

A Historical Contextual Approach to the Evolvment of Theatre in Algeria

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Abstract : This work attempts to trace the evolvement of the Algerian theatre from traditional model to modernized version. Indeed, no single aspect of the Algerian life was not shaped by the historical changes that Algeria was subject to, including the cultural sphere. Hence, every area has developed in response to different theories and practice that were the result of distinct historical events, and every product was created to suit the audience of its period. In this regard, the crux of the matter in the current presentation is to historically and contextually extract the reasons as well as the impact of the context on the alterations in the Algerian theatre by demonstrating how this change was manifested.

Keywords: Algerian theatre; evolvement; historical change

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1. The Introduction

Scholars, historians, critics, and Western orientalists have always claimed that theatrical arts in the western sense have never existed in the Arab-Muslim societies provided that these were against the Islamic ethical principles (Schmidt, 2015). Hence, they reckon that according to

Islamic norms and rules, types of any representation of human form and all forms of figurative arts, be they in the arts, plastic arts, or even performing arts were forbidden (Schmidt, 2015). This certainly gave the impression that Islam was, and remained for a long time inimical to the theatre.

In the same vein, they highlight that according to Muslims; this universe was created and is governed by Allah Who is responsible for every shred of life. Thus, depicting how human beings live, react, encounter hardships...etc are not necessary (Selmane, 1989).

Therefore, theoretical traditional have no place in the Arab countries, including Algeria. This means that the Arabs and the Muslims, according to these claims, had no idea what so ever about theatrical arts and drama nor did they have any theatrical artistic tradition and the only meager bibliography about these arts were the documents of classical Greece the Arabs and the Muslims translated and transmitted to the West without being aware of understanding the meaning of “tragedy” and “drama” (Selmane, 1989).

Nevertheless, historical evidence denies the idea that the Arabic countries were devoid of artistic representations. For instance, Khalifah Rashed AlHadjri from the University of Leeds in the fourth chapter of his thesis entitled *A Scenographer's Perspective on Arabic Theatre and Arab-Muslim Identity*, examines the different arguments tackling this issue (Alhajri, 2007). He tries to trace the history of the Arabic theatre from its medieval origins to the advent of European –influenced forms in the nineteenth century (Alhajri, 2007). He, also, describes the development of the modern Arabic drama from 1847, focusing on three twentieth-century playwrights with the aim of scrutinizing the state of the Arabic theatre (Alhajri, 2007).

In this regard, this work tries to put emphasis on the Algerian theatre. It aims at describing its evolvement contextually and historically.

2. The Algerian Theatre before the Algerian Independence:

It is believed that the Arab-Muslims' long traditions like performing and acting, including Algeria's, may be traced back the Roman period. As an illustration, the following theatres were among the earliest theatres in Algeria:

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- ✓ **Djémila** (Arabic: جميلة meaning the beautiful). It was formerly known as **Cuicul** and was founded by the Romans in the first century A.D. In 1982, Djémila became a UNESCO World Heritage Site being a unique Roman architecture adapted according to the mountainous environment. With its unique forum, temples, basilicas, triumphal arches and houses (UNESCO).

Fig.1. The Djémila



Source: (UNESCO)

Fig.2. The Djémila Theatre



Source: (UNESCO)

- ✓ **The Theatre of Guelma:** Built between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this place is historically known as Calama. It is among the very rare Roman sites known for the art crafts geometric and architectural forms in the world. It was restored between 1902 and 1918 (Sabrina).

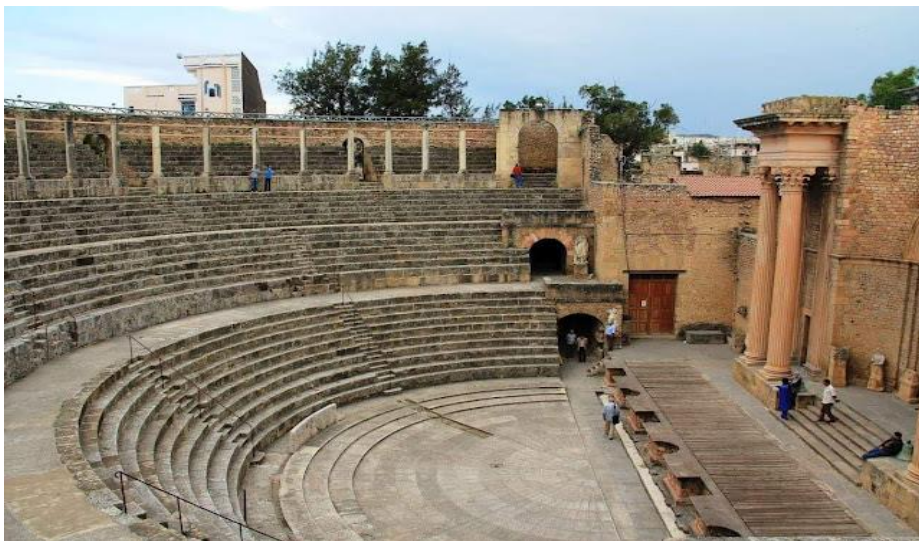
Fig.3. The Theatre of Guelma

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Source: (Sabrina)

Fig.4. Inside The Theatre of Guelma



Source: (Sabrina)

- ✓ **Khmissa:** It is a theatre in Souk-Ahras. It was built by the Romans around the 3rd century A.D.

Fig.5. Inside The Theatre of Khmissa



Source: (Ruines romaines de Khmissa à Souk-Ahras)

- ✓ **Theatre of M'daourouch:** Situated in Souk-Ahras, M'daourouch is one of the Roman remnants that the Romans left, presenting the presence of theatres in Algeria years ago.

Fig.6. The Theatre of M'daourouch

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Source: (M'daourouch/"Madaure", Souk Ahras/"Taghaste"...!)

- ✓ **Timgad.** Historically, it was known as Marciana Traiana Thamugadi. It was founded by the Romans around 100 A.D. Located in modern-day Algeria, about 35 km east of the city of Batna, the ruins are noteworthy for representing one of the best extant examples of the grid plan as used in Roman town planning. Timgad was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 (Timgad).

Fig.7. The Theatre of Timgad



Source: (Timgad, Une Cité Silencieuse)

Fig.8. Inside The Theatre of Timgad



Source: (Timgad, Une Cité Silencieuse)

Besides, historically “*Al Halqa*” constituted the most widely known form of theatrical expression in the Algerian oral popular and folk tradition

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and culture performed for the most part in the open market “*souq*”, cafés, or outdoor places devoted to performance and story-telling. The sole performer of the “*halqa*” was “the story teller” known in the Algerian popular culture as “*El Goual*” who would narrate a tale and play all its components, and performing all characters, moving skillfully from third person narration to first person voicing of the characters of the story or the tale. In fact, the stories and the tales were for the most part about heroic figures. Later, “*El Halqa*” became a platform for criticism against oppression and tyranny mainly after the establishment of the French colonial rule in Algeria in 1830.

In the same vein, the “Shadow theatre” was also among the oldest forms of theatrical expressions of the Algerian historical and artistic heritage, whose origins may be traced back at least to the sixteenth century. It has been introduced by the Turks who designed shadow puppets with a show featuring two main characters: one being “*Karagoz*” and the other “*King Urtila*” to represent the strength of the Ottoman Empire at that time.

Fig.9. The Algerian “*Karagos*” in Oran



Source: (World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts)

In Algeria, “Karagoz” has become a prominent character in the Algerian folklore and popular culture that amused both children and adults (Knio, 1994). In its beginnings, “karagoz” was regarded as a talisman which was to bring wealth, health, and fertility for women. Later, this significant character was depicted as a revolutionary leader who defied oppression against the French dominance. Indeed, “Karagoz” was always represented as strong man who used his stick to hit the French soldiers symbolized throughout the scenes as ‘a devil’ they had to fight as it is illustrated in the following picture

By 1843, these shows started to be prohibited as the French realized their role in raising the people’s consciousness about the presence of colonial rule and their implications on public opinion. Yet, this artistic tradition was to survive and took new forms on the eve of independence.

Fig.10. An Algerian Show of the “Karagos”



Source: (World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts)

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The theatre in its more modern form emerged in Algeria back to the twenties when groups from different Arabic countries visited Algeria like the White George's group in 1921. White George is a Lebanese actor who created different plays and presented them in different countries, including Algeria. Therefore, Algerians were highly encouraged to create their own theatres; and Sellali Ali, Bach Tarzi Mohi Eddine, and Rachid Costantini are considered as the pioneers of the Algerian theatre. At the beginning a classical theater emerged imitating the one in the other Arabic countries. Between 1921 and 1924, a group was formed under the leadership of Taher Cherif who created three plays : الشفاء بعد العناء، خديعة الغرام، بديع

The three plays orbited around alcoholism and were written in standard Arabic. However, since theatre in its modern form was new at that time and the Algerian population was not accustomed to witness or watch such performances, it is believed that the plays failed (ذيب، 2016). In addition to that, Algeria was still under the control of the colonists. People did not have time to spend in theatres watching plays. Consequently, Sellali Ali tried to learn from the mistakes made by his antecedents and to imitate the success achieved by the Lebanese group. He, therefore, attempted to appeal to the Algerians' senses at that time when they were in need of moments of hope, laughter and amusement. He developed plays about Joha جحا. He also chose to use the Algerian dialect to attract the audience. So, he did not only appeal to the audience through his stories that were fictional and captivating but also created a bridge of communication through the use of the dialect instead of the standard Arabic.

The language of the play was a simple, popular and respectful so that it reaches all segments of the population. Besides, the plays during this period included some satirical songs to express the daily life of the Algerian people. Finally, sense of humor and laughter were crucial but at the same time were used to send important messages. Sellali, hence, was the first one who addressed the audience using the dialects spoken in Algiers.

Following suit, other plays were produced during the period that preceded the Algerian independence where both the Algerian dialects and the standard Arabic were used.

The when the war between the colonist and the Algerians escalated after the War of Revolution on 1954, theatre developed as a tool against the French colonialism. Mustapha Kateb for instance created « the theatrical National Liberation Army Group» to serve as a political tool for the cause of independence. This group produced a number of plays

أبناء القصبه 1958

الخالدون 1959

دم الأحرار 1961

العهد 1962

Another writer known as Kateb Yacin produced other remarkable plays including الجثة المطوقة، المرأة المتوحشة، مسحوق الذكاء،

3. The Algerian Theatre before the Algerian Independence:

After the war of independence in 1962, theatre evolved and activities increased and flourished. During the period of colonization, it was not easy for those who were interested in theatre to express their views freely. In 1963, The National Theatre in Algiers (TNA) was established. Plays treated varied topics and were presented differently. Not only Algeria was represented but also Morocco and Tunisia. As plays developed to tackle miscellaneous issues, performance necessitated using diverse dialects along the standard Arabic.

For instance, Kateb Yacine is among the most famous contemporary Algerian playwrights though he contributed to the evolvement of theatre before independence as well. In 1970, he published his play *L'homme aux Sandals de Caoutchouc* (The man with the Rubber Sandals). Furthermore, in 1971, he wrote his first pplay using the Algerian Arabic Mohamed ,*Prends ta Valise* (Mohamed, Take Your Suitcase). Indeed, his were banned from appearing on Tv or even radio because of the incessant focus on wars and sensitive issues not only in Algeria but also Palestine (Sabrina A. , 2017).

By the same token, Abdelkader alloula is another famous playwright, director and actor who developed a new form of theatre and focused on presenting many cultural elements. In 1963, he was offered a job as a professional actor in Algiers. He acted five plays: *The Children of the Casbah*, *The Oath*, *Life is a Dream...*etc. He wrote and directed: *Al*

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Khobza 1970(loaf of bread) which portrays the poor living conditions of the lower classes of society and their daily struggle, *Al Mayda* (the table) 1973, and *Hammam Rabbi* 1975. He used the art of the *Maddah* in his plays (drama).Alloula's language combines borrowings from the traditional heritage and present daily life and from modern standard Arabic, the language used in education and by the press.

In the same vein, Slimane benaissa participated in a great deal to the development of the Algerian theater. Between 1969 and 1971, he acted in several plays, and translated Kateb's *La Poudre D'intelligence* and wrote a play entitled *Al Shaab, Al Shaab*(people, people). Moreover, he wrote and produced two plays in 1977 ,*Yum Al Jumaa*(Friday)*Al Mahgur*(the despised). In march 1982,he produced *Babur Ghraq*(a ship sank).With this play he became an established playwright and director in Algeria like Abdelkader Alloula and Kateb Yacine .He was one of the main contributors to the collective production of *La Femme Algerienne* (The Algerian Woman) ,a controversial play about the harsh situation of Algerian women in a male dominated society .The play was performed for one year 1969-1970 because of its appealing theme and the polemical debates it generated.

Nowadays, theatre plays an important role. It remains a fundamental element for the preservation of Algerian identity, because memory is constructed and reconstructed and theatres are one way to construct a memory about Algeria which respects the culture of this country.

4. The conclusion:

The crux of the matter in the present paper was to historically and contextually describe the development of the Algerian theatre believing that this latter was susceptible to the different happenings. Albeit, it was reckoned that the Algerian theatre was modern, its remnants preceded its establishment for a long time ago, back to the Roman occupation of Africa.

Indeed, it was deduced that the Algerian theatre was evolved as a response to the different alterations that took place in different periods of time. It started as a mere imitation to the foreign plays, and then developed to condemn and fight French colonialism and tyranny. Then it evolved to be a toll that helps maintain

the Algerian identity and culture; mainly that Algeria embraces many cultures and sects.

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