

Epic Structural Techniques in Salah Abdel Sabour's Plays: After the King Dies and The Princess Waits

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Abstract:

Traditionally, playwrights in Poetic Theatre employed classical structural and thematic mechanisms that encouraged audience immersion through scenes culminating in predictable happy or tragic endings. However, poetic theatre evolved significantly under the influence of political, social, and cultural changes, necessitating the adoption of epic techniques that shifted it away from direct dramatization and poetic lyricism toward a theatrical space capable of entertaining, engaging, and intellectually stimulating the audience. This was achieved through the integration of narration, storytelling, heritage-based scenes, self-alienation, fragmentation of events, cinematic clips, songs, and other structural and artistic techniques. Such devices successfully disrupted the “dramatic illusion” and employed the Brechtian concept of estrangement to present events in a way that opens unexpected horizons for the viewer. These manifestations are examined in Salah Abdel Sabour’s plays *After the King Dies* and *The Princess Waits*.

Keywords: Poetic Theatre; Epic Theatre; Chorus; Temporal and Spatial Distancing; Role Exchange.

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Introduction

The contemporary Arab poet has borrowed techniques from theatrical, epic, alienationist, and novelistic texts to delve into the political, social, economic, and cultural issues of the Arab nation. To distinguish their work from other literary forms, poets utilized narrative mechanics, storytelling, and cinematic elements, moving toward a blend of comedy and tragedy. Bertolt Brecht transcended traditional forms to break monotony, evoke wonder, and achieve a sense of illusion that separates art from reality, enabling the recipient to intellectually determine the nature of endings—whether happy or sad. Consequently, we have selected the poetic masterpieces of Salah Abdel Sabour, through which he attempted to express a world governed by laws that forced him to take a stance for or against prevailing life conditions.

However, before analyzing Abdel Sabour's experiments, we must note that Egyptian theater was particularly influenced by Brechtian Epic Theater. This movement emerged from a rejection of Aristotelian theory, which strictly separated comedy from tragedy. Bertolt Brecht transformed theater into a social and political message, requiring the audience to interact with the play's events through conscious intellect rather than mere emotional impulse.

Following a close reading of Salah Abdel Sabour's poetic plays, we have focused on the structural epic mechanisms of estrangement: the generalization of names, temporal and spatial alienation, and the fragmentation of scenes and events. Furthermore, we examine the "strangeness" elicited by the chorus and rhetorical interrogation, reflecting an interdisciplinary overlap of poetry, narration, and drama. This synergy achieves a structure rooted in "pleasure and instruction," breaking the monotony the recipient traditionally encounters in lyrical poetry.

1. Epic Structural Mechanisms

Salah Abdel Sabour ventured into Epic Theater despite the differing circumstances of its emergence in the West compared to the Arab world. Epic theater is considered "a product of Western industrial society—conditions that Egyptian society did not experience in the same way, especially since the goal of this theatrical trend was to awaken the consciousness of the working classes to the consequences of the capitalist system. From this, the idea of non-belonging or alienation emerged, making Brecht's theater a call to change this reality" ¹. This approach distances itself from mimesis (imitation), combining Epic Theater theory with "alienation" as a concept worthy of study, given its implication of human estrangement and weakness against forces that suppress artistic and aesthetic skills.

Abdel Sabour sought to draw from the rich springs of heritage in his poetic plays. This may be attributed to his attempt to "link the viewer to the epic trend to preserve Arab identity. Naturally, this return was not merely for a lost sense of nationalism, but a search for artistic techniques capable of establishing an artistic correspondence with the audience. This became more evident in the creative output of the 1970s, manifesting in the breaking of illusion, the theatrical 'game,' and other levels of Brechtian technique" ², which advocated for renewal in both form and content.

1.1. Role-Playing (Interchangeability of Roles)

The late 1960s appear to be the most fertile period of Salah Abdel Sabour's creativity. Between 1964 and 1970, he provided the Arab reader with significant works in poetry, theater, and criticism, enriching the Arab library with plays such as *Al-Hallaj*, *Night Traveler*, *Layla and the Madman*, and *The Princess Waits* ³. We will address these through the identification of epic structural mechanisms, particularly the technique of role-playing.

In *The Princess Waits*, the poet departs from the Aristotelian pattern by using the "flashback" technique—presenting the result first, then revealing the series of causes leading to it. Moreover, he did not rely on heritage for character selection but drew them from his imagination. The play begins with a scene in a hut depicting the miserable state of the Princess and her three ladies-in-waiting. They speak of the betrayal of time and the fate that befell them. The start is tragic: the Princess was deceived by Al-Samandal, murdered her father, and handed the key of governance to her lover, only for him to expel her from the palace. She lives in a wretched hut hoping for his return. When he does return, it is only to seek her help in ruling after his entourage abandoned him. However, a benevolent character assists her, saving her from the tyranny of the ruler (Al-Qarandal), allowing her to live her freedom once more with a new dawn ⁴.

The play is replete with binary oppositions—cunning vs. deception, good vs. evil. Through these, the poet attempts to transport the recipient from lived reality to psychological and social worlds via a symbolic formula that breaks barriers. He clarifies that there is no direct link between theatrical scenes and reality, removing every illusory barrier on stage, whether through decor (space, lighting, clothing) or acting. The ladies-in-waiting appear in a miserable state, saying:

First Lady-in-waiting: Death hastens us, Yet we cling to the scattered tethers of life.

Second Lady-in-waiting: It is not for us to choose; [We are but] words within a sentence.

First Lady-in-waiting: What was said, has been said; The days have spoken us, then cast us into the face of the wind ⁵.

However, the poet creates wonder by presenting the ladies in different forms and roles to dissipate the illusion the recipient falls into

when empathizing with them. Suddenly, the appearance of the Second Lady changes: "The Princess rises gracefully to stretch out on the table in a seductive position... she disappears for a moment and returns wearing the mask of a middle-aged man with a thick mustache and a challenging demeanor" ⁶. She attempts to tell the Princess of the arrival of the "knight of her dreams" who had cast her into the hut. Thus, roles overlap and are exchanged within a single play to emphasize that "what is presented to the recipient is nothing but a theatrical game with a known beginning and end; the writer feared the viewer falling into the trap of immersion" ⁷. He avoids this by creating astonishment and surprise to break the illusion and shatter the horizon of expectation.

2. Temporal and Spatial Distancing

Space is defined by the features of the character and the timing of their roles. If it is built on stage with attention directed toward patterns, decor, and lighting while tracking the characters' paths and dialogues, it is called "theatrical space." However, if we take the written text as a tool, the term shifts from "place" to "space" (espace), which the recipient can imagine after grasping all structural, thematic, and technical epic elements ⁸.

In *The Princess Waits*, the poet presents the decor starting from "the light extending from the front of the stage to its depth, illuminating a door swinging on its hinge... and when the light returns from the depth, it moves to the right to show stairs ascending to the Princess's room, paralleled on the left by stairs descending to the hut's cellar where the residents keep their poor daily sustenance. In the center of the hut stands an old rectangular table... surrounded by four seats, one with a slightly higher back" ⁹. This allows the recipient to visualize the characters and their linguistic level, alongside the changes the poet introduces through role-playing.

Abdel Sabour focused on the actor's external patterns and their role in defining the play's trajectory. This is evident in the re-enactment of

the King's murder: "The Princess collapses in overwhelming tears on the bed of the dead King, while the two ladies-in-waiting remove their masks, stand behind her, and weep. The weeping echoes in a unified rhythm, and during this, the one Al-Samandal expects enters" ¹⁰. The actor's performance is a pillar of Brechtian theater; thus, the actor separates their performance from their actual persona.

The play contains temporal significations from beginning to end, defining the framework of the narrative and the timing of events alongside the psychological state of the characters. What increased the "estrangement" of time was the poet's temporal vocabulary:

The days have spoken us, and cast us into the face of the wind...
Fifteen autumns since she bore us in the carriage, From amidst the
suitcases of her past. Fifteen autumns since we departed the Palace of
Roses, And descended into this barren valley... The same sequence
remains: When the darkness multiplies into fifteen darknesses, We
exchange these very words. ¹¹.

The poet intensified his temporal lexicon to indicate the heavy burden on the characters (fifteen autumns, fifteen darknesses). Even the title (*The Princess Waits*) signifies melancholy and despair within a dark space, contrasting with the Princess's previous life of "roses." It becomes a place of pain and boredom, perhaps reflecting the political and social conditions from which the poet sought liberation, hoping for a bright tomorrow.

3. The Chorus (Al-Jawqa)

The chorus is one of the most important structural tools in Abdel Sabour's poetic theater. He consistently tries to break illusion, monotony, and directness. In classical theater, the viewer expects answers for every situation the actor portrays (often provided by a narrator). However, the chorus's role is to "inform the audience of facts they did not know, predict what will happen, or comment on events. Therefore, the chorus contributes to sparking thought rather than

emotion" ¹². The viewer must absorb this with a sharp, analytical eye capable of thinking about social and cultural change.

Abdel Sabour begins *After the King Dies* with prose, delivered directly by three women: "Three women enter from the palace—behind the curtain—in obvious makeup, each holding a paper as if reviewing her role. When the music gives the signal, they stand before the curtain at equal distances, then the music signals them to begin speaking" ¹³.

The first woman begins by introducing the playwright: "The play we present tonight is written by a poet named Salah Abdel Sabour, a tan man with glasses..." ¹⁴. The second woman tries to win over the viewer, highlighting their active contribution alongside the actor, author, and director. Meanwhile, the third woman introduces the play as an intellectual issue concerning the viewer, actor, and poet: "The play we present tonight is about the death of a king" ¹⁵. This seriousness is heightened by a questioning doubt: "A king of which country was this king?" ¹⁶. This question awaits a quick answer, preventing the tension and anxiety that Abdel Sabour intends to use to give the play a premature dramatic character.

4. The Chorus (Choral Ensemble)

After the King Dies features an exchange of roles and a change in spaces. "The scene shifts from the introduction by the three women to the throne room, representing the lower part of the scene—a large hall centered by a massive royal setting" ¹⁷. The mistresses begin participating in the events after they had merely introduced the play. When the King points to the first woman, her emotions are stirred:

The Woman: My Lord, Send your breath upon my skin like a playful wind, To shake my fruits, and heap them—ripe and blooming—into your hands; Then my body shall yield, siphoning this lavish glow, And sleep serenely, grateful for the joy... [Suddenly changing tone] Ugh! What a desolate boredom, vast as the desert! We have said this all

before... The same cold, smooth words; We said them yesterday, and the day before yesterday. Go back to the line! O, you... Poet! ¹⁸.

If the viewer were to follow this passage emotionally, they would expect a romantic conclusion. However, the poet suddenly breaks the illusion through the King's rejection and boredom. This is Abdel Sabour's goal in Brechtian theater; the chorus "evolved until it entered a renewed stage at the hands of Bertolt Brecht... it is the active participation in theatrical events that made the chorus an influential dramatic character rather than just a theatrical ornament" ¹⁹. The chorus has many uses, all agreeing that what is being watched is merely a theatrical game in which the viewer engages with their mind and intellect, not their whims and emotions.

¹ Mahmoud Said, *Writing Techniques in Literature and Theater: Yousry El-Gendi's Theater as a Model*, Misr El-Arabia for Publishing, Cairo, 1st ed., 2011, pp. 10-11.

² Wagih Gerges, *Theater Between History and Myth: A Comparative Analytical Study*, Misr El-Arabia for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2010, p. 307.

³ Madiha Amer, *Artistic and Aesthetic Values in the Poetry of Salah Abdel Sabour: An Analytical and Aesthetic Study of Art and Thought*, General Egyptian Book Organization, n.d., 1984, p. 59.

⁴ Adnan Mahmoud Obeidat, *Salah Abdel Sabour as a Critic*, p. 113.

⁵ Salah Abdel Sabour, *The Princess Waits (Al-Amira Tantazir)*, Dar al-Awda, Beirut, 2003, p. 07.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60.

⁷ Mahmoud Said, *Writing Techniques in Literature and Theater*, op. cit., p. 181.

⁸ See: Akram Al-Yousef, *Theatrical Space Between Social Text and Dramatic Economy*, Dar Raslan for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Damascus, 1st ed., 2010, p. 22.

⁹ Salah Abdel Sabour, *The Princess Waits*, op. cit., pp. 05-06.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹² Mahmoud Said, *Writing Techniques in Literature and Theater*, op. cit., p. 57.

¹³ Salah Abdel Sabour, *The Complete Works (Al-Diwan)*, Vol. 3, p. 227.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁹ Mahmoud Said, *Writing Techniques in Literature and Theater*, op. cit., p. 255.