

THE TEXT IN PROGRESS
IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB THEATRE
AS AN AESTHETIC RESPONSE TO SOCIAL INSTABILITY

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Over the previous decade, Arab countries have witnessed and lived transformations that the theatrical scene has swiftly accompanied, supported, and recalled. Analysing a selection of post-2011 Arab theatre plays whose texts are written to constantly change, I argue that an “aesthetic or progress” in these texts is developing, and that it reflects a specific social condition across the contemporary Arab World. The plays examined here allow their audiences to understand the aftermaths of the 2011 uprisings as a process rather than an event. Revolutions have opened a Pandora’s box, and theatre reminds us that the end of the story has not come yet.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that the Arab revolutions of 2010/11 were also cultural¹. Theatre was one of the most important arts during the revolutionary period, as it directly contributed to the revolutionary process. Studies of the Tunisian, Egyptian, Syrian and Moroccan demonstrations have shown a significant breakdown of the distinction between the hyperreal and multi-faceted cultural and political Arab realities. In the field of contemporary Arabic theatre, an aspect that is both evident and understudied is the transformation of play texts over time. This article addresses this gap in scholarship by arguing that these metamorphoses of the texts not only represent a widespread trend in global theatre, as evidenced by Marguerite Laera², but also reflect a

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¹ See Rafika Zahrouni, *The Tunisian Revolution and the Dialectics of Theatre and Reality*, in “Theatre Research International”, 38, 2 (2013), pp.148-157; M. Litvin, *From Tahrir to ‘Tahrir’: Some Theatrical Impulses toward the Egyptian Uprising*, in “Theatre Research International”, 38, 2 (2013), pp. 116-123; Heba El-Abbadi; Sally Hammouda, *From Spectators to “Spect-Actors”: All Tahrir’s a Stage*, in Sirkku Aaltonen; Areeg Ibrahim (eds.), *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre. Translation, Performance, Politics*, Routledge, New York-Abingdon 2016 (ebook edition), chapter 9; E. Ziter, *Clowns of the Revolution: The Malas Twins and Syrian Oppositional Performance*, in “Theatre Research International”, 38, 2 (2013), pp.148-157; Khalid Amine, *Re-enacting Revolution and the New Public Sphere in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco*, in “Theatre Research International”, 38, 2 (2013), pp. 87-103.

² M. Laera, *Theatre and Adaptation. Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2014, p. 1.

particular socio-cultural context that results from revolutions.

In the last decade, rewriting is at the very basis of the writing process of many Arab playwrights who write their texts with the idea of modifying it in the future. As such, their “in progress” texts recognise the social instabilities following the 2011 revolutions as ongoing processes whose interpretation change according to the time and space the plays are to be staged. Moreover, such by their nature modifiable texts are rewritten to engage actively in the public local debate providing different versions according to the context of the staging.

In this article I argue that the text in progress in contemporary Arab theatre is an aesthetical response to the social instability that characterises Arab societies post-2011. Through the close reading of a selection of plays and their modification in time and space, I show how the practice of rewriting after 2011 responds to features concerning almost exclusively Arab theatre that was created after 2011, such as the temporary freedom of expression in the Egyptian theatre (especially between 2011 and 2013), the Arab theatre wide internationalisation with the Syrian diaspora to Europe, and generally as a consequence of globalisation, in the background of social instabilities caused by the revolutions. The corpus here analysed is selected to show this trend through acclaimed plays written, rewritten, and produced in three different contexts: Egypt, the Syrian diaspora in Europe, and Lebanon. They all express social discontent and share a similar aesthetics of the undone texts. The article focuses first on a close reading of two Egyptian plays from 2011 – *Lā waqt li 'l-fann* (No Time for Art) by Laylā Sulaymān (Laila Soliman) and *Sūlītir* (Solitaire) by Dāliyā Basyūnī (Dalia Basiouny) – and how their texts were transformed in the crucial following years, up to 2013. It then examines a case from the Syrian theatre in Europe: the play *al-I'tirāf* (The Confession), by Wā'il Qaddūr (Wael Kadour), which is meaningful because it provides a view of Syrian society from afar. Finally, it expands to contexts that are not directly linked to the 2011 revolutions, but which are nevertheless greatly affected by them, with the plays *Ġūgīng, masraḥ qayd al-taṭwīr* (Jogging, Theatre in Progress) by the Lebanese Ḥanān Ḥāgġ 'Alī (Hanane Hajj Ali) – which inspired the title of this essay – and *IMedeā* (Ay-Mīdiyā)³ by the Kuwaiti Sulaymān al-Bassām (Sulayman Al Bassam), both aspiring to the creation of an open and evolving theatre able to dialogue with different audiences⁴.

³ The play *IMedeā* was originally written in English, then partially translated by Sulaymān al-Bassām into Arabic.

⁴ Elsewhere I argue that the fragmentation of the text is another feature of recent Arab plays recounting violence after 2011. This particular stylistic aspect manifests itself in different ways: in the rupture of the linearity of the discourse, in the hybrid style, in a questioning of the scene and in their intertextuality. See D. Potenza, *Violence et fragmentation du texte dramaturgique arabe contemporain*, in

Theatre in Transformation in Egypt

The theatre of the second decade of the 2000s shows profound changes that reflect the transformations of the country, becoming a platform for voicing political grievances, representing the needs of the revolutionaries, and showing collective aspirations of freedom. Before the revolution, in the Egyptian theatrical field, much of cultural production was integrated into the state system and was supervised by many institutions that tried to ensure its functioning and control. As a result, there was an increasing censorship of artistic content and frequent interference with the artistic process in all its stages. Contrasting the state-owned theatre, during the presidency of Ḥusnī Mubārak, a private and independent theatre emerged. This theatre, which was often opposed to the state-sponsored theatre, was mainly dedicated to alternative forms of production, based on new values and aesthetics, and often with a more critical view of society. During the revolution (the eighteen days of occupation of Maydān al-Taḥrīr in January and February 2011) and during the revolutionary period (from 25 January 2011 to 3 July 2013), the Egyptian theatre proves to be a social practice playing an important role in society in a particular historical moment and towards a specific political event⁵.

With the revolution, artistic and theatrical practice transforms first in the streets and then in the halls, creating new devices that testify to an artistic commitment and a politicisation of aesthetics. Some plays are clearly a continuation of the revolution and the creations multiply in an unprecedented profusion, so the theatre becomes a privileged means not only to describe the cur-

Z. Makach; O. Fertat; P. Katuszewski (dir.), *Du texte à la scène : Quels enjeux pour les écritures contemporaines ?*, Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, Agadir 2022, pp. 47-62. I will not dwell here on the case of Tunisian theatre, which has already been extensively studied. I point out, as an example, the famous case of the cycle of Fāḍil al-Ġa‘āybī (Fadhel Jaïbi) and Ġalīlah Bakkār (Jalila Baccar) including *‘Unf* (Violence, 2015) and *Ḥawf* (Fear, 2017) which follow the post-revolutionary period adding new pieces to the cycle aimed at highlighting the social problems that arose after the revolution. See, among others, M. Ruocco, *Staging as a Historical Event: the Tunisian Revolution Anticipated by Fadhel Jaïbi and Jalila Baccar*, in Khalid Amine; G.F. Roberson (eds.), *Performing Transformation. Proceedings of the 8th Annual Tangier International Conference 2012 (Tangier 1-4 June 2012)*, Collaborative Media International (CMI)-International Centre for Performance Studies (ICPS), Denver-Amherst-Tangier 2013, pp. 90-98.

⁵ P. Donizeau, *La scène égyptienne en révolution*, Presses universitaire de Rennes, Rennes 2023, pp. 29-60; A.R. Suriano, *Il teatro indipendente nella società politica egiziana. Nascita, evoluzione e prospettive*, C.E.T. (Centro Editoriale Toscano), Firenze 2010, and Ead., *Reclaiming public spaces. Foreseeing the 25th January revolution in independent Egyptian theatre*, in Sobhi Boustani; Rasheed El-Enany; Walid Hamarneh (éd.), *La Littérature à l’heure du Printemps Arabes*, Karthala, Paris 2016, pp. 297-309.

rent event, but also to take part in it⁶. The Egyptian revolution has «lifted the curtain on an explosive, performing body that has slipped away from the grip of power and sought to challenge its sociocultural and linguistic constraints»⁷.

Due to the relative freedom of expression guaranteed by the political ambiguity of the period, since 2011 artists have been trying to reach a broader audience and use theatre as a political tool for communication and action. Moreover, theatre becomes a means of giving voice to the revolution in a political process that is increasingly out of the hands of those who lead it⁸. In the postrevolutionary period, especially since the spring of 2011, a form of pessimism appears regarding the fate of the revolution. Accordingly, theatre is no longer the festive place of the revolutionary celebration but is transformed into a place to reflect and think about the transformations taking place, to warn and to reflect on the future of the revolution⁹. Testimonial-based performances aimed at recording or evoking again the events and emotions of the Egyptian uprising¹⁰ try now to achieve a philosophical perspective on the serial disappointments that have followed.

In this broad context, the work of Laylā Sulaymān is of particular interest, because it shows a need to develop plays over time. Born in Cairo in 1981, Sulaymān is a highly regarded playwright in Egypt and abroad. After earning a Bachelor's degree in Arabic literature from the American University in Cairo, Sulaymān began working as a playwright and director in 2004. In 2009, she collaborated with the German collective Rimini Protokoll for the show *Radio Muezzin*, which contributed to her orientation towards the aesthetics of documentary theatre. She has written various plays, which have been presented in Egypt and in the United States. The artist declares she is «interested above all in an independent, socially and politically aware theatre and in the role of art as a tool capable of empowering the individual and bringing out expressive methods that are ignored or stifled»¹¹. Sulaymān's viewpoint plays a critical role in comprehending the uprising as it offers the stance of the younger generation of Egyptians who feel that their prospects are jeopardised due to a patriarchal conflict between the army and religious factions¹².

⁶ Nesreen Hussein, *Gestures of Resistance between the Street and the Theatre: Documentary Theatre in Egypt and Laila Soliman's No Time for Art*, in "Contemporary Theatre Review", 25, 3 (2015), pp. 359-361.

⁷ Mohamed Samir El-Khatib, *Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some Exploratory Remarks on Place, Body and Power*, in "Theatre Research International", 38, 2 (2013), p. 104.

⁸ P. Donizeau, *La scène égyptienne en révolution*, cit., pp. 64-66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-135.

¹⁰ See M. Litvin, *From Tahrir to 'Tahrir'*, cit., p. 119.

¹¹ From the writer's personal blog, "Laila Soliman": <https://lailasoliman.blogspot.com/> (last accessed 5 July 2023).

¹² B.J. Mehta, *Dissident writings of Arab Women. Voices Against Violence*, Routledge, New York-Abingdon 2014, p. 121.

With *Lā waqt li 'l-fann* (March 2011), the playwright employs documentary theatre to reflect on the political function of art through an interactive and collaborative performance capable of adapting to events¹³. In fact, *Lā waqt li 'l-fann* is made up of four episodes developed over time, from 2011 to 2013. The project, at the Rawābiṭ Theatre, in the Townhouse Gallery (Cairo), had also an online platform. At the centre of the first sequence is the arrest of 'Alī Ṣubḥī, activist, actor and Sulaymān's friend, imprisoned and tortured by the army in the spring of 2011. This arrest is documented, and the fact is linked to other cases of arbitrary violence committed by the army against demonstrators¹⁴. While spectacles on the revolution proliferate, Sulaymān warns against the confiscation of the revolution comparing direct testimonies with the representation of the same stories by the official media¹⁵.

The second and third sequences support this comparison through other examples of testimonies of violence carried out by the military forces. The focus of the plays gradually moves away from the revolutionary context to show that the exercise of state violence is a practice rooted in Egypt. The second sequence is about the violence exerted on minors and it is based on testimonies collected by Egyptian NGOs. The central testimony is that of a 15-year-old boy, sentenced to prison by the Child Court, and tortured during his detention. The third sequence examines two parallel testimonies: that of a young man who performs his compulsory military service and remains locked up in army training camps while his country is in the midst of the revolution, and that of a young prisoner awaiting his appeal trial for five years. This second testimony consists of both the accounts of the young prisoner and the letters sent to his sister. These two testimonies have been rewritten so that they intersect¹⁶.

In Sulaymān's first project, the last sequence was supposed to be a moment of homage to the martyrs of the revolution (the victims of military and police forces), but in the end it became an interactive performance where the audience were invited to carry out a collective commemoration and participate in the reconstruction of the community in the aftermath of an event¹⁷. This se-

¹³ I was not able to access the texts of the performances nor to watch the play, so I base my study upon B.J. Mehta, *Dissident Writings of Arab Women*, cit., pp. 218-252, and P. Donizeau, *La scène égyptienne en révolution*, cit., pp. 96-103.

¹⁴ P. Donizeau, *La scène égyptienne en révolution*, cit., pp. 98-101.

¹⁵ Menna Taher, *No Time for Art reflects upon unjust military trials*, in "Ahrām online", 24/06/2011, available at: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/14903/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/No-Time-for-Art-reflects-upon-unjust-military-tria.aspx> (last accessed 3 July 2023).

¹⁶ P. Donizeau, *La scène égyptienne en révolution*, cit., p. 100.

¹⁷ Sulaymān states that for the interactive turn of the last sequence she was inspired by a visual interpretation of her play. On the development of the sequence, see *Truth is concrete 24/09 13:30 I Laila Soliman: No time for art?*, in "YouTube", 2/11/2012, 16'-19', available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfDvJsBhtZw&t=277s> (last accessed 2 July 2023).

quence is interactive and participatory and results in a show that is both spectacular and traumatic. While the revolutionary process is still ongoing, the performance tends to build a memory of the revolution with the aim of inscribing the event in the course of history. Public participation allows spectators both to declare themselves citizens and to perform their citizenship. Thus, the transition from representation to performance, and from passive listening to testimony and to interaction, in *Lā waqt li 'l-fann* gradually allows theatre to offer both a process of judicial investigation and transitional justice, and also to engage viewers to think about new relationships and new political actions¹⁸.

In November 2011, Sulaymān underlined the importance of reporting on what the media did not talk about affirming that one of the aims of her work was to create an alternative version of history with the means of theatre¹⁹. In September 2012, during her speech about *Lā waqt li 'l-fann* at the Steirischer Herbst Festival (Styrian Autumn Festival) marathon entitled “Truth is concrete”, Sulaymān confirmed the urgent need to recount the revolution²⁰. A few years later, in 2018, in her blog, Sulaymān went into more depth regarding her feelings about her production, especially with reference to 2011:

I remember until 2011 directing felt more difficult
 The quest for perfection.
 That is the main virtue of seeing deaths, injuries.
 Engaging in physical violence.
 The adrenalin helps you accept.
 Art becomes again a fleeting moment.
 Or a series.
 Especially theatre.
 A performance is again a fleeting moment.
 I was reminded.
 It is not held on paper.
 It will not stay.
 Even the version, that travels through each attending memory cannot be controlled by the makers.
 It reminded me that it was not about being right.
 It was about that moment of sharing.
 Whatever the reason.
 But it is about that moment.
 More than anything else²¹.

¹⁸ P. Donizeau, *La scène égyptienne en révolution*, cit., pp. 101-102. For a detailed study of *Lā waqt li 'l-fann*, see *Ibid.*, pp. 96-107.

¹⁹ H. Zimmermann, *Vomit – Until the Revolution Comes*, in “Qantara.de”, 18/11/2011, available at: <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-the-egyptian-theatre-director-laila-soliman-vomit-until-the-revolution-comes> (last accessed 4 July 2023).

²⁰ *Truth is concrete 24/09 13:30 I Laila Soliman*, cit., 7^o-10^o.

²¹ <http://lailasoliman.blogspot.com/2018/10/since-having-partially-failed-to.html> (last accessed 2 July 2023).

From Sulaymān's words it is clear that, especially in 2011, when the urge to engage with the revolution was strong, she wanted her theatre to be first of all an ephemeral art apt for expressing the urgency of the moment.

Dāliyā Basyūnī (Dalia Basiouny) had a similar reaction after the revolution, so she felt the need to modify her first play as a writer, *Sūlitīr* (2009, latest version 2011)²². She is an Egyptian theatre artist, founder and director of Sabīl (Sabeel), an independent theatre troupe founded in Cairo in 1997. Basyūnī is also a writer, activist, academic, and translator who has partially been educated in the US but lives in Cairo. Her theatre work includes directing several plays performed in Egypt, England, USA, Morocco, Iraq, Zimbabwe, and Germany. She is a recipient of many awards including the Fulbright Arts Grant (USA), and the British Council Chevening Scholarship (UK). With *Sūlitīr*, she received the theatre award from Āfāq (al-ṣundūq al-‘arabī li ‘l-ṭaqāfah wa ‘l-funūn, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture – AFAC).

Sūlitīr premiered in Cairo in March 2011, but it was created before 2011. The first version was a set of dramatic monologues of three women: an elderly mother and her two daughters. The mother, Nagāh, a sixty-year-old Egyptian, lives in Cairo, and reminisces about the older way of living while playing Solitaire on the computer. The younger daughter, Nuhā, also living in Cairo, goes through an identity crisis while stuck in traffic with her husband. The older daughter, Munā, lives in New York and is trying to figure out who she is as an Arab American after 9/11. She narrates how her experience as an Arab woman who emigrated to post 9/11 America has changed and what discrimination she suffers. Each of the three women speaks a different language or register: standard Arabic (the mother), colloquial Arabic (Nuhā) and English (Munā).

In February 2011, with her theatre troupe Sabīl, Dāliyā Basyūnī staged the monologue-based documentary play *Hikāyāt Tahrīr* (Tahrir Stories), real stories told by demonstrators with a ritualistic streak²³. With the beginning of the demonstrations in Egypt, in which the author participated, Munā's monologue was extended to cover more recent facts, reaching January 25, 2011. For practical reasons, mostly because of the challenging political situation and the curfew, *Sūlitīr* was reduced only to Munā's monologue, recited by the author and staged just six weeks after the end of the riots. The performance opened in Cairo in March 2011, then toured in Iraq, Morocco, Zimb-

²² A translation of Munā's monologue by Dāliyā Basyūnī has been published in "Arab Stages". See Dalia Basiouny, *Solitaire, an Egyptian Multimedia Performance*, in "Arab Stages", 1, 1 (2014), pp. 1-24, available at: <https://arabstages.org/2014/12/solitaire-an-egyptian-multimedia-performance/> (last accessed 4 November 2022).

²³ On *Hikāyāt Tahrīr*, see Eliane Ursula Ettmueller's account as an audience member in her blog "Egyptian Letters", available at: <http://egyptianletters.blogspot.com/2011/> (last accessed 4 November 2022).

abwe, Germany, Ethiopia, in addition to three tours in the US in 2011, 2012, and 2014. In the words of Nihād Ṣulayḥah (Nehad Selaiha):

The original monologue was promptly rewritten [just after the revolution's outbreak] to connect the events of September 11 in the United States to the Egyptian revolution, highlighting both events as main catalysts in the change the world has been, and will be, undergoing in the twenty-first century. With her meagre funds, she decided to stage the rewritten monologue at Rawābeṭ, at her own expense, and it came across as a confessional monodrama about self-discovery and the slippery path connecting private and public spaces, the personal and political, as well as aesthetics, truth, and reality²⁴.

About this experience, Dāliyā Basyūnī explains that she was in rehearsals for the production in January 2011 when the Egyptian revolution took place and altered their reality. As a result, she stopped rehearsals and joined the revolutionary risings:

When I went back to *Solitaire*, so much had changed, so the performance, as a living thing, had to change. I wrote a new section about the revolution that fit perfectly well with the theme of the Egyptian American woman dealing with the aftermath of 9/11 and growing her political awareness. This multi-media performance had visuals from demonstrations in New York in addition to footages and images from demonstrations in Cairo. I felt obliged to perform it myself, as I carry the visceral memory of these unique moments that I personally experienced²⁵.

Basyūnī adds that «it did not feel right to present an Egyptian performance that discusses protests against the war on Afghanistan and Iraq, while ignoring the huge Egyptian demonstrations»²⁶. The same feeling of change is shared by Munà, then the only protagonist of *Sūlitūr*:

The events of September 11th messed up the world
 Changed it to the worse.
 Then, ten years later,
 The Arab Spring came as a surprise for humanity.
 The Egyptian peaceful revolution inspired people all around the planet. It returned the hope that people can create their own destinies, however long the injustice lasts.
 Unfortunately, the Arab Spring turned into a nightmare in many places.
 And I wonder, who wants to keep all these people in the dark ages? Who be-

²⁴ Nehad Selaiha, *Egyptian Realities on Stage and in Society: Theatre Reviews*, in Sirkku Aaltonen; Areeg Ibrahim (eds.), *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre*, cit., chapter 10.

²⁵ Dalia Basiouny, *Performing and Rewriting Solitaire between Languages and Cultures. A Practitioner's Testimonial*, in Sirkku Aaltonen; Areeg Ibrahim (eds.), *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre*, cit., chapter 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

nefits from that? But that's another long story.
 What I know is that the change has already started,
 And no power can stop it. We don't live in the same world anymore²⁷.

The Egyptian revolution is at the centre of Munà's reflections, where it constitutes an unstoppable subversive force that changed the world, for good, but also for worse. In the play, this event has important consequences on Munà's fate. Unlike Munà's original monologue, which ended with her deciding to succumb to the pressure, giving up her Egyptian passport, and swearing the American oath of allegiance, the post-revolutionary Munà decides to keep her passport and takes even greater pride in her Egyptian identity²⁸.

Moulding the Story: Syrian Theatre in Europe

On March 15, 2011, Syria entered the Arab Spring. Beyond the immediately visible political aspect with massive demonstrations from the first weeks, an artistic expression in support of the protest appears very quickly. Overcoming external and internal censorship, which Syrian activists have translated as «the fall of the wall of fear», seems to encourage the «art of the revolution»²⁹. Since the popular revolt, theatrical production has therefore undergone a series of transformations that reflect a constantly evolving political and social context. On the one hand, a protest movement is taking shape that shakes up a highly structured artistic field around the state and its institutions. Through social networks, associative life experiences and collective publications, Syrian intellectuals, at home and in exile, have elaborated the context of the revolt by redesigning the mental, emotional and cultural landscape of several generations of Syrians³⁰.

In this context, creativity is not only a way to survive violence, but it can also challenge it as well. The Syrian Spring, in fact, shook Syrian society as a whole. After forty years of Assadian dictatorship, the streets filled up every Friday with people defying the established order. The movement surprised the world of culture, which until then had considered itself an enlightened elite leading the people. However, attempts to define a cultural environment as an intermediary body between the protest and the regime are blocked by savage repression. The few attempts at theatrical performances aimed at contributing to the revolutionary process, necessarily being limited to small domestic meeting places, prove to be ineffective and risky for those who participate in them³¹.

²⁷ Dalia Basiouny, *Solitaire, an Egyptian Multimedia Performance*, p. 22.

²⁸ Dalia Basiouny, *Performing and Rewriting Solitaire*, cit.

²⁹ S. Dubois, *De la marge au centre, de Syrie en exil : itinéraires d'un jeune théâtre syrien*, PhD thesis, Université d'Aix Marseille, 2019, p. 13.

³⁰ See, for instance, E. Ziter, *Clowns of the Revolution*, cit.

³¹ S. Dubois, *De la marge au centre, de Syrie en exil*, cit., p. 14.

From the end of 2012, waves of arrests and summons for interrogations and the horror of the regime's prisons, as well as compulsory military service for men, prompt the departure and a real exodus of Syrian playwrights begins. Destinations are mainly Lebanon and Turkey, as temporary destinations, and then Germany and France and especially their capitals. Syrian theatrical creation in exile, at least until 2020, is mainly established on the resources offered by Syrian organisations that emerged from the revolution, such as Ettijahat (Ittiḡāhāt, an independent organisation aimed at stimulating the development of a Syrian culture based on ethnic-religious pluralism), and is also founded by international organisations and cultural diplomacy bodies that have established scholarship programs, such as the Lebanese branch of the British Council.

Among these Syrian playwrights who leave Syria for good, we can consider the example of Wā'il Qaddūr³². Born in Syria in 1981, Wā'il Qaddūr is a dramatist, director, and journalist. In 2005, he graduated from the Dramatic Arts Institute in Damascus (ISAD). Late in 2011, he co-founded Ettijahat, where he was in charge of communications. He has claimed refugee status in Paris since 2015. Since then, he has participated in several international theatrical festivals. His first success, *al-Ġuraf al-ṣaġīrah* (The Small Rooms, 2013), develops around the unhealthy relationships between the four characters, suffocated in a web of hate, love and betrayal that they intertwine with each of their actions. The play, which explores the various levels of psychological and social oppression of the protagonist, is staged in Amman, Beirut, Marseille and Egypt, during the 2016 Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF).

In 2013, Qaddūr writes *al-I'tirāf*, his first text directly addressing the theme of the revolution. Set in a highly militarised Arab country and reminiscent of the last three decades in Syria, the play shows us five characters involved in the representation of an adapted version of Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1992). 'Umar is an actor and the director of the play, Hayā is his partner and an actress, the third actor – Akram – is an ex-convict. Directed by 'Umar, Hayā and Akram rehearse with the help of Raḍwān, a soldier doing his military service far from the field of action, as a companion to Ġalāl, a retired army officer who is also 'Umar's uncle.

When the actors are almost ready to represent the play, Ġalāl is asked to return to the army, while Raḍwān is terrified at the prospect of returning to field service and 'Umar wants to represent his play in his country, despite the fact his uncle warns him that this is risky. Hayā is afraid for her brother who

³² On Qaddūr's political theatre, see M. Ruocco, *Théâtre et révolution en Syrie : le choix moral de Wael Kadour*, in "Théâtre/Public", 233 (2019), pp. 78-81. On his artistic experience, see Najla Naklé-Cerruti, *Entretien, Wael Kadour: écrire le théâtre. La part du texte, de la formation à la scène*, in "Théâtre/Public", 233 (2019), pp. 82-85.

has disappeared. The ending of *al-I'tirāf* suggests that, as in *Death and the Maiden*, a torturer has been found by chance by one of the protagonists and he is Ġalāl, who has been recognised by Akram. As in *Death and the Maiden*, the audience will never be certain if the claimed torturer is the *real* torturer nor if he is going to be killed.

The work reflects profoundly on the roles of victim and executioner and on the function of the theatre, but also on the impact of war on everyone's psyche and within family relationships, combining the private sphere with the political one. The Syrian revolution is represented through the intimate sphere, where both the enthusiasm for change and the suffering for the exacerbated violence emerge. A second version of the play brings out this aspect more clearly.

Dating from 2018, the second version of *al-I'tirāf* was staged at the Teatro Nazionale in Genoa in the summer of 2019. Differences between the first and the second version concern mainly the structure, the length and the contents of the play. The first version was about 18000 words, while the second is of approximately 10000³³. The first version follows the classical division in acts and scenes, while the latest version has no acts but only nine consecutive scenes. The length of the script is reduced because some scenes are suppressed and also because of silences often replacing words.

In the first version, more space is devoted to Akram and Ġalāl's story. Certainly, this is the most significant difference between the two versions. Akram and Ġalāl recognise each other as the torturer and the tortured in prison many years before. When they happen to be alone, Ġalāl provokes Akram asking him to take his revenge for his seven years of suffering in the prison. At first Akram does not want to react, but finally he ties Ġalāl to the chair where he was sitting just previously while playing the role of Roberto in *Death and the Maiden*. As the others come back, Akram tells them of his life after the years in prison, while Hayā wants Ġalāl to confess about Akram and also about her brother's death. She hates Ġalāl for having decided to let her brother (his soldier) die. Ġalāl explains that, as a general, he must give orders and the logic of war is different from that of social morals. 'Umar reveals that Ġalāl wants to defect. Now Raḍwān too, who did not know about these events, would like to kill Ġalāl-the-general since he lied to him and let his comrades die, but he will not because he also loves all the care and attention Ġalāl-the-man gave him. The play ends with a similar kind of reflection on 'Umar's part, who tries to think of his beloved uncle as a torturer. In the past he could not. «Is he able now to think of his uncle in such a role?»³⁴, his uncle asks him. The stage becomes progressively dark and the play ends.

In the new version of *al-I'tirāf*, Hayā's brother is missing, while in the

³³ Wā'il Qaddūr, *al-I'tirāf*, 2013 and 2018 (unpublished texts kindly provided by the author).

³⁴ Wā'il Qaddūr, *al-I'tirāf*, 2013, pp. 48-49. English translation is mine.

first version he is dead. In this new version, she is not looking for vengeance for her brother and her quest focuses on herself, her life with 'Umar – who is her boyfriend – and their future together. In the new version, Paulina's story, that she enacts, is a constant reminder to her of what her own life could be to the point that she often identifies with the character she plays. This new version plays more on the similarities between *Death and the Maiden* and the *real* stories of the characters, economising words and time and centring the focus on the fact of confessing. The suppressed parts are condensed in the analogies with the play-within-the-play that in the new compressed play are more impressive:

Hayā: The people in this play are living in a democratic country. They have the luxury of deciding whether to form a committee to look only into those who were murdered, or to examine all the atrocities that happened. In our case, we have a regime that committed massacres over 30 years ago and was never punished for it. And now it's committing crimes on an even bigger scale than before and still no one is punishing it... seriously, why are we doing this play? ... People are dying out there and we are doing a play... And I wish it was the right play, it feels more like science fiction³⁵.

Ĝalāl's provocation, in this case, involves the play within, which Ĝalāl asks Akram to act after the dinner, in front of him. «This play is very difficult... How are you able to do it? You for example Akram, how can you perform the role of a jailer when you were once a prisoner?»³⁶, Ĝalāl asks Akram. While 'Umar, Hayā and Akram play the last scene of *Death and the Maiden* to satisfy Ĝalāl's request, at the end of *Death and the Maiden*, when Hayā/Paulina is uncertain whether or not to kill her torturer (played by Akram), Ĝalāl loads his gun and stares at it³⁷. In this version too, the stage becomes progressively dark and the play ends, leaving the audience with many interrogatives, both about the end of the story and the social implications of a war context.

The play's central theme, whether in the old or the new versions, is always questioning one's behaviour in a morally deviated context. However, the latest version is more condensed, so it emphasises a significant point: the relationship between victims and torturers (Akram and Ĝalāl, Hayā/Paulina and Akram/Roberto). In this new version, Hayā's feelings are the most explored, even if Hayā is not herself a (former) jailer or a (former) prisoner, nor she is directly connected with a jailer or a prisoner. However, she is also a victim of the state of repression generated by war, as her suffering for her

³⁵ Wael Kadour, *The Confession*, translated by Hassan Abdulrazzak, 2018, p. 20 (unpublished text kindly provided by the author).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁷ In the unpublished French translation dating from 2019, Ĝalāl asks Raḍwān to bring him his gun. See Wael Kadour, *L'aveu*, traduction de C. Khodr. 2019, p. 56.

brother's disappearance and her projects for her future life testify. Elaborating Paulina's story and recounting out loud what she thinks about the Chilean girl and the Syrian people, she brings to the stage the brightest reflections on the topic and universalises it.

At the same time, the play within, which is an international reference rather than a local one, acquires more weight in the economy of the text. While the first version of the play included important details and setting derived from the Syrian writer Muṣṭafā Ḥalīfah's prison diary, *al-Qawqa'ah, yawmiyyāt mutalaṣṣiṣ* (The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer, 2008)³⁸ and direct references to the novel *al-Faqd, hikāyāt min dākirah mutahayyalah li-sağīn haqīqī* (The Loss, Tales from an Imaginary Memory of a Real Prison, 2006) by the Syrian writer Lu'ayy Ḥusayn, beside the reference to *Death and the Maiden*, this new version focuses especially on *Death and the Maiden* and only partially on *al-Qawqa'ah*, in a way that even those who do not know the novel, can equally understand the play³⁹.

The transformation of the 2013 play into the 2018 version can be summed up in the peculiarity of Qaddūr's theatre, a theatre of the "in-between", «un espace liminaire qui implique des dynamiques de continuité, de séparation, de transition, de chevauchement et de mobilité, et des questions liées aux territoires, mais aussi à la pratique et à la représentation»⁴⁰.

As the playwright leaves Syria and moves away also from Amman, his play transforms to better represent his renovated idea of Syria. This idea evolves with the author's distance, in space and time, from the country. In addition to the artist's life experience, one has also to consider that, after ten years, the Syrian civil war is still ongoing, causing severe human rights violations, massacres and a major refugee crisis. In the light of the present, the fictional past based on reality can be seen and represented through different lenses. At the same time, with Qaddūr's move to France, the pièce is staged almost exclusively in Europe⁴¹. A change of the audience's culture and knowledge about the Syrian context too might have invited the writer to transform his play.

³⁸ Mustafa Khalifa, *The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer*, translated by P. Starkey, Interlink Books, Northampton (MA) 2017.

³⁹ Elsewhere I analyze the intertextuality in the latest version of *al-I'tirāf*. See D. Potenza, *Wael Kadour e l'inconfessabile verità che solo lo specchio teatrale può rivelare*, in "Illuminazioni", 52, 2020, pp. 37-58.

⁴⁰ M. Ruocco, *Écrire de loin et écrire sur soi : le défi (gagné) de Wael Kadour*, in Wael Kadour, *Chroniques d'une ville qu'on croit connaître. Braveheart, L'espace d'un instant*, Paris 2023, p. 7.

⁴¹ The play has been read at the "Regards Croisés" festival in Grenoble in May 2016, "Les Francophonie" festival in a limousine in Limoges in September 2016 and the "Residenztheatre" in Munich in November 2016; it was staged in Beirut in May 2018 (directed by 'Abd Allāh al-Kafīrī), and at the Teatro Nazionale in Genoa (Italy) in June 2019 (directed by Simone Toni).

In a recent interview, Muḥammad al-‘Aṭṭār (Mohammad Al Attar) has expressed his desire to change his theatre depending on its audience⁴². According to the Syrian dramatist and playwright who has been living in Berlin for a few years, unfinished, ongoing stories can be told in different ways as non-Syrian audiences need a different explanation. Theatre is also a means to challenge media, in general, and mainstream media, more specifically, that often stereotype the story of Syria and create instead a dialogue with the audience. Such “unfinished” theatre can also provoke questions instead of delivering answers as, in the process of discovering, there is no claimed truth⁴³.

al-‘Aṭṭār’s considerations well reflect on how and why Qaddūr might have transformed his play *al-I‘tirāf* into a more powerful and punchy work, more and more based on an international reference (*The Death and the Maiden*) rather than Syrian sources. Moreover, they manifest the importance of theatre, in these times of interest towards the Arabic countries, as a means in natural continuous shaping that is capable of a dialogue with the audience(s). Other Arab dramatists have recently decided to exploit this aspect of their creations, as the following section shows.

Theatre as a Dialogue

When talking of her one-woman show, Ḥanān Ḥāḡḡ ‘Alī (Hanane Hajj Ali) likes to highlight its full title: *Ġūḡīḡ, masraḥ qayd al-taṭwīr*⁴⁴.

Written between 2012 and 2022, *Ġūḡīḡ, masraḥ qayd al-taṭwīr* is a partly autobiographical performance dealing with hot topics such as religion, politics, and sex in Lebanon, and aiming at presenting a challenge to the stereotypes and prejudices that afflict global perceptions of Arab women⁴⁵. Dur-

⁴² Muḥammad al-‘Aṭṭār graduated from al-Ma‘had al-‘ālī li ‘l-funūn al-masrahiyyah in 2007. In the same year, he was selected to participate in the Royal Court program, which aims to publish new authors from the Arab world. During the three workshops, he writes his first play, *Insihāb* (Retreat), which is translated and published in English in 2010 along with the five selected works. He also earned a master’s degree in applied theatre from Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2010, before returning to Syria for a short time. Now he lives in Berlin and his works are systematically published in English before being published in Arabic.

⁴³ M. Lynx Qualey, *New voices For Europe: Theatre is a way to write unfinished, ongoing stories*, in “Literature across Frontiers”, 24/11/2021, available at: https://soundcloud.com/literatureacrossfrontiers/pod-mohammad-al-attar-laf?ref=clipboard&p=i&c=1&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing (last accessed 2 July 2023).

⁴⁴ N. Ghosn, *Hanane Hajj Ali, Portrait of a Theatrical Trailblazer*, in “The Markaz Review”, 14/02/2021, available at: <https://themarkaz.org/hanane-hajj-ali-portrait-of-a-theatrical-trailblazer/> (last accessed 5 July 2023).

⁴⁵ Her several roles in plays and films include, in 2005, the main role of the mother

ing her daily morning jogging in her city, Beirut, the protagonist of the play, Ḥanān, runs and thinks about dreams, desires, hopes, disillusion, characters, and roles, especially of women from her country who – like the Greek Medea – had to make the terrible choice to kill their children.

In its original form, in 2012, *Ġūġīng* was a monologue about Ḥanān's jogging in Beirut. At that time, Ḥāġġ 'Alī invited artists and practitioners of different nationalities and disciplines to take part in her artistic workshop: some of them participated in a specific phase of the research process; others joined in the production stages. Inspired by the *Masrah al-Ḥakawāfī*, which she cofounded in 1978 with the man who later became her husband, Rūġīh 'Assāf (Roger Assaf), and which revived the Arab tradition of storytelling, Ḥāġġ 'Alī promoted collaborative work. In 2016, the Lebanese theatre collective *Kahrabā'* (Kahraba) invited Ḥāġġ 'Alī to the annual festival “*Naḥnu wa 'l-qamar ġirān*” (We and the Moon are Neighbours, advertised in English as “The Moon, the Neighbours and Us”⁴⁶). For that occasion, Ḥāġġ 'Alī turned the show into a 30-minute performance on a staircase in the street. From there, she was subsequently invited to residencies and the work continues to evolve⁴⁷. «This theatrical laboratory created an open platform for reflection, debate, and interaction that we hope to expand and deepen when meeting with the public», the introduction of the 2018 published edition of the play recites⁴⁸.

In a post on Facebook dated 19 July 2022, during *Ġūġīng*'s staging at the important Avignon theatre festival, 'Abd Allāh al-Kafrī (Abdullah Alkafrī) – who collaborated on the play with his dramaturgy – states:

For a play called *Jogging*, our work has, fittingly, been on quite a journey over the years. It has been performed more than one hundred and twenty times, in more than twenty countries, across five continents. It has even been performed on a small tabletop in a refugee camp – and now it finds itself in Avignon. As *Jogging* has grown, moved, and evolved over the years, so have we all⁴⁹.

in *Les Paravents/Les Écrans* by Jean Genet at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. Throughout her 40-year career, she has become an eminent figure on the Lebanese cultural and artistic scene, facilitating and supporting hundreds of colleagues, students, and communities in Lebanon and throughout the entire Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region. With *Ġūġīng*, Ḥāġġ 'Alī won the Vertebra Award for Best Actress at the “Fringe/Edinburgh International Festival” in August 2017, and toured prestigious international theatres and festivals, such as “Avignon Festival” in 2022. She also won the 2020 Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award.

⁴⁶ The name of the festival clearly refers to Fayrūz's homonymous famous song whose text was written by the Raḥbānī's brothers.

⁴⁷ N. Ghosn, *Hanane Hajj Ali, Portrait of a Theatrical Trailblazer*, cit.

⁴⁸ Hanane Hajj Ali, *Jogging, Theatre in progress*, translated by Hassan Abdulrazzak, Raidy Printing Group, Beirut 2018², p. 2.

⁴⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/abdullah.alkafri> (last accessed 5 July 2023).

The idea of development has been a constituent aspect of the play since it was created, in 2012. From being a play about Ḥanān and her reflections during her jogging, the play has developed into a complex performance where Ḥanān starts doing her jogging, then enacts the characters of two other Lebanese women. Ḥāğğ ‘Alī first added the character of Yvonne, a 42-year-old Lebanese mother who has killed her daughters and herself (as the introduction of the character, to be read/performed by a member of the audience, recounts). Then Ḥāğğ ‘Alī received acknowledgement for the story of Zahrah (in this case too, the name is fictional, but the story is real), a 50-year-old woman from the south of Lebanon. As Ḥāğğ ‘Alī told⁵⁰, each of Zahrah’s three children died in war, the first two fighting Israel and the third seven years later fighting in the north of Syria. Before dying, Zahrah’s younger son wrote her a letter from prison, where he told his mother that he was dying in vain. When this happened, Zahrah suffered a breakdown. Ḥāğğ ‘Alī read this letter in 2013 and she decided to add this part to the play. She thought of Zahrah as a Medea, who did not kill her sons directly (like Euripides’ Medea), but she killed them through the ideas and ideals she raised them in. This is indeed what one can understand from the letter Zahrah received from her third son, the letter that Ḥāğğ ‘Alī/Zahrah reads on the stage⁵¹.

Introducing Yvonne and Zahrah, *Ġūğīng* deepens its relation with the myth of Medea, as it shows multiple aspects of it, but the most recent version of the play, played in Avignon in 2022, tightens even more the relation to the myth as at its ending Ḥanān questions the audience about who Medea is:

Who’s Medea today?
 Me? You?
 Beirut? This world never stopping
 sinking in the violence?
 How many thousands of Medeas are there?
 And nobody will ever tell their story⁵².

I asked Ḥāğğ ‘Alī why Medea is taking more and more space in her play. She answered that it is a natural development since, unluckily, there are more and more Medeas in today’s world⁵³. Increasingly seizing the universal power of the Greek myth, Ḥanān’s interior monologue progressively becomes an increasingly open dialogue with the audience, namely with people of mixed backgrounds and beliefs, affirming the monologue’s role as a

⁵⁰ Interview with Ḥanān Ḥāğğ ‘Alī in Beirut, 24/11/2022 (unpublished).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Ḥanān Ḥāğğ ‘Alī, *Ġūğīng*, 2022 (unpublished). English translation is mine. The author kindly sent me (10 August 2022) this new version of the conclusion dating from 2022.

⁵³ Interview with Ḥanān Ḥāğğ ‘Alī in Beirut, 19/11/2022 (unpublished).

means of social discussion:

My performance is called *Jogging: Theatre in Progress* because the theatre is an open agora. I close the show with an epilogue where I open a dialogue with people. I've never been interested in preaching to the converted; what I'm interested in is stirring up the stagnant waters and stimulating critical thinking⁵⁴.

As a matter of fact, each performance is adapted to the place it is staged, to stimulate a conversation with the audience. For instance, performing in Europe, Ḥanān would mention the name of a generally hated local politician instead of just saying: «I spent the whole night dreaming of a man who can't be seen or mentioned»⁵⁵. From the conversations with the audience, Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī also takes inspiration for the next stage of the play.

Besides sharing with *Ġūḡīnḡ* the focus on the Greek myth, *IMedea*, the latest play by the Kuwaiti playwright and theatre director Sulaymān al-Bassām (Sulayman Al Bassam), has a similar aim of entering into an encounter with its audience⁵⁶. As such, its text is always reshaped according to the context it is played in and to the audience it is staged for. An initial draft of *IMedea* was developed during al-Bassām's fellowship on the Visiting Global Faculty Programme at The Gallatin School of Individualised Study, New York University, in 2017, then the play was reworked following the rehearsals in collaboration with the actors. Major changes were made due to the pandemic, as for practical reasons al-Bassām had to reduce the number of actors and so, to modify the text of the play.

Like in Euripides' tragedy, Medea is a foreign woman who has murdered her own brother in order to marry Jason. After a few years of marriage, Jason repudiates Medea to marry the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth, the city they live in. As Medea refuses to accept his decision, Creon condemns her and her two sons to exile. In revenge, Medea murders her children. When

⁵⁴ N. Ghosn, *Hanane Hajj Ali, Portrait of a Theatrical Trailblazer*, cit.

⁵⁵ Interview with Ḥanān Ḥāḡḡ 'Alī in Beirut, 24/11/2022 (unpublished). I also asked the author if she felt the need to modify her play since the 17 October Revolution (2019). She answered that at the time she was in Montreal. Once she came back to Beirut, she felt the need to rethink her play as she was curious to see if it was still working but then, after a staging in Lebanon, she realised that its messages were already updated to the revolution, especially in her quote and comment from *Hamlet*: «There is something rotten in the state of Denmark. Which we can translate literally to: there is something rotten in the Lebanese heaven!». Hanane Hajj Ali, *Jogging, Theatre in progress*, cit., p. 17.

⁵⁶ On Sulaymān al-Bassām and his last production, see H. Von Graham, *Sulayman Al Bassam – Portrait of a Contemporary Arab Theatre*, in “Recherchen 104: Theater im Arabischen Sprachraum – Theatre in the Arab World”, 12, 2013, available at: <https://tdz.de/artikel/9f996618-ec74-4c74-8700-d1ffec33d52> (last accessed 19 July 2023).

Jason appears to exact revenge on her, dragons appear to fly her to the kingdom of Aegean, where she has obtained asylum. Taking place in a contemporary Corinth, where the media and the digital platforms have the power to alter political space, *IMedea* stages the protagonist as a blogger who advocates for migrants' rights. Representing the refugees' voice, her vengeance is linked to her battle against the xenophobia promoted by politicians.

From the pandemic onwards, al-Bassām suppressed the characters of Creusa, Glauce, the Influencer, Medea's maid and the Engineer, while he took the role of Creon, Jason, and the TV host. He also took the role of the author, impersonating himself. The three other characters are Medea (played by the Syrian actress Ḥālā 'Umrān), al-Tinnīn (Two or the Dragon, played by the Beirut based electro-acoustic musicians 'Abd Qubaysī and 'Alī Ḥūt), who performed the play's music, and Aġādīs, a new migrant to Corinth (played by the Tunisian actor Usāmah Ġāmi'ī).

This version of *IMedea* has been performed at Carthage Theatre Festival, in Tunis (Le 4ème Art, 9 December 2021), at “Mahraġān al-Qāhirah al-duwalī li 'l-masraḥ al-taġrībī” (Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, 15-16 December 2021), in Beirut (Masraḥ al-Madīnah, 28-30 January 2022), in Kuwait (Yarmūk Cultural Centre – Dār al-Āṭār al-Islāmiyyah, 26 March 2022), at “Arabisches Theatertreffen Hannover” (Pavillon Hannover, 8-9 June 2022), at “Campania Teatro Festival” (Naples, Teatro Politeama, 2 July 2022), and at “Requiem for Justice”, an international rally of artists and writers for social justice (Centro Cultural del Bosque INBAL, Mexico City, 27-28 October 2022). This means that, in less than a year, *IMedea* has toured seven different countries, starting from the MENA region (Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Kuwait), then Europe (Germany and Italy) and finally Mexico.

It is especially the part of the author that changes according to the staging context to better address the public. At “Campania Teatro Festival”, for instance, the author introduced Medea's story in Italian. From the standard prelude of the play:

AUTHOR: Good evening (Name of City)!

My name is Sulayman Al Bassam, I'm the writer of tonight's performance. I'd like to share with you some “road signs” for those of you who are not familiar with the legend of Medea as narrated by Wikipedia, may God bless its soul⁵⁷.

Greeting the audience in their own language, mentioning the city the play is going to be staged in, stating openly that he is quoting from Wikipedia, «the free encyclopaedia that anyone can edit»⁵⁸, namely a globally known, online,

⁵⁷ Sulayman Al Bassam, *IMedea*, 2022, p. 22 (unpublished text of the play kindly provided by the author).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

free and collaborative reference, and adding some irony, al-Bassām promises to help his audience and immediately gets closer to them, establishing a relationship of complicity.

The choice of some songs is adaptable to the needs of the performance. In the Naples' performance, at some point stadium chants are sung. When speaking with Creon, to obtain a last night with her children, Medea is forced to repeat what the king orders her to do, while he records. From the standard text of the play:

Creon now says – and obliges Medea to repeat – whatever mantras of state sanctioned hatred and violence that seem appropriate in the context of the city of performance⁵⁹.

In this case, in Naples, al-Bassām/Creon and 'Umrān/Medea repeated the famous affirmation by Giorgia Meloni in 2019, when during the “Italian pride” demonstration convened in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome by Matteo Salvini, among other things, she strongly criticised the proposal to replace the words “father” and “mother” on the identity documents of minors with “parent 1” and “parent 2”, concluding with the slogan “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I’m Italian, I’m Christian”. Her bold statements were ironically remixed by two Milanese DJs (MEM & J), and became viral, getting millions of views, imitations and memes on social media. And so, in Naples' performance, Creon forces Medea to repeat more than once “I am Medea, I am a woman, I am a mother”. He records this statement and sends it to Medea so that she can tweet it to her followers if she wants to spend a last night with her children.

The same night of the show (2 July 2022) al-Bassām told in a private conversation that the choice of including Meloni's statement was suggested by some of his Italian friends. This choice is particularly significant because the slogan was so powerful that even if it dated from three years before the staging, many of the audience could recognise it. Thinking of this choice today that Giorgia Meloni is the Italian prime minister (since October 2022), *IMedea* seems still more important as it pointed at the questions of Meloni's approach to gender and nationalism, which is today of primary importance for the country *IMedea* was staged in.

Conclusions

Many post-2011 Arab plays share a common feature: their text evolve over time. Despite the practice of rewriting is a common strategy of theatre of all time and space, the texts in progress here studied present some peculiarities resulting in a trend that is specific of the post-2011 Arab theatre.

Following the 2011 January Revolution, due to the contingency of the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

moment, many Egyptian artists have renegotiated the role of art in society in an attempt to make it relevant to the moment. They have called for art to become a tool for political and social awareness, to help shape a new Egypt. After a first period of enthusiasm, during which, through theatre, many participated in the revolution, a moment of reflection followed. Artistic creation in this time was still driven by the peculiarity of the moment, but it tended to highlight the negative repercussions of the revolution, with an increasingly visible violence and the risk that the revolution would be hijacked. In the face of these dangers, art became a means to raise consciousness and provide an outlet for the fear, doubt, and grief that had become pervasive in society. If the contents of the plays show the revolution as a Pandora's box, on the aesthetic side, we notice an intention to keep the discourse open through texts that evolve with time.

Expressing the violence of a civil war started in 2011, the Syrian theatre of the diaspora shares the need to adapt the stories according to the time and place they are rewritten for. In recent years, Arab artists have become more visible in European international festivals, in response to an ever-growing interest in Middle Eastern issues on the part of Western audiences. This greater attention towards the Arab world after their "Spring" makes it necessary for the theatre to adapt according to the context of the staging and the related needs of the different audiences. Moreover, the (non-physical) liminal space Syrian playwrights inhabit in Europe is also meaningful in understanding the continuous development of their creations.

On the other hand, other Arab prominent plays – such as *Ġūġīnġ* and *IMedeia* – highlight the importance of theatre as a liminal phenomenon. A major reflexive genre, which in keeping with its origin in cultures that recognise the category of "the individual" as the significant decision-making and ethical unit attributes to individuals the authorship of its scenarios, theatre is meant as a public space in which social instability both of Arab and Western countries can be debated. As such, its text is in continuous transformation.

For one reason or another, Arab "in progress" plays post-2011 remind us that our interpretation of events changes in light of following occurrences and so they renounce their privilege of declaring that «what's done, is done»⁶⁰. Instead, they warn us that the end of the story has not come yet.

⁶⁰ W. Shakespeare, *Lady Macbeth*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2013, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 95.