

Shaikh Al-Zubair, an alibi for dissent

If you are an Arab theatre maker looking to take a pop at the eye of authority in today's Arab world, Shakespeare is your perfect bedmate, co-conspirator and alibi.

Hidden within everything that is sometimes construed as tame, inoffensive and establishment about the Bard to the modern Western sensibility lies- to the Arab theatre practitioner- a heaving underworld of illicit meanings, transgressive actions and contentious critique. 'Shaikh Al-Zubair' (Shayk-uzu-Beare), as the Bard is fondly referred to in Arabic -Zubair being a small town east of Basra- is, to the radical Arab theatre maker, a walking toolkit of dissent.

The Bard's universalism aside, the thematic and formal overlap between Shakespeare's world and today's Arab world is striking. Both are turbulent, uneven worlds of Rulers and Ruled in which religious authority and corrupt oligarchs reign supreme over a largely feudal and tribal social fabric. Both are worlds in which the power of language, poetry and storytelling are imbued with incantatory, transformative powers- in the case of Arabic this power has sacred roots anchored as it is in the Holy Qur'an. Wars, conspiracies, hooded assassins, criminal oppression, questions of Kingship, statehood, national and individual identity are all daily fare in today's Arab world. On a micro-political level, Shakespeare's plays converge with a host of social and local issues at the forefront of Arab debate. Notions of marriage (arranged vs. free), parent-child relationships, ambiguities of sexuality and gender, women's rights and the quest of the massive youth population for freedom in love, expression, individuality- all of these are burning issues of live debate in the Arab world. A fundamental pre-modernity is at the core of both the Shakespearian world and today's Arab world, linking the two along a palpable line of tension.

What we are witnessing in the Arab world today is the collision of this pre-modern world whose value systems and perceptions have changed little over centuries with the tide of massive historical change. Out of this chaotic, sprawling and painful upheaval whose harbinger is the technological revolution, whose horseman is the rampant globalisation of western culture and whose trumpet is the agonized roar of militant Islam; out of this, comes the stuff of drama.

But drama, along with other art forms, is a well-guarded mode of expression in today's Arab world. The drying up of significant Arab dramatists' voices in the last twenty years bears witness to this. The reasons behind this draining of writer's voices are manifold and complex, but suffice to say here that theatre is one of the favourite dishes of the one-eyed Cyclops that is the censor.

State censorship takes two main forms. The direct form is that of a censorship committee that damns and approves texts, visits dress rehearsals, cuts scenes or cancels plays. The second indirect form is through the state monopolization of the theatrical means of production which restricts and controls resources as it pleases. These forms of censorship are the single most potent indicator of the subversive power of theatre in the Arab world. While street protests are easily put down, what happens in the darkness of an auditorium is less controllable. Live performance is a threat, the Theatre of Ideas is a threat: governments fear it.

On the opening night of my play "The Al-Hamlet Summit" in Cairo, I stood on the inside of the glass foyer as over 400 spectators- frustrated by the lack of tickets for a performance that was billed as a political bomb-shell and after the arrival of twenty foreign VIPs, enflamed by a rumour that the theatre was only admitting foreigners into the performance- rioted outside the theatre. The police were called, the doors nearly collapsed and five people were arrested. The play re-performed at midnight to allay the disappointment of those that could not get in the first time. It is worth noting that the only reason "The Al-Hamlet Summit" got permission to perform in the first place was because it was in English and any potential threat in its content was neutered by the language barrier. Since that time, "The Al-Hamlet Summit" has been

performing in Arabic across the world but never, ever, has it performed in Arabic within the Arab world.

But it is not only official bodies who act as the censors. Censorship has been internalized by parts of the population and the press. There is a long held belief in the Arab world that it is wrong to 'hang out our dirty washing' and that public self-criticism ranks as a kind of treason. I have now lost count of the number of times I have been labelled a traitor for my own writing- it was once even publicly suggested that my work receives funding from the CIA. That said, it is a testament to the forces of liberalism in my own country, Kuwait, that my work finds itself defended internationally by many prominent individuals in society as well as by the government itself. If this was not the case, I would be more than wary of writing this article.

It is into this game of cat and mouse between theatre and the thought police that Shakespeare's texts come up trumps. The texts are dicey, metaphorical, slippery; they say and they don't say, they offend without offending, they are the perfect simulacra, the ultimate mask.

Masks abound in the mental repertoire of authors and directors in the Arab world. By force, one discovers myriad ways of hiding the real intention- historical plays that couch critique in an idealized past, absurd black comedies that contort themselves to get satire to do anything other than cajole an audience into sniggering at its woes, and so on. But with Shakespeare- for exactly the same reasons that avant-garde practitioners and post-modern critics put the boot in - because the texts are old, established, revered pieces of High Art that carry within them the stamp of *global* accreditation, of a *global* institution, of a *global* industry, the radical theatre maker has, vis-à-vis the censor, not merely a mask but a bullet-proof face.

Shakespeare adapted, Shakespeare twisted, gutted and re-stuffed, mutated, metamorphosed or straight; all remain useful to the radical theatre maker outside of the benevolent, permissive spheres of western cultural production.

What drives myself and other writers like Alfred Faraj (Egypt), Jawad Al-Assadi (Iraq) and Sa'adallah Al-Wannous (Syria), or directors like Salah El-Qassab, Awni Karoumi (Iraq) and Fadhil Jou'abi (Tunisia) to work with and on Shakespeare is not a mercantile desire to cash in on the Shakespearian corporate tag (good luck to those who can!) nor, as Gary Taylor would have it, to ape our former colonial masters. It is rather, the belief that with 'Shaikh Al-Zubair' as our alibi, we can inquire deeper into the pressing concerns of our people, and of the world outside.

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