

# INTERNATIONAL PRESS

## APPENDIX 1:

### RICHARD III ARAB TRAGEDY

### PRESS DOSSIER (UK & INTERNATIONAL)



THE FINANCIAL TIMES

By Ian Shuttleworth

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The Kuwaiti director Sulayman al-Bassam first came to prominence five years ago with a remarkable reimagining of Shakespeare entitled *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. Since then, plays examining the 21st-century Middle East have become more common, not least thanks to the Royal Shakespeare Company commissioning pieces such as David Greig's *The American Pilot* and most recently Roy Williams' *Days Of Significance*.

But **few works catch the various currents within Arabism and Islam such as Al-Bassam**. Here, the family factions that run through Shakespeare's Wars of the Roses tetralogy become an aspect of the dynastic rule that controls the Arabian peninsula. A 14th-century Arab historian's observation on the threats posed by *wazirs*, regent relatives ruling in the name of child-kings, illuminates the dangerous ascent of Edward V's "Lord Protector" and usurper, Richard of Gloucester. (English names are retained, sometimes with an arch self-consciousness, although it seems a little daft when Devonshire is mentioned and someone points on a map to Kuwait.) Tensions between tradition and modernism emerge in costuming: Richard (Fayez Kazak), whose only signs of physical deformity are a neck brace and a surgical girdle, begins in military uniform, but as he moves closer to the throne swaps this for traditional robes. Such tensions also seem to be enacted in the Arabic translation; certainly, the English surtitles range from close paraphrase of Shakespeare to free adaptation. Koranic teachings are frequently quoted by all parties.

Some of the set pieces of the original play are reinvigorated by this treatment. Richard's seduction of the Lady Anne, and the later antiphonal lament of the three queens all of whose families have been ravaged at Richard's behest, gain potency for being performed in mourning robes and backed by the singing of dirges. (Amal Omran is every bit as much of a classical Fury as Queen Margaret needs to be.) It is the most direct parallel with current events that seems least inspired: Richard's ultimate conqueror Richmond (later Henry VII) is here turned into an invading American general whose final speech attempts to discourage future "insurgency". Where Shakespeare's Richmond ended national strife, al-Bassam's seems certain to escalate it. I am undecided whether to admire this as bold reinvention of the original or decry it as flat contradiction. But **it is seldom that one sees a Shakespearean reworking that is so consistently enlightening while also retaining considerable dramatic power.**



**Brian Logan**

**Friday February 16, 2007**

**The Guardian**

Violent regime change. A country on the brink of civil war. Mothers and wives bewailing their slaughtered menfolk. That'll be why adaptor/director Sulayman Al-Bassam transposed Richard III to the modern Middle East. His version, performed in Arabic and set in an unnamed Gulf state, isn't the profoundest you'll see, but it has sardonic fun insisting that the murderous realpolitik of the wars of the roses is alive and kicking today in the Arabian peninsula.

It's immediately clear that Al-Bassam isn't interested in Richard's psychology. The first appearance of the so-called Emir Gloucester (Fayez Kazak) is overshadowed by Buckingham emailing plot updates to the US ambassador. Here, Richard is relegated to a bit player in a global political intrigue, in which Buckingham is forced to confess to taking orders from Mossad. And the Americans await their opportunity: Richard's ultimate conqueror is not so much Richmond as Richmond, Virginia.

It sounds gimmicky; the satirical brushstrokes are broad; and Al-Bassam's free adaptation entails sacrifices, including the cursory despatch of some of the play's finest scenes (Richard's wooing of Anne, the murder of the princes in the tower). But it's all **carried off with great brio**. There are moments of thrilling immediacy, such as when the Americans assume their victory will be welcomed with hosannas rather than a belligerent "Allahu akbar". Eyes blazing, Amal Omran seems to articulate the impotent rage of all Arabian womanhood as the bereaved Margaret - until she is silenced with a beating.

This is **a punchy, irreverent makeover that retools Shakespeare for the world of Saddam, the CIA and the House of Saud.**

# Telegraph.co.uk

## THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

15/02/2007 **Dominic Cavendish** reviews **Richard III - An Arab Tragedy at The Swan, Stratford-Upon-Avon**

It is as though the Swan Theatre has been put on a magic carpet and flown to Saudi Arabia. For **the gripping two-hour duration of Sulayman Al-Bassam's "Arabian" account of Richard III**, we see not dukes, earls and queens but turbaned sheikhs and women in burkas.

We hear not alarms but strange beguiling ululations. Shakespeare's language comes to us as though through secret service intercept: in Arabic, with surtitles.

Anyone who has ever seen the chilling footage of Saddam Hussein presiding over his career-making purge of the Baath party, watching impassively as his foes were dragged off to their slaughter, will be able to picture the atmosphere of fear, mistrust and savagery that hangs over this heavily bastardized version like a newly sharpened scimitar. Yet Saddam is not mentioned once and Al-Bassam keeps things unspecific the better to build up a broad critique of the Arab states.

Cleverly using video and live traditional music to evoke a tyrannical surveillance society shackled to the customs of the remote past, Al-Bassam has duffed up the original text almost to the point of unrecognisability. And yet what results - voiced in a hybrid of classical and modern Arabic, with English surtitles - is an experience as strangely familiar as it is alien.

One may baulk at the way that 'Now is the winter of our discontent' appears to have been needlessly twisted into 'The sorrows of winter and the cold bite of metal have given way to the lazy warmth of spring'. Yet in the ripe, high-flown, at times hysterical pitch of Middle Eastern political rhetoric **Al-Bassam has found the perfect correlative to Shakespeare's poetry**, and the production catches with rare skill the cruel flavour of the original's relentless intrigues.

There's a two-way exchange going on here. The shock of seeing the grieving Lady Anne and her attendants, for example, wailing in burkas - with Kazak himself donning the full veil to woo her - confronts an English audience with a foreign custom. Yet it also sharpens our appreciation of how women were treated in medieval England. And at times, as when ousted Queen Margaret reaches for ever more elaborate curses, **the collision between past and present is smack-on**. The most daring liberties on the adaptor-director's part involves an emphasis on religion - the name of Allah being invoked to sanctify hypocrisy, cruelty and outright butchery. For once, the RSC must be giving thanks that Stratford's rail

connections are so terrible - at least that'll diminish the chances of a kneejerk demonstration by the usual fanatical suspects.

# TIMES ONLINE

From [The Times](#)

February 15, 2007

Sam Marlowe at the Swan, Stratford



East meets West in this intriguing reworking of Shakespeare's blood-mired tale of the crookback King. The production, directed by Sulayman al-Bassam and presented by his Kuwait-based company and the Culture Project for the RSC's Complete Works Festival, is vigorous and occasionally arresting. But it offers few insights into the politics of Shakespeare's dramatisation of English history or of the modern Middle East.

Al-Bassam resets the action in an unnamed present-day Arab state. Here the vengeful Queen Margaret packs the gore-stained garments of her slaughtered husband and son into a designer suitcase, clearing the stage for the dangerously beaming arrival of Emir Gloucester, soon to become King Richard. As played by Faye Kazak, beetle-browed, moustached and on his first appearance dressed in military uniform, he unavoidably calls to mind Saddam Hussein. His deformity is here limited to the wearing of a neck brace. But his jocularity and wolfish smiles seem tinged with a manic energy that hints at instability. The sense of egocentric psychosis reaches its climax in the final battle, as he gallops towards destruction, wild-eyed, astride a saddle on a metal frame.

When I last reviewed the Sulayman al-Bassam Company, in *The Mirror for Princes*, a rich, complex slice of Iraqi history, I remarked on the production's **impressive flair and intellectual ambition** — and on its lack of focus. The same qualities, and limitations, persist here.

Lewis Gibson's musical score combines ancient and modern, with mournful voices blending with traditional Arab instruments and synthesizers. In George Tomlinson's designs, grainy video footage of forced confessions and executions jostle for attention with swaying figures. Richard squirms with delight when Hastings' severed head falls with a sickening thud from the ceiling to the stage, and becomes a grisly football. And in one of the most disturbing scenes, Margaret's curse ends in appalling cruelty when she is straddled like the horse the crazed Richard will later call for and whipped to exorcise the evil spirit that he declares has taken possession of her.

But al-Bassam's adaptation, performed in Arabic with surtitles, stops short of radical daring; it's a mishmash of Shakespearean poetry and modern vernacular sprinkled with references to the Koran and the war against terrorism. And the acting, despite some affecting moments, is often shouty and short on nuance.

What does emerge powerfully, however, is a sense of the way in which religion is often suborned and perverted in conflict — whether it be by al-Bassam’s Muslim Richard, or by Richmond, here a platitude-spouting Christian US general who at the play’s conclusion announces the installation of an interim government. It’s the most potent motif in a production that, if it never quite coheres, is ***rich in resonance***.

## The New York Times

By Sarah Lyall

THE NEW YORK TIMES; AND INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

Published: February 21, 2007

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, England: As played by the Syrian actor Fayez Kazak, the title character in "Richard III: An Arab Tragedy" is a preening, plotting devil with the vulpine intelligence and maniacal charisma of the late Saddam Hussein. But he is not Saddam, even if the director and adapter of the play, Sulayman Al- Bassam, briefly conceived of him that way.

"It was clear that once I'd gone into the process of research into that historical parallel that it was a sort of a non sequitur," Bassam said. And so, commissioned to bring an Arabic production of "Richard III" to Stratford as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's yearlong Complete Works Festival, Bassam set his play in an archetypal present. His unnamed oil- rich Arab state is easily understood in Shakespearean terms, every bit as steeped in blood, riven by tribalism and replete with corruption as the world of 15th-century England.

The form has freed him to consider contemporary Arab politics in a way that would have been all but impossible without the refracting mirror of Shakespeare, said Bassam, 34, who is half Kuwaiti and half British. "You could write such a play," he said, musing on the notion of a present-day political work, "but you'd be best advised to set it in England in the 1400s. That would be a very good starting point for your contemporary play."

In the land imagined in "Richard III: An Arab Tragedy," tyrants seize and cling to power with the help of modern technology and sophisticated propaganda. It is a place where religion is used to justify atrocity, where nascent legal structures are stretched and bent and broken at a ruler's whim, and where a tragic future seems an inevitable outgrowth of the tragic past.

But if its bleak and bloody themes are timeless, the play, produced by Bassam's theater company and by the Culture Project in Kuwait, is not. It is as if **he has unpicked the intricate stitches in "Richard III" and resewn them into a garment of different colors and textures altogether.**

Richard, the Duke of Gloucester in Shakespeare's play, is now Emir Gloucester, with a neck brace mostly concealed by a flowing robe whose pockets are stuffed

with American dollars. The insidious Buckingham wears a Western suit and controls the state-run news media, instructing the increasingly nervous television anchorman how to cast the latest murder as a glorious pro-democratic development. Even as Buckingham does Richard's bidding, he sends e-mail updates on the sly to the American ambassador, reporting on the latest political machinations.

Characters break into traditional Arab folk songs; women in mourning are shrouded in chadors; the prize for loyalty is not just land, but oil-rich land. As it happens, Bassam's "Richard III" has played opposite another, more conventional "Richard III," providing audiences with a fine opportunity to compare the differing approaches. Its short run here ended on Feb. 17, and it is scheduled to travel abroad, starting with Athens in May. The English version, set in modern-day Britain and directed by Michael Boyd, closed on the same day but will return in repertory later in the year.

But although the productions look and sound radically different, it is the similarities between them that most struck Boyd, who is also the Shakespeare company's artistic director. Boyd's version is part of an ambitious two-and-a-half-year program to perform all of Shakespeare's history plays, using the same actors all the way through, and he sees "Richard III" very much in the context of the history that precedes and follows it.

"I recognize my thoughts about the play in Sulayman's work, and there's an extraordinary number of choices we've made that are similar," Boyd said. Both, for example, have given unusual emphasis to the role of Richard's henchman Sir William Catesby, rendering him plump, charming and terrifying, a symbol of the way the ruled can fall so easily into doing a tyrant's bidding.

"There is the tendency, very difficult to resist, of pulling more power where power was in the first place, of increasing the centralization of power," Boyd said, describing similar points of emphasis in the plays. "Most powerful cultures manipulate and try to control communication, a thing that was very much the case in Shakespeare's time, in Richard III's time and now. There is the use of fear as a political weapon, fear as a means of censorship, a means of mobilization, a means of justifying arrest."

If Bassam has taken some liberties with the production, he has also taken liberties with the language. Arabic translations of Shakespeare tend to be written in formal, "high" Arabic, the language of poetry and official pronouncements, he said. With the help of a translator, Mehdi Al-Sayigh, he has recast Shakespeare's language into more colloquial, idiomatic Arabic, sometimes paraphrasing, sometimes rewriting entirely.

A metaphor in which Richard is sarcastically described as being as kind and merciful "as snow in harvest," for example, has been changed to "as rain on mud huts." Richard's famous opening lines ("Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this sun of York") now follow a powerful introductory speech by Queen Margaret, the bitter widow of King Henry VI. They have been rendered, in the surtitles appearing alongside the stage, as: "The earth

has changed its robes. The sorrows of winter and the cold bite of metal have given way to the lazy warmth of spring."

"Al-Bassam has duffed up the original text almost to the point of unrecognizability," the critic Dominic Cavendish wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*. He goes on to say, "Yet in the ripe, high-flown, at times hysterical pitch of Middle Eastern political rhetoric, Al-Bassam has found the perfect correlative to Shakespeare's poetry, and a more faithful imitation would ring hollow."

"*Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*" is the first Arabic production of Shakespeare to appear at Stratford. The play is rarely performed in the Arab world, which leans toward big-ticket works like "*Macbeth*," "*Hamlet*" and "*Romeo and Juliet*," Bassam said. But it is pertinent, and timely.

As is usual in Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, the play ends with a speech by an authority figure — in this case, the Earl of Richmond (and future King Henry VII) — coming forward to announce, essentially, that he is in charge and all is well. But Bassam's has set Richard's downfall against the chaotic backdrop of American troops marching in as the country's domestic troubles broaden into an international crisis whose resolution looks impossible.

His Richmond, in fact, is an American general who, chillingly, speaks the final words of the play in English, with the swaggering accent of the occupying army. The speech, ending with the words "God say amen," is meant to reassure. But even as he delivers it, a group of insurgents can be seen in the background, ready for a fight in the name of their own religion.

"Allah-u akbar!" they cry. "God is great!"

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# THE SPECTATOR

## "Dynastic Dissonance"

The RSC's Complete Works festival continues to produce wondrous juxtapositions. In the Courtyard Theatre Michael Boyd has rounded off his Wars of The Roses sequence with a *Richard III* which for a week played alongside an Arab reworking of the same play in the Swan.

There seems no end to the uses to which the poor old hunchback villain can be put. Plainly he was in the running to be exposed sooner or later as Saddam Hussein. This was confessedly the first idea of Sulayman Al-Bassam in adapting the play for his Kuwaiti-based theatre company. But thankfully he saw that such a notion was too optimistic, and that it would be more fun to lean on Shakespeare's tussle between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians as a blueprint for the squabbles for dynastic successions in Arabian royal families.

Al-Bassam himself is the British-educated son of a Kuwaiti father and a British mother, scoring a success at the 2002 Edinburgh Festival with a version of *Hamlet*. In reimaging *Richard III* as 'An Arab Tragedy', he's careful not to be seen tilting at any particular country or ruler, invoking only a generalized state in the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabic text, so far as you can tell from the surtitles, approximates to Shakespeare up to the point where the contemporaneous concerns of the show needs must take over. The Koran replaces all biblical references in the original, while the playing time is cut back to a continuous span of just under two hours.

The great surprise and pleasure is the banishment of the stereotypical Richard. Faye Kazak's Emir Gloucester sports no hump or lurching limp. He goes so far as to bemoan a face less handsome than Omar Sharif's, but his murderous thoughts are camouflaged beneath a smiling presence of persuasive charm and wit. The dramatic fain is considerable, for his antagonists are suddenly sprung to life rather than fated to dance attendance as ciphers. Alone among the tented swirl of Arab robes, Raymond Hosni's 'Palace Advisor Buckingham' wears a suit in token of his representation of French interests in the Gulf. You get exactly the feeling of a murderous battle between near-equal ambitions within an extended ruling family that Al-Bassam wants to achieve.

He also mines a great deal of irreverent theatrical fun from the play. For the wooing of Anne, Richard smuggles himself among her attendants disguised in a burka. Having gained his objective, the scene is suddenly cut short by the sound of the muezzin summoning to prayer. He has Margaret whipped for her curses: 'The devil inside her is a horse! Catesby, ride the jinn', a tragic-comical scene found so exciting by a group of schoolboys in the gallery that their neighbors had difficulty in silencing them. The strangulations of Rivers and Grey are reported to Richard's command centre by mobile phone, the deaths of the young princes verified by digital camera image. Queen Elizabeth and her son York take refuge within the American Embassy, and how could an invading army not arrive under the command of General Richmond? Power is temporarily handed to Queen Elizabeth pending preparation for democratic elections.

Not all of this makes total sense, but this is an intelligent and enjoyable reading. Al-Bassam pulls few political punches and never presses his metaphor too hard. It's a richly suggestive theatrical experience, not a piece of agitprop.



**By Sebastian Usher**

BBC world media correspondent

**Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company is for the first time putting on a play in Arabic at its main theatre in William Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon.**

The play, an Arabic-language version of Richard III, is set in a Gulf Arab context and draws parallels between the historic dynastic struggles in England and the current political situation in the Middle East.

The actors are drawn from across the Arab world

They wear Gulf costume - the men in thobes and Arab headdress, the women in hijabs and abayas.

The Arabic in the play switches between the classical or formal language, and the language of the street.

The text is shown in English subtitles for the mostly non-Arabic speaking audience at Stratford.

### **Uprooted**

The director is a Kuwaiti, Sulayman al-Bassam.

"What we've done is uproot the play from its Englishness and its Christian framework - and replant it in an Arab context," he said.

"They wanted to understand, because they know Richard III but they just wanted to understand the play through the actors."

Sulayman has called his production Richard III - an Arab Tragedy.

The original title was Baghdad Richard but he changed it in order to widen the focus from the latest events in Iraq to encompass political struggle across the Arab world.

The production is highly stylised. It transposes the play from mediaeval England to the political and religious labyrinth of the modern Middle East.

Sulayman had to transform a scene of Richard feigning religious scruples with Christian leaders into an Islamic context.

"In looking at the scene we tried it as it was written, but it wasn't really working. So I decided to move into a very different context - that of a television studio like al-Jazeera's or another Arab satellite TV station.

"They're presenting a sort of religious programme which is being taken over by these opportunists who are using religion very much for their own ends. This had a knock-on effect for the text, for the kind of sources and quotations they use - as obviously they're quoting sources from the Islamic tradition."

### **Cultural exchange**

The actor playing Richard is a flamboyant Syrian, Fayez Kazak - his luxuriant moustache and gravel voice well-loved staples of the Damascus stage.

The production was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and for the moment there is no concrete plan for it to be put on in the Arab world. But Fayez thinks it would go down well.

"We would take this production as it is and put it on in al-Hamra theatre or al-Qabbani theatre in the heart of Syria - yes! - and believe me people from the hierarchy would come and see this production".

Not everyone in the company is so sure of this.

Sulayman recalls how his adaptation of Hamlet - renamed the al-Hamlet Summit - appeared on the Arab stage in its English language version, but curiously was not taken up in the Middle East in its Arab-language incarnation.

But everyone in the company agrees that this intermingling of Western and Arab culture is a positive step in breaking down the barrier of ignorance and distrust between them - as Fayez puts it.

"Whenever you know me in a human way, whenever I know you in a human way, whenever I sing you my song and you sing me your song, then we become relatives on this earth.

"Otherwise we will always be enemies. Someone will whisper into our ear to say: "This is your enemy," And you will slaughter me and you think I will slaughter you."

"I think that there are sadly few Arab voices that are able to speak to Western audiences outside of a political or a religious context and in that sense one has to find a way to steer between ideological cliché and antagonism but also use those elements - because that's what most people are familiar with - to open new space for dialogue and meeting."

The production opens with a monologue written by Sulayman and spoken by the battered matriarch of Shakespeare's history cycle, Queen Margaret.

The character begins by introducing herself simply. "I am Margaret," she says.

She goes on: "I would ignore myself if I could but my history will not allow me. We lost. I don't want your reconstruction grants, your loans, your pity but I just ask of you not to question my thirst for revenge."

### **Arab tragedy**

Queen Margaret is played by the young Syrian actress Amal Omran. She's been pleased by the Stratford audience's openness to the Arabic reinterpretation of the play:

"Last night I was hearing couples who were talking about the play and they were so happy and they didn't want to follow the subtitles. They were just listening.

