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A Narrative in the Making: Syrian Lives Through Traditional and Applied Theatre

Fadi Skeiker¹

The Lure of Television

I grew up in the Middle East, in Syria, to an intellectual middle-class family in the suburbs of Damascus. During my formative years in the 90s, the Syrian television drama was reaching its regional heights. There were one or two television channels at that time and I still remember when my whole family would eagerly wait for the time of *musalsal* (serial dramas) usually around nine at night. Over time I started paying attention to the names of the actors. Then, to those who wrote the *musalsal* and then who directed them, and I started to notice that the world of the *musalsalāt* (plural form of *musalsal*) was a superior reality, one in which the majority of characters were solidly middle class, living in urban environments, driving cars, exploring hobbies, and most importantly communicating effectively and expressing their emotions. *Musalsalat* at the time offered a safe haven to imagine what a Syrian life could look like, and to this day they are vital sites where Syrians engage in the social act of spectating on characters who speak their language and share their cultural references, but with slight differences. For example, most of these characters live in urban settings, depicting lives distinct from the majority of Syrians who prior to 2011 mainly resided in rural areas with aspirations of moving to

¹ Professor of Theater, Fordham University

the city. These musalsalat also provide teenagers on the brink of transitioning to university life in Damascus with an opportunity to rehearse and envision the lifestyle awaiting them in the city.

Today, Syrians in the diaspora continue this tradition, eagerly anticipating new musalsalat to recreate that communal act of social spectating. Actors, directors, and writers involved in these productions wield significant power—transforming lives and showcasing different possibilities for living. The idea of working in musalsalat has felt akin to being a public intellectual, capable of influencing public discourse on various issues. In that context, as a teenager I was inspired to become part of that transformative scene, and began fantasizing that I would become a Syrian TV megastar and feature in my own musalsal. To achieve that dream, I had to navigate the traditional path of acceptance into the highly selective Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Damascus. Due to Syria's prominent TV industry, the institute attracted students from across the Arab region who were eager to study theater and become familiar with the flourishing Syrian TV industry, which at the turn of the millenium was beginning to dominate many Arab countries, especially in the Gulf states. Opportunities to study theater in the Arab region were limited at this time; apart from the Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Syria, there were only two other similar institutions in Kuwait and Cairo. However, the Syrian Institute was particularly sought after due to the distinctive expertise of its professors and their connections to Syrian TV industry.

My professors were a mix of faculty with Russian training and Syrian TV superstars with professional expertise. As a student, I was pulled between a professor who prided himself on being “the student of the student of the student” of Stanislavsky² and a faculty member so famous that he couldn't

² Konstantin Sergeyeveich Stanislavski was a seminal Soviet Russian theatre practitioner. He was widely recognized as an outstanding character actor, and the many productions that he directed garnered him a reputation as one of the leading theatre directors of his generation.

even walk in the street without causing a scene. I excelled in the context of the theater institute, focusing on the connection between theory and practice, and I was well on my way, as were many of my cohort, to either do theater or television.

Turning Point

Instead of becoming a superstar of Syrian drama, a writer, or a director in *musalsalat*, I received a Fulbright grant and was accepted into a master's degree program at Emerson College in Boston. There, I took a couple of classes with theater professors such as Robbie McCauley,³ and suddenly the idea of returning to Syria and becoming a star started to fade. Instead, I began to think about theater and how it can change the lives of the oppressed and empower people on the so-called margins of society. My classes with Robbie were complemented by puppetry classes with John Bell,⁴ and where I was introduced to the political power of theater and the importance of blending the activist world with artistic work. While there, I had an opportunity to participate in a workshop with the Living Theater Company.⁵ In that experience, we reflected on the socio-political elements of representing diasporic identities in Western contexts in the name of fostering dialogue. I remember during that workshop experience they asked me to consider the political future of Syria. In response, I developed a scene in which the sky was filled with war planes. First one, then another and another until there were so many planes in that sky that they shielded the

³ Robbie Doris McCauley was an American playwright, director, performer, and professor. McCauley is best known for her plays *Sugar* and *Sally's Rape*, among other works that addressed racism in the United States and challenged audiences to participate in dialogue with her work.

⁴ John is a performer, writer, and teacher who started making theater seriously with Bread and Puppet Theater and was a company member of that troupe for over a decade.

⁵ The Living Theatre is an American theater company founded in 1947 and based in New York City. It is the oldest experimental theater group in the United States.

sun. Suddenly, they began dropping bombs all over. Though this was in 2005, I recall this clearly and question my own foreshadowing of what would unexpectedly come just a few years later. But in my active imagination, it must have been a reflection of the only other television programming we received in addition to *musalsalat*, dedicated to building a sense of national unity in the face of an ever-impending war.

Immediately after Emerson, I went to the University of Texas at Austin to pursue my PhD in Performance as Public Practice, a unique program that focuses on connecting theater practice with active citizenship and social justice. After receiving a foundation from both McCauley and Bell, I was certain that I wanted to expand my work in the area of theater for social change. Two memorable projects from my years in Texas involved directing a series of short plays written by Susan Lori Parks⁶ using Arab shadow theater techniques and leading a series of workshops with international students at UT-Austin to encourage them to be civically active during their studies. I later wrote my dissertation on applied theater and liminal citizenship where I made a case for the efficacy of applied theater in activating notions of citizenship and civic engagement. This time as a graduate student in the US shaped my new vision of what theater was and what it could do. I no longer saw theater as purely product or performance driven. Instead, I began to see my discipline as a series of practices and ideologies that could be used for a variety of purposes beyond entertainment.

After completing my PhD, I returned to Syria for a time before taking on a teaching position at the University of Jordan in Amman. Returning to a culture that values traditional theater, I began maintaining two lives: one as an applied theater artist and another as a theater scholar. Taking on an academic role allowed me to merge the two sides of my practice in ways I

⁶ Susan-Lori Parks is an American playwright, screenwriter, musician and novelist. Her play *Topdog/Underdog* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002. Parks was the first African-American woman to receive the award for drama.

hadn't anticipated. In my traditional academic life, I had been hired by a university to teach regular theater courses such as acting, directing, script analysis, and theater collaboration. In my other life, I was wearing my applied theater hat and leading applied theater programs. While in Jordan, I began to write and reflect on my work in this relatively young field.

As my tenure at the University of Jordan continued, I served as both assistant and then associate professor of theater and as assistant dean twice, once for student affairs and once for quality assurance. I taught acting, directing, and theater education while being an active player in the Jordanian professional theater scene, serving as a panelist and judge for most of the theater festivals in Jordan. It has always been important to me to inhabit the life of an arts professor, focusing on artistic expression in my professional work while publishing in peer-reviewed journals about my work. While teaching purely artistic forms, I carried with me the ethos of my applied theater practice and empowered my female-identifying students to write, direct, and act, hiring them in my applied theater projects outside the university. A memorable project from that time was a shadow theater workshop. I used devised theater techniques to collectively script a series of scenes that focused on the themes of child labor, attitudes toward refugees, and women's empowerment. The workshop lasted for a month, during which I trained the group on how to build a shadow theater, and we toured all over Jordan in a traveling show style.

I was leading what seemed like an eventless but beautiful life as a young professor who was also directing and doing applied theater in Jordan. Then 2011 came, and nothing was the same. Thousands upon thousands of Syrian refugees started coming to Jordan, the Zaatari camp was built on the border, and a rapid shift began in how Syrians were perceived in Jordan⁷. I felt this shift firsthand, having lived in Jordan both before and

⁷ The Zaatari refugee camp is a refugee camp in Jordan, located 10 kilometers east of Mafraq, which has gradually evolved into a permanent settlement; it is the world's largest camp for Syrian refugees.

after the influx of refugees. The same organizations I was working with as an applied theater artist started doing work with Syrian refugees and asked me to join forces to use theater as a tool to address the social and psychological well-being of Syrian youth.

From here my life, research, and work changed dramatically, and I found myself increasingly drawn, directly or indirectly, to working with Syrian refugees. Perhaps equally important, I began to drift away from traditional theater and more intensively engaging in applied theater practice.

Applied Theater

Applied theater is broadly defined as the use of theater techniques among a specific community to encourage the members of that community to collectively rethink and embody a specific issue. Applied theater helps facilitate dialogue, heal emotional wounds, or process significant issues within a community. Most scholars and practitioners who write about applied theater agree that its function is not necessarily to create a performance at the end, but rather to create dialogue and opportunities for the community to reflect upon the issue or concern being discussed; the focus remains on the process and the journey of learning and discovery, although a final product may be produced. It serves as a means of giving voice to those who are not heard and offers them a platform to process their situation and advance their psychological and social well-being. Within my applied theater workshops, I continually ask questions rather than presenting answers.

The dichotomy between process and product in applied theater is a contested idea favoring one over the other, often depending on the geographical area where it is practiced. For example, applied theater in the Middle East is more focused on the product, emphasizing the sharing of the presentation with members of the larger community. There, applied theater is closer to the Western understanding of community-based theater in which a group of community members gathers to put on a

show. In the West applied theater takes on another dimension where the focus is on the process rather than the product to the degree that the product is not even part of the applied theater work. Applied theater in this context is similar to our understanding of drama therapy, where whatever happens in the session stays in the session with no desire to share it publicly with an audience or community members.

When I started working in Jordan in 2009, almost all applied theater projects focused on theater devising: the artist goes to a community, leads a workshop, and then creates a performance with community members to share. There are no professional actors or stage lighting, just a social story meaningful to the community members. Most of the work I practiced or observed at that time focused on gender equality within the Jordanian community. A typical story devised in this context was that of a woman who wanted to study a "masculine" discipline such as engineering but faced difficulties from community members who tried to push her to study nursing or education to become a teacher. These were the kinds of projects within the scope of applied theater in Jordan before 2009.

Within the framework of my applied theater practice in Jordan, I also led several programs with and for Syrian refugees, addressing their unique challenges and aspirations. One such program in Zarqa⁸ involved twenty Syrian refugees navigating education and the job market in Jordan. The workshop culminated in a community theater performance that highlighted their narratives, allowing them to share their struggles and resilience with a broader audience. In another project, I collaborated with director Rana Kazkaz⁹ while she was preparing her feature film *The Translator*. Together with Rana

⁸ A city in the northern part of Jordan.

⁹ Rana Kazkaz is a Syrian-American filmmaker and professor. Her films have received numerous international awards and selections, such as at Cannes, Sundance, TIFF, and Tribeca. She is also an associate professor at Northwestern University in Qatar where she teaches narrative filmmaking.

and Anas Khalaf¹⁰, we led what initially appeared to be an acting workshop for Syrian refugees in Jordan, aiming to identify a refugee actor for the lead role of *The Translator*. However, the workshop quickly evolved into an embodied political dialogue, exploring the meaning of "Syrianhood" in the context of diaspora and displacement.

Additionally, I facilitated a program in the Za'atari refugee camp with Syrian youth, focusing on imagining and reimagining their futures. Living under difficult conditions, these young participants dreamed of accessing proper education and leaving the confines of the refugee camp. The project aimed to provide a creative outlet for their aspirations while fostering dialogue about their lived experiences and hopes for the future.

Another Turning Point

The shifts in my and other theatre artists' approach to applied theatre was a response in part to the evolving trauma of the Syrian refugee crisis. After the Arab Spring, we began to see applied theater experiences focusing on public presentations featuring Syrian refugees, most notably the work of Nawar Bolbol¹¹, who staged *King Lear* in the Zaatari camp. Gradually, applied theater in the Middle East and elsewhere began to adopt a therapeutic approach, focusing on the well-being of those involved, with the notion of diminishing the element of public sharing.

My own practice bounced between both approaches. Through the intensity of my work, I began to feel the suffering of the people firsthand, especially migrants and refugees from Syria and other affected countries. When I started with a product-oriented practice, my work became more reflective, and any simple presentations were part of the workshop format and

¹⁰ Anas Khalaf is a Syrian-French filmmaker and actor. He co-founded Synéastes Films, focusing on Middle Eastern films through international co-productions.

¹¹ Nawar Bolbol is a Syrian theatre director, actor, playwright, and founder of Al-Khareef Theatre Troupe in Damascus, Syria.

not shared with the wider community. During this time, I became a research fellow at the Interweaving Performance Cultures at the Free University of Berlin in Germany. By the time I began working with refugees in Berlin, I understood that I could not ask participants to share their personal trauma in public performances, recognizing that they were simultaneously living and processing the ongoing trauma of war and displacement, whether in my workshops or in various venues. Asking them to bare this trauma for German audiences would be damaging and counterintuitive the healing that the applied theater workshop aimed to provide.

In the time between after 2011, I could detect a shift in the rhetoric regarding the perception of Syrians both in the West and the Arab world from before 2011 when Syrians were welcomed, appreciated, and described as “cool or smart” to after 2011 when they had become “a burden and problematic.”¹² At the same time, I entertained the idea of leaving Jordan and starting a life in the West. This shift was a surprisingly excellent catalyst that allowed me to focus and reflect on my work on applied theater and refugees, provided me with the opportunity to observe theater artist Alexander Schroeder in Berlin, who was working with and for refugees¹³. Observing Schroeder’s practice helped me conceptualize how Western practitioners conceived of our shared understanding of the applications for applied theater and how I might envision my own practice differently within the Western context.

Still holding true to my commitment to a more therapeutic application without public sharing, I continued to lead theater workshops in refugee centers around Berlin, working closely on the artistic aspects of performance such as character signature and blocking. During these workshops, I developed what I would describe as an “embodied poetics

¹² Targeting my “Syrianhood” often took the form of microaggressions, subtly conveyed rather than directly expressed.

¹³ Alexandar Schroeder is a German theatre artist/educator who started working with Syrian refugees in Berlin in 2016.

practice," where the bodies of the spectators became the site for presenting and reflecting on a traumatic moment. I recall an example of this practice from a workshop I led in Berlin with Syrian refugees housed in a refugee transition center. One focus was on the hope for a better future, where a group of three participants—a mother and her two children—recited a poem they had developed in the workshop:

*Tomorrow will be better
We cannot forget the hope
The future is for us
We will forget the trauma
And tomorrow we will succeed
I am hopeful
We are hopeful*

They recited this poem against a backdrop of music, while touching each other's shoulders and holding hands, which extended to form one big, connected formation. This beautiful scene lasted for about a minute and a half but took approximately six hours to execute in a room with no audience other than the participants themselves. The hours of practice for this scene resulted not only from rehearsing the choreography but also from reflecting on, discussing, and remembering the trauma they had experienced until they arrived at that moment. The work on this private piece had an emotional impact on the participants; I still remember how they left the workshop that day holding hands. When they returned the next day for the second day of the workshop, I recall them arriving early and welcoming me as if I were an old friend.

My work in Portugal, where I had received a second visiting appointment, revolved around the intercultural dialogue between East and West. Carrying my experiences from Germany, I knew that the negative perceptions of Syrians would follow me to another European country. I made it (in part) my mission to highlight manuscripts written by Syrian playwrights

as, I returned to teaching purely performance-based theatrical courses, such as acting in English. However, my limited Portuguese and my Portuguese students' inability to act in English presented a unique challenge. Somehow, I needed to coach them! But how? This experience allowed me to fully embrace applied theater aesthetics and its core artistic tool—the "frozen image," where the body becomes the medium for storytelling. The use of the "frozen image" in both teaching and directing became an integral part of my artistic identity, emerging out of necessity as it provided me with effective tools for communication.

My work in Portugal was also interdisciplinary because it enabled me to collaborate with professors from different departments. One particular collaboration involved translating *The King's Elephant*, a play by prominent Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous¹⁴ into Portuguese¹⁵ and directing it with my advanced acting students. Reflecting on my time in Portugal, I see my professional work there as a continuation of my digging into the work of Syrian playwrights and attempting to introduce them to Portuguese audiences, a country with few migrants or refugees at that time.¹⁶

In 2017, I moved permanently to the USA. This time, I moved for a job that seemed at the outset to revolve around traditional theatrical skills: teaching directing and directing student productions in a university setting. During that time, I was invited to direct a play called *I Want a Country* by Andreas

¹⁴ Saadallah Wannous was a Syrian playwright, writer, and editor on Arabic theater.

¹⁵ I collaborated with graduate students at The University of Minho who were pursuing their degrees in translation and generously offered their expertise in both English and Portuguese to translate the English version into Portuguese.

¹⁶ That has changed, and now many migrants from Brazil and other former colonies live in the country, as well as tens of thousands of Western lifestyle migrants who have benefitted from Portugal's flexible long-term visa and residency laws.

Flourakis¹⁷. The play is flexible and can be read symbolically as it reflects on a group of people leaving their country in search of a better one. I quickly decided to make my directorial adaptation of the play about the Syrian diaspora, collaborating with the designing team to reflect on what it means to develop this story in a refugee tent, or delivering the lines while actors are on a boat in the middle of the sea. Being in the US had helped me to develop a critical perspective on the Syrian war that I just didn't have the luxury of fostering while actively in the Middle East or while in transition in Europe, particularly in a country that was also being heavily impacted by the migrant crisis. This distance allowed me to shape *I Want a Country* into a multisensory performance, seemingly reflective of the jarring nature of displacement itself.

My work on Flourakis' text later led to an opportunity to direct a play called *Kiss* in at regional theater (The Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia). *Kiss* is a play written by Chilean playwright Guillermo Calderon¹⁸ about a group of Western actors who are interested in performing a Syrian manuscript they found online. Their intention is to bring attention to the Syrian cause. Later in the play, they interview the playwright, only to discover that they have misinterpreted the play.

Kiss examines the role of Western theater artists and performance makers during crises, exploring how solidarity is imagined and performed. The play holds space for people impacted by crisis and war, theater artists, and the audience. The play also examines a central notion in applied theater related to the narratives of the marginalized, the migrants, and the Syrian voices—both those living inside Syria and those who are refugees. It addresses the critical question of who has the right

¹⁷ Flourakis is an influential Greek playwright and director. He has written more than thirty works for theater that have been translated into many languages.

¹⁸ Guillermo Calderón is an influential Chilean playwright, director, and screenwriter.

to tell a specific story. Is a Western theater company entitled to tell a Syrian story simply because they “care” about Syria and have the resources to do it? Does putting the Syrian voice in the public sphere by non-Syrians to bring attention to the Syrian cause carry the same merit as waiting until a Syrian story is presented in public by Syrian artists?

The play takes the audience on a journey similar to that of the Western actors in the play, who initially believe they are witnessing a Syrian drama about love and romance in the first act, only to discover in the second act that they were wrong. This empathetic journey is meant to implicate the Western audience and make them wonder what went wrong. *Kiss* also asks us to consider the line between political solidarity and cultural appropriation, asking ourselves when the notion of solidarity actually becomes cultural appropriation and if this connection is inevitable. What about the way we perceive the other—are we doomed to be lost in translation every time we try to present a work by someone else?

A key question I typically pose while I direct is: What will the audience think about right after the play, five years after the play, or ten years after the play? *Kiss*, in particular, serves as a reminder that the Syrian war is still ongoing, and that millions of displaced Syrian migrants and refugees still exist. However, the play also reflects on presenting stories from conflict zones, prompting the audience to consider what it means to be in solidarity with a specific displaced community. The play challenges audiences, especially Westerners, to reconsider their relationship with others and with stories from the Global South.

As of now, and this might change tomorrow, I have stopped identifying myself solely as a theater artist. Instead, I see myself as an enabler who uses theater as a tool to expose the narratives of the oppressed. These oppressed individuals can be Syrians, but they can also be any group that shares the feeling of being marginalized by the dominant culture. If Syria had remained unchanged since 2010, I would have defined myself simply as a professor and a director. I would likely have never

left Jordan and perhaps would have taken on new or different roles within the theater community there. Perhaps, even, I may have returned to Syria to reinvigorate my ambitions of working on *musalsalat*. What I do know, however, is that the war happened and my life and those of millions of other Syrians changed irreparably. Today, with a majority of us living in diaspora, we are working fiercely to simultaneously understand the implications of the war on our understanding of nationhood, culture, and the future that stand before us and our children. As a theater maker and scholar, I will continue to engage in work that lifts Syrian voices as well as ensuring those voices carry on into the future.