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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2015.1066842>

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Full of Noises: When “World Shakespeare” Met the “Arab Spring”

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Abstract: In Summer 2012, to coincide with the Olympic Games, the United Kingdom celebrated a summer of Shakespeare. Troupes from around the world were invited to produce their own versions of plays from the playwright’s corpus. 2012 was also a very eventful year, politically, in the Arab world as people reacted to what had been dubbed the “Arab Spring”. This article looks at three plays produced by Arabic companies for the World Shakespeare Festival: the Palestinian Ashtar Theatre’s *Richard II*, the Iraqi Theatre Company’s *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, and the Tunisian Artistes Producteurs Associés’ *Macbeth: Leila and Ben - A Bloody History*. Using these performances, this article examines how different Arabic theatre troupes negotiate expectations of different audiences as well as their own artistic aims using the “playable surface” of Shakespeare’s plays.

Keywords: Global Shakespeare, Arabic, Tunisian, Palestinian, Iraqi, Adaptation, World Shakespeare Festival 2012, Cultural Olympiad 2012.

27 July 2012. It was the second Friday of Ramadan but the Muslim holy month had brought no respite from violence or political discord to many countries caught up in the Arab uprisings. On their television screens, Palestinians in the West Bank city of Ramallah saw a variety of depressing, terrifying, or absurd news

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unspool around the region. That week alone, nearly 3000 refugees from Syria's civil war had streamed into Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq (UNHCR); fears mounted of a massacre in Aleppo (MiddleEastLive). In Iraq, al-Qaeda was escalating its campaign to assassinate government officials (Nordland); four days earlier, 111 people had been killed in the country's deadliest day of the year (Reuters). In Tunisia, the finance minister resigned, claiming the Islamist-led "revolutionary" government was spending recklessly to buy public support (AFP). Meanwhile, U.S. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney was in the region; the following day, local television reports would show him visiting Israel and touring Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem (Barghouthi).

Adding another spectacle to that July day, the British Consulate-General invited hundreds of West Bank Palestinians to watch the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony on a large screen in Yasser Arafat Square. Along with a chance to watch "the greatest show on earth", the invitation promised traditional *dabkeh* folk dancing in the square and an opportunity to "come cheer for the Palestinian team who [are] participating in the Olympic Games" (UK in Jerusalem).

That Ramallah audience was part of the estimated 900 million television and online viewers who, in addition to the live spectators in London, simultaneously watched the multi-media event meticulously choreographed by Danny Boyle, the British film director of *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). As one critic noted, "The British pageant had to tread ... carefully given the country's imperial history and modern self-consciousness" (McNulty). It highlighted nineteenth-century industrial workers, singing and dancing National Health Service nurses, Windrush immigration, and multiracial families. Commentators saw both a

“love letter to Britain” (Pomerantz) and a vision of “a new Britain unshackled from its imperial past” (Hunt).

Even William Shakespeare, the dead white British male who inevitably anchored the ceremony, served as much for his intercultural sensibility as his canonical status. He may, in the past, have been “declared to rule world literature at the same time that Britannia was declared to rule the waves” (Dobson 7), but the pageant’s theme, “Isles of Wonder”, echoed and appropriated post-colonial readings of *The Tempest*. This is not only the ubercanonical first play of the First Folio but also a text the past 60 years have reimagined as ultimately renouncing Empire (Hulme and Sherman). The leading Shakespearean actor Kenneth Branagh recited not Prospero, but the subaltern Caliban, and the engraved inscription quoted on the specially cast 23-ton bell that rang in the festivities was his greeting to the shipwrecked clowns: “Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises” (3.2.138).¹

By screening this ceremony in the West Bank, the British Consulate-General effectively set up a pair of facing mirrors in which British and Palestinian nationalist self-congratulation infinitely reproduced each other. Palestinian folk performance framed a British-staged screening of Palestinian athletes’ appearance at a British-hosted global sporting event. As the extravaganza played, its more Britain-specific references were perhaps obscure to the Ramallah audience, yet “the Palestinian crowd cheered enthusiastically, waving Palestinian *and* British flags” (British Consulate General Jerusalem, emphasis added).

Back in London, just a few weeks earlier, Ramallah-based Ashtar Theatre, renowned for their original play *The Gaza Monologues*, were performing a production of *Richard II* on the stage of Shakespeare’s Globe as an event in “Globe to Globe”, part of the World Shakespeare Festival (WSF). Ashtar’s production was

judged by Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* to be politically “pulsating”, making “the toppling of a medieval king seem modern”.

This article posits that these two moments of intercultural spectatorship in Ramallah and London were related as parts of a larger whole. As readers of this journal well know, Shakespeare was central to organizing the international “noises” of that Olympic summer even beyond the opening ceremonies. Festival director Deborah Shaw claimed the RSC had set out to “redefine what’s possible in creating a festival in a global age”; the festival was promoted as the “trump card” of the Cultural Olympiad (Bushby). The London 2012 tagline that “the World is Coming to London” emphasised the expectations that certain events would elucidate world affairs and even current events. In fact, “The sheer symbolic pressure on many of these [WSF] productions to somehow ‘represent’ a whole nation, culture and language in a two- to three-hour show by a long dead English playwright” (Edmondson, Prescott, and Sullivan 24) came to dominate the review process, from *The Guardian* culture pages to the academic blogging project of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, of which *A Year of Shakespeare* was the final outcome.

Globe to Globe festival director Tom Bird claimed in the festival programme that it “found itself at the mercy of international politics (*Cymbeline* from the world’s newest country, South Sudan, *The Comedy of Errors* from Afghanistan, *Richard II* from Palestine)”. But this was part of the design: the problematic “work” to which the WSF put Shakespeare (Edmondson, Prescott and Sullivan 7-8) was to use direct commissions of intercultural Shakespeare to package and present the national or cultural “identities” of the participating nations for British consumption.

To pin down some of the slippery dynamics of such cultural give-and-take, this article analyses the conception and reception of three high-profile WSF

productions commissioned from the “Arab world” and performed in the Arabic language: the Iraqi Theatre Company’s *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* (an Iraqi Theatre Company and Royal Shakespeare Company co-production), the Tunisia-themed adaptation *Macbeth: Leila & Ben – A Bloody History* (by the Franco-Tunisian group Artistes Producteurs Associés), and Ramallah-based Ashtar Theatre’s *Richard II*.² Although these productions differed in every way (style, register of language, and even in their approach to their Shakespearean source text), each had to grapple with a particular reception context explicitly rooted in the historical moment of 2012 in the Arab world and born of the festival organisers’ and audience’s expectations that this historical moment would be reflected.

In the case of these three Arabic appropriations, the expectations concerned not only “world Shakespeare” but also the Arab uprisings that had spread through the region the previous year. Freelance journalist Tanjil Rashid noted the prevalence of Arabic Shakespeares and Arab plays more generally in London that year, attributing it to the “topical currency” of the “Arab Spring” uprisings (Rashid). The homogenizing nature of the concept of an Arab world affected the way all Arab plays – even plays from non-“Arab Spring” countries – were interpreted. For instance, Gardner, one of the most respected and nuanced critics of the WSF, resisted reading Ashtar’s *Richard II* as a Palestinian allegory – she recalled Jan Kott’s *Grand Mechanism* to conclude that “Iman Aoun as the murdered Gloucester's widow, weeping and railing for justice and revenge, is a woman for all time, part of an endless cycle of violence and grief” – but also noted that with “its military fatigues and rebelling masses, [it] offers an unmistakable nod to the Arab spring” (Gardner).

Non-Arab audiences and critics in Britain, from home and abroad, appeared to turn to the Arab productions in the festival for what New York-based Iraqi writer

Sinan Antoon would call a “forensic” theatre experience, looking for historical as well as cultural explanations of recent Arab history in general and of Palestinian, Tunisian, and Iraqi events more specifically. (In “forensic” cultural consumption, an art work deemed representative is used to explain a situation in one socio-political geographic space to the inhabitants of another.)³ By contrast, many reviewers of the Far Eastern festival offerings were captivated by the productions’ visual surfaces and exotic-seeming performance codes; for example, the Yohangza Theatre Company’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* has been described as “deliciously redefined” (Dickson).⁴ Eastern European productions were judged in relation to their long and respected theatre traditions, such as Jan Kochanowski Theatre’s production of *Macbeth*, in a review of which, Poland was described as having “one of the richest and most serious theatre cultures on the planet” (Prescott). The Arab plays, however, and a few others, such as the Afghan production, had to grapple not only with representing a language and culture, but also with the burden of explicating current events.

Of course, given the context of a giant diaspora- and tourist-friendly festival in an Olympics-hosting city, the theatre audiences were far from uniform. In what follows, it is possible only to sketch the ways these productions communicated to different people on different levels. Analysing the productions themselves (each of which was seen by two of the three co-authors of this article) and the available paratexts (talkbacks, interviews, reviews, etc.), this article seeks to investigate the strategies used by the companies in responding to their freighted assignments. How did each of these Arab theatre companies leverage the WSF commissions for its own artistic and nationalist ends? How did each exploit and/or challenge organisers’ and audiences’ expectations of “World Shakespeare” (with its implied local adaptors,

bringing specific local context unknown to the audience) and their conceptions of the Arab uprisings (with their implied global audience)? How did they distinguish for British audiences the specifically Iraqi, Tunisian or Palestinian elements, countering some playgoers' problematic tendency to imagine the whole region as culturally homogenous? As this article will argue, each company appropriated those expectations, making them part of the material of the production, challenging as well as rewarding the audiences' cultural and political assumptions.

Whose Shakespeare? Whose World?

In organizing the World Shakespeare Festival, the RSC, Shakespeare's Globe and LIFT were keenly aware of the politics. Each organization took its own approach, resulting in three markedly different though overlapping festivals. Shaw had previously directed the RSC's Complete Works festival in 2007, an important forerunner of the WSF.⁵ She wanted above all to foreclose any neo-colonial overtones and these projects were open to such accusations. The WSF, Shaw insisted to one of the present authors, could not "only be about ethnographic curiosity". The British response to Shakespeare from abroad, she said,

used to be colonialist. Then it was exoticizing. That's all so patronizing. Now I want people to understand that it's a partnership of equals. We may have more resources. They may have more ideas. It's a real collaboration. (Shaw, Interview)

Deborah Shaw also prided the RSC on having "seeded, developed and showcased" world Shakespeare more generally (Shaw, "Who's Who"). She wanted the companies themselves to benefit, for instance, by seeing and learning from one another's plays (Shaw, Interview).

Shakespeare's Globe, meanwhile, took an approach that was more rigid in overall design but less hands-on about the details. A visiting Shakespeare scholar, Alexa Huang, worried that the Globe could be seen to treat its participants as if the circus was coming to town.⁶ However, this was not actually far from the truth: the Globe aimed to recreate in reverse the conditions of the English Players taking Shakespeare into Europe in the early seventeenth century. The publicity promised a "carnival of stories ... inspirational stories, companies who work underground and in war zones; momentous stories" ("Globe to Globe"). The exuberance drew audiences. Moreover, Globe Executive Producer and festival director Tom Bird insisted the participants had creative autonomy: many productions were invited from existing repertoires, and the newly commissioned shows faced no strictures apart from Globe conditions (running time under two hours, minimal technical support and scenery, scene summaries rather than detailed surtitles), even if that let in artistically or politically uncomfortable content.

LIFT, a festival of contemporary performance, contributed shows as well, in an edgier style. The effect was to open up room for debate, constructive competition, and public excitement. All three festivals faced the paradox of presenting Shakespeare as a national poet *and* as a spokesperson for a global worldview. A researcher from Royal Holloway University was bombarded by over four hundred comments, mostly negative, when she argued: 'Shakespeare, Universal? No, it's cultural imperialism' in the *Comment is Free* section of a national newspaper. Emer O'Toole's article had hit a nerve. One important question that she asked was: why did these companies have to "do Shakespeare" in order to be invited to perform?

As this article will show, the Arab companies explored here treated Shakespeare as neither "universal" nor inherently allied with "cultural imperialism";

his texts simply provided, as another successful Arab adaptor has put it, “a playable surface” on which a contemporary artist can make his or her work (Sulayman al-Bassam, interview). These commissions and texts are “slippery”, yet usable.

Resisting the pressure to be culturally representative was only a part of the challenge that the Iraqi Theatre Company, Artistes Producteurs Associés, and Ashtar faced. In fact, the companies used the opportunities of the WSF with utmost canniness. The attraction of participating in the festival was obvious. Unlike many festivals, the WSF drew audiences that included international cultural tourists, Stratford habitués, and large numbers of first-time playgoers from Britain’s diaspora communities. The visiting artists got strong British and international media coverage (both home-country and sometimes third-country) throughout their tours, and went on to other venues in Britain or abroad to promote their WSF productions, their other non-Shakespearean productions, and also their political agendas, on a broader international stage.

Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad: The Iraqi Theatre Company

Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad was co-produced by the Iraqi Theatre Company with the RSC and has been staged in Baghdad, in England (at Stratford’s Swan Theatre and London’s Riverside Studios), and subsequently in Doha, Qatar. Directed by Monadhil Daood,⁷ with surtitling and other assistance from the RSC’s Deborah Shaw, the production appeared to be a conscious attempt to use Shakespeare as a “cultural bridge”, a theatrical paint-by-numbers of the modern Iraqi situation and, of the three productions that are being explored here, it is the one which comes closest to the charge of succumbing to “forensic fascination”.

In a significant twist to Shakespeare’s plot, the heads of the two sparring families became two brothers; the older Montague (Maimoon Abdalhamza), colour-

coded black, represented the long-deprived majority Shia, now triumphant; the younger Capulet (Haider Monathir), coded red for Sunni, was portrayed as historically privileged, now suddenly nervous and flirting with Al-Qaeda. In a moving interpolated scene with Lady Montague (Fawzia Mohammed Arif), Capulet further discovered that for years his maid had brought him food cooked in Lady Montague's kitchen. Despite her protests, the two men continued to fight over a ship inherited from their father, beautifully realised centre stage as a metaphor of the nation. In this new setting Romeo and Juliet (Ahmed Salah Moneka, Shaam Albayati) were therefore cousins and would-be lovers, kept apart since childhood by sectarian prejudice and sibling jealousy. The disaffected Paris was transformed into a caricature Islamist that no one in the audience could fail to recognise, with his skullcap, beard, ankle-length robe and cargo vest. The play was primarily about Iraq and Iraqis with only a trivial role for an Anglo-American soldier, pushing the IV machine on which the old, sick Montague depends.

The subtexts were simple, as this article's authors' performance notes stated at the time:

Message to Brits: we are all the same, we Iraqis are not savages killing each other, but complex fallible humans just like your high-culture Montagues & Capulets.

Message to Iraqis: unless Sunni and Shia talk to each other, the next generation for Iraq will be a tragedy. (Performance Notes of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*)

The creative team were careful that nothing be left open for misinterpretation. "This iconic play finds fresh purchase in the soil of contemporary Iraq, a country where sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia, ignited and fuelled

from outside, has left the population exhausted by a cycle of violence and revenge” said the RSC website. Inevitably, there were some problems with using Shakespeare’s familiar play as a frame to hang its allegory on. In an otherwise appreciative review in in the London-based English-language *Arab Review*, Moreas Madani lamented the transposition’s bleakness: “The Baghdad of the play is portrayed as little more than a violent backwater, rather than the diverse and culturally rich city that has endured despite nine years of conflict” (Madani). And Susan Bennett and Christie Carson worried that this production, performed in front of a mostly non-Arab audience, would mirror western reaction to events in Iraq more generally: “Lives lost by the end of Shakespeare’s tragedies suddenly seem little more than aesthetic convention; the real tragedy, this adaptation suggests, is the West’s passive spectatorship of a story familiar to us from the nightly news” (Bennett and Carson).

Yet in theatre terms it worked. Non-Iraqi audience members interviewed said they were shocked into empathising with the Iraqi experience by the terrifying special effects; each explosion shook the auditorium.⁸ They were spellbound by the many gorgeously evocative images: a swaying sail, Mercutio and his friends using the language of fairy tales to fly on a magic carpet, Romeo dancing in a midnight rainstorm. (The pouring water was created through lights, courtesy of the RSC technical crew, an example of how such collaboration brought together “ideas” with “resources”.) Audiences also enjoyed the humour: Benvolio in a Messi shirt suggested that Barcelona’s football team offered young Iraqis more hope than politics, and the Nurse joked that becoming an extremist might pay because both the US and UK would court her, and the Iranians would give her money. If this adaptation did not reinterpret or defamiliarise either Shakespeare or Iraq for

international audiences, one can argue that it instead familiarised and humanised both by bringing them together. One sixteen-year-old British audience member, having studied the play in school like most other teenagers in Britain, judged the Iraqi adaptation “the best live theatre” she had seen: the relocated familiar play mirrored the stories on her iPhone News App, making both Shakespeare and the news stories suddenly seem closer. Katherine Steele Brokaw added that the production provided

important new perspectives on both Shakespeare’s play and life in post-war Iraq. Gutting the familiar young-love plotline, the production brought to light elements of *Romeo and Juliet* which are less often emphasized: it highlighted the machismo of young men and the avarice of their fathers, showing how the muddle of youth, passion, and greed lead to such tragedies as we read about in four-hundred-year-old plays and breaking-news headlines. (268)

For blog commenter John Weeks, too, the production “illuminated [his] perception of the world of Verona” and also of “the world of Iraq” (Weeks).

The localization simply borrowed from Shakespeare rather than challenged him and the images never broke free from the only reference points many westerners have of the region: *The Arabian Nights* and war. However, perhaps it is more useful to think of this production not so much as peddling in “forensic fascination” but as dealing in the “performance realities” of the practitioners, if not of every audience. Hazem Azmy and Marvin Carlson, in their “Introduction: Rehearsing Arab Performance Realities”, cite Janelle Reinelt on this:

“this idea implies a uniquely aesthetic mode of knowledge that involves ‘interpreting the contemporary world through a theatrical lens as well as viewing the theatre through contemporary reality’” (Azmy and Carlson 84).

For Arab - and especially Iraqi - playgoers the production offered a radically different set of experiences. This was not a “forensic” explication but an analysis of a very particular contemporary reality. Viewers familiar with Islam, particularly with Shia tradition, would have noticed a subtext when Capulet chastised his brother with “All you do is lament”. To an Arabic speaker the cultural reference was clear – it firmly placed Montague in the Shi‘ite culture of mourning. Furthermore, Iraqi theatre aficionados of any age would have appreciated – and at the Baghdad world premiere, did appreciate – the message of hope and national perseverance not expressed in the play’s lines but embodied in its casting. Daood rewrote the character of the Friar as a history teacher who frames the play by claiming, in teacherly classical Arabic, that he is the legitimate heir to Iraqi history. In a subtext invisible to most international audiences, he cast in this role Sami Abdel Hamid, a dignified octogenarian actor-director who personifies the Iraqi Shakespeare tradition. Abdel Hamid has taught at the Higher Academy of Dramatic Arts for five decades; he has directed high-profile, sometimes experimental Shakespeare plays since the 1970s; he survived as an artist in Iraq throughout the Saddam Hussein period (in part by directing the stage adaptation of Hussein’s novel, *Zabiba and the King*).⁹ Abdel-Hamid’s wife, well-known Iraqi actress Fawziya Arif, achieved a similar resonance as Lady Montague. In the scene in which she chastised the two quarrelling brothers for their senseless feud, she also embodied Iraq’s humanistic tradition, rebuking the murderous present. Meanwhile, the actors cast as Romeo and

Juliet are young Baghdad drama students. The tradition of Iraqi theatre, in other words, lives on.

Macbeth: Leila and Ben – a Bloody History: Artistes Producteurs Associés

Macbeth: Leila and Ben – a Bloody History was co-produced by the Franco Tunisian Artistes Producteurs Associés (APA) and the RSC for LIFT. It was staged in England (at London’s Riverside Studios and Newcastle’s Northern Stage) then subsequently briefly toured Tunisia. It was then performed in Paris in early 2014.

Macbeth was, for obvious reasons, rarely adapted inside Arab countries in the twentieth century; directors generally opted for less conspicuous usurpers such as Claudius or Richard III. Invited to join WSF in 2010, on the heels of their successful 2010 multimedia production *Hobb Story: Instructions for Arab Love*, APA was tentatively considering *Macbeth* before the uprising against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, unsure if it could ever tour inside Tunisia. “Then the revolution happened”, explained the creative team at the Remaking Shakespeare Talkback that accompanied the production’s Newcastle performances. “Now we could really do *Macbeth*” (Achour and Daoud).

The focus of the director Lofti Achour’s radical rewriting, co-adapted with Anissa Daoud, who played Leila Trabelsi, was how to adapt a Shakespeare play from within a post-“Arab Spring” Tunisian viewpoint.¹⁰ They made a straight transposition of their ousted ruling couple for the Thane of Glamis and the machinating Lady Macbeth so that the play charted the rise and fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his wife from the 1980s until their January 2011 abdication. Whereas the Iraqi *Romeo and Juliet* trembled with subtextual hope if not optimism, this *Macbeth* – the WSF’s only play to overtly address the 2010-11 Arab uprisings – took a more self-reflexive and ultimately pessimistic line. Not just the

government but the whole “mentality” of Tunisians, it asserted, was rotten. Not content to simply re-localise Shakespeare’s text, the adaptors brought in characters and images to interrogate it. They added new characters, including modern Tunisians with no parallel in the original, and metatheatrical reflections. Rather than use Shakespeare to teach the British about Tunisia, APA more ambitiously sought to use Tunisia to teach the British about Shakespeare (Krichah). For example, in a Brecht-inspired postmodern twist typical of this company, at about halfway through the play one of the actors stopped centre stage; she told the audience that “the director and his sidekick” had got it all wrong about this supposedly brilliant Shakespeare: his play is missing a character, “The People” (al-Sha‘b). APA were not interested in the feudal context of Shakespeare’s play, but in how it spoke to the here and now. They felt Shakespeare was wrong to portray the Macbeths as independent. The people are a part of the dictatorship, “from the police torturer who, in this play, is the willing servant of anyone in power, to all the ordinary citizens” (Walkling and Cormack 360).¹¹

A purist might ask, why use Shakespeare at all? Litvin’s theory of the global kaleidoscope comes into play here (“Hamlet’s Arab Journey” 2). In the Arab world, Shakespeare’s works have come to audiences and readers not through his texts but through layers of appropriations and translations. APA, who are as much a part of a European experimental theatre tradition as an Arabic one (Walkling and Cormack) worked with English, Arabic and French, then brought in Heiner Müller’s German appropriation, too. Müller’s violent deconstruction fitted well with APA’s existing aims, as they fashion themselves iconoclasts against conservative culture, be it theatrical, religious or social. In a different geographical context, that of South East Asia, Rustom Bharucha has explored how Shakespeare appropriation has

challenged the “Eurocentric agenda of interculturalism”, but the analysis speaks to this production too:

Here, Shakespeare is mobilized as a catalyst (literally, a foreign element), producing a countertext, or more precisely, a metatheatrical performative event where the dramatic text of Shakespeare as such is not the issue. Most decisively, the play is not the thing; the director's deconstruction (or destruction) of the play is. (Bharucha 1)

It would be disingenuous to suggest that there were no problems with the UK reception of this energetic and ambitious production. The combination of multimedia, talking heads, juxtaposed action on various parts of the stage, culturally specific visual and verbal allusions, and the mixing of Arabic and French, were among the factors that made this adaptation difficult for a non-Arabic speaker to grasp. Many complained about the incoherent and poorly synchronised surtitles (Taylor). One found that the play’s allegorical borrowings from Shakespeare’s text “all point[ed] in different directions”; she had to fall back on the “raw power” of the “searing wailing” music, “the same singing you hear calling people to pray at mosques” (Gillinson). Without internal clues or dramaturgical help, well-known Arabic intertexts could not fully resonate, such as the 1933 poem “The Will to Live” by Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi performed in heavy-metal rock style at the end of the play – perhaps ironically, or to point out that complacency could derail any revolutionary impulse. By contrast, Arabic-speaking reviewer Sheyma Buali found that the play “could not have been more relevant and bold. Its strongest affect is its piercing aesthetic of viciousness that informs its historical conception of Tunisian politics” (Buali).

As the revolution's hopes ran their course, a very significant change took place to the genre, moving from tragedy to bloody history, thus removing the sense of closure, replacing the liberating revolution with an eternal return of dictatorship. *Leila and Ben*'s horizon was resolutely Tunisian: aside from a director's note in the programme, the play itself made no references to Egypt or any broader "Arab Spring" (its Jasmine Revolution, along with the events in Tahrir Square, were seen to set the region-wide uprisings in motion). However, it said plenty about the Habib Bourguiba regime and the menace of rising Islamism. The figure of modern Tunisia's founding father Bourguiba, recast as King Duncan, was as ambivalent as the figure of the young Islamist who took the empty stage at the end. Few concessions were offered to linguistically or historically ignorant viewers. In London the show found a slice of Tunisian diaspora audience who, in the street afterwards, continued the "insider" debate about their own history and prospects. In Newcastle, however, a critical mass of the audience was not Tunisian, not even Arab, nor Arabic-speaking. These playgoers did not understand the situation, in some cases coming to the show in order to learn about it. One of the many ways that the participating companies played with the expectations of the WSF led to a comic moment on opening night. "Help me to understand my country's situation, help me to look for a solution", a character remonstrated with an embarrassed woman on the third row – before looking around the auditorium and appearing to notice that he was in the North of England, not North Africa. The audience had to laugh at its own ignorance of Tunisian and broader Arab politics.

Richard II: Ashtar Theatre

Richard II was produced by Ashtar Theatre for Globe to Globe. It was staged in England, then subsequently in Ramallah. It was then performed in Dubai in 2013.

Palestinian actor and Ashtar Theatre director Iman Aoun had never read *Richard II*, but when Shakespeare's Globe came calling, she responded. Initially her company asked to put on *The Taming of the Shrew* because of their "interest in gender" (Aoun and Shbib).¹² *Shrew* was already taken, the Globe's Tom Bird said; but he suggested that Shakespeare's tale of a weak and vain king, who realises too late that his people do not love him, spoke powerfully to the unfolding situation in the Arab world. Ashtar rejected a tendentious reading but took the play anyway. The company likes to co-produce with directors from outside the Palestinian Territories. They always collaborate internationally to ensure "a high standard and a good reception", Aoun told interviewer Sarah Irving, and here was a chance to work with Irish director Conall Morrison. "When you have a king who does battle in Ireland and then goes on pilgrimage to Palestine, we knew we had to collaborate with Conall!" Aoun joked at a Globe discussion forum, perhaps alluding also to the long history of Palestinian-Irish political solidarity (Aoun and Shbib). Ashtar handled the commission astutely. Major figures from other Palestinian theatres, including Georges Ibrahim from al-Kassaba, were invited to participate. A talented Palestinian diaspora actor, Sami Metwasi, was recruited from Jordan to play the king. The Globe organisers wanted – and advertised on their web site, in their programme and on their flyer – a production in Palestinian Arabic, but after initial workshops, the company concluded that the Ramallah vernacular was not an appropriate vehicle for this play. One of the script adaptors, Bayan Shbib, who played Richard's young queen, insisted *Richard II's* poetry and rhetoric, so central to its meaning, could hardly be rendered into language "spoken every day on the bus!" (Aoun and Shbib). Instead, they chose

to work with an extant classical Arabic version: although, in bringing in the Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan to update Egyptian academic Mohamed Enani's translation, they did localise its classicism. "We tried to simplify the text and make it flow", Zaqtan said, in an interview with Margaret Litvin, "Some of these actors were not used to performing in classical Arabic" (Zaqtan). Unlike the other two productions analysed, which localised or overtly intertextualised their source texts, Ashtar's strategy was to produce a good quality "straight" production of Shakespeare's play. The production never mentioned Palestine, apart from where "the Holy Land" appeared in the script. This was in effect an understated approach to "taking the Palestinian message to the world",¹³ sending a subtextual nationalist message: Ashtar can produce world-class "real" Shakespeare, not "folk" or "local" retellings. So, aside from some *keffiyehs*, a trademark Palestinian gesture (a kneeling John of Gaunt sifting the earth's dust between his fingers as he invoked "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England"(2.1.50)), and a pair of gardeners in cross-stitched Palestinian garb (Haddad), there was almost no localization nor overt political allusion. Instead, Ashtar created a non-specific mise-en-scène, firmly keeping Shakespeare's English proper names, titles and place names. Not everyone was moved by this non-localized treatment, however. One prominent London-based Shakespeare scholar said to one of us at Ashtar's performance, surprised that *Richard II* was performed without overt reference to the company's geocultural identity, "But what's Palestinian about it? If it's straight Shakespeare, what's the point of them performing it here, as Palestinians? They should perform it in Palestine".

Aoun and her colleagues gave interviews and talkbacks on Palestinian politics. In *The Electronic Intifada's* interview with Aoun, Sarah Irving gave half its space to the controversy around Israel's Habima Theatre participating in the same

festival. Ashtar repeatedly expressed their support for the Boycott-Divest-Sanction movement against Israeli cultural institutions. Their supporters brought these concerns to the show, unfurling a Palestinian flag and hanging it from the balcony. These issues barely appeared, even as subtext, in the production itself. Other British playgoers kept trying to pin down an allegory in what they saw. Bloggers hunted for (and found) fragments of colour and gesture to support their political reading. Another wrote: “When the crowd comes onstage waving blood-stained, green, red and white flags, we are aware of the Palestinian reference. They throw orange peel and we think of the lost port of Jaffa. The political message is carried through the aesthetic” (Pascal).

To all such readings, the creative team demurred. Veterans of documentary theatre (their previous play had been *Gaza Monologues*), they were at pains to point out this project was *not* documentary. “It’s not Palestine,” they insisted, “and it’s certainly not Syria, as some people are suggesting. No, it’s not Syria [...] We wouldn’t presume to speak for Syrians” (Walkling, “*Year of Shakespeare*”). This final statement was the most overt statement from the participating companies to both refuse and gently mock Western festival organisers’ and audiences’ attempts to homogenise “Arab experience” for easy consumption.

Globe audiences expecting a predictable political fix were forced instead to attend to the characterization and the acting. Ashtar won critical and popular acclaim for its strong performances, particularly Metwasi’s Richard. Audiences responded to theatrical discoveries, not topical political insights. For example, the Shakespeare blogger “Margate Sands” noted the innovative way the actors showed that someone had died:

[Richard's] dead body fell to the ground and Exton emptied a vial of blood over him. Then the production took an incredibly bold step. King Henry entered and silently poured another vial over Richard's body, which was left on the ground for the next scene in which Exton presented the corpse to Henry. King Henry's disavowal of the murder now looked like rank hypocrisy. The production thereby made a deliberate comment on the cynical nature of politics, casting Henry as villain rather than hero.

("Margate Sands")

That dictatorship reproduces itself has been, perhaps, the most prominent insight underlying all Arab Shakespeare adaptations since the early 1970s. Ashtar's one onstage allusion to the 2011 Arab uprisings – a crowd chanting "We Want Bolingbroke!" (Buali, "Ramallah's Ashtar Theater perform Richard II in London") – only sharpened the bite of that age-old wisdom, summed up succinctly by the Ashtar cast and unfortunately still true:

The character of Bolingbroke is amazing... [he] prepares for a revolution against a dictatorship. He himself – once he's in power – he becomes a dictator: the cycle of dictatorship [continues]...

(Shbib and Metwasi)

Epilogue

This article has argued that the Arab theatre-makers commissioned by the WSF in 2012 to bring Cultural Olympiad audiences "inspirational" and "momentous stories" of resistance and uprising not only did this with critical success but also exploited both the "playable surface" of Shakespeare and the widespread public

interest in the Middle East to make (more or less) the work they wanted, with the collaborators they wanted to recruit and the local signifiers they wanted to import. In so doing they navigated between various audiences: those who sought information, those who wanted their political aspirations validated or prejudices reconfirmed, and those who simply desired (for reasons either political or aesthetic) to see a good-quality Shakespeare production and/or intercultural theatre. Their deft manoeuvres were designed to show that art can be more than simplistic national allegory.

As this article has shown, the Arabic Shakespeare performances in the WSF therefore had some unexpected consequences. They demonstrated that an audience brought in by ethnographic curiosity can be seduced by scenographic innovation. The playgoer secure in Shakespeare's prestige can feel rattled by the explosions of contemporary Baghdad.

Perhaps most significantly for the companies involved, however, the fact of preparing for or having been in the WSF opened up access to bookings at home and in other international settings. For instance, *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* enjoyed an afterlife as well, touring to Katara Cultural Village in Doha, Qatar in September-October 2012; director Monadhil Daood has gone on to further successes. Meanwhile, *Leila and Ben* played to appreciative audiences at Tunis's National Theatre in September 2012 and was scheduled for a prominent spot at the *Journées théâtrales de Carthage* in November 2013 before being cancelled for health reasons (Kapitalis). *Leila and Ben* travelled to Brazil for the *Bienal Internacional de Teatro da Universidade de São Paulo* on 13-15 December 2013. It then went on to France, playing in Toulon on 11th December 2014 and at the Tarmac Theatre in Paris from 28th January to 7th February. As Tunisia's post-revolution politics have developed,

Achour has been an outspoken critic (on Facebook and in interviews) of the current Islamist-led government and its Ministry of Culture, nominally a co-producer of his play.

As for Ashtar, they did perform their *Richard II* in Palestine. Before coming to England, the show had premiered to a Palestinian audience at the Crusader Castle ruins in Jericho. Because Bolingbroke's proposed "voyage to the Holy Land / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand" (5.6.49-50) at the end of the play becomes the proposed crusade of *Henry IV Part 1*, this location was deeply symbolic; the staging of a Palestinian production in that space became, in part, a reclamation. The Jericho audience enjoyed the show and found a vein of dark comedy. A Reuters writer, Noah Browning, saw a reference to the Arab uprisings – but this time, the topical relevance caused bitter laughter rather than respectful silence.

"Are you contented to resign the crown?" the rebelling Lord Bolingbroke, leaning impatiently on the already usurped throne, asks the King.

"Yes, no. No, yes," Richard stutters, igniting a roar of laughter from the local audience too familiar with similar jibes aimed at Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh in their waning days.

"Was this the face that, like the sun, used to make those who looked upon it blink?" the king then blubbers into a mirror, echoing the ranting self-praise of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi before revolt, as it did with the title character, led to his murder last year. (Browning)

(It is impossible to say whether this allegorical reading reflects the audience's interpretation or only the foreign correspondent's.)

After London, *Richard II* played in Ramallah in August 2012, again setting up the facing mirrors of cultural capital by advertising its “huge success” at Shakespeare’s Globe in London, where it had “represented Palestine” three months earlier (Ashtar Theatre). It then toured in January 2013 to Dubai.

For Arab audiences “back home”, each play’s political commentary fit smoothly into an existing theatrical tradition; Arab theatre has been skewering tyrants since its nineteenth-century beginnings. Here the messages were not about “other” peoples to be understood but about pressing political dangers to be avoided. In lieu of a “spring”, both *Richard II* and *Leila & Ben* showed only a moment of revolutionary hope quickly swept up into infinitely self-replicating tyranny; *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* dramatized the risk of self-replicating sectarian slaughter. But perhaps this political gloom or precarious hope was tempered by an underlying source of cultural optimism: that a play by an Arab company had seized European and global interest, had been to London, and had won acclaim as part of a World Shakespeare Festival.

Word 8487 (9,235 with endnotes)

¹ Kathleen McLuskie argues, despite the fact that “For the creative practitioners of the Cultural Olympiad, Shakespeare had become [a] creative resource [...] for a huge community of the willing [to] demonstrate their commitment to ideals of social community and international communication” (Prescott and Sullivan 327-28), the Brunel costume confused the intended liberal message. Although the overall ceremony celebrated Britain’s multicultural heritage, having the words of Caliban come out of the mouth of the “father” of the Industrial Revolution, before the green and pleasant land of the ceremony’s arena was literally destroyed by the dark Satanic mills, shifted the emphasis from the post-colonial reading of the play and unintentionally appropriated it in far more disturbing ways. Anybody not familiar with Shakespeare’s play or Blake’s poem would miss the allusions.

² At the Globe, the newly formed South Sudan Theatre Company’s *Cymbeline* celebrated the presence of Juba Arabic and South Sudanese traditional costumes on the international stage, sharply reminding non-speakers that Arabic is also an African language with an existence outside Arab ethnicity and Muslim culture. In Stratford, the Palestinian guest director Amir Nizar Zuabi brought out the “war on terror” undertones in the RSC’s English language *Comedy of Errors*, directing it from the (playful) standpoint that “Shakespeare is ... Palestinian” (Zuabi).

³ In an interview with Ed Lake, Sinan Antoon said that “Life for a displaced Arab writer, if you want to, if you're willing to exoticise yourself and self-orientalise, life is very good and very profitable ... I don't want to be the native informant . . . There is increased interest in the Arab world. But I call it forensic interest. For the most part it’s bad, because it's assumed that novels and poems are going to explain September 11 to you . . . I am against that kind of interest, and I am always in

support of writers who debunk that kind of interest and confuse the reader”. The article is no longer online but Marcia Lynx Qualey has a short discussion of it on the Quarterly Conversation’s website. For the related phenomenon of “ethnographic” theatregoing see Margaret Litvin, “Doomed by Dialogue, Saved by Curiosity: Arab Performances Under American Eyes”.

⁴ “Yohangza’s style is as much dance as drama, using a vivid soundtrack of tuned percussion to blend dialogue into action and movement, rhythmically choreographing scenes at a ferocious pace, and supplementing the unfamiliar language with visuals” (Coghlan).

⁵ This festival has been addressed in detail in Smith and Valls-Russell’s article in Jonathan Bate’s “The RSC Complete Works Festival: An Introduction and Retrospective”.

⁶ Alexa Huang, co-editor of *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* in conversation with Saffron Walkling.

⁷ When writing people’s Arabic names, the article aims to use their own orthography, hence Monandhil Daood and Anissa Daoud.

⁸ Daood and cast members interviewed afterwards just laughed: the explosions in their neighbourhoods in Baghdad had been much louder!

⁹ Any viewer who had read Tim Arango’s review of the production in Baghdad for the *New York Times* would know that “Sami Abdul Hamid, 82, [who] plays a history teacher who represents the secular ideas that were overpowered here by religiosity and extremism ... is quite famous [in Iraq], and in 1965 directed an Iraqi version of ‘The Merchant of Venice’ in Baghdad”.

¹⁰ Kevin Quarmby “Lady Macbeth, First Ladies and the Arab Spring”, traces the connections made between the character of Lady Macbeth and contemporary

political events in the Middle East, particularly from the perspective of the Anglophone media.

¹¹ It must be said, however, that their correction of Shakespeare is slightly tongue-in-cheek and not designed to be a comment on the nature of democracy in feudal Scotland.

¹² This play had already been taken by the Pakistani company, Theatre Wallay/Kashf, and Tom Bird acknowledged the paradox of this situation. "Then the difficult part – how on earth do we go to them and say we want you to tell us a story but we want to define what story you tell?" (Bird).

¹³ "In the meantime, many Palestinian troupes tour Europe and America, taking the Palestinian message to the world. Besides addressing the Palestinian diaspora, mobilizing them politically and raising money, these tours enable future collaboration with international theatre groups and, most importantly, encourage foreign audiences to influence their national governments to reconsider their policy toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" (Nassar 16).

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