

The Phenomenon of Experimentation in the Algerian Theater

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Abstract ;

Since the mid-1980s, experimentation in Algerian theater has taken new directions, driven by the emergence of a new generation of young practitioners. These artists have ventured into experimental theater either through quotation, which serves as a window into the literary traditions of other cultures, or through the utilization of folk heritage as a bridge between the past and the present. Their approach involves reworking pre-theatrical traditional forms and transforming them into theatrical frameworks that engage with contemporary themes.

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1. Introduction

More than a century has passed since what may provisionally be considered the founding of theater in Algeria. During this period, Algerian theater practitioners felt an artistic necessity to engage with European theatrical experiments, captivated by European theatrical forms at a time when those very forms had already been surpassed experimentally. This foundational phase of Algerian theater was manifested in adapted and staged works by pioneering figures such as Ould Abd Errahman Kaki and Abdelkader Alloula.

These early works confirm the observation that “most Maghrebi playwrights’ resort to adaptation because they lack the prerequisites for artistic creation and struggle to meet the conditions of proper playwriting. Consequently, we observe that our theatrical movement remained active in the field of adaptation for an extended period. The author of this view does not stray far from a previous perspective that regarded adaptation as a form of concealment. However, he identifies a potentially positive aspect, provided it is accompanied by an active movement in original playwriting and meets certain standards of quality.” (Al-Kaghat, 1986, p. 111)

Furthermore, the absence of intellectual depth, the lack of a coherent artistic vision, and the disregard for the historical conditions of creative practices stripped these adapted works of their dramatic value, reducing them to mere spectacle-driven performances characterized by “spontaneous dramatic play.” (Al-Munii, 1974, p. 6)

What can be considered as a developmental shift in the trajectory of Algerian theater occurred when practitioners turned to traditional texts and themes to express ideological stances opposing colonial reality. This pivot, however, did not stem from a philosophical vision or artistic convictions necessitated by theatrical practice as a historically situated act. Rather, it was national ideological considerations that imposed this shift, creating an artistic condition within a theatrical practice that was historically, cognitively, and aesthetically unprepared to contain the prevailing ideology.

Accordingly, “the true foundation of Maghrebi theater began practically in the post-1960s period, coinciding with the emergence of theoretical waves associated with a new generation of young theater practitioners with a modernist orientation.” (Ben Ibrahim, n.d., p. 210) This generation aims to establish an artistic and cognitive break from the theater that dominated the foundational period of an authentic Algerian theater. Their primary focus is the search for an artistic form, or at least a locally derived artistic formula rooted in Algerian, Arab, and Islamic heritage, open to global dramatic experiments, and capable of integrating contemporary experimental techniques into the modern theatrical landscape.

The reasons behind focusing on this generation may be summarized as follows:

- A. It emerged as a product of historical and social transformations that necessitated change, the search for creative horizons, and forward-looking intellectual visions. These factors imbued theatrical practice with revolutionary connotations and solidified critical and documentary realism.
- B. It shifted focus away from the elusive search for a rigid artistic form, unlike the pursuits of Tawfiq al-Hakim and Yusuf Idris, based on the belief that theatrical experimentation had emptied the concept of theatrical form of its classical meaning, which was characterized by a rigid mold with absolute constants.
- C. It prioritized a dramatic language rich in semantic density.
- D. It directed experimentation toward performance, acting, and directing. (Ibid, p. 211)

2. Theatrical Modernity and the Necessity of Theorization

Contemporary Algerian theater is somewhat unique in that experimental innovations in dramatic writing and directing have been accompanied by a substantial volume of theoretical discourse aimed at achieving the following primary objectives:

- A. Re-evaluating Aristotelian rules and traditional conceptions of theatrical practice.
- B. Responding to modern imperatives of change and searching for an artistic identity and epistemological foundation for theatrical practices, viewing them as a creative discourse still seeking its existence as a cultural act.
- C. Securing a distinct position within the contemporary cultural landscape, especially after intensified competition with cinema and television in capturing public attention and their superior capacity for mass communication. (Ibid, p.211)

Abd Alkader Alloula, who undertook the most significant theoretical project in contemporary Algerian theater, discussed the relationship between Circle theater and Brechtian theater. He stated: “Brecht did not directly point us toward these forms; rather, he sought to transcend the Aristotelian model by exploring its limitations and proposing possibilities for moving beyond it. As we know, Brecht’s theater rests on two fundamental principles: the alienation effect and non-Aristotelian theater. Since our focus is on the second point, we find that Brecht pursued change and the enlightenment of reality, asserting: ‘Theater has become the domain of philosophers who do not seek to interpret the world but to change it.’ Thus, according to Brecht, theater must serve as a revolutionary instrument that contributes to social transformation in favor of oppressed classes. In

this way, the function of epic theater differs from that of dramatic theater, necessitating a change in form.” (Bayoud, 1998)

Theorization has become an absolute necessity to reclaim the lost modernity of Arab theater, ensuring that it does not remain “merely a craft and industry reduced to muscular, animalistic labor where intellect is absent and the body is present.” (Barshid, n.d.)

Despite the theoretical surge witnessed by contemporary theater since the 1970s, encompassing ritual/festival theater, Circle theater, Third Theater, Poor Theater, Phase Theater, and Testimonial/Critical Theater, this theoretical discourse has acquired both fixed and evolving characteristics that are largely shared, despite variations in artistic visions and conceptual differences among various theoretical trends.

3. Between Indigenization and Experimentation in Contemporary Algerian Theater

Among the signs of social transformation, Algerian theater has undergone notable development encompassing the elements that constitute both the theatrical text and performance. Practitioners and scholars have sought to express their issues and concerns through a new philosophy that contributed to rooting the theater by returning to a popular heritage rich in folk expressive forms that deeply resonate with audiences due to their proximity to their emotions and sensibilities.

“Attempts to establish and root an Algerian theater have evolved, as a group of professional and unprofessional Algerian theater practitioners ventured into experimentation by reviving and adapting pre-theatrical traditional forms, turning them into theatrical molds for contemporary themes. The Circle has thus become an experimental form through which these practitioners have returned Algerian dramatic writing to its pure sources by modernizing the figure of the storyteller (Al-Qawwal) and the eulogist (Al-Maddah) to address current political issues.” (Hadli, 2009)

Among the most prominent playwrights who pioneered Circle theater is Ould Abd Errahman Kaki. He focused on documenting negative social phenomena to dramatize them, blending these realities with heritage and mythology. Within this framework, the search for the distinctiveness of modern theatrical practice gains significance. Makhrouf Boukhrouf notes: “No theatrical experience emerges spontaneously or from factors external to the social environment that expresses it; rather, it is shaped by the nature of societal change, which imparts a unique character upon it.” (Boukhrouf, 2002)

4. Performance and Staging

This approach allows for greater control over the directing process. In turn, the audience is expected to understand the dramatic function of these new mechanisms, not as ends in themselves meant to dazzle the spectator, but as tools to articulate the meaning of theatrical direction.

“Theatrical experimentation presupposes acceptance of the idea that art is based on trial and error, as long as it seeks what does not yet exist or uncovers hidden truths. These trials may involve testing unpublished texts, tackling works known for their difficulty, experimenting with acting techniques, or exploring modes of reception. Experimentation means continuous renewal and the search for new methods and forms.” (Ibn Yassir, n.d., p. 120)

If experimentation entails all of this, it does not aim to present fully cohesive and finalized works. Rather, it offers evolving proposals to a knowledgeable audience, remaining open to continuous development to ensure the progression and sustainability of theatrical experiments. The relationship with the audience lies at the center of experimental theater’s concerns. Here, theater is no longer confined to the dichotomy between entertainment and didacticism; instead, it seeks to provoke questioning and critical reflection in the audience, transforming the traditional receptive posture marked by emotional passivity and unidirectional influence.

In light of the above, and if we may expand the concept of theatrical experimentation as an adventurous endeavor by playwrights and directors to test dramatic forms and techniques within their specific cultural fields, whether those fields possess deeply entrenched dramatic traditions, as in the West, or only encountered theater in its embryonic form at a late stage, as in our context, we can assert that Algerian theater was born experimentally, through and by means of experimentation. Since this theater lacks an ancient history or a deep accumulation of rooted experiences, experimentation was unavoidable. “Experimentation was the destiny of our nascent theater at the beginning of the last century, not as a free choice or artistic luxury, but as a historical necessity dictated and controlled by the factors of the historical moment, cultural timeframe, and broader social frameworks.” (Ibid, p. 223)

Early pioneers such as Rachid Ksentini, Mohieddine Bachtarzi, and Slali Ali (known as Allalou) practiced theatrical experimentation in their own unique ways. They were not experimenting with styles and forms within an established theatrical system, as no such system existed yet. Rather, they were experimenting with methods and means to cultivate the emerging dramatic genre within a cultural soil that had no clear, deep-rooted connection to this imported art form. Drawing from “One Thousand and One Nights”, Andalusian history, or even Molière himself was done within a spontaneous experimental framework, that is, “through the synthesis of fragments, adaptation, transposition, and occasionally playful manipulation of texts and models, especially in comedy, whether consciously or unconsciously. This mode of experimentation persisted for a long period from the inception of Algerian theater. Indeed, we can argue that the history of Algerian theater is virtually a history of experiments, and the terms ‘experiment’ or ‘experiments’ are persistent and recurring features in the lexicon of all theoretical and critical discourses on our theater.” (Ibid., p. 124)

5. Experiments in Algerian Theater

5.1 Experimentation through Adaptation

Researchers examining the necessity of adaptation in the movement of Algerian theater find ambiguity and confusion surrounding the term itself. “Adaptation sometimes means Arabization, at other times transposition, synthesis, or montage, all of which refer to one another without precise definition or delineation.” (Ibid., p. 125) This terminological indistinctness points to a major dilemma: how to engage with imported theater and how to internalize adapted texts.

As a window into the literature of other nations, adaptation need not provoke controversy or opposition. However, it “becomes a phenomenon worthy of study when it dominates the theatrical scene, replacing original playwriting. This situation was experienced by Maghribi theater during certain periods, particularly at its inception and during the era of amateur theater.” (Al-Kaghat, 1986)

It is worth noting that theatrical playwriting worldwide has only flourished continuously during specific historical periods. Therefore, the phenomenon should not be overemphasized. There is no need to dramatize Algerian theater’s reliance on adaptation when the pens of playwrights run dry, especially when other factors drive adaptation besides a shortage or weakness in original writing. Moreover, most Algerian theater practitioners’ resort to adaptation because they lack the prerequisites for artistic creation and struggle to fulfill the conditions of proper playwriting. “Thus, we observe that our movement remained active in the field of adaptation for a long time.” [Ibid, p. 50] The figure who best embodied this phase is the playwright Ould Abd Errahman Kaki with his famous absurdist play “History of the Flower”, adapted from Japanese Noh theater. Derived from a mythical legend where a flower sprouts from a lover’s blood, a notion bordering on the absurd or irrational, this play is characterized by its absurdist tone. A passage from the play illustrates this: “Kaki was inspired to create a modern myth that we can classify among myths of sacrifice, redemption, and immortality. The flower symbolizes Algeria, and the gardener represents the individual who sacrifices himself for the nation.” (Hadli, op.cit., p. 114)

In 1958, Ould Abd Errahman Kaki adapted an absurdist play titled “The End of the Game”, inspired by Samuel Beckett’s work. The title employs a chess term referring to the third and final stage of a game, symbolically hinting at the end of things in life.

“This play features four characters, each harboring a dream and striving to communicate it to others, but to no avail. It is a game individuals enjoy while performing, yet its conclusion is grim due to their inability to achieve intellectual connection and their failure to convey their visions, resulting in perpetual frustration. The drama in this play reflects a loss of faith and hope in life,

which remains meaningless amid the dynamic repetition of daily events, as language fails to serve as a tool for understanding and communication among people.” (Ibid., p. 114)

Adaptation as a phenomenon was primarily linked to the movement of theatrical troupes. “Translated or adapted plays were presented to troupes for performance, and their authors never considered publishing them for reading, as they were not regarded as literature meant to be read.” [Potintseva, 1990]

Based on the above, we can deduce the value and role of adaptation in the movement of Arab theatrical text: “Adaptation grants freedom of manipulation, as the adapter preserves the general structure of the text while altering the dialogue and characters to produce a localized play. The original characters become equivalents to those in the adapted text, and these alterations are driven by the desire to make the play acceptable to the local mentality and sensibility.” (Salam, 1993)

However, adaptation often falls short of the pinnacle that original playwriting aspires to reach, given that “those who undertake it are rarely writers by innate talent, but rather practitioners of acting, directing, craftsmanship, or production.” (Ibid., p. 63)

5.2 Experimentation through the Utilization of Heritage and Traditional Spectacle Forms

This approach is clearly evident in the works of Ould Abd Errahman Kaki, particularly in his famous plays “The Kinsfolk and the Righteous People”, “Everyone Has His Own Rule”, and “The Collection of Qaraqoz”, as well as in Abd Alkader Alloula’s works, notably “The Table” and his famous trilogy. These works utilize the Circle form, along with the arts of the storyteller, eulogist, and narrator. Here, experimentation is comprehensive, encompassing playwriting, directing style, scenography, and the performance itself. Alloula’s productions of the same play often differ from one performance to another, depending on specific contexts and circumstances. In this regard, he states: “When we speak about the Circle or the storyteller, we are referring to the theatrical structure and its traditional components. Our encounter with heritage did not begin in 1972; it preceded it. However, the theatrical experience of “The Table”, presented that year, alerted us to the existence of a popular culture with its own heritage, requiring different theatrical structures. The play was collectively written and directed, revolving around the dimensions of the agricultural revolution. It toured rural areas and villages, with performances staged outdoors. Spectators formed a circle around the actors from all sides, which compelled us to abandon traditional scenery. We began working with virtually no set, except for minimal, essential items to distinguish characters. This new spatial arrangement allowed the actor to adapt to a different environment. The removal of scenery also brought a sense of comfort to the audience. When bored or displeased with what was presented, spectators would simply turn their backs to their neighbors, conversing with them or listening with only one ear....

This also prompted us to focus more on dialogic theater, particularly narrative-driven performances. Regarding audience comprehension, Alloula adds: “To better gauge how close we were to the audience, we began discussing the performance with them after every evening’s show to avoid mistakes and achieve aesthetic and intellectual proximity.... We achieved this during our run of “The Table”. After forty performances and continuous discussions with peasant audiences to find solutions that satisfied them, we found that the final performance differed significantly from the first. We also noticed the audience’s remarkable auditory capacity and rich memories. During discussions, they would recall many of our dialogues. Upon analyzing this experience, we became convinced of the necessity to search for a theatrical form that responds to the popular culture, imagination, and inherent components of the audience.” (Bayoud, op.cit., p. 168)

This serves as a project to build new foundations and horizons for Algerian theater, enabling it to creatively bridge oral folk heritage as a reference with contemporary theater as an artistic creation, while drawing on foreign influences to secure a prominent place for Algerian theater without severing its cultural roots.

6. CONCLUSION

The return to cultural heritage constitutes the defining characteristic of theatrical works that seek to root Algerian theater in form and content. Algerian practitioners’ engagement with heritage, however, extends beyond thematic incorporation; it encompasses the deliberate integration of traditional performative elements and formats that resonate emotionally with Arab spectators. These include the eulogist, the storytelling circle, Melodic poetry, and traditional dance. Drawing upon these resources, practitioners have produced a corpus of experimental plays that align with the broader endeavor to establish an authentic Algerian theater. This body of work is distinguished by a dramatic language that derives its distinctive features directly from local cultural heritage.

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