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IFTR's Arabic Theatre Working Group

KHALID AMINE, HAZEM AZMY AND MARVIN CARLSON

This collaborative article looks at the establishment in 2006 of an IFTR/FIRT working group in Arabic theatre, and the significance of this in terms of breaking the twentieth-century, hegemonic hold of European and North American subjects in theatre research. We trace the development of the working group from preliminary conferences and gatherings outside IFTR to its set-up and organization within the Federation. Surveying our methodologies, key issues, research areas and future directions, we argue the significance of the group's work in creating a research forum for Arab theatre scholarship.

Historical preamble: waiting at the gate

When the International Federation for Theatre Research was founded in 1957, its name expressed at the time much more a hope than an actuality. Although theatre research as a field of study was more than half a century old, it still was concentrated in Europe and the United States and its members and areas of study strongly reflected that. The most comprehensive history of the theatre at that time, by George Freedley and John Reeves,[1] devoted not a single one of its 772 pages to the Arab world, but other areas outside Europe and the United States did not fare much better. Africa also was completely forgotten and South America was given only eight pages. In all, less than fifty pages out of 772 went to material outside the US–European axis. Not surprisingly, the membership and the interests of IFTR in its early days reflected this same view of international theatre.

When Oscar Brockett's *History of the Theatre* first appeared in 1968 it immediately established itself as the model for such studies and it still retains its dominance in the field today, thirty years and ten editions later. Yet in geographical spread, the first edition of Brockett was, if anything, less bold than his predecessors, with one chapter out of nineteen on the Orient and nothing on Latin America, Africa or the Arab world. During the 1970s and 1980s, as more and more theatre research was done on non-European theatre, subsequent editions began to include more Asian material and then material from Latin America and Africa, but the Arab world remained totally ignored. Brockett began his book, as his predecessors had done, with the ritual dramas of the pharaonic period and then moved on to Greece. The assumption, often explicitly stated, was that nothing of any theatrical interest had taken place in Egypt since about 1850 BC. Indeed, Brockett concluded his opening chapter, on the origins of theatre, with these dismissive words:

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> The Egyptians maintained an advanced civilization for about 3000 years . . . and never progressed theatrically beyond the stage of ritual drama. Their failure, and that of the people of the Near East with almost as long a history, only serves to emphasize the enormous achievement of the Greeks.[2]

Nothing could illustrate more clearly the traditional Western bias according to which all non-Western cultural achievement is necessarily and essentially inferior to that of the West and of academic use primarily to illustrate Western superiority. The use of such loaded words as 'progress' and 'failure' reveals an assumption that the Greek model and Western teleology have been automatically taken as the standards against which any other cultural products are measured. It is true that because of the rigid opposition in ancient Egypt between the human and the superhuman, Pharaonic performances were not transported into the secular sphere, but the fact remains that the people of ancient Egypt had performance of their own two thousand years before the Greeks.

In recent years, international interest in the Iranian Ta'zieh has caused a few Anglo-American theatre texts to recognize at least this one Islamic, if not Arabic, theatrical form. The Ta'zieh performance is a marked ritual enacted during the tenth of Muharam by Shiites everywhere. '[W]hile Pharaonic drama was confined and died within the temples, the Ta'zieh was not restricted to its Huseiniya but stepped out on the streets.'[3] The performance becomes a marked spectacle that is rehearsed repeatedly through an elaborate pattern of formulae leading to a collective redemptive and cathartic discharge.

Peter J. Chelkowsky considers the Ta'zieh 'the only indigenous drama engendered by the world of Islam'.[4] However, Chelkowsky's statement excludes a wide and heterogeneous body of other performance traditions engendered within the world of Islam. The 2006 volume from Routledge by Phillip Zarrilli and others called *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* claims to be the first theatre-history text in English to move beyond the Brockett model and 'to treat the non-Western world with . . . elegance and seriousness'.[5] One might hope that in the twenty-first century, this would lead at least one of the book's four authors to consider some aspect of theatre of the Arab world, but in fact there is not a word about it, even though the recently discovered Ta'zieh is discussed on several pages. The only really significant exception to this rather surprising lack of Western interest in this large part of the global theatre was the Routledge *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, the first Western encyclopedic work dealing with drama and theatre to engage seriously with the Arab World. An entire volume (Vol. 4, edited by Don Rubin and published in 1999) was devoted to this, with substantial chapters on almost thirty countries in North Africa and the Middle East. At long last, there was an important indication of a growing acknowledgement of these theatrical communities and traditions.

Entry on the world stage

As stated earlier, the main interest of the IFTR/FIRT has been until very recently largely limited to European and American theatre research. During the past decade or so, however, this situation has begun to change, due in large part to the development within

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the organization of working groups, additions specifically designed to provide fora for members with overlapping interests to share and exchange ideas, but also to explore new methodologies and new areas of research. The first such working groups were Performance Analysis and Historiography (represented in this issue), established in 1992 and 1993. Over the years more than twenty other groups have been added.

On a related development, a number of Western scholars, some of them long-time members of IFTR, began to call for more attention to Arabic theatre, a significant part of the international theatre hitherto almost completely ignored, for all the organization's avowed aim of having a truly global reach. At the IFTR Conference in Amsterdam in 2002 two active members of the organization, Marvin Carlson and Mieke Kolk, discovered a mutual interest in drama and performance from the Arab world and began seeking opportunities to extend that interest. Carlson's first Ph.D. student, at Cornell in the early 1960s, had been an Egyptian, Abdul-Aziz Hammouda, who went on to become a leading playwright, educator and public intellectual in his home country. In 1999 another Egyptian graduate student, Wagdi Zeid, sent to Carlson by Dr Hammouda, helped him to organize a conference at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York on Contemporary Theatre in Egypt, the first such conference ever held in the United States. Among the leading dramatists present were Lenin El-Ramly, Alfred Farag and Atef El-Ghamry. Later that year Carlson was invited to Cairo as a member of the jury for the annual Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET), where he met the leading critic Nehad Selaiha and Hazem Azmy, both of whom would be central to the subsequent inauguration of the Arabic Theatre Working Group in IFTR.

Mieke Kolk's interest in Arabic theatre was also stimulated by a trip to Cairo in 2001 as a judge at CIFET, an invitation arranged by Nehad Selaiha. There she met Shams El Din Younis from Sudan, another important figure in the founding of the working group. The events of 9/11 (which occurred only a few hours before the festival's closing ceremony) inspired Kolk to work with Egyptian colleagues in a series of ongoing projects to develop dialogue between the Arabic and Western academic communities. The Dutch Embassy sponsored a series of workshops and Dr Kolk began to plan a series of related international conferences.

The first of these, organized by Kolk and Professor Freddy Decreus from the University of Ghent, took place in Ghent in December of 2003. It was called Rereading Classics in 'East' and 'West': Post-colonial Perspectives on the Tragic. Fourteen Western and Arabic scholars presented papers, several of whom would later become members of the IFTR working group, including Selaiha and Carlson. In April of 2005 a follow-up conference to this was held in Tetouan, Morocco, organized by Khalid Amine of Abdelmalek Essaadi University, on the theme of The Performance of the Comic in Arabic Theatre. More members of the future working group gathered at this conference. Indeed, one of the highlights of this watershed event was the concluding round table called upon by Amine to discuss a proposal by Hazem Azmy to establish an Arab society for theatre research. While the proposal itself was dismissed at the time on grounds of being logistically premature, the stimulating discussion that ensued reflected a growing enthusiasm for scholars of Arabic theatre to work within and in dialogue with the international scholarly scene.[6]

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Several of the international scholars brought together at these meetings were already members of IFTR and they encouraged others to join that organization and to bring to it representation from the Arab world. The 2006 IFTR conference in Helsinki was the first with a distinct Arab presence. Nehad Selaiha was invited to present a keynote speech, the first ever by a scholar from the Arab world, and the programme also offered for the first time a panel of papers on Arabic theatre, chaired by Carlson and Kolk. They were joined by Hazem Azmy from Egypt and Shams El Din Younis from Sudan. Although family reasons prevented Professor Selaiha from attending the conference, Dr Younis took her place as the keynote speaker, beginning his address with a customary greeting in Arabic. For IFTR's past president Josette Féral, however, this seemingly innocuous gesture was highly symbolic since it was the first time Arabic had been spoken in an IFTR general assembly.

The first Arabic panel attracted an overflow crowd and showed widespread interest among IFTR members in this area of study. Such an enthusiastic response encouraged the panelists to meet with other members of the organization and to draw up a formal proposal to set up an ongoing working group in Arabic theatre to join the fifteen working groups already established. No less than forty-five members of the organization, representing ten countries, signed the proposal.

The Arabic Theatre Working Group (ATWG) was approved by the Executive Committee of IFTR in August 2006 and met officially for the first time at the 2007 conference in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The founding members of the working group represented a broad range of scholarship and scholars from both the Western and the Arab and Islamic worlds. In addition to Carlson and Kolk, there were three scholars from Morocco: Khalid Amine, Hassane Yousfi and Said En-Naji; two from Egypt: Batool Khattab and Hazem Azmy; one from Syria, Nesrin Alrefaai; one based in England, Milija Gluhovic; one from Iran: Farah Yeganeh; and three from the United States: Eyad Houssami, Kristin Johnsen-Neshati and Edward Ziter. The general conference focus on theatre in Africa gave particular encouragement to members of the working group involved in North African theatre to propose papers for the general sessions, and where there were four papers on Arabic theatre presented in general sessions in Helsinki, the number had risen to twelve in Stellenbosch.

Having begun to develop a group dialogue on a number of interrelated scholarly questions (as we shall explain in the section that follows), the ATWG felt it important to sustain their momentum by meeting in South Korea. As convener Marvin Carlson was unable to attend, the sessions in Seoul were organized and chaired by Hazem Azmy of Egypt. It was a small but significant meeting that marked the introduction of a number of noteworthy logistical measures. Most important among these measures was the idea of the distance discussant. Even those members who were unable to attend in person were allowed to serve as discussants in absentia, sending their responses in writing to be read out during the meeting. The practice served to give the members of the fledgling group a sense of a larger worldwide community of interlocutors. Also noteworthy was the fact that Moroccan scholar Hassane Youssefi, although a fluent speaker of French, opted to present his paper (on Asian influences in Arabic theatre) in Arabic, the first such precedent in the history of the group.

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Building on the work at the South Korea conference, several members of the ATWG, who attended CIFET 2008 and contributed reviews for the festival's English-language daily journal, also held a follow-up meeting there, chaired by Hazem Azmy on behalf of Marvin Carlson. The meeting was held under the auspices of Professor Sameh Mahran, then the president of the National Centre for Theatre, Ministry of Culture, in Egypt, who would henceforward provide the ATWG with unprecedented support on the regional institutional level.

The IFTR conference in Lisbon, a location more accessible to members than South Korea had been, had a correspondingly much greater attendance, and partly thanks to the preliminary Cairo meeting the Lisbon conference saw a strong Egyptian presence, with a total of nine papers dealing with Egyptian themes. During the working sessions, the group discussed a variety of projects and issues and papers were presented dealing with the current state of censorship in three countries of central interest to the group: Egypt, Syria and Morocco. As had been the case in South Africa, papers by Arabo-Islamic scholars or dealing with this part of the world made up a significant part of presentations in the general sessions, for a total of more than twenty presentations, counting those within the working-group sessions. The topics ranged over a very wide area, though of course the conference theme of censorship was a common one. Among the national traditions represented were those of Egypt, Syria, Iran, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco.[7] In addition to these, the Lisbon organizers were also successful in engaging Nehad Selaiha, who presented a keynote address on her unique career in relation to contemporary Egyptian theatre, with special attention to the conference theme of censorship.

Emerging strategies and common questions

As early as the time of the Stellenbosch conference in 2007, discussions and other forms of scholarly exchange within the first meetings of the group allowed some generalizations to be made regarding the research methods, strategies and concerns of the ATWG's members.

Not surprisingly, since most of these members have received their academic training in European or American universities or in universities oriented toward those traditions and methodologies, there has always been a strong representation of Western critical strategies, from new criticism to postcolonialism. On the other hand, there emerged a strong desire to remain open to other approaches, particularly to ones that recognize the extreme diversity of the theatre and performance cultures represented by the Arabo-Islamic world, stretching as it does from Indonesia to Morocco, and encompassing an enormous variety of language groups and social traditions. Much of this part of the world was dominated by European colonialism, and while that has unquestionably had a major impact on the performative cultures involved, an important marker of the postcolonial period almost everywhere in the Arabo-Islamic world has been an increased attention to alternative local performative traditions and how they have resisted or, more often, blended with colonial manifestations. Indeed, some of the discussions within the group invoked the now familiar idea of the *bricoleur*, in the Derridean sense, a concept that

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acquired a new relevance as a trope of choice for the operations of scholars of Arabic (and other postcolonial) performative traditions. Recall that the *bricoleur* is by definition

> someone who uses 'the means at hand,' that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, *even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous* – and so forth.[8]

Through trial and error, members of the group have increasingly become aware that the research tools developed in the West for the analysis of Western performance are not necessarily suited to the analysis of non-Western forms and practices. Rather than discarding these 'Western' tools completely in favour of more 'authentic' ones, the members of the ATWG, qua *bricoleurs*, have come to recognize the need to remain as flexible and pragmatic as possible in the variety of theoretical approaches and critical methodologies utilized.

Similarly, as a natural corollary of the *bricoleur* trope, the majority of the ATWG scholars operate from the premise that the so-called 'authentic' performance cultures are fundamentally diasporic cultural constructs in a state of constant change. As such, a certain challenge to the myth of origin (with all its myriad hegemonic variants, logocentric ramifications and oppressive consequences) remains a regular feature of the work of these scholars, albeit usually invoked under a number of different terms and, inevitably, with varying points of emphasis. Located at the crossroads of a continuum of intersections, encounters and negotiations, most Arabo-Islamic theatrical and performative practices have long become complex palimpsests that highlight the importance of inter- and intra-cultural exchange and interweaving, while giving the lie to the age-old essentialist quest for the pure and original.

While the group thus derives much of its unique identity from its concern with Arabic/Arabo-Islamic theatre, none of these key signifiers lends itself to any easy or stable definition. The world of Islam is a container of multiple identities, a sedimental layering of cultures past and present, always already in permanent flux. By the same token, the very idea of Arabness is equally problematic, even more so by virtue of its being a troubling reminder of ultra-nationalist/ethnocentric ideologies and discourses that were often seen perpetrating acts of oppression and exclusion – either material or symbolic – against its various internal others. Needless to say, such definitional problems require of the group no small measure of sensitivity and ongoing critical scrutiny (as has emerged in discussions of the group's official name). In 2004, Nehad Selaiha memorably summed up the challenging task at hand:

> Underlying [the label 'Arab culture'] is a facile, comforting assumption that deep down all Arabs are basically the same and all possess a single, homogeneous, stable and finished Arab identity. Such an assumption can only lead to stereotypical images and clichés, often borrowed from the Western perception of what constitutes an Arab . . . One can credibly speak of an Arab world – meaning a group of geographically neighbouring,

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> multi-ethnic, predominantly Muslim states where the population in each speaks a local version of classical Arabic, thickly interlaced with words, echoes and rhythms which belong to earlier languages, cultures and historical periods. But for the term Arab culture to make any sense at all, it has to be viewed as a plural entity (Arab cultures rather than culture) and understood as an ongoing, dialogic historical process – a rich composite of heterogeneous elements, shaped and held together by historical forces and pressures and constantly redefined by its internal tensions and relations to other cultural conglomerates – East–West, North and South. Without recognising this diversity and initiating an inter-Arab dialogue which stresses the differences between the various regions and societies as much as the similarities, it would be difficult to establish an authentic dialogue with other cultures. Indeed, within each Arab society there are diverse cultural groupings or subcultures which the dominant, official culture needs to acknowledge, engage in dialogue with, and accommodate.[9]

What Selaiha notes of Arab ongoing internal tensions – with all their inevitable challenges to long-held notions of the Arab/Muslim Self – remains a constant concern for many members of the group. More specifically, these seek to investigate the conflicting interference between, on the one hand, the power of the utterance of incessant Arabo-Islamic autocratic metaphysics (most notably demonstrated in the ascendancy of neo-Islamist discourses and identitarian politics), and on the other the still-dominant Eurocentric negation of Otherness.

For instance, Hazem Azmy's doctoral research, conducted at the University of Warwick under past IFTR president Janelle Reinelt, adapts insights from sociological research and cultural studies to analyse a number of competing and conflicting performance realities in 'post-9/11' Egypt. Likewise, Kristin Johnsen-Neshati is studying women independent theatre-makers in contemporary Egypt and their vexed relation with forces of the dominant culture. Edward Ziter is currently completing a book-length study on contemporary Syrian theatre with special attention to its oppositional artists. Fawzia Afzal-Khan is studying feminist interventions on radical theatre and performance practices in today's 'Talibanizing' Pakistan.

This concern with a fast-changing present has led some members of the group to retrace its genealogy in recent and modern Arab (theatre) history. An exemplary case in point is the forthcoming study by Margaret Litvin on Arab appropriations of *Hamlet*.[10] Going further back in history, Mustafa Riad (Ain Shams University, Egypt) presented a paper in Seoul on the beginnings of modern Egyptian theatre in the nineteenth century. Nesrin Alrefaai has recently completed her English-language doctoral research on the politically motivated dramaturgy of late Syrian dramatist Saadallah Wannus. Recent work by Egyptian scholars Batool Khattab, Salwa Rashad, Dalia El-Shayal, Areeg Ibrahim, Iman Ismail and Lobna Ismail examines specific dramatic texts and/or productions, exploring the interface between the aesthetic choices informing the works in question and their formative social and political moments.

Running parallel to this genealogical approach is the work that focuses on specific instances of the East–West cultural and theatrical exchange, an exchange made all the more strategically relevant, if doubly precarious, by the post-9/11 surge of international

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curiosity about all that is Arabic or Islamic. At the 2009 Lisbon conference, Frank Bradley of the American University in Cairo presented a case in point, reporting on an English-language student production he directed in Cairo of Naomi Wallace's *The Fever Chart*. While Wallace's text was hailed in the West as a progressive treatment of the Arab–Israeli conflict, in Cairo the same play was publicly condemned by its Egyptian student cast members for what they perceived as the playwright's dramatic and political equivalence of the Israeli oppressor and Palestinian oppressed. Discussing the other end of the continuum, Margaret Litvin has sounded a timely alarm, lest the long-awaited Western interest in Arab peformative practices replicate the same set of familiar stereotypes and Western 'knowledgeable ignorance':

> An audience driven by ethnographic curiosity can turn experimental theatre into the most deadening kind of traditional theatre. Such an audience is ignorant of the local artistic conventions which the experimental work sets out to challenge and against which the theatre-maker creates meaning . . . It can mistake a stylized or even ironic appropriation of a certain cultural tradition for a straightforward part of that tradition. Metaphors are literalized. Satire is misread as fact. Forms of expression which resonated vividly within their original cultural contexts are either mistakenly assumed to be transparent, like journalism, or criticized for being too opaque. If the Arab artist derives much of his or her traction and efficacy from a position partly inside and partly outside his or her home culture, the well-meaning western audience neutralizes that effectiveness by repositioning the artist squarely inside the home culture.[11]

The traditional East/West dichotomy has been challenged by a number of prominent scholars in the group. Moroccan scholar Said En-Naji's most recent book, *Al-Bahlawan Al-Akhir* (The Last Clown), challenges this dichotomy by seeking to highlight, among other things, shared histories between Arab performative traditions and those of other Mediterranean cultures. For other ATWG scholars, however, the postcolonial condition of Arabo-Islamic theatre is characterized by hybridity as a dominant form of interweaving, a term that shows a measure of indebtedness to recent work by Erika Fischer-Lichte. Hybridity in this specific sense is not simply a fusion of two pure moments, but the persistent emergence of liminal third spaces that transform, renew and re-create different kinds of writing out of existing or emerging models. The focus of these scholars is therefore to reflect upon the middle grounds of performativity beyond postcolonial hybridity, where binary relationships between East and West dissolve and become more and more interwoven. Such thematic and conceptual crossovers of different performance practices must perforce remain an open enterprise, offering a critique of postcolonial hybridity while at the same time promising myriad and perhaps indefinite interweaving prospects.[12]

What's in a name?

Four years after its inception, the ATWG continues to expand both numerically and geographically. However, as even a listing of the group's founding members makes clear, the term 'Arabic theatre' has never in fact fully represented the political or geographical

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range of scholarly interest within the group. The group's original 'Mission Statement' attempted to express this diversity: 'The title of the group is meant to indicate a general geographical and cultural area of investigation, not to be exclusive, and investigations of material from related non-Arab and non-Muslim communities located within this area are welcomed by the group'. Despite the attempt of this statement to clarify the range of interest of the working group, discussion continued over the appropriateness of the title 'Arabic theatre', primarily because it suggested a focus on the Arab peoples, marginalizing major non-Arab parts of the Islamic world, most notably Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia, but also because it seemed to continue the historic marginalization of indigenous peoples, such as the Berbers, who are not ethnically Arab.

This question, debated when the group was formed, arose again at the Lisbon conference. Discussion continued by email through the autumn, and a variety of alternative titles were extensively discussed by members of the group. Some favoured adding the term 'Islamic' or some variation of 'theatres of the Muslim world', insisting that such terms were to suggest a cultural, not a religious, context. Others, however, were troubled by the inevitable religious connotations of the terms. Other suggestions, such as 'theatres of the Middle East', did not accurately reflect the geographical range of the group. The lengthy and wide-ranging conversation touched upon many aspects of the political, religious and cultural issues that affect the study of theatre and performance in this part of the world. Finally, the majority of members voted to keep the original title for the group, but to frame a new mission statement that would stress even more clearly the variety of areas of study welcomed within the group. A draft of such a new statement was drawn up by Hazem Azmy and approved by membership in December of 2009. It reads as follows:

> Established in 2007 as the Arabic Theatre Working Group, ATWG exists to broaden international understanding of the theatre and performance cultures of the 'Arabo-Islamic World.' In 2009, the group voted to retain the appellation 'Arabic' in recognition of the historically unifying role of the Arabic language. This recognition notwithstanding, the group is neither meant to be exclusive nor to promote any nationalist or religion-based agenda. Rather, it seeks to maintain its scholarly mission by holding up its key definitional terms to ongoing critical scrutiny.
>
> Defined in strictly geographical and political terms, the operations of the group cover theatre and performance material from the member states of the League of Arab States and/or the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. However, both the operative adjectives Arab and Islamic should be understood here to demarcate, primarily, a general cultural area of scholarly exploration and negotiation. Investigations of material from the many non-Arab and non-Muslim communities located within the Arab/Muslim world are welcomed by the group. The group equally welcomes material covering the theatre and performance activities of Arab and Muslim 'diasporic' communities.
>
> Subjects can be drawn from all areas of theatre activity as well as from performance work that lies outside the traditional European concept of theatre. Methodological approaches from the fields of (theatre) translation, cultural, and postcolonial studies

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> will doubtless be represented in the work of the group, but all approaches that will provide a better understanding of this large field of studies are welcome.
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> The membership of the group is open to all paid-up members of the IFTR/FIRT, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, or religion. Graduate students and early-career researchers are particularly welcome, as well as practice-based researchers and reflexive practitioners. In exceptional circumstances, and subject to the availability of appropriate translation arrangements, the group may consider accommodating participants who are unable to deliver their papers in either English or French.

This more detailed and nuanced statement sums up many of the concerns we have been addressing in this article and stresses the openness of the group to ever-developing areas of investigation. For example, many of the non-Arab and non-Muslim communities within the Arab Muslim world have used theatre and performance in the expression of their own cultural concerns, and this is a clearly growing trend. The rise of the Berber theatre in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the early years of the twenty-first century is a striking case in point. Diasporic theatre is another area only rarely considered in the opening discussions of the working group, but has become a topic of ever greater interest and importance in recent years.

The last sentence in the revised statement also brings us back to the problem of using Arabic for the operations of the group. A review of language policy, to which the ATWG is contributing, is currently taking place in IFTR based on a statement of principles developed by members of the Executive Committee. The first two items of the Executive Committee draft statement are of particular interest to our working group. These are:

1. The official languages of the Federation are French and English; nevertheless, the Federation is committed to ensuring other language constituencies are not excluded from the ongoing scholarly dialogue that is the heart of our work together.
2. At conferences, we prefer that the working languages include the appropriate regional language(s). Conference organizers should put aside a sizeable sum for translation and interpretation in these chosen languages.

This issue is clearly of considerable importance to the Arabic Theatre Working Group, and doubtless will be to other working groups with similar language concerns. Although at present all members of the group speak either English or French, with some speaking both, Arabic is naturally the primary language for the majority of group members, and there is little question that the group would be able to attract new members from the Arab-speaking world in the future if some way were found to incorporate Arabic as one of the working languages of the group.

Opportunities and future directions

In addition to the individual research agendas briefly mentioned above, the establishment of the ATWG has already encouraged several joint projects and will doubtless lead to more in the future. A special issue of the journal *Ecumenica* (Autumn 2008), dealing with Islam and the theatre, was co-edited by Hazem Azmy and Marvin Carlson, with an

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eleven-member editorial board, composed largely of members of the working group.[13] In March of 2008 Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson published the article 'Al-halqa in Arabic Theatre: An Emerging Site of Hybridity', in *Theatre Journal*.[14] Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson collaborated on the article 'Current Trends in Arab-American Performance', which appeared in the collection *Performance, Exile, and 'America'*, published by Palgrave in 2009.[15] Amine's recent contribution is an article entitled 'Performing Postcoloniality in the Moroccan Scene: Emerging Sites of Hybridity'.[16]

A variety of other projects are being developed within the ATWG, including the creation of ongoing bibliographies of translations and other teaching, performance, and research materials, including videos and recordings, exploration of joint sessions in the future with other working groups, and an ongoing international translation project to make more plays from the Arab and Islamic worlds available to English readers. This final project is both the most ambitious and also the one being most actively pursued at the moment. The International Centre for Performance Studies in Tangiers (http://www.icpsmorocco.org) and the Martin E. Segal Center in New York (http://web/gc/cuny.edu/mestc/) provide models and have already produced a number of individual works and collections. Several members of the working group based in Cairo have already organized a series of meetings, drawn up lists of possible translations and are developing an organizational structure there. Individual members in Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Pakistan have indicated a willingness to participate in the project as it develops.

In April of 2010, the Academy of Arts in Egypt, now under the presidency of Professor Sameh Mahran, hosted an international symposium in Cairo which was convened by Hazem Azmy, and thus had as invited speakers a significant number of ATWG's members, as well as some of the most eminent figures in IFTR.[17] Titled '*Theatrum Incognitum:* How Theatre Knowledge Exchange May Help (or Hinder) a Fast-Globalising World', the symposium not only surveyed the current state of international theatre scholarship, but also drew attention to the ATWG specifically as a forum for knowledge exchange and to IFTR generally for its role in the promotion of international scholarly collaboration. Having the symposium also helped the group to prepare for the 2010 IFTR conference in Munich just as in 2008 a preliminary meeting in Cairo had prepared the way for Lisbon.

The 2010 IFTR conference in Munich opened the second four-year term of the group and so served as an important time for taking stock and for projecting the next four years of projects and activities. Of special pride to the group was the fact that one of its founding members, Khalid Amine from Morocco, served as one of the keynote speakers for the conference. He thus became the third Arab scholar to be granted this mark of distinction by the organization, after Younis in Helsinki and Selaiha in Lisbon. In 2008, two other founding members, Farah Yeganeh of Iran and Hazem Azmy of Egypt, joined IFTR's Executive Committee. Such developments evidence a clear indication that Arab theatre scholarship is no longer 'waiting at the gate' but has come to occupy an important place on the international theatre scene.

In its first four years of existence, the Arabic Theatre Working Group has provided an intellectual home, a nexus of contacts and a research stimulus for scholars from around the world, and has thus offered an important new dimension to IFTR's global mission. Its members look forward with excitement to continuing and expanding this contribution in the years to come.

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NOTES

1 George Freedley and John A. Reeves, *A History of the Theatre* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1941).
2 Oscar Brockett, *History of the Theatre* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968), p. 8.
3 Mohammed Al-Khozai, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847–1900* (London and New York: Longman, 1984), p. 28.
4 Peter J. Chelkowsky, ed., *Taziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 1.
5 Phillip B. Zarrilli, Bruce McConachie, Gary Jay Williams and Carol Fischer Sorgenfrei, *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. xvii.
6 In May 2005, as an informal follow-up to this enthusiasm, a Yahoo! listserve called AITheatre was set up by Hazem Azmy; see http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aitheatre
7 See the ATWG Schedule at http://d.yimg.com/kq/groups/20592726/1328452800/name/ATWG+Schedule+IFTR+2009+-+Revised+Version+July+2009.pdf>. Also, for a list of Arabo-Islamic papers in the main conference visit http://d.yimg.com/kq/groups/20592726/409708625/name/Arabo-Islamic+Presentations+in+Main+Conference+-+IFTR+09+REVISED.pdf>).
8 Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *idem*, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 278–94, here p. 360, our emphasis.
9 See Nehad Selaiha 'Back on the Silk Road', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 28 October 2004, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/714/cu1.htm
10 See Litvin's blog on the topic at http://arabshakespeare.blogspot.com/. Also see the special issue of *Critical Survey* devoted to Arab Shakespeare and guest-edited by Litvin (19, 3, Winter 2007).
11 Margaret Litvin, 'Arab Theatre in the New World Market', *The Experimental* (daily of CIFET 2008), 13 October 2008, p. 1.
12 This approach is best exemplified in Amine and Carlson's current book project entitled *Theatre in North Africa: The Performative Turn in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia*, to appear in the Palgrave series Studies in International Performance edited by J. Reinelt and B. Singleton.
13 For a table of the contents of this issue see www.ecumenicaljoural.or/page2.plip
14 Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, 'Al-halqa in Arabic Theatre: An Emerging Site of Hybridity', *Theatre Journal*, 60, 1 (March 2008), pp. 71–87.
15 Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon, eds., *Performance, Exile, and 'America'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
16 Published in Jon McKenzie, Heike Roms and C. J. W.-L. Wee, eds., *Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 191–206.
17 Details available at the symposium's website at http://symposium.egyptartsacademy.com

KHALID AMINE (khamine55@gmail.com) *is Professor of Performance Studies at Abdelmakek Asssadi University, Morocco, and President of the International Centre for Performance Studies. He is currently Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Interweaving Performance Cultures at the Free University of Berlin.*

HAZEM AZMY (hmazmy@aucegypt.edu), *before moving to the University of Warwick in 2006 for his doctoral study, was based in his home country, Egypt, where he continues to maintain an internationally oriented career. He is the Editor of* The Experimental*, the English-language daily of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET).*

MARVIN CARLSON (mcarlson@gc.cuny.edu) *is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the founding convener of the Arabic Theatre Working Group.*

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