian Army and a member of the Ba'ath Party.⁵ Despite the fact that he minimized his association with the SSNP, an assertion some critics doubt is true,⁶ his imprisonment played a primary role in shaping his later life and career. In prison he found he could write and use his writing to fight for his ideas. When he was released from prison he smuggled out his memoirs, which were written as poems on cigarette paper hidden in his undergarments because, he said, prison guards

4 Mentioned by al-Maghut in an interview with al-Jazeera Television. Accessed December 15, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpmz6EooCIM>>.

5 Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria from the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 197–8.

6 Jean Daya disputes al-Maghut's claims that he did not read about the ideology of the party and joined it solely to enjoy its heated office in Salamiyya. Daya's views appear in his book entitled *Muhammad al-Maghut wa Subya al-Hizb al-Qawmi*, which contains essays and poems written by al-Maghut and published in newspapers and journals during the fifties and early sixties. Al-Maghut's early political essays collected in this volume suggest the high esteem in which he held the party's founder Antun Sa'adi, who was assassinated by the Lebanese Regime in 1949. Al-Maghut apparently joined the party shortly after Sa'adi was killed. In the volume's political essays, al-Maghut also critiques communism, Nasserism and political figures and factions with which the NSSP was in conflict at the time. The essays express beliefs that clearly conform to the political positions of NSSP. See Jean Daya, *Muhammad al-Maghut wa Subya al-Hizb al-Qawmi ma' Nusus Majhula: Riwayat Gharam Sinn al-Fil wa Sittun Qasida wa Maqala* (Beirut: Fajr al-Nahda, 2009).

would not allow inmates to leave with anything but “their pride.”⁷ While in prison, al-Maghut met the poet Adunis, also arrested for being a SSNP member. It was Adunis who promoted the work of al-Maghut among the community of *Shi'r* [Poetry], a Beirut-based literary magazine the latter had founded.

After his release from a nine-month term in prison, al-Maghut took refuge in Beirut, but al-Maghut was imprisoned again there in 1962 along with other SSNP members after a failed coup by the Party against the Lebanese government. He was then transferred to Syria where he was incarcerated for several months before being released.⁸ As a result of his life in prison, the motifs of confinement, interrogation, prison guards and abuse by officers and intelligence forces remained constant in his writings, as is evident in *The Jester*. Prison became for him a symbol and an emblem of inescapable human confinement in an absurd and unjust world. His traumatic experience as a prisoner imparted to his work an irrevocable sense of melancholy, masked by cynicism, ridicule, and black humor. The following section from his poem “Tattoo” encapsulates his sensibility:

Now, in the third hour of the twentieth century,
 when only asphalt separates the corpses
 from the shoes of pedestrians,
 I'll lie down in the middle of the street
 like an old Bedouin, and won't get up
 unless the prison bars and files on the world's suspects
 are gathered
 before me to chew on, like a camel at a crossroad;
 unless the sticks of policemen and demonstrators
 drop from their hands
 and become again blooming branches
 in the forest.
 I laugh,
 cry and write in the dark
 until my pen is indistinguishable from my fingers.
 Whenever I hear a knock on the door, or see a curtain move
 I cover my papers with my hand
 like a prostitute in a raid.

7 Al-Maghut describes this incident in an interview with al-Jazeera Television. Accessed December 15, 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpmz6EooCIM>>.

8 Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 198.

Whoever gave me this fear,
 this blood apprehensive as a mountain panther's?⁹

After his release from prison and while in Beirut in the late 1950s and early 1960s, al-Maghut joined the city's intellectual circles, which included NSSP sympathizers, and published extensively in several of its journals and newspapers. His writings included political essays and poems which gained great popularity and also put him at odds with both the Lebanese authorities and fellow poets. For example, he staunchly rebuffed Khalil Hawi's bitter critique of his prose poetry, the form he embraced, and criticized Nizar Qabbani's indulgence in love poetry, although that critique was directed more at the manner in which Syrian society viewed literature than against the poet himself. While acknowledging Qabbani's popularity and significance, al-Maghut critiqued the limited scope of his audience: "No poet, living or dead, was more loved and revered by his society than Nizar Qabbani. He is the only poet read in [people's] rooms, salons and [on their] balconies, everywhere except in some filthy places and detestable circumstances. They do not read Nizar Qabbani in prisons, for example Nizar cannot reach those places because the road to freedom is only trodden by those who are barefoot."¹⁰ Al-Maghut also published his first collection of poetry, *Sadness in Moon Light (Huzn fi Daw' al-Qamar)*, in 1959 after he had fled Syria for Beirut.

Saniyya Salih, a Syrian poet who met al-Maghut in Beirut and later became his wife, describes him as a recluse and outsider who, at times, became psychologically unstable and also experienced sudden bursts of creativity. According to her, his most significant creative periods coincided with times of crises.¹¹ One of these episodes took place after his release from prison in 1962 when he went into hiding and stayed in a low-ceilinged room in Damascus. There he entered a contemplative state, reading avidly and watching from a distance the country's political turmoil. During this reclusive phase he explored new forms of expression that included dramatic writing and wrote his first play, *The Hunchback Bird (al-'Usfur al-Ahdab)* (1989).¹² The play reflects his self-imposed isolation by means of the character of a hunchback bird—a deformity that clearly alludes to the low-ceiling room he was occupying—who roamed freely

9 Muhammad al-Maghut, *Joy is Not My Profession: Selected Poems of Muhammad al-Maghut*, trans. John Asfour and Alison Burch (Montreal: Signal Editions, 1994), 53.

10 Daya, *Muhammad al-Maghut wa Subya al-Hizb al-Qawmi*, 39.

11 Saniyya Salih introduction to al-Maghut's collection of complete works, *A'mal Muhammad al-Maghut* (Beirut: Dar al-Mada, 1998), 8.

12 The play was written in 1967 and published in 1998 in al-Maghut's complete works, *A'mal Muhammad al-Maghut*, 239–322.

outdoors. In the play's first act, the bird, a sort of mouthpiece for al-Maghut, observes from outside a man who is held captive in a prison cell: a cobbler imprisoned for allowing others to put up pieces of paper on the walls of his shop because, in his naiveté he thinks they serve the useful purpose of hiding the cracks in his walls. However, the paper contains political slogans that threaten the ruling classes. The man, who is tortured during his interrogation and loses his fingers, is not only indicted and punished by the governing regime, he is also implicitly condemned by al-Maghut, who decries the shoemaker's passivity and lack of awareness of the reality that surrounds him. Other characters in the play include prisoners who have been convicted of various offenses, but in spite of the fact that they are prisoners, they speak poetically in a language laden with imagery that expresses the absurdity of their condition.

Al-Maghut constantly reiterated that his involvement with the SSNP was peripheral. For him, his mistake was to have been driven to the Party not because of its ideology but because of his poverty and naiveté, which prevented him from anticipating the dangerous consequences of his actions. These imprisoned characters, therefore, can be seen as paying for errors very similar to his own, just as other characters in the play, who are farmers and poor peasants, clearly appear to allude to his own family and economic background. These latter characters live in absolute destitution, in villages ravaged by drought and death. In addition to the misery imposed upon them by nature and poverty, they are subjected to cruel treatment by the authorities. Edward Ziter, in his discussion of the arbitrary detentions and torture that plagued modern Syria,¹³ writes that "One of the great accomplishments of Syrian political theatre has been its transformation of torture, through its representation, into acts of national belonging. No playwright has pursued this project with such dogged persistence, nor employed such varied strategies, as Muhammad al-Maghut."¹⁴

Among the formal elements al-Maghut introduces in *The Hunchback Bird* is the replacement of the authorial voice, which had hitherto been exclusively a poetic "I," with multiple voices and characters. It was this multiplicity of poetic voices that led him to conceive of characters and dialogue and allowed him to produce a work with clearly dramatic elements. Moreover, by deemphasizing his poetic "I," the play dramatizes predicaments that are no longer solely personal and instead describe a communal experience. In the play, al-Maghut's poetic sensibility is made manifest in a surrealistic universe in which humans and non-humans and cultural and natural elements combine to generate violent imagery by means of flogging, suicide, the shooting of children,

¹³ Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 197.

¹⁴ Ibid.

etc. According to Badawi, al-Maghut, in *The Hunchback Bird*, presents “one of the most powerful and haunting dramatic statements of political oppression and tyranny in the modern world.”¹⁵

In the play transformations of the characters occur abruptly with no clear or logical reason. For example, two prisoners, an old man and a sex-crazed bachelor, who appear in Act One, reappear later in the play in the shape of, respectively, a tyrannical prince and a holy man. The play ends with a scene in which executions are performed to demonstrate a prince's love of his people. The shoemaker's character reappears with his wife and children, all of whom have been sentenced to death for cheering for love and rain. The couple is to be executed by hanging and the children by being shot with small rifles because of their size. Ziter describes al-Maghut's mercurial style in the play as one in which “tonal shifts and striking imagery redirect attention from the agony of the prisoner to the virtuosity of the poet.”¹⁶ “This shift,” he argues, “is a kind of victory over authoritarianism—co-opting state violence to demonstrate the power of poetry rather than that of the regime.”¹⁷ *The Hunchback Bird's* symbolic and surreal language, its abrupt shifts in imagery, its characters who undergo illogical transformations, its absence of a clear plot, and its large cast make the play difficult to stage and, therefore, render it more a literary work to be read than a dramatic work to be produced.

In his next play *The Jester (al-Muharrij)*, written in 1969, which appears in this volume, al-Maghut abandons the poetic elements he deploys in *The Hunchback Bird* to compose a farce with a clearly developed plot and well-defined characters. In spite of dramatizing a fantasy world, notably in its second and third acts—which features characters who have arisen from the dead and characters who travel back in time to remote places and return to the present—its references to reality maintain a relationship to quotidian and historical reality, particularly in the first act. Al-Maghut wrote the play in response to the June 1967 war, but, unlike Wannus, who confronts the war directly and the Palestinian refugee crisis it created in his *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June (Haflat Samar min ajl Khamsa Huzayran)*, al-Maghut's play is a broader critique of Arab society and of the propagandist rhetoric of its rulers following their defeat. Because of its humorous and bitterly sarcastic tone, its elements of realism and its potential appeal to large audiences, it was banned from being performed in Syrian theaters when it was completed in 1969. It was

15 M.M. Badawi, introduction to *Modern Arabic Drama, an Anthology*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 14.

16 Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 198.

17 Ibid.

not until later, after the Syria and Egypt war against Israel in 1973, that it was allowed to receive continuous performances.¹⁸ As Ziter points out, the circumstances of its production in the 1980s by the National Theatre were as ironic as the play itself:

It finally came to Damascus in 1983, in a production at the Qabbani Theatre directed by Soheil Shalhoub. It was part of the National Theatre's program of traveling theatre, which already had presented work in 1,200 villages and in 426 factories (according to the 1983 program notes for *The Jester*). The idea of state-sponsored traveling theatre satirizing the state through its representation of an inanely ideological traveling theatre might seem like either a remarkable oversight or a profound sense of humor on the part of the censors at the Ministry of Culture.¹⁹

The Jester was first performed in Beirut in 1973, directed by Ya'qub Shidrawi.²⁰ It received a second production in Beirut in 2007 under the direction of Lina Abyad. The play was translated into English in 2004-2005 by Gordon Witty. That translated version, published here, was performed at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 2005, directed by Evan Winet.

A three-act play that opens in a realistic setting, *The Jester* contrasts vividly with the absurdist beginning of *The Hunchback Bird*, which features surreal dialogue and gloomy images of incarceration, that are devoid of action. The action of *The Jester* begins on an early winter morning on the street of an old neighborhood of an unnamed Arab city. The residents, who are in a state "between sleep and wakefulness," are awakened by the arrival of an itinerant theater group that enters the stage riding a raggedy squeaking cart and beating a drum and dancing to cymbals. The group has arrived to perform its version of Shakespeare's *Othello* (an ironic premonition of *The Jester's* itinerant performance of 1984). Al-Maghut offers extensive stage directions, i.e., along with the description of the setting, he provides detailed descriptions of the actions and demeanor of the characters that he thinks are required in the performance. Al-Maghut's stage directions also offer a critique of the mentality of both performers and audience more generally, a critique he frequently voiced in his essays. In his stage directions he describes the performers as "a band of self-proclaimed 'artistes,'" in whose faces the doors of life have been slammed—so they have banged on the door of art until they broke it down. They have no

18 Ibid., p. 23.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 21.

qualms about mangling the most refined dramatic texts, nor distorting the most prominent historical characters, in order to make their money; anything it takes to flatter their audience and obey their trendy, fleeting desires.” This comic portrayal of artists and audience clearly appears to be a parodic reflection of al-Maghut’s stance on the arts and artists more generally. In his writings, he extended this critique to include intellectuals, to whose ranks he did not see himself belonging.

Unlike the world of floating imagery and abstraction of *The Hunchback Bird*, *The Jester* tends to manifest imagery concretely, often for the purpose of creating comic and parodic effects. At the beginning of the play, for example, when the commentator introduces the members of his itinerant troupe he utilizes hyperbolic imagery to highlight their credentials. But his laudatory intent is undercut by the actors themselves, who respond to the introductions by engaging in earthy and preposterous behavior:

Playing the role of Othello is a young actor whose name has risen (*the first actor in the room rises from among the heaps of clothing on the cart, and bows to the audience*) quickly to become in only a few months one of the most brilliant stars of the theater. And performing the role of Desdemona an outstanding actress, nursed on art since she was an infant. (*The actress springs up, with a baby’s pacifier in her mouth, and greets the audience*) As for the décor and characters, they’ll be drawn by this great artist (*A painter jumps up, brush and palette in hand, bows to the audience, and begins to paint the actors*)

Elsewhere in the play, al-Maghut uses a similar strategy of contrasting verbal tropes with distorted visual representations of those tropes, as a means of critiquing the exalted rhetoric and propagandist ideology embraced by the state. For example, he personifies abstract notions such as Arab chivalry or Arab unity, and converts them into well-defined characters, such as the historic hero Saqr Quraysh, who established Umayyad rule in Andalusia (*al-Andalus*) in the mid-eighth century. Saqr Quraysh, literally the Falcon of Quraysh, is brought to the present to revive the glory of the Arab past and transform what is currently mere propagandist rhetoric into reality. However, his attempt to restore Arab unity fails miserably and he is held captive at the border of an unnamed Arab state and denied entry into any lands presently under the control of the Arabs. His demise occurs when Arab officials strike a deal with Spaniards to hand Saqr over in return for a shipment of Spanish onions. The acquisition of Saqr is seen as a victory for the Spaniards, who intend to put him on trial for his conquest of their land, as it is for the Arabs, who celebrate their acquisition

of a large amount of Spanish onions. In this scene, al-Maghut simultaneously exposes the brute authoritarianism of Arab regimes and foregrounds the hollowness of ostensibly cherished Arab values by emptying political slogans of their meaning. Here, the downfall of Saqr, a mythical Arab hero takes place so that the Arabs can achieve a banal and absurd victory—a large shipment of Spanish onions. In *The Jester*, al-Maghut creates a world that bridges cultures, East and West, across time by moving from the present to the medieval period and back again. Not only are various time periods dramatized in the play, al-Maghut employs and evokes various literary styles that range from Shakespearean drama to the *maqamat* and its picaresque hero, a figure that bridges the Arab world with Arab Spain and its literary legacy.

The itinerant theater troupe performs the scene from Shakespeare's *Othello*, leading up to the murder of Desdemona. The scene is introduced by the Drummer, who refers to it as "the act which relates to jealousy ... For in these momentous times ... jealousy is one of the most pressing dangers facing our nation." As the act ends, he offers an analysis of the play's political implications, describing Othello as an Arab hero who has been destroyed by colonialism:

See the state this brave Moroccan hero Othello was in as he prepared to go to war in the struggle against colonialism. The enemies of our nation found nothing but this cheap way, the way of jealousy, to distract him from his duties. (*Pointing to the Jester, who carries the body of Desdemona and exits with it, weeping and wailing*) Look at this brave Moroccan knight. See how he was transformed from a valiant leader unafraid of death into someone crushed and debilitated.

The Drummer's political speech succeeds in arousing its audience of café customers who rush to defend their national heroes. They identify Othello with a Moroccan martyr, al-Mahdi ibn Baraka, who led Morocco's fight for independence and was forced to flee to France because of his opposition to the Moroccan king al-Hasan II, and who was subsequently kidnapped and killed in Paris in 1965 by Moroccan security forces with the help of the French secret service. The Drummer next leads his audience to consider a series of intriguing and superficially logical deductions through a series of apparently analytical questions. This dialogue illustrates the level of control and influence the Drummer has over his audience as he manifests a clever and treacherous form of leadership that succeeds in making the audience believe that their convictions are their own and are acquired through their own independent reasoning:

DRUMMER: But who is responsible for this painful fate which befell this brave Moroccan hero? Who destroyed his life, and deprived him of his home, his wife and his peace of mind?

CUSTOMER: Shakespeare ... Shakespeare!

CUSTOMER: Down with the imperialist writer Shakespeare!

VOICES: Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: Yes, my brothers. It is Shakespeare. He is the one responsible for this tragedy which befell our immortal Arab hero Othello. And yet ... And yet we must ask, who stands behind this Shakespeare? Who is the power that props him up and stands behind him?

VOICE: Britain! Britain!

VOICES: Down with Britain! Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: Yes, it is Britain, my brothers. And yet we must also ask, who stands behind Britain?

VOICES: America! America!

DRUMMER: (*Amid applause, cheering*) Yes, America, my brothers. Nuclear bases and Phantom fighter jets.

VOICE: Down with NATO!

VOICES: Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: (*Resuming*) ... in which the imperialist schemes appeared in their ugliest form and with their vilest purposes. (*Applause*)

The Drummer convinces his audience that they should not despair since “our history is rich with feats of bravery and righteousness, and abounds with values and virtuous qualities.” He asserts that his traveling theater troupe defends and protects the goals and aspirations of the nation by presenting to the “cultured, enlightened audience” a living page from its glorious history. A new game now begins in which the audience is asked to evoke heroes from the past

other than Othello. After several names are suggested, the Drummer selects Harun al-Rashid, the 'Abbasid caliph who died at the beginning of the ninth century and presided over the golden age of Arab culture. He also figures in the Arab literary tradition, particularly in the classic *One Thousand and One Nights*, as the reigning caliph of Baghdad. His character, as represented in these folk tales, is diminished of its aura. He is frequently used to parody autocrats as, for example, in several plays written by the father of modern Syrian drama, Abu Khalil al-Qabbani who died in 1903. In *The Jester* the troupe draws on Harun al-Rashid's characterization to similarly reinforce its parodic aspects; thus Harun al-Rashid is portrayed as a glutton who dispenses arbitrary and absurd justice to his subjects such as the Bedouin to whom he grants a thousand dinars before having his head cut off because he is excessively talkative. The Drummer, who essentially instructs the audience, explains that this passage shows "Arab justice and Arab generosity in its most magnificent form, a shining example from our history, when Right took its course immediately, without negotiations and deliberations that could've continued for months, even years. Instantly, the oppressed received justice and the oppressor was punished, in the most glorious, noble and smoothest way." The audience, however, does not recognize in the Drummer's lines the ironic tone and the mocking of the possibility of genuine justice.

The audience does, however, bluntly reject the characterization of Saqr Quraysh, who is presented as a pompous, sensuous prince. Unlike Harun al-Rashid, whose image has been softened in folk literature, the figure of Saqr Quraysh, the founder of Muslim Spain, provokes a heartfelt nostalgia, particularly because in the collective Arab psyche *al-Andalus* is perceived as a lost paradise. A member of the audience, enraged by what he sees as a distorted depiction, suggests that Saqr Quraysh must be turning in his grave. Suddenly the telephone rings, and the caller turns out to be Saqr Quraysh, who demands to speak to the actor who is playing him. The actor, who has portrayed Harun al-Rashid in the previous scene, is referred to as a "*al-muharrij*," the jester or clown, from which the play derives its title. He is identified as the jester when he first appears in the stage direction, but the audience, which is enraged by his interpretation of Saqr Quraysh, also derogatively describes him as a *muharrij*, i.e. a clowning fool, because of his falsification of a historical fact.

The Jester, especially its opening scene, is reminiscent of folk itinerant performances that were popular forms of entertainment in Syria and Egypt until the early twentieth century. These performances typically involved traveling troupes who performed a combination of singing, dance, *karagoz*, i.e., shadow puppetry, and comic sketches at the entrances to coffee houses. 'Ali al-Ra'i explains that some cafés in pre-French mandate Damascus were known for their

specific types of performance. Some were renowned for *karagoz*, others for the *hakawati*, and others for their dance numbers.²¹ Although al-Maghut is obviously drawing on these traditions, in *The Jester* the use of an itinerant troupe to dramatize the lives of historic heroes is also obviously a metatheatrical device for constructing a play within a play. In the play, the troupe's street act breaks down the barrier between the performance and the audience and it foregrounds the Jester's improvisational skills. Although the character of the Jester embodies traits of a number of characters who are staples of folk literature of various traditions such as the witty fool, the prankster and the rogue, he is a traditional figure in Arab popular culture and literature. Several versions of the Jester character were common in the early centuries of Islam in shadow plays, narrative literature and in particular in the *maqamat*, a forerunner of the European genre of the picaresque.

Al-Maghut's Jester also echoes the character *muharrij* that actor and director George Dakhul created for himself in early twentieth-century Damascus. According to 'Ali al-Ra'i, the performances of Dakhul, who established a successful group in Syria before moving to Egypt, included comic sketches, dance and song, but he took on the role of the *muharrij* only when he performed comedy.²² Curiously, al-Maghut's Jester describes himself and his own performance in ways that refer to the same type of performance Dakhul offered:

THE JESTER: ... I'll walk on my head ... so there! (*Does a handstand*) I'll dance, I'll jump, I'll sing like a madman! (*He immediately carries out these threats*) And I'll make grammatical mistakes, and anyone who doesn't like it can take his money and spend their nights at the Language Academy. (*He continues to dance and sings a current popular song. The majority of the audience joins in and sings and dances a dabke with him, while a minority of them backs away*)

CUSTOMER: He's a clown, not Saqr Quraysh.

THE JESTER: Yes, a clown. Better than Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy, don't you think? (*He continues to dance and snap his fingers, in a circle of audience members who have joined into the action*)

21 'Ali al-Ra'i, *al-Masrah fi al-Watan al-'Arabi*, 2nd ed. (Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Watani li-al-Thaqafa wa al-Funun wa al-Adab, 1999), 172.

22 Ibid.

Al-Maghut's Jester is also similar to the picaresque hero of the *maqamat*, whose chameleon-like character allows him to assume multiple roles and identities according to the social context in which he finds himself. This malleability of character is evident in the second and third acts of the play, in which the Jester is transported to a new time and place—the period of Umayyad rule in medieval *al-Andalus*—to meet Saqr Quraysh.

The Jester is carried into the court of Saqr Quraysh in a coffin, a comic conceit that also evokes the funereal, especially since Saqr and his companions are dressed in white, the color of a burial shroud. At the court, the Jester is subjected to a frightening interrogation to make him confess the reasons why he falsified history. But even under pressure he denies any responsibility and says that he is a “simple actor” who must repeat the lines assigned to him. The writers are the ones who should be blamed, he says, and goes on to assert that they are “[Y]oung people, atheists ... They let their beards and sideburns grow, and sit in coffeehouses talking about loss and fragmentation ... tribulations of the age ... complexities of civilization.” The coffee house as described in this tirade against writers differs substantially from the one in which he is seen performing in Act One. Despite rejecting responsibility for his earlier performance of Saqr Quraysh, the reader clearly sees his personification of this hero of the Arab past as simply improvised. Yet, the Jester's artful defense of himself impresses the caliph Saqr Quraysh who is enthralled by the Jester's wit and decides that he should remain in the Umayyad era and govern an Arab province. But the Jester quickly discovers that the provinces to which Saqr is considering appointing him—Alexandretta, Sinai and Palestine—are no longer under Arab control, and when he informs the caliph, Saqr insists on returning with the Jester to the present so that these lands may be returned to Arab rule.

The Jester blames the Arab defeat and decline on totalitarianism and the abuse of power. Arab regimes, he says, have robbed people of their dignity and turned them into passive, insignificant beings. The Jester masterfully explains his point by improvising a scene. He asks for a volunteer from among the most courageous of Saqr's men and plays the role of the volunteer's interrogator. He inflicts upon Saqr's valiant warrior, Dahham, a relentless form of psychological torture that completely emasculates him, then instructs Saqr to “tell your Dahham, the hero, to fight. Put a sword, spear and shield in his hands, with the bone of each finger wrapped around it, and call him to war. He wouldn't fight ... He'd be beaten by a chicken.”

Saqr Quraysh is determined to restore unity to his “grandchildren's” land and travels with the Jester back to the present. Ironically, he finds himself at the checkpoint of the border of an unidentified Arab country, is interrogated and denied entry because he does not possess a passport. Eventually, the

immigration officials accept that he actually is the historical hero, and for a shipment of onions hand him over to stand trial for war crimes, i.e. invading Spain. In this final act, imprisonment and interrogation, which haunted al-Maghut in his own life, recur as themes that punctuate the absurdity and sordidness permeating every facet of Arab society. The Jester's character is noteworthy because he appears to be the only one who possesses a clear understanding of his surroundings. He is not fooled by the Arab rhetoric concerning nationalism, democracy, culture and past glory, slogans so overused that they have become devoid of meaning. In that sense, the Jester can be seen both as an evocation of Shakespeare's Fool in *King Lear*, also referred to as *al-Muharrir* in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's standard translation, who is the only one who tells the monarch the truth as the universe collapses around him, and as a theatrical manifestation of al-Maghut himself.

Al-Maghut's last published play was *Outside the Flock (Kharij al-Sirb)* (1999). Like *The Jester*, it reworks aspects of Shakespearean theater and is formally a play within a play. The play reexamines the rhetoric of nationalism, Arab unity and the notion of martyrdom, and the idealization of political sacrifice for the sake of the nation. *Outside the Flock* does not, however, single out the ills of one specific regime as *The Jester* implicitly does; instead it critiques an apparently universal political structure. In *Outside the Flock* theater and the arts are presented as martyrs of this structure, and in it the demise of Shakespeare, Brecht, Pirandello, Beethoven, Wagner and the singer Farid al-Atrash are commemorated with a minute of silence.²³

The plays al-Maghut wrote in collaboration with Durayd Lahham, which include *Tishrin Village (Day'at Tishrin)* (1974), *Exile (Ghurba)* (1976) and *Cheers to the Homeland (Kasak ya Watan)* (1979), were never published despite the wide popularity they enjoyed. His oeuvre consists primarily of works of poetry, although he also wrote essays and scripts for television and cinema. Three of his early poetry collections, *Sadness in Moonlight (Huzn fi Daw' al-Qamar)*, first published in 1959; *A Room with a Million Walls (Ghurfa bi Malayin al-Judran)* first published in 1964; and *Joy is not my Profession (al-Farah Laysa Mihnati)*, first published in 1970, are included in his *Complete Works*. Other poetry collections were published subsequently: *The Rose Slayer (Sayyaf al-Zuhur)*, in 2001; *East of Eden, West of God (Sharq Adan Gharb Allah)*, in 2005, and *The Red Bedouin (al-Badawi al-Ahmar)*, in 2006. A collection of essays entitled *I Will Betray My Homeland (sa-Akhun Watani)* was published in 1987. The essays in this latter collection, which are primarily political, may have appeared previously

23 For a detailed analysis see Ziter, 27–33.

in other publications.²⁴ They are often written in dialogue form and are subtly poetic in tone. Gordon Witty notes that the book “is a fascinating collection of vignettes, monologues, diatribes, and political and social commentary which exude al-Maghut’s trademark cynicism.”²⁵ An autobiographical novel entitled *The Swing* (*al-Urjuha*) was published in 1991, two decades after it was written.



FIGURE 2.1 *The Jester* by Muhammad al-Maghut, directed by Lina Abyad and performed at Gulbenkian Theater at the Lebanese American University in 2007.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS, THE LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY.

24 Six of the essays from this collection were translated to English by Gordon Witty. See Gordon Witty, “I will betray My Country: ‘Ravings of Terror and Freedom’ Essays by al-Maghut,” *al-‘Arabīyya* 25 (1992), 73–96.

25 *Ibid.*, 74.

The Jester

Muhammad al-Maghut

(Translated by Gordon Witty, edited by Robert Myers and Nada Saab)

Act One

Early on a cold winter's morning, in an old working-class section of the city. The crowing of roosters and the squeak of wheels drawing closer is heard from a distance, with the beating of a drum and dancing cymbals and all of the clamor which precedes a traveling theater troupe. The troupe are a band of self-proclaimed "artistes," in whose faces the doors of life have been slammed so they banged on the door of art until they broke it down. They have no qualms about mangling the most refined dramatic texts, nor distorting the most prominent historical characters, in order to make their money; anything it takes to flatter their audience and obey their trendy, fleeting desires. A semi-literate drummer leads the troupe; in presenting the program he uses a microphone, from which hangs the severed wire, as an indirect confirmation of the troupe's lack of connection to any purpose other than making the audience laugh ...

In style, he resembles a skilled announcer, broadcasting a sports match or formal ceremony live at the event. As soon as the noise of the troupe is heard, doors open, and the inhabitants of the neighborhood, between sleep and wakefulness, begin to come in—this one in pajamas, that one drying his face with a towel, and another who has not yet finished sipping his morning tea. Surprise is apparent on their faces when the colorful cart appears, piled high like a moving Christmas tree with actors' costumes and chairs for the customers, and on it an actress, the first and only one in the room, dancing and swaying.

DRUMMER: Honorable customers, esteemed audience!

CUSTOMER: Peace be upon you!

DRUMMER: And upon you. (*Resuming his speech*) The Theater was ...

CUSTOMER: Good morning!

DRUMMER: Good morning to you, welcome. (*Resuming*) The theater has remained ...

(An old, grumpy-looking teacher of the Arabic language cuts him off. He walks over to sit in the coffeehouse, adjacent to the place where they are acting, a pile of notebooks in hand)

TEACHER: A little early for Art, isn't it?

DRUMMER: And what do you want this early in the morning? Beans with oil? Hummus with onions?

ACTOR #1: Ignorant!

DRUMMER: Imbecile! *(Resuming his address to the customers, the number of whom has increased)* The Theater has remained lean for many long years, on the margin of life, at the periphery of the people ... until ...

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: You're blocking the door of the coffeehouse.

DRUMMER: On the contrary, we're raising its level.

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: And I'll raise a complaint against you, as soon as the courthouse opens.

ACTOR #1: Ignorant!

DRUMMER: Imbecile! *(Resuming his speech)* Until a small group of youths, practitioners of art, faithful to its purpose and principles, is able to give back to theater the ... *(Greeting a new customer)* Welcome ... a chair for the gentleman ...

ACTOR #2: Coming! *(He brings him a chair off the cart—this is his perpetual job until the beginning of the acting)*

DRUMMER: ... is able to give back to theater the position of respect it deserves, its consideration to insure the benefit of the people and their interests.

ACTOR #1: *(Reciting a line of poetry)* "If the people should one day yearn for life, then what choice has Fate but to answer?"

ACTOR #2: "And what choice has the night but to yield to the day, and what choice have the fetters but to shatter?"²⁶ (*Applause*)

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: Go someplace else. (*Removing the troupe's chairs*) Go to some other square.

DRUMMER: Leave those chairs in their places.

ACTOR #1: Those are the people's chairs.

ACTOR #2: We're honoring you by performing these masterpieces in front of this miserable coffeehouse of yours.

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: Get out of here before you really start to make me mad.

CUSTOMERS: We can't hear! And we can't see anything. Tell us what this is all about!

DRUMMER: We're here by the authority of the people, and we won't leave until ...

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: (*Taking off his shoe threateningly*) You'll leave with this shoe!

ACTOR #2: Be careful, he's the director of the troupe.

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: (*Sarcastically*) He used to be a porter who carried boxes and other stuff.

DRUMMER: But now what I bear is Responsibility.

ACTOR #1: He carries Culture on his shoulders.

CUSTOMER: Leave them alone, who do you think you are?

CUSTOMER: They're artists.

²⁶ Lines from the Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's (1909-1934) famous poem "The Will to Live."

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: No they're not, they're imposters. Whenever I hire anybody to help me here in the coffeehouse, they play with his head and turn him into an actor. This one worked in the kitchen, that one served argilehs and that one ...

ACTOR #2: It's our choice.

ACTOR #1: We were lost, but now we've found our way.

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: Have a nice ride in your rattletrap (*He goes into his coffeehouse*)

ACTOR #1: Ignorant!

DRUMMER: Imbecile! (*Resuming his speech*) And the importance of this phenomenon is that those whom are undertaking it ...

TEACHER: (*Objecting*) "Those *who*" are undertaking it, not "those *whom*!"

DRUMMER: (*Acceding so as to avoid another argument*) ... *those who* are undertaking it have rejected worldly pleasures and life's vanities and have clung to art.

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: (*Returning*) And it was not a happy turn of events, that's for sure!

CUSTOMER: Be quiet!

DRUMMER: Shut up! (*Resuming*) They don't have curtains, tickets, or a ticket window. All they have is the people and their faith in the people.

CUSTOMER: (*Clapping*) One coffee!

DRUMMER: One coffee for the gentleman. (*Resuming*) So instead of having the people going to the theater, they've brought the theater to the people. (*Applause*) For we ...

ACTOR #1: We didn't build a theater, a fixed place because that space, the land it occupied, could be used to plant a field or erect a factory. (*Applause.*) We also ...

ACTOR #2: We also didn't use curtains, because they could be used to bandage the wounded, clothe the naked and shroud the martyrs.

DRUMMER: So dig into your pockets, fellow citizens, and enjoy the beautiful words and authentic art with us, art which serves the people.

ACTOR #1: And the people's goals.

ACTOR #2: Long live the people! (*Applause*)

DRUMMER: Because we, as artists, know what the people really want. (*Applause*)

CUSTOMER: (*Clapping, for a different reason*) Bring me an argileh!

CUSTOMER: A backgammon set!

DRUMMER: (*Gulping*) They want a living culture, and plays which deal with their problems and concerns. (*Applause, and more customers enter*) Welcome, more chairs for our brothers ... hurry, hurry. (*Resuming*) And it gives us much pleasure on this occasion to begin our program today with one of the greatest playwrights in the world: Shakespeare! And one of the greatest plays in the world: *Othello*! (*Applause*) You will watch this play in a new and radiant garb, and a style never before attempted, all thanks to this elite group of rebellious, avant-garde, revolutionary young people. (*The actors bow to the audience*)

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: They're trash!

DRUMMER: Shut up! (*Resuming*) Playing the role of Othello is a young actor whose name has risen (*The first actor in the room rises from among the heaps of clothing on the cart, and bows to the audience*) quickly to become in only a few months one of the most brilliant stars of the theater. And performing the role of Desdemona an outstanding actress, nursed on art since she was an infant. (*The actress springs up with a baby's pacifier in her mouth and greets the audience*) As for the décor and characters, they'll be drawn by this great artist. (*A painter jumps up, brush and palette in hand, bows to the audience, and begins to paint the actors*) He began his life as a classical painter, then moved from the classical school to the Expressionist, and from there to the Realist and finally to the school of Abstraction, finally becoming the

greatest paint slinger in the land. Homebuilders flock to him wherever he goes. Brothers, (*Applause*) my brother citizens ... since we're living in a fast-paced era, and time is money ... (*A Customer snores loudly. Another takes a loud, long pull on his argileh. The Drummer ignores their responses, which are slaps in the face*) ... and time is money, we're not going to present the entire play. Instead one act will suffice, the act which relates to jealousy. (*The actors applaud*) For in these momentous times, my brothers, jealousy is one of the most pressing dangers facing our nation. (*The actors applaud*) And now for the illustrious jealousy scene, in the immortal play *Othello*. (*The audience and actors applaud, while the Drummer withdraws, leaving the space free for the performance. There are silence, coughs, and the sound of the argilehs. The light focuses on the first actor, who is playing Othello. He has begun to straighten up and twitch a bit, trying, in a comical and unrefined way, to get into the character of Othello, a leader who is walking about arrogantly and nervously as if he were made of rubber. From this point on, he will be referred to as "The Jester"*)

THE JESTER: O Night! O Day! *Ishhadu*, Bear witness to my love for Desdemona.

TEACHER: (*Objecting*) There are two of them ... you have to use the dual form of the verb, not the plural! *Ishhada*, not *Ishhadu*!

THE JESTER: O Night! O Day! O Afternoon, O Evening! Bear witness, *Ishhada* ...

TEACHER: (*Objecting*) No, here you have to use the plural form, not the dual ... *Ishhadu*, not *Ishhada*!

THE JESTER: (*Agitated*) O Night! O Day! O Afternoon, O Evening! *Ishhada, ishhadu* Bear witness to my love for Desdemona! Help me to bear the separation from her as I go forth into battle. Cassio, Cassio!

ACTOR #1: (*As the character Cassio*) Your command, my lord!

THE JESTER: Help me, my friend. Assist me with some poetry, with some prayers that have not been recited except to the angels so I may recite them into the ears of Desdemona, that fragrant rose, that gentle-hearted dove and butterfly who has never seen Naples.

ACTOR #2: (*Whispering from a corner*) Venice!

THE JESTER: And Venice has never seen the likes of her, in terms of love, sincerity and honor ...

ACTOR #1: My lord, your trust in her is excessive, and you can't see farther than your own nose.

THE JESTER: (*Grabbing his nose*) My nose?

ACTOR #1: Yes, my lord. For Desdemona is not as faithful to you as you imagine.

THE JESTER: What do you mean, my dear Cassio?

ACTOR #1: I mean that she loves someone else.

THE JESTER: Who, her father?

ACTOR #1: No.

THE JESTER: Her mother?

ACTOR #1: No.

THE JESTER: (*Nervously*) Her brother? Her servant? Her dog? Who does she love then?

ACTOR #1: Another person, not related to her except by his lips and his arms and his ...

THE JESTER: (*Slapping him*) Liar! Liar! As thunder proves the coming of winter, and night proves the disappearance of the sun, show me proof of her treachery. If an ill omen had a face it would be yours. (*The audience laughs*)

ACTOR #1: (*Producing a handkerchief from his breast pocket*) Here is the proof.

THE JESTER: (*Snatching the handkerchief and sniffing it like a bloodhound*) Her handkerchief! Desdemona's handkerchief! Where did you find it? Where did you stumble upon it? Speak!

ACTOR #1: My lord ...

THE JESTER: Speak, or your head will be flying to Rome.

ACTOR #1: In her lover's house. My wife was doing the housework and putting things in order, after what seemed to have been a fearsome battle in the bed. And she found it ...

THE JESTER: (*Unsheathing his dagger*) What is his name? What is the name of this person who'll soon be deceased?

ACTOR #1: My lord, it's not in my nature to stir up trouble for others.

THE JESTER: Speak, or I'll put my hand down your throat and pull the truth out of you like a midwife pulls out a baby. Who is he? What's his name?

ACTOR #1: Ask Desdemona. She knows the truth. (*Withdrawing aside*)

THE JESTER: Desdemona, O, Desdemona ...

THE ACTRESS: (*Heeding his call, she appears wearing modern clothes, smacking her chewing gum and swinging her purse. The customers applaud for her and she smiles at them, then she goes back into character*) Are you calling me, my lord?

THE JESTER: Where were you just now?

THE ACTRESS: (*Hesitantly*) I was ...

CUSTOMERS: At the movies ... at the tailor's ... at the beauty parlor.

THE ACTRESS: (*To the Customers*) Oh, go catch a fever!

THE JESTER: (*Also to the Customers*) Please, brothers. (*To the actress*) Talking with the audience? Where were you? Where?

THE ACTRESS: In the garden. Do you want something from me?

THE JESTER: (*Pretending to sneeze*) I'm all congested. Give me your handkerchief.

THE ACTRESS: (*Looking in her purse*) Now where did it disappear to?

THE JESTER: (*Sneezes*) Quickly, quickly ... can't you see, my nose is like a faucet.

THE ACTRESS: Use a Kleenex (*Hands him a paper tissue*)

THE JESTER: (*Throwing it on the ground*) I want the handkerchief ... the handkerchief embroidered with roses and herbs. The handkerchief from our wedding, Desdemona!

THE ACTRESS: I don't know where it disappeared to. Maybe I dropped it in the garden.

THE JESTER: In the garden? Or in your lover's bed, you traitor! (*Slaps her*)

THE ACTRESS: Othello!

THE JESTER: (*Slaps her again*) You whore!

THE ACTRESS: (*Backing away, terrified of his fingers outstretched toward her neck*) My lord ... put your brain back in your head!

THE JESTER: I'll put you in your grave, you whore, you traitor, you spy!

(She collapses in his arms, feigning death. The audience applauds and whistles in delight. Meanwhile Actor #2 enters in the uniform of a soldier. The clattering of hooves, the neighing of steeds and the clanking of swords can be heard outside)

ACTOR #2: My lord, the enemy is at the gates of Venice, and the army awaits you.

THE JESTER: (*Sighing and weeping*) Get out! Get out of my sight, you wretch. I don't want to fight. I don't want to struggle anymore. I will wander aimlessly in the desert. (*Feeling his way like a blind man, wailing amidst the audience's applause and shouts of admiration*)

DRUMMER: (*Exploiting the audience's enthusiasm for this part of the program*) And thus, my brothers, you have seen with your own eyes what jealousy does to a soul ... how being numb and weak afflict its resolve and determination.

THE JESTER: (*Above Desdemona's body*) O, my beloved, O, the apple of my eye ...

DRUMMER: See the state this brave Moroccan hero Othello was in as he prepared to go to war in the struggle against colonialism. The enemies of our nation found nothing but this cheap way, the way of jealousy, to distract him from his duties. (*Pointing to the Jester who carries the body of Desdemona and exits with it, weeping and wailing*) Look at this brave Moroccan knight. See how he was transformed from a valiant leader unafraid of death into someone crushed and debilitated.

CUSTOMER: Viva the heroic Moroccan people's struggle!

VOICES: Viva! Viva!

DRUMMER: But who is responsible for this, my brothers?

CUSTOMER: Viva the martyr al-Mahdi ibn Baraka!²⁷

VOICES: Viva! Viva! (*Applause*)

DRUMMER: But who is responsible for this painful fate which befell this brave Moroccan hero? Who destroyed his life, and deprived him of his home, his wife and his peace of mind?

CUSTOMER #1: Shakespeare ... Shakespeare!

CUSTOMER #2: Down with the imperialist writer Shakespeare!

VOICES: Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: Yes, my brothers. It is Shakespeare. He is the one responsible for this tragedy which befell our immortal Arab hero Othello. And yet ... And

²⁷ al-Mahdi ibn Baraka (Mehdi Ben Barka) (1920-1965): Moroccan nationalist politician who was a leader in the fight for independence from France, and after independence became a leader in the call for a constitutional monarchy. He was forced into exile in France due to his criticism of the king, and was kidnapped and killed in Paris by Moroccan security forces in cooperation with the French secret service. A street in Damascus is named for him.

yet we must ask, who stands behind this Shakespeare? Who is the power that props him up and stands behind him?

VOICE: Britain! Britain!

VOICES: Down with Britain! Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: Yes, it is Britain, my brothers. And yet we must also ask, who stands behind Britain?

VOICES: America! America!

DRUMMER: (*Amid applause, cheering*) Yes, America, my brothers. Nuclear bases and Phantom fighter jets.

VOICE: Down with NATO!

VOICES: Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: And thus, my brother citizens, you have witnessed a painful episode in the history of imperialism, an episode in which ...

(A Voice yells something unrelated to the topic)

VOICES: Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: (*Resuming*) ... in which the imperialist schemes appeared in their ugliest form and with their vilest purposes. (*Applause*) And yet ... and yet, my brothers ... Must we surrender? Must we despair? Never, my brothers! We will not surrender and we will not despair, as long as our history is rich with feats of bravery and righteousness, and abounds with values and virtuous qualities. And this traveling theater troupe, defending and protecting its goals and aspirations, is pleased to present to its cultured, enlightened audience a living page from our glorious history. For Othello is not the only hero in our history since, whenever we turn the pages of that history, we find voluminous acts of heroism, and one leader after another. So where should we begin, O brothers? Which one should we choose? My God, I don't know ... Abu 'Ubayda al-Jarrah, Khalid ibn al-Walid ...²⁸

²⁸ Abu 'Ubayda ibn al-Jarrah (d. 640): Famous Companion of the Prophet and one of the first to accept Islam. He led a Muslim army into Syria. Khalid ibn al-Walid (d. 642): The most

CUSTOMER: Al-Hajjaj!²⁹

DRUMMER: Al-Hajjaj!

CUSTOMER: Abu Ja'far al-Mansur!³⁰

DRUMMER: Abu Ja'far al-Mansur. Abu Dharr. Abu Tammam.³¹

VOICES: Harun al-Rashid! Harun al-Rashid!³² (*Applause*)

DRUMMER: Yes, my brothers, Harun al-Rashid. He is the best example of Arab justice and Arab gallantry, garbed in sublime and splendid sensibility. So, to Arab justice and gallantry, my brother citizens ... to (*in a raised, enthusiastic voice*): Harun al-Rashid! (*He withdraws from the stage to leave it free for The Jester, who has appeared in a mask portraying Harun al-Rashid. The applause, laughter and whistling become louder. Then he sits at a table piled high with all sorts of food and begins to devour it gluttonously, eliciting more laughter*) As you can see, His Excellency is consumed by his food, as he is every time he's about to turn his attention to the issues of the people, those who are hungry and oppressed ... (*The Drummer withdraws completely, and silence descends in preparation for the new scene*)

ACTOR #2: (*In the garb of an 'Abbasid servant*) My lord, there is a Bedouin at the door seeking an audience with you. Shall I tell him you will see him?

THE JESTER: (*His mouth is full of food until the end of this scene*) Bring him to me at once!

ACTOR #2: You, Bedouin, come here.

famous of the early Muslim generals, he led the Prophet's army at several critical battles as the Prophet vanquished his enemies at Mecca. He went on to lead the Muslim armies to victory in Syria and Iran.

29 Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi (d. 714): Famous Arab general and governor of Iraq.

30 Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (d. 775): Second 'Abbasid Caliph; he founded Baghdad as its capital.

31 Abu Dharr al-Ghifari (d. 652): Famous Companion of Prophet Muhammad. Abu Tammam (d. 845): Famous Arab poet.

32 Harun al-Rashid (d. 809): Fifth 'Abbasid Caliph. He greatly expanded the Arab-Muslim empire, and his reign is known as the golden age of Arab culture.

ACTOR #3: (*Taking on the character of a poor Bedouin, he enters and throws himself at the Jester's feet*) My lord, I have only you to turn to. There's no one but you who'll have pity upon me and help me regain the fortune I've lost.

THE JESTER: What's your story? Tell me everything, and make it quick.

ACTOR #2: His Excellency does not like jabber and roundabout stories.

(The Jester makes funny gestures with his head)

ACTOR #3: My lord. I once was a young Arab man in excellent health with unblemished skin, and I never broke in through windows or doors, and I had ...

THE JESTER: And ...?

ACTOR #3: I had wealth and slave girls and camels that grazed freely in deserts and valleys.

THE JESTER: And, and ...?

ACTOR #3: Fate fell callously upon me, depriving me of food and drink. I swear I was so weak and emaciated I could've slipped through the holes of a sieve.

THE JESTER: And, and ...?

(The audience laughs)

ACTOR #3: Fortune tossed me to into the hands of a merchant, a snake-like man.

THE JESTER: And, in conclusion ...?

ACTOR #3: A man with no scruples! He gulped down what he owed me, insulted my honor, and left me wandering between Mosul and Basra with nothing but my cane and bundle.

THE JESTER: And the end of the story is ...?

ACTOR #3: That was the end of it for me and my family since I have nine children and a wife with a tongue two meters long. They're waiting for a gesture

from your generous hand that will grant us a bare subsistence and return what is rightfully ours. Otherwise we'll end up as a banquet for the dogs.

THE JESTER: (*Heaving a sigh*) Give him one thousand dinars.

ACTOR #3: Thank you, my lord!

THE JESTER: And cut off his head, because he talks too much.

(*Applause*)

ACTOR #3: (*Panicking*) My lord!

(*The swordsman appears and takes hold of the condemned man, pushing him as he begins to scream*) Mercy! Mercy! (*They disappear, a horrible scream rings out, followed by applause, cheering, and whistling from the audience*)

THE JESTER: (*Clapping drunkenly*) And now, bring me a dancer at once!

(*The Actress enters, in a slave girl's costume, and dances before The Jester to the music that one of the actors plays. The Actor sings a romantic folk song, and the Customers quickly join in, clapping in approval and enjoyment*)

DRUMMER: And thus, my brothers, you have witnessed Arab justice and Arab generosity in its most magnificent form, a shining example from our history, when Right took its course immediately, without negotiations and deliberations that could've continued for months, even years. Instantly, the oppressed received justice and the oppressor was punished, in the most glorious, noble and smoothest way ...

(*The actors disappear and the audience's applause increases*)

CUSTOMER: Bring me a tea.

DRUMMER: And yet, my brothers ...

CUSTOMER: (*Tapping on his argileh*) Bring me another coal!

DRUMMER: And yet, my brother citizens, did things continue this way? Absolutely not, my brothers, for no sooner had Harun al-Rashid died, and his son al-Amin, who possessed a true Arab sensibility and a pure nationalist spirit, ascended to the Caliphate, than the madness of Persian imperialism erupted. They accused him of chauvinism. They provoked the tribes and his followers to rebel against him. They even incited and supported his brother al-Ma'mun against him.³³ Why, my brothers? Merely because his mother was Persian. And almost immediately the dispute escalated and war broke out. Blood flowed. There was poverty, hunger and destruction everywhere. Persian imperialism is riddled with conspiracies that maliciously deceive our people and this nation.

CUSTOMER: Down with reactionary Iran!

VOICES: Down, down, down!

DRUMMER: But, my brothers ...

CUSTOMER: Long live the doctor!

VOICES: Viva! Viva!

DRUMMER: But Imperialism's plan failed, because every time this nation stumbles, it rises again, and every time it falls, it gets back on its feet. Thanks to leaders and knights begotten by pregnant bellies, only a few years passed before stability returned to all the Arab lands and to Arab civilization. Their heroic deeds are on the tip of every tongue. Who among us does not take pride in al-Ghafiqi, and 'Uqbah, and Tariq?³⁴ They are ...

CUSTOMER: And Saqr Quraysh ... Saqr Quraysh!³⁵ (*Lengthy applause*)

33 After Harun al-Rashid's death in 809 c.e., his two sons fought a civil war to succeed him. Al-Ma'mun finally defeated his brother after nearly two decades of war devastated the Caliphate.

34 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ghafiqi (d. 732): Arab general and governor of *al-Andalus*, he was killed during the Arab invasion of France. 'Uqba ibn Nafi' (d. 683): Arab leader who helped conquer North Africa. Tariq ibn Ziyad (d. 720): The Arab general who first entered *al-Andalus*, and for whom Gibraltar (Arabic: *Jabal Tariq*, "Tariq's Mountain") is named.

35 Saqr Quraysh, "The Hawk of Quraysh," the hero of this play, is the epithet of the famous ruler 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Mu'awiya, or 'Abd al-Rahman I (731–788 c.e.). Also known as al-Dakhil, "The Enterer," (of *al-Andalus*) he was an Umayyad prince, born in Damascus.

VOICES: Saqr Quraysh ... Saqr Quraysh!

DRUMMER: Yes, my brothers, and Saqr Quraysh was also one of these heroes, these knights who founded the 'Abbasid state.

TEACHER: The Umayyad, not the 'Abbasid!³⁶

DRUMMER: The Umayyad state in Baghdad.

TEACHER: In *al-Andalus*, not Baghdad! *Al-Andalus*!

DRUMMER: In Baghdad, in *al-Andalus* and everywhere. (*Applause*) Therefore, so that we may recover our trust in ourselves, in our past, and in our future, the best means of concluding our theatrical program today, O brothers, is with Saqr Quraysh. (*Applause*) So now to Arab heroism and Arab bravery, in their most magnificent garb and splendid form ... to Saqr Quraysh! (*Withdrawing aside amid applause and cheers. The Jester appears, impersonating the character of Saqr Quraysh in a dreadful manner. He wears a kaffiyya and 'iqal, an Arab headdress and the rope which holds it in place, and pants as well. He scowls and twitches in an exaggerated manner so as to perform the role of the decisive leader, as he understands decisiveness, so that he resembles Yusuf Wahbi in the film The Seat of Confession.*³⁷ *The audience whistles loudly and laughs*)

THE JESTER: O slave boy!

ACTOR #2: Yes, my lord.

CUSTOMER: (*Protesting*) Saqr Quraysh wearing pants? What a joke!

Fleeing the 'Abbasids, who had overthrown the Umayyads in the Eastern Arab lands, he went west to *al-Andalus*, where he expanded Arab rule and established the Umayyad dynasty there. He reigned for more than 30 years, during which Arab culture in *al-Andalus* flourished. During this time, he also fought to expand Arab control into Europe, which brought him into direct conflict with Charlemagne.

36 The Umayyad dynasty ruled the expanding Arab/Muslim empire from 661–750, from their capital in Damascus, until they were defeated by the 'Abbasids. The 'Abbasids founded a new capital in Baghdad, and ruled until defeated by the Mongols in 1258. The Drummer's mistake is one which any Arab school pupil would know.

37 Yusuf Wahbi: (1898-1984) Famous Egyptian comedic writer, director, and actor, star of stage and screen. The film, originally a play, dates from 1949.

DRUMMER: Please, brothers.

THE JESTER: (*Restraining his anger*) O slave boy!

CUSTOMER: This is a farce ... and bellbottoms too!

THE JESTER: (*Defiantly*) Or pants, or shorts. I can wear whatever I want. (*He puts a European-style hat on his head, on top of the Arab headdress, and the audience laughs at the sight*) There, how do you like that? (*Resuming his speech*) O slave boy!

ACTOR #2: Yes, yes, my lord?

CUSTOMER: And did Saqr Quraysh have pink-eye, too?

THE JESTER: What are you, a doctor?

CUSTOMER: Everyone knows that.

THE JESTER: (*He puts on sunglasses, and the audience's laughter increases*) Here, see that? (*To Actor #2*) Have anyone come to see me?

TEACHER: (*Protesting*) Not have, has!

THE JESTER: *Has* anyone come to see us?

ACTOR #2: A messenger from Charlemagne.

THE JESTER: From Charlemagne? Let him in. (*He sits behind a desk, crosses his legs, and leafs through a newspaper, pretending to take his position seriously*)

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: (*He enters, carrying a message on a large paper scroll*) Peace be with you, O Commander of the Faithful!

THE JESTER: (*He hastily snatches the scroll, glances at it and screams*) A truce for a month? He wants a truce for a whole month? How insolent! (*He paces, feigning anger and concern*)

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: My lord, he asks and beseeches you.

THE JESTER: He will not be granted a truce for a single day, even if he kisses my shoe here (*The audience laughs when they see his shoe, which has a hole in it*)

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: He's only asking for a truce that lasts a month.

THE JESTER: If I want, I can make a month last two, even a year, two years ... But I'm not going to offer a truce that lasts even a single day. I'll attack him like a beast, between September and the month of *Aylul*.

CUSTOMER: (*Surprised*) But September and *Aylul* are the same month!

THE JESTER: Shut up!

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: He will be stunned by this response.

THE JESTER: He can go to Hell. He can go beat his head against a wall. (*Melodramatically*) Because I'll never forget his response to my ardor for that slave girl. She robbed me of my sanity, she stole my heart and he deprived me of her heart. The slave girl Amber. But he married her, and she bore his child. (*Crying*) Because of her, I can't sleep day or night. It's as if my heart was on fire with hot spices.

TEACHER: (*Protesting*) *Were*, not *was*. The verb is in the subjunctive.

THE JESTER: Shut up!

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: But, my lord, he doesn't know about that.

THE JESTER: He must know about it ... He and all world leaders know I'm madly in love with her. (*Unsheathing his sword*) And for her sake, I will plunge into a war that will scorch the earth, and a battle the likes of Ghabra' and Dahis.³⁸

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: Control yourself, my lord!

³⁸ Legendary pre-Islamic war between two Arab tribes. The war began over a race between the two horses named Ghabra' and Dahis, and lasted 40 years (c. 568–609 c.e.).

THE JESTER: I will control nothing but this sword! (*Trying to terrorize his addressee*) Write, you scribe! (*Actor #3 prepares to write*) Write: Charlemagne, you despicable dog,

MESSENGER FROM CHARLEMAGNE: My lord!

ACTOR #2: That's unacceptable!

THE JESTER: Shut up, you two! (*To the laughing audience*) Shut up, all of you! Yes, he's a dog, a despicable, conspiring dog. Write, "As long as the matter between us will remain unresolved."

TEACHER: (*Protesting*) Wrong! *remains* ...

THE JESTER: Shut up!

TEACHER: Wrong! It does not take *will*.

THE JESTER: (*Defiantly*) It does too take it ...

TEACHER: (*Getting up from his chair and advancing, similarly defiant*) It can't take it ... That's impossible!

THE JESTER: And if it took it, what would happen?

TEACHER: It's grammar. The entire basis of language would collapse!

THE JESTER: (*Attacking him*) Go straight to the pit of Hell! The basis of grammar is not the same as missile bases. (*The audience laughs heartily*)

TEACHER: This can't be, it's intolerable! Stop the play! *Remains* is present tense.

THE JESTER: It will remain, whether you like it or not ... (*Grabbing him by the neck*) Is *remain* your sister or your mother? What relation is it to you?

TEACHER: Help, help! (*The audience laughs*)

THE JESTER: There are people being taken to prisons and hospitals every minute of every day. Does that bother one hair on your head? No, of course it doesn't. But for the sake of ...

TEACHER: What does one have to do with the other? Help! Save me!

THE JESTER: ... for the sake of one word in place of another, you want to upset Heaven and Earth ... You stuffed corpse ... you mummy ...

TEACHER: You're ruining the language. You're putting the present and future tense on the same level.

THE JESTER: I'll put you on a level gallows ... (*Lifting him high*) And raise you and your language and its revered rules above my head, and let you come crashing down!

TEACHER: No! Help! Save me! (*The Jester throws him aside, leaving him moaning in pain as he runs away. The Jester then wipes his hands of his opponent and returns to the play as the audience applauds enthusiastically*)

CUSTOMER: Long live the immortal hero Saqr Quraysh!

VOICES: Viva! Viva!

THE JESTER: (*Continuing to dictate the letter*) Continue, slave boy. And concerning the slave girl Amber, I am informing you unequivocally that ... (*In a passionate tone*) I would give up my entire kingdom before I would relinquish a single clipping from her fingernail.

CUSTOMER: This is a distortion!

CUSTOMER: Saqr Quraysh is not concerned with women!

CUSTOMER: He never was!

THE JESTER: Because he's stupid. As for me, I will be concerned. (*Continuing the dictation in a passionate tone*) And I relinquish my Arabness ...

CUSTOMER: This is a distortion!

CUSTOMER: It's unacceptable!

CUSTOMER: Impossible!

THE JESTER: I see heads that are ripe for the picking ... Let he who objects step forward. (*Continuing the dictation with sword in hand*) And may I relinquish my soul and my life.

CUSTOMER: This is not Saqr Quraysh!

CUSTOMER: Look how he swishes, like a drag queen.

THE JESTER: I'll walk however I like. So there. (*He walks, moving side to side, like a dancer, and the audience's laughter increases*) How do you like that?

CUSTOMERS: (*Amid whistling and shouts of disapproval*) You're distorting history!

CUSTOMER: ... and the facts ...

CUSTOMER: A leader doesn't sashay ...

CUSTOMER: And he isn't lewd ...

THE JESTER: Shut up! I'll walk on my head ... so there! (*Does a handstand*) I'll dance, I'll jump, I'll sing like a madman! (*He immediately carries out these threats*) And I'll make grammatical mistakes, and anyone who doesn't like it can take his money and spend their nights at the Language Academy. (*He continues to dance and sings a current popular song. The majority of the audience joins in and sings and dances a dabke with him, while a minority of them backs away*)

CUSTOMER: He's a clown, not Saqr Quraysh.

THE JESTER: Yes, a clown. Better than Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy, don't you think? (*He continues to dance and snap his fingers in a circle of audience members who have joined into the action*)

CUSTOMER: (*As he is leaving*) I'm sure that Saqr Quraysh is spinning in his grave right now.

(The telephone in the coffeehouse rings several times. The coffeehouse owner raises the receiver, while the ruckus continues)

COFFEEHOUSE OWNER: Hello, hello? (*To the audience*) I can't hear. Hello, yes? (*To the audience*) Be quiet! I can't hear ... (*The noise lessens slightly*) Yes, yes, who are you?

VOICE FROM THE TELEPHONE: (*Echoing like thunder*) Saqr Quraysh!

(Everyone freezes in their places, and a frightening silence prevails. The color drains from The Jester's face as the coffeehouse owner passes the phone to him, unable to say a word)

THE JESTER: (*Stammering*) He wants me? (*The coffeehouse owner gulps and is unable to answer. The Jester grabs the receiver with a trembling hand. The audience starts to back toward the exits, preparing to flee*) Hello? (*Silence*) Yes. (*In the midst of the silence, the sound of spitting ... Tfoo! bursts out of the receiver like a gunshot. The Jester and the audience all jump. The Jester wipes imaginary spit from his face*) Yes, yes. But how do I get there? By what means? Where are you speaking from?

VOICE FROM THE TELEPHONE: From the cemetery. From the past. From History!

(Thunder sounds from offstage, and the fleeing audience and actors are covered in intersecting lines of lightning, as if they were ropes of history. Meanwhile the Jester staggers, calling out for help)

THE JESTER: Water ... My throat has gone dry! A chair ... My legs are paralyzed! Don't leave me! Help!

(The lines of lightning encircle him, as if he were a fish in a net, and the world goes dark. Lights fade)

Act Two

The set: An awe-inspiring chamber, at an ancient date in the Umayyad age. It exudes the smell of majesty and death. Saqr Quraysh's council, convened for the urgent matter, occupies it. It includes, in addition to Saqr, his two faithful friends 'Ubayd Allah and Abu Khalid. Their clean, white garments add to the effect of their frowning, bearded, tanned faces. Saqr Quraysh's eyes shine, more than his sword and shield, with anger and vengeance at the Jester, who lies

submissively in his coffin, afraid and humiliated at the terror of the situation and the acrimoniousness of the interrogation.

SAQR QURAYSH: So, this is how I used to conduct affairs of state? With yelling and cursing, I tightened my hold on Europe's neck, until her eyes bulged from her sockets?

THE JESTER: Have mercy, my lord!

SAQR: Had some clown been one of the grandsons of the Persians, or the Romans, and done what you did, then not one thread of my burial shroud here would have quivered. But you! You are my flesh and blood. One of my own grandchildren, and this, by God, is something I will not forget, as long as I have a moustache beneath my nose and a head cord upon my head. (*He sits furiously, as if his body can hardly bear his anger*)

‘UBAYD ALLAH: (*Stands up, brandishing his sword*) You little clown!

ABU KHALID: (*Imitating his companion*) You human hedgehog!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: In what abode did you leave your honor, when you adopted the role of the bravest and most virile of men as a wailing, infatuated lover?

ABU KHALID: And on what shelf did you place your history when you quoted from his tongue words and sayings which no one but a buffoon or drunkard would utter?

THE JESTER: Sir ... my lord ...

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Do you know about his noble descent and lineage?

THE JESTER: No.

ABU KHALID: And do you know about his qualities and deeds?

THE JESTER: No.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: And do you know how he arrived at the seat of power?

THE JESTER: He entered military college and then led a coup?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: No!

THE JESTER: By parliamentary means?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: No, no, no! He arrived there through an open grave, as deep and long as the Euphrates. He was twenty years old, sore-eyed and barefoot, when he challenged the whole of Baghdad, with all its swords and spears and tyranny. (*Inquiring*) And do you know who was ruling Iraq at that time? Do you?

THE JESTER: ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif?³⁹

‘UBAYD ALLAH: No!

THE JESTER: ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Arif?⁴⁰

SAQR QURAYSH: (*As if hearing the name of a new star*) Who?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: No, no! Abu Ja‘far al-Mansur,⁴¹ you idiot! I think you know what that name means. Nevertheless, he challenged this ruler and broke his blockade. He traversed jungles, descended into caves, and crossed rivers to build his kingdom, one house at a time, like the pigeon builds its nest in the coop.

ABU KHALID: Imagine, a youth of twenty standing on the shores of *al-Andalus*, alone and a fugitive, with not even a crust of bread in his mouth. And after ten years, he had in his mouth the fate of the world. (*Gesturing with his sword*) This is our commander!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: This is our leader!

THE COUNCIL: This is Saqr Quraysh!

THE JESTER: (*Throwing himself, in terror, at the feet of Saqr Quraysh*) Have mercy, my lord, have mercy!

39 President of Iraq, 1963-1966.

40 President of Iraq, 1966-1968, and brother of the above.

41 ‘Abd Allah ibn Muhammad Abu Ja‘far al-Mansur (714–775 c.e.) The second ‘Abbasid caliph and founder of Baghdad.

SAQR: (*Kicking him like a pebble*) Get up!

THE JESTER: I didn't know ... I wasn't aware.

SAQR: I said, get up! This is the first time I have seen an Arab bow down between shoes.

THE JESTER: But they are the shoes of Saqr Quraysh ...

SAQR: Even if they were the shoes of the gods ...

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Get up, before you make the earth sick.

THE JESTER: (*Rising, surrounded by a ring of swords*) My lord, that's my poor neck between your sharp swords. Relieve me of it ... reduce my pain and put me to rest.

SAQR: If you're such a coward, why do you provoke lions?

ABU KHALID: And if you're so low, why do you attempt to leap to the stars?

SAQR: Let him be. I'd rather have seen a dead dog than him.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: (*Sarcastically*) And what is this skinny moustache like a mouse's tail?

ABU KHALID: (*Pulling him by his necktie*) And this, like a long donkey halter?

(*Laughter and guffawing*)

THE JESTER: My lord, I'm a simple actor. I repeat what's dictated to me.

SAQR: Like a parrot?

THE JESTER: Right. Like a parrot.

SAQR: Then who's responsible for these lies and slander?

THE JESTER: The authors? The writers?

SAQR: The writers? And who are these writers? To which tribe do they belong?

THE JESTER: How would I know? Young people, atheists, my lord. They let their beards and sideburns grow, and sit in coffeehouses talking about loss and fragmentation.

SAQR: (*Surprised*) Loss? Fragmentation?

ABU KHALID: What does that mean?

THE JESTER: The tribulations of the age. The complexities of civilization.

SAQR: (*Becoming distracted from the main subject*) Do you have civilization, you clown?

THE JESTER: A terrifying civilization.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: (*The interest becoming contagious*) Like the civilization of the Romans?

THE JESTER: Pshaw!

ABU KHALID: Like the civilization of the Persians?

THE JESTER: What Romans? What Persians? The civilization with which we are blessed, my forefathers, surpasses any imagination or fantasy.

(The forefathers gather around him with interest, having swallowed the bait)

SAQR: Alright, tell us!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Don't pique our curiosity!

THE JESTER: Everything has changed and developed ... food, drink, clothing, speech, war, science, literature, everything ... everything's changed. (*As if revealing a secret*) We have Technology!

SAQR: Technology? (*The forefathers are surprised. They mutter and gesture with their hands and eyes*) And what else?

THE JESTER: (*Lighting a cigarette ... the forefathers cough and wave the smoke away with their hands*) Unbelievable things.

ABU KHALID: What is this thing you're puffing?

SAQR: Is it from civilization?

THE JESTER: This is a simple invention to ease one's cares.

'UBAYD ALLAH: Did you hear that, Abu Khalid?

SAQR: Let us understand! What else do you have?

THE JESTER: (*Becoming enthusiastic, having distracted them from the main subject for good*) We have carrot juicers, electric razors and formica tables. Fresco washers, butane lighters, Toshiba fans, Presto pressure cookers, Omega watches and Sheaffer pens. (*He opens the coffin and displays to them some brightly colored, eye-catching samples, and they throng around him, in disbelief*)

SAQR: What wondrous inventions!

ABU KHALID: Unbelievable things!

THE JESTER: And we have cologne, and nylon shirts, and bellbottoms!

SAQR: And you, our Arab grandchildren, you enjoy all of these blessings?

THE JESTER: Of course, of course. And we have steak, roast beef, hamburgers, chateaubriand, tutti-frutti ice cream and chocolate mousse. We have cars that drive and planes that fly. We have newspapers and magazines. (*He gives them a bundle of newspapers and magazines, and each one of them snatches one and immerses himself in it*) Take these, my forefathers, and read whatever you want about the news of civilization and progress in our country. (*He takes this opportunity to prepare to leave*)

SAQR: "The first human to land on the surface of the moon!"

'UBAYD ALLAH: "Discovery of a medicine for epilepsy!"

ABU KHALID: "The Arab team beats the Turkish team in soccer!"

SAQR: Unbelievable news! Unbelievable news!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: "The Egyptian champion defeats the English champion in wrestling!"

ABU KHALID: "The Tunisian champion defeats the French champion in gymnastics!"

SAQR: He is my grandson!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: "A Syrian musician has won the world prize for music!"

SAQR: He is my grandson!

ABU KHALID: "A Lebanese beauty will be Miss Universe!"

SAQR: She is my granddaughter! They are my grandchildren. (*Hugging the Jester*) Thank you, my son, thank you. You have warmed my heart with this news.

THE JESTER: We also have champions in boxing, basketball, ping-pong and chess. In everything!

ABU KHALID: My heart has been eased.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: And my faith in my grandchildren has returned.

SAQR: You are a blessed people.

THE JESTER: And we have the most beautiful clothes, and the most delicious food, and the most modern stores and villas. I've brought you all some presents.

SAQR: No, no. I may faint. Your news is the most beautiful of presents.

THE JESTER: As a souvenir ... only as a souvenir. (*He offers him a pair of sunglasses, and puts them on him*)

SAQR: (*Strutting in his sunglasses*) My God! The world is black. Black, and far away!

THE JESTER: (*Offering a necktie to 'Ubayd Allah and an umbrella to Abu Khalid*)
As a souvenir, a souvenir only.

'UBAYD ALLAH: (*Strutting in his necktie*) How marvelous! Look, Abu Khalid!

ABU KHALID: (*Strutting with the umbrella*) My God ... a tent! A tent you carry in your hand!

SAQR: What unbelievable inventions!

THE JESTER: And we also have Kleenex ... and Kotex!

SAQR: Enough, enough, my son. These examples we have seen, and the news we have read, have made me prouder than a peacock. Thank you, my grandchildren.

'UBAYD ALLAH: Wonderful grandchildren!

SAQR: There is no doubt that this moment is one of the most glorious in our history!

ABU KHALID: And it is no wonder that this day will be immortalized by history like the day of Qadisiyya.⁴²

'UBAYD ALLAH: And it is indisputable that our martyrs are now smiling, at peace in their graves.

THE JESTER: (*After making himself ready to depart*) I gather then that the misunderstanding between us is over?

SAQR: We've forgiven and pardoned you.

ABU KHALID: O messenger of our nation from the twentieth century.

42 Qadisiyya: Site in Iraq of a great battle between the Arabs and the Persians, in 635, c.e. The Arabs defeated the Persians and went on to conquer Persia.

THE JESTER: My generous forefathers! I will seize this unforgettable occasion to express my deepest thanks to you and my gratitude for the considerable welcome which I have received from you. And for your deep understanding of my circumstances as an actor. (*Pretending to cry*) And, as I leave you at this moment, I give you my firm promise that I will transmit to your grandchildren in the twentieth century your most pleasant greetings and best wishes ... Farewell, my forefathers! (*He embraces them individually, then stretches out in his coffin and closes the lid quickly, whereupon four Arabs pick it up and carry it out*)

SAQR: Farewell, my grandson!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: May God make your memory sweet!

ABU KHALID: A pleasant and peaceful journey!

(Saqr, Abu Khalid, and ‘Ubayd Allah sit in despondent silence at the leave-taking. Meanwhile, from outside can be heard the ululations and drumbeats accompanying the coffin, which fades away slowly, with funeral music)

SAQR: It was like a dream.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: A wonderful grandson ...

ABU KHALID: A cultured grandson ...

SAQR: It occurs to me that we were too hasty.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: In what?

SAQR: In his departure.

ABU KHALID: Indeed, what harm would there have been if he had lingered among us for another night?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Or two ...

SAQR: I'm thinking longer than that. (*Looks of concern*) I'm thinking that he might remain among us forever. A man of his talent, memory and information ... We must benefit from him. (*Calling*) You, servant!

SERVANT: At your command, my lord.

SAQR: Go catch up with our departed grandson and bring him back immediately.

(The servant exits in a hurry)

SERVANT'S VOICE: Stop him! Bring him back!

ABU KHALID: An excellent idea.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: But I wonder, will he agree?

SAQR: And why not? If he is devoted to his forefathers and proud of his history ... then he'll have to agree. *(With sudden, elated enthusiasm)* We must exploit him, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: In what capacity, my lord?

ABU KHALID: Our capacities are innumerable.

SAQR: This idea struck me as I felt my tears mingling with his when I was bidding him farewell.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: One blood flows in the veins of us all.

ABU KHALID: Let's appoint him director of the Arab cemeteries, for his exuberant spirit will put some life back into them.

SAQR: No, no. It would be a shame if we wasted his talents in the cemeteries.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Master of ceremonies ... His art, excellent demeanor and spontaneous mind are perfectly suited for that position.

SAQR: No. His qualifications are not confined to his clothes. They're here. *(Pointing to his head)* And we need to exploit them to the last drop.

ABU KHALID: A thought occurred to me, a hellish thought, my lord. Since our grandson is, by nature and instinct, an actor, then why don't we send him to one of the provinces to act on our behalf there?

SAQR: You mean as a governor?

ABU KHALID: Yes, as a governor. He's a veritable wealth of culture and elegant speech.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: That is a thought deserving examination.

SAQR: (*Agreeing enthusiastically*) Indeed, deserving of implementation. I will appoint him as a governor immediately. (*Calling*) Bring him back, stop him, return him. (*The din of the returning funeral coffin, ululations and drumbeats draws near*) He will be a model of administration and organization.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: A magnificent idea.

ABU KHALID: It's my idea.

(The pallbearers enter and place the coffin on the ground and leave. The Jester inquires, before getting out of it)

THE JESTER: What's going on? Why did they bring me back?

ABU KHALID: Happy news!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: A surprise!

THE JESTER: What are you hiding from me, my forefathers?

SAQR: (*Embracing him*) A surprise you'd never have thought of. (*Calling*) O servant!

SERVANT: Yes, my lord?

SAQR: Prepare the banquet table for us, as you would prepare an army for war, for our grandson is hungry.

THE JESTER: (*Without any enthusiasm for staying*) But it's getting late for me, and I'm not comfortable traveling in a coffin at night.

SAQR: And who told you that you'd be departing?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: You won’t be leaving now.

ABU KHALID: Say farewell to the twentieth century.

THE JESTER: I won’t be departing? But what will I do here ... I ...

SAQR: Please, sit down. (*They sit at the table; the servant has begun to bring in the food*) Listen, my dear grandson, in view of what you are blessed with, in terms of fortitude, logic, power of insight and your many talents, and in view of our severe lack of capable men such as yourself, we have decided to appoint you governor of one of the Arab provinces.

THE JESTER: (*The surprise having shaken him*) A governor?

SAQR: Yes, like al-Hajjaj and Ibn al-‘As, and their like.⁴³

THE JESTER: But, my lord, I ...

ABU KHALID: Don’t try to make excuses.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: We won’t accept excuses.

THE JESTER: I don’t know with what tongue to thank you. I accept most certainly, since I was made to bear grave perils and responsibilities. But I have to question whether I’m worthy of such confidence.

SAQR: And who could be more worthy than you for this post?

ABU KHALID: Who surpasses you in culture and insight?

THE JESTER: It’s true I have three diplomas. And I am fluent in three languages. (*He says a few sentences in French, English, and Chinese*)

SAQR: Wonderful, wonderful!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Amazing!

43 al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf and ‘Amr ibn al-‘As: Famous seventh-century generals and governors of Iraq and Egypt respectively.

ABU KHALID: It's my idea.

SAQR: And now, let's eat!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: We should have drunk a toast to him.

SAQR: As long as alcoholic beverages remain prohibited to us, we have nothing to drink except our tears of joy.

THE JESTER: After you have filled my heart with joy, filling my stomach with food becomes a secondary matter. But I would like to ask ...

‘UBAYD ALLAH: And he has a sense of humor, too.

ABU KHALID: A good sense of humor is among the requirements of a governor.
(*They laugh*)

THE JESTER: And yet, I would like to ask, which province am I to govern?

SAQR: Whichever province you wish.

ABU KHALID: Just say, "I want this or that," and the doors will open wide.

THE JESTER: I hope it will have a moderate climate, since my health ... as you see, my lord.

SAQR: Of course, of course. (*Stops chewing his food and thinks*) I will take everything into consideration. What province ... what province ...? *Al-Andalus!* I'll appoint you governor of *al-Andalus*.

THE JESTER: (*The food freezes in his mouth as if he had bitten his tongue*) *Al-Andalus?*

SAQR: Yes, *al-Andalus*. The province dearest to my heart.

THE JESTER: But ...

ABU KHALID: A fortuitous choice!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: A real province!

THE JESTER: But *al-Andalus*, my lord ... May God have mercy on its soul!

SAQR: What do you mean, "May God have mercy on its soul?"

THE JESTER: I mean it's been gone for hundreds of years.

(The three look at each other and then burst out laughing)

SAQR: What a sense of humor!

ABU KHALID: Didn't I tell you he had a good sense of humor?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: *(Nearly unable to keep himself from laughing)* My son, the red rose still blossoms on the plains of *al-Andalus*, because we watered it with our blood.

THE JESTER: In any case, I'm sorry ...

SAQR: There's no need for apologies or excuses. I understand what you mean. *(To the others)* I get what he's driving at. *Al-Andalus* is too big for him. He wants a smaller province.

ABU KHALID: That's obvious.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: We have provinces of all shapes and sizes.

SAQR: Servant, bring the map. I will select a province for you that's small in size but great in its effect.

SERVANT: *(Handing him the map)* Here, my lord.

SAQR: *(Passing his hand over the map as he chews)* I found it. I swear by the Lord of the Ka'ba, I found it. Iskenderun!⁴⁴ What do you think of it?

THE JESTER: *(As if he had bitten a rock in his food)* Iskenderun?

44 Iskenderun, also known as Alexandretta, is the port city founded by Alexander the Great, formerly in Syria but annexed by Turkey in 1939 following the "Alexandretta crisis." Syria does not recognize this, and maps sold in Syria still show it as part of Syria.

SAQR: She's more precious to me than my son Sulayman.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: There's no better climate.

ABU KHALID: No people more noble and esteemed.

SAQR: (*Putting his hand on his chest*) I swear it.

THE JESTER: But Iskenderun, it also ...

SAQR: (*Ready to laugh, he and the other two thinking that this is more of his joking*) What, "May God have mercy on it," too?

THE JESTER: The Turks occupied it decades ago. (*The three explode in laughter once more*)

SAQR: That's a good one ... what a sense of humor, Abu Khalid! The Turks? I wouldn't deign to fight them with a tin sword!

ABU KHALID: That's a good one.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Abu Nuwas⁴⁵ never said anything like it.

THE JESTER: (*After a forced, bewildered laugh*) You don't understand what I'm saying. It's gone too.

SAQR: (*Controlling his laughter*) I understand, I get it. *Al-Andalus* is too big and Iskenderun's too small.

ABU KHALID: He wants a province in the middle.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Medium-sized.

THE JESTER: You don't understand, or you're pretending not to ... the subject ...

SAQR: (*His seriousness beginning to return*) Enough with the jokes. Let's get this over with quickly. (*Searching on the map*) I've found it. Not as far south as

45 Abu Nuwas (757–814, c.e.): Famous Arab poet and companion of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid. He is known for his licentiousness, wine poetry, and bawdy humor.

al-Andalus nor as far north as Iskenderun. It's right between them. Palestine!
We're done. (*He rolls up the map*)

THE JESTER: (*As if he had found a scorpion in his food*) Palestine?

SAQR: The most beautiful country in the world, bar none.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: You can't argue with that.

THE JESTER: But ...

ABU KHALID: Don't play hard to get.

THE JESTER: Please ...

SAQR: What? Did you want me to appoint you Commander of the Faithful?

THE JESTER: No! The problem is that Palestine ... It also ...

SAQR: (*Angrily*) I'm tired of your joking. Three provinces, every square inch of them bathed in our blood and tears ... is no joking matter. I won't put up with this, ever!

THE JESTER: My lord, I'm not joking. I didn't come from the twentieth century to the Umayyad era to tell jokes.

(*The three draw their swords*)

‘UBAYD ALLAH: You're playing with fire.

SAQR: Be careful. Even the angels won't be able to intercede with me on your behalf.

ABU KHALID: Palestine ... the cradle of the prophets and apostles.

THE JESTER: Yes, yes. Palestine, the cradle of the prophets and apostles. It's become the cradle of Phantom jets and paratroopers. The Jews devoured it twenty years ago.

SAQR: The Jews?

ABU KHALID: They're the dregs of history.

'UBAYD ALLAH: The refuse of our conquests.

SAQR: Impossible. The stars might be driven from the skies, but the Arabs would never be driven from their homes. Fingernails might flee from their fingers, but Arabs would never flee from their homeland. *Al-Andalus*? Red like my blood ... how was it lost?

THE JESTER: I don't know. I wasn't born then.

SAQR: I wish you'd never been born.

ABU KHALID: And Iskenderun? Iskenderun, like a child, with its breezes, its stones, its waves? How was she eliminated?

THE JESTER: After World War I and the signing of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the tyrannical imperialists ...⁴⁶

SAQR: And Palestine? Palestine, the color of flowers in spring ... How did it wilt away?

THE JESTER: After the signing of the Balfour Declaration and after World War II, the loathsome imperialists ...⁴⁷

46 The Jester is presumably parroting something Syrian schoolchildren are made to memorize about the loss of Iskenderun (Alexandretta.) Iskenderun, formerly part of Syria, was ceded to Turkey by negotiation between Turkey and France, with minimal input from Syrian Arabs. The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France divided the post-WWI Middle East into British and French spheres of influence, assigning Syria and Lebanon to the French, while the British were to control Palestine, "Trans-Jordan," and Iraq.

47 The Balfour Declaration. The 1917 document, issued by British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour on behalf of his government, stating that Britain "...views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people ..." The declaration helped establish a diplomatic basis for the foundation of the state of Israel, but the Arabs believe it contradicted promises the British government had previously made to them. It also conflicted with the above-mentioned Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France. Needless to say, the effects of this brief and vaguely-worded document are still being felt today.

SAQR: Jaffa, Haifa, Jerusalem, Bethlehem ... Who roams their alleyways? Who knocks on their doors?

THE JESTER: The Zionists. (*Assuringly*) But their internal situation is weakening!

SAQR: (*Sarcastically*) And you?

THE JESTER: (*Enthusiastically*) We're closing ranks and mobilizing to meet them in battle!

SAQR: Really?

THE JESTER: Of course, my lord! World public opinion has taken notice of the gravity of the situation and has begun to take a serious look at it. As for us, we've turned the world around, and telegrams of support are pouring in from hither and yon. Condemnation is being expressed in all corners of the world ... There's a trade union of carpenters in Guatemala that's sympathetic to our cause, and the union for copper and aluminum in Saghali Maghali supports our struggle and fight.

SAQR: Saghali Maghali?

THE JESTER: Yes, and the poultry farmers' cooperative in Denmark condemns the imperialist plots against us.

'UBAYD ALLAH: You're waiting for assistance from chickens?

THE JESTER: Just a second ... also the revolutionaries of Ireland, Bolivia and Mozambique.

ABU KHALID: Mozambique?

THE JESTER: Yes, Mozambique. And Angola, Vietnam and Laos. All of them without exception are supporting us and are sympathetic to our struggle. What more do you want?

SAQR: He's a buffoon!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: He’s brought bad luck. He’s a crow!⁴⁸

ABU KHALID: Death to the crow! (*Drawing his sword*)

SAQR: Death, death, death! But what Arab sword would accept this vile task?

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Let’s flog him with a whip.

SAQR: No, whips also have dignity.

ABU KHALID: Let’s flay him. Let’s roast him over a fire.

SAQR: No, there would still be his ashes.

‘UBAYD ALLAH: What’ll we do with him then, my lord?

SAQR: Let me think! Let me think, by the Prophet’s Companions! (*He throws the sunglasses to the ground, and ‘Ubayd Allah and Abu Khalid likewise throw away their presents*) Take your rotten presents, and gather your filthy belongings and prepare for your punishment! (*The Jester collects the presents and places them in the coffin, then stretches out in it, awaiting the outcome of the situation*) I’ll exile him!

ABU KHALID: What an excellent punishment!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Far, far away, so that no trace of him remains.

SAQR: I’ll exile him to a place in which no plant grows, and no udder gives milk.

ABU KHALID: To the Empty Quarter.⁴⁹

SAQR: No, it would be too close to the Ka’ba. I’ll banish him to the Sinai! (*The Jester jumps up, terrified, when he hears the word. He takes advantage of the others’ preoccupation in discussing his case, and climbs up a column extending to the ceiling*) Yes, to the Sinai, where there is neither water nor trees. So his skin cracks and his eyelids fester and his teeth fall out so that he may be

48 The crow, in Arab culture, is considered an evil omen and harbinger of bad news.

49 The Empty Quarter—the large desert region in Saudi Arabia’s interior.

a warning to others. Come, you wretch! (*He looks for him but does not find him. He looks at the column and his amazement increases*) What are you doing there, you ape?

THE JESTER: My lord, the Sinai ... It too ... May God have mercy on its soul.⁵⁰

SAQR: (*Yelling as loudly as he can*) Kill him!

ABU KHALID: (*Yelling offstage*) O Arabs, Kill him!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: Stone him!

SAQR: The Sinai too, you owl?⁵¹

THE JESTER: The Sinai, Mount Hermon, Sharm al-Shaykh ...

SAQR: Then it's time to bring a *shaykh* to read you your last rites.

(Arabs from this period enter, enraged, brandishing their whips and swords, and try to pull him down from the column, as he pleads for help. They cover him as if they were ants, heaping curses on him, beating and insulting him)

VOICE: Stone him!

VOICE: Skin him!

VOICE: Hang him!

SAQR: He's a crow, a crow!

ABU KHALID: He's no Arab. And he's not a foreigner either!

‘UBAYD ALLAH: He's Judas!

VOICES: Show us your face, your hands, your eyes, your ears!

50 This play was written in 1968 (but not published until 1973). Israel had occupied the Sinai Peninsula during the June War of 1967, and returned it to Egypt, pursuant to the Camp David Accords, in 1980.

51 The owl is also an evil omen of death, worse than a crow.

(The Jester, his clothes ripped and his face dirty and bruised, barely makes a difficult escape. He picks up a stone and stands facing them, threateningly, expressing a combination of despair, madness and rage)

THE JESTER: Get away from me, you animals! I'm an Arab from head to toe!
I was nursed on Arab milk, breathed Arab air and was lashed by Arab whips.

SAQR: *(The Jester's words having touched his heart)* I'm not interested in your ancestry. I want to know ... how was Palestine lost?

THE JESTER: It was lost by speeches.

SAQR: Speeches? What do you mean, "It was lost by speeches?"

THE JESTER: *(Forgetting his misery immediately, and adopting the character of a contemporary orator)* My brother citizens, esteemed people ... *(Then he jumps up and down, cheers and applauds like a member of a rowdy mob, and sings)* "O Palestine we've come for you, we've come, we've come, we've come for you."⁵² *(In spite of the gravity of the situation, people laugh heartily)*

SAQR: Enough. May God turn you into a vile ogre.

THE JESTER: And that, my forefathers, is how Palestine was lost.

SAQR: *Al-Andalus*, Iskenderun, Palestine, Sinai ... My God, what's left of the Arab nation?

THE JESTER: What's left is mountains of backwardness.

SAQR: You should remove them, my grandchildren. Remove them.

THE JESTER: And who's supposed to remove them, my lord? The gods won't.

SAQR: The People. Where are the People?

THE JESTER: These are your people, O Saqr Quraysh. *(A blue light focuses on one of the empty corners, the place where the Jester is pointing. A wretched*

52 The words of a popular political song from the 1960's.

common man, First Person, from the contemporary period appears. He walks right next to the wall carrying a few loaves of bread)

FIRST PERSON: Mind your own business, keep your head down, and say, "May God protect us." (*He disappears, and another person, Second Person, appears, carrying a basket*)

SECOND PERSON: "Whoever marries my mother, I call him uncle." (*He disappears and a Third Person appears*)

THIRD PERSON: "Don't sleep among the graves, or you'll have bad dreams." (*He disappears and a Fourth Person appears*)

FOURTH PERSON: "An eye can't fight an awl."⁵³

THE JESTER: (*The light fades quickly on the people*) This is your people. These are your grandchildren, Saqr Quraysh.

SAQR: I don't believe my eyes. I don't believe my ears.

ABU KHALID: Impossible ... Impossible! The Arabs are the bravest people in history.

THE JESTER: We were brave, my forefathers. Brave and innocent and adventurous. But they've stripped us of everything. Courage and honor, dignity and pride. They've turned us into ... rabbits.

SAQR: Rabbits?

THE JESTER: And cockroaches, too.

SAQR: (*With obvious sympathy*) Who are they, my son? Who turned you into rabbits? Speak. Don't be afraid. We are your grandfathers ... don't be afraid of us. (*The Jester hesitates, then whispers in Saqr Quraysh's ear*) Who? Intimidation? (*The Jester whispers again*) Who? What do you mean, secret intelligence?

THE JESTER: (*Whispering, for the third time*) The police.

53 Arabic proverbs connoting fatalism and helplessness.

SAQR: (*Bursting out laughing*) The police! (*They all laugh and repeat the word with sarcasm and scorn*)

THE JESTER: Don't laugh, my forefathers ... You don't know them.

SAQR: How could we not know them? They're those simple men who carry nightsticks and catch thieves and hoodlums.

THE JESTER: Yes, but now they catch everything! They've evolved, my grandfathers, and they've turned intimidation into an art in its own right, like sculpture and music ... If 'Antara⁵⁴ himself fell into their hands, he would collapse and fall to pieces.

SAQR: Drive! The Arabs are the bravest people ever. If you flay the skin from their bones, they won't become cowards and fall to pieces.

ABU KHALID: (*Gesturing to those around him*) They've fought in wars as myriad as the leaves on trees. You'd find more stab wounds in any of them than hairs on his head or pores in his skin. And even so, he'll continue to be a brave warrior. (*Laughter*)

THE JESTER: War on the back of a steed is one thing. Interrogation in a dungeon's something else. (*Laughter*)

SAQR: Impossible. Arabs are the bravest people on earth.

THE JESTER: Want to bet?

SAQR: Bet what?

THE JESTER: Give me the bravest knight among you. The most courageous and most steadfast, and I'll show you with your own eyes how he collapses and falls apart. In a matter of minutes.

SAQR: (*Guffawing*) Choose whomever you'd like ... they're all brave men. (*Several of the men vie for this task, with disdain*)

54 'Antara—Semi-mythical Arab poet-warrior (approx. 525–615 c.e.) An archetype of Arab bravery and morality, and the subject of epic tales about his adventures.

BEDOUIN #1: Me, my lord!

BEDOUIN #2: Me, O Commander!

BEDOUIN #3: I'm for it!

DAHHAM: (*A Giant Knight appears, armed with sword, mail and dagger, and steps forward through the ranks with arrogance and contempt*) No, no ... me!

SAQR: Dahham!

VOICES: Yes, Dahham, Dahham!

THE JESTER: Okay, where is this Dahham?

DAHHAM: (*Approaching him*) I'm with you for a few minutes ... or a few years. (*He looks at his comrades, winking sarcastically*)

THE JESTER: We'll see shortly. (*To Saqr Quraysh*) I'll need a few other men as strong and vigorous as he to assist me in my task.

SAQR: Select whomever you'd like. They're all stallions.

'UBAYD ALLAH: They're all valiant, and have no fear of death.

ABU KHALID: (*To the Jester*) You fool!

BEDOUIN #4: Me, my lord!

BEDOUIN #5: Me, me!

(*The Jester chooses several of them and separates them from the others*)

SAQR: He's wasting our time and his.

'UBAYD ALLAH: He doesn't know what metal this Dahham is made of.

ABU KHALID: He'll find out soon enough.

THE JESTER: Good, good. (*To his assistants*) Hold him tight, here and here.

(Dahham is stripped of all his weapons, and the assistants seize him decisively. He does not lose his scorn and disdain for the entire experiment. Suddenly, he receives a hard blow from the Jester's hand; he starts, and the others utter expressions of surprise, devoid of any sarcasm or laughing)
Shut up, no laughing! What's your name?

DAHHAM: Dahham.

THE JESTER: *(Slaps him)* Liar!

DAHHAM: Would I lie about my name?

THE JESTER: Of course! You're hiding something. There's something suspicious about you.

DAHHAM: Hiding something? Suspicious?

THE JESTER: *(Slapping him)* Shut up! *(Dahham is silent)* You scum! *(Slapping and kicking him)* Where were you yesterday?

DAHHAM: At home.

THE JESTER: Lying lowlife! *(Slapping him fiercely)*

DAHHAM: I swear on my honor, I was at home. Ask my wife!

THE JESTER: *(Raining blows and kicks upon him)* Married too? You vile scum. You piece of shit. Married?

DAHHAM: In God's name, lighten up.

THE JESTER: *(Beating him mercilessly until the end of the scene)* I'll smash your head in ... I'll smash it in.

DAHHAM: *(Terror-struck, to Saqr)* My lord!

THE JESTER: Shut up, you conniving ...

DAHHAM: Conniving against who?

THE JESTER: Against the People. Against the masses. (*Slaps and kicks him*)

DAHHAM: My lord ... my Prince ...

THE JESTER: When did you join the Party?

DAHHAM: Which party?

THE JESTER: (*Beating him with his whip*) The Party! When did you join it?
When?

DAHHAM: I don't understand. Which party?

THE JESTER: (*Slapping him*) The Nationalist Party.

DAHHAM: No. I swear to God.

THE JESTER: The Progressive Party. (*Slapping him*)

DAHHAM: I swear to God. No!

THE JESTER: The Nationalist Progressive Party. (*Flogging him mercilessly*)

DAHHAM: No, by He "who flattened the Earth and raised ..." Ow, Ahh ... (*The Jester enumerates all of the parties of the Arab world while beating and kicking him*)

DAHHAM: (*Moaning*) By He "who raised the Heavens." No!

THE JESTER: The Gaullist party.

DAHHAM: No.

THE JESTER: The Labor Party. (*Pounding his head on the ground*) The Conservative Party.

DAHHAM: Yes, yes, yes!

THE JESTER: (*Breathing a sigh of relief and informing those around him*) He confessed. The Conservative Party. (*Dahham cries out to the Jester*) Who's involved in the plot with you?

DAHHAM: What plot?

THE JESTER: (*Resuming the beating*) The plot, the plot ... Confess!

DAHHAM: (*Calling for help*) My lord, 'Ubayd Allah, Abu Khalid, help me. (*They remain silent and unconsciously move toward the exit, trying to escape. A deathly terror has seized them*)

THE JESTER: This moustache, I'll pluck it. This beard, I'll tear it out.

DAHHAM: (*Jumping*) Ouch, my beard, my moustache.

THE JESTER: Where do you meet? In what house? Talk. Confess.

DAHHAM: For the love of God.

THE JESTER: Fine ... give me the air pump. (*The Assistants, afraid, quickly obey his demand. The Jester acts as though he is putting the air pump in a specific place, and begins to press on the pump handle*) Confess ... Confess, you dog.

DAHHAM: (*Howling in pain*) Ahh, my ass ... my ass!

THE JESTER: Who's with you in the plot?

DAHHAM: I don't know. I don't know ... ahh ... ahh ...

THE JESTER: (*Pointing to the others*) Which one of them's in the plot with you?

DAHHAM: No-one, nobody ... ahh ... ahh ...

THE JESTER: Who? Talk!

DAHHAM: (*To save himself, he points to one of the Bedouins*) That one! (*The man to whom he points flees*)

THE JESTER: Who else?

DAHHAM: That one, and that one, and that one.

(They all flee, not caring about anything but themselves, including 'Ubayd Allah and Abu Khalid. Only Saqr Quraysh, who seems to have turned into a statue, remains)

THE JESTER: Now. Sign here.

DAHHAM: *(Crying)* I'll sign, I'll sign. *(He reaches his hands out as if he were blind)*

THE JESTER: Swear, you'll never join any party.

DAHHAM: I won't join and I won't disjoin.

THE JESTER: *(Kicking and slapping him for the last time, while Dahham cannot even put on his slippers)* Swear that you won't leave the house, that you'll go to sleep at sunset.

DAHHAM: I'll go to sleep, I'll wake up, I'll kiss your hands and your feet, and your slippers. *(He throws himself at the Jester's feet, sobbing and kissing. The Jester kicks him hard in the ass)*

THE JESTER: Now get out of my sight, you spy, you wretch!

DAHHAM: *(Searching for the way out as if he were blind)* Yes, sir. Yes, my lord. Ohh, my head ... ohh, my back ... ohh, my ass.

THE JESTER: *(Throwing the whip aside, and wiping his hands like a teacher after the end of a lesson, he addresses Saqr Quraysh)* Now tell your Dahham, the hero, to fight. Put a sword, spear and shield in his hands, with the bone of each finger wrapped around it, and call him to war. He wouldn't fight ... He'd be beaten by a chicken.

SAQR: *(Spitting to the side)* Damn you. Damn your civilization, your refrigerators, your washers ... damn you all. *(He turns around as if dazed and searches for something on which to rest his head)*

THE JESTER: *(Lighting a cigarette)* This is a sample, only a sample.

SAQR: Give me one of those things that eases one's cares.

THE JESTER: (*Giving him a cigarette and lighting it for him*) That's only a sample, my lord, of what we suffer, and what your grandchildren have suffered for centuries.

SAQR: (*As if asking the walls*) Don't you have any dignity?

THE JESTER: We have it, but it's prohibited, like drugs, like heroin.

SAQR: (*Spits*) And not a drop of Arab blood?

THE JESTER: Neither Arab nor foreign. All of our blood has been wasted on the nightsticks of the police ... and menstruation. If not every person, then every family, my grandfather, has had one of its members suffer like what you've seen here. The oldest son, or the youngest ... the mother, the grandfather, the grandmother. Thousands of Arab moustaches have been plucked out by the roots and thrown in the garbage bin. Hundreds of pure beards trampled in the dust. Even the birds in the sky can no longer distinguish between the tops of branches and the tops of bayonets.

SAQR: (*With genuine pity*) O, my miserable grandchildren!

THE JESTER: They've turned us into a hundred million mice in front of a giant trap, extending from pre-Islamic times to the twentieth century. In the name of Palestine.

SAQR: (*Almost crying*) O, my poor grandchildren!

THE JESTER: We are men on our identity cards only. But inside, in our depths, we are mice ... cockroaches. (*Throws his identity card to the ground*)

SAQR: (*Sad but hopeful*) Even so, there must be a solution. (*Calling*) Abu Khalid! 'Ubayd Allah!

THE JESTER: There's no point in calling, O prince ... A picked flower can never be rejoined to its stem.

SAQR: (*Repeating his call, in a manner both determined and pleading*) There must be a solution ... There must be. Abu Khalid! 'Ubayd Allah! O Knights!

Where are you, my sons? My comrades? (*There is no answer except the sad echo of his call*)

THE JESTER: There's no point in calling, my lord. Brutality, like a yolk, is lodged in the middle of the egg, and the only way to remove it is to break the entire egg.

SAQR: But who will save the grandchildren if not the grandfathers?

THE JESTER: No one. What gullible grandfather would be crazy enough to risk it?

SAQR: I would.

THE JESTER: (*With alarm*) You?

SAQR: Yes, I, Saqr Quraysh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil. With this sword of mine, I will return dignity to the Arab people!

THE JESTER: My lord ...

SAQR: ... And to the frowning faces, their smiles, and to the lifeless plains, their streams and flowers ... I ... I ... will liberate Palestine. (*Calling out enthusiastically*) Groom, saddle me a steed as fast as the wind!

THE JESTER: (*Trying by every means to prevent him from leaving*) No, no ... You'll regret it, my lord.

SAQR: Leave me alone, you crow, you flock of crows!

THE JESTER: (*Hearing the neighing of the steed outside*) You'll regret it, my lord.

SAQR: (*Exiting, brandishing his sword*) Get out of my way. I'm Saqr Quraysh, the conqueror of *al-Andalus*.

(The Jester sighs as he hears the neighing of the steed blending with the receding hoof beats. Curtain)

Act Three

The set: An inspection center on a border in the Arab world, in the present time. Saqr Quraysh has been detained in the holding cell. The Jester carries a petition and scolds him from behind the bars.

THE JESTER: I warned you in advance, didn't I, my lord? You didn't pay attention. You didn't heed my warning. (*Imitating him bitterly*) "O Groom! Saddle me a steed as fast as the wind! I will liberate Palestine!" Go ahead, liberate her.

SAQR: (*With a strange optimism*) And so I will! I'll liberate Palestine, *al-Andalus* and Iskenderun.

THE JESTER: (*Sarcastically*) And don't forget Antakia, Somalia, Eritrea and Arabistan.

SAQR: God willing ... if God the Omnipotent wills it, I will not leave one inch occupied.

THE JESTER: My lord, are you ... okay?

SAQR: Of course. These are nothing but formalities. Question and answer, and then I'll go wherever I want.

THE JESTER: And who told you that nonsense?

SAQR: My grandsons ... the guard that stopped me at the border.

THE JESTER: (*Sighing*) Question and answer. My lord, you don't know what "question and answer" means to them. You could rot and die behind these bars before they're done with the questions and answers.

GUARD: The times that you're talking about are over and gone forever. Now is the age of struggle, the age of freedom.

THE JESTER: The age of freedom ... and the greatest leader in Arab history stands behind bars like a murderer or a smuggler.

GUARD: All citizens are equal before the law.

THE JESTER: But there are exceptions. This man is like no other. If you helped him your name would go down in history.

GUARD: As far as I'm concerned, the most important thing is that my name go into the pay register. I just prevented the most famous singer in the country from entering because she didn't obtain a visa, even though she ... There, you can hear for yourself.

SINGER: (*Off*) I'll bring a case by any means necessary to the highest levels!
(*She enters*)

GUARD: I hope so. Maybe they'll get an inkling I exist. (*He turns and applies himself to some other business*)

SINGER: (*Turning to the Jester*) Guards, what can you say to them?

THE JESTER: (*He is surprised that she is the same actress who played Desdemona opposite him once upon a time*) Desdemona!

SINGER: (*As if she doesn't know him*) Hello?

THE JESTER: (*Shocked*) What's with you? Do you have a stomach ache?

SINGER: (*Sighing with superiority*) Not at all, it's the tribulations of fame. I'm on cloud nine!

THE JESTER: Why, are you working as a stewardess?

SINGER: I'm the most famous singer in the land, you ... ! Don't you watch television or read the papers or listen to the radio?

THE JESTER: Unfortunately, I've been traveling in ...

CHIEF: (*Off*) What is all this confusion going on at the checkpoint, and what's this filth in front of the station?

POLICEMAN: (*Flustered*) Watch out! The chief's coming, ma'am.

SINGER: Don't flatter me. You'll get your punishment.

CHIEF: (*Enters, carrying an entertainment magazine*) What happened to order? Is there no broom around here? As soon as I leave, the place turns to chaos.

GUARD: (*Salutes*) Yes, sir, chief.

CHIEF: (*To the Jester*) So, what do you want?

THE JESTER: I came in regard to the ...

CHIEF: (*Noticing the presence of the singer, who is smoking angrily*) What a surprise! What blessed wind has set you down in my desolate office on the edge of the desert?

SINGER: What takes me anywhere other than Art?

CHIEF: And I ... this week I accomplished things that even the top brass couldn't, so I could be free this evening to stay out late at the club you're working in.

SINGER: But my concert for tonight may be cancelled.

CHIEF: Why? Is there some religious event?

SINGER: No, because I've been prohibited from getting to my destination, because I haven't obtained that scrawl on my passport.

CHIEF: And what miserable idiot forbade you to enter?

SINGER: This major.

GUARD: Chief. Sir.

CHIEF: You airhead! How could you do something so idiotic?

GUARD: Sir ...

CHIEF: Shut up! Don't you read the papers? Don't you watch television or listen to the radio? Guards, what can you do with them?

SINGER: (*Looking at her watch*) My audience, as you know, can't stand waiting.

CHIEF: (*Indicating her passport*) You can continue your journey right away, but not before you accept our hospitality. (*To the Guard*) Move it! (*Guard lights her cigarette*)

SINGER: Thank you.

CHIEF: Now, what's the news in the art world?

SINGER: Costs are excessive, chief ... clothes and shoes, you know.

THE JESTER: Sir ...

CHIEF: (*Giving him a nasty look*) And what's the news about Mimi and Fufu?

SINGER: Fantastic!

CHIEF: Great, great.

THE JESTER: Sir ...

CHIEF: (*Brusquely*) Yes? What do you want?

THE JESTER: Sir, after you've been reassured about the news of Mimi, Fufu, and Susu ... I ask you, please, to be so kind as to look into the problem of this poor man, Saqr Quraysh.

CHIEF: Saqr who?

THE JESTER: Saqr Quraysh ... 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil.

CHIEF: (*Heaving a sigh, then bursting into laughter*) You mean that idiot who claims he's ...

GUARD: (*Returning with two soft-drink bottles*) He's not an idiot, sir.

THE JESTER: That's right.

CHIEF: He's an idiot, or feigning idiocy. But he's hilarious. (*To the Singer*) The funniest impersonator I've ever seen in my life. (*To the Singer*) How about a little entertainment?

SINGER: (*Reluctantly*) Make it quick ... my audience, as you know ...

CHIEF: Guard, bring him in.

SINGER: (*Looking in the direction of the holding cell*) What a beard! I'll donate the price of a shave to him.

CHIEF: Maybe he's a hippie. (*Saqr Quraysh comes forward, accompanied by the Guard*)

SAQR: Peace be upon you, my grandchildren.

CHIEF: He only speaks classical Arabic.

THE JESTER: (*Undertaking an introduction*) My lord, may I present to you ...

SAQR: (*Averting his eyes, the sight of nakedness having startled him, as the Singer crosses her legs*) God forbid ... and you're the granddaughter of Khawla, Zaynab and al-Khansa'⁵⁵ God save us ... God save us ... (*The Chief and Guard are overcome with laughter*)

SINGER: (*Jumps up, alarmed*) My God ...?

THE JESTER: (*Seeking to stop her*) He's the conqueror of *al-Andalus*.

SINGER: (*She exits, afraid*) Ta-ta!

CHIEF: Ta-ta!

55 Khawla, Zaynab and al-Khansa': Khawla bint al-Azwar, a famous woman warrior in Islamic history, who fought alongside the Prophet Muhammad. Zaynab, name of one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives (d. 625 c.e.) and also of one of his daughters (d. 630.); Al-Khansa' (d. c. 664), is the most famous female poet of the early Islamic age.

THE JESTER: Don't blame her, my lord. In her eyes, a hero's not someone who conquered *al-Andalus* but someone who can conquer the cork of a champagne bottle.

CHIEF: Funny ... funny ... Why doesn't he go into acting?

THE JESTER: (*Helping Saqr Quraysh to sit*) Sit, my lord, sit. You'll be released soon, God willing.

CHIEF: (*His seriousness having returned*) Stop, where do you think you are, you?

SAQR: (*Stands*) In my country. In my nation.

GUARD: And don't play with your beard every time you're confused by a question.

CHIEF: Your name? (*Gestures to the Guard to record the deposition*)

SAQR: Again?

CHIEF: Again and again and again until you admit who you are, and what you've come to do in our country.

SAQR: I answered you clearly before.

CHIEF: Nothing's clear. You're a pile of riddles. I've told you since you were arrested: Bring two witnesses ... two witnesses. That's all.

THE JESTER: Isn't my testimony enough?

CHIEF: No. The law's clear. (*The telephone rings and he lifts the receiver*) What kind of hero is this? No two people from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Arabia recognize him. (*On the phone*) Hello, yes, yes, border station. No trace at all ...? Thank you. (*Hangs up the phone*) They didn't find any evidence of him or his family in the citizens' registries. We've checked with several mayors to look into the situation, but to no avail.

GUARD: Suspicious.

CHIEF: And mysterious. (*To Saqr Quraysh*) Bachelor or married?

SAQR: Married, and ...

CHIEF: And how many children do you have?

SAQR: They are many.

CHIEF: (*Angrily*) And how do you support them? What are you worth? What do you own?

SAQR: I own my faith.

CHIEF: (*Sarcastically*) Your faith? And where do you deposit it? In what bank?

GUARD: (*Joining in the sarcasm*) Intra Bank.⁵⁶

CHIEF: Quiet! (*Continuing the interrogation*) You say you were born in the year 113 of the Islamic era. That means that you're now more than one thousand, two hundred years old. So where were you all this time?

SAQR: In the cemetery.

CHIEF: And why did you leave it?

SAQR: To liberate Palestine, because we will not accept ...

CHIEF: We will not accept? Who are you? In whose name do you speak?

SAQR: In the name of the dead, and the martyrs ... In the name of Khalid and 'Umar, of al-Saluli, al-Hajjab, al-Zamakhshari, Qinnisrin, Ibn Bakht and Ibn Qatar.⁵⁷

CHIEF: Huh? What are these foreign names? (*To the Guard*) Did you understand anything?

56 Intra Bank: Major Lebanese bank which collapsed in 1966, causing a national financial crisis.

57 More famous figures from Arab and Islamic history, many of whose names are Iranian in origin.

GUARD: Not a word.

THE JESTER: These are foreign names, but Susu and Fifi and Mumu ... those are authentically Arab names, *Jahili* names.⁵⁸

CHIEF: Listen, you. I'm a sick man. I have a blood clot, and I could die at any moment. But I'm going to attempt the impossible, to try to remain alive and uncover the secret of this mysterious man. (*To Saqr*) Yes, continue ...

SAQR: In the name of all of them, I have come to ask you, how did you lose Palestine and *al-Andalus* and Iskenderun? And after that, with what face do you eat, drink, and be merry?

CHIEF: Have you finished?

SAQR: No. I haven't finished, you negligent grandchildren. We left you the Arab banner, purer than rainwater, whiter than the beards of saints. And here it has become filthier than a doormat. Why, you negligent grandchildren, why? (*Turns his face and wipes away his tears*)

GUARD: Should I record this nonsense?

CHIEF: No ... He's a hypocrite and an imposter.

SAQR: I am Saqr Quraysh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil.

CHIEF: All I know is you entered the country secretly and you don't possess any proof of who you are. No identity card, no military service record, no discharge paper. Not even a health record.

GUARD: Not even a driver's license.

CHIEF: And to top it all off, no passport. Where is your passport?

SAQR: And what do I need a passport for?

58 The Arabic word for the pre-Islamic era, "al-Jahiliyya," literally means "The Age of Ignorance."

CHIEF: Every citizen who wishes to go from one country to another must have a passport, like this, and this, and this. (*Displays examples of passports to him*)

SAQR: And since when did an Arab need permission to travel in the land of his fathers and forefathers?

CHIEF: The age of chaos and patronage has ended, and the age of law and order has arrived.

GUARD: And democracy.

CHIEF: And democracy. Arab unity is no longer merely an emotional slogan. It has become real, systematized, active and interactive. (*He coughs*) This clot will kill me. But how am I to accept his assertion without any proof or evidence? (*Unconsciously, Saqr Quraysh, who is disappointed, searches in his vest and pants pockets*)

THE JESTER: Must an eagle carry an ID card between his wings to prove that he's an eagle?

CHIEF: I don't know, I don't know. (*To Saqr Quraysh*) Who urged you to undertake this mission?

GUARD: The mission of liberating Palestine.

SAQR: My duty did.

THE JESTER: What about Arab dignity? Have you forgotten about that?

CHIEF: Since I hold tight to my dignity and to my Arabness, I don't try to please people. Not everyone who claims he's a nationalist is one. Most of the people who we arrest at the border profess nationalism. Thus, it's my duty to scrutinize every person who raises concern ...Who is he? Where's he coming from? Where's he going, and why? And how? And when? Our country, as you know, is engaged in a life and death struggle. Therefore, what proof is there that his Honor is not an imperialist agent sent to carry out their plans?

SAQR: An agent of strangers? Working against my homeland and my country?
I, whose sword turned gray before my hair, in defense of its land and its holy places?

THE JESTER: Be logical, sir. A person speaking with such emotion, with such language ... who makes no mistake or grammatical error ... is it possible he could be an agent or a traitor?

CHIEF: That's not sufficient proof. Glubb Pasha,⁵⁹ "Abu Hunayk," spoke Arabic better than scholars and men of letters do. Nevertheless, as history proved, he was a spy.

GUARD: Vile ...

CHIEF: Lawrence of Arabia too, and dozens of others who came to us using the name "expert" and "scholar" and "artist."

THE JESTER: Oh, how fickle is time ... Has he who speaks the pure Arabic language become a foreign agent, while he who speaks the colloquial a nationalist?

CHIEF: Of course. The nationalist is he who speaks the language of the people.

GUARD: The language of the masses.

THE JESTER: And this dress, and this skin? What European or Russian has this authentic Arab color?

CHIEF: That is also insufficient proof. Maybe he got his tan from swimming.

GUARD: Or maybe they dyed him before they sent him to us ...

THE JESTER: He's not a piece of furniture or a door that can be painted. He's Saqr Quraysh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil.

59 "Glubb Pasha" is how Arabs refer to John Bagot Glubb (1897-1986) the British officer who served in Iraq in the 1920's and as chief of staff of the Arab Legion in Jordan during the 1940's and 1950's. Nicknamed "Abu Hunayk" ("possessing a small jaw") by Iraqi Bedouins, he commanded the Arab Legion, Jordan's army, in the 1948 war against Israel. In the wake of that loss, he continued to head the Jordanian army, but many Arabs believed that he was serving British and Zionist interests, and King Husayn dismissed him in 1956.

(The telephone rings)

CHIEF: He's a hypocrite and an imposter. *(Gesturing to the Guard)* Return him to the holding cell.

SAQR: *(To the Jester)* Give me one of those things that eases one's cares.

THE JESTER: *(Gives him a cigarette)* You've been defeated, Saqr Quraysh. Even James Bond couldn't save you from this mess.

SAQR: Whatever happens, they are my grandchildren, and I will forgive them.

THE JESTER: You rode with your head out in front of your steed ... you came believing you'd find the whole Arab nation mounted on their horses and camel howdahs waiting for you ... And here you are being treated like a broom.

CHIEF: Hello ...Yes? Yes ...

SAQR: I'm still optimistic. Desire, anger, confusion ... I may feel these emotions, but I will never feel despair. *(He pats the Jester's cheek before entering the holding cell, but suddenly, all ears turn to the conversation in progress on the telephone)*

CHIEF: I think he's either a dangerous agent or an even more dangerous smuggler ... In either case ... *(Turning pale, with his eyes on Saqr Quraysh, gesturing with his hand)* What? That's impossible ... I couldn't be that wrong. Am I supposed to be an astrologer who can recognize a person who ceased to exist a thousand years ago? Yes, sir, as you command. *(Puts down the receiver and hurries to Saqr Quraysh, imploring)* My lord! My lord, forgive me my harshness and stupidity! *(Kneeling before him)* My lord Saqr Quraysh, in your garments is the fragrance of *al-Andalus*, in your eyes the lights of Granada! *(Car horns and commotion outside)*

THE JESTER: Finally ... Finally, my lord! *(They embrace warmly, hearing the shouts outside)*

VOICES: Viva Saqr Quraysh! Viva! Viva!

CHIEF: (*To the Guard*) Move it! Don't stand there like an idiot. The General's on his way here. (*The two exit; meanwhile a number of Excited People enter. They are the same persons that we saw as the Spectators in Act One. Preceding them are Journalists and Photographers. They crowd around Saqr Quraysh, showering him with questions. He shies away from the cameras like a wild horse who has taken center stage for the first time*)

VOICE: Welcome to our immortal forefather!

VOICE: Welcome to our noble ancestor!

JOURNALIST #1: When did you conquer *al-Andalus*?

SAQR: A thousand years ago. Hello, my grandchildren, hello.

JOURNALIST #2: What kind of food do you like?

JOURNALIST #1: What kind of clothes do you like?

SAQR: I love only my country ... my homeland.

JOURNALIST #2: Why did you come here?

SAQR: To liberate Palestine.

JOURNALIST #1: And where are you staying now?

SAQR: In the holding cell ... I recently heard that Palestine had been lost ...

JOURNALIST #2: What's your opinion on disarmament?

JOURNALIST #1: What's your opinion on China joining the United Nations?

SAQR: ... and it pained me greatly. You are a blessed people ... you are a blessed nation ...

JOURNALIST #2: What's your opinion about underground nuclear tests?

SAQR: ... and it pained me greatly ...

JOURNALIST #1: And above-ground nuclear tests?

THE JESTER: Brothers! Move back ... Give him some room, fellows. Anyone with a question, direct it to me. I'm his press secretary.

VOICES: Long live our great forefather! Viva! Viva!

SAQR: My grandchildren, the apples of my eye, I recently heard that Palestine had been lost ... (*The Chief and Guard enter and begin shoeing those present out*)

DIRECTOR: Who allowed you in here?

POLICEMAN: Get out! Get out!

SAQR: (*Continuing his speech*) ... and that her people have been made homeless, and her holy sites violated ... And I swore to myself ...

VOICES: Long live free and independent Palestine! Viva! Viva!

SAQR: ... and I swore to myself not to eat and not to drink ...

VOICES: Death to the traitors!

SAQR: To arms, O Arabs! (*Meanwhile, an important man enters, who shall be called "The Official." The Chief and the Guard treat him deferentially*)

THE OFFICIAL: Who informed the press? Throw them out immediately, all of them.

GUARD: (*To Journalists*) Let's get moving.

SAQR: To battle!

THE OFFICIAL: (*Indicates to the Policeman to return Saqr Quraysh to the holding cell. He is obeyed immediately*) Don't let anyone see him.

CHIEF: But sir, how did he get out of the cemetery?

THE OFFICIAL: This is proof that Arabs are stronger than death. (*To one of the press photographers*) Get out, or I'll smash that camera on your head!

SAQR: (*While the Policeman pushes him into the holding cell*) Where is my armor? Where is my sword?

GUARD: We're sharpening it, my lord.

(A foreign personage, a Spaniard, enters, and the Official and Chief hasten to greet him with great respect. The person hangs his hat on a coat hook and enters a side room)

CHIEF: What is this heap of riddles, sir? Who is this foreigner, and what did he come here to do?

THE OFFICIAL: An important meeting ... You'll find out shortly. (*To the Guard*) We don't want any noise. (*He enters the side room, and the station Chief follows him. The Policeman closes the door and stands in front of it. The Jester enters, carrying bouquets of flowers, still filled with joy that events have turned in Saqr Quraysh's favor*)

THE JESTER: Flowers and cheering, my lord! (*He is surprised by the fact that the center is empty and absolutely silent*) Where's the prince?

GUARD: (*Blocking him*) Shhh ...

THE JESTER: Where's the prince? Did he go without me?

SAQR: (*From behind the bars*) I'm here.

THE JESTER: (*Surprised and angry*) Who put you back in the holding cell? What kind of game is this?

GUARD: Orders ... Get out, quickly ... not a word ... important meeting.

THE JESTER: Whose hat is this? What's all the secrecy about?

GUARD: There's an important meeting with an official of the Spanish government.

THE JESTER: (*Uneasily, smelling a rat*) My lord ...

GUARD: (*Gesturing to the exit door*) Please. Or I'll remove you by force.

THE JESTER: (*Pleading*) I beg you, just one word and I'll go.

GUARD: (*He agrees reluctantly. A bell rings in the side room and as he prepares to leave to go inside, to the Jester*) Quickly, before anyone sees you.

THE JESTER: (*Beseeching in front of the cell*) You have to flee, my lord.

SAQR: Flee? Did I come from my grave and travel a thousand years from the Umayyad age to now so I can flee?

THE JESTER: But the water is rising under you ...

SAQR: What water? I don't see any water.

THE JESTER: Here, under your feet. Under the earth, everywhere.

SAQR: (*Sarcastically*) Pessimist, always the pessimist.

THE JESTER: You'll drown, my lord, and you're not a good swimmer. Your Andalusian sword and armor aren't fish scales. They're of no use for floating on the waves of the twentieth century.

SAQR: Your pessimism's worse than being in prison. They've confirmed my identity, apologized to me, embraced me and kissed my hand. What more do you want?

GUARD: (*As he leaves the other room*) Make it quick ... I'll lose my job.

THE JESTER: One minute. (*To Saqr Quraysh*) You don't understand, my lord ...

SAQR: Don't you see their faces filled with joy? Don't you hear the cheers resounding in the streets?

THE JESTER: It's not important what goes on in the streets. What's important is what goes on here ... (*Points to the meeting room*) ... in the secret rooms.

(The Guard returns, carrying a tray with beverages) You have to flee. Look, the guard's busy and the bars aren't sturdy.

SAQR: I won't flee. I didn't come to flee.

THE JESTER: You're still determined to liberate Palestine?

SAQR: Of course. These are only formalities, and then I'll be as free as a hawk let loose like the wind above the sands and Arab encampments.

THE JESTER: Now's not the time for poetry.

GUARD: *(Coming in angrily)* What part of "leave" don't you understand?

THE JESTER: One more word, please ... *(The bell rings again. The Guard hurries out)* My lord, under that unsoiled headdress of yours, you're maintaining memories that have been devoured by time ... What encampments, what sands are you talking about? Even if you were able to leave here—and that is never going to happen—and you were able to see the fear, the hunger and the apathy on the other side of these walls ... and the dust and urine of the passersby in the trenches of war ... you'd kiss me here on my cheek, out of respect for my pessimism.

SAQR: The Tower of Babel may be shaken from its foundations, and the mountains of the world may collapse down to their roots, but my trust in this nation will never be shaken, and my faith in these grandchildren will never collapse.

THE JESTER: Fine. Preserve your optimism, like a sardine. But it won't be long before it emits the smell of where it's been ... the smell of the cemeteries ... the smell of the swamps. Farewell, my grandfather. *(Crying, he kisses Saqr's hand outstretched through the bars)*

SAQR: *(Kissing his head sadly)* Farewell, my little crow.

(The door opens and the Guard appears)

GUARD: *(To the Jester)* Quick, get going ... *(To Saqr Quraysh)* You've been released.

SAQR: (*Optimistically*) The formalities are done?

GUARD: The negotiations have finished.

SAQR: (*Rubbing his hands in joy*) Great! I was confident that this moment would come.

(The Spaniard exits the meeting room, frowning, and hastens to put on his hat. The Official follows him, frowning even more)

THE OFFICIAL: I thought that this meeting would be the last ... That we'd be able to conclude the agreement.

SPANIARD: There's still substantial difference between our positions. I've explained to you clearly all the reasons that prevent us from providing the amount you are requesting.

THE OFFICIAL: My government also has its reasons. We will not reduce our request by one single onion. Because, no matter what, Saqr Quraysh remains a national hero.

SPANIARD: As far as we're concerned, he's a criminal. A war criminal who occupied our country by force. And the United Nations Charter is unequivocal on this point.

THE OFFICIAL: We respect the United Nations Charter and are committed to it, but our commitment to our history is more powerful. So we will not budge from our position no matter the consequences.

SPANIARD: Remember, we could demand that you surrender him to us through Interpol.

THE OFFICIAL: That threat is not in keeping with the principles of the negotiations.

SPANIARD: You're quite inflexible.

THE OFFICIAL: We're renowned for that.

SPANIARD: (*Reluctantly*) I will take the responsibility upon myself and raise the amount we offer to 25 thousand tons.

THE OFFICIAL: Thirty thousand tons, and not one ton less.

SPANIARD: No, no ... That's robbery!

THE OFFICIAL: Call it what you wish, we will not yield.

SPANIARD: But you're hurting your own economy.

THE OFFICIAL: To hell with it! We will not give Saqr Quraysh up cheaply. Thirty thousand tons is the last word.

SPANIARD: We will make up the difference for you next season.

THE OFFICIAL: Impossible, we can't give them to the peasants of one district and not to another ... We'd be accused of favoritism.

SPANIARD: But we already have commitments to other countries, and our production for this season is not sufficient for all.

THE OFFICIAL: What concerns me first and foremost is the interest of my country and my people.

SPANIARD: (*At a loss, he amends the draft of the agreement*) Fine, once again, I will take the responsibility upon myself. (*He signs*)

THE OFFICIAL: (*Also signing*) I apologize for being so firm, but it's so that in the future you and others will know who you're negotiating with.

SPANIARD: We must take custody of him and prosecute him, no matter what.

THE OFFICIAL: Congratulations!

SPANIARD: (*Folding the papers and putting them into his briefcase*) O, how my people will rejoice when they see the conqueror of their country, its invader from a thousand years ago, shackled and behind bars. An unforgettable historical moment. Is our man ready?

THE OFFICIAL: He's waiting for you. And are your men ready?

SPANIARD: They're all fired up.

(Two Foreign Persons enter)

THE OFFICIAL: *(To the Guard)* Give custody to them. *(The Guard hastens to open the holding cell, accompanied by the Spaniard and the other Two Foreigners. The Chief staggers out of the other meeting room distractedly, with a bottle of booze in his hand, and the Official tells him the good news)* We've come to an agreement.

CHIEF: *(Remaining distracted)* Great ...

THE OFFICIAL: Thirty thousand tons!

CHIEF: Great!

THE OFFICIAL: He tried to pull one on me, but I was clear and resolute.

CHIEF: Great ... great ...

(Curtain)

Sa'd Allah Wannus

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

Sa'd Allah Wannus, Syria's foremost modern dramatist, was one of the few Arab playwrights to produce a substantial body of work addressing the theory and practice of drama.¹ He was born in 1941 in the northwest of Syria, near the port city of Tartus, to a prosperous 'Alawite² peasant family. He witnessed the lives of peasants close up and was particularly enthralled by their evening gatherings when they improvised scenes based on their daily lives. He would later claim that these impromptu plays had been the source of his drama.³

After completing his baccalaureate in 1959, Wannus moved to Cairo, the capital of the newly formed United Arab Republic, to study journalism at Cairo University. In Cairo, he developed a keen interest in theater, read American and European modern plays and immersed himself in the study of drama theory and criticism. Through the Beirut-based *al-Adab* (Belle Lettres), the principal Arab literary journal, Wannus became acquainted with the existentialist theater of Camus and Sartre and the Theater of the Absurd of Ionesco and Beckett. He was also drawn to the absurdist plays by Egyptian Tawfiq al-Hakim, the pioneer of modern Arab drama.

Wannus graduated in 1963 and returned to Damascus to work for the drama magazine *al-Mawqif al-'Arabi* (Arab Opinion), in which his first published play, *Corpse on the Pavement* (*Juththa 'ala al-Rasif*) (1963), appeared. The play, whose main characters are two homeless beggars, is a ten-page denunciation of social injustice in Arab societies.

His second play, *Bloodletting* (*Fasd al-Damm*) (1964), was published in *al-Adab* and is his first work about the Palestinians and Arab-Israeli relations, an issue that preoccupied Wannus throughout his career. This theme, which is the subject of two of his other plays, has, as some critics have noted, in each instance signaled a discernible shift in the style of his work.⁴ *Bloodletting*, written

1 Abdulaziz al-Abdullah, "Western Influences on the Theatre of Syrian Playwright Sa'd Allah Wannus" (Ph.D. diss., University of Manchester, 1993), 288.

2 A branch of Shi'i Islam.

3 Ali Naji al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study of the Theater of the Syrian Playwright Saadallah Wannus, With Particular Emphasis on the Plays Written After the 1967 War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, UK, 2006), 3.

4 Al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study", 204.

as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was being formed, can be seen as a call to arms to Palestinians at a moment when they were suffering economically and risked losing a coherent identity. The play, like many others by Wannus, is critical of Arab governments, in this case for claiming to support the Palestinians while doing nothing on their behalf. *Bloodletting*, like other works from the early period of Wannus's career, is an overt attempt to create historical and political awareness about the social and economic marginalization of individuals.⁵ However, because they are constructed using schematic literary and symbolic patterns largely borrowed from modern European dramas, these works can seem excessively didactic and static.⁶

In 1966 Wannus moved to Paris where he studied drama at the Sorbonne under the celebrated Brechtian and experimental theater director Jean-Marie Serrault. He also worked as a cultural journalist, wrote short fiction and conducted interviews with intellectuals and artists for *al-Adab*, *al-Ma'rifa* (Knowledge), and *al-Ba'ith* (Resurrection), the latter two magazines published by the Syrian government. Serrault advised him and other playwrights from the so-called "third world" to seek out new approaches in the creation of dramas that critiqued arbitrary power, which, instead of following rigid European models, drew on their own rich folk traditions.⁷

In 1967, Wannus abruptly interrupted his studies in Paris and returned to Damascus following the humiliating Arab defeat in the June 1967 War against Israel. The Arab fiasco forced the general public and intellectuals to acknowledge the deception of their leaders, who manipulated the truth about an ill-fated campaign fought by inferior militaries. Wannus's reaction was extreme: "I cried and cried! I felt that this was the end; history and time had stopped. Everything connecting me to life ... had collapsed."⁸ He decided that the Syrian government was intent on minimizing the extent of the debacle by keeping the society unaware of its implications. Moreover, Israel's new hegemony foregrounded the squabbling among Arab leaders, their inability to solve the Palestinian question, and their focus on controlling their own citizens by keeping them ill-informed. The defeat ushered in a period of instability in the Middle East, and the Pan-Arabism promoted by 'Abd al-Nasir, who had lied about the extent of the Arab defeat, began to slowly disintegrate.

5 See Mary Ilyas interview with Sa'd Allah Wannus, "For the First Time Writing is a Form of Freedom" in *al-Tariq* vol. 1, Jan-Feb 1996. Also in: Sa'dallah Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, trans. Robert Myers and Nada Saab (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

6 Al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study", 44-45.

7 *Ibid.*, 14.

8 *Ibid.*

Wannus, who had been exposed to the Marxist ideas of Palestinian political organizers in the early 1960s, came to conclude, along with other Arab intellectuals, that the political emancipation of Arab citizens could only be achieved by a Marxist-inspired socialism. He returned to Paris determined to use his theater as a weapon and began to develop a play about the defeat. During that period, he was inspired by the experimental theater of the Living Theater and by Jean-Marie Serrault's and Bernard Dort's views of Brecht's theories. He was also affected by the May 1968 political rallies that brought the French government to the brink of collapse.

Wannus described the genre of his new play, *An Evening's Entertainment for the Fifth of June* (*Haflat Samar min Ajl Khamsa Huzayran*) (1968), about the military and moral debacle of the 1967 War, as "haflat samar"—an Arabic phrase that means "party," "soirée" or "evening's entertainment"—terms that allude to vaudeville and emphasize the play's ironic tone and frenetic tempo. Its structure combines Arab cultural and folk traditions with techniques by Pirandello, such as the interrupted performance, Peter Weiss's documentary theater and the techniques of Brecht, particularly breaking the "fourth wall" and a non-linear plot. Wannus also borrowed techniques from the interactive theater and the political "happening" entitled *Us* against the Vietnam War created by Peter Brook. He characterized his new approach to Brecht's epic theater as "theater of politicization," a full-fledged political theater that sought to instigate the audience to take immediate action and affect change in society.⁹

An Evening's Entertainment is a play about the making of theater when theater becomes a means to revise history. It denounces how government-sponsored artists use theater to alienate the public, perpetuate the status quo and prevent public debate. The play proper begins as the opening night of a play. The audience is waiting for the beginning of the show, but no actors appear on the stage. The public reacts angrily—actors posing as spectators simultaneously shout questions and comments—a device that manifests Wannus's new focus on the active role of the audience (*al-jumhur*), which he now sees as an integral part of the action. Eventually, the director of the play appears to explain that the author of *The Whistling of the Spirits* (*Safir al-Arwah*), 'Abd al-Ghani, has withdrawn his text at the last minute and derailed the production. The audience reacts in confusion and frustration because *The Whistling of the Spirits* does not appear in the playbill or in the publicity of the play they came to see, *An Evening's Entertainment*. The director initially proposes an evening of poetry and music to replace *Whistling*, but, instead, he begins to explain its plot. It becomes clear that the cancelled play was no more than a trite,

9 Ibid., 119.

contrived celebration of the heroism of the Syrian soldiers who in fact had been annihilated in the war.

In the next scene the director and the author are at the theater's office, working on the text of *Whistling*, but the scene is interrupted by the "real" playwright, 'Abd al-Ghani, who walks up onto the stage from the audience. 'Abd al-Ghani begins to perform himself and confronts the director who had conceived the plot and explains that he had withdrawn his play, because his words had become tainted and smelled like "the vaginas of whores." At this point, a divided audience begins to discuss their views about the role of playwrights. The director, who has lost control of the production, offers a show of *dabka*, a folkdance, to replace the cancelled play, but the musicians are interrupted by a Palestinian refugee from the Golan Heights who speaks about his village and the Palestinians' condition of statelessness. Instead of a play, the performance becomes a debate and acting becomes part of reality. *An Evening's Entertainment* ends with the audience and performers accused of sedition and arrested. Wannus was deeply dissatisfied with the timid response, particularly in Damascus, to a play he expected to change history, but, as the Syrian poet Adunis correctly asserted, the play had revolutionized the language and forms of the Arab theater.

His next play, *The King's Elephant (al-Filya Malik al-Zaman)* (1969), a didactic parable modeled on Brecht, was written after Wannus returned to Syria. In it, Wannus deemphasizes the use of the alienation effect and, instead of distracting the audience with a new plot, draws on the public's familiarity with the style of the story, which is based on a folk tale. The play dramatizes the story of a peasant, Zakariyya, who leads a rebellion after the king's favorite elephant, which habitually roams through the village destroying crops, tramples and kills a boy. Zakariyya gathers the villagers and convinces them to confront the king to protest the actions of his elephant, but the villagers lose their courage in the presence of the king. Zakariyya, seeing that he has no support from his followers, cunningly beseeches the king, in the name of the people, to let them find his elephant a consort. The king agrees and appoints an exhilarated Zakariyya the guard of the elephant. Zakariyya's failure to follow through with the peasants' demands foregrounds the cost of the failure to intervene and challenge arbitrary power.

The Adventure of the Head of Mamluk Jabir (Mughamarat Ra's al-Mamluk Jabir) (1970) is an obvious allegory based on Eastern folk tales that actualizes various Brechtian strategies, including picaresque elements of *Mother Courage*. The play—a play-within-a-play set in a coffeehouse, with patrons as audience and critics onstage being told a tale by a *hakawati*, a traditional storyteller, that is played out before their eyes—dramatizes the rivalry between the 'Abbasid caliph and his vizier during the siege of Baghdad by the Mongol ruler

Hulagu Khan, which ended in the sacking of the city. The *hakawati* tells the story from the point of view of commoners and a cunning slave, Jabir, who exploits the rivalry in an attempt to rise in status and marry a slave girl he loves, while the audience members, the customers, interrupt the action to comment on the action. Unsurprisingly, Jabir becomes a victim of his own ambitions. The play marks a shift in Wannus's theater of politicization from a direct call to action to a call for reflection. In it he denounces the dire consequences of the power struggles of the elites and the indifference, fear and obsequiousness of the common people under their rule. The play was banned in Syria by censors who considered it an allusion to a series of coups and counter-coups that brought Hafiz al-Asad to power in 1971.

After the military stalemate of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War that led to a compromise between the leaders of Egypt, Syria and Israel and the consolidation of their power, Wannus soon realized that the Arab leaders' claims of victory and their move to suppress political rights in their own societies had even more serious implications than the 1967 defeat. *The King is the King* (*al-Malik Huwa al-Malik*) (1977), which echoes Brecht's *The Man is a Man*, but which Wannus said was derived from a tale in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, may be seen as manifesting a frustration with the authoritarian leanings of the Arab regimes that soon after led the playwright to "succumb to despair" and attempt suicide.¹⁰ The play, a parable about a king who wishes to prove his benevolence by having an imposter replace him for a day but whose courtiers treat the imposter as the real monarch as soon as he adopts the trappings of power, dramatizes the insidiousness of absolute power and the sycophants who enable it.

Wannus structures the performance of *The King is the King* as if it were a farce and a circus act. Two actors, who announce they will "lead the play along," usher the players, who enter the stage in character. But instead of playing their own roles, they act as acrobats or clowns.¹¹ From the beginning the actors announce that they are playing a game. However, as Roger Allen states, at the play's outer level the characters themselves and their interactions with others acquire a "clear symbolic function and therefore a political focus."¹² Thus, by dramatizing power as a masquerade and a game of imposters, the play implies "that every citizen of a class society is in disguise, playing a part determined by

¹⁰ al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study", 162.

¹¹ al-Abdullah, "Western Influences", 228.

¹² Roger Allen, "Arabic Drama in Theory and Practice, The Writings of Sa'dalah Wannus," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 15 (1984), 110.

their circumstance"¹³ and eager to maintain their loyalty to authority figures to assure their privileges.

In 1978, after finishing *The King is the King*, Wannus acknowledged the failure of his theater of politicization. This stark admission was provoked in part by the trip of Egyptian leader, Anwar al-Sadat, to Israel in 1977 to propose direct peace negotiations. Wannus, along with a large group of other Arab progressive intellectuals, saw al-Sadat's initiative as a humiliating capitulation to an occupying, militaristic power, and a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and Arab unity. In an elegiac prose poem, "I am the Cortége," Wannus describes his sense of failure: "Inside me there is a little Sadat, because my 'No' has been suppressed! I am doomed to be the victim, the witness, the cortége and above all a collaborator!"¹⁴ Shortly after completing this text, Wannus attempted suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. After recovering, he resumed his work as a cultural journalist and founded and directed the High Dramatic Institute in Damascus, but he largely withdrew from public life and did not write another play for a decade.

The Rape (al-Ightisab) (1989), an adaptation of *The Double Life of Dr. Valmy (La Doble Historia del Dr. Valmy)* (1964) by the renowned Spanish author Antonio Buero Vallejo, marks Wannus's return to playwriting. It was written during the First Palestinian Intifada (1987-1993), and points toward a final phase of Wannus's dramaturgy in which his theater ceases to be overtly political and allows individual voices to articulate their own intimate dramas. *The Rape* differs significantly from Wannus's two other plays with Palestinian stories. *Blood-letting*, written near the beginning of his career when he produced bleak allegories based on European models, treats the Palestinian issue within the context of Pan-Arabism. *An Evening's Entertainment*, which ushers in a second phase in which Brechtian dramaturgy predominates but is employed in conjunction with Arab folk and literary elements to create complex hybrid forms, treats the complicity of Arab leaders in the loss of land and the crisis of Palestinian refugees. *The Rape*, although set in the West Bank during the first Intifada, treats the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on why it has engendered such enmity between the two groups and how Zionism and colonialism have affected and corrupted every aspect of individual Palestinian and Israeli lives. Nonetheless, the play treats these themes by focusing on the abuses perpetrated during the First Intifada against Palestinian civilians by the repressive Israeli state apparatus.

13 al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study", 191.

14 Ibid., 202.

The Intifada, or uprising, began unexpectedly in late 1987 in Gaza after four workers were killed by an Israeli army vehicle that crashed into a bus carrying Palestinians to work in Israel. The Palestinians deemed the event intentional and angrily protested by throwing rocks and petrol bombs at Israeli soldiers. A well-organized campaign of civil disobedience, followed by a wave of further protests and stone throwing was answered with mass arrests and the use of live ammunition by Israeli patrols against young protesters. As the demonstrations intensified, Israel adopted the so-called “iron fist” policy characterized by beatings, mass arrests and the cutting off of food supplies. Palestinians also declared war on collaborators, who were killed by their own communities.

In *The Rape*, whose title in the original Arabic, *al-Ightisab*, means both sexual violation and usurpation of land, Wannus dramatizes the violence of the Intifada indirectly, through the story of two families. The first is that of an officer of the Israeli Shin Bet, a branch of the secret police, who becomes impotent. At his wife’s suggestion, he seeks the help of a psychiatrist to whom he admits he is a torturer of Palestinian political prisoners and details the brutal interrogation methods his unit employs. The other family is that of a Palestinian resistance fighter whom the officer has tortured.

The Rape both echoes and reconfigures various thematic and formal elements of Buero Vallejo’s text. The Spanish play is set in the imaginary country of Surelia and dramatizes the effects of a repressive regime on the lives both those who resist the regime and those who sustain its power. *The Double Life*, which was censored in Spain until 1976, after Franco’s death, treats the illegal detention, torture and death in custody of a political prisoner during Franco’s regime. The narrator, a doctor who is writing a book of case histories, relates the story of a member of Franco’s political police who has become impotent. During his appointment, the doctor listens to the policeman’s story of violently torturing a political prisoner and concludes that his sexual impotence has been caused by the torture session.

Wannus, who credits Buero Vallejo as a source in the introduction to the play, explains that his initial plan was to prepare the Spanish play for production. Eventually, he writes, he changed his mind and opted to write “a new play” about the Arab-Israeli conflict. *The Rape* may be interpreted in terms of Wannus’s own theories of adaptation. Wannus suggests that adaptation does not result from a crisis of creativity but is instead a means to investigate old and new dramatic traditions.¹⁵ He observes that the adaptations of Western plays by the pioneers of Arabic theater was both an enriching intercultural

15 Sa’d Allah Wannus, *al-A’mal al-Kamila*, 3: 67. English text in Sa’d Allah Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, eds. and trans., Robert Myers and Nada Saab (forthcoming)

practice and a function of the dramatic texts themselves, which “are constantly evolving and changing to reflect the problems of different ages and cultures.”¹⁶ Clearly, one reason Buero Vallejo’s drama attracted Wannus’s attention was that the Spanish playwright’s play treated ideologically charged material by focusing on how political structures affect individual lives. As opposed to Brecht, Buero Vallejo created dramatic forms that involve the audience emotionally in the action and provoke critical reflection both through identification and through leaving the plays “open-ended.”¹⁷ Buero Vallejo’s political theater, which shares more with the theater of writers like Ibsen, is constructed to engender individual moral enlightenment.¹⁸ Buero Vallejo refers to dramas he wrote such as *The Double Life* as “tragedies with hope,” which, writes Barry Jordan, must “be open and forward looking.”¹⁹ The incorporation of Buero Vallejo’s vision of theater not only marks a significant shift in Wannus’s own work it prefigures his most celebrated statement, near the end of his life, about the role of theater audiences and artists who, he asserts, are “sentenced to hope.”

The Rape echoes the struggle for self-realization in a hostile environment enacted in *The Double Life*.²⁰ The play’s central conflict derives from the outward story of *The Double Life*, the narrative of a doctor who probes his own ability to continue practicing after he meets a patient whose actions repulse him. From the Spanish playwright, Wannus borrows rhetorical devices such as the doctor’s confessional and digressive tone. He also transposes scenes almost directly from *The Double Life*, such as the therapy session that sets the action in motion, and some of its characters: the torturer and his family, and his commander and two fellow interrogators. But Wannus expands the structure of the source text by adding two narrators and two stories, one Israeli and the other Palestinian. He also engages both families directly in the political drama, especially the powerful female characters he creates, and overtly dramatizes aspects of political and sexual violence onstage.

Like *Mamluk Jabir*, *The Rape* interweaves textual narrative and theatrical forms to dramatize its two stories, but it does so in an explicitly literary fashion. The conventional division of plays into acts and scenes is replaced by two books of eight chapters each of which tell the two interwoven stories. “The

16 Ibid., 3: 69.

17 Barry Jordan, ed. Introduction to *La Doble Historia del Doctor Valmy* by Antonio Buero Vallejo (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 10.

18 al-Anezi, “An Analytical Study,” 204; Jordan, 9.

19 Jordan, 10.

20 Jordan, 11.

Book of Daily Sorrows” tells the story of the defeat, occupation, forcible transfer and resistance of the Palestinians. “The Book of Prophecies” is an account of the ills and excesses of Zionism. Their titles clearly refer to the stories of cruelty, retribution, punishment, sacrifice and loyalty of the Hebrew Bible. The two narrators are contrasting characters. They differ in gender, ethnicity and class, and both experience, directly or indirectly, the injustice of occupation. The Palestinian narrator, the sister of the freedom fighter and of a collaborator, is also an active participant who is engaged in many of the most significant scenes. The Israeli narrator, Doctor Menuhin, who actively participates in fewer scenes, narrates his story digressively, principally through soliloquies that interweave moral musings with psychological case histories.

The play’s dramatic action and diction derive from classic genres such as tragedy, epic and elegy all condensed in the opening, “Beginnings,” which includes a prologue, a hymn, a soliloquy and a battle. The scene is a preface to the Palestinian book and introduces the two narrators and their antagonists, the militant Zionists. In the prologue, the Palestinian narrator, al-Fari’a, a moderate activist, and the daughter of a hero of the resistance, bakes bread and tells her baby nephew the story of his birth, his forceful separation from his mother and the arrest of his uncle. History has left its marks on him and he must grow up, “like children in legends,” because “one who was born like a piece of smuggled merchandise can’t grow up following the laws of nature.” Al-Fari’a’s narrative is followed by a short scene entitled “Hymn,” a reference to the songs of Judaism. The language in this short scene mimics that of the Jewish prophets. Dr. Menuhin, the Israeli narrator, describes his country as “a kingdom of neurosis and insanity,” in which Israeli soldiers, exhorted by their commanders with Biblical-like imprecations, attack the Palestinians. By dramatizing persecution, hatred and despair, “Beginnings” simultaneously maps out the play’s central conflict and foreshadows its ultimate irresolution.

The narrative sequence proper begins in Chapter One of the Palestinian book with al-Fari’a arriving at the family home to tell her sister-in-law, Dalal, the daughter of a rich merchant, that her husband and al-Fari’a’s brother, Isma’il, has been detained by the Shin Bet. Soon after, Shin Bet officers arrive at the home and arrest Dalal, and although al-Fari’a tells her not to be afraid, after she leaves, al-Fari’a tells her nephew that “He [Isma’il] was always so worried about her ... but now that she’s awake it will be brutal and horrifying”

In Chapter 2 of the Palestinian and Israeli books Wannus dramatizes how the occupation permeates daily life and exacerbates family conflicts. Muhammad, al-Fari’a’s brother, rejects the family tradition of resistance and is intent on working for the Israelis to obtain a permit to join his wife outside the occupied territories, “... I want a life that has nothing to do with heroism,” he says.

In the Israeli household, the agent Isaac's domineering mother Sarah, referred to by Wannus simply as the Mother, a character who clearly evokes Golda Meir, is an overzealous Zionist who patronizes his sensitive wife, Rachel, and tells their baby religious parables of Jewish victory over the enemy. In spite of Rachel's support, Isaac is consumed by his sexual impotence.

Chapter 3 of the Israeli book relates the play's inciting incident and one of its central themes: the brutal repression of the Palestinians by the Israelis. This polyphonic scene juxtaposes the logical discourse of psychoanalysis, as Isaac visits Dr. Menuhin to treat his impotence, with that of religious confession, the inflamed rhetoric of Zionism and the abject language of interrogators. The introduction is a soliloquy, a lament, and an admonition by Menuhin, who seemingly addresses his country, "Mother, may I be damned since you bred me to be an aggressive man who grabs all the earth for himself." After this prologue, Menuhin relates Isaac's visit to his office, which, in turn, is dramatized. During this visit Isaac discusses his work for the Shin Bet and his interrogation of Isma'il, which is also dramatized. Isaac's session with the doctor is enacted on one level of the stage and the interrogation, at the Shin Bet office, on another. Doctor Menuhin, who is both an observer who is privy to Isaac's double story—his professional and personal life—and a participant, in the sense that he too benefits from the privileged status of an Israeli Jew, refuses to reconcile Isaac's two contradictory sides or to accept that to survive and thrive he too must despise and dehumanize the Palestinian enemy. "Part of our Zionist upbringing is constantly teaching us to hate," he says to Isaac, "but those who raise us don't consider that there's a limit beyond which, psychologically, human beings cannot go. Absolute hatred is the threshold to a realm in which everything can be justified and anything that threatens one's stability can simply be shut out."

To construct this long sequence, Wannus substitutes the metatheatrical and distancing techniques of narration in *Evening' Entertainment*, such as dramatizing a scene within a scene, with a scene and a subscene that take place consecutively in two different spatial frames. He borrowed this device from Buero Vallejo in order to separate the character who is narrating from the character who is entangled in the play's central conflict. The narrator is placed within the audience's view and, like them, is an observer who will respond to the actions performed on the stage. The time frame of the narration is also twice removed from the main action, the long interrogation subscene. Dr. Menuhin reconstructs an event that precedes the one he relates, that of his first, unsettling encounter with a patient whose personal crisis provokes a moral and ideological confrontation between the two of them. Wannus's previous narrative drama, following Piscator's model, deemphasizes dramatic progress by deploying

the *hakawati* who negotiates the stage and the audience and in so doing breaks the dramatic illusion. In this scene of *The Rape*, however, the narrator is both a character and an author who selects and reconstructs the past for the audience. In addition, he reacts to the story he narrates in the same manner as a sensitive member of the audience might react.

Wannus, who describes the actors in his theater of politicization as a composite of “voices and features” without “any particular dimensions,”²¹ echoes Chekhov and Ibsen’s realistic, psychological characterization in *The Rape*. Although his characters’ lives are the product of a violent history, they have dense, recognizable traits. They are also simultaneously oppositional and parallel, as in the case of Rachel and Dalal, and their husbands Isaac and Isma’il, one the victim of the ideological manipulations of a police state and the other of its abuses.

The parallels between Rachel, the sheltered wife of the torturer, and Dalal, the loving wife of his victim, are illustrative of Wannus’s newfound focus on the emotional horizons of his characters in *The Rape*, and of their responses to personal tragedy. Both the Israeli and the Palestinian women are initially ignorant of their husbands’ role in the repressive apparatus and the resistance respectively. In Chapter Five of the Israeli book, Rachel, who is often left alone at home, accepts an invitation to go out with Isaac’s sadistic partner, Gideon, and herself becomes a victim of the state-sanctioned violence that Dalal has already suffered and Rachel is just now coming to understand exists. “So your job is actually to torture?” says Rachel. “It’s the only language terrorists understand,” says Gideon, who has just re-directed his extreme violence onto her, his partner’s wife. Rachel’s understanding of herself and the society that sustains her is shredded both by Gideon and her own husband, Isaac, who tells her about the interrogation in which he participated: “[T]here was this saboteur who was stubborn ... he wouldn’t confess ... We destroyed his manhood. He’s inside me now, punishing me, destroying mine.” Rachel, who experiences trauma as “a terrifying abyss,” internalizes her suffering, and must go through a process of healing to tell her story, which, we learn, has been written by Dr. Menuhin.

The violation of Rachel by Gideon, one of Dalal’s abusers, propels the play’s final action in much the same way Dalal’s torture and violation initiated it. But Dalal’s response to trauma is physical and instinctive. After she returns from prison where, she tells al-Fari’a, “Israel has stamped its brand upon me, and nothing will wash it away but death,” she decides to join the political resistance.

21 al-Abdullah, *Western Influences*, 4.

The final scene of *The Rape*, a sort of coda to Dr. Menuhin's story, is perhaps its most emblematic and original. The doctor, who is alone on the stage, looks about and asks the audience if Wannus is among them. A character playing Wannus comes up on the stage to discuss with the doctor the plausibility of his role as an Israeli who is sympathetic to Palestinians. Although al-Anezi says that Wannus's appearance is a means to "instruct [the audience] in how they are to react,"²² the metatheatrical exchange between author and character recasts Brecht's didacticism by suggesting an internal, self-reflexive dialogue about dramaturgy in which the author probes his own convictions and limitations: "It was difficult to bring someone like me into being?" asks Menuhin. "There were many impediments to overcome," answers the character called Wannus, "the history of suspicion standing in the way of admitting your existence, the chaotic political events that precluded seeing you as a distinct being, the fear of the defeated that he'll be duped again, the chasm of war wounds and casualties."

Performances of *The Rape* were banned in Syria, but the text was published by the Palestinian journal, *Freedom* in 1989.²³ The play divided Syrian critics, who were either hostile to or perplexed by Wannus's suggestion in the coda that there were also "Arab Zionists" and the reminder that torture was also routinely practiced in Arab prisons, as well as by the play's portrayal of an Israeli progressive. As he pointed out in 1994, however, those who attacked the play did not oppose the Madrid negotiations that helped to end the First Intifada.²⁴ *The Rape* received its first theatrical production in 1991 in Beirut, which was a success, and it then traveled to Cairo and other Arab cities where it was equally well-received. The Beirut production greatly displeased Wannus, however, and in his collected works, published in 1996, he added an appendix to the play criticizing director Jawad al-Asadi for cutting the Palestinian story and changing the play's ending.²⁵ In a 1992 interview with the *New York Times* journalist Judith Miller, Wannus says that after the play was censored, his name was banned from some Syrian newspapers and that, like Israel, he had become "an abstraction." In a book she published in 1996, Miller, asserts that Wannus "could not bring himself to create a sympathetic Jew who believed in Israel's right to exist."²⁶ Al-Anezi claims that this criticism by Miller is legitimate

22 al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study," 217.

23 Ziter, *Political Performance*, 142.

24 al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study," 215.

25 Ziter, *Political Performance*, 142.

26 Judith Miller, *God has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), 317.

because, according to him, it points to “the limitations of Wannus’s willingness to engage in dialogue.”²⁷ The play was produced again in Beirut in 2015, in an English translation by Robert Myers and Nada Saab, directed by Sahar Assaf, which is the one that appears here. The audience response to the play varied from shock and perplexity at its violence to skepticism about its portrayal of dissenting and moderate Israelis. Theater critics also reacted in different ways; some praised the play as “compelling, brutal and uncompromising,” particularly in its dramatic complexity and themes,²⁸ others found fault in what they saw as Wannus’s misconceptions and contradictions, and one suggested that the text should have been presented in its original Arabic.²⁹

Many of the shifts in form and tone in the plays Wannus wrote in the 1990s, especially the formal innovations and thematic complexities they contain, are already evident in *The Rape*. The play’s hybrid structure, its focus on personal suffering and responsibility, its denunciation of ideological manipulation and violence and particularly its view of history as circular and tragic—rather than transformative—can also be seen in the three most significant plays of this latter period. Wannus’s life and work, which had principally been shaped by political crisis, was now redefined by serious illness. In 1990 he was diagnosed with cancer of the pharynx and given six months to live. His response was to write with new a sense of urgency, “in a frenzy,” as he describes it in his seminal 1996 address to UNESCO, adding that writing had become his “strongest weapon” against the disease.³⁰

Historical Miniatures (Munamnamat Tarikhiyya) (1994), is a historical epic of defeat and conquest. Among its characters is Ibn Khaldun, the renowned Arab historian and philosopher, who chooses to remain neutral during the invasion and occupation of Damascus by the Tartars in 1401. The play derives its form from the fragmented narratives of miniature painting. Its plotless structure has three acts composed of short scenes that successively interrupt the narrative flow. By using disconnected scenes to dramatize events that illustrate the trauma of a succession of Arab defeats, Wannus constructs a form for rep-

27 al-Anezi, “An Analytical Study,” 215.

28 India Stoughton, review of *The Rape*, by Sa’dallah Wannus, Irwin Hall, LAU, *The Daily Star*, March 25, 2015, <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Arts-and-Ent/Culture/2015/Mar-25/292042-humanizing-the-enemy-Wannus-the-rape.ashx>>.

29 Edgar Davidian, review of *The Rape*, *L’Orient Le Jour*, March 27, 2015, <<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/917782/-le-viol-de-saadallah-Wannus-une-bombe-mal-degou-pillee.html>>.

30 Wannus, *al-A’mal al-Kamila*, vol. 1, 44. English text in Sa’d Allah Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, eds. and trans., Robert Myers and Nada Saab (forthcoming)

resenting a so-called "real Arab history," which he suggested had not yet been written.³¹

Rituals of Signs and Transformations (*Tuqus al-Isharat wa al-Tahawwulat*) (1994), his most celebrated play, exposes the hypocrisy of a traditional society dominated by political intrigue and clerical corruption. It takes its basic story, from which he weaves a much more complex tale, from historian Fakhri al-Barudi's account of an event in 1880s Damascus when a feud between two clerics, the Mufti, the religious and legal leader, and the Naqib al-Ashraf, the leader of the descendants of the Prophet, divided the city into two factions.

The arrest of 'Abd Allah, the Naqib, and his mistress, a prostitute, while they are making love in his semi-private garden causes the Mufti to save him as a means to guarantee stability in the city and enhance the Mufti's own power. He arranges for Mu'mina, 'Abd Allah's wife, to replace his mistress in jail, but in return for her participation in his scheme, she demands a divorce and then embraces her role as a prostitute and is transformed into Almasa, a prominent prostitute and the most influential woman in Damascus. Her transformation, in turn, sets in motion other radical transformations by other characters, including the Mufti himself, who ultimately falls in love with her. In *Rituals* the historical narrative is framed as a series of embedded stories in which various characters replicate Mu'mina's experience and assert their deep desires and so-called "hidden truths," employing rhetoric that shifts from lyric to comedic to tragic. Through their stories, the play treats male homosexuality, male and female prostitution, sexual abuse, suicide and honor killing. *Rituals* also marks Wannus's most radical shift, from a political theater that focuses on historical conflicts and oppression to an empathetic theater in which, in the process of writing, the author identifies with his characters. "I was," asserts Wannus, "probing the hidden and repressed mysteries that had lain neglected in the darkness of my soul."³²

The Drunken Days (*al-Ayyam al-Makhmura*) was finished in 1997, the year of Wannus's death. According to the author, the play is based on the story of the grandmother of his friend, the Syrian filmmaker 'Umar Amiralay. It takes place in Beirut during the French occupation of Lebanon and Syria in the 1930s and examines the plight of women in traditional, patriarchal societies and the clash between old values and those of the metropole. The play is composed of twenty-six disconnected scenes that dramatize stories told by different narrators. *Drunken Days* begins with a monologue by the "Grandson" who, at the age of six, is introduced to a mysterious old woman whom his mother Layla

31 Interview with Wannus in al-Anezi, "An Analytical Study," 221.

32 Ibid., 251.

identifies as his grandmother, Sana'. He begins to suspect that his mother is hiding a family secret and questions her. Layla's story, a series of recollections, shifts the narrative to her past, to the day she learns her unhappily married mother, a Muslim, is being tempted by a *Jinni* to actualize her passion for Habib, a Christian businessman. Eventually, Sana' abandons her husband for Habib, breaking a religious taboo. The tragic story is tempered by scenes that intentionally use comic devices, such as the *Karagoz* (clown) who comments on a scene that contrasts Sana's children's Westernized ways with those of her conservative husband. The juxtaposition of the *Karagoz* and the *Jinni*, characters that derive from Eastern tales and shadow plays, with a female protagonist from a traditional society struggling with her own sexual desires and the collision of so-called Eastern and Western societal values, is indicative of the ways in which Wannus combined themes and forms from the Arab world with those from Europe and the West to construct new hybrid forms of theater to address ideological questions.

The pursuit of love, transgression and cultural assimilation are among the central themes of *Drunken Days*. In the play Wannus, who is approaching death, seemingly encourages women to imagine how their lives would be if they could realize their deepest desires. But the play is ultimately a critique of the liberation that is solely achieved through sexual fulfillment—ironically Sana' is drawn back to her children by her son who arrives at Habib's house to kill her and restore the family honor but realizes he cannot—and an examination of how private lives are changed by rapid Westernization.³³

Wannus is almost alone among contemporary Arab playwrights and intellectuals in using his art to denounce arbitrary power, political oppression and injustice, whatever the source. His formal innovations, efforts to restore the literary and emancipatory power of drama and his willingness to treat themes such as female sexuality, same sex-love, religious corruption and the necessity to consider peace with Israel are unprecedented among his contemporaries in the Arab world. Although he was drawn to the theater by Tawfiq al-Hakim's philosophical and absurdist plays and was later heavily influenced by Brecht's epic theater with its use of historical subject matter, non-linear plotting, allegory and parable and its use of direct address, narration, alienation and the foregrounding of class and power relations, Wannus ultimately developed his own multifarious theatrical language and style. While his later plays may, at first glance, appear less overtly political than many of his earlier works, they

33 Robert Myers, introduction to *Four Plays from Syria: Sa'dallah Wannus*, ed. Marvin Carlson and Safi Mahfouz (New York: Martin E. Segal Theater Center Publications, 2014), xxxi-xxxiv.

nonetheless address the extent to which traditional and authoritarian societies engender stasis, silence, obedience, self-censorship and lacerating forms of self-abnegation. Although his early belief in the ability of theater to transform Arab societies was short-lived, he remained deeply committed to the medium of theater, which he described in his last public address as not simply an art form but as “a complex cultural phenomenon without which the world would become lonelier, uglier and poorer.”³⁴



FIGURE 3.1 Dima Matta playing al-Fari'a in *The Rape* by Sa'd Allah Wannus, in the English-language version of *The Rape* translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab, directed by Sahar Assaf, and performed at Irwin Theater at the Lebanese American University, Beirut, 2015.

IMAGE COURTESY OF SAHAR ASSAF. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXY FRANGIEH.

34 Wannus, *al-'amal al-Kamila*, vol. 1, 44. English text in Sa'd Allah Wannous, *Sentence to Hope*, eds. and trans., Robert Myers and Nada Saab (forthcoming)

The Rape

Sa'd Allah Wannus

(Translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab)

To Naji al-'Ali, Mahdi 'Amil and Fawwaz al-Sajir
who were murdered by this dark and oppressive age



I benefited in the construction of this story from the work of the Spanish author Antonio Buero Vallejo's *The Double Life of Doctor Valmy*. My project was initially to prepare Vallejo's text for production, but I soon changed my mind and decided to write a new text about our most important cause, the Arab-Israeli struggle.

It is probably appropriate to say here that true dramatic inspiration has never existed in a story in itself, but rather in novel approaches that allow the spectator to ponder his or her historical and existential condition. When, at the dawn of time, ancient Athenians carried baskets of food and drink and flocked to theaters with raked stone seats in which dramatic competitions were held, they did so not to hear new stories but to ponder their lives and social conditions in light of novel approaches employed by great dramatists to stories that were already known. Ancient Athenians knew that Agamemnon would be killed by his wife and her lover, and they knew that Orestes would kill his mother. It was not the unfolding events that provoked their curiosity, but the approach that Aeschylus or Euripides employed in presenting those events and the vision they utilized in each of their works. As such, the theater became a place where dialogue, contemplation, liberty, freedom and a civilized life could prosper. The same can be said about all great theatrical and dramatic experiments. Did the Elizabethan audience flock to the Shakespearean theater to find out the end of *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, or *Antony and Cleopatra*? Certainly not. The stories of these tragic characters were known and readily available in the history books of the period. People jockeyed for better position so they could listen to the poetry and contemplate their own reality as revealed to them by the vision of these artists.

I consciously make the observation above because a number of our critics do not understand the essence of theater. They mistakenly believe that the main component of a dramatic text and its performance is the story. Hence, they distort theater and the essential inspiration underlying it by representing it in the form of useless summaries of stories, and in so doing undermine their own work by reducing it to a senseless search for the origin of the story.

No, theater is not a realm in which one should employ the kind of entertaining detective work that was prevalent in the period of theater's decline. This decadent period coincided with the appearance of melodrama, vaudeville and other farces of the triumphant bourgeoisie at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was the time when theater lost its true inspiration and was no longer a realm in which one could contemplate the human condition and engage in dialogue. During this period theater became nothing more than an entertaining form of storytelling, preoccupied with the creation of well-woven but empty plots.

This play has two narrators and two stories, an Israeli narrator and a Palestinian narrator, an Israeli story and a Palestinian story. Both stories are integrated and contribute to each other's growth. I envision two high-quality performance styles, one that dramatizes the distinctively Israeli story and the other the distinctively Palestinian. Both performance styles should be serious and rigorous. I warn against presenting Israeli characters in a comic, coarse or exaggerated manner. I also warn actors about being unable to control their feelings of animosity toward the roles they are playing. I would like to see composed and focused performances. How these performances are manifested in this way while also distinguishing them (from the characters in the Palestinian story) is a matter I leave to the discretion of the director and cast, based on the research they do. The hymns of the Psalms, the Book of Kings, and even the rhythm of the Hebrew language may help in finding inspiration for a distinctive style in performance. I do not know how a director will be able to manage this, but I believe it is necessary to do so.

As for the Palestinian performances, I envision them as being based on simplicity with a covert sense of lyricism. I hope lyricism is not confused with oration, for there is no place for an oratorical performance in this play. That kind of performance would destroy the play and render it superficial.

Undoubtedly, the director, along with his or her actors and crew, will have a creative vision based on his or her own personal concerns regarding the form and structure of elements and how they are made manifest. I am not the kind of person who would ever limit the freedom of a director. Freedom is the essential element that guarantees the completion of the dramatic text in an innovative theatrical performance capable of provoking dialogue. However, I hope that a director will leave room within his or her personal vision for the ideas that are in this written text. He or she should be diligent in insuring that the text is clear and that members of the audience are directed toward calm attentiveness. I know that our spectators are impatient, inert, and in need of powerful and sometimes spurious provocations to be engaged by a theatrical performance. The spectators are not to blame since formidable institutions and systems mold their reactions and tastes in this direction. Nonetheless, it is

perhaps time that we find rhythms and means in performance that help spectators to focus and concentrate on the dialogue so that they arrive at the point where they actually enjoy paying close attention to the ideas being presented.

This play is an open text, which means that it is open to additions and changes that are dictated by historical developments. The Palestinian story does not have an ultimate conclusion but instead constitutes an open horizon. Additions and changes that make the text contemporary are therefore quite possible. Needless to say, additions and changes should give further depth to the general vision of the play rather than destroy it or make it ambiguous. The Israeli story is also an incomplete text, albeit to a lesser extent. It may entail additional argument and debate. In short, I view this work as a piece that is extracted from a violent history laden with possibilities and transformations. Any performance of this play should be based on an understanding of history and the changes it has wrought so that it can benefit from the open structure of the text and present its subject matter within the context of contemporary transformations. This requires the director to engage in a creative quest not only for an artistic form but also for historical continuity. Historical consciousness is equivalent to artistic creativity in this process, and an essential aspect of it.

The set is filled with a large mass of rusty metal ladders that lead to the office of Meir. (This is my personal vision, which is not necessarily compulsory). A spacious room with pictures of Herzl, Ben Gurion, Begin, and a map of Biblical Israel are hanging on the walls. The office gives the impression of opulence and modernity. It has several doors that squeak whenever they are opened or shut. One door leads to an inside room where parties take place, another door leads to a waiting room. The mass composed of ladders and the office give an overwhelming sense of having taken over the space of the stage.

Other than that, I would suggest symbolic demarcations of various places where events take place. This can be achieved through props with multiple uses, pieces of furniture, moving frames and screens that represent various places, or signs with writing. There is absolutely no need to clutter the space with furniture to represent realistic places. Symbolic means to indicate place will, on the one hand, aid in making movement smoother, and, on the other, it will make the realistic and oppressive mass of ladders and maze of offices appear more prominent.

Lighting plays an important role in the sequence of events and in changing locations.

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Beginning

(A traditional clay oven is in the corner of the house. Al-Fari'a³⁵ is flattening out balls of dough, which she then puts into the oven to bake. Beside her, on a worn-out mattress lies, a baby wrapped in a bundle.)

AL-FARI'A: *(She takes a warm loaf from the oven and smells it)* Do you smell this, Wa'd?³⁶ It's the aroma of fresh-baked bread. Breathe it in deeply and store it in your memory. Nothing compares to the aroma of bread except the smell of freshly watered earth. They're the finest and noblest fragrances in the world. They're the grace that feeds our longing for home, for love, for work. *(The baby mumbles in amusement)* No, no, don't say your aunt has lost her mind, that it's too soon for you to be learning lessons. One who was born like a piece of smuggled merchandise can't grow up following the laws of nature. Tell me, don't the laws of nature say you should suckle at your mother's breast for at least a year? How many days did you feed at her bosom? No more than twenty, and then you were weaned and began the next stage of your development. I wonder if you were destined to mature based on a law that concerns no one but us. Your fate is to grow up like children in legends, to learn early what longing is and which words suit your story. When the boy Wa'd was mere months old, he spoke and said: "I, Wa'd, son of Muhammad al-Safadi, understood my story before I was born. While still in my mother's womb, I was twice thrown out of my homeland. It caused me pain to first see light in a foreign land, so I resisted. I held onto the wall of my mother's womb until she was able to return and give birth to me in my own land. I, Wa'd, son of Muhammad al-Safadi, rewarded my mother with an easy birth. The day I was born, the occupation forces blew up five houses in my neighborhood, which was the reason I released my first cry. When I was still only a few months old, they took my mother from me and tossed her across the river. She wailed and beat her breast until out of her flowed a river of tears and the milk she had stored to nourish me. I didn't dare leave with her for fear they wouldn't let me back into my homeland. I remained, in the lap of my aunt, who wants me to grow up like children in legends, to learn longing and language while I'm mere months old." That's what you'll say, Wa'd. And then you'll say: "When I was seven months old, they imprisoned my

35 The word *fari'a* is an adjective referring to a towering or lofty figure. It is not generally used as a name of a person. Here it is obviously the character's nickname.

36 The word *wa'd* is a verbal noun that means promise. It is not generally used as a proper noun.

Uncle Isma'íl. My aunt hopes when I grow up I'll be like him and my grandfather Husayn al-Safadi. And as for my father ..." No, let's leave your father to his own worries. (*She arranges the loaves of bread and is delighted with their aroma*) This is the aroma of grace. Is it engraved in your memory yet? Come, let's go see Aunt Dalal.

(Lights fade)

The Beginning Hymn

(Doctor Menuhin steps forward on a stage that is softly lit)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: This is a kingdom of neurosis and insanity. All of the head is ill. The entire heart is ailing. The body is diseased from the top of its head to the tips of its toes. Scars, bruises, open wounds with no bandages, to which no salve has been applied.

(The Doctor exits. The Mother, Sarah, enters, becoming exuberant as she hears an explosion. Meir, Isaac, Gideon, Moshe, and David follow her and gather round. Flashes and sounds of explosions follow as an Israeli force blows up a number of Arabs' houses)

THE MOTHER: Everywhere you step is yours. You will be sated in the wilderness, in Lebanon, upon the Euphrates River and the sea to the west.

MEIR: Let no breeze blow in the towns that your Lord grants to you as your allotment. Proscribe the air.

GIDEON: Lead them to their death.

MOSHE: Slaughter them.

THE MOTHER: Show no mercy toward them. Kill every man, woman and child. Every cow, sheep, camel and donkey.

MEIR: Be merciless until you have destroyed so-called Arab culture, on whose ruins we shall build our civilization.

(An extended flash and the sound of an explosion. The group exits)

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter One

(Al-Fari'a enters holding the baby against her chest. With her other hand, she carries a bag containing fresh baked bread and the baby's necessities)

DALAL: May the name of the Prophet protect you.

AL-FARI'A: Place him on the bed. He became bored with my lessons and went to sleep.

DALAL: You're so late.

AL-FARI'A: I have soft bread for you.

DALAL: Who has an appetite?

AL-FARI'A: You'll find an appetite, and you'll eat. *(She puts a platter down and arranges the loaves of bread on it)* Look how pale your cheeks are. If you don't develop an appetite, my brother will have nothing to embrace when he's released.

DALAL: Do you have news of him?

AL-FARI'A: I went and asked ... as I do every day. They're still in the interrogation division. If they'd been moved to prison, we'd have known immediately. *(She puts za'tar³⁷ and oil on the platter. She shouts as if she were in a demonstration)* Here's the thyme, za'tar, and here's the oil, zet.³⁸ Za'tar, zet, za'tar, zet, God damn the Shin Bet. Come, join me. We'll start an indoor demonstration. *(She raises her fist as if walking in a demonstration)* Za'tar, zet, za'tar, zet, God damn the Shin Bet.

DALAL: What is this Shin Bet?

AL-FARI'A: You've never heard of the Shin Bet?

37 *Za'tar* refers to a spice mixture that has thyme as its main ingredient. It is generally anglicized as "zaatar."

38 The word is *zayt* in Modern Standard Arabic. It is pronounced *zet* in Palestinian dialect which is maintained in the translation to keep the rhyming effect in the character's chant.

DALAL: I don't think so.

AL-FARI'A: They're the agency responsible for security in the occupied territory, the agency that detains, tortures, exiles, and counts the breaths we take.

DALAL: God help us.

AL-FARI'A: Repeat after me then: "*Za'tar, zet, za'tar, zet*, God damn the Shin Bet."

DALAL: A heavy weight is pressing against my chest. My heart tells me Isma'il is not well.

AL-FARI'A: (*Continues to move around preparing dinner*) I know Isma'il like I know myself. He's a rock. The Israelis won't get a thing banging their heads against a rock.

DALAL: You're frightening me more. The Israelis won't stand for arrogance.

AL-FARI'A: Would you prefer a weakling who peed in his pants?

DALAL: I don't know what I'd prefer. All I know is I want him back. If you had any idea how alone and frightened I feel when he's not here. We've only been married for three months. When we were joined together in this room that first night I was defenseless, I couldn't contain my happiness. I didn't care that my father objected, that people around me were talking. I was swept away by the idea of the beautiful days we'd be spending together in this nest. He kept his secret from me. He didn't tell me about his other life.

AL-FARI'A: He didn't want to scare you, to spoil your happiness. He hesitated a long time before deciding to marry.

DALAL: Yes, he was hesitant. I almost gave up on him. At times, I doubted his love for me. The world turned dark, I felt lost.

AL-FARI'A: When he talked of love, he'd sigh. He'd tell me about the innocence and life gushing forth from a schoolgirl named Dalal. Her father was an important merchant, he'd say, who refused to accept a humble teacher with meager means as a son-in-law. When he spoke of her he'd confuse her with

the land, the rain, the olive trees. "She's too precious," he'd grumble, "to get involved in my misery and precarious life."

DALAL: My father said: "If you continue with your obstinance, forget you have a father and a home." I told him: "It's a price I'll gladly pay." His eyes filled with rage. Were it not for my mother and his fear of scandal, he'd have slit my throat at the doorstep to our house. Instead he spat and snarled: "Get out of my face. As far as I'm concerned you're dead." I lost my family and my home and didn't regret it. I forgot the past and looked ahead as soon as we were joined in this nest. Every morning I'd feel ready, mature. Two days before he was arrested, we talked about having our first child. I called him Zahir, he called him Jihad. I was certain a seed was forming in my womb, but nothing was there but separation.

AL-FARI'A: (*She puts on a pot of water for tea and sits on the floor*) Don't talk about separation. He'll be back. And you'll bear so many children you'll be exhausted. Childbearing requires a strong body. Come, Dalal, hold out your hand. Eat.

DALAL: I'm not hungry.

AL-FARI'A: One word opens a conversation, a single morsel unlocks your stomach.

DALAL: (*Trying to eat, her eyes appear lost*) I've been thinking a great deal. He and I were not equal. His love for me occupied the margins of his life. My love for him took over my whole existence.

AL-FARI'A: You're being unfair. His desire to protect you came close to breaking his spirit. For him, you were light. When he used to ask me to look after you, his voice would tremble.

DALAL: Why wasn't our happiness enough for him then?

AL-FARI'A: Who can be content in times like these?

DALAL: We were content. You saw it. Our nights were filled with celebration, our mornings with delight. He gave up hard-won happiness for a dream as fleeting as the fog.

AL-FARI'A: You didn't see his face turn pale, notice his heart pounding when you embraced? And when the embrace ended didn't he whisper, "I need to rest"?

DALAL: He told you these details?

AL-FARI'A: No, he was too discrete to share the details, but I know Isma'il. I know he took these things to bed with him. He turned pale when he saw people arrested. The sound of posts exploding and towns being bombarded exhausted him. He saw what you couldn't see. He knew those embraces you were sharing were under siege.

DALAL: Was all this anguish sharing our bed?

AL-FARI'A: It was, Dalal.

DALAL: If only he'd been content with the happiness we had and stayed away from trouble. There are thousands of people around us who go on with their lives living in peace.

AL-FARI'A: This kind of peace is deceptive. Israel hasn't annexed our country to grant us peace. Just look around you. Our situation's terrifying. Death, arrests, houses blown-up, motherless children. Do you want your son to be born without identity, without hope? This child here, sound asleep ... His life was laid with landmines before he was born. He's sleeping on top of one now. He and all of us are living with this horror. How could any of us feel safe? No, Isma'il would not have been able to sit in this room and stay out of trouble. In our situation, staying away from trouble means slow death, and we don't want to die.

DALAL: I despise politics, and I intentionally avoid the news, though I know we're living in a tragedy. But how shall I say it ... You have to be in love to understand.

AL-FARI'A: Who told you I'm not in love?

DALAL: You are?

AL-FARI'A: Yes. One could even say I'm married.

DALAL: Married? Are you joking?

AL-FARI'A: I know you think it's strange. It's a secret no one knows but Isma'il. I wouldn't have told you if you didn't mean so much to me and I know you need to be stronger.

DALAL: Why the secrecy?

AL-FARI'A: We didn't have the time to tie the knot.

DALAL: What happened?

AL-FARI'A: He's in prison.

DALAL: For how long?

AL-FARI'A: Eight years, four months and nine days. I know the hours and minutes too.

DALAL: My God, for all this time. How long is his sentence?

AL-FARI'A: Life.

DALAL: Forever?

AL-FARI'A: Yes. And you still see me living, working and waiting.

DALAL: What is there to wait for?

AL-FARI'A: For him to be released.

DALAL: Are you expecting a miracle?

AL-FARI'A: Why not? We're people who live based on made-up logic, which applies only to us. Why not expect miracles in the same way we expect everyday life!

DALAL: Aren't you fooling yourself?

AL-FARI'A: Absolutely not. If we allow ourselves to be ruled by impossibility, we'll be lost. We won't be able to go on from one day to the next unless we know our dreams are possible, that waiting for us tomorrow or the day after are miracles.

DALAL: My God, how strong you are, and your faith. Why did he receive a life sentence?

AL-FARI'A: Because he attacked an Israeli patrol. There were four of them. He killed one and wounded another. They arrested 'Umar and his friend Marwan. Both of them were sentenced to life. At the beginning they were in al-Fari'a Prison. Then they moved 'Umar to Ramla Prison.

DALAL: Al-Fari'a?

AL-FARI'A: Yes. I'd been there so many times that I'd start wailing absent-mindedly "Going to al-Fari'a, Going to al-Fari'a," so Isma'il started calling me "al-Fari'a." People followed suit, assuming the nickname meant a powerful, bereaved sister of men.

DALAL: They weren't mistaken. You are a sister of men.

AL-FARI'A: If only you knew. It's a shell I've developed through patience and willpower. I was thrown into a sea of sorrows without knowing how to swim. I was sixteen when my father died. Didn't Isma'il tell you about his father?

DALAL: Once or twice. I know Isma'il was ten when he lost his father.

AL-FARI'A: He was martyred during Black September, fighting in al-Wahdat Camp in Amman. He had joined the freedom fighters three years before, after the June defeat, which pained him greatly. He told us all about the operations he'd participated in. Muhammad was thirteen, Isma'il was ten. My mother, who was already ill, couldn't bear his passing, and she followed him soon after. Suddenly I found myself the head of the family. I had to look after Isma'il and Muhammad and provide the means for them to continue their studies. Myself, I stopped at middle school and started working at whatever I could to make up for the children's loss of their father. I succeeded with Isma'il. He excelled at everything, but not Muhammad.

DALAL: What about the man you're with?

AL-FARI'A: 'Umar ... was my father's comrade in his battalion. He brought 'Umar to the house one time and told us all about him. He was a young man who'd finished his college degree but left everything to join the resistance. He was a great help to me after my father died. In the midst of that calamity a beautiful, fresh feeling budded between us. The first time he held my hand and glanced warmly at me it was as if my strength evaporated. He'd disappear for days at a time and then suddenly reappear, and when he did blossoms would suddenly sprout in my heart. He loved my brothers as if they were his own. The last time I saw him I promised to be his, and we swore we'd be loyal to one another no matter what happened, and I am.

DALAL: I had no idea you were bearing this burden.

AL-FARI'A: That's our life, Dalal. I told you this so you'd know you're not the only woman whose love is imprisoned. There are thousands of others like us, also waiting. What we learn is to be patient and to prepare ourselves for future happiness. It's as if you've turned love into a golden cage that confines you. Love must strengthen our wings, not make them weaker. It's about time we all escaped from our cages and discovered what is actually taking place. Your misery will not diminish unless all of us fight ours.

DALAL: What can I do?

AL-FARI'A: A lot can be done by one who is resolute.

DALAL: You mean resistance?

AL-FARI'A: Yes, resistance. That would make Isma'il very happy. There's no other way out, Dalal.

DALAL: I don't I have your strength or faith. This wasn't the way I imagined my life.

AL-FARI'A: You're not lacking faith or strength, but you're imprisoning yourself. (*The baby cries*) The prince has awakened. (*Dalal rises and picks him up*) Play with him while I prepare his milk.

DALAL: Come here, Wa'd. No, no, naughty boy. Hungry? Right away, milk is coming. Are you *wa'd* ... a promise ... or *waghd* ... a scoundrel?

AL-FARI'A: His aunt would never allow him to be a scoundrel.

DALAL: Did you hear that? You better stop fidgeting. Your aunt's looking over your shoulder. (*Loud knocking on the door*) Who could that be? (*Al-Fari'a goes to door, carrying the bottle of milk*)

AL-FARI'A: Who is it?

GIDEON: (*From outside*) Open up. Israeli security.

DALAL: What should we do?

AL-FARI'A: Keep calm and don't say a thing.

GIDEON: (*From outside*) Open the door or we'll break it down.

(*Al-Fari'a calmly opens the door. Gideon, Moshe and David barge in with their weapons drawn*)

AL-FARI'A: Take it easy. You'll scare the baby.

GIDEON: Is this the house of Isma'il al-Safadi?

AL-FARI'A: Yes. And you have him in prison.

GIDEON: (*To Dalal*) Are you his wife?

AL-FARI'A: (*Takes the baby from Dalal and stands between her and the Officers*)
What do you want from her?

GIDEON: Are you the wife of Isma'il al-Safadi?

DALAL: Yes.

GIDEON: (*To Moshe*) Take her.

AL-FARI'A: To where?

GIDEON: That's none of your business.

AL-FARI'A: Take me instead.

MOSHE: (*Violently shoves al-Fari'a out of the way. She nearly falls. He holds Dalal. To al-Fari'a*) Get out of the way. We want his wife.

AL-FARI'A: May God break your arm. I almost fell on the baby.

GIDEON: Shut up. Who are you?

AL-FARI'A: Her cousin.

GIDEON: And the baby?

AL-FARI'A: Do you want to put him in jail too?

GIDEON: Watch your manners. Answer. Is he her son?

AL-FARI'A: No. He's mine. You want to arrest him?

GIDEON: His time will come. Let's go. (*Moshe and David drag Dalal towards the door*)

DALAL: I'm scared.

AL-FARI'A: Don't be afraid, Dalal. You're stronger than they are. Keep calm and keep your chin up. I'll be here waiting for you. (*All exit except al-Fari'a and the baby*) We'll all be waiting for you. He was always so worried about her, so careful not to awaken her, but now that she's awake it will be brutal and horrifying and you, my little one, you must engrave this in your memory as well. No, no. I haven't forgotten that you're hungry. It's for your sake that we go through the hardships we do. Come, here's the milk. What did Wa'd say when he was mere months old. He spoke and said, "The chicken has a house. The house of the chicken is called a coop. The bird has a house. The house of the bird is called a nest. The rabbit has a house. The house of the rabbit is called a burrow. As for me, the Palestinian, I have no house because my enemy is living in it." Who is the enemy of the Palestinian?

(*Lights fade*)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter One

(Light shines on Doctor Abraham Menuhin in what is apparently a garden)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Who will deliver me from my pain. The heart within me is melancholic. Oh, kingdom of neurosis and insanity your children are bleeding and there is no one to treat them because the doctor, himself, is ill and in need of healing. *(Rachel Benhas, wife of Isaac Benhas, enters carrying flowers and a shopping bag. She is young and beautiful)* I should admit what I have, not because I want to add another malady to those already known to medical science, but because remaining silent means being an accomplice. I'm a doctor unable to treat his patients because he can't overcome his own revulsion and cure his weary soul. As a psychiatrist I've found myself in many distressing situations, but this is the first time I've felt such melancholy, such disgust and fatigue. Am I betraying my profession? Possibly. From their point of view, I certainly am. But in this history, weighed down by lies, doesn't betrayal have another meaning? Didn't they warn Jeremiah: "Do not utter the prophecies so that you should not die by our hand?" But where is the wise man who can understand this? My patient is a regular man who lives near my clinic. I know his wife very well.

RACHEL: *(Approaching the Doctor)* Two years ago he treated me for a serious breakdown.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: She had manic episodes followed by periods of depression. She lost her fiancé in one of our military outings and then retreated into her grief, focusing solely on her sick father.

RACHEL: When my father died, I started to sink into melancholy. It made me ill. After a few sessions, I began to feel better. I became quite attached to the doctor.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: That happens sometimes.

RACHEL: He coldly and sternly rejected me.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: It was necessary.

RACHEL: I was sitting in this park one day. Isaac noticed I was crying and approached me. He was a mature man who exuded dependability. He said,

"I will cure you, my little patient." And, of course, a few days later, we were married.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: She stopped coming to the clinic. She appeared to be completely cured.

RACHEL: I began to avoid the doctor. I'd feel uneasy when I saw him.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: One day she was coming back from the market and greeted me and said ...

RACHEL: Sometimes I miss the tranquility of the clinic and the comfort of the couch.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Do you miss being ill?

RACHEL: I miss compassion and ... Would you like a flower?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: They look more beautiful in your hands. Are you having marital problems?

RACHEL: No. My husband is a wonderful man, and our lives were going so well.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: And now?

RACHEL: We have a beautiful boy. You must come for a visit and see him.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Had I been introduced to your husband, I certainly would.

RACHEL: I will introduce you to him. He's always busy.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: If it weren't for the little one, I'd be worried about your being lonely.

RACHEL: But my mother-in-law ... I won't bother you with nonsense. Can I invite you to dinner some evening?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: That's very kind of you.

RACHEL: I'll call you soon.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Yes, do.

RACHEL: Goodbye, then.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Goodbye (*Rachel exits. Doctor Menuhin remains*) She seemed anxious, as if she wanted to tell me something. I wondered if she was having manic-depressive episodes again. She had a baby a few months old, a mother-in-law who was attractive and arrogant. Who knows what the heart is? It's the most deceptive and malicious part of us. (*The Doctor exits*)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Two

(In a sitting room in the house of Isaac Benhas. The Mother appears, rocking a baby in a cradle)

MOTHER: My beloved is clean and has a fresh diaper. (*Talking to the baby*) You recognize your grandma, don't you? What do you want? Your father used to laugh when he wanted something from his mama too. Do you want a song or a story? Shall we continue the story of beautiful David. You do understand what I'm telling you? I know you understand. "And Goliath looked at David with disdain because he was a beautiful, blonde lad. Goliath said to David, 'Let us begin and your flesh will become food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the wilderness.' When Goliath rose and approached David, David reached into the bundle on his shoulder and took a stone from it. Using his slingshot he struck Goliath with the stone, burying it in his forehead. Goliath fell on his face, and David, who had no sword, ran toward him, standing over him (*Enter Rachel*) and took the Philistine's sword and with it cut off his head."

RACHEL: Be gentle with the baby, mother. His ears are too tender for these words.

MOTHER: It's the story of his namesake: David.

RACHEL: He'll hear it many times when he grows up.

MOTHER: He needs to know it by heart before he understands it. I raised my son well, and I'll do the same with my grandson.

RACHEL: All right. I brought you batteries for the radio.

MOTHER: Thank you.

RACHEL: (*Bending over toward the cradle*) How is my little sweetie pie? Is she happy mommy's back?

MOTHER: (*Coldly*) Don't address him in the feminine.

RACHEL: See how keen your grandma is to protect your masculinity. Now let's take a look at the family jewels. They must be wet by now.

MOTHER: I just changed his diaper.

RACHEL: Looks like grandma's not leaving anything for me to do. Did Isaac call?

MOTHER: No, he didn't, but you received a letter.

RACHEL: A letter?

MOTHER: It's on the table.

RACHEL: (*She picks up the letter*) That's strange. It's from my aunt who's living in America. She hasn't written to me since my father died.

MOTHER: Why doesn't she return to her own country, instead of babbling in letters? How I despise those who believe it's enough to send a few sympathetic words and some money to their homeland. (*The baby cries*) I know, I know. It's time for your milk now.

RACHEL: I'll go and prepare it.

MOTHER: No. Read your letter. (*As she rises, she stops suddenly*) When does your maternity leave end?

RACHEL: It's open-ended.

MOTHER: I thought you were thinking of going back to teaching.

RACHEL: Are you trying to get rid of me?

MOTHER: I think going back to work would do you good. You hardly ever leave the house.

RACHEL: I'm happy staying home.

MOTHER: What about Isaac, is he happy?

RACHEL: Why do you ask?

MOTHER: He's looking very gloomy these days.

RACHEL: It's nothing. He's tired. He's very busy at work lately.

MOTHER: Does he complain about his job?

RACHEL: No, he's just tired.

MOTHER: He shouldn't complain about his work, and you should help lighten his burden.

RACHEL: He never talks about his job. Don't worry. He's fine.

MOTHER: I'll go prepare the milk.

(Rachel walks away to read the letter. Isaac enters. She hides the letter and goes toward him and greets him)

ISAAC: How's my girl? *(She embraces him tightly. He appears anxious and embarrassed as he pats her on the back)*

RACHEL: I'm happy you're back.

ISAAC: What's wrong?

RACHEL: Nothing. I missed you. Are you staying the night with us?

ISAAC: Unless they call me in.

RACHEL: Wonderful. I'll make that dessert you like.

ISAAC: How's our little darling?

RACHEL: He's quite calm. See how he's smiling.

ISAAC: Are you smiling for papa? You want me to play with you? Come here.

RACHEL: Your mother was just asking about you. She never misses a thing.

ISAAC: You know how attached she is to me. (*The Mother enters with the baby's bottle*) Hi, mama.

MOTHER: Hello, my son.

RACHEL: Isaac is having dinner with us, mom.

MOTHER: Really?

ISAAC: My mother's cooking me dinner, and my wife's making dessert. Who could be luckier than me? And meantime, I'll play the violin, my greatest source of joy.

MOTHER: (*With annoyance*) That violin? (*She hesitates for a moment, then exits*)

ISAAC: It's been a while since I've played. My soul is full of joy, and I want to celebrate.

RACHEL: Do you really want to celebrate?

ISAAC: Why not? Look, David is waving his hands as if he's dancing. (*To the baby*) Are you celebrating too?

RACHEL: Are you really happy?

ISAAC: I don't know.

RACHEL: Didn't you just say you were?

ISAAC: I didn't want her to worry. Maybe I was just trying to convince myself.

(Mother enters carrying slippers. She puts them in front of Isaac)

MOTHER: If you're staying, take off your shoes. *(Isaac obeys his mother as if he were a child. He removes his gun from its holster and puts it on the table. He then bends down and removes his shoes. The Mother stares at him)*

MOTHER: Your face is pale. You look tired.

(The baby cries)

ISAAC: Not a bit. I'm perfectly fine.

MOTHER: *(Trying to calm the baby)* Don't be upset, my little king. Your father distracted me for a moment. *(To the baby)* Come, let's drink our milk in peace. *(She pushes the cradle and exits while reciting)* Place the sword on your thigh and charge with your glory, and an entire people will fall before you. Listen and look, daughter, forget your people and the house of your father. The king desires your beauty. Kneel before him.

ISAAC: What's she reciting?

RACHEL: The usual verses! Her love is so harsh. She wants to keep the two of you for herself.

ISAAC: Try to be patient with her.

RACHEL: I don't want you to think I'm complaining. We get along fine.

ISAAC: What were you reading when I came in?

RACHEL: A letter from my aunt. She wants me to visit. I think she's worried and lonely.

(Rachel gently caresses him. He appears nonplussed)

ISAAC: Are you going to accept the invitation?

RACHEL: And leave you and David? Of course not. I barely know her. She hasn't written to me since my father died. Aren't you going to kiss me? (*Isaac, looking disconcerted, awkwardly embraces her and kisses her neck*) How I miss you.

ISAAC: You're embarrassing me.

RACHEL: Don't say that. Hug me and be quiet. (*He tries to slip out of her embrace*)

ISAAC: This is beginning to humiliate me. I'm starting to sweat.

RACHEL: You're spoiled from too much pampering.

ISAAC: For God's sake, don't make fun of me.

RACHEL: (*Gently*) You're making too much out of this. Why don't you share your problems with me? You never talk about work.

ISAAC: There's no problem. My job's the same. Nothing's changed.

RACHEL: But we barely see you.

ISAAC: We have a lot of work these days.

RACHEL: See, it must be stress from your job.

ISAAC: I've been more exhausted than this before, but I've never not been able to ... I don't know what's going on.

RACHEL: (*Hugging him*) We agreed not to get upset about it and not to give up. (*Isaac moves away from her embrace. She walks away from him looking extremely hurt*)

ISAAC: You've got to understand, I feel trapped.

RACHEL: I'm just trying to express my affection.

ISAAC: Rachel, you know I love you. I feel more attached to you than ever, but your insistence just makes me feel more embarrassed.

RACHEL: Don't get me wrong. I'm not asking for anything. This will pass.

ISAAC: What if it doesn't? You won't be able to bear it.

RACHEL: (*She embraces him*) I'm your wife.

ISAAC: (*Moving away from her*) I can't stand this torture.

RACHEL: Why don't you talk to Dr. Menuhin.

ISAAC: That's all I need. I'll become a joke at work if people find out.

RACHEL: He's a doctor.

ISAAC: But you know what a psychiatrist means and what these doctors do.
They just make people more confused.

RACHEL: I told you. He helped me a lot.

ISAAC: Marriage helped you. Not the doctor.

RACHEL: I ran into him today, and he said he wanted to meet you. You can count on him. We can go see him together if you want.

ISAAC: That really would be embarrassing. I can't.

RACHEL: (*Desperately*) As you wish.

(*The Mother enters carrying a glass with an effervescent medicine*)

MOTHER: (*To Isaac*) Drink.

ISAAC: What is it?

MOTHER: Cold medicine.

ISAAC: I told you ...

MOTHER: Drink. Your face is pale. (*Isaac acquiesces like a child and drinks the medicine. To Rachel*) If you don't get started, he won't have any dessert.

RACHEL: I'm going.

(Both Women exit. Isaac remains alone onstage, appearing exhausted and in anguish. He hesitantly approaches the telephone. He nervously searches in the phone book. He lifts the receiver, looks around warily. He dials)

ISAAC: *(Into phone)* Hello ... Is this the office of Dr. Menuhin ... I'd like an appointment ... Listen, Miss, I'm very busy, and I can't come any other day except today ... It's an emergency ... No ... I don't mind waiting in the office ... At five? ... Okay ... Benhas. The name is Benhas ... Thank you ... Goodbye. *(He hangs up the receiver. He looks relieved. He leaves the living room and goes to another room. A moment later, we hear beautiful music from a violin, which continues for a while. As the music plays, light goes up on in the office where Gideon appears, making a phone call. The phone rings in the living room. Rachel enters rapidly and answers the phone. The music can be heard throughout the phone conversation)*

RACHEL: Hello

GIDEON: Mrs. Benhas.

RACHEL: Yes. Who is this?

GIDEON: It's Gideon, who gets the shivers when he hears your voice.

RACHEL: I told you, I don't like these sorts of jokes.

GIDEON: Who's joking? If longing and love are jokes, then what's serious in this world?

RACHEL: You're over the line.

GIDEON: How can someone who's enraptured know where the line is?

RACHEL: Stop, or I'm going to get very angry.

GIDEON: You're beautiful when you're angry, beautiful when you're calm. Beautiful however you are.

RACHEL: There are things to consider.

GIDEON: From the first moment I saw you, I knew I wouldn't be able to consider anything. Something about you is irresistible. Something missing in all other women.

RACHEL: Please don't mock me.

GIDEON: You think being in love is mocking?

RACHEL: I have enough problems as it is. Don't add to them.

GIDEON: Can I help? You can count on me.

RACHEL: After all these declarations, how can I trust you?

GIDEON: What do I need to do to gain your trust?

RACHEL: I need friendship. I need support and advice, nothing more.

GIDEON: Is that what you really need? Our lives are barren, Rachel. They bear no fruit.

RACHEL: I'm tired. I'm not listening to you.

GIDEON: Have it as you wish. I'll put my heart aside and give you my friendship instead.

RACHEL: Would you do that?

GIDEON: You know I'm your captive and you can make of me what you will.

RACHEL: You're a very smooth talker.

GIDEON: If you knew my feelings you'd see what a poor interpreter my tongue is for my heart. I'm sorry. I won't talk about my feelings anymore. May I speak to Isaac?

RACHEL: Just a moment. I'll call him. *(She puts the receiver aside. She has a perplexed look on her face. She knocks gently on the door, and then violently. The sound of the violin stops. Isaac appears)*

ISAAC: What?

RACHEL: You have a call.

ISAAC: *(He enters and picks up the phone)* Hello. Hi, Gideon. What's up?

GIDEON: Baba Meir wants you in the office.

ISAAC: When?

GIDEON: This evening.

ISAAC: But Baba gave me the night off.

GIDEON: Something new's come up. The blackbird's back from the hospital.

ISAAC: Can't you take my place?

GIDEON: I have a job outside the office.

ISAAC: Send Moshe or David.

GIDEON: Baba insists on you.

ISAAC: I have a doctor's appointment.

GIDEON: Stop kidding. There's nothing wrong with you.

ISAAC: I'm telling you. I have an appointment at five.

GIDEON: You can get there late. Or should I tell him the job's too much for you?

ISAAC: Don't be an idiot.

GIDEON: Then hug your gorgeous wife and get ready. You have a delectable get-together this afternoon.

ISAAC: Okay, okay. *(He angrily puts down the receiver)* What a jerk.

RACHEL: Are you really planning to see the doctor?

ISAAC: It was just an excuse. Bring me my shoes. I'm sorry. We'll lunch together tomorrow.

RACHEL: Don't forget your gun.

ISAAC: Right. *(He kisses on the lips. Lights fade)*

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter Two

(A modest but well-ordered room. Al-Fari'a sits on a mat with the baby, Wa'd, in her lap, gently dandling him and singing in a soft, low voice)

AL-FARI'A: My eyelids are doors that stay open
 But if our estrangement continues to grow
 I'll destroy those doors, make them into a blackboard
 Teach the birds to cry and the doves to wail:
 "Goodbye, we are departing."
 If our estrangement continues to grow
 I'll write its name on the blackboard
 And even if the door to our love should close
 Our estrangement, like my eyelids, will stay open.

(Muhammad enters, looking gloomy, carrying a small bag. He greets her and sits on a low, wicker chair)

AL-FARI'A: Here comes your father. I know your games. Don't pretend to be asleep. Wake up and greet him.

MUHAMMAD: Leave him alone. He's asleep.

AL-FARI'A: It looks like he really is asleep. I'll put him in his bed. *(She rises, speaking to the baby)* May God's name protect you and yours from the devil. *(She places him in bed and covers him. To Muhammad)* You're not going to believe it, Muhammad. I went with Dalal to visit her father, Bashir al-Busi. I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to mend fences because blood is stronger than water. But Dalal was afraid. She thought her situation would cause him trouble with the authorities. When I told him what had happened to her he rained curses down on us. He called us whores and saboteurs. He said he'd disavow her in front of the governor general.

MUHAMMAD: This is a successful man who knows how to take care of himself. He cuts off the part that causes him pain. (*Muhammad rises, agitated. He brings a glass of water. He takes a bottle of 'araq³⁹ from the bag*)

AL-FARI'A: May God destroy successful men such as him. She's his child.

MUHAMMAD: God adorned this world with money before children.

AL-FARI'A: This is money that stinks of shame and betrayal.

MUHAMMAD: (*Pouring himself a glass of 'araq*) Money has no smell. That's how successful people think. They know how to seize the moment. Occupation is an opportunity. And when it's over they end up on top. But I'll tell you this: we won't see the end of occupation during our lifetime.

AL-FARI'A: May God bring us another future, not yours. How will the occupation ever end if people forget their own children and country for the sake of money and others drown themselves in alcohol? Didn't you promise Siham you'd stop drinking?

MUHAMMAD: Spare me the sermon.

AL-FARI'A: I won't spare you the sermon. I'm not going to let you destroy yourself any more than you already have.

MUHAMMAD: I've had it up to here with this talk.

AL-FARI'A: I've had it up to here too.

MUHAMMAD: With what? The little one?

AL-FARI'A: The little one is the light of my eye. It's the big one I'm tired of.

MUHAMMAD: Do you want me to leave the house?

AL-FARI'A: It's your father's house. Why should you leave? Listen, Muhammad, all I want is for you not to destroy yourself.

39 *Araq*, often anglicized as *arak*, is a colorless anise-flavored liquor. It turns white when mixed with water.

MUHAMMAD: *Araq* won't add to my destruction.

AL-FARI'A: Why do you always feel sorry for yourself?

MUHAMMAD: Because there's something for me to feel sorry about. They refused my second request for a family reunion. I won't be able to live with my wife and child the way everyone else does. She has to stay in Irbid, and I'll stay here. And during the moments we steal together, our children are conceived like bastards.

AL-FARI'A: That's what occupation is. One who recognizes the calamities of others will realize how small his own are.

MUHAMMAD: Spare me the proverbs too. I've suffered enough. If I started to tell you what I've seen, I wouldn't stop talking until tomorrow. The only sweet thing I've tasted in my life is Siham. If I lose her, I'll really be lost. I'll have nothing but misery.

AL-FARI'A: What can we do? These people have no gratitude toward God. They behave atrociously. They're merciless. Look what happened to your brother and his wife.

MUHAMMAD: I have nothing to do with my brother and his wife.

AL-FARI'A: Why do you look like you were bitten by a snake every time your brother is mentioned?

MUHAMMAD: He has his way. I have mine.

AL-FARI'A: We all share the same calamity. How can each of us have his own way?

MUHAMMAD: Leave me out of Isma'il's problems. He's made his choice, I've made mine.

AL-FARI'A: What did you choose?

MUHAMMAD: To keep my family together by any means necessary.

AL-FARI'A: What means do you have?

MUHAMMAD: I've been told if I work at their construction site it'll be easier to get my application approved.

AL-FARI'A: (*Angrily*) You want to work at an Israeli construction site?

MUHAMMAD: It's all work. Whether it's here or there. What's the difference?

AL-FARI'A: Are you saying the occupier's equal to your own people?

MUHAMMAD: You know the story. Our people trample on your rights in the name of the homeland and religion. You saw how things exploded between me and Abu Qahtan when I told him I'd been shorted on my pay. He shouted in my face, "Why are you making a big deal out of it? Do you want to sell out your religion and homeland to the Jews? Get out. No one's stopping you." I said, "The one who's selling out his homeland and religion's the one who's trampling on people's rights." Then he said something, and so did I. If decent people hadn't stepped in, somebody would've gotten killed. That's how it is to work with our countrymen.

AL-FARI'A: I still can't believe you're serious.

MUHAMMAD: Why wouldn't I be serious? I might actually get the application approved. And they pay better.

AL-FARI'A: They pay better because you support the occupation by working with them.

MUHAMMAD: Why don't you just drop this story? The occupation has plenty of support whether I work with them or not. If you'd traveled like I have and seen how things work in the other Arab countries, you'd know the occupation is already solid. And they can occupy even more land if they want it.

AL-FARI'A: I know how things work in the other Arab countries, but I also know how to recognize the tone of surrender.

MUHAMMAD: Then write it down using whatever letters you'd like: I have surrendered.

AL-FARI'A: Shame on you. My father's bones must be shivering in his grave. Who would've believed that the son of Husayn al-Safadi would say such things?

MUHAMMAD: Don't try to wall me in by mentioning Husayn al-Safadi.

AL-FARI'A: Does your father's name bite you like a snake too?

MUHAMMAD: I'll tell you something you don't know. The terrifying shadow of Husayn al-Safadi has stalked me like the crack of a whip for years. He wouldn't allow me to persevere at anything. I ran away from the West Bank, but he wouldn't let me find peace anywhere. I left Amman for Damascus and Damascus for Beirut, but I couldn't succeed at anything. He followed me wherever I went, always furious, always taking pleasure at my failure. His tyranny never let up for a second until I met Siham and fell in love.

AL-FARI'A: Did you hate him?

MUHAMMAD: I don't know who hated whom, but I do know he's ruined my life long enough.

AL-FARI'A: He was harsh with you sometimes because he wanted you to learn what life is.

MUHAMMAD: He was harsh with me all the time because he didn't love me. And he was harsh with our mother because he didn't love her. He arranged things so Isma'il would be the son who carried on his legacy. Do you remember the day he asked each of us what we wanted to be when we grew up? Isma'il replied immediately, in a loud voice, "I'll finish my studies and join the resistance." I remained silent, but Husayn al-Safadi jabbed me and asked, "What does the jackass want to be?" I still don't know how I got the courage to answer, but I said, "I'll be a porter," and you all laughed. Husayn al-Safadi spat and said, "That's a fitting choice for a jackass." Then he strutted about like a rooster, recounting the tales of his heroism: "The day of the Battle of al-Karama we made the Israelis recite their death prayers ..." and the rest of that broken record.

AL-FARI'A: Our father was a hero we should be proud of.

MUHAMMAD: You can take his heroism, divide it with Isma'il and shove it down your throat. I want a family life that has nothing to do with heroism.

AL-FARI'A: Don't build a wall of bitterness between you and us. We're one family, Muhammad, born from the same seed, nourished by the same milk. You're exaggerating being wronged so you can remain cut off and alone. What are you blaming us for? Didn't I do everything I could so you could continue your studies? Didn't I beg you not to travel, to be the master of the household and to help me after our mother died?

MUHAMMAD: No one needed me after our mother died. The poor woman ... his shadow was stalking her too. It sucked the life out of her. I'll never forget that time he took off his belt and whipped her with it. She had this look of horrified protest in her eyes ... there was blood ...

AL-FARI'A: Stop. Why are you so intent on mutilating our past?

MUHAMMAD: Because it was mutilated. Because these are the beautiful memories Husayn al-Safadi engraved in my mind.

AL-FARI'A: I had no idea you were so damaged.

MUHAMMAD: See, a little *'araq* won't damage me more than I already am.

AL-FARI'A: So you're intent on working there despite the fact that your father's a martyr and your brother's in prison.

MUHAMMAD: Your father and his son have devoured all glorious deeds and have left me nothing but the hunger for a simple family life. Yes, sister, I've made up my mind, tomorrow morning, I'm joining those who board the bus to work for them.

AL-FARI'A: I beg you brother not to be the lump in the throat that chokes both me and Isma'il. We love you. Don't allow bitterness to cut the binds between us.

MUHAMMAD: Don't suddenly become emotional. What's done is done. I have to get up early tomorrow morning.

AL-FARI'A: You know this is a lump I can't swallow.

MUHAMMAD: Time allows one to swallow any lump.

AL-FARI'A: Not this one. It'll stay in my throat forever. I'll never speak to you again.

MUHAMMAD: Then there's nothing more to say. If the baby's too much trouble for you, I can manage by myself.

AL-FARI'A: What a lost soul you are.

(Lights fade)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Three

(In the office of Doctor Abraham Menuhin)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Mother, may I be damned since you bred me to be an aggressive man who grabs all the earth for himself. In the heart of your children you sowed nothing but arrogance and disdain for others. How can one forget the fear and loathing on which one was nourished as a child? When he grows up how can he save his soul from sickness and not become hard and filled with hostility. I invested so much time and effort purging myself of the fare that I was fed. But those who are keen on keeping the food of their childhood pay a higher price. Isaac came to my office today. I did all I could to insure he wouldn't have to wait.

(Isaac enters appearing gloomy and confused)

ISAAC: Good evening, doctor.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Good evening. I've already met your wife. I'm pleased to meet you.

ISAAC: Thank you. I'm the sick one now.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Sit down, please. *(He offers him a cigarette)*

ISAAC: Thank you. (*He laughs nervously while taking the cigarette. The Doctor lights it for him*) Excuse me for laughing, you offered me what I'm in the habit of offering others.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: You offer people cigarettes too?

ISAAC: Yes, but forget about that.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Go ahead. What's going on?

ISAAC: It's not easy.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I'm here to help you. Relax. Start anywhere you'd like.

ISAAC: Maybe it's better ... to let it out all at once ... For some time I haven't been able to perform my marital duties.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Does the word scare you?

ISAAC: What word?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Impotence. You want to say you're suffering from sexual impotence.

ISAAC: Yes, and it frightens me very much.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Let's try to figure this out. Do you begin to have intercourse and can't complete it or do you not feel the desire in the first place?

ISAAC: I try, but I can't. I don't know if I really don't have the desire. My wife does the best she can to arouse me, but it doesn't work. Sometimes nothing happens at all. Other times it happens before we even get started.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: So far, there's nothing to worry about. These symptoms are more common than you'd imagine.

ISAAC: I'm pleased to hear that, Doctor.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Have you ever had an experience like this in other circumstances?

ISAAC: Sometimes I wouldn't feel the desire. But that's normal, I suppose.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: And premature ejaculation? Have you ever had that before?

ISAAC: Never.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Are you a hot-tempered person, Mr. Benhas?

ISAAC: Let's just say I have my own special temperament.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Do you love your wife?

ISAAC: More than any woman in the world.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Don't you ever feel, even for moment, that you're tired of her?

ISAAC: No, Doctor. I thought so at the beginning, and I told myself I should try another woman. I hadn't slept with anyone else since we got married, but I thought for her sake I would, so I could return to her. I went to see a woman I used to be crazy in love with. I was full of confidence. It was a demeaning, humiliating experience. Afterwards, I became completely consumed by fear.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: How many hours a day do you work?

ISAAC: I work a lot, but I'm very healthy. I'm not ill or exhausted. I don't drink and I rarely smoke. I even took hormone shots, which I asked the doctor at the precinct to give me. I told him I was having an affair, and I didn't want to neglect my wife while it was going on. It didn't work.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: It appears there's nothing wrong physiologically. Now, answer me frankly, that's the best way.

ISAAC: Answer what?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Have you ever felt attracted, no matter how slightly, toward men?

ISAAC: Never.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Even when you were young?

ISAAC: As far as I can remember, never.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Are you inclined to do other things with women besides making love?

ISAAC: What do you mean other things?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Roughness, being satisfied with fondling, refraining from completing the act on purpose.

ISAAC: I always complete the act. Roughness turns me off, whether I'm the rough one or someone else.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Then you're more than normal, Mr. Benhas. Don't worry, we'll find out what's causing this. What line of work are you in?

ISAAC: Me? I'm a government employee.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What do you do?

ISAAC: We're not usually open about it. Besides, I don't understand what the relationship is between my work and what I'm suffering from.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Do you work in a security capacity?

ISAAC: Let's say I do. There's no harm in your knowing. I work for the internal division of national security.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: The division that deals with the local population?

ISAAC: Yes, and I hope you are one of those who appreciates the importance of our work.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: How did you start working in security?

ISAAC: How is talking about this going to help?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: It may help.

ISAAC: I've been working at the internal division, which we call the political division, for three years. As for the security forces, I joined that after my military training, which is about ten years ago. My father died when I was a boy.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: How old were you?

ISAAC: Six years old, and a few months.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What did your father do?

ISAAC: He gave music lessons. But I hardly remember him.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Don't you think he's had some influence on you?

ISAAC: Maybe. The love of music. I adore playing the violin. After he died, my mother took care of me, and she still does. She didn't want me to play the violin or to continue my university studies. My boss, who is a friend of the family, suggested I train to join the security forces. That's how I started my service. When he saw I was politically mature, he moved me to the division he heads.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Does that mean you were forced to take this job?

ISAAC: Of course not. When I was young I didn't know what was good for me, but now I love my work and I feel proud of serving my country.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Great ... In your opinion, what are the possible reasons for this disorder you're suffering from? I'm asking you because sometimes the patient has doubts about something and his doubt shows us the way.

ISAAC: I ... don't know.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Think with me. Didn't anything happen to you recently that has to do with sex? A dream, a story, an experience you saw or heard about?

ISAAC: No ...

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Why aren't you looking at me?

ISAAC: I told you, no.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Why did you blink when I asked the question?

ISAAC: It was a coincidence.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: No ... It's not a coincidence. You work in security and you know the meaning of these spontaneous reactions.

ISAAC: That has nothing to do with it.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: How do you know? Tell me about it, even if it seems insignificant.

ISAAC: It has nothing to do with what we're discussing. Besides, it's a professional secret.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: My profession is based on keeping secrets, Mr. Benhas. People come here to tell me their secrets.

ISAAC: Even so ... I'm not supposed to.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: As you wish, but if that's the case, I can't help you.

ISAAC: All right. If you insist, I'll tell you, but I don't understand the relationship between this and ...

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Go on, Mr. Benhas.

ISAAC: There are things that might be misjudged, but they're necessary.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I'm here to treat people, not to judge them.

(The light begins to intensify on the office of Meir. The terrifying mass of ladders is visible)

ISAAC: We deal with scum. Apes that walk on two feet, who do nothing well but lie and commit evil acts.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Who are you talking about?

ISAAC: Arabs, of course.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Okay. Please continue.

ISAAC: About three weeks ago we had to deal very sternly with one of these pieces of scum. Baba wanted me working next to him.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Baba?

ISAAC: That's what we called our boss, Meir. He's a great man.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Are you the one who gave him the name Baba?

ISAAC: I don't know. We all call him Baba.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Is he the old family friend?

ISAAC: Yes. That's him.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Please, go on.

(Isaac rises and walks toward the ladders and begins climbing up toward the office)

ISAAC: There's been a lot of sabotage recently. You know how sensitive we are about anything to do with security. The Arabs we crushed during the wars, like all cowards, have turned to acts of terror and sabotage. Our history's taught us that the best way to deal with evil is to root it out before it has a chance to take hold. It's a difficult job. If it weren't for our vigilance, the security of the Jewish state would be in peril. Do we treat them harshly? It's necessary. It's the only language these barbarians understand. *(Isaac enters*

the office. He approaches Meir and salutes him) Sir, here's the accused's confession you asked me to get.

MEIR: This is a new speed record.

ISAAC: The little shit didn't require a lot of pressure.

MEIR: And this egg he laid, you think it's edible?

ISAAC: He's not exactly a prize catch.

MEIR: What's the difference? Our job's to crush every terrorist and scare the shit out of the rest of them.

ISAAC: But Isma'il's the real catch.

MEIR: They're bringing him in now. We'll do what's needed to wring a confession out of him.

ISAAC: Is there anything we haven't tried on him?

MEIR: I always keep something in reserve to soften them up. I'll need you next to me while I manage this little get-together. (*The doorbell of the office rings. The telephone rings. Meir picks up the phone*) Hello ... yes ... What newspaper articles about the status of detainees? I wouldn't wipe my ass with those. That's your job ... I don't care about international lawyers ... Take 'em on a tour of the Wailing Wall or Old Jerusalem ... Yes, there have been a lot of arrests lately. We didn't liberate Judea and Sumeria to allow terrorism to sprout up in it like weeds ... Please ... Let us do our jobs and let the politicians embellish the press releases. I'm busy now. Goodbye (*He angrily puts the receiver down*) These civilian sissies annoy the shit out of me. (*David enters leading Isma'il, who is in handcuffs*) Uncuff him, David. (*David uncuffs Isma'il, who rubs his wrists. Meir approaches*) Were the cuffs too tight for you?

DAVID: They weren't tight, but anything that rubs his skin hurts because of the burns.

MEIR: Oh, right ... the burns. Those are just little singes from the sparks that flew out of the wires. How many times did we shock him?

DAVID: It was nothing. Half a dozen.

MEIR: (*To Isma'il*) Show me your fingers (*He holds Isma'il's left hand. The fingernails have been removed*) We don't like stubborn guests. You really don't learn, do you? (*He presses the tips of Isma'il's fingers. Isma'il holds in a cry of pain*) You've paid quite a price for your obstinance ... Four wars, four defeats ... Only an idiot doesn't learn after he loses four times. (*Isma'il's pain intensifies*) Stop acting like you're crying ... We haven't touched your right hand yet. We're keeping it in good shape so you can sign your confession.

(*Moshe enters carrying a piece of paper. He appears victorious*)

MOSHE: My hen finally laid its egg, sir ... Names, places, locations of meetings.

MEIR: (*Takes the piece of paper and looks at it. To Isma'il*) You weren't holding out hope, were you? They've forsaken their hero. They've all signed. Would you like to look at their confessions?

(*Isma'il looks at the paper with curiosity and then bursts out laughing*)

MOSHE: (*Grabs him*) You're laughing, you son of a bitch?

MEIR: Leave him alone. Why are you laughing?

ISMA'IL: Did they confess in Hebrew?

MEIR: Do you want us to write our report in Arabic?

ISMA'IL: What is it they signed then?

MEIR: Their confessions.

ISMA'IL: Confessions written in a language they don't understand.

MOSHE: Listen to this son of a bitch. He wants to argue too.

MEIR: Do you think we forged the confessions?

ISMA'IL: I have no idea. That's your business.

MEIR: Don't try to be a wise guy. They've all betrayed you, like turds dropping to the ground. *(To Isaac)* Give him a cigarette.

(Isaac picks up a pack of cigarettes from the table. He offers it to Isma'il, who ignores it)

ISAAC: Take one.

MEIR: Are you afraid you'll lose your purity ... Do what you like. Leave him be, Isaac. We've decided to be nice to you today, but don't let it confuse you. We have almost the entire picture now. All that's left are a few small details, and then your stay with us will come to an end. On the tenth of last month you met a foreign visitor. He gave you a package. You carried it to a place and a person we already know. All we need's the name of the visitor. Did he bring the package in with him or did he prepare its contents here?

ISMA'IL: I didn't meet any visitor, and I didn't carry any package.

MEIR: The person who received the package was shot. He mentioned your name before he died.

ISMA'IL: I told you. I don't know him.

MEIR: We have a number of confessions that confirm you had a relationship with him.

ISMA'IL: Even so, I don't know him.

MEIR: This obstinance saddens me. You're not helping yourself. Don't you miss your home? Your wife? I believe you just got married.

MOSHE: Just three months ago.

MEIR: You're still on your honeymoon. Why are you throwing away your happiness for nothing? Wouldn't you like to have a child? Who knows, she may be pregnant. In all sincerity, I advise you to confess.

ISMA'IL: I told you everything I know.

MEIR: Did you hear that, Isaac? He told us everything he knows. *(To David)* Call Gideon in. *(David walks to the door to the waiting room. To Isma'il)* Are you sure you have nothing to tell us?

ISMA'IL: I told you what I know.

MEIR: Then let's get ready for a little family get-together.

(Gideon enters from the waiting room, pushing Dalal, who is shackled, in front of him)

GIDEON: Here's the bride, sir.

(Isma'il appears stunned. Dalal has a dazed look on her face)

ISMA'IL: God help us.

DALAL: *(Whispering to Isma'il)* Isma'il, here we meet.

ISMA'IL: Forgive me, Dalal.

MEIR: Don't you want to hug your bride? I adore seeing love scenes.

ISMA'IL: She has nothing to do with this. Torture me as much as you like. Do whatever you want, but leave her out of this hell.

MEIR: If you love her that much, then save her.

DALAL: Al-Fari'a said, "Don't be afraid. You're stronger than they are."

MEIR: *(To Isma'il)* Have you told us everything you know?

DALAL: And she said, "Hold your head up high. And if they give you any trouble spit in their faces."

ISMA'IL: I have nothing to tell you.

MEIR: Let the wedding celebration begin.

(David and Moshe drag Isma'il toward the inner room. Gideon holds Dalal by the buttocks and pushes her. They all walk toward the inner room)

GIDEON: Come along you who are blessed with good things in such abundance *(Dalal spits on him)* Ah, that's the way I want you, wild. I want my bride, guys. My erection's as high as Mount Gilad.

ISMA'IL: Dogs ... dogs.

(The word "dogs" in several different tones until it becomes almost like a death rattle. They all disappear into the inside room. Meir and Isaac remain in the office)

MEIR: Let's see if this helps untie his tongue. Nothing shakes a man as much as what touches his manhood. And these animals place all their pride in the vaginas of their wives.

ISAAC: What if he doesn't talk?

MEIR: He'll talk. This method's more effective than electric shock. Why don't you draw your sword and start the celebration?

ISAAC: Let Gideon go first.

MEIR: I was hoping you'd go first. But that's okay, you can host the party with me. *(He puts his arm around Isaac and they walk toward the room)* I don't know if you'll understand, but this sort of party gives me a rush that's almost religious. Yes, that's it, a religious rush. *(Meir goes into the inner room. Isaac goes back to Doctor's office. The light begins to fade on Meir's office)*

ISAAC: *(Agitated, to Doctor Menuhin)* And that's how the party went until it ended.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: *(Looking down)* Did the man talk?

ISAAC: He had a heart attack and collapsed before he could say anything. We took him and his wife to the hospital, but he's coming back to the station.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What did you do at the party?

ISAAC: Why's that important?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Did you take part in the rape?

ISAAC: No.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Why?

ISAAC: Those Arab women ... Who knows ... She might've given me some sort of disease.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What did you do then?

ISAAC: (*Hesitantly*) We smashed his balls. That's what we do. I put my foot between his thighs and pushed hard just like Baba taught us. Gideon was already aroused.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What about you? Were you aroused?

ISAAC: At the beginning when I was watching Gideon dominate her ... but then it suddenly stopped.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: You were satisfied just watching?

ISAAC: This is meaningless.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Please, go on, we're close.

ISAAC: They took turns with her. There was screaming and curses and loud music. In situations like this, we use music. I could feel my chest contracting. I really don't see the point of all these details.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: (*Sternly*) Go on.

ISAAC: These things are trivial.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I told you to go on.

ISAAC: Suddenly I could feel my chest contracting. Then my anxiety turned into rage. So I took out a razor and went toward her. You know, Arab women, they shave their public hair. Her vagina was smooth and smeared with fluid from the others. I felt like I had a fever. I started cutting her flesh down there. I cut her vagina and breasts and then Meir stopped me. Sweat was pouring out of me. They were both unconscious.

(A long, leaden silence. Isaac is anxious and exhausted)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Do you regret what you did?

ISAAC: Regret what? It was part of my job.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Weren't you repulsed by what your colleagues were doing?

ISAAC: Not a bit. I blame myself for not being as instinctive and rough as Gideon. I was afraid Baba would think I wasn't as tough as he'd hoped.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: The case is very clear, Mr. Benhas.

ISAAC: Clear?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: You say you don't regret it and you weren't disgusted.

ISAAC: There's nothing to regret or be disgusted by. It was an insignificant event that happens every day at work. These saboteurs are the basest sort of criminals.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I wish you felt some remorse.

ISAAC: I don't understand.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: You're showing your remorse unconsciously, through your illness. You're punishing yourself for what you did with the woman and her husband. Maybe this punishment started while you were still at the party.

ISAAC: Listen, Doctor, I've read a little bit about these things and I'm sorry to tell you, they don't make any sense.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Pay attention, Mr. Benhas. There's a voice inside you that's saying "you shouldn't have done this even if it was something your job required." In order for you to be healed, you must either consciously admit that you committed a horrible crime that cannot be justified or you must be absolutely convinced that these acts are just and worthy of respect. In his heart of hearts, no one can possibly be convinced of the latter.

ISAAC: I'm convinced that my job is just. If your analysis is true, that means my nerves are still betraying me or I haven't yet reached the level of maturity one needs for the job.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Yes, Mr. Benhas. Part of our Zionist upbringing is constantly teaching us to hate. But those who raise us don't consider that there's a limit beyond which, psychologically, human beings cannot go. Absolute hatred is the threshold to a realm in which everything can be justified and anything that threatens one's stability can simply be shut out. But who can give himself over to absolute hatred and not fall to pieces?

ISAAC: My colleagues at work do not suffer from anything. I will also learn how to overcome my weakness.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: How do you know your colleagues do not suffer from any ailment? They may not have a conscience that torments them, but they're no healthier than you are.

ISAAC: There is one person at least who has no doubts.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Your boss?

ISAAC: Yes.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Maybe he has insomnia or stomach aches.

ISAAC: He suffers from nothing. All of this psychiatric analysis is nonsense.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I didn't force you to come here.

ISAAC: I want to be cured.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What's happened cannot be repaired. You cannot bring back that woman's dignity or return to that man his manhood, which is why you've destroyed your own manhood. It's ironic but true. The means of healing is hidden in your illness. It may be for your own benefit ... but ...

ISAAC: Go on.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Nothing ... I can't continue treating your case. You should've paid a heavy price for what you did. In order to stop paying in this way you must pay in another way that is no less serious.

ISAAC: Pay what?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I don't know. It would require a huge change. You might need to leave your job or look for atonement, which will be very difficult to find. You're no longer a young man, and I doubt you're willing to destroy your career and an important part of who you are. No, I can't allow you to visit me again with no purpose.

ISAAC: You're driving me away because I disgust you, but have you ever asked yourself where this disgust comes from? Come on, admit it. You're being argumentative with me and making my job seem vile so you can try to plant doubt in me. It's the position of those sissies who can never stop whining. If we're victorious, they whine. If we liberate our land, they get frightened. In the end they have nothing to offer the state of Israel except mistrust and suspicion. Of course you're not a Zionist, yet you live in Israel and all you've done is undermine the right of Israel to flourish.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Listen, Mr. Benhas, don't think I'm afraid of expressing my opinion. My loyalty belongs to justice, not to the law. Nothing you do has anything to do with justice. There's no justice in annexing land, there's no justice in the narrow-minded Zionism on which Israel was founded. I'm one of those sissies like Moshe Menuhin, Julius Cohen, Einstein and Deutscher. We take pride in our skepticism because it's protected us from the spiritual misery into which our miraculous state is sinking. No, I can't condone what you're doing no matter what the justification is. You can turn me in or take whatever measures you want against me.

ISAAC: I knew this was what you were thinking. How much should I pay for this visit?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Nothing this time ... Goodbye.

(Isaac exits. A period of silence. The Doctor is sad and exhausted)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: And the Lord said, "Write it down: this is an impotent man who shall not thrive during his days, and neither shall his progeny prosper". He came requesting my aid, but I could not offer it. When he told me what he'd done, I felt sick, as if I were an accomplice. He dragged me into it to force me to be a witness to our history. I couldn't hide behind the mask of my profession. What he did was not an individual crime that concerned only him, but something that concerns morality itself. It was an incident that affects all our histories: patients and doctors, strong men and sissies. No, I couldn't hide behind the mask of the cold, impartial clinician. Well ... Do not enter a house where people are feasting if you do not plan to sup with them.

(Lights fade on the Doctor's office)

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter Three

(Muhammad appears, dazed and confused. In the corner there is a man with a mask on his face. The scene should give the impression that Muhammad is talking to himself)

MASKED MAN: Do you love your wife so much?

MUHAMMAD: I didn't know life could be so sweet until I met her.

MASKED MAN: Her embrace must be luscious.

MUHAMMAD: How should I say it? No, I'm not embarrassed. It is luscious.

MASKED MAN: And warm.

MUHAMMAD: Yes, it's warm. In her embrace I've come to know true warmth and serenity.

MASKED MAN: You were miserable and lost.

MUHAMMAD: She was the miraculous balm. Her affection cured my misery and showed me the way.

MASKED MAN: An affection with motherly love.

MUHAMMAD: She probably is like my mother. My real mother's affection dried up. My father pushed her toward her death. She went along with him, frail and without resistance. She was a stranger among us.

MASKED MAN: You were a stranger among them as well.

MUHAMMAD: Yes ... I felt like an outcast or an orphan. When he was there, he made me feel like a cowering jackass. When he was away a devilish force would push me to disobey his wishes. Insubordination added to my status as an outcast. It was my way to try to find balance. When he was killed in al-Wahdat Camp I was surprised I felt a horrible emptiness. I thought this emptiness is the freedom I am seeking, but I was mistaken. While I was contemplating my new situation, his ghost suddenly appeared to me, and it didn't depart until I met my wife.

MASKED MAN: Then what are you waiting for?

MUHAMMAD: Waiting for?

MASKED MAN: Why don't you bring her here?

MUHAMMAD: They didn't allow me to.

MASKED MAN: You know their approval isn't that hard to obtain. Since she's the happiness that protects you from anxiety and ghosts, no price is too high to bring her back.

MUHAMMAD: They suggested I work there, so I got a job at a construction site in Tel Aviv. My sister, who's raising my child, cut all ties with me over it, but I wouldn't back down.

MASKED MAN: You were smart to do what you did. Now you can do even better by performing a small favor, for which you'll receive the approval you seek.

MUHAMMAD: Is it really a small favor?

MASKED MAN: You're hesitating.

MUHAMMAD: I don't know ... In spite of everything ...

MASKED MAN: You are hesitating. I don't think you love her as much as you say.

MUHAMMAD: That's an undeniable truth.

MASKED MAN: Listen to me. Do you think these dangerous games your brother and his friends are playing can lead to anything?

MUHAMMAD: My brother. I don't know. Maybe not. These kinds of things don't concern me.

MASKED MAN: You don't have to be concerned about them. Just watch them.

MUHAMMAD: Watch them?

MASKED MAN: We shouldn't allow them to destroy themselves.

MUHAMMAD: Watch them.

MASKED MAN: That's all.

MUHAMMAD: Watch them.

MASKED MAN: You're shivering.

MUHAMMAD: Watch them.

MASKED MAN: Her embrace will warm and heal you.

MUHAMMAD: I'm shivering.

MASKED MAN: This offer probably came as a surprise to you. The shiver will disappear. You'll receive the approval.

MUHAMMAD: It's like every bone in me is shivering. Where are you, Siham? Come here, warm me, no ... wait. The price is too high. Don't call out to me. I'm saying the price is too high.

MASKED MAN: Take your time. Think about it.

MUHAMMAD: Yes ... I will think about it. She's the only sweet thing in my life. But it's too high a price, Siham. Too high.

(Lights fade)

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter Four

(Light shines on Dalal's room. Al-Fari'a appears first, then Dalal, who looks dazed)

AL-FARI'A: When they let Dalal out, I realized the horror of what had happened to her. They'd taken away her youth, forced her to age prematurely. She was calm and quiet. There was a terrifying gravity about her, as if she'd become a land mine that was set to explode. *(Light continues to show Dalal in her dazed condition)* Speak to me, Dalal. What have they done to you? *(Silence)*

DALAL: Where's the baby?

AL-FARI'A: He's asleep.

DALAL: I wish he'd stayed in the womb and not come out into the darkness.

AL-FARI'A: Speak to me. Just let it all out. *(Pause)* What did they want from you? What did they ask? *(Pause)*

DALAL: The smell.

AL-FARI'A: What smell?

DALAL: One that can't be masked by the perfumes of Egypt and Damascus. Nor washed away by the Euphrates and the Jordan River.

AL-FARI'A: Shall I prepare a bath for you? *(Pause)* You must tell me. Did you find out anything about Isma'il?

DALAL: The vase is shattered. It can never be made whole.

AL-FARI'A: Did something happen to him?

DALAL: A person can't remove his skin as he does a dirty shirt.

AL-FARI'A: What happened? (*Pause. The light moves smoothly about*) Her disjointed phrases and her calm frightened me. I didn't realize that behind this façade of composure she was feeling the pains of labor.

DALAL: This land is confining, my cousin.

AL-FARI'A: It's our land.

DALAL: It's our land in which we don't even own our bodies.

AL-FARI'A: I know what you went through was terrible.

DALAL: The land's not big enough for them and us.

AL-FARI'A: This land is blessed. Had it not been invaded it would've remained vast and generous.

DALAL: As long as they're here, life will be as tight as a grave. It's either them or us.

AL-FARI'A: The only reason there's hostility between us and the Jews is Zionism.

DALAL: And these people who attack, torture and desecrate everything? Who are they? Did you split open their chests and look to see what's in their hearts? No, it's either them or us.

AL-FARI'A: That way of seeing the world can turn against us too.

DALAL: I despise these eloquent turns of phrase.

AL-FARI'A: We're freedom fighters, Dalal, not murderers. Our cause is just. Our aim is not to kill people, it's to destroy Zionism.

DALAL: Is Israel one thing and Zionism another? Listen, cousin, when I was in my parents' house I didn't know a thing about Israel. My father lived in a

shell made of money and merchandise. He was terrified of the riff-raff and of revolution, and he hardly even mentioned Israel. Even the '67 war didn't move him. He didn't hide his pleasure at the misfortune of 'Abd al-Nasir and his allies. When I married, my husband felt sorry for me and he too barely talked about Israel. Now, however, I know Israel better than my own body. Did you know it has a smell?

AL-FARI'A: I never thought about it.

DALAL: A horrific smell that fills my nose, my entrails, my pores. Israel has stamped its brand upon me, and nothing will wash it away but death. What I know now is enough, cousin. I'm ready. I want to join the resistance.

AL-FARI'A: Slow down a little.

DALAL: Why should I slow down?

AL-FARI'A: Have you thought it through?

DALAL: Completely.

AL-FARI'A: I'd always hoped you'd do this. But let's begin with simple tasks.

DALAL: No ... When you've brushed up against death, only huge tasks matter. I'm telling you. They have to accept me along with my resentment and despair.

AL-FARI'A: I don't want you to be driven by despair.

DALAL: It's the source of my strength. This enemy can only be hurt by someone filled with hate and hopelessness.

AL-FARI'A: What about Isma'il?

DALAL: We will search for each other until the end of time, trying, with each turn of the season, to pick up the shards of our shattered bodies and bring them back to life. When one's body has been smashed to pieces, each season brings with it a new destination.

(Lighting shifts from Dalal and focuses on Al-Fari'a)

AL-FARI‘A: And so she joined us, a bomb preparing to go off, carrying in her suitcase her despair. Coming and going, with a single phrase ringing in her ears like the bells of the Church of the Resurrection: it's them or us.

(Lights fade)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Four

(Doctor Menuhin is in a half-lit corner. Light focuses more brightly on the office of Meir. Isaac and Meir are in the office)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: They have turned my vineyard into a wasteland that cries out to me. The land has been destroyed because no one will ponder what's in his heart.

(The office is fully lit. Meir speaks into the phone)

MEIR: Bring him right in. *(He puts down the receiver)* I don't want to put this off until tomorrow.

ISAAC: I wonder what he'll do now.

MEIR: He'll shit out what he knows. It's the only way.

ISAAC: He doesn't have anything else we need.

MEIR: He still has one thing that's important. And I'm not talking about information. We have more than enough for security purposes. But his pride's another matter. We can't allow these killers to flaunt their arrogance in our faces. Pride's the serpent's egg we need to smash before it hatches.

ISAAC: I don't think he'll say anything.

MEIR: You'll make him wail until he coughs up what he knows. You're going to be the host of the party.

ISAAC: I was ...

MEIR: Are you sick? What's the matter with you?

ISAAC: Nothing.

(Phone rings. Meir lifts the receiver)

MEIR: Hello ... Yes, doctor. Worried about his heart? These terrorists don't have hearts ... Don't worry ... I'll take responsibility *(He puts down the receiver. To Isaac)* How's your mother?

ISAAC: Fine. She sends her best.

MEIR: I hope she's proud of us.

ISAAC: She's always singing your praises, sir.

(Moshe and David enter, dragging Isma'il with them. He seems barely able to walk. He has a blank, expressionless look on his face. Moshe approaches him to unshackle him)

MEIR: *(Approaching)* Don't uncuff him.

DAVID: *(Whispering)* He's still weak. I don't think he can take shocks with water.

MEIR: *(To Isma'il)* They must've spoiled you at the hospital. *(To the others)* Look, doesn't his complexion look healthy. I think he's back to his senses. *(To Isma'il)* We didn't mean to go quite this far. I told you it was stupid to be stubborn, but you wouldn't listen. Anyway, that's all in the past. You're now acquainted with some of our arts, but you can spare yourself learning about the rest. Come on ... show us how bright you are. *(Isma'il remains silent)* Don't kid yourself ... Don't compound your stupidity. Are you going to talk or not?

ISMA'IL: You know what the sharpest thought is on the minds of Palestinians?

MEIR: Palestinians? There's no such thing as Palestinians.

ISMA'IL: Even so, some Palestinians are sharpening their wits, trying to imagine a dignified state that's big enough for both of us, in which everyone has

freedom and equal rights. They're dreaming that one day you'll demolish this civilized police state of yours and acknowledge the rights guaranteed by citizenship, not power, and we can work together so our humanity will flourish. See the kind of delusions we have.

MEIR: What's this stream of shit? Who asked you to plan the future of our country?

ISMA'IL: Your country?

MEIR: Our country, with its ever-expanding borders.

ISMA'IL: And my country? Where's it?

MEIR: How would I know? Go ask the castrated Arabs.

ISMA'IL: This is my homeland, mister. We were born here. So were our parents and grandparents. We've been woven into it for centuries with bonds and covenants. We've tamed it and been tamed by it. We've placed our inscription upon one another. It nourishes our bodies in life, and we nourish it with our bodies in death. Go up to Galilee, go down to Haifa, contemplate the walls of 'Acca, sit in the shade of the olive trees of al-Khalil. Our features are inscribed everywhere, and everywhere speaks of our history. Take any ancient olive tree, strip its bark away and you'll find the sweat of my fathers and their fathers running through its veins. We've kneaded ourselves like dough into this earth, air and water for centuries with the fermentation of a prosperous people filled with joy and sorrow. It's through this long process that countries take shape. This is my homeland, mister. This place is the placenta to my past. History must be a mad thief to grant sovereignty to imperialists who justify their position with a myth and enforce it with tanks.

MEIR: Are you finished? (*To Moshe and David*) Let's give him a hand! See how terrorists think!

MOSHE: I'll shove your olive trees and the bones of your grandfather up your ass.

MEIR: Calm down, Moshe! (*To Isma'il*) Are you calling God's covenant and his divine promise an imperialist project? We're here because God promised us this land, gave it to us and promised all our enemies would fall dazed before

us. Not one word will be dropped from that which God has spoken to the people of Israel.

ISMA'IL: What a terrifying God who chooses racists to be his people, who is enamored with fighting over land, who finds pleasure in seeing people massacred. No, God Almighty is innocent of this injustice and of being an accomplice to rapists and murderers.

MOSHE: (*Slaps Isma'il*) What do you know about God, you pagan!

MEIR: It's useless. This eloquent speech is the rant of a terrorist.

ISMA'IL: You're right, it's useless. Why don't you let me tell my comrades we're chasing a mirage? There's nothing in front of us. We're looking at nothing but war followed by more wars. Rivers of blood will be shed before this struggle is settled.

MEIR: You want another war? The struggle's already been settled, you idiot.

ISMA'IL: No, sir, it hasn't been settled yet.

MEIR: (*To Moshe and David*) Take him and prove to him that the struggle's been settled. Come on, Isaac. You're in charge of this operation. Don't let up until he confesses.

(Moshe and David push Isma'il into the inner room. Isaac and Meir follow them. The office is now empty. Lights up on Doctor Menuhin)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: They treat the wound of the daughter of my people, saying, "peace, peace," but there is no peace. Woe unto me for being so crushed. The blow I received is one for which there is no cure. I heard that the screaming from that room went on all night. And when the dawn broke, it did so stumbling and ashamed. Suddenly there was absolute silence, and the door opened.

(Lights go up in the office. Meir enters from the inner room, looking gloomy. Moshe and David follow him, pulling Isaac along. Meir picks up the phone)

MEIR: (*To Moshe*) Splash some water on him, Moshe.

DAVID: Isaac, Isaac.

MOSHE: (*Splashes water*) Wake up, mama's little girl.

MEIR: I'm not having any of that.

MOSHE: He suddenly went pale and collapsed like a young maiden.

MEIR: I said, I'm not having any of that. When I put my trust in somebody, I know what I'm doing. Understood?

MOSHE: Yes, sir.

MEIR: (*Into phone*) Doctor, come up quickly. Yes ... Yes ... The detainee. His heart stopped. Don't argue. Come up here. (*He puts down the receiver. Isaac wakes up. He is pale and looks exhausted*)

ISAAC: What happened?

MEIR: (*To David and Moshe*) Go and arrange everything with the doctor. (*They exit*) What happened to you? You embarrassed me.

ISAAC: But he actually died.

MEIR: Yes, he actually died. And they're better off dead than alive. What happened to you? I'm on the verge of disowning you. Is this how I raised you? The host of the party, and you turn white and faint like a woman. How humiliating.

ISAAC: I'm sorry. I'm exhausted. I must be ill.

MEIR: I'll give you sick leave, but you better be fully recovered when you come back.

ISAAC: Yes, sir.

MEIR: Give my regards to your mother.

(*Lights slowly fade*)

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter Five

(In the room of Dalal. The baby is stretched out on a sofa. Al-Fari'a lifts a tile, exposing a hole in the ground.)

AL-FARI'A: Listen carefully, Wa'd. The Crusaders occupied Jerusalem. They founded kingdoms and fortresses and believed they had everything under control. But the leader Salah al-Din, the Ayyubid, was making preparations for war, gathering cavalry from Egypt and Damascus, and turned the tables on them. When the two armies met at Hittin, he crushed the Crusaders.

(Dalal enters. Her belly is round. She appears to be in the last months of pregnancy) Are you sure no one followed you?

DALAL: Yes. The road was empty.

AL-FARI'A: What about Muhammad? Did he see you?

DALAL: I don't think so. I didn't see him.

AL-FARI'A: It's better that way.

DALAL: Why?

AL-FARI'A: Nothing. It's better if he stays away from us. Hurry up, put down your load. The hiding place is ready.

(Dalal raises the hem of her dress. A bundle appears tied to her belly. Al-Fari'a helps her untie it)

AL-FARI'A: I was hoping your first pregnancy would be less dangerous.

DALAL: The men are expecting raids at any moment.

AL-FARI'A: Weren't you afraid?

DALAL: I was overcome by a variety of violent feelings. Fear wasn't one of them. When I put the bundle on, my belly became heavy. I felt like a seed was blooming inside my womb, a seed that looked like a peach, but more beautiful. Then "Isma'il" curled up inside me. When I walked with my pregnant

belly, my steps were firm and the ground felt gentle and solid. I imagined myself exploding and the whole place blown to bits. It was as if my body was being cleansed, fluttering like a clear butterfly. As I exploded, I'd feel a shiver, a hidden pleasure flowing through my veins that made me ashamed.

(They arrange the long bundles inside the hole in the floor)

AL-FARI'A: Don't be ashamed of your pleasure. Imagine you're floating in water. Relax and enjoy it.

DALAL: You've had the feeling yourself?

AL-FARI'A: During the nights of anxiety and loneliness, 'Umar would visit me. 'Umar who breathes, embraces, perspires. How can I explain it to you? Imagination for us is an enchanted realm. We have to hone it constantly to make our dreams concrete. The 'Umar who visits me is real and alive. Our pleasure is tangible. So is our burden. We can feel the future coming into being like a mason feels the wall rising above him in his hands.

DALAL: I meant another form of pleasure. The kind that gushes out of me as I imagine the sticks of dynamite pressing against my navel, blowing me apart, scattering me into fire and destruction. Death intermingles with desire. Ecstasy with purity. Exploding is a shudder, a kind of coming.

AL-FARI'A: What you're overcome by is revenge, not the struggle for a free and beautiful country.

DALAL: A free and beautiful country is an obscure dream. Revenge is clear and simple. Had each of us nourished his reasons for revenge and resolved to take it, we wouldn't be in this horrific situation.

AL-FARI'A: We can't turn the cause of a people into individual acts of revenge.

DALAL: An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. That's the law. If we're not burning with the lust for revenge, we'll go on bleeding and groaning in agony.

AL-FARI'A: I love the simple, straightforward way you imagine things.

DALAL: I'm guided by my body.

AL-FARI'A: How I wish that guide was good enough.

(There is a subtle noise near the door. Spontaneously Dalal sits on top of the hole and covers it with her dress. Al-Fari'a rises carefully. She listens briefly, then opens the door quickly. Muhammad stands at the door, looking confused)

AL-FARI'A: *(Angrily)* What are you doing here?

MUHAMMAD: *(Stammering)* Nothing ... I want ...

AL-FARI'A: What do you want?

MUHAMMAD: To see the baby ... Yes ... I want to see the baby.

AL-FARI'A: Dispense with the lies. Tell me what you want.

MUHAMMAD: Don't yell in my face.

AL-FARI'A: Are you spying on us?

MUHAMMAD: *(Stunned)* What?

AL-FARI'A: Tell me. Are you spying on us?

MUHAMMAD: Sister ...

AL-FARI'A: I swear on brotherhood, sisterhood, on every tie that binds us as a family, if what I'm thinking is true ...

MUHAMMAD: Sister, I need you.

AL-FARI'A: Don't beat around the bush. What do you want?

MUHAMMAD: I'm alone. I'm lost.

AL-FARI'A: I know. What are you doing here?

MUHAMMAD: Sister, please. Don't make things more difficult than they already are. Everything one does requires energy, and I don't have any. I wasn't able

to be noble, and I couldn't be base. Being base requires an enormous inner strength.

AL-FARI'A: What are you babbling about?

MUHAMMAD: I'm confused. I need you.

AL-FARI'A: What were you doing?

MUHAMMAD: Forget it. I don't want your help. I've always been able to do without you.

AL-FARI'A: Where are you going?

MUHAMMAD: To Hell. (*He exits*)

DALAL: Do you think ...

AL-FARI'A: I don't know ... He's desperate ... His bitterness scares me. Let's change the hiding place.

(Lights fade)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Five

(Lights up on a room in Gideon's house. Gideon is half-naked. Rachel moves about unkempt on the floor. Through her torn clothes, one can see parts of her naked body)

RACHEL: My God, what depths have we sunk to? How could you have done this?

GIDEON: Sorry about the clothes. We can get them fixed.

RACHEL: You low-life. That's what you're sorry for? What about me?

GIDEON: If you didn't get enough, we can do it again.

RACHEL: You're really vile, aren't you?

GIDEON: If you keep cursing, I won't be able to control myself. You're appetizing when you're angry. (*He fondles her*) And luscious when you resist.

RACHEL: Don't touch me. My God, how could you have done this?

GIDEON: Don't feign innocence with me. You knew very well what I wanted from you.

RACHEL: It never occurred to me you'd get it this way.

GIDEON: This way or that. What's the difference? I admit, though, I prefer it rough.

RACHEL: Rough? You assaulted me.

GIDEON: I'm not one of those men who melts like a piece of butter. You can get as much butter as you want at home.

RACHEL: I'm not interested in what kind of man you are. I don't even think you are a man. You raped me.

GIDEON: Don't forget, you came here of your own free will.

RACHEL: I came because you promised me friendship, and I needed the help of a friend.

GIDEON: It was my way of winning your affection.

RACHEL: Why don't you say it was your way to lure me here, to deceive me? And who is it you were luring? I'm your friend's wife.

GIDEON: Who says your husband's my friend? I don't have friends. My only friend is power. I'm a Tzabar, a Jew who was born here. I learned that real men have no friends and trust no one.

RACHEL: What about your song and dance about being madly in love? Your feelings with no words to express them?

GIDEON: For me, love is desire and desire is raw.

RACHEL: My God, how did I get tangled up in this web of lies? How did I descend to this level?

GIDEON: Listen, my darling, you were neither entangled nor deceived. You knew exactly what you were getting into. Maybe you didn't like the way it happened, but as far as I'm concerned that's what love is: violence and control.

RACHEL: Why don't you say it? It was rape.

GIDEON: When we were children we were taught to steer clear of empathy and compassion, to just take whatever it was we wanted. Yes, it was rape, and the more brutal I become the more respect I gain from Baba.

RACHEL: Baba?

GIDEON: Our boss, Mr. Meir.

RACHEL: And do you tell Mr. Meir about your conquests?

GIDEON: There's no need to tell him. He can see them for himself. We have lots of fun down at the station.

RACHEL: The two of you do these sorts of things together?

GIDEON: We all do. Didn't Isaac tell you about our parties?

RACHEL: He doesn't talk to me about work. Does he participate too?

GIDEON: What do you think? He hasn't got my physique. There's something weak and feminine about him. A couple of days ago he blacked out like ladies do. I'm sure a woman like you can't be satisfied by him.

RACHEL: What sort of parties are these? Rape parties?

GIDEON: Rape and other things.

RACHEL: Good God ... what are you talking about?

GIDEON: That's our job. We deal with creatures who should be exterminated, but you can't because we have to take international opinion into consideration. But we're not going to allow Israel's security to be undermined, which is why we have to break their bones so they reveal just how wicked their motives are.

RACHEL: Doesn't that take its toll on you?

GIDEON: No, I enjoy it. A man like me who was raised to be self-sufficient and whose only friend was power can't help but enjoy it.

RACHEL: So your job is actually to torture ...

GIDEON: It's the only language terrorists understand.

RACHEL: You use the sort of methods one reads about in books?

GIDEON: The tools we use are more up-to-date than anything in a book. We have instruments we haven't even tried yet. But as Baba says, there's nothing more effective than crushing someone's balls or spreading a woman's thighs in front of her husband.

RACHEL: And Isaac participates in all this?

GIDEON: Of course. But he has a very obvious weakness. Recently we brought in the wife of one of the detainees and had a wild party, but Isaac tried to outdo himself in cruelty. He took a razorblade and began cutting her breasts and pubic area. He sliced the nipple off her left breast. (*He approaches her. As he speaks he becomes more excited*) His face turned red, his eyes started flashing in desperation. The music was loud, the blood flowing along the curves of her body. He held it, repulsed and terrified, like a dark red cherry in his fingers, then tossed it to the floor.

RACHEL: (*Frightened*) Don't touch me.

GIDEON: Your fear's exciting. Your anger's exciting. Your ferocity is exciting.

RACHEL: Don't touch me. Stay away from me. Animals, you're animals. Good God, what level have we descended to?

(He overpowers her and begins to rape her again. Lights fade)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Six

(The living room in the Benhas house. Isaac appears absent-minded. His Mother reads a magazine. She reaches out automatically and turns on the transistor radio. The sound of an announcer is heard. She adjusts the sound)

ANNOUNCER: Israeli Air Force planes bombed the posts of saboteurs in southern Lebanon. The pilots reported that they achieved direct hits on the targets. The chief military officer issued an order to close the University of Birzeit because of disturbances that took place in areas ...

ISAAC: *(Muttering)* Please, turn it off. *(The Mother, appearing annoyed, turns it off)* Rachel's late.

MOTHER: She likes to hang out in the market.

ISAAC: Mother, try not to be so hard on her.

MOTHER: She needs to go back to work.

ISAAC: She can't leave the baby.

MOTHER: The baby is my responsibility. I do everything for him. I want to raise him as he should be raised.

ISAAC: What about his mother? Doesn't she have the right to raise him too?

MOTHER: She doesn't have the experience. A few days ago I heard her cooing to the baby, telling him a silly story: The plum who married the sugar, and the sugar who bore him a sweet baby. And nonsense like that. I, at least, have raised you, and when I look at you I feel proud.

ISAAC: I'm not sure what I am deserves pride.

MOTHER: I forbid you to say that. Don't ever mistake humility for a virtue.

ISAAC: Mother, I wish you'd talk to me about my father.

MOTHER: What's the matter with you, son? I'm concerned about the way you've been behaving lately.

ISAAC: Tell me about my father.

MOTHER: Let the dead rest in their graves.

ISAAC: You've always avoided talking about him. Sometimes I feel like Joseph Benhas never existed, that he's just one of those fleeting images from childhood.

MOTHER: It's better that way because he could never have been a model for his son.

ISAAC: Was he that bad? I remember a man with a gentle expression playing the violin. The evening would be full of colors with music flowing between them like a stream of honey.

MOTHER: Yes ... playing the violin, that's what he did well. While other men trained to use weapons and prepared for the country's future, he remained a weakling filled with bitterness.

ISAAC: Bitter about what?

MOTHER: How should I know. Maybe because he agreed to come here with me, or because he couldn't find a place for himself in the society that was being created.

ISAAC: Didn't he want to return to the land of Israel?

MOTHER: He was disturbed. He didn't share my zeal for Zionism, though he didn't disparage it like the eggheads and communists. I thought if I gave him a little push, he'd get over his hesitation. When he proposed, I suggested we emigrate after we got married and build our life here. He acted as if it hardly mattered and agreed.

ISAAC: Did you love him?

MOTHER: Are you interrogating me?

ISAAC: I want to know. Tell me.

MOTHER: I may have at the beginning. Or, rather, I was deceived by him. I was attracted to his independence, his artistic sensibility. He seemed promising, but after we arrived here I discovered that was all a shell with which he hid his nihilism.

ISAAC: I remember him sitting on the floor surrounded by pieces of colored paper. He was making a kite with a marvelous tail.

MOTHER: Yes. He was enamored with trifles, frivolous things.

ISAAC: I remember the kite, how happy I was with it.

MOTHER: If I'd left it up to him, he would've ruined you. I was so worried about you.

ISAAC: What was life like when you first immigrated here?

MOTHER: All we brought with us was the violin and a trunk full of clothes and books. When we arrived here in the land of Israel, I was like a person overcome with fever, burning with zeal, full of fervor. He, on the other hand, was listless. He couldn't stop complaining. We lived on a kibbutz, and life seemed so full of possibility. I immersed myself in it. I was full of joy and tenacity. But your father remained distant. He couldn't master any job. Then his complaining increased until it turned into a kind of bitter hostility. The gap between us became larger every day. He knew he was losing me forever. That may have also been another reason he turned hostile.

ISAAC: What was he hostile about?

MOTHER: About everything we believed in, about Zionism, immigration, the nation-state.

ISAAC: He expressed those feelings to you privately?

MOTHER: No, he was blatant about it. He arrogantly pronounced them in public. There was a period he was passionate about defending Arabs. He used to taunt us, try to make our lives miserable. He'd collect the statements of disturbed Jews like him and shove them in our faces. He'd say this person said

this, and that person said that. I'd turn red with humiliation and become furious. One day he called us a bureau of international Jewish capitalism. Meir grabbed him by the collar and threatened him and told him he'd better take it back. He ate his words and shut up. In spite of the noise he made, your father was a coward.

ISAAC: Wasn't Mr. Meir his friend?

MOTHER: Meir his friend? He despised him. He considered your father a threat to our cause. I was the only reason he didn't take measures against him.

ISAAC: Did he really die of cirrhosis of the liver?

MOTHER: That's what the doctor said. He had all kinds of things wrong with him, but it was bitterness that killed him.

ISAAC: Was he sick for long?

MOTHER: No, not long. He was in bed for a day and died that night. It was a suitable and satisfying end.

ISAAC: For whom, you? Or Mr. Meir?

MOTHER: For everyone. Principally you.

ISAAC: Me?

MOTHER: Of course. He was all set to raise you as a nihilist too. He was against sending you to the kindergarten at the kibbutz. He tried to keep you confined at home so he could transfer his toxic ideas to you. How I struggled to keep you away from him. How frightened I was when you began to learn to play the violin. Had it not been for Meir, I'd never have borne the anguish your father caused me.

ISAAC: Sometimes I think Meir is my real father.

MOTHER: Listen, Isaac, there's no need for me to be coy with you. You sprang from the loins of Joseph Benhas, but I'd have loved it from the bottom of my heart if they'd been the loins of Meir. Besides, if the father's the one who raises the child, helps build his character and create his destiny, then Meir is

your real father. He shared the responsibility of raising you with me. He taught me how to mold your life and shape your destiny.

ISAAC: Why didn't the two of you marry after my father died?

MOTHER: Because what's between us is more sublime than any marriage could be.

ISAAC: You preferred a free relationship without the obligations of a contract?

MOTHER: Perhaps you have a right to know now. There's nothing remotely similar to our relationship, Isaac. I met him a short time after we moved into the kibbutz. Your father and I were at a meeting of the movement, and a young man, a new immigrant, rose before us. His bearing and posture were regal. It was an extraordinary moment. There in front of me was the progeny of David arising from the dead, shrouded in enchanting beauty. When I was introduced to him I shivered, thinking he's the needle of the compass pointing toward my homeland and glory, and the two of us walked down the path together.

ISAAC: Wouldn't the honorable thing have been for you not to stay with my father then?

MOTHER: That's what I would have preferred, but Meir had his own ideas about purity.

ISAAC: What sort of ideas?

MOTHER: How can I explain it to you? It's better to put these memories aside.

ISAAC: No, we can't put them aside before I know what happened.

MOTHER: The way you're behaving lately worries me.

ISAAC: Say it to me clearly, mama ... What sort of relationship did you have with Meir?

MOTHER: He loved me as the lord loved Israel. And I loved him as a Jew loves the messiah. Our love was a form of platonic suffering.

ISAAC: I have no idea what you're talking about.

MOTHER: Meir thought our dream would only be realized by a generation filled with passion and purity. He used to say our souls must be as transparent as the dawn and as hard as blades so the miracle could be realized.

ISAAC: What miracle?

MOTHER: Israel and its glory. We're a generation that vowed to rectify the long history of malevolence we suffered. We had to find deep within us the springs of unadulterated power because the miracle could not be realized except through power without a hint of sin. That's what he used to say ... and I'd feel as if I were an ethereal being floating above the dream.

ISAAC: He really believed that?

MOTHER: He believed it just as much as he believed in the cause.

ISAAC: And you?

MOTHER: When he spoke, I felt as if I were in the presence of a prophet. His belief penetrated to the depths of my soul. I began to tame my body, to find pleasure in suffering and to rise above my desires.

ISAAC: And my father?

MOTHER: I abandoned his bed forever.

ISAAC: And you maintained a pure relationship with Meir?

MOTHER: There was one time ... but let's not talk about it.

ISAAC: One time?

MOTHER: One time we almost surrendered. Or, I should say, I almost surrendered. We put ourselves in a shameful position. When he realized it, he stood up furious and said coldly: Jerusalem sinned and was afflicted with the curse of menstruation. Those who had revered her now looked upon her with disdain because they could see her shame. How I wished the earth would open up and swallow me, and hide me from his eyes. My allure

evaporated, and I lost whatever esteem he had for me. He said, we still have sin within us, and he was never again alone with me.

ISAAC: And that's why he stopped visiting us?

MOTHER: But our love remained alive.

ISAAC: A bleak and pathological love.

MOTHER: It's the kind of love that built the miracle.

ISAAC: A miracle that brings no happiness and begets no fruit.

MOTHER: Don't ever say that. We purified ourselves and suffered so that you might experience joy and produce progeny.

ISAAC: Couldn't Meir be...?

MOTHER: Be what?

ISAAC: Nothing.

MOTHER: Listen, son, Meir is a perfect man. It was through men like him that the miracle of Israel became a reality. He lived like a monk who devoted himself to the cause. His bravery in the Irgun was legendary. Your generation is spoiled because you had fathers like Meir. If only you knew how lovingly, how diligently he planned your future. And here you are now, living that future, with an important position and a boss who's like a father to you. Our wager on you has paid off. I hope you ascend the ladder Meir constructed for you with the dedication it deserves.

ISAAC: Yes ... He planned everything, but it never occurred to any of you to consider whether I wanted this job or not.

MOTHER: How could you not want it? It's one of the noblest jobs in our state. You are the eyes that protect the fortress we've built. Very few people are afforded this honor and achieve this rank.

ISAAC: It's a grueling job, mama.

MOTHER: Why are you suddenly whining? Something's happened, hasn't it? A mother's intuition's never wrong. Tell me what's going on.

ISAAC: I'm tired.

MOTHER: I'll bring you a seltzer.

ISAAC: No, no. The fatigue's inside. I'm not sure anymore that what we're doing is honorable.

MOTHER: Of course it's honorable. Belief is stronger than truth, Isaac. Your belief should never be shaken, lest you become lost. I'm afraid this is all the influence of your wife. Do you tell her about your job?

ISAAC: No, she doesn't know a thing.

MOTHER: That's better. She's a weakling. *(The sound of the baby crying)* Ah, my beloved. I'm coming, my David. I'm coming, my king. *(Mother exits hurriedly)*

ISAAC: I'm tired. I'm so confused. I remember a man with a gentle face, who'd take clay in his hands and craft a rabbit, a tree, a violin.

(Mother enters carrying the baby)

MOTHER: My king is angry. *(To the baby)* I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Strap on your sword, and with all your majesty take the enemy by storm. Yes, yes, here's daddy. *(She hands the baby to Isaac)* Play with him for a minute while I get the milk. *(Mother exits. Isaac coos toward the baby. Rachel enters, unkempt, bundled up in her coat)*

ISAAC: Where were you? I was starting to worry.

(Rachel takes the baby from him. She sits alone in a far corner. Mother enters)

MOTHER: *(With an assured demeanor, approaches Rachel)* I need to change his diapers and feed him. *(Rachel tries to hold onto the baby. Mother tries to take him away)* He's wet and hungry. Come, my king, come. *(Rachel, resigned, hands over the baby. Mother takes him and walks away. To the baby)* The Lord

shall cause your enemies ... to be smitten before you Listen, my child ... Forget thine own people and thy father's house. (*She and the baby exit*)

ISAAC: (*Approaches Rachel*) Why are you late?

RACHEL: My God, what depths have we descended to?

ISAAC: (*Touching her*) What happened?

RACHEL: (*Frightened*) Don't touch me.

ISAAC: What's the matter. Why are you so scared?

RACHEL: Don't touch me.

ISAAC: Are you disgusted with me? I knew you wouldn't be able to bear it. I don't blame you. A young woman as passionate as you can't be satisfied by a husband who's like a brother to her.

RACHEL: My God, what depths have we descended to?

ISAAC: I know you're suffering, things between us have deteriorated, but ... I was hoping you wouldn't give up on me. If only you knew how much I need you. I'm not ... I'm not trying to win your sympathy, because that would just make things more absurd. I'm lonely ... How horrible it is for a man to be lonely and incapable ... Aren't you going to say something?

RACHEL: My God, what depths have we descended to?

ISAAC: If there's another man, I understand. There's a price I have to pay. (*Then talking to himself as if correcting himself*) But why should I pay? What have I done wrong? We're doing our job. They were the ones who taught me to be as sharp and ruthless as a blade, as alone as dread itself. We all know if we let compassion seep into our hearts, everything will collapse. So what am I paying for? For the sake of a few Arab saboteurs? Isn't the only good Arab a dead Arab? So why am I feeling remorse?

RACHEL: My God, what depths have we descended to?

ISAAC: We really have descended. We were so happy before. Do you remember the good times we had? That night when our desire caught fire while we were in the garden. What we did in the movie theatre. And ... we were truly happy. And now ... what destruction. Meir wanted my mother pure, when she wasn't menstruating. Can you imagine, they were in love for years, and nothing happened. She told me. Everybody looks at him as if he were God incarnate. I smell deception and desolation. I know I'm losing your respect, but I have to tell you everything I'm feeling. I'm in a tunnel that has no exit. Our job is vile, Rachel. It's necessary, but vile. I'm tired. I can't take it anymore. I'm a weakling. Yes, let me say it clearly, I'm the son of my father. A few minutes ago, my mother was saying that my father's death was suitable and satisfying. He too was a weakling. We shouldn't be compassionate toward our enemies. I know that. But feeding hatred requires just as much energy as feeding love. I don't know what I'm talking about. My mind is addled, Rachel. But I have to talk, even if it creates more distance between us. You don't know the horrible things we do to maintain our myths. Help me. Say something.

RACHEL: I want to throw up. My God, what depths have we descended to?

ISAAC: You're that repulsed by me? I went to Doctor Menuhin, and he diagnosed my illness. It's a kind of self-inflicted punishment. It's a physical form of underlying remorse. Of course, you can't understand why I feel this way. You, like everyone, believe that everything that creates the circumstances for our success is unsullied and permissible. So why am I feeling remorse? We had to do something grotesque, Rachel. There was this saboteur who was stubborn ... he wouldn't confess. Meir told us to pressure him in a really horrifying way. We brought his wife and ... We destroyed his manhood. He's inside me now, punishing me, destroying my own manhood ... Him or somebody else inside me who's tormenting me.

RACHEL: (*She gasps and gags, as if there is a death rattle in her throat, and then calms down*) My God, what depths have we descended to?

ISAAC: He wasn't an insect. He wasn't a piece of trash you throw in the garbage. He was a man with terrifying eyes and facial features that shrieked. He was a human being, and a few days ago he died in my hands. I was too haughty to admit what I'd done to Doctor Menuhin, but what was the use of not admitting it? All the rationalizations I have don't even convince me. The lessons of loathing we all memorized couldn't calm me down. As an Israeli, you

may hate me for this, but I'm telling you unequivocally, my job is awful. I can't stand it. I don't want to do it anymore. I despise myself. Help me, Rachel. I want to escape from this dark tunnel. Maybe it's not too late. Oh ... how I wish we could get away ... get away with nothing more than our baby, our love and a violin.

MOTHER: (*As she enters*) Why are you destroying yourself like this?

ISAAC: Mother, you can come away with us too. Did you hear my entire confession?

MOTHER: I heard what I heard. I'm asking ... why are you destroying yourself?

ISAAC: I'm trying to pick up the broken pieces of myself, mother. By disfiguring them we're disfiguring ourselves.

MOTHER: You can't disfigure them more than they already are. What you're doing is less than the Lord commanded us to do.

ISAAC: The Lord could never have imagined we'd develop torture to the level we have.

MOTHER: Don't be blasphemous. God commanded us not to be merciful toward them. He said we should kill them: man, woman, child, baby, cow, sheep, camel, donkey.

ISAAC: If those were his commands he should've created us with a different psyche.

MOTHER: The fault is in you, not in the creator. How disappointing to discover that the way I raised you has not repaired the flaw in your genes. This germ in you comes from your father, and we won't let it multiply and grow. This moment of weakness you're feeling must pass.

ISAAC: It won't pass. My soul's being devoured by doubt.

MOTHER: For God's sake, what are you talking about?

ISAAC: I'm not convinced what we're doing is right.

MOTHER: As long as it keeps Israel impregnable and glorious it is right.

RACHEL: Is it also necessary for me to be raped for Israel to remain impregnable and glorious?

ISAAC: What are you talking about?

MOTHER: (*With disdain*) What kind of story is this?

RACHEL: Your extremely efficient colleague Gideon raped me.

ISAAC: Say that again.

RACHEL: Gideon raped me.

ISAAC: My God, what depths have we descended to?

MOTHER: An affair is one thing. Rape is another.

RACHEL: He raped me just as they rape Arab women while doing their glorious job. Tell her about your parties, Isaac. Tell her about the nipple you sliced off.

ISAAC: My God, what depths have we descended to?

MOTHER: Adulteress ...

RACHEL: You mother of putrid milk. I was trying to help your son, and this is what I get? (*She opens her coat, revealing her torn clothes and the marks on her body*) Look at my clothes and my body. You're the stepmother of wolves. Voracious wolves living in a wasteland that God's deserted out of disgust ... Disgust. (*She puts her hand over her mouth to prevent spitting out the vomit she has thrown up and rushes out of the room*)

ISAAC: My God, what depths have we descended to?

MOTHER: I knew this whore wasn't one of us. (*She rubs his hair*) Listen to me, son. We won't allow her to destroy everything we've built ... Come here to mama. (*Isaac resists*) It's been a long time since we last read that story about birth and heroism. Relax, baby. Mama's going to rock you in her arms and tell you stories to calm you down.

(*Lights fade*)

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter Six

(Lights up on a political demonstration. Sound of people shouting and of bullets. Al-Fari'a, who is injured, falls to the ground. There is the sound of the siren of an ambulance approaching)

AL-FARI'A: Bullets ... Those are bullets. Why doesn't that child run? Run! My knees are weak. It all began, praise God, with the funeral. Isma'il came back in a coffin with the lid nailed shut. They wouldn't allow us to lift the lid, to see the last expression he had on his face. Bullets. Those are bullets. Soldiers with masks, armed to the teeth. In the midst of tears, we chanted and praised God. The crowd at the funeral was solemn until they lowered him into the grave. Then people grew restless. My mouth is dry. Where is Dalal? She didn't cry. She exploded, like a stick of dynamite. The demonstration grew, clashes broke out. My legs are like rubber. I'm thirsty. Soldiers with masks, armed to the teeth, a cloud of dark smoke. My brother, my son whom I didn't give birth to, came back in a coffin ... *(She slowly collapses)* Oh, 'Umar ... I'm thirsty. Dalal, why don't you respond? Bullets ... Oh, God ... There she is ... A tower rising above them. Dalal is the new al-Fari'a. Isma'il ... Look at her. She's advancing toward them with a cyclone of screams surrounding her ... Thick clouds of smoke. I need air. Bullets, coffin, darkness ... The wails surrounding her. You're right, Dalal. Don't fall for the smooth talkers, the hacks, the wheeler dealers trying to get rich off the struggle. I need water ... Bullets, wailing ... It's either them or us.

(She faints. The deafening sound of the siren of an ambulance)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Seven

(Light shines on Rachel and Isaac, who are in a corner)

ISAAC: Have we lost everything? *(Rachel shrugs her shoulders, completely apathetic)* Have we lost everything, Rachel?

RACHEL: Maybe.

ISAAC: Should we just give up?

RACHEL: There's nothing left to fight for.

ISAAC: I need you. If you stand beside me, we may find a way out of this tunnel.

RACHEL: I can't.

ISAAC: Why? Has the fire of your love gone out for good?

RACHEL: I'm broken, and I need someone to mend my fractures. No ... I can't help you.

ISAAC: Don't think for a second I'll let Gideon get away with what he's done. I don't want to do anything rash, but I'll deal with the situation.

RACHEL: I don't care. It makes my stomach turn. I don't want to hear a word about any of it.

ISAAC: Have you made a decision?

RACHEL: Maybe.

ISAAC: What?

RACHEL: I'm thinking about accepting my aunt's invitation. We both need each other now.

ISAAC: What about us? The baby and I need you too.

RACHEL: I have nothing to give you.

ISAAC: Are you also giving up on the baby?

RACHEL: Cursed is the hour I gave birth to him. Didn't your mother immediately snatch him away from me?

ISAAC: I understand your pain. I know things happened one right after the other in a horrific way. My mother, my illness, Gideon ... But give our marriage a chance. We were a loving couple who made a beautiful baby. Let's try to deal with this in a calm manner.

RACHEL: I'll go insane if I stay here. The nausea ... the nightmares ... I'm descending into a terrifying abyss.

ISAAC: I'll quit my job and find a civilian position in another country.

RACHEL: That's your business.

ISAAC: We can leave together. Save ourselves and get out of here.

RACHEL: These wounds will take a long time to heal. They may never heal.

ISAAC: Let's try.

RACHEL: You try if you'd like, but I'm not staying. *(She looks anxious and depressed. She struggles against her nausea)*

ISAAC: Have you decided?

RACHEL: Yes.

ISAAC: Give me a little time.

RACHEL: I can't stand this house. I can't stand looking at you. I can't stand your mother. I can't stand my body. And this nausea ... No ... I have to get out of here. I don't want to die like a dog. *(She puts her hand over her mouth and rushes out of the room)*

ISAAC: What's the messiah waiting for? There's no reason any longer not to come right now. *(Isaac exits. Lights fade gradually. Mother enters pushing the baby in the carriage)*

MOTHER: And all the elders of Israel came to the King of Hebron. And King David made a covenant with them in Hebron before the Lord. And David took, the fortress of Zion and dwelled in it, and called it the city of David. David continued to expand his rule, and the Lord, the God of soldiers, was with him.

The Book of Daily Sorrows/Chapter Seven

(Al-Fari'a is lying on a hospital bed, bandaged. Dalal sits beside the bed)

AL-FARI'A: I feel as if I've been resurrected.

DALAL: What was it like being dead?

AL-FARI'A: Death's coming to all of us. It's lonely and terrifying. Was I unconscious for long?

DALAL: We read the prayer of the dead from the Holy Qur'an several times. Suddenly your body shook and decided to live.

AL-FARI'A: The beloved has died, and the lesser one lives.

DALAL: You're far more dear to us than you realize. If only you knew how many young men donated blood to you.

AL-FARI'A: They gave me their blood?

DALAL: You needed a lot of it. They were pushing each other aside to donate. All the blood that's running in your veins is young.

AL-FARI'A: They need their blood more than an old woman like me.

DALAL: Blood can be replaced. You can't be.

AL-FARI'A: God protect me ... And you, Dalal? Have you overcome your ordeal?

DALAL: I don't want to overcome it. My ordeal's made me more certain the decision I made was right.

AL-FARI'A: When I was unconscious, you appeared to me as a blessed tree with your branches in the sky and your roots in the earth. You were walking, and behind you were people wailing, singing songs and chanting political slogans. And I said to Isma'il, look at her, she hasn't been broken by grief.

DALAL: Didn't the two of us learn together how to overcome death and separation?

AL-FARI'A: Yes ... This is what we learned ... To embrace death and go on living.
How many people died?

DALAL: The time has not yet come to count the dead.

AL-FARI'A: Why? What's going on?

DALAL: It's spreading. It's becoming more intense.

AL-FARI'A: Spreading?

DALAL: From Birzeit to Gaza and from al-Khalil to Jerusalem.

AL-FARI'A: That's the best news someone coming back from the dead could hear. How are the baby and Muhammad?

DALAL: The baby is fine. I'll bring him with me on my next visit. As for Muhammad, his situation would make the heart of an infidel ache. He's locked himself in his room and grown a long beard. He's totally unkempt. He doesn't eat, he doesn't sleep, and he sits with a vacant stare. Sometimes he starts shivering as if he has a fever and screams like he's having his throat slit. By the time he calms down, he's already drenched in sweat and his teeth are chattering.

AL-FARI'A: Has he quit his job?

DALAL: What job? He made a bonfire, and with a great show of ceremony, tossed his employee ID in, and stared at it as if he were insane. I wanted to take him to the doctor, but he refused. He gave me a strange look and then burst into tears.

AL-FARI'A: He's going through labor pains. If his strength doesn't desert him, he'll be re-born his father's son. Please, be compassionate toward him.

DALAL: Don't worry. We're dealing with everything (*She takes a radio out of her bag and gives it to al-Fari'a*) I brought you this so you could follow what's going on.

AL-FARI'A: A radio?

DALAL: It's a gift from all of us. Don't forget, the doctor warned you not to get excited or tire yourself out.

AL-FARI'A: Don't worry about me.

DALAL: (*Whispering*) The big demonstration's tomorrow. I have to go now. Do you need anything?

AL-FARI'A: How I wish I were with you.

DALAL: You'll be with us in a few days. (*Dalal kisses al-Fari'a and exits. Al-Fari'a turns on the radio to a station from another Arab country. A political song about Palestine is playing*)

AL-FARI'A: I wish they'd send some blood and flour instead of songs. That's what we really need, blood and flour.

(*Lights fade*)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Eight

(*Lights up on Doctor Menuhin. As he speaks lights go up on the office. Isaac appears, climbing up the steps and entering the office*)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: My heart is broken. My bones are shivering. I'm like a man overcome by the effects of wine. The land, which is filled with debauchery, wails with curses. The fields where humanity once thrived have withered. Their endeavors have become twisted, and their power has turned to evil. The characters in this story can't retreat, and neither can I. I know everything now. I can't hide it. (*Doctor exits. Isaac enters the office of Meir*)

MEIR: I hope you're feeling better. Anyway, you're here just in time. We've just made some arrests, and the station's packed with guests.

ISAAC: Sir ... My whole life's in disarray, and I need a little compassion and understanding.

MEIR: What now? Is your mother fine?

ISAAC: My mother's fine, but my wife ... and I ... I don't want to give you a headache about my problems. I came to ask for a favor.

MEIR: What?

ISAAC: I wouldn't ask if my life weren't such a mess. Can you help me transfer to another country? I don't care which one. All that matters is that I travel for a while and do something useful.

MEIR: This is a new song you're singing. The only place you can be of use is here, in Israel, in this station.

ISAAC: My wife is having a psychological crisis ... And maybe ...

MEIR: (*Interrupting*) You know we're not interested in hearing stories about people's lives. There's nothing you can tell me about what's going on at home that I don't already know. You think I'm not aware of what's happening to you. Suddenly you've begun to see the Arabs as humans, but you have to remember what they've done and how dangerous they are. If they had the chance they'd exterminate us. Do you have any doubt about that?

ISAAC: Certainly not.

MEIR: How can you feel sorry for them then?

ISAAC: Me feel sorry for them?

MEIR: I know how to recognize the germ of compassion. Fainting, and now this request. I'm telling you ... Beware, son. In our job compassion's as dangerous as treason.

ISAAC: The way you're talking sounds like a threat, sir.

MEIR: You know what special affection I have for you. I raised you, and you better not go weak on me. We're the safety valve for the Jewish state here. That's why we need to be like steel. We can't bend or break. Your colleagues aren't any stronger than you are, so don't let them run roughshod over you. Show them what you're made of. Do you want to disappoint your mother (*The phone rings*) and me too? (*He lifts the receiver and speaks into the phone*)

Hello ... Yes, the riots have started ... I told you, there's no way we're going to solve this except building more settlements and scaring the shit out of people ... We have to keep turning the screws until they leave ... The United Nations is a cattle pen that's not fit to shit in ... The interrogations will be done in a few days, and then we'll give you all the information ... No ... Don't worry ... Okay ... Goodbye. (*Puts down the receiver. To Isaac*) Did you hear that? The murderers are continuing with their acts of sabotage, and you come to me with your stories that put me to sleep. Here ... Take these three files, and get to work.

ISAAC: I'm afraid I can't now.

MEIR: Do you know what you're saying? This is insubordination. It's mutiny.

ISAAC: Since you raised me, I'm begging you for help. My home's falling apart, and I have a right to try to save it. Leaving this country is our only salvation for me and my wife.

MEIR: How long am I supposed to put up with people like you who do nothing but complain? Your request is ridiculous. If it gets around, all sorts of suspicion will be directed at you.

ISAAC: I don't care what gets directed at me. My only concern is protecting my family.

MEIR: The state's your family, not your wife. Listen, Isaac, you're passing through a moment of weakness, which we all have. Don't think this enemy doctor is going to help you overcome this crisis.

ISAAC: You know about that too?

MEIR: Yes ... And I know you're making a big to-do about your sex organ.

ISAAC: You've been digging around in my personal life. You've been watching me as if I were a suspect.

MEIR: No one who works here has a personal life. We watch you to protect you from making a misstep.

ISAAC: And what about my dignity? I'm not allowed that either?

MEIR: True dignity means that, like steel, you can't be bent by your emotions.

ISAAC: So I just go on torturing and killing as if it were breathing?

MEIR: You're neither torturing nor killing. You're protecting your country from killers.

ISAAC: But we're killing them.

MEIR: Killing killers is justice. It's not killing.

ISAAC: That's just playing with words so they suit our needs, isn't it? We call them killers, so we can say torture and killing are justice.

MEIR: You've reached this the level of distortion?

ISAAC: I don't know what level I've reached. All I know is we're sinking deeper into the muck.

MEIR: You're the only one sinking into the muck. Your beliefs have turned rotten.

ISAAC: Maybe ... I don't know if you can grasp what I'm saying, but my own body has helped me understand that what we're doing makes no sense. Those whom we're calling killers have eyes, emotions and they feel injustice.

MEIR: Then why don't you go ahead and say their cause is just too?

ISAAC: I'm no longer absolutely certain that truth is only on our side.

MEIR: You can't say that, it's blasphemy. When I was a child, my father, who was killed by the Germans, taught me by singing the "HaTikvah" that Jews must return to this land to re-establish Israel's grand kingdom. This is the truth that is as clear and simple as the sun rising and the days turning. Anyone who stands in our way must be removed without mercy.

ISAAC: What about my father? Was he an obstacle who should've been removed without mercy?

MEIR: What sort of drivel is this? You really disappoint me, young man. Your poor mother and I worked so hard to make a real man out of you.

ISAAC: Do you think a chaste relationship nourished by hatred and killing can make someone a man?

MEIR: Gideon was right. You're nothing but a limp-dicked loser who pisses all over himself.

ISAAC: What about you? Do you think murder makes you a man? You killed my father, and you want a sexless union with my mother.

MEIR: Stop.

ISAAC: No ... I won't stop. You're calling me limp-dicked? Do you think people can't see your impotence? That pompous historical impotence shining behind the mask of superiority and cruelty.

MEIR: You're signing your death warrant.

ISAAC: I'm regaining who I am. Look me in the eye if you dare. (*Gideon enters*) Is this horrific slaughterhouse the place you've prepared for the arrival of the messiah? Is this our religious message? (*Pointing at Gideon*) Are you going to build the sacred kingdom with low-lives like this? Obviously, you know what this scumbag did ... Maybe you congratulated him for it. What a cesspool. Yes ... this is your grand accomplishment. You've created the cesspool kingdom. (*Meir and Gideon reach for their guns*) Why don't you flip a coin to see which one of you gets to perform this noble deed? You're both professionals ... but if I have the choice I'd prefer to be killed by my father's murderer.

(Meir raises his gun with a steady hand. He shoots several bullets. Isaac falls to the ground)

MEIR: How unfortunate.

GIDEON: He was a little fart.

MEIR: Leave me alone.

GIDEON: Yes, sir. (*Gideon exits. Meir lifts the receiver of the phone. Lights up on the sitting room of the Benhas house. Meir dials the number. The phone rings at the Benhas house. Mother lifts the receiver*)

MEIR: He was a rotten fruit, my love.

MOTHER: You cut it off?

MEIR: It was the only choice.

MOTHER: There was no other way? I believe you ... I believe you. You know best.

MEIR: Would you let me stand with you?

MOTHER: How would I manage if you didn't? (*At the same time, they both put the receivers down*) My son ... My son ... And tomorrow when David asks me about his father, what shall I tell him? In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void. And darkness was over the surface of the deep.

(Lights go down on office. Lights fade very slowly in the house)

The Book of Prophecies/Chapter Nine

(Lights up on the clinic. Doctor Menuhin appears. Rachel is arranging things in her bag)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: And the sound of rapture and joy, the sound of a bride, has been eradicated among them and becomes the sound of war breaking out and the flickering of a dim lamp.

RACHEL: In the announcement, they said he died in an accident.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: He was cleaning his gun, and the bullet went off and was lodged in his chest.

RACHEL: But we know what actually happened.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: We know what happened, and we wrote it down.

RACHEL: It was a very modest funeral.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Yes. The funeral was modest. The mother showed no emotion. She shed no tears. Meir stood with a look of condescension. And Rachel, she collapsed ... And I had to stay with her until she recovered enough to make arrangements to travel.

RACHEL: Did you write everything down?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Yes ... Here's the story.

RACHEL: It's time.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Do you have a lump in your throat about the baby?

RACHEL: What good would that do? He's theirs ... They took him. And I can't get him back.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Don't ever give up the idea that you will.

RACHEL: Maybe later ... When I gather up the broken pieces.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: We mustn't despair. Spread this story as widely as you can. We won't collaborate with them, and we won't allow them to seize the future.

RACHEL: I hope my strength doesn't desert me.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: You'll succeed, Rachel. You must.

RACHEL: How can I thank you?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: There's no need to thank me.

RACHEL: Finally, I've found a friend. Someone humane.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Take care of yourself. *(She hugs him tightly, emotionally, picks up her bag and exits)*

Final Chapter

NOTE: A possible dialogue between Abraham Menuhin and Sa'd Allah Wannus.

(The clinic is still lit, and the Doctor is in it. The Author stands where al-Fari'a had been standing)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Where is Sa'd Allah Wannus?

SA'D ALLAH: I'm here.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: We've reached the summit. The character you called Abraham Menuhin has become whole. Where did his qualities come from?

SA'D ALLAH: In the beginning it was a wish, but the testimonies and views of some brave Jews made me certain it was possible.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: So you believe the existence of people like me is possible?

SA'D ALLAH: I'm certain. If people like you didn't exist, then history would be nothing but a bleak wasteland.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Maybe you're just naïve.

SA'D ALLAH: If one remembers the list of intellectual Jews who rejected Zionism and resisted it, I don't seem so naïve.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Even so ... Do you actually believe I could be as ethical as I am?

SA'D ALLAH: One who decides to be loyal to justice and not the law is ethical.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Even though that leads me to forsake my kin and my people.

SA'D ALLAH: You're not forsaking them. You're trying to protect them. You recognize the path they're on is dangerous, and Zionism, which guides them, is a trap. Did Jeremiah forsake his kin and his people? His tongue roared with curses, but his heart was breaking with pity.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: But who listened to Jeremiah?

SA'D ALLAH: The moment will come and they will listen. In times as tattered as these it's vital for characters to appear who push lies aside and behold the horizon of another sort of future.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Courage alone isn't enough. You don't know how much spiritual strength people like me need to be Jews and anti-Zionists at the same time.

SA'D ALLAH: I can imagine, sir, how much energy it takes to transcend one's lot in life. I also had to marshal enormous energy to create your character and to make you distinct.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: It was difficult to bring someone like me into being?

SA'D ALLAH: There were many impediments to overcome: the history of suspicion standing in the way of admitting your existence, the chaotic political events that precluded seeing you as a distinct being, the fear of the defeated that he'll be duped again, the chasm of war wounds and casualties. Above all, the traps laid by our police and intelligence officers trying to root out collaborators. I had to overcome all these obstacles to bring the character of Abraham Menuhin into being.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: But he does nothing but reject and protest.

SA'D ALLAH: He also realizes Zionism is a trap for Arabs and Jews alike.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: He does.

SA'D ALLAH: Even so, it required all my energy to get past the barriers inside me and out.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: I didn't realize that meeting one another would be such a risky venture, but since we both want to create our own fate, let me ask you, were you ethical in the creation of this story?

SA'D ALLAH: You're suggesting ...

DOCTOR MENUHIN: The statement that resonates in the play, "either them or us," scares me.

SA'D ALLAH: Do you believe you and I can live with people like Meir, Gideon, Moshe?

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Them? No. But the statement has extreme and frightening implications.

SA'D ALLAH: Those are its only implications. We can't get out of this trap as long as beliefs like Meir's and Gideon's are the principal ones on the other side.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Fine ... But what about prisons? You focused on what happens in them here and ignored Arab prisons.

SA'D ALLAH: I hesitated for a long time before I wrote this play because I was worried it would be nothing but a charade. Yes, being ethical must be mutual. And I have to admit that prisons on our side are neither more merciful nor less brutal. But do you think these regimes and their prisons represent us or care one whit about our struggle with Israel? No, they don't. Our problem isn't just Israel. Zionism has extended into the entrails of the Arab regimes. Those who surrendered to Meir's Israel and those preparing to surrender, those who suppress their own people and trample upon them, who steal the riches of their lands and squander them ... All of these are extensions of Zionism within the body of the Arabs. It's a difficult dilemma, and getting out of it requires a complicated and grueling struggle. You're right. Being ethical has to be mutual no matter what it costs. We can't escape from this historical trap without paying a high price.

(Gideon, Moshe and Meir enter the clinic)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: And how do you imagine my end in this play?

SA'D ALLAH: And King Sidqiya ordered that Jeremiah be put in prison and a loaf of bread be brought to him each day from the baker's market until there was no bread left in the city. They come with pleasant expressions, smiling, and put you in a straitjacket and take you to an asylum.

(The Doctor has now been put into a straitjacket by Gideon, Moshe and Meir)

DOCTOR MENUHIN: What about you? What is it that awaits you?

SA'D ALLAH: The hatred of Israeli and Arab Zionists.

DOCTOR MENUHIN: Then let us feel pity for one another.

SA'D ALLAH: Pity ... or possibly hope.

(Gideon, Moshe and Meir exit with the Doctor. Sa'd Allah exits. The stage is empty. Lights fade gradually)

—THE END—

Jawad al-Asadi

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

Jawad al-Asadi's *Baghdadi Bath* is a political play that synthesizes dramatic elements from Eastern and Western theatrical traditions, the form of the European Theater of the Absurd (especially Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*), a traditional Arabic setting (a so-called Turkish bath in Baghdad), and a series of jarring and violent personal experiences linked to the regime of Saddam Husayn and the 2003 American-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Al-Asadi, who was born into a working-class Shi'i Muslim family in the Iraqi city of Karbala in 1947, studied theater at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. By his own account, he entered a career in theater in part because he was a poor student in mathematics and science and was only able to score well on an entrance exam for theater and the arts. He does, however, credit his upbringing in Karbala, the holiest of Shi'i cities and the most significant site of the annual celebration of 'Ashura, which attracts tens of thousands of believers from all over the Arab/Muslim world, for his early and enduring interest in theater and ritual:

Perhaps it was the days leading up to the 10th day of Muharram [i.e. to 'Ashoura, the 10th day of the lunar month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar] that instilled the love of theater in my young soul. The yearly preparations for the re-enactment of Husayn's murder brought the community together and transformed the city into a fantastic theater production. There were constant sounds of religious poetry, wailing men and women striking their chest, homes in mourning decked in black, candles lit across the city, men riding horses and drawing their swords on one another, and multi-colored processions of musicians playing trumpets and cymbals.¹

1 Jawad al-Asadi, interview by Rebecca Joubin, "Jawad al-Assadi: Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the 'Same,'" *Al-Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts*, 2005. <<http://www.aljadid.com/content/jawad-al-assadi-director-returns-iraq-find-nothing-'same'>>. Accessed November 2, 2017.

The transformation of Karbala during the month of Muharram into the fantastic, theatrical world that al-Asadi describes here has in recent decades been a source of intense interest by sociologists, theater scholars and artists such as Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook.² Although the celebrations during the month of Muharram include storytelling, dirge singing and processions with histrionic gestures and bloodletting, the culmination of these rituals is a theatrical re-enactment, called a *ta'ziya* (also *ta'ziyeh*), of the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E. The myth of Husayn, and the betrayal and slaughter of Husayn and his family by troops loyal to the Umayyad caliph Yazid I, is integral to the history of Islam and Shi'ism and the resulting schism between Sunnis and Shi'is, which, for example, erupted in intense violence during the U.S. occupation of Iraq in the twenty-first century. The colorful, highly stylized, ritualistic and often genuinely violent theatrical elements in *ta'ziya* and other rituals associated with 'Ashura, which evolved to express and elicit extreme emotions, especially related to death and loss on the part of viewers and performers alike, constitutes, as al-Asadi suggests, an integral part of his own theatrical aesthetic.

In this same interview, al-Asadi says that since he came from an extremely poor family, one of the only other forms of entertainment that his parents could offer to him and his five siblings was a trip to the public baths.³ In *Baghdadi Bath*, the play translated here, two brothers meet in an abandoned public bath in Baghdad shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and recall their visits to this same bath with their now deceased father when they were children. In the interview, al-Asadi also emphasizes his longstanding preoccupation with the link between theater and the visual arts and his painterly approach to directing, in which he treats the stage in much the same way as a painter would a canvas. This connection between the two art forms—which one also sees in the work of contemporary Western directors such as Robert Wilson and Robert Lepage—was obviously informed in part by al-Asadi's childhood experiences in Karbala, by the rich cultural milieu of Baghdad in the 1960s when he was studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad and his later association, in the 1990s, with the Lebanese painter Helen Karam. Many of the most acclaimed Iraqi visual and literary artists of al-Asadi's generation studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and/or were products of the city's rich cultural life. In

2 Marjan Moosavi, "Ta'ziyeh—Ritual Performance During Muharram." *The Theatre Times*, October 16, 2016. <<https://thetheatretimes.com/tazyeh-ritual-performance-during-muharram/>>. Accessed November 2, 2017. For a discussion of the various rituals and performances that take place in Karbala during Muharram, see Peter J. Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: NYU Press, 1979).

3 al-Asadi, "Jawad al-Assadi: Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the 'Same.'"

her paper entitled “Remembering Cosmopolitan Baghdad in Exile,” Diane Duclos points out that Iraqi artists had been going to Europe for education since the 1930s and Western artists also frequently visited Baghdad. For those, like al-Asadi, who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, the Institute and the city’s coffeehouses, or literary cafés, were central focuses of intellectual, cultural and political life, informed not only by the ideology of the Communist Party but also by readings and discussions of French, German, English and Russian literature and Western thinkers such as Marx, Hegel, Sartre and Spinoza.⁴ The influential Palestinian novelist, translator, painter and art critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who is the principal translator of Shakespeare, Faulkner and Beckett into Arabic, also lived in Baghdad during this period and worked closely with Jawad Selim, the leading figure of a group of visual artists known as the Baghdad Modern Art Movement.⁵

Al-Asadi graduated from the Academy in 1972 and several years later moved to Sofia,⁶ the capital of Bulgaria, to continue his studies in theater. He learned Bulgarian, which he claims to have forgotten soon after leaving the country because he no longer had a reason to speak it, and wrote a PhD dissertation entitled “The Contemporary Iraqi Theatre and Problematic Quests of Theatrical Presentation.” Like many working-class Shi’is in an Iraq dominated by the Ba’th Party, which was dominated by Sunni Muslims, several members of al-Asadi’s family were members of or linked to the country’s Communist Party. While he was in Bulgaria he received word from his family that his brother, who was a leftist, had been executed and his body had been dumped in front of the family’s home. The report of the incident made al-Asadi physically ill and he was hospitalized for over two months.⁷

4 Diane Duclos, “Remembering Cosmopolitan Baghdad in Exile: Narratives from Iraqi artists of the sixties and seventies generations” (unpublished paper, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2011), 7. In the same unpublished paper, Duclos describes an interview with an Iraqi playwright and director then living in Beirut, who is almost certainly al-Asadi and who elsewhere in the paper expresses his love for the city, describing his return to Baghdad after the U.S. invasion as follows: “I felt as if a butcher had come and cut my city and its political life into pieces. Without the river, I would not have recognized my city,” 8.

5 See Nathaniel Greenberg, “Political Modernism, Jabra and the Baghdad Modern Art Group,” *CLCweb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.2, <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481/4374.1603>> and Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1982).

6 Babel Theatre, “Jawad al-Asadi,” Accessed November 6, 2017, <http://babeltheatre.wix.com/babel#!_jawad-al-asadi>.

7 Sahar Assaf, “When Theatre Becomes Home: The Exile and Theatre of the Iraqi Playwright Jawad Al-Assadi” (M.A. thesis, Central Washington University, 2011), 51, and Jawad al-Asadi, in conversation with Robert Myers, 2005, Beirut.

By the mid 1970s Saddam Husayn had solidified his power over the Ba'th Party and the Iraqi state, and by 1979, after a notorious public purge of alleged conspirators in the Party, his grip on control of all aspects of cultural life became virtually complete. Al-Asadi, who had been advised by his family after his brother's death not to return to Iraq, remained in exile until 2004, when he returned with the intention of creating Gilgamesh Project as a vehicle for revitalizing serious theater in Iraq, which had effectively become moribund under the government of Husayn.⁸ When he went to Baghdad in 2004, al-Asadi did manage to stage his play *Women of War (Nisa' fi al-Harb)*, about three female Iraqi exiles at a center for refugees in Germany, but the few performances of the work were sparsely attended because audiences were afraid to leave their houses after four in the afternoon due to the sectarian fighting that had erupted in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq. The violence, effectively an insurrection directed by former officers of the Iraqi Army, who were Sunni Muslims, against the incipient Shi'i-led government and its American allies, has been directly linked to Paul Bremer's ill-advised 2003 de-Ba'athification order to summarily disband the Iraqi Army. During his 2004 visit to Baghdad, al-Asadi hardly left the house where he was staying except to attend rehearsals at the same Academy of Fine Arts where he had studied as a young man. "Danger surrounded us," says al-Asadi, "and we were not naïve to [sic] the fact that at any moment we could be killed."⁹ During the course of rehearsals, the son of one of the three actresses performing in the play was kidnapped, and she was only able to obtain his release through the payment of a considerable ransom. Al-Asadi departed after the play was staged, and has not returned to Iraq since.

Soon after completing his doctoral studies in Sofia, al-Asadi lived primarily in Damascus, although he worked as a director in Eastern Europe, Amman, the United Arab Emirates, Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world. He also worked for over a decade with the Palestinian National Theater. According to the Lebanese theater artist Sahar Assaf, who wrote a study of *Baghdadi Bath*, al-Asadi was particularly drawn to the theater and plight of the Palestinians precisely

8 See al-Asadi, "Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the 'Same,'" and al-Asadi, in conversation with Robert Myers. See also, Assaf, *Ibid.*, particularly her mention of Robert Collier's article "In Baghdad, Art Thrives as War Hovers," where he claims that theater thrived in the 1990s after UN sanctions were imposed on Iraq because foreign films were no longer available. For Collier "[N]ow, with about 30 theatres producing everything from slapstick, burlesque to serious drama, times have never been better for Iraqi actors." Assaf, however, points out that this supposed theatrical renaissance applied only to those who "conform[ed] to the Ba'th government's agenda or at least [did] not criticize it ... Saddam Hussein's regime ... was very intolerant towards dissenters." 22.

9 al-Asadi, "Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the 'Same,'" 2005

because he shared with them a profound understanding of exile as both a historical and existential condition: "The Palestinians impossible homecoming [i.e. return home] is similar to mine; despite the lucid [i.e. a clear] difference. The Palestinians are fighting the Israelis who are occupying their land but we are fighting the son of our own land [Sadam Hussein]."¹⁰

When he did not return to Iraq after completing his studies in Bulgaria, he was stripped of his Iraqi passport, although he was given Syrian citizenship, and in Damascus he worked closely with the celebrated Syrian playwright and director, Sa'd Allah Wannus, at the High Dramatic Institute, which Wannus founded in Damascus in the early 1980s and directed. While in Syria, al-Asadi taught at the Institute and in the 1980s and early 1990s directed a number of productions in Syria, the Arab World and elsewhere including *Macbeth*, in Baghdad, Tunisia, Amman, and Spain during 1993; *The Revolt of the Zenj (Thawrat al-Zanj)*, in 1984, by the Palestinian playwright Mu'in Bsisu; *Harvest Nights (Layali al-Hasad)*, in 1987, by the Egyptian playwright Mahmud Diyab; *The Adventure of the Head of Mamluk Jabir (Mughamarat Ra's al-Mamluk Jabir)*, in 1984 in Valencia, Spain; and *The Rape (al-Ightisab)*, in 1992, at the Cairo International Festival, the latter two plays by Sa'd Allah Wannus. An English-language version of *The Rape*, which dramatizes the use of rape as an instrument of interrogation by the Shin Bet in the West Bank during the first Palestinian Intifada, is included in this volume.¹¹

From the beginning of al-Asadi's career, one finds in his directorial work and the plays he later wrote and directed themes that are clearly related to his own experience, that of his native Iraq and the Arab world more generally in the second half of the twentieth century: exile, war, occupation, violence, madness, failure, absurdity, cruelty and the theatricality of everyday life, especially the theatricality and cruelty of despots. One of his first works as a playwright, *Silver Threads (Khuyut min Fidida)* which he also directed premiered in 1985 at the Carthage Festival in Tunisia, where it won the Best Performance award.¹² A number of these themes are present in the first major work that al-Asadi wrote, *Forget Hamlet (Insu Hamlet)*. A rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play is an obvious allegory of Iraq under Saddam Husayn, but it also manifests a com-

10 Assaf, "When Theatre Becomes Home," 50.

11 Wannus disliked al-Asadi's staging of the play, an adaptation of Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallejo's *La Doble Historia del Doctor Valmy (The Double Life of Doctor Valmy)*, because the Iraqi director eliminated the parallel storyline of a Palestinian family, which was one of Wannus's principal innovations to Buero Vallejo's play, and focused exclusively on the family of a Shin Bet torturer, which closely mirrored the Spanish play's dramatization of the family of a torturer in service to the regime of Francisco Franco.

12 Assaf, "When Theatre Becomes Home," 52.

plex understanding of Shakespeare, the Theater of the Absurd and theatrical traditions from the Arab world.

Margaret Litvin, in her study *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*, convincingly demonstrates that Shakespeare's play was appropriated by various Arab playwrights and directors in quite different ways at different moments and in different countries during the twentieth century as means of theatrically manifesting many of the region's most profound political and social dilemmas. In a chapter entitled "Six Plays in Search of a Protagonist, 1976-2002," she analyzes *Forget Hamlet* in tandem with several other renderings of Shakespeare's play from the same period. One of the features that all of these rewritings have in common is that Shakespeare's protagonist, instead of being portrayed as a hero as in earlier versions of *Hamlet* in the Arab world, is ineffectual, completely emasculated or virtually absent from the action. Moreover, these versions, beginning with Mamduh 'Adwan's parodic *Hamlet Wakes Up Late (Hamlit Yastayqiz Muta'akhhiran)* (1976), are self-conscious adaptations and rewritings of and supplements to Shakespeare's play, as opposed to attempts to authentically create *Hamlet* on the Arab stage. Unsurprisingly, in al-Asadi's version, Hamlet's position as protagonist is usurped by that of Claudius, who is rendered more to resemble Iago than the waffling brother of Hamlet's father and is an omnipotent ogre whose presence pervades the play. Moreover, like the deaths of the opponents of Saddam Husayn after he solidified control of the country, the martyrdom of Hamlet, who is swiftly dispatched early in the play, is "sordid and futile."¹³

The action of al-Asadi's version begins in what is already a hopeless milieu, after Ophelia has witnessed the murder of the older Hamlet. Although she is the closest to a protagonist the play contains, her attempt to save her brother is just as futile as saving Hamlet's father. In an attempt to rescue Laertes she accepts Claudius's invitation to spend a night drinking wine with him, and as the sexually voracious tyrant devours her as he does virtually everyone and everything in his kingdom, she pleads for the release of her brother, not realizing that he has long since been tortured to death. In the macabre milieu of *Forget Hamlet*, in which violence and death are pervasive, the gravediggers, kept busy day and night, are thrust forward as much more prominent characters. Unlike, for example, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's rewriting of *Hamlet*,¹⁴ however, al-Asadi's gravediggers are not hapless marginals whose bizarre and comic interpretations of the absurd theatrical world in which they

13 Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghosts* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 172.

14 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

find themselves are frequently elucidating. They, like all the other citizens of this infinitely cruel kingdom, have had their psyches so thoroughly co-opted by the tyrant who is tormenting them that, instead of parodying Claudius, they praise him. One sees a much more obvious analogue for *Forget Hamlet* in the all-encompassing totalitarian atmosphere of contemporary Latin American dictator novels such as *I the Supreme*, by Roa Bastos, *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, by García-Marquez, and *Reasons of State*, by Carpentier. One could also argue that Shakespeare's gravediggers, who are themselves precursors of Vladimir and Estragon, appear in al-Asadi's *oeuvre* first in *Forget Hamlet* and then in an even bleaker and more realistic landscape in *Baghdadi Bath*, as the allegorical Iraq of the earlier play is simultaneously transformed into *Waiting for Godot* and the actual Iraq of 2004, devastated successively by Saddam Husayn's seizure of power, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, UN sanctions and the American-led invasion and occupation.

Much of al-Asadi's most impressive work as a director was done after he moved from Damascus to Beirut in the mid-1990s. In various plays, several of which were produced at Theatre Beyrouth, near the Lebanese city's corniche in Ras Beirut, and later at Babel Theater in Hamra, which al-Asadi founded, he directed a series of stunning expressionistic plays that continued his explorations of the themes of violence, abuse of power, exile and madness. His adaptation of Chekhov's story, *Ward Six*, for example, in which a psychiatrist eventually joins his patients in their madness, marries stark lighting and a *mise en scène* reminiscent of the bleak terror evoked by Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc*, which features, among others, Antonin Artaud, the architect of the Theater of Cruelty, with shadows and expressionistic gestures that mirror the psyches of the ward's patients. Artaud is but one of al-Asadi's significant modern and contemporary European interlocutors. Not only has he worked and lived in various European cities, including Paris, where he staged his own work and met and attended the work of European directors, in 2004 he received the Amsterdam-based Prince Claus Award in recognition of his body of work for fostering "cultural creativity" in exile.¹⁵

Certainly one of the most profound European influences on al-Asadi was Jean Genet, who, as a supporter of Algerian independence and Palestinian liberation and who visited Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, not only had very direct links with the Arab world, but also created an *oeuvre* that explored racism, colonialism and the dynamics of arbitrary power. Arguably, al-Asadi's most impressive staging in the 1990s was a production in Beirut, and later in Paris, of Genet's *Les Bonnes* (*The Maids*) (*al-Khadimat*). The production, which in

15 C Fonds, Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development. "Jawad al-Assadi," Accessed December 28, 2017. <<http://www.princeclausfund.org/en/network/jawad.html>>.

Beirut featured two of Lebanon's most accomplished actresses, Randa Asmar and Julia Qassar, in a staging that accentuated their comic and physical skills, achieved a genuine *coup de théâtre* in the form of a performance by the Lebanese diva Renée Deek, already in her 60s, as the Madame, her cheeks brightly rouged and with kohl outlining her eyes, wearing pearls around her neck and a black dress, brandishing a walking stick, her head entirely shaved. Her monstrous, uncanny, androgynous presence, speaking Genet's text in formal Arabic, inevitably reinforced her filiation to al-Asadi's tyrannical Claudius, to Saddam Husayn and to the other dictators ruling virtually every country in the Arab world. Other significant works from 1990s and early 2000s include a filmed version of *A Doll's House*, commissioned by Kuwaiti television but never aired, with Julia Qassar as Nora and the renowned performance artist Rabih Mroué as Helmer Torvald. Al-Asadi continued this exploration of power relations and gender in *Women of War*, which he authored and which he eventually staged in Baghdad, about three very different women in a detention center in Germany.¹⁶ One is an actress, who was performing in a production of *The House of Bernarda Alba* in Baghdad, one is an emancipated Algerian woman who fears she will be killed, and another a religious woman, who is veiled, who is having an affair with a refugee from Eastern Europe. The work simultaneously explores the lack of solidarity among women in an environment in which they are all vulnerable, the boredom of waiting to have one's fate decided by an unseen power, the adaptive strategies of vulnerable people who are displaced and, perhaps most importantly, the range of experiences that existed for Iraqi women even under the regime of Saddam Husayn.

Baghdadi Bath, according to al-Asadi, is a work that draws on his own experiences and those of family members in Iraq under Saddam Husayn and later under U.S. occupation.¹⁷ In an interview with Rebecca Joubin, al-Asadi asserts that his experience in Baghdad in 2004 as he attempted to stage *Women of War* during the burgeoning insurrection provided the starting point for *Baghdadi Bath*. Al-Asadi, perhaps because he was from a very modest leftist Shi'i family that had suffered profoundly under Saddam Husayn's regime and was an artist in exile who was obviously aware of the severe strictures placed on artists and others in Iraq, originally supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Having been out-

16 Hadeel Adbelhameed, "Jawad Al-Assadi's Women in War: Troubling, Troubled and Troublesome Female Refugees." *Arab Stages*. Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications, (2017). <<http://arabstages.org/2017/10/jawad-al-assadis-women-in-war-troubling-troubled-and-troublesome-female-refugees/>>. Accessed November 12, 2017.

17 Jawad al-Asadi, "The Iraqi Theatre of Blood," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2007, Culture section. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/aug/21/inrememberenceof-mybrother> Accessed November 12, 2017.

side the country for over twenty-five years, he immediately made plans to return to Iraq after the fall of the Husayn regime. Obviously, his visit to Baghdad a little over a year after the invasion, when sectarian tension had dramatically increased and violence had turned Baghdad and much of the rest of the country into a virtually unlivable environment plagued by kidnappings, bombings and mass killings, forced him to radically reconsider his original enthusiasm for U.S. intervention in Iraq.

Baghdadi Bath can, in one sense, be viewed as an attempt to find a dramatic language to explicate the futility of a traditional family and society wracked by succeeding waves of extreme violence and trauma, torn asunder and offered nothing but equally horrific and ethically untenable options to survive. The play opens with two brothers, Hamid and Majid, in an abandoned public bath in Baghdad shortly after the U.S. invasion. The infernal nature of this environment is reinforced not only by the absence of other men fraternizing in this traditional locus of Iraqi and Arab society and by the sound of offstage explosions and the report of severed heads found just outside, but also by the fact that, as the play opens, Majid, the older of the two brothers, attempts to assure Hamid that the repulsive detritus they find in the bath—putrid blood, a knife, wood, tin foil, a gold tooth in a pool of urine—is “normal.”

Although al-Asadi’s play takes no ideological stand as such, the brothers clearly manifest opposing positions on the question of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Whereas Hamid is appalled by the American invaders’ behavior and Majid’s obsequiousness towards them, his older brother views their presence as a money-making opportunity and paradoxically boasts both that their presence allows him to walk with his head held high and revels in his abasement before the invader’s power. “My body trembles when I see their president on television,” says Majid. “I get goose bumps and have an urge to pee when I look at his beautiful smile ... Look! My body is trembling ... at the mere mention of his name.” Hamid responds by stuffing an orange in Majid’s mouth and telling him he looks like an ox.

What may at first glance appear to be a relatively realistic drama that draws on autobiographical material, which the viewer also inevitably interprets as an allegory about pre- and post-invasion Iraq, reveals itself on closer inspection to be a highly constructed theatrical piece imbued with allusions to dramatic works and forms from various traditions. Moreover, it quickly becomes clear that not only has the public bath—the place where fathers frequently take their sons and where men traditionally go in Islamic societies for socialization and purification—been abandoned and defiled, by the urine of foreign dogs no less, the two brothers have themselves been also. This pervasive and seemingly post-apocalyptic degradation is emphasized shortly after the beginning of the play by echoing Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene in Act V of *Macbeth*.

In Shakespeare's play, which al-Asadi directed in Syria in the 1980s, Lady Macbeth furiously rubs her hands, saying, "[W]hat, will these hands ne'er be clean ... Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." Not only does Hamid complain at the beginning of the play that the "[t]he tub reeks of putrid blood," the two brothers almost immediately begin to harshly scrub one another with pumice and pour buckets of water on each other's heads. "I brought the same loofah and stone which father used ... I'll scrape your body as father scraped mine until your filth goes down the drain." As rapidly becomes clear, however, their attempts to wash away the past are futile. The trauma and degradation they have had to endure before the Americans' arrival, which has even corrupted the bonds between siblings and parent and child, has left them abandoned in a post-moral universe in which Majid's only pleasures are smoking hashish, drinking and fornicating with prostitutes whose rotten mouths repulse him and whose names he cannot even remember. As Hamid already recognizes and Majid will soon discover, the soldiers who have come to rescue them from the infernal world of Saddam Husayn not only bring a new form of terror, they ultimately destroy whatever vestiges remain of the country's once thriving culture and of its citizens' dignity.

The brothers, who, when they are first seen, play with cucumbers, tomatoes and oranges, and playfully splash and scrub one another, echo the physical comedy of Beckett's bums, themselves theatrical descendants of peripheral and stripped-down characters from Shakespeare's plays such as the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. Complaining about his family, Majid says, "God gave me three hunchback daughters. The most I can hope for is they'll marry the local gravedigger and I'll be done with them." As pointed out above, Hamlet's gravediggers also make an appearance in al-Asadi's *Forget Hamlet*, and the opening scenes of slapstick in *Baghdadi Bath*, a play with elements of comedy that suddenly takes a very dark turn, is reminiscent of the tragicomedies of Chekhov and O'Casey, as well as those of Beckett. Although these allusions to and echoes of canonical European and Russian dramatic works are pervasive in *Baghdadi Bath*, the play, one could argue, is structured around two long monologues, one by each of the brothers, which are clear manifestations of one of the oldest traditions in the Arabic dramatic tradition: the *hakawati*, or storyteller. Hamid, who in the first scene tells a horrific tale ostensibly to explain to his brother why he never paid him back as part of a business deal and why he, Hamid, is so severely psychologically damaged, offers a much more profound motive for telling his story—which is, by extension, the story of many Iraqis under Saddam Husayn—of how he was implicated in one of the regime's crimes. However, he feels victimized not only by the government but by his brother's failure to fulfill even his most basic duties to his family. "[Y]ou're the cruelest, most

brutal of brothers ... Don't you ever ask yourself why I'm disturbed? The sudden crying, the fits of hysteria? Forgive me, but I'm going to let everything inside of me out. It will help me if I tell you that you're a person devoid of any conscience, any mercy." In response to his brother's rebuke and the gruesome story he relates, Majid coaxes his brother into joining him in one final business deal, which he claims will make them both wealthy, as a means of trying to undo the past. The brothers will be paid handsomely for transporting a wealthy politician from Amman to Baghdad for the forthcoming elections sponsored by the U.S. occupiers. The next scene finds the brothers in the bleak and freezing no man's land of the Iraq-Jordan border after their scheme has all too predictably gone awry. In the third and final scene the brothers are back at the bath, and now it is Majid's turn to tell a tale of his treatment by the American occupiers that, at least in its absurdity, is every bit as harrowing as Hamid's.

Baghdadi Bath went through multiple revisions, and since al-Asadi is as much a director as a playwright, his focus is less on the storyline, which in various versions seems disjointed, than with dramatic stage effects. The steam of the bath obviously adds to the infernal or purgatorial atmosphere, and the use of running water for the shower simultaneously reinforces the realism of the scene and provides material for the initial slapstick, as well as attempts at ritual cleansing. In some stagings, al-Asadi included a large abstract painting upstage center with swirling strokes that mirrored the clouds of steam, thus creating a *mise en abyme*. In different versions of the play and in the different productions, in Arabic as well as in English, the themes one finds in other works by al-Asadi are pervasive: arbitrary power, cruelty, madness, occupation, the theatricality of everyday life, and paradoxically, above all, exile. The two brothers, although they are both Iraqis and they, unlike the playwright, remained in Iraq through the period of Saddam Husayn's rule and the American occupation, are nonetheless marginalized into a kind of non-existence in their own country.

The play was first performed in Arabic (it was written in *fusha*, i.e., modern standard Arabic) in 2005 in Beirut at Babel Theater, which al-Asadi founded and which became his artistic home until 2017, when the theater closed. It was subsequently staged in Damascus and Amman, at Cairo's International Festival of Experimental Theater in 2006, and at the Midsummer Festival in Cork, Ireland in 2007, before returning to Babel for a production in 2009.¹⁸ In all of these productions Majid was played by Fayiz Quzuq, a celebrated Syrian stage and screen actor, and Hamid was played by the prominent Syrian television

18 Assaf, "When Theatre Becomes Home," 55; Robert Myers, "Blood On Both Hands: Jawad Al Assadi's *Baghdadi Bath*." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 30, no. 2 (2008): 108–111.

actor Nidal Sijari, who died in 2013 at the age of 48. The play, one of the first in any language to dramatize Iraq after the 2003 invasion, received overwhelmingly positive reviews in the Arabic-language press.

The English-language version published here received a fully staged reading at the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College, produced by the New York Theater Workshop, in 2006, with the Canadian stage actor Sean Krishnan as Majid, and the renowned American stage and television actor, who was born in Bombay, Aasif Mandvi as Hamid. The audience, which included a number of New York's most accomplished theater actors, directors and producers, praised the play for dramatizing the effects on ordinary Iraqis of what by then had been almost universally recognized as a tragic and misbegotten war of choice and occupation by the U.S. and its allies. The play also received a fully staged production, in Arabic with titles from the text published here, at La MaMa Theater in New York in 2009, directed by Turkish director Zishan Ugurlu. As Wilborn Hampton writes about the production in *The New York Times*, "It is when [the brothers'] fraternal camaraderie turns vituperative ... that *Baghdadi Bath* takes on the aspect of a national debate ... If Mr. al-Asadi's writing is occasionally heavy on metaphor, there is also real poignancy in some passages. In one, Hamid offers a spin on the traditional morning prayer that evokes the horrible reality with which Iraqis carry out their daily lives."¹⁹

In a final, dark and deeply ironic personal twist to the play, which took place beyond the walls of the theater, al-Asadi received word in 2007 that his brother and nephew had been murdered by a militia in Iraq. As al-Asadi writes in an essay in 2007 in *The Guardian*: "What I described in *Baghdadi Bath* has unfortunately become real in life. My brother and his son were kidnapped as they were driving a bus. The strange thing is that after the escalation of killing, Iraqi drivers, both Sunni and Shia (my brother and his son among them), have got used to carrying two passports: one with a Sunni name to be handed to Sunni militia, and the other with a Shia name to be handed to Shia militia. But my brother and nephew fell into a trap: their kidnappers appeared in the costumes of Shia militia, so my brother and nephew handed them their Shiite passports ... only to discover a few moments later that the kidnappers were actually Sunni. This is the perfect Iraqi theatre of blood. It's the theatre of masks, which leads to brutal murder."²⁰

19 Wilborn Hampton, "Brotherly Insults as National Debate on Iraq," review of *Baghdadi Bath*, La MaMa Theater, New York, *New York Times*, March 13, 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/14/theater/reviews/14bath.html>>. Accessed November 10, 2017.

20 al-Asadi, "The Iraqi Theatre of Blood." <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/aug/21/inrememberanceofmybrother>>.

Al-Asadi, who as a director is renowned for ceaseless revisions of his stagings in the rehearsal room, revised the text of *Baghdadi Bath* many times during the period when it was first being presented. In 2017, shortly before this study was prepared for press, he published a radically altered text, written in Iraqi vernacular—a much more suitable choice for a play about bus drivers and one that both reinforces the play’s lighter moments and underscores a more general trend in contemporary Arabic theater to move away from *fusha*, which many view as a stilted, artificial form of the language for dramatic manifestations of everyday life. The new text also changes some locations (Act One takes place in a bus station), and key plot elements (the corpse the pair is retrieving is in Damascus and is that of their sister instead of a politician). There are other substantial alterations, but the scene in which Hamid recounts the horrific story of transporting prisoners to be executed remains as a climax near the end of the play, and the brothers’ repulsion at what they and their society have become remains undiminished.

As a play that is at once a highly stylized theatrical work by one of the Arab world’s most accomplished artists and a frightening and all-too-realistic rendering of post-invasion Iraq, Jawad al-Asadi’s *Baghdadi Bath* continues to be one of the most poignant and piercing testimonies about Saddam Husayn’s reign of terror and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation and their horrific effects on the lives of ordinary Iraqis.



FIGURE 4.1

Fayiz Quzuq as Hamid and Nidal Sijari as Majid in *Baghdadi Bath*, written and directed by Jawad al-Asadi. Performance at Babel Theater, Beirut, 2005.

IMAGE COURTESY OF JAWAD AL-ASADI.

Baghdadi Bath

Jawad al-Asadi

(Translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab)

(Damascus, July 2005)

The set: A public Baghdadi bath, with small windows and big and small bathing tubs. A big massage table and other smaller tables, a misty atmosphere, thrown orange peels, wet rags, articles left by the customers thrown here and there.

HAMID: (*Violently*) Filthy son of a bitch!

MAJID: Who are you cursing?

HAMID: Come, see for yourself the filth in the bottom of the tub!

MAJID: Did you forget that the customers of this bath are the lowest of the low?

HAMID: How do you explain, for example, the presence of this knife here?
Huh!

MAJID: That's normal.

HAMID: The tub reeks of putrid blood and you tell me that's normal.

MAJID: Clean the tub and shut up.

HAMID: And what about this gold tooth in the bottom of the tub?

MAJID: Oh?

HAMID: It looks like real gold! Would it fit on one of your teeth? (*Sarcastically*)

MAJID: (*Hitting Hamid with a rag*) Animal ... stupid ... moron.

HAMID: (*Jokingly with his brother*) Put it in your mouth.

MAJID: Let me check it if it's really gold.

HAMID: I'll give it to the owner of the bath.

MAJID: Give it to me.

HAMID: What are you going to do with it?

MAJID: I'll sell it, of course.

HAMID: What if it turns out to be fake?

MAJID: I'll give it to my wife or to my mistress. (*He tries the gold tooth in his mouth*)

(*Hamid looks in the tub*)

HAMID: Piss ... bits of wood ... bits of tin. (*Majid and Hamid joke with one another*)

MAJID: How this bath reminds me of my childhood! When Father used to drag me like a puppy to this very bath and this very tub ... He'd scrub my body with pumice. He'd massage me on this table ... and lather my head and body ... Look ... I brought the same loofah and stone which Father used. Here, sniff your father's smell you moron! Sniff! Come ... I'll scrape your body as Father scraped mine until all your filth goes down the drain. (*Majid joyfully scrubs the body of his brother*) Whenever you need, I'll peel an orange for you with these two hands of mine! Here, smell the loofah ...

HAMID: Why is the bath empty?

MAJID: Fear ... People are afraid of surprises. That's why they return to their homes before sunset.

HAMID: And why shouldn't we return to our homes as well?

MAJID: Because we're not afraid.

HAMID: No, I am afraid.

(*Majid continues to scrub Hamid's body and pours water on him*)

MAJID: You shouldn't be afraid as long as I'm with you. It's your turn now ...
Pour hot water on my back (*With overwhelming joy*)

HAMID: As you wish. (*Hamid scrubs Majid intensely and pours water on him*)

MAJID: Lather my head.

HAMID: I am your faithful servant.

(After a few moments, Hamid lathers his head. He does everything his brother tells him to)

MAJID: (*Comfortably and peacefully*) Hamid ... Sing to me. I love to listen to your voice ... especially in the baths. (*Hamid begins to sing. He sings "The Flying Birds", a popular Iraqi song. Hamid continues to sing. Majid joins Hamid and sings with him*) When I was in elementary school my music teacher predicted I'd be a singer.

HAMID: Your voice is excellent ... superb.

MAJID: If I'd acted on my teacher's advice I would have become a famous singer now just like Sa'di al-Hilli and Sa'dun al-Jabir and Nazim al-Ghazali. (*Hamid continues to sing*) But my misfortune led me to drive buses. Oh, how I hate that filthy profession. All I gained from it are curses, drinking and hashish. When I look at my face in the mirror I don't recognize the features of my strange face. I always scream, "Good morning Majid ... Fuck your fate ... your filthy misfortune." My attitude has changed. I've turned rougher with those who ride my car. I smoke hashish ... in the open ... and I go hunting for prostitutes. I have them sit next to me during my long rides outside Baghdad ... I keep kissing them no matter how disgusting their mouths smell ... With time I got used to not staying with any of them. I discard them as I discard my shoes at the door of a room ... I have sex with them as an animal does, without any pleasure ... without differentiating one from the other. (*Hamid laughs*) Their names get jumbled up in my head during sex. When I'm coming I call Amina Fahima ... and Fadila Salima. (*Hamid laughs more*) That's why God punished me and made me marry two women ... One lost her femininity, she's grown a deep voice and a moustache.

HAMID: What about the other?

MAJID: With God's help she turned into a cow. Before I go out of the house she appears from behind the door. (*He imitates a cow*). But what's worse is God gave me three hunchback daughters. The most I can hope for is they'll marry the local gravedigger and I'll be done with them. (*Hamid laughs hysterically*) That's why I got used to running away from the house. At night I'd sneak out to the nearest bar and drink and smoke hashish until I turned into a worn out rag ... then I'd succumb to the first luscious woman I'd see and I'd dance with her babbling in English, of which I know only WOW ... NO ... YES. (*They laugh and dance buoyantly*) At night, I sway like a drunkard in front of the tanks in the streets of Baghdad. I am overwhelmed with euphoria, with a desire to embrace the soldiers, especially the repressed blond female soldiers. (*He laughs*)

HAMID: Embrace the soldiers? Why?

MAJID: You moron, no good would've come to this country of ours without them.

HAMID: I feel disgusted whenever I see them in their tanks. I want to puke.

MAJID: Well, that's because you're a moron who can't tell what's good and what's bad.

HAMID: You love them because they keep your buses in business, moving provisions and weapons and ... Admit it, you fill your pockets with their dollars.

MAJID: If they asked me, I'd sacrifice my eyesight for them. Have you seen their president on television? Have you ever seen a more handsome smile than his? He's as beautiful as the moon.

(*Hamid laughs*)

HAMID: (*Puts a big orange in Majid's mouth to shut his mouth and quiet him*) Swallow and shut up, that serves you better. (*Majid chews on the orange; as he chews his features change to resemble an animal. Hamid ridicules and makes fun of him*) Look at your face. You look like an oxen. My brother has turned into an oxen. (*Majid screams in Hamid's face, which petrifies him. Hamid screams! Then he breaks his fear with frightened, stupid laughs*) You used to yell in my face when we were in school. You would scare me as you're doing now. Do you remember when you frightened me and made me piss in

my pants? Speaking of school days, you never asked about my children or their need for school supplies. My financial situation is “sub-zero” and my family is being ravaged by hunger, while you live in another world.

(A powerful explosion, Majid goes outside to the reception area of the bath. Hamid is scared and covers his head. Majid comes back quickly. He is frightened)

MAJID: We have to get back home right away because the owner of the bath says the police found four headless bodies in front of the women’s bath next door.

HAMID: I’m not leaving. They’ll cut our throats. Let’s wait.

MAJID: Sshhh. Don’t raise your voice.

(Another explosion farther away, a long silence)

HAMID: What’s the matter with you?

MAJID: The dream came true.

HAMID: How’s that?

MAJID: I saw our father’s head cut off and thrown into the tub.

HAMID: You dreamt of him because you constantly have feelings of guilt.

MAJID: And why would I feel guilty?

HAMID: Because you haven’t visited his grave since he died! You didn’t ask for his soul to be blessed. Do something for him. Slaughter a sheep and distribute it to the poor. Sprinkle water on his grave and read the *Fatiha*. *(Majid is distressed by Hamid’s speech)*

MAJID: What makes me sad is that Father lived poor and died without friends. No one walked in his funeral procession.

HAMID: Why are you dismayed with other people when you yourself didn’t? Do you know how many people did? Me and my children.

MAJID: Where was I then?

HAMID: Ask yourself. Probably drunk in the house of one of your mistresses.

MAJID: Son of a bitch.

HAMID: No, I'm not a son of a bitch!

MAJID: If you say one more word I'll cut your tongue off with this shoe. Understand?

HAMID: Why did I ever come with you to this bath? Who knows if some thief or criminal will attack us or kill us, or the occupying soldiers will barge in here to wash their police dogs in these tubs, and then we'll wash ourselves with their piss!

MAJID: I'm happy with them, happy with their dogs and happy with their dogs' piss.

HAMID: When you talk this way you disgust me.

MAJID: Don't insult me, you son of a bitch!

HAMID: You really disgust me.

MAJID: Look at me!

(Hamid has a good look at him. Majid spits on Hamid)

HAMID: I'll accept your insult.

MAJID: Of course you will, that's because you're an insult addict.

HAMID: I won't say anything because you're my older brother.

MAJID: Answer me. You want to insult me because I said I loved them. Because of them I walk the street with my head up high. I can talk about anything without fear.

HAMID: Where is your conscience?

MAJID: I threw my conscience in the toilet, okay?

HAMID: I know.

MAJID: You're too low to know.

HAMID: After fifteen years of working with you I know your naked self.

MAJID: How dare you talk to me about nakedness, you son of a bitch. You low-life, you moron.

(Majid charges at his brother with beastly violence, but Hamid stands up to him and tries to face him)

HAMID: Don't yell in my face. Let me speak!

MAJID: Go ahead. I'll listen to you, but if you go too far I'll bust your head.

HAMID: Your mother ... your mother ...

MAJID: What about my mother?

HAMID: Your mother who carried you in her womb for nine months and another fifty years on her head, did you ever help carry her? *(Majid is unable to answer. He mumbles and curses but in a low voice)* When your mother got sick and fell, did you ask her what was the matter with her? When you came back from Amman or Damascus with tons of flour bags and provisions, did you ever feed her? You give everything to your children and wives, while your mother who is lying on her deathbed sleeps hungry. You spend everything on your children without even thinking, and cheat the brother you've been working with for sixteen years out of the fruits of his labor. The need to feed my children turned me into your meek servant. I don't object for fear of losing my livelihood. Admit before me that you are the most cruel and brutal of brothers. You loveable thief, you steal my strength away with brotherly affection. Don't you ever ask yourself why I'm mentally disturbed? The sudden crying and fits of hysteria? Excuse me, but I'm going to let everything inside of me out. It will help if I tell you that you are a person devoid of any conscience, any mercy. And that you have used me in a vile way for sixteen years. Especially when you used to fill up the bus with smuggled goods and ask me to deliver them to a merchant in Damascus when I had no idea what

they were. How would you have felt if I'd been caught on the Iraq-Syria border and put in prison? Would it have broken your heart if I'd been put to death for smuggling? Who would've protected my children who already live in a tiny house, with no school, no security and with barely enough to eat? Is this justice? Is this brotherly love? You fell in love with the soldiers. You put all your buses at their service and fired me. You hired another driver without giving me a penny in compensation. You threw me out.

MAJID: Because you refused to work with them.

HAMID: I would be ashamed to work for them.

MAJID: I, on the other hand, would deal with the devil to earn my livelihood.

HAMID: But you have become their pet dog.

MAJID: My profession is my master.

HAMID: They occupy your country and you consider them the noblest of God's creatures.

MAJID: With their help I buried my poverty.

HAMID: While poverty has buried me and my children.

MAJID: That is because you are irresponsible.

HAMID: Why did you steal what was mine?

MAJID: And what is mine, how about what is mine? Okay, you tell me, what happened to your conscience and justice and brotherliness in 1998 when I put you in charge of the bus and I told you to keep accurate accounts?

HAMID: You will not find anyone more upright than me.

MAJID: You weren't upright with me. You manipulated the accounts.

HAMID: Are you accusing me of stealing?

MAJID: Yes, I am.

HAMID: (*Yells furiously*) I would steal from my brother, the son of my mother?
(*Hamid explodes and turns into a wild beast*)

MAJID: (*Violently*) Then where did the proceeds of a full year go?

HAMID: Is this what all my toil and devotion comes to?

MAJID: Okay, then tell me the truth.

HAMID: You used to beat me and scream at me. You didn't believe a word I said.

MAJID: Are you scared to confess that you're a thief?

HAMID: Apologize. Right now.

MAJID: You're a professional thief and low life.

HAMID: Say you're sorry or I'll hang myself.

MAJID: Hang yourself. Even if you do you'll still have to tell me the truth.

(*Hamid tries to hang himself but Majid rushes towards him and prevents him from doing so and calms him down*)

HAMID: I confess. Remember January '98?

MAJID: I remember.

HAMID: When I came to your house and asked you to give me the bus.

MAJID: I remember

HAMID: You gave me the bus.

MAJID: I remember.

HAMID: I told you about the deal I had with someone high up in the police to operate the bus. The stipulation was that we transport convicted soldiers from one prison to another. We agreed he would pay me two million dinars after the end of the shift, as he called it. At the same time he made me sign

a separate piece of paper in my own writing that I would keep everything I saw or heard to myself. Otherwise, I'd be killed.

MAJID: And you accepted?

HAMID: Of course I did. But after I signed I got frightened. I felt I'd made a big mistake. He told me what time the soldiers were to be moved. Sunrise. I arrived the next day, in front of the Radwaniyya Prison. At exactly 5:30, the police began to drag out convicted felons between twenty and thirty years old by force to humiliate them. They threw them in the bus blindfolded and nearly naked. They signaled for me to move. There was one military vehicle in front of the bus and another behind it. After driving an hour on streets and alleys I didn't know a big group of soldiers appeared. They made the prisoners stand in random order and then they suddenly started shooting. All the prisoners fell without saying a word. The air was engulfed in a horrible silence. I was overwhelmed with fear ... with filth. It felt like I was their partner in crime. The world turned dark. They didn't even bother to bury these dead youths where they'd murdered them. They wanted to desecrate them even further, so they carried them with blood dripping from their bodies into the bus. They ordered me to drive to somewhere else I didn't recognize. I wanted to puke. The bus reeked of blood. They ceremoniously and joyfully carried the corpses out of the bus and threw them in a ditch ... With no mercy or compassion ... More than a dozen gravediggers stood around that ditch and ten minutes later the corpses all disappeared. The officer in charge came to me and ordered me to clean the bus and wipe away all traces of blood. They sat meters away from me. One of the soldiers pulled a bottle of *'araq* out of his jacket and gulped at it. Others smoked and told jokes, laughing loudly. Those were the worst moments of my life. They returned to the bus as if they hadn't committed a crime. On the contrary, they seemed even happier. They played cards and sang. The officer in charge told me I shouldn't find what had happened strange at all. They were in a struggle against traitors to the nation. He insisted I remain close and help them in their mission. Then he said they were going to keep me in prison for a few days until the operation was over. That meant that I would be held in solitary confinement. The next day the same operation was repeated at dawn. The bus was filled with forty young men all sentenced to death. But on the third day the number of the condemned reached 70. They even asked me to put the corpses in bags, to carry the bodies up to the bus on my shoulders, to smoke with them, and play cards, to tell them dirty jokes. They forced me to get drunk. They wanted to humiliate me. They put a machine gun in my

hand and screamed: Shoot son of a —————! Shoot hard! Shoot up in the air! That was the way they made me the mop for their crimes. I became sick. I puked blood. I lost my appetite. I became pale and thin. I beat my head against the prison wall. I fell to the floor. I cried. They took me to a military hospital and after one month of treatment their leader came to see me again and threatened to cut my tongue if I ever said a word about what I had seen. "We won't give you a penny of your pay. We consider your service with us to be a most valuable gift to the nation." *(He puts his head in the pail and pukes. He screams. He walks as if his body has turned into a pile of rocks. He rushes to the shower to clean up. Majid rushes to him. He hugs and consoles Hamid)*

MAJID: Forget the past. We must take advantage of the present situation to make up for our losses. We'll turn over a new leaf for the sake of our families. Do not despair. I will provide you with excellent opportunities that will make you forget all my past mistakes. Come on, try me. Don't refuse to work with me this time. If you refuse we'll both lose big because the catch is precious. We have to leave Baghdad at dawn. The man we're going to bring from Amman to Baghdad is one of the most important candidates up for election in the next round.

HAMID: *(In a serious tone)* How much is my share going to be?

MAJID: Forget about that for now. He'll be very generous with us.

HAMID: You're not going to trick me this time, are you? *(Hamid looks at Majid with great suspicion. The sounds of horns become louder. The sound of explosions, thunder and wind. A masked driver drags a coffin around the stage with great difficulty)* He died. His head suddenly exploded in front of me and he died. Where should I hide the coffin? Where? There are hungry dogs here. Majid, where are you? Why are you leaving me alone with this coffin? Did you get the passports stamped? We have to deliver this man's body to his family. Why won't you answer me?

(More explosions and heavy wind. Dogs howling and sounds of horns. People's voices are louder)

MAJID: Where were you? Why did you disappear? Are you crazy? Don't take another step without telling me.

HAMID: I went to look for the toilets but found a dead woman dumped on the pavement. I tried to find you where the passports are stamped but you weren't there. Did you get the passports stamped?

(A loud explosion and heavy winds)

MAJID: Stay with me! *(Afraid)*

HAMID: It's getting crowded with trucks and buses. I'm cold and I'm scared. I can't stay here any longer.

MAJID: You have to hang on until they let us cross.

HAMID: I can't hang on. I'm sick of you and the trucks and the border and the Americans.

(Loud bangs and noises. It is still windy and raining. A loud explosion which makes part of the roof fall down)

MAJID: I pray to God that He gets us to Baghdad safely. All my plans have failed. This man was going to be our salvation. Instead he's turned into a corpse that threatens our lives.

HAMID: You always lead me into a dead end. Look, the soldiers are making drivers stand against the wall. Look at the disgraceful way they're searching them.

MAJID: What are we going to do if the corpse starts rotting?

HAMID: You promised me. You said this trip was going to get me out of poverty.

MAJID: It's our bad luck that he died at the Iraqi border. He was just fine at the Jordanian border. He put a cigar in his mouth, put gel on his hair, put perfume on his neck. He was dreaming of winning the election. He kissed his mistress, put his arm around her, and suddenly she screamed. His head exploded as they were embracing and he died. He fell in front her like a handful of dust. She got scared and took off back to Amman. If he'd died at the Jordanian border we could've just returned to Amman.

HAMID: Look! The soldiers are coming towards us. Talk to them. I'm afraid. Say something.

MAJID: Hello! Hello! Please help us. Let us pass. We've been entrusted with this man's body and we have to return him to his family fast. Viva ... Viva!

HAMID: You say, "Viva"? They're blocking the road.

MAJID: They're blocking the road to catch those who are causing explosions and setting booby traps.

HAMID: They themselves are the ones setting them.

MAJID: Talk to the female soldier standing there. Lie to her. Tell her we love them and pray they will stay here.

HAMID: No! You go and talk to her yourself! You're my big brother, aren't you?

MAJID: You moron. You speak better English than I do. Go!

HAMID: I'm scared. I have to go pee.

MAJID: You have to pee every half an hour.

HAMID: I shouldn't go pee? I should pee in my pants?

MAJID: Watch out for stray bullets!

HAMID: You think stray bullets only come when I want to pee? *(He goes to pee. As he pees, he sings. A loud explosion. Frightened, he screams and returns to his brother)* The coffin's moving.

MAJID: Don't be afraid. The wind's moving it.

HAMID: What if the dogs smell the candidate's corpse?

MAJID: That's why you have to convince that female soldier to let us cross the border to get to Baghdad. If we don't, we won't receive the money we were promised.

HAMID: Speaking of money, you never told me how much my share would be.

MAJID: Is this the right time to talk about that? (*Majid's telephone rings*)

HAMID: Whenever I ask you about my money you change the subject.

MAJID: Huh! Ghizlan, my darling Ghizlan. I miss you. I bought you a wonderful gift. Black genuine kohl for your eyes and a fiery red dress. On the border. Listen, prepare the *Jajik*, the yogurt with cucumbers and garlic. Smash that garlic well. I love you madly. (*He kisses the phone*) We're running out of time. Go talk to the soldier!

HAMID: I've decided to go back to Amman.

MAJID: What did you say?

HAMID: I've changed my mind. I don't want to go back to Baghdad.

MAJID: Why, asshole? Why?

HAMID: Because you're still deceiving me. You're playing tricks to rob me of my due. If you think I don't get your games then you're mistaken.

MAJID: My games?

HAMID: I know about all the contracts you made with investors and middlemen to use the buses to move supplies to and from the prisons.

MAJID: I knew you wouldn't like that kind of work.

HAMID: Of course not. I'd much rather move travelers between Amman and Baghdad than supplies to prisons.

MAJID: Sure you would. You have no ambition and you prefer to stay in your swamp.

HAMID: It's better than working with you. Give me my passport. I want to go back to Amman.

MAJID: You'll leave me alone at the border among thieves and murderers, with the howling dogs and rotting corpses?

HAMID: I've made up my mind. That's final. *(Majid grabs Hamid by the neck and waves the passport, holding it away from Hamid)*

MAJID: I won't give you your passport unless you convince the soldier. Lie to her. Tell her that the corpse we have is one of a kind. A "classy" corpse of someone nominated for a high position. Hold her responsible for any delay. *(He tries to convince Hamid by force. Hamid gives in and tries one last time even though he is mad at his brother)*

HAMID: Good morning, explosions; morning, booby traps; morning, murderers and ambulances. Good morning, corpses floating in the Tigris River. There's a billionaire on our bus who had business deals all around the world. He nominated himself for the elections but before he got to Baghdad his head exploded at the border. His family is waiting for us in Baghdad to have the funeral. My daughter Fatima is waiting for me because today is her birthday. Please help us. Let us pass. Yes, what did you say? Search the corpse? No. Search the orifices? That's horrible. But he's dead. How could you desecrate a dead man! No, I won't be part of a crime like that. No! *(Buses moving and the sounds of horns and people again. A loud explosion, congested traffic and loud horns make them run away. Lots of buses moving around and the sound of horns. Hamid and Majid come back dressed as drivers. To Majid)* Get rid of the corpse.

MAJID: Are you crazy?

HAMID: The soldier says she's going to examine the body.

MAJID: So, let her.

HAMID: I'm getting rid of the corpse.

MAJID: No!

HAMID: Let's feed it to the dogs.

MAJID: What will I tell the people who are expecting him?

HAMID: I don't know.

MAJID: You don't know?

HAMID: You've turned me into an animal who's always running behind you panting.

MAJID: Calm down.

HAMID: I will not carry the corpse on my back as you told me to.

MAJID: Don't provoke me!

HAMID: Hire a driver and ask him to take the corpse outside the bus and drag it over to the soldier.

MAJID: But most of the buses have already passed through.

HAMID: I don't think they're going to let us across.

MAJID: It's going to become very dangerous here in a few hours.

HAMID: I'm not going to listen to you ... I don't want to listen to you ... Leave me alone. She wants to search every orifice of the corpse. How can you accept that?

MAJID: She can do whatever she wants. There is nothing else for us to do. If we don't make it to Baghdad with the corpse we'll lose the money.

HAMID: The responsibility for it is yours. I don't want my share.

MAJID: You're leaving me prey to the dogs.

HAMID: I'm not doing what you tell me even if you cut off my head. I'm going back to Amman. I don't want to die for nothing.

MAJID: If I convince her to let me pass I'm not taking you with me to Baghdad.

HAMID: I won't go back with you to Baghdad.

MAJID: Lowlife.

HAMID: You're a lowlife.

MAJID: Scum.

HAMID: You're scum.

MAJID: You betrayed me.

HAMID: You killed me. You murdering ... asshole. You took what was rightfully mine and my children's. You've ruined my life. You filthy ... rotten murderer ... murderer.

(Majid sits next to the coffin)

MAJID: I will not give up this corpse even if the ground explodes under my feet and thunder roars above my head. The most important thing is to get this coffin to Baghdad. I'm going over to the soldier and convince her to let me cross the border. I'm not going to object to anything. Even if she wants to strip the dead man of his clothes and desecrate his body. Yes, she can strip search him and do whatever she'd like. All I care about is getting to Baghdad, delivering the dead man to his family and getting the money I was promised. *(The light changes. Majid is in front of the soldier next to the coffin. He talks to her)* I know the weather's so brutally cold it could kill a beast. *(Sarcastically)* I congratulate your perseverance in defending the security of my country. I too am defending my country in my own way. That's why I'm carrying the corpse of one of the most successful election nominees. It must be painful for you to be away from your family, your country and your children. I have no doubt you want to go back home. I know that here you're deprived of intimacy and intercourse. You want to return to a warm home, to the theater and the movies and play the piano for hours, to walk your dog on the streets of New York, and travel by train to Texas. I too went to Amman dreaming of a strong nominee for our elections. But instead reached this border with a scary corpse. Please let me pass with this corpse to Baghdad. I kiss your hand, your boot, the barrel of your gun. If you want to search the body, go ahead. Search it any way you wish. Strip him naked, strip him of his dignity. *(A very loud explosion. The light changes to one similar to the first scene, but dingier now. Majid and Hamid are now back in the bath again)* Ha-

mid, Hammud, where are you? When you left me punishment befell me from every direction.

HAMID: What happened to you?

MAJID: I gave up driving. Don't I look like a gravedigger?

HAMID: If we had taken up the profession of grave digging instead of driving we would've made millions of dinars. It's an ideal profession. No losses. People die in explosions, they kill each other in the streets and they are taken to graves. Gravediggers deal with corpses they don't own. They bury them in earth they don't own. It's a golden profession.

MAJID: And if I were a gravedigger I'd wish I were a worm. And if that worm could speak, it would say, I'm coming.

HAMID: But you'd be a repressed worm. Did you get the corpse to the cemetery? (*Majid is silent*) Why don't you answer?

MAJID: I didn't get paid.

HAMID: I'm sure you were paid and hid the money from me.

MAJID: Believe me, can't you ... (*Hamid laughs*) I swear on my dead mother and my children's eyesight that all I was paid was the howling of dogs.

HAMID: Liar.

MAJID: I'm lying? Why are you talking to me this way? Did you forget I'm your older brother?

HAMID: You were.

MAJID: What are you saying?

HAMID: You have to change the way you talk to me. I'm not afraid of you anymore.

MAJID: Oh. You're taking advantage of my weakness.

HAMID: You'd better admit it.

MAJID: Admit what?

HAMID: That you've betrayed me.

MAJID: Hamid, I can't stand fighting any more. I can't stand my life. If you continue this way I'll hurt myself.

HAMID: What will you do, kill yourself?

MAJID: I may.

HAMID: You're a coward; you'd never do it. (*Majid is angry and throws the chains in his hands onto the ground and the tables, then he returns*)

MAJID: But you still have to confess.

HAMID: OK. I'll tell you everything. I gathered up the pieces of the corpse after the explosion. I returned the head, the feet, and the hands to the coffin. I drove the bus as fast as I could hoping to get the body to the cemetery in Baghdad where the family was waiting. Suddenly a chopper descended near my bus and I was ordered to get out. The soldiers asked for my passport. They searched the bus and opened the coffin. They looked at the corpse disgusted, but they didn't ask me anything. They told me to drive the bus and follow them. And I did for four hours into the desert. I was frightened to death of them. I didn't know what they wanted and why they'd led me to this strange place. The body was in the bus and his family was waiting in the cemetery. I prayed to the Lord to save me. Suddenly the soldiers all stopped, so did I. They carried their guns and went deep into the desert towards some orchards off in the distance. I realized they were looking for armed people. They went far off and forgot all about me. I stayed in the bus with the rising stench of the corpse. I asked myself, what should I do if they don't come back. If I leave or if I go towards them they'll shoot me. I didn't know where I was or which way to go. It was getting dark. The stench made me throw up. I could hear the howling of the dogs coming closer. I was alone with my agony, and at that moment I needed you. There was nothing else for me to do except to stay in the bus with the coffin, praying to all the saints in the desert. I prayed for the saints. Would the dogs ravage me and the corpse? The only thing I could do was bury the corpse right there. I dug with my hands

and fingernails. I dug and dug and dug. The rabid dogs came closer to the bus. I brought the pieces of the corpse down and threw them in the hole and covered them, covered them with dust. It was so vile and horrible. I wished for a moment I were dead. I hated myself. I cried so hard. It was midnight. I sat by the grave and realized I was all alone. I couldn't think of anyone but Mother. I thought, would she forgive me if I asked her to? I wanted to erase all my mistakes and wash my sins away in front of her. The sun came up. For three days and three nights the tanks were passing in front of me and circling around me, the helicopters were above my head. Soldiers passed in front of me without speaking to me or allowing me to move. The dogs were all around the bus, in the bus, on top of the bus. The soldiers came back running with their machine guns. They went inside the bus again and yelled, "Where's the dead man? What's his name? Where's his passport?" I didn't know what to do. I told them the truth. They told me to dig him up. I dug and dug with my hands. I held his feet, his head, his hands. They started to laugh, they aimed their guns at me then they pushed me into the grave and covered me with dust. Then all of a sudden they disappeared.

—The End—

Ra'ida Taha

Robert Myers and Nada Saab

Palestinian writer-performer Ra'ida Taha's first solo theatrical piece, *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* (*Ala'iqi zayyak fin, ya 'Ali?*) an autobiographical one-woman play she both wrote and performed, was first presented at Babel Theater in Beirut in 2015, directed by the Lebanese theater artist Lina Abyad. Taha's piece, based on her experience as the child of a martyr, i.e., a hero or a freedom fighter in the struggle to liberate Palestine, went on to be produced in other Arab countries, Europe, the U.S. at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., Ramallah and elsewhere in Palestine. The piece, which offers a singular perspective on the Palestinian liberation movement—that of a child of a PLO fighter killed in a plane hijacking—weaves humor and sometimes absurd situations alongside a critical reevaluation of the cost of political struggle on the families of resistance fighters.

Taha was born in Jerusalem in 1965, seventeen years after the founding of the state of Israel. By that time 1,300,000 Palestinians—refugees who had been forced to flee their homes after the Israeli territorial expansion in 1949 and their descendants—were living in and registered with the UN in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Gaza Strip,¹ which exceeded the number of Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank by over 100,000.² The Palestinians and Israelis had become locked in a seemingly intractable conflict over partitioned Palestine, and the cycle of political violence between the two sides had begun to accelerate. *Fatah*, the Palestinian guerilla movement supported by Syria and led by Yasir 'Arafat and others, systematically conducted raids against Israel from across the Jordanian border, which, in turn, provoked strong Israeli retaliations. The increasing tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors ultimately led to the second Arab-Israeli war in June 1967, a conflict in which Israel defeated the Arabs and occupied the West Bank, the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai.³

1 UNISPAL, Yearbook of the United Nations 1965, Chapter XIV. Accessed December 16, 2017. <<https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/891EBC30C64DF1AA852562CE00682973>>.

2 World Population Review. Accessed December 16, 2017. <<http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/palestine-population/>>.

3 Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press: 2009), 377.

After this disastrous defeat, the Palestinian leadership realized that the support of Arab countries was undependable and ineffectual and that if the struggle to retake their homeland were to have any chance of success they would have to lead it. An increasingly popular 'Arafat became the chairman of the PLO, the Palestinian governing body, whose members were considered the most “dynamic Palestinian leaders” and heroes of Arab youth.⁴ By making their cause a struggle between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism and by asserting their rights to reclaim their homeland, the Palestinians became increasingly recognized around the world as having a legitimate political agenda.⁵

In September 1970, however, the PLO, which had established its operational base in Jordan after the June 1967 War and had become a political force in the country, suffered a massive defeat after attempting to overthrow the ruling Hashemite monarchy. This debacle resulted in the fragmentation of the Organization's military units and in the virtual destruction of “its political and social work of the previous three years.”⁶ From 1970 to 1972 the Palestinians endured a period of division and a crisis of leadership that threatened to lead to the disintegration of the resistance movement. Although the PLO maintained an operational base in Lebanon, which expanded as the country fractured in civil war, the tactics used by independent, underground groups active elsewhere shifted from guerilla incursions to more radical operations such as spectacular hijackings or political assassinations, which often drew negative attention or international condemnation.

One such action was the foiled hijacking of Sabena flight 571 from Vienna to Tel Aviv on May 8, 1972. The four hijackers, two young women and two young men, forced the plane to land at the Lod⁷ airport (now Ben Gurion) and demanded the release of 315 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. During negotiations, Israeli commandos disguised as airplane mechanics—among them future prime-ministers Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu—shot the two male hijackers dead. One of them, the leader of the operation, was 'Ali Taha “Abu Snina,” the father of Ra'ida Taha.⁸ It is the story of the aftermath of his death and of growing up as the orphan of a martyr of the Palestinian resistance

4 Ibid., 436.

5 Ibid., 433, 444.

6 Abu Iyad with Eric Rouleau, *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle* (New York: Times Books, 1981): 98, quoted in Tessler, 463.

7 Also called Lydda.

8 Stuart Jeffries. 2015. “Four hijackers and three Israeli PMS: the incredible story of Sabena flight 571.” *Guardian* (UK edition), November 11, 2015. Accessed November 2, 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/11/sabena-flight-571-hijack-plane-black-september-film>>.

that led her to write and perform her first solo theatrical piece, *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* (2015).

During the years her father was active in the resistance, Taha lived in Beirut with her mother and three sisters, where they remained after he was killed. In 1983, she traveled to the U.S. to study Speech Communication and Journalism at George Mason University, just outside Washington, D.C. After graduating in 1987, she received an invitation from 'Arafat to work as his press secretary and moved to Tunisia where the PLO was based after being expelled from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of 1982. In 1994 Taha moved to Ramallah, a year after the First Intifada ended and the Oslo Peace Accord, which laid out conditions for a gradual resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was signed by Yasir 'Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin in Washington. The terms of the Accord were, of course, never implemented. As 'Arafat's press aide, Taha traveled extensively, meeting heads of state, political figures, officials and others in Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa. During her many trips with 'Arafat, they also met with members of the Palestinian diaspora, whom she interviewed about their recollections of her father, 'Ali, as a political activist and *fida'i* (resistance fighter). She recorded and archived these conversations, which formed the basis for a memoir she wrote, entitled *Ali*, which she wrote largely for the purpose of telling the story of her father to his grandchildren. This book, which she finished in three months, was written in Ramallah, where she still resides, during the Israeli invasion and occupation of the West Bank in 2002. She showed the manuscript to her mentor, the celebrated Palestinian poet and PLO official, Mahmud Darwish, who encouraged her to publish it because, although it was, he said, "a simple, emotional book," it was one in which, for the first time, "the daughter of a martyr [a people's hero] said things no one had yet said."⁹ This text, of which no copies remain, was the catalyst for her *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* The theatrical piece also draws on her memories of childhood, as well as statements and stories by family members and others.

Much of Taha's early adult life was defined by her work and relationships with influential men who were at the center of the Palestinian struggle for liberation. She carried on the legacy of a heroic father as the protégée of 'Arafat, and she nurtured an intellectual friendship with Darwish. She points, for example, to his book *In the Presence of Absence (Fi Hadrat al-Ghiyab)* (2006), eulogy the poet wrote for himself, as a text that she particularly admires.¹⁰

9 Ra'ida Taha (author-performer), in conversation with Robert Myers and Nada Saab, Beirut September 15, 2017.

10 Darwish who in this piece draws "on a celebrated *qasida* by the Umayyad poet Malik ibn al-Rayb as his model, composed this work as a funeral speech for himself. Essentially, it is

Taha ultimately married Suhayl Jad'un, a member of a prestigious banking family, who passed away in 2009. Paradoxically, her special position in the community and her high profile work seem to have stifled her true aspirations: "I have this urge ... I have to talk. In the Arabic world we don't talk about [private] things [and] I always had the urge to go up on stage and say something. My family and friends say that I was very talented at telling stories, improvising and mimicking," she said in a 2017 interview, adding that she would have studied theater in Egypt were it not for her protective and traditional mother who prevented her from doing so.¹¹ She later confided to a bemused Darwish that she wanted to perform stand-up comedy. Shortly after the beginning of the twenty-first century, Taha, who was then in her forties, experienced a series of difficult losses in rapid succession: the deaths of 'Arafat, Darwish and her husband. Losing them, she suggests, rekindled her feelings of being abandoned by those whom she had loved: "I carried a void in my life and I decided to do something, to talk about them the way I wanted."¹² But her impulse to memorialize the legendary figures who had shaped her life and the lives of many Palestinians was slow in materializing.

In 2010, during a trip to Beirut, she was offered her first acting role by the Lebanese director Lina Abyad, as one of the female protagonists in the stage adaptation of the Palestinian author and activist Ghassan Kanafani's poignant novella, *Return to Haifa* (*A'id ila Hayfa*). According to Taha, Kanafani was the writer she most revered after Darwish, and *Return to Haifa* the work by him she admired the most. The novella, which was published in 1970—and the play adapted from it—tells the story of a Palestinian couple who fled their home in 1948, leaving their son behind. Years later, when they are allowed to visit their house in Haifa, they meet a Polish-Jewish couple who were Holocaust survivors who have adopted their son, who is now an IDF officer. The story, a veiled condemnation of the Palestinians who left Palestine instead of fighting for the land as the Zionists did, simultaneously inspired many to continue resisting Israeli occupation while at the same time humanizing the plight of displaced Palestinians and others who were forced to flee during war. Not surprisingly, the somber paradoxes of *Return to Haifa* would be referenced in Taha's second solo piece, *36 Abbas Street, Haifa* (*36 Shari' Abbas, Hayfa*), although in a subtly ironic and lyrical fashion.

an oration in prose, but snatches of poetry also appear in a stylistic pattern where rhetorical figures abound." Tetz Rooke. "In the Presence of Absence: Mahmoud Darwish's Testament." *Journal of Arab and Islamic Studies*, vol. 8 (2008). Accessed December 8, 2017. <<https://www.gu.se/english/research/publication?publicationId=83245>>.

11 Taha, in conversation with Myers and Saab.

12 Ibid.

Although Taha claims no particular influences in her development as a theater artist, she credits the prolific Lina Abyad, who also wrote the adaptation of *Return to Haifa*, for recognizing her acting skills and passion for the theater, and for rigorously preparing her for the stage. After her Beirut debut, Taha played leading roles in *Petra Rocks* (2011) and *80 Steps* (2013). The rehearsals for these two plays also functioned as advanced acting laboratories for the forty-five year-old Taha, who embraced the challenge and learned to sing, dance and improvise.

She developed a close friendship with Abyad with whom she discussed her idea of dramatizing her father's story. Abyad agreed to be her collaborator and Taha went back to work on her original manuscript. She says that she had accumulated so much material from interviews, documents and family records that she had to rewrite the script for the play more than ten times. At every stage of the writing process, she and Abyad would read and edit the text, analyzing its content and rearranging the order of the stories, a work she says was protracted and demanding. Once they agreed on a final version of the script, they entered a period of exhaustive rehearsals.¹³

The text itself is an autobiographical collage of interpolated episodes that span a period beginning with the day the news of Taha's killing appears on the cover of a Lebanese paper to the day his body, which had been kept at a morgue by Israel, is finally returned to his family to be mourned and commemorated. Most episodes, which are short vignettes, take place in Beirut and feature a bereaved Fathiyya, Taha's mother, struggling to play her newly assigned role as the young, exemplary mother of four orphan "daughters of the revolution" and widow of a *fida'i* whom she wishes were alive, "selling radishes." The final vignettes are dramatized in Jerusalem and Hebron and feature Taha's matriarchal aunt, Suhayla's, fight to retrieve her brother's body from Israel. All characters, Palestinian men, women and children, two female Israelis—one an affable Israeli soldier and the other a righteous lawyer who defends Palestinians—are enacted in a meticulously crafted solo performance that takes the shape of an autobiographical monologue.¹⁴ The text of *'Ali* is assembled from historical accounts, memoirs and testimonials with tones ranging from comedic to sober to confessional as the narrator's self-dramatization alternates between childhood experience, adult recollections and impersonations of others, and reflections on the construction of the dramatic text being performed.

13 Taha, in conversation with Myers and Saab.

14 Clare Wallace, "Monologue Theater, Solo Performance and the Self as Spectacle," introduction to *Monologues: Theater, Performance, Subjectivity*, ed., Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006), 4.

Scenes of traditional Palestinian family life, which include members' political perspectives and attitudes toward revolution, are dramatized and scrutinized in a vivid and subtly irreverent fashion. The form of the text—a mesh of embedded and often fragmented stories that utilize modes such as burlesque, lyrical and elegiac—echoes the form of storytelling of the traditional Arab *hakawati* as appropriated and reworked in modern and contemporary Arab plays such as *The Adventure of the Head of Mamluk Jabir* (*Mughamarat Ra's al Mamluk Jabir*) (1969) by Sa'd Allah Wannus, and *The Jester* (*al-Muharrij*) (1973) by Muhammad al-Maghut.

Ali's theatrical effectiveness, however, results in large measure from a post-modern recasting of the modernist perception of the self as “the unfixed, fragmented, product of various social and historical forces.”¹⁵ Accordingly, in her performance, Taha projects, as Clare Wallace puts it, the “self as spectacle” and this self is “... alienated, multifaceted, unfinished, split, political, gendered” and “above all performative and provocative.”¹⁶ Taha's self-dramatization, with its rapidly shifting performative elements, is a manifestation of the multi-faceted and fragmented self described by Wallace. In *Ali*, she is a young woman who turns into a child and reappears as an adult; she inhabits her mother, her sisters, her aunt and the widows of martyrs; she enacts the resilience of Palestinian women and, at times, lampoons their shallowness; and she embodies 'Arafat, her “real uncle,” Ghazi, old-guard Palestinian politicians and Henry Kissinger, skillfully capturing their idiolects and turns of phrase.

In addition, in *Ali* the difficulty posed by the monologue as a genre, i.e., its blurring of the lines between subjectivity and performance and the conflation of “the roles of personality, persona, personification and impersonation”¹⁷ acquire a new complexity. Thus, Taha's child orphan persona, one of the most powerful narrators, is very likely to “play tricks”¹⁸ on an audience that is too enraptured by the persona she creates to notice her inherent theatricality. And it is precisely Taha's “tricky” child orphan narrator who deploys ambivalence and parody¹⁹ to comically undermine and destabilize what in her cultural community had heretofore been the widely accepted code of treating the theme of Palestinian political struggle exclusively with seriousness and reverence.

15 Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003): 43 quoted in Wallace “Monologue Theater, Solo Performance and the Self as Spectacle,” 10.

16 Wallace, “Monologue Theater,” 16.

17 *Ibid.*, 6–7.

18 Deborah Geis, *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), quoted in Wallace, 8–9.

19 Wallace, “Monologue Theater,” 9.

In both its form and content Taha's monologue recalls the work of innovative and acclaimed American solo performers. Her story of longing for a martyred father evokes, for example, the dark comedic monologues of Lisa Kron about growing up Jewish in Michigan as the daughter of a holocaust survivor father whom she idolizes. Taha's precise and fast-paced mimicry and seemingly impromptu asides bring to mind the fiery, kaleidoscopic impersonations of Anna Deveare Smith in her account of African-American and Jewish racial tensions in *Fires in the Mirror*.

Allusions are also intrinsic to the construction of Taha's piece. Its title, *Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* (*Alaqa zayyak fin, ya 'Ali?*), is borrowed from an old and mischievous Egyptian love song, recorded by the late Lebanese *tarab*²⁰ diva, Sabah, in which a young woman tells of her fear of being abandoned by her lover.

But the homonymous theatrical piece, purportedly a tale of love and loss, begins with a shocking account of a sexual assault. The story begins *in media res* as Taha relates an assault she suffered as a young woman in her hotel room while on a diplomatic mission abroad with 'Arafat. Although her assailant, a high-ranking PLO official, is eventually punished, she is left damaged, baffled at how vulnerable she is in spite of being part of a revolutionary class whose core values are discipline and equality. Taha's dramatization of the scene evokes both pathos and comedic irony. Her recounting also includes references to cliché movie scenes, respectful but amusing descriptions of a righteous and praise-loving 'Arafat, and a comment on the fact that her sexual assault, though punished, is ultimately covered up. As an opening scene, this incident of a high-level committed political figure engaging in a brutal and brazen sexual attack is jarring, but its dramatization reveals Taha's vulnerability, which, in turn, evokes the figure of the absent father. "I hated my father 'Ali for not being there," she says. "At night, I would dream that 'Ali, and no one else, was thrashing that bastard who had laid his hands on me." But Taha's narration also suggests a degree of autonomy, a sort of "affective" disentanglement from the grip of three men who each embody the failures and the challenges of the Palestinian struggle. In her story, the feminist slogan, the personal is political, is seemingly inverted.

20 The genre "refers to an older repertoire, which is rooted in the pre-World War I musical practice of Egypt and the East-Mediterranean Arab world and is directly associated with emotional evocation." A. J. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4, quoted in Marin Lueg, *Middle Eastern Music and Dance*. Accessed December 10, 2017. <<http://arabicmusicband.com/articles/tarab>>.

Despite *Ali's* lyrical and melancholy dramatizations of themes such as abandonment, sacrifice, loyalty and loss, the piece extensively utilizes comedic vignettes, hyperbolic language and satirical portrayals of a number of eccentric characters who both embody and subvert stereotypes of Palestinians such as camp dwellers, freedom fighters and backward peasants. One such vignette is Scene Seven, "City of Martyrs," whose title is a darkly ironic oxymoron since it refers both to where the families of martyrs are actually housed and the fact that the martyrs themselves are, of course, dead. In it, Taha simultaneously offers the viewpoints of her sisters, herself and her mother, Fathiyya, who struggles to find her young girls a proper school. Fathiyya decides to move the girls from a camp school next to the PFLP²¹ office in Beirut to an upscale French school. However, soon after they enroll, one of the arrogant Francophile parents calls Fathiyya to complain that Taha is upsetting the woman's daughter, who is a student, by "lying" about Taha's father, claiming he is a martyr who hijacked a plane. Fathiyya assures the woman she will discipline Taha, saying, "How dare she tell the truth," and then moves the girls to an English language school where she knows the principal. His brother, Wadi', and *Ali* were, says Taha, "friends and colleagues," i.e., Wadi' had participated in one of the PFLP's most spectacular missions, hijacking and blowing up several planes at an airstrip in Jordan in 1970. "Here, at least was a common history of aircraft hijacking," Taha says wryly, adding that it was "a better fit as a school."

The tone of "City of Martyrs" is almost burlesque, and the scene is arguably the play's most irreverent. However, by mingling the perspectives of adults and children, the scene's comedic effect is steeped in pathos:

With time, life became sweeter. People would pass by, bring us presents, take us on outings, buy us new clothes. Abu 'Ammar ['Arafat] would come and play with us, especially on feast days. I know, I know. Such pampering! Enough to stop the heart with joy! Everyone was jealous of our being daughters of a martyr. All the kids wanted to be like us. Soon some of them got their wish.

In another anecdote in "City of Martyrs," the adult narrator draws on the glib logic and free-associations reminiscent of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* as she impersonates friends: "I once had a childhood friend named Simsim. Her father was a *Fatah* official. And she would pester him: 'Dad, the daughters of Umm Nidal (that's my Mom) get to go on these trips. Can't I join them?' 'No, my

21 Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine the second largest branch of the PLO after *Fatah*.

dear,' her father would reply, 'you're not a martyr's daughter. You can't go.'" The burlesque elements of this passage veer into satire as the narrator proceeds to tell the story of her visit to Simsim's home along with her mother and sisters after the girl's father is assassinated by the Mossad. Here, the blunt and seemingly shocking logic of children is deployed by the adult narrator to satirize, and thus expose, the obsessive cult of *fida'iyyin* heroism in a culture that engages in mythmaking to mask defeat:

And as we entered the house, right in the middle of the crying and screaming and the horrific scenes that we knew all too well, stood Simsim—smiling! "My wish has come true," she said. "Now I can travel with you." And she did. We would go on trips together to represent Palestine and perform *dabka*. Our group grew and grew. A new face appeared every week it seemed. It was no small matter to be the daughter of a martyr. Simsim's luck was so powerful, in fact, that she eventually became not just the daughter of a martyr but the wife of one too.

Bold truth-telling and the resulting offense it tends to produce are inherent in comic *parrhesia*, the rhetorical mode of satire. In an essay about Greek satirists such as Aristophanes and Socrates, and the American stand-up comic Lenny Bruce, Ralph Rosen asserts that, "[S]atirists work in a fundamentally didactic mode whether explicitly or implicitly, and like the best teachers, they need to tell the truth about how the world is."²² However, elsewhere Rosen suggests that in the case of political satire the ultimate goal is not persuasion or education but humor.²³

Although these observations do not fully describe the linguistic and storytelling strategies Taha employs in *Ali*, they offer insight into her inventive brand of political satire and social commentary. In her narration she replaces truth-telling with confession as a means of speaking about sexual abuse, loss and abandonment, and substitutes evocative and amusing mimicking for caricature when she tells the truth about the pettiness and eccentric habits of fellow Palestinians. By shifting between confessional and absurdist but controlled, truth-telling modes, Taha is able to provoke "the active involvement of the peo-

22 Ralph M. Rosen, (2013) "Comic *Parrhêsia* and the Paradoxes of Repression," in *Ancient Comedy and Reception: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey Henderson*, ed. S.D. Olson,¹⁴ Walter de Gruyter. DOI (Chapter): 10.1515/9781614511250.13. Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/37>.

23 Ralph M. Rosen (2012). *Efficacy and Meaning in Ancient and Modern Political Satire: Aristophanes, Lenny Bruce, and Jon Stewart*, 22. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/33>.

ple in the audience,” which is what solo shows and, by extension, solo performers need and hope to achieve.²⁴

Another example of Taha’s subtle satire are her lively impersonations and depictions of ‘Arafat. In the opening scene, “The Visit,” the iconic leader of the Palestinians is depicted as an “uncle.” In “My Old Man,” the scene in which she delves into her ambivalence about ‘Ali, who forsook fatherhood to become a national martyr, she enacts ‘Arafat’s reaction to the news that the Egyptian government would care for Taha and her sisters following the killing of ‘Ali Taha, “What nonsense! And where are *we* in all this? These are the children of the revolution. These are my daughters. Ours! This is crazy! We will raise them and take care of them!” And Taha goes on to say that after he had hired her, “he spoiled me publicly, kept me close to his side, took me on all his trips.” Embodying ‘Arafat, she continues, “She’s my daughter my beloved, the flower of my office. And if anyone so much as sprays a drop of water on her, I’ll spray him with bullets.” In Scene Four, “The Orphans,” she performs a visit ‘Arafat pays to her and her sisters when he says, “Come little darlings. I am your father now. I need courageous girls.” And in “City of Martyrs,” the last scene in which he appears, she performs ‘Arafat’s phone call to her mother Fathiyya, “I need you to go on an official mission and I know you will do a great job. I’d like you to visit the wife of a martyr, Abu Usama. He was assassinated by the Mossad, and his wife lives here in Beirut. Please go, God bless you. My brother Fathi will take you there and I want you to show her how wives of martyrs behave.”

Taha’s ‘Arafat is a surprisingly amusing persona. His earnest, embellished language echoes fragments of a guerrilla manual, tropes of revolutionary communiqués and the exaggerated sentimentality and conventional wisdom of an Arab paterfamilias. And by humorously reclaiming his Egyptian accent—which was used as a weapon by Israeli propaganda to discredit ‘Arafat’s Palestinian origin—Taha validates ‘Arafat’s staunch commitment to the Palestinian nation while simultaneously employing a satirical, iconoclastic tone to poke fun at sacrosanct aspects of the Palestinian struggle.

Most of the other scenes—which are set in Beirut, Jerusalem and Hebron—rely on similar comedic elements, i.e., faulty logic, satire, hyperbole and incongruous juxtapositions. The final scenes, “Frozen in Time,” an ironic title constructed from a pun about the condition of ‘Ali’s corpse, and “Corpse and Kissinger,” as incongruous a pairing as one could imagine, tell the story of Taha’s Aunt Suhayla’s struggle to retrieve the body of her brother, ‘Ali Taha, which Israel, in retaliation for ‘Ali’s mission, has refused to return to his family.

24 Jo Bonney, preface to *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jo Bonney (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2000), xiii.

Taha embodies her mother and her doggedly matriarchal aunt, and tells the story of a visit to her father's grave in Hebron in which she and her sisters are taunted and nearly attacked by a group of Palestinian children who mistake them for Jews. In the next scene, her aunt, dragging a translator along with her, stops Kissinger in the hall of a hotel in Jerusalem to demand the return of her brother's body. In both stories, the image of 'Ali's body frozen in an Israeli morgue provokes tales about blankets and jokes about frozen food, while evoking cultural superstitions, religiosity and the act of grieving.

"Ali, Who Will Not Die," the last scene of the play, suggests a resolution to the narrator's conundrum, i.e., if the absent father is a martyr, a national hero, and if the cause he died for is itself at risk of dying, one must seek to reconcile the pain of loss through the act of relentless remembering.

Where Would I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali? opened in Beirut at Babel Theater in February 2015 to glowing reviews and enthusiastic audiences. The critic of the Beirut Arabic-language newspaper *al-Akhbar*, Pierre Abisaab, explains that "[P]erhaps the writer/performer owes her stunning success to the unique nature of her experience. She is enacting a text she wrote, telling painful episodes of her own life, which happens to be part of a collective memory and a public narrative." He credits her for performing with "poetic flare, wit, sorrow and deferred anger."²⁵ In Beirut's English-language newspaper, *The Daily Star*, Ellen Francis praises the collaboration between Taha and "veteran director Lina Abyad" and the piece they have created in which Taha "herself animates her work, magically deconstructing the legend of the martyr."²⁶ Likewise, Maya Hert, of the French language daily *L'Orient Le Jour*, emphasizes Taha's role as a "pioneer," the meaning of Taha's first name, Ra'ida, in interrogating the myth of martyrdom.²⁷

The success of *'Ali* in Beirut was also reported on in the pages of the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*. In a section in the *Times* entitled "Beirut Journal," Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad summarize the performance and explain the historical and cultural background of the piece to readers unfamiliar with the region. For them "Ms. Taha's show has drawn large crowds and critical

25 Pierre Abisaab, "The Ghost of a Martyred Father Hovers over Babel Theater," review of *Where Can I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali* by Ra'ida Taha, *al-Akhbar*, February 23, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2017. <<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23889>>.

26 Ellen Francis, "Hijack Daughter Memoir Takes the Stage by Storm," *The Daily Star*, February 26, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2017. <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=288464&mode=print>>.

27 Maya Ghandour Hert, "Moi, Raeda, fille de martyr," *L'Orient Le Jour*, February 21, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2017. <<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/912277/moi-raeda-fille-de-martyr.html>>.

acclaim because of its deeply personal and often ironic take on a life shaped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."²⁸ In *Le Monde's* *Lettre de Beyrouth*, Benjamin Barthe also emphasizes the piece's popularity among various audiences: "[P]raised by the pro-Palestinian intelligentsia nostalgic for a revolutionary Beirut, it also attracts younger generations, seduced by the authenticity that it exudes."²⁹

Taha's monologue was enthusiastically received by critics and audiences during its tour of the Arab world to countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain and Palestine, where it was presented in various locales. Interestingly, a reviewer of *Ali's* performance at Birzeit University Theater singles out Taha's choice of presenting the story as a one-person show, suggesting that the form is imported. For the University's anonymous reviewer, "[T]he actor [Taha] and director [Abyad] challenged the traditional approaches in Arab theatrical performance. The story of revolutionaries who sacrificed for Palestine, and the fate of their loved ones were gathered in a [sic] one show, one woman and one story."³⁰ Outside of the Arab world, *Ali* received productions in Germany, Greece and in the U.S., at Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center, where it was lauded as an acting tour-de-force and an exposé of the hidden legacy of the Palestinian political struggle.³¹

In late 2017 Taha returned to the Beirut stage with a new one-woman piece, *36 Abbas Street, Haifa* (*36 Shari' Abbas, Hayfa*). In it Taha departs from the solo autobiographical mode to adopt storytelling strategies derived from the

28 Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, "In One-Woman Show, Arafat Protégée Offers Personal Take on Conflict," review of *Where Can I Find Someone Like You, 'Ali?* by Raeda Taha, *New York Times*, March 22, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2017. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/23/world/middleeast/protégée-of-arafat-offers-in-show-ironic-take-on-a-conflict.html>>.

29 Benjamin Barthe, "Sur le planches de Beyrouth, la confession choc d'une fille de martyr palestinien," *Le Monde*, March 12, 2015. Accessed December 17, 2017. <http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2015/03/12/sur-les-planches-de-beyrouth-la-confession-choc-d-une-fille-de-martyr-palestinien_4592393_3218.html>.

30 Birzeit University. "One-Woman Show Brings Back Palestine's Revolution," November 5, 2016. Accessed December 20, 2017. <<http://www.birzeit.edu/en/news/one-woman-show-brings-back-palestines-revolution>>.

31 See reviews in the following online publications: Robert Michael Oliver, March 24, 2017. Accessed December 22, 2017. <<https://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2017/03/24/review-can-find-someone-like-ali-collaboration-sundance-institute-theatre-program-kennedy-center/>>. Andrew White, March 24, 2017. Accessed December 22, 2017. <<https://www.broadwayworld.com/washington-dc/article/BWW-Review-Kennedy-Center-Hosts-Palestinian-Artist-Raeda-Tahas-WHERE-CAN-I-FIND-SOMEONE-LIKE-YOU-ALI-20170327>>.

hakawati tradition, such as the use of gestural and musical components.³² She constructed the piece in close collaboration with director Junayd Sari al-Din, whose work, characterized by verbal representation through physicality, has been showcased by the acclaimed Beirut Zuqaq troupe. The script—which is based on Taha's seven-month research trip to Haifa to conduct interviews, collect testimonials and learn the city's vernacular Arabic—was also reworked with Sari al-Din during rehearsals.

36 *Abbas Street* treats two essential dilemmas of the Palestinian condition, permanence and exile, both of which, in Taha, are variable forms of exile and represent “the unhealable rift forced between the self and its true home.”³³ In a nod to Kanafani's *Return to Haifa*, the piece tells the story of two families: the Rafi's, who remained in Palestine and became citizens of the Jewish state of Israel, and the Abu Ghaydas, who were expelled in 1948 and live in exile. Although the Rafi's bought from a Jewish family the house that the Abu Ghaydas lost, they see themselves as its keepers, thus symbolically repossessing the Palestinian pre-1948 homeland, or to borrow from Edward Said, helping the Abu Ghaydas to overcome their sense of estrangement as exiles and to find common ground with their historical past.³⁴ As the two families gather in their common house to wait for the arrival of the Abu Ghaydas' son, Fu'ad, they speak of displacement, memory and yearning in compelling and, at times, subtly droll tones.

In an interview about 36 *Abbas Street* in Beirut's *Daily Star*, Taha reaffirms her commitment to recounting the personal anxieties and dramas of the Palestinians: “[O]ur stories were based on a big motto that involved revolution and all the [accompanying] symbolism. Only recently people started talking about their personal feelings and the suffering that affected them, without being considered weak.”³⁵

Not coincidentally, Taha's comments evoke the plight of Muhammad, the flawed character in Wannus's *The Rape*. He rejects the revolutionary cause and struggles to rebuild his family life but is trapped in a society defined by occupa-

32 Reuven Snir, “The Palestinian Hakawati Theater: A Brief Theater,” in ed. Sherifa Zuhur *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East* (Cairo and New York: The American University of Cairo Press, 2001), 112–113.

33 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 137.

34 *Ibid.*, 138.

35 Maghie Ghali, “Two Families Recall their Haifa House,” review of 36 *Abbas Street, Haifa* by Raeda Taha, Masarah al-Madina, Beirut, *The Daily Star*, August 18, 2017. Accessed December 22, 2017. <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Arts-and-Ent/Culture/2017/Aug-18/416298-two-families-recall-their-haifa-house.ashx>>.

tion. Unlike his sister-in-law, a Palestinian from a privileged family who was previously naïve about politics and who joins the resistance only after having her life destroyed by the occupiers, Muhammad becomes a pariah when he makes compromises to keep his family together. Through Muhammad, Wannus, like Taha, suggests that Palestinians are presented with an insoluble dilemma: they can either channel their rage and frustration into politics, which frequently leads to seemingly useless self-sacrifice, or they can focus on personal suffering and risk being accused of being insufficiently committed or of accommodating the enemy.

It should also be noted that Taha's preoccupation with the personal dilemmas of Palestinian women, children and exiles resonates with Wannus's post-1967 shift from a political and programmatic theater to a theater in which the drama of silenced individuals is dramatized. Similarly, her aesthetic project integrates Eastern and Western dramatic and narrative modes, especially through her use of a skillful combination of classical, satirical and modern confessional tones. Ultimately, Taha's performance style, which is conceived in close collaboration with inventive directors, is a transposition of *hakawati* storytelling into a form that employs an array of media, from digital projections to abrupt lighting shifts to recorded music to the studied gestures she employs as she shares confidences in a new and sometimes startling way with her audience.



FIGURE 5.1 Ra'ida Taha playing herself in her play *Where Would I find Someone Like You, 'Ali?*, directed by Lina Abyad. Performance of Babel Theater, Beirut, 2015.

IMAGE COURTESY OF RA'IDA TAHA. PHOTOGRAPH BY RAMZI HAIDAR.

Where Would I Find Someone Like You, ‘Ali?

Ra’ida Taha

(Translated by Ismail Khalidi, edited by Robert Myers and Nada Saab)

The Visit

He knocks. “Who is it?”

“Me,” he says. “Open up. Open the door.”

Why was he coming up to my hotel room? Should I let him in? I was stumped. Even a little intimidated. He was an insignificant little twerp, it was true, but he held a senior position. I opened the door. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and immediately threw me down on the bed. I remember his heavy breathing as he frantically unbuttoned his pants with one hand while pressing hard on my breasts and holding me firmly against the bed with the other. My strongest weapon was my voice, so I screamed. The fear of scandal must have been enough to spook him, so he jumped to his feet. He buttoned his pants and left, giving the door a mighty slam on his way out.

I was shivering. I’m not normally a person who scares easily, but every fiber of my being was shaking.

I ran to the bathroom—just like in the movies. When a woman has a scare like that she heads straight to the bathroom. I didn’t understand why. But that’s what I did. I could feel my legs giving out underneath me, and I held the sink with my hands. I looked at my face in the mirror and threw up. Nothing much there—just water. Just like in the movies. I was disgusted, in shock. And I cried. I felt confused and lost and utterly alone.

I managed to stop crying and I washed my face again and again, washed it a hundred times. I had to pull myself together. I had appointments I needed to keep with journalists; there was work to be done. After all, we were on an official visit with Yasir ‘Arafat.

We called ‘Arafat “Abu ‘Ammar.” By “we” I mean all us Palestinians. But to me he was like an uncle, too. “Should I tell Abu ‘Ammar what happened?” I thought. Or perhaps the timing was wrong? What? I was a wreck. I had lost my bearings

completely. And who could blame me? I was 24 years old, working at a challenging job, a job filled with political intrigue ... And now this. That person had a higher-ranking position in the organization than I did and could say anything, deny everything. And they'd all believe him.

It's true that I was the daughter of 'Ali Taha. Not just any 'Ali Taha. The martyr 'Ali Taha. But that alone didn't assure my safety or immunity from scandal. My best hope was that I was under Abu 'Ammar's protection. I was his adopted "daughter," as well as his press secretary. So I gathered my wits about me and decided to get on with my job until we returned to Tunisia. On the plane back I spoke to Abu 'Ammar: "I have an important matter to report to you when we land," I said. He said okay. That afternoon at the airport, after we landed, he told me, "When you come to the office tonight, come straight to me and we'll talk." Our discussion would have to wait, and that thought made me nervous. I knew the afternoon was when the old man—that's what we called him—took his siesta. Everyone knew that, but I couldn't help thinking he was putting me off.

From the airport I went to my apartment, where I lived alone. I sat down. Now that I was away from the planes, the airports, the aides and Abu 'Ammar, the receptions, the ambassadors, the throngs of people, the cars and sirens going "waw, waw, waw," I collapsed. I was exhausted and angry and ... ashamed. The episode in the hotel room kept repeating itself in my mind. I had to put an end to it.

The Old Man

I was 22 years old when I started working with Abu 'Ammar. I'd just graduated from university in the US. I was thrilled that I was about to join the man and the movement that were going to liberate Palestine. Those first couple of years were some of the happiest of my life. Going to the office was invigorating. But that evening felt different. I didn't want to go in to work. I didn't want to see the man who had attacked me. I couldn't bear to see his face. At six pm I walked as quickly as I could through the office and went straight in to see the "Old Man." He had just woken up. When he saw me he spoke to me in his trademark Egyptian accent. "What is it? What's the matter? Come sit with me on the couch." I sat next to him and I told him everything. His eyes grew wide in shock as he listened. When I finished, I only wanted him to hug me. I wanted to cry my

eyes out, and I did. And he took my hand in his and said, "I'll show that bastard. You'll see."

"But don't do it in public," I said. "Please, no scandals!" He shook his head. "Have no fear. No one will know. But I'll teach him a lesson."

My Old Man

My mother told me that when my father was martyred in 1972, the Egyptian ambassador visited our home. He came to tell her that the Egyptian government was ready to adopt us, to take us to Egypt and cover all our expenses. But when 'Arafat heard that, he lost it: "What nonsense! And where are *we* in all this? These are the children of the revolution. These are my daughters. Ours! This is crazy! We will raise them and take care of them!" And he did. Since we had no father, he raised us, educated us and married us off.

I never found out what 'Arafat did to that man. I would still see him around from time to time. But I knew from his face that 'Arafat did something, I knew too that he had kept his promise, because whatever it was remained discreet.

With me, it was different. 'Arafat had this habit of sending certain messages in public, and in my case he spoiled me publicly, kept me close to his side, took me on all his trips. "She's my daughter," he would say, "my beloved, the flower of my office. And if anyone so much as sprays a drop of water on her, I'll spray him with bullets." No one dared come near me. Even so, that was not enough.

Despite all the doting and concern, something had broken inside of me.

I hated my father 'Ali for not being there. At night, I would dream that 'Ali, and no one else, was thrashing that bastard who had laid his hands on me. And other nights I would be overcome with the terrible realization that if it was possible for the daughter of a martyr to be exposed to such a violent ordeal at the hands of a comrade without any real accounting or punishment, then what about the daughters of the living. And for the first time in my life I truly felt like an orphan. I didn't dare face that sick man. I just carried on, exposed. That's how it feels to be an orphan.

Years later I convinced Fathiyya, my mother, to give me all the papers having to do with her and 'Ali, my father. It was among these papers that I found his last

will and testament, written in his own hand before he left on his final operation. Let me read one part:

Dear Brothers,

Revolutionary Greetings,

We believe our organization (the Black September group) will call to account all who do mischief to our cause, even if they are an Arab or Palestinian official or a member of one of the guerrilla groups. We are entrusting you with a task, one that every honest revolutionary desires to undertake, a trust to be fulfilled as a national duty regardless of how much sacrifice it requires: to keep from our ranks all who do not belong in them, all mercenaries and skeptics, all who join the revolution for private gain. Their number is doubtless very large and they are the greatest danger to us because they have no sense of decency or honor. Their only aim is to gratify their personal pleasures.

The other thing we charge you with is to take care of the families of martyrs and not to allow orphans to feel that they're orphans before they reach adulthood. Give them the kind of education we can be proud of, one that enables them to fight the enemy.

Long live our revolution!

Long live all honest revolutionaries!

Revolution until victory!

The Jerusalem Suicide Group

'A. S. R. 'A. 'Ali, Samira, Rima, 'Abd al-'Aziz.

29/4/1972.

So what about 'Ali? Who is 'Ali? Where is he? What do you know about him? What do I know about him? I know he left behind a young wife, 27 years old, and four girls, me being the eldest and the youngest eight months old. We were left behind in Beirut. We had no family in Beirut—all of them were in Palestine. We were strangers there.

And that's what I thought of on that day when I suffered the greatest insult and abuse of my life—that he wasn't there! I discovered as never before that no one on earth could replace him or fill that void. And I decided that that day of tears and rage and pain would be my day of mourning. I was 25 years old and alone in Tunisia. And I mourned. I cried. I cried as if I had just lost him.

The Orphans

I was awakened by my mother's screams that day. I was seven. I got up and I ran to her. I found her in the kitchen, holding a newspaper and standing on a chair. It was a white chair. "Sa'id," she screamed, and then jumped down from the chair and climbed up again and screamed, "Sa'id!" Sa'id was the concierge of our building, the one who brought up the newspapers every morning. The newspaper fell from her hand as she called out for him again: "Sa'id!" The doorbell rang and in rushed the neighbors. Fathiyya screamed and cried and beat her head. And with her screams my sisters and I also began to scream and cry. What else do children do at the sight of a parent seized by grief and terror? She screamed and we screamed. We were terrified. We didn't know what was happening, only that it was transforming our mother and our surroundings. Our neighbor 'Afaf took us to our room and closed the door. From there we could still hear her screaming, and so we too continued crying.

Suddenly our house was full of people. There was such a commotion, so much shouting that I couldn't hear my mother's screaming anymore, and so I calmed down, as if it was a call-and-response between the lioness and her cubs. But when I heard her scream again, not long after, I had to go to her, so I ran out and stood by the door of the sitting room. I looked at her but couldn't come nearer. She looked at me and screamed. It was then that I saw some women descend upon her and hold down her hands. "No please, for God's sake, leave it!" she said. "'Ali liked it. Please don't remove it. I swear it's too early. Leave me alone." And then one woman, whose voice I still recall, said, "No, my dear Umm Nidal, no red nail polish. You're the wife of a martyr now, dear."

On that day of wailing and lamentation, they sent me and my sister off to school. We took the newspaper from the concierge and went to see Mr. Hasan, the principal of our school, which was attached to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and was located in the Burj al-Barajni refugee camp. 'Ali had insisted we should be educated at Popular Front School. We went into Mr. Hasan's office, and I put the newspaper on his desk. I asked him, "What does a heroic martyr mean?" He looked at us and replied, "A martyr is someone who dies for the sake of what he loves most. For example, he dies for love of Palestine." "So it means 'Ali loves Palestine more than he loves me?" I asked. He froze. "Does a martyr come back?" I asked. Mr. Hasan took the newspaper and opened it. He hugged us and then began to cry.

As we left the office, my sister said: "I know why Mr. Hasan was crying. It's because he's jealous that Dad's the heroic martyr, not him!"

When we went home cars were blocking our street. The entire block was full of people. From the door of our building all the way up the stairs was jammed. Even the elevator was packed. We couldn't make our way through, so all of a sudden young men began carrying us, shouting, "Make way, make way! They're the daughters of the martyr!" before setting us down at the door of our house. Is this our house? The door had never been left open like this before. Inside, people in black—black everywhere. We hardly knew anyone. The sounds of men cursing and women weeping and tearing their hair out swirled around us. The tables in the sitting room and the dining room were covered with newspapers and large photos of 'Ali. There was no place for us to put our backpacks. I went to the kitchen to get a drink but couldn't squeeze through. It was full of coffee pots and overturned coffee cups and ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts. Cigarettes and ash all the way to the ceiling. The place reeked of smoke and sweat and coffee. Every room in the house was full, including the bathrooms. I didn't see my little sister Mays or Baby Susu. Every once in a while people would hug us and cry. We couldn't understand the reason for all this crying. My mom sat on the couch surrounded by people. She didn't greet us, didn't speak to us, give us lunch or help with our homework. So we stayed at the neighbors that night and many nights thereafter, where we'd play and study and spend the night. Mom had never before allowed us to sleep over at anyone's house. And when we'd go home we'd find Mom still sitting on that same couch. There she was, day and night. At least it was a treat to be able to go to sleep without having a bath!

We were at the neighbors' house when he arrived. Some young men came and carried us home and put us in front of him. I recognized him right away. He was the man who used to visit 'Ali at night. My Mom told me he was called Abu 'Ammar. (*In an Egyptian accent*) "Come, little darlings," he said, holding our little hands. He sat all three of us in his lap and kissed our hands. "I am your father now, my darlings. I'll take care of you. I need courageous girls. And you, my little princess, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "An astronaut," I answered. "Great," he said, "you shall be the Valentina Tereshkova of Palestine when we return." "And you?" he asked my second sister. "I don't know yet," she answered. My third sister, who was four years old at the time, answered, "I want Dad". Abu 'Ammar hugged her. And like all those who hugged us then, he too began to cry. We were then taken back to the neighbors' house, leaving the

adults to fill our home with serious conversations and the endless smoke that accompanied them.

'Ali Takes Shape

Many years later, Fathiyya told me what had happened. The day after my father's death she was led by the hand and told they were going to the funeral procession for 'Ali. But this was no ordinary funeral. It was symbolic. My Dad and his comrade 'Abd al-'Aziz had met their martyrdom at Lod Airport near Tel-Aviv. We were in Beirut. In Beirut and without any bodies to bury.

"There were thousands of people walking behind me," she said, "and I could see two coffins. Beside me was your Aunt 'Abla. Suddenly I lost consciousness. While I was passed out I could hear them talking about empty coffins. And I could hear them chanting, "Our souls! Our blood! We offer to the martyr!" I was half conscious, but I could still hear people walking to the Martyrs' Cemetery and giving their speeches: "Ali, you're a hero, Jerusalem's hero, Palestine's hero, their hero, our hero."

After a moment she turned to me and said: "If only your father had stayed by my side and sold radishes instead of becoming a guerrilla fighter!" I was taken aback. "I know what you're thinking," she said. "Listen. Your father was a hero. And that final operation wasn't his first. He was involved in plenty of things. Your father was the organizer and recruiter of Palestinians in the diaspora for the Arab Nationalist movement. Did you know he was the best passport forger around? And not only in Jerusalem. When he disguised himself, even I couldn't recognize him. One time he'd be a doctor, another time a priest, and he was the only tour guide in the whole of Jerusalem who spoke Persian and knew the city's history by heart, every layer, every stone. He'd dress in orange sometimes, and it would suit him! He adored you and your sisters, you know. He would say, "This one, she's one of my eyes, and she's the other, and this one here, she's my heart."

I smiled but I was still thinking about what she had said about wishing my father had been a simple vegetable vendor. She looked at me and spoke before I could. "Don't look so shocked by what I'm saying. And don't think you know better than I do. It was I who lived in Jerusalem and then lost it, just as I lost your father. And it was I who pulled myself together, alone, somehow, and stood on my own two feet. This I did for my sake and yours and your father's.

After he died I worked at a Palestinian institution to set an example for you kids. I was so devoted to bringing you up right that even my eyelashes loved you. I raised you to fulfill your father's wishes, to be educated and to keep Palestine in your hearts. And yet you find it excessive that I would say, 'If only your Dad was near me?' I say it because I feel lonely. Overwhelmed and lonely." She went to the kitchen, mumbling and muttering. "What are you saying?" I asked. "Nothing," she replied, "your grandmother told me not to marry a doctor or a guerrilla fighter. But, dammit, what can I do about love?"

Another letter from 'Ali to Fathiyya:

My darling wife Fathiyya,
 All my love, longing and devotion,
 My absence has been long despite the short distances and the grim times, but these things transform distance and absence into nearness and tenderness. I am saddened by this separation, the waiting makes me anxious, and I resent the fact that these circumstances are imposed upon us. But my love and my feelings toward you grant me some respite and increase my conviction, love and devotion. Images of you are always in my mind, as is your laughter, which fills me with happiness, and your glances full of longing for me are never far from my imagination.
 Your love,
 'Ali

All this love and he still leaves us. Goes away? Forever?

"Because he loved us," my mother replies, "because he loved Palestine."

The Uncles and the "Uncles"

For about a year and a half after my father died, our house was full of people. And Fathiyya stayed put all the while, stationed on that same couch like a statue around which the guests sat. Gradually their numbers decreased. But there would often be a few remaining "uncles" hanging around by the time night fell. Eventually one particular "uncle" would be the last one there and would say to us, "Go, my darlings, with Muhammad the driver and let him buy you some chocolate and ice cream." He would hug us and say something along the lines of, "My darlings, God have mercy on your father. I was going to be on that mission, but he beat me to it." He would become emotional and tell us, "Now go

along my darlings and buy whatever you want.” And with that, the statue of Fathiyya would snap back to life. “Oh no,” she would roar, “you girls aren’t going anywhere. Now get out, you bastard!” Of course, we didn’t understand at the time.

Years later, when I insisted, Fathiyya told me about her life after ‘Ali: “Friends dwindled, neighbors disappeared. The women were afraid their husbands would fall for me, and the men would ogle me and make indirect advances. That’s why I withdrew from all mixed company. The house would empty and just a few would remain, feigning sympathy, and by then I would be sedated, having swallowed one pill after another during the endless day. Invariably the last to leave would draw close and hand me a line about how “Palestine needs us to sacrifice and be patient.” Or “Jaffa cannot be liberated without armed struggle, but I can’t decide whether your eyes are green or honey-colored—The color of your hair is natural. I never saw a more beautiful dark tan. Life must go on and our path is long. A beautiful young woman like you must get on with her life. Have any dream you want at night, and I’ll make it come true by day. Revolutions need blood. Your girls I shall place in my eyes.”

And then there was Ghazi. A real uncle.

“Uncle Ghazi! Uncle Ghazi!” That’s how we girls would greet him when he came to visit, squealing as soon as he walked through the door. We loved him so much we’d fight over him, fight over who’d sit on his right leg or his left, his right shoulder or his left. We’d shout and sing and climb all over him until he’d tell us the stories of “*Zaghlul al-Bahlu*” and his dog “*Dallul*.” We later discovered that these were simply re-hashed episodes of *Tin Tin and Milou*. Uncle Ghazi would apparently read the imperialist Belgian comics in secret and then adapt them for us.

He had a lovely smell, a charming laugh, and a magical voice. He’d take us to the seashore where we’d play and chase each other; he’d buy us corn on the cob and ice cream and we’d stay out till sunset. The best presents always came from Uncle Ghazi. Once, we were strolling on the corniche with our mother when we saw him. But other kids our own age were with him. “Uncle Ghazi has betrayed us with other kids,” we screamed, obsessed with the fact that they were our own age as well. “If only they’d been older than us!” We wept and decided not to speak to him ever again. Later Mom told us that they were other children of martyrs, children that Uncle Ghazi also took care of, and that we weren’t the only children of martyrs he took care of. Of course, that only made us more

jealous. But we soon ended up missing him so much that we made up with him. In fact, so great was our love for Ghazi that Mom's worst punishment for us was to tell us "Anybody who doesn't study or listen to what I tell her ... there'll be no Uncle Ghazi for her."

Soon after, Uncle Ghazi was married and had children of his own. "Bye, bye, Uncle Ghazi."

Years later, when I asked him about 'Ali he told me that a few days before 'Ali had left on his final mission, he invited Ghazi to our house. He picked up Baby Mays from her cot—she was seven months old—and put her in Ghazi's lap. 'Ali then pretended he had some household chores and left him alone with her. "Your father," said Ghazi "was preparing me, making me conscious of my responsibility before the fact." You see, like us, Uncle Ghazi was the son of a martyr. His father was 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, [one of the first Palestinian nationalists].³⁶ He fought the British in the '30s [and was killed in battle near Jerusalem in '48]. That's why he understood us. Why perhaps we understood each other.

I once asked Fathiyya why he loved us as much as he did. She said: "When you'd come home from one of your friend's houses you'd keep talking about her father. You'd say, 'Lucky so-and-so, she has a father.' And I'd spend the night crying for you girls. When I used to take you out, your sister Susu would refuse to go, saying your father's picture had told her not to. I'd start crying, of course, and then you girls would cry, and then the whole outing would turn into a tearfest. That's when I talked to Uncle Ghazi and told him, 'The girls are driving me crazy. They miss 'Ali terribly. I don't know what to do. I wish you'd come by and see them.'"

City of Martyrs

'Ali was martyred, my mom transferred us from the Najah School in Burj al-Barajni, which was attached to the Popular Front, to a school called *Ecole de l'Esperance*. The parents of the other kids were ... different from us.

—*Allo. Bonjour*, Madame Taha.

—Two *bonjours*, answered Mom.

—One will suffice.

³⁶ Language within brackets does not appear in the Arabic original. It is provided to offer essential context.

—One what?

—Bonjour. (*An awkward silence*) Madame Taha, your daughter has a serious problem that I advise you to ... deal with.

—What problem?

—Well Madame, it's simply inconceivable that a girl her age would ... lie so much. Madame, your daughter, to be quite blunt, is a little liar.

—Really?

—Really.

—What did she lie about?

—Every time my husband or I pass by my daughter's room I hear your daughter telling the kids strange stories. "My Dad hijacked a plane and this and that," she says, "and he's a martyr." What's this martyr business, Madame? I don't like my daughter hearing such stories. She's innocent. If they hear about this at the *école*, I assure you Mr. Sharabati most certainly won't allow it.

—Oh, okay, Madame. Don't worry about it; I'll deal with her. I'll slap her up the side of the head. How dare she tell the truth.

My mother decided she wouldn't be able to understand us if we spoke French, so she moved us again, this time to the Rawda School, where the headmaster was Mr. Qaysar Haddad, brother of Wadi' Haddad. Wadi' and 'Ali were friends and colleagues [when, in the seventies, four aircrafts were hijacked and flown to the Revolution Airport]. Here, at least was a common history of aircraft hijacking, a better fit as a school.

With time, life became sweeter. People would pass by, bring us presents, take us on outings, buy us new clothes. Abu 'Ammar would come and play with us, especially on feast days. We'd open the door to find presents, piles of clothes and toys, free subscriptions to beach clubs and free doctors' appointments. I know, I know. Such pampering! Enough to stop the heart with joy! Everyone was jealous of our being daughters of a martyr. All the kids wanted to be like us. Soon some of them got their wish.

With the increase of massacres and assassinations and the frequent military operations, the numbers of martyrs' children grew. In fact, from 1972 onwards, they could barely keep up with the children of martyrs. To the point where they created an institution called "The Families of Martyrs Institution" and founded a school for us, which was given the unfortunate name of the "Happy Childhood School." Lord, how happy all these kids were without mothers or fathers. Sometimes special trips were organized for these fortunate, happy half-orphans to visit the cities of eastern and western Europe. I once had a

childhood friend named Simsim. Her father was a *Fatah* official. And she would pester him: “Dad, the daughters of Umm Nidal (that’s my Mom) get to go on these trips. Can’t I join them?” “No, my dear,” her father would reply, “you’re not a martyr’s daughter. You can’t go.” Then one day my Mom woke us up and told us to get dressed. “We’re off to visit Simsim.” The Mossad had assassinated her father in Cyprus. And as we entered the house, right in the middle of the crying and screaming and the horrific scenes that we knew all too well, stood Simsim—smiling! “My wish has come true,” she said. “Now I can travel with you.” And she did. We would go on trips together to represent Palestine and perform *Dabke*. Our group grew and grew. A new face appeared every week it seemed. It was no small matter to be the daughter of a martyr. Simsim’s luck was so powerful, in fact, that she eventually became not just the daughter of a martyr but the wife of one too. What luck, huh?

My mother was one of the earliest wives of martyrs, but her turn came before they had set up that institute to take care of martyrs’ families.

Some two years after ‘Ali was martyred, Abu ‘Ammar called her:

—(*In an Egyptian accent*) “Hello, sister Umm Nidal, how are you? And the girls? I miss them. Listen, I need you to go on an official mission and I know you will do a great job. I’d like you to visit the wife of a martyr, Abu Usama. He was assassinated by the Mossad, and his wife lives here in Beirut. Please go, God bless you. My brother Fathi will take you there and I want you to show her how wives of martyrs behave.”

So off we went, my mother and I, to a building in the Raouche neighborhood, and up a long staircase. Mother knocked and a woman opened the door. She was incredibly beautiful, younger than my mom, and pregnant. At that time all wives of martyrs were thought to be beautiful and were compared to Georgina Rizk, the Lebanese Miss Universe who was also the wife of a martyr.

Fathiyya shoved her aside and entered the apartment, which was crawling with kids.

—“Where’s Umm Usama?” my mother asked.

—“That’s me,” the woman answered. “I’m Umm Usama.”

—“Who do all these kids belong to for heaven’s sake?”

—“They’re mine.”

—“Five kids! And you’re pregnant? Damn these men! God Help me!”

And then my mother proceeded to collapse on the floor in despair. The beautiful woman got her a glass of lemonade, then asked my mother: "Did you know Abu Usama?" You see, she assumed from my mother's reaction that she must have been Abu Usama's mistress.

"I never met the guy in my life," my mother replied. "Oh you poor creature. Look at you. At us. What's become of us all? What has Palestine done to us? We go from paying one condolence to the next."

In the end, my mom had to be carried home. She had failed utterly in her mission.

Abu 'Ammar phoned the next week to check on my mother. "They tell me you're exhausted and haven't left the house for a week, Umm Nidal. I want you to recover your strength. And so you'll know, this was your last official mission."

These poor womenfolk of the martyrs, these lovers of ghosts, these wives of myths and legends, who spent their days shuttling from heartbreak to tragedy, from visitation to funeral, from one condolence to the next.

One day, Simsim's mother phones my mom. "Come along, Fathiyya, we must go and offer condolences to Georgina Rizk. We can see who looks better in black, her or us." Mother replies, "Let each mourn in his own home." But Simsim's mother insists, so they go off together. My mom cries as usual. Simsim's mom cries too, and then examines all the furniture around her with a keen eye. Suddenly she says to my mom, "That's enough, let's leave. Enough crying, Fathiyya." She whispers, "I bet you if Georgina sells one leg of that table she'd have enough to live on for a year, and all the guerrilla groups will fight amongst themselves to see who'll give her a better pension. And you and I, with just one pension from *Fatah*." Then she said, "Did you notice that I'm taller than Georgina."

Frozen in Time

"Come along, girls. Quick! Quick! We need to go home."

Each time Fathiyya took us to the Sanayi' Garden, we'd have hardly arrived and placed our feet on our bike pedals before she'd call out, "Come on! Come on! Let's go!", or, "Come on, Come on! Let's visit so and so. Come on! We have to get back. Let's go back home!" And so we'd return home disgruntled. She was in a

hysterical state, my mother. At the time, many people had told her that 'Ali was alive, being held in an underground prison in Israel. So she had this crazy notion that he would come home during one of our absences, that he was sitting on the stairs waiting for us, with no key to let himself in, and [again] the outing would turn into a cryfest. [And when she'd find he wasn't there, as was always the case], she'd start blaming herself for changing the lock on the door, even though it had been broken.

And the director asks me, "So when did she find out? What with the empty coffins and the rumors of him being imprisoned in some underground dungeon how did she discover that 'Ali had in fact been martyred?"

I thought about it for a moment and phoned my mom in Amman:

—"How are you, Tuha?"

—"Hi."

I asked her: "Mom, how did you finally know for sure that Dad was martyred?"

—"Not now. I'll tell you another time." And she hung up.

But the next day, she calls me back: "Listen. This is the first and last time I'll speak about this. About a year and a half after he'd gone, during which time I was not aware of anything and totally lost ..." In fact Fathiyya was in a daze then. Whenever we visited someone, she'd forget the way home and I had to tell the taxi driver how to get us back. She continued: "I spoke to your Aunt Suhayla in Jerusalem and she told me the news. They discovered that 'Ali's body was being kept in a morgue in a refrigerated drawer and the Israelis were refusing to hand it over. The news was devastating. And just like that, I suddenly woke up. I began dreaming of him at night, he would tell me: 'Fathiyya, I'm cold ... Fathiyya, get me out of here so you and I and the girls can go back to Jerusalem. Let's go back and pick the fruit from that fig tree. Let me out of here!'"

In 1977, our relatives in Palestine sent us permits and we went to Jerusalem through Amman and went straight to Aunt Suhayla's house in Silwan. We spent the night there in order to visit 'Ali's grave in Hebron the following day. That was the first time my sisters and I had ever been to a cemetery. We left in the morning and arrived at the graveyard in Hebron before noon. There, all four of us, carrying rose garlands, walked behind Aunt Suhayla. Just before we reached the spot, Aunt Suhayla began to shout, "Get up, 'Ali! Here come your daughters! Get up and see how grown up they've become! Get up, darling brother, and talk to them." Then she sat by the grave, picked up handfuls of dust and threw them

on her head while she beat it, again and again. We stood by looking at each other and at her. Near the cemetery there were houses. Children started coming out of them and walking toward us shouting, "Jews, Jews, Jews." We didn't understand, [but they must have thought we were settlers]. My aunt sprang up from her head bashing and screamed at them, "No! No! These are my nieces, daughters of the martyr. Keep away!" And she turned to us and said, "Don't worry about them. They thought you were Jews because of the way you're dressed." We were wearing jeans and short-sleeved t-shirts, after all, in a very conservative city. If it hadn't been for my aunt, we'd have gotten a mouth full of rocks.

"Come nearer, my darlings. Say hello to your father. Talk to him. I brought him here so you could visit him." And what a tomb it was! It was the largest one in the cemetery, tall and enclosed by an iron fence gleaming with black paint, and surrounded by red flowers—no, red anemones. The tombstone had the following inscription in Arabic calligraphy:

"You lived like a hawk and died with honor."

We took our garlands and placed them on the tomb. He neither spoke to us, nor we to him. Then, almost wordlessly, we headed back to Jerusalem with our aunt.

The Corpse and Kissinger

Back home in Silwan, she asked her daughter to take out her collection of pictures and news clippings. "Zalfa, bring me that bag from the cupboard."

My aunt is nobody's fool. She's also illiterate, but you wouldn't know it since she's memorized the contents of every clipping.

"This one is about the time I saw Kurt Waldheim. This one when I sent a letter to Golda Meir. This one when I went to the Red Cross, damned liars, to ask about your father. Let me see? Ah, yes. This is when all the newspapers wrote about me and the American Secretary of State."

With time, as I grew older, she'd tell me more details. When I told her I was doing a play and asked her to lend me her collection of documents she said, "Damn! It's my daughters' fault. When they were cleaning the house while

I was away, they left out the drawer with all the papers and it rained. The papers were damaged. But have no fear, my dear. I know your Dad's story better than I know my own name."

She made me a glass of tea with sage and began her tale:

"When I learned that your Dad was in a refrigerator I vowed to myself not to cover myself with a blanket either summer or winter until I'd removed him from where he was and buried him properly. Early one morning, as I was kneading dough with Dawlat, my daughter-in-law, there was a newsflash on the radio. I jumped up, washed my hands, dressed and ran outside. Ever since the day your father left us, there was a fire in my heart which never went out, a fire that waved its flames back and forth at me, like so! I said to Dawlat: 'Give your father-in-law his breakfast and tell him I'm off to see someone.' I stopped a taxi and told the driver, 'Take me to Jaffa Street, to the office of Felicia Langer. Do you know her?' 'Oh yes,' he replied, 'she's that lawyer who defends Arabs.' It was Felicia who managed to get your Aunt 'Abla released from prison. She'd been caught in 1967 smuggling explosives in a suitcase. And she was pregnant. It was your father who had recruited her into the Arab Nationalist Movement. The day their operation took place I suspected your Aunt 'Abla might be with them, but it turned out to be only your father that time. Anyway, in the taxi I'd look out of the window and see their excavations along the road. Everywhere you looked. And I'd say to myself, 'God damn them, they've been digging from the moment they arrived. We go to sleep and it's one thing and we wake up and it's something else. One time it's a temple, another it's some ruins. Forgive me for saying so, but even the pissoir in the Christian neighborhood was turned into Jewish ruins. Damn them [and their digging]!' I arrived at Jaffa Street and said to myself, 'Jaffa Street my foot! There's not a single person from Jaffa here. They're all Jews from God knows where.' I found Felicia's office and said to her, 'Felicia, Kissinger is here and I want to talk to him.' Felicia said (*Arabic in Israeli accent*), 'Go, my dear, and if you don't get to see him we will go to *La Haye*.'"

"Did you know what *La Haye* was?" I asked my aunt.

"*La Haye* Ma Haye," she replied.

"Yes, of course. Of course I'll go. It's enough your Dad was sitting in the cold and the dark. So I said goodbye to Felicia and continued on to the offices of *Sha'b* newspaper. There was a young fellow there named Ahmad who used to help

me write letters in Arabic and English, so I said to him: 'I want a letter in English which I want to hand to Kissinger and another in Arabic which you will print in your newspaper as a story. I am now off to see him.' I went down to the street and stopped another taxi. The sun was beating down on my head and I told him to take me to the American Consulate, where I found a vast number of people standing in line, so I stood in line until my turn came. I was drenched with sweat. I now found myself facing a woman in a glass booth. 'Hello, sister,' I said, 'Peace be with you. Is Kissinger here?' She started laughing, the little twerp! 'No, my dear, Kissinger is in Mamilla ... Next!' I swear to you, my dear, I didn't know what Mamilla was. So I said to myself, 'Better go to Bab al-'Amud and ask around.' Do you know where Bab al-'Amud is, my dear?"

"Yes," I replied, "it's the gate that leads to the Aqsa Mosque near Grandpa Jamil's house in the Old City."

"At that moment I glimpse my brother Tahir's car—that's your uncle—and hear him shouting, 'Suhayla! What are you doing here, alone without your husband and children?' I couldn't believe my luck. 'Please take me to Mamilla. And, by the way, what's Mamilla?' He frowned. 'Good God! You want to go there and you don't know what it is? Mamilla is a five-star hotel in Jewish Jerusalem.' 'Kissinger is there and I want to see him.' 'What do you want to see him for?' he shouted. 'What? You're afraid I'd kill him? I just want to deliver a letter. Look, just drive me there, please.'"

"And all the way there, my dear, he keeps saying, 'I swear they'll give you the body and take us in his place. Here's the hotel. I can't park here, it's forbidden. Suhayla, what you're about to do is men's work.' Men's Work! Ha! Imagine! And you know what I replied, my dear? I said, 'And where are the men, Tahir? I don't see any men here!' And I slammed the car door in his silly face. You know, my dear, I felt so humiliated. So tired of them and their excuses. Every time I'd say to your uncles, 'Where is your brother? Why don't you ask about him?' They'd say 'Oh it's settled. Tomorrow they'll give him to you.' And I'd say, 'Who will give him to you?'" (*To audience*) My aunt's obsession about burying her brother was bizarre. "My dear, the Israelis are one breed and your uncles are another. So I tidied my hair, wrapped my scarf around, shook out my dress and entered the hotel. The security guard frisked me. And would you believe it, right at the entrance, by some stroke of luck, I found one of your Dad's fellow tour guides, Sabra, from the days when he was a guide in Jerusalem. I said to him, 'Peace be upon you. Do you still remember me? I'm Umm Muhammad, sister of 'Ali Taha.' He came out from behind his desk and began laughing. And then he said 'Ah, Umm Muhammad.' And you know, my dear, how these Jerusalemites

speak. Umm Muhammad! Can it be? What are you doing here? Ah! Those were the days, no? With the tourist groups and the Old City! You know, 'Ali would say to me, 'You take the Brits and I'll take the Germans. I can't stand the Brits. They are the cause of all our misfortunes.' 'What a loss, your brother! What can I do for you, Umm Muhammad?'

—'Kissinger is here and I want to see him.'

—'Wow! Just like that? Kissinger, huh? That should be a breeze.'

—'I want to see him. In person. I want my brother 'Ali and a letter won't do.'

—'Umm Muhammad, you're in luck. Here, as we speak, is the American attaché, and the other one with him is the military attaché.'

"And he goes chasing after them and says, 'Sir.' And he babbles in English to him. The man begins shouting at him and he comes back. 'Kissinger doesn't meet with Arabs,' he tells me. 'What?' And you should have seen me, my dear, charging at the American! And before I've even finished my request, the American starts shouting at me, too. 'Who are you? What are you doing here? If you have a letter, give it to me and go! Go!' It turned out the fellow could speak Arabic! I tell you, they're all spies. 'Listen,' I said. 'I will not hand the letter to anyone except him. In person.' Then I added: 'Do you know 'Ali Taha?' I bet you he knew him. 'Ali is my brother, a gentle person with a permanent smile on his face—come, Sabra, and translate. He hijacked a plane to Lod Airport, but his motive was humanitarian. He only wanted the Israelis to free prisoners who were rotting away in their prisons, a hundred of them, all of them his friends. Some of them sick, too. And they killed him for that. Barak and Netanyahu killed him, God damn them! They tricked him and he fell for their trick, being a decent human being.' The moment I say all this, they go wild and start repeating like parrots: 'All meetings are strictly forbidden! All meetings are strictly forbidden!' Facing him, I say, 'Listen, you ... Sabra, translate ... I am a mother of nine girls and boys. I brought them all to Jerusalem. And the time has come for justice. I'm ready to spend the rest of my life either in prison or in the empty grave I've dug for 'Ali. You choose.' They walked away repeating that phrase: 'All meetings are strictly forbidden!' Then they went up the stairs. And I, my dear, followed stealthily behind."

"And what about Sabra? What did he do?" I asked.

"Oh, he pretended to ignore it all, bless him! He's your Dad's friend and can recognize a just cause when he sees it. But he can also recognize when to keep a low profile. The Americans went into a room. I followed them and knocked on the door. A young woman opened it. When I said, 'Peace be upon you, is

Kissinger here?' she shouted, 'No, no, no,' and shook her head. I asked myself, 'Why on earth are they all like this? Some say it's forbidden others say no, no, no. What is it I'm asking of them? They've all gone crazy.' Suddenly a man comes out from another room and I recognize him! So I shout, at the top of my lungs: 'Hey, you! Kissinger! Hey! Come here, Kissinger!' He comes over and stands between me and the young woman. His eyes are about to pop. Blue, they were very blue. I tell him, 'Listen, my brother is a martyr and they've had him in a refrigerator for the past two years. Every human being has the right to bury and be buried. I wrote you two letters and you didn't respond, Kissinger. Here's my third. Take it. This is inhuman. I only want my brother.'

"Did you really speak like that to Kissinger?" I asked.

"My dear, if you have right on your side, you fear nothing."

She continued:

"Kissinger then patted my shoulder. 'Okay,' he said. 'Okay.' I returned to Silwan, tired and aching, and went straight to sleep. The next thing I know there's a knock on the door. I rise and open it and find my brother Tawfiq, one eye open, the other closed and barely visible through the smoke of the cigarette dangling from his mouth, moving left and right. 'What's up, sister? Too early to sleep, no? It's only nine o'clock. Where's everyone? Where did you go today?' 'I went to see Felicia, then to the U.S. Consulate and the *Sha'b* newspaper.'

—'And then?'

—'Then I went and saw Kissinger and handed over the letter.'

—'Do you want some tea, my brother?' I wanted to calm him down. He's a troublemaker.

—'They sent you a telegram, to my shop in the Old City.' He paused. 'And they want to give you 'Ali. Kissinger asks that you go with the lawyer and the files to Beit Il, the headquarters of the military governor, to receive the body.'

—'You mean Kissinger himself told you to tell me all this?'

"I was totally in shock. Or half-asleep. Tawfiq repeated what he'd told me. 'They sent you a telegram, to my shop in the Old City, and they want to give you 'Ali. Kissinger asks you to go with the lawyer and the files to Beit Il to receive the body.' He'd repeat and repeat and I'd lose track and ask him to repeat it again and again until it hit me. 'Thank God, O people, they're giving me back my brother! They're going to let me bury him! For God's sake, where are my children? Get me my children!'"

"I didn't sleep a wink that night, waiting for the dawn call to prayer. As soon as the call to prayer was over, we took off to the Civil Administration in Ramallah. (*Arabic with Israeli accent*) 'Hello Suhayla', [said a female army officer named Maryam, who was standing there like a rooster]. 'All the arrangements are ready. But you'll want to bring some people from abroad for the funeral.' I was elated. They wanted to bring my brothers and Fathiyya and all four of you girls in. 'Oh, you mean you want to readmit my exiled brothers? Okay, then, write down, my brother Mahmud, my brother Fadl and his wife and kids, my brother Subhi and his wife and kids, my sister 'Abla and her husband and kids, and 'Ali's wife, Fathiyya, and his four daughters.' 'Excellent, Suhayla. Today is Thursday and it's almost the end of the day. Tomorrow's Friday, a Muslim holiday, then Shabat and then Sunday is a Christian holiday and there is no Red Cross. On Monday we'll issue entry permits to all these people and send them to the Red Cross.' 'Heavens,' I said to myself, 'something doesn't smell right. Maybe it was exactly as my brothers had said. They'll give me the missing martyr and disappear all the living.' 'No I don't want anyone to come!' And I snatched the paper from her hand and tore it up. 'Those present will be more than enough,' I said. 'I just want my brother 'Ali and no one else.'

'As you like, Suhayla. Come back Sunday but you need to coordinate with Shaykh Ja'bari in Hebron where your brother will be buried, and not in Jerusalem. No saboteur can be buried here in Jerusalem where people can come and visit the grave. This meeting is now over.'

'Lord,' I thought, 'even as a dead man they're scared of you, brother. The bastards won't even let your body rest in Jerusalem.'"

The Vow is Fulfilled

"I'll never forget that day, a Monday in June, at 12 noon. The day before, I'd prepared a Palestinian flag, large and beautiful, which I sewed, washed, cleaned, wrapped up and placed inside an empty bottle of perfume and hid in my handbag. It was illegal to possess the flag then. 'Please, 'Adnan, I want a sharp blade.' He didn't even ask me why. 'Done, mother.' I took a cold bath, prayed and prayed all night, and slept standing at the door of our house. I was ready, and lost in thought, carrying the handbag. Every few minutes, I'd check its contents. The very first *Allahu Akbar* filled the sky above Jerusalem. I came closer to the door and people started approaching like the waves in the sea. Most everyone was a stranger except for my children and brothers. Cars and buses following each other, all of them behind us going to Hebron. I could hardly believe how

many there were when we arrived. I could barely squeeze my way into the municipality building to see Shaykh Ja'bari.

'Umm Muhammad,' he called out. 'Come sit near me.'

I went over, my eyes sparkling with anger, and didn't look at his face.

'What's the matter, Umm Muhammad?'

'I want to pray over my dead brother in the Ibrahimi Mosque and open the coffin to make sure it's him.'

'It's your right to open the coffin but the Ibrahimi Mosque has been surrounded since dawn by the Israeli military. It's out of the question.'

Allahu Akbar, greater is He than you and the Israelis. And I have no right to go in the mosque? And where am I supposed to pray over my brother? I swear by 'Ali's soul and his eternal sleep, if the Israelis hand him over and then arrest my brothers, I swear I'll become a servant and washerwoman in people's homes so I can make enough to feed my brother's wives and children and I'll raise them to rebel against both your injustice and the Israelis."

"I left the municipality building and went to the cemetery. My dear, I found all the people of Hebron, the West Bank and Palestine waiting for your father. Journalists were everywhere, and their soldiers were stationed on rooftops and on the ground, their helicopters hovering above and tanks below, roses and garlands everywhere. I went up to where the men were sitting."

"Men,' I said. 'Today is the wedding day of my brother. I don't want to hear any weeping, wailing or head beating. Today is his wedding day.' I sat on a chair near the small ornamental fountain and thought, 'this is where I want to bury him, right next to my father.' But then I thought: 'What if they don't bring him at all? They lie to everyone, even God, so why wouldn't they lie to me?' And I started sweating."

"At noon, a military truck arrived, covered with camouflage and packed with soldiers. They leapt out, scattered and surrounded the area, and one soldier shouted: 'Where is the family of the dead person?'"

"I jumped up from my chair and shouted back: 'I'm his family. I am the martyr's sister.'"

"They unloaded the truck and the coffin began to fly from hand to hand and shoulder to shoulder until it was suddenly in front of me. 'Oh, my beloved,' I cried. 'Where is the carpenter? Muhammad, where is the carpenter?' I found

him waiting beside me. 'Open the coffin, my brother. Say *Bismillah* and open it.' As he did, I pulled out the sharp blade. And then carefully and slowly, I cut the white bag in which he'd been placed. I leaned over and took in my 'Ali: 'That's him, that's my brother.' I opened his right eye—'O darling brother!'—and turned his lips around to see his lovely teeth, as lovely as a string of pearls. I then pulled out the Palestinian flag and wrapped him in it."

(*Ululation*)

*"OOOweee! A sword has descended from heaven, shaped by the full moon!
OOOweee! Do not gloat, our enemies, one wall's no longer there, but another re-
mains!*

*OOOweee! A sword has descended from heaven, fashioned by the full moon!
OOOweee! Do not gloat, our enemies, a brave youth has gone, but another re-
mains!"*

"We turned towards the Ibrahimi Mosque and we all prayed. 'Ali was finally at peace."

"I did not sleep in Hebron. I returned to Jerusalem that evening. As soon as I got back to our house in Silwan, I said to my children, 'For God's sake, cover me, cover me. Bring me my heavy blanket.' On that day, I fulfilled my vow even though it was the height of summer. I was feverish and exhausted, and I dreamed of 'Ali on the *howdah* of a white camel. My father, Shafiq, was holding the reins, and my mother and 'Ali were seated next to each other and laughing and waving to me as the *howdah* made its way to heaven."

I remember when 'Ali would play with us. We'd climb on his back in turn. He'd sing and we'd sing back: "My little lambs," and we'd reply, "baaa, baaa," and we'd all collapse laughing. One time, he bought Fathiyya a nightgown. I nearly died of jealousy and said to him, "I want one exactly like it, the same beautiful red." And when they'd go off to spend the evening somewhere, I'd stay up waiting for them on the balcony, frightened, while my other sisters slept on. When I heard their laughing voices below I'd make a fuss and then run off to my bed before they'd seen me. 'Ali would sometimes say, "A little bird has told me that you were naughty and didn't listen to Mom and drink your milk." I didn't believe him—little birds don't speak. So he recorded the voice of a little bird speaking, and when my sisters and I heard it we went wild. At night I'd hear loud voices, men with harsh voices talking and talking. I'd become frightened and call out for my Mom and ask her, "Why is 'Ali angry? I'm afraid for him," and she'd reply,

“No, my dear, it’s just talk. This is how the Palestinians speak and discuss matters.” It was the first time I’d heard the word.

To this day, for the past 42 years, my Aunt Suhayla has a picture of ‘Ali hanging around her neck. And to this day, she will not eat anything frozen.

‘Ali Who Will Not Die

One day, not so long ago, Fathiyya, now in her early seventies, awakened in a very agitated mood.

“What’s the matter, Tuha?” I asked. “I dreamt your father had married another woman and I was going crazy.” Poor Mom! She still loves him, even forty years after his death, though she only lived with him for eight years. My sister Shirin married a man who is the spitting image of my Dad. She is also the one who inherited Dad’s white teeth. Lucky girl! My sister Suhayr married an Englishman and called her son ‘Ali Taha. “My son ‘Ali,” she says, “keeps ‘Ali alive in my heart and makes me miss him each and every moment.”

My sister Mays says, “I am the one who dreams about him most. It’s a strange feeling to be part of a human being whom I don’t even know. It may be that I think like him, feel like him, have the same voice as him, but I’ll never really know for certain.”

They tell me that I take after him, that he was a funny guy who loved life. I returned to Palestine too, like him, in order to be near him. He left us when I was still a little girl. I missed him. I was confused and angry with him. I couldn’t understand. How could I? But I forgave him. And I allowed myself to grieve for him. It didn’t make me miss him any less. But at least now I know one thing for sure: That ‘Ali won’t die. He can’t. Because as long as we exist, ‘Ali does too.

(Song: “Where Would I Find Someone Like You, ‘Ali?”)

—The End—

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