

All the Hamlets of Arabia

Citing Margaret Litvin's forthcoming study on Arab adaptations of *Hamlet*, prominent Egyptian critic **Nehad Selaiha** takes a quick look at the career of the iconic Shakespearean text on the Egyptian stage, shedding light on the Egyptian official entry *I am Hamlet*. Excerpted from *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 963, 3 Sept. 2009).

Of all the foreign dramas translated into Arabic, including Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* has been the most influential since the 1950s. Not only has its language, particularly Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy and phrases like "The time is out of joint" or "Frailty, thy name is woman", found its way into the rhetoric of political writers and intellectuals and even in the daily speech of the educated, it has also haunted the imagination of playwrights, directors and actors, appearing in different guises to address different needs at different historical moments. ...

In her extensively researched, well informed and deeply insightful doctoral dissertation on the appropriation of *Hamlet* by Arab culture between 1952 and 2002 (entitled *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Adventures in Political Culture and Drama*, soon to be published in book form), American scholar Margaret Litvin demonstrates that the different Arab *Hamlet*-appropriations since the 1952 Egyptian revolution 'fall into 4 main phases' that 'have corresponded to the prevailing political moods in the region'. The first phase (1952-64) was one of 'euphoric pride after the 1952 revolution', and in it 'Arab dramatists'

**A l'intérieur des
pages en Français**



The Egyptian official entry, *I am Hamlet!*, to be presented twice on Oct. 17 (at 6 p.m. & 8 p.m.) at the Opera House Grounds' Artistic Creativity Centre

preoccupations with *Hamlet* were focused on [achieving literary and theatrical] international standards'. The second phase (1964-67) was one of 'soul-searching and impatience for progress' and 'Hamlet's incorporation into Arab political drama' then took the form of what Litvin calls ... a "Hamletization" of the Arab Muslim political hero'. 'Such Hamletization,' she goes on to say, 'was an easy way for Arab playwrights to emulate (and borrow) Hamlet's complexity of characterization and to obtain the moral and political standing it conferred. Thus the critical demand for deep, complex, yet politically topical characters encouraged serious dramatists to weave strands of *Hamlet* in their heroes -- in turn linking the character of *Hamlet* with the theme of earthly justice in the audience's imagination' (Litvin, pp, 12, 13. 82).

The third phase, according to Litvin, was one of 'anger and defiance' following 'the disastrous June War of 1967' (p.13) and the

collapse of Nasser's socialist Arab nationalist project. Between 1967 and 1976, the use of *Hamlet* as an allegory for political local conditions underwent a change, embracing political agitation as its purpose, and targeting the audience rather than the regime. The 'Hamletized' heroes of this phase were consequently less complex than their predecessors. As Litvin puts it: 'Rather than thinkers whose towering subjectivity qualified them as political agents, they began to appear simply as martyrs: uncomplicated fighters for justice who challenged an unjust political order' (p. 111). The best of such treatments of *Hamlet*, and perhaps the last, was Mohamed Subhi's 1976/77 memorable production.

By the time Subhi staged his *Hamlet*, however, the political scene had completely changed, ushering in Litvin's fourth phase of Arab *Hamlet* appropriations.

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Professor Klenof (Algeria)

It tells the story of "Forsberg"; a mean merchant who lost all his money in alcohol trading. As mean as he can be, he pushes his daughter "Eliza" to sell her body.

In a desperate attempt "Eliza" tries to commit suicide, but she gets scared of death. By the edge of the river, she meets a professor of philosophy called "Klenof". At first she gets offended by his bad manners; however, soon become friends. When she meets one of his friends; "Fidil", they fall in love. As a result, "Klenof" gets infuriated and turns against his maid "Mary" who will be the sole witness to a crime that will occur. .



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Nasser had died in 1970 and Sadat had succeeded him, swinging the state ideologically to the Right, introducing a rabid form of *laissez-faire* economy and launching peace negotiations with Israel -- the Arabs' 'historical enemy'. As the old dreams collapsed, the mood of anger and defiance which informed Subhi's production soon gave way to one of 'cynicism and nostalgia' (p. 13). For the next 30 years, as Litvin rightly argues, re-writers of Hamlet have sought 'to turn the text upside down or inside out, redeploing its allegorical resonance for ironic effect.' Rather than try to "wipe out" or displace Shakespeare's text in the audience's minds, they stake out a new position between Shakespeare and their audience, emphasizing their plays' divergence from an "original" Hamlet that remains present in memory as a dialogizing background. 'They can play this game,' she goes on to explain, 'because their audiences already know (the stock interpretation of) that "original" rather well' -- an interpretation 'that casts Hamlet as a justice-seeking Arab revolutionary hero.' In this fourth, post-mid-1970s phase of Hamlet-rewritings, 'the audience is invited to weigh the new protagonists against that hero and to find them wanting: they are Hamlets in name alone' (p. 154). ...

Margaret Litvin and her work were on my mind as I followed the three graduation projects recently presented by the students in the department of directing at the Creativity Centre's Studio, of which Khalid Galal is the head and artistic director. Since all were stage adaptations of Hamlet (most probably on Galal's suggestion), I kept wondering what she would make of them and whether she would think they pointed in a new direction different from the one adopted by most re-writers

of the play she discusses. The first of these, Hani Afifi's at once hilariously funny and deeply sad *I Am Hamlet*, was previously aired in two performances at the end of last June, then once more during the National Egyptian Theatre festival at the beginning of July; I saw it then and reviewed it on this page (see the Weekly, 16 July, 2009, Issue No. 956). However, watching it again, in the light of Litvin's thesis, I found myself reading a new meaning in its identification of Fortinbras with George W. Bush. Whereas in most rewritings of the play since the mid-1970, 'Claudius becomes a protean and all-powerful force who dominates the play', signifying the unshakable power of Arab regimes and the futility of trying to do anything to dislodge them, as Litvin argues, by making Fortinbras, dressed in a business suit, walk in at the end of his version to view the corpses, including that of Claudius, and mimicking the language of George W. Bush while the screen at the back shows the actual ex-president of the USA on television addressing the world, Hani Afifi seemed to shift the centre of power from local politics and regimes to Bush's 'new world order' in which the USA is the sole super power, and to pitch the play into a thoroughly globalized world. Afifi could have been influenced in this by Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit*, in which 'Claudius' last speech, a televised address declaring war on "terrorist positions belonging to Hamlet and his army", lifts from current speeches by George W. Bush, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden and Ariel Sharon' and his 'magical powers are transferred upstairs -- to the United States, global capitalism, oil interests, etc' (Manuscript, pp. 214, 213). Al-Bassam's play, which he himself directed, was performed at the Creativity Centre during the 2002 Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre and Afifi, a budding director then, is sure to have seen it.

Wamo'tasemah (Lebanon)

It goes back in history and tells a story that took place two thousand years ago; by the time of Jesus Christ who gives "love" a role to play in life. This is achieved through the story of a woman who lost her child while leaving Palestine and after crossing the borders.

Underground (Romania)

During World War II, a young pregnant woman tries to escape an air raid. She finally finds shelter in the underground; however, she faces difficulties and does her best to survive.

Orpheus (Bulgaria)

Sounds, Sensations, Suppositions, Doubts, Impulses, Intention, Presence, Absence. How.. When .. Why.. written by several writers like Cocteau, Radoev, Igov, Tomov. familiar and not so familiar, converted in one stage attempt to touch our "Orpheus" with whom we are born and with whom we die although we have never met.



Tomorrow's Schedule

PLACE OF PERFORMANCE	مكان العرض Arbic Adress	TIME	COUNTRY	TITLE OF PERFORMANCE	NAME OF COMPANY	DURATION OF PERFORMANCE
Al-Aim (The Main)	المسرح لعالم الكبير المسرح كورنوش النبل بجوار كبرى الجامعة	9:00	Libya	Inconstancy	City Lights	55 min
As-Salam (Main Hall)	مسرح السلام « لقاعة الرئيسية »	9:00	Saudi Arabia	Corona	Society of Culture and Arts- Riyadh	60 min
As-Salam (Youssef Idris)	مسرح السلام « يوسف إدريس »	7:00	Egypt	The Spinster	Youth Theatre Group	
Al-Talyaa (Zake Tolyamat)	مسرح الطليعة « زكي طليمات »	9:00	United Kingdom	Prophecy in The Future Tenses	The Traffic Lights	50 min
Al-Talyaa (Salah Abdel Sabour)	مسرح الطليعة « صلاح عبد الصبور »	7:00	Azerbaijan	I am Mohammed Fizuli	YUG State Theatre	60 min
Al-Arayes	مسرح اعراض	8:00	Romania	Underground	Theatre Artemis (T.I.A)	70 min
Metropol Theatre	مسرح ميامى	7:00	Yemen	Life	Eden Theatre (Society of Eden Theatre)	45 min
Miami Theatre	مسرح ميمز ويل	7:00	Syria	The shadow of The Basement Man	The Union of The "Shabiba's" Revolution-Syria	50 min
Al-Ghad	مسرح الغد	8:00	Poland	Facade	Bialostocki Teatr Lalek	70 min
Cairo Opera House (Small Hall)	المسرح الصغير « الأوبرا »	8:00	Lebanon	Wamo'tasemah	The Experimental Professional	39 min
Al-Gomhoureya	مسرح الجمهورية	9:00	Algeria	Professor Klenof	The Algerian National Theatre	90 min
Artistic Creativity Centre	مركز الإبداع	9:00	Bulgaria	Orpheus	Theatre 4XC	80 min
Amir Taz palace		7:00	Egypt	Sayed of The World	Al-Ghad Theatre Group	
Al-Aim (Small Hall)	مركز لغورى	8:00	Nigeria		Anambra-State	

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