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Staging the North African Transition: Theatrical Productions since the Arab Spring

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Although difficult, the period since the 2010 uprisings and the start of the Arab Spring has been fertile for North African culture. Theatre and performance in particular have proved themselves successful at capturing snapshots of a population in the midst of historic changes. A generation of young, daring writers and artists are increasingly turning to the stage as a means to create social dialogue and open spaces of contestation and subversion. Through the prism of performance, the public is able to discuss sensitive issues such as female sexuality, religion and corruption, and to challenge hegemonic discourses on identity and history. A quick look at the cultural agendas for the year 2013 shows the dynamism of a medium whose death has been announced many times. A number of new festivals have been created, and theatre companies are investing new spaces in cultural centres to reach new audiences. In Egypt, the recent National Theatre festival selected a large variety of plays, offering different viewpoints on the political and social situation. In Morocco, the festival 'Théâtre et Cultures' was this year held around the themes of tolerance, freedom of expression and women's rights.

There has traditionally been a trend of 'engaged art' in North Africa, and the Arab Spring events have inspired many; as comments Nehad Selaiha, "theatre thrives on conflict, (...) it flourishes most in times of deep crisis and stormy transitional periods when it becomes a force of change" (Selaiha, 2013). However, it is concerning that the dynamism of North Af-

rican theatre is being framed within a fixed discourse about the Arab Spring rather than as part of a wider movement towards democratisation and liberalisation of speech.

Making History: The Revolution on Stage

Theatre has proved to be a particularly efficient medium to help North Africans come to terms with the events of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, several plays directly represented the uprisings on stage. Sondos Shabayek's *Tahrir Monologues* created an effective catharsis by using the testimony of a young actor who had been captured by Mubarak's forces, as well as by inviting the audience to pay tribute to the martyrs of the Revolution. The show thus helped both audience and actors to look back on the chaotic aftermath of Mubarak's fall, and establish a dialogue with one another, creating a sense of unity in a chaotic context.

Laila Soliman's series of performances, *No time for art* is also an interesting reflection on revolution and culture. This project started in 2011 and it mirrors Egypt's transition: the first performances were meant as a call for the International Criminal Court to investigate the death of many young protesters, while the more recent ones criticise the violence of the military system which still rules over Egypt. It also proves that in times of crisis, art can play a crucial role by creating an effect of catharsis, and helping both audience and actors to navigate through the traumatic events of the Arab Spring.

A recent Tunisian play entitled *Macbeth, Leila and Ben: a Bloody Story* (2012), directed by Lofti Achour, reprises the popular Shakespeare play and depicts the Ben Ali era, amid corruption, torture, and greed. The play starts with the question "How many Mac-

beths do we have in the Arab world?" and goes on to document the fall of the regime. It also addresses the widespread disappointment that has surfaced post-Revolution, and asks if anything has changed at all in Tunisia since the fall of Ben Ali. The plays discussed here play a role in providing an independent documentary of the Revolutions from the eyes of the population, rather than through the lens of international media. Therefore, they help North Africans to reclaim their history and place the uprisings within a wider context of resistance, challenging the idea of an Arab 'apathy.'

Theatre as an Exutory for a Disenfranchised Youth

In spite of the exhilarating demonstrations of 2011-2012, pressing issues remain for the youth: poverty, unemployment and corruption are the main culprits creating frustration and disenchantment. Theatre has become a space where they can safely 'vent' their anger, representing their daily lives as a way to raise awareness and create constructive dialogues with society. Throughout North Africa, there is a long tradition of performance addressing political issues and playing a role within the social fabric of the country. Khalid Amine describes storytellers of the past as journalists, historians, and commentators as well as entertainers, and "a means of spacing cultural identity" (2001: 56). Similarly, theatre makers of today, as well as other artists such as musicians in particular, create platforms of free, uncensored expression, allowing an alienated young generation to have a public voice.

The play "Feraoun" (2012) by Algerian playwright Boussahel Abdelmalek tells the story of a fallen dictator who meets a group of disaffected youths, who dream of the West. This encounter makes him realise the depth of the social injustice he contributed to create. The play cleverly discusses the issue of illegal immigration and the *hogra* (humiliation) felt by youth in their own country, and it is particularly pertinent in Algeria, where the regime has so far remained in place.

Dabateatr is probably one of the most groundbreaking theatre groups in Morocco: with their monthly arts and theatre festival in Rabat, called *Daba Citizen* (The citizen of Now), they have established a

sustained, regular theatre presence. Their methods also draw heavily on Boal and Brecht with an interactive, didactic approach. *L'khbar fi masrah* (The news through theatre) is the main attraction of the week long festival. It is an evening of theatre and improvisation inspired by current news, both local and international: the actors thus often address controversial issues such as corruption, sexuality or the elections, and then invite their audience to discuss and debate both on the content of the performances and on the role of theatre within social and political life. Humour is an essential tool here, as it makes it possible to discuss sensitive subjects that otherwise wouldn't be addressed so openly. The format of *L'khbar fi masrah* makes it easy for the actors to respond to events in a dynamic and creative way, and to create sites of contestation in which the audience is invited to participate. Aomar Boum comments: "The frustration of the youth is released through the process of the *festivalisation of dissent*" (2012: 175). At the same time, these shows are co-opted by the authorities to prove their own openness and their respect of human rights; they serve to present North Africa, and Morocco more particularly, as a new haven of freedom and liberalism.

Challenging Hegemonic Identities: The Rise of Women and Cultural Minorities

North African women have always been victims of a double discrimination: they have been unable to access equal rights and opportunities at home, although this situation has improved in the last decade, and they are constantly described as submissive and powerless in international media. This state of affairs prevents them from having a strong public voice, and their creative work is often overlooked. The important role played by women in the protests of recent years has surprised many, but in the last decade the status of women and their visibility in the public sphere has greatly evolved, mainly thanks to the dynamism of civil society and women's associations. Recent plays such as *Dialy* (2012) in Morocco, and Laila Soliman's *Spring Awakening* (2010) in Egypt, based on Wedekind's play, have managed to touch upon sensitive issues such as female sexuality, opening up a level of discussion never reached before.

Dialy, by feminist troupe *Théâtre Aquarium* in particular has created a real controversy because of its bold dialogues and the use of crude words to describe female genitalia. Freely inspired by Eva Ensler's infamous play *The Vagina Monologues*, *Dialy* looks at the way Moroccan women refer to and address their bodies, and how they express themselves sexually. The creators of the play, Naima Zitane (director) and Maha Sano (writer), spent several months interviewing women of different backgrounds and compiled this information into a 30-minute show. The play has a cast of three actresses and discusses the complex relationship of women with their bodies and their right to a free sexual life.

There is also an increased visibility of minority groups, in particular through the use of Amazigh languages. In the wake of Independence, North African States defined their identity around Pan-Arabism, and alienated minority groups which they perceived as a threat. With the fall of the authoritarian regimes in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, and a more tolerant climate, Amazigh movements throughout North Africa are now calling for recognition of their specific heritage. The 'Amazigh Renaissance,' which started a decade ago, is now blossoming into a real cultural and political force, and there are festivals dedicated to theatre and literature in Amazigh languages throughout North Africa, as well as political parties.

A Blooming Art Scene: Between Resistance and Co-optation

Since the start of the Arab Spring we have witnessed a real liberalisation of speech in North Africa, both on and off stage. The renewed dynamism of the youth, who for the first time have gained awareness of their political power as a collective voice, has benefited a booming art scene, with growing interest from art dealers like Christie's and Sotheby's and the organisation of a variety of biennales in the Arab world where North African artists featured prominently. Various festivals also invited a number of North African directors and performers to present their pieces in Europe, such as the *Shubbak* festival

in London that featured performers from the Arab world. The downside of this popularity is that artists were asked to provide commentary to the Arab Spring very quickly, with no time to reflect, as well as create narratives focusing on hope and evolution, rather than a more nuanced reality.

Curator Omar Kholeif writes: "Writers, curators and editors are trying to capture, for better or for worse, the genesis of 'revolutionary art' through canon-forming curatorial frames." The uprisings thus led to a real co-optation of Arab artists who were given international coverage on the condition that they respond to the Western concept of the Arab Spring. At the same time, there is no denying that the North African cultural scene has greatly evolved in the last few years: women now have a strong presence in every medium, in particular as theatre writers and directors, positions that were previously dominated by men. Theatre as a genre has been revitalised by its focus on relevant themes and by its social role as a mirror for countries in transition, well beyond the realm of entertainment. The events of the Arab Spring have brought attention to a number of talented artists from the region, and North Africa is under increasing focus from auction houses, collectors and art professionals, and is fast emerging as a lucrative new market.

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