



# **THE SPEAKER'S PROGRESS**

PRESS DOSSIER

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# The New York Times

October 7, 2011

THEATER REVIEW | 'THE SPEAKER'S PROGRESS'

## Restricting Free Speech With Lab Coats in Illyria

By JASON ZINOMAN

In an unnamed Arab country theaters have been shut down and performance criminalized. From a lectern a former theater producer explains that what he is presenting is not a play but a reconstruction of a 1960s production based on the story of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night." It's oddly clinical: Lab coats replace costumes, and men and women remain at a distance from one another. An ominous camera sits in front of the stage. The government is watching.

"The Speaker's Progress," an elegantly staged satire written and directed by a Kuwaiti playwright, Sulayman al-Bassam, begins with this Orwellian metaphor about the restrictions on free speech in the Arab world. And while its high concept occasionally seems to shackle the play, the anchor of the production by the Sabab Theater is a wonderfully dry performance by Mr. Bassam himself as the producer, called here the Speaker.

He talks not like a man with a gun to his head but rather like someone who has been so conditioned to restrain his instincts that no weapon is necessary. His calm resignation is chilling, as if biting his tongue has become second nature.

The conceit may remind some of the Wooster Group's production of "Hamlet," another multimedia piece that recreated a production from the 1960s. In service to very different ends, both shows theatrically illustrate the power of an individual performance to break through constraints.

The 1960s production based on "Twelfth Night," it is suggested, had the radical spirit of its time, and the play's irreverence toward the puritanical impulse and authority speaks to these performers. This government-sponsored revival tries to drain it of any sexuality or spontaneity. But the actors run into trouble, at first benignly, simply by having a woman dress like a man, which a representative from a tourist board frowns upon. Then sexual innuendo draws nervous chuckles.

While this formal device provides an interesting subtext for the actors to play with, it doesn't totally make sense. Would a government really be so threatened by a 50-year-old production that

it would commission a revival after it has banned all plays? When the actors stray off script, it's never truly a surprise. For a play about the liberating power of art, it feels constricted and contrived. Part of the problem may be one of translation. The mainly Arabic dialogue is rendered in English supertitles, and some of the performances, including that of Fayez Kazak, who plays the Malvolio role, seem wildly broad, as if the actors don't trust the audience to understand them.

Yet the production, part of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, is never less than compelling, particularly because it is marvelous looking. The deceptively complex staging benefits from lovely use of video, shadow puppetry (which simulates hand-holding without any touching) and an eerie metallic sound design by Lewis Gibson. While the set is minimal, there is the appearance of a consistent expansion of space. Screens rise. Curtains are torn down. Scene changes are fleet, effortless and occasionally ingenious.

The playwright has said he gave the ending a more optimistic spin in response to the Arab Spring, but there are hopeful signs throughout. What comes through clearly is that even in the middle of totalitarianism, art can carve out space to dissent.

*"The Speaker's Progress" runs through Saturday at the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; (718) 636-4100, bam.org.*

*A version of this review appeared in print on October 8, 2011, on page C2 of the New York edition with the headline: Restricting Free Speech With Lab Coats in Illyria.*



## **‘The Speaker's Progress’ sees ‘Twelfth Night’ through a Kuwaiti lens**

**With Arab Spring, a play about change.**

**By *Christopher Wallenberg***

Boston Globe ,October 07, 2011



Fayez Kazak and Carole Abboud in “The Speaker’s Progress,” by Sulayman Al-Bassam.

NEW YORK - Last fall, when Sulayman Al-Bassam set out to write a piece of theater about the decades of political paralysis and societal stagnation that have gripped the Middle East, he couldn’t have predicted the revolutionary transformations that would sweep across the Arab world only a few months later.

The play, “The Speaker’s Progress,” is a loose variation on “Twelfth Night” and the final installment in his company’s Arab Shakespeare trilogy. Initially, it was intended as “an anguished cry of despair at the inability of art, and even people, to make change happen,” says Al-Bassam during an interview near the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where he’s prepping the play for its United States premiere at BAM’s Next Wave Festival. On Wednesday, ArtsEmerson brings the production to the Paramount Theatre, where it will be performed through Oct. 16 in English and Arabic, with surtitles.

In the Middle East this year, bitter howls of despair have turned into exuberant expressions of hope and joy, as the seismic events of the incendiary Arab Spring reverberated from Egypt’s Tahrir Square to Tunisia. Dictators fell, and entrenched regimes enacted major reforms. To Al-Bassam, this meant the play needed to change as well.

“The seminal thing that was being said in the original version of the piece was no longer true,” he says over lunch at a cafe during a rehearsal break. “We had been happily invalidated by this momentous turn of events.”

In February, Al-Bassam and his actors began to alter the play to reflect the new, turbulent forces pushing back against a repressive political culture - but events were unfolding fast. Indeed, just days before the show began previews in Kuwait that month, Hosni Mubarak resigned as president of Egypt.

“The ability of people to make peaceful protest and to achieve what had been unimaginable . . . worked its way into the performance in a way that was very spontaneous and open and relating to these current events and the actual sense of euphoria people were experiencing,” says Al-Bassam, 39. Half-Kuwaiti and half-British, he founded the eponymous Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre (SABAB) in Kuwait almost a decade ago.

Since the performances in February, Al-Bassam has done a wholesale reworking of the text, particularly in the play’s final section. Set in an unnamed totalitarian state where all forms of theater have been banned, the piece was originally meant as a dark satire on the demoralizing decades of political stagnation in which Arab states have been mired. Instead, it has turned into a sharp theatrical metaphor for social and political transformation, the ways in which resistance takes hold, and the limits of silencing dissent.

“The metaphor for change had to come from within the vocabulary of theater. But we needed to find a more sophisticated theatrical language to describe change - a language that wouldn’t need altering with every turn of event,” says Al-Bassam, a tall man with a smooth, confident voice and a mass of dark hair speckled with gray. Born and raised in Kuwait, Al-Bassam spent nearly 15 years of his life living mostly in Britain, starting in his high school years, before moving back to Kuwait in his late 20s.

“The Speaker’s Progress” centers on a fictional classic play that’s been condemned by an autocratic government. Loosely based on “Twelfth Night,” the text has become a rallying point for an underground, Internet-fueled resistance movement.

Intent on suppressing dissent, the state decides to create a “forensic reconstruction” of the play in an effort to denounce its content. But as the play-within-the-play unfolds, those performing it become increasingly engaged with the material they’re supposed to be denouncing. Their public presentation becomes a subversive act of defiance against the state - a metaphorical middle finger, if you will.

“That’s where we come to the idea of a metaphor for change,” Al-Bassam explains. “How does radical change come about? Where do you go next? What do you do when you no longer have the

institutions, the texts, the directions, and the road maps that have been part and parcel of a society for so many years? How do you move beyond the euphoria of change?"

Al-Bassam acknowledges that creating a play about an abstract idea like change can be a challenge. He says the first two installments in SABAB's Arab Shakespeare trilogy, which explores Middle Eastern politics in the post-9/11 world, had more concrete concepts to theatricalize: power and radicalism. The acclaimed "Richard III: An Arab Tragedy," commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, depicted the maniacal king as the product of a corrupt, power-hungry society. The "Al-Hamlet Summit" explored the effects of a growing militant Islamic movement.

Rob Orchard, ArtsEmerson's executive director, says he wanted to bring SABAB to town because it was a rare opportunity to host a Middle Eastern theater company in Boston and because of the play's connection with the revolutionary change that's still unfolding in the region.

"I think it's important for us to remember that this is dangerous stuff for these performers and artists," Orchard says over the phone. "And you see that in the performance; you see that in the urgency of their work; and you see that in the focus, the buoyancy, the energy, and the joy of the play."

Indeed, it was a challenge just getting some of the actors, who come from across the Middle East, out of their countries and into this one. Even in Kuwait, a relative bastion of artistic free expression in the Arab world, SABAB had its recordings of the play from last February impounded and then ostensibly "lost" by the government's ministry of information.

"Which is bitterly ironic," says Al-Bassam, "because the original piece that we made in February was about a recording of a play that had been seized and destroyed."

Says Orchard, "We're so spoiled by the freedoms that we have in our culture. But these are people who are getting up on a stage and saying words that can be misinterpreted, and their lives can be dramatically affected by that. There are all sorts of pernicious ways in which threats are exercised. So I want them to come and be applauded for their courage."

*Christopher Wallenberg can be reached at [chriswallenberg@gmail.com](mailto:chriswallenberg@gmail.com).*



# The Boston Globe

The signs of 'Progress', Don Aucoin, Boston Globe (USA)

Political repression artistic defiance in Kuwaiti Speakers Progress at Art Emerson, Don Aucoin, Boston Globe (USA)



Fayez Kazak and Nowar Yousef in Sulayman Al-Bassam's political satire "The Speaker's Progress." (ARTSEMERSON)

By Don Aucoin

Globe Staff / October 15, 2011

At the heart of "The Speaker's Progress," an inventive political satire by Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam, lies the notion that the act of creating theater is inherently an act of

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, there's an obvious timeliness to "The Speaker's Progress," which takes place in a totalitarian nation in the Middle East where the authorities have banned theater and stifled popular expression, only to find rebellion surging to the surface in ways they can neither anticipate nor entirely prevent.

Yet Al-Bassam, who directs and performs in the visually striking production by his eponymous theater company, is clearly aiming for more than topicality. He wrote the play last October, then revised it,

crafting a more hopeful ending, as popular uprisings spread in the Arab world. Now the piece is receiving its New England premiere at the Paramount Center Mainstage under the auspices of ArtsEmerson.

Al-Bassam's use of an adaptation of "Twelfth Night" as the central device in "The Speaker's Progress" suggests not just that Shakespeare is the universal playwright, a writer for all times and places, but also that art's power to subvert tyranny transcends eras and cultures.

Certainly the leaders of the regime in "Progress" - unseen but represented by a camera that is trained on the performers - seem to understand the threat to their ironclad rule represented by the marriage of artistic creativity and political ideas.

Al-Bassam plays the title character, a onetime theater producer now forced into the role of an Orwellian mouthpiece for the regime. A theater troupe's 1963 production based on "Twelfth Night," parts of which we see in flickering black-and-white film on a large screen onstage, has become an inspiration for popular resistance, presumably because the dialogue includes such pointed lines as "Music is the food of love and love is the blood of freedom and freedom is the mother of progress. . . . How can you transform a country if you don't put women at its center?"

The Speaker's task is to oversee a live performance of the "Twelfth Night" adaptation, reconstructing it and deconstructing it at the same time, elaborately condemning its "decadence" and tsk-tsking at the troupe's "misguided" values. But Al-Bassam's deadpan delivery subtly signals that the Speaker is not quite the docile puppet the regime imagines him to be.

The reconstruction is performed by eight other cast members who are attired in lab coats. They are not actors, the Speaker emphasizes, but "envoys" from such official organizations as the Tourist Board and the Council of Virtue. The men and women are required to stay a certain distance from one another, and their movements and line deliveries are, at first, mechanical.

Over time, though, they begin to deviate from the script, to hazard the occasional gesture of defiance, and to veer into politically dangerous territory, in an apparent reflection of the social change that is happening in their nation. They burst into bits of song; women change into dresses and take off their head scarves; one of the men hollers, "Freedom!" and is promptly beaten and locked in a cage; the Speaker is taken away. Yet "The Speaker's Progress" conveys the sense that the forces of repression will not prevail, that the tide of change is both inevitable and irresistible.

Though some English is spoken, the 90-minute production is primarily performed in Arabic, with English supertitles. The playwright gets carried away at times by his gifts for poetic and allegorical expression; there are moments when one wishes for more clarity and less opacity. But his overall message is not lost.

“When systems of oppression crumble, so, too, do the masks and texts we used to criticize them,” Al-Bassam writes in a program note. “What is spoken then, after the fall, are the tentative ciphers of a new, unwritten text, daunting in its vastness and obscurity: that is the text of freedom.”

Don Aucoin can be reached at [aucoin@globe.com](mailto:aucoin@globe.com).

THE SPEAKER’S PROGRESS

Written and directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam

Inspired by William Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night”

Sets, Sam Collins. Lights, Marcus Doshi. Costumes, Abdullah Al Awadhi. Composer/sound design, Lewis Gibson.

Production by Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre. Presented by ArtsEmerson. At: Paramount Center Mainstage. Through tomorrow. Tickets: \$25-\$79. 617-824-8400, [www.artsemerson.org](http://www.artsemerson.org)

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## The signs of 'Progress'

STAGE REVIEW

October 15, 2011 | By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff



Fayez Kazak and Nowar Yousef in Sulayman Al-Bassam's political satire *The...*  
(ARTSEMERSON)

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## Stage Review: “Speaker’s Progress” at ArtsEmerson

By Jason Rabin

BLAST Magazine

Oct. 14



Fayez Kazak and Nowar Yousef in "Speaker's Progress"

This is a chance to see something revolutionary—in every sense of the word. Performed by a cast culled from throughout the Middle East, “Speaker’s Progress” is not only a rich, layered satire on government censorship but also a work-in-progress negotiation of just what theatrical performances can achieve in an atmosphere of suppression. In many ways, this is the best play that could be staged so close to Dewey Square at this particular moment in history.

Playwright, director and starring actor, Sulayman Al-Bassam created the piece just before the Arab Spring had bloomed. He is the founder of the Zaoum Theatre in London and the head of the SABAB Theater and “The Culture Project” in his native Kuwait. The play is the third installment in his “Arab Shakespeare Trilogy.”

His role is that of a playwright exiled from an unnamed Middle Eastern country in which theater has been banned as a subversive art form, rife with Western influence. The play begins with this character’s endorsement of the law and renouncement of his former work in the theater. What he proposes to show this audience is a document of one of a characteristically subversive work, a production of Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night” adopted into Arabic with built-in revolutionary

overtones. The production will be reconstructed, purely for the benefit of historical understanding, through the use of a few surviving film clips, and live performance to fill in the gaps in the audio/visual record. Its performers include one former actress, and representatives from a women's league, a cultural ministry and a tourism board.

At its beginning, the exercise is quite funny to watch. Petrified of appearing in anyway subversive, the actors strive to keep their presentation of this poetic romance as drily scientific as possible. Positions on the stage are announced in the manner of chess moves. The men are armed with yardsticks to ensure that the head-dressed actresses never step within an inappropriate distance of their male scene partners.



L-R: Amal Omran, Carole Abboud (seated), actor not coming to Boston (Fahad Al AbdulMohsin), Fayez Kazak, Nassar al Nassar (hidden behind), Faisal Al Ameeri

Even in these conditions, even in Arabic with English subtitles, the message and the passion escape. In fact, the more they are restricted and forbidden the more attentive one becomes to them. As this fact becomes apparent, the cast seems to divide among those who wish to further the production's original cause and those who wish to battle it back.

The greatest threat to the cause is the representative from the tourist board, played by Fayez Kazak. This stern figure has been cast as the play's equivalent of Malvolio, the haughty puritan who gets his comeuppance. In the Arabic adaptation, Malvolio is a Mullah, the very figure who would have censored the play.

Malvolio/The Mullah is undone by falling into a trap in which he is led to believe that he is beloved of a woman more powerful than he—in the Arabic version, her name is "Freedom." He winds up behind bars, tortured. A similar trap is set for this member of the tourism board. He is seduced by the freedom of playing the juicy role of the Mullah, and while his guard is down, his fellow actors try to strip him of his power.

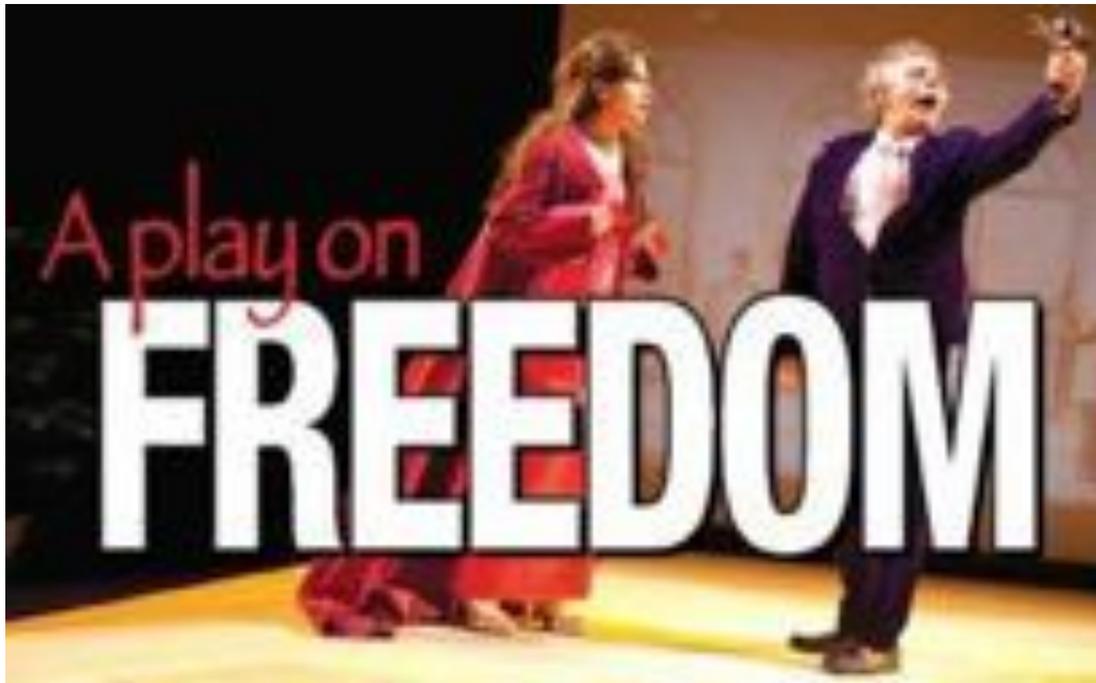
Like much of "Speaker's Progress" this drama plays out on at least four planes of reality at once. Engaging with it gives one some sense of how Sulayman Al-Bassam must feel as he strives to create works about conflicting cultures that speak to Arab citizens, government censors and Western audiences. It also speaks volumes about life under censorship and repression. It must indeed feel like a series of theatrical performances, full of potential for subtle subversions and charged with the constant threat of cages of all kinds.

"Speakers Progress" is a deeply challenging work for a complex historical moment. It's also funny, engaging and unique. Occupy a seat at the Paramount while you still can.

*"Speaker's Progress" plays at ArtsEmerson's Paramount Mainstage through October 16.*

**Playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam tackles a universal quest in the age of Middle East dictatorships**

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*Fayez Kazak, the Mullah, and Carole Abboud, the Lady, in “The Speaker’s Progress.”*

*Playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam tackles a universal quest in the age of Middle East dictatorships*

THE BAY STATE Banner

20-10-2011

Susan Saccoccia

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This summer, Boston’s Company One presented Jason Grote’s play, “1001,” a re-imagining of “The Arabian Nights” as a parable of the Middle East as a world pulled between its past and future.

Written and performed by Americans, the satire transports its characters from a mythical ancient Persia to Manhattan on 9/11.

Last week, at the Paramount Center, ArtsEmerson: The World on Stage presented a satire spanning an old and new Middle East written, directed and performed by Kuwaitis: the Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre production of “The Speaker’s Progress.”

Linking freedom of artistic expression in the Arab world with political power, the inventively staged play is loosely based on Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

Its playwright and director, Sulayman Al-Bassam mines the bungling identity switches, stereotypes and rule-breaking follies of Shakespeare's comedy to portray the atrophy of dictatorship in the Middle East. His production likens the yearning for romantic love in Shakespeare's play with the craving for freedom.



***Members of Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre perform in "The Speaker's Progress." (Photos courtesy of ArtsEmerson)***

Performed with English supertitles in English and Arabic — with occasional asides in Italian, French and Chinese — Al-Bassam's production is a sardonic parody of an Orwellian society. With its poetic language and elegant staging, the production is also an elegiac tribute to the power of theater.

Surrounding a platform on an otherwise dark stage is the high-tech apparatus of a bureaucratic office — computers, desks and a lectern. Above the platform is a movie screen.

At the lectern stands the Speaker, a reformed radical theater director, now purged and a spokesman for the regime. He introduces a restaging of his renowned 1963 production of "Twelfth Night," an event designed to appease a restive populace longing for theater, which has been banned by the ruling regime. Officials observe the proceedings via an on-stage camera.

Before the play-within-a-play begins, the Speaker, a droll Sulayman Al-Bassam, conducts a "live interview" with an elderly actress who performed in the 1963 production. Appearing on a screen above the platform, the Actor from the Golden Era, the regal Sa'ad El Farraj, defiantly insists on the value of theater. She tells the Speaker that theater "tempers the winds and tides of oblivion," that it is "a lighthouse in the fog, a witness to the crime, the memory of a mother's song."

Then the performance begins. As scenes of the 1963 production are projected on the screen, a troupe of non-actors — government functionaries in tan and grey lab coats — mount the platform and perform the same episodes. Others at the desks alongside the stage command the performers' every move as if they are robots or chess pieces.

Describing the staging as “a forensic reconstruction,” the Speaker conducts what amounts to a deconstruction of the elements of stagecraft — the blocking of scenes, the script and acting. The anti-production becomes a subversive demonstration of the power of theater.

As the ensemble plays a mix of roles such as the Ruler/Clown, Mullah, Drunken Uncle, the Lady, they are forbidden to display any emotion. But they can barely contain themselves.

The nuanced staging accents the emergence of their humanity. Shadow puppetry simulates handholding (forbidden in public). Ribbons of smoke evoke a magical atmosphere. The sound design shifts from metallic abstraction to swelling melody as notes of romance seep into the performance.

Disguised as a young man, Amal Omran as Girl/Boy triggers the meltdown as the emissary of the king to the woman who has captured his heart. She bursts into lyrical, sensuous language that evokes traditional Arabic erotic poetry.

What the Speaker describes as “contagion” — spontaneous improvisation — spreads as the players become seized by real emotion. Deft lighting effects frame the stage with a scarlet proscenium, turning it into the setting for real theater. The bare platform suddenly sprouts a set — a row of plants that stand in for an orange grove. A rack of glittering costumes descends from the ceiling like a vessel from another planet.

Lab coats come off and the players don Elizabethan wear. The harsh Mullah, now in a ridiculous purple velvet suit, becomes a lovesick lecher, Malvolio.

The play is at its best as this peak of liberation builds momentum. Near the end, shifts in tone from satire to anger and pain are abrupt and the Speaker inexplicably disappears, never to return. The muddled ending may be a work in progress: Al-Bassam altered the play’s original pessimistic conclusion as he witnessed the transformative events of the Arab Spring.

Yet what stands out is the compelling energy and stagecraft of this production, which confirms the power of theater, in talented hands, to tell a story that crosses languages and worlds. What will Al-Bassam and his adventurous theater troupe do next?

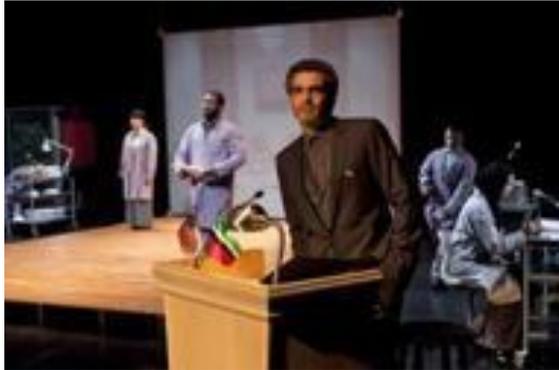
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# PBS NEWSHOUR

## ART BEAT

### **Al-Bassam Theatre Takes Inspiration From Shakespeare and the Arab Spring**

Posted by Jeffrey Brown and Saskia de Melker , October 7, 2011



Kuwaiti playwright and theater director Sulayman al-Bassam adapts Shakespearean plays to the modern Arab context to explore issues of religion and society in the contemporary Gulf. Art Beat talked with al-Bassam in Kuwait in 2007 when his company was presenting the play, "Richard III: An Arab Tragedy."

Al-Bassam's latest work is the final part in his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy, a new play called "The Speaker's Progress". The play premieres in the United States this weekend at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Al-Bassam wrote the play in 2010, but as he prepared to bring it to the stage for rehearsals in early 2011, he could not deny the historical events happening around him which greatly shifted the shape of the play's narrative.

**Al-Bassam joined me on the phone from Brooklyn to talk about the effect of the Arab Spring on his play and on art across the Arab world.  
(A full transcript is after the jump.)**



*Photos from The Speaker's Progress at BAM/Courtesy of Richard Termine*

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Welcome again to Art Beat. I'm Jeffrey Brown. Several years ago I had the opportunity to visit writer and director Sulayman al-Bassam in Kuwait to talk about his theater work often adapting Shakespeare plays into a contemporary Arab setting. His new work is called *The Speaker's Progress*. It's now opening at the BAM, the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, and he's in New York and joins us on the phone. Nice to talk to you again.

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** Thank you Jeff. Nice to speak to you.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Tell me about this new work, *The Speakers Progress*, What is it about?

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** *The Speaker's Progress* is the third and final part of a trilogy of Shakespearean pieces that are performed in Arabic that are about the events and changes in the Arab world. And this is a piece that uses Shakespeare's Twelfth Night as the inset play from which some major strains and themes and lines are taken and the *The Speaker's Progress* is a play about change. It's a play about the process of change and transformation from one state of affairs to another. It is a play that for me is very much concerned with this period that we are moving through in the Arab world at this time.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Yes, I should say so. So change is the context and change is actually what's right in front of you these days, just as this was unfolding.

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** Absolutely. The period that we are in at this point in time across the Arab region as I am sure you and your listeners are aware is a period of great historical moments I think. What has been happening since January across different parts of the region and what's referred to as the Arab awakening or the Arab Spring is really a turning point in our history. The play that began before these events began was a play about the search for a space for freedom. The play was about a retired director who is a former radical theater maker who has become a regime apologist. And it's the last roll of the dice for him so he brings together his thoughts and presents this play in order to try to reclaim the space for theater to actually affect change and be part of a political process. It ended, in the first version of the play, in a very dark and bitter way. That was a kind of reflection upon my feeling around the state of paralysis and stasis that we were in and that we have been in for so many years and for so many decades.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** When we met of course, that was when you were presenting Richard III and the darkness of using that to explore repressive regimes basically.

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** Tyranny. Absolutely. Richard III was about tyranny and *The Speakers Progress* was intended to be if you like an epitaph for political theater. It was a piece that was saying that theater and art is no longer able to affect the kind of change that one would hope for and when we took that version into rehearsals, the events around us were moving so fast and with such enormous power that our ending seemed somehow irrelevant, and happily irrelevant I should say. So it became incumbent upon us to rework this piece to look for ways in which the piece could become more about the process of change and the process of transformation that has engulfed the region.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** So that's how the events of the Arab Spring affected your play. More broadly, I think Americans don't know that much about the flowering of arts, theater, etc. in the Arab world, so more generally, what kind of impact do you see this having on arts and culture?

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** I think arts, culture and the role of intellectuals and artists in this process has been quite curious. Artists and the process of culture, I think, has stood as a witness to these events, which have been taken forth and played out by very different forces that art and culture had been removed from by a strategy of power over a series of decades. And the positions that are now, the spaces that are now open to free voices in those countries where change has led to political developments because also we have to distinguish between them, it's a very complicated picture that we have before is you know. One would like to say that all change is for the better but that's not always true. So we have a very difficult and tumultuous time but the process of movement forward and the emergence from that period of stasis and that period of no voice, that period of no freedom, that period of no space through a peaceful movement as has been the case in Tunis and in Egypt, moving into a space for new voices, new freedoms, and the ability to determine one's own destiny is enormous for the space it that proposes to artists, the space that it proposes to the way in which we think about what we can make with our art, with theater, with poetry, with literature, but also what we need to say. I think that there needs to be a restructuring of the way we think about our work and that's really also what *The Speaker's Progress* is about. The speaker in his journey through this play comes to the conclusion that the strategies that he had been using for many years to be an opposition figure, to be a political theater maker are no longer valid in this phase. That he himself needs to transform his whole way of thinking and on a personal level for me that means that I feel it's no longer appropriate to address a critique through the prism of Shakespeare.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Oh really? Well that's what I was going to ask finally because you describe this *The Speaker's Progress* as the end of a trilogy and of course that trilogy now impacted as you say by world events so what is next for you then?

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** The prism of Shakespeare and the mask of Shakespeare that we've discussed when we were together in Kuwait with *Richard III* is a mask that has taken up to protect and deflect from the dangers of making political theater in a restrictive environment. But when that environment alters and when the sensor is no longer there then we need remove that mask and find a new voice and speak through our own language and perhaps that's where the need for Shakespeare ends.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Well that's very interesting. I wish you good luck with all of that and it's nice to talk to you again. So *The Speaker's Progress* is opening at Brooklyn Academy of Music and then moving on to Boston I guess?

**SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM:** We play at Emerson Arts: The World on Stage from the 12th to the 16th of October.

Spring awakening; or, Malvolio as mullah, Hubreview.blogspot

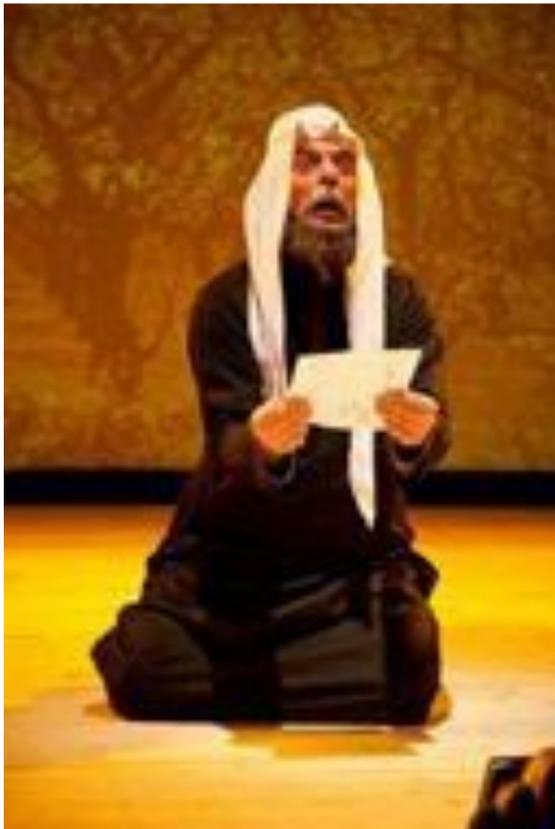


*Nassar Al Nassar and Faisal Al Ameerri grove with Shakespeare's Lord of Misrule.*

As Rodgers and Hammerstein might have said, the Arab Spring is bustin' out all over - we just saw the intriguing *Persian Quarter* take a bow at Merrimack, and right now, downtown, Occupy Boston is showing what may be the green shoots of an "American Spring" (okay, an "American Fall" - an interesting double entendre; let's hope metaphorically that it's spring!).

And now we have, from Arts Emerson, the best news (artistically speaking) of all - SABAB Theatre's *The Speaker's Progress* (through this weekend only), a brilliant translation and transposition of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* into the *milieu* of the Arab world. Written and directed by the Kuwait-born - but I think Edinburgh-educated - Sulayman Al-Bassam (note his company's name looks like an anagram of his own), the production dazzled last night at its local premiere, leaving its audience haunted and moved, if, it seemed, slightly puzzled: a talkback after the performance proved a disaster, with WBUR radio host Tom Ashbrook cluelessly wondering "Who is this production *for*?" while confused ladies in the audience demanded "Tell us what the ending *meant*!" (It was a poignant demonstration of the limits of philistine good intentions.)

Meanwhile I felt as if a dozen windows had been blown open in my mind, and I'm quite sure that *The Speaker's Progress* is the most important event (in intellectual terms) of the theatrical year. Which isn't to say it's a masterpiece; in fact, it starts slowly, and in places it's a mess. Nor is it a fully legitimate interpretation of *Twelfth Night*; the Bard's classic comedy is merely a springboard for Al-Bassam's inspired theatrical sketches - although fair warning: as the author-director (*and* lead actor) dips into *Twelfth Night* at will, if you don't have at least a working knowledge of the play, much of *The Speaker's Progress* may prove frustratingly opaque to you.



Malvolio as mullah, and madness as modernity - the wonderful Faye Kazak.

If you *do*, though - and if you don't mind listening to iambic pentameter translated into the seductive cadences of Arabic (don't worry, there are subtitles) - I promise you the kind of elevated entertainment we rarely see in these parts. In fact, I can't think of any production I've *ever* seen in America that matches the superbly casual, sophisticated charm that *The Speaker's Progress* boasts at its best (the acting of the SABAB company is its own small-scaled miracle).

And there's another dimension to the production which is difficult to explain, and which you'll just have to take from me on faith: Al-Bassam is already moving in the international-theatre circles of figures like Peter Brook, and he strikes me - admittedly on just a single exposure - as being, indeed, at that level of cultural importance. (So remember the name of this Arab Orson Welles, you're going to hear it again.) *The Speaker's Progress* is not, as I said, a consistent success as an interpretation of Shakespeare - and yet somehow you realize that nonetheless it's operating at something like Shakespeare's *level*. Which I've never felt in any Boston production of the Bard before, not in thirty years of theatre-going. (Plus this is only the end of a whole *trilogy*, it turns out, of Al-Bassam's meditations on Shakespeare, which I'm now dying to see.)

Understandably enough, SABAB's version of *Twelfth Night* focuses on the political struggle embedded in the play. Here Malvolio has been translated from a Puritan into a mullah, and Viola operates as a dangerously seductive image of gender subversion; and the "madness" into which the action tips is confused with "modernity." Meanwhile Feste is a blinded wanderer (more from *Lear* than *Twelfth Night*, if you ask me) who sings on a desolate shore, and Orsino's sexism turns genuinely murderous by the play's finish. The production's over-arching conceit is that it's being presented as a kind of show trial - the eponymous Speaker (fluidly played by Al-Bassam himself), a former director of renown, has restaged a famous production from the 60's to decry and denounce it (while censors watch from security cameras, and buzzers go off whenever a man and a woman brush each other on stage). Needless to say, however, the poetic force of Shakespeare won't be denied, and the censors eventually prove powerless before the challenge to authority that the text represents. (That it represents to even its *own* authority, it seems - *The Speaker's Progress* morphs relentlessly, as if to keep up with current events.)

Something has to be said aloud, however, about the production - it's obvious, from its style as well as its text, that *The Speaker's Progress* was inspired by - indeed, has "appropriated" much of the conceptual basis of - the Wooster Group's widely-noted *Hamlet* from a few years back (which likewise "excavated" a famous production of Shakespeare from the 60's). Does this turn Al-Bassam into the *avant-garde* equivalent of Beyoncé? Hardly. Al-Bassam should, of course, always acknowledge his sources - but, as I argued just the other day, there are contexts in which even the most blatant borrowing is legitimate, and Al-Bassam all but soars over that bar, as he translates and transforms his material into a new context with skill and insight.



*How are we to live? The luminous Amal Omran and Carole Abboud as Viola and Olivia.*

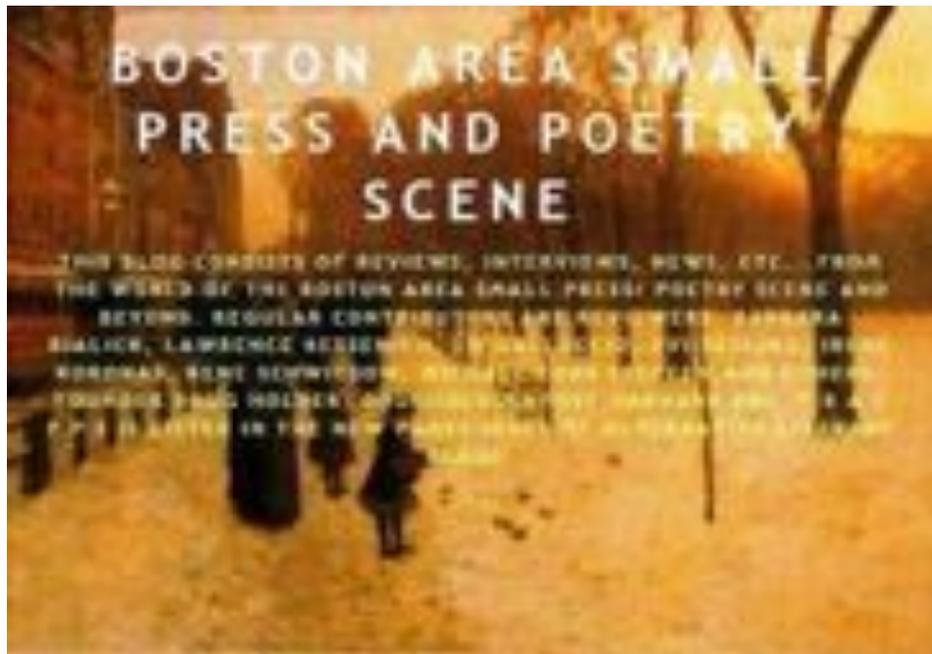
And as pure political theatre, *Progress* is often an intoxicating thrill - it breathes with the bracing air of inspired revision on the fly (Al-Bassam rewrote, and his company rehearsed, as the Arab Spring unfolded around them). Which may be one reason why it operates as the antithesis of agitprop. Instead, it's political theatre as it always *should* be - questing, open-ended, and humane, with a sweet, almost-erotic edge.

(This is political theatre drained of the bitterness of Brecht; it's meant to overturn and simultaneously *extend* civilization.) The text's mystifying finish, for instance, left me wanting to dance in the aisles as I pondered its ramifications: Al-Bassam closes with the basic question "How are we to live?," which is the query every revolution eventually raises. Only no wonder such a quixotic finish confused the earnest ladies in the audience! Americans can't even *think* that way anymore; we're unable to articulate our own political dilemmas (which are really not so far from those of the Middle East). And if you imagine our own political theatre is particularly "free," then you haven't been paying attention - it's abundantly clear the only existential question we're allowed to ponder anymore is "What should I buy next?"

Indeed, it's hard these days not to be humbled by the cultural ferment in the Middle East, isn't it. Democracy is more important to the Arabs than it is to us - *obviously* - and here they are showing us how to approach our own greatest playwright, to boot.

Which made the gently patronizing questions from Tom Ashbrook all the more irritating - he didn't seem to realize that in this production we were encountering our moral and artistic superiors. Who is this production *for*? It's for all of us, Mr. Ashbrook, both East and West.

Posted by Thomas Garvey at 12:20 PM



Thursday, October 13, 2011

The Speaker's Progress: Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre: Written and Directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam



The Speaker's Progress

Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre

Written and Directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam

October 12-16, 2011

Presented by ArtsEmerson

Playing at the Paramount Center Mainstage

Special Post Performance Discussions

For information and tickets:

[www.artsemerson.org](http://www.artsemerson.org)

617-824-8400

Review by Amy Tighe

At the end, the stage is chaotic. The sand that has been flowing from the rafters to the stage has stopped, time is gone now, the unused costumes whisked on stage during the liberation are still neatly hung in a dangling makeshift closet while the costumes that were used, are strewn all over the broken lab equipment. The sail boat has crashed in center stage, and I am not sure if the colleague who was a car mechanic, then a Tourist Board Director, then betrayed his co-workers, then was caged and tortured, is still in his cage. Two women are talking in a soft poetic rhythm. It's up to the audience to decide what just went on, and in fact, after the play ends, there is a strong hesitation throughout the audience before we start to applaud. I think it's because we don't know if we have, indeed, witnessed the end.

Strangely enough, this ending is easier to watch than the beginning of *The Speaker's Progress*. The beginning is like walking with a third leg which is not level with the other two—you limp, you regain balance, and then in the next step, you lurch left. You take a few good steps, you understand what is going on and then, without warning, you get unbalanced again and lurch to the right. It's not arabesque --it's just unsettling.

*The Speaker's Progress*, presented by ArtsEmerson and showing at the Paramount Theatre in its New England Premiere, is written, directed and performed by the Kuwait-based Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre. Showing for one week only, it is an uncomfortable experience of witnessing censorship, coercion and creativity through a retelling of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. It is definitely worth seeing. Written like nesting dolls that don't quite fit right, it is a world within a world within a world. Choices in one world stressfully impact all the other dolls, and choices are made frequently throughout the play.

Performed in Arabic with English subtitles, the piece exposes audience members to many facets of Arabic culture. I had the good fortune to sit next to one of the few Arabic speakers in the audience. She told me there were many nuances and exquisite images I missed as a Westerner. I knew I had felt haunted throughout the entire performance and so I simply believe her. Tom Ashbrook, who moderated the discussion afterwards, said this piece breaks stereotypes that many of us in the West may have. Good to know.

The Speaker, our disingenuous guide for the evening, as well as the main character, starts the play from his podium. He explains how Shakespeare's work was pivotal in building an empire for the British and this can impact Arabic culture as well. Although the play is performed in Arabic, The Speaker speaks flawless English. We rely completely on him to tell us what we see. As a Western audience, we are allowed in to witness Arabic repression and political inertia.

A 1960s performance of Twelfth Night is used to instruct us on current censorship guidelines. Actors playing actors recreate the 1960s version. But inexplicably, mid-scene, an actor, who is playing the car mechanic turned Tourist Board Director, motions subtly to the Speaker, who is still at his podium explaining scenes to us. The two quietly and viciously walk off stage and when The Speaker returns, he recants everything he has just so eloquently said. We witness him participate in his own silencing and we are lost.

In another scene, The Speaker cautions us to cover our eyes—we, of course, still want to believe in him. Bright spot lights are turned on us, O! Innocent Audience, while verses from the Koran are flashed on the screen which we are forced to watch. I think I might be being brainwashed. This is not an easy night of theatre to experience.

In the post performance discussion, Al-Bassam says several times that the ability to express oneself is the first thing to go in a repressed system. He is asked "Who is this written for?" and he laughs. At first, he says, he wrote it as a cry of despair and frustration. But now it is a tribute to the Arab Spring and "the undreamt-of leaps of change that have been made in the Arab world, and that are still to come." He continues, "For an Arab who is 18 -- to live these last few months alters that 18 year old's life forever..."

I can't help it. I think of occupyboston, literally just 6 blocks away. I have been quietly donating to them. The evening at ArtsEmerson has been uncomfortable, but I am getting used to it. Our local and global political and environmental landscape is changing and old forms are falling. I want forms, but which ones? Will the next script have A Speaker who changes in a way I don't accept? What am I supposed to do?

The placards that the occupiers write are intimate accounts of a system that is deeply unbalanced. "When I am in debt, I am alone. When I occupy, I am with all of us." "Are you in control of the state we are in?" "I have a job. It's not working. Now I have an occupation." "You've got money. Use it right." "I am the 99%." It makes me clear to myself. I am the 99%. I am here. Just, where the hell is here?

Tonight at the General Assembly the occupiers are discussing what their message is. They have been criticized for not having a clear message, or a list of specific demands. They know they are creating a new language and a new form of community, but they don't know what it will look like in the end. They know they are willing to occupy their lives to learn and to create. I know I am a witness to democracy gestating. This time it is not a theatre production.

At the post performance discussion, Sulayman Al-Bassam is pointedly asked "What is your message?" He says, "We worked hard to remove a message. This is about getting beyond prepared answers. We actors even used our own names in the play. We are finding a new territory. We are proud that the Kuwaiti government supports this production."

ArtsEmerson's motto is "The World on Stage." Shakespeare said "All the world's a stage." Al-Bassam challenges us to see that on and in every stage of our common human pursuit for self expression, there are infinite worlds of possibilities. As a playwright, he asks me to accept this challenge. I do.

My favorite sign at occupyboston is "The beginning is near." Through a profound performance by Arab artists at the thoughtfully resurrected Paramount and presented by ArtsEmerson, and at the General Assembly by the fragile tent city at Dewey Square, the unscripted expression of human courage and what we all can create is alive in the cement heart of our city. I hope you can enjoy it.

Posted by Doug Holder at 12:01 PM, Thursday, October 13, 2011

## « The Speaker's Progress », ou la liberté de parole en peril

Par Colette KHALAF | mardi, septembre 27, 2011  
L'Orient-Le Jour



Une interaction constante entre la vie et le théâtre, si bien que le spectateur parvient à confondre le réel et le fictif.

Théâtre C'est au Tournesol que le réalisateur et acteur Suleiman al-Bassam a présenté sa pièce théâtrale « The Speaker's Progress ». Une performance de haute qualité qui semble prendre l'actualité à bras-le-corps.

Dans un pays sans identité à l'abri des bouleversements qui traversent la région du monde arabe, une équipe de chercheurs de grande renommée et de grande vertu (?), installés dans un laboratoire, vont s'atteler à comprendre et à décortiquer une pièce de théâtre interprétée dans les années soixante, faite de l'âge d'or du pays. Ce pays qui, depuis, a vu disparaître son théâtre qui constituait une plate-forme de dialogue, va se retrouver comme perdu. Ainsi, au fur et à mesure que les chercheurs transformés en comédiens reprennent en une sorte de mimétisme le jeu des acteurs projeté sur écran géant, le vent de la liberté soufflera dans leurs paroles et dans tous leurs gestes. Ils s'en sortiront alors métamorphosés de cette expérience surprenante.

Le metteur en scène koweïtien, Suleiman al-Bassam

Sabab avait déjà concocté cette pièce en octobre 2010 bien avant que les mouvements arabes ne commencent. C'était comme un un texte prémonitoire. La pièce a été présentée dans plusieurs pays, notamment au Koweït dont le gouvernement a soutenu

sans aucune censure ce travail au dialogue avant-gardiste. S'inspirant de travaux shakespeariens et surtout de La Douzième nuit, *The Speaker's Progress* (wa Dar el-falak) dernière de la trilogie des ces pièces shakespeariennes, est une production du théâtre Sabab, créée en 2002 au Koweït, qui regroupe des comédiens de tous pays. Elle est une interaction constante entre la vie et le théâtre, si bien que le spectateur parvient à confondre le réel avec le fictif. Sur fond d'autodérision totale et dans une scénographie presque tridimensionnelle, le public assiste à la vacuité des paroles employées souvent par les gouverneurs, à l'endoctrinement et au panurgisme des citoyens, mais aussi à la liberté bafouée, méconnue. Aussitôt en possession de l'homme, cette liberté qui, jusque-là, lui était étrangère, ne sera que mal employée. Le réalisateur et acteur encadré par Carole Abboud, Nawar Youssef, Nicolas Daniel, Nassar el-Nassar, Amal Omrane et Fayez Kozak devient à son tour spectateur, s'interrogeant sur cette liberté prise de force par les peuples mais aussi sur le sort du théâtre et de toute création artistique.

À noter que l'acteur Fayçal el-Omeyri, contraint de rentrer au Koweït, suite au décès de sa mère, s'est vu son rôle repris haut la main par le comédien et directeur du théâtre Tournesol, Roger Assaf

*Wa Dar el-falak* ou *The Speaker's Progress* est une performance théâtrale de 90 minutes où la direction et le jeu d'acteurs, la scénographie ou le décor ne pèchent d'aucune faiblesse. Dernière de la trilogie des pièces shakespeariennes, elle témoigne de l'exigence et du perfectionnisme de son auteur ainsi que son inventivité pleine d'une vigueur époustouflante.