



Project
MUSE[®]

Scholarly journals online

THEATRE REVIEWS

Richard III: An Arab Tragedy

Presented by **The Culture Project (Kuwait)** and **Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre** at the **Swan Theatre**, Stratford-upon-Avon. February 8–17, 2007. Adapted and directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam. Arabic translation by Mehdi Al-Sayigh. Producer Georgina Van Welie. Designer George Tomlinson. Lighting design by Richard Williamson. Costume design by Abdulla Al Awadi. Original music and sound design by Lewis Gibson. With Carole Abboud (Queen Elizabeth), Nicolas Daniel (Minister of State Hastings), Monadhil Daood (Catesby, King Edward IV), Christopher Harvey (General Richmond), Raymond Hosni (Palace Advisor Buckingham), Nadine Joma'a (Lady Anne, Mistress Shore), Fayez Kazak (Emir Gloucester), Amal Omran (Queen Margaret), and others.

MARGARET LITVIN, *Yale University*

Richard III lends itself to topical adaptations. Its implacable villain announces his villainy from the opening scene: what better bogeyman could a historical moralist desire? Thus Richard has served as a figure of political invective for propagandists since Milton; more recently he has come to wear “the imagery of the twentieth-century fascist dictator.” (See M. G. Aune, “The Uses of Richard III: From Robert Cecil to Richard Nixon,” in *SB* 24:3.) Offshoots and productions such as Brecht’s *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) and the 1990s play and film starring Ian McKellen have used Nazi parallels, whether to expose the banality of evil or to induce a near-historical “there-but-for-the-grace-of-God” *frisson*. So accepted is the allegorical approach that modern-dress productions lacking a coherent political frame risk looking somehow *ad hoc*. (This was my impression of Michael Boyd’s 2007 RSC production, despite Jonathan Slinger’s arachnid charisma as Richard. Why the black shirts? What exactly were Richmond’s *kaffiyeh* and Kalashnikov meant to tell us?)

Into the midst of these audience expectations strode Sulayman al-Bassam, a fearless 35-year-old playwright/director commissioned to produce the RSC’s first-ever Arabic-language play. Included in the Complete Works Festival, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* was billed as a “response” to the main RSC production. It was an inspired commission. The Kuwaiti-British Al-Bassam oversaw a new Arabic translation of Shakespeare’s

text and assembled a gifted pan-Arab cast. He worked with costume designer Abdulla Al Awadi to reproduce (and parody) a variety of regional fashions, dressing Queen Elizabeth (Carole Abboud) in Qatar-esque “sophisticated hijab” and punctuating Lady Anne (Nadine Joma’a) with a pink handbag in the shape of a poodle. He recruited Kuwaiti musicians to perform a powerful score that drew on a range of Gulf Arab musical styles, offset with eerie post-modern compositions by Lewis Gibson. And, as he had done in his earlier Shakespeare adaptation, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (staged in English in 2002 and in Arabic since 2004), Al-Bassam sought out contemporary Arab and Muslim correlatives for Shakespeare’s treatment of rhetoric, religion, family, and politics.

However, Al-Bassam’s take on *Richard III* went a step deeper than allegory. Tickets were originally sold under the title “Baghdad Richard,” but Al-Bassam wisely decided against producing an adaptation centered on Saddam Hussein. Instead *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* used Shakespeare’s play to orient Western viewers to some traits of Gulf Arab culture and politics. It also commented (pessimistically, I thought) on the chances that such an orientation could somehow make sense of the violence and suffering in the region. In fact, by showing how the very tokens of cultural exchange (traditional costumes, music, prayers, food rituals, rhetorical tropes, etc.) were cynically theatricalized and exploited by those in power, the production undercut its own ethnographic lessons even as it imparted them.

The Gulf Arab context occasioned some smart transpositions. Gloucester wooed Lady Anne from under a woman’s *abaya* (loose black cloak) at an all-female mourning session. The York clan funded its own slick satellite TV station. The “citizen scene” became a TV call-in show in which Gloucester mouthed Islamic pieties and 99% of online poll respondents supported him. Catesby (his role swallowing Tyrell’s and several others) recoiled in genuine religious horror after killing the Quran-reading young princes. And at the end, Richmond became a conquering American general begging God to “save us from the scourge of insurgency.” Some scenes were visually very striking. In one, Hastings’s bloody head served as the ball for a macabre soccer game while at the same time, on the catwalk above, a little vaudeville routine (with gun-toting chorus girls) celebrated the “War on Terror.”

Fayez Kazak’s Emir Gloucester disarmed reviewers with his good looks and “vulpine” manner (Sarah Lyall, *New York Times*), but aside from flirting with female audience members after Anne’s seduction he took little obvious pleasure in performing his villainy. Kazak (a celebrated stage



Fayeز Kazak as King Richard III in *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*. Image courtesy of Sulayman Al-Bassam.

and film actor in his native Syria) held himself rigidly erect, a neck brace protruding above his military uniform the only hint of his disability except at the moment where he claimed to be bewitched. Gloucester's Arabic, inflected with the accents of desert tribes, was more Gulf-specific and even archaic than that of most other characters. He appeared to be driven by pure force of will, a warrior identifying with an ancient tradition of masculinity and domination.

Its many pleasures notwithstanding, this production's inaccessibility was partly fated. Despite deferential press reviews, the Swan was one-third empty when I went, even though Boyd's *Richard III* had the night off. (One regular RSC-goer found the audience "the smallest I've ever seen for a full-scale production in the Swan"—see http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/pkirwan/entry/the_value_of/). Poor train links to Stratford surely kept away part of Al-Bassam's potential audience, especially the London-based Arabic speakers who, when they did make it, seemed to enjoy the show most. This created an audience mainly of Stratford regulars, people more familiar with Shakespeare than with Arab politics. (At an audience talk-back after one performance, questions focused on Al-Bassam's "departures" from Shakespeare's text: why was Gloucester not a hunchback? where was the nightmare scene at Bosworth Field? why was there no "closure" at the end?) Such circumstances made it difficult to convey multilayered political analysis, let alone satire. A send-up of a political culture, if presented to viewers who do not know the original, risks being accepted as an earnest representation.

For this audience, a further accessibility problem was linguistic. The English surtitles, part Shakespeare and part Al-Bassam, tried in vain to keep up with the Arabic script's dizzying language games; they flattened out its different speech registers, which spanned pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry, stilted foreigner's Arabic, satellite TV-speak, and Gulf colloquial. (In fact, some of the dialogue was so Gulfi that even Syrian and Lebanese native speakers had to glance at the surtitles.) Many quick jokes ("George Stanley . . . is that an Arab name?") were not translated at all.

Rather than deny the misunderstandings inherent in doing "Arab" Shakespeare at Stratford, Al-Bassam's adaptation made them a central theme. Queen Margaret's opening monologue—inserted before Emir Gloucester's first soliloquy—threw our ignorance in our faces. Syrian actress Amal Omran, her formidable stage presence accentuated by a heavy costume embroidered with seashell bits and broken Arabic words in gold thread, spoke directly to the audience:

I am Margaret. You needn't be concerned about me. We lost. It is your right to ignore me. I would ignore myself if my history let me. I don't want your loans, your gifts, your reconstruction grants. I don't want your pity: we lost. All I ask from you is not to question my thirst for revenge. It is not because I am Arab—I have a degree. And anyway, my name is not Margaret. But our history is so awful, even the victors have changed their names.

Margaret's "you" conflated the audience with the West. Her speech "establish[ed] an immediate link between the different 'pasts' of the play—c. 1400 and the early 1590s—and the present" (Graham Holder-ness, "From Summit to Tragedy: Sulayman Al-Bassam's *Richard III* and Political Theatre," in *Critical Survey* 19:3, forthcoming). She invoked "history" twice: as that which cannot be forgotten and as that which has been concealed. Before Gloucester had said a word, therefore, the audience was on notice: Margaret was not about to give us access to her whole story. Later as she whirled and cursed or was whipped to exorcise the "jinn" thought to possess her (in 1.3), the audience saw only the darkest, most disordered top layer of her multilayered dress and the black veil partly covering it. What past had shaped her? What had she been before civil war turned her into a Fury? The sense of a back-story lent the show depth but also made a political point. Misunderstanding these complex historical and cultural dynamics was a moral crime and a strategic danger, but understanding them was impossible.

The theme of mutual Arab-West ignorance and misappropriation continued to resonate throughout. Members of the House of York wore their English names ("Emir Clarence, Emir Rivers," etc.) with evident discomfort, sometimes forgetting how to pronounce them. Buckingham (Lebanese actor Raymond Hosni) was reimagined as a French-educated court "consultant" whom King Edward IV addressed as "ya al-fransi" (Frenchie). Buckingham spent much of the play sending weirdly intimate English-language emails to the U.S. Ambassador. (Other characters seemed aware of Buckingham's unstable allegiance. In this light, Gloucester's embrace of him as "my oracle, my prophet" at the end of 2.2 took on an even darker hue.) The U.S. ambassador, played with consummate charm and some irony by the intercultural Al-Bassam himself, was a sinister presence in key scenes (his role seemed to grow bigger from one night's performance to the next) but ultimately failed to predict Gloucester's violence and to protect the young princes.

Finally, General Richmond (British actor Christopher Harvey) lumbered onstage speaking brash American English. Elizabeth's awkward



Amal Omran as Queen Margaret in *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*. Image courtesy of Sulayman Al-Bassam.

attempts to translate for him emphasized his status as clueless outsider. (The English-speaking audience, who understood Richmond but not the Arabic-speakers, uncomfortably shared this linguistic positioning.) Just as Richmond handed interim governance to Elizabeth “as mild precursor to free elections,” the insurgency began and the first bullets of civil war were fired. So if *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* announced itself (on the RSC web site, for instance) as a “window” into Gulf Arab life, it worked just as much to underscore the complexity—or to Western eyes, the opacity—of the forces shaping it.

Yet alongside this punishing message was another, simpler and more universal: the thirst for unchecked power always cannibalizes whatever rhetorical and cultural resources it can. In the battle scene, for instance, Kazak sat downstage center astride a toy horse. He had named the horse “Al-Umma”: the Muslim nation of believers. The image built on Al-Bassam’s *Al-Hamlet Summit*, where the Islamist Hamlet’s games with a hobbyhorse had expressed much that Hamlet himself could not. But here the scene was at once pathetic and frightening. The wild-haired Kazak recalled a crazed Saddam Hussein dragged from his spider-hole; the sorry steed, about as dynamic as a dressmaker’s dummy, could only be pushed around in circles. Like nationalist demagogues everywhere, Emir Gloucester was happy to use his “kingdom for a horse.” His failure’s aftermath was to be dreaded at least as much as his success.

Al-Bassam’s productions tend to develop in layers as they tour, and the version I saw was clearly a work in progress. The play has since been performed at the Attiki festival in Athens; it will travel in Spring 2008 to Paris’s Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord and Amsterdam’s Holland Festival, then possibly on to the United States in 2009. No doubt this already tight and fascinating production will continue to grow both funnier and deeper, and the surtitles will evolve to contain less of Shakespeare’s text and more of Al-Bassam’s.



The Life and Death of King John

Presented by the **Actors Shakespeare Company** at Jersey City University’s **West Side Theatre**, Jersey City, New Jersey. February 22–March 11, 2007. Producing Artistic Director Colette Rice. Playmaster Bethany Reeves. Assistant to the Playmaster Jennifer America. Text Coaches Susanna Baddiel, Bethany Reeves, Colette Rice, Kate Ross, Ron Sanborn. Music Master/Composer Anthony Bez. Costume Master Eva Lachur Omeljaniuk. Lighting Designer Paul Hudson. Stage Manager Natalie Lebert. Assistant Stage