



Iraqi Silent Theatre: The Body and Sound in Anas AbdulSamad's *A Dream in Baghdad* (2006)

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The interactive body and sound become a visible feature of Iraqi theatre after 2003, due to the importance of body language in today's theatrical performances. *A Dream in Baghdad* is a pioneering experience, the director of which relied entirely on body language, according to a calculated kinesthetic system.

This theatrical performance, which lasted 50 minutes, was silent and did not adopt traditional dialogue. Thus, the director signaled his protest against what is happening in his country, making the actor's body a loud trumpet against darkness, isolation, marginalization, and chaos.

For the voices, they sometimes embodied the logic of force, chaos, and war through the sound of ambulances, the sound of missiles and planes. However, they sometimes expressed peace through calm.

The decor was characterized by a chaotic state similar to the chaos in Iraq, and the lighting seemed dim.

The scene was often bleak, with blood, corpses, body parts, and paramedics present. However, that chaos began to disappear so that the actors could sweep up the remains of the devastation and clearly confirm that the Iraqi people are able to overcome their differences and stop the bloodshed. The director and the author of the play wants to say that the dream is a dream about stability, security, and democracy in Iraq.

AbdulSamad sees that the silent theatre may be more eloquent and influential on the recipient in terms of sensing the tragedy of the Iraqis by employing actors' bodies, which speak and express all the facts.

The present article is an attempt to see how the Iraqi director, Anas AbdulSamad exploits the body and the sound within the silent theatre in *A Dream in Baghdad* to send a humanitarian message aimed at building a new Iraq full of love, hope and culture. This is done without uttering any words, through the medium of only the movements of body and sound.



1. Introduction

Despite the devastation caused by missiles, planes, cannons, the blood and body parts scattered in all parts of Iraq, the Iraqis still have a glimmer of hope in the midst of this devastation, as represented in their dream of a safe country. This is the message that the Iraqi director, Anas AbdulSamad, sends in his play, *A Dream in Baghdad*.

In the presence of a large audience, the play was shown on Tuesday evening at Al-Hamra Hall for the first time as part of the Carthage Theater Festival. The theatrical performance, which lasted 50 minutes, was silent and did not adopt traditional dialogue. Thus, the director signaled his protest against what is happening in his country, making the actor's body a loud trumpet against darkness, isolation, marginalization, and chaos.

The show *A Dream in Baghdad* relied entirely on body language according to a calculated kinesthetic system.

As for the voices, they embodied the logic of force, chaos and war through the sound of ambulances, and sometimes missiles and planes. At other times, they expressed peace through calm.

The decor was characterized by a chaotic state similar to the chaos in Iraq, and the lighting seemed dim.

The scene was often bleak, with blood, corpses, body parts, and paramedics present, but that chaos began to disappear so that the actors would remove the remains of the devastation and clearly confirm that the Iraqi people are able to sweep up their differences and stop the bloodshed.

The author, director, and protagonist of the play, Anas AbdulSamad tells Reuters after the show that, 'The dream is a dream towards stability, security, and democracy in Iraq' (Omara, Tariq 2007).

In one of the scenes, the various Iraqi history books appear to be fading and become torn in the hands of one of the actors.

Besides AbdulSamad, the parts in the play are performed by Farah Taha, Yasser Abdel Razzaq, and Mohamed Ayoub.

AbdulSamad also tells Reuters that the silent theatre may be more eloquent and influential on the recipient's ability to sense the tragedy of the Iraqis, adding that, 'Here, I think silence speaks more than words... the bodies speak and express all the facts' (Omara 2007).

He adds that this work 'is a humanitarian message aimed at building a new Iraq full of love, hope and culture because it is a country of civilizations that is destined to regain its glory, no matter how overwhelming the language of destruction' (Omara 2007).

Anas AbdulSamad chose the subject of his play *A Dream in Baghdad* to convey his artistic speech, in a directing style, which may not be common in the experiences of his peers from young directors, in his employment of body expressions, and creating a (bony) distance between the protagonist of the show, usually Anas, who occupies his central focus and is surrounded by a trained (group) who is not matched by the strength of his presence, his concentration, the intensity of his sign language, and the implicit messages it contains, he communicates them through 'mimika', that is, his strange, shocking facial expressions or the feeling called kinetic Keynesian associated with his experience. Derived from the arts of the Chinese and Japanese East, in particular, which are also influenced by the reading of contemporary Western directors, and the proposals they made for the modern treatment of the arts of spectacle, and the mechanisms for its reception by the local audience.

Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma (2017) show that the director is betting on theatrical excitement, which does not stem from a previous verbal textual plot but rather goes to the present moment, and which runs with the same viewing time and opens the horizon to justify any emergency coincidence that occurs, such as stopping the flow of the show, turning off the light, stopping the music, gathering and looking directly into the eyes of the spectators. After this seemingly spontaneous chapter, he connected him to what he had intended, from the beginning to pass this theatrical game.

The visual and audio alternate from the moment the show began, a nightmarish atmosphere, is intensified by the fall of a drop of water. We hear it, but cannot touch it, in an oriental framework stemming from temples that echo from ancient religious rituals through the memory of the theater, coupled with the appearance of a group of actors lying on the ground, and revolving around their personal axes, wrapped in white nylon bags; and near them is a table with a red cover and three chairs, pots, and red apples, a woman, and two men.

Then the third man enters to take his place, and everyone eats greedily, nibbling on apples with uncharacteristic lust. The actor (Anas) advances half-naked, in his red skirt, to disperse the crowd, with a half-reflexed figure, and distribute them to opposite sides. According to the public, the woman represents the human side, in the midst of a savage environment, devoured by this strange intruder, and overthrowing the peaceful men. Closer to the woman's mind and conscience, the scattered focal points multiply, and the tools (accessories) are scattered in intertwined kinetic patterns, which sometimes fade as an individual or group dance, or accumulate in a collagic manner, which means like an accumulation made of diverse things and touch with a montage that brings the expressive image of the scene closer, parallel with the musical sound and effects, leading to Iraqi music. AbdulSamad (2006) showed that the director's folklore leaves

the causal structure of the structural composition, arranged vertically, so that his scenes turn into fragmented 'snapshots.'

Even these drops of Chinese torment, which fell on the heads like a hammer, turn, after extensive suffering, wars, and destruction, into a magical spectrum emanating from the pocket of a human heart, which still beats with life despite the tragedies and pains, and the nightmares, psychological diseases, and criminal imbalances that are hidden. With a theological-mythical veneer, it does not know the meaning of morality or tolerance.

Voices we hear, monotonous, tonal, and agonizing for a feminine, manly moaning, for the memory of an extinct celebration. What a terrible thing for the stranger to share the apple with the woman eating it, with a scandalous instinctive noise to make the woman bounce back on the red chair, along with the educated man of books who gnaws at his papers, tearing them up after disappointments and humiliation. The role is played by Muhammad Omar in serious and honest manner. The actor Anas plays the role of the intellectual, to become the ignorant against him, also invited the feast to eat the papers of books! However, from the vantage point of overwhelming barbarism, the woman puts on her black clothes, and exchanges them for white, and there is a child involved in the manly crowd being manipulated by the stranger, who raises and drops her with a sword piercing the bellies of books.

The director announces the name of his band during the interval, and the work of the workshop, then the show starts again at an expressive pace, showing the lunatic man, whose costume turns from red, to ruined clothes, driven by his sexual fetish, for the woman to escape from him, and push him away from her, then falls. The two men empty the contents of the bottle, raw blood, over his head. A masochistic disease pursues this predator who hits his bald head with his hands with strong slaps, and his eyes turn in their sockets as if he is from a world of madness.

The side rooms are in the margins, one of which is occupied by the protagonist of the show, and the other in which other men lie.

The show opened to a slow, spiritual initiation, which was drenched by the sport of yoga, with the body enriched with its artistic transcendence, as the Japanese actor does, for example, with his body high. And this is what the actor Anas wanted when his body swam in the space of melodies, or when he turned around on his heels, with a technical know-how.

The group is preoccupied with sweeping the floor of the remains of tattered, lawless book papers, and from mashed apples and shards of glass to smashed plates of food, and carrying glasses of wine back to the red table, the style of performance, touching the

silent, the dancer, the expressive, the adoption of influences and music, or murmurs, as the woman does as she approaches the 'microphone' when the pronunciation betrays her, she tries, as if she is chomping on the microphone! The director's chair acts to convey the meaning, through the meaningless, ambiguous murmurs, without dialogue, ritualistic movement, symbolic expression, for the protagonist, and for the group and its rhythmic arrangement, and the index finger raised to the top, means distress for the tormented people, but it means killing and destruction for the 'terrorist', who is under the illusion that he is the sole spokesman for the Holy One.

The director developed the function of the visual collage with a man appearing on the screen, head in ointment, wrapped in medical gauze, and with blood stains. This man symbolizes the destruction of Baghdad, through the presentation of Datashaw, which represents the movement of a car, piercing the streets of Baghdad, the capital, amid concrete blocks, and escorting him are two men who jump over the car seat due to the bumps in the road. Their movement coincides with the movement of the windshield wiper, which is divided into two halves, as if they represent the eyes of Baghdad, and are trying hard to erase the mote from them in vain, yet with persistence and stubbornness, for the sake of its prospective future, but with clear wide eyes, with the capacity of her charm, her color, and her heritage.

The director, along with the actor, the music designer (Mohamed Omar) and the jurisprudence (Saleh Yasser), in choosing the sound effects the scenographer (Ali Mahmoud Al-Sudani) and his team of young amateurs, have the main role of circulating the performances of the series director (Anas AbdulSamad), the actor whose footsteps leave the floor, the stage with a creative spirit, which has attracted in its travels the names of Japanese actresses Mikasan and Iroko, and a Moroccan actress Salwa El Hajj, and opened the theaters of Japan, Korea, Tunisia and Turkey... her heart, for an Iraqi director who raises his cognitive questions, through the aesthetics of performance the actor in a physical show that links man's obsessions from his first creation, to his explosive, disturbing, and frightening contemporary technology.

The Silent Metatheatre was a title given by the Iraqi theater director Anas AbdulSamad on his theatrical performances, which he began presenting as an author and director with his band *The Impossible Theatre* in the second half of the last decade, most notably: *Marionette Macbeth*, *Silence Like Weeping*, *Othello*, *Dream in Baghdad*, *Street and Life*, *The Silence of the Sea*, *Abu Ghraib*, *Also and Also*, *Reprimand*, and *Yes Godot*.

These shows were warmly received by critics, playwrights and the sector concerned with the new theatrical experiences of the audience inside Iraq, and took part in various Arab and international festivals in Tunisia, Japan, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Holland,

Switzerland, Korea, and Iran. The last show, *Yes Godot*, was presented in five French cities. The show, *A Dream in Baghdad*, won the Gold Award at the Tabriz International Festival.

Not only that, but Anas AbdulSamad was hosted in more than one country and a festival was held to run training workshops in the field of silent meta theater in which hundreds of actors participated, among them workshops in Tokyo, Izmir, Tunisia and Bizerte, and in Korea, in addition to local workshops in Baghdad, Erbil, and Kirkuk.

AbdulSamad, in answer to a question we asked him about his theoretical perception of the silent meta-theater, says that he 'experienced the idea, before turning to the significance of the term, to work in a new style based on continuous exercise, and writing the physical text through it, i.e., movement while retaining the pre-written text and idea, to be. The exercise is a show in the eyes of the recipient, and sometimes it is not a show. The goal, in all cases, is to transcend the prevailing form of theater and to address the human mind and emotion' (Omara 2007).

If these experiences have attracted the attention of various theater critics, the term 'Almitamsarh', which AbdulSamad linked to the (silent) physical performance, was only addressed by two or three of them, one of whom was the late director Sami Abdel Hamid.

In fact, this term is one of the more problematic ones at the semantic level and at the translation level, as it is used in contrast to the foreign term 'Metatheatre'. The problem is attributed to the linguistic precedent 'Meta', which involves confusion when translated into Arabic. Therefore, it is possible to give many interviews for the term, such as the descriptive theater, the explanatory theater, and the reflexive theater, in addition to 'behind the stage', and is often determined in two ways: the play that appears in a narcissistic way in itself, and the play that confirms the theatrical game as actually being a game and breaks the illusion.

It is known that Western theatrical criticism did not crystallize the term except during the early 1960s, as researcher Hassan Yousefi says, and it was associated with intertextuality through experiments in dramatic writing that tried to restore certain texts that preceded them in time, and within the framework of specific aesthetic perspectives aimed at undermining classical perceptions and replacing them by modernist ones.

In his show, *A Dream in Baghdad*, Anas AbdulSamad wanted to send to his audience a glimmer of hope represented in the dream of a safe country that was devastated, blood was shed on its land, and lethal weapons scattered the remains of his sons as a result of the invasion, fighting and terrorism, through a group of personalities performed by

Yasser Abdel Razzaq, Esraa Al-Bassam, Hamad Omar Ayoub, Rita Caspar, Haider Abd Thamer, and the director himself, in an old house with a crumbling roof pierced by heavy rain.

The main character appears in the space of this show as the first to descend to earth- it is the character of Adam, and next to him is a woman, Eve, who shares with him, in quick scenes, dances accompanied by the fall of red apples that fill the place, as a metaphor for the issue of temptation. Then comes Adam's first attempt to show strength in order to impose his control over the other characters, with Eve the first to submit, followed by a character similar to Adam that has been stripped of his original identity, and stripped of his memory to be a duplicate of him.

Soon, the remaining characters become subordinate to Adam, with the exception of an unknown character who is supposed to be an 'intellectual', who isolates himself from others, and the despair of society leads him to lose his faith in culture and reading, so he begins to tear every page from a book after reading it, until he reaches the point of throwing all books, and the search for another cultural means represented by a small television that accompanies him wherever he goes, perhaps saving him from the isolation that is killing the dream within him. But the nightmare overcomes his consciousness, and forces him to destroy the television, and cut the last threads of communication with the other.

Here, Adam exploits his collapse to impose his control over him, and finds that there is no more sword than a solution to killing culture, in a symbolic way, by stabbing the pages of the books torn up by the intellectual. Adam's look-alike continues to stab other faces of culture in a form of behavior bearing the harshest signs of terrorism, in addition to the act of raping Eve, which is also practiced with symbolic violence with elaborate bodily expressions supported by an impressive use of the cinematic projector (data show) in deepening the ritualistic and aesthetic nature of the show.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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