



Theatre in Morocco and the Postcolonial Turn

Khalid Amine, September 21, 2009

Moroccan theater exists in a liminal space, between East and West. It is a fusion of Western theatrical traditions and the Arabo-Tamazegh performance cultures. The hybrid nature of such a theater is evident in the way popular performance behavior such as manifested in performance spaces like *al-halqa*¹ (the circle) has been transposed from public squares and marketplaces like Marrakech's *jmaa-elfna*² into modern theater buildings. *Al-halqa* has a managed environment that is strictly opposed to the European proscenium tradition. Its audience is called upon "to drift" spontaneously into an arc surrounding the performance from all sides. The space required by the *hlayqi* (the maker of spectacle) is not specified, and the timing of the performance is any time. No fourth wall with hypnotic fields is erected between stage and auditorium. All the marketplace or Medina gates can be transformed into a stage; and the entire circle is a performance space, as open as its repertoire of narrative performances, acrobatic games, songs, and dances.

In retrieving this performance tradition, theater in Morocco has become more and more improvisational and self-reflexive, even as such retrieval is still negotiated within the paradoxical parameters of appropriating and dis-appropriating the

¹ ***Al-halqa*** is a public gathering in the form of a circle around a person or a number of persons (*hlayqi/hlayqia*) in a public space (be it a marketplace, a medina gate, or a newly devised downtown square). It is a space of popular culture that is open to all the people from different paths of life. *Al-halqa* hovers between high culture and low mass culture, sacred and profane, literacy and orality. Its repertoire combines fantastic, mythical, and historical narratives from *Thousand and One Nights* and *Sirat bani hilal*, as well as stories from the holy Quran and the Sunna of the prophet Mohammed along with local witty narrative and performative forms. The medium of the halqa also varies from storytelling to acrobatic acting and dancing.

² ***Jmaa-elfna*** is one of the famous sites of popular culture in Morocco. It is a huge and open square in the city of Marrakech wherein story telling and other performance behaviors, which belong to Moroccan popular culture, are practiced as licensed and free oral performances. In brief, the square is a site of popular orality and ritualistic formulae, as well as an archive of Moroccan performance cultures. The square is classified by UNESCO as a site of living immaterial human heritage.



Western models of theatre making that were introduced to the country by the turn of the twentieth century. The Europeanization of Morocco's performance cultures happened as late as 1913, the date of the creation of 'Teatro Cervantes' (its architecture is similar to the Berliner Ensemble) in Tangier and other theatres in big metropolitan centers such as Casablanca, Rabat, Tetouan. The first Arab theatre company visited Morocco in 1923. By the year 1926, Moroccan Amateur companies started to perform in Fes, Tetouan, Tangier, and Casablanca. Famous Moroccan political figures of the independence movement not only encouraged theatre activity, but also utilized theatre's intricate ability to subvert as a means of empowering the majority of illiterate Moroccan subjects under the Franco-Hispanic colonial administrations. In 1950, the French colonial administration decided to render theatrical activity in Morocco less progressive, for Moroccan theater during the colonial period was generally a theater of resistance that paid more attention to the political rather than the aesthetic. Professionals were called from France in order to orient Moroccan theater toward the direction designated for it by the colonial administration. Thus, André Voisin and Charles Nugue assisted by two Moroccans, Abdessamad Kenfaoui and Tahar Ouaziz supervised theatrical workshops in the Mamora Center in Rabat. As a result of such theatrical training, the first professional Moroccan theater company was created under the auspices of the ministry of Youth and Sport bringing together Tayeb Saddiki, Ahmed Tayeb Laalej, Fatima Regragi, Abdessamad Dinia, Driss Tadili, Mohamed Afifi and others. The Mamora theatrical circle, then, was created at the turn of independence (1956-1975), yet still under the influence of the French colonial policy of containment and assimilation. The aim of such Francophone policy was to absorb the nationalist subversive actions that were manifested in the early theater of resistance, and to establish, instead, a mystifying theatrical apparatus that would smooth conflict and resolve social tension through the implementation of a Moroccan version of the French Comedy. Thus the Mamora was established as an official theatrical company. Upon the independence of Morocco in 1956, the National Theater

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Mohammed the Fifth was created in Rabat, along with the Moroccan theater Research Center under government auspices. From 1956 until 1974, a period covering postcolonial administration, the Mamora group (under the supervision of the ministry of Youth and Sport with the playwright Driss Tadili as artistic director) performed a series of adaptations from the Western repertoire, mainly from Molière as a landmark of French theatre. Shakespeare occupied a secondary position. In brief, the Mamora theater company that occupied a hegemonic space within the Moroccan theatrical map since 1956 exemplifies the collaboration that was effected between the State and the Stage, for theatre was utilized as a means of indoctrinating people and depoliticizing them.

Colonial politics of theatre added more complexities to the emerging Moroccan stage. Hybridity has become quite apparent in the works of Tayeb Saddiki – Morocco's most notorious theatre man – and others like Ahmed Tayeb Laalej, Abdessalam Chraïbi, Driss Tadili, Abdessamad Kenfaoui up to Zobeir Ben bouchta. Saddiki's play titled *diwan sidi abderrahman al-majdub* (The collection of Master Abderrahman al-majdub, 1967) is conceived in an open public place that is also hybrid in the way it holds up a mirror to the performance itself almost in the same way as the Commedia dell'arte. The play's structure is circular rather than linear. It is situated in *Jemaa-elfna*, an open site of performance cultures that is also a space of hybridity. The first scenes of *al-majdub* production are designed to draw our attention to the making of *al-halqa* and its circular architecture. On-stage actors inscribe the circular morphology of *al-halqa* through a series of comic acrobatic games and mimetic body language. They serve as audiences for each other as the narrator (the story teller) gives space to his little *halqa*. The *halqa* of al-majdub represents the Moroccan popular poet as a Shakespearean fool, giving voice to wisdom in a corrupt social order. The effects of such an absurd situation are sharply comic, yet leading to a collective questioning of the status quo.

Saddiki's play, *Maqamat Badia Ezzamane El-Hamadani* (The Assembly of Badie Ezzamane El-Hamadani)³ marks another turning point in Moroccan theater as it restores the performative qualities of maqamat's narrativity back to the Moroccan and Arab stage. The play takes place in an open public square. At the outset, Saddiki's narrator announces that it can be any of the famous Arab squares: it can be Al-Halfaouin of Tunis, or Harun Arrachid's square in Baghdad, or the Green Ataba of Cairo, or even our magical Jemaa-elfna in Marrakech. Then the two prominent *bsat* (a semi circular performance event that appeared in Morocco in the mid 19th C in the cities of Marrakech and Fes) personae playfully call the attention of their audiences. Other actors play audiences too while preparing to adapt to the roles. Like most halqa's of the *bsat* tradition, the performance lacks an organic thematic unity, for it is fragmented into little *furjas* (performances) or *halqas* (circles) that have only one common aspect: that is the master narrator. In the first *furja* (performance) Issa Bnou Hicham tells the story of his friend, poet Abdoul Fath Al-Iskandari whom he surprisingly runs into in one of the *halqas* of Baghdad. Aboul Fath justifies his present situation as a performer and condemns the decadent spirit of his society. The second *furja* is composed of five *maqama* wherein the two friends Issa Bnou Hicham and Aboul Fath Al Iskandari have more stories performed in the *bsat*'s *halqa*. All these stories are derived from the *maqamas*, yet theatricalised as fragmented little performances. Saddiki's fragmentation strategy is rooted in the dynamics of the *halqa* and its fluidity as far as the unity of subject is

³ The *maqama* or assembly is an Arab artistic form. It is a long narrative poem. The tradition of *maqama* started in the eleventh century when Badie a-Azzaman al-hamadani composed his first *maqama*. Though it has dramatic characteristics, the *maqama* cannot be regarded as a complete play destined for the stage. Jacob Landou highlights the theatricality of the *maqama*: "Another popular literary form which often contains the elements of mimicry is the Arabic *maqama*, in which the theme was frequently presented in the guise of conversation, parts of which imitated various characters" (Jacob, M. Landou, *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema*(Philadelphia: 1957). The *rawi* (narrator) presents his narrative in the form of story telling, yet adapts different roles to render his characters more flesh and blood. However, the poetic aspect of the *maqama* is much more dominant than its theatricality as Landou rightly observes: "(Its) linguistic sophistication is valued more than the successful imitation" (Landou, *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*, 3).



concerned. In sum, Saddiki's two plays described briefly above exemplify the postcolonial dynamics of retrieving tradition as a form of interweaving with past performance cultures.

However, the most recent Moroccan improvised theatrical projects engage in what Abdelkbir Khatibi calls '*un dialogue en abyme*', that is a self-reflexive dialogue with the actual theatrical apparatus in Morocco. Mohamed El-kaghat remains the best representative of the subversive Moroccan *murtajala* (*L'Impromptu Théâtrale*/the Improvised play). He is an academic, playwright, director, and actor who is well acquainted with the Western *Impromptu* and its comic yet ironic representation of theatre problematics since Molière's *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (1663), and *Critique de L'école des Femmes*, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search for an Author* (1921) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1929), Eugene Ionesco's *L'Impromptu d'Alma* (1956), or Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* (1982). El-Kaghat realized the intricate ability of such a theatrical genre to communicate the Moroccan tremulous performance body through self-reflexive performance semiosis. In his prologue to *Murtajalat Fes*⁴ (The Improvised of Fes), El-kaghat not only legitimizes his practice of the *Impromptu*, but also our need for such a theater practice: "Because our theatre suffers from all kinds of problems, I have adapted *the Impromptu* in order to expose them to the audience after I realized that discussing problems is not as effective as performing them on stage. Through irony and the exaggeration of comic situations I desire to create a dark comedy."⁵

The improvised play becomes a legitimate theater practice that is based on an unfinished dramatic script, full of holes and that should be filled in the process of the performance event through actors' improvisation. And this very fact enlarges the freedom of actors who contribute a great deal in the re-writing of the dramatic script in every performance.

⁴ Mohamed El-kaghat, *al-murtajala al-jadida & murtajalt Fes* (The New Improvised Play & The Improvised of Fes) (Unfinished Theatrical Projects), Casablanca: Sabou Publications, 1991.

⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

The *murtajala* is comic through and through, due to its hilarious witty dialogues, comic situations, and sharp critique of theater practice within its social milieu. Still, it is considered a dark comedy as it foregrounds the old Moroccan saying “*more sadness makes you laugh*”. In *The Improvised of Fes*, for example, and through an ironic representation of the corrupt and ruthless judge *al-kadi Yazref*, El-kaghat reminds us of one of the most painful moments in Moroccan theater’s brief history, namely the Fakh Ahmed Ben Saddik’s fatwa against the practice of theater and acting at large: “Ah... Ah... You don’t know that acting is forbidden by divine law? Haven’t you read the book of “*Ikamatu dālili àla hurmati at-tamtil*”? You don’t know that the imitation of non-believers is forbidden...”⁶ Such statement sums up a whole mindset that still regards theater as an evil practice which should be eradicated from our deeply rooted Arabo-Islamic culture. El-kaghat’s ironic reflection on the subject illustrates the true problems that hinder artistic expression in Morocco. Yet, in *murtajalat Chmisa Lalla*⁷, the general public’s incessant search for trivialities and non-substantial laughter change all of a sudden into a state of deep sorrow. Lalla Chmisa, daughter of the sultan can no longer laugh or enjoy the beauty of life because of such sadness. So the sultan asks all actors and entertainers of the country to restore her smile and discover the causes behind her deep sorrow. The play critiques the reification of theater practice under government auspices (especially the highly disturbing amateur theater of the 1970s), and reveals the impotence of most selected juries in the National Festival of Amateur Theater. *Lajnat al-hukàm al-hukamaa al-muhanàkin* (the committee of wise and fat jury) is supposed to be the savior of Lalla Chmisa. But what happens in the play is quite the opposite, for they deepen her sadness. This fact illustrates their incompetence and inability to appreciate substantial art. The representation of the committee’s debates and suggestions reveal their theatrical illiteracy, a fact that creates ironic situations.

⁶ Mohamed El-kaghat, *Murtajalat Fes*: 83-84.

⁷ Mohamed El-kaghat, *Chmisa Lalla* (unpublished script).



The Improvised of Casablanca (Arabic Version 2003 / French Version 2005) by Masrah Adifa al-ukhra (The Other Bank Theatre Company) also stages the predicament of theatre practice in Morocco during the present period which is often called the period of change in the ministry of cultures (with the poet Mohamed El-Achaari as minister between 1998 and 2007, and renown actress of Masrah Al-Yawm Touria Jebran as minister of culture since 2007). Through an intricate deployment of black humor, the play dismantles the hegemonic discursive structures that control theater practice in Morocco. Such predicament is manifestly related to the status of the Arts and Artists in a country that still regards Artistic expression as a luxury rather than being functional in the construction of cultural identity. The play's comicality invokes a bitter laugh, a laugh that laughs at the absurd situation wherein these trained young actors of the High Institute of Theatre (ISADAC) found themselves thrown into being in a social structure that hinders art as a profession. More than that, and through an ironic representation of the National Theater's Ex-director and his naïve understanding of the needs and demands of professionals, the play sharply critiques government policies as regards theater and calls for an urgent change in mindsets and subsidy structures. These young professionals have chosen the improvised form as a means to make a powerful statement about the state of Performing Arts in Morocco. Their message was underwritten within comic situations that are brought to absurd extremes invoking what I called before 'the bitter laugh'. Because their situation (and that of all other Moroccan artists in general) is so critical at all levels, they have chosen to laugh at it.