

Culture Wars: Interview with Sulayman Al-Bassam - Playwright/Director, The Al-Hamlet Summit

By Shirley Dent

<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2003-01/albassam.htm>

The Al-Hamlet Summit takes Shakespeare's tragedy and transposes the action to an undefined Middle Eastern state on the brink of war, besieged by enemy neighbours from without and a growing politicised Islam from within, and in thrall to US dollars and the arms trade. It has been described as 'an example of serious, meaty politics' (The New Statesman) and a 'fascinating reworking of Shakespeare... insightful and interesting'(Evening Standard).

SD: At the very end of The Al-Hamlet Summit I felt as if you had put the assassin's knife in the hands of the audience. Was this your intention, and if so, why?

SA-B: The script was written from a contemporary Arab perspective. It carries many concerns and issues of today's Arab world and its relationship to the West. At the same time, it addresses these concerns to an English-speaking audience. The cross-cultural construction of the piece create a sense of implication in the affairs of the other. But the polemic stops there. There is no moral closure to the piece. When Fortinbras enters at the end to restore moral order, we discover from his monologue that begins 'Faeces, intestines and sweat: only dead humans can smell like that', that Fortinbras is far from being a 'good' moral agent, on the contrary, he possesses a voracious appetite for slaughter.

This absence of moral closure is also the absence of authorial judgement; it leaves the spectator in free-fall and this is empowering.

SD: Talking of audience, what has the response been - are people enjoying Shakespeare anew or are they engaging with the politics in its own terms - and have different audiences responded in different ways?

SA-B: The production takes major plot strands and elements of tone from Shakespeare, but the text of The Al-Hamlet Summit, being entirely original, stirs very different cultural responses than the Shakespearean text.

I think particularly for British and English-speaking audiences the production offers a powerful insight into the politics and emotions of the Arab world. They watch the piece with a great deal of concentration and something bordering on 'respect'. I think this is because they are acutely aware of hearing a political and cultural voice expressing opinions very different from their own.

When the piece opened in Cairo, there was a riot for tickets outside the theatre and the British ambassador was forced to enter the theatre through the stage door!

In the Arab world, where political theatre is fiercely monitored by the state, The Al-Hamlet Summit was a much-needed breath of air. As it happens, Arab audiences discovered a streak of black comedy in the piece that until then had been very overlooked by Western audiences.

SD: So who - or what - did you have in mind when you choose to 'strap Shakespeare's Hamlet to a theatrical warhead'?

SA-B: That phrase was used in some of our publicity for the production. It refers to the explosive political meanings of the piece. Ironically, it also plays on the Western media's obsession with equating the idea of 'Arab' with ideas of violence or war.

Before writing *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, I had been touring various adaptations of the Shakespearian text in the Arab world with Zaoum Theatre, my London-based company. During this period, I made *Hamlet* in Kuwait that was performed in my home country, Kuwait, and another adaptation called *The Arab League Hamlet* that was performed at a festival in Tunisia. You can read more about these on our website www.zaoum.com.

What became apparent to me through these productions was the depth of charged political meaning that *Hamlet* carried for audiences across the Arab world. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is a text and a production that manifests these secret, coded political meanings.

SD: And is this Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Is there something in Shakespeare that lends itself to general political truths, which can be reworked for every generation? Or is Shakespeare simply great drama?

SA-B: I was not aiming to make general political truths. In a sense that is the point of the piece: it throws light on specific political viewpoints, within a very precise cultural geography. The piece is set in an unnamed Arab country similar in its anarchy to Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion or Lebanon during the civil war. The attitudes expressed and the questions raised (the inadequacy of democracy, the militarization of the social sphere, the failures of intellectual revolution) these themes are, however, common to many countries in today's Arab world.

Having said that, I think 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.

SD: One of the most dramatic and politically acute and shocking moments in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* comes not from Shakespeare but from Sulayman Al-Bassam. I am thinking of Claudius's speech, as he strips almost naked and literally begs the USA, to, well, shaft him. Can you talk us through this? What inspired this speech?

SA-B: Firstly, I am flattered that you should think this.

I wrote that speech before I wrote the play. It was written after a night of channel surfing between BBC World, Al-Jazeera, CNN and Iraqi TV which gave me an acute dose of the back street snuff theatre that is world politics. This monologue was the impulse for the rest of the play and it sums up many of the contradictions and dramatic tensions within the piece.

The Claudius character is a secular tyrant. He is also a cynic and a political pragmatist. This is a moment of truth that moves away from the rhetoric of the political arena and where we see the man in desperate need of the hand that feeds him- and that he longs to bite. It is about the tortured relationship between the puppet ruler and his imperial masters. Claudius: (opening a briefcase full of dollars) Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars.

I have no other God than you, I am created in your image, I seek guidance from you the All-Seeing, the All-Knowing Master of Worlds, Prosperity and Order. This for the nation's new satellite TV station, this for God's satellite; this for the epic about my valiant life, this for God's film industry; this for surveillance networks across the capital, this for God's installation people; this for primary, secondary and higher; this for God's curriculums; this for me. This for the leader of the opposition party; this for the Austrian torturer; this for the editor of the national press - or is he dead? This for the MD of Crude Futures: all of Heaven's gifts down to the cracks of their arses and I, the poor, sluttish Arab, forgoing billions to worship you: I am transparent, so transparent my flesh emerges like calves milk- I beg you, Lord, give me the recognition I need and help me calculate what is good.

Is it not charm, is it not consummate charm to slouch on silk cushions and fuck and be fucked by the all the flesh dollars can buy? I am a fine apprentice, do I not learn well what you taught me? This for you, oh God.

Help me, Lord, help me - your angelic ministers defame me, they portray me as a murderer a trafficker of toxins, a strangler of children, why is this, God? I lie naked before you while they deafen you with abuse. Let me not be disagreeable to you, God, I do not compete with you, how could these packets of human flesh compete with your infinity; I am your agent, nor am I an ill partner for your gluttony and endless filth.

I do not try to be pure: I have learnt so much filth, I eat filth, I am an artist of filth I make mounds of human bodies, sacrifices to your glory, I adore the stench of rotting peasants gassed with your technology, I am a descendant of the Prophet, Peace be Upon Him, and you, you are God. Your angelic ministers want to eliminate me, throw me like Lucifer from the lap of your mercy, but who brought me here oh God let us not forget, who put me here?

In front of your beneficence, I am a naked mortal, full of awe: my ugliness is not unbearable, surely it is not? My nose is still as hooked, my eyes as diabolical as when you offered me your Washington virgins and CIA opium. Oh, God, my ugliness does not offend you now, does it?

Your plutonium, your loans, your democratic filth that drips off your ecstatic crowds-I want them all, Oh God; I want your vaseline smiles and I want your pimp ridden plutocracies; I want your world shafting bank; I want it shafting me now - offer me the shafting hand of redemption - Oh God let us be dirty together, won't you?

SD: The Al Hamlet Summit not only brought the politics of the Middle East to life but also made alive the characters of Shakespeare's Hamlet in new ways. Polonius, for example, who often gets off with being portrayed as a bit of an old duffer, is really nailed as a sinister, manipulative courtier. Did you feel you were being more faithful than most to Shakespeare's characterisation?

SA-B: I think it is dramatically more engaging for Polonius to be portrayed as a manipulative courtier, because it makes him responsible for the pain he causes and this responsibility brings with it the question of guilt.

In the same way, I always thought it was a shame that there was so little interaction between Hamlet and his peer Laertes. In The Al-Hamlet Summit script they are given that opportunity to meet and, as a result, we see them expressing two very different attitudes towards resistance.

The Ghost of Old Hamlet is transformed into a shadowy network of propaganda and disinformation, that drops leaflets over the city- in the same way American and British bombers are leafleting Basra today.

SD: An important part of the production is the projection of the character's close up features on to a screen behind using webcams. Again, what does this say about political propaganda and what does it say about theatrical aesthetics?

SA-B: The aesthetic takes its cue from the real. In directing the piece, I actively sought a hyper-realism in the conference room that slides into a war room and is a deadly arena for the fighting out of internal conflicts. The projection screen develops its own dramatic logic as the play progresses and becomes gradually less objective until, in the final scene, it spews out the deaths of the characters on stage.

SD: And finally, The Al-Hamlet Summit is not just a transposition of Shakespeare into contemporary politics, it is a staging using Arabic culture - the music for example. How important is this and how interchangeable are politics, theatre and culture? Is Shakespeare an internationalist?

SA-B: The globalisation of politics is deceptive. Every Arab knows that George Bush said 'either you are with us or you are against us' and everyone in the West now knows that Saddam is bad. This is globalisation of politics, but it does very little to increase dialogue between cultures. All it does it promote vacuous 'world views'. This is where culture and theatre become vital. They permit complexity and difference and they permit the weak to be other than pitied and the cruel to be other than hated. Theatre challenges the accepted world views and breaks the mirrors of authority. Shakespeare understood that power very well.