

Review of *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam for the Sabab/Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre) at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 9–12 June 2009

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When a turbaned Richard III neared his fatal end in Kuwaiti director Sulayman Al-Bassam's innovative *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, he sat astride a weary saddle mounted precariously on a metal pole. Behind him, the glass panels through which or projected on which the audience had seen far too much of the behind-the-scenes work of politics (the coercions, the slayings, the cynical ploys) had gone dark. Richard motioned for the horse, to replace which he would trade the kingdom he's stolen, to move. Nothing happened; his feet dangled uselessly, as if he were a child too short to reach the stirrups. It's no wonder that the king could go nowhere after a solid two hours – without intermission – of vicious, uninterrupted and at times quite comical scheming. Of course, the bare situation we already know from Shakespeare's *Richard III*. But Al-Bassam's canny geopolitical translation of *Richard III* took advantage of the extreme adaptability of Shakespeare to examine the vicious plasticity of power, which grafts itself onto any cultural formation to the ruin of all. If at first one might wonder if Shakespearean intrigue could bear the complexity of contemporary Middle Eastern politics (or if the specificity of *Richard III*'s Tudor mythologizing might resist recalibration to contemporary needs), any doubt quickly dissipated under Al Bassam's spell.

Richard III is of course no stranger to adaptation, and its own particular political intrigues have been located in various histories of power, though quite often associated with fascism. And Al-Bassam, we should note, is no stranger to Shakespeare; his company has tackled *Hamlet* in a work called *Al-Hamlet Summit*. In a post-performance onstage interview, he expressed interest in future work with *Measure for Measure* or perhaps *Twelfth Night*. This production, commissioned by the RSC and premiered in Stratford, toured France, Greece, The Netherlands, Kuwait and Jordan before debuting in America at the Arab Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC and then joining the Brooklyn Academy of Music's new series *Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas*. In this Arabic language adaptation, Richard's Machiavellian manipulations took up the world of oil-rich Persian Gulf monarchies whose ties to Western powers – American, French, British and Italian – linger sinisterly. Richmond was played as none other than the American ambassador who will make an uneasy alliance with the kingdom's powers at the end, as represented by Edward's widow (not his daughter) Elizabeth. As the boys were escorted to the tower, one of them asked if the tower was built not by Caesar but by the British. Richard's

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conspiracy unfolded under the watchful eyes of Richmond and Buckingham, who sent coded missives back and forth throughout the play. The War on Terror became just the strategy Richard needed to execute his enemies and secure the throne. And the awful events of the play were uncomfortably staged for Al Jazeera so that we could see, on stage, the coercion of the media by the powers that be and its simultaneous projection on a screen above as “news”.

But this was not merely a topically allusive adaptation in which every gesture was code for the ongoing war in Iraq. Indeed, in both the program notes and his comments after the performance, Al-Bassam was at pains to resist this simplification. Interestingly, his first stab at this adaptation, *Baghdad Richard*, did locate its analysis of political intrigues in the 1980s of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Clearly, in this later version, the Iraq of 1980 or even 2009 cannot quite contain the complexity of Al-Bassam’s political vision. But, how does one graft this vision onto the stalk of Shakespearean intrigue? One of the most interesting features of the production was its relationship to language. Take, for instance, Richard’s famous opening monologue. Like much of the production, the speech stuck closely to the sense of Richard’s text – the change of the seasons, the political victory of the York cause, Richard’s deformity, etc. Yet the text displayed on the supertitles was noticeably distinct, as if translated back into English after having been translated in Arabic through the lens of Richard’s brutality. At other moments, the text on the supertitles came directly from Shakespeare’s text, as if Shakespeare *were* somehow the translation of the Al-Bassam’s Arabic text. For a production quite faithful to its Shakespearean precedent, this *Richard III* was quite supple in its attitude to the nature of adaptation. Shakespeare may not be our contemporary but it was as if his words were waiting for this particular context to make their greatest impact.

Al-Bassam began with the figure of Margaret. Although, by the end, she’s left the kingdom for good, she threaded her way through the production, binding together its various elements. Indeed, it was Amal Omran’s incantatory and vicious Margaret, not Richard, who opened the production, standing at the centre of the stage with a suitcase that would return again and again throughout the production. “We lost,” she announces. “It is your right to ignore me. I would ignore myself if history let me.” As in Shakespeare’s text, it is the losses inflicted on Margaret, a character otherwise inclined to brutality and triumph, which lend her any wisdom. In spite of the lessons of history she has been forced to learn, Margaret makes clear her real intent: “I don’t want your loans, your reconstruction grants. I want revenge.” Revenge, she tells us, is not “an Arab thing” but a function of history. She is not even Margaret, she admits, but “our history is so awful, even the victors have changed their names.” Here, as throughout the production, Al-Bassam teetered on a knife’s edge between the particularity of these Persian Gulf monarchies (or of Shakespeare’s England) and the thirst for revenge that initiates recurrent violence in larger cycles of time. Indeed, the baggage of history cleverly emblemized in Margaret’s suitcase passed to Jassim Al-Nabhan’s moving Clarence who, as he was about to be murdered, staggered to the front of the stage and opened the case to reveal that it was full of water. The contents suggested both the water of the nightmare Clarence recounts (1.4) and the malmsey in which he drowns, cleverly translated into an image of containment and insufficiency. Clarence dipped his hands in the water in some failed act of penitence or ablation as his murderer approached from behind, trying to force him to pray before death as a way of appeasing his *own* need for absolution.

Al-Bassam had clearly cultivated a deeply collaborative ensemble cast that still allowed its members to shine as brightly as Omran and Al-Nabhan. It was hard to look away from Fayez Kazak's Richard, regardless of what he did as he blended brutality and humour in almost equal portions. When he described himself as so ugly, at birth, that dogs barked, he supplied the barking. His notoriously improper seduction of Lady Anne occurred not over a corpse but in the cloistered confines of a room full of weeping women clad in black burkas. Richard, too, with his henchman Catesby (a captivating Monadhil Daood), entered, wailing, in a burka. He bumped a mourner off the bench so as to sit closely to Anne and let his hands wander. Moments later, Richard and Catesby revealed themselves and chased the other women out of the room, slapping them with canes. Kazak and Daood were, at times, a slapstick comedy duo – even as their humour teetered on the edge of atrocity. Nadine Joma'a excelled as the fiery but gullible Anne and was even more potent as a Jane Shore alternating between sexual excess and terrified spectatorship of events beyond her ken. Carole Abboud was a regal and calculating Elizabeth who worked well in tension with both Richard and Margaret while a sexy, sly Raymond El Hosny played all sides – accused, variously, of being French and a Mossad operative – as the politically deft Buckingham.

Although some details in this visually complex spectacle might have slipped past the viewer, whether one spoke Arabic or not, there was no mistaking that this production was settling for neither glib truths nor facile political allegories. The horse Richard rode was named *ummah*, referring to the ideal of a transnational Muslim community, a popular if unrealized project of pan-Arabic solidarity in the wake of decolonization. Just as that aspiration was undone by a precipitous fall into authoritarian power brokering – not to mention ongoing interference from former colonial powers – so too did we learn that all governance is undone by vicious aspiration. It's not just that power corrupts (though of course it does). It isn't even just that there are unsavoury individuals like Richard or interfering external powers (there always are). More potently, systems of power create feedback loops of repression and resistance that can't help but blow all circuits. This is a *Richard III* for an age of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a halting and often stalled "peace" process in Palestine, constant upheaval in Iran, Syria and Lebanon, and uneasy alliances between repressive Gulf monarchies and Western democracies. That is to say, Al-Bassam found in Shakespeare's *Richard III* a world whose complexity and violence is too much to bear but must be borne anyway.

At the end, there was nothing to do but mourn as an endless cycle of violence wheeled around for another pass. And so, the reading of the list of the dead – mercifully short in Shakespeare's text – extended on with the names of martyrs, politicians and reporters killed in the various political conflagrations that have engulfed not merely the Persian Gulf monarchies but the entire region. And as Elizabeth and Richmond sealed their unholy alliance, a crowd of would-be martyrs rose up on the screens behind them. The pretence of political stability and legitimacy lasted just long enough for the next explosion to strike. Every explosion is a reproach to the powers that be, regardless of their intention. But this was not a dogmatic performance; propaganda was farthest from Al-Bassam's mind, for neither propaganda nor sentimentality could possibly alleviate the "Arab Tragedy" of Al-Bassam's title. After the show, one member of the audience asked what message he would send to Barak Obama in the wake of Obama's conciliatory Cairo address. Al-Bassam smiled and said only, "I don't think the aim of theatre is to prick the conscience of the king."