

## BBC -Radio 3 Night Waves

### Sulayman Al-Bassam interview by Gabriel Gbadamosi

*Presenter:* Welcome to Nightwaves. Tonight, cross cultural inspiration as Kuwaiti writer and Director Sulayman A-Bassam tells us why Shakespeare is the perfect co-conspirator for Arab theatre directors.

The Kuwaiti writer and director Sulayman Al-Bassam came to the attention of audiences and critics in this country with his intriguing take on an English classic "Al-Hamlet Summit", which matched Shakespeare's' Danish story to the complexities of Middle Eastern power Politics.

His "Baghdad Richard", a version of Richard III comes to the Royal Shakespeare Company next year as part of its program of producing the complete works of Shakespeare.

To be a playwright in the Arab world is often a delicate balancing Act between censorship and speaking truth to power. This is the subject of Al-Bassams current production which opens tomorrow at the Barbican in London.

Kalila Wa Dimna is a re-working from 8<sup>th</sup> century Arabic of the animal fables originally intended as a book of advice for kings. Arriving into Persia & Arabia from an origin in India, these subtle philosophical tales were translated into a classic of Arabic literature by the court scribe Ibn Al-Muqaffa. Al-Bassam's play sets the fables in the context of Al-Muqaffa's own turbulent times, his struggle to write and survive in the midst of the bloody 8<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid Revolution in the Muslim world.

I went to meet Sulayman Al-Bassam in rehearsal for Kalila Wa Dimna at the Barbican and he began by explaining the title for me.

**SAB:** Kalila Wa Dimna are two jackals and the stories of Kalila Wa Dimna relate to the escapades and shenanigans of these two jackals as they move into the centre of power in the king's court. Ibn Al-Muqaffa had a political program that he was interested in developing through these fables. One of how best to rule, if we take a line like.. "SAB quotes in Arabic", which means the animals gathered and said to the lion, "*you have given us protection without causing us fear, therefore we will send to you at every lunch time a carcass for you to eat*"

This simple line actually reflects an aspect of Ibn Al-Muqaffas political philosophy, in terms of his theory about the relationship between Rulers and Ruled. He wrote elsewhere that the ideal ruler would be one who allows his people to remove him from power and instate someone else who would give them the means to increase their wealth, the means to develop their society in return for which the ruled would make it easier for that ruler to rule over them.

**Presenter:** So what has drawn you back to this story?

**SAB:** I was looking for a way into some of today's ruined and chaotic and overcharged landscape of power and politics in my region and I was given the opportunity to explore these tales further by an Islamic Arts Museum in Kuwait and I found that through them I could find a very satisfying indirect way of addressing some of the issues that I want to explore today.

**Presenter:** A collection of 8<sup>th</sup> century fables, but the back projections in your productions are of contemporary Basra?

**SAB:** Yes, Basra, Al-Anbar, Kufaa, Baghdad, that's where the events of our play unfold.

The Abbasids in the play are creating a large empire which is a project that is also being undertaken one may say today in those very same places. The relationship between empire and narrative, what stories the empire tells and what stories the empire doesn't tell and how the empire has altered its own stories that it creates for itself is one of the themes that I'm interested in exploring in this piece and so it made sense for some of the back projections to draw on aspects of the contemporary war footage that we see today. All of which is done I hope also in a way that keeps that fabulous distance that I'm very keen to maintain for this piece. Its not docu-drama, its an approach to politics, religion & questions of social justices in the Middle-East through history on one hand and fable on the other. Both of which are mechanisms to objectify and then perhaps distort and that you feel your watching something that could very well be about now, that could very well be about this moment, that is in-fact about this moment. You are seeing it as if from a promonotory.

**Presenter:** I think you see yourself as very much a contemporary of many other writers and directors across the Arabic speaking world. Can you tell us something more generally about the relationship of Arabic language theatre writers and directors to the society? Is that an easy relationship or something you have to negotiate with great care?

**SAB:** Political theatre has a very strong sort of history in the region and its something that has a strong following as well, but of course its something that is quiet difficult to create. By its definition, political theatre is something that takes a position against authority or with regard to authority and puts itself into perilous scenarios and often finds itself either shut down or kicked out of a theatre or whatever it might be.... You know. I'm lucky in that where I come from, in the large tapestry of the Arab world which is Kuwait, there is a large berth for freedom of expression that is guaranteed by the constitution and its something that we're proud of and that we use a lot.

That said, I have also decided to make this production in English for several reasons and one of which is that I think it would probably have more guarantee of a stage life being in English than if it were in Arabic. The creation of work is a perilous undertaking that can be scuppered at any moment.

**Presenter:** Are there many state theatres, many private theatres in the Gulf? Or your creating it as you go along?

**SAB:** It's a nascent infrastructure. I try to put in my elbow grease where it might have some positive effect.

**Presenter:** Reading your play in English, it reads as very very generous with language, it's very rhetorical, its beautifully, intricately created and I have the impression that always behind the English is Arabic somehow. I was very intrigued by this kind of process almost of translation and I know that people like President Nasser of Egypt has much of his power from being one of the finest Arabic speakers of his generation. Can you tell us something about this kind of function of the language within the Arab world.

**SAB:** The power of rhetoric, the power of words is almost magical in the Arab-Islamic world. And its say a power that is harnessed and drawn out into the mental map, also by the power of the Quran and by the fact that words from the Quranic heritage words have a transformative power. The Quran is the word of God, the word of God has the transformative power. Therefore, the word," Logos" the verb has the power.

In terms of what this does for a language of theatre you can imagine that it gives enormous tools to the theatre maker. Because you can rouse and you can depress and you can cut, you can destroy with words. That's one of the things I think is very very exciting about the potential culture of theatre in the Arab world.

**Presenter:** Well in Kalila Wa Dimna, you've drawn on fables from your part of the world, in an earlier play "Al-Hamlet" you've turned to Shakespeare as a text and you've created a play which takes place at a summit. Some kind of political kind of description of the middle-east through Shakespeare... Can you tell me what drew you to Shakespeare for your Al-Hamlet? What was the interest for the middle-east, for the middle-eastern audiences of Shakespeare?

**SAB:** I feel that Shakespeare and the contemporary Middle-East really share a lot of common ground, both in terms of the quest of individuals for identity, the quest of nations for identity, questions, major questions over the nature of power and kinship, sexuality, gender politics. All of these issues I feel are really very very potent issues in the Middle-East and you can see them and you can sense them everyday. And I feel that Shakespeare gives me a sort of passport into addressing some of

these questions. We've touched a little bit on the questions of censorship in the Arab world and Shakespeare is often a way through which I can explore issues of great political moment or social moment without having to expose myself, without having to fall into the trap of "oh well you are trying to say this and therefore you should be accused of this"!

*Presenter:* By using Shakespeare, do you somehow say well this is Shakespeare speaking and not me speaking, so anything that you don't like in the play you can apply elsewhere?

*SAB:* Yes, he's very useful like that, he's an alibi. I mean it happened also under the "Iron Curtain" in the east, East Europe & so on. There is a great heritage of that. The conceit that the Al Hamlet Summit develops is that it puts contemporary figures in the political landscape, within the fabric of another world, a Shakespearean world and thereby opens up a space for dissent or a space for other kind of annotation or thinking around these characters. Without that mask one has much less freedom to explore real emotions or dangerous emotions of these characters because you are representing reality and to represent reality is a dangerous thing, because the reality that we live in, in the Arab world is very tumultuous.

*Presenter:* The private subjectivity of the powerful is off limits.

*SAB:* Yes