

# Al-Hamlet daringly transposes Shakespeare's classic play to modern Middle Eastern setting

London production boasts multinational cast from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UK

Ali Jaafar  
Special to The Daily Star

LONDON: There is an old joke, which claims that William Shakespeare was actually an Arab. How else, it goes, could someone have the name "Sheikh Zubair?" Given the preponderance of power-hungry rulers, crumbling regimes and general discontent in his plays, one can see plenty of common ground between Shakespeare and the politics of the Middle East, aside from his name.

With this in mind it is no surprise, therefore, to come across Al-Hamlet, a daring new play by Anglo-Kuwaiti writer and director Sulayman al-Bassam playing at London's Riverside Theater, which transposes the characters and plot of Shakespeare's Hamlet to an unnamed Arab country. Produced in partnership with the Tokyo International Arts Festival, the production boasts a multinational cast from all parts of the Arab world including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait as well as artists from the UK.

The core story largely remains faithful to the original, with Hamlet returning home to discover his father, the revered ruler of the state, dead – and his position filled by his uncle Claudius, who has also wed his mother, Gertrude. To make matters worse, the forces of Fortinbras, their old enemy, are amassing on the border with the threat of invasion imminent.

While the original explored "something rotten in Denmark," in his new interpolation Bassam finds plenty of material in the current landscape of the Middle East. Thus we now have bushy-moustachioed dictators, bearded fundamentalists and haunted suicide bombers tread-

ing the boards, amid the more universal themes of betrayal, love lost and family conflict.

Bassam spoke to The Daily Star about why he felt that Hamlet was so suited to adaptation to a Middle Eastern setting.

"What interests me is that Hamlet looks at the dying days of an imperial order, the dying days of an aristocracy at a moment of historical change. The house of Denmark collapses because of the rot inside it. It is the dawn of new moment in history," he said.

"That moment of historical change is what I'm interested in exploring and why Hamlet is such a good vehicle. I feel that everywhere in the Middle East is facing a great challenge over the determining of our future and the way in which we are to face the future, what kind of societies we want to live in and what kind of institutions we want to create. I think that we're in that historical moment when we are looking at a period of great change."

Bassam's play is drenched with timely resonance in the wake of continued global instability over the "war on terror" and the situation in Iraq. While ostensibly set in an anonymous Arab country, there are enough sly hints littered throughout implying specific situations.

In one scene, Claudius' adviser and Ophelia's father Polonius states: "The Shiite leaders are being rounded up, I've got 50 mobile squadrons in a net around the city, men scouring the sewers." As if by the reference to Saddam Hussein's Iraq needed further embellishment, he goes adds: "I have summoned you Laertes to brief us on developments in the south."

The play is about far more, however, than just Iraq, painting instead a panoramic indictment of states throughout the region,



Al-Hamlet, which is playing in London's Riverside Theater, is a timely take on Shakespeare's classic play

with their autocratic institutions, repressive regimes and government-controlled media.

The stage itself is designed as a series of desks behind which the protagonists sit, speaking into microphones, with the ominous tones of a state broadcast booming intermittently throughout the play.

At the back of the stage there is a screen onto which various images are projected; these range from a massive photo of the newly crowned Claudius, to scenes of oil wells burning, news footage of various Arab wars and, most strikingly, the martyr videotape of Ophelia.

In Shakespeare's original the

character is driven mad following her lover Hamlet's rejection, but in Bassam's version her insanity is made all the more affecting by her solemnly inarticulate confession, delivered while wearing a black veil.

"The one who has turned me into a refugee has made a bomb of me" – a line lifted straight

from a Mahmoud Darwish poem. It is a stunning moment, an air of portentous doom filling the auditorium as we know what tragic outcome awaits her. Her words are filled with a grief made all the more painful by her angelic face.

"On many nights I severed my tongue, but my silence bleeds

from my mouth." This is the suicide note of a young lady, driven to unimaginable acts by a vicious world of betrayal and despair.

This sense of malaise consumes the play's second half, and it is here that its Arab setting really comes into its own. Gone is the ghostly figure of Hamlet's father from Shakespeare's play, in his place a shadowy English arms dealer who revels in playing all the warring factions against each other. Rarely has the maxim "divide and rule" been presented with such banal efficiency.

Elsewhere Hamlet's conversion from urbane, modern student to fanatical Islamist, replete with white robes and long beard, brings home just how contemporary this work is. Gone are the intellectual gymnastics of the opening scenes, replaced instead with blank statements of intent. He is no longer the Hamlet of love who tells Ophelia, "I long to look at you, to stare at you, to drink from the sight of you."

He is now the Hamlet of the sword, who blankly vows to "crush the fingers of the thieving bureaucrats, neutralize the hypocrites, tame the fires of debauchery that engulf our cities and return our noble people to the path of God." It is a riveting performance by Kehaf al-Khous in the title role.

The play's standout scene comes with the frenzied plea by Claudius to God for help. Surrounded on all sides by the forces of Hamlet and Fortinbras, he appears on stage topless with a suitcase full of money, desperately trying to delay the inevitable. "Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars." It is an electrifying moment, symbolic of the changing of the guard, the pathetic recreation of a finished epoch, a decrepit ideology.

"I have learned so much filth, I eat filth, I am an artist of filth. I make mounds of human bodies, sacrifices to your glory. I adore the stench of peasants gassed with your technology. I am a descendant of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and you, you are God. Your angelic ministers want to eliminate me, throw me like Lucifer from the lap of your mercy, but who brought me here oh God. Let us not forget who put me here." They are the dying words of a man facing a dying regime, unable to understand the new world order around him.

The play is not without its moments of comedy, most notably when Claudius and Gertrude attempt to agree on where to send Hamlet on exile. Beirut is rejected for having "too many militias," Cairo for having "too many liars," Rabat for having "too many druggies." And Washington? "He'd never get in."

Instead the group finally decides to send him to London, to which Hamlet replies, "I will not be alone. I will eat little, grow thin, write tracts and become the prized animal of the European liberals. Good uncle – a perfect choice."

By the time the play has reached its apocalyptic conclusion, however, one is left emotionally drained as Hamlet utters his final words: "Perhaps the hardest thing is to find the courage to wake in the morning and face this landscape of ruins that are our lands. This perception of truth too late is Hell."

For Bassam, however, his play offers a glimpse of hope. "The play is an optimistic piece of art in the sense that it is a very human piece. I remain optimistic and I'm of a generation that has in front of it the challenge of being optimistic and trying to deal with the changing world."

## Newly refurbished Baghdad National Theater kicks off 8-day dance, music festival

Culture minister blames low attendance on poor security situation

Sebastien Blanc  
Agence France Presse

BAGHDAD: An eight-day festival of plays, dance and music kicked off Saturday at Baghdad's refurbished National Theater but only a third of the seats were filled as security fears remained high in the capital.

Workers were still putting the finishing touches to the building, which opened its doors free of charge for an afternoon show dubbed Monodrama, which runs until April 3.

The festival was the third cultural event to take place at the theater since Saddam Hussein's ouster, said Fatthee Zein al-Abidin, head of theater and cinema at the Culture Ministry. "We in the Culture Ministry are trying to make the Iraqi intellectuals play a vital role in creating the new cultural life for the new Iraq," Zein al-Abidin said before the show got under way.

"Professional and young actors should work hand in hand

to create a new reality," he said. Over 90 minutes, dancers, singers and musicians went on the stage to present a fare of traditional folklore that was followed by a play depicting the successive wars that plagued modern-day Iraq.

A trickle of applause accompanied each performance in the 1,000-seat theater where only one-third of the seats were filled.

"The situation is still very complicated. It is difficult to start living culturally again," Iraq's interim culture minister, Muhi al-Jazairi, said to explain the low occupancy.

Numerous suicide bombings, gunfire attacks and armed robberies have shaken Baghdad since the collapse of the regime last April, robbing Baghdadis of a normal life after office hours. Residents prefer to stay indoors and avoid public gatherings.

And for many, who lived under the oppression of Saddam Hussein, culture is still a mysterious notion, according to Jazairi

and at least one theatergoer.

"This is the first time I've come to the theater to see a live performance. We never did that before," said Salwan, who declined to give his surname.

Jazairi squarely blamed it on the former dictator.

"Saddam had an anti-culture policy. We hope the Iraqi theater will rise up after decades of pressure and limitations," he said. "The theater under Saddam was a commercial theater with very low cultural values."

Actors and employees of the Culture Ministry meanwhile

stormed the stage before the start of the performance carrying banners demanding better pay and working conditions.

The messages said: "No to the marginalization of Iraqi artists. No to the marginalization of culture in Iraq."

Again Jazairi blamed it on Saddam Hussein.

"We inherited the funding system of the older regime. We did not set the guidelines," Jazairi told the protesters, adding that he will urge the US-picked Governing Council to review the situation.

### CORRECTION

A mistake appeared in The Daily Star's March 26 issue, in the article titled 1st Muslim Film Festival in US Breaks Stereotypes. The eighth sentence reads: "Aleem, who herself has worn a hijab since she was 10, does so because it is part of her religion, not for reasons of modesty." It should have read: "... and for reasons of modesty." The Daily Star regrets the error.

### ARAB HISTORY AND IDENTITY

## Gauguin portrays an image of Tahiti tinged with Egypt, Buddhism

Painter depicts island in art with the perspective of one who's never been there

Tamim Al-Barghouti

This week I am writing about an exhibition of Paul Gauguin's art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The great painter's work has been the subject of thousands of studies and evaluations for the past century. Nevertheless, watching his paintings in the current American settings, here and now, made me read his paintings in unfamiliar ways. Thus, my reading is not only the result of myself seeing the paintings, but also the result of seeing the paintings in America in the year 2004.

Looking at the paintings from his first trip to Tahiti, I think that Gauguin was actually creating his own island; he saw Tahiti as a civilizational child. I mean, he totally subscribed to the idea of human evolution dominant in 19th century Europe, where the European man is the most developed and therefore the least innocent, just like an adult is more developed but less innocent, and therefore less beautiful, than a child.

The striking thing, however, is that he never saw Tahiti for anything else. In the exhibition, there were a couple of photographs from Tahiti, the country so much romanticized by the painter. One of the photos showed members of a local royal family being shipped aboard some European ship called the Astree.

The face of each and every human being says only one thing: extreme inhuman misery. Misery enveloped the black-and-white photos; it was as if fumes of pain flowed from the frames and filled the museum's rooms. It is strange to me how the great painter could not see this misery at all, seeing in Tahiti only the perfect ideal of the happy, tranquil and innocent humanity in her childhood.

The paintings from Gauguin's first visit show this very well: His famous painting Hale Mary where he paints the Madonna and the Child with Tahitian features and cloths, and his painting The Delights of the Land where he paints his 13-year-old Tahitian lover as Eve, are very indicative.

While the two paintings express great love for the painter's new home, they also tell us that he did not see the land for what it was; he reformed it into the mould of his own culture, into what is sacred and loved to him. The peace and tranquility that flow from Hale Mary directly contradict the overwhelming misery in the photos. The body of the Tahitian Eve in The Delights of the Land is taken from a photo of a Buddhist temple in Java which Gauguin had taken with him to Tahiti. In another painting, he drew a Tahitian woman in positions similar to those of Pharaonic female dancers; again, after a photo of an ancient Egypt-

ian tomb he had brought with him to Tahiti. In a sense, since Tahiti was not France, it could be anything else.

Also, the masculine-feminine ingredient of 19th century Eurocentric thought is strongly present in the fact that Gauguin mostly drew women; he almost never drew a man. When he drew his 13-year-old lover as Eve, he called the painting: The Delights of the Land. This, coupled with the very fact that he befriended a 13-year-old girl and made her a theme of many of his paintings, an act that could not have passed acceptably in late 19th century France, is indicative as well.

To complete the picture, Gauguin needed a savage local religion, but in Tahiti he did not find the primitive savage religion he sought, he only found very poor men and women being manipulated by French Catholic missionaries. Few of them even knew the tenets of their old religion.

Gauguin had to reconstruct the image he did not find. He did that depending on a book written by a Frenchman in the thirties of the 19th century about Tahitian religion. Whenever he found gaps he filled them with photographs of Buddhist temples and Egyptian tombs. To him, humanity in its childhood is but one, the dif-

ferences among Buddhism, ancient Egyptian religion and that of Tahiti don't really matter; as long as they are not European, they are all but primitive, savage things that are therefore nice, innocent, beautiful ... and more or less the same.

But Gauguin is a great painter despite the fact that he was a 19th century Frenchman. After all, he was not a 19th century French general or politician. In his second trip to Tahiti one sees that he stopped painting his image of the place, the place was internalized in Gauguin's perception of the world. The fig-

ures from Tahiti became, not the objects he was drawing, but rather the means by which he was drawing something else, something abstract, some feeling, some understanding of human nature he held. He stopped seeing Tahiti as France in her childhood; rather, he saw the Tahitian bodies as means by which he could express Gauguin in his later days. Here, one finds his masterpiece Where We Come From, Who We Are and Where Are We Going? The mural that is the hugest and the most comprehensive of his works deserves detailed description by an expert – which I cannot provide. Central to the mural, there is a figure of a man, painted in bright yellow. The figure directly reminded me of Christ, yet, instead of the hands stretched to the sides and nailed to a cross, they are stretching upward in an attempt to get fruit; the fruit nails the human body, yet stretches it as if it were holding it off the ground and calling upon it to fly. To the left of the vertical Christ of the mural, we see an idol, religion, and a woman walking away from it. To the right of the central figure, there are two women walking into the dark and talking, most probably asking questions, their figures balance the religious image to the left. Finally, near the feet of the central figure, stretching from right to left, there are women and children in various every-day life positions. At the bottom left of the painting there is an old woman, resigned to fate; "all that remains" in Gauguin's own words.

This fascinating painting is the daughter of Gauguin and his own culture. It is full of Tahitian figures, yet Gauguin was definitely not painting them, nor was he painting Tahiti. One is inclined to say that Gauguin has never seen Tahiti; in his first visit he was actually painting the Tahiti in his mind, while in the second visit, he was not painting any Tahiti, neither the one in his mind, nor the one in reality – he was painting himself and his feelings. But this, after all, is the artist's job.

Tamim al-Barghouti is a Palestinian poet. He writes a regular feature for THE DAILY STAR

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### Jarir Bookstore

Al Rashid Mall, Al Khobar  
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### Markaz Mazra Nissma Compound

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### Meridian Hotel Bookshop

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### WEB WATCH

#### Monitoring WMD intelligence failure:

This page on the website of the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) contains summaries and links to articles on distortions and misrepresentations concerning Iraq's unconventional weapons programs. BASIC is continuing to monitor the media and open source information for relevant articles.

[www.basinc.org/iraq\\_update.htm](http://www.basinc.org/iraq_update.htm)