

The Emergence of Playwriting in Arabic Literature

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Abstract: This article explores the historical trajectory of playwriting in Arabic literature, highlighting theatre as a Western art form that was not embraced by Arab cultures until the mid-19th century. It traces the origins of theater to ancient religious rituals and its subsequent development in Greek civilization. The article also examines the factors that delayed the emergence of theater in the Arab world, including political and social instability, the dominance of poetry as a primary artistic expression, and religious and cultural prohibitions on music, dance, and gender mixing. It further reviews the early stages of theater in Lebanon, its migration to Egypt, and the rise of prominent playwrights like Tawfiq al-Hakim. The article also touches on the history of Syrian theater, its pioneers, and the evolution of playwriting genres, concluding that efforts to root theater in Arabic literature have often been driven by subjective, rather than objective, motives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

2. Theater, as both a literary and performative art, is widely regarded as a Western innovation that remained foreign to Arab culture until the mid-19th century. Despite the rich narrative, lyrical, and epic traditions in Arabic literature, which could have served as fertile ground for theatrical adaptation, theater did not take root in the Arab world until much later. Its origins can be traced back to ancient religious rituals performed in temples by the Egyptians, Indians, and Greeks. These early performances were deeply intertwined with spiritual practices, serving as tools for religious institutions to maintain authority and influence over the masses (Ghallab, *Lamps of the Greek Theater*, p. 37).
3. Theater evolved significantly in ancient Greece, particularly through festivals honoring Dionysus, the god of fertility and growth. Initially, these performances consisted of improvised dithyrambic songs and dances. The transition to a more structured literary form is attributed to Arion of Corinth, who introduced pre-written texts recited by a chorus member. Thespis, often considered the first actor, further revolutionized theater by separating from the chorus to engage in dialogue, marking the birth of acting as a distinct art form (Saber, *History of Greek Literature*, p. 73).
4. The Greek theatrical tradition reached its zenith with the contributions of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Aeschylus introduced a second actor, while Sophocles added a third, expanding the dramatic possibilities of tragedy. Euripides, though making fewer innovations in staging, refined the structure of tragedy by

introducing the prologue and incorporating characters from diverse social classes. Despite these advancements, theater found no equivalent in Arab culture, neither in the pre-Islamic era nor during the Islamic Golden Age (Bakathir, *The Art of Playwriting Through My Personal Experiences*, p. 23).

5. The Arab World and the Absence of Theater

The absence of theater in the Arab world can be attributed to a combination of historical, social, and religious factors. Unlike Greece, which enjoyed a stable environment conducive to artistic experimentation, the Arab world was shaped by the harsh realities of desert life, which prioritized survival over cultural innovation. Poetry emerged as the dominant form of artistic expression, capturing the rhythms of nomadic life and the intricacies of Arab identity. This lyrical tradition left little room for the dramatic and performative elements of theater (Al-Feel, *Vision and Statement of Arab Theater*, p. 09).

The rise of Islam further distanced Arab society from theatrical traditions. The Islamic emphasis on monotheism and moral purity led to a cautious approach toward foreign influences, particularly those associated with pagan rituals or Greek philosophy. Theater, with its reliance on music, dance, and the portrayal of human emotions, was seen as potentially subversive. The mingling of genders on stage and the performative aspects of theater were at odds with the values of early Islamic society, which prioritized modesty and restraint (Ismail, *Human Issues in Contemporary Arabic Literature*, pp. 43-50).

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Even during the Abbasid era, when the Arab world became a hub of intellectual and scientific exchange, theater remained conspicuously absent. While Greek texts on logic, mathematics, and philosophy were eagerly translated and studied, works on drama and the arts were largely ignored. This selective engagement with Greek thought reflects a broader cultural hesitation toward forms of expression that might challenge religious or social norms (Taymur, *The Story in Arabic Literature*, pp. 61-68).

1- The Dawn of Arab Theater: A Borrowed Art

The introduction of theater to the Arab world in the 19th century was not an organic development but rather a borrowed art form, adapted from European models. The pioneering figure in this endeavor was Maroun al-Naqqash, a Lebanese merchant who encountered theater during his travels in Italy. Inspired by what he saw, al-Naqqash sought to transplant this art form to Lebanese soil, envisioning it as a catalyst for cultural renaissance.

In 1847, al-Naqqash staged his first play, *The Miser*, an adaptation of Molière's work, marking the birth of Arab theater. His subsequent productions, such as *Abu al-Hasan al-Mughaffal* and *Harun al-Rashid*, were met with enthusiasm, signaling the potential for theater to resonate with Arab audiences. However, despite his efforts, theater remained a niche pursuit, confined to elite circles and educational institutions rather than becoming a widespread cultural phenomenon (Al-Ra'i, *Theater in the Arab World*, p. 197).

The legacy of al-Naqqash was carried forward by his nephew, Salim al-Naqqash, who established a theater troupe that later migrated to Egypt. This migration proved pivotal, as Egypt became the new epicenter of Arab theater, thanks to the contributions of playwrights like Tawfiq al-Hakim and the establishment of institutions such as the National Troupe and the Acting Institute. These developments marked the maturation of Arab theater, transforming it from a borrowed art into a distinctively Arab form of expression (Al-Maqdisi, *Literary Arts in the Modern Arab Renaissance*, pp. 533-535).

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2- Theater in Egypt

The arrival of theater troupes from Lebanon to Egypt played a crucial role in shaping theatrical awareness in the region. In 1912, the "Association of Supporters of Acting" was established, though it was short-lived due to financial difficulties. Despite this setback, theatrical activity in Egypt began to flourish, with the emergence of playwrights like Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhammad Taymur, and Salama Hijazi. Yaqub Sanu'a, a prominent figure in Egyptian theater, wrote and directed 32 plays, most of which were social commentaries on the backwardness and injustices of the time (Najm, *Playwriting in Modern Arabic Literature*, p. 71).

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The theatrical craft reached its zenith in Egypt with the emergence of Tawfiq al-Hakim, whose first international play, *The Heavy Guest*, premiered in 1919. However, the theatrical renaissance began to decline, prompting the Egyptian government to intervene. In 1930, it established a national troupe, an acting institute, and sent formative missions abroad to encourage playwrights and translators, revitalizing the art of theater (Melith& Bentley, *The Art of Playwriting*, p. 36).

1- Syrian Theater

The history of Syrian theater dates back to 1871, with Ahmed Abu Khalil al-Qabbani as its pioneer. Al-Qabbani founded the first Arab theater in Damascus, staging plays like *Naker El Gamil*, *Anis El Jalis*, and *Harun El Rashid*. Despite facing numerous obstacles, including opposition from conservative elements and political turmoil,

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al-Qabbani succeeded in establishing a theatrical movement in Syria and the Arab world (Al-Ra'i, *Theater in the Arab World*, pp. 69-73).

Before al-Qabbani, Syrian theater was limited to informal performances such as shadow plays (Karagoz and Awaz), Samaa dance, and Hakawati storytelling. Al-Qabbani's efforts laid the foundation for a more formalized theatrical tradition, which continued to evolve despite periods of decline under Ottoman and French rule (Melith& Bentley, *The Art of Playwriting*, p. 189).

2- Algerian Theater: Art of Resistance and Identity

Algerian theater, as one of the most prominent expressive arts in the Arab world, represents a mirror reflecting a history filled with challenges and cultural and political transformations. It is not merely an art form for entertainment but has been a means of resistance and an expression of national identity, especially under French colonialism, which sought to erase Algerian culture. Algerian theater emerged in a complex context, where local influences intertwined with foreign ones, creating a unique art form that carries the spirit of the Algerian people and their struggles.

6-1- The Beginnings: Foreign Influences and Local Roots

The history of Algerian theater dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Algeria was under French occupation. During this period, French culture dominated the artistic scene, leading to the establishment of French theaters in major cities such as Algiers and Oran. These theaters primarily presented performances in French, targeting European audiences.

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However, signs of an authentic Algerian theater began to emerge, drawing inspiration from folk heritage and Arab-Islamic culture. Folk tales, songs, and religious rituals, such as those associated with the Prophet's birthday, formed the basis for primitive theatrical

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forms. These performances relied on storytelling and improvisation and were held in public squares and markets, making them accessible to the general Algerian public.

6-2- Theater During the Colonial Period: A Tool of Resistance

With the rise of the Algerian national movement in the 1930s and 1940s, theater became an effective tool in resisting French colonialism. Algerian writers and actors began using theater to convey national and awareness-raising messages through works that reflected the suffering and struggles of the Algerian people. Among the prominent figures of this period was the writer and director *Abdelkader Alloula*, considered one of the pioneers of modern Algerian theater.

During this time, theater often used classical Arabic and sometimes Algerian dialect, making it relatable to a broad audience. The performances were characterized by their simplicity and ability to resonate with the public, addressing issues such as poverty, social injustice, and national identity.

6-3- Post-Independence: Flourishing and Renewal

After Algeria gained independence in 1962, Algerian theater entered a new phase of flourishing and renewal. Theater became part of the state's cultural project, with the establishment of schools and institutes for teaching dramatic arts, such as the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Algiers. National theater troupes were also founded, including the Algerian National Theater, which presented works reflecting the values of

the revolution and freedom.

During this period, prominent figures emerged in the Algerian theater scene, such as *Kateb Yacine*, one of the most important playwrights in Algeria and the Arab world. His works, like the play "Mohammed, Take Your Suitcase," combined philosophical depth with political commitment, making them landmark pieces in the history of Algerian theater.

6-4- Algerian Theater Today: Challenges and Prospects

Today, Algerian theater faces numerous challenges, including declining government support and the rise of modern entertainment that has drawn audiences away from theaters. Nevertheless, Algerian theater retains its creative spirit, with many young artists working on productions that blend tradition and modernity while addressing contemporary social and political issues.

In recent years, Algerian theater has seen attempts at innovation by incorporating modern techniques such as video and multimedia into performances. Additionally, theatrical works in Amazigh languages have begun to emerge, reflecting the diversity of Algerian culture and reinforcing the multifaceted national identity.

3- Types of Plays

Theater is traditionally divided into two primary genres: tragedy and comedy.

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7-1- Tragedy

Tragedy is viewed as the oldest and finest form of theater, representing humanity's attempt to understand its position and existence. It is "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain length, its language adorned with every artistic

decoration, and the different types of it found in the separate parts of the play. It is presented in the form of an act, not a story, and is based on pity and fear to cleanse these emotions appropriately" (Ghallab, *Lamps of the Greek Theater*, p. 37).

Tragedy is characterized by its treatment of serious themes from the lives of heroes, gods, and demigods, often culminating in unhappy endings. Its characters are typically drawn

from the upper echelons of society, reflecting the genre's emphasis on class parity and grandeur.

7-2- Comedy

Comedy, on the other hand, is more difficult to define due to its evolving nature across different historical periods. In the Roman era, comedy relied heavily on intrigue and awkward situations. During the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare's romantic comedies and Ben Jonson's realistic comedies gained prominence. Molière's moral comedies and the Restoration era's comedy of manners further expanded the genre's scope. By the 18th and

19th centuries, comedy had evolved to include tender emotions and social satire (Melith& Bentley, *The Art of Playwriting*, p. 36).

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Comedy is generally considered less sublime than tragedy, as it imitates common people and employs a discourse that falls below the elevated language of tragedy. Despite this, comedy serves as a powerful tool for social critique and human connection

Conclusion

Theater, as an art form, was not native to Arab culture and has no trace in its ancient literary traditions. Its introduction to the Arab world in the 19th century was a result of cultural borrowing rather than organic development. Efforts to root theater in Arabic literature have often been driven by nationalistic motives rather than purely artistic ones, reflecting the complex interplay between art and identity in the Arab world. Despite these challenges, theater has evolved into a distinctively Arab form of expression, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of Arab culture.

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