



## **The Al-Hamlet Summit**

Riverside Studios, London

The king is dead; long live the king. Only in this instance, the new ruthless ruler of this unnamed contemporary Middle Eastern country is the former king's brother. He has not only taken the throne, but also married his brother's widow, and is setting about creating a more westernised state.

Not everyone is happy about this. The playboy prince, called back from whoring his way across Europe, is in a sulk; a neighbouring country is amassing troops on the border, and an internal opposition group is distributing leaflets suggesting that the death of the previous king was foul play.

Sound familiar? It is more than that. Sulayman Al-Bassam's reworking of Shakespeare's play is a brilliantly simple theatrical conjuring trick that has Elsinore fitting the current explosive state of Middle East politics like a silk glove. There are some oddities: I couldn't quite work out why Ophelia ends up as a fundamentalist suicide bomber, and as the piece nears its climax it becomes slightly overloaded with conflicting themes.

By and large, however, this is 90 minutes that has you riveted to your seat, not least because the format is so intriguing. The political machinations of the new king, his inept spin doctor Polonius and poisonous wife Gertrude (Amana Wali, who is excellent) are exposed through an ongoing summit that has each of them sitting at desks with nameplates. Video cameras relay their body language on to a larger screen, so that as one person talks, you can keep an eye on another.

The fact that the piece is largely performed in Arabic (with English surtitles) adds to the sense that we are observers at a high-level summit, although it is behind the scenes that the real power-brokering takes place. Nigel Barrett is superb as the smooth English arms dealer who works for the side that pays most. Live music and percussive effects lend atmosphere to a show that offers a unique relevant take on an old, familiar play.

Ends tomorrow. Box office: 020-8237 1111.

**Lyn Gardner, [The Guardian](#) (UK)**

Saturday 13 March 2004

## **A play for our times The Al-Hamlet Summit**

The room is set up like a conference hall somewhere in the Arab world, or perhaps like the legislative assembly of a small modern state. There are desks with push-button microphones and headsets. Behind, there is a screen, as if someone planned to give a Powerpoint presentation. But the names on the desks are the familiar characters from Hamlet. The setting of Sulayman Al Bassam's powerful, disturbing version of the Hamlet story is a modern Middle-Eastern state whose old king has just died, to be replaced by his brother, a ruthless, westernised dictator who has married the old king's wife to legitimise his rule, and calls his regime a "new democracy".

The Al-Hamlet Summit is presented by Al Bassam's London-based Zaoum Theatre Company with an English and international cast; and there are times when it seems a little glossily distant from the region it strives so passionately to represent.

But this show has three striking features. First, there is Al Bassam's astonishing text, which rarely echoes Shakespeare's words, but takes the story of Hamlet and reworks it in a rich new poetic version, full of what sounds like Koranic and classical Arab imagery. Some of the results are electrifying.

Second, the show uses video and projected images in a seriously effective and disturbing way, the glare of burning oilfields haunting the action, characters observed by hidden cameras as they talk.

And finally, its story of Hamlet's progression from dumb Oedipal rage to cold-eyed religious fundamentalism is chilling and utterly credible. It is as important for our understanding of the conflict looming over the world this month as the images of a transformed America in Eastcheap Rep's Jumpers at the Underbelly.

This is not a perfect show; sometimes its intense poetic approach spills over into pretentiousness, sometimes its solemnity is wearing. But the acting is generally strong, the live music magnificent.

And I doubt whether this year's Festival will produce another show so directly relevant to the nightmare that is brewing in the Middle East, or so vivid and eloquent in the theatrical means it uses to confront it.

**Joyce McMillan, The Scotsman (UK)**

Thursday 8 August 2002

## The Al-Hamlet Summit

As Shakespearean updates go, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is about as original and pulse-quickeningly topical a take on the Bard as you could wish.

The production was first presented at the 2002 Edinburgh Fringe. The Anglo-Kuwaiti playwright and director Sulayman al-Bassam has since rewritten and recast the show to accommodate both current events and an acting ensemble drawn from across the Arab world. It is this version which plays in London until Sunday. It is well worth the trip to Hammersmith to see it.

It is fascinating to observe and absorb the resonances of Al-Bassam's theatrical choices. The principal location is the official assembly of an unnamed, contemporary Middle Eastern state. Strong beams of light are cast above six desks. Each surface is equipped with microphone, lamp and mini-camera, the latter affording probing, surveillance-style close-ups of the sitters on a screen up on the back wall.

Nameplates identify a familiar bunch of characters, but they spout a fresh, heightened language. Al-Bassam has ditched Shakespeare's text in favour of a seductive blend of pointed political rhetoric and feverish poetry. The script is bilingual. English is spoken sporadically, but Arabic rightly predominates. It may take a few minutes to grow accustomed to reading surtitles, but the intensity of the performances, the words themselves and the relevance of the ideas behind them draw you in.

Shakespeare's premise remains, but underscored with an intriguing timeliness. Nicolas Daniel's Claudius pays lip-service to his government's New Democracy, which is basically dictatorship. He and Gertrude, played by Amana Wali, are ice-cold strategists armed with a ruthless faith in their own duplicities.

Mohammed Kefah Al-Kous's Hamlet dodges in and out, his suicidal and Oedipally tinged grief segueing into almost Marx Brothers-style madness. In one moment of inspired comedy he enters his uncle's meeting chamber hauling a car door blown off in a bomb. But his ultimate guise as an Islamic extremist is a disturbingly believable turn of events.

The show's initial urgency is undermined by tonal uncertainties, variable acting and some awkwardly staged scenes. But these flaws are balanced by a terrifically atmospheric live soundtrack, a telling use of video back-projections and a root integrity that reflects today's incendiary world with accuracy and ambiguity.

As a piece of political theatre this *Hamlet* offers no solutions, but plenty to ponder.

**Donald Hutera, The Times (UK) \*\*\*\***  
12 March 2004

## The play's the thing

I'd arrived at Damascus airport in the middle of the night laden with two guns, some knives, a couple of grenades, reams of blood-stained dollar bills, video projectors, scripts and a wad of green propaganda leaflets. The Syrian customs officers looked at each other in menacing silence.

"Stage props!" I blurted. "Political theatre," I squeaked. "It's a touring piece, look," I gabbled, waving a Japanese playbill in the air. "I'm here for some rehearsals at the national theatre - I'm a Kuwaiti!"

That went down well... within seconds my aftershave bottle was garrotted, my dirty laundry punched to the ground and my paperbacks slapped into blubbering wrecks. This done, I was led into a room that looked like a set from *Midnight Express* right down to the hand marks on the olive green walls, the solitary naked bulb and the swarthy man in a vest asleep on a rickety metal bed, his back to the door.

This was the superintendent - a man so feared by his subordinates that the officers who had taken me to him bickered with each other in the doorway over who should risk waking him up. The superintendent cocked one eye open.

"And?" he barked.

"Hamlet," I said.

"Hamlet?"

"I'm making a version of Hamlet," I said.

"I like Shakespeare. Give us some Hamlet," he said.

And off we went: one line led to another, one scene to the next, tea was ordered, and two hours later it transpired that among the Syrian customs officers there were a variety of firmly held opinions about the Prince of Denmark: why he was a good 'un led astray by history; why it was all his mother's fault; why he was a ponce who got what he deserved. Tea was followed by coffee, cigarettes by an analysis of Claudius's virtues as a leader and, as dawn cracked over Damascus, guns, knives, grenades and blood-stained dollar bills evaporated like so many ghosts over the ramparts.

**by Sulayman Al-Bassam** - Kuwaiti writer and director.

*He has been commissioned by the RSC to make *The Baghdad Richard*, a free adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, opening next February as part of the Complete Works Festival. His latest production, *The Mirror for Princes, Kalila wa Dimna*, opens at the Barbican next month.*

## The Financial Times online

Published: April 24 2006

<http://news.ft.com/cms/s/a72b0840-d03d-11da-b160-0000779e2340.html>

## Shakespeare and suicide bombers

**Theatre director Suleyman Al-Bassam's new version of Hamlet places the action in a controversial setting: the Middle East.** He talks to Peter Culshaw

Hamlet must be the best known play in the world. We've had a sci-fi Hamlet, a reggae Hamlet; there has doubtless been a naturist Hamlet. But what we haven't had, as far as I'm aware, is an Arabic Hamlet. Until now. The idea may seem strange, but then other cultures are often in a better position to interpret Shakespeare, because in terms of social structure their societies are often closer to the Shakespearean world than our own.

Gregori Kozintsev's Russian version of King Lear, for example, with its brooding landscapes and music by Shostakovich, is – for my money – the best ever film of the play (Laurence Olivier praised its "stark brilliance").

Last year I [met Hollywood actor John Cusack](#). After our interview, we were talking about Hamlet and how to present a radical, contemporary version of the play. He asked me if I had any ideas. "Set it somewhere like Saudi Arabia," I suggested. "The feudal system, the corruption, the hothouse court atmosphere – it would be perfect."

Cusack told me he thought the idea was brilliant and I told him he could get his people on to my people in the morning and we could knock out a deal.

I never heard from him again – perhaps because I remembered that I haven't actually got any "people". In any case, I would have had to confess that the concept wasn't original but came from a stunning production I had seen in London by the Anglo-Kuwaiti director Suleyman Al-Bassam.

His new interpretation of the play is the most intriguing production in the Bath Shakespeare Festival, which opens next week.

The Hamlet I saw in London began with the characters seated behind desks as though at a summit, complete with name tags and headphones. This set the scene for an evening of power struggle, negotiations, compromise and tragic chaos. The overheated, incestuous atmosphere built up ("something rotten in the state of Denmark") with Claudius as a western puppet and the confused Hamlet outraged by the corruption. The sexual ambiguity was effectively symbolised by a moment when Hamlet gives Ophelia a garment which could be some silky lingerie and turns out to be a veil.

Al-Bassam subsequently did an entirely new, post-September 11 version which won a Fringe First award in Edinburgh. Now called The Al-Hamlet Summit, and performed with a London-based company, the new play kept the original's characters but jettisoned nearly all of Shakespeare's text. Al-

Bassam had, in effect, written a new play. When I heard he was rehearsing a group of Arabic actors in Kuwait, this time in an Arabic version, I flew out to see it.

While many of the design ideas and the excellent improvised music remain, the new play, set in an unnamed Arabic country, makes explicit what was implicit in the Hamlet I had seen in 2001. Claudius has a key speech saying, "Oh God: petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars. I have no other God than you, I am created in your image." Polonius is a devious spin-doctor, Hamlet moves from indecision to becoming a Bin Laden-type religious fanatic, while Ophelia ends up as a suicide bomber. CNN-type footage of burning oil wells adds to the claustrophobia.

I asked Al-Bassam what had made him latch on to Shakespeare as a vehicle for his ideas. "Shakespeare's world, with its mixture of autocracy and feud, conspiracies, adoration of rhetoric, and its feudal structures, has specific resonances for the Arab world," he says.

There was another, more practical reason: "The play is well known in the Middle East, so people knew the basic story, and it was a way around the Cyclops of the state censors. It would take a particular brass-neck to censor Shakespeare. After all, the Elizabethan dramatists used historical settings and poetic conceit to encode their political critiques and get past the censor of their day."

Before they put on the original Hamlet in Kuwait, one of the more liberal Arabic states in terms of freedom of speech, the actors had to undergo the rather strange experience of performing it to an audience of one person, a mullah, who insisted on certain changes (there was to be no touching between men and women, for example).

Al-Bassam's troupe includes actors from all over the Arab world including Syria and Iraq, something unique in Arabic theatre. "Generally, companies are national and go to festivals and compete like a sporting event," he says. "I wanted to get beyond that nationalistic thing and have actors with very different history and talents." Their most extraordinary performance may well have been to 600 American troops in Doha. "I met an American general and suggested that we perform to his soldiers," he says. "The backdrop was seven huge American tanks."

He had also toured The Al-Hamlet Summit, and in Egypt the play caused a riot. "Word about its political frankness had spread, and the play sold out. Suddenly there were 300 people outside fighting to get in. We had to do an emergency performance at midnight."

The play stirred up a vehement debate in the Arabic press, some feeling that Al-Bassam was a "Westernised traitor", for falsely approximating Islam and the propagation of violence, others that it was "a vital and much needed

expression of today's Arab concerns which had presented them to the West in a sophisticated and human form".

Why did he find it necessary to junk the Shakespeare text, especially as many of the same political points were being made in his original Hamlet?

"What Arab audiences saw as a politically loaded piece that touched at their feelings of despair in the political process, Western audiences regarded as little more than a `clever' adaptation of Shakespeare. I had imagined the meaning of the work would be as transparent to Western audiences as it was to Arab audiences. I was wrong. It was time for a rewrite."

The play is passionately critical of both Western and Arabic authorities. Al-Bassam's background – his father is a Kuwaiti, his mother English – gives him a foot in both camps. Relative to the rest of the Middle East, the Kuwaiti viewpoint is an unusual one, in that there is more sympathy for the US-led coalition.

"Saddam had tried to wipe us off the map," says Al-Bassam. "As a Kuwaiti, there is a lot I owe to the coalition." But he is critical of the "short-term policy after short-term policy" – the West's earlier support for the likes of Saddam and Bin Laden "is so crazy you couldn't write it. In Kuwait we feel all the contradictions very keenly."

Al-Bassam hopes that theatre can be a bridge, "however frail", between the cultures. "It permits complexity and difference, and it permits the weak to be other than pitied and the cruel to be other than hated. Theatre challenges accepted world views and breaks the mirrors of authority. Shakespeare understood that very well."

**Peter Culshaw, Daily Telegraph (UK)**

1 March 2004

## **Hamlet gets Middle Eastern makeover**

The family feud takes place in a Middle Eastern summit.

Shakespeare meets the Middle East in an imaginative and topical remake of Hamlet by the Anglo-Kuwaiti director Sulayman Al-Bassam.

The Al-Hamlet Summit, set in a Middle Eastern country riven with war and corruption, deservedly won a Fringe First Award last week.

Although the names are familiar from the Shakespearean version, the setting is decidedly 21st Century.

Hamlet, the aggrieved son of the deceased king who has just been succeeded by his westernised despot of a brother, Claudius, descends to bitterness and religious extremism in his attempt to gain the crown.

Unnerving

The family feud is played out against the backdrop of a country wracked by a devastating war as well as domestic insurrection.

Al-Bassam's play is a brave attempt to bring one of Shakespeare's darkest and most unnerving plays into a modern context.

Extracts of Shakespearean verse are interspersed with chilling background images of burning oil fields, and whether by accident or design, its Middle Eastern setting makes it one of the most topical plays on this year's Fringe circuit.

### **BBC ONLINE**

Tuesday 20 August 2002

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/reviews/2193375.stm>

# All the War's A Stage

**The season's best dramas center on power and conflict in our new world.**

**By Carla Power**

Newsweek International

June 20 issue - Summer is traditionally a time for light theatrical fare, from alfresco Shakespearean comedies to high-kicking choruses. Those in search of the feel-good factor can take comfort in new smash musicals like **Billy Elliot** and **Guys and Dolls** in London, or the zany antics of the **Blue Man Group** in Berlin. But a clutch of this season's stellar productions are darker, preoccupied with the power politics and conflicts of a post-9/11 world.

Deborah Warner's production of **Julius Caesar**—which opened in London, moved on to the Theatre National de Chaillot in Paris and heads next to Madrid's Teatro Espanol and the Grand Theatre de la Ville in Luxembourg—is quite literally blood-stained. To costume soldiers for the civil war following the Roman leader's assassination, Warner's designer went to a British Army surplus shop and bought fatigues just back from the Iraqi front. Some were stained with the blood of real soldiers. Warner initially had doubts about directing the production: the tale of dictatorships, bloody coups and civil war was so timely that she assumed there'd be a "rash of 'Caesar's" onstage. "The play has always been linked to the times it's been presented in," she notes. As it turned out, there was only one other major one: this spring's New York production with Denzel Washington as a sharp-suited Brutus. In Warner's vision, Caesar himself is a power mogul, complete with requisite black silk dressing gown, trophy wife and fawning retinue. Ralph Fiennes plays Marc Antony as a dumb jock jolted into eloquence by the boss's assassination. When his famous funeral oration moves the crowd to bay for revenge, Warner homes in on the terrifying consequences of political rhetoric. In a later, oft-cut scene, mobsters attack a hapless poet, caught in the crossfire of the crowd's wrath. As the mob closes in to watch a wild-haired woman rape the poet, it's hard not to think of Lynndie England, the infamous female guard at Abu Ghraib Prison.

Warner is too fine a director not to acknowledge war's potential as glamorous spectacle. The civil-war scenes evoke the high-tech power of 21st-century warfare, in the acrid yellow smoke that creeps across the stage, the heavy-metal soundtrack and the flickering video projections. "There are lots of reports of people going into battle with loud music coming through their helmets," says Warner. "We wanted to suggest war as a very technical world—something live, full of energy, that's going to be a destructive force."

Like Warner, Nicholas Hytner is too canny to reduce Shakespeare to the simple role of a propagandist for pacifism. Editing out Shakespeare's ambivalence about war robs him of genius, argues Hytner, director of the Royal National Theatre. "If a [Shakespeare] play deals with the glory of conquest, it will also deal with the squalor of conquest as well," he says. His current production of **Henry IV** (through Aug. 31) opens with a grim vision of that squalor. Widows keened over corpses lying by stubby, charred trees. A gaunt Henry Bolingbroke presides over a joyless court; you can't help hoping Falstaff gets onstage fast. When he does, he is a one-man antiwar movement, streaking across the warscape, all tummy and red trousers. Played by Michael Gambon as a bohemian cowardly lion, he is, as Shakespeare scholar Harold C. Goddard wrote, a symbol of "the opposite of force." Yet despite Gambon's appeal, there is an acknowledgment of the usefulness of violence, notes Hytner, in the "great chivalric coming of age" of young Prince Hal's growth from party boy to responsible heir. When Hal (a wonderful Matthew Macfadyen) throws down his glove to challenge his rival Hotspur to a duel, only to have his father, Henry Bolingbroke, kick it coldly aside, it feels more like a slap than a paternal impulse. In Shakespeare's universe, notes Hytner, "there's the notion that it's honorable and necessary for one man to kill another for him to become fully a man."

And that, of course, is the central theme of "Hamlet," which has been reimagined in the modern Middle East by the Anglo-Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam. Set to play this August at the "Hamlet" summer season in Helsingor, Denmark, **The Al-Hamlet Summit** is a spare 90-minute production that blends the Arabic oral storytelling tradition with modern political realities. The court at Elsinore is the sterile world of an international summit, complete with microphones and nameplates. Hamlet's madness is cast as Islamic extremism, picked up at the university; Ophelia is a suicide bomber, and Polonius a spin doctor.

Less pointedly political, but equally powerful, judging by the ecstatic reviews on its recent opening in Singapore, is **Puur**. A meditation on memory and genocide by the Belgian choreographer-director Wim Vandekeybus and his Ultima Vez company, it will play at the Festival d'Avignon in July and then tour Belgium and the Netherlands. The piece, the most political in the 41-year-old Vandekeybus's career, draws on old myths about the murders of innocents. "Puur," which asks, "Why do men murder?" blends theater, super-8 film and dance to explore fundamental emotions like alienation, fear and guilt. As Shakespeare knew well, war makes for dreadful realities, but wonderful theater.

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## The Al-Hamlet Summit

Riverside Studios, London ★★★★★

Claudius and Polonius drag up as two women in burqas to spy on the hero and Ophelia in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, a bold transposition of Shakespeare's tragedy to today's Middle East. This powerful piece, written and directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam, is set in some unidentified, composite Arab state. Hamlet is the grief-stricken son of the deceased king, who has been replaced by his Westernised autocrat brother Claudius.

The moral conundrum posed by the ghost in Shakespeare (is he to be believed, and what is his provenance?) finds its ingenious equivalent in the People's Liberation Front, which claims that the old king was murdered by his successor. Instead of a visitor from beyond the grave, this Hamlet (the handsome, intense Mohammed Kefah Al-Kous) is waylaid by a suited Western arms-dealer, who, in the fashion of such folk, is quite promiscuous about whom he's prepared to deal with.

Using Shakespeare's characters and dramatic template but with a new script, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was performed in English at the Edinburgh Festival in 2002, winning a Fringe First. It comes to London in an Arabic version, with English surtitles. Of course, we can't help but view it now in the context of Iraq.

The play deposits us in a country besieged. The armies of Fortinbras are massed on the frontier. There's a militant Islamic opposition, and the country is in thrall to American finance. Just as Claudius is disarmingly honest with himself in the scene in which he struggles to pray and fails, so there is a shocking candour here when his counterpart (Nicolas Daniel) strips off, kneels and addresses his own idea of god - a suitcase of petro-dollars - with an obscene mock-prayer.

The piece is staged with hypnotic force. The characters sit at labeled desks in a conference room that transmutes into a war cabinet. Facial close-ups are projected on to a screen. Laertes becomes the representative of an approach to the crisis very different to that taken by Hamlet who, during his stay in England, becomes an Islamic fundamentalist and returns proclaiming that the epoch of the pen has passed and the era of the sword is at hand.

The time scales of the play jar at this point. It is scarcely believable that Fortinbras and his tanks would hang around at the border waiting for Hamlet to come back a convert. But the psychology feels right. The beautiful Ophelia (Maryam Ali) becomes a suicide bomber, filmed chillingly just before she embarks on her mission.

Not everything works. With no ghost, the hero's unhinged behaviour is less viscerally motivated and it's harder to see why Hamlet does not get on with the job of killing his uncle. There's no room for the play within the play. But this is an intelligent adaptation, reminiscent of those East European versions during the Cold War.

**Paul Taylor, The Independent** (<http://www.independent.co.uk>)

11 March 2004