# POLITICAL PERFORMANCE IN SYRIA

## From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising

Edward Ziter

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# Political Performance in Syria

## From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising

Edward Ziter
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# Series Editors' Preface

The "Studies in International Performance" series was initiated in 2004 on behalf of the International Federation for Theatre Research, by Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton, successive Presidents of the Federation. Their aim was, and still is, to call on performance scholars to expand their disciplinary horizons to include the comparative study of performances across national, cultural, social, and political borders. This is necessary not only in order to avoid the homogenizing tendency of national paradigms in performance scholarship, but also in order to engage in creating new performance scholarship that takes account of and embraces the complexities of transnational cultural production, the new media, and the economic and social consequences of increasingly international forms of artistic expression. Comparative studies (especially when conceived across more than two terms) can value both the specifically local and the broadly conceived global forms of performance practices, histories, and social formations. Comparative aesthetics can challenge the limitations of national orthodoxies of art criticism and current artistic knowledges. In formalizing the work of the Federation's members through rigorous and innovative scholarship this series aims to make a significant contribution to an ever-changing project of knowledge creation.

Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton


International Federation for Theatre Research
Fédération Internationale pour la Recherche Théâtrale

# Acknowledgments

This book took a while to prepare, during which time I relied on the knowledge and expertise of a great many scholars and practitioners. At the top of the list are the director, acting teacher, and activist, Naila al-Atrash, and the scholar and dramaturge Marie Elias. I met these two women in the spring of 2002, which is when my research on Syrian theatre began in earnest. They devoted many hours to educating me about their national theatre.

My engagement with Syrian theatre began in the 1994/1995 academic year when a Fulbright grant made it possible for me to audit classes at the High Institute of Theatre Arts in Damascus. Faculty member Akram al-Yusuf made me his pet project and personally introduced me to many of the playwrights and directors discussed in these pages. During that year I also studied at the Institut Français Des Etudes Arabes de Damas (subsequently renamed Institut Français du Proche-Orient) where Hassan Abbas not only taught me but arranged for me to direct a play by Saadallah Wannus at the French Cultural Center—which is when my fascination with that playwright began.

Several theatre critics, directors, playwrights, and actors allowed me to interview them. Most generous with their time and guidance were the director Walid Kowalti and actor/director Jihad Saad. Others who sat for multiple interviews were: Riad al-Ismat, Anwar Bader, Walid Ikhlasi, Jawad al-Assadi, Muhammad al-Maghut, Ajaj Salem, Ramez Alaswad, Omar Abu Saada, Mohammed al-Attar, and al-Fares al-Thahabi. I also interviewed or corresponded with Nawar Bulbul, Ferhan Bulbul, Ossama Halal, Mai Skaff, Noura Saaed Mourad, Manuel Gigi, Fayez Kazak, Nidal Sejar, Hasan Oueity, Juwan Jan, Ramzi Choukair, Jamal Adam, the Malas twins (Ahmed and Mohammad), and representatives from the Abou Naddara collective and Masasit Mati troupe. This is an incomplete list but to thank everyone who helped me over years of meandering research would fill pages.

I drafted the first two chapters while on a 2011–2012 Research Fellowship from the NYU Humanities Initiative. The feedback I received from other fellows was a great help. While teaching at the NYU Abu Dhabi campus in the spring of 2013 I received valuable feedback from the Arab Crossroads faculty, particularly Muhamad al-Khalil.

Portions of Chapters 1 and 5 first appeared in *TDR* 57.1 (2013): 116–136 and *Theatre Research International* 38.2 (2013): 137–147. Portions of Chapter 2 appeared in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*, ed. Eyad Houssami (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 11–27.

Brian Singleton and Janelle Reinelt were everything one could hope for in series editors. They insisted that I fully develop my argument and trusted that I had an argument worth developing.

Sameer Hammady transcribed taped performances, clarified idiomatic expressions, and provided general research assistance. I turned to a number of people to correct my translations, including two of my students, Farah Ahmad Mohmad and Rasha Shraim. One would think that given how long I have worked on this project and the number of people who helped, it would be free of errors or questionable interpretations. I cannot promise that. However, I can promise that I alone am responsible for any weakness in this book.

I dedicate this book to my children, Hanan Ruth Ziter Lane and Samer Edward Ziter Lane. In happier days, I hope to introduce you to some of the people whose work and country I discuss.

# Timeline

**Important dates**

May 6, 1916: Public execution of Nationalist leaders in Damascus and Beirut by order of the Ottoman Wali of Greater Syria. Subsequently commemorated in Syria and Lebanon as Martyrs' Day.

April 17, 1946: Evacuation of the last French soldiers and Syria's full independence. Subsequently commemorated in Syria as Evacuation Day.

February 1, 1958: Formation of the United Arab Republic, a union between Syria and Egypt, under President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

1959: First season of the Syrian National Theatre.

September 28, 1961: Syrian officers stage a coup and declare independence from the UAR.

March 8, 1963: March 8 Revolution. Baath party military officers stage a successful coup. Subsequently commemorated in Syria as Revolution Day.

June 5–11, 1967: The Six Day War. Israel defeats Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

May 1–31, 1969: First Damascus International Theatre Festival.

November 13, 1970: Hafez al-Assad comes to power through an intra-party coup. Subsequently commemorated in Syria as Correction Movement Day.

October 6–25, 1973: Egypt and Syria lead a coalition of Arab states in war with Israel. Subsequently commemorated in Syria on October 6 as Liberation War Day.

June 10, 2000: Hafez al-Assad dies and Bashar al-Assad appointed president.

March 2011: Large-scale demonstrations in the southern city of Daraa prompted by the detention of children who produced anti-regime graffiti.

# Introduction

All but the oldest Syrians have only known a government with the power to arrest individuals without charge and to hold them indefinitely. In the midst of this seemingly permanent state of exception, Syrian theatre has attempted to open up spaces of inquiry and self-imagining, transforming the state of exception from an unassailable fact to an object of analysis. What emergency (or emergencies) prompts this state of exception and to what effect? Who have we become as a nation as a result? In a country in which "weakening national sentiment" is grounds for a multi-year prison sentence,[1] the fact that the theatre has been a deeply political and, often, oppositional institution is a measure of the courage and commitment of its artists.

There is much that we in the US can learn from this insistent questioning of the state of exception. If we accept Carl Schmitt's assertion that sovereignty is defined by the ability to declare a state of exception[2] then the difference between democracy and dictatorship is a matter of degree rather than kind. Giorgio Agamben makes this point when he compares the legal status of Guantánamo detainees with Jews in Nazi camps. According to Agamben (2005: 3–4), George W. Bush's 2001 military order subjecting noncitizens suspected of terrorist activity to "indefinite detention" renders them "object(s) of a pure de facto rule, of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight." It follows then that theatre that explores the reduced status of the human under dictators is anything but parochial. These are the kinds of questions theatre everywhere needs to ask.

This questioning of the state of exception and the brutality of its enforcement informed the Syrian Uprising of 2011, a nonviolent movement that ultimately gave way to civil war. In February of that year a group

of young people in Daraa were arrested for reproducing the rallying cry of the Tunisian Revolution on their school wall: "The people want the fall of the regime." They added a warning to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad (trained in ophthalmology), "It's your turn doctor" (McEvers 2013). Officials refused to release the youths and by mid-March Daraa had become the site of repeated protests despite violent crackdowns and a government siege of the city that lasted from April 25 to May 5. Protests and rallies spread throughout the country in open defiance of the Emergency Law's restriction on public assembly and despite a rising death toll from sniper fire into crowds (Marsh 2011).

Judging from chants and banners, a desire for civil liberties and anger at economic injustice inspired these early protests. The chant that began in Daraa soon spread to multiple cities: "God, Syria, and Freedom Only" (*New York Times* 2011). Equally common was the rhythmic chanting of the word "Freedom." The song that Western media subsequently named the anthem of the revolution, "Come on Bashar, leave" announced that "Freedom is right at the door." However, it also railed against crony capitalism, complaining that "We get new thieves regularly; Shaleesh and Maher and Rami, they ripped off my brothers and uncles" (Shadid 2011a). General Zul Himma Shaleesh and Rami Maklouf are cousins of the President and Maher al-Assad is his brother and the three have vast business holdings. Rami Makhlouf is commonly referred to as "Mister Ten Percent" because of the perception that he has used his connections to the President to secure a stake in every Syrian industry. As head of the presidential security body and the republican guards respectively, Shaleesh and Maher al-Assad are also associated with state violence and repression; the Baath regime, in the minds of many Syrians, unites oppression with cronyism[3] – this at a time when inflation, long-term drought, and the mismanagement of natural resources has put intense pressure on average Syrians (Femia and Werrell 2014).

This book, however, begins with the premise that Syrians desired greater civil liberties long before the start of the Uprising; there has been a pent-up desire to complain openly of injustices and argue for change free of the fear of imprisonment and torture. How else can one account for the fact that throughout 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians attended protests, knowing that snipers were targeting the crowds, for the chance to openly chant "Freedom." The desire to protest inequalities and oppression, I posit, has been building over generations. This premise is also my justification for writing a book about theatre at this moment. Over the past fifty years, the very best Syrian theatre has engaged forbidden topics, critiquing the government's use of surveillance, imprisonment,

and torture, analyzing Arab–Israeli relations, drawing attention to Arab repression of Palestinians, debating how ideas of history and heritage have been employed to serve the state, even problematizing such loaded concepts as martyrdom.[4] My desire to tell the story of Syrian theatre only grew more intense as I witnessed the defiance of Syrian people in the spring of 2011.

To be clear, I am not telling the story of Syrian theatre so as to clarify some aspect of the Uprising; rather I am noting that the story of Syrian theatre – which is a story punctuated by acts of creative resistance in the face of authoritarian control – lends insight to the strategies of the Syrian Uprising. On several occasions in this book, I draw attention to theatre tropes that will be taken up by the performance and cyber activists of the Uprising. Rarely do I assert that activists are quoting the theatre. Rather, I present these echoes as evidence that ways of understanding one's condition circulate outside the written archive of a society and become part of the unofficial culture. Theatre, with its bodily metaphor and contradictory voices, is a valuable storehouse of unofficial beliefs and denied truths. In this respect my approach is genealogical rather than strictly historical. I am as much interested in the circulation of ideas in which the theatre partakes, as I am interested in the history of the Syrian stage.

Having said that, a goal of this book is to provide readers with an overview of Syrian theatre history under the Assad regime. In order to gauge the impact of Syrian theatre on its society it is first necessary to consider theatre's place within that society. That means considering the context of performance and/or publication, including factors such as contemporaneous events, venue size and location, and the institutional support theatre and theatre publishing receive and constraints they face. These factors change over time, and so I address them below when they are relevant (acknowledging the limitations of the archive and my personal experience). Some factors, however, can be summarized in advance.

Theatre enjoys a high status in Syria at the same time that its condition has been long lamented. This dipole is ingrained into the history of the theatre as it is commonly recounted in Syria. Educated Syrians know that the father of Syrian theatre was Abu Khalil Qabbani. He received financial support from the Ottoman governor of the Syrian province, Midhat Pasha, enabling the creation of a permanent theatre. Midhat Pasha was a prominent figure in efforts to modernize the Ottoman Empire and greatly relaxed censorship. Syrian historians have emphasized associations between theatre and progressive values in this period, and this continues in recent histories (Wannus 1994a; Abu Shanab 2005;

Isma'il 2008). Of particular interest to these historians is that Qabbani combined indigenous music and dance forms with an imported form so as to dramatize stories associated with Arab heritage, and Qabbani's musical compositions and dramas garner contemporary respect.

Qabbani's success prompted denunciations from reactionaries who ultimately secured an order from the Ottoman government that the theatre be closed. Following the order, these reactionaries incited their followers to burn Qabbani's theatre to the ground. These facts have been interpreted by historians as a battle between modernization and the forces of tradition. The most compelling recounting of this story emerges in Saadallah Wannus's play, *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* (1972), which is discussed in Chapter 4. That play emphasizes that the modernizing tendencies associated with early theatre were populist in nature and that the defeat of the theatre represented the triumph of a feudalism that (the play implies) persisted under colonialism into the twentieth century.

The origin story of Syrian theatre pits modernizers against traditionalists, and – in Wannus's iteration – populism against feudalism. That story describes a European art form repurposed to present music and tales associated with Arab heritage. Such associations were present when Syria's newly formed National Theatre began its inaugural season at the newly built Qabbani Theatre in 1959. Syria had joined with Egypt in a short-lived union, the United Arab Republic, and the creation of a National Theatre accompanied other reforms such as nationalization and land redistribution that brought Syria in line with its socialist partner. (In Egypt an earlier state-funded troupe had been reorganized as the National Theatre the year before.) The National Theatre was born in a moment of hopeful pan-Arabism. It allied itself with a nineteenth-century reformer who, the story goes, threatened entrenched powers by combining Arab culture with the best Europe had to offer.[5]

The UAR was short-lived, collapsing in 1961 in the face of elite resistance to nationalization, but the Qabbani Theatre continues as one of the venues financed by the Syrian Ministry of Culture as of 2014. The Ministry of Culture controls several other venues in Damascus. The Hamra Theatre (in what had previously been the Qabbani Cinema) is a 450-seat proscenium space. The Dar al-Assad complex houses: the Opera House, a 1,331-seat proscenium space with boxes and two balconies; the Drama Theatre, a 663-seat proscenium space with continental seating and a semicircular apron; and the Multipurpose Hall, a 237-seat flexible space seemingly modeled on a Georgian theatre.

In addition Damascus is home to the Military Theatre, similar in size to the Hamra Theatre (and also a former cinema). The Syrian military

operated both a local company and a touring company, though productions grew less frequent with the decline and eventual fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent loss of financial support. Similarly, the touring company of the National Theatre – begun in 1970 – eventually discontinued its work. State-funded theatres exist in other cities, but only the National Theatre of Aleppo has originated important work, because of collaborations with playwright Walid Ikhlaṣi and director Husain Idilbi.

State-supported theatre flourished during Syria's alliance with the Soviet Union, an alliance that predated the UAR and grew especially close after Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. There were also several independent companies active in this period. In this book I discuss in detail plays produced by both the National Theatre and private companies; here I provide a brief overview of some of the earlier practitioners. The pioneering company in political theatre was The Theatre of Thorns founded in 1969 by Omar Hijo and Duraid Lahham. The company specialized in political sketches collectively written by troupe members. Their scripts have not been preserved and though a great many texts mention their significance in orienting Syrian theatre towards politics, I do not know of any published analyses of their work. The company contributed several of its members to the October Family Troupe, founded in 1974 by Duraid Lahham and long-time collaborator Nouhaad Qala'i with the poet and playwright Muhammad al-Maghut. In addition to being smart and cutting, their work was extremely popular and continues to be widely circulated on DVDs and via YouTube. I discuss their work in Chapter 1 and again in Chapter 5.

The dominating figure in Syrian theatre throughout this period is Saadallah Wannus. I discuss his work in several chapters, and he is the sole subject of Chapter 4. It is not simply that he was the most important playwright in Syrian theatre history (and arguably the most important Arab playwright of the last forty years), he was also a major theatre theorist and reformer. His *Manifestos For a New Arab Theatre* (1988) was significant for theatre-makers attempting to imagine a truly Arab theatre and his theoretical writings fill 738 pages in his collected works. He was instrumental in beginning the Damascus International Theatre Festival in 1969, he founded the journal *Theatre Life* and served as its first editor in 1977, and in that same year he was one of several theatre figures who successfully argued for the creation of a High Institute of Theatrical Arts in Damascus, teaching there for several years. In 1969 he and Alaal-din Koksh founded The Syndicate of Artists, which (as will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 4) produced two of Wannus's controversial plays. In addition to addressing forbidden subjects, these productions attempted to radically transform

the actor/audience relationship. This line of experimentation continued when Wannus and the director Fawaz as-Sajir founded the Experimental Theatre in 1976. In recognition of his central role in Arab theatre, the International Theatre Institute (an affiliate of UNESCO) invited him in 1996 to author the annual World Theatre Day address, which is read in participating theatres throughout the world for tens of thousands of spectators.

The growth of state theatre in the 1970s depended on Soviet aid and was premised on the idea that it should be a widely disseminated art form. State support ensured that it would be an inexpensive pleasure and it remains so. When I arrived in Syria in 1994, a ticket to the National Theatre was 50 Syrian pounds. Before the recent plunge in the value of the Syrian pound, that would have been about a dollar. In recent years, the price of a ticket has increased to 100 pounds, but that is still well below the cost of a movie ticket. While the low ticket price has made the theatre accessible, not all agree that it has resulted in great theatre, especially as the state began withdrawing funding following the break-up of the Soviet Union and, more recently, the institution of neoliberal economic policies. Cheap tickets further complicate the lack of funding.

The growth of satellite television has put additional pressure on Syrian theatre. Actors accepted into the National Theatre, since its founding in 1959, are state functionaries drawing monthly salaries whether or not they are involved in a production. Many of these salaried actors have pursued more lucrative work in television, leaving the National Theatre without actors after committing much of its seasonal budget. The National Theatre has had to hire actors at low wages for individual shows while also cutting back on the number of productions. Remarkably, the National Theatre is still able to mount full-scale productions with major actors. Theatre remains a valued institution powered by cultural capital; however, the strains are evident in an uneven and abbreviated season.

The close relation between the Soviet Union and Syria in the 1970s not only meant increased support for the theatre, it also impacted the training – and consequently the aesthetic – of many theatre practitioners. This, in turn, had a considerable impact on the training at the High Institute of Theatrical Arts; not only did many of these practitioners teach, many found that directing at the Institute was a space where greater experimentation could be pursued. Fawaz as-Sajir, for example, who studied directing at the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS), taught at the Institute from 1978 to 1983. The company he founded with Wannus included Walid Kowalti who himself had studied directing at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria, as well as Zinati Qudsiyya. I discuss Qudsiyya in Chapter 3 and Kowalti in

Chapter 5. Kowalti developed a deep love of *commedia dell'arte* while studying at Sofia, and this infused his teaching at the High Institute of Theatrical Arts in Damascus from 1979 to 1992, serving as Director of the acting department from 1991 to 1992. His work, in addition to being deeply political, delves continuously into different physicalities: *commedia* pieces in the 1990s, a 2006 adaptation of *Waiting for Godot* (retitled *Waiting: Play with Beckett*) inspired by circus clowning tradition, and the 2010 production *Waiting for the Barbarians* based on the poem of that name by Constantine Cavafy that included substantial b-boying (the 1970s street dance sometimes known as breakdancing). Other directors who taught at the High Institute and who studied in either the Soviet Union or Bulgaria include Hasan Ouelty, Sharif Shakir, Fuad al Rashid, Ajaj Salem, and Naila al-Atrash.

If these many practitioners have one aspect in common, I would describe it as a proclivity for heightened or stylized physicality. I began traveling to Syria after receiving a Fulbright grant as a graduate student and began auditing the criticism classes at the Damascus High Institute of Theatre in the 1994/1995 academic year. I have repeatedly returned to Syria, making a point to attend the biannual Damascus Theatre Festival where I have been able to see the highlights of the previous seasons (as well as other important work from the region). Consistently, I have been struck by the physical presence of mature Syrian actors and their bold physical choices. Ajaj Salem – who studied at the Moscow Art Theatre, served as the Director of the Acting Program when I was a student, and later served as Director of Theatres and Music in the Syrian Ministry of Culture – attributed this to the Russian interpretation of Stanislavski. He explained that many of his colleagues understand the method of physical acting to be at the core of the Stanislavski technique (personal interview December 2007). Without digressing into the complicated history of the dissemination of Stanislavski's method, suffice it to say that Syria followed the lead of some Eastern bloc countries in using Stanislavski, first and foremost, as a means of producing a physically expressive actor.

This is certainly true of the work of Naila al-Atrash, one of the most politically outspoken directors of Syrian theatre and a huge influence on Syrian theatre training (see Figure 1). Al-Atrash's work is discussed in Chapter 3, and I will argue that her work is indicative of how Syrian directors have used abstraction and self-reflexive gestures to make political critiques. Al-Atrash studied at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria. After returning to Syria, she taught at the High Institute for Theatrical Arts from 1978 to 2001. She served as Director of the Acting Program from 1989 to 1991 (when she stepped

*Figure 1* Naila al-Atrash directs. Photo by Adel Samara. Courtesy Adel Samara.

down to protest the merging of the Institutes of Theatre and Music) and then again from 1995 to 2001, when she was dismissed from her post by order of the Ministry of Culture.

The activities leading to her dismissal say much about the challenges facing oppositional artists, and their efforts to extend the boundaries of permissible speech. Al-Atrash was one of ninety-nine public intellectuals who signed a statement in 2000 that demanded (1) an end to emergency laws, (2) pardons for political prisoners, (3) freedom of assembly and expression, and (4) an end to government surveillance and censorship (George 2003: 178–181). However, the immediate cause of her dismissal was her refusal to forcibly end a 2001 student strike at her Institute in solidarity with the al-Aqsa Intifada (the second

Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, which followed Ariel Sharon's September 2000 visit to the Temple Mount).[6]

The student strike, like the Statement of 99, are examples of the prominence of Syrian artists in political debate. Both the strike and the Statement were part of a flurry of social and political debates – termed the Damascus Spring – that followed the death of Hafez al-Assad in June of 2000. Professionals in the arts and entertainment industry were prominent in the movement, evident in the fact that eighteen of the signatories of the Statement of 99 worked in theatre, film, and fine art. Anecdotally, well-known directors and actors were regularly seen at the Forums – the large public discussions held (without official approval) in private homes – that spread throughout Damascus and other cities. The Spring was short-lived and by the fall of 2001 the government of Bashar al-Assad had begun imprisoning leading members of the civil society movement or dismissing them from their posts and closing the Forums. However, the Damascus Spring was anything but an aberration, and the presence of artists in the movement was far from coincidental. As this manuscript will make clear, Syrian artists had long looked to the theatre as a possible arena of debate and would continue to do so even in the midst of civil war.

This is not to posit a reductive image of a uniformly oppositional theatre relentlessly and openly challenging the state. As I have noted, theatre in Syria is by and large a state-sponsored activity and its funding mechanisms discourage oppositional work. Productions are approved on a case-by-case basis when a director proposes a specific project to the Director of Theatres and Music. There is no stipulation in advance how many productions will be included in a season or what kinds of plays should be produced. Self-censorship is prompted as much by a fear of exclusion from the theatre scene as by fear of reprisal. In addition, scripts are submitted to the Ministry of Culture for approval and censors attend dress rehearsals. As will be explained in Chapter 4, Saadallah Wannus's much-acclaimed play, *The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk*, was banned after its dress rehearsal in 1971. Two years later Syria sent a production of the play to the German Democratic Republic as part of a cultural exchange program. However, *Jabir the Mamluk* did not receive a full run in Syria until 1984. This example is all the more striking since the main storyline of the play is set in the thirteenth century; it is oppositional only through analogy. By contrast, Wannus's previous play, *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, a direct and devastating critique of the Syrian government, was permitted a long and heavily attended run.

As this one example makes clear, censorship in Syria can seem arbitrary at times. Though the lack of clear guidelines can prompt greater

self-censorship, in many instances careful attention to the historical context accounts for why different degrees of criticism are permitted at specific moments. Understanding the context of performance (and or publication) will be central in my exploration of what these plays meant at specific moments in time. Other scholars have drawn attention to the value for the regime of licensing limited amounts of criticism. Lisa Wedeen has argued that Syrian propaganda is effective, not because it transforms public sentiment, but because it demonstrates the power of the state to coerce the population into behaving "as if" they believed state propaganda (Wedeen 1999: 69). By extension, I argue that when a play is performed that relies on analogy, the state demonstrates its power to control interpretation. Even if the play is very likely a criticism of the regime, the fact that such an interpretation will never appear in print or be stated openly becomes a display of state power. Miriam Cooke has argued that the arts in Syria sometimes serve as "commissioned criticism." Drawing from an idea formulated by Wedeen (1999: 89), Cooke refers to the Syrian use of the word "breathing" (*tanaffus*) to describe a genre of art that serves as a "safety-valve mechanism," allowing Syrians to breathe freely and momentarily share an awareness of injustice without directly challenging the regime (Cooke 2007: 72).

In making this statement, I do not intend to paint Syrian theatre-makers as inadvertent collaborators and state officials as uniformly committed to controlling speech. Nor is this the intent of Cooke or Wedeen. As Wedeen notes, sites of licensed critique are not freely granted but hard won (1999: 90). Moreover, both artists and officials function in changing political and social environments: both constantly feel out the shifting limits of the permissible. Many of the artists I examine do so in a project of expanding what can be said and inventing a legitimate civil society. State officials do so in an effort to secure stability or simply to please a superior. If the state seems arbitrary, the artist is similarly mercurial. Nothing illustrates this as clearly as the changing political positions of the comedians Duraid Lahham and Hammam Hoot. Lahham – star of theatre, film, and television – has been long praised as a critic of state oppression and corruption. As discussed in Chapter 5, it came as a shock to many when Lahham publicly and repeatedly endorsed President Assad during the first year of the Uprising. By contrast, the vaudeville star Hammam Hoot had previously bent over backwards to demonstrate his loyalty to the Assad regime. However, he publicly endorsed the resistance after fighting spread to his home town of Aleppo.

Limitations on expression stem from Emergency Laws passed in 1963 when the Military Committee of the Baath party seized power in

a March coup. These laws replaced the Emergency Laws instituted by Nasser in 1958 during Syria's short-lived union with Egypt. Before that, martial law had been instituted in both 1953 and 1956. This state of affairs purportedly changed on April 19, 2011; one month into the Syrian Uprising, Bashar al-Assad lifted the State of Emergency in a symbolic response to protesters' demands. However, the security services retained immunity from prosecution (Karam and Kennedy 2011) and in effect nothing changed. In lifting Emergency Laws only to continue the actions justified by those laws, the Syrian government acknowledged a universally recognized, though largely unstated, truth: the state of exception is in fact the rule.

This book analyzes the Syrian theatre's response to a state of exception that was widely, if implicitly, recognized as permanent. Whether working in 1967 or 2013, the theatre-makers discussed in these pages labored under severe and long-standing limitations on speech and civil liberties. In defining Syrian theatre as one that responds to a permanent state of exception, I am, of course, invoking Benjamin's eighth historical thesis in which he writes:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency. (Benjamin 2007: 266)

This "mission" is specific to the needs of a given historical moment (in Benjamin's case, the struggle against fascism). However, to the extent that Benjamin suggests that a permanent state of emergency lies latently behind all forms of state power, the need to invoke a genuine state of exception is constant. The plays and performances discussed in subsequent chapters respond to historically specific needs, and much of the writing that follows will unpack these needs. However, these plays are also meditations on the systems of power that define our shared modernity. I read these plays as an ongoing conversation about Syrian national identity, a conversation – I argue – that carries into the work of theatre performers and performance activists participating in the Uprising. However, I also make the case that these works explore common features of modern nation-states, features that are evident in the mining of Internet metadata and responses to refugee crises.

I have organized my chapters around terms and concepts repeated across a range of highly praised and/or popular plays. Taken together,

these plays constitute a spirited debate on what it means to be Syrian and the conditions that have created this national identity. This debate repeatedly returns to martyrdom, war, Palestinians, history and heritage, and torture – terms that serve as my chapter titles. These terms figure in many stories of national becoming. Every nation has its list of fallen heroes, every Arab nation grapples with the emotions stirred by the loss of Palestine and the refugee problem that followed, and most post-colonial states gained independence despite systems of surveillance and torture, reproducing and extending those systems in many cases. These terms are not uniquely Syrian but a uniquely Syrian self emerges as Syrians repeat and contest these terms. To be Syrian is to learn that the Arab Revolt began with the execution of nationalist heroes in 1916 in Damascus and Beirut. To be Syrian is also to know that the security services are headquartered in the Damascene Square where those executions took place. There is yet another Syrian self, a newer Syrian self, that comes from the memory of being beaten in Martyrs' Square after gathering at the call of Facebook page "The Syrian Revolution 2011" in order to present a petition calling for the release of political prisoners. Martyrdom, like the other terms that organize my chapters, figures prominently both in official narratives of national becoming and in the stories told by those seeking to forge a different national self.

Labeling a specific body of theatre "political" is problematic if only because it presupposes a body of normal, nonpolitical theatre. One could argue that all theatre (like all expression) either supports or challenges the existing political order, but making such an argument renders the word "political" meaningless. We are then left with the subjective task of deciding which plays most directly address the powers and authority granted states and so merit the label political. I further narrowed my pool by focusing on works that examine the relation of state powers to ideas of national identity. Finally, I narrowed in on a series of key terms, which guide my selection of texts. This has meant excluding plays that I admire and sometimes including plays that I would not rank among the great works of Syrian theatre. You will not find plays in this book by Riad Ismat, even though he has been as widely produced as many of the authors I discuss, nor Abdul Monem Amayri, even though he has been extremely active in recent years mounting his own texts. The one play by Farhan Bulbul that I discuss is hardly his most important. As is inevitably the case, my evolving argument shaped my selection of materials.

That argument is structured around the terms that have been central to efforts to define Syrian identity. I start with "martyrdom"

in the first chapter because the idea of struggle and sacrifice for a group identity is so central to modern tellings and contestations of Syrian identity. That chapter covers the entire period of this study from Muhammad al-Maghut's 1967 play, *The Hunchback Sparrow*, to episodes of *Top Goon* uploaded by the puppet troupe Masasit Mati in 2012. Rather than providing exhaustive analysis of selected works, the chapter explores how the idea of martyrdom functions in a vast range of performance forms, such as theatre, ceremonies, film, and performance activism. In the process, I summarize the significant historical events of the period of this study, events to which I will refer throughout the rest of the book.

The next three chapters explore key terms through analyses of selected plays and productions. "War" examines representations of the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel in five plays published or performed between 1968 and 1974. The trauma of the 1967 defeat and the effective prohibition of publicly exploring the causes and effects of defeat created a profound crisis in national identity. While the war in 1973 was said to restore Arab pride, celebrations of the nation's performance were grounded in memory of devastating defeat and recognition of the state's failure to liberate territory.

Chapter 3, "Palestinians," examines the impact of the Palestinian Diaspora on Syrian identity as evidenced in five plays published or produced between 1963 and 1989. This period saw significant changes in the resistance movement and the development of an independent Palestinian leadership. Such changes, I argue, are evident in redefinitions of the idea of Syria and the Arab world in these plays. Chapter 4, "History and Heritage," examines these concepts in five plays by Saadallah Wannus published or performed between 1970 and 2008. Wannus depicts history and heritage as a dialectic potentially productive of new forms of national belonging. His tremendous and well-deserved renown throughout the Arab world allowed him to question long-held beliefs and directly challenge the state.

The fifth and final chapter, "Torture," once again takes up the entire time period of this study, and like the first chapter explores a scene repeated in a great number of plays. Here I introduce new plays to the study but also revisit works examined earlier in the book, keeping my focus on specific scenes of interrogation and torture whether or not the representation of torture dominates the play or is simply addressed in passing. This fact – that there are plays that address torture in passing – along with the huge number of plays that depict torture demonstrate how profoundly it weighs on the cultural imagination. Interrogation

and torture has been and – in the current conflict – continues to be one of the most deeply felt and troubling facts of Syrian identity.

At the time of this writing (September 2014), the death toll in Syria exceeds 191,000, three million Syrians are refugees, and nearly half of all Syrians are displaced. Not surprisingly, the majority of the active theatre makers discussed in these pages now work outside of their homeland. Some, like Omar Abu Saada and Nawar Bulbul, have created therapeutic theatre pieces with refugees in Jordan and elsewhere. Others, like Ahmed and Mohammad Malas, create work for their YouTube channel in the hope of reaching Arabic-speaking people throughout the world who share their wish for a free and secular Syria. The pages that follow describe a 57-year effort to use theatre to reimagine a Syria with a vibrant civil society, a Syria in which the state of exception is a threat to be resisted rather than a hardship to be endured. The violence of the Assad regime and the even more horrific brutality of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have made a democratic Syria a distant possibility. Still, the Syrian theatre's project of national imagining persists, albeit online and in exile. To understand this impulse to creative resistance is to understand how theatre can remain relevant in an age of atrocities.

# 1
# Martyrdom

A central argument of this book is that Syrian theatre artists have engaged or challenged government grand narratives by adopting or transforming many of the terms by which the state has represented Arab resistance to external threats. I begin with one of the most over-determined and contested words in the Syrian discourse: martyrdom. The word condenses different political and social experiences into a single image – a lifeless body, the marks of its trauma still plainly visible. In its control of school curriculum, and numerous voluntary organizations like the Baath Vanguard, the Revolutionary Youth, and the Union of Students, the Baath party has worked assiduously to shape the idea of martyrdom. Within Baath ideology, this martyr represents a pan-Arab commitment to resisting colonialism that began with the struggle against Ottoman imperialism and that continues in the government's battle with foreign jihadists funded by the US, reactionary Arab states, and/or Israel. Martyrs gave their lives to secure a strong state and, now that this is accomplished, give their lives to protect that state. A quick glance at YouTube reveals that the idea has come full circle. In hundreds of thousands of videos the martyr is the man or woman who dies defying the state.

Syrian political theatre has taken up the idea of martyrdom in all of its complexity, and that is true across the period examined in this book. In Syria (and arguably most anywhere) martyrdom is both a religious and political concept, but it is hard to imagine the word's use in Syria separate from considerations of state and nation. It is important to note that prior to the 1980s suicidal acts did not qualify as martyrdom, but that this has changed in many Muslim countries with the rise of "martyrdom operations" (or suicide bombings as they are known in the West). I do not engage the current debate over what constitutes martyrdom. Rather, I will argue that the Syrian regime has systematically invoked ideas of martyrdom to

legitimize its rule, and that when Syrian playwrights and activists depict martyrs they support, undermine, or coopt the imagery of the state.

The ubiquity of such imagery is suggested by the fact that fifteen of the plays discussed in these pages address martyrdom, and that number excludes the video plays and online performance activism that I will discuss later in this chapter. Some playwrights, such as ʻAli ʻUqlah ʻArsan, reflect Baath ideology in their work: the martyr gives his life for a pan-Arabism that lies at the heart of the Baath project. Many other playwrights, however, define the martyr as the individual who labors for Arab dignity or freedoms *despite* the machinations of corrupt states, Syria included. Muhammad al-Maghut provides the most irreverent response to the concept of the martyr: the state has rendered the word meaningless so the best one can do is to lampoon its current usage. The only remaining martyrs, for Maghut, are the artists who continue in their vain commitment to antiquated ideas like truth and beauty.

Maghut's influence on popular understandings of martyrdom is not insignificant. There have been well over half a million downloads of the culminating scene of his play *Cheers Homeland*, in which the protagonist speaks magically with his father, "martyred in a recent war," reluctantly acknowledging the political and social failures of the Arabs and earning his father's curse in the process. The play has been broadcast repeatedly on television through much of the Arab world and is as much a part of Arab identity as *A Christmas Story* is a part of US identity. Can we look upon our martyrs with pride or should shame force us to cower before them? The question is central to how Syrian theatre artists imagine a national identity.

In any culture, dying for a cause is a powerful and emotional concept but that is not to discount the specific histories that give such deaths force for each community. In Syria, the Baath government has consciously framed a history that mobilized the idea of martyrdom to support the party and the Assad leadership. Theatre's engagement with the idea of martyrdom is very much in response to this party project; those theatre practitioners that contest the state's idea of martyrdom implicitly contest the state's legitimacy. The state, according to its propaganda, leads the people in a liberation struggle that began with the martyrdom of nationalist leaders on May 6, 1916 and continues today. This idea circulates in history textbooks, ceremonies, and news broadcasts.

The sixth of May 1916, it should be noted, is a questionable starting point for an ongoing war of national liberation, but spotlighting the event does important ideological work for the state. On that day the Ottoman Governor of Greater Syria ordered the execution of twenty-one

urban notables in Damascus and Beirut. William Cleveland has suggested that most of the notables had been singled out for earlier activities in the Ottoman Decentralization Party, a party that called for reform of Ottoman administration of Arab lands not independence. This followed eleven executions the previous year, and all were prompted by Ottoman anxiety about Arab loyalty in the midst of the First World War. To quote Cleveland, "The coincidental timing of the second wave of executions – one month before the proclamation of the Arab Revolt – gave all of the victims an aura of martyrdom, and their deaths came to be associated with the cause of Arabism" (Cleveland and Bunton 2009: 154).

The Baath party has done much to strengthen the association between the 1916 executions and the rise of Arab nationalism. Since the party adopted its constitution in 1947, it has held that: "The emblem of the Arab state is that of the Arab revolution begun in 1916 to liberate and unify the Arab nation" (Arab Baath Party 1962: 236). By citing 1916 as the starting point for Arab nationalism, the Baath party posits a fully indigenous anti-colonial movement, centered in Damascus and Beirut, before the French assumed the administration of Syria and Lebanon after the defeat of the Ottomans in the First World War. According to this timeline, the Arabs of Greater Syria longed for a state before European colonialism entered the Levant, even before the Arab Revolt in which the Hashemite ruler of Mecca, Grand Sharif Hussein, entered into an agreement with Britain against Ottoman forces – significant given Syria's later opposition to the conservative Hashemite monarchies Britain created in Jordan and Iraq.

When the Baath party came to power in 1963, it immediately set about centralizing educational policy and overseeing the preparation and approval of all textbooks (Alrabaa 1985: 337), policies that would lead to the dissemination of the Baath history of the Arab revolution. The following year saw the publication a new high school history textbook that described the 1916 execution of notables as a "deep influence" in prompting the declaration of the Arab Revolt (Aflaq et al. 1965: 201). A more recent Syrian high school textbook cites this execution as a principal cause of the Arab Revolt, and goes on to depict "the martyrs of May 6" approaching the gallows and repeating in a loud voice a chant that concluded: "We are begot of Qahtan [the legendary ancestor of the South Arabians], the grandfather of all Arabs" (Syria. Wizārat al-Tarbiyah wa-al-Taʿlīm 2001: 169). Resistance to Ottoman oppression is depicted as prompted by feelings of pan-Arab unity.

Muhammad al-Maghut, in a signature gesture of his dramatic canon, transforms the state's repeated invocation of martyrs into comically transparent self-aggrandizing and a blatant effort to distract from the needs

of the present. That strategy is evident from his first published play, *The Hunchback Sparrow* (1967). It depicts a group of political prisoners, who later reappear as Prince, Holy Man, and The Accused. The play's absurdist transformations and fable-like character-types mask a realistic examination of Syria at the time of the play's composition. Rapid coups and multiple cabinets afflicted Syria between 1949 and 1963 when the Baath party seized power. (There were four coups between 1949 and 1951 alone.) Maghut particularly blurs the boundaries between absurdism and satire in the second act of the play, when an Industrial Commissioner addresses the peasant farmers of a drought-plagued village.

The villagers had anticipated a visit from the Agricultural Commissioner, who would investigate their misery and listen to their descriptions of a village in which everything is "dry and blazing," from the fields and livestock to the men and women (Maghut 1981: 405). The Agricultural Commissioner does in fact drive through the village, but without stopping, glancing at a field from his car window and continuing with a yawn. Instead the village receives a visit from an Industrial Commissioner who clearly has no interest in or expertise on their crop failures, but comes simply to deny the slanderous claims that the authorities know nothing of the people's "crusty fields and hungry poultry" (417). His long speech attacks those who slander the state and he praises officials who "travel like clouds in the desert to the farthest villages, the most filthy and disordered, to console the wounded mother or the grieving father" (420). The speech only makes passing reference to the drought when the Commissioner concludes: "We do not care if the branches (āghṣān) are green or yellow, so long as they make fitting frames for the pictures of our heroes and martyrs" (421).

The village has a desperate need for water, but rather than an irrigation plan they receive party officials who travel like "clouds in the desert." It is a cruel response to the drought since these officials do not dispense rain but (supposed) "comfort" to wounded mothers and grieving fathers. The Commissioner shifts attention from the lack of water to some obscure past melee – for whom does the father grieve, how was the mother wounded? One grasps at phrases as the official races over images until concluding with a less than stirring reference to martyrs and heroes, whose veneration is far more important than whether mere branches or twigs (āghṣān can mean either) are healthy or withered. The villagers are unimpressed:

Grandmother: Nonsense. Everything he said was nonsense.
Pregnant Woman: I didn't understand a word he said.

Unknown: I understood some things. Our martyrs don't need frames to preserve their memories.
Grandfather: Because most of them die from hunger or boredom. (421)

The great enemy is not colonialism, according to Grandfather, but want and inactivity. Both, the play implies, grow common when the rains dry up and the government is absent.

Government creates martyrs through its inattention when it is not creating martyrs through outright oppression. Earlier the play features a conversation between a student and a shoemaker in prison – literally, in a "nameless human cage in a nameless desert" (345). From their conversation, the shoemaker concludes that the student is a member of the Nationalist Party, "one of those who carry winding-sheets and combs" (384). Banners are imagined as burial sheets and every protester carries a comb to prepare the body for burial. The government does not preserve the memory of martyrs, as suggested by the Industrial Commissioner, but actively creates martyrs when people inadvisedly take to the streets with demands. The lines are not hypothetical; Maghut was imprisoned in 1955 and again in 1962 for his membership of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). The founder of that party, Antun Saadeh, was executed in 1949 after the Syrian authorities handed him over to a Lebanese military court. Saadeh died within forty-eight hours of his capture and is described as a martyr in much SSNP literature.

The play was published in Beirut in 1967, and Maghut presumably composed it before the June War. After that debacle, it became a more complicated thing for Syrian officials to evoke the glory of the nation's martyrs. As has been discussed extensively elsewhere, Syrian missteps were instrumental in bringing about a war that neither Damascus, Cairo, nor Amman was prepared to fight.[1] Leading up to 1967, Damascus supported Palestinian fedayeen attacks against Israel, intensified anti-Israel rhetoric, and vociferously critiqued President Nasser of Egypt for his more cautious approach to the Palestinian problem. After the Soviet Union incorrectly informed Nasser that Israel was massing troops on the Syrian border, Egypt (which had signed a mutual defense treaty with Syria in 1966) mobilized troops into what had been the demilitarized Sinai Peninsula. Things came to a head on May 22 when Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping – despite Israel's assertions that doing so would be considered an act of war. On June 5 Israel launched a massive air attack effectively destroying the Egyptian air force on the ground. The Israelis then destroyed the much smaller air forces of Syria and Jordan.

Without air support and believing Egyptian press reports of victory, the Syrians stayed out of the ground war for the first four days. Their defenses had already been compromised by repeated purges in the officer corps (particularly after a 1966 inter-party coup in which the Baath General, Salah Jadid, seized power from the National Command of the Baath party). When Israel did attack, Syria withdrew forces from the Golan fearing an attack on Damascus through Lebanon. Israel took the Golan Heights by June 10, precipitating a chaotic retreat. Syrian radio announced the fall of Quneitra before fighting even began, prompting an exodus of surrounding villages and confusion among military ranks that, in their disorganization, were getting much of their information from the radio (Seale 1965: 140–141).

Theatre responded. The next chapter examines two plays about defeat written in the aftermath of the humiliating 1967 War – both of which critique the state's invocation of the martyr. As I will discuss later, *Soirée for the Fifth of June* (1968) by Saadallah Wannus undermines official rhetoric invoking the glorious sacrifices of Syrian soldiers and the assertion that such losses were not in vain. In that play, actors playing audience members contest such statements, relating their own experience of a confused and disorganized retreat, and asserting that substantial social and political change are necessary if there is to be any hope of redeeming the sacrifices of the war dead. In *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight* (1970) by Mumdoh 'Adwan, the dead stand in relief against a population that cowers before both foreign invaders and their own authoritarian rulers. That play depicts the trial of a thirteenth-century peasant farmer accused of fleeing before the Mongol invader, Hulagu. The farmer views his timidity before the invader as an extension of a timidity cultivated through years of bowing before a repressive regime. The farmer envies his son for his refusal to bend, both earlier when he resisted arrest without charges and now when he dies resisting the invaders. By contrast to the son's dignified martyrdom, the father lives on "to flee like a terrified rabbit" ('Adwan 2006: 1:158).

After Hafez al-Assad came to power in a 1970 intra-party coup, he reasserted the state's claim on the concept of martyrdom, declaring May 6 a public holiday to honor all who had fallen for the country – not simply those executed on 1916. Under Assad's rule, according to one historian, "sacrifice for one's country was treated almost as an alternative to religious sanctity" and Martyrs' Day became a celebration of "national unity" and a "source of power, valor, active pride, patriotism, and courage." Recent Arab failures (the Wars of 1948 and 1967) were subsumed within a long struggle replete with acts of heroism. The state presented

the Syrian martyrs of 1916 as "the most revered of mankind, and the noblest of men," to use Assad's own words (quoted in Zachs 2012: 85). Assad implicitly acknowledged the human losses of 1967, during which time he served as Minister of Defense, without naming that debacle. Instead the death of reputed nationalists resisting Ottoman oppression became an occasion to remember all who died for country. Ottoman imperialism eventually collapsed and – by extension – Zionism would one day as well.

In this context Maghut penned a much more damning critique of the state's rhetoric of martyrdom. His next play, *The Jester* (1973), is not specifically an examination of the June War but clearly reflects a growing frustration with hollow party propaganda accompanied by an inept foreign policy. The play begins in an Arab working-class neighborhood with an itinerant acting troupe performing a comically populist version of *Othello*, followed by a seemingly improvised riff on the Muslim conqueror, Saqr Qurash. The play then travels back in time when the troupe's leading actor, the jester, is summoned to the eighth-century court of the actual Saqr Qurash. The play concludes when Arab officials detain the actor and Saqr Qurash at an inspection office on the Israeli border. These wildly different episodes are linked by a false nationalism – each location is the setting for bad theatre in which self-serving actors promise to defend "the people" when in fact they manipulate and diminish the people for their own benefit.

The first act begins with a barker resorting to nationalistic slogans to scrape together an audience for *Othello*. It is not clear whether their performance or their ideology is more hackneyed and self-serving. Their noble goal is to "bring the theatre to the people." They do so without a playhouse because "this land could be used for growing crops or building a factory." Nor do they use a curtain, for cloth is better used in "bandaging the wounded, clothing the naked, and shrouding the martyrs" (Maghut 1981: 505). After performing a burlesque of the bedchamber scene, the barker summarizes: Othello was a "brave Moroccan hero" committed to the "struggle against colonialism"; Iago represents "the enemies of the nation" using nefarious means to distract the Arab hero from "his duty" (515) and "crush" him.

The audience knows its part as well. In response, one spectator connects Othello with a recently murdered Moroccan left-wing politician, spontaneously shouting "Long live the martyr Mehdi Ben Barka!" Ben Barka, who was abducted by French police in Paris in 1965 and then never seen again, founded a socialist party in Morocco and espoused the united revolution of Third World peoples. The barker then makes explicit

the idea that Othello is another in a long history of Arab nationalists persecuted by reactionary forces. Invoking the idea that client states invariably follow the imperialistic dictates of the great powers, the barker asks "But who, citizens, is behind the downfall of this Arab hero?" An audience member shouts, "Shakespeare!" which is followed by chants of "Down with Shakespeare!" As in any political catechism, more probing questions follow. Who is behind Shakespeare? Britain! Down with Britain! And behind Britain? America! Down with NATO! (515–516).

The itinerant troupe reels in its audience with a false nationalism pivoting around the martyr. The emotion generated by death for a cause is simply the means for scraping together a living. Maghut explains in his stage directions that the troupe happened upon the theatre after failing at every other profession and "in order to gather money would not hesitate to deform the most refined play and distort the most distinguished historical figure" (499). Their burlesque of Shakespeare is matched by their burlesque of the cause of Arab nationalism and their misuse of the legacy of those who died in the name of socialist revolution, like Ben Barka. Similar to the politicians they mimic, these actors resort to the propaganda business because they are unfit for any other employment. With their little cart and makeshift properties, curtains are clearly beyond the troupe's means, whether or not the nation's martyrs need shrouds. Nor is the lack of a playhouse evidence of government policies to increase arable land or build factories. Ideologues in arts and politics both use stirring slogans to distract from the inadequacy of their performance.

For Maghut, the invocation of martyrs to distract from agricultural and industrial failures pales in comparison to the giant act of bad faith that lies at the heart of the play: for all their cant of Arab nationalism, Arab leaders have watched as the Arab world has grown smaller. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, the play blames national security apparatuses for making the people timid and easily defeated. The play mentions the loss of Andalusia, Alexandretta (Iskenderun), and the Sinai, but the failure to reclaim Palestine drives the play. In the final act of the play, when a legitimate Arab hero appears – Saqr Qurash, the eighth-century Muslim conqueror of Andalusia returned from the dead and intent on recapturing Palestine – modern-day authorities arrest him at the Arab side of the Israeli border and prevent him from undertaking his mission. He is ultimately extradited to Spain to stand trial for war crimes dating from his conquest as part of a deal for a large shipment of onions. The play tells its audience: a political class of big talk and small ambitions has sold our heritage on the cheap.

Though Maghut told me that he wrote *The Jester* in response to the 1967 War, the play would not be produced in Syria until well after its next war

with Israel, the October War of 1973. In between it was published (1973) and performed in Beirut, directed by Yacoub Chedrawi.[2] It finally came to Damascus in 1983, in a production at the Qabbani Theatre directed by Soheil Shalhoub. It was also part of the National Theatre's program of traveling theatre, which already had presented work in 1,200 villages and in 426 factories (according to the 1983 program notes for *The Jester*). The idea of state-sponsored traveling theatre satirizing the state through its representation of an inanely ideological traveling theatre company might seem like either a remarkable oversight or a profound sense of humor on the part of the censors at the Ministry of Culture. One could discuss such a phenomenon as an example of *tannufus*, letting off steam as it were. Miriam Cooke (2007: 73) does characterize Maghut's writing as "tanaffus literature" because it levels critiques at generalized administrators, sparing the President and party elites. Similarly, one could say that the production reflects the growing confidence of the regime, its certainty that no one would dare suggest that the Arab authorities that capture Saqr Qurash at the Israeli border and then send him to stand trial in Spain represent Baath party officials. Audience members will act "as if" all agree that Syria is the beating heart of Arab nationalism and the leader of the effort to reclaim Palestine, regardless of what they know to be true.

However, it is equally important to acknowledge the political events that would dramatically change potential reception of the play: the 1973 October War and the 1979 Egypt–Israeli Peace Treaty. On October 6, 1973, Syria and Egypt launched a joint attack on Israel in order to retrieve the Golan Heights and the Sinai, territories those nations had lost in the 1967 War. Early successes by Arab forces did much to restore a sense of pride among Syrians, even though Israeli forces were able to push back, retaking the Golan and threatening Damascus. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the strong performance of the Syrian and Egyptian military prompted several plays lauding Arab redemption and confident of eventual success against Israel.

One important example is Maghut's own *October Village*, which was produced in 1974 and repeatedly broadcast on television in subsequent years. It is a scathing attack on past Syrian leaders, but clearly differentiates Hafez al-Assad from those who preceded. The play ends with the village (representing the Arab world) battling a band of thieves (Israel). The battle is inconclusive but a source of pride for the villagers, despite the death of one of the play's central characters, the clownish Ghawar. His dying words, "I'm lucky to die for the nation," would seem to suggest Maghut's acceptance of the regime's use of martyrdom and the idea that

Assad has rejuvenated the nation in its battle against Zionism. While I will problematize such a reading in the next chapter, suffice it to say that the wide and enthusiastic reception of *October Village* blunted the assumption that *The Jester* was an attack on Assad, and presumably made the latter's mounting easier to consider.

The choice to kill off Ghawar was of great cultural significance, as that character and the actor who played him had become much loved well before Maghut adopted them. Duraid Lahham created the light-hearted character for the 1966 television series *Ghawar's Pranks*, and then reprised the role for three subsequent television series: *The Pleasant Bath* (1968), *Good Morning* (1971, 1972), and *Salt and Sugar* (1972).[3] Ghawar's death on the field of battle would be akin to a US play transforming Bob Denver's Gilligan into a heroic war casualty. In killing Ghawar, Maghut and Lahham chose a familiar and much-loved figure to stand in effigy for a nation's losses.

The 1979 Egypt–Israeli Peace Treaty was even more significant to the context of the 1983 production of *The Jester*. Following Egypt's separate peace with Israel, audiences were likely to interpret any play attacking accommodation as an attack on Egypt. In this context, *The Jester* appeared as one of several plays attacking the normalization process such as 'Ali 'Uqlah 'Arsan's *A Demonstration of Opponents* (1976) and Mamduh 'Adwan's *Hamlet Awakens Too Late* (1976, performed 1978). Both of those plays were written immediately after the Sinai Interim Agreement in which Egypt and Israel agreed to a new UN buffer zone and committed themselves to peaceful resolutions of conflicts. The agreement was roundly condemned in Syria. The production of *Hamlet Awakens Too Late* followed Sadat's historic speech to the Israeli Knesset in 1977, which came as huge shock to the Arab world. Egypt's separate peace was especially galling to Syrians as an affront to the memory of soldiers who died in 1973 in order to liberate Arab lands. This is specifically the argument made in *A Demonstration of Opponents*, in which "the mother of a martyr" of the Sinai campaign (an especially respected figure in many Arab countries) calls on the men of her village to rally to war and redeem the dead by liberating Arab lands held by Israel. Government security forces and oppositional activists conspire to discredit her, seeing that her call to action undermines them both.

*Hamlet Awakens Too Late* similarly suggests that normalization is an affront to the dead of 1973. As the prince debates honor and culpability, Denmark and Norway negotiate trade agreements and normalized relations despite Norway's confiscation of Danish lands. Hamlet awakens to these

developments only when he discovers that the elaborate preparations he witnesses are in advance of a state visit by Fortinbras.

> Oh blood shed on the field of battle. Will you rise up today in protest? Oh martyrs, you who swarmed to death in defense of the homeland. Rise up and see the enemy who killed you trample on the earth anointed by your blood. Now you must move the stone from the graves and raise up the martyrs. Now martyrs! Now you must ensure that you did not die in vain. ('Adwan 2006: 1:366)

The queen interprets his outbreak as madness, and in fact at the height of his passion, young Hamlet sees the ghost of his father. In 'Adwan's adaptation, accommodating national enemies – rather than polluting a marriage bed – is the greatest barrier to sovereign legitimacy. As in the original, the dead demand vengeance, but the greatest betrayal is political appeasement, not sexual transgression.

The angry ghost of a father features prominently in the most famous scene of martyrdom portrayed on the Syrian stage. Muhammad al-Maghut's *Cheers Homeland* (1978) reclaims Ghawar despite his death in the earlier *October Village*.[4] Ghawar is now the son of a martyr, an identity that he underscores by perpetually wearing the medal awarded his dead father. The play squarely faces the fear that Arabs have disgraced the memory of their martyrs, and places the responsibility largely on corrupt regimes only intent on preserving their power even at the cost of terrorizing the general population. The play follows Ghawar through a series of tragedies: his daughter, Ahlam (the name translates as "Dreams"), dies from a lack of medical treatment; he is detained and tortured when he complains about her death; and his increasing poverty forces him to sell his two other children. Stripped of his children – literally his "dreams" for the future – Ghawar finds temporary relief in drink. In the play's final scene, an inebriated Ghawar receives a telephone call from paradise – his father calling to inquire about the homeland for which he gave his life.

The scene's comedy stems from the outlandish lies that Ghawar relates to his father, seeking to reassure him that the Arabs have achieved the unity and liberation for which martyrs died. These lies are also the source of the scene's pathos. It is a repeated trope in Maghut's dramaturgy and one to which I will return in later chapters: today's Arabs stand ashamed before the sacrifices of their ancestors. As wonderful as paradise is, the martyr still longs for the homeland, Ghawar's father explains. Ghawar wishes to protect his father from the nation that betrayed his sacrifice, and concocts outlandish lies. Ghawar announces that unity reigns between Arab

nations and borders exist "only on maps," as he gulps down Arak – a strong alcoholic drink from the Levant. Ghawar explains that just this morning he ate breakfast in Baghdad, lunch in Khartoum, and that he is speaking with his father from Abu Dhabi. Freedom reigns and jails now only hold criminals. The structures that once held political prisoners have been converted into schools and hospitals. Foreigners travel from afar to examine Arab systems of justice, laws, and order – as if the whole Arab world had become one big Expo.

These reassuring tales prompt the martyred father to broach the subject of Palestine, which occasions Ghawar's most outrageous lies. Palestine has been liberated, the refugees have returned to their homes, and the Jews have been reintegrated into Arab society. The father reminds his son that the Arabs have always been generous in victory, and the audience can only envy one who died before such a statement would sound comically irrelevant. The father's desire to see his son in paradise prompts a comically panicked Ghawar to insist that he has everything he needs right here on earth. Paradise might flow with milk and honey, but the Arab world has 100 honeys and 200 cheeses – including *vache qui rit*! Processed cheese spread calls to mind other imported luxuries, like Somali bananas (an expensive item in the 1970s) and color TVs. In short, the only thing of worth in the Arab world arrived by boat. "You lack for nothing," the father notes with admiration. Ghawar can no longer maintain his lies: "By God, you are right father. The only thing we lack is a little dignity!"

The truth pours out of a shamed Ghawar. Israel has expanded, Yemen has split into two, and Lebanon has splintered. His mother is reduced to working in a Laundromat and he has sold his children. The Arabs have made their flags into ties for businessmen and the price of Arab blood is set by banks. Finally the father asks what of the "cause" – the nationalism for which he died – to which Ghawar confesses that all that is left of the cause is one last sip, which he will drink down and finish once and for all. "God punish you; now, you have killed me," the father announces. The Arabs finish off their martyrs themselves, having destroyed the Arab nationalism that gave sacrifice meaning.

Ghawar's defeatism shifts in the closing lines. Having been abandoned by his martyred father, Ghawar turns to the audience, addressing them as "brothers," and explains that for all of the pain this country has brought him, he cannot flee, for the homeland is lodged in him. He has no choice but to remain, whether he is wanted or not, and announce the errors that surround him. "I will make a revolution with my flask," he says while re-pinning his father's medal to his jacket, "and drink to you, my homeland." His disorderliness, his sharp humor, even his

drunkenness all serve a revolutionary project: drawing attention to the betrayals and illogic that passes as the normal everyday. Ghawar accepts his marginalization as the price of this project, and by pinning on his father's medal he claims common cause with the war dead.

Maghut invokes the greatest sacrifice and then undermines any comfort one might have from the idea that dying for the nation is glorious. In the place of the war hero, Maghut substitutes the satirist as the true martyr, one martyred by the state. This idea became literal in his last staged play, *Out of the Flock* (1999). (Describing someone as "out of the flock" in the Arab world is equivalent to describing them as "a black sheep" in the US and elsewhere.) In that play an actor agrees to give his life to protect an artistic legacy under attack. The threat is no longer a single oppressive regime, but an international organization that views artistic creation as a threat to the social and cultural domination by global elites. The play depicts a theatre company attempting to stage *Romeo and Juliet*, until a committee from the High Arab Organization for the Development and Freedom of the Theatre commandeers the production with the intention of covertly destroying the theatre. *Out of the Flock* was privately financed, running sixty-seven nights in Damascus before touring major cities in Syria. Jihad Saad, star of film and television, directed and performed the lead role, Atif (see Figure 2).

*Figure 2* Jihad Saad as Atif in *Out of the Flock*. Courtesy Jihad Saad.

In *Out of the Flock* international organizations are the villains and theatre practitioners are the true heroes, a fact that is immediately apparent once the curtains part. The walls of the performance space display pictures of "the great actors, actresses, and authors of the world theatre: Shakespeare, Wagner, Sarah Bernhardt, Laurence Olivier, Chekov, Brecht, and in the middle a huge framed picture of Farid al-Atrash" (Maghut 1999: 5). The Syrian singer, composer, and star of tens of Egyptian films from the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s takes his place alongside Europe's greats. Farid and the others look upon a stage space that is arranged like a medieval mystery play: a box office, a green room, a general playing area, and Juliet's balcony all simultaneously visible.

From the outset the play underscores the vulnerability of theatre-making in fraught times. The cast's opening night jitters are heightened by a series of explosions emanating from just beyond the theatre. One character speculates that they might be hearing echoes from Sarajevo or Afghanistan, but the show's producer is convinced that the theatre itself is under attack from multiple cannons. His anxiety proves prophetic; later in the play after the committee wreaks havoc on their production, the delegate from the High Arab Organization confesses the committee's true intention: "that not a single paving stone remain of this theatre, to tear down everything that is here because it is out of date, and build a new theatre from the rubble with a new understanding and new goals, all filled with splendor and joy." What little confidence one might have in the committee evaporates as the delegate goes on to boast of the committee's membership. He provides a haphazard list of government areas and academic disciplines – none of which relate to the performing arts – led by the minister of petroleum (92).

In a world in which petroleum drives every initiative, talk of liberation and Arab unity rings as hollow cant. The misuse of such causes is a repeated trope in Maghut's earlier work, but *Outside of the Flock* also shifts audience attention to the true heroes of Arab struggle. The troupe is about to begin their production of *Romeo and Juliet* when the theatre janitor, ticket seller, and understudy – Atif – reminds the play's producer that he must first address the "dignitaries and audience." Atif instructs the producer to "touch on the theatre and its role in the development of the people, and the role of the people in general, and the arts in particular, in achieving freedom, justice, and the liberation of Palestine." The producer, who wishes only to avoid politics, has no intention of getting involved in the liberation of Palestine. "Who said you'd liberate it?" Atif demands. "It's just tradition, and dignitaries like to hear a few words about the liberation on every occasion" (35).

The producer delivers a short stammering speech, but still Atif won't let the play start until there is a minute of silence for the souls of the martyrs. The director erupts that he has had enough: "Why this standing for a minute of silence for the souls of who knows who every time there's a festival speech or election or commemoration of occupation or independence." So it falls to Atif to request a moment of silence from the audience for the souls of the martyrs from all over the world, such as "Shakespeare, Brecht, Pirandello, Beethoven, Wagner, and Farid al-Atrash" (39). Atif concludes:

> I hope that if we can stand, not for a minute or minutes, but hours for the spirits of our colleagues in theatre, journalism, art, and broadcasting who fall daily in our brother Arab nations, whose names we cannot mention, then other theatre makers will not mourn our souls before we finish performing this play. (40)

Art and media in the Arab world is a dangerous business. When Atif worries that his troupe might become an object of mourning before the performance concludes, it is unclear if he fears that the show will be a flop or that the play's denouement will include the real death of the actors.

The *Romeo and Juliet* performance has barely started before a delegate of the High Arab Organization arrests the play in mid-performance, complaining that it lacks Arab characteristics. Taking over the role of director, the delegate transforms the performance into an illustration of Arab unity. Romeo and Juliet now come from two Arab tribes and the production will end with joyous wedding celebrations replete with traditional line dances. The only source of tension in the delegate's revised production emerges in the rival wedding speeches, in which one family insists that "sexual honor comes before land" and the other that "land comes before sexual honor." The first statement [*al-arḍ qabla al-ʿarḍ*] dates back to the massacre at Deir Yassim in 1948 when some Palestinian families fled in order to protect their women from rape. The inversion originates from the 1960s when the Palestinian resistance took the position that traditional honor codes impeded the national struggle.

The debate is further complicated when the delegate instructs a third actor to proclaim that: "the party comes before land or sexual honor." The delegate then concludes the debate by instructing a fourth actor to announce that "God is greater than the land, honor, the regime, chaos, theatre, history, geography, language, painting, philology, music, and all the philosophy books in the world, and greater than all things in existence" (63). Some playwrights would find it sufficiently incendiary to joke about the alleged rapes of Palestinian women by Zionists,

Palestinian militancy, and party loyalty – accusing those who invoke these ideas as sloganeers. However, Maghut tops it off by satirizing those who have set up Islam as an alternative to liberation ideology, Baathism, and humanism.

In fact, the delegation serves no ideology other than maintaining the prominence of global elites. Atif innocently attests to this when he suggests to the actress playing Juliet that they copy their betters and further the cause of Arab nationalism by marrying and traveling to the US for the delivery of their first child. The "most important Arab VIPs in art and Arabists on the right and left" do it, he explains. That way when the next blockade comes, half of the US army will be of Arab descent and will smuggle food, drink, medicine, blankets, and canned goods to their parents. Atif concludes: "The blockade will be a family affair. Conception in the homeland and birth in America is a nationalistic undertaking one-hundred percent" (102). In an age of inevitable blockades, national sovereignty is an antiquated idea, no more real than the supposed nationalism of elites who circulate with the wantonness of global capital.

Unfortunately for those left behind, VIPs jet-setting for the good of the Arabs need not concern themselves with conditions in the old country. When the delegate demands local characteristics in the set design, Atif responds by spreading garbage underneath Juliet's balcony and writing graffiti on the wall: "Whoever's been pissing here is a son of a bitch" (46). The delegate's Arabization of the play means the inclusion of traditional line dances. Atif provides a more realistic picture of everyday life in Arab lands. The nostalgia industry may have coopted Arabism for the purpose of distracting from mismanagement and underdevelopment, but those of Atif's class live with the effects of such disregard.

When mobility is a sign of privilege and the local a sign of deprivation, only the most tortured logic allows elites to claim the banner of nationalism. What value, then, accrues to live performance, so doggedly atavistic in its connection to one place and time? It becomes merely a balm – joyful line dances and traditional wedding ceremonies to provide a sense of authentic identity for those who travel to the US for childbirth or other medical procedures and a sense of self-worth to those who spend their entire lives in one neighborhood. Elites do not simply abandon local practices, they bury the local in order to erect a manageable image of the indigenous in its place. Meanwhile, the play suggests, the deterritorialization of elite culture accompanies the avaricious territorial appetite of the US. There will be a blockade; it is just that elites have already made other arrangements.

The actress playing Juliet highlights the vulnerability of live performance to elite manipulation when she speculates that the committee's revisions of *Romeo and Juliet* are a calculated attack on the theatre. The committee, she explains, spares cabaret but wishes "to reverse and worsen [theatre] and to do belly dances and line dances [*raqaṣo wa dabko*] … on poetry, freedom, and emotion" (103). *Romeo and Juliet* is particularly a threat to elites, "because they don't want anyone to imagine or to depict that there are two in this world or in this nation able to love each other and are ready to die for the cause of love even if they are simply actors." In this new order, she explains, "you are only allowed to love your leaders" (104).

She commands Atif to join her in resistance; they will complete the play as it was written by committing an actual lovers' suicide on stage. In doing so, she explains, they will join "hundreds of poets, intellectuals, lovers, and knights" who have given their lives "in service to an idea in which they believe, or a noble word they've said, or a pledge they've made to their souls, or to rid themselves of self-loathing"; they will show their love for "the children of the stones," the Palestinian youths whose resistance sparked the first Intifada; and they will ally themselves with the young men and women who chose self-immolation in Prague and Tiananmen Square "for the dignity and freedom of their countries" (105).

Challenging a tank with stones, self-immolation, and other forms of suicidal resistance are local acts that quickly segue to a global mediascape whether or not calculated to do so. The proposed real suicide in *Out of the Flock* summons to mind the martyrdom operations and presages the December 2010 self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor at the start of the Arab Uprising. However, the martyr has no control over his or her image after death, and this alone gives Atif pause. His only fear, he explains, is "funeral orations and elegiac posters that won't stop," adding "I don't want to die twice please" (111). He is right to be concerned, for in fact his beloved actress was collaborating with the committee from the start, an elaborate "brainwashing" designed to teach a lesson to "idiots that dare fly outside the flock" (113). There seem to be no viable acts of resistance. Even one's suicide might be coordinated by international organizations. Fortunately for Atif the poison was defective.

Atif is left alone on stage and begins a stunning monologue that radically transforms all of the images marshaled to this point. Beginning with the line "Is it possible Juliet is an illusion?" Atif runs through a desperate list of the touchstones of his life, each one a possible illusion, from characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, to abstract concepts, to historical events, to great writers in both the European and Arab traditions, to

popular song lyrics, to features of the natural world. Are these illusions? "Is there no reality other than Israel and petrol?" he asks (114).

Here the monologue shifts, and he pulls himself back from the edge with the rediscovery of his own corporality. "But here is my hand, and here is my leg …" and onward, delineating the features of his body, and then outward, delineating the features of the Arab world. For over a page he lists its boundaries in tremendous detail, inching his way around an imaginary map. And above the Arab world, a lone Arab satellite circles back and forth, and below the Arab world are underground "prisons and concentration camps and individual and group cells extending from the ocean to the gulf, and all of it with concrete doors and steel windows such that a bug couldn't pass through, and then … so where will Israel fly to? Where?" (115).

The play concludes with a very different form of martyrdom, far removed from the sacrifices of Farid al-Atrash and his fellow artists. This is the image of a region that has destroyed itself in the name of a cause. The Arab countries that surround Israel have become prisons for no other purpose than to trap the enemy – the entrapment of their own populations an apparent byproduct. In the name of territorial liberation Arab governments have transformed their territories into one giant jail. Atif, the idiot who refuses to fly with the flock, delineates every bar in his cage, the Arab world. Except that in the final line he insists that this cage holds not himself but Israel. To where can Israel fly? Israel suddenly becomes the bird out of the flock trapped in a cage. Israel takes Atif's place and allows him to imagine himself as jailer rather than jailed. This troubling image grows darker with the play's final stage direction: "He rises to his feet, head raised and smiling, like a Nazi soldier at the peak of his victory" (115). Self-destruction, overtly or implicitly state-directed, has rendered Atif inhuman. He shares the "victory" of a party completely defeated and repudiated.

For Maghut and the other playwrights of his generation, the critique and refashioning of martyrdom is grounded in the word's relegation to the realm of the abstract. The Industrial Commissioner's statement in *The Hunchback Sparrow*, "We do not care if the branches are green or yellow, so long as they make fitting frames for the pictures of our heroes and martyrs," is laughable because of its remove from the pressing needs of the drought-plagued villagers. In response, Maghut reveals martyrdom's centrality to the logic of the authoritarian regimes that have transformed the region into a giant police state. By accepting the logic of martyrdom as articulated by the state, Arab populations have accepted their own imprisonment. Maghut counters by repurposing "martyrdom" as

a commitment to locally grounded artistic achievement in the face of a clichéd and false indigenousness created to serve global elites.

The state, Maghut rightly suggests, has constructed an abstract martyr, a figure that embodies national sacrifice but is far removed from actual events. The strategy is a response to a very specific dilemma: Syria's modern history is replete with military failure. To invoke specific martyrs at specific battles is to invite a policy debate. Why so many martyrs at so many defeats? For what did they die? One solution, I argue, has been to construct a ceremonial calendar that begins historically with the 1916 executions and culminates in the restoration of Arab dignity in 1973. At the beginning and end of the ceremonial calendar, Martyrs' Day (May 6) and Liberation War Day (October 6) feature identical observances.

Since former President Hafez al-Asaad first declared Martyrs' Day a state holiday, the President has laid a wreath on May 6 for the war dead. The ceremony has taken place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Mount Qassioun since that structure was completed in 1994. Military leaders greet the President on his arrival, they listen as the National Anthem plays, they review an honor guard, the President receives flowers from the children of recent martyrs, and he greets state officials (including the Chief of Staff of the Syrian wing of the Palestinian Liberation Army). The President then lays a wreath before an eternal flame and reads the first seven verses of the Quran for the souls of the martyrs. Then on October 6 the same group reconvenes and enacts the same ceremonies to honor the dead of 1973.

As the seasonal calendar progresses from fall to winter to spring, the ceremonial calendar marches back in time, beginning with the 1973 War and concluding with the 1916 execution of notables. In between are three additional commemorations that similarly travel backwards. On November 16 Syrians celebrate Corrective Movement Day marking the intra-party coup that brought Assad to power in 1970. On March 8 they celebrate Revolution Day marking the coup that brought the Baath party to power in 1963. On April 17 they celebrate Evacuation Day marking the final departure of French forces from Syria in 1946. This calendar bypasses the traumatic wars of 1948 and 1967, which generally go unremarked in the three national state dailies.[5] The calendar describes a series of Syrian victories leading to the successful 1973 War. From the darkest hour of Ottoman oppression, Syrians eventually force French withdrawal, the Baath party replaces a reactionary regime, Assad purifies the party, and then leads the country to an honorable war. This history lesson begins and ends by honoring the dead.

This abstracting of the martyr became an untenable strategy in the spring of 2011. As noted in the introduction, in February of that year, a group of young people in Daraa were arrested for writing anti-regime graffiti on a wall of their school. Protests followed when authorities refused to release the children. The ensuing government siege of Daraa sparked protests across the country. Then, on April 29, thirteen-year-old Hamza Ali al-Khatib disappeared when gunmen broke up a rally in Daraa. His corpse was returned to his family on May 24 on the condition, according to activists, that the family never speak of the child's death (Stack 2011). Graphic video posted online with narration in Arabic revealed mutilation that included castration. On May 27, activists created the Facebook page, "We are all the child martyr Hamza Ali al-Khatib." According to Al Jazeera, within days the page had more than 60,000 followers (Macleod and Flamand 2013). Initially the page was a place where adults and children posted drawings and comments memorializing Hamza, but soon became a space for memorializing any child killed, wounded, or emotionally scarred by the conflict. The page had 772,426 likes as of September 2014.

This use of social media was modeled on similar uses in the Egyptian Revolution, which had been credited with galvanizing the opposition movement. The Hamza Ali al-Khatib page clearly evokes the Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said." That page, similarly devoted to an Egyptian youth brutalized and killed in detention, garnered a huge following. The *New York Times* has described the site – with the outrage it generated and its calls to protest – as an important catalyst to the Egyptian Revolution (Preston 2011). As the number of Syrian casualties has skyrocketed – over 191,000 as of September 2014 according to the United Nations – so have the number of Facebook pages and YouTube channels addressing death. "We are all the child martyr Hamza Ali al-Khatib" was the start of an outpouring of online engagement by a population increasingly online. A great many Syrians access the web, 20.7% of the population according to one recent study (Salem and Mourtada 2012: 11). Facebook use has climbed throughout the conflict, increasing 22% between January and May of 2012 with 17.4% of the Syrian population using the service (Salem and Mourtada 2012: 16). These online representations of martyrs extend far beyond the recording of names and circumstances of death to include a host of complex meditations of the idea of martyrdom.

The opposition has pointedly employed forms of commemoration in defiance of state-sanctioned commemorations. In advance of the state's May 6 Martyrs' Day commemorations, the Local Coordination Committees of Syria named the planned April 1 protests "Martyrs' Day" in honor of the more than seventy who had died in the unrest of

the previous weeks (Duncan and Therolf 2011), and the Facebook page "Syrian Revolution 2011" organized "Martyrs' Week," a series of rallies beginning April 5 in honor of the dead (AFP/NOW Lebanon 2011). In doing so, activists added a new reference to the official celebrations that would take place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: those who had fallen challenging the state now ghosted the commemoration of those who had fallen defending the state.

Individuals have also taken on the job of wresting the idea of martyrdom from the state. Writing in August 2011, Anthony Shadid noted that throughout Homs, where hundreds had already died, protesters have renamed streets where the casualties once lived, "scrawling their names on buildings, walls, and signs" (Shadid 2011b). Normally the state reserves the power of institutionalizing history through the naming of public space. By scrawling the name of an unofficial martyr, these individuals subvert state narratives and legitimate their own lived histories. Such appropriations often evoke layers of the past. Azma Square in downtown Damascus is named for the Syrian Minister of War who died leading a band of poorly armed soldiers and civilians against vastly superior French forces in 1920, rather than submit to the French Mandate. On Martyrs' Day in 2012, protesters surrounded the statue of Yusuf al-Azma at Azma Square, holding signs that drew attention to the then 9,000 martyrs of the revolution and the culpability of the state (Adsmasyaf 2012). Symbolically, the death of Yusuf al-Azma in an anti-colonialist struggle is joined to the deaths of thousands of Syrians rebelling against Baath party rule.

While the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is a principal site in the state's mapping of martyrdom, Marjeh Square, officially known as Martyrs' Square, is almost as important. There the Ottomans executed Syrian notables in 1916 and the French executed revolutionaries during the Mandate period. It is also the location of the Ministry of the Interior, the department responsible for security forces and prisons. Not surprisingly, Marjeh has throughout the Uprising seen protests and bombings. Facing the square is the Yalbugha Mosque named for the thirteenth-century mosque that occupied the site until it was demolished in 1975 to make way for a new mosque and business complex. The mosque is serviceable but incomplete and the large business complex remains an empty shell after years of stalled construction. Like the square, the mosque has been renamed for a famous "martyr."

Now officially the Mosque of the Martyr Bassel al-Assad, the structure memorializes the older brother of Bashar al-Assad. Bassel was the intended presidential successor to his father but died in 1994 after

crashing his Mercedes while driving to the Damascus airport at 80 mph in early morning fog en route for a ski vacation (Schmidt 1994; Pipes 1996: 29). The death led to a long period of national mourning. As one scholar notes: "Over a year later, the mourning remained frenzied. Pictures remained ubiquitous, appearing not just on walls, cars and in stores but also on such artifacts as dishes, clothing and watches" (Pipes 1996: 29). Damascus's international airport, schools, and numerous city squares were renamed after the martyr Bassel al-Assad.

The organizers of the Facebook page "The Syrian Revolution 2011" called for a demonstration at Marjeh Square for March 16, 2011, the second demonstration in Damascus according to Al Jazeera. Organizers intended to present the Minister of the Interior with a petition for the release of political prisoners, but the security services beat and detained the protesters before they could approach the ministry (Al Jazeera 2011). The petition served as a subtle rejoinder to the state's promise to hold the memory (rather than the living bodies) of those who fought for liberation. The state's claim to the exclusive right to name the martyr is most flagrantly evident in the creation of the martyr Bassel, as if rushing to a ski trip was the equivalent of defending one's faith, family, country, or ideals.

Subsequent protests at Marjeh Square have been much larger. A YouTube video of an April 25, 2011 demonstration shows crowds filling the square, with the silver dome of the Mosque of the Martyr Bassel al-Assad and the concrete shell of the Yalbugha Business Center in the background. "God, Syria, and freedom only!" they chant, pointedly excluding the state (Ugarit News 2011). Intentionally or not, the framing of the shot joins the mosque (an increasingly unconvincing celebration of the state's sacrifices), the business center (evidence of the state's graft or incompetence), and the resistant crowd. A year later, on April 24, 2012, a car bomb was detonated near the mosque.

The Marjeh Square car bombing draws attention to a disturbing development in the Syrian performance of martyrdom: the emergence of martyrdom operations. According to the state news agency, the bombing only injured three and was not a suicide attack ("Violence in Syria Ongoing," 2012). However, a much more deadly suicide attack followed on May 10 when two cars exploded outside a military intelligence compound, killing 55 and wounding nearly 400 (MacFarquhar 2012a).[6] It was at least the sixth instance of a suicide bombing in Syria since the start of the Uprising and the number grew dramatically in the months and years that followed.

It is a measure of Syrian opposition groups' faith in the power of performance that individuals have shown themselves willing to copy

acts of self-destruction – a fact that was made evident at the very start of the revolt. The beginning of the Syrian Uprising is sometimes cited as January 26, 2011 with the self-immolation of Hasan Ali Akseh. The act repeats that of the Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, credited with igniting the Tunisian Revolution. Ali Akseh was one of thirteen others in Arab countries who, in the span of a few months, reproduced Bouazizi's self-immolation to protest government actions or lack of action (Rosenberg 2011).

Contrasting images of the martyr now circulate in society. For the party regular, the martyr dies in the name of national liberation reified in the regime; for the Jihadist, the martyr dies for Islam; for the secular revolutionary, the martyr dies for a freedom that can only come into existence once the regime has fallen. Whereas Maghut and others of his generation responded to a monolithic image of the martyr, current theatre practitioners and performance activists respond to myriad representations that can be roughly grouped into the above three categories. Whereas Maghut and others referred to an abstraction misused by the state, current practitioners refer to recently dead individuals who have become intimately familiar through YouTube and Facebook. However, this is not to suggest that these images are invariably desacralized. Instead, in many instances, popular sovereignty gains metaphysical proportions. As Camus has noted (1956: 118): "In order to prove that the people are themselves the embodiment of eternal truth it is necessary to demonstrate that royalty is the embodiment of eternal crime." In this passage, Camus refers to the execution of Louis XVI, but in eighteenth-century France as in present-day Syria, revolutionaries depict a battle against a Satan who has usurped the divine right of the people. When martyrs are evoked, the idea of transcendence is near.

The organization Freedom Days strikes a tone of poetic transcendence in the majority of their actions and web pieces. Freedom Days describes itself on its Facebook and YouTube pages as a "Syrian group for peaceful struggle and nonviolent civil resistance." On their YouTube channel they document political actions and circulate animated shorts and photomontages critical of the regime and calling for popular resistance. As of June 21, 2012, the group had posted 182 videos generating over 338,000 views. Much of their work draws attention to the victims of state violence. For example, on the eve of the December 2011 local elections, Freedom Days created election posters featuring photographs of individuals killed by the regime in lieu of the party's candidates. The group then posted them throughout Damascus. The two-and-a-half-minute video "Surprise election of martyrs for freedom!" is a series of close-ups

of hands pasting the posters in lobbies and on exterior walls, accompanied by Lisa Gerrard's soaring track, "Now We Are Free" (2000). The video ends with a tracking shot from a car window showing the oppositional posters on storefronts and walls, pasted over official party posters (Freedom Days Syria 2011).

The group repeated the action and similarly documented it for the May 2012 parliamentary election, this time extending the project to the villages surrounding Damascus (Freedom Days Syria 2012). Each time an individual glued a poster to a wall, a caption below listed the neighborhood or village as "free." It was a particularly pointed action in 2012, for it was the first election following a new constitution supposedly ending the Baath party's monopoly over political life. In the face of the state's claims of constitutional reform, activists point to a logic of sovereignty grounded in violence rather than consent. Like the individual who renames a street for a martyr, those who participated in the "election of martyrs" liberated their streets and neighborhoods by inscribing the names of the dead across state markers and iconography.

In the "surprise election" action, Freedom Days constructs what Benjamin refers to as "dialectical images." Such images are connected to Benjamin's understanding of revolutionary time, because they substitute a dialectical relation between the "what-has-been" to the "now" in lieu of a temporal and continuous relation between past and present. "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (Benjamin 1999: 462). Historical materialism has "annihilated within itself the idea of progress" substituting "actualization" (460). In substituting the face of the martyr for the party regular, in revealing the state as the entity monopolizing the legal power to exercise lethal force (to invoke Max Weber 1994: 310), Freedom Days takes on the role of historian of the revolution. While groups such as Local Coordinating Committees create scrupulous timelines of violence, Freedom Days cracks open this narrative of resistance and oppression with images imbued with the prescience of dreams. To return to Benjamin: "It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation" (1999: 464).

The fantastic, which is a prominent feature of "surprise election," dominates the short film *End of Broadcast* by the documentary film collective Abou Naddara. This remarkable group uses irony and dark humor to reveal a residue of violence lingering in the everyday of a Syria under siege by its own government. The work is open-ended,

demanding continued contemplation. The group has posted a short video on its Vimeo channel every week since May 2011 "as a tribute and contribution to the street protests," according to Al Jazeera.com (Ratta 2011). The name, Abou Naddara (which translates as "the man with glasses"), is the pseudonym of the nineteenth-century Egyptian playwright and journalist, Yacub Sanu. Sanu's journal, also *Abou Naddara*, was outlawed for its liberal and revolutionary content but smuggled editions were popular in Egypt across classes.

In addition to evoking a nineteenth-century history of liberal Arab thought, the collective's name also evokes the film by Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, "a film we hold dear," according to group members (Abou Naddara 2012c). Like the films of Vertov, the videos of Abou Naddara are shot with portable cameras using natural lighting, recording spontaneous events rather than planned-out scenarios. From the material of the everyday, the group unearths the impulse to resist and imagines a future free of violence – regardless of how removed that future might feel from the current situation.

*End of Broadcast* posits the fantastic possibility that, swayed by the sacrifices of the people, state institutions would rise up against the government. The video, which was posted on October 21, 2011, shows a television screen in a dark interior, tilted slightly from the camera. The television image indicates that it is the end of the broadcast day; a Syrian flag flaps in the wind while a brass band plays the Syrian anthem (see Figure 3). The television image switches to an old black and white photograph of Ummayad Square, home to the Syrian Television Building, as Arabic text scrolls across the screen: "In the interest of the public good, for the honor of the souls of the martyrs, and in support of the people's legitimate demands, the General authority for Radio and Television announces a general strike until the regime falls" (Abu Naddara 2011b). As the text ends the television switches to static, and the sound of static continues even after the television has gone dark. Abou Naddara grounds the video in a double entendre. It is literally the end of the broadcast day but one that foreshadows the end of the regime now that state institutions have decided to honor the souls of the martyrs and align themselves with the people. The sound of static, uncoupled from the television image, transforms into the dying gasp of a corrupt regime.

Dziga Vertov's credos – "life as it is" and "life caught unaware" – reveal much of the twin strategies of Abou Naddara. They employ footage of unplanned and unstructured events, often found footage, which they then manipulate and combine to reveal daily life. The Abou Naddara collective formed before the Uprising, but now focuses exclusively on

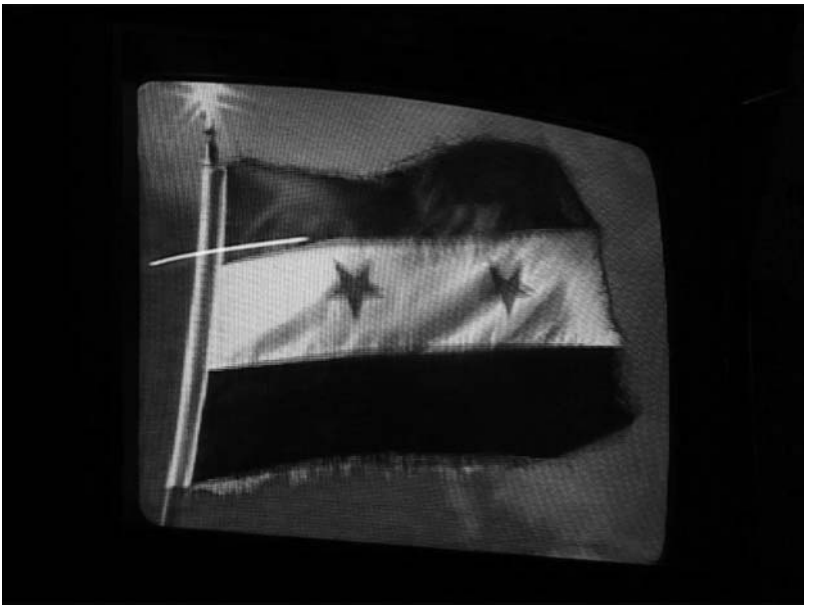

*Figure 3* *End of the Broadcast*. Courtesy Abou Naddara.

the effects of violence on everyday life; "we don't film the revolution but its countershot," a spokesperson for the group explained (in Ratta 2011). The work is deeply political while avoiding simplistic polemics. That said, Abou Naddara videos have displayed a growing urgency as the violence has escalated. This is evident in the comparison of two related videos that implicitly address the death of children by juxtaposing recent footage with beloved songs by Fairouz that sentimentalize childhood.

On August 5, 2011, Abou Naddara posted a film titled *Rima*, a common Arabic female name (Abou Naddara 2011c). In the 90-second film, a woman in a headscarf and long coat walks in a cemetery while the soundtrack features Fairouz singing the lullaby "Rima" (which she made popular in the 1968 Lebanese film *The Guard's Daughter* (*bint al-haras*)). In most of the shots the woman appears at a distance, obscured by the memorial stones. The closing shot focuses on a kite flying over the cemetery. The camera's large depth of field and distance from its subject keep the viewer ignorant of the woman's emotional state or purpose in the cemetery until we see her hand tending plants by a grave marker. Only the soundtrack and the image of the kite evoke the idea of

untimely death, and only one's memory of online memorials to child martyrs allows one to read the film as oppositional.

By contrast, *They're Playing*, posted ten months later on June 22, 2012, is relentless in its assertion that state violence is crippling a generation (Abou Naddara 2012b). The film, which is less than a minute long, depicts childhood trauma and death in five still images, which are accompanied by the opening lines from the Fairouz song "The Children Are Playing." The first image shows boys with toy guns – some fashioned from scrap wood and cardboard – as Fairouz sings: "The children are playing / under the blue sky they play." The second image shows a smiling child in a hospital bed, his right arm amputated at the shoulder and his left hand holding a store-bought toy gun as Fairouz sings: "They're lost in their beautiful games / they run without tiring." Finally as Farouz repeats the line, "They are playing," the viewer sees two images of bombed out interiors. Torn maps of the world in one and a single microscope in the other are the only indications of place (a school? a university?). The film ends with an image of simple wooden markers, the number "474" visible on one, planted in recently turned earth. The film not only mourns the death of children (who are presumably among the hundreds of dead suggested by the number 474) but the effects of a year of violence on all the children who play commando with homemade guns in bombed out streets. It is a marker of our poverty, the video asserts, that a toy gun consoles a disfigured child and a piece of scrap wood will mark his grave.

The photographs and footage in both films feel accidental and serendipitous. The distance between the camera and figure in *Rima* and the framing of shots that keep her partially obscured would seem to suggest that the subject has been caught unawares. Only the close-up of the hand tending the grave site suggests some communication between subject and camera operator. The kite in the background is the accidental event that gives the film its logic. Whether or not the woman is mourning a child, the kite necessitated a film about untimely death. The photographs of the boys in *They're Playing* feel equally candid and accidental. One can imagine the photographer happening upon children playing and snapping the first image. The photograph of the smiling boy in the hospital bed looks like a family snapshot of a child beaming over a new toy. As such the Abu Naddara project is emblematic of the time. Based on the massively expanded Syrian mediascape, one could conclude that half the country is busily filming and photographing the other half. The internet is full of footage capturing "life unaware" in Syria, though that is not quite accurate since most of this footage focuses on death.

Abou Naddara's steadfast focus on the revolution's "countershot" differs from that of the army of videographers capturing tragedy as it unfolds. These videographers have taped civilians falling to snipers, army officers beating civilians, and relatives first encountering the bodies of loved ones. Perhaps most disturbingly, there are several instances of footage ascribed to videographers at the moment of their own deaths.[7] The camera focuses on distant plumes or soldiers, a shot or explosion is heard, and the camera swings about, finally resting with a shot of sky or road.

Abou Naddara offers a countershot to such footage with the film *Corrective Movement*, posted on November 18, 2011 (Abou Naddara 2011a). The title is taken from the 1970 intra-party coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power, which, as noted above, is commemorated on November 16. *Corrective Movement* starts with a close-up of a young man's eyes. The reverse shot shows the computer screen he sees: columns running across the computer screen assign a number, list name, age, city, zone, date, and then terminate with "detained." Most of the film consists of a single shot of the screen as the man scrolls through pages and pages of names. He stops two thirds into the document; he erases "detained" in one of the rows and types "martyred under torture." Only now does the viewer get the joke; "corrective" does not mean ideological repositioning but textual editing. The detained is now a martyr. In a certain sense it amounts to the same thing: the elimination of rivals, whether the rival is Syria's de facto leader or the Syrian people as a whole. In 1970, "correction" meant imprisonment, torture, and murder – just as it does today. The film metaphorically captures the moment of death: not the moment when a bullet pierces the skin but the moment when a name is added to the roll of martyrs.

Activists have used the Internet to produce a massive martyrology, one that not only includes names and dates but likenesses from before and after death and records of mourning. The martyr election posters of Freedom Days recirculate this martryology, accosting those who had refused to look or had become inured. By contrast, the Abou Naddara videos arrest such circulation, pulling the viewer's attention from the figure to the ground; in most of their works the martyr is momentarily rendered invisible so that the viewer can better see the context. In *Rima* and *They're Playing* the viewer never learns the names nor sees the faces of those interred. In *Corrective Movement* the names on the screen pass so quickly that the viewer can't possibly register them – conscious only of the correction from "detained" to "martyred."

With *I Will Cross Tomorrow*, Abou Naddara brought the victim to the center of the piece without ever showing his face, and withholding his name until the final credits. *I Will Cross Tomorrow* is possibly Abou

Naddara's most poignant video and by far the most viewed (Abou Naddara 2012a). The three-and-a-half-minute video is composed of three shots, each filmed with a video camera. The first is a night scene in which a man, protected by the wall of a building, taunts a sniper: "Freedom forever, angering you Assad." A shot rings out. The man muses on the strange hostility of snipers towards the idea of freedom, concluding: "If I was armed and shot at him, he wouldn't shoot back. But if I shout 'Peaceful' he shoots." The man chants by way of example, "Peaceful forever, angering you, Assad," and the promised gunshot echoes. The next scene shows an empty roadway. A man's voice explains that you just have to say your prayers and set off and, God willing, nothing will happen. The camera tilts about as the cameraman begins to run across the street, and we see glimpses of his curly hair, the horizon, the road, and telephone lines indicating proximity to the other side of the roadway. Throughout we hear his panting and distant explosions. A final explosion sounds loudly and the camera tilts to the sky. The third and final camera shot shows a crowd of people carrying a shrouded body at night. Flashlights pointed at the body and the occasional camera flash provide the only light. The sound in this scene is entirely extra-diegetic; a man sings without accompaniment:

> Oh mother, sing me a love song, sing to me
> Better to be stabbed by daggers and swords than live under
> the rule of rascals
>
> I walked in winter and winter quenched my thirst
> But when summer came, it caught fire
> My life is the sacrifice, freedom's ransom
>
> Oh mother, sing me a love song, sing to me
> Better to be stabbed by daggers and swords than live under
> the rule of rascals
>
> Our courageous martyr, more dear than the most high
> Key to the passage to hope, hope in man
> Oh my people, oh hero, I would give my eyes to protect you
>
> Oh mother, sing me a love song, sing to me
> Better to be stabbed by daggers and swords than live under
> the rule of rascals.

As the song ends, the screen fades and lines of text appear: "Camera / Bassel [*sic*] Shehadeh / Assassinated in Homs, May 28th 2012."

The simple act of crossing a street can mean crossing into the world of martyrs. However, this crossing is also the act that secures our hope for the future; the martyr is the "key" for our passage to hope – not victory, merely hope. That might seem like scant reward for such a huge sacrifice, but better death than life "under the rule of rascals." The singer projects himself into Shehadeh's place. The song asserts that *my* life is freedom's ransom just as the title asserts that *I* will cross tomorrow. This identification between viewer and martyr is reinforced when the sole credit lists Shehadeh as the camera operator. The camera makes us present in his frantic sprint across a roadway, we hear the explosion that presumably killed Shehadeh, and we share his dying vision of a cloudless sky. The funeral scene that follows was taken from a video posted on YouTube on May 28, 2012, labeled as the funeral of four martyrs, one of whom is listed as Basel Shehadeh (MsSamer010 2012).

Within weeks of his death, Shehadeh's sacrifice had been widely circulated in the Arab mediascape. Al Jazeera ran multiple pieces on the filmmaker, focusing on his work in Homs, describing the response of people in Damascus, and broadcasting an interview with Shehadeh's friend, actor Ahmed Malas. Orient TV broadcast a segment focused on the films Shehadeh had posted on his YouTube channel before the rebellion began. These films have received thousands of views. *I Will Cross Tomorrow* is by far Abou Naddara's most viewed film. Between June 1 and June 19, 2012, it received 5,797 plays on Abou Naddara's Vimeo channel. In this same time span, the film received another 5,666 views on the YouTube channel whdasyria. In addition, there have been dozens of online memorials created from the limited number of photographs of Shehadeh online combined with other images culled from the rebellion's mediascape.

Basel Shehadeh was not the first videographer killed in the uprising. In fact, three other videographers were killed with him – presumably the three other corpses visible in the YouTube video of his funeral (MsSamer010 2012) – though their names have not circulated widely. However, unlike most of the victims of Baath violence, Shehadeh was a Christian from Damascus – the demographic that reportedly has stayed on the sidelines or actively supports the regime (as suggested in the state's coverage of the 2012 Martyrs' Day celebrations). According to the *New York Times*, the 28-year-old Shehadeh was pursuing an MFA in film at the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University on a Fulbright scholarship when he took a leave of absence to return

to Syria to document the revolution and train amateur videographers (Schwirtz 2012). As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "Shahade [*sic*] didn't fit the revolutionary profile" (McDonnell et al. 2012).

Numerous outlets supporting the resistance have held up Shehadeh as evidence that the rebellion is not sectarian. When Souria2011 reposted footage of his funeral to YouTube, it provided the title (in English) "Funeral for Bassel Shahade [sic] and Comrades – Christian And Sunnis Killed by Assad 5-29-12." The eponymous title presents the Sunnis – Basel's comrades – as the supporting cast in the drama of resistance and martyrdom. By contrast, when the video was first posted on the channel Roh al-thawra al-suria, the title was written in Arabic: "Wedding of a new constellation of Homs martyrs." The word "wedding" in the title is a reference to the Hadith promising martyrs 72 virgin wives in the afterlife. The substitution of "wedding" for "funeral" when discussing the death of martyrs is a common usage, but it is hardly ecumenical. Subsequent opposition uploads have followed the lead of Souria2011, avoiding language that depicts martyrdom in a Muslim context. A YouTube post of a June 14 demonstration in Kafar Sousa (a village on the outskirts of Damascus) described the crowds in the footage as calling for the "unity of the Syrian people in bringing down the dictatorship," saluting "the martyr Basel Shehadeh and all the martyrs of Syria" and noting the participation of "all sects and regions of Syria" in the uprising (nabdsyria2012).

The Syrian authorities are clearly aware of the performative power of funerals: this is the regime that instituted a full year of mourning for Bassel al-Assad. The act of praying is not simply a petition for a soul but an assertion of a shared objective among the mourners. There is no telling where such performatives could lead. A Christian funeral in Damascus would undermine the official claim that the opposition is actually a group of foreign jihadists outside the capital. It is not surprising, then, that the state forbade any services for Shehadeh. The funeral in Homs took place at night lit only by flashlights. When friends of Shehadeh gathered in Damascus at St. Cyril's Church for a planned memorial prayer service, they found the church locked. Government thugs hauled some mourners off to jail and chased others away, activists reported to the *New York Times*. In response, a Jesuit priest (with Italian citizenship) invited mourners to an inter-faith prayer service at a desert monastery in Deir Mar Musa about 50 miles north of Damascus. The government responded by expelling the priest on June 16 (MacFarquhar 2012b). A regime that asserts that it alone protects minority sects from a Muslim bloodbath cannot tolerate images of Christians and Muslims together mourning a victim of state violence.

Basel Shehadeh, Ali al-Farra, Azmi Mohammad Najjar, Ibrahim al-Khasm, Ahmed Hamada, and Osama al-Jalam are a few of the individuals who were shot and killed while making videos of demonstrations or shellings. Such footage is dramatic, but not because it presents a violent image; these videos could be accurately titled "videographer drops his camera." Rather, the power of the footage is that the viewer is forced into the subject position of the martyr. The *viewer* drops the camera immediately after a shot rings out. One would think the videos would serve as cautionary tales, but based on the escalating increase in oppositional videos, it appears as though more people are heading to the streets with cameras in hand, and when they train their camera on a plume of smoke they may be reliving an experience first encountered online. No doubt they have seen a plume of smoke before, but they frame *this* plume of smoke with a camera knowing they enact a ritual earlier performed by the martyr Basel Shehadeh.

Theatre practitioners have engaged and contributed to this vast online martyrology, both lamenting loss and holding up the martyr as proof of the rightness of a cause. Some, like the Arab Dream Theatre, publicly ally themselves with the Free Syrian Army at the same time that they openly criticize both the regime and opposition forces for the death of civilians. The troupe produces street theatre and short silent works. They describe their second play *An Ode to the Martyrs of Truth* as "focusing on the kidnapping and murdering of journalist[s] by the regime and some groups of the FSA and radical Islamist groups." Images from this piece of street theatre show a young man holding a poster in a crowded street with tallies of those killed by both regime and opposition forces and another young man with a poster reading "You cannot assassinate truth." The group reports that the militant group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, tried to prevent the production but they persisted anyway (Arab Dream Theatre Troupe).

Similarly, the puppet troupe Masasit Mati has called for non-violent resistance in their work – eventually prompting two members to leave the troupe. At the same time, the troupe presents the innocent martyr as an almost sacred figure whose sacrifice will necessarily ensure change, as if ordained by karma. The group's name refers to the straw used for drinking Mate tea, which is popular throughout Syria. According to a company member, the name refers to the pleasure Syrians take in sitting with friends and family "drinking and discussing and exchanging points of view" (email December 10, 2012).

The troupe's series, *Top Goon*, uses finger puppets to depict a comically inept Beeshu (a diminutive of Bashar) replete with a prominent widow's

peak and huge ears, along with his security chief, Shabiha (the unofficial name of Assad's paramilitary forces). The Shabiha puppet is modeled to resemble Deputy-Minister of Defense Assef Shawkat. The two terrorize citizens to no effect. The first season – thirteen episodes uploaded between November 2011 and February 2012 – was a kind of messianic Punch and Judy show, a completely earnest and serious *Ubu Roi*. The scenarios were largely extreme: Beeshu as Dracula, Beeshu on the game show *Who Wants To Kill a Million*, Beeshu throwing a tantrum on his birthday because the security services only managed to kill fifty protesters. However, the episodes always culminated in assertions of the unity of the Syrian people and confidence in their ability to triumph over the regime.

The first season of *Top Goon* assures viewers that the sacrifices of martyrs will not be in vain. In episode nine, "Reforms," Beeshu makes a speech promising change, with a series of slips of the tongue that have him describing his regime as "sadistic" and promising to become God rather than step down. Actors, whose faces are wrapped in *kafiyas*, stand behind the puppet. With every line of his speech, machine guns sound and an actor convulses and falls below the frame until there are none. Beeshu asks how many Syrians are left, and on being informed that they are all dead, he rejoices: "it's over because all the Syrians are gone." In the moment of his victory the puppet freezes as a Syrian rap song calling for revolution drowns out Beeshu's laughter. The puppet is withdrawn as hands making the peace sign shoot up from where the actors had fallen (Masasit Mati 2011b). Demands for peaceful change spring from the site of massacres and drive the puppet tyrant from the stage.

The full payoff for the conceit of a puppet tyrant comes in the final episode of the first season when the puppeteer confronts his creation (episode thirteen, "Last Days in Hell"). Beeshu taunts the audience in a speech in which he mixes up the names of martyrs and pop singers, promises never to leave "even if the blood reaches the summit of Mount Qasioun," and reminds the audience that the world has abandoned them. He finishes and is about to leave when the puppeteer calls him back: "I am done carrying the burden of you." The puppet complains that the puppeteer agreed to this: "You agreed to let me speak for you, to take over for you, to exist in your place, to breathe for you, to eat for you, to make decisions for you, so go back down to where you belong" (Masasit Mati 2012a). The puppeteer refuses and instead makes Beeshu dance to the resistance song "Come On, Leave Bashar." He grasps the puppet in his left hand and pulls it off, revealing his finger, the sole support of the puppet head. The other puppeteers join him, all making the peace sign. In lieu of credits, the series ends with the words "For the

souls of Khalidiah [the neighborhood in Homs subjected to extensive government attacks], For the martyrs of Syria, For all Syrians, Freedom is coming." There is no longer any reason to crouch beneath the stage while the tyrant struts above. The power to claim one's place in the open air has been secured by the blood of the people.

The second season, seventeen episodes uploaded between July 2012 and November 2012, grew darker as violence escalated. The first episode, "Runaway," was uploaded four days after the Free Syrian Army assassinated Assef Shawkat in a bomb explosion. "Runaway" blames Assad for the assassination, depicting Beeshu gunning down Shabiha with a binder clip that stands in for a Kalashnikov (Masasit Mati 2012b). The violence escalates in the second episode, "Baba Amr." Baba Amr is the name of a neighborhood in Homs and the site of a massacre after the city fell to government loyalists in March 2012. Beeshu is in fatigues holding his binder clip as he climbs above a pile of hand puppets. The setting is lit in red light and strips of red cloth flow from the pile of puppets suggesting blood. Beeshu delivers a victory speech replete with phrases culled from al-Assad's past speeches to canned applause. Suddenly one of the inanimate puppets rises up and seizes Beeshu. One by one the puppets join in seizing Beeshu and pulling him below the frame as the song "Baba Amr," by the group The Syrian Bear, plays. "Baba Amr is going to grill you, duck," the singer intones, referencing the pet name reportedly used by Bashar al-Assad's wife (Masasit Mati 2012c). Al-Assad will be dragged to hell for martyring Syrians.

Subsequent episodes depict realistic scenarios performed in complete seriousness. This juxtaposition between crude materials (papier mâché heads) and naturalistic method (realistic acting and sound effects) is most effective in prompting audience horror at acts of violence – and in such scenes the idea of martyrdom is prominent. Episodes depicting a woman's efforts to transport blood to a secret clinic, that woman's outrage at her father's attempts to conduct business as usual despite the violence, and her parting from an affianced activist who is compelled to flee the country, personalize the conflict in ways that cannot be convincingly sustained by finger puppets. By contrast, the realistic sound of a gunshot and of a man gasping for breath against the muted background of chirping cicadas is surprisingly poignant when combined with the sight of a crumpled puppet in episode three, "Defection." In that episode, a soldier is shot and killed by Shabiha when the soldier attempts to defect because he can no longer kill innocent men, women, and children.

The most effective juxtaposition of realistic elements and crude puppetry comes in episode thirteen, "The Interrogator" (see Figure 4). It opens with the realistic sounds of whips as a puppet screams and cowers under strikes from a torturer to an ominous soundtrack. Shabiha interrupts, playing good cop, offering water and cigarettes and skillfully working on the detainee to extract information on other protesters. When the detainee remains firm, an infuriated Shabiha erupts and beats the detainee to realistic sound effects. In the most grotesque moment, Shabiha shouts, "Film me! Film me!" as he repeatedly smashes the skull of the detainee on the ground (Masasit Mati 2012d).

The startling shift in registers that informs the second season, particularly the vaguely sexualized sadism of "The Interrogator," renders *Top Goon* an example of "puppet modernism" to use John Bell's phrase. Bell explains:

> Puppet modernism has involved not only the rediscovery of traditional forms of puppet theatre, but also their combination with new puppet techniques and technological innovations, as well as ideas about how puppets could successfully articulate all aspects of modernity. (Bell 2006: 88)

*Figure 4* "The Interrogator." Courtesy Masasit Mati.

Modernity is clearly evident in the technology: multiple camera angles, theatrical lighting, naturalistic acting, realistic sound effects, synthesized score, skillful editing, and a final product uploaded to the Internet. More striking is the fact that a performance form associated with children is used to depict modern warfare and torture. A binder clip becomes a Kalashnikov, a pocket flashlight becomes a cattle prod, and a thimble of water simulates water-boarding. It is the stuff of children's play, but children growing up in a war zone. "Film me! Film me!" an excited Shabiha shouts, drawing attention to the fact that the same technology that disseminates *Top Goon* is also regularly used to feed the exhibitionist tendencies of fighters taking horrific pleasure in the torture and desecration of vanquished combatants and unfortunate civilians.

The final episode, "Judgment Day," swings back to stylization as Beeshu's victims, beginning with Hamza Ali al-Khatib, confront him in the grave. They appear as shadows of hand puppets against a white background, each recounting the gruesome circumstances of their deaths (Masasit Mati 2012e). The angels of death will not test Beeshu in the grave. Rather he will answer to the innocents he martyred. Shabiha enters, but he cannot protect Beeshu here. Shabiha himself is dead at Beeshu's orders, a reference to the idea that Assad sent his forces into a self-destructive war or that Assad ordered the bombing that killed Shawkat. Beeshu's supporters, like Shabiha, are denied a "normal death." Nor are they "martyrs." Instead, they are condemned to share this fate. The scene ends with a black box enclosing a screaming Beeshu, an image of the tortures of the grave that await him. On completing the first season the group launched a kickstarter campaign to raise funds for a second season. They failed to raise the $20,000 needed to film a second season, but were able to complete the season nonetheless with support from three Dutch organizations: the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, the NGO Hivos, and the Danish Center for Culture and Development.

Two of the puppeteers in the first season of *Top Goon*, Ahmed and Mohammad Malas, have created a series of two-handers that similarly alternate between broad comedy and a somber insistence that attention be paid to the atrocities committed against the Syrian people. Ahmed and Mohammad Malas trained in private acting schools in Damascus after they were repeatedly denied admission at the Damascus High Theatre Institute. They were working in children's theatre when in 2009 they decided to stage a two-hander they had written, *Melodrama*, in their own bedroom for a handful of spectators. The play depicts two theatre extras, Abou Hamlet and Najim, who are trapped in insignificant

roles and, ultimately, their own apartment. What they anticipated would be a one-time experiment ran 122 nights as interest in the piece spread. Eventually they took the play to Amman and Cairo.

With the start of the uprising in 2011, they created a new two-hander for their bedroom theatre, *Tomorrow's Revolution Postponed until Yesterday* (which will be discussed in Chapter 5), this time depicting a conversation between a detained protester and an official in the security forces. On May 5, 2011, in the midst of the siege of Daraa, the Malas twins were among more than 300 Syrian artists and intellectuals who signed a petition condemning the crackdown and calling for humanitarian access for the delivery of food, water, and milk. In response, twenty-one Syrian production companies circulated their own statement promising to blacklist the actors and writers who had signed the "Milk Statement."

On July 6, the actors performed *Tomorrow's Revolution* at Beirut's Sunflower Theatre and then on the 13th they took part in an anti-regime march that featured over 200 actors, authors, and public intellectuals, the first such march prominently featuring celebrities. Authorities broke up the march and arrested thirty, including the Malas twins as well as such major figures as the directors Mohammad Malas (uncle of the Malas twins) and Nabil Maleh, and the actress Mai Skaff – all of whom had helped orchestrate the Daraa petition. They were held for one week, during which time the Malas twins staged *Tomorrow's Revolution* twice for the prisoners and guards, an experience that the twins later described as one of their "most important achievements, something that can probably never really be repeated" (quoted in "Ahmad and Mohammad Malas and Their 'Magic Square'" 2013). A week later the twins took the play to Avignon Theatre Festival.

The twins continued to live and work in Syria, creating oppositional work for their bedroom theatre and international audiences. That summer, they reprised the two characters from their first play, *Melodrama*, this time placing them in a room besieged by the Syrian military. *Najim and Abou Hamlet in the Shadow of the Revolution* was posted to YouTube in three episodes in August 2011. On August 28, they performed *Tomorrow's Revolution* in Moscow. The twins were summoned for questioning by Syrian intelligence, at which point Ahmed and Mohammad fled to Beirut. There the twins joined the Syrian puppet troupe, Masasit Mati, performing in the first season of *Top Goon*. However, the twins report that they left the troupe after the first season because they disagreed with its rejection of armed resistance (Facebook message, November 9, 2012). Fearing for their safety in Beirut, they then fled to Cairo at the end of 2011.

While in exile, the Malas twins have developed a substantial Internet following. As of October 19, 2013, their YouTube channel, A. M. Malas, had recorded 1,874,655 views with 3,220 subscribers, and their Facebook page is followed by over 16,000. They have used these platforms to circulate a near-constant stream of theatrical vignettes, improvisations, and short films – circulating at least two original works a week on their YouTube page as well as interviews and the work of others. The tone of this work runs the gamut, but like most Syrian artists, they have focused on the immense human loss since the start of the Uprising. For example, their two-minute film, *Once Upon a Time There Was No More Space* (uploaded on July 11, 2011) depicts a Syria in which public space for death announcements has been entirely exhausted. The camera focuses on the death announcement of the country's most famous victim, Hamza al-Khatib. The camera pulls back to show row upon row of death notices constituting a wall of paper that extends onto surrounding trees. Mohammad Malas enters with a bucket of paste and a handful of rolled notices, and additional notices pinned to his coat. He pauses to read the notices or perhaps contemplate the lack of space for new notices. He eventually turns and pastes a rolled sheet onto the empty space that separates him from the camera, effectively enclosing himself in a box of death notices (Malas Brothers 2011).

Similarly, their three-part YouTube film, *Najim and Abou Hamlet in the Shadow of the Revolution* (uploaded on August 25 and 28, 2011), depicts an oppressive claustrophobia produced by the escalation of state violence (see Figure 5). The film reprises the two characters that first appeared in the twins' 2009 play, *Melodrama*. As before, the limited opportunities for the two characters (unemployed extras) contrast with their names and aspirations. The younger Najim, whose name means "star," longs for fame on TV and in film; the elderly Abou Hamlet, as his name suggests, aspires to major roles in classic theatre. In *Melodrama*, a world of limited opportunity is evident in the stage space (which was little over a meter square), the character's obsessive attention to a theatre culture that excludes them, and circular conversations (that mix references to Beckett and popular culture), culminating in their inability to find the exit to their own room. In February 2012 they transformed *Najim and Abou Hamlet in the Shadow of the Revolution* into one act (re-titled *Two Actors in the Shadow of the Revolution*) and performed it at Rawabet Theatre in Cairo.

There is a tradition in Syrian theatre and film of depicting the actor's difficulty in gaining access to the stage as symbolic of restrictions on the public sphere. The most famous work in this genre may be Nabil

*Figure 5* Ahmed and Mohammad Malas in *Najim and Abou Hamlet in the Shadow of the Revolution*. Courtesy Mohammad Malas.

Maleh's popular film, *The Extras* (1993). It depicts a tryst between a supernumerary of the National Theatre and a widow, which is suddenly interrupted when security forces arrest a blind musician in a neighboring apartment. There are also several plays in this tradition, including Walid Ikhlasi *The Path* (1975) and Saadallah Wannus's *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* (1976). The most relevant example is the previously discussed *Out of the Flock* (1999) by Muhammad al-Maghut. In that play, Atif specifically likens his condition as understudy to the status of the Arab world – unable to act and instead forced to wait silently offstage.

*Najim and Abou Hamlet in the Shadow of the Revolution* makes important changes in this genre. First, their resistance is infused with hope. Secondly, the metaphor is made literal; when the play asserts that the state besieges the arts it means quite literally that soldiers may break down the doors at any moment. The first episode begins with Abou Hamlet's observation, "They've surrounded the Room Theatre."

Najim jumps to a theatrical pose as if holding a rapier and shouts, "My kingdom faces stallions!" to which Abou Hamlet responds with one word: "Tanks." If there was any confusion as to who ordered the tanks, Abou Hamlet adds that "They have forbidden bringing milk into the theatre" (Chawi chaki 2011a). The Milk Statement – calling for, among other things, the delivery of foodstuffs into besieged cities – was the first instance in which artists expressed solidarity with the victims of government repression. The response was immediate. Through the blacklist, allies of the government conspired to deprive those artists of their livelihood. In the play, the artists are themselves besieged, though Najim, who relies on the Syrian media for information, is slow to grasp his situation. When Abou Hamlet notes that the milk merchant has been arrested, Najim replies that Al-Dunya (the television station owned by the president's cousin) had reported that the merchant was a "foreign infiltrator."

The confused pair tries to make sense of the changes afoot in the second episode, but are too timid to tackle most subjects. Najim is ready to answer whether "to be or not to be" but responds with terror when Abou Hamlet asks what Facebook is (Chawi chaki 2011b). That word has been expunged from Syrian dictionaries along with "freedom, revolution, and demonstration," Najim explains. Abou Hamlet asks for an explanation of the Baath party but that subject renders Najim ill. He is much more comfortable discussing history, or rather a version of history shaped by a party that sees itself as the sole legitimate descendant of all Arab heroes.[8] In their zeal or confusion, the two stretch Baath history to encompass all Arab history. Both Tarik ibn Ziyad and Saqr Qurash (medieval conquerors of what is now southern Spain) were active Baath party members in the Andalusia chapter. Similarly Khalid ibn al-Walid (a companion of the Prophet) had a Baath past.

History shows that even one of the prophets was a prominent party member, Najim explains. He whispers the name and on the YouTube upload it remains inaudible, though in the script for the theatrical version of the series the name is written: "Hafiz al-Assad." The idea that party devotion to the ruling family approaches idolatry has been a common trope of opposition activism, at least since a video of soldiers forcing a detained man to chant "There is no God but Bashar" went viral in August 2011 (YW53 2011). However, an even more wondrous claim ends this episode. "Probably," they reflect, "Facebook itself is the doing of the Baath Party" (Chawi chaki 2011b).

The regime's blasphemy turns to violence in the third episode (Chawi chaki 2011c) when Najim and Abou Hamlet address the state of Syria's favorite television shows; Assad's soldiers have not only surrounded the

Room Theatre, they have assaulted the most beloved characters of satellite television. Abou Hamlet announces that the two must flee since this is "the final episode." When asked, "To where?" Abou Hamlet responds that when they darken his gate, he will flee to "the neighborhood gate," a reference to the popular show that depicted a unified Damascene population resisting French occupation in the 1930s. A distraught Najim doubles up in pain, his hand over his heart, and announces that they have broken it down. Najim then runs through the virtuous characters in the show, explaining who was arrested, who was tortured and how, and who was stripped naked. (The authorities apparently left the show's villains alone.)

Najim then recounts the sad fates of the characters of a series of popular programs filmed in Syria. *The People of the Flag* (a period drama set in Damascus) lost their moustaches and their flags to Bashar's thugs. *The Palestinian Exiles* were sent packing to the Golan without weapons. The inhabitants of *The Lost Village* were imprisoned or killed by "friendly fire." The titular character in *Abou Janti King of the Taxis* lost his cab when he refused to hang a picture of the president therein. The mediascape proves to be shaky ground for imagining a new Syrian community. After real-life actors who called for humanitarian aid to besieged cities were blacklisted, it became apparent that television production in Syria was largely subservient to the state.

The two actors eventually consider making a desperate run to one of the three state theatres, but their locations – next to the old Officers' Club or in areas known for the high number of security officials – make such treks perilous. With no other choice, they decide to make their last stand in the Room Theatre. First, though, Najim makes a confession: "I am an artist and an infiltrator." Abou Hamlet responds, "And I too am an artist and an infiltrator." The twins now offer theatre as dissidence. They embrace the regime's dismissal of the opposition as foreign infiltrators; as artists, they make it their business to sneak complexities over the borders of the tightly controlled everyday.

At the episode's close, the two induct their viewers into a resistance project. The camera tracks down during their final exchange.

| | |
|---|---|
| Najim: | They said, where did I see that face before? |
| Abou Hamlet: | At the theatre, at the protest. |

While the state had successfully contained the old theatre, situating it next to government institutions and then surrounding the stage with security officials, the new theatre – the one secreted away in bedrooms

or disseminated online – resists control from above. To attend such a theatre is the equivalent of taking part in a demonstration, and the consequences can be dire. They are besieging the theatre; those who engage in creative resistance risk martyrdom. This theatre might have an audience of ten squeezed cheek by jowl or ten thousand at computers spread across the region. Ten or ten thousand, they populate an emerging public forum, one that may play a significant part in the constitution of a post-Assad Syria.

While the Syrian mediascape is awash in imagery that employs the martyr as agit-prop, contemporary theatre-makers have taken up the figure to ask, "Who are we in the midst of this conflict and who might we become?" The question of what Syria will become after the conflict has ended might seem tragically premature at the time of this writing. However, it is the question that invariably drives combatants and must also haunt those trapped in conflict zones. The new feature in this conflict is that new communication technologies are enabling millions of Syrians, both from within Syria and from exile, to ponder this question aloud.

Much has been written in recent years about the complicated state of the civil society movement in Arab countries and its possible role in a transition to democracy (Aarts and Cavatorta 2013; Cavatora and Durac 2010; Heydemann 2007; Browers 2006). Arguably, democratic change requires venues in which people can examine their national identity. Though nominally under the control of the state, theatre is one of very few institutions in Syria where such questions can be raised. This, I believe, accounts for the prominence of theatre-makers in the uprising and why – even in the midst of civil war – the strategies of the theatre continue to inform online debates.

# 2
# War

Syria's modern theatre developed during a state of war. Since fighting broke out in June 1967, Syrian–Israeli relations have been characterized by sporadic hostilities, open warfare, and periodic disengagements. War has been a constant, if unexamined, background. The emergency laws that criminalize "weakening national sentiment" ensure that there will be no policy debates beyond circles of power. Consequently war has been transformed into an abstraction – a constant that can only be acknowledged in received slogans and concepts without reference to specific events and policy decisions. Nonetheless, playwrights have repeatedly pressed the boundaries of permissible speech, embodying contrary visions of the national struggle. In doing so, the theatre has asked its audience to examine a trauma that continues to shape the national imaginary.

This chapter examines Syrian theatre's representations of the conflict with Israel, specifically plays addressing the June War of 1967 and the October War of 1973. These plays address chapters in a conflict that continues into the present, a conflict that has undermined Syria's territorial integrity with the loss of the Golan Heights and that threatens Syria with still greater losses, at least in the minds of many of its citizens. In short, these plays negotiate an ongoing trauma. As such, these plays are part of a process of remembering and active forgetting at work in Syrian culture. I will argue that many of these plays not only engage this process, they comment on it, examining how remembering and forgetting have been marshaled to serve ruling powers, and how these processes do and do not serve the Syrian people.

I begin with a brief review of the events from the Syrian perspective. The creation of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing loss of Palestine as a result of the dismal performance of Arab armies in the Arab–Israeli

War came as a tremendous blow to Arab populations. In large measure, a widespread belief that Arab leaders had mismanaged the war accounts for the ease with which the civilian government in Syria was overthrown by a military coup in 1949, and Egypt's king overthrown by a group of officers (including Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser). Syria experienced repeated coups until the Baath party came to power in a 1966 military coup. This government, like the Nasser government in Egypt, based much of its legitimacy on the promise to restore Palestine to the Arab nation.

While this stated commitment had kept Palestinian organizations subservient to Arab leaders for at least a decade, by the early 1960s Palestinian groups had begun to launch cross-border raids independently, particularly from Syria. In a quest to maintain legitimacy as defenders of the Palestinian cause, both Egypt and Syria (which had entered into a mutual defense pact in 1966 at Soviet insistence) increased their anti-Israeli rhetoric. In the months preceding the 1967 war, Syria and Israel repeatedly traded fire after Palestinian attacks or in response to Israeli farming in the demilitarized zone separating the two nations. The conflict came to a head when Egypt closed the straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, an action that Israel had previously defined as a *casus belli*. Subsequent historians would debate Nasser's reasoning, but indisputably neither Egypt nor Syria were prepared for war with Israel (Seale 1989: 117–141; Lesch 2012; James 2012). On June 5, Israel launched a preemptive strike against Egypt and Syria, leading to a six-day rout and the capture of half of the Golan Heights and the entire Sinai Peninsula.

Despite the humiliating defeat, Nasser remained in power until his death in 1970 and the Baath party remains in power today, though the handling of the war contributed to an internal party rift culminating in Hafez al-Assad's 1970 coup. The Soviet Union rebuilt the militaries of its two Arab allies, and in 1973 Assad and Anwar Sadat (Nasser's successor) launched a surprise offensive against Israel with the intent of reclaiming the Golan and the Sinai. The October War (as it is known in the Arab world) did not restore the lost territory, but it did lay the grounds for the return of the Sinai through Egypt's separate peace. The strong performance of the Syrian and Egyptian armies did much to mitigate the defeat of 1967. While Sadat's separate peace made him reviled in much of the Arab world, Assad's steadfast refusal to negotiate with the Israelis became a pillar of his legitimacy.

The five plays I examine in this chapter respond to these events, but oftentimes do so while addressing the other important themes of this study. None of these plays examine historical events in isolation;

to say that a playwright writes in the context of the 1973 War is not to suggest that he had forgotten the trauma of 1967. As discussed in the Introduction, censorship and intimidation have largely prevented theatre practitioners from openly criticizing the Syrian government and directly engaging controversial subjects. Given these constraints, it is remarkable how many playwrights have taken up Syria's wars with Israel, and the degree to which some playwrights have been clearly critical of the government's defense of the nation and self-serving actions in the name of defense.

These plays address issues of war and government repression in gendered terms. The plays that follow the 1967 War describe a male trauma. Men are the primary speakers and describe defeat in war, oppression by the Syrian authorities, and the fragility of national myths as undermining their own sense of manhood. Women exist primarily as witnesses of this loss of manhood, either as actual critics of male insufficiency or as receptacles for displaced anxiety and self-contempt. Later plays provide more varied representations of women, perhaps reflecting reconsiderations through much of the Arab world of their role in national liberation. The mother of the martyr emerges as a new and dangerous dissident, able to critique the course of the struggle because of her incontestable loss (most compellingly evident in 'Ali 'Uqlah 'Arsan's *A Demonstration of Opponents*, though not discussed here). The peasant woman who takes up arms reveals an Arab resolve that defies Israeli condescension. These plays all address understandings of pride and perseverance that are gender specific, and this is true whether the writing is direct or allegorical, silent on, supportive of, or hostile to the regime.

The plays vary greatly in their approach and politics. The most stridently oppositional play examined in this chapter came soon after Syria's worst defeat; *Soirée for the Fifth of June* (1968) by Saadallah Wannus was written less than a year after the June War (though not performed until 1971). The play asserts that Syrians are saddled with a false and incomplete identity because their government has denied them free speech, and that defeat in the 1967 War was a result of this persecution. This argument is made by actors posing as audience members who object to the scenes represented on stage: first images of soldiers and villagers in valiant defense of the Golan, then a pleasing selection of traditional songs and dances. A spirited debate follows in which supposed audience members debate the causes and events of the 1967 defeat in defiance of the theatre management. While less direct, Mumdoh 'Adwan's *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight* (1970) also provides sharp critique of the Syrian leadership. The play, which is set during the thirteenth-century

invasion of Iraq and Syria by the Mongol leader Hulagu Khan, examines the reasons for military defeat and similarly turns to an elaborate security apparatus that has both become distracted from national defense and rendered the population fearful and docile.[1]

Several plays written immediately after the 1973 War embrace the enthusiasm of the moment. 'Ali 'Uqla 'Arsan's *The Strangers* (1974) depicts a small village that allows a group of strangers to encamp, only to find that the strangers evict villagers from portions of the village and eventually take over the village square. Scattered references to the 1948 War make the analogy clear: the village is the Arab world and the square is Palestine. Only after the mayor rallies the entire village do they successfully stand up against the strangers. While the extent of their victory is not indicated, it is clear that the villagers have redeemed themselves. Mustafa al-Hallaj's *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* (1974) similarly describes Arab redemption, though here a people's honor is manifest in a single peasant woman who demonstrates that this time Arabs will stand their ground. She risks her life and that of her infant to capture an armed Israeli pilot whose plane has been shot down in the war.

Muhammad al-Maghut's *October Village* (1974) both engages this enthusiasm and subtly critiques it by noting the cost at which this partial victory has come. In this play, the theft of a groom's vineyard delays a marriage for decades, despite the promises of a series of village leaders to reclaim the lost land. At the play's low point, one typically inept leader orders the village into a hasty and ill-planned confrontation with the thieves (an obvious reference to the 1967 War). At the play's close, it is revealed that the men of the village have set off in secrecy against the thieves; they return proud of their efforts but the play's comic hero has died in battle. The sorrow inserted within the midst of celebrations further complicates what is already a strangely sudden change in tone. The play is a relentlessly cynical black comedy about the perfidy of Arab leaders, so it feels almost ironic when the actors turn to the audience at the close of the play to announce that every Arab nation supports their project of liberating the Golan, the Sinai, and occupied Jordan (i.e. the West Bank).

*Soirée for the Fifth of June* is the striking exception to a body of work that fails to directly critique Syrian leadership. When Arab playwrights critique Arab governments they often resort to fable, set their plays in the distant past, or simply leave the government depicted unnamed. This obscurity obviously increases the likelihood that the Syrian Ministry of Culture will approve the plays for performance; there is always the possibility that their criticisms are directed at other countries. However, this

strategy can also prompt a more imaginatively active spectator. Analogy and metaphor force spectators to interpret. In doing so, these plays shift the onus for national criticism to audience members. While this can be seen as a means for exculpating the theatre-makers, it can also be seen as a strategy for inducing oppositional thinking on the part of their audience. As I discuss in Chapter 3, many of Wannus's subsequent plays employed such tactics as part of a project he described as "the theatre of politicization" (Wannus 1996a: 1:131).

'Adwan, Wannus, and Maghut were unusual in their willingness to explore the causes and effects of defeat in the 1967 War. Little or no record of the war (commonly known as *al-Naksah* or "the setback") can be found in Syrian textbooks, war memorials, or military museums. Soon after the war, it became state policy to repress memories of Syria's territorial loss and dismal military performance and this policy has extended into the cultural sphere. One is hard put to find films or television series that address the war, with the exception of Samir Zikra's remarkable film, *The Half-Meter Incident* (1981). That film, produced fourteen years after the war, depicts a culture of malaise and corruption that continued unchanged despite military defeat. The film was screened at several US and European festivals but received slight distribution in Syria. In this context, the fact that the theatre successfully examined the 1967 defeat in the years immediately following is remarkable and demonstrates the political commitment of the playwrights, directors, and actors responsible for the creation of the modern theatre in Syria.

*Soirée for the Fifth of June* and *The Man Who Didn't Fight* respond to, reflect on, and process a collective trauma. They do so by focusing on the spectacle of landlessness, addressing the underlying anxiety that informs Syria's confrontation with Israel. The wars of 1948 and 1967 created Arabs without land; the need to reclaim this land and the fear of losing more land drives all of the plays in this chapter. Both *Soirée for the Fifth of June* and *The Man Who Didn't Fight* focus on the experience of refugees, taking these experiences as emblematic of the contemporary Arab. Examining these plays together allows us to focus on the social dynamic of trauma. Such an understanding, I will argue, is essential to understanding Syrian theatre of the past fifty years. As Kai Erikson (1976: 154) has documented, human-made catastrophes strike at a community's social bonds, producing the "gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared." These plays depict the wrenching of the social fabric as characters experience profound isolation generated from the fear that all of the dictums of Syrian society are in fact false. In this

sense, the refugee is the exemplar of the traumatized self. It is not simply that these plays depict the landless on stage; rather, these plays depict expatriation as a common experience for all in the audience.

To be sure, there is something deeply disquieting in creating community from a shared feeling of expatriation. The refugee not only prompts assertions of nationalistic defiance, he also reveals the fragility of national boundaries. Celebrations of steadfast resistance and the love of the land mask the fact of flight. Some of the plays examined here explore these contradictions. Others simply manifest them. All of them ask, at some level, "How did we become a defeated people?" Even the plays that celebrate the 1973 War celebrate a redemption – or, more often, a potential for redemption – that is only understandable in the context of past failure. In troubling the Syrian self, these plays also undermine the authority of the Syrian state.

When refugees shift from nationalistic icons to dramatic characters, they cease to serve systems of power. They grow unruly and threaten to reveal the gaps they were marshaled to obscure. They are, after all, as much victims of Arab incompetence as they are victims of Israeli aggression. The state proclaims its concern for the refugees, lauds them as a symbol of national unity, and then labors to keep them quiet. Here, then, is the most subversive aspect of the community posited in these plays: they point to the oppressive nature of the Baath regime. Implicitly or explicitly, these plays present the silencing of the refugee as a corollary for the silencing of the nation. How did we become a defeated people? First, political intimidation, torture, imprisonment, and state monopolies on speech and representation sharply delineated the imaginative potential of the nation.

*Soirée for the Fifth of June* eschews analogy and metaphor for a direct discussion of Syria's territorial loss, and does so in a way designed to accentuate audience involvement in its controversial project. The play insists that Syria's recent military defeat is an opportunity to define a Syrian identity in defiance of a state that had rendered its population deaf and dumb. What is much less transparent, however, are the strategies through which Wannus attempts to induce his audience into such a controversial self-imagining. The process, I will argue, entails two interrelated steps, both of which give speech to those who should be silent. First, Wannus invents a site of free exchange where none exists by imagining a theatre in which audience members are fully empowered to reject the planned bill of fare and substitute questioning, debate, and their own spontaneous performances. Second, Wannus stages this revolutionary theatre through the interventions of the voiceless. The

refugee – the figure whose presence and representation are the objects of considerable control and concern throughout the Arab world – upends the performance when he innocently notes the difference between his experience of flight and that represented in the official culture of the state theatre.

*Soirée for the Fifth of June* is structured around an elaborate theatrical conceit; the audience has supposedly come to the theatre to see an entirely different play, *The Murmur of Ghosts*. This fiction is introduced soon after the curtain is raised. After an initially unexplained delay, an actor playing the embarrassed director of *The Murmur of Ghosts* steps forward to apologize for assembling an audience despite the fact that the play cannot be performed. However, the tickets had already been issued and a number of guests invited. He makes no mention of the actual advertised play, *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, or its playwright, Saadallah Wannus. Instead this director explains why he felt it was important to commission a play on the recent war, a play entitled *The Murmur of Ghosts* written by "Abd al-Ghani," an invented name but supposedly a well-known playwright and the author of this evening's entertainment. This "director" begins to recount his initial conversations with Abd al-Ghani, with an actor from the troupe playing the playwright, when suddenly the "real" Abd al-Ghani emerges from the audience offering to play himself. Their conversation about a potential play is illustrated by the troupe, which performs scenes from *The Murmur of Ghosts*, the inexplicably un-performable play. As the summary/dramatization is relatively brief, the director explains that the troupe will now entertain the audience with folk dances. It is at this point that a refugee from the Golan interrupts the proceedings with questions that send the show in a very different direction.

From the outset, Wannus establishes that this audience will speak, and this willingness to talk back to the stage is essential to his project of transforming the performance into a rehearsal for civil society. Actors in the audience play the part of impatient audience members, complaining about the delay. We get a hint of the potential of this "audience" for political speech when one member of the scripted-audience complains that the delay reflects a "contempt for the audience," prompting another to quip "Or it's an imperialist plot" (Wannus 1996a: 1:25). The two statements resonate rather than clash, for the ascription of all failures to ubiquitous imperialism evidences far more contempt than mere delays. The joke implies a jaded cynicism in the face of official culture, whether it is explanations for holding the curtain at the National Theatre or explanations for failures on the battlefield.

The scripted-audience shifts from cynical interjections to angry condemnation after the director presents his theatrical vision of the night hostilities broke out: chaos and confusion as experienced from the vantage point of a child. By focusing on the child's experience, the director effectively casts the Syrian people as a naïve and pacifist population, ignorant of the issues that underlie the conflict and incapable of undertaking the management and defense of the nation. However, an audience member rejects such a representation: "But that's a fairytale! You and your silent confused characters are a joke. Your child is a ragdoll." Ignoring other audience members who advise him not to overstep his place, the spectator continues: "Our war is an old and just hope. We all remember that morning. The streets were full of people. We embraced each other. We cried with excitement and enthusiasm" (1:39–40). The defiance of this audience member prompts a rush of memories from other supposed audience members.

– By God, that's right.
– The women in our neighborhood trilled till their voices became hoarse.
– What do you want? That's how war breaks out in American movies. (1:40)

If there is an imperialist plot, it is the cultural imperialism that infects even the Syrian National Theatre, which opportunistically adopts Hollywood's image of a depoliticized people.

The director chastises the audience for behaving as if they were in a coffee shop rather than a theatre, but this would seem to be precisely the point. In effect, Wannus is attempting to transform the theatre into a coffee shop and then to make the coffee shop a space in which people feel empowered to discuss politics. In addition to denying the audience a right to speak, the director denies that he, as an artist, is confined by fact. Ultimately, Wannus will suggest that the disregard of truth in the name of aesthetics is as likely to serve authoritarian power structures as it is "art." The director's argument begins innocuously, when he prefaces his entertainment by explaining that "memory is not the specialty of the theatre but rather the specialty of the historian"; the only specialty of the theatre is "art" (1:27). From this vantage point he easily dismisses the contrasting memory of the audience as well as their right to speak back to the stage. He states: "I don't understand the justification for these outbursts. […] I wanted to present a theatrical vision of the start of the war, no more" (1:40). Through the director's haughty disregard of

the facts, Wannus attempts to excite audience indignation at authority's monopoly over the representation of the past.

Wannus's scripted-audience is able to contest the director's vision of the beginning of the war, but they are forced to sit silently once the play shifts to depictions of the front. Their dilemma, the dilemma of Syrians in general, is that without access to the facts of their defeat, they have little ability to debate its immediate causes and significance. This is not to say that Wannus makes his audience passive consumers of official representations of the past (whether those representations are mounted on the national stage or narrated by the national news service). Instead, *The Murmur of Ghosts* prompts disbelief with its overblown rhetoric of resistance. The people of the Golan retreat, but they do so only to ensure that the battle will continue. As one of the villagers in the play within a play explains, a "treacherous and powerful enemy" has taken the village by surprise, but retreat will "preserve [their] children and the wombs of [their] women," insuring victory in some unspecified future (1:59). Meanwhile, a handful of peasant farmers stay on to fight despite certain death. The ghosts of dead soldiers remain with them. These ghosts promise to cloud the minds of the invaders, fill their sleep with nightmares, and – in doing so – prevent any lasting Israeli settlement (1:67). The promise that ghosts will liberate the Golan was no less ridiculous in 1968 than it is today, and it served to spotlight the cynicism of a government whose official media could assert that the war had been a victory because it had not resulted in the overthrow of the Baath regime (Seale 1989: 143).

At this point we learn that Abd al-Ghani forbade performance of the play. No sooner had he completed the work than he began to fear that he had prostituted his talents, trotting out well-worn and cheaply pleasing lies such as a steadfast peasantry committed to national liberation. According to the playwright, his pages began to reek of the "repulsive stench of a whore's crotch" (Wannus 1996a: 1:70) – implicitly casting any in the audience who delighted in images of Syrian heroism as clients in the market for tawdry delusions. Disregarding the playwright's complaints, the director quickly moves on to the evening's replacement entertainment. Since the setting of *The Murmur of Ghosts* "recalls the old festivals," the troupe will use it as a backdrop for the performance of "rural songs and dances," placing "nostalgia and delight in the very place in which heroism was glorified" (1:71). The depiction of steadfast and nationalistic villagers in the *The Murmur of Ghosts* has as much basis in fact as the director's troupe of happy peasants comfortably ensconced in their villages.

In lieu of history, the director offers nostalgia. His soirée is not an exploration of recent events but rather a presentation of fetishized imagery designed to soothe a troubled population: nationalistic villagers and the happy folk dancing and singing as they have for countless centuries and will long into the future. As Freud explains, the fetish serves to mask an unsettling absence, one that strikes deeply at the essence of one's identity.[2] *Soirée for the Fifth of June* explores the absence of a meaningful national identity, an absence evident in the ease with which Israelis swept Syrians from the Golan, an absence displaced through the fictionalized image of the resistant folk. As if invoking Freud, Abd al-Ghani describes the experience of looking beyond the fetishized villager as the shock of discovering sexual difference: he likens his play to a prostitute's genitalia. As in Freud's discussion of the fetish, the discovery of the absence of national identity is a trauma that can only be displaced through the substitution of a pleasing screen: steadfast villagers and folk dances.

Abd al-Ghani's sexualized language constitutes a jarring tonal shift in the play, but one revealing of the trauma experienced by the male characters. They suddenly discover that their national identity is a tissue of lies covering a gaping hole. Up until this point, the conversation has been entirely between men: the director, Abd al-Ghani, and various male spectators (though many of the calls from the audience are attributed in the script to "Voices"). The named characters in the snippets of *The Murmur of Ghosts* – soldiers and villagers – are also men. When women are mentioned they are undifferentiated celebrants and supporters of resistance, and this is true whether one of the "real" characters is speaking (namely the director, Abd al-Ghani, and the spectators) or one of the intentionally artificial characters in *The Murmur of Ghosts*. In the men's words, women trill till they are hoarse or carry future soldiers in their wombs. The first statement is intended to go unremarked, the second invites immediate skepticism. However, both statements reveal a disconnect between hopes for, and the reality of, war with Israel.

There is no reason to trill in celebration nor is it a viable war strategy to rely on the wombs of peasant women to liberate the Golan. In lieu of images of female production (joyous sounds or children) that all portend national liberation, Abd al-Ghani is taken by an image of female lack that parallels his own loss of meaningful structures of national belonging. The language with which he describes betrayal, first by the state and then by his own script, is very much grounded in his experience as a man, even though the specificity of his experience goes unmarked in the text. The director hardly wants his evening to become an exploration of

loss (male or otherwise), and quickly calls on the dancers. Despite his efforts at displacement, the refugee overtakes the evening's performance when an old man in faded trousers, dark blue jacket, and white kaffiyeh stands up to ask the name of that remarkable village depicted on stage (1:72). The contrast between this supposedly real refugee and the theatre's happy noble peasants arrests a celebration of Syrian heroism; the soirée becomes an examination of loss – not simply the loss of land but a preceding loss of self.

From the opening stage directions of *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, Wannus draws the reader's attention to the contradictory hierarchy of representations that greet spectators at an "official theatre" on opening night. There are the "traditional invitations for officials and the pillars of authority" as well as "the other traditional invitations for a number of refugees and citizens of the third estate" (1:23). The choice to use the antiquated term, third estate, rather than a more common – and deeply loaded – term like the people (*al-shāb*), rings like an indictment of an atavistic society. Two hundred years earlier, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès argued that the third estate attends to nineteen-twentieths of all public functions for the parasitic upper orders. It would seem that Wannus saw a similar dynamic in "modern" Syrian society with the party and its supporters occupying the role formerly held by the nobility and clergy. However, lest one think such a theatre is isolated from current events, the stage directions further clarify that the refugees who have been invited are the product of "existing situations," which is to say that they are drawn from the 80,000 uprooted inhabitants of the Golan, and are not Palestinian refugees. The need for clarification implicitly asserts that the state has made a policy of manipulating the visibility of the refugee to serve state ends. As prominent members of the audience, they may be seen but not heard.

This hierarchy is undermined when one of these invited refugees becomes the center of the audience's attention. What is the name of that remarkable village? The question draws attention to the obvious fact that the director's vision of recent events is a complete fiction. The refugee, his son, and another elderly male companion approach the stage, posing questions and speaking among themselves as if the theatre were a town hall. They note the huge difference between the behavior of the people from his village and the stage's villagers: "How fine, how beautiful their organization is!" (1:75). The three then recount anecdotes that reveal an uneducated and unsophisticated rural population fleeing in confusion and driven by fear and greed rather than nationalism. Even more disturbing to the director's representations, the refugees encountered

fleeing soldiers that were similarly naïve. Some fled the front in tears, ascribing superhuman powers to the Israelis. Others never saw any action but spent their time wasting what little ammunition they had shooting at bottles and tree stumps.

The audience is riveted by the refugees' tale, even as it evokes horror and disgust. Spectators ask: "Why did you leave even before the war broke out?" (1:87), but the refugees, in their seclusion from the modern discourse of nationalism, do not even understand the question.[3] In this context, the scripted-audience rejects the director's repeated calls to begin the dancing. One spectator exclaims:

> You and your dance troupe! For shame! Do you think that all we need is an hour of singing and dancing! You and your folk troupe can go to a country without problems. Settle there and provide the people with recreation. But here, we're a country with refugee camps. With people who left their village and don't know why. Listen to me … the abscess is bleeding, and jesting won't stop abscesses from bleeding. (1:88)

Nostalgia, Michael Kammen (1993: 688) has written, "is essentially history without guilt." The enjoyment of a folk troupe is the enjoyment of an unsullied past. The dance is valued first and foremost for a simplicity that parallels the pure simplicity of national identity.

This audience, however, is incapable of bracketing shame long enough to enjoy nostalgia. Repeatedly, audience members experience revulsion rather than sympathetic engagement at the sight of the refugees. Their failure to resist and the failure of Syria is a bleeding abscess on the face of nationalism. A spectator explains:

> If one village had resisted it would have changed the meaning greatly. But before the war started their inhabitants fled. They left behind land without people to the enemy, houses without people, cities without people. That also embraces a truth that has significance, and a putrid stink like dirty armpits. (Wannus 1996a: 1:98)

The director had attempted to paper over this ugly absence, populating the empty houses of the Golan with valiant ghosts, and hiding guerrilla fighters in the shadows of empty villages. However, the presence of (supposedly) real refugees on stage gives the lie to this representation.

The refugee reveals the tenuous nature of national belonging, especially in nations that suppress forms of civic identification. Without mutually agreed-upon structures of social and political expression, the

nation is nothing more than images of happy villagers and folk dances. *Soirée for the Fifth of June* illustrates how easily such images are swept by the wayside in times of crisis. The theatre provides a setting that "recalls the old festivals"; the refugee describes a field of tents "that provide no protection from the heat or the cold" (1:86). The disjuncture between the two marks the distance between the myth of Syrian nationalism and the experience of forced migration.

Wannus is positing three different images of the peasantry, each with a different order of connection to the land. First, there are the steadfast peasants of *The Murmur of Ghosts*, who would prefer death to the "life of shame and disgrace" that would accompany flight: "What will we say on judgment day when our ancestors ask us what became of the land they bequeathed?" (1:58). Such peasants view their loved ones as "chains" and call on their compatriots to cast family aside along with shame, so as to join in the battle (1:70). Next to these exaggerated creations are the peasants that emerge from the audience. They are refugees who recall different images of flight: an old woman crying over the chickens she had left behind, and an old man who loaded his donkey with so many provisions – down to his last cup of salt – that the beast collapsed on the road rather than leave anything to the army (1:76–77).

The contrast between the fancifully heroic and the greedy and fearful peasant is complicated by a third image, the Vietcong, cited by one of the more politically minded audience members. In Vietnam, the bodies of the poor and the peasantry "stick to the land and take root" (1:92). In Vietnam, "they die by the hundreds, by the thousands, but they keep their land and the strongest nation in the world is shaking in fear of them" (1:93). However, as audience members point out, the Vietcong had not been abandoned by their leaders. Instead, they were "out in front of the tanks" not hiding in "fortified palaces" and protected by "security forces" (1:99). Beyond the myth of the steadfast Syrian peasant and the reality of the Golan refugee is the fact of a successful insurgency in South East Asia.

By invoking the Vietcong, Wannus posits a revolutionary potentiality to be claimed by the Syrian audience. Just as the audience has usurped the authority of the director, substituting an open forum for scripted drama, the public must usurp the authority of the regime. It is a call for the audience/public to seize constituting power in defiance of the constituted power of the director/regime. Wannus's target is not simply theatre as currently practiced, but political authorities that would keep the people offstage, silent in a darkened room, empowered only to applaud the lighted actors at predetermined moments.

In a telling footnote Wannus refers to the fictional director as "mukhrij al-sulta" – the director belonging to the [sovereign] power – when explaining that the exaggerated nationalism of *The Murmur of Ghosts* was a product of the director's zealotry and not intended as Wannus's own beliefs; some critics and audience members apparently took offense at the more extreme speeches of the fictional villagers not realizing that they were "satirical" representations of a position informed by "barbarism and an absence of reason" (1:60). In identifying such empty nationalism with "mukhrij al-sulta," Wannus suggests that just as the audience has the power to drive a bad play from the theatrical stage, the public has the power to drive bad regimes from the national stage. Wannus's project of politicizing theatre ultimately hopes to create a Syrian population, like the Vietcong described by audience members, who create their own future.

The sharp contrast between the steadfast resistance of the Vietcong and the confused flight of the peasants of the Golan prompts revulsion in the scripted-audience responses, and this revulsion, the play suggests, is a precondition to political action. The sight of the refugee recalls and deepens the trauma of defeat; the abjection of the refugee threatens to overwhelm the audience. Nonetheless, the audience prevents the director from driving the refugees from the stage. The refugees' failings cannot be externalized even as the audience experiences them as radically alien. As one spectator explains: "With their simple words [these refugees] exhumed the truth above which our paralyzed existence totters. Exhumed it and threw it in our faces" (1:98). The knowledge that others have resisted and made the world's strongest nation shake with fear intensifies the audience's horror at the sight of the refugee as well as the audience's need to hold the refugee in view. The example of successful national struggle makes the absence of a coherent national identity all the more abhorrent.

The dilemma in which the audience finds themselves can be likened to Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject. For Kristeva, the abject defines and recalls the moment in human development when an infant begins to become an individual by recognizing the mother to be separate from, rather than an extension of, the self. The abject resides at the boundary between self and other, threatening to undermine the idea of the individuated subject. As Kristeva explains, "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be – maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing

vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out" (Kristeva 1982: 10). A corpse produces the sensation of abjection, according to Kristeva, because it evokes that boundary at which an individual reverts to all-consuming materiality (the primordial Real in Lacan's terms). One responds in horror to the abject because of the persistent fear of dissolving back into that corroding night wherein "the outline of the signified thing vanishes."

In turning to theories of psychosexual development for understanding structures of national belonging, I follow the lead of scholars such as Karen Shimikawa (2002) and Maurice Stevens (2003) who respectively have invoked the idea of the abject to unpack ideas of Asian-American and African-American identity in theatre and film. Shimikawa (2002: 160) describes "national abjection" as the frontier wherein the "the apparition of the other that persists symbolically *within* [national identity], thus compelling its continual, symbolic expulsion." In *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, the refugee similarly lies on the borders of national identification. As the figure without a home, he powerfully evokes the idea of the homeland through his negative example even as he illustrates the fragility of such ideas of belonging. It all can be swept away in a moment and therein rests the horror. If one village had resisted, the spectator complains, it would have changed the meaning greatly. Instead we are left with "a bleeding abscess" and "a putrid stink like dirty armpits." The play forces its audience to stare into the face of the refugee, the national abject, but not in a fetishizing paroxysm of self-pity. Rather, the play holds up the refugee so as to force the audience to contemplate the weak ties of Syrian national identity. Your identities as national subjects, the play asserts, are as shallow and false as the dancing and singing peasantry on the national stage.

Kristeva defines abjection as a precondition for self-recognition, and similarly the characters in *Soirée for the Fifth of June* now begin the arduous process of identifying a Syrian self. In their discussions, audience members repeatedly asked who was responsible for the loss of the Golan, and whether the audience members – as representatives of the nation – are themselves responsible. However, that question, according to one of the spectators, assumes that there is a "we" capable of taking responsibility. Having mounted the stage, this spectator draws an imaginary mirror and invites the audience to look upon themselves. "In order to bear responsibility, one needs to exist, and to have an image in the mirror. Well … Do we exist?!" (Wannus 1996a: 1:103).

Not finding an image, the spectator then asserts that the "national interest erased the image before it formed or became visible." In the play's most compelling and daring move, a group of spectators perform a drama of national erasure:

| | |
|---|---|
| Spectator 2: | Don't speak. Tongues err. Words taste bitter. For the sake of the national interest, cut out your tongues. |
| Spectator: | (from the hall) Cutting out tongues would be benign. |
| Spectator 2: | And we cut out our tongues. |
| Spectator 1: | Why did we cut out our tongues? |
| Spectator 2: | If we didn't cut out our tongues, then you would not forget that the national interest is a prison in which the light of the sun does not penetrate, not even once a year. (104) |

In this manner, the group of spectators acts out the process by which they cut out their tongues, cut off their ears, and cast aside their intellects. In the name of a false nationalism that made the preservation of the state the nation's sole objective, individuals rendered themselves deaf, dumb, and blind to their political realities. In the face of this oppressive state, the nation is prevented from creating a coherent image of itself, and the social imaginary is left bereft.

The audience looks again into the imaginary mirror and sees only faint shadows behind the national interest – people playing backgammon and smoking water pipes. In short, the limited aspects of civil society permitted are informal, unstructured, and personal. These faint shadows of a nation, a spectator notes, are dispersed like clouds by the winds of war (102). Lacan famously defined the mirror stage as the period in subject formation during which the infant confronts a coherent external image of the self that exceeds the jumble of opposing drives and emotions experienced. At the level of national subject formation, *Soirée for the Fifth of June* describes a people arrested in the development of a coherent self-image; the audience stares into the mirror but sees nothing beyond a limited jumble of shared experiences that dissipates before an image of the nation can come into focus, a jumble that vanishes in moments of crisis. How then to form a nation without full freedom of speech and assembly?

The answer, according to Wannus's play, would seem to lie in the powerful sense of hope and common cause that swept through Damascus when the Israeli invasion was announced. Audience members recount that streets and squares were overfilling with people, every window and door was open, people cried with enthusiasm, and there was a common

belief that "a long period of shame would come to an end, justice and sovereignty would be established, and misery turned aside for ever" (114). This crowd included a broad cross-section of society: audience members remember sharing public space with itinerant peddlers, sellers of lottery tickets, even the desperately poor. The language of audience members takes on a poetic quality as a revolutionary sense of community is recalled. Consecutive audience members announce: the hungry forgot their hunger; the naked forgot their nakedness; the duped forgot their frauds; the persecuted forgot their persecution on that day in June (115).

According to *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, on that day the Syrian nation came into existence temporarily in a shared desire to defend the homeland. In demanding the right to defend themselves, the people claim their sovereignty.

Spectator 7: We were united in that succinct clear call. What do you ask for?
The Group: Weapons. (116)

The shift in tense is significant: we *were* united, we *ask* for weapons. Their demand for weapons is both in the past and in present. The audience remembers a past moment when collective action seemed possible and, in doing so, invents the possibility of future political action. There is no obvious goal for this demand. The war is over. Wannus does not call for the overthrow of the state. Rather, somewhat paradoxically, the call for arms reads as a call to create a nation – the nation that might have come into being had the people repelled the Israeli invasion of the Golan. In the theatre, missed opportunities can be re-performed as successful interventions. The process creates a space of radical potential in which actions can jump from the fictional to actual – performing resistance on stage might be a rehearsal for things to come.

In choosing to fight for the nation in defiance of the state, Wannus posits a violence that is neither law-preserving nor law-making. In *The Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin identifies two species of political violence: violence used as a means to the ends of the state (law-preserving) and violence that transfers power from one privileged group to another (law-making). The cycle of repression, coups, and more repression, is one form of an endless oscillation between law-preserving and law-making violence that, in Benjamin's analysis, is the rule of state formations. Against these, Benjamin posits a third form of violence, divine violence, obscurely defined as neither serving to preserve nor to make the law. This "unalloyed" violence, this violence without end, is the violence of the

true revolution, the violence of the proletarian general strike that does not strive to secure specific benefits but "sets itself the sole task of destroying state power" (Benjamin 2007: 291). It is a mystical concept, but one that helps us understand the seemingly impossible aims of Wannus's theatre. To adapt a phrase from Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, every second of time in Wannus's radical theatre is the strait gate through which the messiah – or rather the revolution – might enter (Benjamin 1969: 264).

The next scene depicts the birth of a revolutionary national consciousness that crosses income and gender boundaries, as audience members recall bakers who wanted to "stuff their bread with bombs" and women who wanted to "carry rifles and ammunitions rather than decorated handbags" (Wannus 1996a: 1:118). Supporters of the regime correctly identify this national becoming as a threat to the existing power structure. The director, an increasingly reactionary figure, accuses the audience of making his theatre the "seat of conspiracy." According to the spectator who first drew the imaginary mirror on stage, this call for weapons marks the beginning of "our existence." Only now can the audience look into that mirror and perceive the outline of a nation: "our images are visible, images they call conspiracy." The statement prompts another spectator to respond, "Then terror spreads" (116). The concern is justified. If the people demand the right to defend the nation they will necessarily challenge those who have labored to prevent the creation of institutions outside of direct governmental control and surveillance. By 1968, successive Syrian governments had already demonstrated the lengths to which they would go to retain power.

At first, audience members simply assert their desire to defend the homeland against foreign invaders, but over time they shift their attention from those who invaded the nation to those who stymied its development. When a spectator asserts his desire to "irrigate the land with the blood of the usurpers," one assumes he refers to the Israelis. However, it is significant that the defense comes against "usurpers" [*ghaasabin*] rather than "occupiers" [*moḥtilin*]. The word choice allows for a certain ambiguity. Later when spectators announce that "our war" is against "usurpers and thieves," against "the defenders of thieves," and against "hunger, misery, and daily death," the idea of the "usurper" has shifted to include all who support the existing power structure with its myriad inequalities at the expense of popular sovereignty (119). Defense of the nation requires revolution.

Well before this point, security personnel had secured the exits, preventing any of the spectators from leaving. Now, one of the officials

in the front row stands up, giving directions to the men guarding the doors to fan out. They surround the entire hall, take out their pistols, and point them at the audience, singling out those who took part in the discussion (121). As they purge the audience of troublemakers, the official delivers a triumphant speech that runs for at least five minutes, celebrating the staying power of the state – a reprisal of the arguments made in national broadcasts following the defeat. The audience's uprising has been a mere "infection" of the "infidel colonialist powers and their client states." With the inclusion of Salafi Jihadists, the speech could have been delivered in the spring of 2011. "Goodness," one of the refugees whispers to his companion, "he talks like the radio" (125).

The official counters the earlier image of the Vietcong as the ideal of resistance; it is the Baath leadership that demonstrates true *ṣumud* or steadfast perseverance.

> The colonialist powers and their client states imagine that events have weakened our *ṣumud*, and that they can easily tear down our nation and that trials will divide our righteous and resistant masses. They want chaos to prevail. They hope that we will relinquish the reins of power. But they don't know that the masses, with their devoted and loyal leadership, are able to foil their plans, and mock their fantasies and trample them underfoot like insects. (125)

In the course of the passage, the distinction between masses and leaders is left fuzzy. Whose *ṣumud* is being tested? The term is associated with peasants remaining on his land. Does "our *ṣumud*" then ask all in the audience to find common identity with the peasant farmers – in short, the refugees – who demonstrated a notable lack of *ṣumud*? Or does "our *ṣumud*" refer to "we the Baathis" who refuse to "relinquish the reins of power"? In fact, the rhetorical strategy is designed precisely to undermine such distinctions; the Baath are the nation, there is no room beyond this category.

The entire audience exits under guard and the more vocal "audience" members are taken off for questioning. One is beaten after shouting: "Tonight we improvised. Tomorrow it is up to you to finish the improvisation" (126). However, Wannus makes it clear that the revolutionary fervor of the soirée is unlikely to spread on its own. Actors in the balconies and on the stairs are already distancing themselves from the event. When one remarks, "you have to admit they showed a lot of courage and we did nothing to protect them," it only prompts another to warn

that "the walls have ears" (127). The world has returned to normal, most glaringly evident in the play's closing exchange:

| | |
|---|---|
| Spectator: | I told you I didn't want to come. Do you see what happened?! |
| Woman: | How scared you are! It's not like you got arrested. |
| Spectator: | You'd like that wouldn't you! |
| Woman: | Like that would ever happen! |

A world of radical possibility in which men and women would co-conspire in a project of instituting justice and popular sovereignty is replaced with a clichéd scene of marital discord: a frustrated wife harassing her husband for his temerity, implicitly accepting that action is his preserve.

The play immediately gained considerable attention and attracted huge crowds once approved for production. Wannus wrote the play in 1968 while studying in Paris. He published the play the following year in the May issue of *Mawaqif*, which was published in Beirut and London. In 1970 the play was published by Beirut press, Dar al-Adab. According to Sabhah Ahmad 'Alqam (2000: 89) the play was banned in Syria until it was unexpectedly granted a Damascene performance in 1971, after first being performed by a Palestinian theatre company in Beirut. Badr al-Din Urudki (1972: 14) writes that the Damascus production was directed by 'Alaal-din Koksh and performed by the independent theatre company The Syndicate of Artists. It received forty-four performances during its run, and the number attending exceeded 25,000, more than the yearly attendance at the National Theatre in each of the previous twelve years. Later that year, the play was remounted for the Damascus Theatre Festival (ayam al-mahrajan dimashq 2004: 27). According to Hani Rumani, who acted in the play, some audience members who were unaware that the audience interjections were scripted tried to join in (cited in Seale 1989: 171).

Sabhah Ahmad 'Alqam (2000: 98–99) speculates that the play was eventually allowed performance because the question the play poses to the Arab world, "Who are we?," had grown insistent in the years following the 1967 War. That may be, but it also seems significant that the play was performed after Hafez al-Assad's intra-party coup and purge in 1970. Viewed from that point in time, the play's call to revolution could in fact be construed as a vindication of the Corrective Movement (as the coup is delicately described). In addition, allowing the play to be performed was consistent with Assad's efforts to project a more

liberal image than the hated strongman he had replaced, Salah Jadid. In 1968 the play was a dangerous call to insurrection. In 1971, the play could be read as an attack on the corruption of the previous regime and an implicit welcoming of the current, more benevolent rule of Hafez al-Assad.

This may explain why Wannus's next play for The Syndicate of Artists, *The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* (1970), was banned following its dress rehearsal in 1972 (Wannus and Ellias 1992: 102). A modern-day storyteller relates to his coffee-shop patrons a well-known tale from the late Abbasid period. Though the subject material is set in the past, the contemporary frame drives home the danger of blindly trusting authority. Invoking a common Syrian expression, the play warns its audience that oppression is likely to befall a people who blithely "learn to call anyone who marries [their] mother 'Uncle'." It is a warning that points forward rather than back and, not surprisingly, the regime responded quickly on behalf of the recently installed leader. There is no obvious explanation as to why the play was allowed to be performed less than a year later at the Damascus Theatre Festival (ayam al-mahrajan dimashq 2004: 96); however, it is worth noting that the festival context ensures a limited audience, unlike the forty-four night run of *Soirée for the Fifth of June*.

While *Soirée for the Fifth of June* was the only Syrian play to directly address the 1967 War, other plays addressed the war through analogy or tangentially. By far the most compelling of these is Mamduh 'Adwan's *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight*, published in 1970 by the Iraqi Ministry of Information. It was republished in Beirut in 1980, but was not published in Syria until 2006 after 'Adwan's death, when his complete plays were collected in three volumes. The play's slow circulation within Syria speaks to its aggressive engagement of difficult truths. The limited distribution of *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight* in Syria throws into further relief how remarkable the production of *Soirée* was.

A similar desire to assign culpability for defeat informs both *Soirée for the Fifth of June* and *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight*. In the former, the theatre becomes a metaphorical courtroom in which the refugee is judged for his flight – briefly though, for there can be no jury of peers when true citizenship is yet to be established. In the latter, the state has literally summoned the refugee to stand trial and suffers no such self-doubt. In that play, the thirteenth-century Mongol ruler Hulagu Khan has already sacked Baghdad and menaces Mosul, where a court summoned in the name of the Abbasid Caliph weighs the guilt of one Abu al-Shukri, a peasant farmer accused of having fled with his family

before the invaders. According to the state prosecutor, Abu al-Shukri is consequently responsible for the ease with which the enemy sweeps across the land, for only when the people themselves resist occupation will foreign invaders be forced to depart. The selection of Abu al-Shukri to stand trial for a people seems arbitrary. However, the prosecution can demonstrate from the files of the secret police that Abu al-Shukri has long harbored contempt for the caliph and, by extension, the nation.

The play is both historical analogy and parable. Mamduh 'Adwan uses Hulagu Khan's conquest of Arab lands as an opportunity to discuss the failings of Arab leaders in the 1967 War, the condition of Arab peoples before and during the war, and the growing number of refugees in the Arab world. However, the play also aspires to speak broadly of modern power structures, of authoritarian regimes and the populations that endure the loss of civil liberties. The generic character names – judge, prosecutor, defender, court usher – give the play the feel of a morality play. Characters are reduced to their function and names are at best problematic. When the court usher has trouble remembering the name of the accused, he remarks that it is of little importance: "he is quite simply the man who didn't fight" ('Adwan 2006: 1:108). Over the course of the play, he is most often referred to as "the accused." Similarly, the witnesses could be anyone or no one. The court usher hesitates to call out the first witness fearing that his name, Abdullah bin Abd Rabbo (which literally translates as "servant of god, son of the servant of his lord") is a pseudonym since it applies to all humanity (1:112). Whether one takes the usher's statement as an indication of piety or servility (we are all servants of God or, perhaps, we are simply all servants), the implication is that these proceedings spare no one.

As in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, parts of *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight* are directly addressed to the audience, which is made complicit in the trial. The play opens on the courtroom, with the usher on one side of the stage and the accused (who eventually gives his name as Abu al-Shukri) in a cage that occupies the other half of the stage. The usher is surprised by the presence of an audience at a trial "held in secrecy," but promises not to reveal the audience's presence so long as they remain silent. He stresses the gravity of the case. While it might be true that many in the audience did not fight, the usher warns not to let such information spread: "even if you hear it repeated, we must say that they are biased rumors that the enemy spreads between our ranks to hinder our endeavor." The usher is contemptuous of Abu al-Shukri, referring to him as a thing and not bothering to get his name right (108). It is, in the usher's mind, "unbelievable" that this thing should flee rather

than remain and resist Hulagu's army. While it is true that "between us are many who didn't fight," it is important to remember that "we – and I mean me and you – weren't ordered to fight" so there is no way "to be certain that we wouldn't have fought if ordered" (1:107–108).

The court usher's direct address and assumed intimacy with the audience are disconcerting on many counts. His contempt for the caged man, combined with the fact that these are secret proceedings, suggests that the audience is inadvertently party to a sham court (and, in fact, it is implied repeatedly that the trial is a mere formality before execution). It is not simply that the usher has asked the audience to share in the lie that the people are actively resisting invasion; he asks the audience to share in a lie that has long ago been exposed. The ease with which the Israelis conquered the Golan is familiar to all in the audience. In the aftermath of defeat the idea that victory is simply a matter of proclaiming the people's steadfast persistence and attributing rumors of flight to enemy propaganda is a painfully obvious fallacy. The usher unintentionally suggests that, but for the grace of God, anyone in the audience could find themselves in the cage on stage. It is not that "many" in the audience didn't fight – more likely none in the audience fought. The assertion that there is no way to be certain that audience members would not have fought if ordered also underscores the possibility that they too would have fled rather than taken up arms if confronted by an invading army. Who, then, are we to judge?

From the outset, the play works to counter any disavowal of responsibility the audience might feel for the caged man's fate. The audience is not just asked to identify with a court usher ("we – and I mean you and me," as he explains) but a court usher who doubles as a torturer and executioner:

> I'm serving in the military, working as a court usher and torturer. Yes, I've carried out multiple execution sentences and whippings, and maybe the judge will become irritated with one of you and order that I execute him, and you'll see my skill in implementing the orders, but God willing he won't be annoyed … (1:108)

We find ourselves in a state of exception, a time of secret courts in which the military and the judiciary are intertwined. Soldiers serve in civilian courts and carry out execution orders. The audience, in its coerced identification with the usher, is a cog in this system, and remains so even when they shift from executioners to the condemned. *We* weren't ordered to fight; the judge may become irritated with one

of *you*; then I will execute *him*. The ease with which the usher shifts from first-person plural, to second-person plural, to third-person singular suggests how easily one can shift from member of a collective that supports power through the collective's labor to the singular corpse that supports power as an object lesson illustrating the reach of the government.

The question of culpability is not limited to a specific defeat but extends to a system of power made manifest in the image of a caged refugee – or, to be more specific, in the audience's failure to respond to this image of abjection despite the knowledge that they themselves may become the next victims. The audience starts the performance in the auditorium but could end up on stage and in a cage awaiting execution, according to the court usher (who presumably knows the seating practices). As in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, the essential question is "How did we become a defeated people?" The answer, it would seem from the outset, is connected to a dynamic of imprisonment and passive acceptance. The court usher's subservience is almost a point of pride. He announces that he "doesn't do anything until he receives an order," whether that's fetching a witness, cleaning the judge's home, or playing with the judge's children, race horse, or dog (1:109). The usher makes this statement in order to cut off a request from the defendant, as if to deflect any sense of responsibility the usher might feel to the caged man, as well as deny culpability for the executions and torture the usher carries out. However, the usher's statement has the opposite effect; his willing embrace of his own subservience underscores the fact that acceptance of injustice is a choice.

By contrast, the defendant, Abu al-Shukri, has a heightened sense of his own responsibility for the world he inhabits, even if he is incapable of acting on this belief. In the course of the trial, witnesses recount past events and these scenes are acted out in Abu al-Shukri's cell. He is prevented from testifying in his own defense, and so the audience only hears his voice in these reenactments. In these testimonies, the audience sees Abu al-Shukri lamenting the city's lack of preparation, and his frustration at not knowing how to help strengthens the defense. Meanwhile other characters are content simply to laud past Arab victories as proof of a timeless and immanent Arab strength: "We are the sons of those knights that conquered to the borders of China" (1:114). When news of the defeat arrives, Abu al-Shukri angrily insists that everyone in the city take responsibility for the loss of the "war and the nation" (1:117). Not only is territory at stake but a fragile experience of national belonging. His sense of responsibility extends beyond his failure to defend the

homeland to a long-standing inability to claim the rights of citizenship in the face of an authoritarian regime. He describes himself as a "vile insect" that does not know how to defend the homeland because the only thing the authorities have taught him was to be afraid and follow orders (1:122).

The play describes a political scene that is much closer to modern Syria than Abbasid Baghdad. There has been a steady stream of caliphs, each seizing power in the name of the public good, suggestive of the frequent coups that rocked Syria between 1949 and 1970. In the play, the caliph has expanded and given vast powers to his secret police. In the name of the Mongol threat the regime has grown even more repressive. Early in the trial, the prosecution explains why the son of one of Abu al-Shukri's friends is able to provide such detailed recollections of Abu al-Shukri's statements and actions; the young man has an excellent memory, which – incidentally – is why he was hired by the secret service. "I didn't have a job so I took work with the secret police," he explains in embarrassment. "To keep my job and eat I had to file a report every day, and there was no one around except my father's friends" (1:122). People "commit suicide" in detention, their bodies returned in sealed coffins and rumored to have been hacked to pieces (1:148).

Abu al-Shukri's own son spent three months in detention without knowing the charge only because his fiancée was desired by someone in the secret service (1:148). Even with Hulagu's army at the city's gate, the secret police is occupied with inventing dissidents to persecute. Abu al-Shukri intervened in a fight, mistakenly thinking that the secret police were abducting a man. When the police eventually learned of the slight, he was dragged from his bed in the middle of the night and subjected to fifty lashes (1:135).

The state justifies such persecution by the emergency facing the nation. According to the prosecution, Abu al-Shukri's self-doubts and skepticism amount to the grossest treason. Reviewing the defendant's complaint that a culture of fear has left him unprepared to carry a sword, the prosecutor casts him as an unwitting fifth column. Such statements, he asserts, "spread within the ranks of the nation, just as the enemy wants, and so the defendant accomplishes the will of the enemy – probably without knowing – causing the people's steadfast perseverance [*ṣumud*] to crumble and destabilizing their confidence in themselves and stirring anxiety" (1:123). Military preparation and tactical acumen are unimportant compared to the steadfastness of the people. If the first two are lacking it makes no difference so long as the latter is in abundance.

Those who diminish the morale of the nation pose the greatest risk and merit the severest penalty. As the prosecutor later explains:

> Your honor, we find ourselves in trying times, and it requires us to take a firm stand on this dangerous issue cast before us, for the number of displaced persons is increasing, and the number of citizens who refuse to cooperate with the army is also increasing. I deem it proper that you hasten to issue your verdict of execution so that he will be a lesson to others and so that the people learn that their government's hold on power is still strong despite the shocks that have befallen the nation. (1:142)

Refugees are *a priori* criminals. Actual investigation is unnecessary for their simple existence untethered to a home makes them sources of chaos and enemies of the state. They live in limbo between freedom and execution, awaiting a sentencing that (in this play in particular) is perpetually deferred.

Even though the guilt of Abu al-Shukri is a foregone conclusion to the judge and prosecutor, it becomes clear that the trial is open-ended. As the prosecutor notes, the defendant stands before us in Mosul – not at his home in Baghdad – and unless the defense can change geography there is very little to debate. However, as the court reaches back deeper into its dossier on the life of the accused, the proceedings seem to move further and further from a verdict. The project of delineating the life of Abu al-Shukri, in its full culpability, is an endless excavation that will persist until the final collapse of the state. Twice the proceedings are interrupted by the announcement that Hulagu's invading army threatens the court, which must relocate – first from Mosul to Homs, then from Homs to Damascus. With each order to relocate the court, the judge makes formulaic announcements about the "steadfast [*ṣamād*] people who remain on their land, a thorn in the throat of the enemy" (1:136, 163), before the court abruptly rises and departs. The trial of the refugee – like the collection of information on the citizenry – must persist even as the state crumbles around it. The usher sums up the situation when he explains that there will never be a verdict: "they need you alive and accused; it is neither possible to condemn nor liberate you" (1:140).

The accused gives meaning to the proceedings and – by extension – the elaborate state machinery that exists to persecute the internal dissident. The usher explains:

> If they don't have an accused, what will they do? What will the magistrate, and the court recorder, and the executioner, and the witness

> for the prosecution, and the onlookers, and even the judge do? […] I'm used to you. It's like you're part of our family. And you're the most important member of the family for you are the provider for all of us. As far as the judge is concerned, you're more important than me. There are lots of ushers, but it's not easy to find an accused. (1:140)

There is no shortage of refugees ("the number of displaced persons is increasing," the prosecutor notes) but the transformation of the refugee into the accused requires all the trappings of the modern state, from paid informants and secret police to the many functionaries that constitute a court.

This web threatens to come undone as the state retreats, and the number of bodies under state control shrinks. As a result, the accused – "provider" to a still large family – grows all the more precious. Hence the judge's excessive attention to the well-being of the accused, even though guilt is a foregone conclusion. According to the usher, he is forced to monitor every aspect of Abu al-Shukri's existence: that he eat, but not eat too much; that he not eat anything that could harm him; that he sleep, but not oversleep (1:140). Abu al-Shukri is carefully preserved in the liminal space between citizenship and death, and through him the state persists.

The state is only interested in Abu al-Shukri as the accused, the man who didn't fight, but witness testimonies reveal a complex man humiliated by state violence who redirects his anger at his family. As noted earlier, Abu al-Shukri is not allowed to speak during the trial, silenced by both the judge and the defense attorney. A state that only teaches its citizens to be afraid and follow orders (as Abu al-Shukri puts it) is not about to grant opportunities for self-expression to the accused. However, each testimony prompts a performance in the cell onstage, and in these performances 'Adwan explores the relation of masculinity to political oppression. Through the recovery of the past, the personal dimensions of the political are explored, most pointedly when Abu al-Shukri acknowledges his fears of inadequacy to his wife. He acknowledges that he had long "been cruel so as to appear a man" but that this grew even more intense after his beating by the secret police (1:158).

The fact that he was too frightened to resist, too frightened to even acknowledge his pain, left him feeling that he was not "a complete man" and that "his manhood was lacking" before his wife. He turned his anger against her, as the witness to his presumed inadequacies, since she – in his words – knows "everything" about him, knowing him even "between the sheets." His masculinity was just a show, and an increasingly

tenuous show once the state had asserted its complete control over his proper self: "At any instant the police could make me feel shame that my masculinity was just feathers pasted on a cock, and there I am without feathers, naked" (1:158). Systems of oppression replicate themselves; weak states oppress their citizens in a show of power and such strategies are repeated throughout patriarchy.

Abu al-Shukri's failure to resist state violence revealed him as less than a man in his mind, and his failure to resist foreign invasion was even more damaging to his sense of masculinity. He contrasts himself with his son, who resisted arrest and died battling Hulagu's forces: "I envied him because he was able to respond to the police and I envy him now because he knew how to die in the war whereas I am left to flee like a terrified rabbit" (1:158). The son is the exception. State violence has traumatized the men, leaving them paralyzed before invaders.

Symptoms of this pathology are revealed earlier in the play. When first issued a sword, Abu al-Shukri doubts his own ability to defend the nation because combat requires that one look one's adversary in the eye. Doing so, he speculates, is not only beyond him but his companions as well:

> We are used to staring in the eyes of those we love and know, in the eyes of neighbors when we quarrel, but not in the eyes of the state officials or strangers. We need to learn to stare in the eyes of men. (1:121)

In this context resistance to foreign invasion is only possible after healing a male psyche damaged by years of tyrannical rule. The father envies the son's martyrdom, interpreting it as evidence of the young man's rehabilitation. Beyond the obvious paradox – health through death – the play's focus on wounded masculinity denies women a role in liberation movements. Women are simply witnesses to, and commentators on, the action and inaction of male characters.

The play ends with a happy ending of sorts: the usher, unwilling to flee with the court to Damascus, releases Abu al-Shukri, and the two men agree to battle Hulagu's forces. They do so in defiance of the state as much as in defiance of the invaders. When the usher asks Abu al-Shukri if he has chosen certain death on the battlefield to disprove the charge of treason, he counters that it is "perhaps to prove the accusations" (1:165). To stare the enemy in the eye undermines the state's power of subjugation, a power it strenuously upholds even at the cost of national implosion. For the accused, whose liminal status is necessary for the maintenance of state power, to face the enemy is to deny the state the power to decide who can and cannot participate in the

nation. In other worlds, when Abu al-Shukri faces the enemy he proves himself a traitor to the state and a supporter of the nation.

The play imagines that the long defile of state persecution opens eventually upon a space of self-invention. Abu al-Shukri is now ready to look into the eyes of men, he explains, because in prison he "faced death and stared in his eyes" (1:166). Throughout the play, a sword has hung behind the bench. We might say, following Weber, that the decoration suggests the state's ability to monopolize and delegate violence – the sword suggests the punishment that will befall the accused as well as his crime in not fulfilling the state's order to resist the invaders. Abu al-Shukri takes the hanging sword with a rallying cry. The usher joins him and repeats the cry. In doing so, they claim the right to resist without state approval. The spectators in *Soirée for the Fifth of June* demand weapons but only receive imprisonment. By contrast, Abu al-Shukri spends the entire play imprisoned but – in a utopian moment – seizes the power of divine violence.

In proportion that 1967 is occluded from Syrian history, the 1973 War (commonly known as *harb tishreen* or the October War) is endlessly remembered in textbooks, monuments, and government and commercial buildings. There is a Tishreen Power Plant outside Damascus and a Tishreen Thermal Power Plant in Aleppo. There is a Tishreen Military Hospital in Damascus. The University of Latakia was renamed Tishreen University in 1975. One of the state newspapers is named *Tishreen*. There are Tishreen parks, Tishreen squares, and Tishreen hotels in multiple Syrian cities, a Tishreen basketball club and a Tishreen soccer club. The Tishreen War Panorama Museum contains a range of military displays, but the focus is – as expected – on the 1973 War and contains an impressive moving panorama of the fighting in and around Quneitra. At that museum you can also see Israeli military hardware captured in the 1982 War. However, there is no mention of the 1967 War.

The 1973 War is also prominent in the drama as part of an ongoing narrative of potential redemption and healing. Of the three plays that I examine here – *The Strangers*, *October Village*, and *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* – only the last play exclusively depicts events set during the October War. Both *The Strangers* and *October Village* are fables that offer summaries of the Arab–Israeli conflict beginning in 1948. They are both stories of disorganized and poorly represented peoples who, almost magically, unify at the eleventh hour and forge victory. *The Strangers* is entirely earnest in its presentation of loss and redemption; *October Village* opens multiple sites to question its own representation of events. By contrast, Mustafa al-Hallaj's one-act *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender*

compresses a history of hostility into a tense encounter between a downed Israeli pilot and a young peasant women.

In *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender*, Arab redemption is symbolized in a young peasant woman's ability to stand her ground against an armed and condescending enemy. Taking *Soirée for the Fifth of June* as the emblematic play of the 1967 defeat, *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* acts as a response prompted by Syria's strong performance in the 1973 War. Whereas *Soirée for the Fifth of June* presented the ignorance and backwardness of the peasant as evidence of a state that constrained rather than cultivated its population, *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* cautions against confusing simplicity for backwardness. In *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, the peasant has become a refugee and symbolizes of a critical lack of *ṣumud* in the general populace and a correlating weak sense of national identity. By contrast, *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* creates an unmovable peasant so as to valorize a populace united in their steadfast commitment to the land. This commitment is explicitly connected to a love for and identification with the Syrian nation.

From the outset the play prompts the audience to underestimate the heroine, Rouli. Consequently, they are susceptible to the contempt of the Israeli pilot who believes himself to be vastly superior to his Arab adversary. The play feeds off a sense of national inadequacy such that the eventual triumph of the young peasant woman generates an even greater satisfaction for its audience – a satisfaction that parallels then recent news that Syria's army had scored early successes in the battle to retake the Golan. The play is designed to reproduce both the sense of inadequacy that prevailed before the 1973 War and the sense of satisfaction at a military outcome said to restore Arab pride.

The setting of the play is a room in a house in the countryside; there are a few wooden chairs "without cushions," mattresses of "shabby fabric" and "stuffed with straw," and a wooden cradle (Hallaj 1947: 167). In Rouli's opening monologue, she recites a litany of concerns to her infant son: she has a long day of work ahead of her, her father-in-law is off at the village square listening to radio broadcasts when his time would be better spent gathering the chickens that have strayed before they are blown up, the remaining chickens have stopped laying because of the noise from the bombs, even the birds of the sky are circling in panic from the constant shelling, and she cannot know whether her husband will return from the war. The Arab is in reduced circumstances, impoverished (apparently there is not even a radio in the house) and in a war

zone; given her worldly concerns, she seems an unlikely standard-bearer for the liberation struggle.

The Israeli pilot can almost be forgiven for confusing Rouli's simplicity with backwardness; certainly the play is evoking ideas of the lamentable state of the Syrian peasantry, as suggested in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*. Soon into the play he evidences contempt for the woman, revealing the chauvinism that will be his undoing. When she lets slip that her husband is with all the other men of the village, he assumes this means they are in the village; it never occurs to him that they would join in the battle (170). He demands boiling water to clean his wounded leg, and when Rouli refuses, he assumes that means she does not have a stove or any source of fire. When she says that she does but still refuses to bring him boiled water, he is still incapable of recognizing her defiance:

> You can't boil water! … Don't you ever eat cooked food? (*In ridicule.*) Just raw plant roots?? (172)

Despite her continued refusals, it takes him several exchanges before he realizes that she is resisting his commands. She is, in his mind, utterly abject and he accepts that she lives without fire before it occurs to him that she might challenge his will.

The pilot is looking for an Ariel and is slow to recognize that he is in the presence of Caliban. Even when insulting her as a "stupid peasant" or interpreting her failure to bring him boiling water as the confusion of "a stupid people" (171), he still fully expects that she will acquiesce to his demands. He holds the gun, much as Prospero has his magic, assuring that the master's wishes will be respected. He ultimately succeeds in making her boil water by threatening to shoot her child, though not until she offers a word of contempt: "Israeli!" His realization that she resists only convinces him that she will make an appropriate conquest:

> (*He laughs.*) Ha, ha, ha, finally your little head sets to work … (*He watches her as she ignites the gas stove.*) And trained hands as well … (*Imitating her*) "Israeli!" You know, you're not as stupid as I thought. You all have an instinctive intelligence … unpolished. Not surprisingly … we … I mean you and us, are from the same race. The difference is in the degrees of development. You stopped. We stayed the course. Rather than move forward, we leapt forward. (*She puts water in a metal pan on the fire.*) Come here. Let's talk a little. I don't always get such an opportunity … Come here. (*He contemplates her.*)

> You're not what I had thought. You know how to strut, a woman with a lovely step – (173)

She cuts him off, ordering him to be quiet, which only seems to please him more as his flirting grows more direct.

Hallaj fills the Israeli's short speech with colonialist tropes. The Arab's "trained hands" show dexterity in the kitchen but she is incapable of the complicated activities of the peoples of developed nations. Mention of her skilled hands retroactively takes on a sexual tone when he shifts from her domestic chores to her "strut" and "lovely step." According to the pilot, Arabs have an "instinctive," if undeveloped, intelligence, a throwback to theories of natural man. He reassures her that the gap between them is simply a difference of development – an advancing versus an arrested people. They are actually of one race, he explains, as if proactively countering the complaint that he is contemplating miscegenation.

Over the course of the play, the pilot swings between physical intimidation, flirting, assertions of friendships, and sexual threats. It is not enough that he controls the young Arab; he also insists that she want him. When Rouli responds to his sexual advances with contempt, he attributes it to "jealousy" (174). If she does not desire him, it can only be because she desires his culture and national achievements even more. His egotism allows him to believe that his friendship would be a prize even for those on whom he had recently dropped bombs. He congratulates himself that this is the first time he has talked to an Arab "in anything other than the language of weapons," explaining that in 1967 he "bombed cities, villages, soldiers, and targets of every stripe" (178). When that reminiscence fails to warm Rouli to free conversation, the pilot warns her that if she refuses to chat, "loneliness and boredom might push me to an evil act" (178). In fact his contempt for her or any of his other past "targets" is so great that he cannot imagine that they have the will to resist nor that the potential loss of their loved ones, homes, or nation should rate more than a small increase in their abjection.

Whereas *Soirée for the Fifth of June* describes a people beset by self-loathing, *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* displaces such feelings onto the enemy. We know who we are, the play announces; we are the people who will reclaim the Golan and only the enemy could think we lack the steadfast commitment to complete the task. When the pilot muses that his ancestors tended goats and sheep in the rocky Golan, a land that Israel is now transforming into a "paradise" of "fields and

gardens" (176), Rouli counters that the land is Arab and that the Israelis are just the most recent of a string of temporary occupiers:

> (*She lifts her head and faces him.*) Listen … This land has been our ancestors' for hundreds of years. The Turks occupied it, the French, feudal lords, now … They all left and that will happen again. (177)

Repeating a vision of Syrian history already being codified in its civic holidays, Rouli describes the past as an ongoing project of driving out the occupiers.

The pilot discounts her opinion, but he cannot deny that she has remained on her land despite the fact that only yesterday he had dropped "ten tons of explosives on the area" (180). Why, he asks, would she risk death for a plot with "nothing of value," a "wasteland" of rocky land and a "neglected chicken coop"? When she responds calmly, "It's my land," he grows angry. The idea of a steadfast peasantry completely upends his understanding of the conflict:

> Pilot: That crusty field …
> Rouli: (*certain of her words*) My land.
> Pilot: No … your husband forced you to stay … maybe the village forces … They left you to die and fled.

The pilot imagines an Arab society in which men leave women to certain death as a way of staking a claim to land they would not defend themselves. The pilot pictures a deeply misogynistic society with weak ties to the land; clear evidence of Arabs' "delayed development." In this context, an Israeli invasion is a boon – especially to women – a precursor to the stance Gayatri Spivak described as "white men saving brown women from brown men." The hypocrisy is made all the more glaring by the fact that only minutes earlier he had threatened her with rape if she refused his overtures of friendship.

In the course of the play she grows increasingly resistant until she is prepared to sacrifice her life and the life of her child to ensure the pilot's capture. At the start of the play, her principal political act was her refusal to flee. By the end of the play, she arranges his capture, even as he holds a gun to her infant. Rather than simply demonstrate her allegiance to the land through "*ṣumud*," she takes on the role of resistance fighter. First she unsuccessfully struggles with the pilot for his pistol. Then she announces to a passing contingent of villagers – composed of the old men, women, and children who could not join the soldiers – that the pilot they search

for has taken her and her child hostage. When the pilot threatens her, she only shouts the louder: "Don't let the monster escape … Remember the bombs … Remember the destruction …" (197). Even if he kills her, her child, and many of the villagers before he is captured – as he has promised – that will still entail less destruction than if they allow the pilot to escape to Israel and return with another ten tons of explosives.

The pilot projects (or feigns) confidence, appearing certain that the abject villagers are incapable of resisting: "Surrender to that handful of wretches? A few shots and they'll flee like rats." However, Rouli insists that not only she but the entire village sees through the powerful show of the Israeli military. She explains, "I know my nation, Israeli … when they open their eyes, they will remain open. They will not flee" (198). Their commitment is as strong as hers: "When people make up their minds to die … it's no use" (199). This new embrace of martyrdom for the sake of the nation has been forged in the fire of past defeat. Earlier, Rouli recounts the tears of her husband who, on a particular night, left the house to stare longingly at the Golan (184). However, rather than languish in despair, she and her husband have looked forward to a future victory: "Listen Israeli, Hamdan showed me the map … the map of my great nation … you are like a small mark … (*with deep pride*) We are a huge body" (200). Israel, once an insurmountable foe, is now a small disfigurement on the body of the Arab nation. The Syrian peasantry, who once fled well in advance of the Israeli military, is now prepared to fight to the death – every man, woman, and child. Now that the eyes of the people are open, active resistance replaces a dream of *ṣumud*.

Mustafa al-Hallaj published *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender* immediately after the 1973 War in the October–November issue of *M'arifa*. It was performed the following year by the Syrian National Theatre, under the direction of 'Ali 'Uqla 'Arsan. That season also included 'Arsan's own celebration of the 1973 War, *The Strangers*, which he directed himself. Not only does that play assert that common Syrians have united in resistance to Israeli aggression, the play presents this shared endeavor as precursor to a new age of pan-Arab unity that will most certainly result in the complete restoration of the Arab nation. Past disunity and military failures have not been the result of domestic oppression (as depicted in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*). Instead, *The Strangers* insists that current Arab leaders have been hampered by their inheritance of a fractured nation and their own hospitality towards an abject – and ultimately perfidious – people.

If Wannus was the playwright who most openly opposed the Syrian regime, 'Arsan is the playwright who most fervently supports it. In 1967

he was named as Director of the National Theatre in the Ministry of Culture. The following year he helped draft the law establishing the Artists' Union, becoming its first Secretary General. He also helped found and lead both the Revolutionary Youth Union and the Baath's Children Vanguards. The Syrian Ministry of Culture published his play in 1974, and it was subsequently published by two other presses.

*The Strangers* is anti-Semitic in addition to being anti-Zionist. Most glaring is the play's repeated insinuation that European Jews have prompted the persecution they have suffered by remaining a divisive element in their host countries. The play not only discounts the idea of a Jewish historical connection to Palestine, it suggests that Zionism is nothing but a cover for blatant and violent colonialism. In short, 'Arsan is the regime's most loyal mouthpiece in the theatre. He excels at creating emotional agit-prop, work that aspires to agitate and propagandize. *The Strangers* provides explanation for past Arab failures, depicts and assuages Arab guilt for these failures, reveals and soothes the trauma of the Arab refugee, and points to an Arab future of political and military advancement. The strands of anger, recrimination, joy, and hope are tightly knotted within the play, which can only imagine a future by excoriating Israelis for the past.

In the play, a village welcomes a group of strangers led by one Abu Daoud, despite the serious reservations of villagers. The strangers grow in number and eventually take over portions of the village including its square. The symbolism is clear: the village is the Arab world, the square is Palestine, the strangers are Zionists, and consecutive conflicts in the play represent the Wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. From the outset, the play foregrounds the irony that the strangers are a group of refugees who will turn their hosts into refugees themselves. The play begins with an emissary from another village warning the residents of the danger of Abu Daoud's group, which seeks shelter. When the headman of one of the quarters objects that Abu Daoud's people are a "group of downtrodden," the emissary contradicts him: Abu Daoud's people have been the scourge of the villages they reside in, and so they themselves have caused their "catastrophe" ('Arsan 1989: 2:681). The word choice is significant, for catastrophe (nakba) has become the Arab term for the exodus of Palestinians following the creation of Israel.

The displacement of Abu Daoud's people presages the displacement of those who live around the village square, i.e. the Palestinian people. The mirroring is important, for the play seeks to justify the persecution of Jews in Europe by looking ahead to a persecution that will be exacted by the Zionist residents of Palestine. In addition, Yusuf – the villager who

objects to the strangers from the outset – argues that the fact that they are arguing over the strangers is itself evidence that the strangers are evil (2:704). While some in the audience, like many of the villagers, will object to such logic, Abu Daoud's group will ultimately demonstrate Yusuf's prescience as they intentionally sow discord.

While the play clearly blames Abu Daoud's people for their persecution, it acknowledges the offensiveness of this idea. This is not in order to address the moral complexities that attend opposing Zionism, but to excuse Arabs who did not strenuously resist Jewish migration to Palestine. Yusuf – the voice of Arab resistance to Zionism – is over-emotional, dismissive of those who disagree with him, and quick to cut off conversation. Nor can the audience so easily disregard, as Yusuf does, the strangers' explanation that in coming to the village they "have fled from death" (2:709). The audience, then, is able to understand why the headman stood idly by during the first wave of migration, and can feel all the more indignant when these refugees take over a portion of the village square and deny the displaced inhabitants the right of return.

Any sympathy audience members might have had for the strangers quickly evaporates once Abu Daoud takes over a quarter for his people, his ranks swelling with additional strangers from Europe who arrive with cases of weapons and ammunitions. With the mention of Europe, the play shifts temporarily from fable to an open gloss on recent events, demonstrating how overmatched the villagers are. They have never heard of Europe, have no idea of the number of refugees that are flowing into their territories nor the financial and military support these refugees can leverage. That strength becomes evident when, by force of arms, the strangers increase their territory, ejecting the original inhabitants. By this time it is perfectly clear to all in the audience that they see a representation of the 1948 War.

The use of fable allows the play to compress decades, and when a group of poorly armed villagers try to force their way back to their homes it is clear that the reference is the 1967 War. The strangers repel them and seize additional territory (the Golan and the Sinai) including the entire square (Jerusalem). It is a spontaneous and poorly planned attack by a handful of the displaced villagers – not a foray organized by village leaders – and as such it would seem to exempt Arab governments from the debacle of 1967. There is no closing of the straits of Tiran or other bellicose acts; responsibility for 1967 lies solely with displaced Palestinians who understandably sought a way of returning to their homes. Meanwhile, those who remain in the territory now controlled by the strangers are subjected to daily beatings and humiliations (2:771).

The idea of heritage is used to deepen the audience's attachment to the land and to spur desire for the reclaiming of lost territory. As such, *The Strangers* is in marked contrast to *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, which asserted that a state-controlled entertainment industry disseminated ideas of Arab heritage to distract from the challenges facing an underdeveloped nation in the present. Early in *The Strangers*, a sheik explains that to deny the strangers refuge would be a betrayal of the village's customs of hospitality and protection. He prefaces his comments by noting that his children have children in the village and that his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather all "lived, died, and were buried in the village" (2:685).

By contrast, Abu Daoud explains that he and his people feel emotionally connected to the village because "one of our ancestors is buried here, having died here" (2:703). Abu Daoud makes no claim that this "one" ancestor actually lived in the village, but simply that he was buried there. It is as if Abu Daoud openly brands his people as wanderers without legitimate ties to any one spot on the earth. No matter that the name "Daoud" is Arabic for "David," a clear reference the House of David, or that David is recognized as a Hebrew prophet in Islam. Given Abu Daoud's European lineage his name rings as another of his many thefts. Repeatedly the play evokes Israeli justifications only to undermine them through the strangers' perfidy.

The villagers' tradition of hospitality opens the door to occupation, but their disunity is the principal reason that they fail to defend their lands. This emphasis is central to the play's hopeful conclusion, which looks forward to a new age of Arab cooperation. This imagined future is made all the more magnificent by the relentless disunity that plagues the village earlier. The angry squabbling of the villagers in the opening scenes not only insures that the strangers will gain a foothold in the village but explains how they were able to grow in numbers and develop militias without challenge. Characters who seek to act are told to wait until the village comes to agreement – and it is the belief that such agreement would never come that prompts displaced villagers to take matters into their own hands in the ill-fated expedition that represents the 1967 War. However, unlike the caliph in *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight*, who calls for a popular uprising while oppressing his population, the leader in *The Strangers* constructs consensus in the face of great obstacles.

The play insists that activists must table their complaints about past failures, cease to critique the present state of the nation, and unify behind their leaders. Yusuf blames the headman for failing to prevent the mass emigration of strangers and the consolidation of their power.

He is equally contemptuous of his fellow villagers, whom he describes as "ghosts of a people sleeping peacefully without acting or raising their voices except to mourn" (2:767). However, the headman counters that he has inherited a divided village, one that is only further disheartened by Yusuf's attacks. The headman, after all, is only responsible for one of many quarters, and in the village are "tens of headmen." He laments, "I can't command the village" (2:766).

The headman accepts responsibility only to the extent that both leaders and opposition have been locked in an unproductive battle:

> When they hear our polemics they lose their hope in us, and their confidence that one of them will rise up and realize their hope. When they hear us pelt one another they feel as if the road to agreement between us is blocked and so everyone remains in their homes and doesn't exit them. If one is convinced of a misery it is better to encounter it alone […] That is a fatal feeling. (2:768)

The *people* will rise up and realize their hopes but only once leaders and activists have reestablished a common cause. The criticism and introspection of works such as *Soirée for the Fifth of June* did nothing to advance the cause of territorial liberation. Only a display of unity will free the potential of the people. They have the power to reclaim their lands once leaders and intellectuals put aside their squabbles.

Throughout the play, the headman has insisted that the people possess a latent resolve that has not yet been revealed. In many ways it is the same blind confidence in a timeless and immanent strength that *The Trial of the Man Who Didn't Fight* critiques. In *The Strangers*, however, the people do fight. They cling to their land despite the threat of death and successfully rise against their invaders. Early in the play, when it first becomes clear that the strangers are armed and intend to seize territory, one of the characters stations himself in the square, refusing to move when his friend urges him to flee:

> I love to sit on the ground of the square. I cling to it and gaze upon it and embrace it. I have witnessed many events in it, and I fear that I will not have the opportunity to witness what takes place in it for the rest of my life. […] Tomorrow [the stranger] will kill me, or kill you with those weapons. Why did you let him enter the quarter? Why? Why? (2:743)

Whereas *Soirée* had critiqued the state's self-serving invocation of steadfast resistance ("The colonialist powers and their client states imagine

that events have weakened our *ṣumud*" the state official declares), *The Strangers* depicts a connection to the land that is stronger than the instinct of self-preservation.

The play stages individual, and consequently futile, acts of resistance alongside a growing sense of discouragement such that when the headman eventually rallies the village to a surprise attack it feels both inevitable and miraculous. In a crowning moment a wounded man reports from the hill on the battle's progress:

> The men's enthusiasm is ignited. We discovered something new in us. We were able to stand our ground against them, and they fled before us. […] I feel something that can't be described, as if I was washed of my shame […] the shame that stuck to the sons of the village for long years. We poured out our blood and started to wash the shame from our foreheads and from our soil. All of it washed away in blood. […] The war of liberation washed the people of their shame. (2:798)

The headman urges him to received treatment for his wounds, but the soldier insists on returning to the battle for the hill.

*The Strangers* depicts the War of 1973, the War of Liberation, as it is known in Syria, as a transformative event – the beginning of a healing process for a trauma that began in 1948 and grew more damaging with subsequent defeats. The play acknowledges that the war did not resolve the conflict; the villagers are on the verge of victory when regional police provide the strangers with weapons – a reference to the US airlift of weapons. However, such an outcome was expected, Yusuf explains; the important thing is that "The strangers will not be able to stand their ground before the villagers and the regional police will not support them against us forever" (2:801). Whether the war ends today or years from now, the important thing is that the Arab psyche has begun to heal.

The best-known play to depict the 1973 War, *October Village*, adopts a similar conceit: a small village represents the Arab world, though this time Palestine is symbolized by a vineyard rather than the city square. A thief occupies the vineyard. The audience never sees him and this single thief transforms into a powerful band of robbers over the course of the play. *October Village* is a raucous and politically pointed comedy filled with music and dance, the first of three plays co-authored by Muhammad al-Maghut and Duraid Lahham and performed by Lahham's company, October Family. (Lahham would also produce a fourth play solely authored by Maghut.)

Maghut was already credited with introducing free verse to Arab poetry in three highly acclaimed volumes, and had authored two plays, *The Hunchback Sparrow* (1967) and *The Jester* (1973). The latter had been performed throughout Syria by a touring arm of the National Theatre. Lahham was a prominent actor, principally known for playing Ghawar, a conniving if often comically foolish everyman that he had created for the 1966 television program *Ghawar's Pranks*. Lahham played Ghawar in *October Village* and two subsequent theatrical collaborations with Maghut: *Cheers Homeland* (1974) and *The Anemones* (1987). (They also collaborated on two films, *The Borders* (1984) and *The Report* (1986) in which Lahham created the characters 'Abd al-Wahud al-Tayih and 'Azmi Baik respectively.) *October Village* has not been published and my analysis is based on a DVD of the 1974 performance. That performance has been broadcast repeatedly in Syria and is widely available as a DVD. Multiple individuals have uploaded the play in its entirety to YouTube, where the opening clip had registered well over 300,000 views as of March 2014.

Whereas *The Strangers* presents the loss of land as a self-evident trauma, *October Village* finds a simple objective correlative that not only conveys this loss but links it to the even more powerful pain of an aborted national becoming. The vineyard, which was the property of a young man named Naif, was the *mahr* (or mandatory gift from groom to bride) in his coming marriage with Zeina. The news of the theft of the vineyard comes just at the moment that the marriage is to be consummated. The headman has recorded their names in the marriage contract and the two are about to enter their home amid the cheers of the village. Zeina has been given a small ball of dough starter which she slaps above the threshold as she enters but it falls to the ground just as the village guard rushes in to announce that a thief has taken control of the vineyard. From this point, the play depicts twenty-five years of stasis; the couple's names have been entered into the marriage contract but their married life cannot begin until the bride price is restored. After the long occupation of Ottoman and European powers, just as the Arab world approached unification, the Arab was dispossessed of a national self. The tragedy is not simply the loss of Palestine, but of a stillborn Arab nation.

Unlike *The Strangers*, which attempts to justify the actions of Arab leaders in the period between 1948 and 1973, *October Village* is scathing in its attack on the greed, cynicism, and repression of Arab governments. Arab leaders, no less than foreign powers, are responsible for the sorry state of the Arab world. Whereas the village in *The Strangers* is led by a fatherly if initially ineffectual "headman," the village in *October*

*Village* is subjected to series of headmen, each arising by coup but no different than the last dictator.

About mid-way through the play, the villagers respond with joy on hearing that the village's headman has been overthrown, and no one seems to notice when the new headman is played by the same actor, Nihad Qali, wearing a different hat. Two scenes later, Naif relates the news that there has been an additional coup, explaining that he brings "good news fresh from the oven." It prompts Ghawar to respond, "If only we could find bread as fresh as these coups." With martial music the radio prepares listeners for an important announcement, as the coffee-shop owner takes down the photo of the last headman from his shop and runs off to frame a picture of the new leader. As in the previous scene depicting a coup, the guard steps onto the balcony, this time announcing the "*very* new headman." Once again Nihad Qali steps out on the balcony to address the masses in a new and slightly more ridiculous hat to tired applause.

No sooner has the coffee-shop owner returned than martial music and the radio announcer's voice prepare the villagers for another address. The guard announces a "*very very very* new headman" and Nihad Qali again emerges with an even more ridiculous hat. The guard has considerably more difficulty convincing the villagers to applaud, but they eventually join in, even finishing the headman's speech (which is identical to those of his two predecessors). The coffee-shop owner takes the opportunity to ask the headman if he knows who will hold that office next, explaining that the new leaders do not give the people enough time to frame their photographs. The scene ends with the address of the "new headman, final edition," as announced by the guard. The villagers begin raucous hollering that drowns out the speech and the frustrated coffee-shop owner breaks the outdated framed photograph over his knee as he and the others dance about.

These acts – shouting down the speech of a government official, cracking the image of a leader, and dancing on its shards – would be highly provocative if they did not so obviously refer to the Syria that came before. Between the 1948 defeat and the consolidation of Hafez al-Assad's power in 1970, a series of strongmen had seized power often in rapid succession (such as Husni al-Zaim, Sami al-Hinnami, Adib Shishlaki, and Salah Jadid). By the time the scene's last headman has emerged wearing a gold turban like a cartoon genie, events have digressed into a tragic farce. The guard's announcement that this headman constitutes the "final edition" acknowledges that there has already been a morning edition and an evening edition, and also suggests that the process will begin

again tomorrow. The dilemma is not that change is impossible, but that change has been rendered meaningless by its ubiquity. However, this is the world that precedes the October War. The play's title would seem to juxtapose these scenes of meaningless change with a present of purposeful action. In this context, the act of destroying the leader's image is one that celebrates, rather than attacks, the present government's tight grip on the reins of power.

In his chapter on the plays of Lahham and Maghut, Mas'ud Hamdan (2006: 116) describes this scene as the "carnivalization for the figure of the leader." By such a formulation, *October Village* can be said to depict the period from 1948 to 1970 as an insane festival of misrule, one from which the participants would seem to have no hope of escaping. The play depicts a world in which the seat of power is occupied by a never-ending succession of fools. Whereas Bakhtin (1984: 81) saw festive laughter as expressing "the people's hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order, of a new truth," the laughter of Ghawar and his compatriots expresses their relinquishing of hope. The growing hopelessness depicted in the play is in marked contrast to the play's title, which reminds the audience that the cycle of constant change will be arrested and with it a long period of shame.

Bakhtin tells us that carnival laughter is universal and ambivalent. It is not directed exclusively at the headman but at all of the sorry villagers, onstage and in the audience, who have no choice but to play out the farce to its end. It raises the people above the king, but does so while foregrounding that their victory will be short-lived; we laugh now, tomorrow the whip. The laughter in *October Village* is no less ambivalent. While the title points to a transformative victory, everything else about the play points to ongoing forms of persecution. Even the scene of the revolving headmen carries a warning. When the coffee-shop owner asks the "*very very very* new headman" for the name of the next leader, the latter replies that he will be the last headman because he intends to do it right. His actual expression, "I make the weave tight from all sides" (aḥabaka masboot), along with his gesture of grabbing and pulling threads tightly, suggests new forms of pressure will be exerted on the villagers. In fact as the play unfolds, the state comes to be as damaging to the village psyche as the thief, if not more so.

Subsequent scenes depict a state that uses excessive force to silence dissidents or anyone who might potentially be a dissident. The descent into state violence is all the more upsetting as it comes with the arrival of a populist headman. Three scenes after the carnivalesque crowning, a new headman appears on the balcony, but this time flanked by Ghawar,

the common man, and Naif the Palestinian. The new headman (again Nihad Qali, but this time without a hat) rails against the "bourgeoisie" as he asserts his bond with the villagers. Full of expectation for a better future, Zeina dons her wedding dress in the next scene, noting that it is fifteen years since she first wore it. The year, then, is 1963, the same year that the Baath party came to power in a military coup. It was, according to Patrick Seale (1989: 72 and 89), the end of the dominance of city notables as Assad and his allies – newcomers from the country – waged a war on the urban propertied class in the name of socialist revolution. The air of hope is brief. The next scene begins with an armed man in civilian dress and sunglasses dragging a street beggar off, euphemistically, "to the cinema." There are shortages of provisions; the headman is now inaccessible to the public; and when Naif complains that "other nations discover petrol, magnesium, and iron but here we only discover intrigues," the armed man swoops in to take both Naif and Ghawar "to the cinema."

The following interrogation scene depicts security services more intent on rendering the public docile than discovering plots against the state. This is especially evident in the interrogation of Ghawar, who has not actually spoken against the state. Naif complained of shortages, which his interrogator quickly refutes by noting that the headman's home is full of rice, whiskey, meat, and bulgur. However, Ghawar's silence is even more dangerous than Naif's criticism, according to the interrogator (performed by Yasser al-Azma): "The difference between you and Naif is that Naif repeated what he said and we heard it. You're more dangerous because we don't know what you were going to say." When Ghawar still finds nothing to confess, the interrogator grows increasingly frustrated, shouting that Ghawar's silence threatens the freedom of speech necessary to the nation's development. He begins to beat Ghawar, repeatedly asking the cowering clown, "What are you?" In increasing fear and confusion Ghawar eventually blurts: "I am nothing. I am a citizen. I am nothing." As if hearing the desired response, the interrogator stops beating Ghawar and hands him paper and pen and tells him to confess to the things he "intended to say."

In this upside-down world, silence is more damning than dissent, torture ensures free speech, and to be a citizen is to be nothing. The scene ends with Ghawar and Naif back in their cell.

Naif: Did they hit you?
Ghawar: Yes.
Naif: Did they hit you bad?

Ghawar: I don't know, I stopped feeling. What about you?
Naif: I felt. I felt that the dogs have more value than we. (Ghawar cries.) Are you crying? When the colonizers hit you, you never shed a tear.
Ghawar: Oh Naif, it's one thing when a stranger beats you, it's something else when it's the son of your nation [ibn baladik].

Ghawar's interrogation has discovered no new plots but it has succeeded in breaking any potential he might have had to resist, to actually exercise the freedom of speech that the interrogator comically claims to uphold. Ghawar apparently suffered beatings at the hand of colonizers, but this was before he was a citizen of his own nation. It takes a fellow son of his nation to render citizenship meaningless.

From his creation in the 1960s, Ghawar was something of a clever fool whose seeming confusion masked wry observations, a lowly laborer who often got the better of his superiors. In Maghut's hands, Ghawar's truths grew increasingly political and he was invested with a past of colonial oppression and a deep despondency over the failures of the post-colonial period. The interrogation scene in *October Village* deprives Ghawar of his wit and his ability to bounce back endlessly and triumph against the odds. Instead, Ghawar unexpectedly becomes the abject straight man to the comic viciousness of the interrogator. His transformation is complete when he tearfully acknowledges that the blows of a fellow citizen are more painful than those of the colonizer. Harlequin has become Pierrot, but rather than losing his Columbine he has lost the myth of Arab unity.

The headman's government has been vicious in its policing of the citizen and completely incompetent in its handling of state affairs. The repercussions of this are evident two scenes later when the headman sends the village men off to reclaim the stolen vineyard. The headman announces his "secret" plan in a booming voice and when Naif tells him to speak quietly so that the thief does not hear, the headman only shouts louder to demonstrate that he is not intimidated by his enemies. His bellicose statements recall Nasser's call to his countrymen to ready for the "final battle in Palestine" on May 15, 1967, when in fact Egyptian forces were totally unprepared for the war that would soon follow. Nor are the headman's forces in any greater readiness. Ghawar, asleep at a table and with a twisted ankle, has to be carried to the front. The headman takes up his field glasses, offering to recount the battle, though Zeina points out to him that he is facing the wrong way. It soon becomes clear that his descriptions have no relation to reality. He announces the death of the first ten thieves despite the fact that there are only three thieves in

total. He continues to follow the supposed battle, urging his troops to surround and kill the remaining thieves, even after the defeated villagers have entered downstage, much as Radio Cairo had announced that Tel Aviv was in flames on the second day of fighting when in fact the war had already been lost by that time (Oren 2004: 208). In the exchange that follows, villagers blame the headman for their lack of preparedness; even more compellingly, Ghawar describes a state that in its repression has created a people who are ill-equipped to defend themselves. Villagers complain about their lack of weapons and the military superiority of the opposing force, and complain that the headman remained far from the front – complaints that both reflect Syria's lack of supplies and the refusal of officers to accompany their troops into battle in the June War. However, when the headman tries to shame the village men for failing to fight and die for "the land and the nation," Ghawar responds with the most damning critique. "What value," he asks, "does this land have without the people, the citizens, on it?"

Ghawar goes on to describe a society in which citizens are denied basic dignities. The detained leave prison with feet four sizes larger from the beatings across the soles. The state is flush with prisons while thousands of children are in the street without schools. What is there worth defending? When the headman demands who is responsible for these opinions, Ghawar responds, "the citizen, the victim (ma'zum), Ghawar." Earlier, Ghawar had been beaten to the point of equating his citizenship with "nothing." Now he reclaims the word: to be a citizen of the Arab world does mean something, it means one is a victim. It may seem like a slight improvement but recognizing victimhood allows the audience to see their position as aberrant rather than natural and unavoidable. It makes change a right.

The headman rushes to recuperation. The outcome was not a defeat but a "setback" (naksa), the term that came to designate the 1967 War. In fact, the thieves' true goal was to overthrow the headman of the village and so his continued rule constitutes a victory for the village. At the end of *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, the government official makes a similar claim before rounding up the audience for questioning. In that play, the state's instinct for self-preservation is evident in its strict control of the public sphere and its willingness to detain and imprison large numbers of innocent people. In *October Village*, this instinct for self-preservation is made ridiculous; the mere word "setback" evokes seditious laughter. However, this laughter carries the memory of Ghawar's beating.

For a work titled *October Village*, the play is anything but congratulatory. As additional scenes unfold, the government of the village continues

to demonstrate its viciousness and incompetence. It is not until the final scene that change becomes possible. The women awake to note that all of the men and the "new headman" are missing. The men return to the village with rifles upraised. "We battled!" one announces proudly. There is no further description of the war, no mention of its outcome, simply the statement that they fought. As the women greet the men, Ghawar's wife frantically looks for her husband. She confronts Naif who gives her the news that Ghawar died in battle. The scene closes with Zeina telling Naif that she had hoped he would bring Ghawar to their wedding. Naif responds that before his death, Ghawar said "I'm lucky to die for the nation." If anything, the play would seem to use the cover of the 1974 War to level a thoroughly damning critique of Arab governments. The play differentiates Hafez al-Assad, the "new" headman who has accompanied the men to battle, from the chain of headmen that have preceded him. Beyond that, however, the play is silent on his rule. Zeina and Naif remain hopeful that they will someday complete their marriage. It is also clear that this renewed hope was purchased with Ghawar's life.

In these many plays, Israel is the foil that reveals either Arab weakness or strength. Israel itself is hardly represented – it is by and large an offstage thief enjoying the fruit of an occupied vineyard. When an Israeli does appear on stage he is perfidy pure and simple, as in *The Strangers*, or unmitigated arrogance, as in *Hey Israeli, It's Time to Surrender*. In part, that is a function of the genre – war stories rarely explore the enemy's perspective. However, the unknowable nature of the Israeli enemy is also a function of an Arab boycott that extended to any form of contact or exchange. It is a rare play, such as *Soirée for the Fifth of June* by Saadallah Wannus, that made this blind spot itself an object of analysis. How is it, the play asks, that our soldiers either fled ascribing superhuman powers to the Israelis or never even saw any action? How can this enemy be so unknown? As we shall see, simply exploring a Palestinian psychology was a long and complicated process for the Syrian theatre. Here again, it was Wannus who – quite controversially – extended such analysis to imagine the psychology of the enemy.

# 3
# Palestinians

Syrian plays about the experience of Palestinians are first and foremost plays about what it means to be Syrian. This seemingly contradictory statement should make sense having examined plays like *The Strangers* and *October Village*. In these plays, the loss of Palestine is experienced as a loss at the heart of the homeland. Whether imagined as the village square or the vineyard, Palestine is central to the polity's identity. That polity, according to different strands of Syrian ideology, is either the Arab world or Greater Syria. However, for the purposes of this chapter the distinction is insignificant. For Syrians, the homeland grew smaller in 1948.

Despite this deep sense of identification with Palestine, Syrian playwrights have explored Palestinian identity as a distinct national experience; however, they do so in the context of loss. Lament for the absence of Arab unity and anger at the self-serving actions of Arab leaders often accompany depictions of an independent Palestinian nationalism. Numerous states and militias have claimed the mantle of Palestinian liberation, even the exclusive right to speak for Palestinians. In the six plays examined here, these assertions ring false, the most glaring instances of the bad faith of leaders who are more interested in securing their own power than restoring the nation.

Written over a period of twenty-six years, these plays present a consistent critique. Even as the situation of Palestinians changed dramatically, even as non-state actors claimed the right of resistance from the exclusive purview of states, playwrights of different political allegiance agreed that Arab leaders had turned their backs on the Palestinian people. Exploring the historical context of these six plays will be essential to understanding their individual critiques. Saadallah Wannus wrote *Cleansing the Blood* (1963) at a time when many Palestinians in

Syria were embroiled in the domestic struggle between Baathists and partisans of Nasser. The absence of Arab unity undermined the idea that Arab states could restore Palestine. By contrast, Farhan Bulbul wrote *The Scarlet Walls* (1968) after Fatah had begun carrying out operations within Israel in defiance of Arab leaders.

Baath party member ʻAli ʻUqlah ʻArsan wrote *The Palestinian Women* (1971) after Hafez al-Assad had claimed the Syrian presidency, and that play reasserts the idea of a widespread Arab resistance effort to claim Palestine, even as the play lambasts conservative Arab regimes for their subservience to US foreign policy. Mumdoh ʻAdwan wrote *If You Were Palestinian* (1977) in the aftermath of spectacular terrorist acts by organizations such the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Black September Organization. That play, like his next a decade later, *The Resurrection* (1987), reveals that Arab states will quickly turn on militants when expedient. Finally Saadallah Wannus wrote *The Rape* (1989) in the midst of the first Intifada, and that play is the first in Syrian history to depict an independent resistance from within the territories.

The theatre's willingness to explore these topics distinguishes it from other media. Given Syria's self-proclaimed role as defender of Palestinian rights, it is striking how rarely Syrian arts and entertainment have depicted actual Palestinians – at least until recent years. For decades, the Syrian government's steadfast refusal to allow cultural contact between Syrians and Israelis not only rendered Israel an abstraction, the policy also inhibited examinations of Palestinians living in Israel and the occupied territories. Moreover, the Syrian state's long-standing hostility to the PLO – evidenced in the full-scale Syrian offensive against PLO forces in Lebanon in 1976 and then the Syrian expulsion of Arafat and the PLO from northern Lebanon in 1982 – have made refugees and the resistance movement in Arab countries a controversial subject for Syrian authors. Examining Palestinian identity has not only entailed revisiting the wounds of military defeat, it has meant traversing the heavily mined terrain of Syrian–Palestinian relations. The only Syrian film or television program to focus directly on Palestinians during the rule of Hafez al-Assad was *The Dupes* (Al-makhduʻun), the powerful 1973 film adaptation of Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Three Men in the Sun*. Significantly, the film depicts Palestinian refugees in Iraq.

Palestine is fraught terrain for Syrian artists. Attention to the Palestinian experience as distinct from the Syrian struggle against colonialism undermines central tenets of state ideology. In 1960, Nasser described Syria as the "beating heart of Arabism," and under Hafez al-Assad's regime the expression became the country's sobriquet. One

proof of Syria's Arabism was its frequent invocation of the Palestinian cause (a tendency Maghut lampooned in *Out of the Flock* when *Romeo and Juliet* begins with a few words on Palestine, as noted in Chapter 1). Resistance to Israel is an Arab cause, with Syria leading the charge – not a Palestinian cause independent of Syrian oversight.

To be clear, I am making an argument about plays written during the rule of Hafez al-Assad and prior to the formation of the Palestinian National Authority. More recently, representations of Palestinian life have grown more common in Syria. In the last eight years Syria has produced two Ramadan television series about Palestinian life. *Palestinian Exile* (taghriba filastini 2004) follows fifty years of Palestinian resistance and was written by West Bank author Walid Seif. *Summer Cloud* (sahabat saif 2009) depicts exiles from Palestine, Iraq, and the Golan in the outskirts of present-day Damascus and was written by Eman Seeif, a Palestinian residing in Syria.

At the same time, the Damascus Ministry of Culture has included a number of productions created by Palestinian theatre companies in the Damascus Theatre Festival, such as *The Mural* (al-jidariyya) presented by the Palestinian National Theatre in 2006, *Vice Versa* (safad-shantilla) presented by al-Ashtar in 2006, *The Wall* (al-jadr) presented by al-Kasaba in 2006, and *Emergency Landing* (haboot idtirani) presented by the Palestinian National Theatre in 2009. Also, in 2010 the Ministry funded Damascene participation in al-Ashtar's *Gaza Monologues* project, in which young people from around the world read personal stories written by Gaza's children. Without asserting a cause and effect relationship, it is possible to note that the founding of the Palestinian National Authority has coincided with the decline of Greater Syria rhetoric. The period has also seen an increase in contact between Syria and authors and theatre companies from the occupied territories, and a greater number of Palestinian characters on Syrian stages and screens.

It was a very different world in 1963 when Saadallah Wannus wrote *Cleansing the Blood* (fasid ad-dem), an experimental one-act play that asks what it means both for an individual and a community to contemplate resistance in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The play was published in the Beirut journal *al-Adab*, in the March 1964 issue devoted to Palestine. It is the first Syrian play with a Palestinian protagonist written after the Arab–Israeli War and may very likely be the first such play in Arabic. It is, then, an essential starting point for any exploration of Arab representations of Palestinian identity. *Cleansing the Blood* both reflects its historical moment and raises issues that would be debated long into the future.

Written just before the creation of the PLO and Fatah, *Cleansing the Blood* depicts Palestinian identity at a crossroads. It is clear that the Arab nations that claim to speak for Palestinian rights have no objective other than the preservation of their own power; however, the Palestinians themselves possess no institutions of resistance. Either the individual accepts the futility of revolt, abandons his past and his hopes for a homeland, and accepts his role as refugee, or he rejects his own rationality and takes up arms in an isolated struggle that will most certainly bring hardship and death.

The impossibility of the Palestinian's situation induces a state of schizophrenia that is manifest in the play world through the bifurcation of the main character into two roles: Ali and Alewa (a diminutive of Ali). Alewa is rational but completely cynical and despondent, escaping his squalid present and painful past in alcohol. Ali is driven only to destroy that part of himself that hinders his commitment to a purely Palestinian struggle. The play's expressionistic elements are also evident in its structure, a passion play of sorts in which both Ali and Alewa encounter different segments of Arab society in a series of stations as the rational/passive self flees from the emotional/rebellious self. The outcome of the reckoning between these two selves is foreshadowed in the play's title. The expression "fasid ad-dam" literally translates as "blood-letting" and refers to the ancient practice (still practiced in some parts of the Arab world) of making small incisions to draw off perceived stagnant or clotted blood. The cleansing of the Palestinian self is synonymous with the shedding of blood.

Wannus penned this radical play before the emergence of the Palestinian resistance movement. The Arab–Israeli War of 1948 resulted in the expatriation of roughly 80% of the Arab population of Palestine, or about 800,000 individuals. By 1950 the UN estimated that 896,690 Palestinian refugees subsisted on UN care – 31,000 in Israel and the rest in camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt (the West Bank and Gaza controlled by Jordan and Egypt respectively) (Polk 1991: 232). Notwithstanding sporadic and unorganized infiltration into Israel, this population largely relied on the Arab regimes to bring about their return (Ajami 1992: 142). It was not until the early 1960s that Fatah began to disseminate the idea of an independent Palestinian struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Fatah carried out its first operation after the composition of the play: a 1965 bombing attack on a water diversion project in northern Israel (Kurz 2005: 30, 38).

Looking back on the play's composition in 1963, Wannus wrote for a 1978 revised edition that he had written the play after the "rending" of

the Arab nation, when national regimes were consumed with inter-Arab machinations, and the airways were filled with empty diatribes or plaintive songs about the "return" that only served to "anesthetize" populations to their loss. In the 1963 Arab world, Wannus continues, "the birth of the resistance was a dream" (1996a: 1:327). Wannus posits a single Arab nation, splintered both by the creation by Israel and by Arab leaders whose self-interest deepened the rifts they should be mending. These regimes talk of a resistance and their cultural machinery invokes the return, but only as a means of distracting from the lamentable state of the Arab world. Arabism had been sold out and resistance was only a dream so long as it was tethered to corrupt regimes.

Notably, Wannus does not qualify "the resistance" (*al-muqawima*), enabling an even more radical reading of the play. At the time of the 1978 edition, the term was widely associated with the Palestinian cause; however, coming after his critique of Arab regimes, Wannus leaves open the possibility that the "dream" involves Arab nations rising up against their own governments, the national regimes that he criticizes for their exclusive attention to holding power despite their cant of liberation. Wannus makes clear that the psychological damage that troubles the play's Palestinian protagonist is a shared Arab ailment:

> It appeared that the birth [of the resistance] would not be unless Palestinians in particular, and Arabs in general, amputated their damaged half – the half paralyzed by illusions, lies and fear. In short, it was up to each of us to clean his blood and set to work … I speak in the past, but after the birth of the resistance can we persist unless each of us cleans the blood that has spoiled and clotted? (1996a: 1:327)

The play, then, is not only about the loss of a territory but the loss of the self. The Arab world shrunk in 1948 and the Arab citizen diminished just as profoundly, with half of his or her psyche consumed by "illusions, lies, and fear."

If the reader assumes that these "illusions and lies" are disseminated by the regimes that filled the airwaves with plaintive songs and meaningless diatribes, it would follow that Wannus is asking his audience to overcome its "fear" of its *own* government as well as its fear of Israel. In short, these comments can be read as calling for the birth of a resistance movement focused on a social revolution throughout the Arab world as a precursor to the restoration of Palestine. Wannus's insistence that all Arabs need to purge their clotted blood is a call to revive the body politic by liberating daily life. Only by overcoming "illusions, lies, and

fears" that oppress the Arab citizen day in and day out can one hope to restore the Arab world.[1]

Writing from 1978, Wannus would seem to ally his play with a project of personal and national salvation – an idea that is borne out and problematized by the play. As asserted earlier, *Cleansing the Blood* should be read as a passion play in the tradition of expressionism. The Palestinian self – split between Ali and Alewa – encounters figures of the Arab past and present in a flight-from/quest-for a unified self. The play ends in a death that promises, though it does not deliver, redemption. Each figure encountered takes on iconic status, in part because of character names like Young Man, Man, Woman, and Journalist. In addition there is a silent chorus of Palestinian refugees that continuously occupies the stage and is composed of "old men, women, and children." The chorus is not simply selected Palestinian refugees but all Palestinian refugees – all but young males. As a result Ali/Alewa (who is roughly twenty-seven according to stage directions) becomes *the* Palestinian young man, in addition to a specific individual, completing the play's representation of the refugee population. His journey through stations of Arab society is emblematic of the (male) Palestinian's journey, and one – Wannus asserts in his 1978 introduction – that all Arabs must undergo.

The choice to represent as male a universal Palestinian/Arab aspiration towards unified identity and meaningful action is hardly incidental. Rather the choice, as I will explain in greater detail later in this chapter, is consistent with an elaborate gendering of liberation struggles evident in writings on a range of Arab movements in the early 1960s from Palestine to Algeria. As several scholars have demonstrated, the gendering of the Palestinian conflict has undergone significant changes between 1948 and the Palestinian Intifada (Sharoni 1995; Warnock 1990; Peteet 1991). The plays discussed here reflect this gender dynamic. In *Cleansing the Blood*, the male characters Ali and Alewa debate resistance. Young Man (not Young Woman) is the audience for this debate, and tragically it leaves *him* paralyzed. A male journalist articulates the state's position. The past as impetus to future action is evident in the voice of the now-dead father, and the past as an irretrievable space of comfort resides as a memory of the mother. Other than her, women only exist in the play alongside children and old men in a silent chorus.

As with Wannus's later play, *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, *Cleansing the Blood* examines a dispossession that begins with the loss of land but extends to a loss of self stemming from repression by a government that sees its own population as a disruptive force to be managed and pacified. The link between political and existential crises surfaces in

Alewa's first lines to the silent Palestinian chorus, when he compares "refugees" to "those dismissed from existence" (1996a: 1:329). The term I have chosen to translate as "those dismissed" (al-massrahin) could also be translated as demobilized or discharged. This does not connote simply an abstract loss of self that threatens all humans but specifically the dilemma of those denied recourse to arms that they desperately need. To be a refugee is to be excluded from the field of combat, to be denied the opportunity to fight for one's rights or home. This dismissal undermines one's very being; denied a struggle, the refugee becomes a ghost at the edge of existence. The chorus responds to Alewa with vacant looks (1:328) and a shake of the head that repeats sequentially through the chorus suggesting a "sad emptiness" (1:329). Their silence is inscrutable, leaving the audience to wonder if their gestures represent a conscious agreement with, or unconscious illustration of, Alewa's description of a people without existence.

Alewa and Ali live among ghosts, not simply the silent chorus of present-day refugees but the ever-returning memory of the Palestinians killed in 1948. For Alewa, his drive to destroy that part of himself that hinders his commitment to military resistance is prompted by the "murmur of ghosts" who rust in waiting. While Ali aspires to redeem the casualties of the Arab–Israeli War, Alewa dismisses their sacrifice as useless. When Alewa complains that a "wake would be wasted" on his passionate self, he notes that Ali is cut from the same cloth as their father, "the dumbest of them all" (1:331). This prompts a flashback to the 1948 War, when his father remained to defend the family home while instructing his wife to flee with their child. The father condemns those men who flee as "sheep" who will prompt "the land to curse and reject us" (1:332). When the woman demands that he flee for the sake of the son, the father asserts that he stays precisely for the boy – to safeguard the boy's home, the only home he can ever have. There can be no new home in some new land; he explains, "We won't be worthy of another if we don't defend this one" (1:333). Alewa, removed from that home by a temporary flight that has become permanent, has only inherited the land's curse and the returning vision of the dead father who prophesized that curse.

Whereas the murmur of ghosts propels Ali towards action, Alewa sees such action as futile. That house, he muses, has long since been wiped out, its garden uprooted and replaced with barracks, or more likely, nightclubs in which "all the bastards of the world dance to songs of loyalty and heroism." The age is cursed, Alewa asserts, deflecting the land's malediction onto the era. Even this rare moment of passion is quickly repudiated; he laughs and exclaims that he's turned into an actor (1:334).

The assertion that the age itself is cursed not only absolves Alewa from action, but anyone who might feel compelled to act – an idea explored in the next station. In his search for Alewa, Ali happens upon a young man with a transistor radio listening to government decrees, empty slogans, and vapid songs. The young man turns it off but knows that it will not be long before his "sick fingers" once again search out the machine's "opium." He awaits "the miracle" but worries that it is just "a dream of a trivial junkie." A character like Ali – convinced of the individual's ability to create change through violent struggle – is beyond the young man's comprehension and he assumes that Ali similarly searches for "a refuge beyond geography and far from the terrible vortex of history" (1:335). In the young man, the audience sees Alewa's condition extended outward to all who are subjected to meaningless government decrees and cynical assertions of unity. Ali sees this as the language of Alewa's defeatism and assumes his enemy is near: "I know how his intoxicating language seduces with indulgence … as seductive as complacency … as seductive as sleep" (1:336). Ali exits and Alewa enters. He lingers with the young man, realizing that his desire for oblivion makes him a suitable drinking partner. The Palestinian refugee further demoralizes a dejected Arab population.

Dispossession is rendered throughout the play as a political experience, but it is given a strong psychological component when Ali confronts Alewa in the closing scene. Rejecting Alewa's pleas for mercy, Ali reminds him of the promise to their father. Returning to the site of their trauma – the loss of their father in the tumult of the 1948 War – Ali forces Alewa to witness the portion of the memory he had repressed. Alewa's father insists that his wife and child set off, but not until he issues a final command:

> Teach him and raise him to manhood that he might support me. I will continue to drive off these dogs until his return. And a thousand woes unto you if he does not return. (1:350)

For Ali it is not a question of purging the rational self but of casting aside "all who forget or try to forget … all who accept their defeat, who betray their roots and break their promise, who search for comfort and concord" (1:352). Wannus constructs a lost father, a resistance fighter prepared to die before relinquishing the land and heritage he intends to pass to his son. Alewa, the rational self that recognizes the futility of Palestinian resistance in the current political climate, has had to obliterate this figure from memory in order to escape an irrational command. Half of Alewa's birthright was stolen from him, but half of it he freely

relinquished; Jewish militias took his land and home, but he himself gave up the right to resist and with it the idea of a father.

Wannus overlays an Oedipal drama upon a political passion play. It is not simply a question of whether Ali/Alewa can claim the power of political resistance; Ali battles to assume the role of his lost father and jettison that part of himself that hinders his entry into this male realm. Foreseeing his own destruction, Alewa asks Ali to stop and consider the compassionate mother who forgave their transgressions:

> We had days … and we had a mother. Do you remember how she surprised us and we gobbled up the bread that we had stolen from her basket. We choked and fumbled about and she grinned from ear to ear as she rebuked us. (1:352)

However, Ali cuts him off, and then asks: "Do you hear that overpowering call, from far, from the core of our noble past?" (1:353). One must set aside maternal attachment to heed the call of history, a call imagined within the play as the father's voice. Ali waivers in his commitment, unable to shed blood, and in that moment his father's words echo and drown out Alewa: "Raise him to manhood that he might support me. I will continue to drive off these dogs until his return. And a thousand woes unto you if he does not return." Ali then repeats the words as he stabs Alewa.

The play's shift to a psychological register underscores its gendering of revolutionary action. The choice to resist is a male decision born of the trauma of dispersal, which is experienced as the loss of a father. The woman is a mother who provides comfort to the dispossessed male or she is a member of the silent backdrop of refugees. For Wannus, the lost father is not a condition specific to Ali/Alewa, but a universal experience of refugees exiled from their history; it is social trauma allegorized as psychic trauma. This social trauma parallels that which Frantz Fanon ascribed to the Negro in a white world, an individual exiled from his proper self by a self-contempt taught by the colonizing authority.

Wannus's refugee, like Fanon's colonized black man, possesses a "psychic structure in danger of disintegration" as a result of social forces (rather than family drama); and like Fanon, Wannus proposes agitation (rather than analysis) as a means of psychic reintegration. As Fanon explains, once the patient's motivations have been brought into consciousness, he will be "in a position to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict – that is toward social structure" (Fanon 1968: 100). Following Freud, Fanon focuses on male experience; women are considered to the

extent that they impact a male's psychosexual development (Bergner 1995). Similarly the one female character in *Cleansing the Blood*, "Woman," exists only in the memories of the male protagonist as witness to his dispossession and then as comfort in the coming years of homelessness. As a mother, she is defined by the son's drama.

This gendering is consistent with a prominent current in 1960s liberation movements. In her study of Middle Eastern gender transformation, Valentine M. Moghadam (1993: 83–85) distinguishes between revolutionary movements that adopt a "Women's Emancipation" model and those that adopt a "Women-in-the-Family" model. Algeria – which overthrew French rule in 1962, the year before the composition of *Cleansing the Blood* – is a prominent example of the latter. While noting the widespread participation of women in the Algerian revolution, Moghadam highlights the state's rejection of women's emancipation as a legacy of the French colonial project and incompatible with Algerian culture and tradition. Women best serve the nation by retreating to traditional family roles. Frances S. Hasso (2000: 492) asserts that Palestinian nationalists, responding to Arab military failures in 1948 and 1967, called for a modernization that left intact gender assumptions contained in the terms "citizenship, self-determination, and even employment"; she writes: "when imagined by men, these ideas were almost always premised on a male colonized (and potentially liberated) national subject."

Similarly in her study of women's roles in the Palestinian resistance movement, Julie Peteet (1991: 60) notes that none of the pan-Arabist organizations that attracted Palestinian men in the 1950s and 1960s were concerned with "mobilizing or addressing the specific problems of women or even in women as a political question." In *Cleansing the Blood*, women are primarily on stage as members of the silent chorus. The play addresses "women as political question" to the extent that it prompts audiences to consider the inaccessibility of the ideas and experiences of these figures. However, this inaccessibility proves central to the play's political agenda.

The idea of a silent chorus – especially one continuously present on stage – is entirely contrary to the traditional idea of the chorus and is among the most un-dramatic devices one can imagine. However, rather than evidence of a lack of dramaturgical experience or that the play should be read as closet drama, I will argue that Wannus's silent chorus uses the conventions of the theatre to force the audience into an uncomfortable recognition of the marginalization of sectors of Arab society, the impossibility of making these sectors speak, and the vanity of attempting to speak for this subaltern population.

From Attic theatre onward, the chorus has been used to mediate between the central characters and the audience, commenting on the events, highlighting details, and providing information on past events. They have served as guides for the audience to what is otherwise inaccessible: the removed and elevated figures of the community's past, its myths. From the outset, Wannus's chorus defies this expectation. They provide no insight into a shared past or the actions of the Palestinian protagonist. When Ali or Alewa pose questions to – or turn for support from – the chorus, their silence and repetitive gestures only illustrate the isolation of both the revolutionary and the intellectual from the underclass for which he attempts to speak.

The chorus comes into sharper focus in the scenes with the journalist, who intends to write a piece on the resistance. After a give-and-take with Ali, the journalist finally speaks frankly:

> The lord wants to continue to rule, and continuing to rule may require the good will of the people, and the good will of the people may require the appearance of nationalism, heroism, and piety. And your issue is the most affecting issue and the most suitable for donning the robes of nationalism, heroism, and piety. (Wannus 1996a: 1:343)

Ali summarizes the journalist's logic for the chorus: "Do you hear what we are? Worms to trap lost birds. And worms don't have a nation except the mud of swamps" (1:343). Palestinians and their cause are simply the bait to lure a public that might otherwise withhold the "good will" needed for continued rule. Palestinians have never had nor will have a homeland beyond the stretch of mud in which they huddle – and one swamp is good as any other. Even more striking than these heretical assertions is the silence of the Palestinian chorus that looks on, who have no response to the journalist's admission or Ali's angry interjection. In such moments, their silence becomes the source of dramatic tension. Their inability to contest, deny, or decry these insults must produce discomfort if not anger in the audience.

This disturbing silence becomes the overt subject of the following scene; after Ali leaves the stage the journalist is left with the problem of coaxing ringing support for the regime from an inarticulate mass. After repeated efforts (and bribes) he fails to generate the quotes he needs for his article but happens on a new writing tactic, one that demonstrates the power of state media to invent the voice of the people. Deciding to title his piece, "When Silence Speaks Louder than Words,"

the journalist fabricates a display of support for the regime. He recites as he writes:

> I found them in dark corners. They were joined, rather united … wandering with gasps of mysterious pain … heavy … jostled. Saddened spirits, they grew timid when my voice echoed in the emptiness like a gust from the tomb … No, the editor doesn't like the word tomb … like a gust … like a gust from a dreary expanse. At first I didn't understand. Then when they let loose truncated sounds laden with meaning I realized they were mute. What to do? I would have left them looking for others if they hadn't flooded around me with eloquent and affecting babbling. So I took out a picture of the leader and put it before them. What wonderment! Even Homer couldn't describe the scene. An old man leapt up and snatched the picture and started to kiss it. The women shouted with joy until they grew hoarse, and the cheering children joined the dancing. It was if they were Ancient Greeks presenting offerings of thanks to the wiser and more courageous gods. (1:345)

By substituting an imaginary chorus – one that sings and dances like those of Attic theatre – the journalist focuses greater attention on the enigmatic silence of the refugees. Incapable of representing themselves, they cannot contest their depiction in the media: a thankful body who embrace their role as loyal Arabs through their joyful recognition that their leaders are gods among men.

The chorus's silence and the ease with which the state speaks on their behalf reflect the reduced conditions and isolation of Palestinian refugees, dispersed in multiple camps in multiple nations. Wannus depicts these refugees as incapable of articulating their communal interests. Driven from their homes and told to wait for brother nations to solve their dilemma, each passing year confirms that Palestinians not only lack a homeland but a voice. Various Arab strongmen promise to speak for them, and one could say of the chorus:

> They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. [Their] political influence … therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power, which subordinates society to itself. (Marx 1986: 254)

The quote, of course, is from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, and describes the inability of peasant farmers to assert their

class interests, and the susceptibility of societies dominated by peasant farmers to the rise of mediocre strongmen. The Arab dictator, like Napoleon III, consolidates full power in himself and his party; to paraphrase Marx, this dictator steals the Arab world to make it a present to the Arabs.

If the Palestinians in the 1963 context "cannot represent themselves" in the political sense, what repercussions follow their representation in the artistic sense? Or, to repeat the question posed by Gayatri Spivak (1988: 294): "What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern?" Spivak poses the question in the concluding section of her much-cited article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she uses the above passage from Marx to critique scholars who unwittingly depict oppressed groups as autonomous sovereign subjects. According to Spivak, this effort to rescue and speak for the subaltern merely repeats the silencing of the subaltern. In the process, these authors disavow their own imbrication within class structures and institutions of power.

Spivak's critique leads her to a dilemma illustrated by contrasting representations of widow sacrifice by British colonial administrators and by members of the Subaltern Studies Group. On the one hand, Spivak reveals the "epistemic violence" of the "remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as the Other" (280–281), a project (she argues) that underlies British writings on – and efforts to outlaw – widow burning. However, she is also deeply skeptical of "clear-cut nostalgias for lost origins" as "grounds for counter hegemonic ideological production" (307), a stance and project she ascribes to some members of the Subaltern Studies Group. Since the subaltern lies outside of the circuit of hegemonic discourse, the subaltern's speech cannot enter into economies of representation. The answer to the title's question is an emphatic "no," and so Spivak explores the challenge of speaking to (rather than listening to or speaking for) historically muted subjects – specifically the subaltern woman (295).

I have argued that Wannus's exploration of the challenges facing Palestinian resistance through the representation of a male schizophrenic identity reproduces the sexism implicit in some expressions of liberation ideology from the 1960s and 1970s. I would also like to present Wannus's silent chorus – composed of women, old men, and children – as a meditation on the complexity of writing about Palestinian identity in 1963. The chorus, I argue here, is an effort to "watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern." The play suggests that Arab governments have cynically used the silence of the Palestinian to

make false claims of commitment to the Palestinian cause, bolstering claims of legitimacy. However, the play is careful not to invent a "true" Palestinian voice to counter the inventions of the state. The intellectual speaks only for himself, whether his position is grounded in hopeful defiance or pessimistic rationality.

At the end of the play, Ali succeeds in cleansing his blood but not that of his people. He separates himself from Alewa's bloody corpse, rises from the ground, and announces that: "All that remains is for me to begin." The chorus offers no response and the curtain lowers on Alewa's surprised complaint: "But your silence remains … your silence remains" (Wannus 1996a: 1:355). Writing in 1963, Wannus suggests that the mass of refugees is excluded from circuits of political, historical, or artistic self-representation; they cannot speak. It is not simply a matter of finding the proper catalyst or providing the needed vocabulary. Whether because of past trauma and ongoing persecution or the product of structural isolation, there will be no wide-scale Palestinian uprising without widespread and systematic change. There will be no revolution until the Palestinians shed their subaltern status.

In suggesting that the Arab intellectual is removed from the consciousness of the camps, Wannus draws attention to the inability of theatre to listen to, or speak for, Palestinians. Wannus adopts the prevailing gender dynamic of liberation ideology along with its rhetoric, but then undermines this dynamic when he highlights the fact that depictions of refugee populations are constructions. The camp population in *Cleansing the Blood* has no more access to historical self-representation than they have access to political self-representation. This is a passion play without the promise of redemption. Redemption would first require that a people decry their bondage and pray for delivery, they would need to *speak*.

This brings me to an additional interpolation, one that comes from Wannus's own hand. In *Cleansing the Blood*, Ali is driven by the "murmur of ghosts" urging the young to redeem their sacrifice in the 1948 War. Wannus would reprise this phrase in *Soirée for the Fifth of June* in 1968. The audience for that play has supposedly gathered to see a play titled *The Murmur of Ghosts*, though this time it is the dead of the 1967 War who await redemption. That play-within-a-play, as I have argued in the second chapter, stands as an exaggerated act of bad faith; it fabricates a steadfast army and the promise of territorial liberation in blatant disregard for facts known to the audience. In reclaiming this phrase from the 1963 play for the 1968 play, Wannus comments on the first and makes its critique even harsher. There is no murmur of ghosts calling

Ali to action, there are only lies and delusions that serve to distract the people from the need for political change. It might be more accurate to call *Cleansing the Blood* an anti-passion play, for it deeply problematizes the idea of sacrifice.

Five years after Wannus had written *Cleansing the Blood*, Farhan Bulbul published a drama about Palestinians in exile. The world of *The Scarlet Walls* (1968) is profoundly different than that of Wannus's earlier play. Wannus asserts that in 1963 "the birth of the resistance was a dream"; by 1968 it was an emerging reality. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) was the principal independent organization calling for the liberation of Palestine. However the ANM eschewed military struggle against Israel, arguing that the first step in liberation was the unification of the Arab world. In its early years, Fatah was primarily a loose association of secret organizations, and it was the creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization by the Arab states in 1964 (a means of controlling rather than furthering Palestinian aspirations) that prompted Fatah to step from the shadows and begin a campaign of armed struggle.

Between early 1965 and mid-1967, Fatah's military arm carried out several dozen raids each year. At the same time, several smaller organizations merged with Fatah, helping to propel it to the forefront of the resistance (Kurz 2005: 29–39). Following the 1967 War, Fatah temporarily pursued a strategy of establishing cells in the occupied territories, but then returned to a strategy of cross-border raids from its growing bases and training camps in refugee camps in Jordan, at which point the number of raids increased dramatically.[2] While the June War undermined the authority of Arab states, it bolstered that of Fatah, which came to dominate the PLO. After the war, Fatah's membership grew rapidly from 600 to 25,000 by the end of the decade. Some 10,000 of these members were trained guerrilla fighters (Kurz 2005: 55). By 1968, the year in which *The Scarlet Walls* had its first performance in a Homs cinema (adapted for theatrical performance), resistance had become more than a dream.

In *The Scarlet Walls* a young Palestinian – who has lived with his mother, brother, and cousin in an unnamed Arab country for roughly twenty years – must decide whether to join the resistance. It is a decision that not only determines the youth's future, but one that promises to open or foreclose webs of memory for the entire family. The play adheres closely to the well-made play structure with a late point of attack, a series of announcements that complicate the rising action, and a culminating revelation followed by a quick denouement. Not only is the play structurally miles apart from *Cleansing the Blood*, it depicts a radically different

historical context. By 1968 the resistance movement had become a formidable force. However, these differences mask a central similarity. The same central dilemma drives *Cleansing the Blood* and *The Scarlet Walls*: How can one devote oneself to a struggle that will most certainly lead to death, a struggle in which the longed-for success can only be realized long after the abbreviated circuit of one's own life?

The play's central protagonist, Khalil, lost a brother and his father as an infant when a Jewish militia attacked their Palestinian village. He has spent most of his life in exile. His remaining older brother, Suliman, was thrust into the role of head of household and has built a successful business. The two live with their mother, and their female cousin, Souad, both of whose parents are dead. An older man affectionately referred to as Uncle Ahmed, who lived in the same Palestinian village and has accompanied the family since their flight, regularly visits them. Souad and Khalil have grown up with stories of their fathers' heroism, stories that prompted Souad's only brother to join the resistance and that prompt her to urge Khalil to do the same. The two are in love and a submerged eroticism inflects Souad's repeated description of the calm that Khalil will achieve once he commits his life to territorial liberation. Khalil's mother accepts that Khalil has a duty to join the resistance, but insists that he is still too young. Only Suliman patently rejects resistance as a vain endeavor, insisting that Khalil focus on his university studies and prepare to take the helm of the family business.

Like Ali/Alewa, Khalil finds himself in a space of unsustainable contradiction. He has been nourished on memories of a home and a father he has never known, and he is deeply in love with a cousin intent on consecrating her life and the lives of those she holds dear (including future children) to armed resistance. However, he also possesses a natural instinct of self-preservation and revolts against those who would prescribe a life for him, whether they assume that he will take up arms or that he will settle into the routines of a successful merchant. This conflict, as well as his desire for freedom, is given a physical correlative in the first act through Khalil's love of dance.

The audience is alerted to the symbolic function of dance prior to the start of the play; before the rise of the curtain the audience hears dance music, which is suddenly interrupted by the sounds of machine guns and cannon blasts. Music and artillery alternate with the music another three times before the curtain rises and we see Khalil and two friends dancing in a "sumptuously" furnished living room (Bulbul 2003: 1:11). From their first exchanges we learn that Khalil thinks of music

and dance as a "medicine" he takes with some ambivalence. When a friend commands that they spin albums to calm Khalil's "frenzy," Khalil "bitterly" agrees, "until my head spins with them" (12). Dance is his own form of self-medication, an attempt to smother both the pain of his profound alienation in his host country and the knowledge that his community's past houses a trauma he has never fully confronted. In this sense, Khalil is very much an extension of Alewa who seeks oblivion in drink.

It is not only that Khalil delights in dancing – an activity that everyone in his family considers a frivolous if not impious distraction from the calling to which he should devote himself (whether that be a struggle for territorial liberation or financial success), dance is both a manifestation of internal conflict and a means of temporarily silencing this conflict. When Souad asks him why he sets the house in an uproar with his dance parties, he responds that he does not know and that something "deep inside him spins and spins." Souad rebukes him: "the spinning of wretched records will not stop your spinning." She counsels him to find relief by giving himself over to the liberation struggle, rather than giving himself to the ecstasy of music and dance. Khalil whirls, seeking release, but is unable to shake the oppressing alienation of exile. He flees family and friends, taking up residence in a poor quarter of the city as part of his search for a "new existence" (34).

In the second act, Souad visits Khalil's modest room and, in a scene overlaid with desire and mystical fervor, again insists that Khalil will only find peace of mind once he joins the resistance. She tells Khalil that his hesitation stems from his having "forgotten that [he is] a stranger here," an exile, and that he will only know "contentment" once he "shakes off delusions and fear and joins [the resistance]" (36). Khalil waivers; how can one pronounce one's own death sentence? Souad responds that joining the resistance means embracing death, not a death sentence; "execution is a punishment, death is desired." The fervor that underscores her language is mixed with a subtle eroticism:

> If only you could hear my brother when he tells me what he feels. I could live in the enchantment of his words forever. Join him, Khalil. I will see in you alone two faces of a true image: the knight and the beloved. (37)

Resistance, with its embrace of martyrdom, is figured as an emotionally transformative experience that radiates. It is not simply the means to the return, but a means to healing a battered community.

In uniting the "knight" and the "beloved" as a figure that lives at the threshold of death, Souad reverses the logic of courtly love. The knight (rather than the lady) becomes the unattainable object – one no more likely to consummate a love than the brother whose words hold her frozen in enchantment. When Khalil rejects the resistance, and with it the role of "knight and beloved," Souad buries her own potential for desire. In the final act, five years later, we find Souad and Khalil still in the same house, wracked by frustrated desire. Souad has vowed to reject any marriage offer (from Khalil and other suitors) until the Palestinians return to their homeland. She imagines herself, as in past legends, a sacrifice to "gods who are not satisfied unless tribes offer up their virgins," equating her celibacy with a "blood" offering (48). Unable to offer her beloved to the struggle, she offers her virginity.

In the context of Souad's mystical imagery, Uncle Ahmed emerges as a kind of guru of liberation – a quality we first see in the second act when Souad counsels Khalid to join the resistance, attempting to bolster Khalid's courage by explaining that Uncle Ahmed is himself a resistance fighter. Khalid is amazed to learn that this "silent calm man" has taken up arms, but Souad explains he is in fact a "tenacious" combatant and that this is the source of his calm (37). The other family members, including Uncle Ahmed, enter the scene, but it is to Uncle Ahmed that Khalil confesses that his flight was simply a flight from himself, and it is from Uncle Ahmed that Khalil asks forgiveness. Uncle Ahmed responds:

> The land alone can forgive your errors for the land is the face of God. The important thing is that we enable the revelation of God's face. (38)

According to Uncle Ahmed, Zionism is not simply an ideology that has oppressed Palestinians; it is an affront to God. Territorial liberation reveals a sacred face inscribed in a land that has been covered over by colonial squatters.

At the other extreme, Khalil's older brother Suliman is a practical businessman focused on building the wealth of his family. He is contemptuous of those who would commit all of their efforts and their lives in vain undertakings. He finds nothing so "harassing" as Souad's endless talk of her brother "day and night." When his mother hushes him, alluding to recent events (Souad's brother has been wounded), Suliman retorts mockingly: "What happened? Has glorious victory been achieved?" Suliman is deeply suspicious of Souad's affection for Khalil. "Does she love him for himself and his personality, or as a lamb for the slaughter beside her brother?" (26). He cares little for his mother's assertion that

Khalil will "avenge" the family at the "right moment." This awaited moment of liberation is a "false dream" that they will endlessly chase. His advice is simple: "Stay away from dangerous delusions" (20).

There is only one meaningful form of revenge, in Suliman's mind, and it has already been achieved. At the age of seventeen, as the head of a family of refugees, and lacking even milk for his infant brother, Suliman swore and achieved "revenge on poverty and hunger" (21). Like Souad, his vow leads to celibacy, denying himself marriage and children so as not to lessen his commitment to his brother. He is also similar to Souad in that he values the achievement of his goal above life and well-being. He builds his wealth by manipulating the supply of foodstuffs in the Palestinian community, subjecting others to the hunger he vanquished, and he works constantly despite ailing health. Ironically, Suliman proves more vulnerable than Souad's militant brother; the second act ends with the announcement that Suliman has succumbed to a heart attack.

*The Scarlet Walls* races through sequential rising actions – in the first act a fight over Khalil's future culminates with his announcement that he is moving out, in the second act Khalil is on the verge of joining the resistance when the news arrives that his brother is being rushed to a hospital. Additional announcements further complicate the rising action: Souad reveals that Uncle Ahmed is a resistance fighter; details emerge about Suliman's unethical business transactions, including that he has been making large financial contributions to the resistance movement on the condition that they not recruit his brother; and that as a younger man Suliman was deeply in love with one of the secondary characters but she rejected him on the grounds that his growing wealth came at the expense of the Palestinian community. However, this forward movement masks the play's true dramatic spring: the controlled revelation of past trauma. Like other well-made plays, *The Scarlet Walls* features a late point of attack; the event of real consequence, the Palestinian exodus, transpired long before the start of the play. More importantly, the full nature of this trauma only becomes clear through a series of revelations that come in rapid succession in the final act.

Five years pass between the second and third act. (Since the first and second acts are set at the time of production, the final act is presumably set in the near future.) The home of the first act is now even more sumptuous though the phonograph is absent. Suliman, we learn, has died of a heart attack, and Khalil has taken up where his brother left off – developing greater personal wealth at the expense of the Palestinian community while making financial contributions to a resistance that he himself has

rejected. Souad's brother has died in a military action and she remains in the home of a man that she still loves despite her mounting contempt for his life choices.

Uncle Ahmed's presence increasingly grates at Khalil as a reminder of his own failure to avenge the death of his father and the loss of their land. When Ahmed chastises Khalil for straying from the cause, and laments "I have long awaited the moment when you crossed the border with me and put set your feet on the earth of your village," the younger man responds angrily:

> And to what benefit? There are lots of fighters but to what benefit? Have they accomplished anything? Hasn't blood flown without benefit? (54)

As Khalil gives full vent to his frustration he describes Uncle Ahmed as an oppressive force in their life, who lingers at their door like grief and misfortune (56). Even his loving attention to Khalil is played back as a burden. His mother commands him to beg forgiveness from, and open his heart to, Uncle Ahmed, but Khalil responds angrily:

> So that he can sit on his chair staring at me like I was a morsel of meat to be savored by his mad dogs? (57)

Uncle Ahmed is nothing more than the master of unruly monsters intent on consuming Palestinian youth for their own pleasure and without any true benefit.

In the context of this scathing attack on both Uncle Ahmed and the resistance movement, the full scope of a past catastrophe comes into view. Over the objections of Uncle Ahmed, Khalil's mother describes the motivating trauma that underscores their current life: the day on which a five-man Jewish militia unexpectedly attacked their village in Palestine. Khalil's father and a brother were able to kill three of the fighters before they themselves were killed. A seventeen-year-old Suliman, armed and on the roof of the house, could have defended his father and brother but, overcome with fear, he hid instead. The two remaining militiamen entered the home, one attacking Khalil's mother and the other menacing the infant Khalil. It was only through the intercession of Ahmed, who burst into the room, that the family was saved. However, the cost to Ahmed was immense; while defending Khalil and his mother another militia attacked Ahmed's home killing his wife and children. Since that time, Khalil's mother explains to him, Ahmed has "watched over you"

with an "unknowable vow evident in his eyes," concluding that the old man "loves you more than all of us combined" (59). In the minds of both Souad and Khalil's mother, Khalil's deliverance at the cost of Ahmed's family constitutes a debt that can only be repaid through a commitment to help liberate the lands lost to the murderers of that family.

Though Khalil is swayed by this logic, he finds himself confused and conscious of "a huge obstacle" before him. Uncle Ahmed identifies the comfort and luxury Khalil has secured while in exile as the obstacles that stymie resistance, describing them as "bright soft scarlet walls" that Palestinians have created with their own money and which protect Israelis and serve as the true "borders" between Palestinians in diaspora and their homeland (59). In this description, which gives the play its title, the color of luxury is contrasted with the blood of a murdered father and brother. Their death – and the deaths of all the Palestinians who fell in 1948 – is inscribed in the signs of wealth that Khalil and other descendants have obtained even if they dutifully make financial contributions to the resistance movement. As in all well-made plays, the physical objects of everyday life – in this case the color of the walls – are steeped with a hidden but ever-present past. "A glass of water" or "a slip of paper" (to consider eponymous examples) is the means by which this past floods the stage space whether or not characters choose to remember.

These questions of whether or not to remember and whether such a choice exists are central concerns in *The Scarlet Walls*. Such questions are especially vexed as the play depicts a generational divide; while Suliman, his mother, and Ahmed have memories of Palestine and of their expatriation, Khalil and Souad only have indirect access to their Palestinian past. Suliman grounds his rejection of armed resistance in a memory of privation striking at those he loves – he is compelled to amass wealth by a memory of his infant brother's hunger following flight. By the end of the play it becomes clear that this memory supplants a more traumatic image: the death of his father and brother at enemy hands while he lay frozen on the roof of his home. In this context, his rejection of a responsibility to the dead can be read as a defense against a potentially debilitating memory. This stance has his mother exclaiming the impossibility of "banish[ing] ghosts" and Uncle Ahmed sarcastically parroting: "Remember nothing. That is the law decreed by the great head of the household" (21).

While the older characters respond to their memories, Khalil and Souad organize their lives according to the memories of others – and in choosing between memories they chart a path forward. Souad and her brother listened to their aunt's grief for a dead husband and son, and

from these remembrances forged a commitment to armed resistance. Khalil defers decision as long as he can, but when his brother's death finally pushes him into a course of action, he chooses to identify with the past described by this brother. Defending his choices he shouts at Souad and Uncle Ahmed:

> Don't you remember what my brother said? Didn't I go hungry as a child? I will not permit my family to go hungry. (54)

In adopting his brother's memories he chooses to live his brother's life, a choice that leaves him deeply isolated by the end of the play.

Uncle Ahmed and Souad finally decide to abandon Khalil to his scarlet walls when he continues to cling to luxury even after the story of his deliverance is revealed. In the play's dark climax, Khalil's mother announces, to the pained shock of her son, that now all her children are dead. She retreats into a world of her own, vowing only to speak with the ghosts of her past, asking forgiveness for Suliman and Khalil, and leaving her younger son to his account books. Khalil's profound alienation and his inability to imagine meaningful political action illustrates the trans-generational trauma of those raised in exile, nurtured on stories of loss, and offered only a deadly route to belonging.

*The Palestinian Women*, 'Ali 'Uqla 'Arsan's 1971 verse drama, similarly focuses on a generation raised in diaspora. Whereas *The Scarlet Walls* presents an organized resistance as the alternative to an alienated (albeit comfortable) life in an Arab host country, *The Palestinian Women* imagines a world-wide uprising of the destitute and dispossessed. Such an uprising, according to the play, is the only route to dignity for those in the Third World, whether they live in refugee camps or on the streets. *The Scarlet Walls* depicts a clear but difficult choice: a life of alienated comfort or commitment to liberation with the embrace of potential martyrdom. In *The Palestinian Women*, there is no choice. Revolution is the only route out of despair; however, that revolution lies beyond the play's horizon. The play is an unambiguous call for agitation and like 'Arsan's later play, *The Strangers*, makes its case by demonizing the enemy.

While *The Strangers* begins as a fable, *The Palestinian Women* purports to present Arab/Israeli history. As a result, its anti-Semitism is more immediately apparent. It is 1948 and Massoud, a port sentry, alerts his neighbors to illegal Jewish emigration; ships are "raiding" the coast at night, packed with "people oozing hate" like "battalions of locusts" ('Arsan 1989: 1:220). By the end of the act Massoud's son, Ahmed, has died in battle with Jewish militias and an officer of the Arab army urges

villagers to flee until Arab forces can secure the village. In between, the act provides a history lesson that reveals the perfidy of European powers and the viciousness of Jewish forces, as villagers discuss the Balfour Declaration, the White Papers of 1939, and the massacre of Palestinian villagers at Deir Yassin. With this last atrocity fresh in their minds, the men insist that their wives and children leave the village. They do, despite protests, including Massoud's wife, Selma.

The second act falls twenty years later in a refugee camp in an unnamed Arab country, before the tent of Massoud, Selma, and their eighteen-year-old son, Numaan, who was apparently born in the refugee camp. Numaan spends much of his time with Hassan, a homeless citizen of the host country, and several other destitute young men. This is a decidedly non-political group who largely agree with Hassan's assertion that "the greatest blessing is that we live" (1:267). Such a motto prompts passivity in the face of injustice, and it comes as something of a surprise when we learn that Numaan has participated and died in a cross-border attack. The death has a transforming effect on Hassan who convinces his compatriots to unite with the refugees and demand that the nation's ruler liberate Palestine. Despite the skepticism of the refugees, who do not see the city's underclass as natural allies in their struggle, the Palestinians and the homeless join in petitioning the government for a more aggressive response to Israel. The leader responds with political slogans that degenerate into gibberish, prompting the group to take to the street calling for revolution. The play ends with the entire company invoking an unknown martyr, Mazen, who apparently fell without commemoration in the famous battles between Palestinians and British in the Jabal al Nar region during the Mandate period. Mazen is invoked as "a symbol in our Third World" (1:335). Through Mazen the play calls upon the audience to identify with the downtrodden in downtrodden nations and start a universal revolution.

In its title and subject, *The Palestinian Women* calls to mind Euripides's *The Trojan Women*. In evoking antiquity, 'Arsan casts the *naqba* as a tragedy of mythic dimensions and suggests a coming retribution. Both plays feature a chorus of women, dispossessed by war, who comment on and augment our appreciation of the loss experienced by the central characters. Several of these characters resemble those of Euripides's play. Ahmed's widow, Fatima, insane with grief, speaks in an oddly prophetic language like Cassandra (though more like the Cassandra of Aeschylus than Euripides). Ahmed's mother, Selma, takes on a matriarchal role much like Hecuba. Selma's lamentations for Ahmed, who never appears on stage, are similar to those of Hecuba who mourns the death of her

eldest son, Hector, who had died before the start of *The Trojan Women*. Finally, the death of Selma's younger son, Numaan, evokes the death of the child Astyanax, the last male heir of the House of Troy.

If *The Trojan Women* is a cautionary tale for conquerors, *The Palestinian Women* is agit-prop for the conquered. The events depicted in *The Trojan Women* precede the destruction of the Greek fleet, a retribution that is decided in the play's first scene when Athena asks Poseidon to punish the Greeks. Though certain, this punishment lies beyond the span of time depicted in the play. Similarly, when *The Palestinian Women* ends with a call for revolution, that play posits a future retribution that is certain even if beyond the play's time frame. If we take *The Palestinian Women* as an evocation of Euripides's play, it follows that the destruction of present-day colonial powers is no less assured than the havoc visited upon the Greek fleet. Significantly, the choice to project the play into a revolutionary future obscures an event that falls between the first and second acts but is never mentioned. Setting the second act in 1968 means the Palestinian characters have recently witnessed the crushing defeat of Arab forces in the 1967 War. The play treads carefully, always looking back to the perfidy of Jewish forces and the failure of past (rather than current) Arab regimes.

The play's promise of revolution sublimates the central trauma of the modern Arab psyche. Both *Cleansing the Blood* and *The Scarlet Walls* toggle between alienation and trauma, between a dysfunctional present and a painful past that endlessly returns because it was in fact never absent. *The Palestinian Women* similarly explores the trauma of dispossession through the psyches of deeply alienated characters. In this later play, the past is not repressed but exhibited and analyzed. The first act is entirely devoted to accounting for the loss of Palestine, identifying and analyzing the external causes of defeat that constitute a shared history. If there is a repressed past it is not that 1948 silently haunts the characters but rather that 1967 haunts the playwright and audience.

In *The Palestinian Women*, the idea of martyrdom is very much imbedded in a dynamic of trauma and alienation, and the play manipulates tropes developed in the two plays discussed earlier. In *Cleansing the Blood*, Alewa flees through drink from the entwined traumas of forced migration and a father's death. In *The Scarlet Walls*, Khalil and Souad experience a second-generation trauma that leaves them alienated from the society in which they live. For Khalil, a father's death similarly intersects with forced migration, but for him this trauma is not a memory (whether acknowledged or repressed) but a story passed

down by an older generation, a story that is frequently invoked but never explored until the play's conclusion. In *Cleansing the Blood*, Ali's purification in preparation for guerrilla activity is depicted as a bloody murder. In *The Scarlet Walls*, Souad insists that the calm afforded the guerrilla comes from his embrace of death for a cause, and she likens her own celibacy to a blood-sacrifice. Both plays approach, without fully articulating, a story of repeating martyrdom over generations. 'Arsan's *The Palestinian Women* takes up such a project and, not surprisingly, articulates a world-view consistent with (if not constitutive of) Baath party rhetoric.

In *The Palestinian Women*, martyrdom is a strategy for pursuing political ends, for combating enemies and galvanizing allies. The play also poeticizes martyrdom, imbuing both lamentations and celebrations of the martyr with beauty. Characters that accept death for a greater goal, and those who celebrate the choice, attempt to forge links to lost lands and reinforce fading memories with the buttress of resistance. The martyr born in exile tries to connect to land only known through the recollections of elders. Martyrdom in *The Palestinian Women* is a network of ideas with its own logic, a network that creates a resistance community, grounds individuals in this community by giving them an identity, and prompts action. It papers over the lacuna generated by past trauma, providing a sense of wholeness. *The Palestinian Women* invokes martyrs repeatedly, from the announcement of Ahmed's death in the first act to the almost mystical imagining of Mazen, "symbol of our Third World," that allows the play to promise a world-wide revolution in its closing moments.

The text moves between quotidian dialogue (albeit composed in classical Arabic), verse, and choral recitation. Images of martyrdom often drive the change in registers; heightened language extracts the martyr from a seemingly endless flow of hardships, recasting death as a world-changing catastrophe. In the play's opening ode, set roughly at the time of the play's composition, the chorus of women identifies itself as dispossessed Palestinians longing for their lost lands, opening mouths wide to take in the "aroma of oranges from our gardens." Their men are gone: "for twenty years we bury weddings and sorrow resides in a slaughtered heart" (1:218). The imagery – weddings that will never happen and scarred hearts – suggests that these are the mothers and/or wives of martyrs. The ode begins and ends on a portentous note, for the heavy accumulation has "awoken the sleepers" (1:217, 218).

The play then jumps back in time to 1948 and proceeds, by and large, in a classicized form of everyday speech. This switches when the chorus

reappears, now as the young wives of men who have set off to defend the village. Marked from the prologue by the aura of martyrdom, the women's entrance brings greater foreboding to the scene. Midway into the act they transform from wives to widows, individually announcing the Palestinian cities in which their husbands died (1:246). They are a constant presence for the remainder of the act (presumably, as entrances and exits are inconsistently marked), responding to a series of tragic deaths in language that grows increasingly rhythmic and repetitive, leading to the announcement of Ahmed's death (1:242) and culminating with news of the massacre of Palestinian villagers at Deir Yassin (1:249).

The deaths of sons and husbands give weight and authority to women's voices in *The Palestinian Women*; however, this does not translate into political agency. Julie Peteet's (1997: 104–105) observation on Palestinian maternal activism very much applies to the depiction of women in 'Arsan's play: "The national movement endorsed the 'mother of martyrs' with the status of national icons and yet did not consider this particular being and participation as grounds for equal citizenship." In the first act, widows define the Palestinian community; announcing the cities in which their husbands have fallen, they map a nation united in loss. These widows, along with Selma, mother of the martyred Ahmed, are the sole voices insisting that the villagers stay rooted in their villages despite the danger posed by Jewish militias. On hearing the officer of the Arab army call for the evacuation of the village, Fatima refuses: "I will not depart. / My husband's blood is a red spot in one of the street corners. / And a thousand blood sacrifices died in my land" ('Arsan 1989a: 1:254).

It is not simply that she and other widows cannot leave the land that has absorbed their husbands' blood. They must remain for the aestheticizing of the martyrs. As Fatima explains: "Who will sing of the red blood on every street corner? / Who will sing for the young men? / [...] Who will dress shining Ahmed in a crown of flowers?" (1:258). Blood is not scoured from the streets but preserved in song; Ahmed's bloody body is not washed (the martyr is already in a purified state so does not require ablution), instead blood shines beneath a string of flowers. The martyr does not simply require ceremony, but ceremony of heightened aestheticizing. For victimization to be recouped as sublime sacrifice, women must sing blood into beauty. So it is all the more tragic when these women flee their homes under the shadow of Deir Yassin never to return.

The second act reveals the repercussions of this flight, and again women voice the pain of dispossession with the added anguish of raising children in Diaspora, witnessing their disconnection to their

longed-for homeland. At the start of the act, Selma, twenty years older and conscious of her mortality, worries that after death her body will find no rest in "a vile foreign grave and eternal exile." Her eighteen-year-old son, Numaan, born in the camp, responds with impatience to the endless mourning that leaves their tent "swimming in a sea of tears" (1:265). The chorus clarifies the dilemma. "A generation of tragedies has grown up. / A generation nourished to their fill on pain, in streets and fields. / […] A generation raised in injustice. / Raised in the shadow of an age of emigration. / In the shadow of an age of occupation" (1:283). This is a generation alienated from the memories of their parents, unattached to the homeland, and lacking a sense of political, economic, or social entitlement. This generation largely accepts Hassan's belief that "the greatest blessing is that we live."

Recalling the martyr helps connect the women to their lost homes and provides new ties for the young. In response to Numaan's frustration with his mother's mourning, she promises silence and wipes her tears, describing him as "the last bunch [of grapes]" wherein she finds "sweet hope." Drawing him close, she describes the lemon tree her dead son would decorate as a child and how he "worshiped" the tree and its fruit. Her imagery connects the son raised in Diaspora to the lost fruit tree in Palestine, a connection that turns on the memory of the martyred son. This younger son is the hope, the fruit that may enable a return to see the tree beloved by the martyr son.

This use of the martyr grows more insistent in an exchange of exhortations that alternate between Selma and the chorus. The women begin by returning the audience to 1948: "Remember the past … and the night of terror. / And the wounded children." Soon into the exchange the women command "Remember the killed, the victims of Deir Yassin." By the end, Selma has shifted into happy memories but ones that simultaneously recall the dead:

> Remember our celebrations, our weddings, the junction
> of our villages.
> Remember Haifa … and seaside celebrations.
> Remember the wedding of sands.
> A day they [the sands] embraced our people.

From the victims of 1948, Selma shifts to a series of joyful images that come full circle when the sands become the site of both weddings and burials. The "wedding of sands" shifts seaside celebrations to an image of internment – sands "embracing" the dead of the *naqba*. The link

is clearer when one notes that among Muslim militants funerals for martyrs are often called "wedding parties" in reference to the pleasures that await them in the afterlife.

Such remembering impacts the younger generation, who – as foreseen in the prologue – "awaken" to the responsibility of liberating lost land. The scenes following the exhortations depict young men vowing to "pitch a tent" in Jerusalem (1:295) and telling their mothers they will visit lost orchards (1:296), as well as husbands bidding their wives goodbye (1:298). For these men, "hunger for the land of the ancestors" is greater than the fear of leaving their children fatherless. Whereas the chorus of women refers to "our land," these young men leave to see (possibly for the first time) the land of their ancestors. They do not return and we learn that Numaan was among them. They have joined the ranks of the dead that call upon the living to liberate occupied lands. It is a trope I have described in both *Cleansing the Blood* and *The Scarlet Walls*, a trope that was subtly critiqued in *Soiree for the Fifth of June*. Often the trope is made literal, as it is in *The Palestinian Women*: a ghost appears to the women commanding them to remember the dead who await burial (1:308). Echoing a concern expressed in *Cleansing the Blood*, the ghost complains that the Israelis are building structures on top of what had been Palestinian homes (1:305), a reference to the fear that traces of Palestinian life are being systematically erased.

The Palestinian dead mount in the play and at this point 'Arsan rejects the idea of an independent Palestinian struggle, positing instead the ideology of Arab nationalism and anti-colonial struggle. According to the women, war has taken "all the young men in the camp," who have given their lives in the West Bank (1:302). The reference is the sole acknowledgment of the 1967 War, as prior to that Jordan controlled the West Bank. It also references the PLO's military strategy of infiltrating and launching raids from Israel's newly occupied Arab territories. With the failure of Arab governments in 1967, the PLO became in the minds of many the legitimate representative of Palestinian people. By the time of the play's composition, Yasir Arafat's Fatah had come to dominate the PLO and Arafat had become its chairman. In these years the PLO vastly increased its military actions against Israel.

'Arsan, however, insists that the struggle is not between Palestinians and Israelis but between the Arab people and a persistent colonialism. It is not a Palestinian, but a homeless citizen of the host country who rallies the people to demand that their reactionary ruler commit the nation to the liberation of Palestine. The Ruler combines references to his "friend" Nixon with seemingly nationalistic rhetoric ("words like

martyr are sweet" (1:330)) before lapsing into gibberish; hypocritical Western-orientated Arab leaders are as much the enemy of the people as Israel or the US. The people here are the Arab people, not Palestinians alone. Hassan is not Palestinian but he too has been driven from his land – not by Israelis but by capitalist forces. Arabs, citizens and refugees, hold up a youth who fell fighting the British during the Mandate period as an inspiration in their joint struggle. Israel is not a new and unique phenomenon but the continuation of the colonialism that has oppressed Arabs throughout the twentieth century.

In the previous chapter I noted 'Arsan's party pedigree. His Arabism and discounting an independent Palestinian resistance are consistent with the position of the Syrian government. When 'Arsan wrote *The Palestinian Women* in 1971 it required a vigorous act of omission to depict Palestinian resistance without mentioning specific Palestinian resistance organizations, especially as the play was written soon after the Dawson's Field hijackings of 1970 in which members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine took control of five airplanes bound for New York. The play is filled with details about the European perfidy that preceded, and Jewish atrocities during, the 1948 War. However, once the play shifts to the present it largely abjures historical reference. In effect, the play turns back the clock and restores a discredited dream of Arab nationalism, a dream still capable of subsuming the Palestinian issue.

Mamduh 'Adwan's *If You were Palestinian*, composed in 1977 and first published in 1981, explores the emergence of an independent Palestinian movement and the corresponding death of Arab nationalism. It is, without a doubt, the most psychologically complex and challenging representation of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in the Syrian theatre. The play forces its audience to examine their own culpability for the reduced conditions of Palestinians in diaspora as well as the manipulation of the Palestinian cause by Arab governments. Most striking, perhaps, is that the play foregrounds the humanity of its Israeli characters (arguably the most sympathetic character in the play is a young Israeli woman who has been taken hostage) and concludes by making the audience victims of Palestinian gunfire. Audience loyalties are pulled this way and that over the course of the play, most of which depicts Palestinian guerrillas who have taken a group of Israeli archeologists hostage demanding the release of Palestinian prisoners as well as airplanes for their own escape.

The plot recalls several well-known events of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. The victimization of archeologists recalls a 1956 shooting attack in which Jordanian soldiers killed four Israeli archeologists touring the excavations near the kibbutz Ramat Rachal. The event may

not have been widely remembered when the play was published, but readers would certainly recall the 1972 Munich Massacre and the 1976 hijacking of Air France Flight 139 to Entebbe, Uganda. Like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1972 and the Black September Organization in 1976, the guerrillas in the play demand the release of Palestinian prisoners. The hostages in the play are civilians with great cultural capital (the lead archeologist is internationally renowned) calling to mind the Black September's seizing of Israeli athletes at the Summer Olympics at Munich. As was the case in 1972, the guerrillas in the play also demand jet transport out of the country. These real events are acknowledged by one of the Palestinian guerrillas. When the leader of the guerrillas agrees that the jet can take hijackers and hostages to a "non-Arab country," one of the guerrillas reminds him of "what they did to our colleagues in the airports" ('Adwan 2006: 1:443 ). The comment makes reference to the raids that ended the hijackings in 1972 and 1976, resulting in the deaths of both the Israeli athletes and hijackers in the Munich Massacre. The comment darkly foreshadows the conclusion of *If You Were Palestinian*.

Like *Soirée for the Fifth of June* before it, *If You Were Palestinian* imagines a theatre in which actors are free to shape the performance in unexpected ways, suggesting an open forum that does not exist in reality, and so prompts desire for such a forum. Underwriting the play, which asks audiences to consider their own culpability in the continued exile and disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people, is the concern that when such questions are posed in a theatre they are forgotten as they are articulated. Rather than allowing audience members to feel they have participated in a valuable forum, the play prompts dissatisfaction with the available venues for debate and change.

The play starts with a chorus of Palestinians describing hardships, but unlike in *The Palestinian Women*, this chorus challenges the audience to consider their own responsibility for these conditions, as well as their own experience of dispossession. The group of actors begin by reciting, "If you were Palestinian, what would you do?" The question is elaborated through a series of conditionals with presumed Israeli responsibility: "If you were sent into exile […] If the tears were confiscated from your eyes […]" (1:407). However, after seventeen lines the sense of culpability shifts:

> If they cut the cords of memory with the past …
> What would you do?
> If they forbade you from living in the present …
> What would you do?

> If they slammed in your face the doors of the future …
> If they did not permit you to question … (1:408)

Two-thirds into the poem, the repeated question "What would you do?" marks a transition from Israeli persecution (cutting the cords of memory) to the complicity of Arab states (denying Palestinians a present). Who, if not the host nations, have denied Palestinians the right to question? In shifting responsibility, the questions extend the experience of abjection. While few in the audience had been "sent into exile," many may have heard the doors of the future slamming and felt themselves denied the right to question. The question "What would you do?" has effectively become "What have you done?"

*If You Were Palestinian* adopts the device of the self-satisfied director, but unlike the director in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, he is at odds with his actors rather than his playwright. The director enters after the recitation, telling his actors that it is time to start. He dispenses with introductions since, he explains, the audience will soon forget the names of the actors. However, the actors only insist that the audience know that they are Palestinians. The director accedes and addresses the audience: "Yes, Gentlemen, these you see before you are Palestinians, a group of wretched youth who have joined together in a troupe in order to present something for your entertainment" (1:408). The director clearly has a performance of abjection in mind: "They are impoverished and refugees, who have lost their land, lost their rights, and now will perform their lamentations for you" (1:409). So starts a debate between director and actors in which the latter insist on being seen as more than "victims or refugees" but also combatants, martyrs, and agitators (1:409–410), as well as other roles unified in disturbing the status quo. The actors then begin (ostensibly) to improvise a series of variations on a single scene: an Arab father rejects a Palestinian's request for a daughter's hand in marriage. Each scene includes an increasingly demeaning assessment of a Palestinian's value when the father explains why he does not want a Palestinian son-in-law: Palestinians are soon to return to their homeland; they invariably are carted off to prison or enlist as Fedayeen; they are all pickpockets, gamblers, drunks, and pimps (1:410–411).

The director stops their improvisations, demanding that they show more gratitude to their host nation, but the actors only grow more insistent on depicting the fullness of Palestinian experiences. The impatient director complains that Palestinians have made a mess of things and are simply living with the consequences – to which one Palestinian

responds (as if directly to the thesis of *The Palestinian Women*) that such errors do not justify attempts to demilitarize the Palestinians or subsume their struggle within calls for Arab nationalism (1:412). When the director cuts off debate, they refuse to yield the stage. As they drag the director off, he imparts a last assessment: "Leave me alone you troublemakers, by God you deserve everything that's happened to you, Damn the Israelis for not finishing you off" (1:412). The director's words are both comical and scandalous, and audience members who laugh or who felt similarly stung by Palestinian ingratitude might ask if they too harbor a desire to see these troublemakers finished off.

Free of the director, the actors are able to stage the play as they see fit, casting themselves as Palestinian guerrillas rather than the wretched. Their play has not been pre-scripted: at one point the actors stop to debate whether dramatizing a hijacking provides an appropriate image of the Palestinian struggle (1:427). Of course, the audience knows the theatre is not a space of spontaneous debate, where a convincing argument has the potential to change what will transpire on stage, and resistance to a tyrannical director results in democratic theatre-making. However, it is the audience's desire for such things to be true that allows for the suspension of disbelief, and the suspension of disbelief frees the audience to imagine how things should be rather than how they are.

As in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, the model of theatre as forum in *If You Were Palestinian* is powerful because it explores the limits of permissible speech. Among the most disquieting aspects of the debate, for a Syrian audience, must be the play's complex and largely sympathetic depiction of its Israeli characters. The Israelis have their own history of victimization that informs their attachment to the land of Israel. Some of the characters are deeply committed to a humanist project premised on coexistence. At the same time, these humanist beliefs are bound in a history of colonialist expansion that has victimized the Palestinian characters.

This complex interplay of positions is evident in the identity of the hostages: they are an archeological team (Doctor Moishe and his male and female assistants Bandet and Sarah). Despite the assertions of the humanist, Sarah, that science lies outside of political debates, Doctor Moishe clearly understands himself to be furthering Zionism. He searches for antiquities to demonstrate that the land of the dig has been Jewish for thousands of years. When an armed young man from a neighboring kibbutz, Menahem, remarks that the rifle (not antiquities) created Israel and will secure it, the doctor responds: "That [rifle] creates Israel in any place on earth, but these antiquities prove that Israel must be here alone" (1:416). The context of their debate underscores its complexity; Menahem is

there to provide the team with milk. An armed kibbutz on occupied land provides the foodstuffs that make their scientific inquiry possible.

Both humanist and militant Israelis make convincing arguments, further undermining simplistic understandings of the enemy for a Syrian audience. Menaham makes a heartfelt case for Zionism when he asserts that: "Jews live in all corners of the world in humiliation and degradation, and so come to Israel in order to feel safety and dignity" (1:417). Later, after Fedayeen take the archeological team hostage, the coolly rational Bandet cannot prevent himself from responding to the Palestinians' descriptions of exile by noting "You have been homeless for thirty years, whereas we were homeless for two thousand years" (1:442). The Fedayeen may not accept his logic, but they are incapable of dismissing it.

Sarah is by far the most sympathetic of the Israeli characters and is arguably the most sympathetic character in the play. She repeatedly makes recourse to humanity's basic love of life and desire for pleasure as a common ground from which to solve all disputes. She recounts a story from the Second World War in which, in the midst of the terrible destruction in Stalingrad, during a half-hour truce, German and Russian soldiers came out of their trenches and danced together. This, she asserts, is proof that "humanity's desire for life and joy is stronger than any hatred that can be stirred by war" (1:429). Later, when a Palestinian character asserts that the past persecution of Jews is irrelevant to the current conflict since "we didn't make you homeless," Sarah again directs attention to the bonds of shared experience:

> That's not important. The important thing is that we are partners in one misfortune and the solution is that we know how to understand each other. We must abandon enmity and leave room for understanding. (1:442)

Even if one imagines that Sarah is making calculated arguments to preserve her life (one of several viable directing choices), she does so by underscoring the shared humanity of captor and captive.

Such complex characterizations complicate Arab perceptions of the conflict, but even more disorienting is the play's assertion that both Arab governments and populations are complicit in the suffering of Palestinians. That suffering is vividly depicted. When Sarah implies that her own experiences of deprivation allow her to appreciate the blessings of life, Yamour, the leader of the Palestinians responds:

> You speak of deprivation? Were you born in a tent with water dripping on your mother? Did your mother die in a bombardment after

> your birth? Did you walk barefoot in snow and mud? Did you stand in a long line carrying a container for your turn to take a bit of food? Did you give thanks to the help of charities from throughout the world? Did you pass your entire life without an identity or a nation? What deprivations are you talking about? (1:432)

These complaints are obviously directed at Israel, but they also point to the vastly different experiences of Palestinian refugees in different Arab nations; Palestinians in Syria are granted equal rights to employment, education, and travel whereas Palestinians in Lebanon are barred from most jobs, social services, and traveling abroad.

Even the image of the mother killed in an Israeli bombardment threatens to bleed culpability onto the host nations. Benny Morris (1993: 176) states that after 1948 the Israeli Defense Forces responded to infiltration with attacks on "collective targets" by blowing up houses and killing Palestinians in the villages of infiltrators. However, Yamour's speech also calls to mind recent Arab actions against the Palestinian camps – such as the expulsion of the PLO and thousands of refugees from Jordan during the Black September conflict that began in 1970, or the Tel al-Zataar Massacre in 1976 when Lebanese Christian militias, with support from Syria, besieged the Palestinian camp of that name, killing thousands. That recent history no doubt underscores Bandet's assertion that Arabs have killed "ten times as many" Palestinians as the Israelis have. "Show me one Arab prison," he exclaims, "that doesn't hold Palestinians. Show me one Arab army that hasn't killed Palestinians" ('Adwan 2006: 1:439).

The perfidy of Arab governments is brought into focus through the inclusion of radio broadcasts and scenes between government leaders. In conversations between an American official and an Arab official, the latter is only too willing to pressure the Palestinian organization in its territory to suspend its operations (1:449). In a later scene this Arab official persuades a Palestinian leader to repudiate the raid and takes into custody another Palestinian leader who refuses such repudiation (1:452), ultimately leading to the guerrillas' organization ordering their surrender. In between these scenes we hear a radio broadcast reporting that several Arab countries have condemned the guerrilla action and refused to accept any prisoners that might be released (1:450).

Even more damning is how the state's manipulation of the Palestinian issue ultimately undermines popular support for Palestinians. In one scene an interrogator beats an Arab citizen for participating in

a demonstration supporting the Palestinian guerrillas. He is told to confess that he acted to embarrass his government, which confuses him since official declarations all express support for the liberation movement (1:444). In such an environment it is only natural that Arabs turn on the refugees. Without irony, one young man complains that for thirty years Palestinians have "occupied our land, killed our youths, and wasted our money" (1:453).

Caught between Israelis and duplicitous Arab leaders, Palestinians are forced to pursue their own objectives whether or not their actions endanger Arab populations. The point is illustrated in the play's conclusion. Having isolated the guerrillas, the Israelis then finish them off, launching an attack that leads to the deaths of the hostages as well. When Fatima, one of the Palestinians, falls dead, the others realize that she has been shot in the back. One guerrilla continues to fire offstage at the Israelis. The other, Yamour, sets up a chest on the curtain line, and hiding behind it he fires straight ahead. "My brother," someone ventures from the audience, "you're firing at us."

> "What do you want me to do? Imagine yourself in my place."
> "But you are wounding us."
> "If you were Palestinian, what would you do?" (1:457)

Given the Arab people's betrayal of the Palestinian cause, the guerrillas have no choice but to defend themselves against the audience.

For the space of two hours one could imagine it easy to embrace liberation, whether territorial, national, or theatrical. The play's end reminds the audience that unlike in the imaginary forum offered by the stage, liberation outside of the theatre entails struggle. At the start of the play, the troupe identified themselves as "Palestinians, dispossessed, combatants, refugees, fighters" (1:409). To mount the stage is to accept such roles, to risk arrest on the charge of attempting to "embarrass" authorities. However, the end of the play draws attention to the fact that there is no safe space outside of social debates; mount the stage with all associated dangers or choose the comfort and anonymity of the audience only to draw fire from the revolutionaries.

Mumdoh 'Adwan covered similar terrain in even more strident terms in his monodrama *The Resurrection* (al-qiyama), which was first published in 1987 and performed by Zinati Qudsiyya that same year at the Qabbini Theatre in Damascus. The play's title refers to the day of judgment described in the Quran, when – at the sounding of the

trumpet of the angel Israfil – the dead will be resurrected, their bodies restored, and the followers of the Abrahamic religions will be judged by their deeds and consigned to heaven or hell. Judgment awaits. Can the dispossessed, denied even a grave in the earth, hope for resurrection? In bending to their governments and resistance organizations, in relinquishing the ability to fight tyranny in the name of fighting Israel, have the Arabs condemned themselves? The play is set in a cemetery and depicts an old and broken resistance fighter, Yusef Abu Majid, now residing in a Palestinian refugee camp in an unnamed Arab country, presumably Lebanon.

Throughout the monologue, Abu Majid addresses the dead, and more specifically a fellow resistance fighter, Abu Fouad, whose grave he cannot find. In the course of a disjointed thirty-two-page monologue the deeply distraught Abu Majid meanders between images of death, retribution, and life in the camp, while slowly revealing a complicated backstory. He and Abu Fouad met in an Israeli prison and both were released during prisoner swaps (Abu Majid was one of twenty prisoners exchanged for the corpse of an Israeli soldier). In the aftermath of an Israeli bombardment – presumably one of the many Israeli bombardments of southern Lebanon during the southern Lebanon conflict that followed Israel's 1982 invasion – Abu Fouad publicly criticized Palestinian organizations and Arab regimes for their culpability for lives lost.

Abu Fouad was assassinated soon after voicing his criticisms. Abu Majid witnessed the killing from a safe distance and, though armed, was too fearful to intervene. An Arab militia later descends on him, forcing him to say he saw Abu Fouad commit suicide. He was questioned by authorities who object to the story; Abu Fouad was shot twenty times in the back. However, these authorities have no desire to know what actually happened and instead beat Abu Majid until he agrees to assert that he himself shot Abu Fouad on learning that he had become an arms smuggler and was undermining the resistance movement. These events, combined with the loss of his family who perished in the Israeli bombardments, push Abu Majid to the brink of insanity. At this point, he discovers that a drunkard is masquerading as, and collecting the indemnity of, a resistance fighter Abu Majid knew in prison. He vows to kill the impostor but has hidden his rifle in the grave of Abu Fouad and now is unable to find it.

The idea of resurrection is suggested in the play's opening moments and, over the course the play, is increasingly linked to the ideas of national and civic rebirth. This rebirth is threatened by oppression from Israel, Arab regimes, and bloody factions within the resistance movement.

The fragility of the hope for rebirth is suggested by Abu Majid's tenuous hold on sanity. A disheveled Abu Majid enters the moonlit stage holding a trumpet, calling to mind the Islamic angel, Israfil, who is charged with sounding the horn that will begin the resurrection.[3] The audience eventually learns that Abu Fouad was known by that name; in prison when an Israeli captain identified himself as Azrael, the Muslim angel of death, Abou Fouad countered that his own name is no less strange: "My name is Israfil. […] You are the cause of death and I am the cause of the resurrection, and in time we'll see which of us is stronger: Israfil or Azrael" ('Adwan 2006: 3:474). The death of men like Abu Fouad puts that resurrection in doubt. Abu Majid's pathetic attempts to sound the horn, and his own insistence that having lost his rifle he has lost any hopes of resurrection, leaves the audience with the pervading sense that the struggle for national rebirth has given way to an internecine warfare.

In the play, rebirth is premised on a proper respect for the dead. Abu Majid's rambling comments on the desecration of remains (Islam prohibits disturbing or cremating the dead whenever possible) connects to a more pervasive fear that Palestinians have no hold on the land, in or out of Palestine. Early in his monologue he worries that the cemetery has shrunk, speculating that graves are missing and that the encroaching buildings are built upon the dead. He asks: Were the families successful at retrieving the remains first? He recalls the excavation of a graveyard in Hebron for a new street. Families hurriedly retrieved bones and effects but in the ensuing chaos carts overturned, remains became mixed, and violence led to three deaths and many injuries. "We are all like that," he concludes, "especially after we've been moving and emigrating from place to place, and they bulldoze over every place in which we leave our traces" (3:470). As he explains later, we cannot carry our land with us, nor our neighborhoods, our memories, the places where our children played, the shade of trees under which the old sat. "How," he asks, "can we carry the graves?" (3:471).

Endlessly fleeing, the Palestinians have had to abandon the graves of loved ones; they have lost all material effects and with them the memories that reside therein. In *The Palestinian Women*, Fatima in effect asks, If I flee, who will attend to the grave of my martyred husband? She flees nonetheless and descends into insanity. Abu Majid similarly finds himself exiled from his homeland and tottering at the edge of sanity. Meanwhile in Palestine, Israel encroaches on the little land that remains – forcing even the creation of mass graves. Abu Majid asks: "We lived ten to a room. Is it necessary that we are buried ten to a hole?" (3:471). In the chaos of flight and overcrowding, Palestinians have turned against each

other, fighting over the bones that have spilled from their overturned carts, drifting further from the dream of a national homeland.

Abu Majid repeatedly asserts that Abu Fouad will signal the resurrection. It is an indication of Abu Majid's weakening hold on reality that he confuses the man with the angel that the man once pretended to be. However, this doubling also reflects Abu Majid's recognition that Abu Fouad modeled a freedom of expression and responsible citizenship that can alone bring an Arab rebirth; Abu Fouad fearlessly critiqued both Palestinian organizations and Arab regimes. Through Abu Majid's memories the audience discovers an activist deeply critical of Palestinian organizations willing to "subjugate" themselves to Arab regimes for aid. These regimes, according to Abu Fouad, did not give aid "for [the liberation of] Palestine" but "for our submission" and "for our isolation from the sons of the Arab people" (3:486–487). The dispossession of the Palestinian people is not limited to the loss of land but to the loss of communal identity, and the victims were not the Palestinians alone but the Arab people.

The very regimes that have long proclaimed their commitment to Arab nationalism have actually isolated Arab populations for the sole purpose of preserving power. As a result, Abu Fouad asserts, "every time we fell, we fell alone." With threats bearing down, Palestinians found no help, not from Arab governments that "wanted our extermination the day before yesterday" and not from the Arab people "who cannot even mount a demonstration on our behalf" (3:487). In *If You Were Palestinian*, an Arab who dares demonstrate in support of Palestinian liberation is beaten by secret police for presumed treason. In *Resurrection* Palestinian organizations, through their subservience to dictatorial regimes, are depicted as complicit in processes that have left the Arab people fractured and dispossessed.

According to Abu Fouad, Palestinian organizations have begun to reproduce the oppressive systems that characterize Arab regimes, and it is this last assertion that leads to his death. In the aftermath of an Israeli bombing of a prison operated by Palestinians,[4] Abu Fouad delivered a speech in which he went beyond castigating Israel to point to the oppression of Palestinians by Palestinian organizations. Imitating his friend, Abu Majid asks:

> Isn't it enough that everybody imprisons us? Is it necessary we imitate the governments right up to the question of prisons? And if we start imitating them now, what will we do when we have our own country? […] Even when the others are happy that we have

> independent prisons, the Israeli enemy is not satisfied. They don't want us to have anything independent right up to prisons. That's why they bombed us, killing those poor men imprisoned on the intimations or orders of God knows what regime. (3:489)

In a vicious if unavowed collaboration, Palestinian organizations detain agitators on behalf of Arab regimes, holding them captive for a mass Israeli execution. Expanding on a question that 'Adwan had put in the mouth of an Israeli character in *If You Were Palestinian*, Abu Fouad asks: Who has killed more Palestinians, the enemy, the Arabs, or the Palestinians themselves in their conflicts? (3:490).

In the closing moments of the monologue, 'Adwan again turns his critique out to the audience, much as he did in *If You Were Palestinian*. Abu Majid's tragedy is the audience's tragedy. With the death of men like Abu Fouad, with our inability to protect them even with their persecution in plain view, there is little hope for the resurrection of Arab civil society. Abu Majid had hidden his gun in the Abu Fouad's grave, both in fear that it would be taken from him when the authorities came, and from the shame of carrying a gun he dared not use. However, once relinquished, the right to resist is hard to reclaim. Abu Majid knows that he has lost the ability to contribute to a future society, a self-damning that extends outward.

> I will never be resurrected. The Resurrection is to revive those who guarded their weapon. The Resurrection is for men, Abu Fouad, those who still carry a weapon, those that are not silent before a leader, and don't consent to a ruler, and are not scared of a government, and only support their Lord, their weapon, and their people. (3:502)

His self-criticism is turned outward. Those who are silent before their leaders, who are scared of their governments, have buried their weapons in the grave of a now-dead resistance.

The play both looks back to 'Adwan's earlier work and looks forward to the events that would shake Syria. In 'Adwan's 1970 play, *The Man Who Didn't Fight*, a lost sword speaks of a people whose persecution leaves them incapable to resist invaders. The play asserts, optimistically, that staring into the face of that persecution might revive the capacity for self-defense. In *The Resurrection* a lost rifle speaks of a generation that has relinquished the right to resist, that has grown silent and scared before their leaders. There is another breed, or perhaps another generation, who only support their Lord, weapon, and people. They displace

the leader bowing only to God, invest sovereignty in the people, and claim and defend their freedoms. The line presages the rallying cry of the Syrian Uprising: "God, Syria, and Freedom only."

Of all the plays discussed in this chapter, Saadallah Wannus's *The Rape* (1989) goes furthest in examining the Palestinian–Israeli conflict as distinct from the larger question of Arab politics. The play was written in the midst of the first Intifada, the wave of civil disobedience, rock throwing, general strikes, and boycotts that occurred in the occupied territories between 1987 and 1993. The play depicts an independent resistance from within the territories and the violence of the Israeli Iron Fist policy. Despite the play's solid grounding in the experiences of Palestinians and Israelis, the play also poses important questions about the possibility of Arab–Israeli coexistence and, consequently, directly engages questions of Syrian national identity. Wannus published the play in the Palestinian journal *Freedom* (based in Damascus and Beirut) in 1989. The following year it was issued by a Lebanese press.

Wannus opposed the only production staged during his lifetime. Jawad al-Assadi cut the Palestinian narrative, focusing on the actions of Israelis, and changed the ending for his 1991 production. Wannus condemned the changes in an appendix to the play when it was reissued in his collected works in 1996 (1996a: 2:170). Despite Wannus's objections, the play was hailed when performed in Beirut and other Arab countries, winning the best actress award at the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre. According to Elias Khoury (in Houssami 2012: xii), al-Assadi's production was mounted in a private residence in Damascus, circumventing the play's official ban.

Al-Assadi's edits bring the play closer to its source text, *The Double Case-History of Dr. Valmy* (1964) by Antonio Buero Vallejo. Wannus's adaptation, like Vallejo's play, depicts the psychological trauma experienced by a torturer of political prisoners who finds himself incapable of protecting his family life from the violence of his working life and equally incapable of extracting himself from the brutal workings of a repressive regime. Wannus transplanted the play from Spain to Israel and the occupied territories, focusing on the families of an Israeli interrogator for the Shin Bet and a resistance fighter. Wannus also added a second narrative, creating a complicated family history for the torture victim. In the Palestinian narrative, Wannus explored issues such as Palestinian collaboration with Israeli forces, the effects of long-term detention on Palestinian life, Palestinian civil disobedience, and Palestinian armed resistance.

The play demonstrates that violence cannot be compartmentalized: a state that employs violence against occupied peoples will inevitably see

that violence permeate into all reaches of society. One cannot dally in violence. When the interrogator tries to leave the service, he is shot and killed by the chief of his interrogation unit. The connection between the domestic and political spheres is evident in the play's title. The Arabic, *al-ightisab*, translates as both rape and illegal seizure and the verb form can refer to the invasion of a country (as in the expression "*ightasab aboab al-balaad*"). In the interrogation chamber, the Palestinian is forced to watch as his wife is brutally raped. Later, the wife of the interrogator is raped by a fellow member of the security services. Occupation leads to political and domestic violence.

Despite the play's focus on an independent Palestinian resistance and the violence of Israeli reprisals, *The Rape* challenges Syrian understandings of the Arab–Israeli conflict, ultimately indicting Arab regimes such as Syria that use the idea of colonial resistance to justify the persecution of internal dissidents. These ideas are most forcefully articulated in the play's final scene. As in the Spanish source text, the psychiatrist who treats the interrogator serves as the play's narrator. Wannus's psychiatrist, Dr. Abrahim Manuhin, is an Israeli anti-Zionist who believes that a nation founded and sustained through violence will be "a kingdom of neurosis and madness" (2:69). When the interrogator accuses him of hindering the nation in which Manuhin resides, he counters that his "loyalty is not to the law but justice" and that there is no justice in torture or occupation. Manuhin aligns himself with other Jews who questioned the idea or reality of the Jewish state, such as Moshe Manuhin, Julius Khan, Albert Einstein, and Isaac Deutscher (2:113–114).

The play ends with Manuhin alone on stage and, as in many earlier Syrian plays, the character looks out into the auditorium. However, rather than interrogating the audience, Manuhin asks if Saadallah Wannus is present, and then engages the author in a conversation about the genesis of Manuhin. When he asks if Wannus might not have been optimistic in creating the character, Wannus refers him to the "list of Jewish thinkers who refused and resisted Zionism" (2:164). What was hard, Wannus notes, was overcoming the cultural conditioning that prevented him from imaging an Israeli who respected the humanity and rights of Palestinians:

> I had to cross many obstacles. The historical suspicion that blocked my awareness of your existence, the political demagoguery that precludes my recognition of you, the fear of the defeated, of betrayal, and the agony of the victims and the wounded, and the machinations of the police and the security services. (2:165)

Writing the play, Wannus explains, was a process of self-discovery, exploring his own internal obstacles that hinder mutual understanding.

Some of these obstacles are clearly the product of the state: security services that target authors who appear to question the regime, mind-numbing demagoguery that blots out the possibility of coexistence. However, Wannus the character also acknowledges the restraint prompted by his identification with a "defeated" people who invariably suspect "betrayal," as well as his own compassion for fellow Syrians who died or were wounded in past conflicts. To imagine an anti-Zionist Israeli not only required that he weather the hostility of the state, but that he overcome his fear that penning a sympathetic Israeli was tantamount to forgetting the dead and neglecting the stateless.

In this sense, in creating Manuhin, Wannus created his own Israeli counterpart: a man whose humanism and independence allowed him to contradict his government and repudiate the deep assumptions of his society. In his conversation with Manuhin, the author explains to his character that whoever "chooses loyalty to justice rather than loyalty to the law must be pure," which prompts the character to worry that such a position might lead him to "abandon my family and people" (2:165). Wannus counters with an example of sacred history common to both Judaism and Islam:

> You don't abandon them, rather you change their fanaticism. You see that the path they pursue is dangerous and that Zionism is a predicament that leaves them sleepless. Did Jeremiah abandon his family and people? His tongue thundered with curses but his heart split with compassion.

Yes, Manuhin agrees, but who listened to Jeremiah?

Wannus's idea that Zionism victimizes Israelis as well as Palestinians is matched by his even more radical assertion that Arab regimes are themselves hotbeds of Zionism. Manuhin criticizes Wannus for focusing on Israeli prisons when atrocities are also committed in Arab prisons. Wannus accepts the criticism, noting that he long hesitated before writing the play for fear that it might appear a means of evading problems in the Arab world. However, he explains, it is important to note that the regimes that imprison Arabs do not represent the Arabs. "Zionism," Wannus explains, "stretches organically into contemporary Arab regimes." He then elaborates on the nature of these regimes:

> [They are the regimes] that surrender to the Israel of [violent interrogators], that prepare for surrender, that suppress and trample on

> their people, that plunder the wealth of these countries and waste it. These regimes are some of the extensions of Zionism into the Arab body. (2:166–167)

One cannot imagine a more incendiary statement. Wannus accuses Arab governments of imposing Zionism on their subject people by occupying Arab land and plundering Arab wealth. The passage also points to the dependence of regimes like the Syrian Baaths on foreign threats to justify the continued persecution of dissidents. In this sense, Wannus implies the modern Baath party is both the creation and replication of Zionism.

Wannus and Manuhim both court oppression from their respective governments. Manuhim has documented the interrogator's confession but it is clear that the information will not circulate. Manuhim asks Wannus how he intends to conclude the play, and the latter begins with a quote from the Book of Jeremiah that grows contemporary:

> The King Zedekiah ordered that Jeremiah be placed in the prison house, and that that he be given a loaf of bread from the bakers' market every day until all the bread of the city was depleted. They come with kindness and smiles and stuff him in a straitjacket, and then take him to one of the Sanatoriums.

As Wannus narrates, the other interrogators enter and bind Manuhim in a straitjacket. "What awaits you?" the Doctor asks the playwright. Wannus answers: "The hostility of Israeli and Arab Zionists." Playwright and character face similar dangers, which allows them to exchange "pity … and maybe hope" (2:167).

It hardly required tremendous clairvoyance for Wannus to see that his play would evoke hostility from those he termed "Arab Zionists." According to Wannus, the play prompted a wide debate and while in some quarters it was "welcomed and admired," elsewhere it was greeted with "aversion and attacks" and was described as "a scandal and a betrayal" (2:169). However, *The Rape* does not contradict other Syrian representations of Israel; the play depicts Israel as a nation founded in, and perpetuated by, violence and sadism. *The Rape* thwarts Syrian expectation by asserting that Israeli citizens no less than Palestinians are victims of this sadism and by creating an Israeli character who rejects such sadism even at the cost of Israel's Jewish identity and at the risk of alienating his fellow citizens. It is not the play but the final scene that is profoundly radical, particularly in the challenges it poses to the

self-imagining of a Syrian audience. Syrians should understand that they themselves are occupied and look to both Palestinians and Israelis as fellow victims of oppressive states.

Like virtually all of Wannus's plays, *The Rape* explores national identity and the possibility for creating popular sovereignty despite the rule of oppressive regimes. For his audience, this means confronting the "Arab-Zionist" regimes that plunder the Arab world while constricting the national imagination. As Wannus asserted in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, these regimes demand that their people cut out their tongues "for the sake of the national interest." Time and again, Wannus's plays encourage their audiences to think through how one might disobey this command.

What are we to make of the frequency with which Syrian plays about Palestinians evoke the idea of martyrdom at the same time that these plays depict Arab nationalism as a betrayed or outdated ideology? I am reminded of a cynical joke I first heard in 1994: Assad's commitment to the Palestinian cause is so great that he will fight until the last Palestinian is dead. Certainly these plays depict the Palestinian cause as itself martyred to the ambitions of self-serving Arab leaders. However, it would be reductive to say these plays announce the end of Arab nationalism. Rather, I read the frequent invocation of betrayed Palestinians who, despite such betrayals, continue to agitate for liberation as a rallying call to Arab populations. It does not matter that we have been betrayed, these plays seem to assert, nor that authoritarian regimes respond forcefully to the slightest resistance; we must assert national identities in defiance of the state, if only to hold on to our humanity. Given the sacrifices of the Palestinian people, these plays ask their audiences, how can we do less?

# 4
# History and Heritage

Saadallah Wannus, the most prolific and respected of Syria's playwrights, was also the one to challenge Syrian conceptions of national identity most consistently. The three of his plays that I have already discussed – *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, *Cleansing the Blood*, and *The Rape* – reveal the range of styles with which he experimented while posing the question "Who are we as Syrians?" Despite the stylistic heterogeneity, this small sample of his work also reflects what I will argue is a central concern of his opus: the processes and strategies of narrating the past and how these narrations open or foreclose possibilities for the future. For Wannus, Syrian identity is tied to how Syrians (both as individuals and as a community) manage a past shot through with trauma. In this chapter I will take up five plays that directly address heritage arts and historiography as identity forming enterprises: *The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* (1970), *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* (1972), *Historical Miniatures* (1993), *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (1994), and *Wretched Dreams* (1994). These plays, I will argue, present heritage and history as mutually constructed ideas. In representing this dialectic, Wannus's works intervene in existing patterns of knowing the past, undermining the inevitability of such patterns and proposing new models for understanding Syria's past and present.

In identifying a recurring dialectic in these works, I depart from the dominant organizing principle of much Wannus scholarship. Wannus is the only modern Syrian playwright to have generated a body of criticism in either Arabic or European languages.[1] Without exception, these studies follow the lead of Marie Elias's 1997 essay/interview, "Characteristics … and Transformations in the Journey of Saadallah Wannus," which identified three periods in Wannus's development.

While there is not unanimity in how to characterize these periods, I would summarize the schema as:

1. The first period represents Wannus's experimentations with European modernism, especially Expressionism and Symbolism. Typical of these movements, these plays are attentive to the stultifying social and economic conditions that oppress characters.
2. The second period is often referred to as that of "Politicizing Theatre," a phrase that Wannus coined in the introduction to *The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk*. The period is marked by the use of indigenous tales and performance forms that directly engage audience members. Usually allegorical, these works draw audience attention to their own responsibility in creating and perpetuating the existing power structures. This period also marks Wannus's engagement with Brecht.
3. The late works feature a new attention to psychological complexity, specifically exploring how these psychologies are shaped by and help shape the power structure of the family and the state in specific historical moments.

The three plays discussed thus far represent each of these periods. *Cleansing the Blood* lies in the first period, *Soirée for the Fifth of June* is the first play of the second period, and *The Rape* is usually cited as the first play of the third period.

This three-period model for understanding Wannus's development as a playwright reveals much, but it also obscures important consistencies across his career. It is clear that early in his career Wannus employed Expressionist and Symbolist elements, that his work grew more Brechtian, and that at the end of his life he turned to historical realism with characters possessing a new emotional depth. However, as I have already shown, the early work *Cleansing the Blood* demonstrates complex psychological characterization. The later play *The Rape* employs Expressionistic elements and engages the audience in ways associated with the middle period of politicizing theatre.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for dividing Wannus's works into three periods is not radical transformations in his writing style but the life-changing traumas that marked his own personal history. *Soirée for the Fifth of June* (the first play of the second phase) was written immediately after the 1967 War and was soon followed by his return to Syria after studies in Cairo and Paris. This phase of more explicitly political theatre ended when Wannus, dejected by Sadat's visit to Israel, attempted suicide in 1977. Wannus abandoned playwriting for thirteen

years, returning to the theatre to write *The Rape* (the first play of the third phase) in the midst of the Palestinian Intifada. After completing *The Rape*, Wannus was diagnosed with cancer and then, in a flurry of playwriting, he wrote six plays between 1992 and his death in 1997 – several of which are widely considered his very best.

Throughout Wannus's varied career he gave focused attention to how ideas of history, heritage, and popular will function in national processes of identity formation. In particular, his plays examine how powerful elites mobilize such concepts for their own preservation at the expense of the common good and national development. Wannus's plays attempt to pry the past from the grip of official culture so as to prompt debates on the future of Syria and Arab nationalism.

This project grew increasingly focused in his later years, especially after his cancer diagnosis. Five of his final seven plays examine Arab history ranging from the fourteenth century to the 1980s. *Historical Miniatures* (1993) depicts Damascene resistance to Tamerlane in the fourteenth century. *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (1994) is set in nineteenth-century Damascus during Ottoman rule. *Drunken Days* (1997) is set in Beirut and Damascus in the 1930s of the French Mandate. *Wretched Dreams* (1994) is set in Damascus following the 1963 Baath coup. *A Day of Our Time* (1995) satirizes Syria's neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s. These plays are not simply historical. Rather they examine how the past is transmitted and made meaningful – and so they represent a continuation of a theme prominent across his opus.

In making this argument I am guided by Wannus's own interpretation of his development as a playwright. In an interview with Marie Elias, he remarked that early in his career he "used to feel that personal suffering and individual concerns were superficial unessential bourgeois issues to be ignored." He continued that his principal concern was "historical consciousness" and that he "mistakenly supposed that the concern for the movement of history must supersede the individual" (Wannus 1992: 99). History, as the playwright notes, had always been his principal focus. The later phase of heightened productivity followed his recognition that attention to the individual complemented attention to history. I will argue that Wannus's later work was increasingly premised on a belief that analysis of historical processes is best accomplished through the analysis of individual psyches at specific moments in historical development.

The plays that I examine in this chapter were published between 1970 and 1994; however, even a play as early as *Cleansing the Blood* (1963) takes up the state's manipulation of the historical imagination.

That play posits a government that attempts to define the refugee as a kind of timeless folk figure in a project of regime solidification. The journalist – little more than a state functionary – fabricates an image of mute refugees dancing and vocalizing their love of the leader in meaningless shouts and babbling. "Even Homer couldn't describe the scene," the journalist writes, further comparing the refugees to "Ancient Greeks presenting offerings of thanks to the wiser and more courageous gods" (Wannus 1996a: 1:345). In placing refugees outside of history, in ascribing to them spontaneous performances dating from antiquity, the journalist sublimates the painful events of forced migration into the image of an unchanging and ever-joyous Arab people.

This people does not speak. Though they exist in the present, they lie across the divide of history. Contemporary citizens of the host nation are complicit in this falsification. Many, like the nameless young man in the play, hunger for a refuge "far from the terrible vortex of history" (1:335). This fear of history is evident in the hauntings of Alewa, who is tormented by a father's command to rectify the expulsion of 1948. Alewa's past is not simply one of trauma, but a trauma that demands (what he sees as) a suicidal struggle. For Ali, in contrast, the past is a tradition of heroism and resistance that inspires imitation: "Do you hear that overpowering call, from afar, from the core of our noble past?" (1:353). In the response to the traumas of history, Ali offers the balm of heritage. However, the play never clarifies whether this imagining of an Arab past is any less false than the state's evocation of a happy and unchanging Palestinian folk.

The state's use and abuse of history along with its manipulation of heritage is the explicit subject of the play that christened his project of politicizing theatre, *Soirée for the Fifth of June*. That play contains within it a blatant falsification of the recent past, *The Murmur of Ghosts*, a play depicting noble resistance on the part of soldiers and peasant farmers. Attempting to soothe without addressing the trauma of the past, *The Murmur of Ghosts* misidentifies that trauma as "the setback" (or *an-naksah*, as the war was officially known in the Arab world). Whereas *Soirée for the Fifth of June* reveals the absence of a grounded sense of national identity, *The Murmur of Ghosts* insists that all is well with the national self. The play within a play reassures its audience that the return of the Golan is inevitable: because national identity is whole, national territory will be whole.

The director offers heroic soldiers and a steadfast peasantry and if this alone is not proof of a secure, unified, and timeless national identity, the performance concludes with heritage arts. The director explains

that since the setting of *The Murmur of Ghosts* "recalls the old festivals," his actors will now use it as the backdrop for "rural songs and dances." He stresses the connection between the play's depiction of the recent past and his promise of soothing performance. Traditional dancing and singing will generate "nostalgia and delight in the very place in which heroism was glorified" (Wannus 1996a: 1:71). *The Murmur of Ghosts* and the heritage performances that follow promise to displace the trauma of arrested identity formation.

Wannus retroactively referred to *The Soirée for the Fifth of June* as the start of his theatre of politicization. According to Ali 'Ajil Naji al-Azeni (2006: 45), Wannus introduced that phrase at the 1969 Arab Festival of Theatre Arts in Damascus. However, he first described the concept in writing in his introduction to his next play, *The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* (1970). Al-Azeni argues that Wannus developed the concept in response to implicit attacks from the pro-regime playwright 'Ali 'Uqlah 'Arsan, who invoked the idea of "political theatre" in his book *Politics in Theatre* to attack oppositional playwrights whom he accused of imitating European models. Ironically, Wannus's earlier plays are most indebted to Europe and *The Soirée for the Fifth of June* began what would become a long search for a distinctly Arab theatre grounded in both the analysis and embodiment of Arab history and heritage. Regardless of the validity of 'Arsan's attack, it seems to have inspired Wannus to articulate a dramatic theory that would shape his next eight years of dramatic output.

In the introduction to *Jabir the Mamluk*, Wannus explains that the goal of the theatre of politicization is to erase the boundary between the audience and the performers so as to "break the power of silence" even if by artificial means. He is not so naïve, he explains, to think that spectators at *Soirée for the Fifth of June* were unaware that the interpolations from the hall were unscripted. Instead, *Soirée* was intended as an "example" to the spectators, one that would ultimately promote "impromptu, heated, real dialogue" between the audience and the stage (Wannus 1996a: 1:131). In *Jabir the Mamluk*, Wannus further attempts to collapse the separation between actor and audience by placing the play in a coffee shop (though he clarifies that the play could be presented in any space). The coffee shop provides the "intimacy" between actor and audience demanded by the play.

As in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, actors in *Jabir the Mamluk* play spectators, or more properly patrons, calling for coffee and tea, and the rekindling of their water pipes. They are both participants in and witnesses to the performance: a storyteller, or *hakawati*, recites for the benefit of

all in the space. The hakawati is a long-standing feature of Arab coffee houses, particularly during Ramadan, in which a storyteller narrates a tale, often extending over many consecutive nights, while reading from a thick volume. The tale is invariably a well-known epic, often based on historical figures of the Arab past, sometimes legends or fantasies. Hakawati performance is an interactive format with patrons speaking to each other and praising the performer.

This format for *Jabir the Mamluk*, according to Wannus's introduction, produces a comfortable and intellectually engaged spectator. On the one hand, such language reflects Wannus's familiarity with Brecht. However, Wannus's use of the hakawati also stems from his awareness of the community-building potential of heritage arts; while he critiques the misuse of folklore in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, he does so with an awareness of the power of revived forms for modern audiences. The setting and style of *Jabir the Mamluk* will break the "rigid ring surrounding the performance" and achieve a new "affinity" between audience and actors (1:132). In particular, the use of the hakawati contributes to an atmosphere of "relaxation and, possibly, mirth" and "in this respect [the spectators] are in the same situation as patrons in a coffee house" (1:134). It is tempting to think of these patrons listening to the performer as they smoke their water pipes as modeling the kind of spectator Brecht (1978: 44) describes as adopting "an attitude of smoking-and-watching." Smoking at the theatre, according to Brecht, could produce a relaxed audience, critical of what transpired: "it is hopeless to try to 'carry away' any man who is smoking and accordingly pretty well occupied with himself."

The hakawati is not simply a means of producing a Brechtian "relaxed spectator"; the hakawati figure is itself an example of how Wannus re-purposes tradition as a tool for agitation and change. The arc of historical imagining in the play travels along two paths. First, the play depicts past events and does so in a manner intended to prompt examination of historical processes that impact the present. Second, this content is presented through the simulation of a traditional entertainment form, one imbued with nostalgia for many audience members. This presentation of history through heritage arts helps make bitter examinations more palatable. The hakawati typically recounts well-known stories of Arab heroism or fancy, stories that never change in a performance style that similarly remains constant. However, Wannus's hakawati thwarts these expectations. This storyteller insists on telling disturbing stories that reveal his audience's responsibility for the conditions in which they currently live and the future that might await. In the process, the play presents history and heritage as strategies of

structuring the past and imaging the future. As such, they can be used to prompt or stifle change.

The play begins with the coffee-house patrons demanding a story of Arab heroism, a demand the hakawati resists. They ask to hear of the feats of the Egyptian Sultan Zahir Baybars. (Zahir was the thirteenth-century Mamluk who repelled invasions by Crusaders and Mongols; Mamluks – literally "owned" – were the soldier-slaves who developed into a military caste and, as in the case of Zahir, even seized the Sultanate.) The coffee-house patrons crave, in their own words, stories of "right overcoming wrong" and "justice overcoming injustice." However, the hakawati explains that the stories come in an order and they can only move on to stories of Zahir once they have finished stories about the age they have already started, an age of "confusion and disorder."

At the core of the dispute between storyteller and audience is a difference in opinion about the purpose of narrating the past. The audience has no interest in stories of past confusion and disorder, since those words describe – as two patrons explain – "the age in which we live," an age whose "bitterness we taste every instant." Another patron elaborates: we want only to "forget our troubles in a joyful story." They crave theatre of "nostalgia and delight," to adopt the language of the director in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, but instead the hakawati will offer a story that explores the historical relation of a people and their rulers. The patrons know what they are in for. One customer complains that last night's story was "gloomy" and "darkened the hearts of the listeners" (1:138).

The irony is that the hakawati is itself a figure of nostalgia; a historical materialist hakawati is an oxymoron. The word hakawati is much employed in today's heritage industry. Christa Salamandra (2004: 36) described university students, women, and tourists (all untraditional coffee-house patrons) attending hakawati performances in Damascus's old city in search of "an 'experience' of local color"; Syrians join tourists in search of an unchanged Arab past inscribed in present performance. The hakawati appears in the literature of many non-governmental organizations based in and outside the region, as in the name of scores of Levantine restaurants throughout the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, in the contemporary multi-performer hakawati troupe of Ahmed Yousef (replete with colorful Orientalist costumes and props), and even in the 2008 author reading of the novel *The Hakawati* at the Libraire Antoine's flagship store in west Beirut in which Lebanese readers followed along in the English language texts they had just purchased. Today's hakawati arrives through layers of mediation, including the English prose of the Lebanese ex-pat author, Rabih Alameddine. Like

the cedars of Lebanon, representations of the hakawati seem to increase in inverse proportion to its actual existence.

Wannus is part of a twentieth-century Arab tradition of invoking Arab folklore and performance traditions in modern theatre. As early as 1930 Tawfiq al-Hakim turned to the *Tales of the Arabian Nights* for *Shahrazad* (published 1934) and the folktales of Goha for *The Donkey Market* in 1971. A host of other Egyptian playwrights in the 1950s and 1960s drew from folklore and Islamic tradition to create political parables, including Alfred Farag, Nu'man 'Ashur, Sa'd al-Din Wahab, Salah 'Abd al-Sabbur, and Rahman al-Sharqwi (Selim 2004). As Dina Amin (2006: 92) points out, in three 1964 articles collectively titled "Toward an Egyptian Theatre," the playwright Yusuf Idris called for a theatre grounded in local folk traditions. In doing so he and others refuted the charge that Egypt lacked a performance heritage and that its theatre was entirely indebted to Europe. As Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson (2008) have shown, this search for a theatre developing out of indigenous performance was also prominent in the theatre of the Maghreb. Wannus approached this technique with caution, complaining in 1970 that the Egyptian Rashad Rushdi's play, *My Country, Oh My Country*, "used the people's folklore to present an idea that is against them and against their interest" (quoted in 'Ajil Naji al-Azeni 2006: 119). For Wannus, while folk material could produce a relaxed and more critical spectator, the use of such material was no guarantee of progressive goals. To the contrary, he had shown in *Soirée for the Fifth of June* how easy it was for disingenuous theatre practitioners to use ideas of heritage arts to thwart historical analysis and paper over past trauma.

In *Jabir the Mamluk*, Wannus attempts to banish nostalgia and instead to use heritage arts to further historical analysis. Or rather, as Nawwaf Abul-Hayja' argues, to lure audiences with nostalgia into a project of self-analysis. In a 1971 article on Wannus (republished 1980), Abul-Hayja' lapses into a reverie that draws attention to the emotional power of seeing a hakawati on stage:

> The hakawati, of course, has been one of the earliest Arab dramatic attempts from ancient times to the present. How many hakawati have our parents and we known, and how many evenings have all spent listening to the hakawati relating the stories of al-Zir, the One Thousand and One Nights, 'Antara and so on! The presence of the hakawati and the creation of an atmosphere akin to that of a people's coffeehouse … [serve to] interest the audience and to drag it into the heart of the events. (Abul-Hayja' 1980: 353)

In recounting the seductive allure of the hakawati, Abul-Hayja' announces his own attachment to the kinds of epics the coffee-house patrons demand but which the storyteller in *Jabir the Mamluk* refuses. Though the play ultimately thwarts audience desire for a timeless art preserved in memory and connecting generations, the promise of such comfort drags that audience into the play's distressing events.

In fact, the hakawati recounts a very different kind of story, one depicting Arab defeat and perfidy and focusing not on the heroic struggles of the great but on the common failures of common people: deferring to leaders, neglecting to ask the right questions, and placing personal gain over communal security. Rather than recounting the thirteenth-century victories of Zahir, the hakawati describes the thirteenth-century sack of Baghdad. The hero of this story, Jabir, is also a Mamluk but rather than a military leader he is one of the Wazir's household servants. Hoping to curry favor with the Wazir, Jabir hatches a plan that serves the Wazir in his intrigues against the Caliph; Jabir will allow the Wazir to tattoo a message on his shaven head, and once his hair grows back he will deliver the message to the Caliph's enemies. Jabir does not concern himself with the nature of the rivalry between Wazir and Caliph nor the content of the message printed on his scalp, an oversight that leads to the destruction of the city and Jabir's death.

Wannus adapted the central events of his play from both history and legend. As 'Ajil Naji al-Azeni (2006: 129) points out, Baghdad was sacked by foreign invaders in 1258, medieval sources speak of intrigues between the Wazir and the invaders, and some of these sources assert that the Wazir passed messages to the invaders on the previously shaven scalps of slaves. Wannus fills in this skeletal history and changes the names of the Caliph and the foreign foe (possibly, al-Azeni asserts, so as to invoke Israel). In *Jabir the Mamluk*, the Wazir's power rivals that of the Caliph. Fearing a potential alliance between the Wazir and foreign powers, the Caliph orders that all who leave the city be searched, as he lays the groundwork to attack the Wazir and his forces. Jabir proposes the shaven head ruse – much to the delight of the coffee-house patrons – but remains indifferent to the larger forces affecting the city. Only after Jabir's decapitation does the hakawati relate the message tattooed on the slave's scalp: the Wazir offers assistance to the invading army, promises to open the city's gates, and in order to keep this pact secret requests that Jabir be immediately executed.

The failure of common people to ask the right questions of leadership is evident in two registers, both in the events the hakawati narrates and in the refusal of the coffee-house audience to take up the lessons of the tale.

While hakawatis are solo performers, in *Jabir the Mamluk* the narration is brought to life by actors. Not only does the conceit break up narration, it allows for the multiplicity of voices that distinguishes the dramatic from the epic, and so Wannus is able to introduce scenes in which the actions (and lack of actions) of commoners contribute to the city's tragedy. Standing before a bakery, citizens express disbelief when one of their number suggests that they should ascertain the nature of the dispute between the Caliph and Wazir. The others are certain that their only necessary concern is "bread and safety" (Wannus 1996a: 1:154). As one man explains, the wise man knows that "we the masses do not intervene in the affairs and disputes [of our lords], and if we do they will immediately unite and turn on us with all of their power." Asking questions, as another points out, will only land you in prison (1:157). The questioning man, who has known detention and torture, acknowledges that he has no love of prison, but continues "nor do I love the life of a dog that I endure just as I have no love of paying with my head for troubles I have no say in" (1:158). Breaking from character, these actors comment on the scene, quoting from an Arab proverb in unison: "Whoever marries our mother, we call 'Uncle'" (1:159).

The scene draws attention to the danger of leaving politics to the politicians, an attitude endemic to a people who proverbially offer terms of respect (Uncle) to whoever assumes authority. However the coffee-house patrons model an opposite response, commenting on the truthfulness of the proverb and describing the questioning man as the kind "who likes to make trouble" (1:159). Similarly vexing is the patrons' delight in Jabir's dogged pursuit of his own interest, without concern for the potential danger that might befall the people of Baghdad, who could become kindling in the ensuing blaze (1:145–148). Nor have the coffee-house patrons absorbed any lessons by the end of the hakawati's tale, even after he describes the horrors that befall the sacked city and the actors turn to the patrons and drive home their point: "If a troubling night full of woe should descend upon you, don't forget you once said, who cares [pottery gets broken], whoever marries our mother, we call 'Uncle'" (1:218).

Instead the patrons simply complain that they will not return for more of the same and demand that the hakawati begin the epic of the Zahir Baybars. The failure of the characters in the tale and in the frame to recognize dangers and learn from mistakes likely frustrates the audience and leaves it responsible for change. When the hakawati tells the patrons that whether or not he starts a new story "depends on [them]," his words could easily be directed to the audience. That is certainly the implication of the play's closing line. The patrons have left the

performance space for their beds, and only the waiter remains. He locks up the coffee house and turns to the audience: "And to you too, sleep well. Till tomorrow" (1:219). Will the audience accept the responsibility described by the play? Will they begin to ask the right questions and demand answers?

As *Jabir the Mamluk* makes clear, creating a responsive spectator is not necessarily the same thing as creating a politicized spectator. A year earlier in *Soirée for the Fifth of June*, the frustrated director chastises his audience for behaving as if they were in a coffee shop when they begin to talk back to the stage. However, the director's true complaint is not that the spectators speak but that they contest the image of history presented on stage. As Wannus demonstrates in *Jabir the Mamluk*, patrons in a coffee shop may feel empowered to correct the hakawati. However, such freedom carries no positive political valence if spectators use freedom to demand false and comforting images extracted from heritage without attention to ongoing historical processes. For the hakawati, his art does not simply preserve heritage but cultivates historical awareness. When the coffee-house patrons complain that he exaggerates the need to preserve the order of tales in the book, he responds: "We will not understand the days of Zahir unless we understand what conditions and periods preceded them. Do not forget that history is a sequence" (1:185). In order to understand a moment in history, one must first grasp the material conditions that precede and shape the events of that moment.

Of course, Wannus's ultimate object is not to make sense of the age of Zahir, but the present age, and that may account for why the play was banned on opening night. The play was scheduled to be performed by The Syndicate of Artists, the company that Wannus had founded with Alaal-din Koksh and that had previously performed *Soirée for the Fifth of June*. According to his widow, Faiza al-Shawish, officials attended the dress rehearsal in October of 1971 and when the actors finished, informed Wannus that the play could not be performed the following night. Al-Shawish explained that Wannus was given permission to perform *Soirée for the Fifth of June* instead, which ran for forty nights to packed audiences (quoted in al-Azeni 2006: 132). Given that Assad had come to power the previous November, it is not surprising that authorities would censor a play that criticized a people prepared to salute as "Uncle" anyone who married their mother.

Despite banning *Jabir the Mamluk* during rehearsals in 1971, the government allowed several performances of the play in May 1972 for the Damascus Theatre Festival. In 1973 a new production directed by

As'ad Faddah traveled to the German Democratic Republic as part of a cultural exchange program. However, the play did not receive a full run in Syria until 1984 in a production directed by Jawad al-Assadi. Al-Assadi extended the coffee house on the low stage of the intimate Qabbani Theatre into the audience by replacing the first rows of seats with café tables. Audience members in the front of the house found themselves in a coffee house, undermining the barrier between stage and audience as Wannus intended.

Wannus's next play, *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* (1972), was his most sustained exploration of heritage and history as mutually constructed ideas that in turn shape conceptions of national identity. The play takes up the father of Syrian theatre, Abu Khalil Qabbani, whose work engaged Arab performance traditions in his Damascene theatre but ultimately fell victim to the opposition of religious authorities (in Wannus's interpretation) intent on preserving a feudalistic power structure. Against this backdrop, Wannus also explores the beginnings of Arab nationalism and Ottoman efforts to modernize. It is a sprawling work, charting a range of historical tensions and filled with songs and dance. In its scope and theatricality it presages Wannus's later work even if it lacks the psychological complexity of the later plays. This was clearly intentional; in his introduction Wannus writes that though his play is filled with historical figures he is not interested in their "psychological makeup nor human characteristics." Instead he presents them as "examples of intellectual trends" (Wannus 1996a: 1:587). In other words, the historical figures in the play are placeholders marking the social and economic forces that shape modern Syria.

From the opening line of Wannus's text, he draws attention to the complicated dialectic of history and heritage. He begins the introduction by describing the play as "an attempt to revive and understand heritage" (1:585), namely, the distinctively Arab theatre of Abu Khalil Qabbani, a genre that was drawn from popular stories and that incorporated Arab music and dance. In particular, Wannus stages within part of Qabbani's play, *Harun al-Rashid with Ghanim ibn Ayyub and Qut al-Qulub*, which Qabbani adapted from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Wannus recreates Qabbani's musical theatre, adapting Qabbani's text, including the original songs, and incorporating dance. Wannus peppers the audience with nineteenth-century theatre patrons occupying different rungs of the social ladder and who demand recognition from the performers.

He also includes a "caller" in the production, a narrator/barker who moves the narrative forward and clarifies the shifts between historical

scenes, performance reconstructions, and stylized historical summary. At the start of the play, the caller moves about the seats and aisles, announcing the performance and instructing the audience on how to behave in the theatre – extemporizing as necessary. In effect, the caller casts the twentieth-century audience as part of the nineteenth-century audience for whom theatre was a new social phenomenon. As Wannus explains in his scene directions, he prefers that the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century audiences be mixed in the hall, "to cement the connection between past and present" (1:592).

While *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* is a play depicting historical events, Wannus stresses that the performance style is based in heritage arts. As such, he retained elements of past performance such as an onstage prompter reinforcing the idea that we are seeing the recreation of a past performance style. He describes this performance style as "showing (*tashkhīṣ*)" as opposed to "metamorphosis or acting." The effect for audiences in Qabbani's theatre was "estrangement (*taghrīb*)" and it is this very effect that Wannus wishes to recreate for his twentieth-century audience (1:585). Wannus describes this performance style as both historically specific and timeless. It is a particular conjunction of Arab storytelling and Western theatre in the nineteenth century. However, this presentational style persists in "the coffee houses and the popular cheap theatres and in the celebrations that take place in the old quarters." The director is not limited to Wannus's stage directions but is encouraged to conduct research in such sites; here one finds "the essence of past performance" (1:586). The director joins university students and tourists attending hakawati performances in Damascus's old city in search of local color – heritage preserved in the popular.

Wannus shows his debt to Brecht in the use of terms like "showing" and "estrangement" to describe the actor's art and its effect on the audience. In "The Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting," Brecht (1978: 92) praises a performance style in which actors "openly choose those positions which best show them off." The actor does not act passionately but "shows that this man is not in complete control of himself" by pointing to "outward signs." In the process the Chinese actor avoids "complete conversion." There is no metamorphosis or acting only clearly marked performance (1978: 93). In such a formulation, it is clear that Brecht is not attempting to understand how traditional audiences experienced Beijing Opera. Rather it is Brecht's lack of familiarity with the conventions that make them strange and so an inspiration to Western actors of the epic acting style. One wonders if the conventions of such acting were any more off-putting for a Chinese audience than the curtain is for

Western audiences. The problem then arises how Wannus's popular performance style, which (according to Wannus) persists in coffee houses and popular celebrations, can be both ubiquitous and alienating.

The answer lies in the Syrian audience's familiarity with the conventions of realist theatre and the assumption that *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* will be staged in a playhouse associated with art and not popular entertainment. Transplanted into a European-style theatre, the features of Qabbani's performances – "the crudeness of the setting and brightly colored costumes, the exaggeration of the acting, and the good advantage of music and dance elements" along with extemporaneous address (1:586) – dispel the sanctity of theatre. For the nineteenth-century audience, the combination of a familiar performance style sutured to a foreign dramatic form served to "jolt the calm of daily life" (1:586). Wannus seeks just such a jolt for his twentieth-century audience. Drama has become familiar; the indigenous performance style is now the foreign element. Presenting popular performance in a Western-style theatre renders that performance alienating; the audience's critical faculties are sharpened, and heightened sociability ensues. Heritage arts take on an effect similar to that which Brecht experienced when witnessing Mei Lanfang demonstrate elements of Beijing Opera. In other words, heritage for the contemporary audience emerges as the internal other – steadfastly exotic despite its proximity in the old city and rural festivals.

The inclusion of popular performance forms jolts the audience out of complacent reverence and makes sociability possible; however, popular performance is in itself no promise of progressive ends. If, according to Wannus, a playwright like Rashad Rushdi could use "the people's folklore to present an idea that is against them and against their interest" might not popular performance be similarly employed for a reactionary agenda? Sociability is a means to progressive ends but is not the end in itself. Directors that employ heritage arts are free to follow the lead of the director of *The Murmur of Ghosts*, generating "nostalgia and delight" rather than inquiry and analysis.

Wannus ascribes a progressive politics to the sociality generated in Qabbani's theatre, and in recreating that venue in its historical moment Wannus seeks to politicize the contemporary audience. Wannus's script presents a nineteenth-century audience aware that they are taking part in a new project. Taking a seat in the theatre emerges as a complicated negotiation in which elites assert prerogatives that do not translate in a post-feudal enterprise like the theatre. Audience members shout commands to the actors (which the actors sometimes follow (1:595)). Some

audience members complain that the subject matter is licentious, which prompts a heated defense from the actors (1:599). Most significantly, the fact of representing an eighth-century caliph on stage renders authority available to critique: "What a king! He casts aside the affairs and problems of the state for a harlot!" one audience member complains. This in turn prompts denunciations of the theatre from other audience members who object that they are witnessing actors "ridicule the caliphs" (1:604).

This is not simply the sociability of the coffee house, but a sociability grounded in a sense of novelty and transgression. As I have shown, *An Evening for the Fifth of June* and *The Adventures of the Head of Jabir the Mamluk* attempted to produce a spirit of dangerous sociability by stretching the bounds of permissible speech on the stage and then staging responses in the audience. In *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* Wannus takes a more innocuous route, perhaps inspired by his problems with the censors. The play violates theatrical rather than political conventions. It recreates, with great specificity, a historically distant controversy: How will the emergence of theatre affect the existing power structure? If anything, it casts religious reactionaries (who opposed theatre on moral grounds) as an impediment to progress, a message unlikely to prompt the ire of the secular Baath regime. However, the play's seeming innocuity is simple misdirection. The play is not the exposition of an obscure historical event but a paean to theatre's role within civil society and its capacity to develop questioning citizens.

Heritage, far from inherently progressive, is presented in the play as a potential tool for reactionaries. While Wannus describes his recreation of Qabbani's theatre as an attempt "to revive and understand heritage," the idea of heritage also motivates those who object to Qabbani's play for violating the sanctity of the caliphs. The extreme consequence of such reasoning is articulated in the play by Sheik Sa'id al-Ghabra, the historical figure who led the charge against Qabbani. Al-Ghabra repeatedly rejects the theatre on the grounds that it is "innovation and all innovation is forbidden" in Islam (1:622). Scholars agree that Islam's prohibition of innovation refers to issues of theology, and not worldly innovations; however, al-Ghabra invokes the prohibition to object to a range of nineteenth-century changes including "the spread of secular schools for boys and girls and the publication of illustrated books that circulate Western values and concepts" (1:632). For al-Ghabra, the only "true progress is the return to the moral excellence of our ancestors and the strength of their faith in their religion" (1:622). The extremity of al-Ghabra's position undermines what would otherwise be a commonplace celebration of "the values of our forefathers."

While theatre audiences would have no difficulty dismissing al-Ghabra, a more complicated ambivalence is articulated by a character named Abd al-Raheem, who worries that "chasing after everything European" will destroy "our habits, our knowledge, even our clothing." He notes that the markets are flooded with European products while local crafts languish. As he explains, "What worries me is that we will deviate a lot and then lose our roots and not know our way after that" (1:616). In this context, one sees the reactionism of al-Ghabra in the context of both intellectual innovations of the nineteenth century (known as the Arab Renaissance or *nahḍa*) and European penetration of Levantine markets.

Wannus makes clear that understandings of heritage are shaped by historical conditions and he is at pains in the play to display those conditions as well as his own historical method. Throughout, Wannus highlights the creative activity informing historical reconstruction. At the start of the production the caller explains that the play depicts historical characters and incidents in a "factual story, the threads of which we have gathered from documents and reports" (1:590). Soon after the caller draws attention to the creative license this process has required: "We tell you honestly, the documents are meager and the reports few, but we have tried with what we have gathered to show the basic features of that story and draw an approximate picture of the age in which Qabbani appeared" (1:605).

The idea of history as a process of selection and presentation is underscored by the liberty that Wannus grants to future directors to trim the play's historical exposition as they see fit (1:587). As historical reconstruction is a creative process, it follows that future collaborators are similarly free to pick and choose from Wannus's dramaturgical archive – supplementing the playwright's research with their own research in coffee houses and popular theatres. History, like theatre, is a collaborative undertaking and the threads of its construction can be found in both the archive and in living performance practices. History as composition is suggested by the curtain that separates the upstage playing space (Qabbani's theatre) from the downstage playing space (scenes set throughout Damascus); the curtain presents a detailed painting of old Damascus with shadow puppet shows in alleyways and coffee houses and Qabbani's stage prominently visible (see Figure 6).

In the course of the play it becomes clear that the underlying tension that prompts such heated denunciations of the theatre is between those who would maintain old hierarchies (religious elites, traditional notable families, and the Islamic caliphate) and those who propose Arab

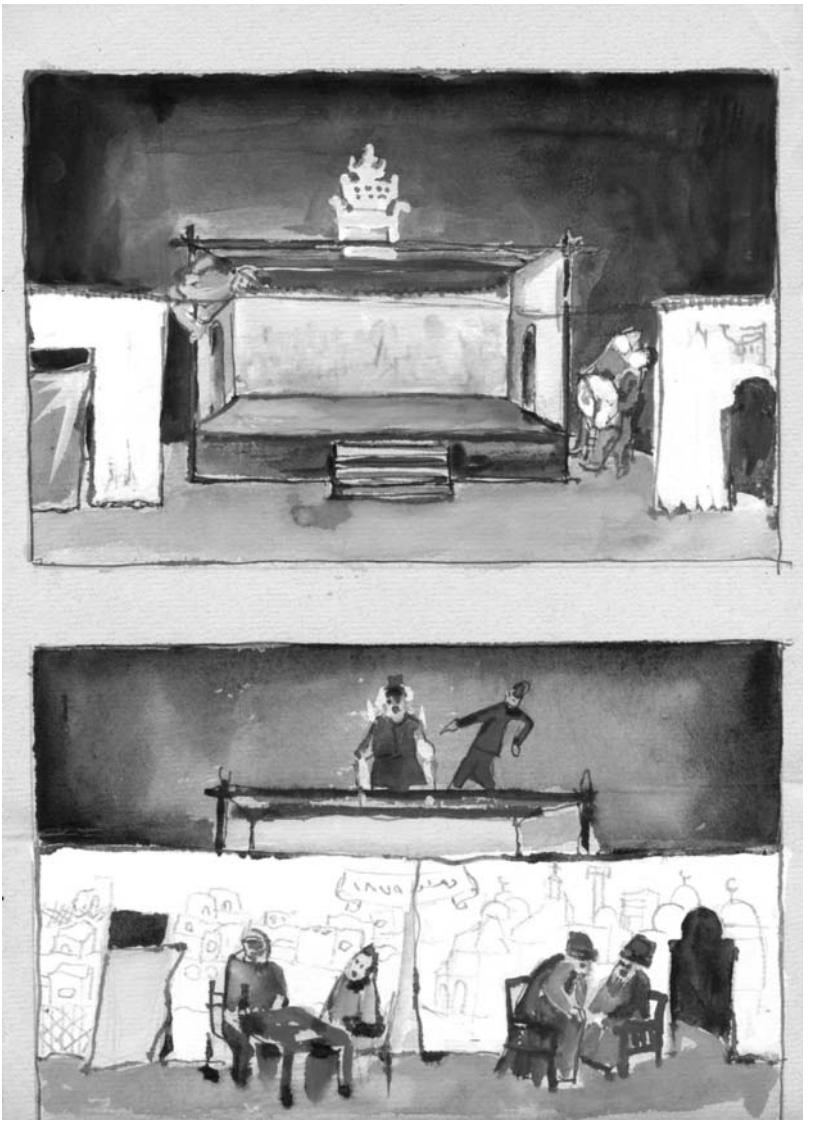

*Figure 6* Set design for *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani*. Notice that the map of old Damascus is depicted on a Brechtian half curtain. Courtesy Directorate of Theatres and Music, Ministry of Culture, Syrian Arab Republic.

nationalism, succession from the Ottoman Empire, and democratic reform. In Sheik Said al-Ghabra's mind, theatre is the great leveler. The fact that "paupers" would dare to "dress up as the caliphs of the Moslems before the people" suggests that it is only a matter of time before they impersonate "Damascus' notable families, religious scholars, and lords … diminishing them in the eyes of the people and tearing down the classes of society" (1:606). Meanwhile, the nationalist Anwar and his colleagues are distributing pamphlets calling for greater autonomy from the Ottoman Porte (1:648). It is not simply that the Ottoman Empire has left the people of the Levant underdeveloped, but that the Levant is underdeveloped because it has been denied autonomy. As Anwar explains: "The basis of the decline is that they do not permit us to choose our destiny." Resorting to an Arabic expression he laments: "They cut our clothes any which way and we wear them" (1:635). It is a continuation of Wannus's complaint that a people who offer terms of respect to whoever marries their mother should expect hard times. The battle is between those who would preserve authority and those who call for democratic reform.

Al-Ghabra is not alone in ascribing to theatre the power to transform society. When a character comments on what he sees as theatre's disturbing power to make people "lose control of their tongues" and to "unify [audiences] in euphoria," Anwar quickly responds that this power is one of theatre's "particular virtues."

> It strengthens people's tendency to gather because it removes their conflicts, intolerance, and discrimination. Then it pushes them to connect and love society, and without a doubt that is a necessary basis for individuals and nations to advance. (1:604)

The theatre marks the collapse of a feudal society and the emergence of a public sphere open to a wide swath of males. It is a utopian vision (provided one is male) of an emerging national identity founded in free exchange.

It is a vision, not unlike that dramatized in *A Soirée for the Fifth of June*: the audience claims the stage and together constructs a vision of itself in defiance of authority. In that earlier play, the project of national discovery came to an abrupt halt when security personnel surrounded the audience, arrested the most vocal, and escorted the remainder of the audience out. Wannus casts this scene back in time. In the midst of a performance, Sheik Sa'id al-Ghabra and two officers stop the actors and

announce a decree from the Ottoman Porte closing Qabbani's theatre. Al-Ghabra instructs the men to "smash the place and rip up everything in it" (1:680). Amidst the sounds of destruction, flames appear upstage. In fact Qabbani's theatre was closed by a decree from the caliph, and it is said that it was burned by a mob.

Qabbani found a more welcoming home in the Cairo of Muhammed Tewfik Pasha, and in reference to this fact Wannus ends the play with Qabbani's promise to continue his art. Once again Wannus's play shows theatre's failed attempt to establish a rich civil society, but unlike other plays, *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani* holds out the promise that future attempts will be more successful. Wannus wrote two more plays before a twelve-year hiatus from playwriting. He returned to playwriting with *The Rape* and then, after a diagnosis of cancer, began a furious period of writing that began with *Historical Miniatures*.

As noted earlier, five of Wannus's final six plays explore Arab history from the fifteenth century forward, and these plays are set entirely or partially in Damascus. Near the end of his life, Wannus asserted that historical dramatization should be seen as resistance to a regime that sought to erase the past.

> [Depriving] a society of its history is a key means for marginalizing civil society and encouraging the rule of tyranny … I consider literary works that try to revive forgotten periods without losing their artistry, to be glorious artifacts of opposition … Only historical consciousness can extricate us from the vicious circle that blocks the road to the future. (Quoted in Cooke 2000: 204)

As the later plays bear out, Wannus was not simply repeating Santayana's well-worn aphorism about the danger of repeating the past. Instead Wannus argued here that the discussion of a shared past is central to the creation of a vibrant civil society that enables a people to meet challenges and resist oppression.

While an appreciation of heritage can bind a community, the fetishizing of supposedly timeless traditions can obscure the mechanisms of historical change, rendering a people docile in the face of tyranny; it has always been and always will be. In the plays that followed, Wannus took up practices and figures hallowed as examples of heritage, desacralizing and examining them in the context of the existing material conditions. Such historical imaginings open a space for potential change.

Wannus inaugurated this project of historical imaging with *Historical Miniatures*, his most complex meditation on history and Arab identity. The play examines fourteenth-century ideas of blood solidarity, martyrdom, jihad, and sovereignty so as to comment on contemporary political events. The play depicts Tamerlane's siege of Damascus in 1399, taking the presence in the city of Ibn Khaldun – the scholar credited with transforming history into a science – as an occasion to examine the intellectual's responsibility to society and historiography's role in social change. As a piece of dramaturgy it is epic, with more than thirty characters and running well over three hours uncut. It is also notable for the emotional depth of its characters, many of which inspire sharp ambivalence. In 2007 Naila al-Atrash received permission to direct a student production with seventeen performances in Damascus (personal interview, May 22, 2004), its first and only run in Syria to date

The term "miniatures" in the translated title is an approximation of the Arabic term *munamnamaat*, the genre of miniature painting on paper, often in manuscripts. The images are without perspective, often crowding a plethora of locations or objects into the frame. According to al-Atrash, each detail in a *munamnama* (singular) says something, but the work's meaning is only evident in the entire series. It is, she explains, a genre without perspective; meaning is not evident in a single frame but must be created by the viewer who discerns connections across multiple frames. The appropriateness of the term to the play is immediately evident; *Historical Miniatures* is composed of isolated scenes of nationalist passion, religious repression, individual greed, and collective action. In no instance is any action free of these seemingly contradictory impulses, making it impossible to relegate the carnage that follows the surrender of Damascus to a specific and historically remote evil.

The calm rationalism of the medieval scholar Ibn Khaldun is seen to justify atrocities provided they ultimately lead to intellectual development and the advancement of civilization. The strongest and most stirring statements against the tyranny of sultans and on behalf of nationalist unification come from a religious leader responsible for the persecution of humanist thinkers. Even when Wannus depicts individual acts of compassion, he shows these actions to be constrained by religious ideology. In his most controversial move, Wannus conflates Tamerlane's siege of Damascus with Israel's 1982 siege of Beirut, suddenly juxtaposing political Islam, Assad's manipulation of the Palestinian issue, Syria's turn to capitalism, and the failure of pan-Arabism with fourteenth-century events. Rather than providing us with a moral or a clear perspective

on the events, *Historical Miniatures* asks us to examine the ideological currents that carry modern nations to carnage.

Ibn Khaldun is both a figure within the miniature and the bearer of a new perspectival logic antithetical to that medium. In the flattened space of the miniature, all details are equally valuable; there is no distinction between figure and ground, simply an open space to fill with decoration, figural or not. The narrative equivalent to the miniature might be the chronicle, "a continuous register of events in order of time … especially one in which the facts are narrated without philosophic treatment," according to the *OED*. Ibn Khaldun ushered in a new understanding of the past. He is widely credited with having "established a science of history some five centuries before the emergence of historiography" and then used this new science to articulate a cyclical pattern of dynastic rise and fall, as one scholar of Ibn Khaldun explains (Salama 2011: 79). Whereas most Muslim historians in the medieval period looked to the golden age of Islam to find explicit dictates, Khaldun looked to the past to uncover the internal mechanisms that drove historical change. The historian did not simply transmit truths, the historian constructed truths by weighing multiple sources and selecting facts that helped the historian trace out processes invisible to the naked eye but evident in their effects over time. History, Ibn Khaldun asserted, is both an art and a science.

Wannus gives Ibn Khaldun a young fictional assistant named Sharaf ad-Din responsible for transcribing the historian's narrative; Sharaf ad-Din repeatedly questions Ibn Khaldun about the repercussions of his method as the younger man decides his own course of action in the face of impending invasion. When Ibn Khaldun refers to Tamerlane as a "prince," Sharaf ad-Din asks if the word unfairly honors one who might be more accurately described as a "heathen" or a "devil." Ibn Khaldun responds that he is composing a "history," not a "satire" or a "treatise." Here satire (*hijā*) refers to a form of invective poetry dating to before Islam and one condemned by many Arab aestheticians; Averroës (Ibn Rushd), for example, asserted in his *Middle Commentary of Aristotle's Poetics* that those who excel in *hijā* were "naturally more deficient and more proximate to vice" than those who excelled as paeans (Averroës 2000: 66).

Implicit in Ibn Khaldun's complaint is not simply that satires and treatises aim at invective rather than clarity; these forms are manifestations of the composer's own moral value. As a science, history demands a method that quarantines the analysis from the limitations, perspective, and historical position of the composer. Ibn Khaldun goes on to explain that history has "nothing to do with whims and biases" nor will it concern itself "with insults or prevalent moral assessment" (Wannus

1994b: 62). The term I have translated as "prevalent," *shā'i'a*, can be used as a noun to mean a rumor. The implication is that what is widely believed may have little grounding in truth. An assessment limited by the vices of the scholar or the transitory mortality of a specific age will not stand the test of time.

Such a philosophy of history prevents historians from making any moral judgment on events or using knowledge to change their society. Past writers, from Aristotle to al-Marwardi, had attempted to treat the flaws of their societies, but that was because they lacked Ibn Khaldun's "science of social organization." Ibn Khaldun explains that past writers did not understand that:

> all events whether in essence or effect, possess their own qualities that are themselves manifestations of their power, that social organizations obey fixed laws as constant as those that govern the seasons in their succession and day and night in their alternation. (123)

Sharaf ad-Din objects that such a philosophy of history leaves no room for human will, ignoring "the people and what they could do if an idea or common interest unified them and knit them together in will and determination" (125). However Ibn Khaldun rejects the view that a single idea can change the historical processes that transpire over generations. The science of social organization allows the scholar to understand "why the Sultan falls and his star dims and why Tamerlane rises and his star burns bright" (125) – a trajectory as irreversible as the succession of seasons.

The full implications of this historical philosophy become evident when Ibn Khaldun agrees to provide Tamerlane with geographic studies of the cities and terrains of the historian's native North Africa. When Sharaf ad-Din points out that such a study will surely aid in invasions afflicting Ibn Khaldun's own family and friends, the historian responds that these nations are already doomed.

> Do you want me to shed tears! I have no tears. Those countries you mourn are decrepit, pillaged already without an invasion. Will I journey with Tamerlane? Yes … Why not! I want to know and record. I want to complete my knowledge and further elaborate my science. (141)

The deterministic nature of Ibn Khaldun's science excuses him of responsibility for the well-being of others. Populations necessarily suffer

in periods of decline and the historian's sole responsibility is to record the rise and fall of empires so as to better understand the internal spring that drives human affairs.

The point is not to reveal the moral failings of Ibn Khaldun or of his science of social organization but rather to ask whether ideas can change the course of history. The play asks if scholars and intellectuals *can* (not *should*) intervene in their world. In case the play seems like an attack on Ibn Khaldun, Wannus clarifies – through a character named "chronicler" – that the historical imagination that dominated in the age of Ibn Khaldun was no more compassionate or engaged than Ibn Khaldun's scientific approach.[2] The chronicler is a figure from the near future, recounting events surrounding Tamerlane's siege that he either witnessed or heard of. However, like the composition of a miniature, his narration makes no distinction between figure and ground. He not only relates the actions of the city's notables, the citadel's commander, and Tamerlane, but also describes in detail the weather and the water level of the River Barda. He uncritically repeats all commonly reported events. So, after noting the first meeting between Tamerlane, the Ulama, and the notables, the chronicler concludes his narration by stating, "On that day one hears of a donkey that gave birth to a foal with a human head and no tail" (111). In a later entry, the chronicler explains that henna had disappeared from the market because scores of women were swayed by one woman's dream in which the king of the Jinn announced that those who applied the dye would be spared the atrocities that befell women in other cities Tamerlane had invaded (135).

The undifferentiated listing of events – in which a description of a hailstorm might precede Tamerlane's most recent threats to the city's inhabitants (170) – frustrates the audience's desire for perspective or point of view. One longs for assessment, criticism of the city's nobles who have decided to surrender the city to Tamerlane in hope of maintaining their privileged position or support for those who have decided to join the commander of the citadel and his men who refuse to lay down their arms. The chronicler's seeming indifference to the coming massacre eventually prompts the actor to step out of character and complain about the role's "cold and neutral" tone. While the actor promises not to "falsify the chronicler's tale," he confesses that it will be impossible for him to recount the coming scenes of horror "without a touch of compassion or some tragic sense" (157). The artist cannot avoid imaginative identification with the past, allowing the given circumstances (to borrow Stanislavski's phrase) to shape his actions in the role. The play sets up theatre as a structure in which discussion of the past and exploration of

the given circumstances inspire a sequence of actions – and then prompts regret on the part of the audience that their reality does not more closely resemble theatrical practice.

The question of whether ideas can change the course of historical events grows most controversial in the play's consideration of jihad. Ibn Khaldun makes his position clear: given the current lack of unity among the Arabs, jihad is a meaningless term. Scattered individuals might resist but in the absence of unity, such actions are futile. According to Ibn Khaldun, "No one speaks of jihad these days except the deluded and charlatans" (106). When Sharaf ad-Din counters that he has been greatly inspired by the Islamic judge (and historical figure) Sheikh Borhan ad-Din at-Tadhili, who has sworn to fight the Tartars to his death, Ibn Khaldun dismisses the Sheikh as "a fanatic" (107). When asked to explain, Ibn Khaldun defines a fanatic as:

> Those who take it upon themselves to establish justice and oppose invasion, who do not recognize that such actions first require *'aṣabīa* (social solidarity), and don't sense the consequences of their ill-advised actions. They are like the insane or the obsessed. They claim a leadership role to fill up their wings, a role they are incapable of obtaining normally, for they think that with these invocations they can achieve the leadership and advantages they hope for. But in fact they achieve nothing but destruction and misfortunes. These fanatics need treatment if they're mad, torture if they're out to create disorder, or public scorn and a reckoning of their lies. (107)

The inevitable march of history, particularly in ages of decline, defies resistance. Those who believe otherwise produce more destruction by denying the social disintegration that reigns.

The opposite of such disintegration, *'aṣabīa*, is central to Ibn Khaldun's theory of dynastic rise and fall, and it similarly grows or ebbs over generations. As he explains in the play, neither ideas nor religious movements can produce solidarity where none exists: "Blood ties and the desire to expand and conquer, these are the origins of the state and the engine of groups and nations. […] 'Aṣabīa isn't created or fashioned but arises naturally and in this country it is weak and retains no power" (122). Given this fact, Arab attempts to resist the domination of powerful nations will necessarily be isolated outbursts of unproductive violence. Calls for resistance might provide provocateurs temporary power and influence, but they will perish with the destruction they incite. It is far better to align oneself with rising powers, and to document and learn from their inevitable spread.

The audience's sympathies are twisted and undermined both in the representation of Ibn Khaldun and in the representation of his antithesis, Sheikh Borhan ad-Din at-Tadhili. Ibn Khaldun has variously been credited as a pioneer in a host of academic disciplines from history and sociology to economics and political science, a tendency that Franz Rosenthal (1983: 15) has referred to (dismissively) as "forerunner syndrome." Whether or not such credit is justified, it is indisputable that Ibn Khaldun has a unique status in the Middle East as a commanding figure in intellectual history; a Google search of "Ibn Khaldun" (in Arabic characters) retrieves dozens of institutes and centers, as well as drug stores, medical providers, and publishing houses that have adopted his name. Arab audiences come to the play familiar with Ibn Khaldun as a prominent figure in their heritage, and it is no doubt a startling experience for many to see him argue for submission to invaders and readily provide those invaders with tools to facilitate additional conquest in Arab lands.

The representation of Sheikh Borhan ad-Din at-Tadhili is even more problematic. At first glance he is a hero of resistance. He is the principal voice defying the invasion; he is deeply humble, publicly condemning himself for seeking a position of influence in the past; despite his advanced age he readily takes up arms to defend his city; and he willingly gives his life in the endeavor. However, in the second scene in which he appears, at-Tadhili condemns a man for questioning the dogma of predestination. Jamal ad-Din ash-Asharaji argues that a just God would not condemn humanity unless that God also gave humanity freedom of choice. In response, at-Tadhili commands the guards: "Beat him until you break his pride. Then throw him in the prison of the citadel." At-Tadhili then orders that Jamal ad-Din's books and manuscripts be burnt. As the flames increase on stage, at-Tadhili delivers a rousing speech insisting that the Mongul invasion is evidence of "God's anger" at such heresy and commands the people of Damascus to return to orthodoxy (Wannus 1994b: 35).

At-Tadhili is a figure of both unity and intolerance, and such ambivalence underscores his rousing call to arms in a moment when the city is gripped with despair. The Sultan had sent an army to defend Damascus against Tamerlane's advance, but when the Sultan's seat of power in Egypt grew unstable he withdrew the army leaving Damascus to defend itself. At-Tadhili begins the speech referencing an idea that Wannus had explored in earlier plays: the failure of the people to hold their governments accountable is both a result and a cause of tyranny. At-Tadhili informs the crowd that the Sultan dishonorably has abandoned the city. At-Tadhili continues: "If we were a different people we

might have a Sultan worthy of the Sultanate, a Sultan who knew how to lead the nation in its adversity, and how to safeguard its land and people." At-Tadhili then explains how the Ulama and Jurists, himself in particular, were seduced by power, striving for influence and sacrificing integrity rather than serving as "the forefront of the community, the voice of truth, and the restraint on the Sultan" (90). These were strong words at a time when Israel occupied southern Lebanon, not to mention the Golan, and when many Syrians had come to view party politics as a source of corruption and experience cronyism as a humiliating injustice.

At-Tadhili's speech gains a messianic fervor as he calls on the people to defend the city. He describes a vision in which the Prophet appeared to him, a sign that he had been called to martyrdom.

> Oh people, the generous Prophet said to me: "Death is nothing but the crossing over of calm waters." And the Prophet waits for us on the other side, he waits amidst verdancy surrounded by light. He waits to dress our wounds and to bless our jihad. Oh people, now I prepare for martyrdom, and I can recover my worth. [...] I, High Judge of the Maliki rite strip the Sultan of all powers along with his circle of princes that tyrannize and violate rights. I go now. I will recite the prayer of the dead for myself, and for those who wish to follow me. Nothing separates us from God but patience and battle. (90)

A divinely issued sovereignty is achieved in the commitment to martyrdom. The speech imagines the possibility of stripping the dishonorable leader of power along with his lackeys who violate the rights of the people. The people commit themselves to righteous struggle. The Prophet appears to welcome them to a certain death. In the process, religious authorities regain political control. This fantasy – and the dangers of such a fantasy – goes unquestioned in the play because the next scene begins with the announcement of at-Tadhili's death. At-Tadhili's speech is both stirring and deeply disconcerting, particularly for an audience that had seen a growing number of martyrdom operations since their use was pioneered during the Lebanese civil war.

While Ibn Khaldun follows science and at-Tadhili dogma, they arrive at similar positions on at least one topic: both condemn Jamal ad-Din's doctrine of free will. The play ends with Jamal ad-Din alone on stage, hanging from a cross. He recounts his experiences, his belief that "reason is greater than dogma and that God's justice could not be the source of

human poverty and humiliation," his trial, torture, and imprisonment. On hearing of his sentence, the Sultan extended it. The commander of the citadel concluded it was too dangerous to let him partake in the defense of the citadel and counseled patience. With the fall of the citadel, he explains, he was brought before Tamerlane where he recognized Ibn Khaldun among other Muslim jurists. Jamal ad-Din concludes:

> Tamerlane inquired of my case. They informed him in his language and anger came to his face and he ordered that I be whipped and crucified. I was bewildered by their unity despite the war and bloodshed that divided them. (205–206)

Ibn Khaldun's historical determinism and at-Tadhili's doctrine of divine predestination similarly exclude the possibility for ideas to change the course of history. Both positions complement the rule of tyrants – both the Sultan and Tamerlane – who rightly understand that when men believe they can change the future revolution becomes possible.

Wannus does not provide a definitive retort to the logic of Ibn Khaldun and at-Tadhili; however, he does produce a play – which is the most one could ask for. He himself acknowledges the limitations of such a rhetorical strategy. At one point the actor playing Sharaf ad-Din steps out of character and asks, "But what will history say of you?" The actor playing Ibn Khaldun steps out of character as well to respond:

> History will only remember the science I founded and the books I composed, whereas no one will remember or concern themselves with these fleeting conversations, no one except the deluded like you and the author of this play. (2:144)

The play protests too much, for in asserting its own impotence the work draws attention to the power of art to prompt the imagination, to haunt dreams, and set wheels of change in motion. Like *The Rape, Historical Miniatures* makes reference to its author and in doing so collapses the distance between the world of the play and the world that author and audience inhabit.

Wannus's careful attention to the historical record makes such eruptions of the now all the more powerful. His principal ally in this project of blurring the boundaries between past and present is the character Sharaf ad-Din who repeatedly evokes modern ideas and events when imagining a new impetus to national development given the weakness of *'aṣabīa*. In his conversations with Ibn Khaldun, Sharaf

ad-Din repeatedly asks if a new form of solidarity could emerge, one grounded in ideas and common interests rather than tribal ties and the urge to grow and conquer. He asks, "Maybe circumstances require that we search for a new form of *'aṣabīa*, one formed in the unity of the nation, the interest of men, and defense against invaders" (126). Here nation (*umma*) refers to a community or people (rather than a state), an expansive community grounded in a shared humanity and resistance to invasion. Later he describes such resistance as "bearing the honor of a nation that occupies two continents" (167). Having rejected organizing principles like the Sultanate, Sharaf ad-Din circles about looking for a concept like pan-Arabism – clearly outside the historical frame of the play but evident in fissures though which the present can be glimpsed.

Images of the present grow more distinct in Sharaf ad-Din's conversations with the commander of the Damascus citadel. After the surrender of the city, Sharaf ad-Din leaves Ibn Khaldun and joins in a final defense against the Tartars. When Sharaf ad-Din counsels that they release men like Jamal ad-Din from the citadel's prison so that they may help in defense, the commander refuses, explaining that the citadel is "the symbol and last bastion of order" and that to "abolish the prison and disregard sentences would be to abolish order" (154). The revolutionary nature of Sharaf ad-Din's thinking emerges when he explains that he fights to "invent a new order." He elaborates: "the nation is one thing, the state or order is something else. […] I battle for the nation and not for its state or its order" (155). The nation takes precedence; political organizations (state and order) follow and serve the people who constitute the nation. The repeated invocation of "order" further summons the present into view; the Arabic word for "order," *naẓām*, also means "regime." In the historical context of the play Sharaf ad-Din is questioning the value of the existing feudal hierarchy, but given the many tears in the play's historical canvas, it is inevitable that the mind's eye summons a modern revolutionary. Rereading the play in 2013, I heard echoes of the chant made ubiquitous by the Arab Spring: "The people want the fall of the regime."

These fissures crack open in the final act of the play, during which fourteenth-century Damascus dissolves, revealing the cityscape of twentieth-century Beirut. Tamerlane has begun his assault of the citadel and, as the daughter of the martyred at-Tadhili notes, "projectiles" pour down on the defenders like angry rain. The word for projectile,

*qadhīfa*, more commonly denotes shell or missile. This begins a slippage between past and present that erupts as she recounts a dream.

> I was in a city on the water … maybe Tripoli or maybe Beirut, probably Beirut. We were under siege as we are here but it was summer, and the sun was radiant and hot. And I saw a strange bird overhead, a bird that roared, and it was as if it was made of silver or iron. It shot over us a deadly terrifying fire, reverberating, demolishing. And then I found myself on a promontory. I looked around and we were circled by houses cut into the mountains. And everyone was out on their terraces, pointing at us and jeering. My father approached me and asked: "Do you know those tribes?" And I said no. And he named them, one after the other. Those are the Arabs of Na'ir, and those of Banu Haritha [a tribe in the Gulf at the time of the Prophet], and those are the Arabs of Greater Syria, and those of Egypt and Cairo, and those are the Qahtan [legendary ancestors of the South Arabians], and those are the Arabs of Africa. They all watched without concern. (167)

The dream clearly foretells the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982. From June 13 to August 12, Israel bombed Beirut in three waves using concussion bombs to bring down whole buildings, phosphorous shells, and American-made cluster bombs. As in the dream, the entire Arab world watched as their governments stood on the sidelines of the conflict.

To fully grasp the boldness of Wannus's reference, it is necessary to review the actions (and lack of actions) taken by the Syrian government during the conflict. Syria had controlled Lebanon's Beqaa Valley since 1976, a region it considered vital for its self-defense. In 1981, in support of the pro-Israeli Christian militia of Bashir Jumayil in his effort to take the Beqaa Valley, the Israeli air force attacked Syrian helicopters in Lebanon. A US-negotiated ceasefire followed. Then on June 6, 1982, with Ariel Sharon recently appointed defense minister, Israel sent 76,000 men, 1,250 tanks, and 1,500 armored personnel carriers into Lebanon supported by the air force and navy. Every major refugee camp in southern Lebanon was subjected to saturation bombing in the hopes of making the region uninhabitable. Despite pledges to go no further than forty kilometers into Lebanon and not to attack Syrian forces, it became apparent that the ultimate objective of the campaign was to expel the PLO and Syrian forces from Lebanon and to install Bashir Jumayil as president of Lebanon. (He was assassinated before he could

assume power.) Notably, the eleven-hour saturation bombing of Beirut on August 12 took place *after* the PLO had agreed to leave the country. Overall, 17,000 to 19,000 Lebanese and Palestinians were killed and another 30,000 to 40,000 were wounded.

In the initial days of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, while Syrian leaders announced on the radio their intention to "fight Zionist and imperialist enemies to the death," the Syrian air force remained grounded for technical reasons. Syrian troops in Lebanon were under orders not to engage the Israelis. Perhaps more embarrassing to the regime, on several occasions, Prime Minister Menachem Begin announced Israel would not attack Syrian forces in Lebanon – a public acknowledgment that Syria was not challenging Israeli actions. Syria was eventually dragged into a massive air battle with Israel when the latter advanced to the Beqaa Valley, but a truce was called after 48 hours of fighting without consulting Palestinian or Lebanese forces. It appeared that Syria, like the many Arab governments that remained silent during the invasion, was happy to see PLO power reduced even if it came at the cost of massive civilian casualties. Despite the failure of Arab governments to respond to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, these governments were openly critical of the Syrian response. As Patrick Seale (1989: 395) notes, Mubarak accused Assad of a secret deal with the Israelis to divide Lebanon, Kaddafi criticized Assad's acceptance of a ceasefire, and King Hussein condemned Assad for "liquidating the Palestinian cause."

Eleven years later in 1993, Wannus's references to the Lebanon War and his condemnation of Arab passivity were deeply controversial. The play condemns a Sultan who fails to safeguard the people and the land, abrogates that Sultan's right to rule, and then makes the analogy explicit by directly referencing the failure of Arab governments – Syria's in particular – to defend the land and people of Lebanon. In response to the dream depicting Beirut's siege, Sharaf ad-Din expresses amazement that the Arab world can sit idly by while Tamerlane menaces Damascus: "Do they think that our siege will not extend to them? Or do they think we are a sacrificial lamb that will save them! It will be a huge disaster if they do not awake from their ignorance before it is too late!" (Wannus 1994b: 168). Arab *realpolitik* has not only destroyed pan-Arabism, it has rendered the Arab world defenseless.

Not surprisingly, the Syrian government initially prevented production of the play even as the repression of Wannus's later works became difficult as the dying playwright became the object of growing international praise. For example, in 1996, as part of UNESCO's International Theatre Day, Wannus was asked to write a speech that was read in many theatres throughout the world – the first Arab writer so honored.

The government was put in the uncomfortable position of supporting Wannus's nomination for the 1997 Nobel Prize despite banning some of his most respected works. Moreover, an entire edition of the Lebanese journal *Tariq* was devoted to essays examining *Historical Miniatures*, which was being hailed as a play of historical importance.

It was in this context that Naila al-Atrash sought permission to direct *Historical Miniatures*. Shortly after the play's publication by a Beirut press, al-Atrash received permission for a production. She quickly secured many of Syria's leading theatre and film actors, but government permission was revoked soon into the production process. Al-Atrash then petitioned for a year and a half before she was allowed to workshop the play with students from the Damascus Theatre Institute (where she had taught for twenty-two years, twelve years of which she served as Director of the Acting Program). So began what she describes as her "game of hide and seek" with the Ministry of Culture (personal interview, May 25, 2002).

According to al-Atrash, the Minister of Culture felt tremendous "shame" that this work had not been staged, especially as it was clear that Wannus would soon die. As long as al-Atrash called her production a student workshop and included actors from the Theatre Institute, the Ministry of Culture seemed willing to look the other way, even as al-Atrash brought in professional actors, a French scene designer, and then independently decided to switch the production from the Theatre Institute to the thirteenth-century citadel in which much of the play actually takes place. Al-Atrash explained to me that she was never certain that the production would take place or that the show would be allowed to run for the approved seventeen nights. Wannus's death on May 17, 1997, just five weeks before opening night, may account for the government's acquiescence. To quote al-Atrash: "If he hadn't died, it would have been difficult."

The relocation of the production to the thirteenth-century citadel of Damascus was the most daring of al-Atrash's directing choices. Al-Atrash oriented the performance spaces such that the cells of the citadel flanked the audience, and since these cells had been used to house political prisoners well into the era of then president Hafez al-Assad, the audience was provided with a visual reminder of the persistence of state violence.[3] At the start of the play, when Jamal ad-Din is imprisoned for heresy, he was led to one of the simultaneously medieval and contemporary cells. He remained there for the entire show, a reminder to the audience that they too live in an era when people are imprisoned for their ideas.

Gender oppression has been a consistent focus of Wannus's work since he returned to playwriting with *The Rape*. As in that work, *Historical Miniatures* examines the replication of abuse across the public and private realms. The play includes a subplot in which a wealthy Damascene merchant, who profits from the growing scarcity and who counsels surrender for selfish economic reasons, purchases a young female refugee from Aleppo from her impoverished father. His rape and abuse of the young girl mirror his economic exploitation of the Damascus population and foreshadow the horrors that will befall the population with the coming of Tamerlane. Economic, political, and sexual oppression are presented as a single logic, the dominance of the powerful over the weak, which finds its clearest expression in a culture of rape.

In subsequent works Wannus increasingly turned to the role of historically specific conditions in shaping human consciousness, specifically the impact of gender oppression and sexual inhibition. These latter works more pointedly explore patterns of patriarchic oppression that link public and private spheres. Taken together they constitute a genealogy of oppression that connects the rise of twentieth-century political oppression to family structures evident from the threshold of Syria's modernity. One prominent element in this genealogy is the persistence of honor killing. Three of his final plays take up this subject: *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (1994), *Wretched Dreams* (1994), and *Drunken Days* (1995). I conclude this chapter with the first two.

*Rituals of Signs and Transformations* revisits the time and place Wannus explored in *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani*, late-nineteenth century Damascus when the modernizing reforms of the Ottoman caliphate prompted intellectual and cultural development as well as the anger of religious reactionaries. In that earlier play, Wannus depicted the theatre as a space in which performance institutes a transgressive space of invention and transformation. The theatre creates and transforms a public. With *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* Wannus imagines the brothel as a space of radical performance, a joyous narcissism that transforms the individual – performer and audience, courtesan and patron. There is nothing new in associating theatre with prostitution; it is a long-standing libel and one that is repeated by religious figures in *An Evening with Abu Khalil Qabbani*. Wannus turns the accusation on its head by depicting sexual display – both for heterosexual women and homosexual men – as an attempt at claiming autonomy and of subverting existing power structures. The reactionaries were right: theatre is about the body and the body – in the best situations – is a theatre in which one performs a self wrought from desires and hopes.

Wannus (1996a: 2:469) explains that *Rituals and Signs of Transformations* is taken from an anecdote recounted in the memoir of the Syrian nationalist Fakhri al-Barudi in which the Mufti of Damascus, setting aside his enmity, came to the rescue of the *naqīb ash-sharāf* (the head representative of those families claiming descent from Muhammad) when he was arrested reveling with his mistress. The play's initiating event, as Joseph Massad (2007: 351) explains, is fully taken from al-Barudi: after the imprisonment of the *naqīb*, the Mufti arranged to have the *naqīb*'s wife secretly trade places with the mistress. The Mufti then went to the Ottoman governor complaining that the police chief threatened all in the city, having gone so far as to arrest the *naqīb* and his own wife without cause. The governor released the *naqīb* and jailed the police chief. The Mufti used his new influence over the *naqīb* to ensure his resignation. To this initial incident, Wannus adds an additional detail that propels his story: the *naqīb*'s wife agrees to the ruse on the condition that the Mufti dissolve her marriage. She breaks all past ties and pursues the life of a courtesan.

Released from marriage, the *naqīb*'s wife, Mu'minah (which translates as "one who believes or is faithful"), changes her name to Al-Masa (which translates as "diamond") and begins a new life as a courtesan. She describes this as a project of self-articulation, liberating herself from restrictive precepts so that her desires and hopes may be immediately visible on the skin. When the Mufti, who both desires Al-Masa and fears her impact on his society, proposes to make Al-Masa one of his wives, she declines, explaining that rather than reentering a restrictive institution she is attempting to cut the cords that bind her body, cords "braided from terror, prudery, chastity, feelings of filth, sermons, scripture, warnings, proverbs, and the commandments of ancestors" (Wannus 1996a: 2:553–554). Once free of such cords, she imagines herself "as clear as glass." On that day, "The eye will see my secrets, and my secrets will be what the eye sees" (2:554).

Al-Masa effectively describes sexual liberation as a purifying process releasing one from a heritage of shame. She aspires to a kind of radical transparency, in which the self and its desires are immediately legible. Once she is "as clear as glass" she will be cleansed of social pollution – the "feelings of filth" passed down from ancestors. Her language takes on a messianic quality when she explains her dream of becoming "an ocean whose waters are neither bounded nor putrid" (2:589). The body will become a means to transcendence rather than a tie to the material world. The "believer," one focused on spiritual concerns, will truly become a "diamond," an object of material perfection. Significantly,

at the same time that Al-Masa searches for release in the world, her shamed former husband casts aside all worldly possessions and takes up a life of ascetic worship, quoting the Sufi mystic Bayazid Bastami. However, even these deprivations focus back on the body, beautifully manifest in the husband's dervish-like spinning.

Al-Masa's project of self-legibility has a magical effect on the city. Even those at a distance seem to have become infected, releasing an outpouring of latent desire. Merchants complain of prostitutes, both male and female, "strutting in the markets for all to see and no one condemning them" (2:567). One male prostitute complains that his business has been bankrupt by oversupply. Referring to the growing fad for anal and oral sex between men, he complains: "Virile men open from behind and aristocrats open in the front. People, doesn't business suffer when there's too much merchandise!" Competition has become, in his words, "a fever" (2:558). This eruption of desire resembles the spontaneous outpourings of the theatre of cruelty, as theorized by Antonin Artaud. Artaud (2010: 20) writes:

> If fundamental theatre is like the plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation, urging forward the exteriorization of a latent undercurrent of cruelty through which all the perversity of which the mind is capable, whether in a person or a nation, become localized.

In striving to make her body the clear and immediate exteriorization of internal impulse, Al-Masa becomes Artaud's transforming actor.

Paradoxically Al-Masa pursues the life of the courtesan, with its deceptions and artifice, as a means of truthful self-expression. This seeming paradox is best understood as a radicalization of Wannus's career-long effort to reimagine theatre as a space of civic engagement and communication. The idea that the theatre is a space in which a public could define themselves as a nation – that is, diverse practices and memories could coalesce into a coherent image – is corollary to the idea that through the theatre of prostitution one could realize a true self. Wannus imagines the theatre as a space in which a national identity could evolve in defiance of state narratives, and despite the state's control of the venue. Similarly, the brothel becomes the site of imagining a radicalized freedom despite the brothel's role within the order of patriarchy.

Joseph Massad identifies the fallacy informing the play's imagining of desire as a site from which one can constitute oneself as an individual,

escape the logic of a feudalistic society, and attain freedom. Massad (2007: 359) writes:

> If the play stresses the quest for individuality and individualism in a society that represses both, then desire cannot be the foundation of such a quest. As desire is always already social and not part of the individualist economy, how is Mu'minah's quest to release her desires from the shackles of traditional repression, and even oppression, to enter the social economy of carnal pleasure, a quest for modern individualism?

Desire cannot be the site for transcending social pollution, since desire is a product of society. The critique is accurate if we take the play as a call for sexual liberation as a first step in instituting a modern democratic society. That would be a viable reading, but one that would make for a banal production.

Instead, it is more interesting to imagine *Rituals and Signs of Transformations* as part of a modernist reimagining of transgression as an exploration of limits in a desacralized world – a search for absolute freedom rather than a civil society how-to. As such, the play shares in the innovations, contradictions, and limitations of the modernist tradition. The play should be read within a literary tradition including Arthur Schnitzler, André Gide, Georges Bataille, and Jean Genet – not as an elaboration of Voltaire's *Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet*. While it is true that the play is illogical, it is a mistake to conclude that such illogic lessens the play's power. To the contrary, the revolutionary nature of *Rituals and Signs of Transformations* is evident in the unsustainability of the play world it imagines. As in his earlier works, the return of the preexisting order goads the imagination and whets an appetite for change.

Unlike in Wannus's earlier plays, however, in *Rituals and Signs of Transformations* that preexisting order is identified as patriarchal and especially violent in the suppression of women and men who depart from acceptable sexual practice. Sexual oppression as the wellspring of other forms of oppression (and not political oppression alone) is presented as the soul-destroying normalcy of society. We see this in a subplot depicting the relation of two men, Abbas and Afsah. The two characters are initially presented as thoughtless agents of repression, and it is while harassing a male prostitute that Afsah finds license to intimate his desire for Abbas. Afsah is transformed by his confession, and in a later scene shaves his moustache and offers it to Abbas as a love token. He has shaven his entire body so that no other person will ever look at

him, and so that Abbas will find him "beautiful and sleek in embrace." Afsah has effectively renounced his life in the public sphere, has turned his back on his family, and committed himself solely to Abbas.

However, Afsah's gesture threatens Abbas's identification with power, an identification that structures both his public and private self. He responds to the token with disgust: "What pleased me was to mount a man considered one of the strongest in the city. It pleased me to see him bend and humble himself between my arms. Today what pleasure can I expect from mounting a shameless fem?" (Wannus 1996a: 2:542). As the one who penetrates, Abbas can still imagine himself as instantiating patriarchal domination. Significantly, he later conspires in the murder of Al-Masa, when told that the city needs "virile men to combat corruption and return prestige to the regime" (2:592). Abbas is not able to fulfill the plan before Al-Masa is killed by her own brother, Safwan, who seeks to restore family honor and prove himself a man. Marveling at his bloody dagger, he shouts, "Look at me Father, I am the [real] man among you!" Abbas and Safwan both identify their masculinity with the power to police and punish the aberrant.

In his next play, *Wretched Dreams* (1995), Wannus placed gender oppression in relation to the rise of the modern state, specifically the development of the security apparatus under Baath party rule. The play is set in 1963, soon after the dissolution of the United Arab Republic (the three-year union between Syria and Egypt) and immediately following a coup by Baath army officers, lead by Muhammad Umran, Salah Jadid, and Hafez al-Assad. The play focuses on the married lives of two women: Mari, the landlady who is married to a deadbeat from whom she contracted syphilis, and her tenant, Ghada, the mother of a small child and married to an abusive officer in the Baath party. Mari is Christian and Ghada is Muslim, suggesting that the gender dynamics examined in the play are not confined to a specific religious tradition. Instead, the play examines a widespread patriarchal culture that smothers female potential for self-fulfillment and autonomy. The oppressive structures that constrict the lives of these women are shown to expand outward through a state that systemizes and regularizes patriarchal surveillance and oppression.

The second scene of the play shows Ghada's husband, Kazim, imposing a tyrannical control, invading her correspondence, censoring her political opinions, and forcing himself upon her. In this scene the personal is literally political – his increasing aggression upon her person is sparked by her refusal to parrot his political opinions. The two sit on the floor of the main room. Kazim eats grilled chicken. Ghada, in a

corner, writes a letter to her brother who is studying abroad. Their son, Tha'ir, who is three or four years old, sleeps on a bed. Kazim repeatedly interrupts Ghada's writing, frustrated by her lack of attention. When she refuses food, he warns her "Today I'm in a serene mood, Ghada and I don't want any disturbances." He then forces her to drink 'arak, a strong anise-flavored liquor, though she resists. When she immediately retreats to her letter, he taunts her:

> Don't you ever stop writing to your brother? Write him that: "Your brother-in-law sends his greeting and drinks to your health." And don't forget to tell him that the heart of the revolution grows stronger and we defeated the traitorous separatists and unionists of the group of the peacock of Egypt [Nasser]. (Wannus 1996a: 2:263)

He quotes from a popular song that became repurposed as an anti-union song, which was regularly broadcast on the eve of the breakup of the union. He concludes his rant by telling Ghada to write: "And tell him that we don't need his Western science and that he should return to serve the revolution" (2:263). When she refuses to include this in her letter he attempts to take the letter from her so that he can write the passage himself.

Kazim, who only has a primary school education, demeans Ghada's educated brother, presumably a supporter of the union with Egypt. Defying Kazim, she announces, "I love Abd al-Nasser." He grows increasingly enraged, as Kazim somewhat comically curses "Nasser's grandparents and yours." (Kazim and Ghada are cousins and so share the same grandparents.) To each of his taunts she steadfastly repeats, "I love Nasser" until Kazim grabs her by the hair and beats her. Without resisting she shouts: "Hit me!" Kazim responds, "My uncle didn't know how to raise you but I do!" to which she continues, "Hit me!" (2:264). Kazim insists that he can properly "raise" his better-educated wife, taking the place of a father who failed to teach her a woman's place. The fight is only arrested when the child awakes and commands his father, "Let go of Mama." Kazim releases her, cursing both his son and wife, and yelling: "Here, I am God. In this house I'm the lord that you submit to. Not a word from you, no talking" (2:265). Settling the child back in bed, she grows subservient to Kazim, who presses his advantage. He makes her eat from his hand and concludes the scene by demanding sex, to which she complies.

The scene conflates Kazim's insistence on dominating every aspect of his wife's life with his party's project of complete political dominance. He announces that the Baath party has defeated both the "separatists"

and the "unionists," that is, both those who favored union with Egypt and those who ended the union in a 1961 coup (preceding the Baath coup of 1963). While the line refers to historically specific parties, it suggests the suppression of the entire political landscape; whether you oppose or support a position you are open to Baath persecution – all political expression makes you a potential target.

His contempt for democratic processes and expression is evident when Ghada briefly leaves the room to go to the toilet after her beating. "Don't forget to say hello to the President of the Parliament," he shouts after her (2:266). Elected representatives are excrement, the party apparatus alone has a voice. Kazim, like the party, is God in this household and commands complete silence: "Not a word from you, no talking." The only valuable contribution is to serve the revolution. Ghada's brother is instructed to give up his "Western" studies; any discourse beyond Baath surveillance might eventually be used to challenge an emerging Baath hegemony. Similarly, Kazim is angered when his wife writes a letter to her brother, and begins dictating its contents in an attempt to control all language. Her assertion that she "loves" Nasser is both a personal and political refusal. Kazim cannot compel her to love him nor can he compel her to love his party; he can only beat her.

The men in the play are simultaneously pathetic and domineering, a symptom of a social system that mandates female subservience and a political system that suppresses all voices outside the party. In the first scene Mari's husband, Faris, is seen cajoling her for permission to enter her bed, whining and adopting the language and manner of a child demanding comfort from his mother. In the course of the play we learn that Mari's elderly parents married her off because at twenty-five they feared she was becoming an old maid. Faris turned out to be a gambler who is incapable of holding a job, and Mari is forced to support them with seamstress work and renting out rooms in the house, which was given to her by her father. Worst of all, Faris infects Mari with venereal disease on their wedding night, which causes her to later miscarry. In her sexual ignorance, she is unaware of the cause of her increasingly painful symptoms. With her mother ill and her sister abroad, Mari has no one to turn to for information and accepts Faris's explanation that "women are very dirty; they are an exposed impurity" (299). Eventually a female tenant takes Mari to a doctor, but by that time the disease has left her barren. As a Catholic, divorce is prohibited, and she still feels compelled to rely on Faris for certain public dealings. In a comic exchange we learn that Mari has repeatedly charged Faris to select her casket and each time he has squandered the money.

Similarly, Ghada can only ask Kazim to divorce her; as a Muslim she herself cannot initiate divorce. She is more intelligent and better educated than her brutish husband yet is completely under his control. Her own studies were cut short when her father determined that middle schooling was sufficient for a woman. She relied on her brother for reading material and intellectual companionship, but this ceased when he went abroad to continue his education and he has stopped responding to her letters. In fact she agreed to marriage at her brother's insistence. He was fearful that conflict in the family would prompt his father to reverse his reticent approval of foreign study. Women must make themselves small so as not to overshadow the men in their lives.

The political corollary is a party that promises equality but delivers equal subservience to the party. In a scene in a coffee house, Kazim repeatedly corrects Faris who refers to the former with honorifics like Bey and Effendi that are left over from the Ottoman era. Later, Kazim will instruct Faris to spend time in such coffee houses to collect incriminating information on patrons. Kazim has found a like-minded lackey; in their coffee-house conversation Faris reminisces of a time when the "garçon was frightened of birds and was in the hands of the patron before he even took his seat" (2:277). This old world is in fact the one aspired to by the revolution, except in the future all citizens will tremble like the waiters of old. New honorifics do not make a new world. The waiter underscores this point when he interjects: "No Beys, no Effendis, and everyone gets their coffee black no sugar" (2:277). Revolutionary leveling is universal deprivation before an all-powerful state.

The women's hopes for release circle around a mysterious boarder, Bashir, who only appears in an expressionistic scene tangential to the storylines. Mari identifies Bashir as the son she miscarried twenty-six years ago. Ghada closely associates him with her absent brother, but a brother for whom she can lawfully experience desire. He is similarly a receptacle for the men's fears. Faris resents him as the object of Mari's attention and affection and intimates to Kazim that the boarder might be involved in politics and carrying on an affair with Ghada. Bashir is something of a Rorschach test, an indication of desire and fear as structured by gender.

These different projections culminate in a long expressionistic scene in the middle of the play. It might be a dream; the stage directions explain that the scene "swings between dream and reality" (284) and in the scenes following both Mari and Ghada complain of nightmares. However, this prompts the question: Whose dream? The expressionistic scene includes information that the women have not yet shared with each other, and

concludes with Faris and Kazim shooting and tossing Bashir into the garbage – a representation of their plan to drive Bashir from the house that very night. If a dream, it may be a collectively authored dream. Or it may be the most extreme version of the stylistic breaks that Wannus had regularly employed. The world of the play cracks to imagine a space of revolutionary struggle and change, a space that is quickly foreclosed with the return of the play world's dominant logic.

The expressionistic scene begins by revisiting an instigating trauma, the miscarriage and subsequent disease that followed consummation. Mari and Bashir are in the latter's room. He insists that he must travel, fearing the nearby river. "The river flows," she responds, "and I, in my place, wait." Bashir's fear of the river echoes Mari's earlier speculation that Faris had disposed of her fetus by throwing it into the river. She repeats to her son the story of his death: "He extracted it from me, threw it into the river, then spat" (2:284). Bashir asks Mari if his father tortured her, which prompts her to reveal her buttocks, black and blue from an endless regimen of shots. When Bashir refuses to look she takes him to her breast. In their dreamlike state, they double back to the scene of the crime, the miscarriage produced by a disease that will subsequently require a treatment of fifty injections (as Mari later explains).

The infant, an image of possibility, was killed before it was born by a diseased father. His disease is left to fester in her body, bringing pain and foreclosing the possibility of future birth. Her bruised buttocks suggest a reign of terror and torture. However, the scene reclaims possibility. The dead baby – whether a stillborn nationalism, a vibrant civil society, or the open expression of desire – has returned grown, accepting comfort at his mother's breast. His return is temporary. Bashir rises complaining that he cannot live near the river, and his mother repeats that the river flows and she, in her place, waits. How long she and the Arab people must wait is left unanswered.

The light comes up on Faris, transformed into a figure of tradition and heritage but a shameful heritage steeped in violence. Faris appears with a thick moustache, and wearing a keffiyeh and iqal – the traditional headdress of Arab men – eventually commanding Bashir, his "first born," to perform an honor killing. Faris explains that his son must complete "two harvests" this season. When Bashir counters that he will act as two harvesters, his father responds: "What do they teach you in school? Have you lost your dignity? We have habits and traditions and we will not abandon one of them so long as there is manliness or life." He gives Bashir his dagger commanding him to kill his sister for having "exposed us to our people and enemies." Bashir must first complete the normal

harvest and then he will find his sister (his second harvest) waiting for him in the field by the river. As firstborn son, he "will not deserve his place in the clan if he does not purge that stain" (2:285). Faris then opens his shirt, revealing a woman's breast and nipple, which secretes a black viscous milk when pressed. He attempts to force Bashir to smell the noxious fumes coming from his breast (2:286). The unnatural father secretes a poisonous version of mother's milk, one that calls to mind petroleum (especially given Faris's clothing). Wrapping himself in tradition and male honor does not make his secretions less rancid or his dictates less cruel.

The end of the scene explores both the potential for and limitation to poetry as a liberating practice. The setting changes from Bashir's room to a moonlit field. Bashir has completed the harvest and approaches Ghada with the dagger unsheathed and cursing her. Her first line, calmly delivered as she awakens, repositions the site of dishonor: "Did you touch me or was I dreaming?" (2:287). He denies touching her and remains committed to completing the honor killing. She offers no resistance, but when she announces that she must go to the river to the tomb of her mother the scene suddenly shifts registers. "Your eyes are two palm tree forests at dawn," he begins, quoting from "Rain Song" by the Iraqi poet, Baydr Shakir al-Sayyab (2:289). In the course of the scene he confesses his inability to kill his sister, going so far as to admit: "I kissed your thigh while you were sleeping." Ghada responds, "I pretended to sleep" (2:290). Ghada disappears while Bashir recites "Rain Song." Kazim and Feris enter, shoot Bashir, and carry him out to the garbage. Bashir continues reciting, stopping only to inform them that he is not dead, though his assassins pay no attention.

The woman's stain is revealed as illicit male desire: "Did you touch me?" Recognition of his own displaced sin does not deter him from killing. Reference to their mother's tomb by the river does. In death, a mother is reunited with her fetus at the site of its disposal; one grave in, the other by, the river. This image of dead potential releases lines of love poetry by one the pioneers of Arab free verse. "Rain Song," written by an exile hunted by the secret police, is a love poem tinged with loss and expressing despair and anger at the inequalities and hunger that persist in a lost homeland. The poem is the pivot that shifts the scene from that of patriarchal control to a joyful embrace of transgressive desire. As we have seen in other Wannus plays, the space of liberation quickly collapses.

Kazim: So, that's the culprit! Coward … traitor … slinking behind the backs of men to toy with reputations.
Bashir: I was reading poetry.

Kazim: We know what reading suspicious and traitorous poetry means.
Faris: He is an enemy of the revolution. (2:290)

"Rain Song" begins as an expression of desire for an absent love and ends as an indictment of injustice. Artistic innovation opens the door to political critique and so great poetry at some level is the enemy of the Baath revolution. The state responds swiftly and harshly, but the reassertion of control is never complete. Even as they carry Bashir to the trash heap he continues to recite: "Your eyes are two palm tree forests at dawn."

The next morning the women awake to discover that their husbands have excised Bashir from their lives. No longer able to imagine him as the bearer of future happiness, they decide to take action themselves. This choice is preceded by the transmission of poetry. Mari discovers a book that Bashir left under his pillow and gives it to Ghada: "No doubt he left it for you." Ghada recognizes it as "the poems he never tired of reciting" and notes that they were also poems that her brother often read to her as well. She then remarks of her brother and Bashir, "How they resembled each other." In her solitude, she reads from the poem. A Syrian audience would recognize the lines from "Rain Song."

No man – brother or lover or conflation of the two – will secure Ghada's rights. Rights exist in their exercise not in the abstract, and they come into existence the moment a person or a people put a check on authority. The women can only secure their rights through violence, and a poem prompts this realization. In Wannus's utopic dramaturgy, art is the bearer of this revolutionary consciousness. It is a subversive discourse that almost magically opens temporary cracks in the dominant discourses. The women decide to poison their husbands who are sharing an evening meal of stuffed lamb's intestines. Their plan goes awry when Ghada's son, Tha'ir, samples the meal and dies, alerting the men.

This tragic final scene positions the men as representatives of a patriarchal order that unites political surveillance with control of the home. The scene begins with Kazim remarking how much he now loves the house and the neighborhood and that he has decided to rent Bashir's former room in order to "block the door to error at its source" (2:306). He has recently been promoted and he sets off on an apparent new responsibility: recruiting informers. He tells Faris:

> In this country there is a fifth column of reactionaries, Nasserist agents, and communist lackeys. All of them are germs and they'll tear the revolution apart if we don't see them for what they are. The revolution is strong but vigilance is a responsibility. (2:307)

The expansiveness of this fifth column – multiple organizations with completely contrary objectives – reveals a paranoid mindset that considers anyone outside the party a potential traitor.

Kazim then begins teaching Faris how to best induce incriminating statements from their neighbors.

> Of course in the beginning I only want you to sniff out the news of the people in the neighborhood and to relate their actions to me. You should visit people in their homes and open up to them about events, and learn how to pull them into conversation. Don't forget the coffee house. The coffee house is a place you should return to daily, and unobtrusively pay attention to what is said, without putting anyone on guard. (2:308)

In their love of home, Kazim and faris have purged it of "error" and clearly plan to do the same to the neighborhood and nation. Kazim is intent on insuring that no such errors find their way into the house again, and the Baath project of complete control of the public sphere is similarly focused on stopping errors at their source. "The revolution is generous with those who serve it," Kazim explains to an overjoyed Faris who will now receive a monthly salary for his labor (2:308).

The scene culminating with Tha'ir's death leaves the women more abject and Kazim even more dominant. From the start, the scene is a frightening display of male coercive power. Between celebrating his expulsion of Bashir and recruiting Faris as an informer, he commands his son to drink some of his anise-flavored alcohol, falsely telling the boy it's a sweet cinnamon drink. When Tha'ir resists, Kazim asks him: "Don't you want to become a man? A man weans himself from his mother for lions' milk." Kazim then forces his son to drink the milky colored alcohol (2:307). Later Tha'ir resists eating from the men's plates, explaining that his mother forbids it, and again Kazim upbraids the boy for his attachment to his mother. "That woman is harebrained and if you listen to her, Tha'ir, you won't become a man. You're a man and must eat with men" (2:310–311). The boy eats and the effects of the poison are immediate; he doubles in pain, shaking on the floor. Kazim assumes control with a cruel calm, preventing a distraught Ghada from poisoning herself and stopping Faris from running to a doctor: "It's a judgment and fate. I don't want foolish idle talk. And if there's a whiff of scandal the two of you will pay a heavy price" (2:312). His new position in the security services makes rumors anathema; how is he to control the public sphere if he can't control his home? Such control spells abjection for

Ghada. Her last words in the play: "Dreams are not possible. Hopes are not possible. Nothing but darkness and death" (2:313).

The child's death reveals the high stakes for revolutionary action. His name means "avenger" but it is spelled and pronounced the same as the noun "revolutionary." The death of the child corresponds with the death of the women's hope for liberation, but this death also signals the end of revolutionary possibility. Throughout the play he has represented the possibility of resistance to patriarchal violence from within – still connected to the women's world and subverting his father's command. He commands his father to release his mother in one scene, and when that fails he later takes the more creative route of peeing in his father's military garrison cap and blaming his Tarzan action figure. Tha'ir is a revolutionary of sorts, but with his death that word is condemned to antiphrasis – an ironic marker of the persistence of patriarchal violence under the Baath regime.

Bashir's expulsion similarly defines a diminished world but also the need for communal action. His name literally means "bearer of glad tidings," and in the women's imaginations he is very much an emissary from some happier place either in the past or future. In their minds, his mere presence promises release – though the idea that an outside agent will deliver change is thoroughly repudiated by the end of the play. One notes the etymological connection between "Bashir" and "Bashar," which happens to be the name of the president of Syria (at the time of this book's writing) and which means "glad tidings" or "good omens." The play was published the year after the death of Hafez al-Assad's first son and heir apparent, Bassel. At that time Bashar was recalled from his postgraduate ophthalmology training in London – and a rushed grooming for power began. Seemingly removed from the Baath power structure, European educated, and married to a British born and educated Sunni, many civil society activists hoped that Bashar would be a liberalizing figure. Wannus would seem to council against waiting for the mysterious stranger to deliver liberation.

*Wretched Dreams* was mounted in Damascus in 2008 in a production directed by Naila al-Atrash. Prior to that year, she had repeatedly petitioned for permission to stage the play, but was repeatedly denied. In the years following her 1997 production of *Historical Miniatures*, al-Atrash received few directing opportunities in Syria and was eventually banned from teaching at the High Institute of Theatre Arts. During this time she regularly taught master classes in other Arab countries, and directed two college productions in the United States. With the rise of the civil society movement in Syria, al-Atrash grew more outspoken.

In doing so, she traded on her notoriety as a director widely respected throughout the region, but also on the fame of her family. Naila al-Atrash is a member of a Druze family long prominent in politics and art. She is the granddaughter of Sultan Al-Atrash, leader of the Syrian revolution against the French Mandate, and niece of the nationalist leader Mansour al-Atrash, who died in November of 2006. Mansour's death, falling soon after the Baath crackdown on opposition figures, left al-Atrash particularly vulnerable. She was banned from foreign travel and subjected to surveillance.

Then UNESCO selected Damascus as the Capital of Arab Culture for 2008. In addition to inviting performers from around the world, the Syrian Ministry of Culture embarked on an ambitious theatre season. It would be inconceivable that such a season would not include one of Wannus's plays, as Syria's most important playwright. The fact that most of his later works, which are widely considered among his very best, had not been performed in Syria was inconsistent with the image the nation sought to project – especially as it sought to dispel its rogue state status. At the opening ceremonies for the Year of Arab Culture, President Bashar al-Assad lauded Damascene culture as one of "freedom and the defense of freedom," explaining that: "our freedom is a prerequisite for our creativity and hence both are inseparable." Moreover, where censorship is concerned there is often little institutional memory. The year 2007 saw the selection of Ajaj Salem as Director of Theatre and Music in the Ministry of Culture, and whatever objections prevented the play's mounting in earlier years may have receded with the previous administration.

Finally, the play had received a successful run in Egypt in 2005 that may have shifted perceptions of the play. In that production, a talented cast with several famous actors highlighted comic elements in the play. The production focused on the fact that Mari is Christian. Her apartment featured a stained-glass crucifix, which was dramatically lit during the intervals between scenes. The result was to transform the child's death into a mystical sacrifice, effectively dehistoricizing the play and blunting the play's political critique with broad humor. The Egyptian production was remounted at the 2006 Damascus International Theatre Festival, where I saw it, and while several people I spoke with complained that the production had transformed the play into farce, no one commented on the play's potential political message. The Egyptian production, in my mind, made the play appear safe, or rather, uncritical of Baath power. There is also the issue of national chauvinism; the existence of a successful Egyptian production begged a Syrian response.

Why did the state turn to al-Atrash? First, if part of the objective of the 2008 theatre season was to justify Damascus's selection as Capital of Arab Culture, and to refute depictions of Syria as authoritarian, then the presence of an oppositional director in the theatre season had a clear value. If the play is imagined as a personal story of male oppression there is the additional advantage of spotlighting the presence of a female director. Al-Atrash is one of a few female directors in Syria, and is certainly the best known. Some of her most successful productions have been about female sexuality and patriarchy – as when she staged *The House of Bernarda Alba* in an Umayyad period khan so as to connect images of female seclusion and sexuality across regions and periods.

Al-Atrash pruned back *Wretched Dreams* to well under two hours, condensing the interactions between Faris and Kazim and, most strikingly, replacing the scene of the poisoning and a final scene between Mari and Feris with an opening montage that described the death of the child. The setting was similarly economical; rather than the multiple furnished rooms described in the play, designer Bissan al-Sharif substituted a single cast iron bed in an open space backed by a steep rake (see Figure 7). The rake is literally and figuratively a space of dreams; al-Atrash set the expressionistic scene on the rake and employed the rake whenever

*Figure 7* Nanda Muhammad as Ghada and Najwa Alwan as Mari. *Wretched Dreams*. Photo by Adel Samara. Courtesy Adel Samara.

the women described their aspirations and hopes. The bed took on increased significance over the course of the production until the scene in which the women agree to prepare the poisoned meal. The bed sheet twisted into a taught cord became the long intestine, worked vigorously by the women as they discussed their anticipated freedom – a gestus that transformed an image of shame and humiliation (the marriage bed) into an image of revenge and release (the poisoned intestines).

While Wannus's most celebrated plays examine Syria's past, he has recently been lauded for his prescience. Eyad Houssami (2012: 5) explains that the Arab revolts and uprisings that began in 2010 propelled him to edit a collection of essays exploring Wannus's legacy in contemporary Arab theatre. In the foreword to that collection, Elias Khoury noted that though Wannus had died fourteen years before, "he has been most present since the outbreak of the revolution" (in Houssami 2012: xi). Margaret Litvin (2013: 121) argues that *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* contains a "prophetic warning about the chaos that is released when traditional political, religious, and gender structures of authority are suddenly undermined in a society previously deformed by a long experience of despotism." The play has grown more popular in a time of uprisings. It was staged at the American University in Cairo in 2011. In 2013 it was performed in French at the Comédie Française and in English (translated by Robert Myers and Nada Saab) at the American University in Beirut.

If Wannus appears more with us after 2010, it may be that events have shown the degree to which performance is a fertile space from which to imagine change. Early in the Syrian Uprising, performance played a significant role in galvanizing resistance. In the first year of the Uprising, YouTube videos showed raucous crowds packing city squares and chanting mocking protest songs such as "Come on, Bashar, Leave." The proliferation of such songs, often performed to traditional line-dances, prompted the *New York Times* to liken the Uprising to a "dance-athon to dislodge a despot" (MacFarquhar 2011). As discussed in the first and final chapters of this book, puppet troupes, film collective, and documentary theatre-makers have demonstrated that art can be an important space for documenting past wrongs and imagining the future.

# 5
# Torture

Whether set in the distant past, a fable-like setting, or contemporary Syria, interrogation and torture are some of the most repeated scenes in Syrian political theatre from its inception through to the performances of Arab Spring activists. While these representations differ markedly, they consistently depict intelligence gathering as largely or completely indifferent to the veracity of information. In these plays, interrogation and torture are not so much a means of discerning specific threats to the state, but more broadly a strategy of substantiating power. These plays differ, I argue, in the strategies by which the playwrights assault such power.

Torture demonstrates the impotence of the accused before a powerful inquisitor. The plays discussed in this chapter thwart this process by intervening in the moment of torture with imagery that erases the figure of power. These plays employ very different dramaturgical strategies but produce a single political end, undermining the absolute power of the torturer. In this chapter I examine the representation of torture in thirteen works dating from 1967 to 2013. Each employs one of five strategies to rescue the torture victim from powerlessness: (1) lyricism that transforms the accused into a transcendent figure effacing power's monopoly of speech; (2) mocking representations that present the interrogator as an idiotic (albeit effective) instrument of state violence; (3) comic reversals whereby the accused triumphs through crafty simplicity over the interrogator; (4) transformation of the interrogation into a moment of existential self-questioning that shifts a representation of state power to a representation of individual discovery; and (5) depiction of the interrogator as himself a victim of state violence. In these works, the representation of torture draws attention to state repression while also cultivating fantasies of resistance.

This imaginative resistance points to theatre's unique world-making potential, a capacity all the more striking in the scene of unmaking that is torture. Here I am adopting the terminology of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* and throughout this chapter her insights inform my analysis. Scarry (1985: 19) rightly remarks that torture inflicts pain that is "language destroying" and that the purpose of interrogation "is not to elicit needed information but to visibly deconstruct the prisoner's voice." Pain, in its totality, unmakes identity and the world:

> [Pain] takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself and threatening to its claims. (Scarry 1985: 55)

Pain begins as radically separate from the victim of pain and ends by becoming all that the victim can know or be.

Imagining, Scarry explains, is the opposite process, whereby one extends the self through a process of visualizing objects responsive to our needs. If pain is a totalizing experience that turns us completely inward, hungering for an external object, imagining is entirely externalized, requiring no felt experience. As Scarry neatly summarizes: "While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its object" (1985: 162). Imagining extends the self outward as one invents a world of possibility, and it is through such imagining that one experiences the world. Pain turns one wholly inward, destroying potential for such imaginative engagement. Imagining and pain frame the human experience, they are means by which we make or unmake the world.

The representations of interrogation and torture discussed in this chapter present and then deconstruct the unmaking of the accused's voice. Torture, in many of these plays, is not simply an assault on an individual but on the individual as a national consciousness; the voice that is silenced is the voice of national identity. These plays reassert the possibility of national identity by substituting the playwright's voice (either through character speech or dramatic context) for the absent voice of the accused. A scene of unmaking becomes a scene of making as the audience is invited to imagine a new national identity through the sacrificed voice of the accused. This process helps explain the ubiquity of scenes of torture on the Syrian stage. It is not simply

that such scenes draw attention to a horrific fact of Syrian life. Of course they do, but they also transform an act intended to silence into a scene of communal speech as the audience greets the playwright's voice with their own laughter, jeers, or applause.

Detention without trial and torture have been constant features of Syrian life throughout the period of this study and before. Regimes rise and fall; only torture has remained constant. A history of modern state violence in Syria would surely begin with the French Mandate (1923–1943), a period marked by the imposition of punitive violence and collective punishment. As Daniel Neep has amply documented, during the Great Syrian Revolt (1925–1927), Syrian villages suspected of complicity with nationalist rebels were subjected to brutal reprisals by the French military. These included aerial and artillery bombardment of residential quarters, looting and the execution of noncombatants, hostage taking, and the public exhibition of dead rebels (Neep 2012: 50). Accounts of specific atrocities are most often found in private correspondence rather than official documents, such as a letter from a legionnaire noting that after taking a village he received orders to "kill everyone in the town by bayonet or cannon." After sparing a woman and her child, the legionnaire was imprisoned for twenty days for insubordination (Neep 2012: 51–52). Nationalists alleged brutal acts by the French military such as gang rape and immolation (Neep 2012: 64).

During the Mandate, the French established an elaborate security service that served, in the words of Philip Khoury (1987: 78), "as the cornerstone of French administration in Syria." A similar assessment is made by Martin Thomas (2008: 147) who describes French Mandate Syria as an "intelligence state," asserting that the French relied "on their security apparatus to forestall or contain major challenges to the colonial order." According to Middle East Watch (1991: 38), this security apparatus was subject to little legal restraint, practicing detention without trial, torture, and summary execution. Independent Syria inherited these elaborate security systems, which grew increasingly repressive under subsequent military dictatorships. After Syria's first military coup in 1949 by Army Chief of Staff, Husni al-Za'im, that leader promised to "unleash a war to the death against communism in Syria" arresting roughly 400 party members within the first few weeks of his rule (Rathmell 1995: 38). Za'im was in turn overthrown within four and a half months, and before the year was up the ensuing civilian government was overthrown by Colonel Adib al-Shishakli. Shishakli transformed Syria into a police state, banning most political parties, purging the civil services and educational system, greatly strengthening the

military security services, and staffing the Interior Ministry's security services with soldiers.

Under the Baath party, arbitrary detention, torture, and summary execution have been commonplace. On coming to power in 1963, the party passed an Emergency Law suspending all constitutional protections. When Hafez al-Assad seized power in a 1970 intra-party coup, he at first seemed to curb the security services (Seale 1989: 171); however, this openness was short-lived and government violence soon increased. Middle East Watch asserted that prison authorities routinely tortured and mistreated prisoners (1991: 52). According to that study, during the Islamic Uprising in Syria (1979–1982) over one thousand people were summarily executed in Syrian prisons, in addition to the roughly one thousand prisoners who were massacred in Tadmur prison in retaliation for an assassination attempt against Hafez al-Assad (Middle East Watch 1991: 58).

Many hoped that Bashar al-Assad would abandon these tactics when he succeeded his father in June of 2000, especially after the government released hundreds of political prisoners in November of that year. However, these hopes were tempered after a series of high-profile arrests of civil society activists, beginning with the imprisonment of Riad al-Turk in September of 2001. The full brutality of the regime has been on display during the Revolution that began in the spring of 2011. As discussed in the first chapter, one of the most galvanizing early events was the abduction, torture, death, and mutilation of a thirteen-year-old boy, Hamza Ali al-Khatib, allegedly by the government forces, in April 2011. The Emergency Laws were repealed earlier that month, but authorities preserved immunity from prosecution for the security services. Arbitrary detention and punishment have sharply escalated since then, as documented on a daily basis by the Local Coordination Committees of Syria. Torture, the unmaking of national consciousness, has accompanied Syrians throughout the national period.

One of the great accomplishments of Syrian political theatre has been its transformation of torture, through its representation, into acts of national belonging. No playwright has pursued this project with such dogged persistence, nor employed such varied strategies, as Muhammad al-Maghut. I begin by looking at three of his works: *The Hunchback Sparrow* (1967), *The Jester* (1973), and *Cheers Homeland* (1978). Maghut was imprisoned twice as a result of his membership of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), a secular party devoted to establishing a Syrian state extending through the entire Fertile Crescent. In 1955 a member of the SSNP assassinated Adnan al-Mali, Deputy Chief of Staff of the

Army and Baath party member. Pro-Baathist officers used the murder to discredit the SSNP, driving it underground and arresting many of its members (Rathmell 1995: 97–103), including Maghut, who was sent to the Mezzeh prison, known for widespread human rights abuses and torture. According to Maghut he suffered severe beatings. During the nine months of his incarceration he met the poet and fellow SSNP member, Adonis, who encouraged his writing (personal interview, May 20, 2004). In 1956 Maghut fled to Lebanon where he began writing for the SSNP newspaper, *al-Binā'*, publishing his first collection of poems, *Sorrow in the Light of the Moon*, in 1959. His fame was such that, according to his brother, when one of his articles in *al-Binā'* caused him to be "pursued," sixty lawyers volunteered to defend him (Maghut 2009: 41). He was again imprisoned after the SSNP launched an abortive coup attempt against the Lebanese government in 1961. He was delivered to Syria's civilian government in 1962 and released. He resided in Syria until his death in 2006.

In Maghut's first play, *The Hunchback Sparrow*, images of government brutality are the stuff of surreal juxtapositions or fodder for crass jokes. The rapid tonal shifts and striking imagery redirect our attention from the agony of the prisoner to the virtuosity of the poet. This shift, I will argue, is a kind of victory over authoritarianism – co-opting state violence to demonstrate the power of poetry rather than that of the regime. The play begins in a "nameless human cage in a nameless desert" and the stage directions sum up the prisoners' existence: "worn-out blankets, plates, spoons, bandages stained with blood." The stage directions shift from stream of consciousness to a specific stage picture emphasizing brutality; in addition to the main characters – an old man, a dwarf, a shoemaker, and a bachelor – we see additional prisoners, "some of whom have their heads and limbs bandaged" and some of whom "are washing their bandages and clothing in a muddy pool" (Maghut 1981: 345). Their conversation ranges over political theory, memories of torture, and the fantasies of sex-starved prisoners; it shifts between complicated ideas, startling imagery, and crass puns. Their conversation about the sexual appetite of a nearby irrigation ditch turns on the fact that the word in Arabic, *sāqīa*, also means barmaid (347). Throughout, their jailer, whip in hand, randomly interjects "Who is vilifying the state?" (351). His misguided fears and excessive violence reveal the state to be both villainous and idiotic.

The principal characters each reference memories of torture, but each memory serves to further a poetic image running through a point of

debate. That debate is most pointed between the old man, imprisoned for unknown reasons, and the dwarf, imprisoned for copulating with a nanny goat "during the most critical moment of our struggle" (354). The old man is a Machiavellian character who insists on the beauty of violence as the ultimate achievement of human striving. When the dwarf complains of the wind that lashes like a whip, the old man counters that he loves the whip, loves it like a child. The dwarf accuses him of lying, doubting that he had pleasant thoughts when they first brought him, "washed like a tree in blood, crying mournfully, his tongue hanging out of his mouth like a cigarette" (350). However, the old man insists he was thinking of "the beauty of clouds and of dead children in flowers." This prompts the dwarf's memory of his own first interrogation, in which he felt "fire beating on my windows like rain" and also saw images of children – his own children "naked in mud, not flowers" with steam rising from their nostrils (351).

The exchange establishes and then arrests a developing catachresis that begins in the love of the whip. Water, particularly soothing to men detained in the desert, is first evoked to describe the old man after interrogation: he is a tree washed in blood. The idea of one's blood irrigating the land is implicitly evoked in the image of dead children amidst flowers, as beautiful as rain clouds according to an old man confined in the desert. This catachresis culminates when the dwarf describes his own interrogation, likening the lash to rain beating on a window. When the old man employs catachresis it is the voice of an aspirant to power who accepts the logic of the state. If, as Weber explains (1994), a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is the defining characteristic of the state, then violence is a thing of beauty to the would-be tyrant. The dwarf resorts to catachresis but does so to undermine this logic. If whips are like rain, it is the cold rain that pelts windows and sinks naked children in mud, turning their breath into steam. Under the whip, the old man sees beautiful clouds; the dwarf sees steam rising from the nostrils of cold naked children. The old man likens his love of the whip to his love of a hypothetical son. The dwarf longs for his actual children whom he rightly sees as threatened by the state.

The weaving of imagery employed for contradictory ends grows more complex as the old man expounds upon a theory of violence. Here as well the imagery ultimately takes up memories of interrogation. The dwarf calls the old man foolish for his aspirations, explaining that "one finger can't stop many fingers in the huge crowd of bullets; it can bend, or break, or disappear in some glove" (361). The old man responds with different arguments, each time coming back to fingers. A trigger

doesn't discharge itself – it takes but one finger. A finger can't stop a fly if it's animated with a fly's blood rather than an eagle's. Five fingers clutching something firmly can change the face of the earth. Finally, offering proof of the power of the individual, the old man notes that Bonaparte, Attila, and Hitler had only five fingers on each hand. As he explains: "How many fingers do you think have changed the face of the earth since its turning? I assure you that if you cut them off and put them together in this tub it wouldn't fill the half of it" (362). Great men – Bonaparte, Attila, and Hitler for example – are those that have unleashed great suffering. Their achievement, like their rarity, is measured in severed limbs: vast fields of dead or paltry tubs of fingers.

Paradoxically, the old man's love of power coexists with a love of humanity in its abjection. According to the old man the greatness of Bonaparte was not that he burned Moscow but that the ashes of Moscow were not sufficient to cover "what remained of his army, his drums, and his wounded" (364). Moving himself to tears he announces: "I only long to kiss every wretched, deformed, and humiliated person in the world and then die directly before my saliva dries on their wounds and mustaches" (371–372). His tears sway the dwarf, but not the shoemaker who complains, "Each of you wipe your tears for I haven't enough fingers, or any fingers since the last interrogation" (372). The tub of severed fingers shifts from being an analogy indicating the limited number of exceptional people to a literal representation of the effects of torture. Somewhere adjacent to the interrogation center is a tub for the fingers of shoemakers and other manual workers. The paltry number of great men is overshadowed by the vast number of those tortured due to dreams of greatness.

Whether through catachresis or dark humor, these scenes restore language at the site of its erasure. The scream is the alienation of the prisoner's proper voice, summoned by the interrogator and not the prisoner, marking the latter's loss of control of his own body and the triumph of the state. "Were you screaming during the interrogation?" the student asks the shoemaker. "My God," he replies, "I wasn't singing" (383). Song and scream are in direct contrast. One is an act of creation that extends the self as far as the voice will carry. The other demonstrates the interrogator's complete control over the detained, playing him like an instrument. As Elaine Scarry explains:

> Through his ability to project words and sounds out into his environment, a human being inhabits, humanizes, and makes his own a

> space much larger than that occupied by his body alone. This space, always contracted under repressive regimes, is in torture wholly eliminated. The "it" in "Get it out of him" refers not to a piece of information but the capacity for speech itself. (1985: 49)

The regime constricts the world of the individual by policing speech. Torture is censorship at its most extreme, the moment when the power of speech is ceded entirely to the state. Maghut resists torture by inscribing sarcasm at the moment of transfer: "I wasn't singing."

The student is even more adept at undermining the logic of torture, recasting the scream as self-actualization. He explains that he himself adores screaming like nothing else. The shoemaker immediately recognizes the student as a political activist, implicitly understanding screaming to mean rallying. "So you're a Nationalist," the shoemaker concludes. Screaming is not evidence of the triumph of the state but the defiance of those who insist that their voice be heard even if it means likely death. The student also screamed during his interrogation, his head between the feet of his interrogator (389), but he presents this as a continuation of a scream that began in childhood: "I'm a human being! I'm a human being! Mother! Father! Pillow! Can't you hear me!" (384).

Maghut reprises this refrain in torture scene in *October Village* (1974), discussed in Chapter 2. The interrogator shouts, as he beats Ghawar, "What are you?" to which the confused and frightened clown eventually responds: "I am nothing. I am a citizen. I am nothing." In the scene, Maghut clarifies the purpose of torture – not to extract information but to render the prisoner "nothing." While the scene ostensibly deconstructs the prisoner's voice, Maghut actually deconstructs the workings of state power, revealing the state's continuous contraction of the space of human expression. The scene concludes when Ghawar signs a confession of "the things he intended to say" but did not say. It is the coup de grâce, the moment when the torturer's power is shown to be absolute through his transformation of the accused into his own accuser.

The shoemaker is similarly detained for a meaningless crime; both plays depict regimes that do not guard against threats so much as perpetuate violence to foreclose the possibility of future resistance. The shoemaker has no idea why he was imprisoned. Some boys hung pictures of heroes in his shop and next he found himself "drowning in blood" and commanded to "sign here, no there, no here!" He explains, "I screamed and cried and pleaded until my signature at that moment

resembled a small crying mouth" (383). As Scarry explains, during the interrogation, "the question, whatever its content, is an act of wounding; the answer, whatever its content is a scream" (Scarry 1985: 46). However, in both plays the audience's attention is deflected from the consuming spectacle of torture to tropes that reveal processes of power. The comparison of a signature to a screaming mouth underscores that the purpose of "the question" is not to induce a meaningful answer but world-destroying pain, a scream, to render the citizen nothing.

The subsequent acts demonstrate that though regimes change, their reliance on violence remains constant. The first act ends with the release of the prisoners and the second act begins seven months later in the dwarf's drought-wracked village. The government's contempt for the impoverished villagers is met with a mix of silent defiance and self-hating subservience; the authorities send an industrial commissioner (the agricultural commissioner having driven through the village without pausing) who delivers a rambling speech, chastising the villagers for complaining of their poverty. The scene culminates when Grandfather, a character who has vowed to uphold the dignity of the village, retrieves a page the commissioner has dropped. The elderly man's shame at bending before the commissioner prompts mockery from the others and his eventual suicide. While torture is the most extreme form of unmaking, the regime's every interaction with the nation further constricts the terrain of possibility.

The third act is set in the palace where we discover that the old man of the first act has become the prince, and his love of the whip is all the greater now that he wields it. The dwarf – his wife and children recently dead – has sought out the prince in order to see if "any trace of friendship remains in the world or not" (436). The prince greets his familiarity with a lash across the face. The ensuing discussion explores whether those who are only willing to look at poverty "through cannons or from taxi-mirrors" are a fit ruling class (440). However, the prince clarifies that the violence his state directs against individual citizens masks a love for the masses. For whom, the dwarf asks, did we endure "screams and torment" (445). "For whom?" the prince responds in surprise, "For the people."

The old man endured and metes out torture for the love of the people. The seeming paradox is clarified when the prince explains that he loves the masses in their abjection, an abjection aesthetically framed and held at a distance. He later explains to his royal aide:

> I love those peasants, I love their names in books, and their faces in color magazines, where specks of cheese glisten beneath their

> moustaches like snow. Where they are solitary, and silent, and soft on the page. Whereas face to face, you hear their moans and stammering, and you inspect, from a distance of only two centimeters, their boils, their teeth, and their filth like bark on trees, and that is what makes me flee from them and from the whole world like a bird flees from the bullet. (446–447)

The prince values the peasant as a fetish masking the reality of suffering and need that tyranny creates and denies. The prince averts his gaze; once one stares directly into the face of suffering, the need for political change is soon apparent.

Rejected by a man he thought his friend, the dwarf becomes this voice of change, rallying a crowd gathered outside the palace. From the street he addresses the prince.

> I know that you will say that you will not listen to a man who mounted a nanny goat the age of his mother in the nation's darkest hour, and you'll talk of honor and freedom. Let's suppose I did mount an old nanny goat that would have died the next winter if it hadn't that winter. But you are mounting an entire people. A people who will not die this winter or the next, but will continue to breed like flies, throwing out all regulations, whether pertaining to hygiene or aviation, landing on flowers whose fragrance we will never inhale and on mouths whose screams we will never hear. For the screams have settled into our shoes and the bottoms of our arteries. Oh stranger that I treated like my child, you to whom I bid farewell as his tears flowed like rapids – the nation and freedom are not a whip or a pair of gloves or saliva at the corners of the lips. They are – (456–457)

Panicked, the prince orders him shot before he can finish the sentence. Shots are heard and the dwarf falls covered in blood. An attendant warns the prince that others may finish the sentence.

The speech shifts registers rapidly, as does the play as a whole, but settles on images of torture, the nation, and the possibility of liberation. It begins with the dwarf's anti-patriotic bestiality, which had been referenced repeatedly throughout the play each time with new extraneous details. This time we learn of the animal's age, conveyed with incestuous overtones, as if sex with a *younger* goat might be excusable. However, the long withheld payoff comes when the dwarf contrasts his screwing a goat with the leader's screwing an entire people. The prince delights in the peasants that appear in the pages of glossy magazines, purportedly

held at a distance but in fact carnally close. Their degradation presses on the prince's skin, present in all the raiment of power. The dwarf undoes the fetish, revealing a swarming, propagating people, an elemental and uncontainable force (that disregards aviation regulations) only temporarily prostrate before a dominating ruler.

The dwarf takes up the prince's romanticized folk, elaborating it in ways that undermine the image's stability. Yes, this people frame the land, along with its "pretty flowers," but they also settle on the screaming mouths. Flowers and torture victims are contrasting but equally distinctive markers of national identity. The nation is not simply a people shaped by a particular land, but a people shaped by a particular history of oppression. The contours of this people owe as much to the nation's flora as to mouths gaping with "screams we will never hear." The loss of a romanticized folk parallels a much more serious occlusion: everywhere, beneath our feet, people are tortured and their pain goes unheeded. Their screams are with us, in us, settling in our shoes and arteries, but these screams have become the unnoted background noise of everyday life. The prince asserts he loves the people, but in fact he loves the whip, gloves, and saliva (which he tells us earlier spattered off his lips during his fight for power); in short he does not love the people, he loves dominating the people and struggling to hold power. This he falsely calls freedom.

The play concludes with summary executions showing the ruler's love of the people in action. In the fourth and final act, the shoemaker, his wife, and two remaining children (who are curled up inside a rabbit cage) are sentenced to death. In a darkly comic hearing we learn that the four were arrested after a watchman caught them cheering for love and rainfall. One gathers that the only cheering will be for the state. The watchman demanded their identity cards and when the shoemaker's smallest child offered his ball the watchman shot and killed him. For their wailing and for thrashing the officer with sheaths of wheat, the court sentences that the parents be hanged by the necks until dead and the children, "considering their youth [literally 'small years'], be executed by small rifles" (492). The bad pun is followed by the children's murder. All exit the court except the children and a firing squad lines before them. The "whole room and everything in it shakes" with the sound of rifles, the children are bloodstained and their heads drop forward. The only movement is two balls that fall from the children's hands and roll across the stage.

Throughout the play, Maghut explores the twisted logic of state violence through a series of contradictory images such as the soothing lash and the beauty of dead children. These grotesque contradictions – beautiful

at the same time that they repel – culminate when the shoemaker's children are brought into court in a rabbit hutch. The idea that a child's ball could threaten an armed officer is matched by the assertion that the state needs to actively protect itself from children that can be restrained in a pen designed for five-pound animals. The state's paranoia, its tendency to see insurrection in cheers for rain, is evident in its targeting of the innocent and harmless as objects of its persecution. After the deafening sound of rifles, the weapons of insurrection appear when the children drop their toy balls. State violence is not simply cruel, the play asserts, but also elegant in its stupidity.

Maghut followed this dark absurdist drama with a farce, *The Jester* (1973). Typical of Maghut, it is a farce that takes up Arab nationalism, Palestine, martyrdom, and torture. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the play begins with an itinerant theatre troupe resorting to hollow nationalism to attract an audience. Their lead actor, an irreverent and wily jester, performs a series of send-ups of Arab "heroes" beginning with Othello (see Figure 8).

When an audience member calls for a dramatization of the conquests of Saqr Qurash, the troupe immediately complies, though it is clear that they have no idea of the hero's century, origin, or accomplishments. It makes no difference, since the jester will simply continue his improvisation of broad salacious comedy. The onstage audience delights in the performance, but not the hero himself. The phone rings in the coffee shop, and when the jester answers, the voice of Saqr Qurash rings out over speakers emanating "from the grave … from the past … from history." At this point "Thunder rings out offstage and the audience and actors flee. Flashes of lightning extend like cords from history, while the Jester sways calling for help" (535). By the next act, the jester has been transported via a coffin to the court of Saqr Qurash, which Maghut describes as "a vast hole in ancient history … to which clings the smell of glory and death" (539). In the current age of decline, the glories of the Umayyad past are rendered "ancient" and distant – the finality of their remove evident in their internment in a *fajā* (which I have translated as "hole"), a word that means both "gap or breach" and the horizontal tombstones that cover graves in the Arab world.

The jester at first attempts to avoid the wrath of the Umayyad conqueror by blaming the writers, whom he describes as "godless youths with long beards and sideburns who sit in coffee shops discussing loss and fragmentation" (544). However, the jester escapes the anger of the past not by burying modernity but by praising it. He shows the critiques of hip young writers to be misplaced when he begins to pull the fruits of Arab "civilization" out of his coffin: cigarettes, Toshiba fans, Presto

*Figure 8* Amad Faris as the Jester dances with Badoor Khadir as the belly dancer. *The Jester*. Courtesy Directorate of Theatres and Music, Ministry of Culture, Syrian Arab Republic.

fryers, cologne, nylon shirts, and bellbottom pants (546). To be Arab is to have fully entered consumer culture. Delighted by all the products, Saqr Qurash decides to appoint the jester as governor of one of his provinces. Here is the rub. Every time Saqr Qurash suggests an area, the jester is forced to acknowledge that it is no longer in Arab hands. Andalusia and Alexandretta (Iskenderun), and Palestine are all lost. Even the Sinai (at the time of composition) was in Israeli hands.

When Saqr Qurash commands the people to remove the "mountains of backwardness" that stifle the Arab nation, the jester reveals the state of these people. A light shines on a group of wretched people who repeat proverbs revealing their caution and timidity.

> Whoever marries my mother I call uncle.
> Step cautiously and call on God.
> Don't sleep in the graveyard or you'll have bad dreams.
> The eye doesn't pick fights with the awl. (568–569)

Yes, the jester acknowledges, we were once brave but "they" have turned us into rabbits and cockroaches. When Saqr Qurash asks who is this "they," the jester hesitates before whispering a different response before finally naming the police. Even at a distance of twelve hundred years, the jester fears he will be overheard, fears that he will be called into account for "vilifying the state."

The scene that follows illustrates the methods by which Arab dictators have made the Arab populace docile. It realistically represents torture, and layers this representation with the stupidity and banality of interrogators. The scene almost dares us to laugh, but keeps the laughter (and the release laughter provides) just out of our reach. Having lived before the rise of the police state, Saqr Qurash rejects the idea that authorities are capable of breaking an Arab, even though the jester insists that the modern police have "made terror an art in its own right … like sculpture … like music" (570). The jester offers to illustrate. He selects a few assistants and an accused from Saqr Qurash's men. The interrogation follows an illogic that would be funny if it were not so chilling.

The assistants hold the man down and the jester immediately strikes him. "Shut up, no laughing!" the jester shouts when his sudden violence prompts somber surprise. The jester asks banal questions, responding with growing violence to every answer. "What is your name?" the Jester asks, and then beats the man for lying when he repeats the name with which Saqr Qurash introduced him only moments before. The man is punched, kicked, and whipped as the jester accuses him of membership in "the nationalist party," "the progressive party," "the nationalist progressive party," and even "the Degaullist party" (575). It is a joke, but one that precludes laugher accompanied as it is by the sight of a man being severely beaten. The jester is successful in inducing whatever confession he wishes, but this does not diminish his violence. The jester progresses to pressurized air torture, in which the nozzle of a bicycle pump is inserted into the accused's rectum and air is forced into the body. After this, the man is willing to incriminate everyone in the room as party to his "conspiracy against the people" (574).

The jester presents this illustration by way of explaining the Arab world's long decline. The accused, crying, willingly signs a confession without reading it. In times of war you could arm such a man, the jester explains, but "he wouldn't fight … he'd lose to a chicken" (579). This soul-destroying oppression, according to the jester, is not new to the modern era but has been taking place for centuries. In other words, the Ottoman Empire and the European mandates sustained themselves

through terror and modern Arab regimes have simply perfected a long-standing art. Such oppression is widespread. As the jester explains: "If not every person, every family has someone who has suffered what you've seen. The older son, the younger, the mother, the grandfather, or the grandmother" (579). Based on his convincing performance, we can conclude that the jester, like Maghut himself, has apparently had extensive experience with the security forces. Saqr Qurash's men flee before the spectacle of modern torture. Abandoned by his men and despite the jester's protests, Saqr Qurash decides to travel to the present in order to liberate Palestine and restore Arab dignity.

The third and final act begins with Saqr Qurash in a holding cell in a border control station in an unnamed Arab country, as the Jester scolds him for his quixotic mission. It is not the unlikeliness of his identity that prompts the detention of Saqr Qurash; the border officers are prepared to accept that the eighth-century conqueror of Andalusia has traveled to the present to liberate Palestine. The problem is that the Arab government views Saqr Qurash as a valuable bargaining chip in ongoing trade negotiations. He is ultimately extradited to Spain to stand trial for war crimes dating from his conquest as part of a deal for a large shipment of onions.

The United Nations charter might be explicit in the definition of a war criminal, but – as the Arab trade negotiator explains – the Arabs' commitment to their history is even greater than their commitment to the UN. For this reason, the government is unwilling to hand over the Arab world's greatest hero for one onion less than thirty thousand tons. The government's claim to safeguard Arab history and territory is no less ludicrous than the theatre troupe's claim to safeguard the memory of Othello and other Arab heroes, whom they in fact lampoon. They have learned their trade from a government that makes a mockery of the idea of nationalism and that terrorizes the people in the name of defending the people.

The most famous interrogation scene in Syrian theatre, and possibly in Arab literature generally, is the torture of Ghawar in Muhammad al-Maghut and Duraid Lahham's second collaboration, *Cheers Homeland* (1978). Like other Lahham–Maghut collaborations, *Cheers Homeland* was never published but the film of its first production is available at DVD kiosks in many Arab countries, and has been repeatedly broadcast on television throughout the Arab world. It is this production I analyze here. In their previous collaboration, *October Village* (1974), Ghawar had died when the villagers launched a surprise attack against the thieves occupying the vineyard. Such sacrifice goes unredeemed in *Cheers Homeland*;

Ghawar is now the son of a martyr sacrificed in a "past war" making his way in a corrupt society.

Ghawar and his family totter at the edge of poverty. He is a clerk in a government storehouse and sells lottery tickets and chickpeas at night. The juxtaposition of haves and have-nots comes into sharp relief when Ghawar rushes to the hospital with his ill infant child, Ahlam (or "Dreams"), only to be forced to wait while the doctor attends to a wealthy diplomat. The diplomat monopolizes the doctor's time with an issue of great significance to "national reputation," his own sexual impotence, while an increasingly alarmed Ghawar struggles to draw attention to his child's rising fever. Ahlam dies in the hospital waiting room, and with her the dreams of the poor. However, national reputation is preserved as long as the ruling class maintains lives of pleasure; in rapid succession the doctor provides a prescription for the impotence of the elite and pronounces the child dead. Later Ghawar is summoned to an interrogation room after he complains to both national and international organizations about the death of his child.

Though Ghawar is beaten down and his dreams killed, his interrogation is a scene of comic reversal, making this play different from Maghut's earlier works. In *The Hunchback Sparrow*, the old man's love of the whip is a manifestation of his own desire for power. Through his poetic descriptions of state violence, Maghut's own voice pulls focus, derailing the state's monopoly of speech. The poet's victory, however, is extra-diegetic and cannot be represented within the scene of the state's totalizing violence. Similarly, *The Jester* demonstrates the complete efficiency of state violence in its dismantling of the citizen. The play's resistance to the violence it dramatizes is in the choice to make the fool character the agent of state terror; the terrifying illogic of torture is simultaneously buffoonish in the doubled image of jester/interrogator. Here as well the critique cannot be represented but only occurs in the audience member's recognition that an actor plays a jester playing a security agent. In *Cheers Homeland* Maghut pursues a new strategy, creating a Ghawar who triumphs over the security agents. The illogic of torture goes head to head with magical resistance when the detained takes pleasure in genital electrocution and dunking, and stops the caning of his feet by asserting the rights of man.

In *Cheers Homeland*, Maghut gives full license to his wily Harlequin, whose unintended witticisms are invariably attacks on government corruption and incompetence. Placed in the interrogation chamber, Ghawar's unintentionally witty remarks feel grotesquely misplaced. Once the laughter subsides, one wonders how genital electrocution could be the

set up for a joke about government mismanagement? The scene opens two hours into the interrogation but Ghawar is surprisingly fresh, comfortably reading a newspaper he has smuggled into the detention center. ("It's become an addiction," he confesses.) The interrogator, performed by Omar Hijo, warns that he might be forced to abandon his "humane methods" if Ghawar does not cooperate, to which Ghawar responds by reading headlines: "More than 200,000 detained in Chile and more than 150,000 in Nicaragua." To Ghawar's great disappointment, even in torture the Arab world lags, with only one paltry Ghawar to poke and prod. "Don't worry," the interrogator reassures the detained, "there are many more than you." Ghawar thanks God for the news explaining that it puts his mind at rest. The security services in fact promote the public good by showing that Arabs can match the Pinochet and Somoza regimes of Chile and Nicaragua in atrocities.

Despite his apparent efforts to cooperate, Ghawar innocently undermines the authorities. Interrogation and torture, which are by definition the destruction of volition, become an instance of comic self-invention. Interrogations normally proceed according to narrow scripts in which the interrogators determine both the questions and the range of permissible responses. As Scarry notes:

> The question and answer […] objectify the fact that while the prisoner has almost no voice – his confession is a halfway point in the disintegration of language, an audible objectification of the proximity of silence – the torturer and the regime have doubled their voices since the prisoner is now speaking their words. (1985: 36)

In a setting devoted to power's monopoly of expression, repartee is unthinkable. Imagination can only exist in one's responsibility to anticipate the desired statement.

In *Cheers Homeland*, the process repeatedly misfires. Ghawar almost speaks the words of the regime, only to give them a comic inflection that reveals that the emperor wears no clothes.

| | |
|---|---|
| Interrogator: | Are you frightened? |
| Ghawar: | No, terrified. |
| Interrogator: | Of me? |
| Ghawar: | No, of poverty. |
| Interrogator: | Don't fear that, we will vanquish poverty and colonialism. |
| Ghawar: | Ohhhh, that means we'll be occupied here a long time. Go get me some paper and pens. |

Ghawar eventually explains that all political prisoners are supposed to write their memoirs. He is just trying to fulfill his part of the bargain.

The interrogator tries to intimidate Ghawar by revealing the omniscience of the security services, but here as well the attempt misfires. When the interrogator explains that the security apparatus has documented his every move and conversation, Ghawar expresses surprise that the security services have fixed every problem in the country and are now free to focus exclusively on him. When the interrogator recounts details of Ghawar's activities, right down to the minute he extinguished the lights before sleeping the night before, Ghawar responds with amazement belying his anger: "You have all that information on me and you don't know that my children are barefoot?" The contradiction between the government's promise to extinguish poverty and the experience of the detained resonates loudly in the thunderous applause at the recorded performance.

The most famous moment in the scene comes when a superior joins the interrogator and orders that Ghawar be readied for electrocution. The interrogator explains that they tried that already without success, and Ghawar interjects that the problem was that they only used 110 volts but that he feels nothing under 220. "Do you have a transformer?" he asks trying to be helpful. The interrogator slides the wires between the chair and Ghawar's buttocks, and the superior commands him to set the current at 220 volts. In the scene that follows, Ghawar wiggles and chuckles with manic pleasure as he is repeatedly shocked. "He's laughing rather than screaming," the interrogator complains, which prompts the funniest line in the play: "Yes, sir, I'm laughing because it makes no sense. My ass has been electrified, by God, before my village!" Ghawar takes an almost sexual pleasure in being tortured, thanking his torturers and wishing with apparent sincerity: "May God enlighten you, as you have me!" He ends his electrocution proud of experiencing modernity and announces that he will return to his village with his "ass held high."

In the remainder of the scene other attempts at torture misfire. The interrogator prepares to submerge Ghawar in a pail of water, but the clown remains nonchalant: "Please take the memoirs, I don't want them to get wet." As the interrogator approaches with the pail, Ghawar adds (as if he were stepping into the shower), "If anyone asks for me, tell them I'm in the pail." Face submerged, a comic gargling noise echoes from the pail. The supervisor commands that Ghawar be raised, but once again the clown resists the end of his torture. When he is finally pulled out of the pail the interrogator announces that Ghawar has drunk every drop. During the hours of the interrogation, Ghawar explains, he longed for even a teardrop to drink and would have drunk from a mop bucket.

The scene concludes with the interrogator resorting to an old-fashioned beating, and prepares to shackle his legs. Here again the threat fails to illicit fear. Ghawar warns that such torture will be much harder on them than him: "the abused only feels the first blow and after that loses all feeling […] in the end you'll be tortured, not me." When they tell him to get down on the floor, his only concern is that he will dirty the carpet. He does so, insisting that he will not accept responsibility for the mess, but offers his first resistance when they try to raise his legs above his head. "Read the newspaper," he commands. "The citizen is made to raise his head, not his legs!" The scene ends as the torturer and his superior carry Ghawar offstage.

Throughout the scene, the modernity of interrogation methods is juxtaposed against the underdevelopment embodied by Ghawar. The interrogators' Western clothing contrasts with Ghawar's shirwal (peasant pants), fez, and traditional clogs. His outfit is completed by a medal awarded for his father's martyrdom in a previous war, a reminder that the underclass invariably make the sacrifices called for in the patriotic appeals of the elite. When the interrogator asks Ghawar for whom he works and how many dollars he received, Ghawar protests that he never received Mr. Dollar nor would he recognize him on the street. Such unfamiliarity with the global currency might seem disingenuous from a character who goes nowhere without a newspaper, but Ghawar (like Harlequin before him) is an amalgam of contradictory qualities. Maghut's innovation was to expand the contrasting character traits of the clever fool to include modernity and underdevelopment.

Maghut was not alone in addressing detention and interrogation with humor. Walid Ikhlasi's *The Path* similarly creates a simple but unpredictable character that finds himself in the clutches of the security services. This play's clever fool is a professional buffoon; Abd Rabbo, a theatre janitor, inadvertently becomes a beloved comic actor of theatre, television, and radio. Impertinent, drunk when he first appears (and with little ambition beyond remaining inebriated), he is a figure of misrule. Completely marginal, he not only cleans up after others, he cleans up after an outcast profession. Even his name, which literally translates as "slave of the Lord," makes reference to his low status. His unexpected fame brings him to the attention of the security services, which insist that his performances support the state and its interests. In this moment, Abd Rabbo experiences an extreme form of the dilemma confronting all citizens living under authoritarian rule: how to remain true to one's beliefs in the face of a government that brooks no dissent. The play was published in 1975 and had its first performance in 1977

in Aleppo, with subsequent performances in other parts of Syria and the Arab world (Jayyusi and Allen 1995: 122).

Like Ghawar before him, Abd Rabbo seems principally concerned with satisfying his own appetites yet, almost despite himself, repeatedly objects to surrounding injustices. Abd Rabbo becomes an actor at the theatre where he is janitor when a lead actor becomes sick. Abd Rabbo finds himself miscast as a dignified Sheik in a desert epic. Still tipsy, confused by the prompter, prone to interpolation, and unsympathetic to the hero of the play, he inadvertently transforms the performance into a comedy championing the landless in defiance of traditional elites. Brandishing his sandal, he threatens the wealthy horseman, commands him to feed the gypsies that gather on his borders, and drinks a toast to the poor (Ikhlasi 1976: 24) to the delight of the audience. He is soon starring on a children's television program and in that venue his spontaneous populism evolves into a consistent denunciation of economic inequality. While playing a donkey imprisoned for refusing to carry a wealthy merchant, Abd Rabbo calls on viewers to question authorities that have allowed poverty to persist and then imprison the poor when need compels them to steal.

Like Ghawar before him, Abd Rabbo is hauled in before the security services but the two clowns encounter very different forms of repression. The security services in the Ghawar plays use violence and intimidation to secure citizens within the boundaries of permissible speech. The security services in *The Path*, by contrast, have claimed speech itself as a capacity granted by the state. One speaks, one works, one breathes because the state has willed it; the state does not simply control the citizen, it constitutes the citizen, and the state can deconstitute the citizen with equal ease. To exist beyond the control of the state is to discover a form of speech that exists between what is prescribed and proscribed, to reside in the imaginary boundaries that separate nations, "to walk the path," in the language of the play.

The play's opening scene prepares the audience for this more radical reading of state repression and the limited strategies available to those who dissent. To the clamor of circus music, "two masked men in the form of modern-day devils" sketch a straight line that they label "the straight path" (9). They illustrate the difficulty of walking this path, each falling to one side or the other. However, Abd Rabbo walks and retraces the path with ease, even drinking from a bottle as he explains:

> We had been ordered to be silent, so we loved. We were advised to love, so we were silent. We spoke and were told to be silent. We were silent and told to kneel. We were silent, we spoke, we loved,

> we kneeled, and we walked. (*A moment of silent thought.*) We walked the straight path. […] He who wishes to walk the straight path, follow me. And he who does not wish to, (*thinking*) follow me as well. (10–11)

By invoking the "straight path" Ikhlasi contrasts the demands of the state with God's commandments as depicted in the sixth sura of the Quran. In 6.151–6.153 the Prophet charts "the straight path" through life by prohibiting clear sins ranging from polytheism to infanticide. By contrast, life under an authoritarian regime is a complicated balancing act. The state makes ever-shifting demands (be silent, love, kneel …) and citizens of conscience must weigh commitment to their own beliefs against the danger of running afoul of masked devils. Those who wish to walk this straight path are instructed to follow a buffoonish tightrope walker.

According to Abd Rabbo, everyday life is an elaborate game of not-not; neither obeying nor disobeying authority, not adhering to stipulations but not not adhering. We speak, love, kneel, and walk – but never quite in the order or with the inflection demanded by the state. In this sense, the play asserts that under authoritarian regimes all life is rendered theatre – or, more accurately, circus. I am of course referencing Richard Schechner's famous explanation that both individuals and objects enlisted in ritual performances are "not themselves" and "not not themselves" (6). Performer and property reside in a liminal space, habitable only for the duration of the ritual or until the curtain falls. Citizens under authoritarian regimes, by contrast, perform endlessly but for an audience of one: the state. If such endless performance is sustainable it is because despite assertions to the contrary, the state is an inattentive audience. However, artists are denied such respite; their every slip into the proscribed and prescribed is made visible. *The Path* depicts a buffoon who awakes one day to discover himself an artist and then struggles to recover his equilibrium.

Abd Rabbo soon learns that the state is paying attention. He is called before the security services when his children's program very nearly turns into a call for insurrection. The setting for the scene features simple furniture and a prominent flood-light, suggesting that this is the office of "the authority in charge of investigation and guidance." Just as the stage directions sublimate "interrogation and torture" within the more benign "investigation and guidance," the text similarly describes the two men who receive Abd Rabbo as "acting like assistants" (28). They offer Abd Rabbo a seat and then pull out the chair so that he falls to the floor. They offer him a trick cigarette that explodes after being lit.

Their performance is designed to summon a different stage to mind; they "act" as office assistants but the act transparently references their regular work inflicting pain. An exploding cigarette does not burn the skin, but a regular cigarette or other hot implements will. Pulling out a chair is a tired gag, but one that calls to mind chairs to which one is firmly bound. The first scene of the play made clear that modern-day devils are awful funambulists; they happily tumble into the prescribed. In the interrogation scene, they show themselves to be similarly inept at clowning; devils lack subtlety. The displacement of violence onto misnomers and clowning leaves it to the reader to imagine the true work of the office.

The Chief enters, dismisses the assistants, and replaces the threat of torture with a more potent form of intimidation. When his office encounters someone who attempts to subvert the state, the process is simple, he explains. First, deprive the subversive of any livelihood. Second, demonstrate the subversive's cooperation with enemies of the state. Third, imprison the subversive. In short, the state makes the citizen and can unmake the citizen with equal ease. Abd Rabbo is offered a choice between invisibility and disappearance on the one hand and wealth and prominence on the other. The Chief simply asks that he "be more positive" and show his love of "the people, systems [*anẓima*], and traditions" (77) – a series that inserts the regime [*niẓām*] between the people and their traditions.

It is hardly a choice. As Abd Rabbo notes, "They are kind people who let you choose between prison and money" (79). He is soon making advertisements that succinctly undermine all of his previous work. There is little need to fight injustice when one can simply say "no to dirt and yes to Freedom Soap, Spray, and Detergent" (85). Nor does one need to search for freedom. The commodity and concept are equally ubiquitous; the announcer explains that you'll find the detergent "everywhere because it's like freedom" (86). Abd Rabbo sums up his new orientation succinctly in another commercial: "Life holds no pleasure without Kings Plastic Shoes" (89).

Obeying the regime proves more distressing to Abd Rabbo than risking reprisal. In the midst of a stage production he ad libs an attack on "art sponsored by merchants and brokers" and immediately flees for the border (103). There he learns that his name is at the top of the list of those prevented from leaving the country, but also at the bottom of the list of those prevented from entering the country. Prohibited from entering and exiting, he has no choice but to reside in "those imaginary lines that separate one country from another." He discovers joyfully that he can

"walk without surveillance, interdiction or prohibitions." The play ends as he carefully paces back and forth, balancing like a tightrope walker, as the lights dim. While Abd Rabbo presents his expulsion into this nether zone as a solution to the problem of the artist, the sight of him retracing the same narrow path as the lights dim to "complete blackness" (110) is anything but uplifting. The play is, in the words of Ikhlasi, "the story of an unsatisfactory answer" to the question of an artist's migration (5). Threatened at home and homeless in exile, the artist can only aspire to balance in the imaginary space between repression and alienation.

While Maghut politicized the buffoon, Ikhlasi made him the object of political contemplation. We laugh with and at Ghawar and share his outrage at persecution, comforted by our common citizenship albeit as part of an oppressed nation. Abd Rabbo only prompts discomfort. He induces a cognitive dissonance that short-circuits both laughter and outrage, possibly even empathy. His public lauds him for truth-telling and the state forces rewards upon him for telling lies. Maghut transformed Ghawar's pranks into political objections; Ikhlasi explored these objections as the source of a psychological dilemma undermining the formation of a coherent national identity. Unable to reduce the dissonance between his desired self (an honest citizen) and the enforced self (a self-serving lackey), the subject of authoritarian rule flees. Flight intensifies this dissonance as exile further isolates the subject from desired forms of citizenship. He cannot flee, he cannot return; he can only find solace at the threshold.

After the initial laughter, Ikhlasi's buffoon takes his audience far from comedy, and in this respect he has much in common with the final buffoon addressed in this chapter. There is nothing funny in Abd Rabbo's pratfalls in the interrogation chamber or in his imprisonment within the borders separating nations. As an unfunny clown, Abd Rabbo was preceded by the least funny of Syria's tortured simpletons: Darwish Izz al-Din in Mustafa al-Hallaj's *The Darwishes Search for the Truth* (1970), which won best full-length play from the Egyptian Council for the Welfare of Art, Literature, and Social Sciences. Like Ghawar and Abd Rabbo, Darwish is a naïve everyman who unexpectedly finds himself in the crosshairs of the security services. Unlike Ghawar and Abd Rabbo, Darwish's political education at the hands of his torturers leads him to formulate a philosophy of sovereignty. Interrogation and torture, according to Darwish, are not a political aberration but evidence of the state's inherent compulsion to dominate and control.

The play has a very simple storyline. Darwish Izz al-Din shares his name with a revolutionary. The apolitical Darwish is imprisoned and

under torture confesses to the activities of his namesake. He is hindered in his efforts to clear himself by his fear of prompting more torture. In the process he comes to understand his experience not as an exception but the rule of political sovereignty. This discovery is underscored by a double entendre that informs the title. "Darwish" is a common name, but also translates as "religious mendicant" (dervish) or more generally as "an impoverished individual." The use of the plural in title, *The Darwishes Search for the Truth*, suggests that Darwish stands in for his class – and over the course of the play the word dervishes comes to denote humanity.

Darwish's simplicity links him to Ghawar, but only his guard finds the situation amusing. Responding to the mocking questions of his guard, Darwish pleads, "Don't think I'm stupid if I tell you the simple truth; I don't know why they've brought me here" (Hallaj 2008: 24). The most galling thing, in the mind of the guard, is the fact that Darwish had the audacity to ask why he had been summoned to the interrogation complex. On hearing this, the guard comically notes that Darwish had simply "questioned them as they questioned him" (25). The joke is obvious to the guard if not to Darwish (or, in all likelihood, the audience). The ridiculousness of the interrogated becoming the interrogator is more apparent if we recall Elaine Scarry's (1985: 47) observation that in torture sessions "the question, whatever its content, is an act of wounding" and that "the answer, whether its content is a scream." The torture victim's only access to language is confession or the signing of an unread confession, "a mime in which the one annihilated shifts to being the agent of his own annihilation." When Darwish explains that his question only prompted further beating, the guard speaks seriously for the first time: "You deserved it" (Hallaj 2008: 25). In the guard's mind, the interrogator's monopoly on speech is inviolable.

This monopoly on speech is entwined with the myth of the state's complete knowledge. From the outset Darwish marvels at the state's information on the other Darwish:

> They directed their questions to some person or other … Some particular person … but certainly not me … and, by God, they know lots of things about that person, probably more than they should … his name … his family … his work … his private details … all the secret minutes in any man's life … as if they followed behind him whenever he turned and wherever his feet carried him! (24)

Little if any information is sought – it has already been detailed in the state's expansive archive. The torture victim's only role is to validate

and justify this archive. If Darwish is being tortured he must, by definition, deserve his torture. Should the interrogated turn interrogator it would not only violate the monopoly of speech, it would render the state's archive subject to question and revision.

The previously discussed plays distance the viewer from the spectacle of torture through humor and stylization, allowing the audience to reflect on the conditions that inform abusive practices. These plays invite the audience to mock (rather than fear) the state, or assert that the artist's creative power is greater than the silencing power of the state. By contrast, torture hangs as a palpable and terrifying threat in *The Darwishes Search for the Truth*, even if the worst examples of suffering take place offstage. Darwish explains that during the course of his questioning he slowly realized that he had been mistaken for another, and that by concocting stories he could "lighten the load of [his] calamity." The important thing was that "they stop the machine" (28). He then recounts a story of feigning knowledge, pretending to struggle to remember, and making up names and encounters all to forestall the restarting of the machine.

At no point is the machine described or displayed, rather the impossibility of its representation is the most disturbing and accurate aspect of the play. The closest Darwish comes to a description is when he explains his decision to confess to acts of which he knows nothing. He begins by asking the guard if he knows what the machine is.

| | |
|---|---|
| The Guard: | (*Surprised*) What, Me?! … What is my relation to the matter? |
| Darwish: | (*Approaching him persistently*) You know of the machine … I know you are aware of it. |
| The Guard: | (*Averting his face*) Curse it … I saw it once … |
| Darwish: | (*Turning away again*) They took me to it … Then … Then … (*He grows self-absorbed and trembles pressing his arms against his torso.*) They set it in motion one time and went on their way … then they returned and looked at me … but the matter wasn't resolved yet … Oh … Oh … They signaled to me from time to time. "When the wheel of truth turns, the machine stops" and so. (*Stops*) |
| The Guard: | (*Mechanically*) And so. |
| Darwish: | To stop the machine I decided to say what they wanted me to say. (28–29) |

Pain cannot be represented. It is a blotting out of the capacity of speech, destroying one's ability to separate oneself from the world and take

control of it through naming. To describe pain is to deny its absolutism. The closest the play comes to a description of the machine is the guard's disavowal of his knowledge of its existence. The more one tries to describe torture the further one spirals from the experience of pain. It is why, to my mind, the most compelling description of torture in the English language is the first two lines of Byron's play, *The Two Foscari*: "Where is the prisoner?" The answer: "Reposing from The Question." No more needs to be said, nor can be said.

"When the wheel of truth turns, the machine stops." Like Europeans, Arabs imagine fortune as a turning wheel (a hold-over from the Ptolemaic cosmology shared by medieval Christians and Muslims).[1] However, when the interrogator invokes the "wheel of truth" he is not referring to the vagaries of fate but the straight certainty of confession. In the old metaphor, fortune would rise and fall; in the new metaphor, one's agony is a machine running constantly until the wheels of a different machine, the confession machine, start up. There is a strict conservation of energy, the force of confession equal to the force of torture. For this reason, once set in motion the confession machine is nearly impossible to stop. When Darwish informs the guard that he intends to repudiate his confession, the guard responds with disbelief. After checking that there is no one in the hall who might overhear him, the guard says softly, "They will tear you apart, bit by bit" (31). Darwish will be shredded as if ripped up in the gears of some colossal engine.

In the remainder of the play, Darwish's attempts to distance himself from the "other" Darwish draw him into a semantic confusion that ultimately collapses individual characteristics and identities. He explains to the guard that confession "ended one dilemma and began another," saving him from torture but instigating a new desire to assert his authentic self. With confession, the interrogator's "file was closed" but at the same time "a new file opened" in Darwish's chest (29). The knowledge that the state had cast him into a fully fleshed-out role prompts a previously unknown desire to assert his identity – a desire that paradoxically drives him further into the role of the rebellious Darwish. In the next scene, he is called before his two interrogators and a third, silent man, bearing a whip. He attempts to distinguish himself from the Darwish in the file, explaining that he can't be held responsible for his name: "My father gave it to me. I didn't choose it so why must I bear its iniquity?" (36). However, under the threat of torture he is again acknowledging and even elaborating on the state's delineation of Darwish.

At a certain level, he recognizes that his crime is that he is a Darwish, a poor man. When his interrogators press him to name the individual

who recruited him into the conspiracy, he instinctively makes up the name "Sabri al-Fakir," which translates as "one who is patient, the one who is poor." Concocting a revolutionary program to avoid further torture, Darwish confesses the goal of "toppling the government." He was part of a "leftist revolutionary group" that sought to "turn the world head over heels, masters in the place of slaves and slaves in the place of masters" (43). Though he blames his name (and not the state) for his oppression, he implicitly understands that names are the shorthand employed by the state to delineate the subjects of its rule.

Darwish's political education is not simply an awakening class-consciousness but a broader understanding of the relation between the ruled and their rulers. In his difficulty discerning the narrative in the file, the narrative he must recount to avoid more torture, he naïvely asks if there is an additional Darwish for which he must account. His seemingly comic question, "Is there a third Darwish?" (one can imagine the audience's laughter if the question were delivered by Ghawar) is related to an emerging sense of the oppressed as interconnected, all abject before their rulers. He explains, "I realize that if one of these Darwishes tosses a pebble in the ocean, it affects the coasts of the entire world." This is what happened, and now all of the Darwishes of the world "are sentenced to torture and destruction" through the one Darwish in custody. He understands himself as the effigy for all Darwishes and accepts this role: "You want one of them, Sir. I'm him … I'm him … Take me for my guilt … take me for what is recorded on my page" (53). He vainly hopes to redeem his unseen compatriots: "I will become Darwish after Darwish after Darwish until you fill your files with condemning facts until the last page … I will be a merchant … and worker … and revolutionary …" (54).

On becoming the object of state violence, Darwish loses his rights as a citizen, and with them the identity he acquired as a citizen. The magnitude of his loss is conveyed in a dream sequence in which he turns his back on his old life. In an earlier scene, Darwish was beside himself when his interrogators insisted that he had only three children, responding as if the assertion spelled the death of his infant fourth child. In the subsequent dream, he denies his wife and children, having forgotten their existence at the command of his torturers and counsels them to do the same: "Depart woman, before they catch your ghost and drag it off to the [interrogation center]" (61–62). No one, not even dream figures, are safe from the world-destroying power of pain.

Darwish relinquishes his individual identity in the vain hope that state torture will stop with him. His wife, describing the sorrow of her

abandoned children, convinces Darwish to flee with her. Before he can leave, another woman – the wife attributed to him in the interrogator's files – appears and insists that he fulfill his responsibility as the tortured. Darwish understands this as a call to ransom all the subjugated Darwishes of the world through his own suffering. When he refuses, this second wife warns him that should he negate his past suffering, the state will simply search out new victims.

> The executioners will make quick work in the streets of the world and they will inflict what they will on the people. And you know the rest, Darwish. Skin will be flayed and bodies roasted, the machine will be set in motion and screams of pain and torture will rise from all corners of the world. (68–69)

This second wife insists that Darwish stare into the violence that accompanies power at its inception. Like Oedipus, who similarly refused to see the truth before him, when Darwish finally confronts power "the vision burns [his] eyes" (75). Later in the scene, rather than look upon the children he has abandoned, he threatens to "gouge out" his eyes (80) and confront his fate alone and blinded. Though the second wife suggests that Darwish could become a sacrifice, his Oedipal language foreshadows his fate; the state has not cast him as sacrificial victim but as the pollution that must be driven out and forgotten.

Darwish comes to believe that by accepting a sentence he can make himself into a kind of universal Darwish, absorbing the state's use of extrajuridical violence so as to spare the rest of its citizenry. It is as if Darwish imagines torture and detention as the result of unwanted pressure building in the system. Once pressure is released, those responsible can make the necessary adjustments to keep the system running smoothly. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the final scene, Darwish is brought before a judge in the presence of his two interrogators and the third whip bearer. Darwish is masked, as is the judge whose "strange" masks depicts "a laughing man with ruddy cheeks" (89). It is not a trial, in that the torture victim is immediately placed outside the law. Rather, it is an opportunity for him to express remorse before sentencing.

Darwish wishes to use the venue to articulate the truth for which he has searched since his interrogation began and which only now shines before him. He quickly acknowledges the remorse the court desires. In the course of the scene it becomes clear that he is not expressing regret for the revolutionary program of the other Darwish but for his own blind indifference to the fragility of basic human values in an age of endemic

torture. "Stripped" by his torturers of "all cords connecting [him] to the heedless world," Darwish discovers that "logic, truth, justice, and morality are all like the inflated paper balls that children play with" and that "burst and fly apart" when tedium prompts one to press against them.

Having discovered the fragility of the concepts that had girded his sense of the world, Darwish offers to die on their behalf. He would willingly accept the court's sentence to stop the process. He asks to be a sacrifice releasing humanity from the oppression of the state rather than fuel for that oppression. The danger, he warns the judge, is that his interrogators will not rest until they have brought the world in shackles before the court, bolstering their power by uncovering revolutionaries at every level of society (101).

> My Lord, my Lord, they mislead you. They will unsheathe your sword on the necks of all the poor and the Darwishes. They will hand over the innocent to you one after another. You will condemn them all rather than just one. Kill me. Kill one particular Darwish. For any crime you want except for that crime recorded before you. [Or] you will change your court into a massacre of the innocent, the good, and the Darwishes. (104)

When the judge sentences him to death on the basis of the fictions in the interrogators' file, Darwish recognizes he has simply fed the machine. Had he been sacrificed, the killing might have ended. He cannot be sacrificed because, caught in the machine, his life had already been stripped of value. He laments: "Death to Darwish, to Darwish the merchant, and the teacher, and the laborer, and the peasant, and the great and the small" (107).

The great and shining truth, which he initially found blinding but to which his eyes grew accustomed, is simply summarized: before the state all humans are Darwishes. The use of the plural, as I have noted, draws attention to a double entendre. In the context of the play, Darwishes can refer to multiple men named Darwish or to the poor. However, by the end of the play Darwishes has taken on an additional meaning: those caught in the sovereign ban. All citizens can be stripped of their political identity and rendered a life without rights, bare life, to cite Giorgio Agamben's much-cited discussion of sovereignty. Drawing from Carl Schmitt's famous definition of the sovereign as "he who decides on the state of exception," Agamben has argued that the constituting act of sovereign power is the declaration that an individual is outside the political community.

The sovereign ban strips the individual of political existence (that which separates humans from animals) and reduces that person to bare life. The twentieth century, according to Agamben, has been marked by the increased regulation and control of this bare life – hence his distressing assertion that "the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself." Concentration camps, which first appear at the end of the nineteenth century, transform the state of exception, which had been a "temporary suspension of the juridico-political order," into a "new and stable spatial arrangement" for cordoning off refugees, racial others, and the politically undesirable. All the forms of bare life that exceed inscription into the juridico-political order must be separated and neutralized (Agamben 1998: 174–175).

The interrogation center in *The Darwishes Search for the Truth* is not a room but a complex, a "winding crypt [multaff sirdāb]," in the words of Darwish (Hallaj 2008: 107), housing "guests," many of whom like Darwish have lost any sense of how long their stay has lasted (23). In the first chapter I quoted, from Muhammad al-Maghut's *Out of the Flock*, a description of the borders of the Arab world, culminating in a vast network of underground prisons:

> Below the earth are prisons and concentration camps and individual and group cells and others of known foundations extending from the ocean to the gulf, and all of it of concrete with doors and windows of steel such that a bug couldn't pass through. (115)

The secret prison, imagined as a vast complex, emerges as the defining feature of the Arab world. The Mediterranean Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Black Sea, and the other features in Maghut's geography belong to multiple nations. They are noted but not described. However, these prisons are the sole property of the Arabs and seem to demand Maghut's expansive description. They are, after all, the proof of Arab modernity – more so that the cigarettes, Toshiba fans, Presto fryers, cologne, nylon shirts, and bellbottom pants that Maghut's jester presents to Saqr Qurash. Constructed decades earlier during declared states of emergency that stretched into decades, these prisons demonstrate Benjamin's axiom that such states are not the exception but the rule. One could argue that in the uprising that began in 2011, Arabs heeded Benjamin (2007: 266) and made it their task "to bring about a real state of emergency" to improve their position in the struggle against authoritarian regimes.

In some small degree, *The Darwishes Search for the Truth* (like the other plays discussed earlier) is an attempt to bring about such a state of emergency. A trial in a bare room somewhere in a "winding crypt" in which both the accused and the judge wear masks speaks to the overdetermined invisibility of the summary execution of the tortured. It is not enough to take away the accused's voice; the state also deprives him of his ability to see a judge utter his sentence or to register a response. If masks were not enough to achieve this end, the entire process transpires in a secret subterranean maze in which time and relative location slowly lose meaning for the accused. However, the erasure of the accused is thwarted when the prison is exhumed and placed on stage. As the death sentence is repeated by an offstage voice, Darwish delivers his final lines: "If only all human beings … If only they all knew, then my death would not be in vain" (108). The play tells its audience that their presence gives this death a meaning. In casting its audience as members of an opposition, the play invites its audience to future oppositional acts.

Before progressing to the current generation of theatre-makers, I wish to conclude with an adaptation of *Waiting for Godot* by Walid Kowalti, retitled *Waiting: Play with Beckett*, that juxtaposes the violence of Beckett's text against the violence of the state. The play was part of the 2006 Syrian National Theatre season and was mounted again in December at the Damascus Theatre Festival, which is when I saw it. (The following discussion is based on a DVD of that production.) The setting is Beckett's: two tramps (nameless here), a lone tree, and a mound. Kowalti's mound is pile of newspapers that covers a quarter of the stage. A sense of impending violence is established early, when the sound of a machine gun echoes offstage. When the sound repeats a few minutes into the scene, the first tramp speculates that a storm is coming, while the other asks if it might be the one for whom they wait. The play undermines any sense that this waiting is an existential condition (and significantly, the offstage figure is not given a name let alone one that might be associated with God). When the awaited one arrives, likely he will be heralded with machine guns. In this context, the arrival of Beckett's whip-wielding Pozzo and enslaved Lucky (here renamed "the Lord" and "Pig" respectively) evokes a divide in Syria between landowners and peasantry that persisted until the 1960s.

In the second act, the production is littered with details of modernity, particularly when images of detention and torture emerge. Bored, the two tramps play a game of insulting one another while throwing balled-up newspapers. The insults build until one calls the other a "corrupt bureaucrat." The other responds with the Syrian word, *shbīha*, to which the first

responds with the topper: "You're general shbīha." Shbīha is the colloquial term for members of the paramilitary groups connected to various individuals in the Assad clan. Unlike the state intelligence services, shbīha are without hierarchy, operate entirely outside the law, and are known for smuggling and drug-running. The crowning insult, "general shbīha," combines the phrase "general intelligence service" (the branch most associated with monitoring civilians) with the phrase for paramilitaries – suggesting that the state intelligence services are little more than thugs.

The scene concludes with the discovery of a series of modern objects. After trading insults, the characters pull out a rope of newspapers that they wrap around each other (see Figure 9). The print media is a solely

*Figure 9 Waiting: Play with Beckett*. Walid al-Dibs wraps himself in newspapers that serve as fashion rather than news or information. Photo by Walid Kowalti. Courtesy Walid Kowalti.

state institution and so the perfect vestment for corrupt bureaucrats and government thugs. The two find from within and behind the mound of newspapers: a clothesline with old clothes attached, the inner tube of a truck tire, and a bicycle. Each leads to playful physical humor until the second tramp finds the crowning piece of debris; he emerges from the wings pulling an old rusted grating, at least eight feet high and twelve feet wide, which he sets up on the curtain line. At this point the play segues into straight-on political commentary.

The Lord and Pig reappear and, as in Beckett's play, the dominant of the two is now blind and the servant has lost the capacity of speech. The Lord calls out for help, unaware of where he is, as both collapse at the foot of the mound of newspapers. Viewed through the grating, they appear to be lying in a cell. Ignoring the Lord's pleas, the second tramp ascends the mound and launches into a political speech:

> At this critical moment in the history of mankind, we must take the opportunity to expound upon the corrupt race from which we descend. […] A very important person comes to the heart of this mess, the one for whom we wait. […] I know well that we must make good use of the long hours of wait, even training ourselves so that our minds do not descend into the quagmire of triviality.

At this point the Lord interrupts, which prompts the tramp to descend from the mound, seize the whip, and turn it on the aristocrat, pausing only to kick the screaming man. Seen through the grating the stage presents the image of a prisoner subjected to a savage beating. Though this is supposedly in vindication of Pig, the tramps then turn their fury on him, wrapping him in the whip and spinning him about the stage. In his distress, Pig babbles incomprehensibly. Lucky's mysterious silence is here reimagined as evidence of torture's power to destroy language.

The current generation of theatre-makers continue to examine torture and interrogation, but their use of realism differs markedly from the heightened language and broad comedy of earlier plays. Composition methods differ as well. Two of my final three plays were devised in rehearsal, the third was generated from interviews. *The Solitary* (2008) dramatizes torture in order to explore the pain of personal betrayal and the random losses that mark the human condition. *Tomorrow's Revolution Postponed until Yesterday* (2011) reflects the euphoria at the initial outbreak of the Arab Spring. In that optimistic play, state violence simply fades into the past, no match for Syrians' deep-rooted unity, which is further amplified by social media and satellite television.

The final play, *Could You Please Look into the Camera* (2012), depicts a young woman's attempt to make sense of her relation to the Uprising as she makes a documentary film about the detained and tortured.

*The Solitary* depicts the intense intimacy generated between a political prisoner, Abu Nidal, and his torturer, Mhanna. Ramez Alaswad and Nawar Bulbul of Al-Khareef Theatre wrote and performed the play in theatre festivals in Damascus and Homs, Syria; Nova Scotia and Mont Laurier, Canada; Winethur, Switzerland; and New York and San Francisco (see Figure 10). Abu Nidal, who is nearing the end of a five-year prison sentence, tutors Mhanna, between rounds of agonizing torture. Abu Nidal, a former teacher, is both abject in his pain and exacting and cruel as a tutor. Mhanna, who desperately prepares for a high school equivalency exam in advance of the birth of his first child, is a methodical and relentless torturer and a cringing and unconfident student. Violence and discipline, dependency and compassion oscillate in their interactions, but play out solely in personal terms. We never learn the nature of the allegation that brings about Abu Nidal's imprisonment. Mhanna goes about his torture with the disinterest of a factory worker without any apparent sense of why he inflicts pain.

*Figure 10* Ramez Alaswad as Mhanna and Nawar Bulbul as Abu Nidal in *The Solitary*. Photo by Adel Samara. Courtesy Adel Samara.

A strange equality between jailor and prisoner is evident from the play's start. In a DVD of a 2008 performance at the theatre of the Federation of Trade Unions in Damascus, the first forty-five seconds transpire in the dark, the sound of a whip alternating with low moans. The moans die out and the whips slow and eventually stop. Lights come up on Abu Nidal (Bulbul) face down on the ground, his shoeless feet elevated, and Mhanna (Alaswad) panting and rubbing his sore and bandaged arm. For over two minutes their panting and moans alternate as Abu Nidal drags himself to a corner and Mhanna struggles to raise his arms and retrieve a blackboard that represents the printed confession that Abu Nidal consistently refuses to sign. Moments later the two are sharing a pot of tea, the prisoner caringly adding sugar and offering the cup as well as demanding a cigarette which the other quickly provides. In between, Mhanna promises to "destroy" Abu Nidal.

No sooner do they light their cigarettes than Mhanna breaks into unrestrained sobs. Throughout Abu Nidal commands him to "Cry!" in a strange mixture of anger and compassion. Just as moments earlier their panting alternated in perfect rhythm, now Abu Nidal's commands alternate with Mhanna's deep sobs.

> – Cry Mhanna! Empty and purify yourself!
> – Um Nidal [his wife] used to say: Nobody cries but the defeated! Cry!
> – Cry Mhanna! All the torturers and unjust feel there is something inside eating them! There is something that doesn't let them sleep at night. Cry!

The opening ten-minute scene is a strange dance of alternating energy and shifting power, beginning with the unanticipated equality of the opening image: torturer and victim both worn out by the routine of daily beatings. The most jarring and confusing shift happens when Mhannna explains that he cries because yesterday his wife fell down the stairs and then Abu Nidal breaks into frantic movement. Abu Nidal's announcement that all torturers "feel there is something inside eating them" echoes a major theme in Saadallah Wannus's play *The Rape*: the security state damages the psyche of both the colonized and the colonizer. However, Abu Nidal's observation misses the mark; Mhanna sobs because of his wife's fall, not because of tortured conscience. After nearly five years of trying to have a child, borrowing money to see fertility doctors, his wife has become pregnant. Abu Nidal's panic stems from his fear for his torturer's unborn child, a child whose longed-for arrival (five years of effort) corresponds with his imprisonment (a five-year

sentence). The due date for Mhanna's child roughly corresponds to Abu Nidal's release date. The doubling grows more explicit when it becomes clear that Abu Nidal looks to his release first and foremost as reunion with his children. The play eschews the sociological corollary of Wannus's play (colonization traumatizes both colonizer and colonizer) for a purely personal corollary (longing for children traumatizes two men).

This symmetry extends to representations of torture. In one scene Mhanna and Abu Nidal are shown in spotlights on either side of the stage. Mhanna has attached clamps to his legs and applies increasing pressure as he attempts to recall his lessons. In between screams of pain and the recitation of facts from botany and history, he reminds himself that his diploma will be a gift to his newborn son. This alternates with Abu Nidal's interior monologue as he considers signing a confession presumably under torture, but asserts that if he does he will be prohibited from seeing his children and so must hold out. Here, the literal torture of a political prisoner is juxtaposed with the self-torture (either metaphorical or literal) of a man studying for an exam and wracked by fear of failure. It is a false symmetry that undermines the horror of political violence; while deeply political, *The Solitary* is not oppositional.

If Wannus's later plays can be said to have embraced the creed that the personal is political, *The Solitary* suggests that political issues mask personal traumas. This is most clearly evident when it is revealed that Abu Nidal is not motivated by politics. He was mistakenly imprisoned for another man's activities. However, Abu Nidal's wife, who is apparently active in an unnamed oppositional movement, insisted that he serve the sentence because of the other man's "sensitive position" within the movement. The wife goes so far as to demand that Abu Nidal serve out the entire sentence because of the press it has generated, threatening to prevent him from seeing their children otherwise.

This information is immediately followed by the play's most harrowing representation of torture, a scene that concludes by showing that the harm inflicted by our loved ones can be worse than the actions of the state. On opposite sides of the stage, Mhanna cranks a large gear and Abu Nidal, strapped into a crouching position, shakes and screams uncontrollably. As he cranks the gear, Mhanna recounts his apparent success on the first day of his exams, stopping long enough for the still shaking Abu Nidal to slur out words of encouragement and congratulation. On concluding, Mhanna rushes off home to study, remembering at the last minute to untie Abu Nidal and to deliver a letter to the still shaking Abu Nidal: "Please forgive me … As usual we were occupied with the torture

and forgot to give you the letter." Abu Nidal gingerly opens the letter and reads, and then begins to shake and scream more violently than at the height of his torture. During a blackout the contents of the letter are revealed. A woman's voice commands: "Go on honey, write." This is followed by a child's voice: "Daddy … If you sign and leave before you finish your sentence, we will throw you out of the house like a dog and forbid you to see us again." The knowledge that his wife has turned his daughter against him is far more painful than anything the state can devise.

The final scene shows the two men united in common abjection. Abu Nidal is dressed in street clothes, his possessions in a small package on his lap. He has completed his sentence and is about to be released. Mhanna arrives shivering and Abu Nidal removes his own clothing to cover his former torturer as he asks him if he failed his exam. Mhanna speaks, interspersing two stories as he tears off his clothing. In the first story he learns that he received the highest grade in the city; in the second he learns that his wife and son died in childbirth. Earlier in the play the two men had strung colored beads, gifts for their respective children (and a reference to the beaded work that Syrian prisoners are known to produce). In the final image, the two men, naked to their shorts, break the strings as beads scatter on the stage. Abu Nidal crosses and signs the chalkboard, a symbol of his surrender to the state.

Torture did not break Abu Nidal nor has life as a torturer scarred Mhanna. Torture is merely the backdrop to two stories of personal loss – insignificant compared with the pain of a stillbirth or the loss of a child's love. The performances in this production are so riveting, especially Nawar Bulbul as Abu Nidal, that one experiences the show as a graphic exploration of political violence, when in fact the play inadvertently occludes the fact of political violence. With good reason, Bulbul received the best actor awards at both the 2008 Liverpool International Theatre Festival in Nova Scotia and the 2009 Mont-Laurier International Theatre Festival. His performance also received a rousing ovation at the Fourteenth Damascus Theatre Festival in 2008, which is where I first saw it. However, once one is no longer in the grip of these commanding performances one realizes that the play asks its audience to accept torture as a given, a background detail in a story of love and loss.

This approach, of course, is radically different from the plays of the 1970s discussed in this chapter, but *The Solitary* (and al-Khareef's work more generally) does share with these earlier plays a deep concern over the effects of poverty and underdevelopment. Up-to-date torture techniques and villages without electricity were a meaningful contradiction for audiences in the late 1970s. At the start of that decade less than 2%

of Syrian villages were connected to the national electrical grid. Electrification was a stated goal of the 1971 Five-Year Plan and the pace of electrification had increased by the time of the play's production but it would be another decade before most the nation was connected to a national electrical system (Winckler 1999: 133–135). By 2008, not only was the country electrified, eight years earlier the state had given up on outlawing satellite dishes – effectively acknowledging that the desire for satellite television exceeded the state's ability to control its access. This was a serious concession for a regime that had successfully outlawed fax machines until 1993 (George 2003: 135). It is now estimated that a third of all Syrians own satellite dishes (CIA 2012). The result is not a lessening of the divide between rich and poor, but a far greater awareness of how great that divide is.

One can read the intimacy of Mhanna and Abu Nidal as a commentary on their shared financial straits. As schoolteacher and prison guard, they are both low-level government employees in a country in which the average state wage is estimated at little over US$120 a month (IRIN News 2007). The whip divided Ghawar from his interrogators. Despite the whip, Mhanna and Abu Nidal are members of the same underclass. The liberalization of a state-run economy has left many unprotected at a time of rampant inflation. In 2007, for example, independent observers estimated inflation at 30%, the product of drought combined with privatization and Iraqi emigration (IRIN News 2008). By 2010 the four-year drought, continued privatization, and rampant corruption contributed to widespread dissatisfaction. In that year, an estimated 50,000 rural families migrated to urban centers on top of the hundreds of thousands who had done so in prior years (Worth 2010). This economic stress was the background to the start of the Uprising, as well as the theatre of the Malas twins.

Mohammad and Ahmed Malas are among the most active of Syria's oppositional theatre-makers, reaching a wide audience through their YouTube channel. At the start of the Uprising in 2011, they created a two-hander for their bedroom theatre. *Tomorrow's Revolution Postponed until Yesterday* depicts a conversation between an interrogator and a young man seized while attending a peaceful protest, and similar to *The Solitary* it depicts a close bond between jailer and jailed – both of whom are subject to similar pressures. As noted in the first chapter, they performed that play in numerous countries as well as in the detention center where they were held for a week in July.

*Tomorrow's Revolution Postponed until Yesterday* begins with the kind of comic reversal that saw Ghawar triumphing over the security services

thirty-five years earlier. The detainee enters, but it is the interrogator who has collapsed, exhausted from a grueling routine of endless questioning. The protester wakes him with something of a taunt, repeating the popular chant: "God, Syria, and freedom only."[2] Before he even opens his eyes, the interrogator complains "Protesters from morning's ass," later asserting that officials don't even have time to shave for the constant flow of detained protesters. Like Ghawar, the protester uses witty responses to undermine the official's authority. The official asks if the protesters "even know what this freedom that [they] are all shouting about means?" The answer is "no" but that is the point; the officer does not know what "Cordon Bleu" means, the protester points out, but one can still crave a food they've never tasted.

As in *October Village* and *Cheers Homeland*, the state's use of the language of democracy in *Tomorrow's Revolution* underscores an absence of human rights. In *October Village*, the security officer precedes Ghawar's beating with the ironic assertion that the interrogated must speak because freedom of expression is a sacred principle imported from Europe. Similarly the security officer in *Tomorrow's Revolution* begins beating the protester while shouting "We told you we wanted a discussion, so discuuuuuussss!" The play is conscious of its forebears in this respect. Just before the beating, the protester momentarily crosses his legs, indicating an ease that belies the oppressive nature of the "discussion" between citizen and state representative. The security officer instructs the protester to relax and lift his leg to where it was before if he doesn't want to find "his legs above his head." The protester responds, "Sir, we citizens raise our heads, not our legs." The security officer catches the reference: "So you watched *Cheers Homeland* before joining us Monsieur Ghawar." While security officer and protester subscribe to vastly different ideologies, both were schooled in a tradition of oppositional theatre. The officer may have seen the original production; the protester most likely downloaded his favorite scenes from the internet.

The shared mediascape of security officer and protester is more evident in their access to television than the internet. The officer begins his search of the protester by asking him where he's hiding his Facebook. However, while the officer may not quite understand internet technology, others in the regime do. The officer reads a report to the protester that includes the incriminating statements he published on Facebook. Your online activity is being monitored (even if some in the security services do not quite grasp the meaning of online).

The two are on a much more equal footing when it comes to satellite television. In an impassioned speech the protester declares himself

ready for whatever is about to befall him, whether the officer chooses to discuss the situation or to "beat, insult, and humiliate [him], strike [his] head with clubs, and to trample on [him] with other officers." Noting the choice he's been offered, the officer asks if the protester thinks this is an episode of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and whether he can use his lifeline before answering. Later the officer confuses an actor with a role performed, expressing surprise that Abou Assam (from the popular television series *The Neighborhood Gate*) would sign the traitorous "Milk Statement," the petition calling for the delivery of foodstuffs to besieged Daraa. The protester explains that love of county prompted the statement, not treachery (though he neglects to explain that Abbas al-Nouri – the actor who created Abou Assam – did not sign the statement).

Their shared appreciation for *The Neighborhood Gate* (and several other television programs) is one of many points of commonality the two discover as they move from antagonists to compatriots. When the protester complains of the crippling daily expenses and omnipresent corruptions, it prompts the officer to such an outpouring of hardships that the protester reflexively warns him to lower his voice lest the police hear. Their friendship really develops when it comes to light that the protester is a member of the President's own religious sect, the Alawites, whereas the officer is a part of the Sunni majority that constitutes the bulk of the opposition. Moreover, both men claim lineage from multiple sects and religions. In addition to Alawite and Sunni, the two discuss their Druze, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic ancestry. According to the play, resistance to the regime, or support for it, is not evidence of narrow confessional motivations but of a love of country. Some Sunnis support the regime; some Alawites oppose it. Far from being a country of sectarian schisms, the play depicts a Syria of sectarian harmony and inter-sectarian marriage.

An undercurrent of violence undercuts the play's hopefulness. The revolution, after all, has been postponed until yesterday, suggesting a continuous deferral; there is no returning to yesterday. From the present moment in 2014 of rampant violence and fears of a future sectarian backlash, the play's depiction of fraternity between Sunnis and Alawites (as well as Druze and Christians) feels as falsely nostalgic as the television series *The Neighborhood Gate* that the two characters repeatedly reference. That five-season mini-series, set in the 1930s, depicted a Damascene neighborhood that was united in its resistance to French rule and appeared, in the words of one scholar, "a utopia of social integration and mutual assistance" (Salamandra 2011: 160). At the close of *Tomorrow's Revolution Postponed until Yesterday*, the official

decides to release the protester, who pledges to continue non-violent resistance. They agree that three principles unite Syrians: a commitment to peaceful opposition, resistance to Israel, and that "*The Neighborhood Gate* is about us." Television, specifically the nostalgic fare offered by Gulf satellite stations, is presented as a potential basis for a new Syrian identity in a post-Assad future. The assertion would ring false soon after its articulation; on November 2, 2012, Mohamad Rafeh, a pro-regime actor who starred in *The Neighborhood Gate*, was kidnapped and found dead the following day. Apparently that television show did not serve as the unifying bond between Syrians who support and oppose the regime, regardless of what the Malas twins would like to believe.

The play ends as the two men recite the Fatiha for the dead, a prayer that – improbably – the security officer dedicates to the martyrs of a long list of Syrian cities under government siege, as well as all civilian and military victims of the conflict "for they all carry Syrian citizenship." As they finish their prayer, we hear a recording of the famous Quranic reciter, Mishary bin Rashid Alafasy, reciting the Fatiha as church bells ring out. Whether or not the nation has consciously decided to mourn together as these two men have, the nation is occupied in mourning their respective dead.

In invoking Ghawar, the Malas twins lay claim to a rich tradition of political clowning within Syrian theatre. Abd Rabbo can be read as a commentary on the balancing act that a performer like Duraid Lahham had to perform as he grew increasingly famous as Ghawar. Maghut, in turn, refashioned Ghawar in Abd Rabbo's image. When Ghawar drunkenly toasts his homeland, it is tempting to recall that three years earlier Abd Rabbo had raised a glass to the health of the poor. A more obvious citation occurs in Maghut and Lahham's film, *The Borders* (1987), in which Lahham plays a character who loses his passport while attempting to cross the border from Middlestan to Eastestan. Unable to enter or exit, he finds himself residing, much like Abd Rabbo, in between nations. Later in Maghut's *Out of the Flock* (discussed in Chapter 1), a theatre janitor attempts to protect the institution from officials who would twist it to their own purposes, and again the debt to Abd Rabbo is obvious. As Syrian political clowns propagate online and on the airwaves, it is useful to think of them as part of an ongoing conversation.

That conversation has grown especially heated of late. Duraid Lahham, much to the surprise of many of Ghawar's admirers, came out in support of Bashar al-Assad early in the Uprising. In early May of 2011 Lahham gave several interviews on state television praising the president. On May 6, 2011, for example, Lahham appeared on state

television and distinguished between the Egyptian Revolution, which he characterized as peaceful, and the Syrian "rebellion" which he described as the work of a violent minority. He asserted that, "Ninety percent of the people trust Dr. Bashar al-Assad." In that same interview he lamented that many people get their information from "liars and charlatans," referring to a report of a mutiny in the fifth division under General Muhammad Saleh al-Rifai. In fact, Lahham asserted, Rifai had retired ten years earlier (FreeMediaSyria 2011). While Lahham did not mention his source, the interview made clear that Lahham spoke as a friend of the regime.

In another interview from the same period, Lahham appeared in his office with a picture of the president presenting him an award. In this interview Lahham described the president as a "reformer" who "lives in the hearts of the people." He asserted that Assad had made demands of the new parliament that went far beyond the demands of the rebellion. When asked if he had any personal demands, Lahham replied that he wanted "the military and the government to lead the nation and support Bashar al-Assad" (Plasmajo 2011). Such interviews have prompted opposition activists to include Lahham on Celebrity Lists of Shame circulated via Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

A new generation of oppositional clowns have directly attacked the regime. Christa Salamandra (2012) has illuminated the debt of the Syrian clowns of the anti-Bashar television program *Freedom Only* (aired on Orient TV) to the clowns of the politically accented *No Hope* which aired on Syrian television in 2004. However, she notes that the *Freedom Only* performers complained that *No Hope* only "skimmed the surface of Syrian issues." Orient TV, which now broadcasts from Dubai, was one of a handful of Syrian stations formed after the state began to allow the private sector into the media industry in 2001. In 2009 it became the third of these stations closed by authorities without explanation, forced to move operations to Dubai ("Private TV Channel Forced to Close Office" 2009). It is certainly true that *Freedom Only* attacks the regime with humor in ways that no show broadcast from Syria ever could, and this is especially the case in its depiction of torture.

While the first episodes of *Freedom Only* are clearly referencing *No Hope*, later episodes reprise a style of humor indebted to Ghawar. In one episode aired in 2012, the two heroes are shown with their feet above their heads as an interrogator repeatedly whips the soles of their naked feet. The entire time the chief interrogator sits behind his desk, sipping Matte and trying to complete a crossword puzzle. He is looking for a five-letter word for the clue "foundation of the nation." He rejoices

when the other interrogator breaks off from striking the clowns to suggest "police" but begins cursing him when he realizes it has too many letters. Between moans the clowns make suggestions such as "people" and "justice" but neither fit. When the clowns suggest "constitution" it is clear that the chief interrogator has never heard the word before, and they try to explain it by comparing it to a "file," something the interrogator might understand. Forced to look at the answers, the interrogator discovers that the missing word is "The Freedoms," which has five letters in Arabic (FreedomWoBas 2012).

I have argued that the depiction of torture in Syrian theatre imagines resistance by short-circuiting the interrogator's power to unmake the world, and begin a process of imaging a different Syria. The final play I examine, *Could You Please Look into the Camera* (2012), approaches this project from a vastly different perspective (see Figure 11). To make a new Syria, this play suggests, we will first need to heal the victims of violence. The play's author, Mohammed al-Attar, received a Master's degree in Applied Drama at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2010, before returning to Syria. In the early months of the Uprising, al-Attar conducted interviews with thirteen Syrians recently detained. He began composing a verbatim theatre piece, but over multiple drafts he edited

*Figure 11* Nanda Mohammad as Noura and Jamal Choukeir as her older brother Ghassan in *Could You Please Look into the Camera*. Courtesy Omar Abu Saada.

and reshaped the interviews, situating them within a fictional story about an amateur director, Noura, filming a documentary about the Uprising.

The first draft of the text was presented as a staged reading, directed by Omar Abu Saada, at Meeting Points 6, a multi-disciplinary festival curated by Okwul Enwezor that traveled to Athens, Brussels, and Berlin. On returning to Damascus, Abu Saada rented the theatre of the Syrian Federation of Trade Unions (an organization closely allied with the Baath party) to rehearse and revise the play for additional foreign productions. Abu Saada did not submit the play to government censors and paid the facility manager a higher than normal fee to help ensure privacy. They then took the play to the Doosan Art Center in Seoul for a two-week run in April 2012, followed by a one-night performance at the Sunflower Theatre in Beirut. An English language production by the National Theatre of Scotland ran at Oran Mor in Glasgow and the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in April 2012.

Abu Saada continues to make theatre in Syria under increasingly difficult circumstances. In November 2013 he traveled to Amman, Jordan, where he directed female refugees in a devised piece based on Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, mounted that December at a theatre of the Jordanian National Center for Culture and Arts. He then returned to Damascus where he has led therapeutic theatre projects with displaced teenagers. In August 2013, al-Attar was in northern Syria where he trained theatre practitioners in telling and uncovering stories drawing on the techniques he learned at Goldsmiths. Al-Attar describes his students as "potential trainers" themselves (e-mail, November 26, 2013). Just as an army of amateur videographers has captured government atrocities, al-Attar envisions a battalion of applied theatre practitioners who will help Syrians to tell their stories to themselves and the world. To pursue this work, al-Attar declined a Vivian G. Prins Global Scholars Fellowship (in conjunction with the Scholars at Risk Program) for a residency at the Drama Department of New York University for the 2012–2013 academic year.

More than a transcript of atrocities, *Could You Please Look into the Camera* meditates on when and how people decide to accept personal risk for their ideals, even when doing so might put others at risk. The play begins with projected video of five different individuals, their faces distorted for anonymity, recounting their experiences of detention and torture. The final three are actually characters in the play, people Noura has recruited for her film. Scenes build slowly as the characters discuss the decisions that led to their incarceration – to attend a demonstration, to post a flier – as well as

their experiences in prison and after. In these conversations, Noura works through her own fears of joining the opposition.

Noura speaks with her brother repeatedly, and from these conversations the audience learns of Noura's comfortable background and family connections, as well as her brother's resistance to the project and his fears for her (and his family's) safety and well-being. As the play progresses, more harrowing experiences come to light and additional testimonies with distorted faces are projected on screens. Near the end of the play, the three characters complete their testimonies for Noura's camera (the final two projected) but without facial distortion, a choice that draws attention to an openness and vulnerability that has developed in the process of documentation. In the final scene, Noura is herself in a detention center, speaking with her brother about his efforts to secure her release. How she was arrested, when she will be released, and the fate of her informants are left obscure.

The play leaves Noura's future and the future of her country disturbingly open. However, if the play posits any hope it is in a scene in which one of her informants muses on how it is that torture is possible. He remembers, on first arriving at the center, naïvely asking for a magazine to help pass the time. The guard responded with stunned silence. Noura does not see the significance, but the informant makes much of the fact that it might have been the first time the guard had received such a request. The point, in his mind, is the "thick barriers" between jailor and prisoner: "I want to say the real problem is the place itself, the structure and the mentality it's based on." Reflecting on an interrogator who felt compelled to strike him savagely when he remarked on interrogator's kindness in front of others, the informant explains: "One of the most forbidden things in detention is addressing the human aspect common among us, I mean both captors and captives." It is a small discovery but one that could point towards reconciliation once the bloodshed has concluded.

Syria in 2014 is a very different place than it was in 2011 when Al-Attar began collecting the testimonials that would become *Could You Please Look into the Camera*, or in 2012 when that play premiered. It is hard now to imagine a Syrian theatre piece that would meditate the "thick walls" between jailor and prisoner – not with half of the population displaced, the death toll approaching 200,000, and portions of Syria under the control of a barbaric self-proclaimed caliphate. There are more pressing concerns. I was initially prompted to write this book because of a desire to understand the role of theatre during a state of exception. I am left pondering the possibilities for theatre in an age

of atrocity. What can theatre mean and do in the midst of apparent national disintegration? For the artists described in these pages that question informs daily life choices.

Most of these artists are working outside of Syria. Naila al-Atrash is currently teaching and directing at the Department of Drama at New York University through the intercession of Scholars at Risk and a Vivian G. Prins Global Scholars Fellowship. She is scheduled to create a devised piece with students on the Syrian Civil War in Spring 2015. Walid Kowalti works from the UAE where he has created theatre and short films that reflect on the tragedy unfolding. Omar Abu Saada's plans to bring his adaptation of the *Trojan Women* to Georgetown University later this month (September 2014) were delayed because of visa restrictions. Nawar Bulbul recently directed a production of *King Lear* with the children of the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan (March 2014). Other oppositional actors, such as the Malas twins, upload short works in support of the secular opposition. Scores of actors continue working in television while residing in neighboring countries. Jihad Saad took a break in his busy film schedule to devise a theatre piece with the graduating class of the High Institute of Theatrical Arts in Damascus entitled *Hysteria*, that attempted to capture the experience of living in a war zone (April 2014).

Artists make theatre because the drive to have one's say persists even in the worst of times. At some level it does not matter if activist theatre inspires action, or if therapeutic theatre really can heal individual or national identities. Theatre is a weed that survives even in the absence of soil, water, or sun. States may cut it back but it always returns. The playwright Muhammad al-Maghut died five years before the start of the Uprising, but his voice now strikes me as the most prescient. The artist is a martyr in the struggle to be heard. No matter the times, as scholars and as citizens we do well to document, describe, and applaud the theatre. In doing so, we celebrate our ability to survive scarcity and repression.

# Notes

## Introduction

1. Article 285 of the Syrian Penal Code criminalizes speech that "weakens national sentiment." Human Rights Watch documented 104 convictions of this charge in Syria's State Security Court based on proceedings between January 2007 and June 2008.
2. In 1921 Carl Schmitt (2013: 14) asserted that "Whoever rules over the state of exception therefore rules over the state, because he decides when this state should emerge and what means are necessary."
3. In describing the government as a "regime" I am adopting an understanding of Syrian rule that emphasizes the state's use of the party to establish control over the state apparatus, army, and all mass organizations combined with the use of the public sector to create a state-dependent bourgeoisie. These clients both depend on and influence the government. A concise analysis of the regime Hafiz al-Assad built can be found in Leverett (2005: 23–27).
4. While it falls outside of the scope of the book, playwrights had even begun to analyze the effects of neoliberal economic policy and spread of crony capitalism (*The Last Supper,* Ikhlasi 2004), tensions within the regime due to generational change (*Two Variables in the Equation*, Ikhlasi 2004), domestic violence (*The Breeze*, al-Thahabi 2008), prostitution (*Tactics*, Amayri unpublished, performed 2008), and premarital sex (*Layla and the Wolf*, al-Thabahi unpublished, performed 2008).
5. Interestingly, Qabbani emigrated to Cairo where he created a successful theatre after the destruction of his theatre in Damascus.
6. Popular support for the Palestinians put pressure on the newly installed Bashar al-Assad to soften long-standing Syrian criticism of the PLO, but the leader steadfastly refused to support the uprising. For analysis of Bashar al-Assad's response to the Al-Aqsa Intifada see Ghadbian (2001). Information on the 2001 student strike is from a personal interview with al-Atrash, February 28, 2014.

## 1 Martyrdom

1. See for example Lesch (2012: 79–98); Ma'oz (1995: 79–111); Seale (1989: 104–141); and Lawson (1996: 20–51).
2. Muhammad al-Maghut interviewed by Edward Ziter, Damascus, May 20, 2004. Maghut gave the production date as 1973. However Al-Hayat dates the production as 1970 (May 28, 2013; accessed September 23, 2013): http://alhayat.com/Details/517942
3. Lahham returned to the role in 1999 for the series *The Return of Ghawar*.
4. The production was filmed and broadcast on Syrian television. A bootleg version is widely available and has been uploaded to the Internet. All quotations are taken from this production.

5. The Syrian government apparently reversed this policy in 2011, when Palestinian demonstrators were allowed to approach and try to broach the border fence fronting the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. According to the *New York Times*, "Syria's decision to allow the protest appeared to reflect a calculated strategy to divert attention from its own antigovernment uprising" (Kershner 2011). This protest received extensive coverage in the three state dailies: *Al-Thawra*, *al-Baath*, and *Tishreen*.
6. The Syrian state paper, *al-Baath*, referred to the drivers as "suicide bombers" eschewing its more typical language of "martyrdom operations" (*Jaridat al-Baath* 2012).
7. Rabih Mroué discusses such videos in his lecture/performance *The Pixelated Revolution*. For a transcript see Mroué (2013).
8. The government's relentless lionization of the party is evident in a school curriculum that requires students to take course on "nationalism" at the primary and secondary levels – courses whose required texts are little more than hagiographies of the party. See for example: *al-Tarbiyah al-wataniyah al-ishtirakiyah, al-thani al-thanawi, al-'ammwa-al-mihniwa-al-shar'i*. Damascus: Ministry of Education, 1999; *al-Tarbiyah al-qawmiyah al-ishtirakiyah, al-thalith al-thanawi, al-'ammwa-al-mihniwa-al-shar'i*. Damascus: Ministry of Education, 1996.

## 2 War

1. In addition, 'Ali 'Uqla 'Arsan's *The Palestinian Women* (1971) and Muhammad al-Maghut's *The Jester* (1973) deserve mention (the former is discussed in Chapter 3 and the latter in Chapter 4). *The Palestinian Women* depicts a group of Palestinians caught in the confusion of the 1948 War and then some eighteen years later in a refugee camp. As such, the play presents Palestinian disenfranchisement as a precursor to a catastrophe that the audience does not witness but knows is about to occur; the 1967 War looms on the outer edge of the play. *The Jester* depicts a Syrian state that is indifferent to territorial loss despite the ubiquity of liberation rhetoric. In that irreverent play the Andalusian conqueror, Abd al Rahman I, has returned from the dead to reclaim Palestine, only to be detained at the Israeli border by Arab officials who extradite him to Spain for medieval war crimes in return for a shipment of Spanish onions.
2. In his 1927 article, "Fetishism," Freud argued that, for the male child, the discovery that women lack a penis produces a deep fear of castration and that fetish objects placate such fear by acting as substitute penises (Freud 1950: 5:198–204).
3. Syrian radio announced the fall of Quneitra before fighting even began, prompting an exodus of surrounding villages and confusion among military ranks that, in their disorganization, were getting much of their information from the radio (Seale 1989: 140–141).

## 3 Palestinians

1. In linking Palestinian resistance to an imagined region-wide uprising in his 1978 preface, Wannus revives and refashions an idea of Arab unity that had all but dissipated. As early as the 1950s, organizations like the Arab National Movement (ANM) told recruits that, "The road to Tel Aviv passes through

Damascus, Baghdad, Amman, and Cairo" (quoted in Sayigh 1997: 73). However, the ANM never agitated for popular uprisings and had become by the time of the play's composition a pro-Nasser force. By 1978, Arab unity had been dealt a severe blow with Sadat's 1977 peace initiative.
2. According to Alain Gresh (1985: 14) "'Incidents' on the border between Jordan and Israel rose from 97 in 1967 (after June) to 916 in 1968, 2,432 in 1969 and 1,887 (up to August) in 1970."
3. I do not know if 'Adwan was familiar with the August Wilson play *Fences* (1983), which ends when a character named Gabriel attempts to open the gates of heaven for his recently departed brother, first with a horn he carries throughout the play and then through dance. However, 'Adwan read English and translated twenty-three books from English into Arabic.
4. This may be a reference to the 1984 Israeli bombing of a two-storey jail in the Bekka Valley, which killed twenty-five people when Israeli jets attacked a suspected Palestinian guerrilla base. The prison was operated by Fatah al-Intifada, a dissident faction within the PLO supported by Syria (UPI 1984: A1).

## 4 History and Heritage

1. As of 2013 five English-language PhD dissertations have been produced on Wannus: Nima (1993), Abdulla (1993), Al-Soulemann (2005), al-Alzeni (2006), and Alrefaai (2009). In addition, Eyad Houssami edited a collection of essays on Wannus's legacy in the Arab Theatre (2012). There have been more than thirty Arabic language monographs on Wannus, as well as studies in French, German, and Italian.
2. The character is named *mu'arrikh qadīm* or literally "ancient historian." However, "chronicler" is the best English approximation. The French translation of the play for Actes Sud/Sinbad uses the French term "Le Chroniqueur" (1996b)
3. Several Syrians have repeated to me that the citadel housed political prisoners until 1996. However, Ross Burns (1994: 84) asserts that the citadel was last used as a prison in 1985.

## 5 Torture

1. The English-language expression "the wheels of justice" does not have a literal equivalent in Arabic.
2. My analysis is based on an unpublished and unpaginated manuscript provided by the authors. When commenting on performance choices I refer to the Moscow performance of August 28, 2011 posted on YouTube (slavafree 2011).

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