

forthcoming issue

WOMEN, ACTIVISM, AND THE ARTS

Women in the Performing Arts



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The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World
at the Lebanese American University

The Lebanese American University founded the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) in 1973. The history of the Institute is closely linked to that of the first women’s college in the Middle East, the American Junior College for Women, which was established in 1924 by the Presbyterian Mission. The College, which educated Middle Eastern women for half a century, became coed in 1973. In order to honor the college’s unique heritage as the first educational institution for women in the region, the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World was established that same year.

- Mission
- Engage in academic research on women in the Arab world.
 - Develop and integrate women’s studies in the Lebanese American University curriculum.
 - Empower women in the Arab world through development programs and education.
 - Serve as a catalyst for policy changes regarding the rights of women in the Arab world.
 - Facilitate networking and communication among individuals, groups, and institutions concerned with women in the Arab world.
 - Extend ties with international organizations and universities working on gender issues.

Al-Raida Quarterly Journal

IWSAW issues a quaterly journal, *al-Raida*, whose mission is to promote research and the dissemination of updated information regarding the condition of women in the Arab world.

Each issue of *al-Raida* features a file which focuses on a particular theme, in addition to articles, conference reports, interviews, book reviews, and art news.

All submitted articles are reviewed by IWSAW. IWSAW reserves the right to accept or reject the articles submitted. Those articles that are accepted will be edited according to journal standards.

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al-raida

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Women in the Performing Arts

Mona Knio

Performance is a process-oriented tool which improves our sensuous, intellectual, social, and aesthetic appreciation of life and the world we live in. A performer is a doer whose action is carried out in a space shared with a public. The visible image of a performer contradicts the stereotypical image of the passive female in Arab societies. What is more inconsistent is the presence of the female performer as an economic player in contemporary Arab societies. She does not live on the margin of society but is a professional, an evident contributor to the cultural scene, and above all has been instigating change in her community by expanding the horizons of her gender and certainly exercising power. Scheherazade's bedtime stories proved to be a stratagem to change her fate and that of her sisters.

It is seldom that one thinks of a female performer as a career woman, one who carries out an action, or displays certain skills in front of her clientele, better known as audience. Her expressions, actions, or skills are perceived as a commodity for artistic, or cultural consumption. Some performers are rebels or activists who dare social, intellectual, artistic, and cultural norms in the process of exploring and expanding the margins of their individual humanity alongside that of humanity at large. A prime example is Rabi'a al-Adawiya, a female slave singer who preached and sang in 8th century Baghdad the doctrine of Divine Love. The first Sufi woman was given a brand name: *shahidat al-hub al-ilahi* (i.e. martyr of divine love).

Characteristically, an Arab female performer has to transgress the traditional boundaries of her society, family, and gender which are usually determined by a patriarchal perception of feminine sexuality. She also has to transgress the private boundaries of her intimate world and occasionally has to share it unrestrictedly live or on a screen. For in the context of performance, the organic actuality of the feminine body is vigorously the center of attention given that it is the medium or instrument through which expressions crystallize. In performance, many traits of a talented and liberated female identity are played out. Audiences are often preoccupied by the female performers' sexuality as long as some female performers flaunt their physical attractiveness and exploit their sex appeal. Predictably, female performers often exploit the power of seduction in order to increase their visibility and consequently their economic independence and empowerment.

In Beirut, during the fifties, sixties, and seventies a female performer was referred to as "artiste", which was written in Arabic letters on billboards in front of the names of female performers. Singers, dancers, and actresses were

all referred to as “artistes”. However, “artiste” is not always used in the positive sense of the word. Often it reveals total disrespect to the designated female performer; the reference is made to the sexual activity some female artists perform in order to secure more income and/or to manipulate men. Nevertheless, female performers were not always considered outcasts in the Arab world. In Egypt, for example, ‘*awalem* (singular ‘*alima*, i.e. a learned woman) composed poetry and music and were welcome in the best households. ‘*Awalem* performed to female audiences during weddings and other celebrations. Ironically, Moroccan *shaykhat* (singular *shaykha*, i.e. an elderly dignified woman) were regarded as loose women for publicly asserting their sexual liberty through song and dance, while entertaining male and female audiences at family festivities. Moreover, like the *shaykhat*, the Egyptian *ghawazi* (singular *ghaziya*, literally meaning someone who invades) danced unveiled in public places. Throughout history, Arab female performers earned a respectable name and status when they took notice of the social boundaries which set the articulation of intimate artistic expressions in private spaces, and were treated as outsiders when their performances were made public for male or mixed audiences.

Early during the 20th century female professional singers, actresses, and dancers became visible in the public space. The Lebanese Samiha al-Qurashi and Zakiya Hamdan sang in *Qahwat Le’jez* coffee house. Naima al-Masriyah danced in a cabaret near al-Farouk theater in the Burj area in Beirut. On the other hand, *sultana* Munira al-Mahdiyya, Fatimah Rushdi, Naimah Akef, Badia Masabni, Tahiya Karioka, and Samia Jamal in Cairo, transgressed the cultural boundaries imposed on the ‘*awalem* and introduced the culture of body performance in public *salas* (i.e. music halls), cafés, theaters, and casinos often owned by them. Overcoming the obstacles facing women artists by performing in public spaces without being regarded as *ghawazi* was a great achievement then.

Umm Kulthum is a significant example of a performer encouraged by her father to join the family troupe disguised as a male singer. The family support in this context helped Umm Kulthum carve out a female space and even advance female power as a singer, musician, manager, president of the musician’s union, and an activist, while maintaining control over her reputation and representation in a male-dominated field. Umm Kulthum’s artistic project is amongst the rare grounded in the Arab nation. *As-Sayeda* or *as-Sit* (i.e. the lady) often raised funds for social projects in her home village. However, after the 1967 war, her fundraising for the Egyptian army increased her visibility in society and politics. Moreover, it underlined the economic dimension and power of the consummate performer Umm Kulthum. It is this role model of a well rounded, self-empowered female artist who also upheld traditions which appealed to the Arab *umma* (i.e. nation) and continues to capture the Arab conscience.

Various female performers have accomplished wonders regarding cultural transmission and artistic unity; they have also left a legacy for the subsequent generations to build on. It is thanks to them that the field of performing arts as an entertainment enterprise has developed in scale and scope to the extent of being a substantial industry, probably amongst the few thriving in the region. Consequently, more and more females set out to perform to mixed audiences in male-dominated public spaces. All these females experience crossing the borders of the private self to the public performer. Some succeed in breaking away from old stereotypes while others frame themselves in a box of their

own making. The generations of the early and mid-twentieth century performers proved capable of challenging obstacles starting with the restrictions imposed by patriarchal societies, religious taboos, segregation of sexes, lack of public professional training, etc. With a more liberated environment in today's consumerist society, and the numerous possibilities for professional training for youth in the performing arts, the nature of the challenge is sadly narrowed down to marketing the artistic or cultural products rather than cultivating unique cultural expressions.

Until recently, it was not possible for women to lead even in the art sector; often a male agent or *impresario* negotiated and made decisions on behalf of the female performer. Today, several Arab females are leading in the performing arts field not only as performers but also as administrators, artisans, and artists. For instance, Moroccan actress Thuraya Jubran is today a minister of culture. It is evident that more women are promptly and courageously joining the performing arts industry and constituting a considerable proportion of its work force. In the age of mass media, stars are being promoted as any other product on the shelves; the process includes branding, packaging, marketing, presentation, etc. More female workers are joining and contributing to the different production stages and eventually will learn to exercise more power in shaping their self-image into a quality product.

The entertainment industry is generally exploitive of women especially since the dominance of youth and beauty rather than talent and skills constrain the activities of older performers. While some performers are very rich, several suffer poverty and loneliness behind closed doors. In Lebanon, health and social security systems are not available to support performers as they are struck by misfortunes of illness and hardship, especially later on in their career. Some of these women are the breadwinners of their families; others are marginalized by their community for having chosen this career. Female performers deserve recognition and support throughout their career and beyond; their work should be documented, archived, and eventually studied. In addition, their well-being in old age should be the concern of both the society at large and the government. As I write many performers who are suffering neglect and ill health come to mind, in addition to those who left us without having had the chance to be recognized as individuals who made a difference in this rich, intricate, and inexhaustible field of expression.

The articles in this issue of *al-Raida* cover a fairly wide territory as they address different attributes of contemporary Arab women performers working all over the world. The contributors come from diverse academic and professional backgrounds. They are researchers, producers, fans, and performers writing about their own experience in performance and/or their experience of other female performers in action. Our main concern is to look at how female performers play a major role in the process of reshaping the female image and enhancing the status of women in contemporary Arab societies. We open with two academic articles, the first depicting pioneer performers, the Egyptian Munira al-Mahdiya and the Iranian Qamar al-Molouk; and the second describing current forces in Morocco contributing to the transformation of the cultural life in Moroccan society. They are followed by two pieces; the first one looking at how gender is reconstructed in the Lebanese theater work place today, while the second studies the warped image of the female ideal as projected on the screen by prominent Egyptian

actresses Faten Hamama and Hind Rostum. The next section focuses on a range of distinct Arab singers; Umm Kulthum, Fairouz, Sabah, Haifa, and Camilia, who are role models for many generations to come. Unusual performing art examples are also included in this issue. Visual artists share their experiences: Marya Kazoun performs in her installations and Lina Issa imagines home through a replacement performer. Storytelling, a female expression par excellence, is revived by two female Arab performers in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Mai Ghossoub, the theater maker, is remembered by one of her actresses. Freedom of expression remains a vital issue for all artists; it is discussed in reference to music and it is also a concern to the Lebanese female performers who participated in the roundtable discussion which took place at LAU in April 2007 in preparation for the present issue.

Women performers' work patterns may have been affected by their own sense of assertiveness and independence. Indeed, it is very rare that male family members support the choice of a sister, mother, wife, or mistress taking up performance as a career unless they are dependent on her financially, are extremely progressive, or the performer is educated enough to stand up and persuade her community of her career choice. Female presence is definitely stronger when education plays a supportive role to talent and hard work.

Here, it is important to note that LAU's Communication Arts program, the oldest in the region, has been contributing to breaking the barriers for some Arab women who want to join the performing arts field. Moreover, it has succeeded in forming perceptive audience members with a supportive attitude towards female performers. Thanks is due to educators like Dr. Irene Faffler who started a family theater tradition at the American Junior College for Women (AJCW currently LAU) in the late fifties, then in the early seventies pushed forward the Communication Arts program which has been preparing generations of young people to work in the performing arts field.

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Women in the Performing Arts

Laura Chakravarty Box
North Africa's Performing Women:
Notes from the Field

Sahar Assaf
Stage Directors in the Rehearsal Room

Jean Saida Makdissi
Faten Hamama and Hind Rustom:
Stars from Different Heavens

Fakhri Haghani
The "New Woman" of the Interwar
Period

Hind Soufi Assaf
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Time Goes One Way - Against the Classification
of Arts

Afaf Shawwa
Mai Ghoussoub: A Passion for Expression

Noura Al-Sakkaf
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Saudi Arabia

Yasmine Dabbous
Khayaal Theater Company: Introducing Muslim
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North Africa's Performing Women:

Notes from the Field

Laura Chakravarty Box

Introduction

The post-independence years have been turbulent and fruitful for North African women in the performing arts: theater, cinema, dance, music, and art performance. In Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, the forces shaping the status of women are dynamic, unstable, productive, and in some cases, violent. They take place within larger, and equally volatile, discourses about the socio-political future of the three nation-states. This atmosphere has a profound effect on the women artists who must operate within it, or from its diaspora, as they agitate to have a voice in the future of the region. When we consider their work from a remove, it is easy to forget that, in addition to facing themselves the social and political issues about which they write, film, and perform, they, like artists everywhere, grapple with the petty politics of publishing, publicity, funding, public taste, and bureaucratic policy.

This article is a continuation of an earlier study, conducted in the years 1997-2000, that identified some of these artists and their works for the first time in English. It returns to the region, specifically Morocco, to pick up the threads of the discourse in recent work by the artists of the study, and by artists who have emerged since its completion. For example, it considers the cases of two young Moroccan artists who have had tremendous impact in the last year: Laïla Marrakchi, who made the controversial film, *MaRock*, and Samia Akariou who, with the almost entirely female troupe, *Takoon*, created *Bnat Lalla Mennana*, a brilliant feminist adaptation of Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*.

Like any post-colonized region, the part of North Africa formerly occupied by France and its proxies defies neat categories and scholarly comfort zones. Its taxonomy is culturally, religiously, and linguistically messy, residing in several places at once: Mediterranean Studies, MENA Studies, African Studies – and these are just the geographically-constructed categories. At various times, the region is considered to be a part of the Arab world, the Islamic world, the Maghreb, and the francophonie. It manifests itself in the Western imagination in such disparate places as the discourse of the *hijab* (i.e. Islamic headscarf), the fad for all things “Moroccan” in interior design, the criminal trial of Zacarias Moussaoui, endless appropriations (both respectful and not) of *raqs sharqi* – what is popularly termed “belly dance” in the West – and the entirely fictionalized setting of the classic American film, *Casablanca*. Despite the West's new hunger for information about the MENA, attention to North Africa's realities remains almost entirely absent from

popular and scholarly consciousness in the anglosphere. North Africa does not, after all, contain Iraq, Iran, or Palestine, the three MENA areas upon which our attention is currently focused.

In this respect, not much has changed since I began my (2005) examination of North African women's dramatic literature in the mid-1990s. If francophone North Africa is a blip on the radar screen when it comes to Western scholarship written in English on the so-called Arabo-Islamic¹ arts, then North African performance arts are an even tinier mote, and women's production of same is almost invisible. Oscar Brockett (1995), an American giant in the field of theater history, took the positive step of adding a brief section on the region, in a general chapter on Africa, to the seventh edition of his tome, *The History of the Theater*. It made no mention of women artists whatsoever. The volume now has a second author, Franklin Hildy (2003), and is in its ninth edition, but the section on North Africa has remained silent on the subject of women's literature and performance. Brockett has fallen into the twin traps that plague theater scholars who attempt to include the MENA in their considerations. Western scholars tend to assume either that the Islamic ban on representational art is universal – a notion that is put to the test by the Moghul miniature, the Egyptian *hadj* painting, the Iranian *ta'ziyeh* and other artistic forms too numerous to mention here – or that the condition (for which one must read “oppression”) of women in the Arab world precludes their participation in the theatrical arts. So deeply held are these twin mythologies that even the giants fall prey to them. Furthermore, due to the history of colonization in the past two centuries, the misapprehensions occasioned by these two glaring errors have come to be reflected even in the work done by MENA scholars writing the histories of their own theaters.

In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophesy, this scholarly confusion is one of the conditions that has made it very difficult for women in the performing arts in francophone North Africa to gain attention and respect for their work, both at home or abroad. When they do receive notice, they are usually pressed into a framework of Western feminism that celebrates their existence by reifying stereotypes of their supposed oppression. This is a particularly insidious cycle.

Cause for cautious optimism, however, comes from the discipline of film. Rebecca Hillauer (2005) has given us the first truly authoritative work on Arab women's cinema in English, the *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers*. In it, she has included a wealth of information about, and interviews of, North African filmmakers, some of whom are also playwrights. In 2002, Wellesley College sponsored a North African women's film festival that hosted luminaries Moufida Tlatli and Djamila Sahraoui. Such germinal works as Farida Benlyazid's (1989) *A Door to the Sky*, and Tlatli's (1994) *The Silences of the Palace*, as well as more recent offerings like Raja Amari's (2002) *Satin Rouge*, and Yamina Bachir's (2002) *Rachida*, are available for sale on the internet, and films by North African women routinely make the rounds of international film festivals.

1. The term “Arabo-Islamic” is problematic when applied to North Africa, where there are prominent non-Muslim and non-Arab populations.

For a time, it seemed as if francophone plays by North African women authors had a champion in Françoise Kourilsky and her Ubu Repertory Theater translators. Ubu published a number of English translations of plays by Algerians Fatima Gallaire, Leïla Sebbar, and Denise Bonal, as well as their fellow countryman, Kateb Yacine. While sometimes of questionable quality, particularly in the case of Gallaire's plays (Box, 2005,

pp. 118-121), and with the exception of the translated oeuvre of Hélène Cixous, these were, and continue to be, the only published translations of North African women's plays available in English (Box, 2005, pp. 205-206). This lack could be excused by the general disinterest in francophone works evidenced by the anglosphere, but in fact the question of publication and dissemination of plays by North African women authors is more complex. North African women who write in French can and do find a limited market for their work in France and in the French-language bookstores of the urban elites in their own countries. They tend to receive little recognition, however. The bibliography of a recent dossier on Morocco in *Quantara*, the publication of L'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, has listed only one playwright, a man (Ksikes, 2006, p. 54). Women who write plays in Arabic, if my recent observations on Morocco can be extrapolated to apply to the entire region, do not make it into print. Tamazight (Berber language) plays are beginning to gain official recognition in Morocco, where King Mohammed VI's new policies of openness to Morocco's Amazigh heritage are creating something of an Amazigh renaissance, but I have not encountered any plays by Amazigh Moroccan women, published or otherwise. Tamazight arts in Algeria have some momentum, but have been impeded by long-standing tensions between Arab Algerians and their Amazigh compatriots in Kabylia. The Amazigh presence in Tunisia is so marginalized and muted that it has had no chance to develop its own body of post-independence literature.

Training in the performing arts continues to be available and governmentally sanctioned in the three countries of francophone North Africa. Each has a training school, attached to the requisite Ministry of Culture. There is no shortage of women actors and cultural animators these days, although employment for them is by no means steady, and the threat of a religiously or socially-motivated backlash against "public" women, that is to say those who perform in public, continues to be a problem. Women directors are more in evidence in Morocco today than they were ten years ago, and some of them are also writers. Contributions in the areas of design and technical operation by women used to be limited to the areas of makeup and costumes, but I saw some evidence in Morocco that this barrier is being broken for set design, as well as for light operation.

The general openness of Morocco's new regime to foreign and minority arts, the tourist economy and sweeping changes in the *moudawana* (i.e. the Moroccan family code) have contributed to a dynamic artistic atmosphere, yielding what Driss Ksikes (2006) has described as "moments of internal culture shock" (p. 45). This, in turn, has prompted a conservative backlash that, ironically, finds high-art elites from the political left making the same arguments as Islamic fundamentalists on the political right. While the latter are concerned with morality, and the former with cultural purity, their call for an artistic standard that is authentically Moroccan is the same. Arts that do not conform to this standard, like Laïla Marrakchi's (2005) film, *MaRock*, are said to be subject to "foreign manipulation," a charge that invokes the specter of creeping neo-colonialism (Ksikes, 2006, pp. 44-45).

The women who participate in the arts often pay a heavy price for what I have characterized elsewhere as their socially "outrageous behavior" (Box, 2006). My Moroccan friend and mentor, Fatima Chebchoub, who was both a practitioner of the traditional *halqa*² and a participant in the contemporary theatrical arts, was never able

2. The *halqa* [lit. "circle"] is a highly codified form of traditional North African performance that takes place in a circle or semi-circle of spectators. *Halqa* comes in many forms, and may involve musical, theatrical, acrobatic, and oratory performances. It is often political and/or satirical. Central to its ethos is the notion that the spectator is the boundary by which the *halqa* constitutes itself, and a lively exchange between performer and spectator is considered necessary to the *halqa*'s existence (Chebchoub, F., personal communication, October 14-17, 1997; Box, 2005, p. 46).

to balance her work with a family life, and she always maintained that this was because of her work as a public performer. The family histories of other Moroccan female artists to whom I have talked support this notion. Chebchoub died in a swimming accident at Skhirat, near Rabat, on August 9, 2006. Her death represents a great loss for Morocco's theater culture, although she was the subject of much controversy throughout her life. Such was her knowledge of the Moroccan arts that upon hearing of her passing, Driss Ajbali (2006) wrote, "It is a library that has drowned" (¶ 3). Chebchouba, as she was known in the *halqa*, was an actor, director, filmmaker, television personality, cultural animator, comedian, musician, poet, academic, and, sadly, athlete. She was physically and intellectually fearless, and this is what led to her untimely death at the age of 53.

Chebchoub (1998 & 2002), whose one-woman *halqa*, *The Keeper of the Secret*, toured conferences and university venues internationally, is joined by professional theater artists Touria Jabrane (*Quatre heures à Chatila or Four Hours at Shatila*, 2006) and Khedija Assad (*State of the Nation*, 1997); comedian and television personality Hanane Fadili (*Such is Hanane*, 1997); feature filmmaker Farida Benlyazid (*Women's Wiles*, 1999); documentarists Izza Genini (*Cyberstories*, 2001) and Fatima Jebli Ouazzani (*In My Father's House*, 1997); playwrights Leïla Houari (*The Lower Rooms*, 1993) and Amina Lhassani (*Nour, or the Call of God*, 1994); and her longtime friend and collaborator, performance artist Latifa Toujani (*Haïk Salam or Peace Veil*, 1995), at the vanguard of contemporary performing arts by Moroccan women. Growing up during the time when the country was gaining its independence, these women were and are the pioneers (Hillauer, 2005, pp. 337-354; Box, 2005, pp. 199-209). Most have, until recently, toiled in relative obscurity, but some are now receiving the accolades they deserve. Jabrane and her theater company, *Masrah el-Youm* (i.e. theater of today) were honored at the thirteenth Festival of Theater Arts in Damascus in November of 2006 for their adaptation of Jean Genet's *Four Hours at Shatila*; Benlyazid was feted at the Oriental Film Festival in Geneva in April 2007, and the Moroccan National Conference of Short Films at Azrou gave Chebchoub a posthumous tribute in July 2007 (Yahia, 2007; "Hommage", 2006; "Le Festival du Film", 2007).

Arriving in the wake of the pioneers are a host of young talents who do not suffer as many of the restraints and obstacles their predecessors did. Success and accolades are coming much more quickly to them than they did to artists of Chebchoub's generation. Theatrical director Naïma Zitan, for example, was a recent graduate of Morocco's Institut Supérieur d'Art Dramatique et d'Animation Culturel (ISADAC) when I first met her in 1997. She expressed the fear to me then that she would languish in a bureaucratic ministry job forever, for want of backing for her artistic projects (Zitan, N., personal communication, October 9, 1997). By 2006, she had become an auteur, and her *Rouge+Bleu=Violet*, a play about domestic violence, was touring the nation. Frustratingly, like so many plays in Morocco, it had one or two-day runs in most places, and never stayed in one venue long enough for me to see it. Film, a durable medium, is easier to find. The experimental work of Anissa and Yasmina Bouziane, sisters of Moroccan and French descent now based in New York, appeared at *Cinemayaat* 1999 (the San Francisco Arab Film Festival), and the North African Women's Film Festival held at Wellesley in 2002. Laïla Marrakchi's (2000) short film, *Lost Horizon (L'horizon perdu)* also screened at the Wellesley festival, although it gave no indication of the furor her feature film, *MaRock*, would cause.

I do not know if Fatima Chebchoub ever saw *MaRock*. I never got the chance to ask her. It is interesting to imagine what she might have thought of it. She turned a harsh lens on the work of her fellow artists, and was dismissive of most contemporary popular fare. Even the elite art produced by her university and professional colleagues sometimes met with her scorn. She applied the same rigor to her own work. She would, for example, re-write a *halqa* each time she re-cast a role, in order to best showcase the talents of that particular newcomer. It was her opinion that the responsibility of the performer is to hold the interest of the public, and she believed strongly in the educative function of both *halqa* and theater (F. Chebchoub, personal communication, October 14-17, 1997). Social commentary, often in the form of blistering satire, was her *métier*. Despite being herself an innovator of traditional arts, she held strong opinions about the integrity and purity of Moroccan traditions, and thus, would probably have fallen into the camp of the elite artists who protested the inclusion of *MaRock* in the first Festival of Casablanca and the Moroccan Film Festival of Tangiers, both held in 2005 (Boukhari, 2006; Ksikes, 2006, p. 45). In the years just before her death, however, Chebchoub began to work extensively with Jewish artists in the community of the University of Pennsylvania, where she was a doctoral candidate. She had always felt a strong attraction to Moroccan Jewish culture, despite her own Muslim family background, and for this reason alone, I suspect she would have quietly applauded Laïla Marrakchi's bridge-building aspirations, if not her choice of genre and execution.

At its core, *MaRock* is a melodrama, a story of doomed teenage love set in the wealthy enclaves of Casablanca. Its characters, spoiled, wealthy, and Westernized, are representative of a slim minority of Morocco's youth. The girl, Ghita, is a Muslim, but she makes a point of defying her parents' moderate religious practices. The boy, Youri, is a Jew – part of a group of hard-drinking, fast-driving young men with too much time on their hands – but his religious practices are barely treated by the film at all. Rather, “Jewishness” becomes a code for “licentiousness,” in one of the film's most severe absences of self-reflexivity. Ghita's brother, Mao, returns from study abroad and begins to adopt strict, orthodox Muslim habits. His disapprobation of his sister's secular partying lifestyle and his dismay at her disrespect for Islamic custom, explode when her relationship with Youri is discovered. The couple is separated; Youri pulls a stunt reminiscent of James Dean and dies in a fiery auto crash, and Ghita is packed off to study abroad. This is the family's solution for social embarrassment, as it had been with her brother before her. It transpires that Mao is guilty of vehicular manslaughter, and his sojourn out of the country was meant to conceal his crime.

While it is difficult to ascertain what kind of a statement *MaRock* is trying to make – beyond the desire to shock the complacent – its notoriety has propelled Marrakchi onto the international scene. Clips from the film, including controversial moments such as the one when Ghita taunts her brother while he is conducting *salat* (daily prayer), are posted on YouTube (2006), and the debate about the film's Moroccan-ness, or lack thereof, rages on in the blogosphere. For an American viewer, the formula is predictable. The young people are sympathetic, the parents and brother are hypocrites, society does not understand their love, and so on. For Moroccans, it is a different matter. A Moroccan film that shows a young Muslim woman eating insolently during the Ramadan fast and having pre-marital sex with a Jewish man turns the world upside down. Moroccans have seen sex, religious questioning, and interfaith relationships

on film before, but the films containing these depictions were foreign products. This is why the opposition to *MaRock* has chosen to attack its Moroccan credentials, even suggesting that, since the director currently lives in France and is married to a Jewish man herself, the film represents a sinister, foreign effort by a “Zionist lobby” (Boukhari, 2006). If Moroccans are forced to admit that *MaRock* is a Moroccan film, then they must face the rapid changes that are sweeping across Moroccan society. This is Marrakchi’s singular accomplishment.

When viewed in this light, Marrakchi’s audacity is impressive. Boukhari (2006), in a much-cited article for the Moroccan weekly magazine, *TelQuel*, has given a clue to her agenda: the film is set, very precisely, not in the present, but in the late 1990s, during the last years of the reign of Hassan II. He has noted that the film begins with a scene of corruption, in which Ghita is seen in a romantic clinch with a boyfriend (not Youri) in an automobile. They are caught by a police officer, who is persuaded with a bribe to leave them alone. Ghita exclaims, “Shitty country! We don’t have the right to do anything!” If we read the macrocosm in the tiny microcosmic mirror of the domestic melodrama the film portrays, it becomes at once a criticism of the Moroccan government’s hypocrisy under Hassan II, and a celebration of Morocco’s changing political landscape under the more open rule of his son, Mohammed VI, who shows some signs of being the kind of innovative ruler his grandfather was. For a country whose citizens did not dare to openly criticize their ruler nine years ago, this is revolution in a film canister. On the other hand, the fact that *MaRock* is pitched at the teen market is both a strength and a flaw. The film’s intended consumers, who are the age of the protagonists, are the future of the country. It is possible that they will miss Marrakchi’s political message, however, because they were young children when Mohammed IV came to power in 1999. Older audience members, who remember Hassan II and his policies, are unlikely to find the film’s rebellious, in-your-face style congenial. *MaRock*’s revolution may have missed its target.

Remarkably, the charge that *MaRock* does not authentically address the issues current in Moroccan society has also been leveled at a very different work, namely, *Bnat Lalla Mennana* (*The Daughters of Lalla Mennana*), a piece created by the almost entirely female theater company, *Takoon*. Initiated in 1993 by a group of graduating ISADAC students as a final project, it was revived in 2003, when *Takoon* re-invented itself as a professional company. The work toured Tunisia in 2005, where it was reviewed by Zohra Abid (2005), who opined that its message was old news for Morocco. Perhaps this analysis is true for Tunisian viewers, whose regime is every bit as politically stifling, but more attentive to gender issues than Morocco’s was prior to the turn of the millennium, but I must take exception to Abid’s (2005) dismissive assertion that *Takoon* is guilty of mounting an outdated theme with “a flagrant lack of research” (¶ 1). When I saw the play in 2006 at the National Theater Mohammed V in Rabat, the warmth of its reception by the almost entirely Moroccan audience was conspicuous. Of course, ISADAC is in the same district as the National, so *Takoon* was on its home turf, but this fact does not entirely account for the joy that greeted the play that night, nor does it explain the prizes the production received at the National Theater Festival in Meknes in 2003 (“Program of”, 2005).

Bnat Lalla Mennana is a free adaptation of Federico García Lorca’s (1955) play, *The House of Bernarda Alba* (*La casa de Bernarda Alba*). It pares down the original

and simplifies the plot, but more importantly, it turns Lorca's pessimistic vision of gender relations and intergenerational cruelty on its head. Relying on Morocco's intense historical ties with al-Andalus (Andalusian Spain) for its soundscape and choreography, this Moorish Bernarda Alba honors Lorca's passion for the flamenco in its depiction of moments of inner turmoil. The setting of this production, however, has the feel of a stately home in Fès. The actual house of Lalla Mennana is a tomb in Larache, a city once occupied by Spain, that holds the remains of the city's patron Sufi saint, who lived in the eighteenth century. Lalla Mennana al-Masbahiya, daughter of another saint, Sidi Jilali ben Abd Allah al-Masbahi,³ died on the eve of her wedding at her father's *zawiyya* (i.e. sufi lodge). According to legend, when her intended husband entered the room where she had died, he found a white dove in her place (Anidjar, 2007; "Tombeau de", 2007). Bernarda Alba's final plea in Lorca's (1955) original text is that her youngest daughter, who has just committed suicide in the mistaken belief that her mother has killed her lover, must be buried as a virgin in order to save her house's reputation (p. 211). Thus, the densely metaphoric title of the adaptation has a satisfying resonance, particularly for Moroccans.

Lalla Mennana retains the claustrophobic feel of Bernarda Alba, but uses it to comic effect. One does not usually attend a play by Lorca in order to laugh, although any production of the original text would benefit from a recognition of its comic moments, if for no other reason than to increase the dramatic tension. In this production, however, the ratio of laughter to tears is reversed. Since the dominant mode for social commentary in MENA arts is satire, this is an excellent choice for Moroccan audiences, and one that holds up well for the foreign viewer also. The bickering of the sexually and romantically frustrated sisters is touchingly familiar as sibling rivalry, and the moment when they hang out of the house's upper windows in an attempt to attract the attention of passing male workers is a bit of physical comedy worthy of Lucille Ball. The pattern of cruelty that has brought the six women of the play⁴ to this pass is clearly delineated as the widow Lalla Mennana tries to impose the pattern of sequestration, to which she herself was subjected as a young woman, on her daughters. As their rebellion pushes the play toward tragedy, we watch with a surprising amount of sympathy as she tries to hold the house together. She and her daughters have no male protector. For Moroccans, whose legal system did not abandon the *sharia* (i.e. Islamic law) custom of the *wali* (i.e. guardian) until 2004, this makes immediate sense. The idea of women living without legal autonomy is not as distant a history for Moroccan Muslims as it is for Spanish Christians, or even for Tunisian Muslims.

3. Lalla and *Sidi* are titles of respect in Moroccan colloquial Arabic. They mean honored lady and honored sir, respectively.

4. *Bnat Lalla Mennana* eliminates several important characters from Lorca's original: one of the middle daughters, one of the servants, the neighbour, and Bernarda Alba's mother.

In the end, Lalla Mennana makes a different choice than Bernarda Alba. Realizing her youngest daughter is on a course of self-destruction, she throws down the keys to her house, which in this production weigh down the train of her lavish *kaftan* (i.e. traditional garment), and says, "No. Not my daughter." She refuses, in the end, to perpetuate the cycle, and sets her daughters free to leave the house. The flamenco, which has punctuated the play with intense passages of danced inner monologue and angry, competitive duologue, becomes a *komos*, a wild, celebratory dance like the ones that provided the conclusion to ancient Greek comedies. All the women survive, and Lalla Mennana herself joins the dance at the end of the play. This is a different kind of revolution than we see in *MaRock*, because it plays across generations, and allows the possibility for the protagonists to escape and take their audiences with them.

Samia Akariou, the director of this innovative interpretation and the actor who plays the youngest daughter, is familiar to Western audiences as the clever protagonist of Farida Benlyazid's (1999) *Women's Wiles*. Her colleagues in the cast, Noura Skali (who also developed the text adaptation), Saadia Ladib, Nadia el-Alami, Saadia Azgoun, and Hind Saadidi, while not as well-known in the West, are every bit as skilled. Their commitment to the physicality of the piece is extraordinary, and Akariou's direction is spare, rigorous, and masterful. They are supported by a female design team, the two exceptions being the lighting designer, Hassen Benjeddi, and Younes Megri, an acting star in his own right, who composed the music. Since the production has toured extensively, Rafika Benmaimoun's set and Noura Elqasbi's décor are models of economy. A few modular pieces provide multiple interior spaces with varied levels, as well as a *hammam* (bath house) and the house's exterior. Despite the efficiency of the mise-en-scène, it manages to convey a sense of stifling luxury that is supported by Saida Rkiek's engaging costumes.

This product of concentrated artistic collaboration by women is, I am certain, not a fluke. Morocco is on the cusp of a new artistic period, one in which women and minorities will have the chance to participate in. *Bnat Lalla Mennana*, created under the rule of Hassan II, before the change in the Family Code, found its voice in the time of his son, and *MaRock*, unimaginable in the former period, is now free to comment upon it.

If *Bnat Lalla Mennana* is the most rewarding piece of live theater I saw during my six months in Morocco last year, *MaRock* is the most disappointing film. Yet both works remind us that young female artists are serving as the agents for, and barometers of, change in Moroccan society. The possibilities that are opening up for women artists in Morocco are astounding. If the country's leaders are paying attention to the messages these young women are sending, they will provide Moroccan girls at all social levels with opportunities to learn the traditional and contemporary performing arts, and offer women safe spaces in which to consume and create performance works. Soon, women will be among the leaders of Morocco in every field. Chebchouba's legacy lives, and the doors of Lalla Mennana's house are open wide at last.

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Stage Directors in the Rehearsal Room:

Degendered Bodies in a Degendered Workplace*

Sahar Assaf

Introduction

The directing profession worldwide is a relatively new trend. Its current conceptualization is roughly a hundred years old. It started at the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of modern naturalism and then became a form of art at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after the explosion of different directing practices and methods, namely methods advocated by Antonin Artaud, Constantine Stanislavski, and Bertolt Brecht, among others. Rehearsals, or the practice sessions in preparation for the performance, obtained a fundamental role in theater-making and the director was placed at the top of the theater hierarchy.

In Lebanon, the director in the “modern” sense of the term – whereby “he” is the creator of the theater performance and where all members of the production crew work under “his” supervision – emerged in the 1950s. It was in the mid 1960s that some Lebanese women, namely Latifa Multaqa and Nidal Ashqar, started to get themselves involved in the directing aspect of the theater (Said, 1998). However, the number of Lebanese women who practice theater directing is limited. According to my field research for this study and the literature review on Lebanese theater, those who have been involved in theater directing between the 1960s and today number approximately fifty directors; only nine of them are women.¹ This limited number of women in the profession raises the question as to whether gender makes a difference as far as the actualities of directing are concerned.

The Director: Blending Masculine and Feminine Qualities

Readers in the history of directing in general will notice that the first innovators in the profession of stage directing were all men such as David Garrick, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, George II (Duke of Saxe-Meiningen), Constantine Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, etc. (see Wilson & Goldfarb, 2000). This says something about the perception of directing as a man’s job. “Director” is a gender-marked term; female directors would need to be called “women directors”. Perhaps this is because directing, as stated by Peta Tait, “is a non-traditional occupation for women in theater” (Benjamin 1994, ¶ 10). A director, Benjamin (1994) argues, “is a leader and society has been slow to see women as natural leaders, or holders of authority”, for authority and leadership are typically seen as male traits (¶ 10).

* This article is based on a thesis submitted in 2005 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts to the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Beirut.

1. For the list of names of these directors, see Assaf, S. (2005). (Appendix III).

In this sense, and in order to understand issues of gender difference in the theater, the interviewees for the study were asked about their views on the profession. Essentially, in the process of generally defining “the director”, they were defining themselves.

Most of the interviewees have cited both feminine and masculine qualities when discussing their concept of the director’s persona. The leader, the captain, the creative artist, the diplomat, and the psychologist are the images of the director that figured prominently in the interviewees’ definitions of a director. Using the image of the psychologist which is, unlike other images, usually associated with both “men” and “women”, my interviewees were highlighting the importance of shared masculine/feminine qualities in a director alongside authoritarian ones. A director is a tough person who is able to take complete charge of the production. “He should be a leader” was a phrase adopted by almost all of the directors interviewed.

Exploring my interviewees’ perceptions of the director’s persona might help explain why the job is conceived of as a man’s job, and consequently, why there is a relatively small number of Lebanese women stage directors. First, although my interviewees at certain points used what are conceived of as feminine qualities, such as being patient and tolerant, to describe a “director”, most of the other qualities deemed important for a director to possess were generally associated with the male in the Lebanese patriarchal society. Being in a leadership position, taking full responsibility both at work and at home, being able to make crucial decisions, and being strong and authoritative are qualities generally associated with the male. Second, while the interviewees often combined both masculine and feminine qualities to describe the director’s character, they constantly used the masculine pronoun “he” to refer to both male and female directors. This tells us that a director, even in the minds of the most liberal of men and women, is still being conceived of as a “male”.

Based on the above description of what a “director” is, one can propose a simple hypothesis to talk about the experience of women directors. The assumption could be that female stage directors in Lebanon challenge traditional feminine roles/attitudes and adopt traditional masculine characteristics in order to achieve success in the domain of directing. However, considering that gender is a social construct, one can assume that the “masculine” traits that the director should have are not really “masculine”; they are “human” traits that are gendered by the society. Women directors are not being more masculine or less feminine; they are just being “directors”. These assumptions will be better investigated in the next section, which will look at how the men and women interviewed experience their gender roles in the rehearsal room, and consequently, how gender gets reconstructed in the theater.

Gender Reconstruction in the Lebanese Theater Workplace

In order to understand the issue of gender differences in the rehearsal rooms of the directors interviewed for this study,² I have relied on social constructionist approaches, which, despite the variations in the disciplines and methodologies used in their respective research studies, all question the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender as based in natural or biological difference. Instead, they offer explanations of gender based on social interaction. Understanding the notion of gender as neither deeply-rooted in biology nor as an indispensable property of personality, but as a construction

2. All interviews were conducted between May 2004 and January 2005. The interviewees are: Latifa Multaqa, Siham Nasser, Issam Bou Khaled, Nicolas Daniel, Carmen Libboss, Joseph Bou Nassar, Randa Asmar, Walid Fakhreddine, Lina Abyad, Lina Saneh, Rana Najjar, Talal Jurdi, Hisham Jaber, and Nidal Ashqar. For a short biography on each, see Assaf, Sahar 2005, (Appendix II).

that runs through the interactional sphere of life, has allowed the study to free itself from the traditional dichotomous classification of masculinity and femininity.

In an essay entitled, "Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman (2002), from a symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological theoretical framework (Waters 1994), argue that gender, a basic part of identity, is a product of social interaction much more than it is a set of characteristics inherent in an individual. They contend that "the 'doing' of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production" (West & Zimmerman 2002, p. 4). Gender, according to West and Zimmerman (2002), is not something we have but something we do in social interactions, i.e., in the presence of other people. "Participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in a similar light" (West & Zimmerman 2002, p. 4). Any type of social interaction or activity is potentially subject to "doing gender", whereby one's action is deemed accountable in terms of its appropriateness to one's gender.

Grounding aspects of the social constructionist approaches in the lived experience of Lebanese women and men directors have revealed that the theater practitioners, while doing theater, are re-doing gender and, by so doing, are minimizing the differences between men and women. For instance, responding very thoughtfully to my query about the nature of relationships in the theater, Nidal Ashqar, a pioneer Lebanese female stage director, talked about the identity of the artist as she sees it. Ashqar argues that men and women in the theater are aware of their gender identities, but there is no one who does feminine directing or masculine directing. "The artist is a person liberated from all restrictions and obstacles. In order to succeed in theater work, we should rid ourselves of all the obstacles, whether social, sectarian, or gender-based" (N. Ashqar, personal communication, January 21, 2005). Ashqar's femininity can be strongly felt in the way she sees things, but as an artist, she has more urgent concerns than worrying about how to present her femininity. "I regard men and women from the perspective of a woman; this of course distinguishes me from others, but I do not concern myself with this issue" (N. Ashqar, personal communication, January 21, 2005). What is important for Ashqar is how to deliver her message to the audience through the bodies and the voices of her actors. "If you consider the plays I have directed, you cannot tell whether this is a man's direction or a woman's direction. How can you tell? No doubt that in each one of us there is a bizarre assortment of masculinity and femininity; we bring out the qualities we need in the particular situation we are living" (N. Ashqar, personal communication, January 21, 2005). By claiming that there is an "assortment of masculinity and femininity" in each one of us, Ashqar is probably suggesting that there is no such thing as real gender. This falls within Judith Butler's (1998) concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an essence; it is real only to the extent that it is performed. Hence, being a "man" does not have to signify masculinity just as being a "woman" does not have to signify femininity. In other words, being male or female does not guarantee one's masculinity or femininity, respectively. Gender becomes a "free-floating artifice," using Butler's terms, as long as it is independent of sex (p. 278).

Ashqar's attitude towards the artist is reminiscent of what Lebanese director and actor Issam Bou Khaled has said about gender in the context of the theater: "There is no

difference between men and women in the theater, because in this domain, you should be neutral in order to create and give. When I am acting, I am like clay. When I am directing, I consider my actors to be like clay not only at the physical level but also at the emotional level" (I. Bou Khaled, personal communication, December 03, 2004). Comparing the artist to clay, Bou Khaled is saying that the artist is not a fixed entity but s/he is continually assuming different shapes in order to be able to become the "person" or the "character" s/he is performing. Gender, according to Bou Khaled, is one of these shapes. He stresses the importance of discovering the different human sensations in the theater. "As a man, I should learn how to feel like a woman, and the woman should learn how to be a man" (I. Bou Khaled, personal communication, December 03, 2004). Thus, we see how practicing social expressions that are not associated with one's biological sex is not only acceptable but also necessary in theater work.

However, one can conclude that stage directors, while doing a directing job, do not express their gender identity, whether it is socially labeled as masculine or as feminine. The norms, expectations, and attributes of masculine or feminine that are learned through a socialization process alter dramatically inside the theater workplace. Moreover, gender, as some constructionists have argued, is not only an act of the individual. West and Zimmerman (2002) argue that doing gender occurs in institutional arenas, from which the norms of appropriate gender are drawn. In this sense, one can argue that the specific norms of the theater institution as opposed to those of society allow theater practitioners to employ less traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity. In order to explore this assumption, the subsequent section will look at the director-actor relationship.

Degendered Bodies in a Degendered Workplace

The delicate balance and relationship achieved between the director and the actor is one of the most intriguing areas of the directing process. The questions as to how directors deal with actresses and actors and what kind of relationship they intend to build with them have revealed the importance of behaving freely and unreservedly in theater because healthy and strong relationships between the crew members come first in theater-making. Almost all of the directors interviewed, while talking about their relationship with the actors, used the term "friends" to describe this relationship.

However, it was remarkable that while discussing the importance of the director-actor friendly relationship, two themes recurred in the narratives of most of the interviewees. The first theme raised was the fragility of working with the body of the actor or actress and how that defines the relation. The second theme was the private nature of the rehearsal room.

In order to develop the friendly relation that is crucial for both the director and his/her actors, some of the directors interviewed have emphasized the value of freeing the relations in the rehearsal room from any sexual connotations. This notion shows that the existing biological differences would appear unimportant without the social construction of gender. Issam Bou Khaled, while talking about dealing with his male and female actors, said: "I treat them in the same way. From the first moment in the rehearsal room, I intend to break the sexual barrier because I know that in our work

there will be physical contact. Accordingly, I do not place myself in a male position dealing with the opposite sex. This might create a problem that might go out of control and might put us at a disadvantage at the research and imagination levels" (I. Bou Khaled, personal communication, December 03, 2004).

Theater director and script writer Hisham Jaber has also reflected on the relations in the theater workplace from the perspective of a man-woman relationship: "The relation between a man and a woman in the theater becomes relaxed. Once you are making theater, there is the game of the body, body contacts. So, if we are talking about sex, the sexual congestion will disappear. Things become more refined and spiritual" (H. Jaber, personal communication, November 25, 2004). Given that gender differences are greatly expressed in our sexual relationships, as long as relationships in the rehearsal room are stripped of sexual implications, the men and women making theater are alike. Bou Khaled and Jaber both argue that gender differences are felt less in the theater workplace.

When asked to discuss her views on the human relations in the theater workplace, theater director Lina Abyad discussed the importance of working with the body of the actor and how that defines the relation: "You cannot work with the actor while you are standing 20 meters away from him. You need to get close to him, touch him. There should be this freedom. You should feel that it is acceptable for him" (L. Abyad, personal communication, June 01, 2004). That is why as a director, she takes the first step to form a close relationship with her actors by talking about her private life, her dreams, even her sexual life. Abyad's attitude towards the director-actor close relationship in the rehearsal room provides a typical example of how uncommon issues in society become acceptable within the context of the theater. Clearly, while open public debates about sensitive issues and very old taboos, like sexual habits, are uncommon in Lebanese society, they are perfectly acceptable in the theater workplace. The rehearsal room gives us the agency to re-define our social realities. This is more evident in the following views on the private nature of the rehearsal room.

The intimate relations that are necessary for producing a play are dictated by the private nature of the rehearsal room and the theater institution, in general. In theater, one must behave spontaneously, says Latifa Multaqa, first female director in Lebanon, because lies and artificiality are almost instantly detected: "Masks that are usually imposed by society and traditions must be dropped. Theater is freedom; it is a way of expressing oneself freely" (L. Multaqa, personal communication, May 11, 2004). Thus, the private nature of the rehearsal room seems to foster an explicitly safe environment for alternative ways of doing gender. Theater work is mainly about creating a new world, or as put by Lina Abyad, it is about "re-doing" the world or "re-saying it". As such, in the process of re-doing the world, the theater practitioners are re-doing their gender identities and rendering the rehearsal room a degendered workplace.

Towards an Androgynous Society

Living in a gendered society that perceives men and women as different human beings who have different roles to perform, I was motivated, for the purposes of this study, to ask the following question: "How many women directors are being themselves, in other words, being feminine?" Looking at the issue from this

perspective, I was unconsciously complying with traditional feminine and masculine qualities and with the biological essentialist views of gender differences. However, as I started reading through the relevant literature, and as soon as my field research started, the focus of the study shifted to exploring how the existing gender structure affects the work of women stage directors, as well as exploring the reconstruction of gender in the rehearsal room.

The juxtaposition of the experience of women directors with their male counterparts has led to the following conclusion: Theater practitioners are redoing their gender while doing theater. In the process of doing theater, theater practitioners are, to some degree, altering the immediate social norms of gender accountability. The traditional expectations of being feminine and masculine change in the theater workplace. Hence, what it means to be male or female becomes broader than normally defined outside the rehearsal room. While doing theater, theater directors stop doing gender. They minimize the differences between men and women. They construct a world where men and women play similar roles, roles that are equally respected by others without any concern as to whether one's sex is male or female.

Borrowing from Virginia Woolf (1992), who once said that the mind of an artist must be "incandescent" and "unimpeded", one can say that theater artists are not ordinary men or women (pp. 98-99). These artists have the type of man-womanly or woman-manly mind, i.e. androgynous minds. Although they are aware of the significance of gender as a factor in influencing the roles that are played by men and women, they themselves consider gender differences neutral. This is reflected via their views on human relations in the rehearsal room. When dealing with the others' bodies as degendered bodies, they are essentially not thinking specifically about the sex of the bodies in question. As directors and actors, they need to integrate the experience and feelings of both men and women in order to reincarnate the characters they are playing on stage. Perhaps both their awareness of the artifice of difference that social customs impose and the nature of their theater work join to produce their androgynous minds.

Finally, understanding theater as a degendered place, i.e. as a place whose organizational dynamics do not reproduce gender inequality and gender differences, women and men directors are not expressing their social realities in their rehearsal rooms. An intriguing question remains: Can theater practitioners express their "theater realities" in their social lives? Can real life be a mirror of the theater world? Would that be a first step towards an androgynous society, and would that be the kind of society we want to live in?

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Faten Hamama and Hind Rustom:

Stars from Different Heavens

Jean Said Makdissi

One of the current topics in critical discussions on the Arab cinema is the gendered nature of nationalist and national themes. It has been repeatedly said that in the Egyptian cinema, Egypt itself is often represented by an idealized woman. Both Viola Shafik (1998) and Lina Khatib (2006) make much of this idea, and investigate it with reference to particular films. In this context the idealizing title *sayidat al-shasha al-arabiyya*, (i.e. the lady of the Arab screen) has been universally granted to Faten Hamama, the grande dame of the Egyptian cinema and one of the most prolific of its actresses, and thus she is the ideal embodiment on the screen not only of Egyptian and Arab womanhood, but also of Egypt's view of itself and of the Arab world. To study the output of Faten Hamama is to have an idea of how Egyptians – and perhaps all Arabs – like to see themselves, and especially their women. But to arrive at a clearer idea of the self-definition of the Arab world and its fantasy of the feminine ideal I believe it would be helpful to contrast her work with that of Hind Rustom, who both in her physical appearance and the persona she represents on screen is almost directly antithetical to Faten.

In preparation for this article I have seen more than two dozen films, and of course drawn on decades of experience with the Egyptian cinema. For want of space I shall not write about all of them, or even list them all, but shall use only a handful of them selectively to make the points I wish to make about the performances of these two great actresses.

The first and most obvious contrast between the two actresses under study is in their appearance. While Faten Hamama is petite, with dark hair and eyes, Hind Rustom is larger, taller, bigger, fleshier, and, most importantly, a blonde. The blonde Hind suggests a foreign or alien identity while the dark Faten seems more homemade, more authentically Egyptian. Her hair tends to be cut close to her head, not very short but rarely long: it is neatly coiffed, often covered, never untidy, tousled, or loose. This is visual reinforcement of the impression created by almost all of her roles as a character that is reserved, restrained, self-possessed, and sympathetic. These characteristics have come to suggest in a cinematic way virtue and righteousness. This impression is compounded by the invariable modesty of her dress. She has never, as far as I know, appeared in an oriental dance, which is very sensual and sexually evocative.

Hind Rustom on the other hand has often danced on screen, wearing the classic oriental dancer's costume, her feet, legs and midriff naked, and her upper torso barely covered – all of which emphasize the inherent sensuality of the characters she plays.

Her long hair is almost always tumbling unrestrainedly over her face like an element of nature; she swings her hips seductively. Her voice is loud and open, and though obscenities are never permitted in the Egyptian cinema one can as easily imagine the characters she portrays uttering them just as one can be sure that those that Faten portrays would never do so. Thus, Hind's film persona suggests physical abandon, as well as absence of restraint and of inhibition.

If it is commonplace to see the blonde Hind as the epitome of all that is sinful but at the same time desirable, especially in her sexuality, and dark-haired Faten as the epitome of virtue and domesticity, the inevitable conclusion is that Faten represents authentic Egyptian (and by extension Arab) culture and morals, while Hind represents the dangerous magnetism of a kind of tantalizing, summoning, but alien depravity.

The respective acting techniques of the two women emphasize the difference in their appearance. Samir Farid (1995) writes in his book on Faten Hamama that she, above all others, learned and mastered the art of cinematic acting early on in her career (p. 51). He points out that she successfully translates innermost feelings into visible outer signs using restrained and understated gestures. He offers as one example a scene in *Sayiddat al-qasr* (i.e. the lady of the palace) directed by Kamal al-Sheikh in 1958, in which she plays an extremely poor young woman who marries a wealthy man. When she enters his house for the first time, she is overwhelmed by the signs of his wealth, so much in contrast with her own modest home. Faten Hamama, points out Farid, brilliantly portrays her character's background, her modesty, and her discomfort in these alien surroundings with the simple gesture of sitting gingerly throughout the scene on the edge of the chair to which she has been shown.

In sharp contrast to this subtle form of acting, Hind Rustom employs in many of her roles an emphatic, even overstated, style. In almost all her films, her loud voice denotes self-assurance and aggressive physicality; she swings her hips assertively as she walks, denoting a very explicit kind of sensuality. Yet in her best films, Hind Rustom is also capable of fine acting even while playing the usual sexy temptress.

In Youssef Chahine's 1958 film *Bab al-hadid* (i.e. the iron gate), one of the masterpieces of the Egyptian cinema and one of her best performances, she plays Hanouma, who sells soft drinks at the train station. Hanouma is engaged to the virile and dynamic porter Abu Siri' (Farid Shawki), and she is completely unaware of the destructive power of her overt sexuality on the lame newspaper seller Qinnawi (played by Chahine himself), whom she treats with teasing contempt, not recognizing (realizing) the intensity and desperation of his obsession with her. In the end, beside himself with frustration and misery, Qinnawi is driven to murder and insanity. In the unforgettable role of Hanouma, Hind Rustom acts with finely nuanced understatement, without in any way undermining the natural sensuality of her character.

In *Sira' fi al-nil* (i.e. struggle on the Nile) directed by Atef Salem in 1959, she plays the dancer Nargis, sent by a gang of thieves onto a boat owned by the town elder's son, Mahassib, (played by Omar Sherif) who has just come to manhood and who is carrying with him a large amount of cash entrusted to him by the people of Luxor, his hometown, to buy a more modern boat in Cairo. An older and more experienced sailor,



Young Faten Hamama

Mujahed (Rushdy Abatha), is sent along to watch over the young man and the money he is carrying, as well as to oversee the purchase of the new boat. Nargis's task is to find out where the money is hidden, and to steal it, which she easily does by seducing Mahassib, whom she marries as part of the plot against him. Mahassib, in his innocent youth, is an easy target of her seductive powers. His first sight of her is on stage in a country fair. As she enters, dancing wildly, she takes his breath away, as she does ours: it is an entrance of pure and wild sexuality, full of the vigour and vitality of sex rather than of a subtler eroticism. Even as she succeeds in her endeavour, she falls in love with Mujahid, who is no less attracted to her, and the story becomes one of intricate sets of betrayal. Though Nargis's wicked machinations almost destroy the relationship between the two men, and the livelihood of the people of Luxor, not to mention the safety and harmony of life on the Nile boat, she herself is a victim of the gang of thieves for whom she works. Her fear of them shows the vulnerability of the lone woman facing male brutality, greed, and violence. In the end, her love for Mujahed redeems her, and in the final scene of the film, she atones for her crimes by taking a fatal blow to the head meant for him, and thus unintentionally saves his life.

In film after film, Hind Rustom plays the seductress, the fallen woman. Often, however, her character, though apparently wicked, is in fact a victim. A typical role is *Banat al-layl* (i.e. girls of the night) directed by Hassan al-Imam in 1955, in which she plays Naima, a drunken prostitute, who though she comes from a good and notable family, has been brought to her life of sin by a divorce which left her helpless and desperate. She is about to be rescued by the love of a good man (played by Kamal al-Shinnawi) when she discovers she is pregnant from an earlier lover. She gives up her *fiancé* and her child, and thus loses all chances of happiness. In the end, just as she is about to recover both child and *fiancé*, she dies. In this sort of melodrama, Hind Rustom is always astonishingly dynamic, full of life, feeling, and energy, a sexual magnet who not only fatally attracts men but creates in us a deep sense of moral malaise: is she a victim of society or a representative of its wickedness?



Hind Rustom and Abdel-Salam Nabulsi. Egypt/Cairo. Photographer; anonymous. Collection Phaysal el-Atrash
©Fondation Arabe pour l'image

In two of her best-known films, *Shafiqah al-qubtiya* (i.e. Shafiqah the Copt) and *al-Rahiba* (i.e. the nun), both directed by Hassan al-Imam in 1963 and 1965 respectively, she plays characters seeking redemption from their previous lives. The first, infinitely superior to the second in its subject matter, script, direction, sets and art production, as well as in her performance, has more depth and more subtlety in its content. Playing a woman whose parents, of modest means, disown her when she takes up a life of vice and depravity as a dancer and drug addict in the sinful centre of Cairo wealth and privilege, Hind Rustom's acting grows in intensity as the film progresses, and she plays the dark as well as the lighter moments, such as they are, with subtlety and intelligence. The film itself is sombre, and many of its scenes are dark. Indeed, most of the film takes place at night, either in the artificially and garishly lit palaces she dances in – which only emphasizes the moral darkness of these places – or in the dark interior of her parents' house. In one particularly memorable scene, we see Shafiqah covered from head to toe in a black *milaya* (i.e. cloak) standing plaintively in front of her seated and unbending parents in their dark and bare living room, full of ominous shadows. They reject her thoroughly, refusing the forgiveness she yearns for, and eventually she turns and leaves, her head bowed and her sorrow visible. It is one of the bleakest scenes that I know of in the Egyptian cinema, and is made utterly unforgettable by the sheer power of Hind Rustom's presence, this time not exploding into explicit sexuality as it so often does, but on the contrary, denied, covered over with shame, humiliation, sorrow, and remorse. The film seems to argue the parallel between the calculated wickedness of immorality and corruption on the one hand, and the inhuman coldness and cruelty of unforgiving morality on the other.

Al-Rahiba takes place in Lebanon, which often in the Egyptian cinema is depicted as a place of happy honeymoons, beautiful scenery, and innocent fun. In this case it is also a place of depravity and vice. Hind Rustom plays an *ingénue*, Hoda, a young village girl who is at first duped into a life of sin, and then takes it on professionally, having moved, predictably, from the village to the city, from relative modesty and simplicity of

life to wealth and power. She plays now by the rules of that urban game of corruption and betrayal. At the end of the film, she comes to understand the extent of her moral collapse, which had led to the death of her mother and the ruin of her sister, and she enters a nunnery to make up for her sins.

If in the roles she plays Hind Rustom seems to represent a force of nature, creating in the viewer a storm of contradictory impulses, and though her screen presence is overwhelming, there is a certain uniformity in her performances. She has never played, as far as I know, the role of a virtuous, quiet, dignified, modestly dressed, repressed housewife or mother, who lives out her life in the protective walls of domestic life, and to whom nothing much has happened outside it. On screen, she is always a woman of the world, and almost always also a woman familiar with the uglier side of that world, though often redeemed by an enormous capacity for love and for life itself.

In contrast, though Faten Hamama has played a wide range of social roles, she has never, to my knowledge, played a wicked, vicious, or sexually intemperate woman. Much has been written about her virtuosity, and of the subtlety of her skills as an actress, in comedies, tragedies, melodramas, and political thrillers. Yet the characters she plays are almost always virtuous and basically innocent of any calculated wickedness or immorality, or even of the forgivable moral ambiguity in which many of Hind Rustom's characters thrive.

This is not to say that she never plays the role of the social outcast, or especially the "fallen woman": she does, and does so brilliantly, as in two of her greatest roles, namely, *Du'a al-qarawan*, (i.e. the nightingale's prayer) based on the novel by Taha Hussein, and in *Al-Haram* (i.e. the sin), both directed by Barakat, in 1959 and 1965 respectively. But in both cases, the fallen woman role she portrays is really that of an innocent victim of a man's vicious nature, and of the cruelty and hypocrisy of an immoral society. She is not, as so often Hind Rustom's characters are, a victim by virtue of her own sexuality.

In *Du'a al-qarawan* Hamama plays a young village woman who seeks employment with the man who had seduced her sister and led to her being killed by their uncle as punishment for staining the family's honour. Her plan is to kill him in order to avenge her sister. Instead, however, she falls in love with him, and though in the end he pays with his life for his sin, it is not she who kills him. In *Al-Haram* she gives birth to an illegitimate child, conceived when she is raped. As she tries to stifle the infant's cries so as to keep its existence a secret and thus cover up her shame, she inadvertently kills it. The unforgettable scenes of the birth in the field, and of the killing of the baby are among the most dramatic and moving in Faten Hamama's long repertoire of great moments.

It is almost inconceivable to imagine Faten Hamama playing the part of a truly wicked woman, a truly corrupt or a truly violent one. The basic innocence of her characters, and the purity of their motives, offers space, even when they stray for forgiveness and for redemption. In *La anam* (directed by Salah abu Saif in 1957), which is a kind of distant and feeble echo of *Othello*, she plays a young woman, Nadia, who deliberately misleads her father into doubting the fidelity of his virtuous new wife, of whom she

is intensely jealous. So successful is she that her father divorces his innocent wife, whom he had loved deeply. Later, however, Nadia regrets her actions, and, full of remorse, tries to undo the damage she has done. Nadia's actions are not motivated by any inherent evil on her part, but by her loneliness, and her genuine love for her father, whose affection and attention she craves. In *Tariq al-amal* (i.e. the path of hope) directed by Izzeddine Zulficar in 1957, she plays the part of Saniyya, who has killed the would-be rapist of her friend Laila, but refuses to explain her motive to the court so as not to tarnish Laila's honour. In the end, Laila admits the truth, and Saniyya's reputation is restored.

More interesting than her dozens of roles in melodrama are those that Faten Hamama played as head of a large family. In these roles – and they are quite numerous – her status can be seen as political, and the little domestic kingdom that she runs can be seen as suggestive of – or even a model for – the larger nation outside the doors of her house, whether that is a village hovel or a villa in Maadi. The best known and most written about of these roles is in *Embaratoriyat mim* (i.e. m's empire), directed by Hussein Kamel in 1972. Mona is a well-off widow with many children, who works as an inspector in the Ministry of Education. She tries to keep her large brood under strict control to ensure that they are well behaved. As the children grow older she begins to lose control over them, and to see that her attempt to maintain it is not only a mistake but also a destructive illusion. Demanding more democratic house rules, her older children wish to have a say in their own development, and in the end she is forced to agree.

In *Afwah wa aranib* (i.e. mouths and rabbits) directed by Henri Barakat in 1977, as well as in *Yawm murr, yawm helu*, (i.e. bitter day, sweet day) directed by Khayri Bshara in 1988, she plays the role of a desperately poor woman trying to keep a large brood under control, which is made almost impossible because of the inequitable economic circumstances they find themselves under. She punishes her wayward children mercilessly, at all times trying to keep them in line with her standards of morality and truth telling. Though strict, her character in both these films (and others like them) is always faithful, loving, loyal, strong, unbendingly moral, a model of the ideal governor, whose only failing is often her absence of perception: she often does not see or understand what is happening right around her.

In *Afwah wa aranib* Faten plays the part of the unmarried Ni'mat who lives in the village with her sister, Gamalat, and her husband Abdel Maguid, played by Farid Shawki, a foolish and irresponsible pair, for whose numerous progeny Ni'mat helps provide. Ni'mat is the one who holds the family together, disciplining the children and at the same time providing them with the affection and attention their parents have neither the time nor the good sense to give them. The pivotal scene of the film is when Abdel Maguid signs a marriage contract on her behalf but without her knowledge, falsely claiming that he has her consent. Unaware that she is now married, she leaves the village to escape the attentions of the odious Mualim Battawi, and finds work as a grape-picker on the estate of Mahmoud Bey (Mahmoud Yassin). One thing leads to another. She gradually impresses Mahmoud Bey with her skill and virtue, works her way up in his household, moves with him to Cairo, and at last of course, marries him. In the final scenes she rescues her sister's family from its hopeless poverty, and carries them away from the village to prosperity and happiness.

In *Yawm murr, yawm helu* Aysha lives in the impoverished and crowded Cairo neighbourhood of Shoubra, a widow with five children who is struggling as a dressmaker to pay off the debts left by her late husband. Her house is blanketed in layers of hopelessness. In her love for her children, and her anxiety to keep them under control and obedient to the social norms that she never questions, she actually mistreats them. We often see her beating her children, and though they love her, they try, each one in his or her own way, to escape her ministrations. As the film progresses we watch Aysha and her children suffer endless problems; sickness, abuse, betrayal, overwork, suicide, a runaway child, fire, prostitution, and so on. It is only in the final scene of the film that we see the “sweet day” promised in the title of the film when her beloved only son returns to her after a long absence, though by then several of his sisters have met dreadful fates.

I have elsewhere described *Yawm murr, yawm helu* as an anti-feminist film because of the nature of the character played by Faten Hamama, and I believe the same could be said of many of her films. For in all the troubles she faces, however bravely, and stoically, we almost never see Aysha rebelling against the reality that has placed her in the position she is in: like so many other of Faten’s characters, she accepts the world as it is, no matter what it does to her.

In one of her most brilliant roles, however, Faten’s character does rebel and take up arms against the corrupt and vicious world that has victimized her and her people. In *Laylat al-qabd ala Fatma*, (i.e. the night Fatma was arrested), directed by Henri Barakat in 1984, she plays another woman in charge of a poor and fatherless family. This is an explicitly political film, in more ways than one. The early scenes take place during the British occupation of Egypt, and Fatma’s young brother Galal has joined the national resistance. When the moment for his participation in an operation arrives, however, he fails to show up, jeopardizing not only the mission but also his comrades. Fatma courageously takes his place, but later begins to understand that he is a morally failed individual. Eventually he becomes an important man in the now independent state, and we see him in action, corrupt, vicious, selfish, and cruel. In the meantime Fatma, from the moment she took charge of her orphaned younger siblings, has postponed her own happiness until they grow up. Her long engagement to the fisherman Sayyid, whom she loves deeply and who loves her as well, is jeopardized just as they are about to marry at last. He is arrested and imprisoned for fifteen years for a crime he did not commit. When she discovers that it is her wicked brother who has framed Sayyid, she confronts him in his grand villa in Cairo. Not only does he refuse to undo his wickedness by seeing to Sayyid’s release, but he has her mercilessly thrown out of his house. When she pursues her demands for justice, he claims that she is mad, and we see her being dragged away by the police to a mental hospital, where she continues to resist the injustice. In the end of course, he is exposed and punished, and she and Sayyid are reunited at last, both of them now grey-haired and bent.

This film is a severe and explicit indictment not just of individual immorality and weakness, but of public affairs and of the politics of the post-colonial independent state, built, as it appears to be in this film, on a web of corruption, deceit, injustice, and violence. Thus some of Faten Hamama’s films go beyond Hind Rustom’s in their implications. She made some films to specifically address social problems, the most

famous being *Uridu hallan* (i.e. I want a solution) directed by Said Marzouk in 1975, in which the injustice of the Egyptian divorce laws as they apply to women is explored and illustrated.

It is on this political level that Faten Hamama's place in the Egyptian cinema differs greatly in the final analysis from that of Hind Rostom. While the latter seems often in her roles to represent nature and natural forces in all their destructiveness, disarray, and catastrophic results – and also in all their beauty and power – Faten represents the virtuous life – self-sacrifice, discipline, honour, fidelity, sincerity, morality – which, though it is fraught with its own weaknesses, is seen as the only force that can withstand nature and provide protection against its dangers. Paramount among these dangers is the individuality that threatens the cohesiveness of the group, and the well being of society – and this is most often present in its natural embodiments, that is, sexuality and greed, the temptation to pursue the selfish desire for pleasure and power, regardless of the moral implications, and despite the damage that may be done to society.

If Faten Hamama has been dubbed *sayyidat al-shasha al-arabiyya*, I believe it is because we like to see ourselves as we see her persona, a nation to which many misfortunes and even catastrophes have befallen, one which has often been betrayed and maltreated, which has made mistakes and even occasionally strayed into error, but which in the end is basically virtuous, moral, decent, and strong, inevitably heading, as long as it is true to itself, for survival and success. In this view of ourselves, we have expunged all that is wicked, immoral, and anti-social – qualities so often inherent in the characters played by Hind Rostom – as elements alien to our nature, present in our society as temptations, but always resisted and in the end denied and defeated.

But is there not inherent in the title *sayyidat al-shasha* an admission that there is a touch of fantasy in this self-definition? In the 1920s Safiah Zaghloul, wife of Saad Zaghloul, leader of the nationalist revolution against the British, was dubbed *umm al-masriyyin* (i.e. the mother of the Egyptians). In Faten Hamama's title on the other hand, the reference is only to the movie screen, to an actress, to someone who works in make-believe, in an invented world, a world of outer appearances. In *Afwah wa aranib*, Ni'mat comments on Mahmoud Bey's erstwhile fiancée, a blonde woman much given to travel in Europe and to European clothes, whom she will eventually supplant: *min barra hala hala, min guwa ya'lam allah!* (i.e. on the outside hohoho, on the inside, God only knows!)

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The “New Woman” of the Interwar Period:

Performance, Identity, and Performative Act of Everyday Life in Egypt and Iran*

Fakhri Haghani

Introduction

This article is about visual culture, identity, and women in interwar Egypt and Iran. I use a transnational feminist approach to connect the histories of Egypt and Iran, in their differences and commonalities, during the interwar period. By emphasizing women's education as the source of advancement of the society, the late nineteenth century Egyptian thinkers, Qasim Amin and Mohammad Abduh, and Iranian intellectuals Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (al-Afghani), Abdolhossein Khan Kermani, and Yusef Ashtiyani, invoked a male representation of a “feminist” discourse. During the 1906-1911 Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the 1919 Egyptian anti-British Revolution, the discourse of education was translated into women's first quest for legal and political rights. National modernization policies, as diverse as they were in each country, translated the “woman question,” both as a discursive and a practice, into the question of women's appearance in public.

In interwar Egypt and Iran, articulation of the “new modes of women's identity formation” was tied to many emerging aspects of the public sphere and many shifting boundaries of public and private realms of the culture of the body performance, including writing, music, theater, cinema, and dress. As a result, the public sphere shifted from a “site of debates and dialogue” to a “field of appearance, visibilities, and performances.” Print culture and press, with its many photographs and illustrated articles, contributed to the discursive foundation. The “New Woman” of the interwar Egypt and Iran addressed the emergence of this new culture of visual public sphere.¹

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1. See Amin, 2000; Badran, 1994; Cinar, 2005; Habermas, 1989; & Najmabadi, 1998.

The concept of the “New Woman” was an early twentieth century cultural import to the Middle East. It dealt with the notion of “modernity” and the emergence of a new concept, that of the visual public sphere, with its socio-political challenges to the hegemony of society. The British journalist, Sarah Grand, first used the term in 1894 in the *North American Review*. The European press and Anglo-American novel writers immediately popularized it. Henric Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), staged for the first time in London, in 1889, ignited the proliferation of a series of public images on “the woman question” (Roberts, 2002, p. 22). The concept of the “New Woman” incorporated the “culture of personality, self-development, and self-fulfillment, rejecting the traditional notion of domesticity and its moral association with sacrifice and self-denial” (Roberts, p. 21).

Although in Europe and North America the concept was defined as “a rebellion against the stale Victorian truisms of bourgeois liberal culture” voicing “to attain moral and economic freedom” (Roberts, p. 21), the symbol became painted with a slight political tint in the Middle East.

Drawing on a closer reading of images, texts, and audio collections, I historicize the visual as an experience of women’s everyday life, underlining in so doing the significance of the performing arts as a performative act. I talk about the liminal position of music and stage performance as sites of transgression. Many of the shifting boundaries of the public and private realms of the culture of body performance, including one’s feminist consciousness, feminine persona, nationalist self, and social responsibility, have defined the interlocking means of the artistic performance and creativity of the “New Woman” in interwar Egypt and Iran. To explore these major points, I have focused on different strata of society, but at the same time, on the private persona of the interwar Iranian musical stage celebrity, Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri, and the Egyptian musical theater artist, Munira al-Mahdiyya.

Women, Performing Arts, and Performance during Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries Egypt and Iran

The origin of the art of performance in Egypt and Iran, as the manifestation of diverse forms of artistic expression in private and public settings, is as old as the histories of these countries themselves. Despite the widespread notion in grand narratives of the males’ enactment of women’s roles in pre-nineteenth century Iran and Egypt, sporadic documents tracing back women’s historical presence in the performing arts as singers, performers, and dancers tell us that such a history has yet to be written. In the nineteenth century, both in Egypt and Iran, women singers and performers entered the profession through informal family or local training, but it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that these activities were acknowledged as careers for women. Although the establishment of separate training institutions and European-style theater and concert halls has shattered the unity of what could be termed the performing arts of the period – singing, acting, and dancing – women of the interwar period were still combining all those different artistic expressions in their performances on stage. As Karin van Nieuwkerk (1995) has argued with reference to Egypt, “The status of entertainers became increasingly determined by the form and context of their performances” (p. 62) when in the 1930s different state-funded professional art schools began to flourish.

According to Ali Racy (1997), musical culture in Egypt during the 1920s was still centered on artists “reinterpreting musical and poetic models known in the culture” (p. 140). As a means of creating personal and national identities and as a form of resistance to Western cultural domination, a search for *sunna* (i.e. tradition) in *al-musiqā al-arabiyya* (i.e. Arab music) in Egypt (Castelo-Branco, 1980) and *aseel* (i.e. original/traditional) in *melli* (i.e. national) music in Iran (During, 1991) became popular during the early decades of the twentieth century. Women performers were an integral part of this momentum with their presence on public stages in coffeehouses, theater halls, and nightclubs. As pioneers for the future generation of female artists, these women with their public presence transformed their own personal lives as well as their society’s cultural attitudes, norms, and aesthetics. Like women’s activities and accomplishments in politics, education, and law led by Egyptian feminists, such as Huda Sh’arawi, S’aiza

Nabrawi, and Nabawiyya Musa, and Iranian activists Sediqeh Dawlatabadi and Nur al-Huda Manganeh, the public participation of women in the performing arts has played a significant role in transforming the cultural life of the society.

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1789 led to the country's encounter with Europe, producing works of art in the form of either European adaptations or Arabic plays and songs. With the presence of the Europeans in the country, construction of large theater and concert halls funded by the Khedives laid the ground for women's public performances. For example, many women professional singers and performers of the 1920s in Egypt began their careers by performing during intermissions at the Opera House built in 1869 on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal (Racy, 1977). In general, though, women's performance on stage as well as their presence in the audience was a spatially segregated phenomenon which explains why, in the 1920s, Badi'a Masabni still held matinee shows on Tuesdays in her *sala* (i.e. music hall) for women.

During the nineteenth century, female professional singers and performers, known as '*awalim*' in Cairo, had their own trade guilds and made contracts with individual patrons for particular private ceremonies attended by women. Some elite and royal families housed the talented '*awalim*' within their palaces. Seated inside a room with wooden lattice-work windows, these women could be heard, but not seen, by the male guests sitting in the court. It is important to note that there were two classes of women performers, '*awalim*' and '*ghawazi*', and they had distinctive levels of social respect and status. '*Awalim*' were learned women who wrote poetry, composed music, and sang songs, but did not perform in public. '*Awalim*' performed a repertoire called *taqtuqa* which refers to light, short songs written in colloquial Arabic. A minor form of art in a male dominated profession, *taqtuqa* could resemble the Western "pop music," as opposed to *dawr* and *muwashaha* performed by men, and comparable with Western "classical compositions." Unlike the '*awalim*', *ghawazi* were groups of female dancers and entertainers who "performed unveiled in the streets and in front of coffeehouses" on the occasion of saint's day or *mawlid* (i.e. prophet's birthday) festivities.² Although there were some Christian and Jewish '*awalim*', most of them were born in Egypt from working-class Muslim families. One such '*alma*' Almaz (1860-1896), a professional singer as talented as her male counterparts under the patronage of Khedive Isma'il, was born into a Lebanese family in Alexandria (Nieuwkerk, 1995). Moreover, Al-Hajja Huda, the daughter of a miller in the Muski neighborhood of Cairo, whose daughters later became '*awalim*', was the leader of the guild in the early twentieth century. Besides, Fathiyya, Mufida, and Ratiba Ahmed, the three sisters who became famous professional singers owning their own *sala* during the 1920s, were nieces of Bamba Kashshar, a famous '*alma*' (Danielson, 1991).

The post World War I culture of the spectacle in the city, streets, and public entertainment districts, including art schools, and music, theater, and movie halls, as well as clubs provided numerous sites for women to watch and be seen. The increase in the number of musical recordings, journal ads, and other commercial entertainment venues has popularized performing arts as a career for women. The emergence of artistic districts, such as Raud al-Faraj and Emad al-Din streets, known as the "Broadway of Cairo," with theaters and music halls, helped produce stars, such as Munira al-Mahdiyya, Fatima Rushdi, Fathiyya Ahmed, Na'ima al-Masriyya, Fatima Sirri, Ratiba Ahmed, Badi'a

2. For more information see Van Nieuwkerk, 1995, p.26; Racy, 1977, pp. 52-54.

Masabni, and Umm Kulthum (Danielson, 1991; Mitchell, 2006). The increase in the genre of “musical theater,” on the one hand, brought traditional music such as classical poetic text with rhyme (i.e. *qasida*) accompanied by an orchestra (*takht*)³ to the heart of the theatrical plays, while on the other hand it popularized nationalistic songs of poets and musicians such as Ahmed Shawqi, Salama Hijazi, and Sayyid Darwish. Musical theater in Egypt also created fields of specialization for artists and brought forth a group consisting of *mutrib* (i.e. the singer), *mu'allif* (i.e. the writer/poet), *mulahhin* (i.e. the composer), and *takht* (i.e. orchestra) (Racy, 1977).

In Iran, Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar's (1848-1896) several trips abroad, financed with European loans, opened the country's door to the West and to the construction of theaters and concert halls funded by the Shahs. The constitutional revolution of 1906-1911 and the debates generated by the newly emerging middle class nationalists and intelligentsia over the impact of the art of performance on social and cultural awakening and the advancement of masses have paved the way for the opening of several performing arts companies such as *Farhang* (i.e. the culture) Company, *Komedi Iran* (i.e. Iran comedy) and *Komedi Akhavan* (i.e. Akhavan comedy). Armenian, Turkish, and Jewish women, such as Sara Yahoodi and Molouk Hosseini, were the first performers playing women's parts on a public stage (Emami, 1987; Sami'i, 1999). In 1910, a woman for the first time appeared on a public stage in front of male audiences. The play was an adaptation of *Tabeeb Ijbari* (i.e. the doctor in spite of himself), a seventeenth century comedy by French playwright, Moliere. It was performed by an Armenian theatrical group whose members had full command of Farsi and was brought to the stage inside the Armenian School of Tehran (Rasoulzadeh, 1910). *Iran Javan* (i.e. the young Iran) Theater was the first theater hall in 1922 where Muslim women and men were able to sit together and watch plays (Beyzai, 2004; Sami'i, 1999). *Honarestan Musiqi* (i.e. the school of music), established in 1926 by the master *tar* (i.e. a corded musical instrument) player, 'Alinaqi Vaziri in Iran, allotted matinee shows to women. These women later founded *Jam'iat Bidari Neswan* (i.e. women's awakening association) and organized a few plays at the auditorium of the Zoroastrian school (Khosrowpanah, 2003).

In post World War I Iran, few women directed plays (e.g. Marzieh Khanom); some performed in the works directed by their husbands (e.g. Lala Vartoonian), and others, like Mme Pari Aqababayof, performed in plays, operettas, and folklore music, forming the first female dancing group (Sami'i, 1999). Pioneering screen actresses during the 1930s, such as Fakhrolzaman Jabbar Vaziri, Iran Daftari, and Ruhangiz Sami Nejad, sang songs in films. While Ruhangiz and Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri confined their artistic careers to singing, phonographic recordings, and later radio, Molouk Zarrabi explored her talent in musical theater. The nationalistic songs of 'Aref Qazvini, Mirzadeh 'Eshqi, Shyeda, and Malek al-Sho'ara Bahar, sung by women celebrities in Iran, just as in Egypt, were produced in collaboration with the *muallif*.

Women's Press and Performing Arts

During the 1920s and 1930s, the press in Egypt and Iran played a vital role in both reflecting and constructing an identity for a modern nation. The number of journals published by women increased, and both their content (editorials, letters to editors, art pages) and style (the addition of illustrations) underwent change. These women of the

3. *Takht*, a Persian word literally translated as the “platform”, was a small music ensemble consisting of two to five instrumentalists and a solo vocalist. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, through musical theater, new instruments including some Western ones were introduced, and the name *takht* was replaced with *firqa* (i.e. band). See Castelo-Branco, 1980, p. 559.

press wrote about each other in detail and displayed visual images of their identities. In Egypt 15 journals were in circulation and in Iran 13.

In Iran, from the mid 1920s, ads about women's public performances in theaters and musical concerts appeared in *'Alam Neswan* (the world of women). Some journals, such as *Ayandeh Iran* (the Future of Iran), added illustrations, mostly sketches, and photographs of teachers and students (Babran, 2002). In Egypt, by contrast, women's journals, such as *Ruz al-Yusuf*, *al-Hisan*, and *al-Fatat*, were filled with visual and literary stories about the personal and professional lives of women artists in the fields of music, theater, and cinema. Illustrated news about women who were finally able to open their own *salas* made headlines in both Iran and Egypt, and articles about the positive and negative aspects of different forms of performing arts abounded.

A Voice, a Time, and a Place: Private Qamar and Public Munira

Several studies on the historical narrative of performance in Egypt and Iran separately explore themes, such as storytelling, improvisation, and musical lyrics, as elements of continuity and change (Castelo-Branco, 1980; During, 1991). In writing a history of women's artistic activities in performance in Iran and Egypt, these themes obtain trans-historical meanings as they address the question of continuity and change between the early twentieth century and the past. They are central to the understanding of everyday life of female performers in interwar Egypt and Iran. Moreover, the motifs studied in relation to the artistic activities of Qamar and Munira provide a transnational terrain for the exploration of historical connections between the two countries. In other words, they represent shared operative tropes through which different or similar artistic performative acts of the Egyptian musical theater artist, Munira al-Mahdiyya, and the Iranian stage celebrity, Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri, are explored as each of these women goes through complex processes in the formation of her identity as the "New Woman." According to Farfan (2004), public discourse on gender regards performance as pertaining not only to the performing arts but also to the performative act or to everyday life practices. The relationship between performing arts and gender is dependent on the political, economic, and social contexts of each society. At the same time, the performing arts play a significant role in defining national and cultural identities: "One cannot underestimate the power of performance, the substantial risks undertaken by performers, and the dynamic relationship between theater, identity, politics, and society" (Lengel & Warren, 2005, p. 2). As Roberts (2002) has argued about women artists and performers of the turn of the century in France, "[t]o act" for a woman "was a form of prostitution aimed at seducing the entire audience. Actresses threatened the naturalized female virtue vital to sexual differentiation, but actresses were idols to new women as well as outcasts" (pp. 54-57). Moreover, "[b]y entering the world of the stage, actresses lost respectability but escaped the strictures of domestic life" (Roberts, 2002, p. 57).

Cultural flourishing surrounding the discourse of the "New Woman" of the interwar period in Iran and Egypt is best illustrated by the extraordinary vocal stands of two women performers namely, the Iranian Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri and the Egyptian Munira al-Mahdiyya, who played significant roles in giving a humanist, visible, and nationalistic identity to women, music, and culture in their societies. Both were born

in environments where singing and performing were sources of economic necessity, and they drew their earlier inspirations from that.

Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri: in Iran

Following the death of her mother, Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri lived with her grandmother, Mulla Khair al-Nessa', who was a court *rozehkhan* (i.e. religious reciter) and *mawlid* (i.e. chanter). On occasion, she would sing with her grandmother, revealing her talent and interest in singing. It has been said that, from this early exposure, Qamar had gained the self-confidence and internal strength vital to a young woman performing in public. Her first exposure to the intellectual world of Iranian traditional music was when her grandmother took a trip leaving Qamar in her cousin's house, the wife of Majd al-Sanay'e, a wealthy man whose house was often frequented by many celebrities of the time. By listening to the songs and lyrics performed during these friendly gatherings, Qamar was informally introduced to the different styles of Iranian traditional music and developed a special interest in them. At the tender age of seventeen, while attending a wedding party with her grandmother, Qamar dared to sing a song, which consisted of rich lyrics from Persian classical poetry, displaying her talent and self-confidence for the first time in public. She became the shining star of the wedding ceremony. It was on this occasion that Ustad Morteza Naydawood encouraged Qamar to pursue advanced musical education. A few days later, Qamar appeared at the doorsteps of Ustad's house ready to take those special lessons in vocal music (Khaleqi, 2000).

Following her emergence as a female artist, Qamar struggled against prejudice and discrimination. She had to deal with her husband while working in a professional field historically dominated by men and while resisting being controlled by the powers that be. She left her husband early on in pursuit of musical training. She appeared unveiled in her first public concert in the Grand Hotel in Tehran in 1924, despite receiving several threats, and refused to perform in Kermanshah for the governor's private party as a precondition for the public concert she was invited to hold in that city. To assert her independence, she walked out to the balcony of the hotel and started singing for people on the street (Khaleqi, 2000). Her class-consciousness has definitely contributed to her persistence in educating the public on drawing a distinction between professional singers and prostitutes. Her newly attained middle class status contributed to her establishing strong connections with many Iranian nationalist leaders and artists, such as Colonel 'Ali Naqi Vaziri, Ustad Naydawood, Abolhassan Saba, and Seyyed Zia al-Din Tabatabai. Her house had become a gathering place for many intellectuals, politicians, and artists. She performed songs, which were written by nationalist and revolutionary poets and lyricists, such as Mirzadeh 'Eshqi and Abolqasim 'Aref. *Marsh Jomhuri* (i.e. the republic march) and *Morq Sahar* (i.e. the twilight bird) became Qamar's popular records of the time, although Reza Shah Pahlavi banned the circulation of the former in 1928. *Marsh Jomhuri* was written on the occasion of an uprising led by a member of Reza Shah's cabinet, Seyyed Zia al-Din Tabatabai who was in favor of forming a republic government of Iran; *Morq Sahar* was considered to promote revolutionary actions among peasants against the repressive system of landownership in Iran.⁴ It has been claimed that Qamar never used a microphone in her public performances. Her ability to remain calm despite the challenges entailed in elevating her voice in terms of diversity, tone, and extension, was unique among female singers of the time. Qamar is associated with the origin of a

4. I would like to acknowledge Mr. Mohammad Hossein Khosrowpanah for addressing the point about the historical context of the two songs *Marsh Jomhuri* and *Morq Sahar* and providing me with audio/visual primary source materials on Qamar.

new vocal tone known as *bam* (Shoja'i, 2006). The emergence of commercial recording companies in the region has brought about change in the stylistic development of the performing arts, defining artists' success and securing their financial independence (Racy, 1977). Qamar was a female pioneer in recording songs with pre World War I recording companies in Iran. However, it was during the 1920s and after the fall of the Qajar dynasty, the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the popularity of the press, play writing, and the spread of nationalistic songs and anthems, that her increasing fame and charming voice attracted European recording companies, which poured into Iran in large numbers to record her songs after a decade of production stalemate in the region (Khaleqi, 2000).

Qamar integrated the important aspects of her public presence with her private feminine persona as she created a subversive self for herself. She often used the charm of her physical and moral personality to display her other self in public. People still associate her pioneering contribution to the Iranian music of the 1920s and the 1930s with the attractive features of her public presence on stage, her beautiful blond hair, her fashionable clothes, and her affectionate expressions (Shoja'i, 2004). Although Qamar was invited by Umm Kulthum to give a public concert in Cairo, she never traveled outside Iran. Even though at the height of her career her financial gain was enormous, Qamar was remembered by her peers for her activist work on behalf of the poor, children, and women, either by contributing to numerous charity organizations or through personal assistance. She died in extreme poverty living in a small rented room (Khaleqi, 2000).

Munira al-Mahdiyya in Egypt

Born in 1885 in the village of Mahdiyya in Syria, Zakiyya Hassan Mansour, later known as Munira al-Mahdiyya, grew up in a poor, crowded household. She was raised by her older sister, after losing her parents at a very young age. In her memoirs, compiled on May 30, 1927, Munira recalled the memories of her first subversive act while growing up in Alexandria:

Every morning, I wore my uniform to attend the school, but before going out of the door, I changed that uniform for a nice dress, which I had previously hidden under the steps. I would spend the entire day out in town hanging out but return on time when students were on their way home from school. I would then change my dress, go to the store, and purchase the ink to smear my fingers, face, and uniform to give the impression that I was at school. When I arrived home, my sister would welcome me with blessing and admiration. Later, when she found out about my habit, she changed my school and supervised me very closely. (Al-Hafni, 1968, p. 85, author's translation)

In 1905, Muhammad Faraj, an influential Cairene, who was on a visit to the school of Zaqaziq, discovered the beauty and power of Munira's voice and offered her the opportunity to move to Cairo and sing in his café. Munira developed a particular passion for and interest in listening to the voice of the singer Al-Lawandiyya whose influence on her was enormous. She started taking lessons in singing, embellishing her voice with a magical tone, which brought her fame and won everyone's heart in an unprecedented way (Al-Hafni, 1968).

Stories have it that Kamil al-Khalai'i, the great artist, heard Munira's voice and offered her to work in his café located in Birhamas neighborhood, close to Bab al-shaariyya in Cairo. This was the smallest café in a crowded neighborhood in which great female and male musicians worked. Moreover, as a popular café in the capital city, frequented by various musicians, it had become a place where works by artists, such as Ibrahim al-Qabbani, Suleyman Qardahi, and Sallama Hijazi, were introduced or cited before musical performances. Munira, at that time, was a beautiful young woman with intellectual and artistic talents, whose presence in the café attracted huge audiences. It was then that Munira realized the timeliness of her success and moved to the Eldorado nightclub which increased her fame. She then married Mahmud Jabr, who assumed the position of manager of her artistic activities (al-Hafni, 1968). Munira used her middle-class status to challenge those who questioned her professional persona while performing in coffeehouses and nightclubs. Like Qamar, though different in her approach, she used her improvisation skills and was able to break the traditional association which existed between female performers and the concept of fallen women which for centuries had created obstacles for women who wanted to appear on the public stage of theaters, nightclubs, and coffeehouses. Moreover, Munira's role-playing skits as a man where she was replacing the popular male musical artist Salama Hijazi in his absence brought her initial success. They also increased her popularity among women who supported her transgressive act of being among the first Muslim women to take off the veil in front of a mixed audience. Although she was criticized, sometimes for this unconventional performance, she demonstrated her mastery in that role.

After achieving success, Munira rented a café in al-Uzbakiyya neighborhood, decorated it and named it Nuzhat al-Nufus. It became a place where artists, intellectuals, and politicians, such as Sa'd Zaghlul and Husain Rushdi, gathered. Elites, aristocrats, and top businessmen would gather in Nuzhat al-Nufus daily. No café in Egypt enjoyed more fame and prestige at the time, to the point that even British officials attested to the distinctive status of Munira al-Mahdiyya's *sala*. *Sultanat al-tarab* (i.e. the queen of entertainment) had become the people's artist, enjoying equal status to the most popular musical artist, Sallama Hijazi. In response, Munira took people's love to heart while singing nationalistic songs, which stirred patriotic sentiments (al-Hafni, 1968). She was so active in this area that she became the subject of a popular slogan, *hawa' al-hurriyya fi masrah Munira al-Mahdiyya* (i.e. the love of freedom in the theater of Munira al-Mahdiyya) (Danielson, 1991). Munira was a pioneer in the twentieth-century Egyptian vocal genre, known as *taqtuqa*. She generated a regional popularity for herself through signing contracts with a "pan-Middle Eastern-North African enterprise", the Baidaphone Recording Company, which produced many records of hers in *taqtuqa* style (Racy, 1977, p. 112).

A beauty model, an attractive woman, and a fashionable celebrity on and off stage, Munira participated once in a pretty leg contest and won first prize.⁵ In another contest, the public chose Munira, among three contestants, in second place ahead of Umm Kulthum, when they were asked about the most beautiful voice, the best performer, and the most appealing entertainment concert to attend (Ruz al-Yusuf, 1926). Munira has been described as a keen businesswoman. She managed closely the financial affairs of her *sala* and troupe. She traveled to a number of countries, including Iran, and gave many public concerts overseas (Al-Hafni, 1968).

5. I would like to acknowledge Ms. Kristina Nelson at the Egyptian Center for Culture and Art (ECCA) for assisting me in contacting Mr. Mohamed Hassan Ashour, an independent collector of rare Egyptian early recordings, prints, books, original ads, and photos. He informed me about this contest and provided me with additional audio/visual primary source materials on Munira al-Mahdiyya, which I used during my presentation at several conferences.

Conclusion

The artistic, nationalist, and feminist performative acts of Qamar on stage and of Munira in musical theaters have contributed to the discursive and social emergence of the concept of the “New Woman” in Iran and Egypt. This concept prevailed throughout interwar societies, undergoing dramatic political and cultural changes, resulting from the introduction of photography, sound recording, advertisement, and the street culture with its theater halls, *salas*, and nightclubs. Qamar and Munira drew on these interactions to create identities for themselves as “New Women.” They both grew up in cultures where oral art, improvisation, and musical lyrics played significant roles in defining both music and performance. Both improvised in their nationalistic songs, and included their names in the lyrics. By doing so, they appealed to their own personas to bring music to the service of the people, to make it available to the public, and render it a source of inspiration for cultural, political, and social advancements.⁶ In displaying a visual presence of herself, Qamar operated within the paradigm of a private sphere, while giving it a public turn. She was an extremely private individual who sought the medium of music and the public domain of the stage as a vocal venue for expressing her creative and humanist self. Munira, on the other hand, longed for a public life and became the singing and performing star of commercial recording and musical theater in the region. Perhaps no narrative better reflects the different public appearances, and at the same time, the private persona of these two interwar celebrities, than the historical memory of the two nations, whereby Qamar awakened stage music with her humanist voice as *bulbul* Iran (i.e. the nightingale of Iran) while Munira enriched musical theater in Egypt with her spectacular performance as *sultanat al-tarab* (the queen of entertainment).

6. Despite the presence of gender biases in the field of music of the time, the popularity of both *bam* and *taqtuqa* and their association with low-brow genre of art reflect the significant role that Qamar and Munira had played in moving music from the private spaces of royal courts into the street and public stages accessible to common men and women.

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Umm Kulthum:

A Legend or a Story of Will!

Hind Soufi Assaf

This article is abridged from a study prepared by Hind Soufi Assaf and appeared in Arabic in the periodical by *Bahithat*: the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers and titled *Out of the Shadows: Investigating the Lives of Arab Women*, Volume XI: 2005-2006.

This article sheds light on the life of a unique female performer who managed to earn the respect of the whole Arab nation through her art, at a time when public performance by a female was still considered to be a taboo. It aims at introducing the reader to a unique phenomenon in the Arab world which has contributed to reforming the perception of women professionals in the fields of music and singing.

Umm Kulthum is one of the most important Arab female singers of her time. She was known as *Kawkab al-sharq* (i.e. the star of the East) as well as *Sitt* (i.e. lady) Umm Kulthum. She was considered the lady of all ladies. The title *Sitt* was granted to upper-class virtuous ladies. No female singer or artist other than Umm Kulthum was able to earn such a title, regardless of her status and the value of her art.

As for the choice of Umm Kulthum's name, according to Neemat Ahmad Fouad (2000), Umm Kulthum's father had once a vision after the *tajahhud* prayer (extra night prayers). In the vision he saw Umm Kulthum, daughter of the prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him), engulfed in light. She approached him and gave him a piece of jewelry, asking him to take care of it. Upon interpreting the vision, the father decided to call his daughter Umm Kulthum. The fortune (i.e., jewelry) descending from heaven was interpreted as a symbol of the daughter who was expected to be a carrier of blessings and hope. The interpretation seemed to be affirmed by her birth on *laylat al-*



Umm Kulthum with Aimée Kettaneh, organiser of the Baalbek festival. Lebanon. Photographer; anonymous. Collection Aimée Kettaneh ©Fondation Arabe pour l'image

qadr (i.e. the night of excellence). *Laylat al-qadr* is a special night during the month of Ramadan. Muslims believe the first verses of the *Qur'an* were revealed to the Islamic prophet Mohammad on that night.

Her Singing Career

Umm Kulthum's exact birth date remains unknown, though many researchers believe that she was probably born in 1902 (Sahhab, 2003). She grew up in a conservative milieu. Her father was a *muazzin* (i.e. announcer of the hours of prayer at the mosque), and a religious singer who had been preparing his son to succeed him. The father was amazed with the speed with which his daughter learned the *Qur'an*. Umm Kulthum used to recite the religious supplications without any help and without committing any mistakes. One evening, quite unexpectedly, her father invited her, when she was only five, to accompany him to a performance that was organized by the village mayor. Umm Kulthum's performance was a great success and ever since her father started taking her along with him to the singing sessions.

Umm Kulthum's parents played an important role in shaping her personality and in her future career. Her mother Fatima insisted on educating her daughter. She was adamant about sending her to school, despite her husband's hesitation (because of financial obstacles, and perhaps out of fear of people's gossip). Most Arab families, especially peasants, did not send their daughters to school at the beginning of the 20th century (Sayyah, 1985).

In another instance, at a time when women were neglected and did not enjoy the same attention and rights that men did, Fatima, Umm Kulthum's mother, sold her jewelry to treat an eye injury that had afflicted her daughter. Umm Kulthum's eye problem persisted throughout her life, which led to her continuous use of opaque eye-glasses (Sahhab, 2003). Fatima had such a positive influence on Umm Kulthum's life that the latter considered her mother the ally to whom she resorted during critical periods of her life.

Out of fear of going against the prevalent customs and traditions, and in order to avoid offending his entourage, Umm Kulthum's father sought to hide her feminine features when he took her with him to the singing gatherings. He disguised her in men's clothing and covered her hair with a traditional masculine head-piece. Justifying this practice, Umm

Kulthum's father used to repeat that she did not need to depend on her looks to sing. He considered the other famous female singers' mode of dressing shameful. He looked down on them. In his opinion, all what they were doing was trying to distract listeners away from their bad performance. This disguise continued until Umm Kulthum reached adulthood. With time it became evident that Umm Kulthum could no longer appear in rural masculine garb that hid her identity as a woman. It is said that Umm Kulthum once wrote a letter to her mother asking her to persuade her father to allow her to exchange the masculine clothes he made her wear at parties for feminine clothes instead.

Finally, Umm Kulthum took the decision to change her clothing style, in spite of her father's objection and anger. When performing in women's clothes for the first time, she wore a black head-piece because she was shy to appear uncovered in front of her father, brother, and the audience as well. On this evening, Umm Kulthum held a handkerchief in her hand to alleviate the level of tension resulting from her new feminine appearance (Sayyah, 1985). Since then, the handkerchief became a trademark of Umm Kulthum.

Because of the stigma attached to female performers, Umm Kulthum's father confined her repertoire, for many years, to religious songs. However, he approved of her teacher's recommendation that she sing worldly, non-religious songs after Sheikh Abul 'Ula Mohammad personally intervened. The Sheikh convinced her father that singing poetry would not compromise Umm Kulthum's status as a singer and the respectable image she had earned from singing religious songs (Sahhab, 2003, pp. 53-63-81).

Umm Kulthum always performed in the presence of her father and brother and she always behaved in a serious manner. Her moral integrity remained unquestionable throughout her singing career. She was also a devout Muslim. She used to read from the *Qur'an* before every performance and whenever she faced difficult times. She also used to pray and thank God at the end of every performance. Umm Kulthum used to thank God for granting her the gift

of voice and blessing her with the ability to make others happy (Sayyah, 1985). She used to criticize the behavior of female performers in nightclubs and criticized their taking pride in the private meetings they held with ministers in their homes. Umm Kulthum strove to distinguish herself from other performers such as Munira al-Mahdiyya whom she specifically looked down upon.

According to Sahhab (2003), Umm Kulthum did not provoke the jealousy of eminent women singers, because she sang without a music band and was dressed in men's clothes. He adds that it is possible that other women singers were neither threatened nor jealous at first. However, they started feeling threatened and started attacking her after Umm Kulthum shifted to worldly singing (Sahhab, 2003).

Umm Kulthum and her family were angered when pictures of her unexpectedly appeared in magazines (Sayyah, 1985). In one incident, a photographer managed to take a picture of Umm Kulthum while she was relaxing with her girlfriend in an isolated spot at the beach. Umm Kulthum managed to persuade him to return the camera film to her. She explained to him that she is a peasant and has her own values and that it was not proper for the photographer to invade her privacy while she was relaxing and not properly dressed. The photographer returned the film to her and apologized (Sayyah, 1985).

Umm Kulthum maintained a solid relationship with the Azhari Sheikh, Mustafa Abdul-Razik, who came to her defense several times, whenever her father decided that his daughter should quit her career and go back to singing religious songs. Certainly, the protection extended by an Azharite and a conservative rural man, a man of religion of Abdul Razik's stature, constituted a source of assurance to the father. This is why Umm Kulthum (and her father) chose to live near him. For similar reasons, Sheikh Abul 'Ula Mohamed, who was known for his ethical and conservative principles, was chosen to be the primary composer of Umm Kulthum's songs (Sahhab, 2003).

It was Sheikh Abul 'Ula's wish that Umm Kulthum succeed him in singing *dawr* (a specialized genre

of classical Arabic music) that was exclusively performed by male singers. Her being a woman did not seem to make a difference to him. What apparently mattered to Abu al-'Ula was the fact that she was the most suited performer for this genre of music. This support, coming from a prominent religious figure, constituted the first step in Umm Kulthum's transition from singing religious songs to worldly, romantic singing. It was a transition that she insisted on making in spite of her father's fear that it could be the beginning of her moral deterioration. Umm Kulthum's decision to defy customs and participate in Sheikh Abu al-'Ula's funeral (a traditionally segregated event), in spite of both her father's and brother's objection, should not come as a surprise. It was a decision that no woman, except the *sitt* Umm Kulthum, could dare to carry out.

Acting in movies constituted a short phase in Umm Kulthum's career. It was after her father's death that she acted in a limited number of movies (six movies in total). Umm Kulthum added a condition in her contracts that there will be "no kissing" on her part. In these movies she performed a series of songs that tackled the life of a historical figure or a rural woman. In the movie *Salamah*, in which she was the heroine, a *Qur'anic* recital by her was recorded. A unique event in the Arab world she was. No *Qur'anic* recital was ever recorded in a woman's voice before or after Umm Kulthum.

Search for Self and Female Rebellion

Umm Kulthum had a very strong personality and presence. Her professional journey and her singing career started off at an early age, when she performed in front of audiences from diverse backgrounds (from countryside to city). This reinforced early on her self-esteem and developed her singing abilities.

Umm Kulthum was very ambitious and had very high hopes. She learned several languages, especially French. She also learned to play the *oud* (i.e. an oriental string instrument similar to the guitar). Armed with knowledge, she became empowered to play an active role in shaping her career. As time passed, she gained professional

maturity. She started behaving confidently, giving her opinion to poets, and asking them to follow a style that is more readily accessible to people. She also chose the poems, changed words in them, and interfered in the writing and composition of her songs (Sahhab, 2003).

In a presentation she delivered at the academic conference on Arab music, which was held in Cairo in 1932, Umm Kulthum stated: "Reform is a necessity. This does not mean, however, that in order for us to assert our modernity, we should lose our spirit" (Sahhab, 2003, p. 111). She proposed the idea of a modified piano that would better fit the oriental demands and also the idea of a modified *qanoun* (i.e. an oriental musical string instrument). During the conference, Umm Kulthum appeared provoked by what she perceived as the organizers' underestimating of her role as a musician. In order to affirm her status as a musician, she, for the first time, played the *oud* and the piano while singing.

Umm Kulthum played an active role in advocating for women's right. In her tours in Egypt and the neighboring countries, Umm Kulthum frequently asserted women's right to vote, criticized female circumcision, and called for raising the marriage age. She insisted on running for the presidency of the Artists' Syndicate. She eventually won, becoming the first woman to ever head the Syndicate.

Umm Kulthum often spoke of her appreciation and respect for women's contributions: "I always empathize with women for the courage that they demonstrate on all occasions" (Sayyah, 1985, p. 143). In one of her keynote speeches in Tunisia, she said: "My sisters, uncover your heads, we are the productive force in society. We can keep our heads up and without a cover" (Sayyah, 1985, p. 165). Describing the extent to which Umm Kulthum influenced these women, Sayyah (1985) wrote: "the women took off the veil ..." (Sayyah, 1985, p. 165).

Nationalist par Excellence

Umm Kulthum's songs stirred the emotions of Arab audiences. According to Sahhab (2003), the songs produced during the royal era were dedicated to

the country and not to the ruling elite. This is why the Arab audiences identified with those songs that moved beyond the narrow geographical boundaries of Egypt and expressed national sentiment shared among Arab populations.

Umm Kulthum was known to be sympathetic to people's suffering. Even though she sang for King Fu'ad of Egypt, "Shall I be loyal to him whether he was loyal or not (...) I can do nothing", and despite the fact that she honored Crown prince Farouk by singing "the kingdom is in your hands", "she sang for Farouk while dreaming of liberation" (Sahhab, 2003, p. 21).

King Farouk honored Umm Kulthum with the royal medal, "the Nile Star." She was the first woman to receive such a medal in the modern history of Egypt. According to Sahhab (2003), "despite the limited number of songs she sang for King Farouk, she earned the title of 'the Infallible', a title that was granted to women of high family rank" (pp. 89-105). Yet, when the King's uncle fell in love with Umm Kulthum, the royal family rejected the prospect of him marrying her given that she did not belong to the aristocracy. This was painful and offensive to Umm Kulthum who believed that she had attained an elevated status through her profession and high art.

Umm Kulthum believed that the audience of the revolution was her real audience. Hence, when a decision was taken by the revolutionary leadership to prohibit the songs of Umm Kulthum from being broadcasted given that she had sang for the monarchy, President Abdel Nasser rose to her defense. When he was told, "She sang during the monarchy", his historic response was: "The sun, the Nile, and the pyramids existed during the Monarchy, should we eliminate them because of that?" (cited in Soufii-Assaf, 2005, p. 131).

Umm Kulthum was a nationalist par excellence. She is the first woman artist in the Arab world who managed to give citizenship a real meaning. According to Sahhab, Umm Kulthum's interest in public issues began early on in her life, long before the 1967 revolution led by Abdel Nasser.

After Abdel Nasser's revolution, Umm Kulthum's national awareness matured. She supported the revolution and the Nasser program which ran in her veins. The intimate connection between her songs and the ongoing developments at the level of the Arab nation began ever since her relationship with Saad Zaghloul started. He was the founder of Egypt's most important political party, the *Wafd* Party. Zaghloul led the nationalist forces in Egypt that called for independence and advocated for reform. Umm Kulthum sang for him "Saad did not die", seeing in him, along with the rest of the Egyptians, a symbol of salvation. Using her songs, she also appealed to the president not to resign from his post following the 1967 defeat in the Arab-Israeli war.

Umm Kulthum sang for Abdul Nasser, for the revolution, and for the Arab identity. She was "the Voice of the Arabs": "I will not become a mother, my life journey has become about working for the sake of my country, and my friends will help me continue the journey". Umm Kulthum believed that working for the sake of the Arab cause was a calling in and of itself, and described herself as a singer who loves her country (Sayyah, 1985, pp. 141-144-164-168).

Umm Kulthum also supported the military. During the 1976 war, she extended an invitation to the soldiers upon their return from war to honor them. She had heard that her voice united them in times of difficulty. She founded "the Union of Women" for the support of the soldiers and played an active role in re-building her country thanks to her generous monetary contributions. She was the first Egyptian woman to donate her jewelry to the military and to the martyrs' families, which led others to follow in her footsteps.

She participated in international and Arab tours in support of her country, becoming the first woman artist to represent Egypt and to give performances in support of her country. Her trip to Paris constituted a significant event that was discussed by international critics who were awed by her presence and remarkable ability to affect people, leaving them almost in a state of intoxication.

The Kulthumic School

Umm Kulthum was not only an excellent performer. She was also an innovator who developed the notion of improvisation when singing during live performances. She won at a relatively late stage in her career "the Award of Musical Creativity". She is responsible for three fourths of the developments that Arab music had undergone during the twentieth century. Sahhab (2003) states: "Everyone who composed melodies for Umm Kulthum got kulthoumized" (cited in Soufi-Assaf, 2005, p. 140). The Lady (i.e. *sitt*) was responsible for introducing the extended live radio broadcasts on the first Thursday of every month. It is true that despite the fact that Egypt had given birth to male voices that mastered the art of improvisation, Umm Kulthum had reached the highest and most refined peak in this art. She had a vocal quality that carried some of the qualities of the masculine voice. She also demonstrated such mastery over her voice to the extent of performing musical phrases that were considered miraculous. She could sing phrases that could hardly be played by musical instruments. She also tolerated immense pressure during performances which lasted four hours, even when she was at an advanced age. That was exceptional.

According to Sahhab (2003), "It is certain that exceptional singing through the lower levels of her voice occurred at the expense of her voice's feminine nature" (cited in Soufi-Assaf, 2005, p. 135). Sahhab wonders: "We do not know whether mistaking her voice for that of a man was purely physiological, or whether disguising her feminine appearance in masculine clothes during the first two decades of her life (in a conservative society which considers girls' singing a source of shame) had left a psychological impact that affected her larynx" (cited in Soufi-Assaf, 2005, p. 137.) There is no doubt, though, that the combination of feminine and masculine characteristics in a voice with exceptional zones was one of the reasons that distinguished her voice from the rest.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the group of people which contributed to Umm Kulthum's success was ahead of its time. The male entourage surrounding her

included Azharite Sheikhs, singers, musicians, modern and traditional composers, as well as poets who set for themselves the goal of guiding the Lady. They helped refine Umm Kulthum's professional identity and were also instrumental in shaping her personality and her career (Sahhab, 2003). Umm Kulthum, for her part, did not let them down. She was receptive to their comments and support, and committed to their shared societal values. Had it not been for this harmony between the two parties, the "phenomenon of Umm Kulthum" would probably not have seen the light and the general perception of women singers would have continued to be influenced by earlier prejudices - biases from which Umm Kulthum herself was not initially exempt.

It was the first time in the history of the Arab nation, that men in the field of music collaborated towards creating an example of a female artist who

does not promote consumerism. They managed to create a new example of female star. The example seemed to be the product of a sub-culture that was both culturally conservative and open to change and creativity, a sub-culture that sprang out of religious singing, keeping a distance from *taqatiq* (i.e. pop) nightclub singing.

Even though male figures were behind very many decisions taken on her behalf, this does not negate the fact that Umm Kulthum was personally determined to prove to herself and to her competitors that she was indeed "the Lady of Singing" in Cairo. She managed to do so thanks to her unique talent and intuition, qualities which were seldom found together in a single personality.

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Tomorrow You Will See How Beautiful Our Home Is

Hanan Kassab-Hassan

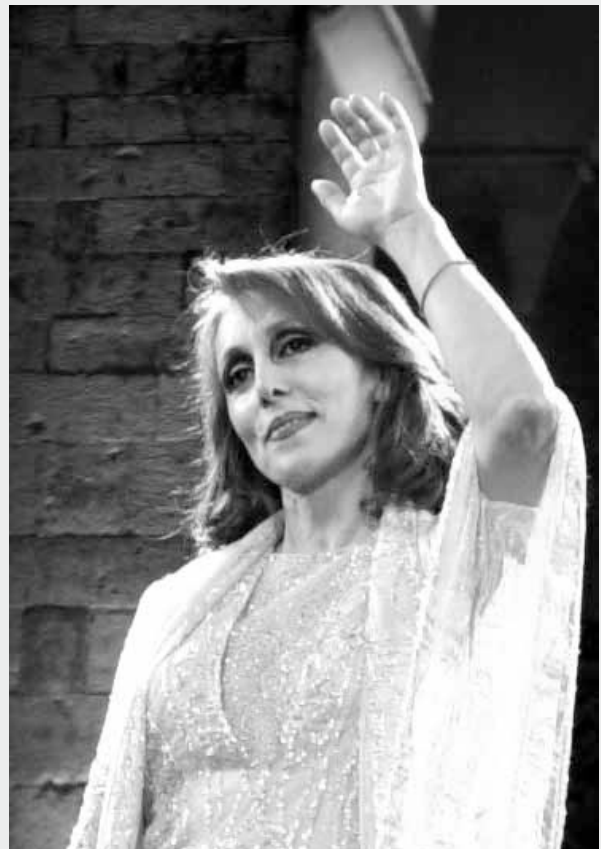
I fear, when I talk about Fairouz, that I might slip into a nostalgic mode, or slip unwittingly into that translucent spot where childhood images mesh with the scents and sounds of cities, and that I might begin my discourse about Fairouz and end up by confounding Beirut with Damascus.

Has Fairouz not always brought us together? Her voice is an inseparable part of the city, particularly when Damascus would wait the whole year for September, and when Beirut was only a by-way to Antelias, as if the traveler had only one destination, namely, her residence overlooking Rabieh. "You'll see tomorrow, you'll see how beautiful our home is ..." I always had a child-like conviction that she was singing that song only for us every time we used to journey to the Rahbani residence. For when we arrive there, it indeed was beautiful, and Fairouz used to greet us on the terrace with coffee cups in her hands.

Fairouz sings about a little house in Canada nowadays. Did she favor snow over sunshine? Did she decide to travel? This song has stirred much controversy and has made headline news. The world would collapse if Fairouz were to leave for Canada!

Fairouz is not Canada-bound, simply because the said ditty is a translation of "Ma Cabane au Canada", but when it is delivered by Fairouz, it becomes her mouthpiece, regardless of the imagined personality conjured up by the lyrics.

It often happens that the listener forgets the lyricist and listens to the lyrics as if they were the singer's, so the lyricist and the singer are confounded, save in rare cases when the author of the lyrics is a man



Fairouz in one of her concerts. Picture Credit: Marwan Assaf

and the singer a woman, as is the case with *Samra yam 'uyn was'ah* (i.e. the dark wide-eyed woman) and *Katabtu ilayki min atabee hikayat 'asheqin ta'b* (i.e. I wrote you out of blame, tales of a forlorn lover). This factor, among others, transforms the song into the mantra that lovers fully embrace and through whose lyrics they communicate, even identify, in such a way that potentiality becomes actuality, to use Aristotle's principles.

The lyricist lends the singer his voice through a set of rules reminiscent of what happens in theater where the “I” of the playwright is diffused within the multiple ‘Is’ of the imagined characters incarnated by actors who use a borrowed, non-existent “I”. Hence, the impact of words changes when they become imagined. That is, the words of the actor/character become devoid of meaning or impact outside the context in which they were uttered.

According to John Austin’s principle of performative utterances, sentences can become speech acts in certain situations and action verbs, such as “say”, “listen”, and “sing”, become actualized as soon as they are uttered. In all three cases, the sentence is not being used to describe or state what one is “doing”, but is being used to actually “do” it.

When Fairouz sings for the city of Jerusalem with complete humility, in prayer-like fashion, the verse, “For you, O City of Prayers, I pray”, she is actually praying. Whomever else might sing this phrase with the same inflection would be in a praying mode one way or the other, thereby achieving a state of complete fusion of the author and the mouthpiece, of the word and the action, particularly when the rest of the hymn makes a transformation from the “I point of view” in “I pray” to the “we point of view” as in “Our eyes journey to you every day”, chanted by the choir.

This is a rare occurrence in song writing, for songs usually depict an imaginary situation. Thus, “Earth shattering wrath is imminent” does not literally mean that a war had been waged.

When Fairouz croons, “I tell my daughter”, the verb matches its resulting action, hence creating perfect congruence between the “I” of the singer and that of the performer at that defined moment when the lyrics are being uttered. Since we cannot isolate the word from the context of its occurrence, we see that the rest of the verse removes the action from its context, throwing it in another time frame altogether, namely the cold night: “I tell my daughter if the night is cold”, thus the verb put in the present tense imbues the action with a

contemporaneousness that minimizes the effect of fusion (between the singer and the performer), and conjures up the image of a generic mother, not necessarily Fairouz. The same pattern governs the rest of the song, including the stanza, “I tell my neighbor ... let’s sing since you’re lonesome; singing could make your waiting feel shorter”.

The fusion exists not only in action verbs, but also between the “I” of the speaker and that of the imaginary character portrayed in the song. The lyrics written by the Rahbani brothers reflect, through Fairouz’s voice, the personality of the woman in love in a way that is different from that reflected in the lyrics prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s when songs only spoke of love, longing, and separation.

Fairouz’ songs have ushered in a new personality into the world of love, that of the young, innocent woman who opens her eyes to newfound emotions and who is clueless as to what is happening to her: “Oh mother, I don’t know what’s wrong with me”; “Mother, I don’t know how he approached me”; “I love you but I’m not sure ... they told me”.

At the time, Fairouz was coming of age herself, demure and reserved, trying to carve her niche in the world of singing, and probably in the ways of love (during this epoch, she had a liaison with Assi Rahbani which subsequently led to marriage). The songs of that era were most likely inspired by Fairouz’s persona. If they stood out during those early beginnings, it is because of the uniqueness of their interpretation.

But what kind of passion do these songs describe? The lyrics in Fairouz’s repertoire elevated love to an unadulterated and transparent state, in a way unparalleled in the history of the Arabic song. Both the music and the musical arrangements, embellished by Western accents, made Fairouz’s vocal interpretations unique and set her apart from what was commonplace. Both have contributed to making her voice ethereal and transparent, and to branding its owner as an exceptional singer. The media further reinforced this image by bestowing on her such titles as “The Ambassador of Lebanon to the Stars” and “The Woman with the Angelic

Voice". These titles, although flattering, have robbed Fairouz of her depth as a real human being, and while these songs lifted her to the heavens, they deprived her at some level of her image as a mortal. Fairouz herself (with a little help) has contributed to the spread of this image when she weaved around herself the web of the enigmatic "Diva", impenetrable, and inaccessible to all but a select few. However, those who knew the real Fairouz then and know her now recognize her strong personality, her commanding presence, and her flair for repartee. This latter image is more in tandem with the image her son Ziad had subsequently carved up for her.

The Egyptian songs of that period went to great lengths to describe the state of sensual love, and would not shy away from portraying lovers who drown in "the hell of kisses". These influences were all too present in Fairouz's earlier and oft-forgotten songs:

The words of lovers; whispers from heart
to heart and nostalgia; closer and closer
Teardrops, drowning the eyes,
disappear in kisses, when eye lids move
Tremors of lips, and convulsions of foreheads;
the ultimate secret of life. The words of lovers.

ولا كلمات العاشقين همسات من قلوب
لقلوبٍ وحنين. من قريبٍ لقريب

قطراتٌ في المقل. غرقت فيها العيون
تتلاشى في القبل. عند خريك الجفون

رعشاتٌ من شفاة. واختلاجٌ من جبين
سرُّ أسرار الحياة. كلمات العاشقين

In later songs, they [the lovers] approach love with diffidence, through prudish images that hardly exceed touching hands and exchanging looks, and in rare instances, embracing. The carnal desire would surface then vanish just as summarily, sometimes fronted as a fib, as in, "they said he held me twice tightly... look what a lie! ... Once! granted... but twice?" or, as in a song that slips the pangs of passion into childhood innocence, "The house went round and round ... and we are mere children", or when another says, "We're having a tête-à-tête,

united in love; together on the chair, insane". Here again end both the frenzy of passion and desire for unification, "Come close so we can chat a little".

The majority of the Rahbani songs written for Fairouz have focused on a type of love devoid of gender, and on a lover whose identity was unknown: "The Handsome One". "The Handsome One hasn't shown up in a long time"; "The Handsome One passed by and greeted us"; "O Handsome One, how could you be mad at us?"; "The Handsome One would not talk to us anymore"; "The wind knocked on the door, we thought it was our loved one ... the Handsome One long gone is back to reproach us for not keeping in touch"... All of these lyrics have contributed to keeping Fairouz - and the protagonist whose role she plays - away from any potential association with her personal life; in her songs, she incarnated love in the absolute. Thus, the object of affection, regardless of sex, age, or social class, was blessed in this liaison, putting forth an image of unspoiled love, and contributing to sketching a state of love that is both absolute and encompassing.

This volitional window dressing of reality against a backdrop of idealism and romanticism becomes all too noticeable when we compare the Rahbani songs with the ones written by the Lebanese poet and writer Joseph Harb. During this period, the image of the protagonist was transformed into that of a woman who is more mature, and closer to reality; she spends the night with the loved one, parting ways with him at daybreak: "When we say goodbye at the door, daylight is barely coming out". In the song "On a night and in the rain", passion is described in more sensual terms, notwithstanding the fact that congruence is improbable since the description is given by a third party: "Two lovers sitting down ... consumed by one another ... having a talk by candlelight ... their eyes fixated on each other ... their hands cold, and their lips paramours staying up together". At the end of the song: "Between their kisses by candlelight and their moans, every time they remember the door, a teardrop rolls down from both their eyes".

Then Ziad, her son, composer and lyricist, comes in. Surprising is the image he has presented of the

woman in the songs Fairouz has interpreted, and far is the distance that separates the woman who used to plead: "I'm coming back to stand by his door in prostration, showing penance for my absence and asking for his forgiveness" from the one who taunts, "You stop by or you don't ... I don't give a damn".

Ziad has dismantled the translucent image that his father Assi and his uncle Mansour, both composers and lyricists, had painted for the woman incarnated by Fairouz. He replaced her with a real and realistic one, firmly grounded in time and place, and closer to the woman of our times. Ziad's work in this respect is an evolution in the concept of the song, the relationship between man and woman, and the female image. For the woman doesn't merely fall in love and wait, but she also argues, derides, acts up, and asks questions forcefully: "How are you? What a character you are!" She also possesses enough courage to analyze her emotions and justify them by using arguments not related to passion and love: "My acquaintance with you came out of sadness; my acquaintance with you was not normal; it was the result of boredom; your love for me started more like pity; I wanted tenderness, and didn't care much, got stuck in this circle, and needed a human being".

The man in Ziad's songs is no longer the infatuated lover who is greeted by the moon at his doorstep. He has become a real and loathsome person: "Do you remember what you last told me? If you want, you can stay or you can go. I got upset then and didn't think it through much. That it's you ... this is you".

This new balance has brought relationships closer to our times, and closer to reality, with a zest of wit which emanates from the day-to-day bickering, as in this song:

You talk over me; I talk over you; who would benefit?²² Trust me, day after day, your talking keeps going up; you tell me I keep rehashing the same old stuff when in fact you are the one actually doing it; you're always sure of everything yet nothing seems sure; you predict a bright future for us... where do you see the brightness? You've got 10 birds on the tree and none in the hand".

Or when the lyrics transport us to such realism we can almost see it: "Quit blowing smoke in my face, even if you smoke 'light'."

This is not to mention the many references to characters or moods culled from old Rahbani favorites, such as "O guardians of snow, O guardians of cold and rain and wind" which spring up in: "O you who await the snow you don't want to go back", among others. Even the world depicted by Ziad's songs seems more real, worn out, weighed down by life's tribulations, such as traveling to Kuwait and Sharjah (in search of work), where the crampedness of houses which stopped being "a forgotten room in the night"; one "that withers at the edge of dark and wind", or "a house befriended by rivers". It is now a tiny and dark apartment: "Wider was this parlor; more welcoming this balcony" in a building with many floors and an iron gate: "I wish your house wasn't far; and the front door not made of iron; I would've joined you in a moment and come up to talk to you my love so I could fall asleep".

Instead for the poetic image about voyage, the ambiguous identity of travel companions and the wait at the crossroads in "They made us wait at Darina's stop; we didn't know their name; they didn't know ours; a small car; night and jealousy, and lovers in pairs going no one knows where", we find in Ziad's lyrics the realistic image of the bus and its passengers who can be seen in other means of public transportation. "One is eating lettuce; another eating figs; there's this character with his wife; he hyperventilates and his wife gets dizzy".

The Rahbani brothers have fashioned a world wherein beauty and purity had reached unrealistic proportions, and led the biographic "I" of Fairouz to a state of complete oblivion in order to allow her to exist in the song as an imagined character, and to endure in people's consciousness as a heavenly presence that is totally ethereal.

By contrast, Ziad has crossed the "t's" and dotted the "i's" and separated the personalities of the imagined woman who is the protagonist of the songs from Fairouz, the singer, when he restrained

the illusory gimmicks and proclaimed the song as a realistic peg through its lyrics and the process of its recording, by emphasizing the dialogue between the singer and the backup vocalists, just as in the song, "Send my regards to him": "I'm singing the refrain, and when I do, sing back; it is the same old refrain, if you can ad lib to it; then repeat the verse, send my regards to him, do".

If the Rahbani Brothers have followed in the footsteps of those who have inspired the works of fictional theater, Ziad, by contrast, has succeeded in obliterating the artifice and in insisting on the instruments of theater and the ways to achieve them, and in driving the audience into a state of denial. He freed the participant from the world of illusion and made him/her see in the imagined work of art not an alternate idealized image of the world, but a realistic rendering of the human transactions negotiated in the world around him/her. He invoked his critical sense, in much the same way Brecht introduced his theory of alienation in the epic theater.

Ziad has brought about change as early as his first song for Fairouz at the time of her husband Assi's ailment: "People are asking me about you, my beloved". In this song, through merging the lyrics with the actual temporal context in which it was conceived (i.e. Assi's death), a collusion occurred between the protagonist's "I" and the singer's "I" in singing, so we started thinking of her as a real woman, not just the voice of an imagined character: "It hurts me to sing, my love; for the first time we're not together". Ziad's second song, "I have to bid you farewell", marked the dawning of a new era in the history of the Arabic song. Just as in modern story-writing the act of writing becomes the theme of the story, and in the theater, the actor's occupation becomes the theme of the play, Ziad's songs reflect critically and innovatively on the nature of songs

as an art form. He takes a critical stab at the nature of the song which he describes as "words on paper"; the nature of the singer's life ("Every night I sing in a different city, take my voice and tour constantly; not a single song was of benefit and not a word; it's something sad"); the relationship between interpretation on stage and the living reality of the singer ("Everything I say is heartfelt and real"), the difference between interpretation and reality ("If we did not cry or shed tears, it doesn't mean we're happy"); and the relationship between the singer and her audience ("Now I have to bid you farewell and tell you about myself; at the end of the day if it hadn't been for you I wouldn't sing"). He even goes as far as announcing the end of the Rahbani traditional song: "Musicians played and signed off, and the audience became scarce." This song is ominous, anticipating the end of it all, namely, the musicians' disbandment, the audience's departure, then the separation. It had the makings of a swan song.

As for Fairouz, Ziad has succeeded in dissociating the different roles she plays. He presented her as Assi's wife in "People are asking about you", as a singer in "Now I have to bid you farewell", as a mere performer in "My comrade Sobhi al-Jeez", and as a woman in all the songs that speak of romance between a couple. He even drove the song to the ultimate level of minimalism when he cast away all lyrics and bestowed on it an ambiguous title: "...and wheat", leading Fairouz in the process to the ultimate state of perfection, morphing her into the best in her. He turned her into a voice.

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ENDNOTES

* This paper was presented at the three-day forum (April 27-30, 2006) entitled "Something Is Happening": Fairuz and Ziad al-Rahbani hosted by the Anis Makdisi Program in Literature, at the American University of Beirut (AUB) on the rich and diverse music of famous Lebanese singer Fairuz and her son, composer Ziad.

1. Most of the quotations are phrases, lyrics, or titles from Fairouz's songs.

2. This is the literal translation of a Lebanese idiom.

Sunset Boulevard By Way of Wadi Shahrour:

A Psychological Profile of Our National Norma Desmond

Ahmad Oueini

In biology, senescence is the state or process of aging, the inevitable stage that marks our later life, and that is invariably accompanied by deterioration in certain areas of functioning.

Although aging is common to all mortals, there is a morbid fascination with how it affects celebrities, particularly women who have made a career out of looking beautiful, set many fashion trends, and left indelible marks on the arts and in the field of entertainment.

To dispel the myth that aging is all about deterioration and loss, scientists have coined new terms, such as “successful aging” or “healthy aging”, to refer to those elderly persons who experience a low probability of disease or disability, a high cognitive and physical function capacity, and who are actively engaged with life (Strawbridge, Wallhagen, & Cohen, 2002).

Any reference to an aging entertainment star inevitably brings to mind our national self-proclaimed “legend”, Sabah (born in Wadi Shahrour, Lebanon). But is she really undergoing successful aging?

Recently, on a rerun of Layla Roustom’s, *Noujoum ala al-ard* (i.e. earthbound stars), the classy talk show of circa 1968, richly redolent of the past, yet so contemporaneous, Sabah graced the black and white TV screen with her presence. Interviewed in her own luxury apartment, she was grilled by the skilled hostess for over two hours about her life and career. The show was interspersed with the



A recent picture of Sabah

latest hits lip-synched against a variety of quaint but never cheesy studio backdrops. Sabah was at the top of her game. Resplendent in a feathered 1960s evening overall, considered avant-garde even by that decade’s standards, she sang impeccably. As a speaker, she was poised, sensible, witty,

and charming, even when answering the sacrosanct inquiries about her ageless beauty, extravagant wardrobe, and prodigal daughter, then still under wraps waiting for her big-bang coming of age.

Cut to the present. Sabah guest-starring on a number of lesser variety shows: frail, disoriented, and unseemly. Her exaggerated make-up, elaborate coiffe, shimmering gown, and glistening jewelry cannot hope to camouflage the havoc time has wreaked on her physique. After this visual assault, she proceeds to wage another war, this time, on our aural receptors. With a little 'support' (in more ways than one) to get to the mic (off scene to save face), she stands there like a deer caught in the headlight, and starts warbling with an unsure voice her old favorites with such a strain as if gasping for air, hitting every other note embarrassingly off-key, and consistently losing the tempo, all before a confused audience that does not know whether to cheer, laugh, applaud, gawk, or snicker. Then she struts back to the safety of her seat where an awe-struck host kicks off the interview. With a raspy and strong voice, our star chirpily answers various questions. Her discourse runs the gamut. Some revelations are sagacious, thought-provoking, and insightful, imbued with Sabah's trademark wisdom, and philosophy. Others are giddy to the point of absurdity, while alarmingly nonsensical, or uproariously funny.

However she presents herself, Sabah leaves no one indifferent. People still watch her for the shock value if not for the pleasure or entertainment they derive from doing so.

I am a psychology professor and a personal fan of Sabah's matchless, rock-chiseled instrument and vast repertoire of debonair pop songs that never pretend to be more than blithely optimistic ditties



Lebanese singer and actress, Sabah. Lebanon/Beirut, 1960-1969. Photographer; Georges Abdeni. Collection Jorge Abud Chami ©Fondation Arabe pour l'image

that brighten our day and bring a little smile to our dreary existence. My fascination with and intrigue by Sabah's persona have led me to ponder Sabah's metamorphosis from Lebanon's most venerated pop singer for nearly 40 years (from the mid 1940s to the early 1980s), to the most parodied, the most ridiculed, and the most ridiculous entertainment diva of the Arab World.

The question on my mind, and probably on others' as well, is: "Whatever happened to the good old Sabah we grew up watching and admiring?"

How could she allow herself to slip into this state of ludicrous effeteness?

We should probably blame her for a number of questionable personal and professional choices that have accelerated her downfall and resulted in bad karma.

Or maybe we should blame ourselves, her volatile and less than faithful admirers, fast to replace her with more youthful copycats and to let her down when she most needs our support. Or perhaps we should point our fingers to the music industry,

notorious for disposing of singers based on the volatile laws of supply and demand, and single-handedly responsible for the prevalent culture of bad taste and substandard music. Or we should simply reckon that Sabah's plight is the expected price of fame every major star has to pay for being in the limelight for too long.

Then again, if all of the above were true, how come that divas of the past such as Umm Kulthum or contemporary icons, like Fairouz, have never had to endure Sabah's plight, but instead have commanded respect of mythical proportions? How did they manage to shield themselves from the vicissitudes of time and musical styles and remain unshakably adulated and venerated in our collective conscience?

Norma Desmond is probably Sabah's American alter ego. Their stories bear an eerie resemblance (save the killing impulse). For those of you who never saw Billy Wilder's classic, *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond (a role immortalized by Gloria Swanson), a grandiose and past-her-prime movie star from the silent era living reclusively in a decrepit Hollywood mansion, still believes in her own indestructibility, and deludes herself of a great comeback. Her butler-husband feeds her illusion by protecting her from the harsh reality of the outside world. Norma eventually becomes involved with a small-time writer whom she draws into her web and "keeps" in her mansion to write her a script for the movie she hopes will get her out of forced retirement. Insanely jealous and possessive, she murders him, whereupon she becomes completely demented. Lured downstairs by the police and convinced that she is shooting a scene from her comeback movie, she signals to her fictitious director what became an instant classical movie line: "I'm ready for my close-up now, Mr. DeMille".

One of the most pervasive myths about aging is that, in old age, persons lose their memory, their intellectual capacity, and their ability to think and reason-- or to use the vernacular, they become "senile" (Westen, 1996). In reality, only about 5 percent of the population suffer progressive and irreversible dementia, a disorder marked by global



Sabah and Ahmad Oueini in Sabah's residence. Courtesy of Ahmad Oueini

disturbance of higher mental functions, such as some form of memory loss.

As her interviews prove, Sabah's memory is infallible. She can hardly be suffering from senility. Even physically, she remained healthy, dynamic, and well-preserved until recently.

More likely, Sabah is afflicted with the Norma Desmond syndrome, namely, denial.

Denial is a defense mechanism, a completely unconscious behavior in which a person is faced with a fact that is too painful to accept and rejects it instead, insisting that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence. The subject may deny the reality of the unpleasant fact altogether (simple denial), admit the fact but

deny its seriousness (minimisation), or admit both the fact and seriousness but deny responsibility (transference) (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2003).

Denial may have a salutary effect on one's life when it helps the person move forward despite negative life events. This is called adaptive denial, which facilitates self-growth, such as going on with one's life despite an illness or a disability, and helps challenge formidable gender, race, or socio-economic barriers to earn a degree, land a prestigious job, find a significant other, or win an election.

In my psychology classes at the Lebanese American University (LAU), I always refer to Sabah to illustrate the opposite of adaptive denial – namely, maladaptive denial, one that is counterproductive to one's life, that undermines one's well-being, and that causes irreparable damage to one's reputation.

Sabah reigned supreme for several decades in the Arab World. She built a prolific repertoire of Lebanese and Egyptian accented pop songs, and a very successful movie career which established her as a solid box office name, rivaling native Egyptian actresses, and succeeding where all other equally eligible Lebanese exports had failed (think of Nour El Hoda, Najah Slam, Souad Mohamad, and Hyam Younes). She kept a busy recording, performing, and shooting schedule between Beirut and Cairo. Along with Fairouz, she was the toast of Baalbeck and national festivals, touring the world to packed auditoriums and sold-out performances. She was assured a permanent place in the Hall of Fame of Arabic female divas, in such auspicious company as Fairouz, Asmahan, Umm Kulthum, and Layla Mrad's. In the late 1960s, she reinvented herself as a paragon of elegance and became a trendsetter, managing to seduce her fans with her sex appeal, lavish gowns, and alluring beauty.

Sabah's good fortune seemed unshakable. However, her extravagant lifestyle had planted the seeds of her eventual downfall, and a confluence of unique factors, circumstances, personal, and professional decisions triggered her demise in earnest. On the one hand, her preoccupation with beauty,

youthfulness and elegance, accentuated by a daring wardrobe, unbecoming stage and movie roles (where she played anachronistically younger women), and seductive lyrics constantly referencing her irresistibility, have helped create the myth that Sabah is ageless, which led the media to obsess about her real age and unjustifiably inflate it. Ever since I was a child, people used to speculate that Sabah must be in her 1960s or 1970s, but owed her youthful appearance to extreme make-up and countless plastic surgeries.

On the other hand, in an ongoing quest for love resulting from an emotional void that has its roots in a miserable childhood, marred by physical abuse and limited means, Sabah found herself tying the knot one time too many, a fact which has largely undermined her respectability. Although a close inspection of the men she was involved with shows that she was mostly victimized, the Arab culture frowns upon women who marry repeatedly, and equates multiple marriages with loose morals. Her daughter's endless stream of faux-pas and reckless behavior produced unwanted negative publicity, made Sabah a regular tabloid headliner, and further eroded her reputation.

Finally, to sustain her unrestrained lifestyle and formidable financial obligations towards her family, Sabah mercilessly abused her voice, accepting endless engagements in second-rate night clubs around the world, especially after the Lebanese war had crippled the entertainment industry and left most performers out of work. By 1982, she found herself with a severe vocal impediment (hoarseness and breathiness) which proved irreversible this time, at the relatively young age of 55. Although the vigor of her voice remained intact, her fans found it hard to accept the new and unimproved version of Sabah, coming back to reclaim her place in the Lebanese musical comedy in a misguided role of a twenty-something woman looking for her father in "Wadi Shamseen". This role ominously signaled the end of her career and was her swan song. Although she managed to stay afloat for at least another two decades, this was mostly due to capitalizing on her erstwhile popularity, larger-than-life persona and good will, rather than consequential artistic output.

This decade is marked by a jaw-dropping marriage of convenience (with a young dancer several decades her junior), grotesque movie roles, eminently forgettable songs, eerily flashy gowns, unbecoming hair-dos, and uninspired musical plays which ended up bombing at the box office. I had the opportunity to watch her in the lackluster, "*al-Ustura - The Sequel*" back in 1997. I felt so embarrassed for her when I found myself in an audience of no more than 10 people. By that time, the mere mention of Sabah's name elicited more laughter than respect, more pity than admiration. She had become a caricature of herself, yet continued to delude herself by singing live (gauchely), discussing plans to star in upcoming Baalbeck festivals, and to release new CDs, completely oblivious to her obsolescence. In short, she heavily engaged in maladaptive denial, convincing herself that her art and appearance are still coveted assets.

How come Fairouz and Umm Kulthum never had to endure Sabah's falling out of grace? The answer is at best speculative.

They never played the "youthfulness" or "elegance" game, and never cultivated the myth of the femme fatale. They were detached yet effective mouthpieces to their lyricists, and unlike Sabah, never incarnated the subjects they were singing, and never accentuated their songs with seductive melismas or salacious come-ons, bound to be dismissed as sheer camp.

They were hence allowed to age gracefully, and their voice's weariness, an inevitable by-product of aging, was readily accepted, embraced, even celebrated.

Further, both divas have led virtually uneventful personal lives that presented little juicy material for the sensation-hungry media. Although Umm Kulthum's career coincided with critical milestones of Egypt's history, her notoriety and ubiquitous presence in magazines was mainly attributed to her incomparable voice, powerhouse personality, militancy against the Israeli occupation and endorsement of Nasser's pan-Arabism. Despite their unfulfilling marriages, Fairouz and Umm Kulthum

never took miscalculated chances and never caused scandals or stirred controversy, thereby preserving their dignity and maintaining their credibility both as performers and women.

Artistically, Fairouz got a lot of help from her Pygmalion Assi Rahbani (with his brother Mansour in tow) who carefully groomed her, crafted her triumphant career, cultivated her mystic public persona, and virtually made all the professional decisions for her. Meanwhile, Sabah, with only her instincts to fall back on to build her career, never erred on the side of caution. While she managed to pull it off with more hits than misses (at least initially), the little guidance she received got her stuck in a conforming and predictable repertoire of reasonably popular working class ditties which either celebrate the glory of marriage to a pauper *Al-Bassata* (i.e. array for the simple life!), or dwell on the heartbreak of deception by flaky city-boys *Allah Yu'suf 'Umr il hob* (i.e. cursed be love!), or narrate her flirts with the apple vendor *Mare' Biya' il tuffah* (i.e. the apple vendor is passing by) or the building custodian *Ya natur il binayeh* (i.e. hey building custodian). Luckily, her teaming up with some big names in the business yielded more versatile and respectable songs and musical plays. Her occasional forays into the Rahbani or Abdel Wahab territory resulted in gems like *An Nada* (i.e. my love interest), *Jeeb il Mejwez* (i.e. get the *mejwez* - an instrument used in Lebanese villages which consists of a dual flute), *Adday'a* (i.e. take me back to the village), and *Sana Helwa* (i.e. the Arabic version of "Happy Birthday to you" with added stanzas). Romeo Lahoud, her mentor during the early 1970s, takes a lot of credit for propelling her to the height of elegance and class, adorning her repertoire with innovative songs like *Akhadu il rih* (i.e. they took the wind and left me alone), *Lamma a tareek il 'ayn*, and *M'aalla' wo mtalla'* (i.e. stuck yet free), and compositions that reek of history and culture. Alas, these collaborations were short-lived, and before long, Sabah was back to recording lesser songs or chewing the scenery in senseless local movie productions.

Many of us rightly believe that Sabah should have retired from singing and media appearance as soon

as she realized her vocal deficiencies, instead of causing irreparable damage to her image. Many also argue that she should have remained single, steering clear from the string of increasingly young suitors, and keeping a low profile altogether. However, these naysayers do not realize that Sabah's personal and artistic lives have fused inextricably. Retirement would mean a death sentence. There are many lessons to be learned from Layla Mrad's demise (after her early retirement, she slipped into oblivion and died a penniless recluse).

Can we blame Sabah for looking for intimacy, love, and adulation all in the wrong places when so many men had failed her, exploited her, and deserted her?

Can we blame her for craving attention, affection, and popularity?

Can we blame her for refusing to "move over" overnight once her artistic gifts started to dwindle, after enjoying the limelight and entertaining millions for so many years?

Can we blame her for being let down by a system that never assures long-term financial comfort to entertainers who reach their autumn years and are forced to continue working beyond their productive years to make ends meet?

Can we blame her for holding on to her fame of yesteryears, refusing to admit to a terrifying reality, without a dependable companion or a mentally stable child by her side?

With her natural proclivities for self-grandeur and psychopathology notwithstanding, we, her fans, the studio system, the entertainment industry, and the public at large, have unwittingly conspired to push Sabah into her pitiful state, denying her the right to reach "successful aging".

We indulged her delusions, hypocritically cheered her grotesque appearance and dubious singing, and invited her over and over again to our shows to guarantee a quick laugh and satisfy our pathological curiosity.

In my opinion, show producers should take serious measures to put an end to this self-destructive spree by discouraging her from singing live or singing at all. Show hosts should not query about her upcoming musical plans. Hairdressers and fashion designers should stop flamboyantly showcasing her as a ditzzy starlet. Instead, our efforts should be directed towards preserving her legacy, throwing lavish tributes, inviting young singers to reprise her hits, releasing all her body of work on CD compilations, immortalizing her with statues and eponymous conservatory wings, and assuring her the financial comfort she amply deserves by paying her unsettled royalties from sold or broadcast songs and TV reruns.

Whether or not we appreciate her art or are moved by her songs, we should all recognize her great impact on Lebanese and Arab music, and work harder on altering her public image. In short, we should confer dignity upon this great dame. Perhaps, then, she may regain some of her good judgment, accept reality, and as Eriskon has argued, reach the ego integration stage, i.e., a sense of wholeness, an acceptance that all is well and can only get better... Only this time, she may mean her signature invitation of hope, "Tomorrow rises the sun of *Eid* that ushers in a new day..." (i.e. *bukra bteshrok shams al-eid*).

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Alone With Them All

Lina Abyad

The First Encounter

On the steps of the Fine Arts building.
I rediscover this campus after fifteen years of absence.

I see a woman step forward. She should be in her mid-fifties. I have the impression of someone who is walking in another space, another time. There is nothing usual or common about her. The way she dresses, the strong red colour of her hair, but most strikingly the way she moves. Her silhouette is in contrast to that of the students: they are 20 years old but look tired and drag along. As for Renée, she moves as if parading on a catwalk.

She vanishes into the staircase that leads to the classes of the Fine Arts.

I ask: "Who is this woman?"

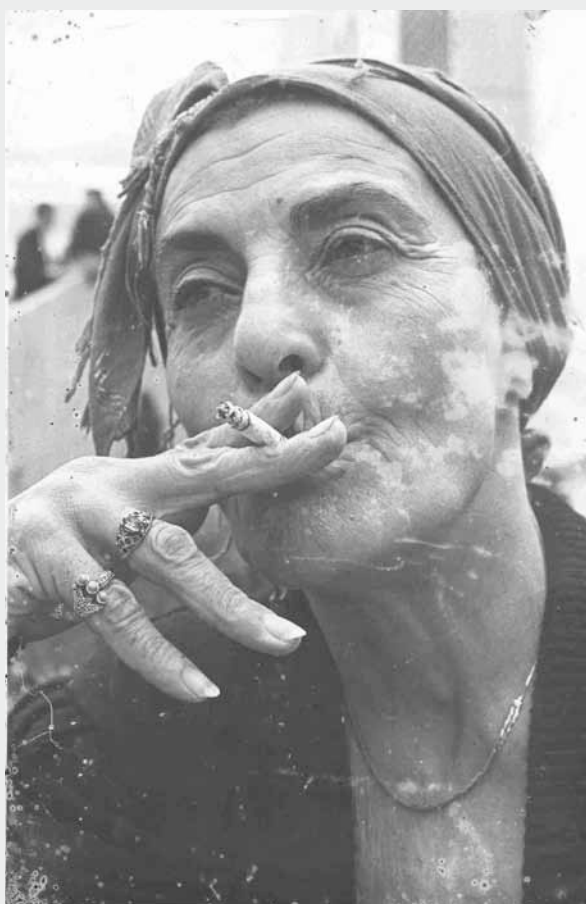
Someone replies: "Renée Deek. She poses for the drawing classes".

I heard about her. She had a remarkable performance in Jawad el-Assadi's revival of *The Maids* by Jean Genet. I am fascinated by the woman, a real character.

Very quickly, Renée and I become friends. This rarely happens with me.

The Rebel

Renée is still a schoolgirl when she talks to her parents about her desire to become an actress. They both disapprove categorically. She leaves home, quits school, and seeks shelter at a family friend. She joins an art class given by the painter Michel el-Mirr. Soon, he asks her to pose nude for him. She does not understand the concept of modelling for a painter. She is shocked. She cries her heart out. Patiently, he explains to her the importance of a model to a painter. He lends her his books. But Renée is appalled by el-Mirr's proposition and she cries persistently.



Renée Deek

A Tragedy in the Byblos Ruins

Around that time, circa summer 1962, Renée discovers *Macbeth* directed by Mounir Abu Debs in the Byblos ruins. She talks to Michel el-Mirr and shares her dreams with him: she would love to act. "I know Mounir, I will introduce you to him and in return, will you become my model?" Renée hesitates.



Renée Deek the actress.

The meeting with the director takes place at the painter's house. Renée is so terrified by Abu Debs' presence that, when el-Mirr disappears in the kitchen to prepare the coffee, she runs away.

Back to School

Abu Debs invites Renée to join his theater group. The first step is acting school: the director believes that an actor should be trained first and only then s/he can perform. All the members of Abu Debs' troupe must take classes in voice, corporal expression, singing, and text analysis. The Baalbeck Festival organization has been seduced by Abu Debs' proposition and made available for him an old Lebanese house on Bliss Street for rehearsals.

She is Twenty Years Old

Renée poses, in the nude, for el-Mirr. The first sessions are painful for the model, but the painter is patient. Quickly, she becomes known in the world of Lebanese painters and is able to earn her living

by posing for Juliana Saroufim, Rachid Wehbe, Jean Khalife, and others. In the fifties, the Lebanese painters get on the bandwagon of drawing nudes. Renée draws my attention that today this trend has been totally neglected.

"Is it a matter of trend or is it a social issue?" wonders the model.

Later, in the mid-seventies, she poses for students at the Lebanese University and Beirut University College (BUC currently Lebanese American University, LAU).

In winter, it is so cold in the art studio classrooms that Renée keeps her clothes on, and in summer she poses in her bathing suit.

In the late seventies, fundamentalist militias permanently ban posing in bathing suits in various universities across the country. "The model must be dressed decently!" comments Renée.

First Death

Renée tells it to me like one tells an adolescent's secret. She is now part of the Abu Debs group. She starts rehearsing for a role but a few days later the director decides to give the part to another actress. Disgusted and hurt, Renée decides to quit the acting workshop. But Abu Debs calls her back and promises her the role.

She resumes rehearsals.

A few days later, Abu Debs changes his mind again and snatches the role away from her. Renée is terribly disappointed. She runs away from the rehearsal room. Her decision is irrevocable: she is going to kill herself. Abu Debs realizes what he has done; he knows the passion that animates Renée. He runs after her and is able to save her. He rushes her to the hospital for treatment.

Like in a Book

Renée recalls the names of the different plays she acted in. The history of the burgeoning Lebanese theater unfolds: Renée seems to be reciting the first chapters of Khalida Said's book *The Theatrical Movement of Lebanon from 1969 to 1975*.

The Phone Call

Renée calls me often to break the silence of her home. This time, she is calling because she has the sudden regret of never having pursued a more



Renée Deek in *al-Khadimatan* directed by Jawad al-Assadi

simple and banal occupation, “like working in a beauty parlour or as a secretary”, she adds on the verge of sobbing. I explain to her that thanks to actresses like her, or like Nidal Achqar, Madona Ghazi, Theodora Rassi, and last but not least, Rida Khury, many women like myself chose to be actresses or stage directors!

I hear her sobbing fading away and I can only hope that tonight she will be able to sleep!

The Museum

Renée lives far from Beirut. To some, her apartment resembles Ali Baba’s cavern: coats, hats, little sculptures and scripts lying everywhere. Some canes also, including medical ones ... but I would like to imagine that they are stage props. On the wall, nude sketches, paintings, photographs, and framed magazine covers that represent Renée’s life. How peculiar all this is or feels. Renée’s life has bounced between two extremes: extravagantly dressed and made up for the theater or buck naked for modelling.

I ask Renée to comment on the art works and the pictures. She talks, but never about herself: these are the traces and the testimonies of the work of the painters and directors Renée has posed for or worked with.

Renée has offered to all artists and students she worked with a wall of fame in her apartment.

Renée lives far from Beirut, in an apartment which she considers to be a museum dedicated to all those who directed or sketched her.

Like the Unknown Soldier

Renée falls from the first floor of her home while running after one of her numerous cats. Since then, she has been seriously ill. She is now in her sixties but the consequences of the accident are visible: her voice is distorted and her walk unsure. She is hopeless. She calls me: “why live?” For some, it is retirement age, but Renée feels the same passion as if she were 20. She has longings for texts to read and memorize, and longings for characters to inhabit. Once again I realize how precious theater is to Renée; it is life itself. She just wants to do her job, not for the limelight, not for the glory, the accolades, or the flowers. She wants to be an actress like others are bakers, astronauts, or soldiers.

The Memory and the Sea

Our conversation is long today.

Renée is tired.

She hesitates.

She is unable to recall some of the titles of the plays she has acted in.

She is bewildered by her memory lapses.

I do not insist.

I ask her to show me some pictures.

She opens a little cabinet stuffed with newspapers and photo albums. We browse through them. Renée is bewildered: many of these photos are destroyed, ravaged. "It is the sea!" whispers Renée. In fact, it is the humidity. Not only has it wreaked havoc on the facade of the apartment, it has crept in everywhere and damaged photos and newspapers. Perplexed, I watch a tragedy playing out to the rhythm of broken waves. Unwillingly, Renée is the protagonist of a play in which her memory is pillaged by the sea.

The Next Day

On the heels of our meeting, Renée catches up with me in the hallway of the Fine Arts Building at LAU. She remembers the titles of plays she had forgotten the night before. Without waiting for me to grab something to write on, she lists titles of films and plays.

What moves me deeply in Renée's effort to recall what she failed to remember yesterday is that, for her, there are no minor or major plays. All her artistic experiences were intense moments in her life. All of them deserve to be mentioned equally.

First Meeting Revisited

Today, after ten years of friendship, ten years punctuated by many rendezvous and hundred of late phone calls, crowned by a play in which we acted together, and a play I directed and Renée acted in, I can explain what caught my attention when I first laid my eyes on this unique woman. That day, this woman was not walking alone. She was leading a procession.

Closing this procession were the directors who chose her to act in their plays, and the painters and students who extensively watched her pose naked and sketched her.

Despite an apparent loneliness that begins as soon as her modelling sessions end and continues into the night, Renée is never alone.

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Translated from French by Ahmad Oueini.

Bio Data

Renee Dik is a Lebanese actress and model. She was born in Beirut in 1943. Renee posed for many renowned painters and university students and acted in many stage, TV, and film productions in Lebanon and abroad.

Modelling:

1963 – 2008: Posing as a model for Lebanese professional painters, Lebanese University, and LAU Fine Arts students.

Acting:

1963 – Baalbeck Festival, *Al-Zubab* (The Flies), by Jean Paul Sartre, director Mounir Abu Debs.

1964 – *Al-Izml*, by Antoine Maalouf, director Mounir Abu Debs, the American University of Beirut (AUB).

1965 – *Al-Malik Yamout*, by Ionesco, director Mounir Abu Debs, toured in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt.

1966 – *Al-Fizya'i* (The Physicist), by Durrenmatt, director Mounir Abu Debs, toured in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.

1967 – *Romulus al-Kabir* (Romulus the Great), by Durrenmatt, director Shakib Khoury, the American University of Beirut (AUB).

1968 – *Al-Malik Lear* (King Lear) by Shakespeare, director Mohammad Al Azir, Tunisia.

1970 – Studied Performance Arts in France.

1971 – *Al-Khadimatan* (The Maids), by Jean Genet, director Abdel Razzak Zaazaa, toured in Tunisia and Morocco.

1978 – *The Life of Mikhael Naimi*, director Yakoub Chidrawi, the Lebanese American University (LAU).

1981 – 1983 *Film Ameriki Tawil*, director Ziad Rahbani, Orly Theater, Beirut.

1994 – *Al-Khadimatan* (The Maids), by Jean Genet, director Jawad al-Assadi, Masrah Beirut.

1998 – *Munamnamat Jazairiya*, director Lina Abyad at the Lebanese American University (LAU).

2000 – *Ta'a Kuol Mjadara Ya Sabi*, director Elie Karam, Monnot Theater, Beirut.

Renée Deek by Greta Naufal



Renée Deek sketched by artist Greta Naufal in 2007

Kamilya Jubran's Solo Journey:

Lemon by Lemon and Cigarette by Cigarette

Amy Amahl Khoury

When Mounira al-Mahdiyya began to sing publically in Egypt in 1893, she was said to be the first Arab woman to do so in the modern age. She was followed shortly after by Umm Kulthum. Since no women were allowed onstage prior to that, no female singing tradition existed yet at that time. Singing softly, or sweetly “like a girl”, was unheard of. Singing was something learned from male *mashayikh* (i.e. religious figures). If you ever hear Umm Kulthum recite the *Qur'an* you will understand. This is no nightingale, this is not a lullaby, this is not Fairouz. Their voices had to be strong, assured, and dead precise in key and diction. They had to carry religious songs and *qasa'id* (i.e. epic poems) comfortably. They had to project across a wide space to reach an audience well before microphones could do the work.

This is the particular vocal tradition embedded in Kamilya Jubran from childhood, when her father began to train her. Kamilya makes no effort to sound pretty or “feminine”. Her voice cannot be categorized as sweet, although it can take sweet and playful turns. It is always permeated by serious emotion, but never sentimental.

In one black and white photograph, she is about four years old singing on a chair in the village square surrounded by her father, the priest, and a gathering crowd. Her voice sweeps through the narrow streets of al-Rama, over the hills of Galilee where this village sleeps. It reaches for the vast expanses of Umm Kulthum's *Anta 'Umri* with all the might it can muster from those tiny lungs. A child singing on a chair, until the chair becomes a stage in Cairo, Paris, or Bern and the year is 2003.



Kamilya Jubran singing on a chair in the village square in al-Rama Galilee

From 1982 until 2002, Kamilya was lead singer and *qanoun* player for the Jerusalem based Palestinian band, *Sabreen*. During that time, *Sabreen* released four albums, each corresponding somehow to the Palestinian situation: from the Sabra and Shatila massacres to the Oslo Accords, or to everyday life under occupation. Lyrics included poems written by Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qassim.

In 2002, Kamilya headed to Europe to begin her solo journey. Since then, she has released the ground-breaking album, *Wameedd*, a collaboration between Kamilya on *oud* and vocals and the Swiss musician Werner Hassler on electronics. With her first solo album, Kamilya is setting sail as a composer, her love of language serving as a compass. The result is minimalist and poignant and downright beautiful.

Wameedd is a rare kind of collaboration between East and West. This is due to both Kamilya and Werner's conscious effort to avoid the pitfalls of

the “World Music” genre. At no point does Kamilya sound sampled¹ or exotic. Instead, the electronics work to understand and underline her mood. Kamilya presents haunting minimalist melodies and stripped down *oud* phrasings. What is interesting and wonderfully contradictory about Kamilya’s idea of minimalism and abstraction is that it always contains pockets of ornamentation.

Even though Kamilya is clearly rooted in the vocal traditions of certain Egyptian schools, and even though she has been singing with *Sabreen* for 20 years, with *Wameedd*, she breaks the conventions set by them and set by the Egyptian schools and *Sabreen*, to the point where you can barely hear those influences or ghosts anymore. Kamilya has liberated herself. With her solo work, she is her own unique invention, no *déjà entendu* here. Kamilya’s voice is her laboratory, a diary.

First and foremost, Arabic is a language of onomatopoeia. Think of the word *bala’* (i.e. to swallow) which begins on the lips, moves to the tongue, then down to the throat. And Kamilya has been trained in and has internalized schools of pure Arabic musicality where the sound and meaning are ecstatically wedded and where diction is king. Kamilya makes classical Arabic cool again.

She grafts her unparalleled craft onto a careful selection of Arabic poems (both original and translated). She probes them without inhibition. Kamilya clearly has a love and understanding of poetry. This is evident in her choice of poems and in her delivery. The texts are written in free form style and are void of cliché. They range from Gibran Khalil Gibran to Paul Shaoul to Sawzan Darwazeh. They are deeply relevant both to her and to our times. This produces a truly contemporary effect.

“A stranger in this world
I wandered East and West on earth
But found not my birthplace nor met one who
recognizes me
Or who heard of me”. (Lyrics from *Ghareeba*, by
Gibran Khalil Gibran)

Which of us has not known war and exile? These

are the motifs of our Arab lives and the motifs of Kamilya’s life. She packages and delivers back to us in such a way as to make us love them for an instant because she renders them beautiful.

Kamilya tastes the sorrow and ecstasy of each syllable in her mouth. She is clearly enamoured by the sound of words, like a child discovering the power of their sounds for the first time. The *Nafad al-Ahwal* series remains a strong example of this. She gives each and every word in these contemporary poems by Paul Shaoul due pause and natural nuance, delivering with perfect classical Arabic diction. One could even call it classical Arabic rap. For any lover of the language, the result is pure pleasure. The same pleasure she herself is deriving.

“I remembered the day I was killed, raped, cut to pieces lemon by lemon, cigarette by cigarette, was ripped and for the first time I cried for my death and for nature”. (Lyrics from *Nafad al-Ahwal* by Paul Shaoul)

Due to the diverse travel restrictions placed on Palestinians, it is mostly in Europe (sadly) that Kamilya can be free to tour now. And while the reception of her shows there has been very warm, one wonders how deeply European audiences can appreciate the scope of Kamilya’s achievement. After all, they don’t really have an Arabic reference - linguistic or musical.

Ironically, amongst the audiences who do have a reference, this reference in itself proves to be a barrier. These are the crowds nourished on Rotana pop² or maybe even a kind of “Rotana *tarab*”³ found plentifully on the independent Arabic music scene. Kamilya is not a neoclassicist, to the chagrin of many Arab audiences. Worse, it is not unusual that requests for folksongs pour in at her concerts, for confounded audience members to talk or to get up loudly and leave, or for a baby to cry, unabated.

Attempts to broadcast concerts live via satellite to several Arab cities simultaneously have failed because of dangerous situations on the ground (such as the Second Intifada). These are some of the sad ironies that Kamilya lives and which feed her songs.

Kamilya is a singer who cannot be entirely divorced from the burden or the gift of her political and historical context. In the past, Arab families and friends used to gather around their radio sets every other Thursday for the communal musical experience of listening to a new Umm Kulthum song. Now, most of us walk around with headphones in our ears, exiles riding the dank metro in Paris, or drowning out the lingering sound of a car bomb in Beirut, or watching a tank from the window in Ramallah. *Tarab* is now a private experience. The Arab Left is for all intents and purposes, dead. Secularism is a bad word. Rabid capitalism is the name of the game. The Arab Gulf is consuming itself into oblivion. The “situations” in the region especially Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon get worse every time we think they can’t. Who better than Kamilya to sing the anthems for our broken times?

I would like to think of Kamilya’s work as a harbinger of an Arab renaissance. Few people realize the political darkness that gave birth to the Italian renaissance. Consider this quote from the film *The Third Man*: “In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love; they had five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock”.

Despite the frustrations, there is, however, a growing and loyal Arab fan base that eagerly awaits her concerts in places like Cairo and Amman. Videos clips from her concerts are appearing on YouTube and a Facebook fan page has been set up. Word is going around. It has only been two years



Kamilya performing at Al-balad theater in Amman

since the release of her first album. Considering its avant garde nature, considering that internet access in the Middle East only reached reasonable levels last year, considering the fact that Kamilya cannot travel and tour freely in Arab countries, this is remarkable. As the radio and cassette tapes once crossed impossible boundaries to bring music to her home in the Galilee, so Kamilya stands proudly poised on her website, defying passport control and visa requirements and entering the homes of Arab populations torn and separated from each other by politics and war. Where Kamilya cannot go for political reasons, her music is going. Kamilya is creating her own musical territory where she has none on land.

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ENDNOTES

1. When small sound bytes or samples of a song are placed in another, the phenomenon of sampling takes place.
2. The most popular and Arabic music label today, known for its reliance on the sex appeal of its artists, rather than their musical talent.
3. A term of my own invention: If tarab is the ecstatic musical state experienced through the classical music, Rotana tarab would be a cheap copy or attempt at the higher forms of Arabic song.

Performing the Body:

Haifa Wehbi in the becoming

Zena Meskaoui

“Everything is related to the body, as if it was discovered after being long forgotten; body image, body language, body-consciousness, liberation of the body are the passwords” (Starobinski as cited in Morgan & Scott, 1993, p. 1)

Haifa Wehbi is a Lebanese singer who started her career as a model. She was the first runner up for Miss Lebanon in 1995. She became known in the Arab world after the release of her first album *Huwa al-Zaman* (i.e. it is time). In 2006 she was on *People* magazine's list of the 50 most beautiful people.

Haifa Wehbi appears and deploys her body; she sings and dances. Her principal achievement is to wander and exhibit her body in public places and various media such as stages, billboards, TV, and magazines – posing, changing poses, and uttering a few words. She is beautiful and desirable, an object of desire. She is a sex symbol and an image. In *Ana Haifa*¹ (i.e. I am Haifa), she is a body and not just has one (Radley, 2003, p. 70). Her (self) staging involves embodiment. She performs being a body: “The body in question here is more expansive than the physical body” (Judovitz, 2001, p. 23).

Bodies have acquired a dimension that is far beyond the body: the body is “a subject, an object, and a representation” (Judovitz, 2001, p. 22). It is a throw back to a Baroque perception of the individual where subject and body form a whole. The separation between body and mind has collapsed as well as the preference of the mind over the body.² Identity is therefore performed, and not given, by means of the body. The visible expression of oneself is within the purview of, and inseparable from, his/her body. Performers dependent on the

body, such as Haifa Wehbi, carry out, through body images and representations deciphered by the viewer, the production of an identity. Haifa Wehbi's performance “being Haifa” involves being traditional and modern, conservative and outgoing, responsive to the public needs and/or reflecting her Arab and Western public.

I believe that Wehbi is aware of herself as a role model. Her success lies in her various representations of womanhood and not in her ability to sing or dance. She distinguishes between “*mutriba*” (i.e. interpreter), which implies both range and depth of talent, and “*mughanniyah*” (i.e. singer), which implies performance, and admits being a “*mughanniyah*”. She sings, she said in an interview on *Melody Channel*, what she can, or what “suits her” (i.e. *bi yilba'li*). She sings “her way”.³ So singing and dancing are a means to represent her “self”. In her singing performances, she dances, suggesting rather than completing the movements, as if deconstructing iconic images of both traditional and modern women.⁴

She poses when interviewed, and poses for posters. Throughout her performances on stage and in video-clips, she carries out a series of stills, slowly moving from one pose to the other. Her performance becomes a number of stills produced live: stills that are read and interpreted by the viewer. This is similar to the way that Cindy Sherman in

*Untitled Film Still series*⁵ (started in 1977), shows photographs of herself, staging various scenarios, demonstrating the ability of the body image to embody a context, a mood, and a character. Equated with speech and gesture, “bodies speak”, and are therefore conceived as “... site[s] for mediated representations ...” (Montaigne in Judovitz, 2001, p. 24). Using the uncertainty lying between being a “body image” and the image of being a body, the viewer, through the faculty of imagination, completes the show (Cruz, 1997). In this mode of representation, the viewers use references such as films, promotions, and advertisements to identify the embodied representations.⁶

In the pictures and stills from clips and shows [fig. 1 to 7], Haifa Wehbi creates several representations of

the modern woman. They vary from the provocative sophisticated woman to the traditional, innocent, countryside girl [fig.1 & 7]. The spectrum includes the contemporary woman in jeans [fig. 4 & 5], the femme fatale in black [fig. 2], the “pure” virginal woman [fig. 3] and the “princess” [fig. 6]. Her body speaks “... as a mediated exercise, a dialogue of multiple voices ...” (Judovitz, 2001, p. 24). Yet, despite the (sometimes) contradictory aspects of the imagined identities in the stills, she remains oriental. It is the representation of the oriental woman that she manages to expand.

According to one Western journalist, Wehbi wears “tight jeans and black *kohl* eyeliner, [and] mixes Eastern belly dancing with Western nightclub moves in an MTV update of the *Dance of the*



Fig 1. <http://www.askmen.com/women/galleries/singer/haifa-wehbe/picture-2.html>



Fig.2. <http://www.webtunisian.com/haifawahbi/page2>



Fig.3. <http://www.askmen.com/women/galleries/singer/haifa-wehbe/picture-1.html>



Fig. 4-5-6 <http://www.webtunisian.com/haifawahbi/page2>

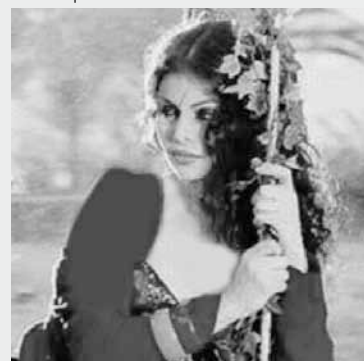


Fig. 7. <http://www.askmen.com/women/galleries/singer/haifa-wehbe/picture-2.html>

Seven Veils that promises all and delivers nothing” (Butters, 2006, ¶ 4). The references identified by the journalist are a mixture of Eastern and Western, modern and traditional characteristics. However, according to Butters the imagined identity is oriental. His description of the “oriental dance” is suggestive though not accurate: Wehbi is not veiled. The veil usually acts as a metaphor for the inaccessible embodied desire for the “Orient”. Desire, according to Judovitz, “brings [ing] representation within the purview of the body” (p. 24). Wehbi becomes the inaccessible Orient by means of her bodily performance.

In Butters’ (2006) description, Wehbi poses, suggesting the movement and never finishing it, promising without delivering. These are flirting strategies, and flirt according to Mernissi (1987) is “...a conflict strategy, a way seeming to give of yourself and of procuring great pleasure without actually giving anything” (p. 140). Moreover, Mernissi (1987) holds that flirting is a universal social act with strict rules between participants, not an exclusive oriental act as suggested by Butters (2006). Wehbi performs her body within the framework of flirting, wherein pleasure is satisfied by imagination and fulfillment of the promised seduction will not take place.

Wehbi appears and deploys her body, celebrates it, communicates through it and controls it. Then from time to time, she stares back, returning the gaze, dominating the viewer! [fig. 3 & 6] Her performance involves highlighting the visibility of the female body as a tool to strengthen the body-object, transforming it into a subject.⁷ She acknowledges the necessary presence of the viewer without whom representation cannot take place. Wehbi’s performance uses the power of representation, interweaved with the act of singing and dancing, to seize control over the viewers, men and women. She

flirts with the viewer as well as with the different identities she embodies. Her success lies in the uncertainty she maintains; both uncertainty as a flirting strategy and uncertainty in the identity-image she embodies.

Wehbi flirts with an impalpable participant: the public. In the absence of an embodied partner, the game’s rules of flirting are, on the one hand, easy to handle, since fulfillment cannot take place with an immaterial audience/public. On the other hand, performing a flirt is difficult to maintain in the absence of a partner, so she flirts with her own image reflected by the public, adding to it a touch of narcissistic behavior. Her performances become an embodiment of a large range of representations fulfilling social and economic demands that are promoted by cosmetic advertisements and plastic surgery. She is able to seduce men and women, young and old alike, because attention to bodily matters has increased; young skin, slim silhouette, perfect nose, flat belly, ideal breasts, etc ...⁸

Wehbi performs the body, giving form to women and men’s fantasies. She performs “being Haifa”, objectifying her body in order to enact Haifa as a subject. By embodying various forms of representations Wehbi creates an elusive identity and gains control over her own fate.

“Son corps lui apprenait beaucoup, elle l’emmenait partout avec elle. Il la devançait parfois” (Nasr, 1999, p. 99).

“Her body taught her a lot, she took it everywhere with her. Sometimes it preceeded her” (Nasr, 1999, p. 99).

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ENDNOTES

1. *Ana Haifa* (i.e. I Am Haifa) is the title of one of her songs and her line in the Pepsi advertisement in response to "I am Thierry Henri" of the football player. The third character says *Ana 'atchan* (i.e. I am thirsty) at the end.
2. Reference to Descartes' view of the subject with a strong delineation between the body and mind (Judovitz, 2003). Two aspects of modernity are identified parallel to Descartes and Montaigne: one that "... would tend to detach and remove the body as a solid and separate object. Another ... that stresses fragmentation and constant flux, renders the body less stable, more mysterious" (Morgan: 1993:4).
3. Check youtube.com retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaAA3JzqHF8&mode=related&search=>
4. One can view a number of interviews, video clips, and shows from televisions on youtube.com last retrieved 09-05-07 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaAA3JzqHF8&mode=related&search=> & <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Sjq2lm1rE>
5. For more information see <http://www.cindysherman.com/art.shtml>
6. In Sherman the constructed feminine identities vary. From the tomboy to the seductive celebrity caught wearing her lingerie, to the blond librarian.
7. According to Judith Butler (*Bodies That Matter*, 1993), and based on Foucault's philosophy of the subject, subjectification is not given but depends on power relations within the psyche and society. The individual, here called the subject, 'struggles' to 'be'. Since there is no 'essence', no core of the 'self', the process of formation of 'oneself' is continuous, always in the becoming.
The female body images are at the same time, objects of (male's) desire and subjects "controlling [the] male gaze" (Cruz, 1997).
8. There can be little doubt that there has been a remarkable growth of interest in these topics [bodily matters] in a matter of years (Morgan, 1993:2_.

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Hakawati Freestyle

Laila Debs

I have a bone to pick with Eve. Not only did she deprive her partner of a rib and then entice him to pluck the fruit and eat it, but she also succeeded in using her female charm to plunge Noura al-Sakkaf and I into Hakawati Freestyle.

It all began past midnight in March 2006, in Dubai. Tired and dishevelled, Leila Mroueh (from now on referred to as Leila) and I emerged from the editing suite after many overnights working on a reality TV show, in pursuit of a hearty dinner. Leila attempted to lighten the mood and asked me the question of the century, "what I thought of television". Oh, nothing beats the theater for me. Leila asks another question. Would I consider performing with *Arabise Me*? Perform what? I ask. Leila flatters me by saying I am a good storyteller and apparently have good comic skills. I would certainly say these skills are missing tonight because a piece of my Bresaola got stuck in my throat, and I was coughing the restaurant away.

Arabise Me is an event produced by Leila and her colleague, that was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2006. Leila believes I only need to let my humour run its course. Umph! It's that humour that Leila keeps referring to that is worrying me. However, I wasn't going to let her down.

Right, Leila was already packing her trendy GAP bag to go and inform London of this new addition to the program, namely, a female *hakawati* in modern style. Things were moving too fast for my dead brain. I am no storyteller. I am not that great an actress, either. However, my friend, Noura, is a natural. I proposed (that) Leila contact Noura ...

Two days later, Leila succeeded with great difficulty and after a lot of persuasion, to get Noura's consent, but there were conditions. First, it would

be a duo between the two of us; one of the "us", of course, is me. Aaagh! We will battle over who tells better stories. Another aaaagh, Noura will win with hardly any challenge on my part. Secondly, she is not writing any scripts. Unless she is handed one immediately, she's out. Noura's terms were accepted. The event was scheduled to take place five months later. Our friends started booking their flights to London. It's happening.

Our TV show in Dubai was over. Leila and I were back in London. Before we knew it, August was on our doorsteps. Noura continued to make her regular phone calls from Saudi Arabia to inquire about the script, and I constantly re-assured her that I would be working on one soon. That "soon" never arrived. Then one day, Noura called and gave Leila and I an ultimatum; she either receives the script now or she's walking out. If Noura walks out, we would have no show. It's time I pulled my act together. Eve, what's wrong with taking the easy way out, quit?

What do we relate in our *Hakawati* performance? What do we call it? Obviously, we are not playing it the traditional way, so the title of Hakawati Freestyle was born. We knew we could always resort to *The Thousand and One Nights* when we reached an impasse. Well, we have reached the impasse. At that thought, Noura rang and eased my stress. She commented that the best storyteller on earth is Sheherazade. Noura added that she would like it if we went into the domain of the kitchen, as women usually gossip and tell tales whilst cleaning the lentils, plucking the spinach, and cracking the broad beans. Brilliant idea, I thought. Make the cooking ingredients reflect modern technology. We drafted the below.

Setting:

Noura working at her laptop. Laila engrossed in setting up the session.

LAILA DEBS: Traditional classic or freestyle?

NOURA AL-SAKKAF: Ummmh?

LAILA: I'm going to start from the very beginning, the *Nights*.

NOURA: Ah huh!

LAILA: Why shouldn't I? Do you know how it came to be?

NOURA: Look, I really don't know what you're on about. All I know is we're here to tell stories, *a la* make-believe *hakawati*. We don't have the usual coffee house backdrop, the round tables, the tea, the backgammon, the *hakawati* with his massive book, his cane, his stool and his dog, and certainly not the customers who are eager to hear a tale of heroic deeds which they already know by heart. And here you are babbling about starting from the beginning. Beginning of what?

LAILA: No need to get so worked up just because we have to change a bit or two.

NOURA: A bit or two? Listen to yourself. You may not have noticed but we are performing in a museum, in the Nehru India Room, to an audience who is not allowed to drink or eat anything due to health and safety reasons; we have just about half an hour to tell an abridged epic tale, and you want to go back to the classics, and excuse me, start from the very beginning. Well, you better hurry up cause you've just lost two minutes from your allotted time.

LAILA: You're upset.

NOURA: No I'm not upset, that's an understatement. I am fuming.

We were both fuming. We were running out of time, we had no script and we needed to perform in two weeks' time. We wished our friends would cancel their trip to London. Noura calls up to inform me she would be arriving in two days' time to sort out the mess I got both of us in. Thank God for that. Eve,

why can't you just take the short cut like men do?

Noura arrived, and the battle raged between the two of us. We decided to carry on with the script by developing the draft above. It ran as such:

LAILA: Would you feel better if you went first?

NOURA: You know what, just get on with your story.

LAILA: What's wrong with going back to the classics?

NOURA: Nothing ... That's precisely it ... classics, old, gone, finished, covered in cobweb.

LAILA: I bet you don't know the beginnings of the *Nights*.

NOURA: I do.

LAILA: You really don't know it, do you? Long ago, there lived a just king who commanded great armies. He left two sons; the elder, called King Shahriyar, and the younger, King Shahzaman. Both governed their kingdoms justly. Twenty years later, the older brother, Shahriyar, invited his younger brother, Shahzaman, to come visit him. King Shahzaman began immediate preparations for the journey. It so happened that, after setting off with his men, King Shahzaman realized that he had forgotten his brother's gift behind. He returned to his palace, unheralded, and upon entering his private chambers, he found his wife lying on a couch in the arms of one of their slaves.

NOURA: The lady prefers a slave to a king!!!

LAILA: At this sight, he drew his sword, killed them both and resumed his journey.

NOURA: Just like that!

LAILA: Upon arriving, Shahriyar noticed how distressed his younger brother looked. He organized a hunting party in his honour, hoping the sport would dispel his brother's bad mood. Shahzaman declined his brother's invitation, so Shahriyar went alone to the hunt.

NOURA: The loving older brother inherited the bigger chunk of his father's kingdom.

LAILA: While Shahzaman sat at one of the windows, he saw his brother's beautiful queen emerge with twenty slave girls and twenty male slaves, and they all made their way to the fountain. The queen then called Massood the slave to come to her. Promptly, this slave embraced the queen, and while smothering her with kisses ...

NOURA: (Strangely begins to pay attention to the story).

LAILA: As Shahzaman witnessed this spectacle, his gloom was lifted, thinking to himself that his misfortune was far lighter than that of his brother. When Shahriyar returned from the hunt, he was overjoyed to see the transformation in his brother's state. Upon inquiring about the cause, Shahzaman related the entire story about slaying his wife and the slave. As Shahriyar urged his brother to continue with the story, Shahzaman related what he had seen in his brother's garden that day. Shahriyar was alarmed, but he would not believe the reports unless he saw them with his own eyes. They agreed to pretend they were going on another hunting trip, but this time, remained behind.

NOURA: Oh dear, that went down very well. They were pretty simple in those days.

LAILA: The second hunting trip was organised, and this time Shahriyar hid, together with Shahzaman, and witnessed the scene exactly as his brother had described it. Half demented at the sight, Shahriyar suggested to his brother that they renounce their royal state and roam the world until they found out if any other king had ever met with such disgrace. They both left secretly and traveled many days until they arrived at a meadow by the seashore.

NOURA: Obviously, they could simply get up and go, why not, after all it was an inheritance, come easy...

LAILA: As they sat down to rest, the waves of the sea suddenly surged and foamed before them. Struck with terror, they climbed into a tree just as a *jinni*¹ of gigantic stature, carrying a chest on his head, waded to the shore and walked towards the same tree. The *jinni* opened the chest and took out a box which he also opened and from which rose a beautiful girl. The *jinni* seated the girl on the ground, rested his head

upon her knees and fell asleep. The girl suddenly lifted her head up and saw the two kings high in the tree. She made signs to them to come down. Of course, they pleaded with her to leave them alone. She threatened to wake up the *jinni* if they did not comply with her wishes. In fear, they both climbed down. The girl then ordered them to ...

NOURA: I have listened enough to this *hishek bishek*, *jinni minnee* crap that no longer has any relevance. Why do we want to keep telling those ridiculous stories that time itself has worn out?

Noura does not agree with the portrayal of women in the *Nights*. She wants her stories to be about real women, who are relevant to our times.

We improvised during our next two meetings, where I would pluck stories from the *Nights* and Noura would jump in with a story about real women who actually effected social change. This was done amid bickering battles between the two of us.

Only a week left. We both began to lose sleep over the deadline. We had to finish the script. An absolute ordeal, but we managed to do it. The following day, we met to rehearse it, and we realized that we had a disaster on our hands. We simply could not remember the lines. Script reading was inevitable, and we had to live with it. We parted that night in total disillusionment. Perhaps we should really call those friends and ask them to change their plans.

The performance day arrived. We entered the hall where we were to perform. Our performance time came, and suddenly, the hall filled up to near saturation. Where did all these people come from? Why are they all flocking to our event? There was no more time. The show had to begin, and this is how it was presented:

Setting:

Laila sitting on the platform, eagerly waiting for audience to settle down. Noura leaning against a column in the background drinking coffee, clearly not happy to be there.

LAILA: Ladies and gentlemen. I will start our story from the very beginning. Once upon

a time, king Shahrayar ruled an island between India and China. He was a truly great king, and his people loved him. But, all this bliss was soon to be shattered when, one day, he caught his wife in the arms of one of his slaves. Enraged, he ordered their execution. Believing all women to be likewise unfaithful, he resolved to marry a new virgin wife every night and to have her killed the following morning. This cruelty continued for some time, and the people who had once loved their monarch, raised one universal outcry against him. The grand Vizier was approached by his favourite daughter, the beautiful Scheherazade, who volunteered to become the next virgin wife of the king. Scheherazade, with the help of her younger sister, Dunyazade, designed a clever plan. The minute her marriage to the king was consummated, she left Shahrayar's bed and spent the rest of the night relating intriguing tales to her sister. When Scheherazade noticed the dawn of day, she stopped her storytelling and interrupted the tale with a cliffhanger. The insomniac king, captivated by the story and his burning desire to hear the ending, delayed Scheherazade's execution another day. And thus continued Scheherazade to succeed with her plan night after night for a thousand nights, and on the one thousand and first night, Sheherazade presented the king with their three sons, and they all lived happily ever after.

NOURA: Stop, stop. Just tell me, how did she manage to conceal three kids from her husband? Three times 9 equals 27, twenty seven months of this (makes a gesture around her stomach). Nobody should listen to this stuff anymore. Give me real stories with real people in them. Tell me about people who get things done.

LAILA: What, you're mocking the *Nights*?

NOURA: I'm not mocking it I'm just fed up with these fanciful tales of *jinnis* and flying carpets and magical lamps and ...

LAILA: It's fantasy, stories that give flight to the imagination.

NOURA: Imagination, imagination!!!! Scheherazade spent three years telling a mass murderer stories instead of trying the bastard for murder. Take Doria Shafik, for example. She was an Egyptian feminist,

poet, publisher, and a political activist who, during the 1940s, burst onto the public stage in Egypt, openly challenging every social, cultural, and legal barrier that she viewed as being oppressive to women. She and a group of women stormed the House of Parliament, and for four hours, demonstrated before finally being received by the vice president of the Chamber of Deputies and extracting from the senate a verbal promise that parliament would immediately address the women's demands. She believed that no one would deliver freedom to women, except woman herself. She went on hunger strikes for her cause. She suffered house arrest. That, for me, is real. She acted. She didn't spend three years telling stories to a psychopath.

LAILA: Why did you stop here? Go on finish the story and tell our audience how Doria Shafik failed. How the members of parliament went back on their promise to meet with the delegation and instead, Doria was summoned to appear in court. Didn't the king tell Doria's husband that as long as he is king there would be no political rights for women?

NOURA: That doesn't matter. What matters is the active attempt at making a difference.

LAILA: I don't see the difference between my story of Scheherazade and that of Doria, except that my lady succeeded where yours failed.

NOURA: What? You'd rather have her wait 1001 nights, sleep and have children with a killer?

LAILA: All right, some of the ideas seem antiquated, but there is still much one can learn from them. If only Doria acted like the young woman in the story of "The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers".

NOURA: Oh no!!!!

LAILA: There was once this beautiful young girl whose husband journeyed to a distant land and was gone for a long time. She gave up on him and fell in love with a handsome young man. One day, the young man was imprisoned after being caught in a violent brawl. Deeply grieved, she set out to free her lover, devising a cunning plan. She wore her finest robes, groomed herself and hurried to the governor,

pleading for the release of the prisoner whom she claimed to be her brother and sole supporter. The governor was smitten by the woman's beauty and suggested she wait for him in his harem whilst he prepared the release order. She persuaded him that it would be more private if he were to bring the signed order in person and they met at her house instead. That gained the governor's approval, and they agreed on the time. She then headed to the *Qadi's* office in the hope that he would give her the order, but he only wanted the same thing as the governor. So she invited him to her house as well. The same thing happened with the *Vizier*, and finally the King. She then headed to a carpenter and instructed him to build her a cupboard with four separate lockable compartments. The carpenter offered to charge her less if she accepted spending some time with him. She smiled, thanked him for his consideration, and invited him to her house that night. She asked him to add a fifth compartment to the cupboard. The first to arrive was the governor. She sat him down, got him some wine, and just as they got to the seductive embrace, she asked for the signed order. As soon as she had the order in her hand, the door bell rang heralding the arrival of the next lover. Pretending it was her husband, she rushed the governor to hide in one of the compartments and locked it. And so she managed to lock up the five lovers, and with four signed orders, she dashed to the prison and secured her lover's release.

NOURA: (Hands over ears) Stop, stop, stop right now, you are not finishing that story. That's precisely the view of women we should be fighting. All that seducing and charm to get your way, what a load of rubbish.

LAILA: But if Doria had been more flexible and had concocted a little plot to get her request formalized, she would have left that parliament with a signed document, not a verbal promise.

NOURA: Excuse me, in your tale, the woman is your typical cheap low-lying little ... Doria is fighting for equal rights, for having our existence acknowledged, and you are comparing her struggle to that of getting a lover released. What good is your story to our sorry reality?

LAILA: She made us laugh. It's entertaining.

NOURA: Laugh? Your story sets us women back many years; you even threw them back in the harems. Huda Sha'rawi lived those years in a harem, and she fought bloody hard to abolish them. Just forget your thousand and one nights' world of magic carpets and imagine this scene. At Cairo station, one spring day in 1923, a crowd of women with veils and long black cloaks descended from their horse-drawn carriages to welcome home two friends returning from an international women's meeting in Rome. Huda Sha'rawi and Saiza Nabarawi stepped out on the running board of the train. Suddenly, Huda, followed by Saiza, drew back the veil from their face. The waiting women broke into a loud applause. Some removed their veils as well. This daring act signalled the end of the harem system in Egypt. At that moment, Huda stood at two junctures of her life, the one she was leaving behind back in the harem and the one she would lead at the head of the women's movement. She freed herself from the narrowness of family circles and went on to create new institutions. She had courage and commitment; that's the kind of woman I want to hold up as an example, not your wily scheming women from a dusty old book of stories.

LAILA: But you can't sense the suffering. Had Huda's story been told by Scheherazade, she would have had a story abounding with misery like that tale of "The Woman Whose Hands Were Cut Off for Giving Alms to the Poor".

NOURA: C'mon this is getting silly, please!!!! ...

LAILA: (Insulted) A certain king once made a proclamation to the people of his realm saying, "If any of you give alms, I will have his hands cut off". All the people abstained from alms-giving. Now it happened that, one day, a hungry beggar came to a certain woman ...".

NOURA: (Laughing still)

LAILA: What's tickling you?

NOURA: That ridiculous title. Oh please, go on. I can hardly wait to hear the story.

LAILA: Enough, I can't concentrate on the story.

One day, a beggar came to a certain woman and asked for charity. She reminded him of the king's decree but he somehow managed to touch her heart, so she gave him two scones. The king heard of this and cut off her hands. And as fate would have it, the king one day told his mother to marry him off to a fair woman. His mother mentioned one of their female slaves who is unsurpassed in beauty, but who has a grievous blemish; both her hands are cut off. The king asked to see the woman and was ravished by her beauty. He married her instantly, and with time, she bore him a son. Things were going fine until his other wives became envious and plotted to ruin the woman's relationship with the king. They accused her of being unchaste and of delivering an illegitimate son. The king ordered his wife's banishment to the desert along with her son. She came to a river and knelt down to drink, but, as she bent her head, the child she was holding fell into the water. She sat weeping bitter tears for her child. Behold, two men came out of the water and asked about the reason for her deep sorrow. They prayed to God and the child came forth, out of the water, to her bosom, safe and sound. Then the two men once more prayed, and this time, her hands were restored to her. Then they asked her if she knew who they were, and she replied that only God knows what she does not know. The two men said they were the two scones which she gave to the beggar and which were the cause of the cutting off of her hands.

NOURA: Enough, enough that's it. I'm speechless, mortified at the total idiocy of this story. I'll tell you a real story about a real woman who suffered hardship but who did something about it, not waited for two scones to bring her justice.

The story of Rania has none of this hocus pocus crap of Sheherezade. Rania had a beautiful face, and every morning, her beautiful face appeared on television screens across homes in Saudi Arabia. She started her career in her late teens. By her early 20s, she had become one of the best known TV figures in Saudi Arabia. She had had a short-lived marriage and a daughter when in 1998, Rania met the singer, Yunus, and soon, defying custom, they had a love marriage. Rania and Yunus had two children, boys. Shortly after their marriage, her husband's popularity dwindled. Rania gained

more fame. Jealous, Yunus started to become more violent. Rania did not report this to the authorities for many reasons. Mainly, she feared that their relation would only get worse if reports of Yunus' violence were taken outside the home. One night, Yunus came home to find his wife on the telephone. After accusing her of cheating on him, he proceeded to beat her up. Rania's house helper was there; she was afraid to intervene, but she said that Yunus knocked his wife down to her knees and began to choke her, while punching her face. He kept saying, "I am going to kill you." He kept banging Rania's head on the floor until she became unconscious; then he stopped, showered, and changed. He wrapped Rania in a sheet and put her in the back of his car. At some point during the drive, Rania suddenly regained consciousness. Yunus panicked and rushed her to hospital at about 2:30 a.m. He told the hospital staff that Rania had been in a car crash. He then went to the site of the "car crash" to "save" the other victims. In reality, he went into hiding. Rania suffered thirteen facial fractures and had to undergo extensive surgery. Her relatives, friends and colleagues encouraged her to go public. Her battered swollen face was seen in every local paper and magazine. Newspapers called her story a "ground-breaker". Her story was a wake-up call to the abuse that was going on all around. Finally, the cat was out of the bag. For the first time in Saudi Arabia, it was publicly acknowledged that domestic violence does exist just like anywhere else in the world. That, for me is true hardship and pain.

LAILA: (Silent)

NOURA: Why silent? Is this reality too harsh for Scheherazade's world of fantasy?

LAILA: No, not at all. Rania's story is very sad and Scheherazade tells a far more heartbreaking story. At least in Scheherazade's story of "The Tale of the Three Apples" justice is served without delay.

NOURA: Great!

LAILA: One day, the caliph Harun al-Rashid desired to go down into the city and find out how his people were faring. He came upon a very old fisherman who pulled out a chest in which was found the body of a fair young lady slain and cut into nineteen pieces. The Caliph turning to Ja'afar,

his *Vizier*, ordered an immediate search to find the murderer; otherwise, the *Vizier* himself would be hanged. To Ja'afar's good fortune, a young man came forward and confessed to the murder.

When the young man married his wife, she was a maid and God blessed him with three male children. She fell ill with a grievous sickness. One day, she had a craving for apples, so he went instantly into the city in search of apples, but he could find none. At last, by chance, he saw an old gardener who informed him that apples can only be found in the garden of the Commander of the Faithful. His love for his wife and his affection moved him to undertake the journey. So he travelled fifteen days and nights, and brought her three apples. But when he went in to his wife and set them before her, she took no pleasure in them and let them lie by her side. So, slightly disappointed, he left the house and went to his shop. About midday, a slave passed by his shop holding in his hand one of the three apples. The husband called to the slave and asked where he had gotten that specific fruit. The slave laughed and answered, "I got it from my mistress; I had been absent for a while, and on my return, I found her lying ill with three apples by her side. She told me how her idiot of a husband made a fifteen-day journey to get them for her. So I ate and drank with her and took this apple from her". When the husband heard those words, the world grew black before his face, and he rose instantly, locked up the shop and went home. He looked for the apples, and finding only two of the three, asked his wife where the third apple was. She raised her head languidly and said that she did not know. This convinced him that the slave had spoken the truth, so he took a knife, and without uttering a word, cut her throat. Then he hewed off her head and her limbs in pieces, placed them in a chest and threw it into the river.

(Throughout the story, Noura comes closer and is quite taken by the story)

When he went back home, he found his eldest son crying. Upon inquiring about the reason for his

tears, the boy said that he had taken one of the three apples which were by his mother's bedside and went down into the lane to play with his brothers when behold, a cruel slave snatched it from his hand. The slave had heard the story of how the boy's father struggled to get these apples for his sick wife. When the husband heard what his child had said, he fell to his knees weeping, knowing that the slave had foully slandered his wife.

The caliph marvelled at his words and said, "By God, this young man is excusable; I will hang none but the accursed slave".

NOURA: And Scheherazade perceived the dawn of day and ceased saying her permitted say.

LAILA: But there's more to the story.

NOURA: And I'm sure those good people would love to hear it, but I've had it. You and Scheherazade tell a good story. I listened and I was riveted, but I can't help it. I hate that I was taken in; it makes me fume. The guy chops his wife into little bits and throws her in the river without a shred of evidence and the great caliph forgives him because somehow men are naturally jealous and violent so all is forgiven! I've had enough (starts to leave)

LAILA: Where are you going?

NOURA: I'm going out into the real world. I have perceived the dawn of day and have ceased to say my permitted say.

LAILA: (Teasingly to the audience) Do you want to hear another story? Perhaps tomorrow.

Eve, what can we say, if we were Adam, we would have taken the shorter road of compliance, but having your physical and mental make-up, we cannot but be self-critical, endure hardship, aim at excelling, be positive, and embrace others. That does not mean I don't still have that bone to pick with you.

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ENDNOTE

1. *Jinni* is in Islamic mythology, a spirit that can take on various human and animal forms and makes mischievous use of its supernatural powers.

Finding 'a now' to Inhabit:

Between the Performative in life and Professional Practice

Lina Issa

In Italo Calvino's (1874) *Invisible Cities*, the emperor Kublai Khan asked his guest, the traveler Marco Polo, whether his understanding of himself, of the world, and of his place within it is inevitably predicated on his own history. Polo replied that "the more he was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more he understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive at" (Tan, 1999). Kublai Khan interrupted him with the question: "You advance always with your head turned back? Is what you see always behind you? Does your journey take place only in the past?" (Tan, 1999). Polo replied that what he sought was always lying ahead of him, even if it was a matter of the past. Arriving at each new city, the traveler again finds a past that he did not know he had. The foreignness of what he no longer is or no longer possesses waits for him in foreign places.

The migrant's experience of "foreignness" that unfolded in Marco Polo's travels reveals to me certain dialectics of time and place that shape my understanding and construction of the self and of cultural identity. According to Polo's notion of place, homeland is no longer necessarily located in the past. And when it becomes located in the future, it is not necessarily as the destiny of the migrant's journey, but more as a narrative component, which can, or perhaps has to be, integrated into the migrant's notion of self.

Away from home, studying in the Netherlands, my relationship and understanding of this entity called "self" – its forms, roles, desires, possessions, values, narratives, and geographies – was questioned through internal and external confrontations with

my self and others, both in a new cultural context and in a broader platform of professional art practice.

In the last couple of years, my work has revolved around issues of place, displacement, otherness, personal histories, kinesthetic embodied memory, and communicating/sharing experience. I will be talking about two projects, one that I started when I arrived in the Netherlands in 2003, and the other is one of my latest ongoing projects titled *Where We Are Not*.

In their approach and concerns, these projects uncover my process of searching for a framework, a language, a context to address and be inspired with, and a place to inhabit personally and professionally.

Report on Body: Mapping my Context

My first project, *Report On Body*, was inspired by movement research (Skinner release technique, Contact Improvisation, Alexander technique, Body Weather Laboratory, etc ...) and the language of physical theater. It consisted of a set of exercises that I put together into a lab/workshop situation. The aim of these exercises is to listen to the body, and pay attention to its impulses, vibrations, dynamics, departure/arrival points, desires, anxieties, (im)possibilities, and communicative abilities. Suggested mental images, textures, sounds, and direct physical and verbal feedback are active tools in this setup.

These workshops allowed me to trace physically certain memories, narratives and experiences and to map the interrelations between the "here and now"

and the “there and then” of my embodied memory, patterns, cultural body, and personal versus collective history. They also pointed in my body at “how I am”, and when working in a group, at “how we are”. They provided a specific momentum where time unfolded and was measured inside the body: its impulses, detailed movement, and place were mapped internally through perception and externally through relations to other bodies and their movement.

Suely Rolnik (1989) writes beautifully in *Sentimental Cartography*:

To geographers, cartography – distinct from maps which are representations of a static whole – is a drawing that accompanies and creates itself at the same time as the transformation movements of the landscape. Psychosocial landscapes can also have cartography. (p. 15)

The body itself can be seen as a resonant entity. Rolnik (1989) describes it as an affective circuit, which affects and is affected by the world around it, so that the self opens up to an intimate relationship with the psychosocial landscape, allowing both to lose and constitute themselves in relation to each other.

This resonant apprehension of the world can be frustrated in a surrounding milieu that is inhospitable to this quality of relation. A hostile social or political environment can even anaesthetize the body, paralyzing its resonant capacity. But the capacity to let oneself be affected by a multiplicity of forces can also be exercised:

The cartographer of the psychosocial landscape makes use of a hybrid compound, made out of his eye but also out of his sentient body. Gently placing himself not vis-à-vis but amidst the drift of life, he tries to mobilize a constant process of action and reaction, orientation and reorientation, as means of creating sense. (Rolnik, 1989, p. 15)

There were a lot of questions left open in *Report*

On Body, such as “the definition of my position” – whether it was that of an artist, a participant, an instructor, or a therapist etc...

I was interested in exploring new relations with the audience through the lab/workshop situation, where the participants are themselves the audience of their own experience and that of the group. But at that point, I wasn't really interested in defining my role; what interested me most was creating the possibility to research the role of a “sentimental cartographer” and to exercise it – finding tools to access and understand a (some)body's history and geography, and the crucial differentiation between macro and micro politics in my practice.

Macro politics, which deals with perception and identification with ideologies, visible images, or representation and positioning oneself on one side of the political debate or the other, has, to my feeling, often been a framework for cultural practice in Lebanon and it feeds into its content. I have been struggling to find a way to relate to the political scene in the Middle East being away in Europe without having to take sides or finding myself caught in a defensive reactionary position based on a limited perception of “otherness”. It was difficult to liberate myself from the urge to refer to and contextualise myself within such a socio political framework.

However, I found, by shifting my focus to micro politics, a larger, more progressive and full of potential space to address the “effects of otherness” and “the reality of the other” in our body.

Micro politics is the politics of relation with “otherness”, especially with ourselves. It is the space for being affected, for being vulnerable. It is the space of tension between sensible reality, where things are perceived as forms and representations, and our subjectivity. Confronting and dealing with this tension allows life to breathe and opens up our capacity to receive, to affect, and be affected.

The micro political resides in what our affective body remembers. What the body remembers (i.e.

kinesthetic memory), unfolds as we move and relate to things, discovering that our understanding of the moment is affected by experiences of a similar moment or a larger, more general experience. I realised, for example, that I had never perceived myself as belonging to the war generation even though I lived through wars in Lebanon. However, my body remembers those experiences in very subtle, detailed ways; for example, in its reaction to speed, surprise or loudness, and in its perception of a movement as violent or an energy as aggressive, and in experiencing certain physical positions as oppressive or submissive or scary, having evacuation, bombardment, demonstration, darkness, and mass chaos experiences in war situations as my reference. I moved on with these ideas and explorations at hand, developing several performances of which I would like to present my latest, *Where We Are Not*, looking at it through the dialectics of time and place that Calvino's text presents and the way the thinker Ernst van Alphen discusses the notion of homeland and identity in his text, *Imagined Homelands*.

Where We Are Not: Absences of a Cultural Body

Through migration, place is radically disconnected from culture. The relationship between place and culture becomes one of disconnection, displacement, and incommensurability. This makes the relationship between cultural identity (the self) and place more crucial and their respective perception in time becomes quite puzzling.

What have made the relationship even more crucial and urgent in this project are the conditions under which it has developed: As a student from Lebanon, I was denied my residence permit for the Netherlands for strictly bureaucratic reasons. Having appealed against this decision, I was not allowed to leave the Netherlands and re-enter the country. The decision created a "state of exception" that excluded me from my own home country, and placed me outside the zone of "contemporary mobility". My project *Where We Are Not* is framed by this state of exception, in which I found myself a migrant, and by the disparate narratives and impossible scenarios it produced.

The Project and its Presentation:

Not being able to travel home myself, I cast a replacement and sent Aitana, a Spanish dancer/choreographer, to Lebanon for 10 days as my stand-in, messenger, and recording device. She visited different people – my family and friends – and traced the places of my memory and what constitutes the idea of "home" for me.

In the reading/performance, Aitana and I appear together to explore the possibility and the impossibility of putting oneself in place of the other, and of sharing memories and experiences. In an intimate one to two encounters with an audience member, we try to challenge the personal private space of each of our bodies and that of the audience. We attempt to cross the physical separation/border of "the other", and we shift the position of spectatorship among the three of us.

In a negotiation of power and authorship, among different confused layers of identity, sameness and difference, channeled through a mix of intense emotions of jealousy, manipulation, disappearance, exclusion, love, desire, fear, and embarrassment, we go through our memories enacting them and enacting our identities, and all the places that have formed us.

This project deals with memory and identity and their performative aspects in different ways during its different phases. Preparing my stand-in to carry out her role(s) in Lebanon in the first phase, I worked with her physically, looking for possibilities to experience the way we each embody space and carry our body arriving and departing from different intentions, motives, feelings, abilities, forms and embodied memories. If she was to sleep in my bed, hold my mother like I do and touch the surfaces I long to touch, then let us explore each other's weight, the texture of our hands, the resistance of our backs, the shifting of our centre as we stand facing each other at a very small distance, and the details and patterns of our walking posture, lying posture, and sitting posture. These explorations put forward the desire yet the impossibility of two bodies, two cultural subjects, to occupy the same space.

Where We Are Not also poses the question: What if, if you take my place? Can you feel what I feel? Can I share my body-memory with you? Can you share my body-memory with me?

The intimate, the familiar, the instance, the non-thought sensations of everyday life that are all housed in our system and cannot be filmed, or painted, or photographed, can only be hinted at. They become significant when we are distant, when there is a need to bridge that distance, when we are impeded from access to these sensations.

The notion of time and place that Calvino's (1974) text presents is puzzling, yet fascinating because it distorts the migrant's perception of past and present, real and fictive, remembered and imagined. It dictates the way of relating to images or stories of the homeland in the past. Places and sensations from the past are re-enacted in the places where "the migrant" resides in the present.

Tracing Absence: Notebook, Guidebook, Instruction Book

In this project, I found myself, like Marco Polo, in an endless process of combining fragmented images and stories from the homeland and those places I lived in after the homeland, of places real and imaginary, past and future, which contribute to the construction of my identity in the present. I wrote an extensive and detailed guide/notebook for Aitana to give structure to her trip and to clearly specify her tasks. I described people and places, smells and flavours, situations and relations that seemed to constitute my idea of home and establish my relationship to it. I asked her to touch hands and faces, smell breaths and pillows, taste favorite and nostalgic flavours.

This notebook has been experienced by many people who have read it as a "metaphor for love". For me, addressing those places and relations of my past in writing was an act of love – love being the degree of attention you give certain things, rather than the general definition of love as attraction and affection.

It is a reconstruction of my memory, an exercise in projecting my past onto the screens of the

present and future. It is written in the future tense, putting dates for Aitana in the future where she will encounter my past and how I remember and imagine it in "the now".

Written slowly in clear, neat handwriting, this notebook touches the pain and fear of loss – losing the love, the security, and references felt and given at home. It represents these memories as fixed and represents the tension in the desire to keep them as such to confirm my history and identity on the one hand. It undertakes the risk of idealising home, and on the other hand, it opens up completely the possibility of sharing this personal history with a stranger, with another subject who will look at it with different references, and later with the audience. (see images)

It is as if by asking Aitana to notice my mother's breath after coffee; by sharing that moment, it is alive in the present, it is actual, and it grows to bring me new places and bring Aitana and the audience their own memories and relations.

In *Imagined Homelands* (2002), Alphen writes:

Ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places cannot be conflated with geographical place. The place is imagined rather than real. But what 'imagined' means remains to be specified. For imagined is not the same as imagination. 'Imagined places' are not fairytale places, they are not just fantasy. In one way or another imagined places do have a connection with a place that exists geographically. However, the mode in which this geographic place is experienced is not ontologically different: geographic place is experienced not through real interaction but rather through imagination. (p. 56)

In this project, however, my home was experienced through my stand-in's body, projecting my desire to be in two places, or my desire to have an extension of my body that can interact directly with home. In addition, imagining home happened through someone else's subjectivity and experience of my own personal history. The web of images

Thursday 20 >
 [Take Lemon + salt + knife from home]
 Visit my cousin Nagham and teta
 in the village with my father.
 (mum could come as well) - 20 minutes ride.

- > After resting - preparing f Lunch
 By car to 'Marwanieh' my dad's village.
- > In Marwanieh lives my grandma with Salma, my aunt.
 Next to them f around them live my uncles f their families.
- > The village has been big part of my childhood, games, friends, outdoors, nature and lots of family.
- > When we lived in Sour, as a child we went there in the weekend.
 As we moved to Said'a, closer, we were there more often.

> you'll arrive to teta's house.
 She'll receive you at the balcony - or in the Living room.
 She might be just finishing her prayers as you arrive, or checking on someone in the house next door, ~~but~~ then Salma will receive you.

- > Some fruits.
 Some tea.

Kiss her as you ~~try~~ cup her head with your hands - and give her my greetings.

Lina betsaleem âlay Ki Kteer
 (Lina greets u a lot) d

- > Give her my picture, to put it on the Living room table -
- > I would like you to sense the quietness of the house.
 - the temperature.
 - the colors f the texture of the floor, walls f external walls of the house.
 - the texture f colors of her veil f dress.
 - the texture of her feet f hands.

- > sit next to her.
- > Later Nagham will arrive and take you to 'Balayet' - the name we used to refer to the spot we played as kids.
- > Go there with Nagham alone.
 - As you walk, keep senses attentive to the soil textures, the houses, the looks of the people.
- > Find a spot to sit on the rocks or grass or the 'Balayet'.
- > Ask Nagham if you can sit facing the deserted blue house on the other side of the hall, where we used to pick up flowers.
- > Find a moment, to bring out the kmon f give it to Nagham to peel it off...
- > If she has a picture of her son, Karim.
- > back to my teta's house
 - probably my dad will give you a tour to say hello to my uncles... greetings.

> back to Said'a.

- > At home, prepare, write... work -
- > On T.V. with parents.

Teta:

- > name: abdet el zohra / just teta
 age: ≈ 80
- > solid, strong woman.
- > straight back, broad shoulders f ~~also~~
- > small wet eyes.
- > She wants to do everything herself still
- > She baked bread the traditional way as we sat next to her eating fresh ~~was~~ bread dipped in Labneh f olive oil.
- > Always received us at the balcony - f said goodbye there.
- > She raised 11 children.
- > knows the character f needs of all around her f tries to care for all of them.
- > she remembers details if you tell her f follows its development with you even if after a year.

and narratives that constructs my identity is now interwoven with those of another subject coming from a different place and understanding her self and history through different parameters than mine.

Jeroen Fabius (2006), who followed my work and wrote about it, brings forward some of the interesting problematics of this experience as he says:

This project has become a hyperbole of the impossible. Sending a stranger to your intimate world to perceive the familiar can only produce misunderstandings. A 'journalism' into the intimate can only distort what is found. The stranger disappears into the world that is intimate to you, and thus becomes no one. What are the moments in our society when people are reduced to disappearance? (p. 11)

In Lebanon, Aitana became a "function". Her presence triggered and allowed remembering and imagining to happen on the side of those involved in the project in Lebanon. Later, during the performance, Aitana presents her stories and impressions, re-establishing her subjectivity and reflecting on the potentiality of the "disappearance of the subject" to explore other modes of "identity", "presence", and thus encounter.

Aitana's experience and narratives from Lebanon, what her body received within the emotional space of the family and the intimate framework I set up for her, made the memories in my notebook far less static and presented them as available or

communicable through someone else's experience of them. This experience brought forward similarities, differences, and a lot of confrontation. It did not reveal anything I did not know or bring about any major discoveries about my own history, but it definitely brought different intonations and urgencies to it.

The most important issue explored was not the truthfulness or plausibility of the autobiographical narrative, but rather its performative effectivity which I would like to pursue exploring in my coming projects.

While working, in general, I also pursue the best conditions in which experience can be communicated, avoiding the expectation that the resulting artwork should be a spectacle, trying instead to develop my sensitivity for conditions that are appropriate for the sharing of experience. Above all, I realize that these conditions are temporal and transitory – only visible at the moment when the sharing of experience is happening. I would like to locate my work at an intersection where the micro-scale of the individual meets the macro-scale of wider cultural and political issues. And my desire is to place the audience at this intersection.

"Ultimately, I only see Amsterdam. And it is in the sight of Amsterdam that past, faraway places await me" (Alphen, 2002, p. 67).

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Performance & I

Marya Kazoun

Marya Kazoun is a visual artist who has been exploring the interplay between performance and artwork. Kazoun's artistic endeavor is characterized by her need to communicate through action – specifically by creating works where the public interacts with the artist's physical presence in real time. Her staged presence within her installations or as she roams the streets in costume displays a theatrical dimension. At the same time, the intense focus on performing the body of the artist points to the performative gendered quality of her work. Her inclusion in this issue of al-Raida aims at exposing the reader to an unfamiliar example/genre of female Arab visual artist exploring the field of performance art, a phenomenon rarely seen in the Arab world.

I had organized a photo shoot for an installation I had “finished” in 2003 entitled *Steady Breath*. I had made an outfit but I was not quite sure why I had made it nor what its purpose was. I was wearing it and got into one of the pictures of the installation to show the scale of my work. When I got my slides back from the photographer and looked carefully at them, it suddenly hit me. It all made sense: I felt that the work needed me to support it, to help it sustain itself.

The project started with an urge to embody the works. Having a similar external shell, I wanted to become part of those works, like them, “their equal”. However, I had something they did not have: I was alive and moving. I sometimes would become the protagonist of the situation. Do I do it to compensate for their weaknesses or to highlight the fact that I am alive?

In my work, I create worlds, and I explore them long after. I uncover worlds in which my genuine self can “exist” independently from outside social boundaries and where I can feel “safe”. They might be utopian worlds.



Steady Breath, Installation/ Performance, 2003

For the viewer, these little worlds might appear like renaissance wunderkabinetts (cabinets filled with wonders).

Gradually, the more I got into performance, the more doubts started arising: Was I overestimating



Personal Living Space, Installation/ Performance, 51st Venice biennale, 2005



Personal Living Space, the model - Print on canvas, 51st Venice biennale, 2005

my own appearance and abilities? Did I have a secret need for admiration and a need to shock the audience? Furthermore, I started questioning eroticism, narcissism, self-image, and self-representation. I also had questions about the human body. Some elements, such as the processes and rituals entailed in the making of my outfits, were consistent in my pieces. I also wondered how much of it was inducing stupor. What did I want the audience to see and feel? What about the level of eroticism present in those performances?

During the last few decades, contemporary performance art has been characterized by a strong relationship between the self and the body: "The performer is obsessed with the urgency of displaying his body in order to be able to exist in the first place" (Lea Vergine, cited in Kunst, n.d. ¶ 2).¹

I looked up performance artists, women specifically. I started to research their reasons for performing. The era of the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by a predominance of modernist ideas, like women using their bodies to express feminist statements. Other topics that were widespread during those times were ecology, body, and earth art. A lot of women artists often used the nude to challenge the traditional male ideas of women and nudity at that time.

Who do I dialogue with? I dialogue with society and the audience. The most crucial moment in my performances is the moment of awareness, when a kind of tacit agreement takes place between the viewer and I.

How important is the role of drama and acting? Am I acting? Why do I feel this urge to dress up?²

I find flirting with reality very appealing. I am very interested in the discomfort zone, whereby the viewer finds him/herself looking at me. S/he probably wonders if it is all for real. Am I serious?³

Arthur Danto defines these scenes as "arts of disturbance", the destruction of borders between art and life. This compromises reality itself.

I am very interested in bringing the viewer back to how my objects are created. It feels comfortable, honest, and safe to share my art-making process with the audience. I also sometimes get tired during my performances, and I sleep. While an actor does not really sleep, I do. My performances would last forever if I did not have time constraints.

I try to communicate an honest process. How much more real can it get?



Mamma the Rings are Hairy, Installation/performance, 2005



Pull Christian, Pull, Pull, Installation/Performance, 2005

Not all my work requires that I be part of it. I still want the objects that I create and use during my performances to have a life of their own, to “work” or stand on their own. I only become part of the work when it “needs” me.⁴

My creative process goes through many different stages. Some are sometimes obvious to the audience and to myself. Some make their way slowly, unconsciously, or accidentally into the pieces. The most interesting moments of my work are when I can acknowledge an accident. Sometimes, there is an immediate awareness of these “accidents”. Sometimes no. One has to break one’s rules to reset new ones.

I slowly begin to make up stories in my mind for the objects I create. They suddenly become alive and have attributes and functions. I start talking to them, and we carry out a full-fledged dialogue. My performances generally involve me dialoguing with

my pieces in front of an audience. I perform actions I would normally perform privately in my studio. I would sew my pieces, wrap them up, and perform “operations” to stitch up their “wounds”.

Sometimes, there is no story. Sometimes, the story/script comes after the object has been created. At other times, the script comes first, gets elaborated on, and becomes clearer while working on the piece. I am very aware of the role of fairytales and children’s stories in my work. Beasts and gentle creatures are very present as well. There is a lot of theater in my performances; I have a lot of admiration for Samuel Beckett. I’m also a movie and soundtrack addict. I sometimes feel the influence of Hollywood and its culture seeps in unconsciously. It sometimes feels like I am playwriting.

Below is a dialogue for a piece entitled, “Fortune Seeker,” shown in the Art Miami Fair of this year:

Black sorcerer: What are you doing little girl?
Little girl: I'm making a Totem! I need to find fortune. I am a fortune-seeker. Look, look! I used windshields, mops so I can see my fortune more clearly; the windows are so dirty sometimes that I can't see anything clearly. Can you help me, black sorcerer, to make it more beautiful?
Black sorcerer: (smiling) What should I do?
Little girl: I am filling it up with details and beauty so it hears and grants all my wishes. We all fill our lives with details while we wait... You can do the same things I'm doing ... Coucou! Coucou! Catch me, beautiful sorcerer!

My interest in the dynamics of space, like performing in the street in a big installation and with other people, is fading. I have come to realize that all those dynamics are tenuous and inseparable. As Cecilia Foote has mentioned on the show she curated in March of 2007, and quoting from her exhibition leaflet, "Intimate Bodies, Public Spaces",



Self-Portrait, Installation/Performance, 2005 Stitching

"Our bodies carry intimate feelings in public spaces, and we bring back home the experiences perceived through our own bodies in the world".

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ENDNOTES

1. Lea Virgine is an Italian writer and curator who has been active in the field of contemporary art since the 1970s. She has written many books and curated many shows on body art and performance.
2. Cindy Sherman is a good example of an artist who transforms herself completely in her photo works and films. She would use her own body to portray the object.
3. It slowly became clear that I wasn't acting. I'm interested in that edge where the viewer thinks, "Is it an act or is it real?" Am I a character from real life or am I just putting on an act?
4. Another artist/performer I relate to is Lee Bull with her costume-making and some of her aesthetics. Lee Bull is a leading contemporary Korean artist based in Seoul. She has become known in the 1990s for her high-tech sculptures and performances based on mythical monsters and futuristic cyborgs. Her concern with the human body, gender and technology has led her to the construction of worlds where flesh and metal meet. I also relate to a number of Mathew Barney's works. His art is a celebration art, a critique, and a celebration of commercialism and blockbuster Hollywood filmmaking. I guess I relate to others in other ways.

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Fear and Laughing in the Occupied Territories:

Comedienne Maysoon Zayid Transforms Lives

Dalila Mahdawi

A young woman takes a seat before the microphone, flicks her hair, and surveys her audience. Shaking slightly, she introduces herself, "My name is Maysoon Zayid and I'm a Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey... and if you don't feel better about yourself, maybe you should!" The crowd roars. Maysoon Zayid certainly ticks all the minority boxes in both the Arab and American worlds. She seems to derive strength from these apparent weaknesses, however, and successfully incorporates them into her career as one of the best Arab-American stand-up comedians. At a time when so many of her Arab-American cousins are trying hard to be taken seriously, perhaps Maysoon's willingness to ridicule her identity is what makes her so successful. Her jokes are sometimes shocking, often outrageously rude, and full of foul language. A particularly memorable anecdote describes Maysoon's experience of meeting the late PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, who suffered from Parkinson's, which meant he shook continuously. Maysoon's cerebral palsy means she, too, shakes, which some of her audience members have wrongly assumed is induced by drunkenness. As Arafat and Maysoon shook hands, they both trembled so much that they unintentionally started belly dancing. They never succeeded in shaking hands, although Arafat did manage to lick Maysoon's face.

Maysoon was born in the 1970s to Palestinian immigrants and raised in Cliffside Park, New Jersey. Original aspirations to become an actress led her to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in acting

from Arizona State University and to cameos in television shows like *Law & Order* and *As the World Turns*, but it soon became clear that she didn't fit the mold. She turned to comedy, giving free performances throughout New York City. She quickly began receiving positive coverage on the comedy scene.

Following the September 11th attacks in New York, negative images of Arabs abounded in the American media. Some of Maysoon's non-Arab friends asked if she had known the attacks were going to happen, while others stopped talking to her. Her sister, a UN employee, even received death threats. In response to the experiences of Arab-Americans, Maysoon co-founded and co-produced the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, which may be considered a creative form of political activism. The annual festival features Arab and Iranian comedians, whose stand-up act addresses prevalent stereotypes of both Americans and Middle Easterners and brings some much-needed positivity to the beleaguered Arab-American community.

One stereotype Maysoon dismantles is the image of the repressed, veiled Arab woman. "I feel it's a sense of duty - one of the motivations for my comedy is to bring a human face to Arab Muslim women", says Maysoon.¹ It seems laughter is more powerful than fear, for the festival continues to sell out each year, attracting an ethnically-mixed crowd. Maysoon was even told by an American member of the audience that he was surprised to encounter a Muslim woman he would consider sleeping with.

"I think that was supposed to be a compliment",² Maysoon concludes with her trademark optimism, choosing to ignore the racism and sexism of the remark.

Maysoon's activism stretches across the globe to Palestine, where she spent several summer vacations as a child. She was the first comedian ever to perform standup in Palestine, with performances in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Haifa. A graduate of the Hala Salaam Maksoud Foundation for Arab-American Leadership, she founded Maysoon's Kids (website: <http://www.maysoon.com>) in April 2001, during the second Intifada, to assist the growing population of disabled children in the West Bank. Maysoon spends three months a year in Palestine, traveling between eleven refugee camps³ to run an art program for disabled, wounded, and at risk refugee children. The program benefits the local economy, as orphans are provided with Palestinian-made toys, shoes, diapers, and underwear. The program also supplies disabled and wounded refugee children with eye exams, glasses, computers, and prescription medicine. Maysoon's Kids is expanding rapidly. Four former Maysoon kids currently receive full scholarships to Bethlehem University, and two more will be paid for in 2008. Funding for Maysoon's Kids is raised partly through her comedy tours and partly from fundraising and donations on her website.

Maysoon has recently begun promoting education by providing tutors to enable Palestinian seniors to graduate from high school and find families to sponsor their college education in America. A natural consequence of such scholarships will be to humanize the Palestinian people in the eyes

of Americans and, hopefully, lead to a better understanding of the conflict, of which media coverage is so biased. Maysoon's Kids also provided cooked meals to 90 needy families throughout Ramadan in 2007, lunch and milk for children at the centers, an occupational and play therapy room in Jelazon and, in collaboration with Playgrounds for Palestine, a playground in Silwad.

When I asked her whether her comedy might be seen as a way of bridging the gap between Americans and Arab-Americans, Maysoon replied: "No, I think of it as a way to put shoes on kids' feet. I love doing stand-up, but my main goal is more about humanising than bridging" (M. Zayid, personal communication, August 23, 2007).

What is the secret of Maysoon's success and her large Arab and Arab-American following? "Comedy is misery plus timing",⁴ according to Maysoon. Her audience seems to be growing continuously, as is reflected by coverage on Al-Jazeera's *Everywoman* program, ABC's *20/20*, features on Comedy Central's *The Watch List*, and in the upcoming Adam Sandler movie, *You Don't Mess With Zohan*. She has also been hard at work in Los Angeles on her own feature film, *Little American Whore*, set to be produced by Kathy Najimy in 2008.

Maysoon is a testament to the strength and ability of disabled Arab women. Her humanitarian work and comedy are not only changing lives, but also opinions.

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ENDNOTES

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4. Check Maysoon Zaid- 'Finding Comedy in Ramallah', BBC, Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/outlook/news/story/2007/06/070628_zaid_palestinianterritories.shtml

Roundtable on Women in the Performing Arts

“Women in the Performing Arts” was the subject of a round table discussion held at the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World in January 2007. The participants were Nidal Ashqar, a pioneer actress and director, and the first Lebanese woman to manage her own theater *Masrah al-Madina*; Julia Kassar, renowned Lebanese actress and acting instructor; Joelle Khoury, pianist, composer, and founder of the Jazz quintet *In-Version*; Yasmina Fayed, singer in the troupe *Shahadeen ya Baladna* and assistant producer at *Future Television*; Pamela Koueik, singer and university student at LAU; Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, director of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, and Mona Knio, guest editor of *al-Raida*. Due to space constraints, the following are excerpts from the two-hour discussion.

Guest editor Mona Knio welcomed the participants and the discussion began.

Mona Knio: Are female performers more independent than ordinary women?

Joelle Khoury: The first thing that comes to mind when trying to answer this question is yes female performers are more independent than ordinary women. Female performers are free to say and do whatever they please and express themselves the way they want to. On the other hand, I have to admit that they are not fully independent, simply because they are criticized more than ordinary women. Ordinary women fail to pose a threat; they do not shock people in society. The stronger the personality of a female performer and the more outspoken she is, the more she is fought and feared.

Being a female composer I sense a sort of animosity that other colleagues do not suffer from. I believe that artists who sing, dance, or play an instrument are less criticized than me. When a woman composes music and does not do so in a traditional way she is strongly criticized.

Yasmina Fayed: I believe that ordinary women are a bit more powerful than female performers simply because their everyday life is not under scrutiny. The accomplishments of women in general become apparent through their children and the way they raise them. However, when it comes to female performers the situation is different given that as public figures, their life is scrutinized. We are living in a patriarchal society where women are often controlled and monitored by their male counterparts in whatever they do.

Pamela Koueik: I believe that female performers have more freedom than regular women simply because they work and are financially independent. A female performer has a strong personality simply because of her way of life and work experience.

Nidal Ashqar: I think the time factor is very important to take into consideration when talking about female performers, given that they have been historically judged according to the era they were living in. For instance Sarah Bernhardt was viewed as a whore even though her friends were among the greatest writers and poets of that time. They used to nourish her intellectually and she learned a lot from them.

Female performers during the eighteenth and

nineteenth century were considered loose. They could come and go as they pleased and could say whatever they wanted. Moreover, their body, mind, and intellect were free. They could display their bodies publicly and sleep around with whomever they wished. People enjoyed watching these women perform but deep down people did not respect female performers.

I believe that when the opera and ballet were introduced, people valued such art forms. Even though ballet dancers wear short skirts (tutu) and show their legs, ballet is still respected because there is a barrier between the audience and the performer's body. The moves in ballet are calculated and studied. What the ballerina is performing are moves that are mechanical and have no relation to everyday life. Ballet has no message to deliver and doesn't change anything in one's life the way the opera does. It is very abstract and the bourgeoisie accepted such an art form. Members of the bourgeoisie in our part of the world approve that their children learn ballet but not belly dancing or acting.

In the past, acting had a lot of stigma surrounding it. Actors were considered to be doing something against the law. Actors were considered to be rebels against society, social outcasts, in their actions, in their profession, in their demeanor, and in their portrayal of characters on the stage using their body and loud voice.

There is no doubt that female performers in Lebanon are still paying a high price. We the female performers of the 1960s became the prototype because the younger generation started looking up to us. Against our will, we became a role model. It was a novelty to see women from respectable families sing, dance, and act.

Theater work in Lebanon did not start with the Baalbeck Festival. It started on the streets with Theater Farouk and Badi'a Masabni's theater. In those days singing was more acceptable than acting. Female performers suffered a great deal. Some became outcasts and rebels and others were stigmatized then later got accepted. Mothers worked

hard on fathers to have them accept their daughters who worked in the performing arts field given that it is a profession that is looked down upon. It was a taboo. Men refused to marry female performers. They believed that actresses were whores.

Julia Kassar: People are scared of female performers. Given that they are very comfortable in their skin and are very outspoken in their everyday life, they become blunt with their husbands and hence scare them. Sometimes men fail to accept their daring attitude and their bluntness. Female performers are used to theater work where everything is out in the open.

Dima Dabbous: Women performers are under a lot of pressure. They are rejected by society. Moreover, performing is not like any other acceptable profession such as being a lawyer or a teacher. The nature of theater work, the odd working hours and late hours you have to put in are all not very normal.

At university I majored in communication arts and I recall all the hardships I endured in trying to convince my parents that I had to stay up very late rehearsing. Working on a play required putting in long hours. We used to work very hard as students, when everyone else had finished their course work and could leave the university, we started rehearsing. I recall my mother's reaction when I was directing or acting in a play, she used to get very upset when I got home very late. She often lamented "I don't want you to continue in this major ... what is this university and what is this major?"

Nidal: Not just that, as performers we are fully exposed to people. We use our bodies and voices and everything we have for the sake of the audience. I believe that actors are bare in front of the audience. Sometimes you need to show some flesh in certain scenes and it is deemed unnecessary by the audience and you are criticized.

Julia: I believe that female performers are not independent. I chose the theater because it offered me the freedom I needed. The only place I feel

totally free is when I am on stage. When I leave the stage I feel more restricted. We lead a schizophrenic life as a result of our society. As actresses we have to succeed because if we don't, people will criticize us. If we remain the way we are and preserve our independence and freedom and we always offer something new, people will eventually accept us the way we are. People like what is nice, innovative, and new.

In our daily life we are not free since we are chained and bound by a lot of constraints. If we are to talk about the financial aspect, well, we might work for six months and then stop working for two years. How can one be independent when one doesn't have the means and is financially insecure? I believe that being independent as a performer requires financial stability and success. I can be independent once I have the financial power to change the norms.

One very important point I have to add is that performers and actors are as critical of our work as ordinary people. I believe that ordinary people are the ones who support us. We are still working because they love us.

I will give you an example. In the first movie I participated in I was asked to act in a daring love scene that lasted around 5 minutes. I was hesitant to take the part but then accepted because I really wanted that part. I did the love scene and even though I was certain that I wanted to do it, I later had a deep personal crisis. I knew that I was not the first one to perform such a daring love scene. (Twenty-five years ago, Gladys Abou Jaoude appeared fully nude in the Lebanese film *al-Qadar*). The film was censored, not because of the daring love scene but for political and religious reasons. A huge outcry took place on the part of the intellectual body that met in Beirut Theater to sign a petition against censorship. In the meeting, many intellectuals criticized the love scene in which I appeared. I didn't hear any comment from ordinary people who watched the film (it was screened for 6 months in Lebanese theaters). I heard hurtful and mean things from the so-called intellectuals. I also believe that some intellectuals work hard

on censoring us, the performers. Unlike them we can be outspoken, we say things that they long to say but are unable to. I believe that the previous generation was much more daring than we are.

Joelle: I agree. My latest CD has a picture of me wearing a sexy top. I was gravely criticized by a lot of my friends who consider themselves to be cultured and intellectuals simply because according to them it is shameful to appear in this sexy manner when one is creating alternative and intellectual music. I believe that I am free to do whatever I want. I don't want anyone to dictate to me what to do or how to behave.

Mona: How does the image of the female performer affect ordinary woman in society? How is the image of female performers affected by how the media portrays them? We sometimes play games in order for society to accept us.

Joelle: People are allowed to play games provided that this gets them to where they want and fulfills their goals.

Mona: Joelle, in your profession as a composer do you think about the image you are portraying and how society will view you?

Joelle: I think about that constantly especially that within my family I faced a lot of rejection because of my profession. There are no artists in my family so my parents often made me feel like I was good for nothing. They fought with me because of my career path and refused to talk to me for five whole years. After I got married and when they realized that my husband accepted and respected me and my profession they decided to give me a chance. The first time my mother saw me on television giving an interview, she said: "My daughter is not that bad". Bottom line is I was very hurt by my parent's attitude. My daughter too didn't accept me at first. She often used to complain and say: "Why aren't you like other mothers? Why don't you dress like other mothers?" She also used to tell me "people will leave the minute they hear your music". But now things have changed. She accepts me and respects my music. She often helps out during my

concerts and invites her friends and parents to attend and listen to my music.

Yasmina: When I first sang one of our alternative songs that ends with the phrase *el-'ama bi albak* (i.e. damn you) in front of my parents and grandmother they laughed. In their presence and while performing the song, I fought back the urge to laugh. People found the song very appealing. To be honest, I used to feel hindered by the fact that my parents were present when I had to say daring lyrics. It is important for people to be able to express themselves. Also sometimes when you want to pass a message across you have to shock people. An example is the play *Haqi Neswan* (i.e. women's talk). I liked the daring element in the play. It spoke freely about a lot of subjects that are taboo and hush hush. It addressed the issue of menstruation openly and exposed other women's issues bluntly. They named the vagina "coco". I was saddened that it is no longer performed in theater.

Dima: It all boils down to one's upbringing. As girls we are raised not to express a lot of things. We shouldn't reveal our strong personality, its *aib* (i.e. shameful). We shouldn't talk about certain issues. Unlike us, men are free to do whatever they want. If a boy/young man swears then it is ok. As for us it's an absolute no. A female performer is a role model. When she is daring and outspoken she encourages other women to speak out. Who gets scared in the process? Men.

Yasmina: I want to add a comment. We started off with *mouwachahat* (ie. terza rima or third rhyme). The young generation saw in us something unusual. We influenced the youth who were not raised to experience or appreciate this type of music. After seeing young people of their age group singing this genre they started thinking maybe this music is interesting. They got introduced to many songs through us.

Nidal: This is so true. When in 1995 we at Theater al-Madina organized events to commemorate the month of Ramadan and invited classical authentic Arab groups to perform, we managed to attract a lot of people. The aim was to introduce the younger

generation to classical and authentic Arabic music. The youngsters, who were raised huddled under staircases hiding from the shelling during the war years, grew up listening only to the *taqatik* (i.e. low brow pop songs). We hosted the best groups and the most beautiful voices that sing classical Arabic music. We succeeded in attracting the younger generation, many of whom fell in love with this genre of music. Yasmina you are a live example, you sing classical Arabic music and then you move on to sing a song that has the phrase "damn you" in it and you are liked and accepted.

Dima: Yasmina, I wonder what would have happened had you started off with singing alternative songs like the one with "damn you" in it.

Yasmina: We knew we couldn't do that since we had to establish ourself as a serious band first.

Knio: How does the voice of the performer shape the Arab woman?

Nidal: What is trendy and fashionable affects people's perception and style of dress. People take the performer as a prototype to copy and emulate. Even if the performer is not a good influence people still copy her. A lot of girls nowadays are very much affected by famous female singers and want to be like them. Some want to be Haifa Wehbe, others try to imitate Nancy Ajram. Video clips promote European fashions. Black *kohl* is very much in thanks to the video clips.

People tend to construct an image of the performer in their mind and they sometimes mix between the real performer and the character she is portraying. People attend a play and their aim is to listen to what Nidal Ashqar has to say. In fact it is not what Nidal has to say but what the character is saying. When the portrayed character overshadows the performer, it is very difficult to differentiate between them.

Mona: Actually change is not well tolerated; changing genres and exposing oneself to the scrutiny of the audience isn't easy. I can give the example of Fairouz who was criticized by her fans

when she changed the genre she used to sing and ventured into something more daring.

Nidal: Like everyone else female performers want to progress. If the performer is loved by people and has a renowned status in society she will succeed. Fairouz is a person who has a huge effect on the collective memory of people. She has influenced very many people positively. Had she stuck to the old genre of music she used to sing she would have remained in the past, a remnant of the collective memory. She managed to make a transition from the past to the present. Fairouz managed to move on. She sang songs like *kifak inta mala inta* and created the antithesis of the Rahbanis when she spoke of the real Lebanon. She gave people a shock but they later accepted her.

Pamela: The way the female performer presents herself makes the media respect her or not. I belong to the new generation and I sing light songs and the media likes me. They do not criticize me because the way I present myself differs from others. People accept me the way I am. I do not overdo it. I don't exceed the limits. On the contrary I perform in a very respectable manner.

Nidal: So what you are trying to say is that when you are true to yourself, people respect you and accept you.

Pamela: Yes.

Nidal: I agree that when a performer resembles herself when performing she is accepted. The way one presents oneself to the audience is very important. Maintaining this image makes people like us for who we are. Then if we are to shift in genres we can simply do so because people accept us and we grow stronger.

Julia: The media has promoted a catastrophic prototype of the female performer: all plastic from top to bottom. This is really outrageous. Performers are reduced to dolls. I am not against plastic surgery and beautifying oneself. However, it is sad because for a performer to succeed nowadays she has to be fake and appear flawless.

Fortunately, there are still performers who refuse this stereotypical portrayal, women who are true to themselves and who try to promote an alternative image to the one prevalent and the one that is in vogue. People are being indoctrinated to like what is offered. It is important to highlight the fact that there is an alternative image that is also beautiful, acceptable, and real.

Yasmina: People think differently of the female stereotyped image promoted by the media. People are more down to earth and deep down they identify with people who are more like them and resemble them.

Julia: We should fight this trend and work hard on promoting an authentic image of the female. It is difficult to sustain but as long as we exist we can easily expose the difference between us and them.

Nidal: The media outlets are media merchants. Each and every one reminds you of a store that is trying to promote its own goods.

Julia: Introducing change is possible on a small scale (personal level) but on a larger scale it becomes very difficult. I remember during the war years, television stations were fighting to have the exclusive rights to airing plays. Theater back then had more weight. Nowadays nobody cares.

Nidal: Unfortunately the ten television stations in Lebanon are like kiosks that promote their merchandise. There used to be a state owned television station (Tele Liban) that we performers and artists helped build and sustain but was killed [currently under-funded Tele Liban mostly broadcasts re-runs of old Lebanese series and shows]. Those who are responsible for the breakdown of Tele Liban did so to found their own television stations which are more like retail stores that have contributed to destroying our taste in music, singing, and theater. There are ten merchants who own television stations that promote what sells in the Gulf. They don't bother spending a penny on what doesn't sell in the Gulf. To add to that there are many journalists who are ignorant. They are not cultured in the sense that they have no idea about the history of music, poetry,

etc. Some journalists are hired personnel who cash a check every time they promote a specific artist. Can you believe that they get paid by the artists they promote? This is very unfortunate.

Dima: This is so true. With the hegemony of Arab media in satellite channels there are hours and hours of airing time to be filled. The audience with the money is located in Saudi Arabia.

Nidal: We the performers and artists are exhausted. Unfortunately when the performers who belong to my generation start dying, what we will be left with are the petty cheap artists along with a handful of other serious performers. It is very difficult to remain authentic and preserve what is there simply because satellite television has invaded our houses.

Julia: Television stations would actually lose in France if the government doesn't sponsor and provide a budget for artistic work that is not commercial.

Nidal: A huge budget is allocated to support the theaters in France. Unfortunately I don't expect anything from the Lebanese government. I believe that since the Independence in 1943 and up until today Lebanon is the country of the uneducated. We are reputed as being intellectuals but we are not, we are also not united, there is no cultural unity. We have groups of people that follow their religion and confession.

Yasmina: I love Lebanon and I refuse to leave this country. What bothers me though is that some television presenters are in positions unfit for them. For example you will find a young woman who has a program about the latest films and knows nothing about the films, who the directors are, who the actors are. She is good at reading what is written on the piece of paper in front of her. One feels that she is presenting, she is shallow. If you ask her a question other than what is written on the paper she is reading she gets lost since she is not knowledgeable in this field.

Nidal: There is a difference between the performers in theater and presenters on television. What scares

me the most is the fact that Lebanese journalists are neither cultured nor educated. In earlier years, whenever there was a play, it used to get extensive coverage in the press. Every journalist would run the news item on the first page and would write about the play. Nowadays you hardly get any coverage whatsoever. When working on a play, we have to worry about who is going to defend it if it is censored. We have no real journalists left to defend a good piece of work in music, art, and theater, etc. You have to keep in mind that in Lebanon we are currently living in an era of decadence.

I agree with Julia that the audience is the entity/body that will defend us and support us. However, nowadays this is not enough, we need more than that to fight the current trend. Cultured and cultivated individuals who are willing to defend works of art and fight the censors are rare commodities nowadays. Art is when a person can freely express himself/herself. It is a world of make belief and imagination; a virtual world that we create out of reality.

Who are we supposed to depend on if we don't have the support of journalists, intellectuals, or the government? We are left to fend for ourselves. Therefore, on a personal level, I use my authority and my words against everyone in the Lebanese government. This is the only way to defy them. I stood by dozens of directors in their struggle with the Internal Security Forces and the censors. I am willing to defend any play even if it is the most awful play on earth because I believe that it is my duty. The theater is supposed to be a free platform where no censorship exists and where one is free to say whatever he/she wants.

Dima: Is there solidarity among women working in this field?

Nidal: I know for a fact that if I call Julia Kassar, Carol Samaha, Jahida Wehbe, Sumaya Baalbaki, or Joelle Khoury in the middle of the night and ask them to meet me at al-Madina Theater because there is a play or a song the state censors want to stop and I need their help, they will comply. They

will definitely be there. Those are the real artists, the genuine ones. They are theater people who have sacrificed their whole life for the sake of art. I often wonder whether we are able to change things. I believe what we have been doing is not enough anymore.

When the play of Lina Khoury, *Haqi Neswan*, was stopped I went down to the police station and met with the director of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and asked her why they are stopping a play directed by a graduate of the Lebanese American University and who is a free human being. By the way I don't necessarily like the play. But I believe I have to fight for Lina to remain free to express herself. I explained to the director of the ISF that the play is about women's issues and given that discussing political issues is not approved of, we might at least discuss sexually taboo subjects. The Internal Security Forces director complained that the actors are using unspoken words. I told her that only 5,000 to 10,000 people will watch the play. Let them see it, it is better than having them say that the government banned a play. I explained to her that the obscene words they use are actually heard on the streets everyday. So let them say whatever they want. I worked hard for all the plays to be performed. Then came the play *Testefil Meryl Streep*. Well when the ISF came to watch a rehearsal I instructed the actors to use auto-censorship on stage. It was a beautiful performance. The ISF officer interfered to tell me that there are vulgar words and I told them Nidal Ashqar cannot be censored. I scared them because I am outspoken.

Nidal: Saying the English word "condom" is acceptable. While *kabbout* [condom in slang Lebanese] is not.

Julia: There is a wave of fundamentalism that is spreading throughout the world. It is scary. The generation of actors and directors who came before us were fortunate because there was more freedom. People were more religious previously. Now they are

fanatics. I envy the generation that came before us. They enjoyed more freedom.

Mona: Joelle, do you face a similar problem in terms of censorship in the music industry?

Joelle: I must admit that I am very envious of theater people, given that I work on my own as a composer. There is no one I can fall back on and discuss my compositions with. You on the other hand can do things jointly. As for censorship, there cannot be much censorship on compositions.

Pamela: Censorship is directed towards those who steal old melodies.

Joelle: I wish they were that careful. My music is aired on all radios with no copyright protection. I was once asked to speak in a conference on censorship and I prepared a paper answering a lot of the questions the organizers wanted to discuss. When they read my paper they told me it was very interesting but I shouldn't be outspoken. In a conference on censorship I was censored.

A lot of people come from the West with budgets to help out Lebanese artists since they see it as a political game. They have a political agenda they want to propagate. Mainly they want to appear politically correct in the sense that they are encouraging Arab artists. They always choose amateurs who are not the best artists. They want to promote the idea that Arabs can make music, also that they are like Westerners, they can make electronic music.

Dima: Performers and musicians in the Arab world are suffering from this situation. Anyway it is important to note that there is no policy to assist and encourage Arab artists and so artists tend to look for foreign funders in Europe to help them out.

[The discussion ended].

Time Goes One Way - Against the Classification of Arts

Joelle Khoury

... [T]he present time ... ourselves ... Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing ... Change had to come ... or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of mama's knitting. (Woolf, 2000, p.107)

I was asked, on the occasion of a conference on the theme of free expression in music¹, as composer and performer of non-commercial/non-traditional music, and as a woman composer, to speak about the following topics: women composers and/or modernity versus tradition in Lebanon. Although both these topics are pertinent, they are mere parts of a broader topic, namely, what makes an individual, and what is the importance of individuality in art. For surely when we speak of freedom we speak of individual freedom.

I will start with a short true story that touched me and that I was never able to forget. It is about a great teacher and friend of mine. Let's call him Smith. Smith is a Jazz and classical composer/pianist, a renowned poet in the Washington D.C. area, a chess player, and speaker of six languages, who happened to be black and who enjoyed reciting Shakespeare sonnets while striding along the streets of the black residential D.C. area. When I met Smith, he was the house pianist at the greatest jam session in D.C., at a pub which has now been torn down. He was an unbelievable musician; all the young musicians I knew dreamed of getting close to him, but an aura of strangeness surrounded him which seemed to chase people away. I was curious about the man and started a little inquiry. I learned that he had spent some time in a psychiatric institution, which made him uncommunicative. Later on, as I got to know him, he told me some of his mishaps: he had supposedly punched some black guy who followed him around very often, bugging

him, calling him "whitey", for no other reason than Smith's admiration for Shakespeare and elegant, Western clothing. To make things worse, later in the court room, the judge got annoyed by Smith's arrogance when the latter replied in Latin when asked if he was guilty. I must add that his white classical piano teachers were also bothered by the fact that he was a black kid who played Beethoven very well. So who is Smith? Who are we? Are we sometimes guilty until proven innocent? Who is the jury and what are the rules?!

I hope this story makes clear that I am not setting up West against East, light against dark-colored skin, popular art against so-called academic music, or new against old. For freedom of expression involves the possibility of using whatever means one wishes to use to express oneself. As Francis Bacon has put it in an interview about contemporary art, "[N]ow that in the art world all is accepted and possible ... that there is no longer any possibilities for art "schools"... art has now become a mere game ... one can only react to certain situations according to one's own nervous system" (Sylvester, 1996, p. 77).

From the moment a human being is born, he/she is exposed to the outside world. The larger and the more varied the outside world is, the more information a person has to process. In our modern world, because of the expanding communication systems, the outside world is becoming larger at an increasingly rapid rate. Let's take the example of an average individual in the city of Beirut.

Let's assume that this person speaks three basic languages, namely, Arabic, French, and English. He/she turns on the television and is instantly exposed to Lebanese drama, Egyptian drama, French series, Indian musicals, CNN, Arts, Mezzo, cowboys, and politicians. S/he goes to school and studies world history and the phoenicians. S/he walks down the street and finds blue jeans, veils and shorts, cigars, cigarettes, and water pipes. He/she turns on the radio and listens to *dabkeh* (i.e. traditional Lebanese dance) and rap, blues and jazz, pop and rock, Jacques Brel, Fairuz, and Umm Kulthum. Some may enjoy reading Albert Camus and Shakespeare, maybe even Khalil Gibran (who had himself read Nietzsche and admired the work of William Blake). He/she goes to the restaurant where the choices may vary between steak and tabbouleh, spaghetti and samboussek, arak and red wine. The example is Lebanese, but it can be universally generalized.

Addressing the question of why we, Lebanese, speak English or French is not what I am here to do. Yet, it amazes me, just as it shocks numerous Lebanese artists I know, when, after displaying their work or as they are seeking help in production, to be sometimes implicitly, and very often explicitly, asked the following: "Why don't you include *dabkeh* in your music or *oud*?² Why do you quote Virginia Woolf or Albert Einstein? How come your films are inspired by Fellini? Shouldn't your photographs include more veiled women or villagers riding donkeys or details of the Lebanese war? The list goes on, but the message is the same. It was once crudely, yet maybe innocently put to me, "Why not deal with your own heritage ... (and leave Goethe alone!).

Roots exist, we can't deny it, but so do we. "... [T]he present time ... ourselves ... Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing ... Change had to come ... or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of mama's knitting" (Woolf, 2000, p. 107). Art is not a dusty archive register, and a portrait signed Rubens is not a passport photo. The greatness of Velazquez' painting *Les Menines* (1556/1557 - representing Philippe IV's royal family) does not lie in the resemblance with the real characters. The artistic statement is an expression

of one's freedom. It uses reality as a spring-board but it transcends it. All means of expression are permitted, including the use of tradition. Living in an era of openness, one is exposed to a multitude of aesthetics. Our present is openness. Blues music is becoming as natural to the Lebanese as reggae is to Europeans. Soon there will be as many British women doing the belly dance as there are Lebanese. One of the greatest interpreters of Jean Sebastian Bach, Gould, was Canadian. A work of art belongs to anyone who wishes to experiment with it, to be transported by it, even "... if the thing transporting you doesn't come from your neighbourhood!" (Byrne, 1999, ¶ 9).

You cannot teach Shakespeare to Indians and later forbid them to understand and appreciate him. The assimilation of the "other", of what is supposedly different from oneself is deep and real; it is not confined to ridiculous mimicking. As we all know, some of us might get along better with a friend than with a close relative. It is like having a preference for a color or a smell or a taste. Freedom entails choice. Don't many Americans eat Chinese food now? The world has become more diversified, offering us more choices. A world of "selective affinities", as Goethe would put it. Each according to his/her own "nervous system", echoes Bacon. "All means are sacred when the goal is right," affirms Kandinsky (1989, p. 61).

There are numerous reasons why an artist may decide, consciously or unconsciously, to use particular means of expression. These means are all considered legitimate, except the ones aiming at financial gain and/or popularity. The idea of commercial art is in itself "an oxymoron". If we believe that art is nurtured by and seeks freedom, how can that freedom survive if a certain market dictates at the outset what the artist must express and how to express it? Rules and art do not go together. Art feeds on inner necessity.

What does the market demand today? That a certain "type" of artist stick to a certain "type" of music or style. What is this thing about types and categories, anyway? For what is really interesting about a work of art lies in its singularity and not generality. Saying something that is general is like

saying nothing at all. Generalities (in everyday talk they might amount to nice weather today, or hey! how is it going? without listening to the answer) are usually fillers when one wants to avoid serious discussion or has nothing to say. By pushing artists to produce commercial art, companies and individuals who run artistic industries create a world of disguised or false statements about personal as well as social identity. They castrate the artist as well as the public whose salvation lies in the artist's hand, since most people are practically too busy to delve into and explore their own being.

In my experience, the use of the term world music is a way of dismissing artists or their music as irrelevant to one's own life. It's a way of relegating this 'thing' into the realm of something exotic and therefore cute, weird but safe, because exotica is beautiful but irrelevant. (Byrne, 1999, ¶ 4)

Art becomes a mere form of entertainment. Although fun is sometimes necessary, some of us believe art has a deeper message. "The artist is the one in charge of pulling the heavy human chariot forward and up ... if art runs away from its task, this void cannot be filled. For no other power can replace art" (Kandinsky, 1989, pp. 61-62).

Some of us non-Western artists, who happen to have chosen not to make a display of our folk art on every public occasion, tend to be misjudged. What are we being accused of here? Why should we just meddle with our own heritage and leave Western culture alone?!

Some may object: "But you are forgetting your roots, your traditions". My answer is, "What once was never ceases to be, one way or the other". Also, the task of many scholars is researching, documenting, classifying, and saving our traditions. Let us not rob them of their task. My second answer is that traditions are not a set of fixed ideas; they are living practices which are subject to change. What is fixed is called history. An artist is no historian. I must add that artists may freely make use of tradition when they feel the inner urge to do so. Bela Bartok is one great example. He was able to

capture the essence of folk music yet bring it to life by breathing into it something personal and new. Misuse and artificial use of tradition amount to prostituting and killing it.

Are we implicitly being accused of theft? (The same could be said about Westerners incorporating Oriental music in their work). Aren't culture, information, or education out there for grabs? Again, I believe it is now too late for any one group to claim exclusive ownership of one tradition, concept, or style. Knowledge is out there to be used by anyone who feels the urge to do so, hopefully for the sake of advancement and progress!

Identification with the winner?

In psychoanalysis, they call it identification with the aggressor, but we are trying to be friendly and positive here. So let us imagine that some Oriental artists unconsciously or consciously want to act Western, for the West has taken over right now. Again we are not here to judge anyone, just to defend freedom of expression. Many say Beethoven was a great composer because he hated his father, that Billie Holiday was a moving singer because her life had been miserable, and that Virginia Woolf was such a creative writer because her childhood was very awkward. I should remind you all that we are surrounded by very many miserable people. Some end up mentally ill, yet they do not give birth to a single work of art. So if the artist happens to suffer from some kind of identity crisis, we wish him/her a quick recovery, but let us not evaluate the quality of his/her work based on his/her personal life.

In conclusion, I ask myself the following: Does a style or manner of expression refer to a specific thing? Can we express the same effect using any style? Do certain ideas fit more logically with certain traditions? Do certain traditions reflect specific points of view while other styles see the world from a different angle? Can we use the vocabulary of the past without falling into the obsolete? The relationship between form and content in art is a complex relationship which has long been debated. Some modern scholars argue that art has no content at all. For example, Hanslick, a famous musicologist, believes that "there exists no universal,

determinable relationship between a given feeling and a musical form" (Braun, 1987, p. 102). We, the general public, however, seem to basically agree on whether a musical piece is "sad" or "joyful". The term basically is here meant literally, since emotions and ideas are each a unique entity. Terms, such as sad or joyful, simply reflect the fact that most humans can recognize general kinds of emotions in some art works, something they can relate to, to a certain extent. Another issue complicates matters a little further, namely, the question of whether feelings are a fixed thing. Technology has become more and more sophisticated over the years. How about feelings and ideas? Thinkers, such as Bergson and Kandinsky, believe that, if time is not an empty container – and therefore useless, and if life has a specific goal, then new emotions are continuously being born, leading to greater subtlety of vision. Life is not a series of morbid repetitions. Does this mean that there can be no repetition? That history and traditions are dead and must be discarded? That we can no longer enjoy Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or relate to it? Not really. For what once was never ceases to be; it lives within us and drives us forward. It is armed with the knowledge we already have and which we try to advance. So how does this function, this marriage, when it does occur – and it always does since memory exists – between past and present occur?

In his article, "Vers une metapsychologie de la creation", psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu distinguishes between artistic creation, and what he calls simple creativity. While the act of creating involves

breaking rules and opening up new horizons, creativity implies a mere re-arrangement of existing elements. For the purpose of meeting market demands, numerous artists have had to give up the sublime and stick to shallow forms of prettiness, elegantly (and sometimes less elegantly) re-arranging elements familiar to the ear or eye. Who is to blame? Is it true that demand reflects the real desire of the public – who's often accused by producers as well as artists of being ignorant or unable to appreciate quality artistic content? If that is the case, aren't we artists responsible for producing better artistic quality? This task can become virtually impossible since a true artist has to survive ... by eating, sleeping, keeping warm and healthy...

The situation described above is a vicious circle. It would be useless and unfair to point fingers at any specific group and blame it for all our problems. Nonetheless, becoming aware of a problem is a positive step towards improvement.

So we'll let each do his/her thing, each according to his/her own "nervous system", keeping in mind that where we are born, who we are, who we believe ourselves to be, who we want to be and how we want to be perceived by others are questions not easily answered. Yet we all love this thing called ART! So as my friend Smith used to enjoy saying, "To the integrity of each and the unity of all"!

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ENDNOTES

1. Paper originally presented during the conference entitled "Freedom of Expression in Music in the Middle East" organized by the Middle East Office of Heinrich Böll Foundation in cooperation with Freemuse and the Arab Association for Arabic Music.
2. Walid Gholmieh, composer, conductor and President of the Lebanese National Conservatory was once invited to perform one of his symphonies abroad. He was ironically asked why he didn't include *Oud* in his orchestration. His answer was: I will when you include the balalaika (not in the intention of lacking respect to either instrument).

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Mai Ghoussoub:

A Passion for Expression

Afaf Shawwa

When I first met Mai Ghoussoub in Beirut in the fall of 2004, I could not have guessed from her down-to-earth demeanor that I was sitting with a successful writer, publisher, and artist who had created a name for herself among friends, colleagues, and strangers alike. Nor that she was a founder of the cutting-edge Saqi bookstore and publishing house; writer and advocate of social, cultural, and political issues; and an internationally-exhibited sculptor and installation artist. Since that first meeting, I had the opportunity to learn all this and much more through our work together on her play *Terminators*. When Mai passed away on February 17, 2007, it was a major shock to me, as it was for many. Her death made me reflect on her life and spurred me to find out how her colleagues and friends saw her. What I have discovered tells of a woman with an infectious passion for creative expression.

Mai had decided to bring *Terminators*, which she wrote, directed, and in which she performed, from London to Beirut. My impression of her during our initial meetings was that she was an interesting woman, modern, and intellectual. She had given me a copy of the play's soundtrack to listen to as I learned my role. Along with a mix of Fairuz, Paul Robeson, and jazz and Indian classical music, I was surprised to hear Kruder & Dorfmeister - electronic DJs whom I assumed were familiar only to the "younger" generations. Her eclectic choice of music reflected what I would later discover to be her open-mindedness and variety of interests.

Anna Sherbany, artist, photographer, and a close friend of Mai's, explains that although Mai was



Mai Ghoussoub on the cover of her latest book titled *Selected Writings*, 2008.

mostly known for her writing and her publishing, it was quite recently that she was being increasingly recognized as an artist. Mai's trademark was the way she combined different creative elements like writing, sculpting, or performing. Sherbany remembers their joint exhibition, *Maianna*, at

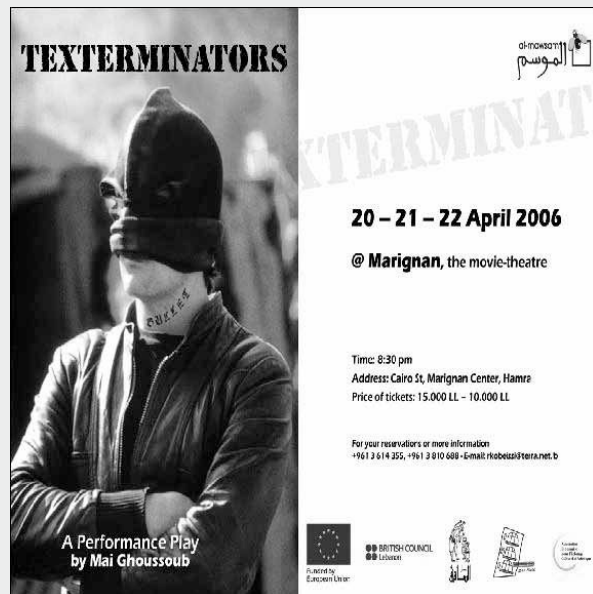
the London Biennale in 2004, in which they had recreated posters of 1960s cult films such as *Lolita* and *The Graduate*. At the opening, Mai decided to dress up like the various film characters and walk around silently. She did this to bring them to life, and not necessarily as a performance mechanism. Still, this playful approach is what characterized her plays.

In her show *Divas* (2002) Mai combined sculpture, text, and narration. It was in *Texterminators* (2005) that Mai further ventured into theater, dance, and story-telling along with supporting elements of sculpture, music, and photography. *Texterminators* was shown at the Lyric and Dominion Theaters in London; the Marignan Theater in Beirut; and finally at the Unity Theater in Liverpool.

According to Sherbany, Mai was an “issue-based” artist. This meant that any number of issues would affect her and elicit a creative response: the role of women, sexuality, and the female body, or how people of color are represented, among others. Her interests spanned different cultures. The themes of war, violence, and censorship explored in *Texterminators* were universal; she identifies the war-torn city in which the main character, Bullet, and his fellow fighters have occupied an abandoned home as “Beirut ... or was it Sarajevo?”. By having an all-female cast, with the male gang members being played by three females, Mai was also exploring the role of gender, asking: “Would women turn violent as well, when all normality is lost and the game of power is the key to survival?”

In addition to writing, directing and performing in *Texterminators*, Mai designed the costumes and make-up, selected the music, and organized the recordings along with Roula Ayoubi. Her approach to the work was collaborative. She had a vision of what she wanted as well as a clear idea of the play’s structure, but was able to draw upon each person’s skills and experience to build the play.

In this sense, Mai was not a conventional director (if there is one). She would spell out the overall effect she was looking for and allow us as performers to come up with the result. This was



Poster of the play *Texterminators*

challenging at times, given the time pressure, and compelled us to make rich creative choices. Ana Belen Serrano, who performed in all renditions of *Texterminators* and choreographed the dance pieces, describes Mai as an open-minded director: “If I saw something that should be changed, I just tried it in rehearsals and most of the times she liked it”, explains Serrano. “In this way, Mai was able to introduce new elements to her piece”.

Tania Khoury, who performed in the final run of *Texterminators* in Liverpool, adds that as an established and successful writer and publisher, Mai “had nothing left to prove to the audience. Despite the fact that she was highly intellectual, she had a fun way of looking at performance art”. This didn’t mean her view was shallow or commercial but, rather, “more enjoyable ... unpretentious”. Taking *Texterminators* to different cities, for example, was as much an opportunity for a group of artists to take a trip together and enjoy a new experience, as it was to show her work.

Souheil Sleiman, a sculptor and close friend of Ghoussoub, worked on the play’s lighting and set design and was an integral part of its development. He says, “Mai was a great artist to work with. She had ideas and with them came determination to

develop them". Sleiman explains that Mai's strength was "in getting the work shown, whether it was a performance or visual art, soon after it was made".

Those with whom I spoke also agree that she was a very caring and generous person. Serrano says: "Her support was constant no matter what the need. And she never asked for anything back; just the joy of the experience and the commitment". Khoury describes her care toward the crew in the play as "very maternal". During the show, for example, she would eagerly watch from the wings, offer words of encouragement to us backstage, or help anyone struggling with a costume change. Mai instilled an atmosphere of cooperation and support among the whole cast.

During performance week we used to go out for drinks, joined by Mai's sister Huda and other friends. It struck me how spirited, fun, and young-at-heart the pair were. One night, Huda revealed to me the story of Mai's near-fatal accident during the Lebanese civil war in which she lost her eye. Mai's subsequent determination to live optimistically and her quest for expression and creativity made her family extremely proud. After I heard the story, my admiration for Mai grew. In spite of her debilitating accident – or perhaps because of it – Mai had the fortitude to see ideas through to fruition.

In discovering further this one-of-a kind woman who loved life, people, ideas, and creativity, I have acquired a role model. In her death, Mai has inspired me – as she has done with others – to pursue my passions, to follow ideas and dreams through to fruition, and most of all to enjoy the creative process. And so, through her legacy, Mai continues to live.

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Aqbal Al-Khayr:

The First Women Only Play in Saudi Arabia

Noura Al-Sakkaf

The Janadriyya festival is a cultural event hosted by the Saudi National Guard and held annually at a location 45 minutes outside the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. The location is a housing complex especially created for the festival and consists of replicas of traditional houses and buildings from the different regions of the kingdom as well as a large hangar-like structure for theatrical performances. Each year artisans from all over the Kingdom are invited to attend and demonstrate the various wares that are created in their specific regions. An operetta is also performed for the male visitors. There are art exhibits, debates, poetry readings, and other activities housed at another location. In July of 1998, the chairperson of the women's activities at the Janadriyya festival contacted me. The year 1998 was a special year; it was the 100th anniversary of the taking of Riyadh by His Majesty King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud. This historic event led to the ultimate unification of Saudi Arabia.

In July 1998 I knew very little about the festival but I was intrigued enough to accept a meeting with the head of the committee, HRH Princess Abeer bint Turki Bin Nasser. I left the meeting having said yes without a moment of hesitation. I had just been asked to direct a play for the festival; not only a play but a play by women, with women, for women. This was an opportunity beyond my wildest dreams. Of course, I would have preferred

to direct a play with a mixed cast but in a country where gender segregation is the norm and where theater is practically non-existent, this was a rare opportunity.

The working team's collective knowledge of the current cultural scene in Saudi Arabia was at best non-existent, so Princess Abeer's contribution proved invaluable. We met the renowned female Saudi author Badriyya al-Bishr who had been selected to write the script.

Princess Abeer had also selected a design company from Los Angeles; initially I felt this was a mistake: we were a million miles from L.A. and many more cultural light years away. A local or Arab designer would have been the apt choice. However, our meeting with Jeremy Railton went so well that our fears were allayed and we knew that he and his design team would do a great job. Fortunately, a friend and colleague from college, Aliyya al-Khalidi, was living in Riyadh at the time and she agreed to be the assistant director.

The immediate concern was talent: where do we get it? The suggestion from princess Abeer and her assistant Faten Delejan was to recruit young girls from the National Guard schools. Off we went and within ten minutes of being in one of the schools we were aware that it would be impossible to work

with the girls. The overwhelming majority of the girls came from extremely conservative families and the thought of them performing song and dance even to an all female audience was unacceptable to their parents and to many of the girls themselves. We were pressed for time so instead of trying to convince the girls and their families that no harm will come from participating in such a cultural activity, we turned to the privately owned schools where participating in a theatrical activity was not frowned upon.

Given that we still had no script, it was difficult to hold try-outs. The committee for the festival whose job was to read and approve of all written material did not retain an initial script from Badriyya al-Bishr. During summer, I had read several history books about Saudi Arabia and eventually, through discussions with Badriyya and the rest of the team, we decided to do a play about prominent Saudi women who had been instrumental in helping the cause of unifying Saudi Arabia. We knew we would be working with inexperienced teenage girls, so we opted for spoken Arabic.

The plot was very simple: five girls in a school yard are always nagging about how terrible their lives are, when suddenly a rather ethereal woman appears and berates them for their attitude. She then takes them on a journey where each of the five girls witnesses the deeds of her grandmother. This simple plot line ran in parallel with the period from the taking of Riyadh in 1902 to the total unification of the country in 1932. The choice to do a play about women was obvious: it would have been unthinkable to do a play with girls disguised as men and it was crucial to highlight the role women played in the birth of the country. With the script now taking shape, we began casting. Many of the girls who ended up participating came from the private schools and also belonged to the royal family. Several were older and were at university level.

The logistical nightmare began in earnest. We were rehearsing in a private palace, where there was plenty of room. The main issue was marshalling the large number of participants, 117 girls to be precise. We had selected the main roles and

supporting roles but the majority of the girls were there to participate in the song and dance numbers and the crowd scenes. From the start we decided to divide the girls into two groups: we had five major scenes and the finale, so the groups would alternate the scenes so that they will have time to change their costumes. We further divided the girls into singers and/or dancers, small speaking parts and crowd. The groups were color-coded and we proceeded with the pre-staging phase. Aliyya al-Khalidi worked on diction and movement. The choreographer worked on dance steps, the composer Hossam Ramzi worked on voice, and I worked with the main characters on their lines, character development, and movement.

Other elements had to be worked on in parallel: costume design, make-up design, and the recording of the music. It would have been ideal to have a live orchestra but a women-only orchestra does not exist in Saudi Arabia. So Hossam went off to Cairo to record the music. Given that we had to work in a very large space with a 50-meter long stage and a large cast, the visual elements had to be simple but powerful and changes had to be minimal. Jeremy Railton and his team created a series of soft canopies that would be raised and lowered according to the scene. We had made a selection of images to be used in a large format power projection, PIGI system. It was the end of December and the start of the month of Ramadan, so rehearsals started after the evening prayers and continued past midnight. We had moved into a parking garage that was the only space large enough to accommodate us.

The disruption in the rehearsal process because of breaking the fast was not helpful. The girls lacked discipline and commitment and it was a struggle to maintain a calm attitude among them. Some failed to respect the rehearsal time by arriving late or failing to attend.

The designers and their crews were starting to arrive, costumes were ready, music was ready, and we were getting very close to the performance date. My weight was dropping fast; tempers were flaring and arguments erupting with regard to the dance

numbers and other aspects of the play. There were very few qualified stage managers in Saudi Arabia so we started recruiting people from Lebanon. We went out looking for props and we needed to find a horse. To keep the gender thing going we opted for a mare. The list of what needed to be done just grew longer and longer but there was a sense that everything was beginning to gel. Then the *Eid al-Fitr* (i.e. end of Ramadan celebration) came along and everything came to a halt; nothing for a whole week.

We returned to work knowing that this was the final stretch. A few more days of rehearsal in the garage and then we moved to the performance space. It all happened very quickly.

Then the news dropped like a bomb: some ultra orthodox religious figures wanted the play cancelled. They had written to His Majesty the King to complain, claiming that this performance was an abomination. We fretted for a good 24 hours while the work still went ahead until the news was announced that the performance could go ahead. Earlier in the rehearsal process we had added another twenty girls as a chorus as well as a Saudi woman singer and her troupe of percussionists. This sat very poorly with the religious authorities who agreed to allow us to perform only if the singer and her chorus were removed from the play and the number of performances was reduced from

three to two. We agreed reluctantly, knowing that many highly placed individuals had worked very hard to make sure our performance went ahead. This encounter with the extremists brought the importance of what we were doing to the fore. We were breaking quite a few taboos, and with increasing coverage in the press the weight of what all this meant gave us the extra impetus to carry on with ever more determination. The underlying purpose of this whole exercise became more and more precise in all our minds and we knew we had to succeed in pulling off the minor miracle of staging *Aqbal al-Khayr*, the first ever women-only play in Saudi Arabia.

The performance space could hold up to 8000 people. We had a full house. The performance started two hours late due to strict security procedures and traffic. I hid backstage. The performance started and then there was applause. That is all I remember. Afterwards the girls came to me with hugs and tears. One of them thanked me and when I asked why, she said: "I feel that as an individual and a woman that I have some value, that I can do something with my life, be someone". In a country where women are still treated as second-class citizens, this was deeply important, regardless of the quality of the work itself.

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Khayaal Theater Company:

Introducing Muslim Theater to Europe

Yasmine Dabbous

Playing against a dramatic backdrop of a map sketched by al-Idrisi, Hassan (Andrew Joshi) and his mother (Samantha Adams) stand about 1.5 meters away from each other. They simultaneously cross their arms across their chests, slightly squeezing themselves as one does to another in an embrace. Together, they tilt their heads to one shoulder then release their arms at the same time.

Hassan, a young Chinese Muslim, had just come back from a long and eventful journey during which he learned about the wisdom of selflessness. His story is one of the four acts making up *Tales from Muslim Lands*, produced by the British *Khayaal* Theater Company.

Established in July 1997, *Khayaal* (Arabic for fantasy) is a small London-based company dedicated to the dramatic interpretation of literature from the Muslim world. It provides wisdom-oriented entertainment for the stage, radio, and television.

“Our aim is to revitalize the human dream of virtue”, Luqman Ali, *Khayaal*’s founder and artistic director, said. “Revolving around this central objective are numerous other socio-cultural aims including those of promoting intercultural understanding and demonstrating reconciliation between Muslims and non-Muslims” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Khayaal’s plays are directed in a popularly accessible and appealing way. They often make their audiences laugh and always make them think about their humanity.

The poignant symbolic embrace between Hassan and his mother epitomizes *Khayaal*’s approach

to theatrical performance as the company strives to present refined artistic expression without compromising the teachings of Islamic *shari’a*.

“We take the principles of the *shari’a* very seriously in all of our work but not in a dogmatic way”, Ali, a second-generation African-American Muslim, said. “It is more about an ethos or a respect for the spirit and intent of the *shari’a*” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

A central point in this regard is the female performer. Often based on the 31st verse of *Surat Annour*, Muslim religious scholars commonly condemn and forbid female performance. The verse translates as follows:

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers or their brothers’ sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain bliss. (*Qur’an* 24:31)

But female performers in Islamic countries like Malaysia and Indonesia do exist. Most Randai

and Sijobang troops, for example, have replaced male impersonators of female roles with female actresses. Some justify their position by citing the *hadith* where Prophet Mohamed refrained his companion Abu Bakr from silencing two young female singers performing for his daughter Aisha.

Ali provides another explanation. Islamic texts, he said, are addressing the types of female performances based on the promotion of sexual impropriety and exploitation. "They should not be interpreted in such a way as to suggest prohibition of all female performance whatever the nature and circumstance of the performance", he continued (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Although many of them are non-Muslim, *Khayaal* actresses always observe on stage the modesty mandated by Islam. The costumes of female characters reflect the boundaries imposed by the *Qur'an*. Touching between genders is avoided as much as possible, as in the case of Hassan's symbolic embrace of his mother.

"The parameters in which we have to work as Muslims actually challenge us to employ our imagination in ways which we believe enhance our work rather than detract from it", Ali said (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Eleanor Martin, Ali's wife and a founding member and associate director of *Khayaal*, explained that the role of women is integral to the company's work. "In these times, Muslims cannot afford to eliminate the contribution of women from any areas of society", she said (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

A professional British actress who converted to



Eleanor Martin in *The Truth about Your Father*

Islam in 1996, Martin said, *Khayaal* provides her with the opportunity to pursue her career without compromising her faith. "It would be very hard for a Muslim woman to make a living as an actress in mainstream theater", she said (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

Martin's most recent performance with *Khayaal* was in *The Truth About Your Father*, where she plays the wife of a suicide bomber. The only performer in the play, Martin recounts classic Muslim stories to her son Jihad, helping him confront his father's hideous act. The play is meant to send a message of peace and tolerance and to bridge the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Martin observes the Islamic *hijab* and, when she works with male members of the group, she does so in the presence of her husband or of another female. "The actors we work with, although not always Muslim, are very respectful of my beliefs", Martin said (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

Most Muslim scholars who were exposed to *Khayaal*'s work showed their support for the concept. Muslim audiences also expressed their admiration and enthusiasm about the project. In fact, *Khayaal* won the very first Muslim News Alhambra Award for Excellence in the Arts in 2000.

On one occasion, *Khayaal* performed at a fundraising evening where the audience included members of the strict Wahabi tradition. *Khayaal* directors warned their cast – most of which were non-Muslim – not to expect applause after the show. To their amazement, however, the whole audience burst into a spontaneous ovation. “So many of the people in the room that night would never have dreamt of setting foot in a theater”, Martin said. “We gave them a theatrical experience which demonstrated how theater and its power can be used for a higher purpose” (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

The most difficult challenge *Khayaal* faces is financial. When the company was first established in Ali and Martin’s apartment in southeast London, the couple did not have the resources to sustain a theatrical group and decided to make it a charitable company. But the concept of a theatrical corporation was too far a leap for many Muslim donors. Most did not believe that it warrants investment or financial support.

Khayaal’s first performance, Fariduddin Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, was launched in May 1998, almost a year after the company was established. Actors, hired on a freelance basis, worked for a little more than the cost of their travel and lunch expenses. Indeed, *Khayaal* faced numerous hardships that almost prevented the dream from materializing.

“In many ways, the struggles and trials that were involved in the process mirrored the storyline of the

play”, Ali said. “We felt that we had experienced the reality of the author’s work and teachings” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Nine years later, *Khayaal* still faces the same hardships. Actors are hired on a project basis and many of the full-time staff operate as volunteers. Ali finds himself obliged to work as a writer, translator, editor, lecturer, and freelance imam – in addition to his job with *Khayaal* – in order to sustain his family.

But despite the challenge, *Khayaal* continues to grow, narrating virtuous and often comical stories of the Muslim world and attracting strong British and international acclaim. More importantly, it stands out in providing a tolerant message of Islam to the Western world and in reintroducing the theater to the Muslim culture.

“People forget that before the Prophet Mohamed played the roles of statesman, warrior, judge, and legislator, he was a supreme storyteller who captured the imagination of his audiences with a vision of a dream of virtue for humanity”, Ali said. “This function was of such importance that Allah commands the Prophet [in the *Qur’an*] to ‘relate the stories so that they will reflect’” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

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Book Reviews

Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, by Saba Mahmood, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005, 264 pages. \$23.95.

REVIEWED BY MAX WEISS

As interest continues to grow in what is occasionally called the global resurgence of religion, the importance of understanding and explaining the Islamic revival (*al-sahwa al-islamiyya*) has never been greater. Indeed, no longer the exclusive domain of scholars, students, and policymakers working in and around the Islamic world, the politics and practices of Islamism are now, suddenly, issues that matter to all. It is in this connection that Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* has already proved to stand as one of the most meaningful contributions to the field of Islamic studies over the past five years, with striking resonance across such disciplines as cultural anthropology, women's studies, religion, and critical philosophy.

Mahmood aims to explicate how certain forms of desire, embodiment, and agency have been and continue to be articulated through daily bodily practices among pious Muslim women in contemporary Cairo. Her theoretical interventions are interwoven with colorful participant observation that lends the book a unique style and political charge. Strongly influenced by the thought and writings of Talal Asad on the genealogies of the secular and the anthropology of the modern, Mahmood seeks to engage with what she calls "the mosque movement" in early 21st century Cairo on its own terms and, to borrow an often-used phrase from the critical sociology of religion, to take religion and religious belief seriously.

In chapter one, "The Subject of Freedom", Mahmood situates her interest in the women of the "mosque movement" within the broader context of Western feminist discourses on the notion of positive and negative freedom(s), with specific emphasis on the implications those debates have had for non-Western struggles towards equality and liberation. Traditionally, feminist norms have sought to promote the maximization of freedom, and have called for more effective strategies to liberate women from patriarchal structures and societies. Such an approach to feminism, however, is short-sighted, limited, and biased, as Mahmood argues, inasmuch as Western feminist theory and practice have elided and short-changed other life-worlds and other kinds of women's agency and experience by making a veritable fetish out of the notion or category of "resistance" to power.

In order to demonstrate what Mahmood considers to be other strategies for articulating feminist subject positions beyond the purview of such hegemonic feminist norms, in chapter two, "Topography of the Piety Movement", she turns to the contemporary landscape of Islamist women's engagement, focusing on various kinds of talk about faith. By centering the work of piety rather than the work of politics or struggle or solidarity, or any other political buzzword, Mahmood would appear to be venturing into terrain that is far different from what might be expected in a discussion of feminism and feminist agency. Even more problematic for such feminist common-sense is to consider how such engaged women could be perceived as agents even as Mahmood situates them within the context of "why and how movements of ethical reform – such as the piety movement – unsettle key assumptions of the secular-liberal imaginary even when they do not aim to transform the state" (p. 78). Without subverting apparently oppressive

practices of submission to male authority or religiously validated patriarchy, then, these women are to be understood as engaged in a project of ethical reform and reconstruction by other means. chapter three, "Pedagogies of Persuasion", continues this discussion by looking at the educational techniques and strategies used by the women of the mosque movement.

If the women's mosque movement is perceived as a move towards greater agency for women even through ostensible submission to dominant modes of patriarchal oppression, how are scholars and observers appropriately to distinguish between intentional and unintentional action? In other words, if the intention of an agent no longer signifies substantive meaning for making sense of human behavior – ritual, daily life, or otherwise – what standards remain for evaluating the content and character of various modes of social practice? These and other such questions surround and bedevil the last two chapters: chapter four on "Positive Ethics and Ritual Conventions" and chapter five on "Agency, Gender, and Embodiment". Returning to deal more directly with the philosophical implications of this line of argumentation, Mahmood proposes an engagement with the genealogy of Aristotelian "positive ethics" as one possible means of circumventing the stranglehold of Liberal and Kantian perspectives on the proper place of "traditional" forms of religious practice. By the logic of that latter discursive formation, religious practice would gradually be restricted to "private" spheres of human action, and the pull of "the religious" on rationalist individual citizens would precipitously decline. Rather than viewing the continuing engagement of pious women in contemporary Cairo as anomalous or somehow incomprehensible within the progressivist narratives of Liberalism and Western feminisms, Mahmood locates these women and their engaged submission otherwise. In other words, by "uncoupling the analytical notion of agency from the politically prescriptive project of feminism, with its propensity to valorize those operations of power that subvert and re-signify the hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality", Mahmood aims to demonstrate how "to the extent that feminist scholarship emphasizes this politically subversive form of agency, it has ignored other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and re-signification of hegemonic terms of discourse" (p. 153).

Again, this argument is arresting in its bold opposition to common sense, at least the common sense derived from what Mahmood terms the "liberal progressive imaginary" (p. 155). Opting out of the Enlightenment tradition of discourse on the generation of norms, positive law and the production of the autonomous human subject, Mahmood finds analytical power and insight within the tradition of behaviorism as it might be derived from Aristotelian positive ethics, only in this case, action is considered more meaningful – whether Mahmood would consider the term "meaningful" meaningful is an open question – than intention. Consequently, Mahmood is less interested in the meanings of her interlocutors' actions – scoffing, at times, at a "hermeneutical" (read: structuralist) approach to social interaction – than in the practical work done by their actions in the world, their effects. Even as such a behaviorist approach to the study of religious practice becomes more accepted, one wonders whether there is space to demand the continued translation from and perhaps even interpretation of – call it hermeneutics, or not – the array of signifiers and signified at play in various world-historical contexts of religious culture and activism.

Part of the reason why these theoretical – or, better, philosophical – questions stand out so boldly in our reading of the book stems from another point that detracts from its overall impact: the paucity of empirical ethnographic evidence. While there is much stimulating material included in the book for illuminating discussions of the philosophical traditions of modernity and the limitations of Western feminist discourse, students and scholars of the contemporary Middle East

might want more snapshots of pious everyday life in Mahmood's Cairo. To be fair, those anecdotes and conversations included in the text are tantalizingly interesting, but one could still hope for more details in this regard.

These conceptual and empirical reservations notwithstanding, *Politics of Piety* has generated an enormous volume of discussion and has already become required reading for students of Islam, religious practice, gender studies, and political philosophy in the modern Middle East. Indeed, its specific time frame should not stand in the way of it continuing to be read well after the tumult of the "secularism debates" has died down.

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Women's Rights and Islamic Family Law: Perspectives on Reform, Edited by Lynn Welchman, London and New York: Zed books, 2004, 300 pages.

REVIEWED BY NAJLA HAMADEH

Recently, Islam in general, and Islamic family law in particular, have been the object of much interest and research. The particular focus on family law is justified not only by the importance of families, the building blocks that constitute society and mold individuals, but also by the fact that Islamic family law is often the most resistant to change, as it is the hardest to disentangle from religious authority.

Works dealing with Islamic family law are sometimes apologetic, defending the law's fairness to women, and sometimes critical of its blocking women's attainment of full human rights. However, from this volume (the fourth based on research projects directed by Abdallah al-Na'im of the school of law at Emory University, and funded by the Ford Foundation), a more nuanced and often confusing complexity of final positions seeps through. The book contains country studies and one thematic study (on domestic violence), and it is sometimes the Islamic origin of law that is criticized, as in Lisa Hajjar's view that *Qur'anic* verses that permit men to chastise, indeed beat, their women are the source of cultures in which violence against women is prevalent; and that it is these verses that prevent legal systems from redressing gender injustice. At other times, *shari'a* (i.e. Islamic law) seems to be kinder to women than civil laws, as in Fadwa al-Labadi's account of fourteen Palestinian women factory-workers who died in a fire at their work-place in Hebron. In this case, the *diya* (i.e. compensation for death paid to the family of the deceased) of each woman was estimated by the civil court as half the usual *diya* for a man, whereas the *qadi al-qudat* (i.e. chief judge), who rules according to *shari'a*, claimed that the women's *diyas* ought to have been equal to those of men (pp. 164-171). More nuanced (and perhaps more puzzling) is the way Essam Fawzi blames both the image of women in Islamic thought and poverty and ignorance for the legal injustices suffered by Egyptian women.

This apparent incoherence stems largely from the nature and aim of the book. All the chapters except the one on domestic violence focus on lived experience rather than on consistency of argumentation. The central aim of "genuine and legitimate reform", to quote from Lynn Welchman's introduction, is to be served by extracting from experience recommendations that may guide future activists in realizing reform. But since the book records experience that takes

place in different cultures and settings, lessons learnt and conclusions drawn may point in conflicting directions.

In line with the book's subject matter and chosen strategy, it is natural that the contributors belong to the legal professions, and that they are activists who have lived the struggle they write about. Thus Abdallah al-Na'im, the leader of the project, Lynn Welchman, the book's editor, and several of the authors of the various chapters are teachers and/or practitioners of the law. Most of them are also activists who either focus on Muslim women's rights, or champion those rights from within their general concern for human rights or conflict resolution. With the exception of Essam Fawzi, author of the chapter on Egypt, where he got his education and worked all his life, all the authors are graduates of Western universities. The four women who wrote the chapters on Palestine, namely Lynn Welchman, Penny Johnson, Rema Hammami, and Fadwa al-Labadi, are either previously or currently affiliated with universities in the Palestinian Occupied Territories (Birzeit and al-Quds). Lisa Hajjar, who wrote the chapter on domestic violence, teaches at the University of California and has written about political prisoners and the Israeli court system. Of the two women who wrote the section on the United States, Asifa Quraishi is a member of *Karamah* (i.e. dignity), the Association of Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights; and Najeeba Syeed-Miller is a trainer of activists for conflict resolution.

Writing about these countries and topics, however, does not justify al-Na'im's claim that the book is "a global study of Islamic family law" (inside cover). The book leaves out some important types of Islamic societies, such as Saudi Arabia, probably the most misogynistic and restrictive of women. The book would have been greatly enriched by including some European Islamic societies, such as Kosovo which has outlawed polygyny - considered by other Islamic societies as an integral right of Muslim men. Such inclusions would have made the book more "global" as well as more innovative and informative about new methods for achieving reform.

Where the choice of countries is concerned, though Egyptian and Palestinian societies are extremely important because they harbor tough and interesting activism for women's rights, they have already been covered extensively in previous works. Writing about the United States, however, is an original choice, since most previous works on Islamic family law have tackled either the Middle East or the United States, but have rarely combined the two in one work. It is also a useful choice, serving as an example of the ease and speed with which change can take place in a democratic society ruled by a strong state that separates the legal from the political, and where decisions follow a professional system, away from the various forms of authoritarianism that prevail in the Arab world. One example from the section on the US describes how it merely took an explanation by lawyer Abed Awad that Islamic marriage is a contract like any other, to convince the New Jersey court in the divorce case of Odatalla vs. Odatalla (2002) that the husband should pay his wife the *mahr* (i.e. bride-price or compensation) as agreed upon in the Islamic marriage contract. Previous court-rulings in the United States deprived wives of their *mahr*, because they considered Muslim marriage to be equivalent to a religious pre-nuptial agreement and hence less binding than a true (secular) marriage (pp. 202-206).

In contrast, the chapters on the Palestinian Occupied Territories and on Egypt show clearly how difficult it is to reform family laws there, and how even more difficult it is to implement such laws once they are passed. One telling example is the endorsement by President Arafat of the Palestinian Women's Charter of 1994. To the endorsement he added the clause: "As long as there is no contradiction with shari'a" (p. 147), an addition that reduced the endorsement to a political

gesture of little real impact. These chapters show how the long struggle of Palestinian women's movements has led to little more than lip service to reform where family law is concerned, and to non-implementation of reforms in the case of restrictions on marriage-age. In her chapter in the section on Palestine, Penny Johnson comments on the relative ease with which women's demands for rights in the public sphere have been granted, and wonders at the discrepancy between this and the extreme difficulty of reform of their status within the family. But if Fatima Mernissi's analysis in *Beyond the Veil* is correct, i.e. that it is only within the family that women do not have equality with men, then the rights that Johnson sees as gained by the Palestinian women's movement are "regained" rather than "gained", since such rights were always theirs according to Islamic precepts. Such "reforms" amount merely to heightening Muslim women's awareness of rights they already have.

In Egypt there is more movement, maybe because, though the country is authoritarian and complex, there is a state. The events surrounding "Jihan's Law" (1979) illustrate this point. Jihan, the wife of president Sadat, succeeded in having a law passed stipulating that a woman whose husband takes another wife without her consent is entitled to obtain a divorce, on the grounds that such an action is "injurious to the wife per se" (p. 35). This led to a huge demonstration that caused the law to be repealed. The majority of the demonstrators were women students of Al-Azhar University, who considered this law contrary to *shari'a*. Further, twenty out of twenty-seven judges ruled that the law contradicts the right to polygyny granted to men by the holy *Qur'an*, adding that it is also against women's nature as "the natural thing would be for a wife eager for her husband's happiness to be happy herself if he took another wife" (p. 37). Despite these strange "objections" and "arguments", 1985 saw the birth of law no.100, which allows a wife to get a divorce if she succeeds in convincing the court that her husband's taking another wife is injurious to someone of her cultural milieu and social circumstances. The account shows how in passing this law, religious authorities succeeded in defying Islamists and appeasing reformists and political authorities, while showing the latter which authority carries the day, as far as decisions on family law are concerned.

It seems to me that the chief value of this book stems from its being an important source of historical information concerning specific attempts to reform Islamic family law, rather than from its recommendations about how to achieve "genuine reform". Where the book opts to describe rather than to recommend, it becomes a rich source of indirect insights concerning the misogynistic fixations, resistance to logic, and hoarding of authority that the struggle for Muslim women's rights is likely to encounter. The straightforward recommendations to future activists are, to my mind, of less significance and value. This is because they are sometimes contradictory, and sometimes influenced by the preconception of the authors, for example concerning gender equality. Some of the conclusions concerning the need to strengthen the state, to promote democracy, and to avoid head-on clashes with religious authorities may be considered generally useful recommendations. But didn't we know this before reading the book?

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Women's Voices in Middle East Museums: Case Studies in Jordan, by Carol Malt, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse New York, 2005, 150 pages including appendices.

REVIEWED BY SHELAGH WEIR

During the past few decades museums have proliferated in the Middle East, not only in the wealthy oil states, but also in poorer countries and even (notably) within the dreadful constraints of occupied Palestine. Rulers and their officials want them for international prestige, to promote dynastic or nationalistic narratives, to attract tourists, and to provide educational facilities for their publics. There is also a grass roots drive for museums. Leading local figures want to assert regional or ethnic identities and present their own accounts of customs and histories. And scholars, collectors, and connoisseurs want places to study, preserve, and display the objects of their fascination and love. The general public is, however, variably interested in visiting museums. Those with beautiful, informative displays, and stimulating activities, including in-house and out-reach educational programmes, are popular. But others are too dusty, uninformative, and inaccessible to attract many visitors.

Women play significant roles in all spheres of museum activity. As an honourable, prestigious, and potentially stimulating profession, museum work can be an attractive option for educated women with limited choices, and many find employment as curators, conservators, educators, administrators, or (a few) as directors. Some elite and wealthy women are also enthusiastic private collectors, and have founded their own museums.

The stated aim of *Women's Voices in Middle East Museums* is therefore of great interest: "to know how [Middle Eastern] museums represent, serve, empower, and advance society in general and women in particular" (although I would add "or whether" after "how"), and focussing mainly on Jordan as a "case study" (p. vii). Malt describes herself as an art historian and museologist who has travelled and lived in the Middle East, but confesses that she has "no training in anthropology and no formal experience in cultural fieldwork" (p. xi). This shows up in her methodology and presentation. Information appears to have been elicited from her female informants mainly by means of formal interviews and questionnaires, and lacks depth and detail. The book is also confusingly structured with similar categories of information fragmented in different places. This might have been avoided if the author had imposed a unifying authorial perspective.

Most of the book is based on research Malt conducted in Jordan and the West Bank in 1999, when she visited museums, galleries and sites, studied written information about them, and interviewed selected women associated in some capacity with the museum world. It begins with an introduction to the history and development of museums in the Middle East including Egypt and the West Bank, but excluding the Gulf. Thus Malt brings in outstanding women such as Hind Hussein of the *Dar al-Tifl* in Jerusalem, and Sameeha Khalil of the *Inaash al-Usrah* in Al-Bireh, though she does not elaborate on their backgrounds or achievements. Then follows a survey of the surprising diversity of museums in Jordan, which she categorizes by discipline (archaeology, ethnography, fine arts, history, numismatics etc), though not all fit easily into one category. Further information about the development and functions of selected museums is also provided in chapter four, and in Appendix A entitled "Museums in Jordan", which also contains a potted history of Jordan and of the nine major cities where museums are situated. Here she also provides facts about exhibits, addresses, opening hours, and entrance fees such as is readily avail-

able in guidebooks. Most of this historical and museological information would have been better integrated in one place – perhaps at the beginning of the book – both for easier reference, and to avoid repetition.

In chapter one, entitled “Women in Middle Eastern Society”, Malt seems out of her depth as she attempts to interweave a history of Islam and the position of women in less than five pages. In chapter two she provides background to her main subject by describing Jordanian women’s education, training, and work opportunities within the context of recent economic and political change. Here she discusses the problems faced by women working in the museum world. Like their Western counterparts they have to juggle work and family commitments, and struggle to be taken seriously and given promotions. In addition, they are expected to embody cultural identity and traditional values, which creates its own stresses. Nevertheless many are ambivalent about or indifferent to feminism. Like much else in the book, this begs for deeper exploration and theorizing. Chapter three discusses the functions of museums, then focuses more closely on the practical and symbolic functions performed in and by Jordanian museums, and the roles of women working therein. Here she rightly notes that displays convey “silent messages about power, identity, and continuity” (p. 37), and “reinforce the inequality of women and perpetuate traditional stereotypes” (p. 37). She describes how women came into museum work: “Each woman had a story, a reason, and the determination to get where she now was” (p. 41). Here one longs for a fuller rendering of some of these stories, and/or an idea of what can be deduced from them.

Malt focuses most closely on forty-two women who were, or had once been, involved in the museum world in various capacities – as curators, administrators, patrons, and founders. This is an elite sample, for it apparently excludes women who worked or still work at lower levels of the museum hierarchy as technicians and conservators. In Appendix B, entitled “Jordanian Women and Museums”, these interviewees are listed with their institutions and present or former titles or positions. Together with comments and quotes scattered through the text, this reveals that most of these women are from the upper echelons of society as well as their professions. Twenty-four of these women who were currently working in museums were also subjected to a questionnaire, the results of which are summarized in Appendix B. She lists the responses to only three questions, the value of which can be gauged from the second and its results: “Do you support the feminist movement in Jordan? Responses: Yes: 2, No: 6, No opinion: 14, Considered it: 2”. The same appendix also provides a breakdown of the ages, marital status, religion, and educational level of these women. But we are not told how many women are currently working in the museum sphere in Jordan, so we have no idea what proportion of the total this small sample represents nor whether it typifies the wider picture.

None of these methodological defects would matter so much if Malt had explored the social backgrounds and individual biographies of her chosen subjects in greater depth in order to help us understand their remarkable achievements. Information about them and short quotes by them are scattered through the text. Potted biographies of eleven women (some deceased) are also provided in chapter five. But key facts are either absent, or are recorded without any exploration of their significance. She does not mention, for example, that Sa’diyah Tall (a Syrian) was first married to Musa ‘Alami, member of a leading Palestinian family, nor that her second husband, Wasfi Tall, was the Prime Minister of Jordan who presided over Black September in 1970, and was assassinated in revenge in 1971. Malt mentions that Tall encouraged Sa’diyah to found the Museum of Popular Traditions at the ancient amphitheater in Amman (which opened in 1971), but does not mention the view I heard expressed that Sa’diyah included Palestinian exhibits partly out

of a desire to make some kind of reparation for Black September. Neither does she explain what position Princess Wijdan Ali occupies in the Jordanian royal family, nor consider how her status might have helped (or hindered) her struggles to create and direct the Jordan National Gallery. She mentions that the noted collector Widad Kawar was born in Bethlehem, but not that she attributes her special feeling for peasant culture and costumes partly to her parental background in Palestinian villages. Absent too, is any detailed analysis of how these remarkable, high-achieving women were enabled or influenced by their educational backgrounds, by family wealth, or by their collaborations with foreign researchers and museologists. One would also like to know what professional and personal obstacles they overcame in the pursuit of their goals, and how they and others evaluate their achievements. But Malt's research methods do not seem to have been conducive to eliciting such information. She interviewed some of her informants "behind their desks", suggesting an inhibiting formality, and also tape-recorded some of them. This would inevitably have caused reticence about sensitive matters such as the social and political pressures to which these women and their institutions have been subjected. But it is precisely those issues which need to be thoroughly addressed in order to understand how Jordanian (or any other) museums are succeeding or failing to address social needs, or to promote female concerns and careers (for a more detailed and nuanced treatment see Irene Maffi's *Pratiques du patrimoine et politiques de la mémoire en Jordanie*, 2003).

Malt raises many interesting questions, indeed several sections begin with a long list of questions (the most I counted was ten in succession). But she too often leaves them hanging, or veers off to quote other authors, leaving the reader confused and unsatisfied. This book will therefore be more useful as a reference work than for providing major insights into the issues it sets out to address.

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Dreaming of Change: Young Middle-Class Women and Social Transformation in Jordan, by Julia Droeber. Leiden: Brill, 2005, 327 pages. \$188.00.

REVIEWED BY LUCINE TAMINIAN

In her book *Dreaming of Change*, Droeber studies young single women of middle class background and higher education as a social group that has great influence on the direction that social and political changes are taking in Jordan. Youth, male and female, are under-represented in the anthropological literature on the Middle East, despite the fact that they constitute almost one third of the population of any Middle Eastern country. Moreover, Jordan ranks eight out of 161 countries with regard to the youthfulness of its population. As such, Droeber's book constitutes a welcome addition to social studies on the Middle East.

Droeber raises two important issues: first, the impact of women's behavior and worldviews on the process of social change in general, and on gender roles and family relations in particular; second, the significance of religion in the lives of young single women, including Christian women. In her analysis of these two issues, she focuses on young women's daily experiences and on the way such experiences shape and are shaped by their social environment, religion being a component of the social environment. Unlike some anthropologists who come to the field with strictly defined

research questions and thus see “reality” through their presuppositions, Droeber reformulates her research questions while doing her field research in Amman, thus allowing for a better understanding of her research topic.

In her analysis, Droeber draws on data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with university students she met when teaching in the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Jordan, as well as on data gathered from forty female respondents who filled out the seven-page questionnaire she prepared. The problem here is that though Droeber introduces the ten women who constitute her main informants, she overlooks any presentation of the forty respondents whom she frequently quotes in the discussion of her research questions. Who are these women? In what respects do they differ from, or are similar to, her main informants? What significance do their views have for Droeber’s research? Moreover, the author fails to include a translation of the questionnaire as an index for the reader to refer to.

Following on from Turner’s discussion of liminality and “communitas”, Droeber considers marriage the rite of passage to “adulthood”, and the ability to create a family a signifier of becoming a fully-grown member of society. Despite the fact that young single women are gaining financial power and are actively engaged in socio-political life, Droeber argues that they are liminal since, though they are past adolescence, they are not yet fully adults. As is the case with all “in-between” groups, Droeber sees the power of young, liminal women to lie in the fact that they form a “communitas” that has the power to challenge social taboos, and therefore can pose a threat to social order. In this sense, she regards young single women as active participants in social processes, formulating and negotiating new ideas, and consequently furthering the socio-political changes that are taking place in Jordan. Thus she assigns agency to middle class young women in triggering change, and locates their agency in their liminality. However she fails to look into the socio-cultural conditions that are conducive to the emergence of a “communitas” of young, liminal women.

Gender ideologies, roles, and relationships are the main themes throughout Droeber’s discussion of her research questions. She examines the ways in which gender relations and roles are constructed, negotiated, and challenged in Jordan, and how young women are involved in these processes. Rather than looking at gender roles as totally determined by gender ideologies, she considers gender roles as flexible and in constant flux. This flexibility in acting out gender roles allows for change. Droeber’s concept of change brings to mind Bourdieu’s (1972) theory of practice whereby change is located in “improvisation”. Bourdieu (1972) argues that social systems are powerfully constraining, yet they can be made and unmade through human action and interaction, or more precisely through the improvisation that characterizes human action.

The second issue Droeber focuses on is the meaning of religion and religiousness for young Jordanian women. She defines religiousness in terms of worldviews and behavior, or belief and practices, rooted in the main principles of the religion one adheres to. Accordingly, she discusses three issues: women’s attitude towards gender inequality in religion and the strategies they adopt to accommodate them; women’s participation in the life of religious communities; and the Islamic dress code. Here her discussion is confusing. She states that only one third of the forty female respondents consider themselves religious, and also that the majority of the women she met are aware of gender inequality in their religion. But what in her view is the relationship between religiousness and awareness of gender inequality in religion? In other words, are “religious” women aware of gender inequality in religion? Or are women who are aware of such inequalities

‘irreligious’? Do all women agree on which aspects of religion constitute gender inequality? By focusing simply on women’s reactions to gender inequality in religion, Droeber overlooks such questions.

Another problem arises from the way that Droeber draws on the private/public opposition to analyze women’s religious practices, a conceptual framework that many anthropological studies use to explain gender inequalities. By describing women’s religious practices as private, Droeber indicates that they are less influential than men’s public practices with regard to religious ceremonial and doctrinal issues. Though she is aware of women’s participation in the Ramadan communal prayer known as *salat al-tarawih*, she does not try to go beyond the private/public dichotomy to research instances when women’s religiousness is practiced in public, and when it is practiced in private. Moreover, she limits her discussion of religious practices to fasting and prayer and ignores other practices, such as giving alms and *hajj*.

Droeber’s analysis of *hijab* is richer and more convincing. She researches it within the context of a dress code which she considers as one of the self-representational markers of everyday life. She looks at the different “expressions” of *hijab* (veil, or headscarf combined with loose gown, long skirt, or trousers, etc.), and unpacks its multiple social significance. *Hijab*, as Droeber argues, is not only a marker of religiousness, but also of class and sometimes of opposition to social norms and cultural values.

That said, there are some flaws in Droeber’s study. First, in her discussion of the public discourses on gender issues, she fails to refer to the debates on young single people that are voiced in the pages of Jordanian newspapers, or to the related literature in Arabic. Here, Droeber quotes only Shteivi and Daghestani (1994), and *The Star*, an English-language Jordanian newspaper. The topic of single women, usually referred to as ‘*al-’awanis*’ (spinsters), often makes the main headlines in the socio-cultural pages of Jordanian daily newspapers, and is the core issue of the publication of the Islamic NGO *Al-Afaf* (i.e. chastity). She also fails to refer to UNICEF’s (2001) study on Jordanian youth, which covers topics of relevance to her study, such as the youth’s attitudes towards gender roles and gender inequalities.

Secondly, her remarks on the “lazy Jordanians” as compared to the “energetic Palestinians”, and on the “local” outlook of Jordanian families as compared to the “transnational” outlook of Palestinian and Circassian families, reflect existing stereotypes.

Thirdly, her account of women’s movements in Jordan is superficial and inaccurate. She could be expected to have presented a better account, especially that women’s political activism is central to her discussion of changes in gender roles. She also overlooks the related literature on women’s movements and on women political activists written by Jordanians, e.g. al-Tall (1985), al-Burini (1994), and others.

Finally, she says that Christians and Muslims fall under different marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws. This is not entirely correct. Christians and Muslims fall under different marital laws (marriage and divorce), but the same inheritance laws.

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Al-Rujula wa Taghayyur Ahwal al-Nisa' (Manhood and Women Changing Conditions of Women, by Azza C. Baydoun. Beirut and Casablanca: The Arab Cultural Center, 2007.

REVIEWED BY FEISAL A. YUNIS

Azza Baydoun is not the kind of social psychologist you often encounter in our world of academia. She is a woman with a specific mission: to delve deeply into the inner core of society, so as to uncover intensely held perceptions, beliefs, and behavioral orientations that affect the most important and the most troubled relationship: that between man and woman. She does this armed with a mastery of theoretical as well as methodological tools. Most of her research involves well-designed fieldwork coupled with a clear theoretical understanding of the real issues behind the data. This book is no exception.

The main issue is the perception of self, of the opposite sex, and the beliefs and attitudes related to differing male-female roles among young Lebanese adults. The assumption is that the changes brought about in female self-perception might bring about similar changes in male perception of themselves, their gender identity, and their attitudes towards the other sex. I do not intend to cover the entire book in this short review. To try to do this might not do justice to a study that I consider to be an exhaustive source of information on the major theories and research in the field, the first of its kind in Arabic. Instead, I will focus on Baydoun's most important findings with the objective of persuading the reader to go straight to the book.

The first study focuses on the concept of androgyny, considering it as a measure of change away from the stereotypical male-female dichotomy. Her critical assessment of the available measures of androgyny is an example seldom followed in the field of psychological research. She justifies this by the need to avoid a "scientific Babel's tower", and believes that "the researcher must present her frames of reference and research tools, to be able to define the limitations of her results for herself, and to make them easy for the critic to find" (p. 95). One of the main findings is that there has been a shift towards crossing stereotypical gender boundaries, and that male and female students are now attributing more of the opposite sex characteristics to themselves than before. This is a significant finding especially when we consider that, even in the United States, male students are more reluctant to cross gender boundaries than female students. I wonder what we would find if we were to replicate the study in other more conservative societies in the Arab world. Other important findings are those dealing with the effects of social factors on gender stereotyping. In a country as diverse as Lebanon, it is surprising to find that gender perceptions are not influenced by socioeconomic and demographic variables, except for religious differences, with Christian males more committed to the masculine stereotype, and the females less committed to the feminine stereotype.

In the second part of her project, Baydoun moves to a study of the interplay between the characteristics men choose for the desired woman, and women's self-perception. Her objective is to find out the degree of sensitivity among men to changes in gender identity among women. Among the very arresting results are the findings related to gender type that young male adults desire in a partner. They certainly do not want them to be of the masculine gender type (6.8%), nor of the feminine type (19.7%), but prefer by a large margin an undifferentiated gender type (46.8%) or androgenous type (26.9%). Again these findings appear not to be influenced by social, educational, religious, sectarian, and other demographic factors, except for age, as if the chief characteristic of Lebanese society, its diversity, does not matter in this regard.

Another important result is that, of the ten characteristics commonly desired by members of the two sexes in their choice of partner, eight are stereotypically attributed to the female sex. In her interpretation of this finding, Baydoun refers to the findings reported in the research literature, which indicate that women are more satisfied in marriages with partners displaying more of the feminine gender type.

The third part of the book deals with prejudice, whether against women or men. She starts with two chapters reviewing and organizing the research literature published on the subject. Research findings that pose problems for the social scientist trying to make sense of social reality in the Arab region arise from contradictions in attitudes towards women. For example, Baydoun cites research from Egypt (p. 199) showing that, while a majority of respondents asserted the supremacy of men over women, the vast majority also acknowledged the right of women to work. Other research she mentions from Tunisia (p. 199) found that 62% of participants agreed that men and women should be treated equally, while 60% objected to their mothers working.

Young Lebanese men and women answered a questionnaire carefully designed by Baydoun. The results were analyzed, and the two groups compared on all the dimensions. Some of the findings were surprising. To start with, the young men were reluctant to reject gender stereotypes, whereas women readily rejected them. This goes against the common belief that women are more conservative than men. The details of this general finding make interesting reading, and raise some important issues concerning gender attitudes. Another important finding is that women were more forthcoming in expressing their beliefs than men, as shown by the fact that more men chose "do not know" as an answer to questions asked. Baydoun suggests that women might have thought about these issues more than men. Another reason might be that most gender issues are a more sensitive subject for women than for men.

There are many other crucial issues raised in this book, all of which are fundamental to understanding the extent and nature of changing gender attitudes in Lebanese and Arab society. What is more important is the endeavor to seek meaning beyond the direct empirical data, which is clearly manifested throughout the text. This reviewer considers Baydoun's book to be a substantial addition to the research available in the Arab world on this very important subject.

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Al-Rajula wa Taghayyur Ahwal al-Nesa' won the Arab Women's Organization Award for Social Sciences in 2007. The AWO works under the auspices of the Duwal al-Jamiaa' al-'Arabiyyah.

Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East, by Brian Whitaker,
London: Saqi Books, 2006. 264 pages. £14.99.

REVIEWED BY KEVIN TAYLOR

In the past several years, the state of gays and lesbians in the Middle East has been increasingly covered by scholars and journalists. While articles and formal research give varying pictures of specific situations, Brian Whitaker attempts to give a broad overview of the experiences of local gays and lesbians in this groundbreaking work. Whitaker, the Middle East editor for *The Guardian* newspaper, conducted an impressive amount of research in order to examine the familial, social, religious, and legal situations of gays and lesbians in the region. The result is a compelling read that conveys a balanced and thorough insight into regional gay life.

Whitaker structures his survey into seven chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of the current atmosphere. Although details from across the region are included, the author focuses on Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia in order to represent the spectrum of attitudes and conditions in the area with specific examples. The author relies on his own readings and interviews to uncover a broader picture of the realities of gay life.

The book begins with an outline of the cultural importance of honor in the family and the perpetual fear that discovery of a gay or lesbian member will bring shame upon the entire family. To illustrate the extremes in attitudes, Whitaker gives examples of families who force their children into psychotherapy with the hope of “curing” them (some even electing to subject their children to shock therapy), and other situations where beatings or even death are very real possibilities. Other families simply rely on a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and hope that the son or daughter will appease the family by eventually marrying. Parental ignorance of the issues and realities of homosexuality is blamed for such severe reactions. Interesting here is the conflict between family loyalty and the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfillment. In the face of the most severe familial constraints and this conflict of interests, Whitaker concludes that some people are driven to emigrate or, in extreme circumstances, to commit suicide.

In addition to examining the situations gays face within their families, Whitaker studies the legal and social realities in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Included in this section of the book is a look at the Lebanese organization *Helem* (an acronym for *himaya lubnaniyya lil-mithliyyin* – Lebanese protection for homosexuals) which is working to promote gay rights in Lebanon. Whitaker also explores the gay life that flourishes in all three countries in spite of legal restrictions. He argues that, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “there is no room for selectively excluding some human beings on the pretext of local circumstances or cultural norms” (p. 110), and that, therefore, local laws and regulations limiting or prohibiting homosexuality are unacceptable. In legal terms, the three countries in question have taken different approaches to dealing with gay rights, with Lebanon taking a generally more tolerant approach. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, by contrast, have worked to repress any blatant displays of homosexuality. Despite attempts to block internet sites in Saudi Arabia or crackdowns on assumed gay venues, and even entrapment in Egypt, gay life continues unabated. In Saudi Arabia, Whitaker notes a certain denial of gay life and a willingness to overlook activities conducted behind closed doors. He finds that there is a “social dualism” at work in society, and that gay life is possible mainly due to the distinction between public and private worlds. Because

of the segregation of men and women, same-sex contact is actually quite common (and even encouraged by these living conditions), but most often a gay identity is not associated with these activities. In fact, Whitaker contends that gay relationships are often easier to maintain than straight relationships in these societies and that homosexuality is sometimes seen as a temporary substitute for heterosexual relations.

A section of the book is devoted to the messages about gays conveyed through literature, the media, and pop culture. Here the idea of homosexuality and gay identities as something “foreign” and Western is explored. Most interestingly, the author examines Edward Said’s notion of Western orientalism and writes of a new form of reverse orientalism. Whitaker relies on the writings of Sir Richard Burton and his description of a “Sotadic Zone” (a zone including the Middle East, in which same-sex activity was assumed by Westerners to be prevalent) to illustrate the historical assumption that the region was sexually more liberal (or perverse) than the West. The author asserts that the opposite is now true concerning gays and lesbians: the West is now seen by locals to be projecting perverse ideas onto this region of the world.

Although homosexual references abound in historical literature in the Arab World, current works generally avoid them. Films, on the other hand, have had comparatively more gay characters or representations, but usually in a manner that incites either laughter or disgust. This may be changing gradually, however, as more recent works featuring gay characters, such as *The Yacoubian Building*, have not caused great reaction or outrage. Local media normally give only the most basic facts of news stories from abroad but occasionally local stories have included references to “Europe’s Sodomy Revolution”, or have given extreme portrayals of gay events (describing gays as perverts or morally corrupt individuals). Local journalists who entertain the idea of covering gay issues are usually deterred by the threat of censorship or concern over violating social norms. Whatever the source of the image or message, there is rarely a human face to homosexuality and individual life stories and experiences are scarce in the media.

The final chapters explore the impact of religion on gay issues and gay and lesbian individuals’ lives. Here Whitaker describes an erroneous trend to treat religion (specifically Islam) as the root of the problem rather than various social attitudes in the region. Examples of varying interpretations of religious teachings are examined as well as the use of these teachings to justify anti-gay attitudes. He highlights the fact that greater acceptance in the West is also a relatively new phenomenon and that tensions between religion and sexual identity have obviously not been erased there either. These sections of the book are particularly well researched and documented to provide challenges to many of the standard religious arguments used against gays and lesbians. Whitaker also researches the predicament many gays and lesbians face when considering a life that is often in conflict with their individual or family’s religious beliefs. Examples of advice given to young gays and lesbians on religious websites further demonstrate the disapproving messages many people receive from the surrounding community.

Unspeakable Love concludes with a summary of the current situation, and with Whitaker’s opinions concerning the prospects for reform. Here, the author challenges Joseph Massad’s assertion that homosexuality and the gay rights movement are a foreign, imperialistic import. Whitaker acknowledges that sexual activity between members of the same sex has occurred historically in a manner different from that of the West; however, he argues that gays and lesbians today are in need of solidarity to fully assume their sexual identities. He also contends that local gays do not merely copy Western gay identities and movements but are forging their own

uniquely Middle Eastern gay identities. Regardless of the country or community, local gays and lesbians will eventually find their own combinations of their individual cultures and sexuality.

While it could be argued that the book should have been written by a native of the region, it is important to note that this work does make a large contribution to a field that has been thus far under-researched. The author attempts to condense a wide range of conditions and experiences into one work and successfully gives a glimpse of the realities facing local gays. Ideally a book of this nature would focus on individual countries or communities rather than attempting to cover a whole region and lumping gays and lesbians together in a single study. The book does include examples of both gay men and women but does eventually place greater emphasis on the situation of gay men (likely due to a distinct paucity of research on local lesbian life). Whitaker's study could have also benefited from more personal interviews and accounts demonstrating the ways that Middle Eastern gays and lesbians negotiate their sexuality and identity in the face of the specific difficulties they encounter. Additionally, the inclusion of some positive examples of gays who have reconciled their sexual identities with their familial and societal demands would have served to give a more complete picture of gay life in the Middle East. Nonetheless, *Unspeakable Love* is an important book for anyone wanting to gain insight into the lives of gays and lesbians in the region.

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Call for Papers

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), at the Lebanese American University, is in the process of soliciting articles for the forthcoming issue of our quarterly publication *al-Raida* <<http://intranet.lau.edu.lb/centers-institutes/iwsaw/raida.html>>, which will focus on "Women and Scriptures in the Arab World".

We are interested in receiving academic studies and critical essays that revolve around the issue in question. Scripture scholarship is a difficult discipline that is usually offered in departments of religious studies or in different schools of theology in the Arab world. Scripture scholarship, with the

Forthcoming Issue: Women and Scriptures in the Arab World

appropriate research methods, can be attractive to many women scholars, literary critics, theologians, and *Qur'an* reciters.

Topics may include but are not restricted to:

- Named and unnamed women in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the *Qur'an*.
- Sacred texts, interpretation, and women's rights.
- Spiritual quest and women's experience.
- Women scholars and the study of Scriptures.
- Sacred women figures in the Arts and Music.
- Women, sacred narrative, and literary criticism.

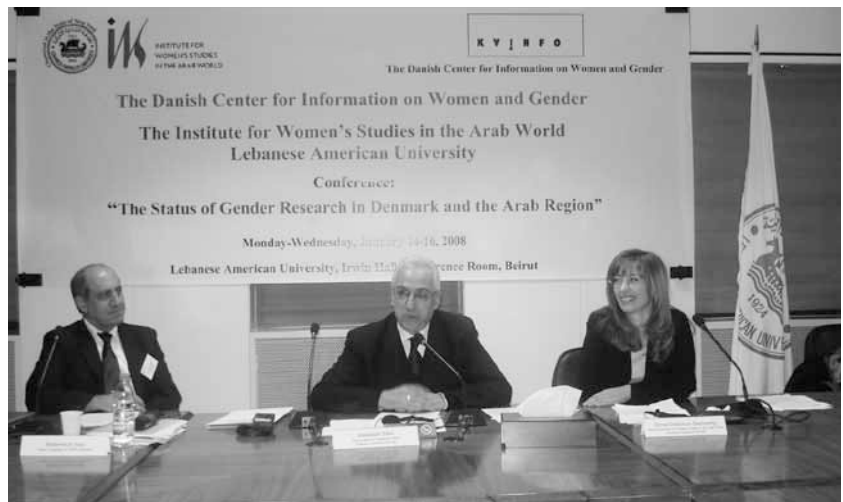
If you are interested in contributing to this issue of *al-Raida*, kindly send your abstract (250–300 words) no later than April 30, 2009. All abstracts submitted are reviewed by *al-Raida*'s editorial staff and are subject to its approval. Once the abstract is approved contributors will have to submit their paper no later than July 15, 2009. Submissions are accepted in English, Arabic, or French. All non-English submissions will be translated by IWSAW and published in English following the approval of the author.

This journal edition will be edited by Dr. Hosn Abboud, a scholar on *Qur'anic* Mary and a literary critic. Kindly send your emails simultaneously to the managing editor, Ms. Myriam Sfeir, at al-raida@lau.edu.lb and to the guest editor, Dr. Hosn Abboud, at hosnabboud@gmail.com.

News

Conference on: “The Status of Gender Research in Denmark and the Arab Region” - January 14-16, 2008

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and the Danish Center for Information on Women and Gender (KVINFO) held a conference entitled: “The Status of Gender Research in Denmark and the Arab Region”. This conference was organized in the context of the regional programme Dialogue and Cooperation on Women's Rights in the Arab Region, financed by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The conference focused on four strategic areas identified through consultation with members of Arab civil society: legal change, women in the public sphere, domestic violence, and research, documentation, and information on gender-related issues. Twenty-eight researchers and experts from different Arab countries (Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon) and European countries (Denmark and the United Kingdom) convened for two and a half days to discuss the status of gender research in Denmark and the Arab region.



From left to right: Mr. Mahmoud Issa, Dr. Abdallah Sfeir, and Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig



The conference participants

International Women's Day: A Tribute to Mai Ghoussoub - March 6, 2008

On the occasion of the International Women's Day 2008, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University, in partnership with the British Council of Lebanon, dedicated this day to the memory of a very special Lebanese woman, the late Mai Ghoussoub. During the tribute, friends, family, and guests remembered Ghoussoub's significant achievements and qualities.

Speakers at the event were: Dr. Joseph Jabbra, President of the Lebanese American University; Ms. Maud Stephan, representative of H.E. Dr. Tarek Mitri, Minister of Culture; Mr. Cris O'Connor, representative of H.E. Frances Guy, Ambassador of the United Kingdom; Ms. Amanda Burrell, Director of the British Council in Lebanon; Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, IWSAW Director; Dr. Maggie Gee, novelist and visiting professor of creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University, UK; Mr. Abbas Beydoun, Lebanese poet; and Dr. Roseanne Saad Khalaf, Assistant Professor of English and creative writing at the American University of Beirut.

The tribute was followed by an exhibit of some of Ghoussoub's sculptures and personal effects.



The speakers who paid tribute to Mai Ghoussoub



The exhibit featuring some of Mai Ghoussoub's sculptures and personal effects

Lecture: “Let Women Rule” - June 20, 2008

On June 20, 2008 H.E. Ambassador Swanee Hunt, Director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Chair of the Initiative for Inclusive Security, and former US Ambassador to Austria from 1993 to 1997, gave a lecture at the Lebanese American University (LAU) titled “Let Women Rule”. The event was organized by the Lebanese League for Women in Business, in collaboration with the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at LAU.



From left to right Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, Mrs. Hanan Saab, and H. E. Ambassador Swanee Hunt

Dream She Is: Monodrama for a Woman's Voice - July 12 & 13, 2008

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University (LAU) sponsored a Monodrama entitled “Dream She Is” which was performed in Universite Saint Joseph (USJ) theater on July 12th & 13th, 2008. “Dream She Is” is an opera monodrama for a woman's voice composed by Lebanese composer Ms. Joelle Khoury and performed by Lebanese singer Fadia Tomb El-Hage. Conductor Harout Fazlian led the musicians of the Chamber Music Ensemble “FRAGMENTS” from Belgium.



Poster of the event featuring composer Joelle Khoury (left) and singer Fadia Tomb El-Hage (right).

Lebanese Women Demand Parliamentary Quota - September 23, 2008

As a gender expert/consultant, Dr. Dabbous-Sensenig was invited by MP Gilberte Zouein, chair of the parliamentary sub-committee for the Woman and Child, along with other experts, to discuss the issue of parliamentary quota for women, and to draft a proposal to introduce the women quota in the Lebanese election law. A total of 5 meetings with members of the said sub-committee, which took place in July and August 2008, culminated in the drafting of two such proposals in September 2008.

As a follow-up, the parliamentary sub-committee along with women activists organized a demonstration on September 23, 2008 in front of the parliament to demand the right to introduce the women quota in the upcoming June elections in Lebanon.



Women activists demonstrating in front of the House of Parliament.



From left to right: Dr. Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, Dr. Aman Shaarani, Ms. Laura Sfeir, and representatives of the various Lebanese NGOs during the demonstration