Reorientalism

A festival of Middle Eastern drama witnesses the emergence of a new immigrant community—and a new category of U.S. theatre

BY RANDY GENER

GOHAR BARSEGHYAN

Charles Isen, Raffi Wartanian and Leah Herman in *Coming Home*, by Motti Lerner.

ON DECEMBER 1—FOUR DAYS BEFORE GOLDEN Thread Productions staged a two-day forum as part of ReOrient Festival 2009 at Theatre Artaud in San Francisco—President Barack Obama gave an Afghanistan war speech at West Point that left many Americans feeling déjà vu all over again. "I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan," the president said. "After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home." This strategy, which acknowledged that the Afghan people would likely suffer the ravages of a civil war if the withdrawal were immediate, lurched between a surge and an exit. The rest of Obama's speech suggested that our interests, our means and our responsibility are finite in Afghanistan, but they do exist. As Obama put it, "We simply can't afford to ignore the price of these wars."

During the previous administration, Iraq dominated the U.S. media, while that other war in Central Asia, which had started earlier and is focused primarily today on preventing the growth of terrorism, was largely ignored. Predictably, plays about Iraq proliferated on American stages during the aught decade, from Heather Raffo's richly personal *9 Parts of Desire* and Josh Fox and Jason Christopher Hartley's riveting *Surrender* to George Packer's *Betrayed*, Ellen McLaughlin's *Ajax in Iraq*, and the extraordinary documentary play *Aftermath* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen. But when it comes to that other landlocked nation, to which our newly minted Nobel Peace laureate has decided to send more troops, the U.S. theatre has remained an extremely late responder.

This geographically lopsided state of affairs has been true in both British and U.S. theatres. The Bush/Blair axis revved up the fortunes of political theatre in both countries, but even as some angry or furrow-browed playwrights have begun to congratulate themselves for tackling the biggest matters of the day, the dearth persists of English-speaking drama (or drama in any other Western language, for that matter) that ponders our relation to the world-scale troubles brewing in Afghanistan. A pathetically small number of American works have drawn an emphatic circle on the Afghan map. The most notable is Tony Kushner's 2001 ramble *Homebody/Kabul*. Written before 9/11, it takes place in 1998, just after Bill Clinton's bombing of the terrorist camps. Reportedly, the Guthrie Theater of Minneapolis is planning to import for its 2010–11 season *The Great Game*, a cycle of 12 half-hour plays about Afghanistan's history, culture and politics. Yet this ambitious three-evening marathon was commissioned by London's Tricycle Theatre, and only one of the dozen works was penned by an American (J.T. Rogers). Does the failure of American politicians to grasp local realities in Afghanistan extend to the cultural practices of U.S. theatre artists as well?

That question resonated quietly but powerfully in San Francisco, where Obama's history-in-the-making war speech coincided with the celebratory events surrounding the 10th-year anniversary of the ReOrient Festival. Marking the historic emergence of a new genre of Middle Eastern–American drama in the U.S., the festival also hosted a book launch for TCG's *Salaam.Peace*, the first-ever anthology of Middle Eastern–American drama.

GOLDEN THREAD IS A NONPROFIT COMPANY exploring Middle Eastern identities, and of the nine festival plays unveiled on the shadowy stage of the Thick House in

the Portrero Hill district, Naomi Wallace's *No Such Cold Thing* had the distinction of being the only one that directly dealt with the war in Afghanistan. In this poetic parable, three figures—two young Afghan girls and a Chicano soldier from Indiana—loll about restlessly at the edge of a war zone in a desert near Kabul. It's late autumn 2001. For the moment, the Taliban is out of sight. The U.S. serviceman, Sergio, sprawls on a rusty spring bed with a sandbag as a pillow. The younger of the two girls, Alya (played with intensity by Sara Razavi), stands holding a suitcase, dressed in a burqa and U.S. Army boots far too big for her. In the twilight, Alya looks like she might have a hump on her back. "Quills," she explains. "I'm growing quills. Along my spine."

No Such Cold Thing dramatizes a puzzling reunion. Alya's older sister Meena (portrayed by a confident and lovely Nora el Samahy) has returned from England to fetch her. A taxi is waiting for them; their father is presumably at the airport. Partly because of the 300 sharp quills growing on Alya's back, however, Meena is having trouble convincing her sister to leave. "My back hurts," Alya complains. "It hurts so much I can hardly move." In director Bella Warda's mournful staging, one got the awful sense that those heavy boots were keeping Alya stolidly in place.

Proud Meena, her face naked to the elements, attempts to convince her sister to flee Afghanistan by speaking of the freedoms that lie ahead of them. In the West, Alya would be free to study the Urdu poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and the male of the species would no longer be forbidden territory: "I've been held in the arms. Of a man," Meena says, recalling the night she was carried by an honorable English stranger. "I couldn't find my way home. I got lost. I was tired, and he put his arms around me and carried me." Upon hearing this story, Alya is overtaken by a complex rush of prurient fascination, moral repulsion and aching longing. "Did he squeeze your boobs?" she wonders, then asserts: "That's a death sentence for you here. Whore. Whore. I have missed you every hour."

When Sergio (the likable Basel Al-Naffouri) wakes up, he wonders aloud where his army boots have gone, thinks (wrongly) that he slept off a night of drunken sexual revelry with the two sisters, and assumes that he is still living in mother's house in Gary, Ind. This American soldier's state of disorientation might be a metaphor for blundering American miscomprehension, but it soon becomes clear in Wallace's compact allegory that the ground has shifted beneath *all* of these characters' feet. The play is actually taking place after their deaths—they aren't in a house or in a bedroom but somewhere in limbo, reunited in the aftermath of a violent encounter in which 20 or 30 American soldiers came upon an Afghan village. It was Sergio who shot Meena and, amid his shock and guilt, tried to carry her into the shade to stop her bleeding. He failed. Sergio and his fleeing buddies were then interrupted by a land mine. Alya's sandbag of a corpse remains at the bottom of a well.

Grief is a social experience. But while the call for more U.S. troops to fight in the Middle East lends a new urgency and unnerving pertinence to Wallace's death-ridden play, grief is also about slippage. In this play, we seem to have wandered into a nightmare—but whose bad dream is it, exactly? And why is the strangeness of their grief not written in bruised hieroglyphics all over the muted faces of Wallace's characters? Wallace leaves us only with a terse question ("This was your. Freedom. For us?" Alya asks Sergio) before her dead characters exit the perimeters of a surrealistic plateau. It is as if these three souls were locked in a ritual of self-abasement.

The emotional restraint that grips *No Such Cold Thing* is elucidated in its haunting title, a reference to George Herbert's devotional poem "The Flower" ("Grief melts away / Like snow in May, / As if there were no such cold thing"), in which the poet contemplates the process of one's ironic acceptance of mortality. As evidenced by her heart-stopping collection *The Fever Chart: Three Short Visions of the Middle East*, Wallace, a London-based American writer, has never flinched from confronting the painful truths of the Middle East on U.S. stages. But it is worth noting, for the purposes of appreciating the new Middle Eastern–American drama, that while her representations are sympathetic and theatrically progressive, she is not of Middle Eastern descent, and that she prefers, like Caryl Churchill and Harold Pinter, to address difficult political subjects through quick hits (as opposed to, say, offering grand, overarching epics about the clash of civilizations).

Moreover, Wallace's Middle Eastern plays are frequently deceptive in their settings—she often throws out riddles and

eerily askew situations. Her characters are likely to be shocked to discover that their present realities are illusory—that the land they are fighting over might as well be a graveyard. In their existential disorientation, Wallace's Middle East plays escape the logic, the prison and the sentimental clichés of a realistic and more sociable theatre, because their impatient narratives take shape only to disintegrate, their dramatic value heightened by the instability of the drama itself.

CONSCIOUSLY OR NOT, MOST HOLLY-wood and television narratives assume a hostile approach to Arab Americans by characterizing them as helpless pawns, innocent victims or treacherous villains. So rife are the issues of cultural stereotyping in the media that taking a humorous slant has become a popular way for comics and theatre writers to diffuse the tension, perhaps, through such events as the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival or through satirical plays that feast upon the inherent inconsistencies and foibles of Arab and Arab-American culture. A good example: *Browntown*, a blistering comedy anthologized in *Salaam.Peace*, in which three brown-skinned male actors (two Arab Americans and one Indian American) compete for yet another terrorist role in a less-than-original TV movie called *The Color of Terror*. The play's author, Sam Younis, a Lebanese-American actor and a Texas native, notes: "Why am I routinely a candidate for terrorist roles? Why are these terrorist roles always named Mohammed? Why does that Indian guy keep getting the Arab terrorist parts over me?"

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Dina Mousawi, Michael Sommers and Afif Houssain in *A Marriage Proposal*, by Yussef El Guindi.

Sometimes in films or on television, a multiculturalist ethos is affirmed through the inclusion of decent Arab types—an assimilation imperative implying that "Arab" or "Muslim" could reliably serve as one half of a moral binary, with "American" on the other side.

"9/11 created great fear of the particular Arab/Muslim 'other,'" points out Dina Amin, an Egyptian stage director who is a professor of Arabic literature and language, and co-editor, with the drama critic Holly Hill, of *Salaam.Peace*. "9/11 also resulted in an interest in hearing Arab/Muslim stories—the stranger the story, the better, because that confirms the notion of difference and facilitates demonization. Remember how after 9/11, the popular TV show 'West Wing' went from oversimplification to total vilification of Islam and Muslims, all in one season? What we got after 9/11 was, by and large, two perspectives: On the one hand, Hollywood and the media reflected and analyzed the Arab/Muslim condition inside and outside the U.S., usually in response to the false assumption and naïve question, 'Why do they hate us?'. On the other hand, and as a result of the sweeping stereotyping that took place after 9/11, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans needed to tell their stories from their point of view."

Representing the diversity of Middle Eastern–American points of view, however, is not an easy task. For most of the past century, mainstream America has seen the Middle East as monolithic, made up of people of similar backgrounds and similar opinions. Moreover, American interest in the Middle East has been mapped largely through the intersecting deployment of cultural interests (such as "the Holy Land") and economic investments (i.e., vast reserves of oil). In the theatre, misconceptions about the Middle East are compounded by such heterogeneous factors as language and religion. And that's not even considering the heavy quills on the backs of writers of color: the difficulties of trying to get heard through the medium of theatre.

Patterns of immigration need also be considered. In *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media,*

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Nora el Samahy and Basel Al-Naffouri in *No Such Cold Thing*, by Naomi Wallace.

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Sara Razavi expresses herself in El Guindi's *The Monologist Suffers Her Monologue.*

(basically Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans) are labeled as '*les Beurs*' (slang for Arabs). The treatment of their artistic production can be construed as an expression of their social alienation or marginalization, or simply an expression of difference from their first-generation parents. So these categories are not specific to the American context alone. They exist around the world as a result of migrant populations or colonization."

and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945, Melani McAlister states that "following the 1965 change in immigration laws and especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war…increasing numbers of Palestinians, Iraqis, Yemenis and others began to join the Lebanese and Syrians of earlier generations. In contrast to earlier immigrants, these new arrivals were more likely to be Muslims, more nationalist and, after the Black Power and identity movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, more conscious of race and culture, as well as more critical and political, than previous generations." Arab-speaking immigrants soon became the fastest growing ethnic community in Detroit. By 1988, the Arab-American capital of Dearborn, Mich., could lay claim to its own theatre, AJYAL, which produced comedies about the challenges facing Arab immigrants. Meanwhile, the growing Iranian population in the Bay Area began to support a Farsi-speaking theatre group, Darvag, founded in 1985, which, according to Golden Thread Productions founder Torange Yeghiazarian, "created a strong theatre audience in Berkeley through [its] work in Persian."

From the beginning, the study of the contemporary Middle East was bedeviled by problems with definition: What exactly are the parameters of the so-called Middle East? What made it distinct from other regions? The editors of *Salaam.Peace* responded to these quandaries by putting out a call for plays through Arab, Iranian, Turkish and Israeli communities, asking for plays from writers who self-identified as Middle Eastern–Americans—"artists," as Dina Amin further explains, "who do not necessarily have a unified vision or constitute a movement within American theatre so far, but have become visible, for both positive and negative reasons, only after 9/11, because of their ethnic background."

But in an age of globalization and transnational migrations, why can't plays about the Middle East be considered irrespective of the author's bloodlines? "These categories exist in many parts of the world with varying degrees of distinction or discrimination," Amin says. "For example, North African writers in France

THE AMERICAN-FOCUSED GAZE OF *Salaam.Peace*, which makes perfect sense for an anthology of its scope, stands in contrast to the annual ReOrient Festival, one of the most remarkable aspects of which is the largeness of its producing and artistic vision. Since establishing the festival in 1999, Yeghiazarian has generously embraced all plays *about* the Middle East. Her selections are unsullied by any biases against the specific provenance,

ancestry or self-identification of the writer. In addition to the Kentucky–born Wallace, the 2009 festival program spotlighted an Egyptian-born writer (the prolific Yussef El Guindi), a Palestinian-American (the fearlessly versatile Betty Shamieh), a white Brooklyn boy (writer/director Kevin Doyle), an Iranian-American (writer/actor/director Kaveh Zahedi), an Israeli (the pugnacious Motti Lerner) and Yeghiazarian herself, who was born in Iran to a Muslim mother and an Armenian Christian father.

Salaam.Peace editor Holly Hill praises Yeghiazarian as "the Margo Jones founding-mother-figure of Middle Eastern–American theatre." Inspired by Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*—in which the novelist stated that "Disorientation is loss of the East," and added, "Suppose that it's only when you dare let go that your real life begins?"—Yeghiazarian employed a pun that is more proactive: Instead of bemoaning the disorientation of living in a world where the pervasive sense is that "It shouldn't be this way," the ReOrient Festival adheres to Yeghiazarian's idea that "To find our way (back) we need to find our East again." As she puts it, "Today, 10 years later, we continue to search for our East. Questions of home, identity, agency and longing loom large."

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Ahou Tabibzadeh and George Psarras in Torange Yeghiazarian's *Call Me Mehdi*.

Yeghiazarian's own contribution, *Call Me Mehdi*, wittily bears out that search. In this delightful bedroom comedy about a naked couple's late-night cross-cultural argument, an Iranian-American woman tries to set her Farsi-challenged American husband straight regarding ethnic-specific Farsi jokes by issuing him a challenge: "Listen, Mr. Very Deep Way, if you really cared about opening up, you'd go to Iran with me."

If one considers the conspicuous lack of Arab- and Muslim-American voices and visions, even in multicultural theatres in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the troubling social repercussions that followed in the wake of 9/11 (deportations, civil-rights issues, surveillance), it would have been perfectly understandable for Golden Thread to restrict its festival only to writers of Arab and/or Muslim descent. Instead, ReOrient's 2009 bill revived two works from outside that perspective. Lerner's emotionally crushing *Coming Home*, originally produced in 2003, chronicles the homecoming of a disturbed young Israeli soldier (devastatingly portrayed by Raffi Wartanian) from the front lines of the occupation. Lerner's domestic drama about a family dealing with their son's severe post-traumatic stress disorder—which culminates in the young man throwing off his clothes and squirting ketchup all over the furniture—provoked heated words in an post-performance discussion that involved an Israeli diplomat.

ReOrient also found room for a revival of Kevin Doyle's 2004 *Compression of a Casualty*, even though, arguably, it isn't about the Middle East at all. If anything, Doyle's play is a reaction to the media coverage of the Gulf War. Using the actual dialogue of former CNN "American Morning" news anchors Bill Hemmer and Soledad O'Brien, the play expresses Doyle's profound anxiety over news coverage that promises but never delivers any

details about an unnamed American soldier killed in Fallujah in July 2003. Recognizing that the Gulf War was fought as a media spectacle, the play's critical intervention takes the form of the Missouri soldier, Joel L. Bertoldie, disrupting the endlessly repeated newscast to identify himself and offering up personal details that the gossipy news anchors never bothered to report.

IT WAS, OF COURSE, TELEVISION THAT brought the Iran hostage crisis into the homes of millions of Americans night after night, and for many critics of Desert Storm, the saturation of live TV coverage led to a discussion, especially in academic circles, of the Gulf War as the first postmodern war—the war looked like a video game (or a mass-media simulacrum, according to the philosopher Jean Baudrillard), as if the representation of the event *was* the event. By the same token, television forced America to acknowledge the Arabs within.

The spectacular nature of 9/11 was cause enough to see it as a declaration of war on America, so it is hardly surprising, given the journalistic clichés and simplistic nationalism that underlie mass-media discourse, that 9/11 has repeatedly been considered—wrongly—as ground zero for the birth of a new category of Middle Eastern–American drama. The lives and artistic works of Middle Eastern-American artists, whose work both predates and functions apart from 9/11, have thus been tarnished by association with death and destruction. Yussef El Guindi notes in his preface to *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*, "After 9/11, there was a feeling within the Arab and Muslim community that we had been placed beyond the pale. Though, in truth, we had never really found our way into the cultural conversation, even before 9/11. And now that we had been shoved into that conversation, it was not in a good way. At all." In a follow-up interview, El Guindi told me, "I do want to emphasize, though, that Middle Eastern–American drama was picking up steam before 9/11. In fact, I felt a flowering of sorts happening in the Arab-American and the larger Middle Eastern arts community. One of my fears after 9/11 was that all those voices that were now emerging would be silenced by this event."

One of the thought-provoking themes that recurred during the 2009 festival was that at this particular moment, Middle Eastern–American theatre is still in its infancy. If you would like to better understand Middle Eastern–American theatre and get a better sense of who are the new and major artists and players in this burgeoning field—from theatre companies like Silk Road Theatre Project (see page 90) and Nibras, to new-play initiatives that seek to develop Middle Eastern–American voices—the editors of the *Salaam.Peace* anthology offer an excellent survey that traces its short history. "It will take time for Middle East plays to be known throughout this country," Holly Hill noted at the forum. "You are going to have to be patient." In a panel discussion on the theme of "Permission to Represent and Transform," Turkey-born director/dramaturg Evren Odcikin noted, "America is looking for the next great Middle East playwright who will explore a new terrain about the war, about the politics." Not much will change for Middle Eastern Americans, Odcikin contended, "until we do something extraordinary. For now, we need to keep giving each other wind and current."

As Betty Shamieh attests, "I think there is a real trepidation on the part of artistic directors to take on truly challenging stories from Arab and Arab-American writers. It is problematic that the works about the Middle East that consistently get the most financial support for development and productions in our nation's most important theatrical venues are plays that dehumanize both Arabs and Americans, despite the intentions of some well-meaning writers."

Add to that quandary the apathy among some U.S. critics who consistently dismiss (or in rare cases apologetically inveigh against) plays that deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, like Shamieh's *Tamam* and Lerner's *Coming Home*, by writing things like, "These plays may not change anybody's political convictions," or "These plays speak to the converted." Such expressions of impotence don't begin to truly critically grapple with the rich vitality of the new Middle Eastern–American drama, whose real aims are to offer fresh reckonings about a new immigrant experience, to make the invisible visible, and to suggest, both literally and metaphorically, nothing less than a wholesale revision—a reorientation, indeed—of the significance of the Middle East to the mosaic of our collective American identity.