

**Review of *The Speaker's Progress* (directed by
Sulayman Al-Bassam), Paramount Theatre, Boston, USA,
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Al-Bassam's two previous Shakespeare engagements were scene-for-scene quasi-localized adaptations of *Hamlet* and *Richard III* respectively. Unlike them, *The Speaker's Progress* (TSP) took a double grip on its Shakespearean intertext. In TSP, a former director is sent abroad with a troupe of "envoys" to defend their unnamed totalitarian homeland, which has banned all theatre. The "text" they reconstruct for the western audience, and thus the play-within-a-play, is a Gulf Arab localized version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Black-and-white film fragments of the supposed 1963 production – actually written, cast, and directed by Al-Bassam in playful faux-1960s style – provide the pretext and counterpoint for the modern-day outer plot. This metatheatrical move follows a venerable Arab tradition of Shakespearean *mise-en-abime*, especially beloved by 1970s filmmakers and 1980s playwright-directors. (Full video of the *Speaker's Progress* is available on the *Global Shakespeares* open-access archive (Huang and Donaldson).)

In the outer play, life gradually becomes art. Despite (or *because*) of the Ministry of Information camera downstage, the sterile rubber-gloved reconstruction sparks a revolutionary performance; the Speaker, like Hamlet in *The Mousetrap*, adds a few subversive lines; the "envoys" blossom into actors and then (so the hastily re-engineered ending would have the audience believe) into full-fledged moral and political agents. The Malvolio character (Fayez Kazak), a sinister *aparatchik* in the outer play cast as a hardline Mullah in the inner play, is gulled, whipped, and imprisoned in a wire cage.

The outer plot responded to fast-shifting politics (Al-Bassam "Director's Note"). Al-Bassam's early draft, written in 2010 just a month before a Tunisian fruit vendor's self-immolation ignited what was later labeled "the Arab Spring," ended with self-indulgent pessimism: the female re-enactors ran home for curfew; the Director, cross-dressed to substitute for them, was attacked by armed vigilantes seeking to punish the forbidden same-sex love between the Viola and Olivia figures (Al-Bassam script).

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Thus free love, political self-determination, and the possibility of theatre all perished with the same stroke of the knife.

As uprisings in several Arab countries unfolded, Al-Bassam's usually allusive and muscular writing grew fervid. An intermediate version previewed in Kuwait in March 2011 ended in a euphoric, even frightening celebration of freedom. (A 5-minute video of this piece is available on YouTube.) By the October 2011 shows in Beirut, Brooklyn, and Boston, the script had evolved toward the darker ending described above: open-ended, still hopeful, but conscious that no post-Malvolio society will easily overcome its crippling past.

The scenography offered Beauty as an antidote to totalitarian dystopia. As the laboratory crumbled, the set became richly, generously theatrical. In the lush "orange grove scene" (equivalent to the *Twelfth Night* sequence in Olivia's garden), it sprouted trees, fruits, and blossoms with Marcus Doshi's fairy-tale orange and yellow lighting; the actors still held plastic fruits, but the Speaker peeled and ate a real one. In another scene, envoys veiled the omnipresent state security camera (with a woman's headscarf!) for a drag concert; however campily, the Umm Kulthum impersonation by the Feste figure (blind poet Feylooti, played by the talented Faysal El-Amiri) invoked the hypnotic audience-performer relationship ascribed to the Arab 1960s. TSP's rose-tinted presentation of Art – linked to such ideals as love, revolution, beauty, creativity, emotional sincerity, dignity, Nasser-era Arab nationalism, humanistic religion, and political freedom – served as the ideological glue holding together Al-Bassam's precarious dramatico-civic construction.

Eschewing the quasi-ethnographic detail that structured and cluttered his earlier "Arab" Shakespeare adaptations – which gained visually but suffered intellectually from what Borges would call the problem of too many camels – Al-Bassam risked disappointing those audience members who came to learn something about the Arab world (Borges). TSP gestured at contemporary political allusion: the women wore hijab and stayed 90 cm away from the men (measured with a meter-stick), giving the dystopian state a recognizably Wahhabi style. But the metatheatrical doubling, showing two totally different Arabic-speaking worlds, foreclosed any generalizations about Arab "culture" in the singular. Even the hijabs were inconclusive: in a scene that drew chuckles in Puritan-founded Boston, the theatre ban was likened not to any existing Arab reality but to the closure of British theatres under Cromwell.

Al-Bassam's greatest community-building success so far has been his (eponymous) theatre company. It exists virtually, gathering actors from Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Britain, and elsewhere who meet only to rehearse and perform. One Boston playgoer remarked on the "casual sophistication" of their acting; a local blogger called it "a minor miracle (Garvey). Several actors have been with Al-Bassam for a decade: Nicolas Daniel, who was also in Al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* and *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, gave a particularly moving performance as the Toby Belch figure (writers' union representative/drunken uncle Tagtiga) whose sodden nostalgia for the 1960s turned out to have revolutionary valence. The charismatic Amal Omran captured the mature actress pouring herself into the Viola/Cesario role. Carole Abboud convincingly pouted, flounced, then baby-stepped her way through the transformation of the Olivia figure (women's union representative/heiress Thuraya) from old-regime sulkiness to post-revolutionary aporia. The play punned on Thuraya and *thawra*, Arabic for revolution. Gifted newcomer Nowar Yusuf (as Thuraya's maid Nishami) was a playful and persuasively cruel Maria figure. The

actors in the film-within-the-play, notably Jassim al-Nabhan, gave fine performances. Composer and sound designer Lewis Gibson, whose subtly disconcerting compositions have textured all three of Al-Bassam's Shakespeare-based works, here made extraordinary atmospheric use of his limited palette (music being banned) of bells, buzzers, violin-bow desk-scratching, and a harmonica.

The greatest missed opportunity was the characterization of the "tourist board representative"/regime official/Mullah/Malvolio (Fayez Kazak). A film star and state drama academy professor in his native Syria, Kazak was an unforgettable Emir Gloucester in Al-Bassam's *Richard III*. This time his performances were described as "overly broad" at BAM (Zinoman) and in Boston missed both the role's potential gravitas and its pathos. The audience neither feared him when he arrested Amal, nor really pitied him when, gulled by the other characters, he screamed in English (thinking it meant something more carnal) his desire to "defect" with Thuraya.

However, Kazak's characterization appeared to evolve over the Boston shows toward something more interesting: a prudish minor functionary, but one emboldened and made savage – terrifying in his very clownishness – by the mantle of the regime. The tension between Kazak's character and Al-Bassam's, more palpable each night, justified the otherwise inexplicable centering of the Speaker as the rebellion's heroic source. Most commentators have described the real-world Arab uprisings as bottom-up and leaderless. The metatheatrical pairing of Director and Dictator is a common trope in Arab drama; with the Speaker-Mullah symmetry the play acquired a hero, a villain, and some troubling resemblances between the self-righteous practices of the two.

Billed as the final work of Al-Bassam's "Arab Shakespeare Trilogy", *TSP* marked the unclosed closure of a decade-long experiment. It both shared and mocked the rigidly stylized scenography of *Al-Hamlet Summit*, echoing that play's set (the division between the bustling periphery of the stage and its mostly deserted centre) and its performance rules (*Summit's* actors spoke only into microphones, only to the audience; actors were not allowed to face each other). Yet unlike the immediately-post-September-11 *Summit*, *TSP* was no longer working to prove, as if proof were necessary, that Shakespeare applies to an Arab context. If *Summit* was the tighter work, *TSP* was the more ambitious and multi-layered.

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