

Preface

My first interest in Palestinian theatre started in the early 1990s when I was invited to write a "short" article about the "newborn" Palestinian theatrical activities in the 1970s to be included in a special ivolume of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on "Palestinians and Israelis in the Theatre." In my preliminary investigations into this field I found that it was impossible to write on Palestinian theatre in the 1970s without some historical background. Thus, I extended my inquiry to cover the general development of Palestinian theatrical activities from their beginnings. The article,¹ which would later lead to several other studies,² confronted me with some contradictions: while I found much material on the topic that had been previously unknown to me, many works ostensibly dealing with Arabic theatre and literature in fact either wholly or partially ignored the existence of such phenomena.³ Moreover, I encountered dismissive statements regarding Palestinian drama and theatre

By that I do not mean the merely cautious references of scholars and critics to the absence of any material or any studies on the topic, such as Kāmil al-Sawāfirī's study of Arabic literature in Palestine, in which he indicates that he was unable to find any Palestinian "prose play" (*masrahiyya nathriyya*) before 1960 that he could write about.⁴ Likewise, Khayrī Maṣṣūr in a book about Palestinian literature after 1967 expressed his disappointment at not being able to study Palestinian theatre due to the absence of any printed plays.⁵ Similarly, in a special issue of the Egyptian magazine *al-Qāhira* (vol. 77, 15 November 1987), which dedicated separate articles to Palestinian poetry and fiction, there appeared another general article on Palestinian literature in which Palestinian theatrical activities were only mentioned in brief.⁶ It seems that the absence of a separate study on Palestinian theatre in such a volume had disturbed the editor-in-chief of the magazine, Ibrāhīm Ḥamāda, himself a dedicated scholar of Arab theatre, and so he "compensated" for such an absence by including in the volume two "dramatic" items which had some relationship to Palestine. The first was a complete translation with an

¹ "Palestinian Theatre: Historical Development and Contemporary Distinctive Identity," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 3.2 (1995), pp. 29-73.

² Snir 1993a, pp. 129-147; Snir 1995b, pp. 63-103; Snir 1996, pp. 101-120; Snir 1998/1999, pp. 57-71; Snir 2001b, pp. 107-124; Snir 2001c, pp. 293-317; Snir 2005, pp. 5-29.

³ For example, see Tomiche 1969; Haywood 1971; Cachia 1990; Somekh 1991; Badawi 1992; Badawi 1993. See also *al-Ādāb*'s special issue (November 1974) on Palestinian literature which made no mention of Palestinian theatre.

⁴ Al-Sawāfirī 1987, p. 359. Ironically, that indication comes in the introduction to a chapter entitled "al-Funūn al-Mustaḥdatha: al-Qiṣṣa wa-l-Masrahiyya" (The New Arts: Fiction and Theatre). In fact, the chapter includes no reference at all to any theatrical activities before and after 1960.

⁵ See Maṣṣūr 1984, p. 10.

⁶ Shahin 1987, pp. 43, 49.

introduction, both by Ḥamāda, himself, of *Arthur and the Acetone*, a very short play by George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) in which he protested against the Balfour Declaration.⁷ The "Acetone" mentioned in the title of the play alludes to an invention (which was to be used in making explosives) by the Zionist Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952) – later to become the first president of the State of Israel. The play presents the declaration as an opportunistic act by Balfour.⁸ The second item included in the special issue by *al-Qāhira* was an article by ʿAbd al-Ghānī Dawūd on Jewish characteristics in the plays of Arthur Miller (1915-2005).⁹

The dismissive statements that I encountered were not of this ilk, but absolutely rejected the very notion of Palestinian theatre, such as the statement by M.M. Badawī, in an introduction to a book dedicated entirely to modern Arabic drama, that "Palestinians have been primarily interested in drama as literature."¹⁰ Furthermore, these dismissive statements are mostly by Palestinian scholars and critics such as that of Ishāq Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī (1904-1990), who, in the mid-1960s, said that "there are no theatres in the Arab world outside Egypt,"¹¹ or that of Ḥanān Mikhāʾil Ashrāwī (b. 1946) in the mid-1970s, who asserted that "Palestinian literature cannot boast of a single written play of any merit, despite several attempts."¹² Muḥammad Ṣiddīq (b. 1945) wrote that "all recent efforts to establish a regular Palestinian theater in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have faltered under the harsh and precarious conditions of life under Israeli military occupation. Although a number of Palestinian plays do exist, they are too few and too tentative to constitute a distinct literary tradition."¹³ Sihām Daʿūd (b. 1952) even stated in an interview with Imīl Ḥabībī (1921-1996) that all Palestinian theatre troupes are "at a very primitive stage; it cannot be called a truly vital theatre movement."¹⁴ Only recently, with Palestinian theatrical activities becoming a widespread phenomena, has the "existence" of Palestinian theatre been "officially" recognized by Palestinian critics and scholars, even if sometimes reluctantly.¹⁵

The most serious attempt so far by a Palestinian scholar to study the topic is a Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Palestinian Theatre: Between Origins and Visions* (2001) written at the Freie Universität Berlin by Hāla Khamīs Naṣṣār (Hala Khamīs Nassar) (b.

⁷ The letter sent on 2 November 1917 by British Foreign Minister Arthur James Balfour to Lord Rothschild in which "his Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."

⁸ *Al-Qāhira* 77 (15 November 1987), pp. 25-27.

⁹ *Al-Qāhira* 77 (15 November 1987), pp. 50-55.

¹⁰ Jayyusi and Allen 1995, p. 17. The sections in this introduction about Palestinian theatre are the same sections devoted to this subject in Badawī 1993, pp. 284-286, without any significant change.

¹¹ See al-Ḥusaynī 1966, p. 43.

¹² Ashrawī 1976, p. 55.

¹³ Siddiq 1994, p. 472.

¹⁴ Daoud 1995a, p. 110.

¹⁵ *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians* (2000) dedicates to "Performing Arts" a short entry without references (Mattar 2000, pp. 321-322), contrary to the entry "Literature," which is a much more detailed entry with a bibliography (Mattar 2000, pp. 263-268).

literary student, I have found it imperative to draw upon historical findings, especially with regard to the process of Palestinian nation-building. Accordingly, the study is essentially an historical one, but the methodology is combined with literary and dramatic perspectives. Emphasis is placed on description of the historical development of practical theatrical activities and the rise of dramatic literature, with special attention given to the institutions in which those activities took place. Some parts of the study concentrate on the dramatic, poetic and literary dimensions; therefore, an attempt has been made to present in some detail several of what I consider to be the most important dramatic works in the various historical phases. The art of drama submits to our judgment, touches our instincts, and stimulates our emotions. It is not intended for "a student coolly isolated in his study," but rather for "a mass of spectators of varied temperaments gathered in a theater."²⁰ Hence, in addition to an analysis of the written texts, my discussion of the plays will also refer to the relevant details of their practical staging.

I have made efforts to collect the available material on the formative stages of Palestinian theatre – that before 1948, which was unfortunately destined to fail as an outcome of political events; and that which followed the 1967 War and would lead to development of the professional theatre in the 1970s. Due to the importance of both periods, mainly from the point of view of Palestinian nation-building, the data collected will be presented at some length. On the other hand, the quantity of material I have gathered in recent years about Palestinian theatrical activities since the 1980s, including the extensive theatrical activities in Arabic inside Israel, is so vast and multifarious that a full analysis of the material perforce requires a second volume.

As a student of literature and theatre, I will be considering my next volume on Palestinian theatre as a kind of "compensation" for the need to here neglect the analytical approach in favor of the historical chronological one. It will deal in detail with several theatrical issues which for lack of space cannot be treated here, such as the development of the female role, Islamic theatre, prison theatre, children's theatre, the role of guest troupes, the development of the monodrama as a favorite genre, and the phenomenon of Hebrew-speaking actors in Israeli theatre. In addition, some outstanding printed plays and live performances, which are mentioned briefly in the present study, will be analyzed in some detail.

I generally avoided referring to the content of printed plays and live performances, and no in-depth investigation of such plays and performances will be undertaken in the present study. Two exceptions to this are the activities of the al-Balālīn and al-Ḥakawātī troupes, which have been presented in some detail due to the vital effect these troupes had on the professionalization of Palestinian theatre. Although this study deals with Palestinian theatre into the late 1970s, the activities of the al-Ḥakawātī troupe will be dealt with into the 1990s. I hope the material I present in this study will be helpful to other students of Palestinian literature and theatre and enable them to contribute detailed studies of their own on specific plays and particular performances.

²⁰ Jayyusi and Allen 1995, p. vii.

In carrying out my research all sorts of materials were used: books, journals, dailies, archives, radio and television programs as well as video and audio cassettes. Use is made also of resources of the Internet including material published through Web sites or various mailing lists. Unless otherwise noted the analysis of the plays presented in the article is based upon a viewing of them, whether in live performance or on video-cassette. I also used the material, based upon interviews and information brochures, found in Dov Shinar's study on communication and nation-building in the West Bank.²¹ Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from the Arabic are mine.

I am very grateful to the undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Haifa, especially the participants in the seminars dealing with Palestinian theatre. The discussions we had provided me with many insights into a variety of topics. Some of the students submitted seminar papers on particular aspects of Palestinian drama and theatre.²² I would like to express my thanks to the friends and colleagues who have assisted me and contributed their comments, especially Katharina Lack for her valuable remarks, and Professor Dan Urian of Tel Aviv University, who originally invited me to write the article that emerged as the nucleus of the present study.

Some of the arguments I present here have already appeared elsewhere in more sketchy and tentative versions, and I wish to thank the editors and publishers of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Ha-Mizrah He-Hadash* (The New East), *Journal of Theatre and Drama*, and *Theatre Survey* for permission to re-use this material. My thanks to Indiana University Press and Aida Bamia and Thomas G. Ezzy for permission to quote from their translation of the al-Balālin troupe's *al-'Atma*, published in *Modern Arabic Drama* edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen (1995). I thank Aviva Butt for reading the first draft of the book and offering me her important remarks and the Research Authority at the University of Haifa for providing me with style-editing services. The final stage in the preparation of the study was undertaken while I was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, in 2004-05. I am very grateful to Georges Khalil of the Wissenschaftskolleg and Professor Angelika Neuwirth of the Freie Universität Berlin for their good advice and help in the publication of the study. My thanks to Kevin McAleer of the Wissenschaftskolleg for his help in style-editing some parts of the book.

Only because it is customary that a researcher's appears on the title page, does my name appear here as author, for the work, whatever it is worth, is mine only in the sense that I assembled the work of other scholars, colleagues and students. Naturally, none of them should be held in any way accountable for the views expressed and the book's deficiencies, which are wholly my responsibility.

²¹ Especially Shinar 1987, pp. 132-140.

²² Special thanks go to Muḥammad 'Alī, Fātin 'Allush, Yamin 'Ārif, Majdūlin Awwād, Basilyūs Bawārda, Mālik Ḥujayrāt, Ridā Aḥmad Ighbāriyya, Fu'ād Dhib Kana'āni, Alona Luski, Yafit Marom, and Yaffa Frisch.