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Introduction: Rehearsing Arab Performance Realities

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More than a year and half ago, when the two editors of this special issue started conceptualizing a collection of essays on theatre and the Arab Spring, they were occasionally greeted with a measure of scepticism from those who thought that the developing situation in the region was far more reminiscent of a bleak winter than any spring of hope. In fact, part of this scepticism was due to the very phrase 'Arab Spring', a cliché long promoted by Western media outlets which routinely celebrated the (typically young) forces of regeneration in their presumed longing for the 'global' values of Western liberal democracies, but especially when these values were manifested in – you guessed it – neo-liberal capitalism.

Even more challenging for a project like the one at hand, the usual highlighting of the role of theatre and allied artistic practices in the current Arab zeitgeist has often been dismissed by many well-informed commentators as naively euphoric. Citing the example of a young Egyptian theatre director who refused to see any play with the word 'Tahrir' in its title, Margaret Litvin in her piece in this issue cautions against the rush to produce 'revolutionary' plays that depend for their appeal on 'emotional release and self-glorification'. As she puts it,

> To praise a revolutionary uprising – to try to tell its story, as though it were already over – *is* to bury it. A performance like *The Tahrir Monologues*, which does not reach a mass-market audience, quite literally takes its relatively small activist audience 'out of the streets and into the theatre', reversing the neo-Brechtian avant-garde's slogan.

Yet perhaps the problem here has less to do with the limits of theatre itself than with where we should look for the 'theatrical truth' behind the new Arab realities. For their part, rather than lamenting the often rushed or underdeveloped theatrical expressions of the revolutionary uprising, many of the contributors to this collection have opted to cast their net wider, employing the tools of their theatrical trade to make better sense of the myriad complex socio-cultural and political realities defining this new environment. In fact, whether these contributors are conscious of it or not, this approach clearly suggests the idea of 'performance realities', a term that Janelle Reinelt, among others, has been popularizing for the last ten years or so. In her words, this idea implies a uniquely aesthetic mode of knowledge that involves 'interpreting the contemporary world through a theatrical lens as well as viewing the theatre through contemporary reality'.

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This theatre–reality double dynamic is in ample evidence in the image chosen for the cover of this issue, depicting a demonstration that took place at Tahrir Square on 25 January 2012, marking the first anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. Many readers will immediately recognize the Guy Fawkes theatrical mask, a reference to the 1982 comic book *V for Vendetta*, which was adapted in 2005 into a successful movie. When shown in Egypt in early 2006, the film was not exactly a box office hit; however, following the example of earlier protest movements in the West, the theatrically minded and globally open demonstrators would appropriate the film's signature mask as an iconic symbol of defiance, explicitly encouraging a re-enactment of a popular uprising against a totalitarian regime similar to that which we find in the film. This endorsement of the Guy Fawkes symbol, with its conscious blurring of the dividing line between dramatic fiction and real life, would eventually result in some of the worst paranoid propaganda by the post-Mubarak military regime, as well as, most notoriously, by Islamists. Both factions would cite the mask and its 'anarchist' associations as one further proof of the criminal and vandalist nature of the predominantly young and secular revolutionaries (hence the sign lifted by the female demonstrator in the background of the picture, which reads, defiantly, 'The Martyrs of Egypt Ain't No Thugs!').

Images like this one suggest that, perhaps, the major achievement of the 'Arab Spring' to date has not necessarily been the toppling of any dictatorial regimes, much less replacing them with truly representative 'democratic' ones. Rather, this achievement has proven to be first and foremost a theatrical one, resulting, for good or ill, in a certain decisive dismantling of whatever dividing line between the theatrical/hyperreal and multi-layered cultural and political Arab realities (which had always been theatrical in many curious ways). Rafika Zahrouni's article on the dialectics of theatre and reality in pre- and post-revolutionary Tunisia is one clear an example of this productive blurring. An equally illustrative example is to be found in Edward Ziter's article on Internet activism in Syria, a country that, at the time of writing, is still reeling under the bloodstained regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Yet, whatever the tenacity of authoritarian orders, long-suppressed creative and multi-voiced energies have been unleashed irrevocably. This is the burden of the argument made here by Mohamed Samir El-Khatib in his study of the Tahrir Square as a heteroglossic theatrical spectacle in its own right. El-Khatib's study is also an example of a growing interest among Arab scholars in engaging with the theatrical energies of civic and urban spaces, an interest that found even more urgency in the hitherto unprecedented public dynamics of the Arab uprisings.

With all this in mind, we open this collection with an ambitious and theoretically rich article by Moroccan scholar Khalid Amine. Here, he draws upon performance theorists Christopher Balme and Rebecca Schneider, as well as upon a number of contemporary cultural theorists, to lay the foundations for a new understanding of the Arab public sphere, particularly in terms of what it means to its participants and the contributions of memorialization and theatricalization to the rapidly changing concept.

While the various plays examined by Amine come from different theatrical and national cultures, they all can be read as varying depictions of much the same precarious

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positioning of women in the Arab public sphere, both before and after the so-called Arab Spring. This brings us back to the cover picture, where the young women in the background are shouting at the top of their voices lest their plight be silenced once and for all by ascending religious fundamentalists.

Indeed, it is a telling coincidence (or perhaps no coincidence at all) that two of the articles we publish here (Myers and Saab, as well as, in part, Litvin) have chosen to revisit the play *Tuqus al-Isharat wa-l-Tahawwulat* (*Rituals of Signs and Transformations*) by the late Syrian dramatist Sa'dallah Wannus. Although the play was published in 1994 and first produced in Beirut in 1996, it presents an ever more topical deconstruction of Arab gender and sexual politics. Questioning almost all certitudes with the stoic wisdom of a man diagnosed with a terminal cancer, Wannus captures the inevitable clash between, on the one hand, a self-perpetuating dominant class that calls itself synonymous with stability and order and, on the other, (Dionysian) subversive energies that give the polis its renewed life and youthful regeneration. Yet, with their typical abandon and liberationist zeal, these energies can also threaten eventual self-destruction.

Which of the two competing forces will carry the day and ultimately define the Arab polity's presumed 'Spring'? Or will they continue into the future to create ever-new configurations of their age-old tensions and negotiations? Only time will tell.

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