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Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Youssef el Guindi, and Lameese Issaq and Jacob Kader ed. by Michael Malek Najjar (review)

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Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies, Volume 2, Number 2, 2014, (Review)

Published by Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies



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MICHAEL MALEK NAJJAR, editor, *Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef el Guindi, and Lameese Issaq and Jacob Kader* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013). Pp. 194. \$45.00 paper. ISBN 9780786474868.

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In *Four Arab American Plays*, Michael Malek Najjar contends that a cadre of Americans of Arab decent have forged a genre of playwriting that could be characterized as Arab American, and that Arab American plays have recently gained prominence in the United States. His introduction, the four original plays, and the afterward give ample evidence of the characteristics of this genre. Yet, overall, the volume lacks context as to what drew this cohort of aspiring professional playwrights into politicized cultural production, and why they feel that among the biggest barriers they face is lack of support for their work from Arab Americans. In this book review, I hope to add such context by briefly reminding readers of the growth in the aesthetic economy in the US since World War II, as well as the general lack of public investment in the arts. This background in part explains why a group of mostly Generation X'ers were educated and ready to respond to interests in Arabs in America following 9/11, and why support from the Arab American community is perceived to be critical to the production of Arab American theater.

In the introduction, Najjar provides a list of overarching characteristics of Arab American theater, including (but not limited to) plays written by Arab Americans in English and/or Arabic, that use a realistic dramaturgy, that are interested in issues of assimilation, acculturation, and isolationism among Arab Americans, and that are deeply personal yet political. In conducting my dissertation on Arab American artists in New York, I similarly found that it was not enough for artists to simply be Arab American to make Arab American art; at

some point they had to consciously choose to incorporate this aspect of their identity into their work. In doing so, they believed they were making better art, and that such art was more marketable (whether among Arab Americans or preferably the “mainstream”). This process of positive self-identification often came about despite being surrounded by negative perceptions and stereotypes of Arabs and feeling persecuted through various forms and waves of federal and local surveillance and detention in the US. Like Najjar, I found Arab American artists to be engaged in art as a form of “resistance.”

The boom in Arab American theater that Najjar refers to came after the most recent wave of both persecution (and resistance): 9/11. As an anthropologist doing fieldwork in New York from 2003–2006, I would attest to that surge in interest in Arab culture and identity across all sectors in the arts, including theater. Among the thirty-one Arab-related theatrical productions that I observed, seventeen were plays by Arabs or Arab Americans. This included the full-scale mainstream production of Betty Shamieh’s *Roar* at Clurman Theater and a reading of her work *Again and Against: the Art of Hoping Indefinitely* at the Public Theater. The remainder were mainstream productions that may or may not have included Arab American actors, such as *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* at the Culture Project. There was also the revival of western plays that were “Arabized” through characters and settings making them presumably more relevant to contemporary audiences, including *Miss Julie* by Strindberg at the Cherry Lane Theater and *Metamorphosis* by Kafka at the Soto Velez Cultural Center. I offer these examples to affirm that there was an appetite for the plays in Najjar’s volume, all but one of which was originally produced after 9/11, thereby giving Arab American playwrights some degree of prominence.

The fact that Arab American theater professionals, like the ones included in Najjar’s volume, were ready to showcase personal yet politicized work speaks to characteristics of Generation X Americans who grew up in a post-industrialized service sector economy, and whose parents migrated from “post-colonial, independent” countries, or countries that were still seeking independence, such as Palestine. In “Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject” (2006), Sherry Ornter suggested that individuals in this diverse generation—born between roughly 1961 and 1981—largely established their identity through their professional choices: “whatever else Generation X has been about—social problems, ecological disasters, AIDS—it has always been, first and foremost, about identity

through work: jobs, money, and careers" (89). As immigrants and children of immigrants in this "new second generation," they were also likely to be involved in the active process of differentiation from the dominant and discriminatory American culture. In "The Forging of a New America" (2001), Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut argued that the new second generation demonstrated "a universal shift from American identities to ethnic ones, increasing perceptions of discrimination against one's own group, and increasing reassertion of heritage and cultural distinctness" (301). Many Arab American artists that I encountered thanked Edward Said and his work *Orientalism* (1978) for their general approach to their own work, and many also appreciated their heritage for making them distinct from other Americans.

Najjar offers a great showcase of work by this generation of Arab Americans. The background I offered is not meant to undermine the specificity of the circumstances through which each work was created, or in which it was produced. It is simply to set a broader context in which these Arab Americans playwrights have thrived.

ISite, by Leila Buck (1999), has remarkably sustained her career for over a decade. While continuing to create and appear in new work, Buck's "younger" voice of a half-Arab diplomat's daughter in the Arab world still speaks to audiences eager to learn something about the terrifying world that they see in the news. Also, I believe some of the body image issues that surface in *ISite* timelessly speak to young women. In one ironic scene, Buck plays a young woman arduously primping to go out while discussing "the shit that women go through" in the Middle East. Buck still tours college campuses, high schools, and other venues performing *ISite*.

Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* (2012) was first performed in 2003 as the inaugural production of the Silk Road Rising theater company in Chicago. This theater company was formed post 9/11 by the author and his partner, Malik Gillani. The play, set in 1989 during the first intifada, explores awakenings in both political and sexual identities. For a Jewish American character, it explores what it means to sympathize with Palestinians and seek co-existence; for a Palestinian lesbian, it explores what it would mean to be "out," and with a Jewish American woman, no less.

Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat, by Youseef El Guindi (2014), was produced by the Silk Road Theater Project in 2009. Through fast talk and sharp wit, its characters explore what it means to

be a successful “representative” of Arabs in America without “selling out” one’s culture or identity to discriminatory stereotypes. His work focuses on conflicts among Arabs in America as they struggle to be recognized as authentic and original cultural producers in today’s aesthetic economy.

Food and Fadwa (2014), by Lameece Issaq and Jacob Kader, was co-produced by the New York Theater Workshop (NYTW) and the Noor Theater in 2012. It is the story of love and loss among young Palestinians as they struggle to make lives for themselves both under Israeli occupation and as immigrants to the US. Among the four plays featured, it is arguably the most successful; its mainstream producer offered technical support, development assistance, and major financing and promotion. In 2006, NYTW stirred up controversy by canceling its performances of the pro-Palestinian play *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a Royal Court Theater Production by Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner based on the diaries of a murdered peace activist, Rachel Corrie. This led to a series of attempts to foster Palestinian American theater, and ultimately the full-scale production of *Food and Fadwa*. Yet as a co-production, it required a significant financial contribution from Noor Theater. Through fundraisers and donations, Noor was able to raise \$80,000 of the \$410,000 production.¹

Which brings me to my final point about funding for the arts, and arts appreciation. According to the 2012 National Endowment for the Art’s Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, only 8.3 percent of a nationally representative sample of adults in America reported attending a non-musical theater event in the past 12 months (and this was a 12 percent drop in attendance from 2008). Considering this finding, it seems unfair to assert that the lack of outstanding theater in the Arab American community is in large part due to lack of support from the Arab American community. With the bulk of support for artistic productions coming from earned income, support from within the community is critical, especially given the relatively small percentage of Arabs in America. Yet, Arab Americans need outside support to earn enough to cover the cost of their productions. Therefore, it’s good for theater artists like Jamil Khoury to “think big,” as he does in the volume’s afterward, and continue to assert their presence in the contentious, multi-cultural world that is America. This volume and the work of the artists it features serves as a good example of arts activism among a generation of professional Arab American theater artists in the US in the twenty-first century. It will be interesting to see how future artists learn from and build upon it.

NOTES

¹ "Out of the Mideast, a Comic Recipe for the Stage," *New York Times*, 5 May 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/theater/food-and-fadwa-how-noor-theater-was-born.html>.