

The

# EXPERIMENTAL



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## Invoking a Telling Past

Areeg Ibrahim writes

This year it is noticeable that experimentation is gearing towards not only reinventing theatrical forms and language, but also and mainly revisiting heritage and canonical texts in order to redefine and reevaluate the present moment.

The Lebanese performance *Wamo'tasemah* (which can be roughly translated as O Al-Mu'tasim!), which was presented at the Cairo Opera House's small hall on Tuesday 13 Oct., not only experiments with movement, dance, and music as modes of expression, but also explores this juxtaposition of past and present to revisit the ongoing Arab concern about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Sifting through the one-page pamphlet that describes the play as a remembrance of the story of Jesus Christ to shed light on the memories of the Nakba (Arabic for Catastrophe, or the 1948 Palestinian exodus), one wonders about the relationship between such description and a title that brings to mind the memories of Muslim days of victory and honor, personified in Al-Mu'tasim, the magnanimous Abbasid Caliph who, the historical narrative goes, prepared a massive army in response to an Arab woman's cry for help "O Al-Mu'tasim!" (upon abuse and oppression by a Roman soldier). The play thus juxtaposes Muslim and Christian history and suggests that the oppressive enemy of yore remains more or less the same in our vexed present.

The performance consists of sequences of sketches of movement, modern dance, and songs both live and in playback.

Beginning with a patriotic song about one's country, the theatrical



Lebanon's *Wamo'tasemah*

piece features an executioner, dressed in black, and gloating at the power of his whip from old time memorial. Two banners of carton, bearing faces of Palestinian faces, are carried by two performers from the sides around the stage, both marking the enormity of the number of the Palestinians involved, along with their helplessness and almost decapitation, as they are represented as merely carton faces carried around. An old man also crosses the stage carrying Al-Aqsa mosque, with his shoulders bent from the burden. The executioner/soldier re-emerges; this time with an automatic gun not a

whip and oppresses the other characters, aims his gun at them, and then at the audience members.

The woman who bewails the loss of her child could stand for every Palestinian mother in present, as well as a woman that lost her child crossing the borders during Christ's time. She might as well serve as a symbol of Virgin Mary herself with baby Jesus.

A man is brought on stage, carried by three performers; he is spread-eagled as if on a cross; and the executioner looks at them triumphantly.

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A l'intérieur des  
pages en Français

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## If it were only more intimate!



**K** *tenang*, a production by Teater Ekamatra from Singapore, tells the story of a Minang girl who leaves her family and village to seek employment as domestic help in Singapore. Over the course of the narrative, we not only hear about the girl's daily chores and moments of happiness in her new life but also about her plight as a migrant worker. In the end, she realizes that is impossible to reconcile her Minang traditions with modern urban life.

The opening video clip introduces us to the Minang, an indigenous people from the Highlands in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The traditional society is based on matrilineal heritage and women occupy an active, important role in society.

In the video, the actress (Shida Mahadi), dressed in traditional colorful clothes and head dressing, narrates one of the old folktales in her indigenous language (English surtitles provide translation for the parts in Malay parts throughout the performance). It is the story of Sabia, a girl who avenges her father's murder, as her cowardly brother fails to do so. This opening sequence provides the background for the following story, which takes place in today's Singapore, explaining her dilemma with her role in modern society.

The actress, now dressed in a simple white shirt and pants, enters with a big plastic bag—like the ones poor people use for travelling. The bag contains all she needs for her performance: a small folding stool and several pieces of clothing that represent the other characters. These few props are enough to create different scenarios and scenes.

We hear about the girl's life in the village, her decision to leave her family, about her training to become a domestic help—here the meticulous narrative is accompanied by amusing slides showing various household objects, highlighting that the girl is not familiar with common electrical appliances such as iron, fridge and stove.

And we share her joy when she finds employment with a family in Singapore.

The young girl introduces us to the members of the family one by one by hanging representative pieces of clothing on racks onstage. The clothes embody the people she interacts with. Yet they are also looming figures in the background who dictate her new life. Through her continuous narrative, but also in several short scenes of dialogue, we learn about the family's problems: the loneliness of the frail and aging grandmother; the wife's contested choice of career over family; and the head of the household's severity and strong patriarchal values.

From time to time, the monodrama becomes a bit more dramatic and dynamic when the actress slips into other characters. She is particularly successful in her impression of the grandmother—here a white headscarf helps her to become an elderly woman with a face that reflects years of hardship and disappointments.

No story is complete without a love story, and also the young Minang girl finds someone in the foreign city. Her employer, however, is not very happy to hear about her friendship with the young man. Here his patriarchal values become particularly apparent, and the girl realizes more and more that she cannot reconcile her Minang upbringing with her life in Singapore. In the end, we are not surprised that the girl chooses to go back to her village and take care of her ill mother.

As the girl lives in Singapore, the narrative switches back and forth between English—the universal language of the city—and Malay. Unfortunately, the actress's voice is too soft for the open air stage at the Cairo Opera House and half of her English text remains unintelligible. This is also true for the closing story, for which the actress returns onstage again dressed in traditional clothes.

A more intimate setting allowing for proximity and possibly interaction with the spectators would have made this evening, which heavily relies on storytelling and presents little action, more gratifying and exciting.

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## Invoking a Telling Past

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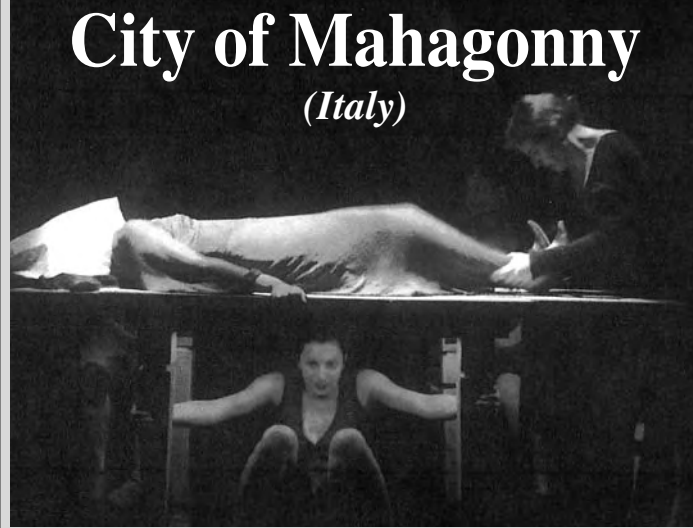
This is accompanied with playback religious hymns by the famous Lebanese singer Fairuz about the Holy Mother. The performance also invokes the satirical Arab sense and slips a comic moment when a passer-by stops to urinate on the military canon and uses the flag (made in underwear shape) as tissue.

After fairly slow-paced sequences, the performance reaches a crescendo with the finale, which is reminiscent of the Intifada (or the Palestinian Uprising that involved stone throwing). The performers fervently throw stones at a supposed enemy on stage, with a song playing, about a limping woman/nation that is the cause of pistols or wars. At the end of the performance, the performers start throwing stones at the audience too, possibly to comment on the Arab apathy towards the whole situation. The performance had interesting moments of good use of stage composition, stage lighting, choreography, semi-professional modern dances, and an ascending strong finale. It was performed by Malek Endary, Bassam Abou Diyyab, Zaher Qayys, Ahlam Awwad, Mira Sidawy, Gheith Rahhal, Selim Zahr, Sandy Bitar, and Samy Hawwat. The performance certainly appealed to the Arab common concerns and combined sense of tragic and comic. It was directed by Samir Awwad, who refers to himself as both director and synthesizer or composer. The play was thus an experimental synthesis or composition and juxtaposition of past and present and as well as of a recurring theme in the Experimental Festival: the wake-up howl for all Arabs.

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## Ascent and Ruin of the City of Mahagonny

(Italy)



Based on the original symphonic opera by Brecht, Lisa Natoli added some excerpts from other Brecht's works. The performance tackles the fantasy of what would happen if we built a city anywhere, in any country with the sole objective of living a better life. Nothing is forbidden in the city of "Mahagonny". However, we discover that this rule is applied only with the destruction of the city as it is consumed by fire and we are obliged to leave . .

## Tomorrow's Schedule

PLACE OF PERFORMANCE	مكان العرض Arbic Address	TIME	COUNTRY	TITLE OF PERFORMANCE	NAME OF COMPANY	DURATION OF PERFORMANCE
Al-Aim (The Main)	المسرح العائم الكبير الميدان كورنيش النيل بجوار كوبى الجامعة	9:00	Bangladesh	Racktakarabi (Red Oleanders)	Nagorik Theatre Group	90 min
As-Salam (Main Hall)	مسرح السلام القاعة الرئيسية	7:00	Guine- Conakry	Targuaya	Arenk Theatre de Guine	70 min
Al-Talyaa (Zake Tolyamat)	مسرح الطبيعة «زكي طليمات»	9:00	Russia	Old New Faust	Moscow "Moon Theatre"	110 min
Al-Talyaa (Salah Abdel Sabour)	مسرح الطبيعة «صلاح عبد الصبور»	7:00	Kazakhstan	Kyz Zhibek	Kazakh Drama- Theatre of Jambyl Region	45 min
Al-Arayeres	مسرح العرض	8:00	Bulgaria	Thornapple	The State Drama Theatre	65 min
Metropol Theatre	مسرح متروبول	7:00	Yemen	The Game	National Theatre Group-Sana'a	45 min
Miami Theatre	مسرح ميامي	9:00	Tunisia	After a While	Kerebatis	60 min
Al-Ghad	مسرح الغد	8:00	Syria	Don Quixote	Koon Theatre	60 min
Cairo Opera House (Small Hall)	المسرح الصغير الأوبرا	8:30	Jordan	Nirvana	Jordnian National Theatre	60 min
Al- Gomhoureyya	مسرح الجمهورية	9:00	South Korea	Macbth	Jaranda Project	90 min
Cairo Opera House (Parking Area)	ساحة انتظار السيارات	9:00	Ukraine	Gloria	Lviv Theatre Voskresinnia	40 min
Artistic Creativity Centre	مركز الابداع الفني	10:00	Italy	Ascent And Ruin of The City of Mahagonny	Lacasadargilla	90 min

The Experimental takes no responsibility for changes introduced to the above schedule without a 24-hour advance notice

The Experimental is available online daily at 6 p.m. (in PDF format) at the Cultural Development Fund's Web Site: [www.cdf-eg.org/English/exp\\_theater/news.htm](http://www.cdf-eg.org/English/exp_theater/news.htm)

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