

Two plays by Anglo-Iraqi writers offer London audiences an opportunity to experience close-up the ironies and dangers of the Arab Spring they may only have heard about in the news media

By Hadani Ditmars

In a theater in a warehouse district in Hackney Wick, on the edge of London's Olympic Village, in the East End, a strange ritual unfolds. As a young, hip crowd watches, two female figures behind a translucent plastic sheet appear to be dressing a woman on her wedding day, singing an Arabic love song. After a few minutes, however, the three figures emerge to reveal that the "bride" is actually a prisoner who has been tied up and is being led to her imminent hanging.

This moment in "Return," by Anglo-Iraqi playwright and actress Dina Mousawi, heralds not only the beginning of a powerful piece of theater, but also serves as a metaphor for the East/West conundrum. When Kipling said that never the twain shall meet, he hadn't seen "Return," which is an honest and often riveting account of a young Anglo-Iraqi woman's attempt at piercing the veil of misunderstanding that exists between her two countries.

"Return" is also emblematic of London's growing importance as a center for Arab diaspora theater – a fertile ground for exploring the Arab world's relationship with the West, often through the filter of the second-generation experience.

The play that Mousawi wrote (in collaboration with the cast and director) and stars in recounts her journey back to Baghdad, where she was born and raised by an English mother and Iraqi father, and lived until the family fled in the 80s when Iranian missiles rained down on the Iraqi capital during the lengthy war between the two countries.

Traveling in late 2010 to Iraq, as well as to Syria and Jordan (both of which have significant Iraqi refugee populations), Mousawi chose

to focus on the experience of women as part of an effort to capture the reality of life in post-invasion Iraq.

"When it comes to war, power and politics," says the slight, dark-haired Mousawi, who looks younger than her 33 years, "it's more often than not the men's stories and the Western experience of involvement in Iraq that is depicted in the media. I wanted to discover what impact war and occupation has had on Iraqi women's lives."

And so she did: The play that she ended up writing integrates more than 40 interviews she conducted, with everyone from refugees in Jordan – who recounted horror stories of Islamist militias issuing and carrying through on death threats against female students at the University of Baghdad – to the indefatigable Hana Adwar, head of the Iraqi NGO Al-Amal, who successfully fought for the establishment of a quota

setting aside 25 percent of the seats in parliament for women.

Mousawi was also in Iraq at the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, early last year, and while the ongoing protests in Iraq against its tyrannical and corrupt post-invasion regime have gone largely undocumented by Western media, "Return" honors the memory of a young woman human rights activist, "disappeared" one day by armed men.

Despite the poignancy of these stories, it is the details of Mousawi's own journey, and the narratives of her English mother and grandmother, that prove the most memorable. The personal is the political in this piece of theater, where her own memories as well as actual conversations with her family – about life in Saddam Hussein-era Baghdad, or her Bradford-born grandmother's recollections of her first impressions of her Iraqi son-in-law – form the dramatic narrative.

The play, skillfully shaped from Mousawi's transcripts by the talented young Anglo-Asian director Poonam Brah, uses text and video to great effect, projecting onto a screen some of Mousawi's own Facebook messages to her mother from the time of her travels, as well as using the young, multiracial and all-female cast as walking billboards for texts about



Mousawi's "Return." Uses all-female cast as walking billboards about post-war conditions in Iraq.

A promising 'hybrid' theater



Nitzan Sharron and Sasha Behar in "The Prophet." A second collaboration between the Israeli Sharron and Anglo-Iraqi director Abdulrazzak.

Iraq's hardscabble, post-war conditions – viscerally portraying the physicality of the experience.

Despite the serious subject matter, Mousawi (who also stars in a current UK production, "Rest Upon the Wind," about the life of Khalil Gibran) employs generous amounts of humor: In one scene, a reenactment of a discussion with her right-wing American airplane seatmate, about

the "benefits" of post-invasion "liberation," the word "dickhead" is projected onto a screen as playful subtext, followed by another reading, "This actually happened."

The character of her maternal grandmother – with her salty Northern English humor (a joke about porridge and nipples is unforgettable) – plays off nicely against the jokes told by Iraqi women, creating a sense of survival-

ist solidarity that transcends geography and culture.

'The Prophet'

The personal and the political are interwoven in a different way in Hassan Abdulrazzak's "The Prophet," that just ended a successful run at the Gate Theater in Notting Hill.

Like Mousawi, Abdulrazzak is also in his 30s, and his Iraqi-born parents also emi-

grated to the United Kingdom when he was a child. But this is his second play – his first, "Baghdad Wedding," was a West End wonder when it opened to critical acclaim in 2007. Like "Return," "Baghdad Wedding" also challenged stereotypes about the Arab world. Its hard-drinking protagonist – a bisexual doctor – found himself kidnapped by insurgents and then held indefinitely by American troops – under suspicion by "both sides" while actually representing, in a sense, Iraq's disappearing secular society.

In "The Prophet," Abdulrazzak turns his gaze to the "Egyptian Spring," and pits the story of a young novelist and his wife against the backdrop of events unfolding in Tahrir Square in early 2011. While the timing of the play gives it political relevance, the current Islamist victory and military muscle-flexing also infuses the lead characters' secular idealism with a

sobering sense of hindsight. Like Mousawi, Abdulrazzak actually traveled to the region, in his case to Egypt (together with director Christopher Haydon), and interviewed activists and ordinary citizens. Although some video footage is employed, his technique is less documentary than Mousawi's – it feels rather literary, at times more novel than play – mirroring perhaps the protagonist's profession.

In a memorable monologue, the novelist's wife, Layla (played convincingly by Anglo-Indian actress Sasha Behar), weaves together some of the collected stories and makes a passionate plea for national unity in Egypt, one that transcends class and religion. As she recounts being taken in and fed, along with a group of fellow middle-class protestors, by inhabitants of a Cairo slum, she muses on the lives of the working class women she meets – and for one shining moment, their worlds happily collide.

Abdulrazzak's script is witty and fast-paced. Layla, an engineer at the communications company Vodafone – a nod to technology's key role in the Egyptian Spring – is told by her boss, Hani, "This is a Western company. Things like freedom, democracy and equality, they come with our company like Nokia accessories."

A few seconds later, he instructs Layla to cut off the network on orders by the government. The character of Suzanne, a villainous half-Egyptian, half-English literary agent, seduces the novelist Hisham with promises of a contract, saying, with arch, ironic understatement, "Our London branch is looking for talent from the Middle East. This is a departure. Usually when we seek foreign writers, we skip over the Arabs and look for them in South America, Japan or Eastern Europe. But things are changing. There is recognition that it is not good to continue ignoring this area. That the things we ignore have a habit of popping up later, when we least expect them to, armed with sharp teeth ready to bite us."

Indeed, "The Prophet" as a whole explores the often troubled relationship between the West and the Middle East. Layla says to Hisham of Suzanne: "She's a hybrid. I don't trust hybrids ... Half English, half Egyptian ... doesn't even speak proper Arabic and to top it all she has the same name as Mubarak's wife ... Suzanne. Yuck."

And in a witty exchange, she accuses her husband of having a "complex," believing that, "everything Western is so wonderful. Everything Egyptian is sh-."

To which Hisham replies, "Is there anyone that doesn't think that?" Egyptian complexes aside, there is great promise in this new type of "hybrid" – Anglo-Arab theater being born in London. Middle Eastern experience, Western wit, Arab humor and tumultuous current events conspire to create a new theater that is relevant, significant, even urgent.

The male lead of Abdulrazzak's play, Nitzan Sharron, is an Israeli. (He also starred in "Baghdad Wedding.") "I remember when we first did the casting [for "Baghdad Wedding]," recalled a thoughtful Abdulrazzak. "The director thought he was perfect for the part, but I had reservations about casting an Israeli."

But the director told him, "Look, he comes from a left-wing, liberal family. Would you want someone not to hire you because they thought you were a Baathist?" Luckily for their ongoing artistic collaborations, Abdulrazzak soon saw the logic in this argument. And London's theater scene is all the richer for it.

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'Between Bob Dylan and the Exodus'

Olivier Rubinstein, the son of Holocaust survivors, is the new cultural attache at France's Tel Aviv embassy. He himself comes from the world of publishing, but envisions a wide range of arts-related initiatives, some in far-flung parts of the country

By Maya Sela



Eliyahu Hershkovitz From the "Moliere in the Negev" project.

Three black-and-white photographs hang in Olivier Rubinstein's office at the Institut Francais on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. Their choice reveals something about the new cultural adviser to the French Embassy and director of the Institut Francais in Israel, as I learned from my recent conversation with him.

On one wall is a large picture of the illegal immigrant ship Exodus, which embarked from France for Palestine in 1947 carrying 4,500 Holocaust survivors; the ship was not permitted to dock and the survivors were returned to displaced persons camps in Germany. Next to this photo hangs a smaller one from the 1920s, showing two bearded Jewish immigrants at Ellis Island, with Manhattan in the background. On the opposing wall is a photo of a young Bob Dylan.

We could go on about Olivier Rubinstein's Gallic charm, but in our conversation he actually tries to distance himself from French clichés and make it clear that the culture he comes from is not only foie gras and chansons.

Paris-born Rubinstein, 53, whose parents were Holocaust survivors, was a publisher in France for 33 years: He was co-founder of the imprints Austral, Climat, Mille et Une Nuits and Le Dilettante, and co-founded with Alain Finkielkraut the political journal "Le Meilleur des mondes." Until recently he ran Denoel, the publishing house that Antoine Gallimard placed in his care 13 years ago.

In the course of his career as a publisher, Rubinstein published such French writers as Pierre-Andre Taguieff, Claude Lanzmann, Andre Glucksmann, and comics artists such as Joann Sfar and R. Crumb.

But when he was offered the posting in Israel, Rubinstein decided to change tack.

"I was a Parisian, and I was very involved in the intellectual scene. I got tired of that and had an opportunity to come here. It was a real challenge for me. I have felt connected to this country all these years," he says.

If you had been offered to go to Africa instead, would you have gone?

"To be honest, the first thing they offered me was to go to Kabul or Baghdad. I asked if they did not think that with my name, Rubinstein, that would be a little complicated.

I said that I had to think about it and a few weeks later they called me again and offered me Israel. I left everything within weeks. When you live in a city that is perhaps the most beautiful in the world, you don't see things because you pass by them every day: It's not like being a tourist. At my age if you don't choose to make a serious change, you never will. It was a challenge."

Cuisine and politics

Rubinstein grew up in France. Though some members of his family immigrated from there to Israel in the 1950s, his parents remained in Paris. He never attended university. "To be honest, I refused to go. At the age of 20, I decided to open a bookstore. That was in the 70s. After that I was involved in the publishing house Gallimard as a marketing man. In the process I set up a little publishing house and another one after that.

"Fifteen years ago Gallimard – perhaps the country's most prestigious literary publisher – "proposed that I join the Gallimard group with my publishing house, and that is what we did. I published many books. Among my best-sellers were the books of Irene Nemirovsky," the Jewish-born French writer killed at Auschwitz, whose novels were rediscovered during the past decade and published worldwide. "She was a big success also in Israel," says Rubinstein. "I also published many French writers, like Gilles Rozier, and many translations from Yiddish, because I thought Yiddish was a dying language and I was interested in discovering the masterpieces of its literature. We published important works by all sorts of writers like Leib Rochman," a Holocaust survivor who later came to Israel.

One of the changes he has already introduced at local branches of the Institut Francais, which offer French-language courses and promote French literature and culture in various forums through ongoing programs, performances and lectures, under the auspices of embassies worldwide, is "to open it not just to the French community in Israel, to French speakers, but to the general public. So now the events we organize here have simultaneous transla-

tion into Hebrew. My job is not just to talk with the French community in Israel but with all Israelis."

Rubinstein seems already to be familiar with Tel Avivians and Israeliness when he declares, "Israel is not only Tel Aviv." He adds, "We have an institute also in Be'er Sheva, in Nazareth and in Haifa. I want to organize events in these places too. In the fall we will organize at the Cameri Theater another 'Books on Stage' literary evening like there was last year. And I want to organize one in Dimona. There is a new theater there and I met the mayor. It surprises me greatly when I talk with Tel Avivian friends that they never go outside of Tel Aviv."

What else do you have planned?

"My goal is to promote French culture, and that means not only cuisine and music, but also political ideas and science. We have ties with the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology and the Weizmann Institute. In my work as a publisher I met a lot of writers, thinkers and philosophers, and I will try to invite some of them here, because most of them know nothing about Israel and have prejudices about it. These are the people I am interested in inviting here, the ones who have certain bad feelings about Israel, rather than my Jewish friends."

He is also planning a television and film forum to bring together people from these industries in France and Israel, and a big exhibition here by the fashion house Balenciaga. Plus Rubinstein has already begun thinking about next year, when he would like to organize a conference around the theme of nationality, patriotism and citizenship.

"It interests me to compare the different situations in Israel and France" he explains. "The question of patriotism is interesting. Today to be a patriot in France is considered fascism. In Israel it is different. You can be on the extreme right or the extreme left and still be a patriot."

Do you think culture can make a difference?

"I am not naive, but I think that culture is a bridge. Even when the relations between France and Israel on the political front are not so good sometimes, the Israelis still love French culture. Look at the success of a writer like Michel Houellebecq. Culture in a



Rubinstein. "Even when relations between France and Israel on the political front are not so good, the Israelis still love French culture."

way constitutes a new path for diplomacy."

Palestinian sensitivities

There are also branches of the Institut Francais in Ramallah and Gaza, but they do not fall under Rubinstein's jurisdiction: There is a separate French Consulate in the Palestinian Authority. Does he think there can be cooperation involving the institutes' branches, between the Israelis and Palestinians?

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"It is difficult and it is not because of us but because of the Palestinians. For example, a few months ago, we invited Jane Birkin for a few concerts here and she was also invited to appear in Ramallah. When the Palestinians saw she was in Tel Aviv, they cancelled her performance in Ramallah. It is a great pity for them.

"A few weeks ago we held in Tel Aviv the forum on religion and democracy [which was co-sponsored by Haaretz] and I tried inviting Palestinians then too; they all refused to come to Tel Aviv. On the other hand I invited several Arabs from France – such as the imam of Paris, a Moroccan artist, a filmmaker from Tunisia – and everyone said yes. [Algerian author] Boualem Sansal was also here in May. So things are changing a bit. I am sure that people of this sort would not have come five years ago."

Rubinstein also has plans for a roving film project in the fall, aimed at the Arab population in the Galilee, involving the screening of French films with Arabic subtitles. "In my eyes, it is important not to leave out such places," he says.

Another example of an initiative that seeks to reach places which Rubinstein says are often neglected by mainstream

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