

Press Quotes:

"A fascinating and clever play, revisiting a Middle Eastern literary masterpiece, offering rare insight into a critical period and exploring how the two resonate in today's volatile world... It is powerful stuff."
Sarah Hemming, THE FINANCIAL TIMES

"Explosive, gutsy and brilliantly acted... It cuts deep"
Emma John, TIME OUT

"The resonances emerge powerfully... its eloquence is visceral and visual."
Sam Marlowe, THE TIMES

"Swirling images, a brilliant mix of video and eerie soundscape, and a use of the space that makes it feel as if the whole production is bleeding at the edges."
Lyn Gardner, THE GUARDIAN

"*The Mirror for Princes* is inventively staged, ferociously acted... through it, Al-Bassam asserts the power of stories themselves to bring about destruction - or creation."
Marina Warner, THE NEW STATESEMAN



The Mirror for Princes (Kalila Wa Dimna)

By SARAH HEMMING

Published: May 17 2006 03:00 |

The Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam chose to write *The Mirror for Princes* in English, fearing that if he wrote it in Arabic it would be denied a stage life because of the incendiary subject matter. English audiences should be grateful for his decision for a more mundane reason: were it in Arabic, I think we would have lost the plot completely. **It is a fascinating and clever play, revisiting a Middle Eastern literary masterpiece, offering rare insight into a critical period and exploring how the two resonate in today's volatile world.**

The piece is set in Iraq in about AD750, during the birth of the Abbasid revolution. As an empire emerges that will hold away for four centuries, so too literature: *The Mirror For Princes* by the poet Ibn Al-Muqaffa. As we meet him, Muqaffa is translating these ancient animal fables, intended as a book of advice for kings, from Persian into Arabic. He creates a beautifully written and profound piece of literature about the ethical conduct of rulers. His genius gets him a place at court, where the Calipha (ruler) finds counsel in the tales. But around Muqaffa's allegorical arguments for justice and peace, bloodshed and turmoil reign. His work starts being interpreted as a justification for slaughter and ultimately as a means of sanctioning his own murder.

The play shows the fate that has often befallen writers who oppose authority and explores the power struggles endemic to empire-building. As Muqaffa composes his "mirror for princes", so the play holds up a mirror to modern times, inviting today's world leaders to scrutinise their own conduct. **It is powerful stuff, given strong performances**, particularly by Neil Edmond as a witty, troubled Muqaffa and Simon Kane as a terrifyingly unpredictable Calipha. But it is also very dense. Performers write useful dates and place names on transparent screens, but at times this can just distract. There is much to take away here, but be prepared to work hard.

TIME OUT *****

The Mirror for Princes

Until May 27, [Barbican Centre](#)

Explosive, gutsy and brilliantly acted, Sulayman Al-Bassam's play is a must for anyone whose knowledge of Arabic literature begins and ends with '1001 Arabian Nights'.

Set in first-century Iraq, when pre-emptive strikes and political insurgencies were nothing new, Al-Bassam's play follows the story of Ibn Al-Muqaffa, a Persian poet whose name has endured thanks to his collection of animal fables, *Kalila Wa Dimna*. Bedtime reading for rulers, these jungle stories were actually politically charged allegories drawn from Muqaffa's own increasingly precarious experiences of a corrupt and bloodthirsty court.

Consciously echoing the powerplay and rich language of Shakespeare's histories, writer-director Al-Bassam creates an oppressive atmosphere on a set dominated by words, whether it's the Arabic surtitles or the notes being scribbled on the large Perspex chalkboards that dominate the design. Muqaffa is a timid hero, with only his wit and banter to protect him from the swords of his enemies, and Neil Edmonds makes him a thoroughly appealing one as he falls in love with Asia, a young revolutionary, and takes his first dangerous steps into the court on her account. 'We need you to stay alive,' she tells him. 'Excellent,' he replies, 'we have lots in common already.'

The more Muqaffa's star rises, the more he is in peril. Sworn against him is Sufyan, a jealous courtier who matches Muqaffa's skill in poetry with an equal gift for violence. There is adamantium-strong support in a doubled-up ensemble, none more so than Simon Kane who portrays both the newly

crowned Al-Mansour, twitching with paranoia, and Muqaffa's ally, the blind poet Bashar. And Nigel Barrett's intemperate Sufyan is terrifying, becoming ever more animalistic until he is the scratching, licking beast of Muqaffa's tale. A discordant and frenzied climax doesn't quite deliver, but this is still **an evening that cuts deep.**
(Emma John, Mon May 15)

The Times *****

The Mirror for Princes

SAM MARLOWE AT BARBICAN PIT

(<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,14936-2175665.html>)

A semi-naked man bathes himself, spluttering and grunting, in blood; others growl and tussle on the ground like dogs. A kneeling woman weeps bitterly, and a sinister black-clad figure with the head of a jackal moves, impervious and watchful, among them. **The constantly flowing images that make up this piece presented by the Kuwait-based company Sulayman Al-Bassam theatre are like shards of a broken mirror offering vivid glimpses into a Middle Eastern past and reflecting back to us our present.**

The Mirror for Princes, written and directed by Al-Bassam, is inspired by stories that originated in India around 200 BC. They travelled to Persia and centuries later, by way of translation by a Persian writer, Ibn Al-Muqaffa, penetrated the powerful heart of the Arab world. These were animal fables intended to provide instructive parables for rulers, and they are here placed against the events of Al-Muqaffa's own fraught existence in 8th-century revolutionary Iraq.

With the country chafing under the Muslim rule of the riven and ruthless Abbasid caliphate, treachery, oppression, insurrection and sectarianism are rife. Al-Muqaffa is in love with Asia, the daughter of an Abbasid general. He wishes to marry her and is prepared to convert to Islam to do so; but her father will accept the proposal only if Al-Muqaffa will act as spy on his behalf at the court in Basra. He agrees and so seals his own fate.

The piece is dense and complex, so much so that it is sometimes frustratingly hard to follow. But if some of the historical detail is difficult to absorb, **the resonances emerge powerfully.** As the Abbasids set about building their triumphant holy city of Baghdad, Iraq drowns in gore. The play ends with a distraught Asia, who is haunted by terrifying visions of malevolent animals, delivering a chilling prediction of violence to come, while Baghdad burns with celebratory fires that presage the flames of contemporary warfare. Julia Bardsley's designs, which frame the action with reflective screens, gauzy black drapes and video imagery, add to the sense of a collision between ancient and modern, and the work is engagingly acted by a hard-working cast. It needs more focus and clarity; but **its eloquence is visceral and visual.**

The Guardian

The Mirror for Princes

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/review/0,,1774020,00.html>

Lyn Gardner

Saturday May 13, 2006

[The Guardian](#)

A few years back, Anglo-Kuwati director and writer Sulayman Al-Bassam scored a hit with *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, an intriguing Middle Eastern take on Hamlet. This latest piece is probably best described as a heroic failure. **Its final 20 minutes are extraordinary, as every aspect of the production comes together in a strange, almost hallucinatory sequence of theatrical power and beauty.** But the wait for this is long.

For most of the evening I felt as if I were fighting my way through an impenetrable forest where all the signposts are in a code I couldn't crack. Even with the help of a two-page synopsis, I kept getting lost. Inspired by the fables of the Persian-born writer Ibn Al-Muqaffa, one of the great works of classical Arabic literature, this piece focuses on the creation of the stories in Iraq circa 750AD, which as now was an era of unrest and revolution.

The self-deprecating writer finds himself caught in the conflicts between revolution and reform, and kings and courtiers, only gradually becoming fully aware that the pen can be mightier than the sword. "I sharpen it every morning," he tells the woman he loves. In the end, the only way he can be silenced is by death. The image of a man walled up in a graffiti-strewn glass box is one of the great moments of the evening, and speaks eloquently of writers who are censored and silenced everywhere. But for too long you are trapped between an indifferently acted and plodding historical drama and a multi-layered story laden with signs and symbols.

Still, at its climax, **the show finds its voice in swirling images, a brilliant mix of video and eerie soundscape, and a use of the space that makes it feel as if the whole production is bleeding at the edges.**

MARINA WARNER IN THE NEW STATESMAN (5/06/06)

newstatesman

Through the looking glass

Marina Warner

Monday 5th June 2006

<http://www.newstatesman.com/200606050036>

The oriental roots of Mickey Mouse and Brer Rabbit are a well-kept secret. But for centuries animal fables have bridged the divide between east and west, finds **Marina Warner**.

The celebrated polemic that Edward Said mounted in his 1978 study *Orientalism* has come under heavy artillery recently, and his attackers, in their often abusively personal animus against Said (Christopher de Bellaigue in the *Times Literary Supplement* takes a swipe at his *shoes*), do less than justice to an argument that his oeuvre develops - an alternative story about intercultural exchange and influence over *une longue durée*, as displayed so vividly in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. Said's thinking about culture enriched the polemical thrust of *Orientalism*, evolving his thinking and giving it nuance: I once went to hear him lecture at Cambridge on Berlioz's *Troyens* fully expecting scathing comments about the representation of Trojan barbarians (subalterns), but, instead, he dwelt admiringly on the opera's musical perfections.

There is a counter-narrative about the Orient and western culture, one opposed to hostility and greed as the operating dynamics of culture. It traces the mutual interrelationship of literature, stressing this symbiosis against ideas of ethnic fingerprinting and cultural clash. In this respect, Brer Rabbit and Mickey Mouse are the descendants of the jackal Dimna and his friends in the 8th-century Arabic story cycle *The Mirror for Princes*, also known as *Kalila wa Dimna* (Kalila and Dimna) after its animal protagonists. It reprises many of Aesop's fables, and both collections descend from a Persian version, itself deriving ultimately from the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, written in the 2nd century BCE. La Fontaine, the defining ironist of French worldly wisdom, willingly admitted his dependence on both Aesop and *Kalila wa Dimna*, but few people know that proverbial chestnuts about cunning and folly, such as "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing", "The Ass in the Lion's Skin", "The Raven and the Swan", "The Tortoise and the Eagle" or "The Lion and the Mouse", have non-western origins.

The animal fable as a principle of civilisation appears under the name of many western philosophers and moralists, including Swift and Voltaire. Ros Ballaster, in her study *Fabulous Orient: fictions of the east in England 1662-1785*, cites a wonderful example of such storytelling in action from the *Spectator* of 1712, where the essayist Joseph Addison relates how a cunning vizier tells his tyrannous sultan that he's been taught by a dervish how to understand the speech of birds. They spot a pair of owls haunting a ruin, and the sultan challenges his vizier to listen and report back on what they are saying. So the vizier approaches the birds, but comes back prevaricating and saying that he dare not tell his master. The sultan insists, naturally, and with a great show of reluctance the vizier tells him that the owls are discussing the marriage of their son and daughter, and they are bargaining over the dowry. The father of the groom demands fifty ruined villages. The father of the bride retorts that fifty is nothing; he will lavish on her five hundred. And the bird then blesses the sultan: "Long life to Sultan Mahmoud! While he reigns over us we shall never want for ruined villages."

When the vizier relays this to the sultan, the sultan is ashamed - so the story claims - and restores the places he has destroyed, ceasing to ravage his people. Addison remarks that "among all the different Ways of giving Counsel, I think the finest, and that which pleases the most universally, is *Fable* . . ."

The fabulist's art of covert political persuasion in a strategic effort to survive has returned strongly to the public arena: telling a story about cross-currents, encounters, imitation and exchange between Muslim and other groups in history has inspired Middle East Now, a

very full programme of art and activities at the British Museum, as well as the hugely ambitious Festival of Muslim Cultures, taking place nationwide over the coming year. (Its programme includes the play version of *The Mirror for Princes* as well as the exhibition "Bellini and the East", currently at the National Gallery.) Both have Middle Eastern money behind them - from Gulf states including Saudi Arabia - as well as, in the case of the festival, the backing of the Home Office and other UK supporters such as Prince Charles.

Storytellers offer "a place for the wise man to find himself", Walter Benjamin writes in his essay "The Storyteller", picking up a thread in the most ancient ideas about narrative. The act of telling has some part to play in enlightening the listener, and the narrator usually has a very important stake in the outcome. *A Thousand and One Nights* moves through a labyrinth of tales to lift the misogyny of the sultan who is poised to cut off the head of the storyteller, Scheherazade - and, eventually, it succeeds. These ancient stories strive to persuade in order for the storyteller to survive. Scheherazade is the most famous, but Aesop's biography - an imaginary Byzantine romance - also tells how he manages by the cunning of his tongue to emancipate himself from slavery.

Ibn al-Muqaffa, writer and courtier, a Zoroastrian-turned-Muslim, was the translator into Arabic of *The Mirror for Princes*; the Kuwaiti playwright/director Sulayman al-Bassam has placed him as the storyteller at the centre of his ambitious staged version. Al-Muqaffa practised the courtly art of fabulism with success for a time, and in his play, al-Bassam has braided together al-Muqaffa's rise with parables of statecraft featuring the rascally jackal Dimna and the loyal Ox, whom he shafts to rise in favour with his ruler, the Lion. Al-Muqaffa enciphered through these fables the ferocious struggles of the medieval Abbasid conquerors who established their fabulously wealthy tyranny over Baghdad and Basra in 750CE. Al-Bassam previously created *The al-Hamlet Summit*, and *The Mirror for Princes* also rings with Shakespearean power struggles (especially from *Macbeth* and *King Lear*) as we watch al-Muqaffa gradually lose influence over his prince, until he is imprisoned, tortured and killed on stage in a scene that recalls present-day horrors.

Animal fables are intrinsically comic, however, and they don't really go with a Jacobean gorefest; masking and busking and puppetry (all brought into play by the production) also struggle against the passionate tirades declaimed by the international cast, and the lofty allegory that is being sought. ***The Mirror for Princes is inventively staged, ferociously acted***, but baffling: who here is ruining the villages? **Mirrored screens bracket the action throughout, reflecting the audience and making us part of the action. But are we perpetrators? Victims? Is this a view from the Gulf of the war in Iraq now? Are the atrocity-drunk Abbasids vehicles for Saddam Hussein's regime? For the Americans and ourselves now? Or yet others in the conflict?** The play ends with a long, chilling curse on the city and people of Baghdad, spoken by the lover of Ibn al-Muqaffa, weightily named Asia.

As I left the Barbican after the London production, I saw the Iraqi ambassador's dark, shuttered car whisk away into the night, a police car latched on to it so closely it looked as if it were being towed. What effect does al-Bassam want to have - could he have - on this prince, on this listener? **In the midst of the complexities of Gulf politics, past and present, the shaping persuasion of his narrative remains inscrutable**, his mirror clouding up for me as soon as I wiped it. Except for one argument: about the power of stories themselves to bring about destruction - or creation. ***The Mirror for Princes asserts the fabulist's raison d'être, to speak and survive, with possibly uncomfortable political consequences for al-Bassam himself.***

The Mirror for Princes runs between 12 and 17 June at the Oxford Playhouse, Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 (01865 305 305). [<http://www.oxfordplayhouse.com>]
Phantasmagoria: spirit visions, metaphors and media by Marina Warner is published by Oxford University Press in October (£18.99)

Kalila wa Dimna: the animals

The lion and the ox Two friends between whom the crafty jackals Kalila and Dimna sow dissension.

The crane An envious character who tries to hunt like a hawk. As a result, he gets stuck in the mud.

The weasel Fights off a snake to save the life of a child. For his pains, he is killed by the child's over-hasty father.

The tortoise Hard-headed, he refuses to take the advice of his wise friends, the geese.