

# ALJADID

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*"Whirling Dervishes," by Monkith Saaid, 2003*

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## Lebanon Takes Center Stage at Avignon Theater Festival

The 63rd Avignon Festival was held from July 7-29 in Avignon, France. Founded by Jean Vilar in 1947, the annual theater festival is one of the oldest in France, and one of the most popular and historically significant. This year there was a special Lebanese presence. The Lebanese participants included associate artist of the festival, Lebanese-Canadian Wajdi Mouawad, Lina Saneh, Rabih Mroue, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Zad Moulkata, Yalda Younes, Yasmine Hamdan, Daniel Arbid and Ghassan Salhab.

Vincent Baudriller, artistic director of the Avignon Festival, emphasized the Lebanese special presence at this year's festival in an interview conducted by Georgine Ayoub, who covered the festival for the Beirut and London-based *Al Hayat* newspaper. The associated artist Wajdi Mouawad is a Lebanese-Canadian actor, director, translator, and playwright who was born in Lebanon, fled the civil war with his family in 1977 and moved to France, finally immigrating to Montréal in 1983.

Three of his plays, the poignantly poetic "Littoral," "Incendies," and "Forêts," were presented in the Palais des Papes' Cour d'honneur for more than 11 hours. Writing in French, Wajdi Mouawad, because of his multiple talents and history, has the ability to appeal to different generations and cultures. Influenced by the Lebanese Civil War, his plays are stories about origins – their mystery and burdens – but also about childhood, family history, civil war, justice, solitude, and the reparation of trauma by breaking silence. The stage becomes the site of epic stories and narrations, and the audience shares the anxiety and bewilderment that accompany unexplained violence, dispossession, loss and death.

As for the other Lebanese artists, Saneh, in an interview with Georgine Ayoub, described the special bond between her fellow Lebanese artists present at Avignon, a bond created by their shared experience of the 15-year-long Lebanese Civil War and which she believes has given them a unique approach to theater.

Saneh's works appear in simple narratives to effectively showcase her ideas. She explained that the dominant voices in the Lebanese artworks attempt to shake the viewer's conscience by describing the horrors of war as well as shaking the perception of the oppressor-victim duality, which she refuses to accept. "We all consider ourselves involved in the war. We are all responsible for it in one way or another, even if we didn't kill anyone," she told Ayoub.

Saneh also feels that theater has a responsibility not to pander to the emotions of the audience. She explains, "We are cautious not to incite emotions. Certainly, the people might respond if we did, but this would only create more violence and polarization, and also allow leaders to control their people. I have the Lebanese audience in mind when I say this,

and I don't allow myself to manipulate that audience." And despite the fact that the play is showing in a French theater festival, she still feels that it is written for the Lebanese people.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige showed a multi-media installation of videos, photographs, and sounds to create a space of absence, bullets and simplicity that aims to recreate Lebanon's memory, highlighting in a double-film shown in the space titled "Khiam 2000-2007," named after a detention camp in southern Lebanon occupied by Israel until 2000, and which was destroyed in the 2006 Lebanon war. The resulting piece deals with questions, as stated on the Avignon Festival website, "...of what is seen, what is not seen, making the invisible speak, rendering it faithfully, but also calling up the ghosts to question Lebanon's present."

Zad Moulkata's vocal ensemble piece, "The Other Bank," used a child against the backdrop of bombs in Lebanon, to pose the question: "What if I were born on the other side?" Through the piece, which deals with the hate and violence that is born from the partisanship and internecine violence, a catharsis is reached. In Moulkata's second piece, "Non" (No), he utilizes the stomping feet of Yalda Younes to recreate the sounds of war, deafeningly loud and terrifying, to remind the audience of the powerlessness daily combat creates.

At one point during the interview, Saneh referred to the other Lebanese artists as "we." Asked what they really had in common by Ayoub, she said that through their work they must further an important discussion: why they must both forget the war and also never forget it. At this year's Avignon Festival, both arguments were heard.

*Cultural Briefings is compiled and edited by Al Jadid staff*



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### A Syrian-American Navigates New Orleans



The representation of Arabs as stereotypes existed before Sept. 11, but even more so after 2001. Nowhere can we find greater examples of this prejudice than in the depiction of Arabs in mainstream cultural media. So it comes as some surprise

that a recent departure from this long-standing stereotyping comes from mainstream American author Dave Eggers's new nonfiction narrative "Zeitoun," about a Syrian-American family and their experience of living through Hurricane Katrina. In the book, Abdulrahman Zeitoun emerges as a man of dignity and heroism, effecting a quiet repudiation of the stereotypical characterization of Arabs while also giving American literature a new hero. Recently, as reported in the New York Times, filmmaker Jonathan Demme optioned the film rights to the story to create an animated film adaptation of the book.

Opening on the Zeitoun family in Uptown New Orleans, the novel depicts the tragedies that befall the patriarch of the Zeitouns, Abdulrahman Zeitoun, who finds himself victim to both Hurricane Katrina and an unlawful arrest on suspicions that he is a terrorist.

After ignoring a warning to evacuate, Zeitoun stays in his New Orleans home while his family leaves. He suspects, like many New Orleanians did, that the damage to his home would be limited to a few broken windows. Waking later to find his city submerged, Zeitoun utilizes a canoe he purchased some years in the past to navigate the newly flooded streets. Eggers relishes these scenes and does not hold back in describing all of the strange details of flooded New Orleans like a vision of the apocalypse, even furthering the comparison by opening the novel with an epigraph from Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel "The Road."

Equipped with only his canoe, Zeitoun, referred to by his last name only in the book, travels through the city answering meek cries for help. With so many in need of help, and government organizations like FEMA so ill-equipped to respond, Zeitoun becomes a hero to a city that desperately needs one.

He rescues a 200-pound, 70-year-old woman trapped in her house. He swims to her porch after hearing her soft cries for help. Once inside he finds her using her furniture as a make-shift floatation device, but barely able to carry on in that manner after nearly 24 hours. Realizing that he can't possibly support her in the canoe, he leaves to find another boat to help. With reports that the city has turned anarchistic and violent, many are unwilling to help. A fan boat passes him by without so much as a glance, nearly toppling his canoe. But luckily a small fishing boat stops and he is able to use a ladder to get the old woman into the boat.

"The woman rolled into the bed of the boat. It was not a graceful landing, but she managed to sit up. ... Zeitoun

shuddered to watch a woman of her age suffer like this. The situation had robbed her of her dignity, and it pained him to bear witness."

In many ways "Zeitoun" is concerned with dignity, both robbed and gained. Despite his good efforts, Zeitoun is arrested and detained without charges by officers under suspicions that he is a terrorist. In prison he is subjected to humiliation and abject tortures in scenes reminiscent of Abu Ghraib prison. In these scenes the anger over the undignified treatment of Arabs since Sept. 11 becomes most apparent, but Zeitoun never loses dignity, and Eggers never loses his journalistic objectivity. Throughout the novel Zeitoun's image is untarnished, and only the reputations of his torturers are damaged.

Eggers set out to "de-exoticize" the idea of a Muslim-American family in "Zeitoun." He said in an interview with GOATMILK, an online blog, that in writing this story he "was seeking to just tell a story about an all-American family that happens to be Muslim."

Based on a series of interviews Eggers conducted with the Zeitoun family, including the freed Abdulrahman Zeitoun, beginning in 2005, Eggers attempted to portray the events preceding and following the hurricane without inserting his own judgments or embellishing the story with too much style or sentimentality. His example was Norman Mailer's "The Executioner's Song," which he found powerful for its lack of Mailer's own voice. Rather, he let the events speak for themselves, which he believed would showcase the material's power.

By choosing to tell a true story, Eggers has avoided the possibility of disbelief here. Also absent are any traces of stereotype and the usual notions about Arab characters to create a powerful and compelling story that effects a repudiation of the mistreatment of Arabs while also showing that Abdulrahman Zeitoun is an American hero.

Critics agree. Timothy Egan wrote in a cover story for the New York Times Book Review: "My guess is, 50 years from now, when people want to know what happened to [New Orleans] during a shameful episode of our history, they will still be talking about a family named Zeitoun."

### A Ghada Samman Duet

One of the most prolific novelists in the Arab world, Ghada Samman remains as busy as ever in enriching the Arab library of letters and engaging the literary imaginations of scholars and critics. Two new books further that trend, one by her and one about her. "The Owl Told Me and Said," by Syrian critic Ibrahim Mahmoud, published by Dar al-Talia, Beirut, is an aesthetic-textual approach to an earlier book by Samman, "Dancing with the Owl." The new work by Samman is titled "The Young Woman Will Come to Admonish You – The Beginnings of Rebellion," and is published by Ghada Samman Publications, Beirut.



In “The Owl Told Me and Said,” Mahmoud raises a series of questions about the significance of the owl in Samman’s writings. According to a review in the London and Beirut-based *Al Hayat* newspaper, Mahmoud asserts that Samman abandoned her own image and found the image of her dreams in the owl.

Al Jadid asked Samman as to what is the real role of the owl in her works, and she had this to say: “The Arab people’s hatred of the owl stems from ideas they have inherited from the past, and is not based on rational thinking. I reject this archaic prejudice and the way we assume traditional mindsets like machines programmed to think a certain way. I reject this thinking in everything I create, say, and love. I love the owl because all have agreed to hate it without asking themselves, at least once, Why? And I love the owl because I find it a beautiful bird with deep eyes. The people are pessimistic about the owl, and I become disheartened by those people. It is the right of the owl to dislike the people for it is hated and killed by them. Arab popular culture is hostile toward the owl to avoid the task of facing the real causes for its troubles.”

“The Young Woman Will Come to Admonish You” is the 17th volume of Samman’s “Incomplete Works,” a collection that includes unpublished essays. It is the fifth in a series of conversations between Samman and her literary colleagues, parts of which appeared in “The Tribe Interrogates the Victim,” “The Sea Tries a Fish,” “Wandering Inside a Wound,” and “Putting Love on Trial.” Literary figures Ghali Shukri, Mutah Safadi, and George al-Rassi are among those with whom Samman conversed.

In praising Ghada Samman, the late Moroccan author Muhammed Choukri said, “She was the foremost daring literary figure in the Arab world during this century. Ghada Samman is a pioneer among the courageous authors, whether in her interviews or creative works; she was steadfast in spite of all temptations, and it is my hope that others who appreciate her will also add their own.”

## Arab Americans On and Off the Big Screen

A recent article published in the *Los Angeles Times* by Raja Abdulrahim highlighted an old dilemma facing Arab-American filmmakers – the difficulty of receiving funding for their films. This topic caught the attention of one of the nation’s major newspapers, because it coincided with the opening of the 13th Annual Arab Film Festival in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Berkeley, and San



Jose.

Most ethnic minorities have their share of under-representation and stereotypical representation in Hollywood. It happens to Mexican Americans, commonly seen on the screen in roles as janitors or maids; jive-talking, street-smart

African Americans, who are typically contrasted with an uncool middle-aged white male; and Asian Americans, who are often old, wise, and prone to spouting nonsensical adages fit for fortune cookies to an unwitting (and often white) protagonist. The same is true for Arab Americans, who have faced a more negative portrayal than most: that of terrorists or criminals, often equipped with a cigarette, just in case their evil intent was not made clear enough by their hijacking a plane.

Increasingly aware that correcting decades, if not centuries-old misrepresentations of Arab Americans and Muslims in Western literature and arts required immediate attention, a generation of Arab-American filmmakers decided to take the task into their own hands. However, for two contemporary Arab-American filmmakers, finding funding for their movies has proved difficult for reasons that are political rather than artistic. Cherien Dabis, director of “Amreeka,” and Ahmad Zahra, producer of “Three Veils,” experienced resistance on political grounds from both their own community and the independent film world when trying to secure investment for their films.

Social, cultural, and religious politics are often reasons for denial of funding given by investors within the Arab community, who are typically hesitant to fund films that depict sexual or violent content. Abdulrahim noted that when Zahra approached wealthy Arabs in Los Angeles to fund his film “Three Veils,” he was routinely turned down on the ironic grounds that the subject matter was either too conservative or too liberal – this because the film depicts an arranged marriage and a character struggling with her homosexual desire.

In the same article in the *Los Angeles Times*, filmmaker Musa Syeed said that “There’s a kind of PR mentality amongst those engaging in the arts in our communities – the only goal is to fix our image.” This places Arab American filmmakers, often graduates of major American universities, in the tedious role of merely attempting damage control, which many are reluctant to accept.

Rather, filmmakers like Zahra would like to create a realistic portrayal of Arab-American life, one that, if at times gritty or unpolished, is at least true, and therefore more effective in showing that the Arab community is just like any other, warts and all. However, since there is such a dearth of Arab characters in the popular arts and media, positive or negative, Arab investors are much more selective about the ones they choose to fund.

While social politics are often the reason for denial of funding by Arab investors, international politics are often the grounds for denial of funding from independent investors in the United States. Films depicting the lives of Arab Americans are often seen as politically charged, even when the narratives concern Arab-American families and are not ostensibly political. As reported by Andrew Gumbel in the Abu Dhabi-based newspaper *The National*, when Dabis approached investors for her movie, they often balked, stating that times were too politically sensitive. This despite the fact that

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# Lebanese Immigrants in Australia: Growing Up in a Culture of Taxi Driving

BY CHRISTINE EID

By its very nature a taxi journey is seen as a passage between two places rather than the subject of focus itself. Taxi driving is a humble profession, usually overlooked, undervalued and often the brunt of jokes and stereotypes. Most consider it a transitory occupation – a short-term solution between jobs, a source of additional income or just a good fall-back position.

With the introduction of industry reforms in the mid-1990s to Australia's state of Victoria, taxis became more outwardly professionalized, regulated by the state government through the Victorian Taxi Directorate. Mandating yellow as Victoria's official taxi color, strict rules and regulations on driver uniforms, code of conduct and vehicle standards aimed to lift the public image of the industry. Reforms continued in the early 2000s with upgraded training programs and the installation of security cameras in an effort to improve taxi safety and reduce driver assaults. But with all of the reforms, the escalating taxi license values and the growing shift from an owner-operator to an investor-driven industry, there has been little improvement in driver working conditions and benefits. For example, there is no annual leave, no sick pay, no pension plan, and driver safety and well-being remain a grave concern.

As the daughter of a taxi driver, I know this all too well. My father drove taxis for over 30 years, initially as an owner-operator and then as a driver, predominantly working the night shift. Growing up, I can recall anxiously waiting for my father to return home. I got into the habit of waking regularly to check my alarm clock. If he was any later than 3:30 a.m., panic would set in. I would get out of bed, pace the room and constantly look out onto the driveway and at the city lights, wondering where he was, imagining the worst. I always felt so guilty that he was out there working, risking his life to support us, while we slept.

After the death of Melbourne taxi driver Rajneesh Joga in 2006 and the subsequent protests and lobbying by taxi drivers, the state government has initiated a taxi industry safety taskforce.

The taskforce intends to address driver concerns by testing safety screens in taxis and providing legal advice to assist the establishment of a driver representative industry body. It will also seek advice from the Victorian Multicultural Commission about combating racism.

Melbourne's taxi entrepreneurs who came to Australia from Hadchit, Lebanon, who included my father, were the influence behind my solo contemporary art exhibition titled "Transit," held in 2006 at Span Galleries in Melbourne, Australia. Exploring

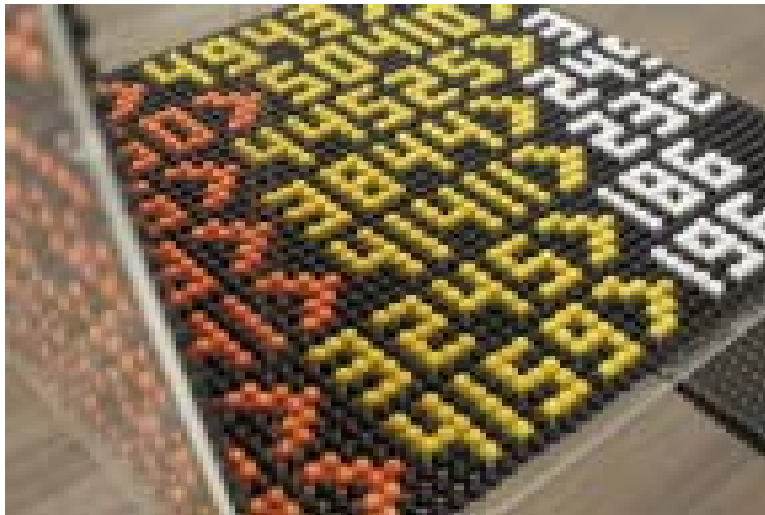
my own history I recorded the rich oral stories of this group, who migrated to Australia as part of the second wave of Lebanese migration (1947-1975).

Melbourne's taxi entrepreneurs from Hadchit, Lebanon, shared a special bond. Because they grew up in a small village, not only did they know one another but in some cases they were related or close family friends, strengthening camaraderie between the men. Usually they met at Moonee Ponds taxi rank, told jokes and shared stories as they waited for a fare. In the

early 1970s my uncle, Raymond Eid, recalls that he and his brothers Joe and Tony (my father) would pass by each other's homes to check that each had made it back safely before the end of their shift. They worried about each other tremendously because around that time an Australian Lebanese taxi driver was killed on a fare to Ballarat (approximately 100km from Melbourne).

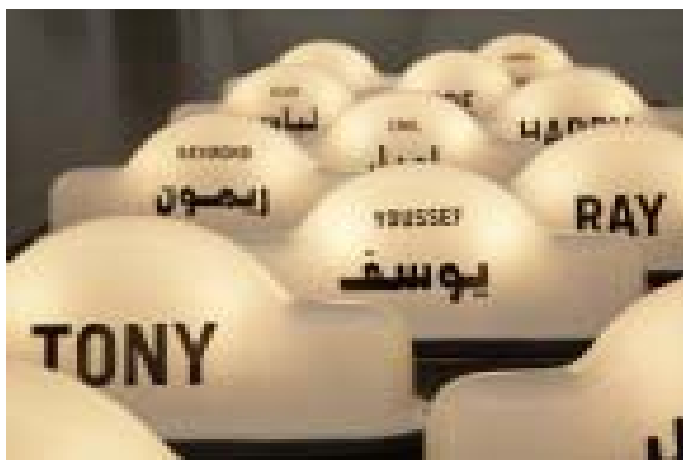
Like so many of Australia's migrants, the Hadchit Lebanese community in Victoria was established through chain migration. The community spans back to 1926, when one night over a card game, Raymond Betros, Simon Younis, George Bicery and his son Michael decided they would go to Australia for a couple of years, earn some money and return to Hadchit. Hadchit's residents were accustomed to this form of temporary migration. Many travelled abroad to Latin America, the United States and Canada to hawk for a few years, only to return to Hadchit with enough capital to improve their standard of living.

The group disembarked in Sydney. After a chance meeting



'Are we there yet?' By Christine Eid (Photo credit: Andrew Lloyd)

with a friend who took them under his wing, within a couple of months, these Hadchit pioneers had equipped themselves with hawker licenses and set up in business. Hawking, or peddling, was a common occupation among the first wave of Lebanese immigrants to Australia (1880s-1920s) who were commonly referred to as “Syrian hawkers.” Betros followed Younis to Melbourne where they hawked door to door in the suburbs before establishing a run in Victoria’s western district. Gradually their



‘Your place.’ By Christine Eid (Photo credit: Andrew Lloyd)

families joined them in Australia; the Second World War temporarily interrupted some of the reunions.

John Werden and Nadim Hanna, who arrived in Melbourne as part of the second wave of Lebanese immigration to Australia (1947-1975), were the first of the taxi entrepreneurs. Younis, a close family friend, sponsored Werden in 1950, while in 1951 Hanna found a sponsor in his uncle Betros. This immigration marked a pivotal point in the history of Victoria’s Hadchit community, as they contributed to the subsequent Hadchit settlement in Melbourne.

Employment opportunities for these men relied on kinship and community networks. The majority began work almost immediately in Melbourne’s manufacturing industry: textile mills, car manufacturing plants, tire manufacturers, steel foundries and meat pie factories. John Werden followed his own career path, beginning in the hardware department at Myer’s Department Store and teaching South American dance at night. Earning eight pounds a week was tough in those days, and when he heard that others were earning 12 to 14 pounds with overtime, he went to General Motors Holden (GMH) to see what he needed to do. After witnessing the noise, the crackle, the dust and the oil, he soon realized that he wasn’t cut out for that type of work.

Werden’s dissatisfaction kept him motivated to explore new ways to earn more money. After a short stint in Sydney working at the Johnson & Johnson factory, he established a hawking business. It was only when he noticed a taxi parked in his neighbor’s driveway that he came upon the inspiration for his new venture. In 1952, he got his taxi driver’s certificate and started driving with Green Tops. By 1954 he returned to

Melbourne and applied for his Victorian credentials. He became well-known as the first taxi driver from Hadchit.

While he was living in Strathmore with his cousin Alamiyi and her husband Nadim Hanna, who had three children to support, they saw the potential in taxi driving. Nadim got his license in 1959, bought a car and was in business, leaving behind a leading hand position at GMH. Gradually he sponsored his brothers Joseph (1956) and Elias (1963) to Australia, helped them find factory work and later to establish their own taxi business. Taxi fever had struck. Once a model had been established, a succession of taxi businesses followed, inspiring their brothers-in-law, cousins and family friends.

Why was the taxi business so popular with this community? Most had limited education and since they had no trade or profession, they felt their career paths were restricted. They identified distinct advantages with the taxi business, such as greater earnings, autonomy, social mobility and a low bar for entry. The sum of these advantages seemed to outweigh the high personal risk, financial risk and the long hours. Elias Hanna recalls that while he was working at Bradmill Cotton Mills in 1965, he drove the taxi on weekends, where, he said, “I was making something like 12 pounds.” Since this was as much as his weekly factory wage, he started driving full-time. They shared their experiences with community networks, spreading the word about the money that could be made driving taxis. My uncle, Raymond Eid, recalls that in the early 1970s, “Nadim Hanna said that if you got your taxi license you could make \$400 a week, while in the factory we’d make \$50 a week.” With a desire to provide for his growing family, he took Nadim’s advice with no regrets.

Establishing a taxi business signified independence over one’s own livelihood. Being “your own boss” provided flexibility and allowed them to determine their own working patterns. Not only could they choose the numbers of hours they worked, but also the specific hours. It allowed them to maintain family and religious commitments, as most did not work Sundays, a day for spending time with family and attending mass. Their mobility also added a social dimension to their profession. They would return home for meals or pop over to a friend’s or relative’s home for coffee, rituals which reinforced their sense of freedom.

They believed that self-employment was the gateway to a higher standard of living. They found that the transition from factory worker to taxi entrepreneur was gratifying and granted them high esteem among their peers. Also, the initial capital outlay for entry into the taxi industry was relatively low. Some saved the entire principal, while others borrowed from family or banks, and with hard work repaid their loans in a relatively short period of time.

For these men entering the industry between the early 1950s and 1970s, the taxi business broadened their opportunities. Some went on to own several taxis, others invested in property or other businesses, and others became employees. While the financial outcomes varied, they were all successful in providing greater opportunities for future generations. **AJ**



## The Season of Tayeb Salih – Crossing the Boundaries

BY LYNNE ROGERS

*If heaven would make me such another world – Othello*

While some immediately think of the violent crisis in Darfur at the mention of Sudan, others will remember Tayeb Salih, the legendary Sudanese writer who passed away in London at the age of 80. His monumental novel, “Season of Migration to the North,” first published in English in 1969, is considered by many critics to be the work that launched contemporary Arab literature onto the world stage and into the modern canon.

Born in a northern Sudanese village in 1928, he studied at Khartoum University. Four years before Sudan’s independence in 1956, Salih left for England to study international affairs at the University of London and to work for the BBC drama department. Later he worked at Qatar’s Ministry of Information and for the UNESCO office in Paris. More recently, he wrote for the London-based Arabic magazine *Al Majalla*.

A benevolent supporter of Arab literature, he lamented the lack of translations of Arab writers to English and observed that “When there is a political crisis, people jump to the wrong conclusions because they have no terms of reference,” he told *Al Jazeera*. A champion of human rights, he was a vocal opponent to the previous Islamic regime in Sudan and the political misappropriation of the Koran. An émigré like the Irish James Joyce, Salih’s fiction continually looked home towards the Sudanese village for his inspiration. Like the English Thomas Hardy and the American Nobel Prize-winning novelist William Faulkner, Tayeb Salih’s universal and human dramas are set in the imaginary and unpretentious village, Wad Hamid.

In his first collection of short stories in 1960, the story “Doom Tree of Wad Hamid,” a dramatic monologue, began Salih’s literary exploration of the outsider and modernity intruding on village life. His characters also had to wrestle with the indigenous oppression and corruption rooted in either the village or the family. In the story “A Handful of Dates,” a young boy perceives the cunning ruthlessness in his beloved grandfather. The grandfather figure, a carrier of culture who

passes on both the diseases and beauty of the Sudanese village and burdens the grandson with responsibility, is a constant motif for Salih. In his “Tayeb Salih, Ideology and the Craft of Fiction,” the Arab-American critic Wail Hassan writes, “In the Wad Hamid Cycle, the recurrent theme of the grandfather-grandson relationship often frames concerns about the old and the new, tradition and modernity, conformity and dissent.”

The famous novella published in 1967, “The Wedding of Zein,” typifies Salih’s dexterous mingling of both Sudanese oral culture and the classic Western canon. As a character reminiscent of Shakespeare’s wise fools, Zein, the androgynous animal-like fool, is also endowed with spiritual sensibility and an appreciative eye for beauty. When he returns from a hospital visit, now more handsome than grotesque, he marries his lovely and willful cousin and stands “like a mast of a ship.” Later, “Wedding of Zein” was dramatized in Libya and made into a Cannes Festival prize-winning film by the Kuwaiti filmmaker Khalid Siddiq.

A second contiguous novel of politics in the village, “Bandashar,” also published in 1967, delves into Salih’s staple themes of myth formation, the seductive quality of surrender, the life force of the Nile and a maternal

love slightly tinged with adolescent sexuality. In the depiction of village life, Salih’s narratives remain rooted to his landscape in the diverse social groups, the corruption, problems of irrigation, the celebration and the unhealthy restraint of tradition. Salih turned to these universal and symbolic motifs once again in his seminal novel, “Season of Migration to the North.”

A few years after its publication in Beirut, the translated “Season” had an auspicious publication in the literary magazine, *Encounter*. Later the publication was found to be financed by the CIA through the “Conference for Cultural Freedom.” Although “Season” has become a Penguin Classic, a rarity for a contemporary Arab literary work, its explicit sexuality and frank discussion of Islam, even touching on female circumcision, caused it to be banned in Egypt, and today it is still banned in the Sudan and the Gulf.

In a now familiar scene that juxtaposes Eastern and Western



Tayeb Salih by Mamoun Sakkal for *Al Jadid*



culture, the novel opens with the return of a poetry student who discovers a stranger ensconced in the village. When the student hears the stranger, Mustafa, drunkenly recite a poem by Ford Madox Ford, the student is drawn into the violent past of Mustafa's sojourn in England. Critics have compared the sophisticated novel to Joseph Conrad for its condemnation of colonialism and double-frame narrative that blurs the boundaries between the narrator and the tale. For critic Issa Boullata, Salih's novel "emphasizes the political side of the East/West confrontation as internalized by Mustafa Said and perverted into a vengeful feeling expressed in sexual conquests..." The author himself pointed out, "I have re-defined the so-called East/West relationship as essentially one of conflict, while it had been previously treated in romantic terms." While in London, the character Mustafa identifies himself to his female conquests as "African-Arab," highlighting the political complications that move beyond the East/West paradigm and foreshadowing the tensions in the Sudan.

Yet the crux of the novel rests in Salih's response to the Great Bard, illustrating the depth and longevity of cultural preconceptions. During his trial for murder, while the lawyers duel for the winning narrative, the novel's protagonist thinks to himself, wants to lash out, "I am no Othello. I am a lie." Still he remains silent. Almost 50 years later, when the literary device of a response to a traditional canon narrative has become mainstream, "Season" retains the power to shock readers out of their complacency.

With the literary references to both Arab and British cultures, the narrative displays an intellectual depth and awareness of performance as a political posture as "sharp" as Mustafa's innate intelligence. David Pryce-Jones' review for The New York Times aptly praised the translation: "Swift and astonishing in its prose, this novel is more instructive than any number of academic books." Celebrated critic Roger Allen describes the novel's construction as "brilliant" as the narrative crosses cultural boundaries. Allen writes that "A major device that the author uses to convey these misunderstandings at the broadest cultural level is that of place, and, specifically, two rooms." The double place is mirrored in the two dead wives, Jean Morris in England and Husnah Bint Mahmudin in Wad Hamid. In "The Experimental Arab Novel," critic Stefan Meyer writes, "The book is significant in many respects, but perhaps in no greater respect than the way in which it explores the intertwined relations between gender and power relations."

Within the umbrella of East/West, the novel weaves a plethora of dialectics: male/female, Christian/Muslim, Eros/Thanos, North/South, Tradition/Modernity, Urban/Rural – enough to keep generations of academics writing about the undiscovered nuances in the novel. Critics have yet to agree on the novel's final image. Issa Boullata reads the ending as an affirmation of life when the narrator "chooses and makes a decision for the first time in his life," while others debate the futility of the narrator's final cry. Salih's legacy will continue to inspire Arab intellectuals and Western humanists. **AJ**

### Two Poems by Mahmoud Darwish

#### If I Were a Hunter

If I were a hunter  
I would give the doe one chance  
And a second  
And a third  
And a tenth,  
For her to fall asleep...  
And I would be content with my share:  
Inner peace drawn from her drowsiness.  
I am able to, but instead I forgive  
And become pure  
Like spring water drawn only from its mouth...

If I were a hunter  
I would form a kinship with the doe...  
"Don't be frightened of the rifle,  
My playful sister"  
And we would both listen, in safety,  
To the howl of the wolf in a distant field!

#### In the Company of Things

We were guests to all things, most of which  
Are less wistful than we are when we desert them

The river laughs when a traveler weeps:  
Pass along, for the beginning of a river is its conclusion

Nothing waits. All things unaware  
Of us, and we greet and thank them

But once we name them our sentiments  
We believe in the name. Does the essence  
Of a name exist within it?

We are the guests of all things, most of us  
Forgetting our initial sentiments ... denying them!

*Translated from the Arabic by Rewa Zeinati*

*From Mahmoud Darwish, "Athar El Farasha" (The Butterfly Effect). Published by Rayyes Books, Beirut, Lebanon, 2008.*

***Report from Washington, D.C.***

## **Kennedy Center Festival Underscores Growing Interest in Arab Literature**

**BY ANDREA SHALAL-ESA**

Literature had a starring role at the Kennedy Center's three-week festival of Arab arts and culture from February 23 - March 15, drawing dozens of noted writers and literary critics from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and other Arab countries, as well as the United States. Eight panels on varying topics and five performances were largely at full capacity, underscoring what many writers described as growing interest in their work.

The panels discussed issues including the state of publishing and reading in the Arab world, the growing impact of Arab writers in exile, the nuances of capturing voices of the opposite gender, and the importance of the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

Topics such as the politics of reception, stereotypes, censorship, problems with translations, and the mysterious forces that make some books bestsellers while others languish also ignited debate and discussion over the seven days of the literary series.

The series became essentially a gathering of friends, some old, some new, many of whom remain deeply concerned about violence, death and destruction in their home or native countries. Some said they were guardedly optimistic that the recent change in government in the United States would lead to increased dialogue – and less war. Others remained skeptical.

"Of course, I believe poets more than politicians," said Hayan Charara, a Detroit-born poet and anthologist who is currently living in Texas, while speaking on a panel about Arab-American writers. Charara, who recently won a coveted National Endowment for the Arts award, said the sheer stature of the writers participating in the festival was a huge draw for him, noting that he had long read the work of Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim but never dreamed he would someday meet him in person.



Lebanese author Hoda Barakat (Courtesy of the Kennedy Center)



Egyptian writer Gamal al-Ghitany (Courtesy of the Kennedy Center)



Egyptian writer Radwa Ashour (Courtesy of the Kennedy Center)

Ibrahim was one of many participants in the literary series, which brought together a veritable "Who's Who" of Arab letters, including Egyptian-British writer Ahdaf Soueif, Moroccan poet Mohammed Bennis, Hoda Barakat from Lebanon, and Gamal al-Ghitany of Egypt, to name just a few.

One of the younger writers present, Adania Shibli, is a Palestinian novelist who is currently completing a Ph.D. in London. Shibli said her generation yearned for the sense of purpose that inspired earlier writers like Mahmoud Darwish, but felt sorely absent today. "The other generation has hope. Now we know there is hope, but not for us," Shibli told a panel that explored the challenge of addressing current political and social concerns. Shibli described writing as "the most silent job in the world."

Radwa Ashour, an Egyptian writer and academic who has published seven novels, an autobiographical work, short stories and four books of literary criticism, noted that writers had pursued different approaches – some more experimental, some more focused on reality – through the ages. "Literature is a historical construct. It is an intervention. The mere fact that you write means you intervene in the world," she said.

Many United States-based writers were also on hand, including Suheir Hammad, the Palestinian-American spoken-word poet who won fame for her role in Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam; Elmaz Abinader, a Lebanese-American writer; Laila Lalami, a Moroccan-American writer and blogger; and Nathalie Handal, who staged a multimedia evening including poetry, film and a short monologue about a woman storyteller.

Khaled Mattawa, a poet and professor at the University of Michigan who has also published two important anthologies of Arab-American writing, helped shape the

literary series and moderated two panels. Speaking of the writers at the festival, most of whom are also members of the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI), Mattawa observed that they were “the closest thing to brothers and sisters I have.”

The literary series, which included an intimate “author dinner,” brought together many Arab and Arab-American writers at a time when the barriers between the two groups have finally begun to come down. Many of the older Arab writers were deeply impressed and inspired by the work being done by young Arab-American writers, Soueif said in an interview with Al Jadid.

Soueif described her excitement when she first came across Suheir Hammad. “There was this voice that was unmistakably Arab and unmistakably American too,” she said, also citing recent work by Charara, Handal and other bicultural writers.

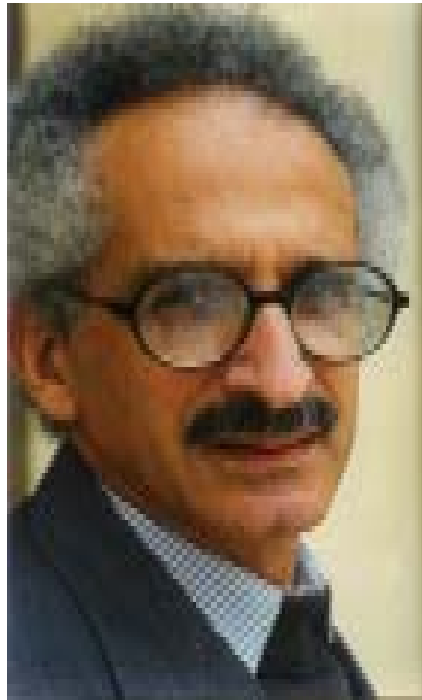
Of course, earlier writers like Etel Adnan and Naomi Shihab Nye also played a huge role in laying the groundwork for the current flourishing of the Arab-American literary scene, Soueif added. “I think this generation wouldn’t have happened without the other one, but this generation is speaking to people now, and that’s very important.”

For many Arab writers, it was their first encounter with writers on this side of the Atlantic, and the challenge now was to continue to nurture that relationship, said Soueif.

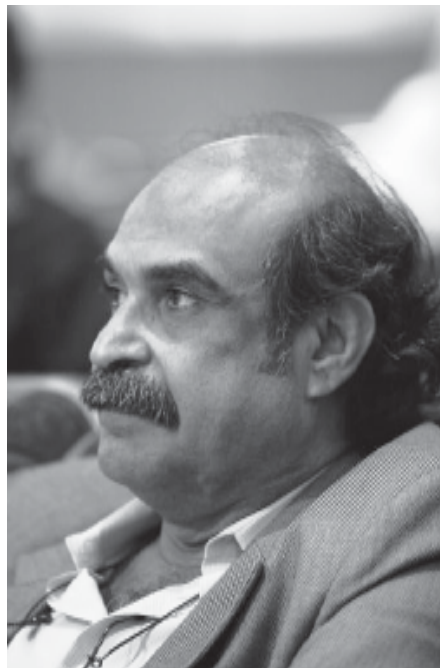
“People like Radwa were just so taken with the Arab Americans – look at what these people are doing. It’s just fantastic. It’s really exciting,” she said.

Whereas earlier works focused heavily on questions of identity, many of the younger Arab-American writers are addressing larger issues and making their distinctive voices heard, said Elmaz Abinader. “There’s a different kind of agency,” she said. “What has to happen next is an evolution of larger bodies of literature.”

The Internet has clearly eased the ability of readers in Arab countries to “see” and experience Arab-American writers and performers. Conversely, United States publishers are responding



Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim  
(Courtesy of the Kennedy Center)



Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad (Courtesy of the Kennedy Center)

to increasing interest and publishing more works from the original Arabic in English.

But publisher Michel Moushabeck, founder and president of Interlink Books, told Al Jadid that selling Arab fiction was still an uphill climb in the difficult United States book market, especially now when even large chain bookstores are scaling

back due to the economy.

Adila Laidi-Hanieh, a Palestinian critic, pointed out that the trend toward scaling back came against the backdrop of what she called an overall ghettoization of literary fiction.

Political forces and the ongoing United States-led war in Iraq also continue to cloud the horizon, writer Gamal al-Ghitany observed at the dinner. He said Arabs would truly like to experience more American art and music across the stages of the Arab world, but they also wanted to stop seeing American soldiers.

Many complex issues complicate the exchange of arts between the American and Arab worlds, according to many of the speakers. Books that challenge societal taboos are eagerly scooped up by American publishers and heavily marketed, while other deeper and more literary works still had trouble reaching audiences.

In other areas, censorship limits the discourse, said Saad al-Bazei, who teaches English and comparative literature in Riyadh. He cited the case of Ghazi Algosaibi, a former Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom, who wrote a novel about young Saudi men who discover a new world of sexual and political freedom when they study abroad. The book, “An Apartment Called Freedom,” generated headlines when it was first published in Arabic, but remained banned in his own country until just two or three years ago, despite Algosaibi’s status as a member of the government, al-Bazei reported.

Just as stereotypes shape American impressions of the Arab world, most Arabs have access to American pop culture and commercialism, but have little knowledge of more artistic endeavors. One recent study indicated reading was on the rise in many Arab countries, although the situation varied greatly from country to country. In any event, magazines, cookbooks and other popular titles are in far greater demand than poetry or fiction, said al-Bazei.

Poor translations also remain a concern. Translations from Arabic into English often suffer from poor writing, which renders the books inaccessible to American readers, Soueif noted. She said she is working to try to create a stable of



superlative translators, possibly through workshops and other events.

Fady Joudah, a Palestinian-American poet and translator of Darwish, acknowledged the difficulty of translating poetry during a panel that paid tribute to Darwish. Joudah, who won the 2008 Saif Ghobash-Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation for his translation of Darwish, said he tried to let the musicality of the poetry guide his work.

Despite his acclaim, Joudah said he would never claim to have authored the definitive translation of any one particular work. Even Darwish, he said, “believed in the multitude of the poems.”

Soueif, who helped shape the overall Kennedy Center festival, said heavy attendance at nearly every event on the schedule left no doubt about the demand for Arab arts and culture in the United States, but the challenge for Arab artists would be to keep the momentum going.

“In the last few decades there were vested interests in keeping the image of the Arab as irrational, fanatic, backward. Certainly not a singing, dancing, painting individual,” she said, calling the Kennedy Center festival “a great breakthrough.”

*Continued on page 30*

## Monkith Saaid: Fingertips Grasping Space

BY SHAWQI ABD AL-AMIR

In Monkith Saaid’s studio in Sahnayah, a village south of Damascus, nothing escapes his artistic universe; neither moldy wood, rusted steel, smashed reeds nor stones nor glass. Not even



Monkith Saaid

sawdust. All traditionally neglected material evading sight or interest enters his workshop and transforms itself, through his extraordinary genius, into beautiful and delicate creatures, whispers of love and shouts of protest against oppression, which collapse together in a hysterical dance.

In bronze, he sculpts a smile. In the wound of wood he

allows for a flow of blood. On the wall spreads a grid of moist, green ivy intermingling with wire formations that replicate the living ivy.

In a corner, far from light, a metal bird with enormous wings settles on the ground. It is as if the place penetrates deeply into the sculpted block itself so that you feel heaviness in everything surrounding it. The air appears like a bird heavy in every aspect, even its wings, unable to coexist with any centimeter of this place. In this obscure corner, a metal bird left behind by Monkith is poised as if about to depart. The air weaves around its surroundings like the roots of an invisible oak.

This bird does not resemble those birds that hover in the horizons and skies. Perhaps it is a mythical bird, a bird that does not hover alone without holding in its clasp a spark of the soul or spirit of the creature it has pulled out from under the earth.

Perhaps this is the same bird that now carries Monkith Saaid’s soul and soars with it far ... far away. I wonder if he saw this bird one day and grasped its wings when it alighted in his workshop. Did he sculpt it from a dream? From a nightmare? Did he realize this by the way the last finishing touches on this sculpture felt? Did he feel fear in its presence?

There is yet another bird, a bird that palpitates, weeps, trembles, and remains hovering amongst these creatures. This is Monkith Saaid himself. With his well-known laughter, he remains soaring amongst his dispersed creatures; amongst the corners, walls, and small surfaces he placed in his studio like one who adorns the folds of metal with generous stone. In his studio you don’t feel the presence of a hammer, nor supplies for chiseling, drilling, casting; nor all the exhaustion and sweat that sometimes overflows when you are in the studio of sculptors. He is content with a vagabond, shy gaze; frequent steps; a hand extended in a gesture. It is as if the trembling represents the exhaustion and sweat responsible for the completion and ascent of his beautiful creatures, for the significance of that which leaves from between the fingertips. For what it sees and says.

In the green sash that flows in the wind, Monkith Saaid hides the defectiveness of the metal when it shows itself in the body of the lover. In dancing movement he casts magical powers under the sheets of rock or lets them soar in the air like bronze undressed at night.

In the walls of his studio and from its material he creates what he longs for. He says what he wishes and becomes silent. When he is silent, it is in all shapes and colors. He writes from the heart and paints its meaning, before one of his sculptures that knows how to create sculptures, stands amongst his formations. He does not, even for one moment, refrain from making his meaning dance. And that which makes his vision clear in the open space is the silent sound that cries out in his artwork and creatures, regardless of its materials, meaning or reference point.

He does not accept the elements as they are, but he has his own way of protest that inverts their original function. Thus the metal of a smashed window takes the shape of exquisite poetry. Neglected sawdust in the trash of the carpenter is transformed into intricately woven sashes or embroidery on a metal stand. He paints sometimes, and plays with his art, at other times, like



a child who is unaware that he is creating worlds and passageways to the horizon.

“The Chair” is one of his last formidable sculptures. One day he told me that he had decided at the last minute to turn the sculpture upside down. Then, as he burst into laughter, he said, “In this sculpture, we see petty tyrants tripping over themselves and losing their power.”

Indeed, it is his laughter, which can never be separated from each sculpture his fingertips have left behind. This laughter must always be present, visualized, and imagined in every glance the spectator has on his work. He or she will certainly find its shadows and features hidden either in the metal, wood, fabric or the gestures, winks and mutters of its creatures.

This laughter is the undying signature of Monkith Saaid, who passed away, but left behind his fingertips grasping the space. *AJ*

*Translated from the Arabic by Rebecca Joubin*

### In Memoriam: Suheil Idriss (1925-2008) Founder of Al Adab ‘moved the waters’ of Arab Literature

**BY MAHMOUD SAEED**

The highest honors in modern Arab literature rightly fall on icons like Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz, both authors of irrefutable genius. But while these figures deserve their place in Arab letters, the publishers behind them – who, often amid difficult circumstances, have the courage and vision to bring their work to readers – sometimes fail to receive their due.

Suheil Idriss, an important literary figure in his own right, might lack the recognition shared by Hussein and Mahfouz, but his accomplishments as a publisher rivaled those of the canon’s most esteemed authors. It was Suheil Idriss who, through his publishing house Dar Al Adab, managed to accomplish what no other Arab was able to do for decades.

Of the hundreds of universities both inside and outside the Arab world that teach Arab literature, how many have produced major intellectuals of the caliber of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, and Sami al-Qassem? Only Idriss could have shed such a broad light on these individuals; not many publishers



Suheil Idriss

possessed the power, courage and talent, or the willingness to make the sacrifices he did. Idriss had the literary taste to publish a distinguished magazine, a piece of excellence that he distributed throughout the Arab world, attracting attention and influencing those who read it everywhere. He continued presenting the creative authors he discovered to an ignited readership.

In this sense, Suheil Idriss’s Al Adab magazine can be considered one of the Arab world’s most important academic institutions.

Idriss was undeniably a courageous and persistent man. The Arab world knew few literary magazines; they came and went, rose and fell. Few flourished before disappearing. Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and others have long lists of the departed. Amid such stagnant conditions, how did Idriss succeed? Even his detractors will admit that he was able to move the waters of Arab literature in a creative and consistent way upon founding Al Adab. And he continued to do so until a few years before his departure.

Al Adab went on flourishing regardless of the rise and demise of other important magazines like Shir and Mawaqaf, as well as those marked by chauvinistic parochialism and sectarian identities that were becoming popular throughout the Arab world.

Idriss did not confine himself to publishing a magazine or writing novels, but opened new doors as well. When we Iraqis were being misled by the Stalinist left, Idriss introduced us to purposeful, consciousness-expanding works – what can be called the electric shock of new ideas and trends: Jean Paul Sartre and existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir and Françoise Sagan, among others. None of these contributions – rare and often singular translations – could have been made without Suheil Idriss and the publishing house he founded, Dar Al Adab.

Idriss began his relationship with writing at Al Makshouf magazine, owned by Fouad Hbeish. He wrote his first essay at Al Makshouf in 1939. Later he began publishing in Al Risala al-Misriyya, Al Adeeb and Al Amali (the latter two Lebanese). In 1952, he earned his doctorate in literature with his thesis, “The Modern Arab Novel and the Effects of Foreign Influence from 1900 to 1950.” He then became editor-in-chief for Al Adab magazine, serving from 1953 to 1992.

In addition to his editorial tasks, Idriss worked in several other related fields, including teaching and translating foreign texts into Arabic. He translated several books from French into Arabic, the most important of which were works of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In collaboration with Jabour Abd al-Nour, he authored “Al Manhal,” a French-Arabic dictionary, as well as an Arabic-French version with the late Subhi al-Saleh.

Idriss also served as the secretary general of the Union of Arab Authors, as well as of the Lebanese Committee of African and Asian Authors. Founding the Union of Lebanese Writers, he became secretary general for four terms and an important participant at the Center of Arab Union.

Throughout his career – the authors and works he published, his translations and his own writing – Idriss demonstrated his deep understanding and appreciation of the Arab creative spirit. *AJ*

## Abstract Sculpture Cropping up in Beirut's Public Spaces

BY RIMA BARAKAT

More and more public sculpture, both representational and purely abstract, is beginning to appear in the public spaces of Beirut. Two years ago, a huge abstract sculpture carved in white Italian Carrara marble with two inverted L-shaped handles to the side and two vertical connecting blades thrusting forward to the front, was placed on a pedestal in the popular Hamam Al Askari area on the Corniche in Ras Beirut. The sculpture was set on a large space three steps up from street level on the crossroad of two main streets.

This sculpture, with its two blades connecting in the front, directing energy to their sides, exudes a reference to fertility. Fertility is a universal concept that touches everyone, the rich and the poor, the erudite and the illiterate. Sadly, the sculpture is in a pitiful state today. It is bathed in dust and missing the three light projectors originally installed around it, and it has become the site for martyrs' photos.

Moreover, there is no inscription with the name of the sculptor or the title and date of the work anywhere on or near the sculpture. The only clue to the sculpture's origins currently is the initials AUG, possibly those of an insurance company, printed in large, blue letters on a stone slab on both sides of the sculpture. This leaves the impression that the sculpture was donated by an insurance company to the city of Beirut. However, the true donor is the municipality of Aley, a town in Mount Lebanon that, up to 2003, organized yearly sculpture workshops. One might find it surprising that the capital city of Beirut would accept contributions from Aley, a small town in the mountains, and wonder how Aley allocates more resources to cultural projects than Beirut, the capital. One would expect Beirut to have contacts with banks and other access to sponsorships.

As one walks farther down the sidewalk of the Corniche along the Mediterranean, more art appears. Mosaic benches studded with beautiful stones and patterns – curvaceous and pointed, square, interlocking spirals and leaf motifs – attract the viewer. As the Corniche is usually frequented at night, these mosaic benches of coral blue, white, and yellow stones radiate in the dark and dazzle the viewer with their interweaving circular and square patterns.

The benches are so utilitarian that not only do the passers-by scrutinize each mosaic bench from a distance, but they are also invited to consume its space, sit on the bench, and become one with this work of art. The spirals on the benches are a universally meaningful symbol of life similar to the shape of a growing embryo or a sprouting seed. The initials BBAC, the name of a well-known Lebanese bank, are inscribed onto the benches. The initials MSC, Mediterranean Shipping Company, are integrated into a second set of benches. Between these two mosaic benches, an abstract iron sculpture gives information on the private sponsorship of these benches, the artist, and the private contractor.

Facing the benches, a vertical stainless steel pole, with three horizontal slabs ending in circles, stands on a one-meter tall rocky crag on the sea coast, eight meters away from the shore. Year after year, the pole is increasingly rusting and moving farther into the water and deeper into the sea. Again, this simple abstract sculpture refers to the basic human yearning to leave a mark in the world as one moves inexorably towards death.

This installation is sponsored by the privately managed Ashkal Alwan

organizers, who offer yearly cultural programs set in diverse locations.

A wealth of non-representational public sculpture seems to be emerging in Beirut. Over the course of a few years and within a space of a few hundred meters, the Beirut Corniche, the public space *par excellence*, has embraced seven purely aesthetic



This marble public sculpture donated by the municipality of Aley is currently on the main road in the popular area of Ras-Beirut.



One of the mosaic benches decorated with stones and patterns on the Corniche sidewalk by the Beirut beach.

sculptures devoid of political, ceremonial, or memorial undertones. All seven, however, were privately sponsored and installed.

In a country like Lebanon, suffering from the debilitating conditions of war, economic collapse, continuous internal strife and impending external crises, public art basically follows the pattern of struggling developing countries. For the most part, Lebanese public sculpture, when funded by the government, serves purely political and nationalistic ends. Sometimes public sculpture celebrates a unified historical, nationalistic moment such as the hanging of the Lebanese nationals who defied Ottoman control during WWI, an incident embodied by the Martyr's monument in downtown Beirut. In other instances, a public sculpture simply represents a key figure in Lebanese history such as the statue of the post-independence Lebanese prime minister Riad al-Solh in downtown Beirut, or the memorial and statue of the assassinated prime minister Rafic Hariri in the Port. However, public sculpture that serves purely aesthetic ends is mainly privately funded.

In contrast, purely aesthetic or abstract sculpture has become the trademark of the town of Aley. There are 237 abstract sculptures currently on display in different public spaces of this town, according to the director of Aley's annual sculpture workshop. Funding from this project mainly came from the municipality of Aley, as well as the Bank of Beirut and the Arab Countries (BBAC), some insurance companies, and other private companies. The United Nations encouraged the project, as did the late Aref El Rayess, the prolific painter-sculptor who was a resident of Aley. El Rayess encouraged his friend and Aley's mayor, Wajdi Mrad, who has a strong personal interest in art and a belief in its cultural benefits, to undertake this project. Mrad decided with the owner of BBAC, who is from the nearby town of Aitah, to proceed with the project.

So what prevents Beirut from getting as involved in promoting public sculpture as the town of Aley? Perhaps the reason is government officials' belief that abstract sculpture is esoteric. It is absorbed and understood only by those already initiated. Does aesthetic public art truly serve any purpose to merit concern by a government that subsists on scarce resources? From the government's perspective, why waste those scarce resources to preach to the converted? But surely, purely aesthetic public sculpture serves more than an aesthetic role. It gives the public a sense of solidarity, of owning a public "ornament." Perhaps the government should emphasize the role that art plays in enriching people's lives and providing them with meaning and identity. By including the sculptures of Lebanese artists in public spaces, the public will eventually identify with one language that is basic to all, the language of basic forms and colors, of universal themes such as fertility, positive energy, and mortality. Although the Lebanese do not generally identify with public spaces and the concept of public ownership, imposing aesthetic sculpture that invades the viewer's daily space with its essential shapes, sizes, and hues can help connect the individual with the larger community.

Historically, abstract art has been used to strengthen community ties in times of crises. During World War I and II,

abstract or formal aesthetic art became the language of expression in times of strife among different communities. Expressionist painters and sculptors used aesthetic, formalist, abstract motifs during World War I to express their yearning to return to the simple, basic essential elements and themes that unify all humans regardless of social status or education. Perhaps the lesson for the Lebanese government is that promoting aesthetic or abstract sculpture in Lebanon's public spaces can be a means of reinforcing the notion of unity within diversity or the concept of sameness amidst apparent religious, social, and ideological differences. **AJ**

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# Sculptor Monkith Saaïd Before His Passing: Searching for Balance Between Art and Life

BY BANDAR ABD AL-HAMID

Monkith Saaïd (1958-2008) was a distinct presence among Arab sculptors of his generation. His artistic experience combined creativity, an intensity of ideas, talent, innovation and a humanist tendency which left him completely open to the dynamics of life in this world. During his lifetime, Saaïd was renowned for his spontaneous, joyful laughter. He was not at all afraid of death, yet his love of life truly astounded us. When I met with him alone or with his wife, author Rebecca Joubin, and their young daughter, Jana, he talked about life as if he were talking about some great artistic work; Jana showed that she had inherited his sculptor's spirit as she touched his face in an attempt to discover him.

In the late 1970s, Saaïd left Iraq to escape execution and thereby lost his Iraqi citizenship. He arrived in Syria with just a small bag on his back. From the beginning, his ambition extended beyond narrow borders. He studied sculpture in the Fine Arts College in Damascus where he graduated in 1982. He continually embraced life, refusing to be intimidated by distance, which often separates the artist's work from its viewers, both close and far away.

His life was not just about immigration, but counter-immigration, for he had emigrated from Syria in the late '80s to Holland, where he lived and worked successfully as a sculptor and installation artist throughout the '90s. Then, at the end of the '90s, at the peak of his artistic career not only in Holland but also Europe as a whole, he made the difficult decision to return to Damascus. That decision, however, did not prevent him from continuing his work with faraway galleries. Indeed, entering the dark and unknown corners of the art world did not lessen the strong impression he made on the international art scene. For example, in 2007, Saaïd's sculpture "Reading by the River" won an

honorable mention at the Torpedo Art Factory in the city of Alexandria, VA. Four hundred artists entered this competition, the organizers chose only 118 to exhibit their artwork, and Saaïd was one of the eight winning artists. The Art League of the Torpedo Factory selected his "Climbing Forty Stairs" and "Before the Last Supper" to be exhibited in the Washington Square sculpture exhibition of that same year.

Earning the honor of designing the UNESCO's Paris office sculpture prize, Saaïd also designed an installation for the project "Book in a Newspaper," which is supervised by Iraqi poet Shawqi Abd al-Amir.

During the final months before his November 21, 2008, death in Holland, I conducted this interview with him in Damascus.

**In the past years, in your exhibitions I have noticed that you have added many new media to your artwork. Your sculptures include not only bronze, but glass, metal, water, even sound. However, along with the changes, there is continuity in themes relating to your relationship with the self, with the other, and with life. Can you tell us about some of the first turning points in your artistic universe?**

In my earliest work, I measured my body as it was and attempted to reduce it proportionally. Thus, my first sculpture series was about my relationship with myself and my

own search for balance. The second was about my relationship with objects and people surrounding me, while the third expressed my relationship with modern myth. I was especially interested in how myth manages to move from one country to another, for it emigrates the same way humans do. Myth also has its own personal reasons for emigrating, including persecution. My next collection portrayed betrayal and the many forms it



"Reflections of Surroundings 1," by Monkith Saaïd, 2000



can take. This ended with the age's betrayal of me. For we live superstitious lives, always waiting for the absent and unknown.

**In many of your works, the planet looks like one similar point while taking continuously different positions. Can you help us interpret this theme?**

These transformations start from the point of Ibn 'Arabi and Sufism. In Sufism all humans revolve around one point. Indeed, the whole universe circles around this same one point. And so in my series "Reflection of Surroundings" (1990s), you see men and women revolving around one sphere. Sometimes they play on it together; sometimes they argue on it together. At times, they stand above it, alone; at times they carry its burden on their back, alone. But that sphere, whether an oppressive force above them, or supporting underneath them, is always present. Indeed, it is always the same simple, ungarnished sphere. This simplicity is also part of the soberness and simplicity of Sufism, which serves as both the psychological and emotional source of inspiration for me. Over the course of my life in exile, where I have often been forced to lose material possessions and start all over, I have become detached from all that is material and now I am drawn toward Sufism.

While the shape of the sphere is simple, however, I am always searching to change its position. Indeed, like life, it is always renewable. I cannot appreciate art which is static or unchanging. Thus you will find that some of my work in this collection, as well as others, even dances with the movement of the breeze or wind.

**Your last works of art, which are monumental in scale, represent Adam and Eve in different situations – flying, standing and sitting down next to a half-eaten apple. This sculpture installation is currently exhibited in a garden of the villa belonging to Feres Naim in the suburb of Yafour near Damascus. The sculpture garden you have created there with eight large sculptures is the first of its kind in Damascus. I would like to talk about the first situation we see Adam and Eve in: swimming in the open space in two different directions and facing each other. Each of them hangs in the air with their**

**feet attached to thin, three-foot-long metal rails resembling pliant branches moving gracefully with the wind. As I understand, the flying position was not in your original sketch, and it proved the most challenging to install. What is it that attracted you to positioning your sculptures in this flying position?**



"Reflections of Surroundings 2," by Monkish Saaïd, 2000

Adam and Eve are the source of humankind in nature; flying is the first movement associated with the onset of love. For there is something that resembles flying in love, as man and woman swim in space the same way the fish swim in the water. Water has borders, though, while the atmosphere – like love – has no visible borders.

Of course, the flying movement also attracted me, since I am always searching to tempt balance and equilibrium in my art. Like most of my sculptures, the figures are held up in the air by just one point, seemingly defying gravity.

**In 1992, you won the prestigious Dutch prize for art and culture. Your sculpture titled "Contrasts" was made of two open arches with a man standing at the center, his arms wide open. You created this sculpture at a time when we were being warned about how our actions were damaging the environment. How did you reflect your own apprehensions in this sculptural design?**

In this design, I attempt to present my personal vision of art and culture. I see two major dimensions in life: the vertical and the dynamic nature of time, which contrasts with the horizontal aesthetic nature of place. The duty of the artist is to connect the points between time and place, in order to build life.

In my view, war, pollution and racism are the three destructive forces unsettling life. This is the premise on which I designed my work, which includes two incomplete arches symbolizing nature and culture. The first arch, which is three-quarters of a circle, represents nature. One quarter represents solid earth, while three quarters are water. The second arch, which is half a circle, represents the contradictions between the internal and external worlds of the artist, and that between matter and spirit.

**With the bronze figure that moves in a balanced manner between two open iron arches, you have combined the materials of bronze and iron. Why did you choose to work**

**with bronze and iron? And why did you position man at the center?**

Naturally, I used these two contrasting materials on purpose. The two arches made of iron were prone to rust, symbolizing death and mortality. They contrast with the bronze sculpture figure, a symbol of immortality, since bronze is immune to rusting. The balanced man made of bronze in the midst of the two arches represents eternity. His position in the middle points to the center of the world, an idea that I borrowed from Leonardo da Vinci.

**In the summer of 2001 you created a monumental installation in the mountains of the Lebanese town Aley along with several Arab and foreign sculptors. This work consists of two permanent stone pieces taking the form of two marble seats with traces of humans chiseled into them, alongside an eight meter form made of metal knives, which stirs with the wind and makes sounds.**

**Can you tell us more about the philosophy behind this installation?**

I created this installation at a symposium in Aley, which sought to bring about a dialogue between civilizations. It was headed by Wajdy Murad, the head of Aley's City Hall, who engaged in the project with great love and dedication. When I accepted the invitation to participate in this symposium in the Aley mountains, they asked me what type of stone I wanted to work with. I told them I could not answer until I saw the place, the home of my future artwork. In fact, I needed to see it before I could even decide on my project. Thus, as I have done for other projects, I surveyed the town for three days before the symposium began. I learned that in this town many had lost loved ones who had crossed the sea to escape war or to look for work. Most were waiting for the return of a loved one. Thus I decided to chisel the inverse features of someone lingering patiently on the stone for the return of a loved one. Next to it, I placed an eight-foot-high wind chime made of metal knives, which would move and make music with the wind, symbolizing, according to Chinese philosophy, the return of a loved one. I chose a position on the mountain for my installation, overlooking a rural road, because the road enables loved ones to return to their parents and homes. The installation thus

constitutes a permanent obsession for those waiting for absentees. Furthermore, I have attempted to combine the functional and the aesthetic in this work. The two stone seats could become a rest station for travelers, lovers or those who simply wish to meditate in nature. On the road, I placed some red dirt, which reveals the peculiarity of the place, making it open in all directions. I entered the element of time through the movement of the metal knives with the rhythm of the wind as both a force and whisper, and also the echo of the sound. Thus I created a piece of artwork that is connected with life and not a work for museums. It is not important to connect this work of art with immortality but rather for it to give way to offspring, communicating its memory.

**You have several other monumental installations in Lebanon. Can you tell us about them?**

In 2003 I participated in a symposium in Ehden. There I created a 13-meter-high installation titled "The Chair." Made of copper, metal and sound, it consisted of a set of inverse stairs leading up to a chair at the top. I attached a series of wind chimes to the chair, the chimes symbolizing the incoherent words of the leader sitting on the chair, dictating to the masses. The inverse stairs symbolize the deviant means through which the individual can reach power. A single point supports the stairs, and they rotate with the movement of the wind. From what I have heard from others, though, the monument was toppled to the ground in the latest wars which have hit Lebanon.

Then in 2004, I created an eight meter installation, which found a home within the new Al-Nahar

newspaper building in downtown Beirut. This work was inspired by a smaller sculpture titled "Before the Last Supper." While the original work consisted of 13 traditional looking chairs, in this installation I adapted it to the theme of reading a newspaper at the café by using ordinary café chairs. Still, as in the original, the rooster is at the top, symbolizing Judas's betrayal of Christ.

**These large monuments in Lebanon are considered art installations, because of the philosophy behind them. Indeed, you spent a lot of time throughout the '90s experimenting with this form of art in Holland and the rest of Europe. You were probably the first to bring installations to Syria. Your most recent installations were exhibited at Al-Mada and Al-Sayed galleries in Damascus. What attracts you to this type of modern art?**



"Whirling Dervishes 1," by Monkith Saaid, 2003

When I just began as an artist in Europe, I approached my work as part of an incomplete diary, a form of defense in a life of exile. Installations provided the perfect psychological and philosophical outlet for me to measure my existence. At first in my installations, I was interested in the photograph, which transfers from memory to memory. I found that the photograph worked very well with my search to discover the personal details of my life. I focused on memory before it transformed or changed into myth and superstition. It was only after I had a sudden heart attack under psychological and physical pressure that my interests and ideas changed. At that moment I began to focus on transmitting all that was real and imaginary into a lasting visual sphere. Here, my true relationship with bronze started. While installations are displayed in one place to a specialized public, my bronze sculptures could travel throughout time and space, conveying my feelings and thoughts to more people.

**To what extent is it possible to attribute the artistic work to philosophical ideas and human concerns?**

There is no artwork without an idea and philosophical stance. Art is a product of the period, the condition under which the artist lives or experiences. We are the generation of the computer and Internet, with all their advantages and disadvantages. To me, the idea is far more important than the details. The major goal of every artistic experiment is to portray humans in all their sadness and happiness, victory and defeat.

**What is your personal relationship with sculpting? What form has this relationship assumed?**

Sculpting is my first language. Like other sculptors, I speak this language by touching, whereby the very act of touching develops into a focused sense. Indeed, touching is a pulse which differs from place to place. That is the reason there is always a talented blind sculptor out there, for the blind individual has a special sense of touch which grows out of need and over time. In my own case, I always feel that my fingers could make my need of the visual sense unnecessary.

**How does your daily relationship with sculpture impact your life and your relationships with things that you see in different places?**

The art of sculpting has stimulated my sensory perceptions and given me a never-ending sense of curiosity. When I wake up

every morning, life surprises me once again. I learn immediately from what surrounds me. I learn from the window that overlooks the outside world. I learn from the bird, the tree, the rain, the snow. I attempt to touch things I encounter; my hands get closer to fire, ice, water, stone, iron, wood and cloth, with varying degrees. The days in which I do not learn something new are for me a personal tragedy.

Of course, sculpting has become an essential part of my daily life. It has entered the very fabric of my being and impacts my position toward all that surrounds me. I see the world around me through a sculptural lens. That said, I am not committed to any one specific material for sculpting. To me, there is nothing which can be excluded from artistic use. Yet, while I continually experiment with new material, bronze is perhaps the most malleable material, which meets my desire in sculpting.



"Whirling Dervishes 2," by Monkith Saaid, 2003

**You have found yourself in many different environments which have broadened the scope of your personal activities and interests. Please elaborate on how these constant environmental changes have influenced you.**

As a child and then teenager in Iraq, I used to read classical European literature. Once, when I was expelled from school after I had defended myself to a dictatorial teacher, I discovered a nearby library. I used to wake up early every morning and leave the house, so my parents would not notice I was not in school. During those hours, I would devour books at that small library. I must have read the whole canon of translated European literature at that time. Herman Hesse was my favorite author. It was only when I was a young man and had settled in Holland that I returned to my own Eastern origins and made sense of it all. I connected with the spirit of the East through the works of Al-Halaj and Al-Sahroudi, who are at the center of balance in my cultural life now, whether I find myself in the East or West.

**Through hobbies, talent and professionalism, art impacts both the creative artist and the spectator to varying degrees. How is art reflected in your personal life?**

Art is comprehensive, moralist and educational. It is a force which elevates the general taste of the people. It has more than one indirect mission, which includes the restoration of balance to the public and personal life. Indeed, when people talk about the cities they love, we find that it is both the hidden and declared

artistic touches in these cities which give them special character. This applies to lifestyles – the pastoral, Bedouin, and rural – where individuals innovate substitutes to art in their daily lives.

I live 24 hours as an artist. There is not one moment of the day that I do not see the world through the eyes of an artist. I have never been able to separate my personal life from my life as an artist. Even in the daily movements or discoveries made by my baby daughter, Jana, I see art and find inspiration.

**As an Eastern artist who has lived and worked extensively in the West, you know that there are always dialogues and problems between the East-West encounter at different levels. Where do you stand on this relationship?**

I am always preoccupied with this dialectic. In Holland, we artists worked a lot on what we called the dialogue of the “dual culture,” and the influence of place on art. At that time, I organized an exhibition-workshop on the influence of art in transmitting culture. Along with other artists, we presented lectures on the idea of dual culture. Nineteen artists from different countries and languages participated. At the center of the workshops and talks was the question of harmony with place.

Europe is not the mother of all arts, though it has played a major role in the discovery and continuity of art. Nonetheless, throughout the last century, non-Western artists have proven their competence in presenting distinguished works in Europe.

**You lived quite a few years in Holland, and still visit often. In your opinion, what are the special characteristics of modern art in Holland?**

Holland is the mother of art schools, from Rembrandt to Robin to van Gogh and Carl Apple, all the way to postmodernism. The artistic scene in Holland is open to all schools and approaches. Video, then the computer both made their impact on art. Next chemistry came into the artistic work, in addition to the pencil and the ancient brooch.

In Holland the most important lesson I learned is that art is all-inclusive, and it has inspired me to this day. As I walk in the streets of whatever country I find myself in, my basic instincts find art in every corner of the streets, walls, traffic and people. No material is excluded from art. In fact, my apartment in Damascus is made of material I have found in the streets and put together as a usable form of art deco. One of my most successful exhibitions in the Atelier gallery in Rome was called “Life’s Passages.” Here my sculptures were constructed of discarded pieces of metal and iron I had found on Ahda Ashariyah – one of the most polluted streets of Damascus – and then combined with bronze. Art can be found in every corner of life, however small. This is the most important lesson I learned in Holland. **AJ**

*Translated from the Arabic by Elie Chalala*

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## *Connecting the Dots*

### **Ahdaf Soueif on Arabesque Festival, Translating Arab Literature, Arabs as Cultural Producers**



Ahdaf Soueif (Courtesy of the Kennedy Center)

**BY ANDREA SHALAL-ESA**

Writer Ahdaf Soueif was in Washington, D.C. for three weeks in March to participate in an unprecedented festival of Arab arts and culture that involved 800 artists from 22 countries, hosted by the Kennedy Center. Soueif worked as a consultant on “Arabesque: Arts of the Arab World,” introducing curator Alicia Adams to various artists and acting as a sounding board for ideas as the festival took shape.

Soueif spoke at the festival’s opening gala, moderated two literature panels and headlined a third panel, at which she read excerpts of a new novel she is writing. As yet untitled, the novel deals with the parallel stories of two women who have lost their husbands, one a contemporary Egyptian woman, the other the goddess Isis. Soueif said the book was partly inspired by her interest in the 42 principles of the Egyptian goddess Ma’at,



which many scholars believe provided the inspiration for the Ten Commandments.

Soueif is the author of two novels, "In the Eye of the Sun" (1992), and "The Map of Love" (1999), which was short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize in 1999. A political and cultural commentator, Soueif writes in Arabic and English for newspapers in both the West and the Arab world. She has also published a collection of essays, "Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground" (2004); two collections of short stories, "Aisha" (1983), "Sandpiper" (1996) later collected into "I Think of You" (2007); and translated Mourid Barghouti's "I Saw Ramallah" from Arabic into English.

Soueif was educated in Egypt and obtained a Ph.D. in linguistics in the U.K. She lives in London and Cairo. She has two sons, aged 24 and 19. Her husband, the writer Ian Hamilton, died of cancer in 2001. Her website is [www.ahdafsoueif.com](http://www.ahdafsoueif.com).

### **How would you assess the importance of the Kennedy Center's Arabesque Festival?**

I think it's tremendously important to have a festival at this premier cultural center in the (U.S.) capital – a festival that lasts three weeks; that treats the Arab world as a unit; that treats the Arabs as cultural and artistic producers; that actually embodies both the unity and diversity of the Arab world. We've already seen how people are responding to it. We've seen the attendance; we've felt the buzz around it. We've registered the press coverage. It's an enormous and totally positive event.

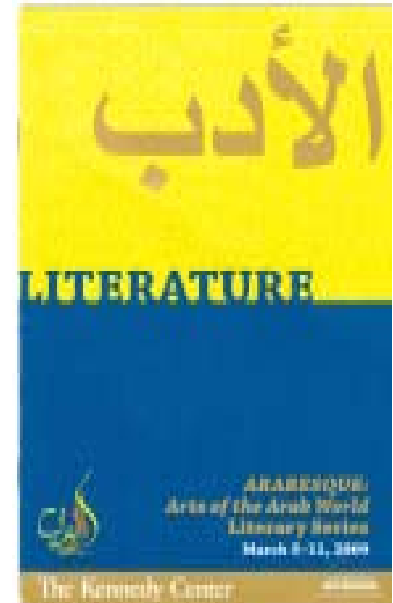
### **Previous Kennedy Center festivals have focused on individual countries. What's the thinking behind having a festival that groups the whole Arab world together instead of highlighting specific countries?**

There is an Arab culture. You have a geographic space where everybody speaks Arabic, where everybody has access to the same literature, where everybody is responsive to the same music and the same art, and in which, at the same time, individual locations have their individual genius. It seems to me that is such a dynamic and rich and fruitful structure. It's brilliant that the organizers at the Kennedy Center saw it that way and presented the festival in a way that showcased that.

### **Do you think this will be the beginning of greater inclusion of Arab arts and culture in future Kennedy Center programming?**

I certainly hope so. People are saying the Kennedy Center should do this every year. Well, of course, they can't. But it can be the starting point for an ongoing program. It doesn't have to be a festival of a particular country, but it can be an ongoing program of presenting Arab arts. So you could have a concert one month, an exhibition another month – an ongoing engagement with the art of the region. I think it would be an excellent thing to do. It would also be a natural thing to do. I can't imagine that an

event as big and important and well-received as this would just end after three weeks without a continuity of some kind. That would be a wasted opportunity. But it's really down to us as Arabs and as cultural producers and to the Americans who are thinking the same way, to now do something about the representation of Arab arts in this country. It's very clear that there is a market, if you like, that there are people who will respond. There's a lot of work that can be done. Now everyone needs to think about how they can contribute.



**Your new novel is trying to connect the dots between the history of ancient Egypt and today. I've always been puzzled that people in the West are fascinated with ancient Egypt, but then it stops. They never associate that history with modern Egypt.**

It is problematic for me. Of course one would have to be crazy to think that you're going to write a novel and it's going to change how people view history and the world and the nature of civilization. But I am interested in those links and those continuities. Also, Egypt was the beginning for everything, for everyone. It's almost as though I feel as if the soul of the world lives there. If the forces of evil were to triumph and Egypt were to stop being Egypt, then that would be a disaster for the whole world. It sounds mad, but there's something in me that actually thinks that.

**You've done some translating yourself, but you have also been critical of the general state of translation from Arabic to English. Your concern is that a lot of the translations are off-putting to a Western reader?**

I think that for a book to attract the reader, and get them interested and involved and keep them turning the pages, it's got to be well-written. I don't think that everybody who can write a sentence in English is a writer who is going to engage the reader. Translators seem to fall into this ready-made way of depicting Arabic, which is a sort of semi-modernized version of the 19th century translations of the "Arabian Nights." So, A – it's just not good writing, and therefore will not engage the reader; B – it is a misrepresentation in that everybody ends up sounding the same; that you don't get the individual voice of the individual author coming through; and that everybody also sounds

somewhat archaic. That people “arise from their slumbers” instead of “waking up.” The effect on the reader in English is not the effect on the reader in Arabic, which is what you want from a translation.

**How as a translator do you deal with the frequent references to God in everyday spoken Arabic, for instance, saying *Allah yirhamu* when referring to someone who has passed away?**

If it’s actually doing something in the Arabic text other than just being normal, then you include it. If it doesn’t stick out in the Arabic text at all – in other words, it has no function other than that this is how Arabic is spoken – then I might put it in once and then leave it after that. The overall strategy is to bring the text

closer to the reader without neutralizing it, to preserve the strangeness of the text only as far as is necessary for the integrity of the text. I would not include every formulaic stock phrase. If it isn’t foregrounded in any way, then it’s probably there just because it would be weird for the Arabic not to have it. So if it’s weird for the English to have it, then I would take it out, since the author’s intention was to not be weird in the language they were writing in. I would preserve that intention. I have seen people changing the whole tense of a chapter from the present into the past, and I don’t see why. It also seems to be automatic to change the focus of a sentence and again I don’t know why. For artistic decisions such as tense, or the focus of a sentence,

*Continued on page 52*

### Three Poems by Ghada Samman

#### **My Naked Heart Will Always Love You**

Have I ever told you,  
That I’ll stay loving you,  
Until life lets go of me?  
Your love is death in small doses of despair and hope,  
And warmth for my bare heart that shivers, passionate to die for you!

#### **Denying a Rumor**

Those whom we’ve loved never truly pass away at their death...  
I smell the fragrance of their ethereal presence...  
Their hands touch me like wind caressing the leaves of a tree...  
I see their faces each time I lift my face from the writing table  
And I meet them in the streets and cafes and we drink coffee together.  
My life is crowded with them  
And when I sleep, they wait for me at the edge of a dream  
So we can continue our lives together,  
Asking me to deny the rumor of their death.

#### **Damascus: The Impossible Return!**

Every morning, I wipe the dust off my Damascene memories  
And cleanse the waterfalls of longing,  
Damascus, don’t open your windows, don’t call out to your lost child,  
For the birds of time  
Have eaten the bread crumbs that I’ve spread like prints as I travel far into the forest,  
And like a seagull whose compass broke, my heart no longer knows the path back to you,  
And my feet can no longer walk to you  
After marching away in snow for a thousand years  
And running after sad, remote, grey trains.  
Damascus, betraying you is impossible, and returning to you is impossible,  
And forgetting is impossible... so where’s the escape?

*Translated from the Arabic by Rewa Zeinati*

*From Ghada Samman, “Al Qalb al-Ari...A’shiqa” (The Naked Heart...Lover), Beirut: Ghada Samman Publications, 2009.*

## Films in Brief / By Rebecca Joubin

### The Yellow House (La Maison Jaune)

A film by Celine Brotons and Amor Hakkar

A co-production: Sarah Films (France) and H.A. Films (Algeria)  
Algeria, 2007

The joy of the wedding procession on the road, which begins the movie, is interrupted by the messenger arriving at the door of a family only to inform them of the sudden death of their son, Belcacem, a conscript. When the mother is stricken with pain from the shock, the eldest daughter gets a ride on the wedding procession to go out to the fields to inform her



From "The Yellow House" (La Maison Jaune)

father that his son has died. Hakkar and Brotons underscore the sense of alienation and distance of the human condition, since it is only on the road to Batna – where the father must travel to bring back the corpse of his son – that he finds out bits and pieces of information surrounding the son's death in a car accident.

For this grieving father, the quest does not end here, as he then searches for ways to end the depression of his mourning wife. When a pill to cure sadness cannot be found, he resorts to painting the house yellow. In the end, the solution seems to come in the form of a personal video found in his son's suitcase, but the father must now buy a television, video recorder, and somehow install electricity in his house. We see he will stop at nothing to ensure his wife's happiness, and despite the uncertainties and sadness, Hakkar and Brotons depict a glimmer of hope in the power of the human imagination. **AJ**

### Young Freud in Gaza

A film by PeA Holmquist and Suzanne Khardalian  
Icarus Films, 2008

"Young Freud in Gaza" presents an often forgotten human dimension to Palestinian suffering and the trauma of living under Israeli occupation. Through the therapy sessions of a young psychologist, Ayad, who works for the Palestinian Authority's Clinic for Mental Health, the filmmakers delve psychologically into a society that is often forgotten. The effects left on a young girl who has seen a dead girl outside her

school are explored, children who have lost siblings in the war, a mother who has seen her son die in a car explosion, and a survivor of a suicide mission. As Ayad teaches breathing exercises to calm anxiety, meditation techniques, and encourages the expression of emotions, a whole range

of psychological trauma comes out into the open. The film adeptly shows that most of these people who are suffering have never been asked to express themselves, and thus have left the trauma bottled up inside.

An older man points to the balloon in the air of Gaza, which monitors Palestinians 24 hours a day, breaking the everyday life of the Palestinians. The effects of Israeli missile attacks in 2006 in which houses were bombed is vividly portrayed. However, this is a fair-minded film depicting not only trauma caused by Israeli occupation, but also needless bloodshed caused by Hamas – Fatah clashes.

Dr. Ayub, who had always thought Palestinians would be fighting Israelis not their own people, expresses his own sadness and how he fears he will not be able to help his own people. He dreams of the day Palestinian children can be free, to live the childhood of real children. "We don't have an enjoyable life. Life hasn't been easy," he says, breathing a deep sigh, re-enforcing his acknowledgement that living under occupation has caused Gaza to need a million psychologists. **AJ**



Courtesy of Icarus Films

### Four Wives — One Man

A film by Nahid Persson

Women Make Movies, 2007, 76 minutes

The opening statement that, in the Quran, a man is entitled to marry two, three, four wives – if he can afford it – and that polygamy is practiced mostly in rural areas in Iran, prepares the viewer to witness the victimization of women in the village. Farangi introduces herself as the first wife of Heda, Goli as the second, Shahpar as the third, and Ziba as the fourth. The film shows how each time harmony is found and the wives turn into unlikely allies, a new wife joins, disrupting the household once again.



Courtesy of Women Make Movies

When the film begins, Ziba has recently joined the household and the other women express their displeasure at the newest wife, saying they were like a family before she came along. Yet Ziba, too, becomes vulnerable when she is not able to produce a child. As time goes on, discord seems to have turned into harmony when we see Heda and the wives and children going on outings at the beach or enjoying picnics together. However, just as the family finds this balance, Heda begins to

speak of bringing on a fifth wife. Despite the uncharacteristically bold statements of Heda's mother, now crippled, this is a film where women are stripped of their agency, and shown as merely passive observers of their destiny. They have nowhere to go, but are forced to remain under the abusive control of their husband. **AJ**

### Recycle

A film by Mahmoud Al Massad  
Icarus Films  
2008, 90 minutes

This subtle documentary takes us into the heart of Zarqa, Jordan's second largest city and birthplace of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. The film is told through the eyes of Abu Ammad, a former owner of a grocery store who now supports his two wives and children by collecting cardboard for recycling. We follow him around on his daily routine, and listen to his conversations with friends about the rise of violence in the name of Islam, the 9/11 attacks in



Courtesy of Icarus Films

America, and about the importance for Muslims to stop immigrating to Western, non-Muslim societies. In his conversations, we see anger toward the West, but we also witness the

ironic interest in exodus to countries such as America to escape poverty. A television clip of a son who begs his father's forgiveness for living in the West reinforces this theme. We watch as the father considers whether he can forgive his son, and the son looks on with desperation awaiting his answer.

Later, we see Abu Ammad arrested, accused of being involved in the 2005 hotel bombings in Amman. Upon release, he decides to leave Jordan. He sends a letter to his mother, begging forgiveness and asking her to protect his wives and children in his absence. "Recycle" very powerfully and harmoniously addresses the ironic way terrorism and hatred of the West parallel emigration to the West to escape an impoverished existence. **AJ**

### Baghdad Twist

A film by Joe Balass  
Icarus Films  
2007, 30 minutes

In his visual memoir "Baghdad Twist," filmmaker Joe Balass, born in Baghdad in 1966, conducts a poignant interview with his mother, Valentine, about her vivid memories living as a Jew in Baghdad and experiencing all the changes occurring in the 1950s. His series of questions is aptly set against a harmonic flow of photographs, archival footage and home videos of his family life in Iraq before their escape to Canada in 1970.

This film is remarkable, not just for the history it presents, but for the melodious way in which Balass lets the story unfold. The interview is a natural one, a son asking his mother questions about his roots, something familiar to those living in exile. Balass asks his mother, "Do you know why I'm asking you all these questions?" and she answers: "Maybe because you want your own memory of Iraq." In one segment

Arabic & Islamic

Calligraphy

Typography

Graphic Design



SAKKAL DESIGN

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Arabic calligraphy for cover of Light in the Palace, Cune Press, Seattle, WA





Courtesy of Icarus Films

he says that he does not recall much of Iraq, only the crust over his milk. His mother responds by telling him how fresh the milk was there, that the milkman came to the house and milked in front of your eyes.

These sweet memories contrast with the archival footage of problems Jews faced after 1948 and then in the 50s. Then we see a home video of a 1965 wedding where everyone is dancing and having fun. Balass tells his mother it is odd that she had just told him about all the tension, and that now she's talking about a joyous wedding. He wonders how Jews dealt with all these changes and twists. She said it's just as when someone dies. You mourn for 30 days, and then you move on with your life. But then she says that in 1967 everything changed. His father was imprisoned several times, and she knew they had to escape or else risk dying in Iraq.

While there are times where he questions in Arabic and she answers in Arabic, the majority of the questioning is in English, serving as yet another twist – a stark reminder that for the exiled, individual communication in a new language becomes easier than one's native tongue. **AJ**

## Occupational, Political Hazards of Free Speech

### Bloody Cartoons

A film directed by Nino Kirtadze  
The Cinema Guild  
2007, 52 minutes

**BY LYNNE ROGERS**

When Fleming Rose, the editor of the liberal, independent newspaper, *Jylands-Posten*, approached the 72-year-old Kurt Westergaard for a cartoon responding “to the provocation by terrorists who use religion as their spiritual ammunition,” these two unlikely Dutchmen ignited a diplomatic explosion. In his irreverent documentary “Bloody Cartoons,” Karsten Kjaer’s travels from his home in Denmark to a village in Iran to discover “why” the Muslim world responded to the cartoons with such violence: rioters destroyed several Dutch embassies and more importantly, 150 demonstrators reportedly died during the protests. Although the Arab world has its own vibrant history of political cartoons, which unfortunately is not addressed in the film, these particular cartoons egged on radical Sunnis, who now had further proof that “the West, headed by Denmark,” scorns

Islam. With his wry sense of humor, Kjaer heads to Lebanon, Turkey and Qatar where he interviews an unflattering assortment of irrational sheikhs and pompous politicians. In the film’s highlight, Kjaer heads to Iran, where despite the efforts of his appointed “fixer” from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, he manages to meet Ali Bakhshi, a 70-year-old villager who was photographed with blood on his hands to illustrate his willingness to battle evil. It turns out this honest and likeable senior farmer



Courtesy of The Cinema Guild

who sidelines as a “specialist in demonstrations” has never seen the cartoons, but does not hesitate to look at them. After all, he’s “not a fanatic.” Meanwhile, back in France, the editor of *Soir* is fired for re-publishing the cartoons and then is acquitted in court. Iran retaliates with a Holocaust cartoon contest and when Rose decides to publish those cartoons in Denmark, he is asked to take a leave of absence. For Westerners, freedom of speech has occupational as well as political hazards. **AJ**

## Speaking Out Against Tribal Injustice

### Dishonored

A film by Sigrun Norderval & Gard A. Andreassen  
Icarus Films  
2008, 52 Minutes

**BY BOBBY GOULSHAN**

Pakistan stands at a crossroads. Like many nations throughout the global south, this country with a Muslim majority struggles with collisions and contradictions borne from its unique history and contemporary reckoning with modernity. The forces of Islamic fundamentalism, indigenous tribal tradition, and Pakistan’s increasing relevance on the global scene, have coalesced to create an air of contention and conflict. The international headlines often paint a bleak picture.

Mukhtar Mai is a light in the dark. “Dishonored,” a film documenting her struggle, shows how the numerous forces vying for power in Pakistan converge in one woman’s heroic effort to rise above, while providing women throughout the developing world a way forward.

The filmmakers, Sigrun Norderval and Gard A. Andreassen, combine documentary interviews with dramatic re-enactments

to tell Mukhtar's story. In June of 2002, her brother Shakoor stood accused of fornicating with Salma, a young woman from the powerful Mastoi tribe of the village of Meerwala. The Mastoi elders formed a *panchayat*, or tribal court, and demanded recompense for Shakoor's crime. Mukhtar was subsequently required to ask for forgiveness from the Mastoi clan. However,



Courtesy of Icarus Films

according to numerous accounts, rather than accepting the formal apology, four members of the clan seized Mukhtar at gunpoint and gang-raped her.

It was expected that Mukhtar Mai would succumb to the shame brought upon herself and her family, and take her own life. It was expected that she would submit to the old tribal ways, to the obscure and entrenched interpretations of Sharia law.

Instead, Mukhtar Mai spoke out against her attackers. The film documents the events that brought Mukhtar's story to the international stage, as well as depicting her struggle for justice through the Pakistani court system. The film excels in detailing Mukhtar's emergence as a symbol for women's rights in the developing world. She was named as Glamour Magazine's Woman of the Year in 2005. Her memoir was published in France and subsequently translated into 23 languages. Mukhtar stood at the front of international protests, demanding that women of the Islamic world and the developing world in general be freed from the chattel-like conditions that plague millions.

Mukhtar's strength and courage bore down on numerous centers of power. The filmmakers do a tremendous service in showing the parallel conflicts involved in the story. Most immediately, Mukhtar challenged the power of tribal patriarchs. In so doing, she exposed the contradictions inherent in certain Muslim societies, in which Sharia law is wedded to aboriginal practices. Jurisprudence and interpretation of scriptural intention is dubious at best, oppressive and violent at worst. Mukhtar maintains on more than one occasion in the film that she sees no contradiction between being a woman who speaks against the injustices brought upon her, and her status as one of the Muslim faithful, thus taking possession of the faith, rather than allowing a narrow view of Islam to dispossess her.

Furthermore, the film depicts her struggles with the state of Pakistan itself. President Pervez Musharraf declared publicly that Mukhtar's passport was seized in order to prevent her from leaving Pakistan and besmirching the nation's reputation. Through Mukhtar's international media presence, Pakistan – and the Pakistani elite in particular – was forced to look upon itself and evaluate its own contradictions, its internal conflicts and its future. This is further embodied in a trial process that included two appeals as the Pakistani justice system vacillated between succumbing to its tribal past and embracing the rule of law and democracy.

And this is perhaps the great value of this film. The details of Mai's case can be obtained from any number of sources. However, "Dishonored" succeeds because it manages not only to pay sufficient homage to a contemporary hero, but also to put her achievement in the very context that gives it meaning. A film of high production value and little dramatic embellishment, its brief 52 minute running time inflates the viewer with hope and inspiration.

Mukhtar has used proceeds from her book sales and speaking engagements to build numerous schools in Pakistan. She receives death threats to this day. "Dishonored" gives the viewers a chance to see exactly the conditions and tribulations that beset those who would dare to push humanity forward. **AJ**

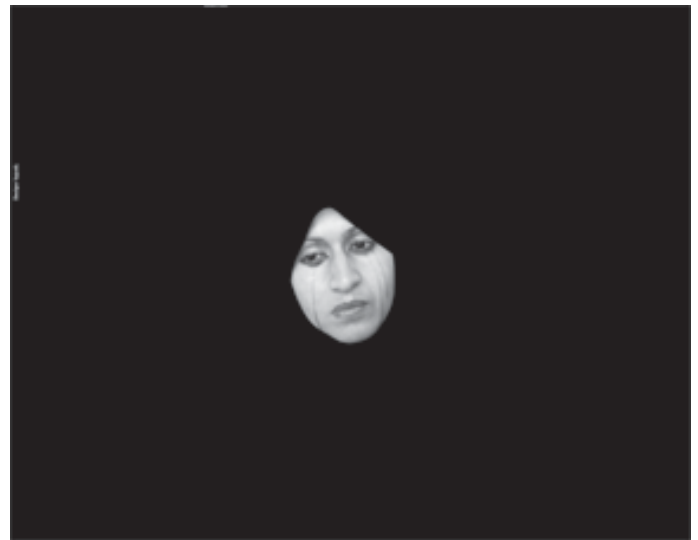
## A Woman's Experience of 'Justice'

### Three Times Divorced

Directed by Ibtisam Salh Mara'ana  
Women Make Movies, 74 min.

### BY SIMONE STEVENS

The documentary "Three Times Divorced" is about the hardships many women in the Middle East experience when faced with divorce and the disintegration of the family unit. It is a startling revelation about the limits of their independence and control; for the divorced woman, opportunity and freedom of



Courtesy of Women Make Movies

choice are sadly absent. Disoriented, shoved from the home they've built, they are forced to string together a new world with little help from the community or the local government.

The film centers on Gaza native Khitam, who married an Arab Israeli, for whom she bore six children. With her entire face veiled, she stares out of a car window, trying to catch a glimpse of her son Mohammed outside her former residence (five of her six children live with their father). She left the home behind

after finding divorce papers folded in her husband's wallet. We follow Khitam's exhausting journey to retrieve her children without an Israeli ID, which proves nearly impossible.

Despite the English subtitles, the film is at times confusing because it lacks a narrative as well as the type of cultural explanations that can be useful in providing a context for foreign audiences. Ibtisam Salh Mara'ana directed and shot the film using a handheld camera that shakes and fights to keep up with the things happening around it. Although she takes in the surrounding countryside when traveling to Haifa, most of the time Mara'ana focuses on Khitam, catching every frustrated tear or brief smile, so that the amateur style gives the film a real intimacy and sense of urgency. We become acquainted with the travails of Khitam's astonishing world at the same pace she does. Her sense of frightened discovery becomes our own. It is obvious that Mara'ana, whose soft voice we hear at times asking Khitam questions, feels very close to her and tries to protect her, even when the film depends on confrontations to expose the husband's brutality. The director's mission to document and reveal the obstacles and suffering endured by divorced women in that part of the world is, sadly, successful.

Khitam's losing battle against patriarchy causes the viewer to lose heart along with her. At one point she turns to a Sharia court, which sides unequivocally with her husband, maintaining that Khitam is responsible for her current position, despoiled of both home and children, despite the fact that it was her husband who demanded the divorce. The hypocrisy is startling: the specifics of a situation don't matter to the court, only the sex of the person requesting justice. Does gender-contingent justice qualify as justice? Khitam cannot even stay in the country without a permit, and the process of acquiring an Israeli ID is long and arduous, with no guarantees. As one social worker says, "She'll become a citizen when I become an astronaut." Thus, she is robbed of the right to live in the country where she bore and raised her six children.

It is not only the legal system that dismisses her. When Khitam secretly visits her children at their school, the teachers ask her why she doesn't return home, implying that she has abandoned her children. Instead of being supported by her fellow females, Khitam finds herself in an awkward position with them ganging up on her. "I am divorced," she explains simply. Perhaps her isolation would be less complete in a big city than it is in this small town. Since marriage in the Middle East tends not only to be a contract between individuals, but between families as well, ruptures between couples are less common because of the damage they inflict upon the group. A divorced woman is something of an aberration, and often times considered a runaway if she has relocated to another region.

Both her circumstances, and who she is as an individual, set Khitam apart from other women in her community. Her personal philosophy fuels her fight for independence and for her children's return to her care and future autonomy. "We must make sacrifices in order to gain something. I see how my brother loves and respects his wives. It makes me sad. But I know that when a man looks at a woman he only sees her body. He doesn't

care about her soul, her education, or her wisdom. He is a man; he wants her in bed, even if she refuses him. I want a good life for my children. I want my daughter to be a doctor. I want her to choose the man she wants to make love to."

Typically, the wife's family sides with the husband, as they would otherwise have to take their daughter back and risk social disgrace. However, at one point Khitam goes to the Gaza border to meet her mother, who delivers the documents necessary for obtaining an Israeli ID. Wiping tears from her eyes, she says to Khitam, "I am so tired for you." Mother and daughter share a poignant moment of mutual social defiance.

There are not many documentaries about divorced women in Khitam's part of the world, not because women do not demand divorce, but because such a right is not theirs to exercise. It is the man who decides how long a woman will be welcome in her own home. This important film painfully exposes the suffering inflicted by a lopsided and antiquated system of justice. **AJ**

## Maps and Ruins: History as Mythical Creation

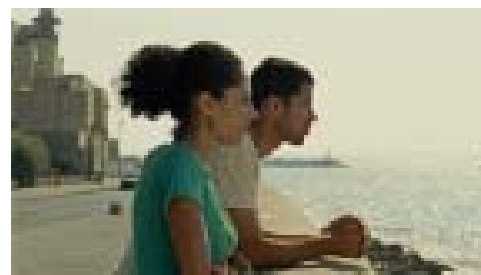
### Salt of This Sea

Directed by Annemarie Jacir

2008, 105 minutes

### BY SALAM MIR

"Salt of This Sea," the debut feature film by Annemarie Jacir, was previewed at the closing night of Boston's Palestine Film Festival, which ran October 4-12 at the Museum of Fine Arts. A mixture of fiction and fact, the film tells the story of



From "Salt of This Sea"

Soraya and Emad within the framework of occupation and colonialism. Whereas the Brooklyn-born Soraya travels to Palestine/Israel to

connect with her heritage and claim her monetary inheritance, Emad, the young Palestinian man she meets in Ramallah and falls in love with, is waiting to leave so that he can live an ordinary life without soldiers.

The script, also written by Palestinian-American Jacir, blends the oral history Soraya knows by heart with the historical reality of Israel and the Palestinian territories. When Soraya submits the legal documents that have been in the family's safe since 1948, documents that entitle her to the family's inheritance, no bank or Palestinian official can recognize them. Undaunted, the assertive Soraya manages with the help of her newly-found



lover and his friend to get the money via a humorous and plausible plot. Money in hand, they claim their right of return to Palestine, again through a humorous ruse. The crew of actors, all ordinary Palestinians dialoguing in distinct Palestinian accent, did an excellent job, perhaps because the story, landscape and history are a part of their existence.

As Soraya, Emad and his friend drive through the land – except for the last portion, the film was shot in Palestine – the beauty of the stones, hills, and sea is captured, accompanied by a haunting score. For two nights, Soraya and Emad set up a make-shift home in a cavern, in the ruins of his old village Ad-Dawayima. In the discussion following the screening, Jacir revealed that the film is dedicated to Ad-Dawayima, one of the approximately 500 villages destroyed by the Israeli Defense Forces in the 1947-48 war. The film offers a poignant climactic scene when Soraya and Emad burn the map and other documents Soraya has cherished for years. They realize that their makeshift “home sweet home” cannot be reclaimed because the ruins are a part of the Biblical heritage, an Israeli tourist and archeological site.

“Salt of This Sea” is believably humane, humorous and tragic. What struck me more than anything in the film is that Jacir’s imaginative creation is not imprisoned in lamentation over the loss; it transcends historical time, stepping to the realm of history as mythical creation. Designated by the Palestinian Authority as the official Palestinian entry to the Oscars, 2009, “Salt of This Sea,” is a tour de force that celebrates Palestine and Palestinians. **AJ**

## A ‘Feel-Good’ Documentary

### Tangier Treehouse

A film by David Shadrack and Charlotte Mangin  
The Cinema Guild  
57 minutes

#### BY LYNNE ROGERS

“Tangier Treehouse” captures an uplifting 10-day workshop led by two New York transplants in the title city’s Darna shelter and trade school.



Courtesy of The Cinema Guild

Darna hosts 170 boys and empowers them through training in a self-chosen trade. With Spain only eight miles away, over 30,000 Moroccans illegally immigrate every year to escape poverty and unemployment, or, as one boy understandably complains,

“wasting our lives away.” The film elaborates on the challenging histories of three courageously hopeful and endearing adolescents: Amin, a 16-year-old found sniffing glue on the street; Omar, the 15-year-old star pupil who has a home; and Elias, a 15-year-old whose father abandoned him following the death of his mother. Not surprisingly, their teacher observes that these resilient carpentry students love to build small houses.

In their ensemble-style workshop with architect and musician Roderick Romero and writer/actor Sean Gallit, the boys “discover for themselves that they could build something themselves in Tangiers.” While the boys learn about design and working with the environment, the viewer gets a glimpse into their daily lives and their heart-wrenchingly modest dreams, such as earning a wage in order to buy their mothers food. When Elias opens his locker of treasured trinkets, the viewer sees past the adolescent who refuses to cry to the tender boy who has managed to survive the streets. Their final product, a boat-like treehouse that was inspired by their particular experiences, offers the boys an imaginative respite and, like Darna, a safe haven. According to Romero, the treehouse demonstrates that “you don’t need a visa to dream.” It also allowed the boys to simply be boys, while simultaneously preparing them to be men. **AJ**

## Animated Film Jars Memory of Sabra and Chatila

### Waltz with Bashir

A film directed by Ari Folman  
127 minutes

#### BY BRIGITTE CALAND

When he was 19 years old, filmmaker Ari Folman participated in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon as an Israeli soldier; his unit supported the mass slaughter of Palestinian civilians at Sabra and Chatila. In “Waltz with Bashir,” he delivers a compelling expression of war, trauma, memory, consciousness and culpability. Having completely repressed the memories of his experience, Folman seeks to confront the trauma of the past. The film portrays Folman’s psychological journey to recover his buried consciousness and to reconnect the images of his recurring nightmares with repressed realities.

The film’s first images unleash fear and terror as salivating, vicious and crazed dogs course through streets in search of prey: fear of confronting alarming memories, fear of facing images of death and destruction, fear of accepting responsibility. In order to create a protective emotional distance from the reality of the past, Folman employs animation. Folman and his comrades march off to war in Lebanon under the distorting influences of ideology (listen to the words of their songs), religion (witness the man who wraps *tefillim* around his arm at Beirut’s airport) and, most probably, narcotics (recall Carmi’s hallucinations on the yacht, Ari at Beirut’s airport, as well as the frenetic and aimless shooting when they enter South Lebanon).



Some of the film's first images depict Tel Aviv in the rain, with the stormy seas beyond. It then transitions to Ari standing alone and silent on Beirut's Corniche, the dark waters of the Mediterranean lapping against the shore below. A cleansing rain has now lifted and a fresh breeze, a harbinger of change, drifts through a car, the door ajar, open to discovery. In stylized, graphic-novel animation, the film flashes surreally back to a recurring dream that is at once one of the most forceful moments of the film, as well as the most psychologically significant.

Ari and two of his friends emerge naked from the still and dark Mediterranean waters and walk somnolently toward the shores of West Beirut. Military illumination flares light up the dark night sky. The three men, silhouettes against an orange backdrop, dress slowly, pick up weapons from the beach and climb stairs. Folman then walks alone through Beirut streets, coming across mourning women who silently approach and pass him by. Assisted by Ori Sivan, Folman's childhood friend and psychoanalyst, the filmmaker questions his connection to these images and his role and culpability in the Sabra and Chatila massacres.

The film weaves recurrent themes of violence and sexuality. Virility is a leitmotif, as with Carmi's fantasy of his diminutive self lying on the belly of an over-dimensioned recumbent nautical woman swimming backstroke, throwing her arms at a regular pace into the Mediterranean waters. Questioning his conflicted virility, Ari recollects a military leave in Tel Aviv when he realizes that his girlfriend has rejected him for another man. He fantasizes dying as a military hero in Lebanon, inducing guilt for the remainder of her life. Moreover, throughout the film, Ari's army buddies regard their weapons as an extension of their "bodies." When they fire their weapons randomly and uncontrollably, as if lost in a trance, the scene suggests nothing less than the ecstasy of ejaculation.

In the emblematic scene of the film, Shmuel Frenkel seizes a comrade's assault rifle, an object of desire, and surrealistically waltzes with it in a *pas de deux*, cradling it in his arms like a dance partner, the rifle straight and proud in the air. The "dance floor" is an urban battlefield, adjacent buildings festooned with iconic posters of Lebanon's assassinated President-elect Bashir Gemayel. Another scene depicts Israeli soldiers casually relaxing in a villa they had arrogated while the commander, smoking a cigar, was watching a pornographic movie.

The artistry of the filmmaker balances the film's profoundly disturbing and horrific images. The audience is, by turns, repulsed by the grotesque imagery and enchanted by the astonishing animation and the compelling interplay of light and shadow.



From "Waltz With Bashir"

The movie deserves serious consideration for its visual execution, its soundtrack and its subtle but spellbinding use of color that reveals emotions, moods and details: orange eyes on brownish dogs, red buckets on a yacht's deck, black contours on orange buildings, gray flies on a horse's eye. The aesthetic level soars to such heights, almost seducing the mind into overlooking the underlying horror. However, Folman deftly manages the protective layer of art so that when the viewer again confronts the realities of brutal human conflict, the dark and appalling truth becomes all the more unbearable.

The film's editing replicates the psychoanalytic process by which one recovers repressed experiences and psychically-hidden images into consciousness, elucidated and confronted. Using unconscious associative linkage of detail – a color, motion, words and sounds – Folman successfully navigates the mazes of the human mind and extracts the stillness of faded memories.

Another recurrent motif in the film is water imagery. From the opening scene when salivating dogs splash through puddles in the streets of Tel Aviv, the symbolic use of water runs through the film. Ari and Boaz part after their first encounter under the heavy falling rain, the sea beyond. Ari's first images of West Beirut are also of the same sea; he and two friends emerge from heavy oily water, mother's womb, slowly abandoning its protection and leading Folman to face alone the destruction of Beirut and the mourning Palestinian women. Another element of the water imagery depicts the yacht sequence when the "nautical" woman carries Carmi away just before a plane bombs the yacht, killing all his friends. Similarly, Roni Dayyag escapes from the deep and dark sea. He swims ironically towards the very troops who abandoned him and who now absurdly believe him to be a traitor.

Once Folman (and by extension the viewer) has recovered these memories, the protective chimera of animation evaporates and stark reality must be confronted. The film transitions to the use of real, photographic images. The destruction and horror are

inescapable. Bodies of young children, women, old people, groups of men, all lying stacked up chest-high in every corner of the camp. An old Palestinian woman cries in Arabic, with no subtitles, because, unlike the rest of the film, this question is obviously addressed to those who understand “[*wayn al Arab?*] Where are the Arabs? Where are the Arabs?”

Where were we indeed when Sabra and Chatila and numerous other massacres occurred? The old Palestinian woman’s question jars our memory. The filmmaker knocked on doors, questioned friends and ventured onto disturbing grounds where emotions may get dangerous. With immense talent, using a brilliant team to create a compelling soundtrack, stunning visual effects, and hauntingly beautiful animation, Folman embarked on a very personal journey to confront his nightmares, to sublimate his horror in order to express it and to question his culpability as an Israeli soldier.

Ari Folman’s unit apparently composed part of the IDF that fired the flares that illuminated the sky above the Sabra and Chatila camp, as suggested by the role that the flares played in his nightmares. As he recovers memories of his complicity, the filmmaker must painfully confront and accept his own responsibility. The flares thus provide an ironic metaphor for Folman’s self-elucidation and illumination, as well as dramatic evidence of the film’s indictment of Israeli commanders. **AJ**

## Kennedy Center Festival

*Continued from page 12*

“It’s very clear that there is a market, if you like, that there are people who will respond. And there’s a lot of work that can be done. Now everyone needs to think about how they can contribute.”

Alicia Adams, the Kennedy Center’s vice president for international programming, said the festival had proven far more successful than expected, with ticket sales at 90 percent for most performances, including the literary series, and even reaching 100 percent for the film series.

“There’s huge interest in this part of the world, and I think in the future you will see the door much more open, in terms of presenting at venues around the country,” Adams told Al Jadid. She said officials from many cultural venues and booking organizations attended the event and she expected to see more performances at the Kennedy Center and elsewhere in coming years.

Adams said the positive response from audiences and upbeat reviews were also heartening for many of the Arab artists who had grown wary of the United States in recent years. One artist told her that it was the first time he had felt comfortable when visiting the United States. “He said that this was a different America, one that was welcoming,” she said.

“This book adds the title ‘Page-Turning Storyteller’ to Dr. Saadah’s well-earned reputation as a poet. His account of the events surrounding the Oklahoma City bombing brought tears to my eyes. He captured our collective sense of loss, unbelief and irreversible tragedy as we dealt with the chaos of that horrific day.”

**Kirk Humphreys**

**Mayor of Oklahoma City (1998 - 2003)**

### About the Novel

This poetic love story with historic and medical undertones is the tale of two families, from the opposite banks of life, startled by the Oklahoma City bombing. The bipolarity of deeply held cultural beliefs, the emotional dissonances between the shores of an unlikely couple, the tacit, spiritual tensions among love, kindness, and freedom, all interplay to provide a well-deserved respite to an action-weary and spirit-starved audience in a world living with violence.

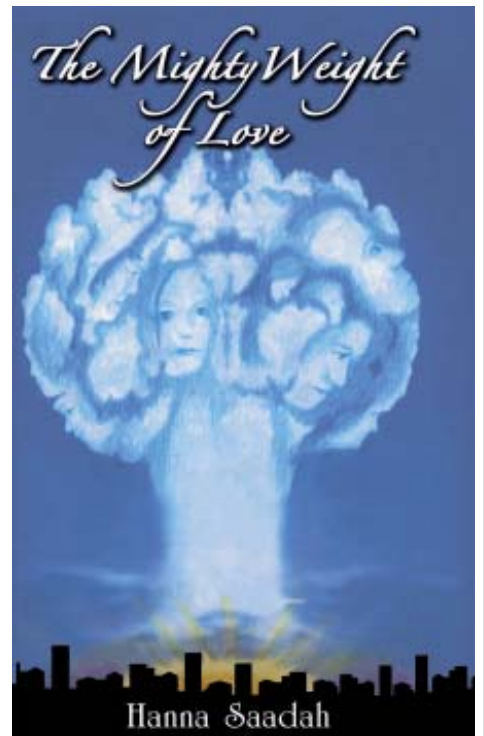
### About the Author

Born in Lebanon in 1946, Hanna Saadah studied medicine at the American University of Beirut. He came to Oklahoma in 1971 for postgraduate training with strong intentions of returning to his homeland, but when the civil war prevented his return, he made Oklahoma his home.



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Cover designed by Oklahoma artist and mother Angel Peck.

\*20% of the sale revenues from this and other books by the author will be distributed to charities by the Oklahoma City Community Foundation.

## MESTO – Western Classics, Ethnic Fusion in Full Orchestra Format

BY SAMI ASMAR

A barrier had long existed between large Western-style orchestras and ethnic ensembles of all types. Orchestra members are viewed as rigorously and classically trained and precisely



Conductor Nabil Azzam

follow a conductor while they read from music sheets that preserve the details of the compositions. Members of smaller ensembles are often centered around one star instrumentalist or vocalist and have varying levels of musical training, but are bonded by a common musical or ethnic background, and typically take liberties in improvisations.

This barrier fell more than eight years ago when an idea was conceived by Nabil Azzam to create the first full orchestra specializing in world music, building on the best of both worlds. MESTO, the Multi-Ethnic Star Orchestra, has already changed the landscape of music. It was formed for the purpose of fusing the traditions of world musical genres and those of Western classical background and ended up fostering new musical expressions not previously conceived by its audiences or even members.

In the West, music of other cultures is called “ethnic,” a word that typically stirs up images of colorful costumes, folk dances or exotic spices. MESTO is indeed spicing up Western musical structures with modes and rhythms from around the world that ease listeners into exposure to other cultures they may not experience otherwise. Through music, knowledge of entire civilizations outside our borders becomes accessible.

The most flavorful spice in this orchestra is its founder and director, Maestro Nabil Azzam. He is multitalented as well as multicultural, having been born and raised in the Galilee, before moving to the U.S. to pursue a Ph.D. in music at UCLA. With a dissertation on the “godfather” of modern Arab music – the late Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab of Egypt – Dr. Azzam is an expert

on the theory and practice of traditional Arab music and, having received his early musical training in the Western classical style, he has become accomplished in both classical European and Middle Eastern musical styles. Azzam, who has taught at several universities, has brilliantly arranged the majority of the nearly 200 compositions in MESTO’s repertoire and has composed several of them, such as “The Crescent,” which appears on MESTO’s first CD.

The virtuoso violinist is a very dynamic and energetic person, and spending time with him never has a dull moment. In the first few minutes of a person’s first meeting with him, Azzam would tell stories about the time he spent with the legendary Wahhab, play examples on the violin or the *oud*, discuss politics, tell a joke and give a referral to a good car mechanic; he is talented at making a complete stranger feel like an old friend in no time. With his refined education and musical skills, he leaves people with a big dose of knowledge and as well as a huge dose of heart-felt enchanting music. These traits were essential to forming the orchestra and maintaining it cohesively, attracting a large number of talented musicians to audition for every unfilled position, and critically attracting the patronage of a significant Arab leader.

Members of MESTO play all the instruments of a philharmonic orchestra, strings, wind, brass, and percussion; but dispersed among them are a handful of traditional instruments from the eastern Mediterranean. These include the *qanun* performed by Armenian-American artist Lilit Khojayan, the *oud* played by Lebanese-American musician Fahd Shaaban, and a suite of Middle Eastern percussion instruments such as the *darbuka* and *daff*. These and other instruments played by guest artists allow the orchestra to perform works from the Arab World, Turkey, Greece and Armenia, as well as Sephardic and Eastern European styles.

When Azzam trains the mostly-American orchestra members in Arab music, he explores the challenging practice of modal or *maqam* music, which necessarily incorporates microtones not heard in Western scales. A *maqam* with notes separated by three-quarters of a tone (unlike the half or full tone distance in the major and minor scales) cannot be played on many Western instruments. However, it can be played on fretless instruments such as the violin and cello, or on specially designed instruments such as those of the *takht*, the classical Arab ensemble. Azzam cleverly calls these microtones “red notes” to heighten the musicians’ awareness of them in a given piece. Special ear training opens up a whole new world of music to the members, and some of them have indeed acquired the taste for *maqam* music.

After the first five years of performing in the United States, MESTO was invited to play at the prestigious Jerash festival in Jordan. This was followed by an invitation to perform in Egypt along with the annual conference on Arab music, with extensive



coverage in the Arab press. The novelty of Americans playing the compositions of Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab in his home country attracted large audiences who were pleasantly surprised by the quality of the performances. Overseas tours allowed the orchestra to meet and collaborate with well-known Arab singers.

MESTO has performed with at least one singer in every concert; singers who varied from local talent to international



Karima Skalli

stars flown in from the Middle East. A historical chapter was added this year when Karima Skalli, considered the next diva of Arab song, rehearsed and performed with the orchestra. Skalli will inevitably reach incredible heights rarely seen today but reminiscent of the age of giants of the last century. The native of Moroccan city of Fez was discovered at the age of 9, when she sang Um Kulthum songs at family gatherings and later developed her repertoire to include other great singers such as Asmahan, the late Syrian Druz princess who moved to Egypt as a child with her mother and later famous brother Farid al-Atrash, with whose work she has become closely associated as she performed in festivals from Lebanon's Beiteddine to Cairo's Arab Music Festival.

In her elegant and gentle style, Karima sought musical training to enhance her incredible talent and took her Moroccan/Andalusian heritage to Aleppo, Beirut and Cairo to continue learning music of varying backgrounds, showing a disciplined and professional approach that earned her tremendous respect. Skalli dazzled California audiences with her interpretations of several Asmahan and Um Kulthum classics arranged by Azzam for MESTO, and surprised the orchestra by performing a solo Sufi vocal improvisation as a result of having been moved by audience adoration.

One of Karima's mentors accompanied her for her collaboration with MESTO: Father Elie Kresrouani, professor of ethnomusicology in Lebanon and the doctorate research director at the Paris IV Sorbonne University. He captured the experience of witnessing MESTO in action, and noted about the "The baton is not only in Maestro Azzam's hand, it is in his soul and being, in his expressions and in the rhythm of his breaths, all which lead to inspiration that passes the chemistry of joy. The musicians read the heartbeat of the melodies from the maestro's face, not from the motionless paper on the music stands." **AJ**

## 'Deportation Nation': Visual Migrations

### Exploring Displacement and Division in North America and Palestine

BY D. W. AOSSEY

The phrase "Divide and Conquer" is a familiar one to students of history and international conquest alike. But when internal divisions are imposed on peaceful civilians, the concept takes on an exceptionally cruel irony – and few places today more fundamentally represent this disparity than the United States/Mexico border region and Israeli-occupied Palestine.

"Deportation Nation: Visual Migrations," a week-long exhibit held in San Diego in January, brought together a group of visual artists to address the issues of mass deportation and disenfranchisement as a result of America's stance on immigration, and to examine the alienation of groups and individuals within regional borders.

The event showcased several well-known artists from the Southwestern United States including Bernice Badillo, Chikle, Isaias Crow, Gerardo Quetzatl Garcia, Xohitl Gil-Higuchi, Nuvia Crisol Guerra, Ricardo Islas and Gabriel J. Valez – and seeking to explore common ground between the Latino population of North America and the Palestinian people, the exhibit also featured prominent Arab-American artists Doris Bittar and John Halaka.

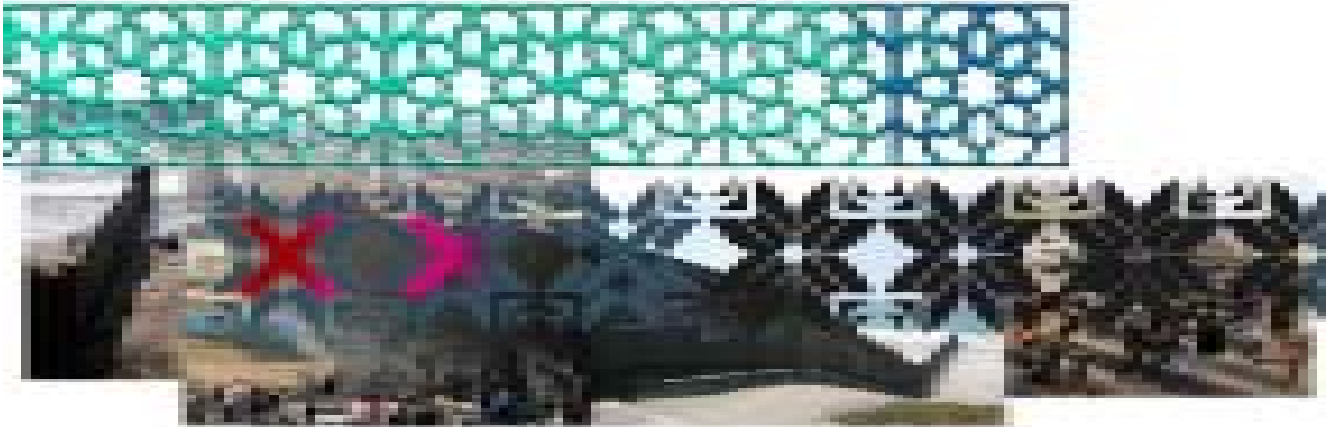
Revealing a richness of ideas and viewpoints, the confluence of Arab and Latino artists was highly complementary and the works on display ranged from the whimsically sad to haunting and surreal; from the spiritual to the abstract. In



"Land of the Free, But Not For Me?," by John Halaka

"Unnatural Disservice" by Nuvia Crisol Guerra, the animated children's character, Dora the Explorer, stands helplessly before an elementary school as her handcuffed parents are led to a Border Patrol vehicle by toy letters wearing oversized sunglasses. The letters form the acronym "INS" – the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The painting drives home the fact that between 2000 and 2007 more than 100,000 adult parents of United States citizens, children, have been deported, in many





"Migration Patterns: Gaza/Tijuana/Gaza/Tijuana," by Doris Bittar

cases forced to leave their children behind with friends and relatives or as wards of the foster care system.

In another eerily surreal painting titled "Operation Body Snatcher," Ricardo Islas portrays a sinister robot-like caricature of Uncle Sam in hot pursuit of a brownish figure representing the Mexican people. The silvery, stun-gun wielding Uncle Sam is characterized as having a hole in his chest where his heart should be – reminiscent of the Tin Man in the movie "The Wizard of Oz." This analogy is an important one, suggesting that, like the Wizard, Uncle Sam is merely an imposter hiding behind a grand facade while only pretending to uphold high-minded values and ideals.

Among the other works on display, a montage of blue security envelopes forms an American flag in "Secured Flag 3" by Doris Bittar. Symbolic of the state of elevated national security, the image invokes America's evolution from the hysteria of the military state to the paranoia of the security state – an eventuality manifest in legislative acts such as FISA and the Patriot Act which have stripped the individual of human and Constitutional rights both inside and outside America's borders.

In "Migration Patterns: Gaza/Tijuana/Gaza/Tijuana," Bittar also explores parallels between the insidious wall erected in Israeli-occupied Palestine and the collection of barriers that separate the United States and Mexico. The inkjet on acrylic image brings into focus the idea that walls and barriers are not necessarily in place to manage borders but rather to control and corral people. To paraphrase San Diego artist John Halaka during a panel discussion that followed the exhibit opening: just as the wall built in the Occupied West Bank was never intended to keep the Jews and the Arabs apart, neither is the wall at the United States/Mexico border intended to separate Mexicans from Americans. Rather, such walls are erected for one purpose – to keep the indigenous people away from each other; to divide and to control.

Similarly, Halaka's contributions to "Deportation Nation" are representative of America's attitude toward outsiders while at the same time betraying a sobering insight into America's national identity. In "Land of the Free, But Not For Me?," a map of the United States is ringed with barbed wire. Yet, not only do

the menacing wires constrict America's external boundaries but, like meandering weeds, the insidious barbs riddle every corner of the nation. The map motif is expanded further in "Land of Desire and Denial." In this work, rubber stamps of the word "allowed" cover the continental United States while on the land and in the water outside her borders the term "denied" predominates.

In keeping with the themes of division and exclusivity in United States immigration policies, as with the oppressive policies of apartheid and confiscation visited upon the Palestinian people, Halaka concludes that a clear pattern of racism is evident – vestiges of colonialism and intercession that have evolved into a sense of superiority and entitlement by the ruling elite. And, unfortunately, the situation does not appear to be softening. But while admittedly discouraging, hope for justice surely lies in vigilance, outspokenness and the continuation of dissent – sentiments which, coming full circle, truly define the spirit of "Deportation Nation: Visual Migrations" and the exceptional artists that participated. **AJ**

### Cover Artist

"Whirling Dervishes" by Monkith Saaïd, 2003, appears on the front cover. Monkith Saaïd received his higher studies in sculpture at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in 1995. He exhibited his sculptures and installations throughout the Middle East, Europe, United States, and Canada. He designed several large monuments for major institutions, including "Before the Last Supper (2004, An-Nahar Building, Downtown Beirut). One of Saaïd's sculptures was offered as a cultural prize by 'Kitab fi Jarida' in their Paris UNESCO office. During his lifetime, he split his time between Holland, Syria, and Lebanon. On Thursday, November 21, 2008, Monkith Saaïd passed away in Holland, ending an extraordinary life of artistic and human achievement. In August 2008, the Monkith Saaïd Award was founded at the Torpedo Art Factory, and will be presented every year to a sculptor who wins first prize at a sculpture exhibition of the Art League, Alexandria, VA. A full colored art book on his life and installations titled: "Monkith Saaïd: The Last Stones of Mesopotamia" will be published in April of 2010 by De Weideblik Press.

# The Artist in Syria

## Dissident Syria

By Miriam Cooke  
Duke University Press, 2007

BY ETEL ADNAN

I just read Miriam Cooke's "Dissident Syria" and feel that this work has to be brought to the attention of specialists of Arab and Middle Eastern studies, students of literature and the general public.

We all have known for about 40 years that the Syrian regime is an authoritarian one, to say the least, and that in addition to the armed opponents that would be prosecuted in any country, Syria systematically tortures and imprisons intellectuals for long

periods of time for no other reason than their having criticized the regime. Arab intellectuals in general, as well as those from the other countries of the world, pay little attention to the plight of Syrian intellectuals either out of fear, discouragement or indifference.

Miriam Cooke, professor of Arab cultures and literatures at Duke University, has had the courage to tackle this problem, and she has done so tactfully, thoroughly and with generosity of heart. The result is a thorough

– and heartbreaking – account of creative life in Syria, and an implicit homage to the indomitable human spirit, in this case Arab men who can be counted among the great dissidents of our times.

She spent six months interviewing and befriending people who had been – and could be again at any time – imprisoned for their views. She shows clearly that elsewhere these individuals would merely be considered writers, playwrights and filmmakers doing their duty as artists by illuminating the flaws of their governments and societies. And that is the irony: these are not opponents who preach violence. Rather they are ordinary, albeit talented, citizens who desire the common good. They are courageous witnesses of a country whose paranoid government has created a nightmarish system of punitive repression that never seems to correct itself.

Cooke's initial interest lay in the intricate relations between government and creativity. In a country with strict censorship, all intellectual and artistic production is subjected to a multitude of controls and must receive permission to be distributed. Culture then takes on the quality of being official, of being at a propaganda machine's service. It is not always that clear. But it is certain that this intense scrutiny by government

services creates a climate of submission, fear, self-censorship or even silence.

The merit of this book lies in the proximity that Miriam Cooke has established between herself and some of the best playwrights, writers and artists. She has seen the most important ones regularly and, above all, she has listened. So their memories of suffering, their ongoing problems, and their very souls have been laid bare to this woman who came from afar to listen, almost to share their misery. Thus the book becomes a work of literature in its own right. It goes beyond research and becomes a human document worthy of the great books known as "literature of prisons," a genre so well illustrated by Dostoyevsky in the 19th century. The list of these books is long, unfortunately, and "Dissident Syria" deserves to have a place among them.

In her book, Cooke accounts for and studies the most important intellectuals, both living and deceased, in contemporary Syria. From Ulfat Idilby to Colette Khoury, she includes such artists as Huda Naamani, Nadia Khust, Saadallah Wannus, Ghassan al Jaba'i, Faraj Bayrakdar, Mohammad Malas and Mamdouh Adwan – to name only a few. She lets them speak by quoting passages from their works, passages so well chosen that they give insight to those who are unfamiliar with their works. She makes their world visible. Although the literature of other Arab countries is fairly well represented, particularly in the West, Syrian literature and art is seldom translated or exhibited. Consequently, Syrian writers' and artists' imprisonment is often spiritual as well as physical, as they also suffer the isolation that accompanies obscurity and lack of acknowledgement.

While exposing their artistic greatness, she also emphasizes their incredible strength. One comes out of this reading feeling on the one hand ashamed of one's own silence, and on the other, comforted... yes, it is those suffering from horrible physical and spiritual oppression that bring courage to those "undead" living outside in numbness.

I would have to say that seldom does academic research – no matter the level of sincerity – transcend its original purpose. But in this case, the professor became a writer, producing a peerless document on contemporary Syrian intellectual life. Nor have I seen an equivalent effort from writers regarding more or less similar problems in other countries, including those in the United States. Yet some two decades ago, Cooke had already written a remarkable study on Lebanese women writers whose works dealt with war. It was sympathetic and thorough, remaining a unique reference for that period in Lebanon, as well as for its women writers.

But this work on Syria, partly because of its subject matter, goes much further: a documentation that has grown to be an essay; a creative work and an implicit homage to the human spirit; a profoundly felt denunciation of tyranny, regardless of where it happens. Cooke is not attacking, not entering politics as such, but does infinitely more. She is bringing recognition and love to particular human beings (writers, filmmakers and visual artists) who have been and continue to be persecuted –



people that we chose to ignore or forget, but who, in the end, we need more than they need us.

She has also brought attention directly and indirectly to the creativity that is taking place in Syria despite the economic and political restrictions. Cinema requires considerable budgets, but in spite of this, there are some excellent Syrian filmmakers, such as Muhammad Malas and Omar Amiralay, who have managed to make remarkable films and documentaries.

Syrian television gives many filmmakers a chance to create indigenous programs. These directors draw heavily on historical subjects – contrary, for example, to Lebanese television, which seems to explicitly avoid such themes, reducing history to some general myths.

Cooke speaks largely on Syrian theater because it happens that all the great playwrights of that country – and they happen to be among the best in the Arab world – have been censored, mistreated or imprisoned, and sometimes all three. Saadallah Wannus and others have had their plays produced outside Syria as well.

In general, we can affirm that Syria has favored traditional arts, not in spectacular or extremely thorough ways, but Syrians have recognized and protected them to some degree. A music academy in Damascus dedicates itself to keeping age-old music alive. The few composers of contemporary music, such as Suchari, live abroad. The Syrian public is particularly fond of Lebanese popular singers such as Sabah Fairuz.

Syria's state universities consciously defend the Arabic language. All their departments teach in Arabic, including the schools of medicine and science, whereas in Lebanon most subjects are taught in French or in English. The universities of the Maghreb also overwhelmingly use French, and although one would strive to know many languages besides one's own, it is dangerous to see a foreign language take the place of one's native tongue. When that happens, we witness not only a weakening of the "mother tongue," but the loss of one's original culture and even ensuing political problems. This problem also affects the Gulf states, where English is becoming ever more prevalent, often spoken instead of Arabic. However, it is interesting to note that in Germany, for example, where almost everybody knows a second language, be it English, Russian or French, people tend to stick to their native tongue when they are among themselves. This is an issue that deserves serious debate.

Despite the challenges of the political conditions, Syria has produced many significant poets. The most famous poet of our generation has been Nizar Kabbani, whose language was particularly beautiful. Of course there is Adonis, who was born in a village in the Alawite Mountains and is considered not only a great Arab poet but also enjoys an international reputation. Adonis has lived in Paris for the last 15 or 20 years, but he also resided and taught in Lebanon for many years. There are many younger poets; some remained in Syria, like Nazih Afash. Others, like Nazih al-Azmeh, returned to Syria after being away. Still others settled abroad, such as Nuri Jarrah, who currently lives and works in the Gulf. These are just a few names among many.

If one wants a thorough list of contemporary Syrian poets, the London-based literary journal *Banipal* devoted an entire issue last year to Syrian literature. Besides famous women writers such as Ulfat Idilbi, Colette Khoury and Ghada Samman, there are numerous Syrian novelists and short story writers, both male and female, who are worthy of our attention.

Contemporary Syria is home to a very lively artistic scene. Everybody knew the painters Fateh al-Mudarres and Luay Kayali, now both deceased, but from the 1960s on, a new generation of painters capitalized on international trends to express specific visions. Some went to Paris – Sakhr Farzat and Yussef Abdelke were the best among them. Yussef Abdelke spent a few years in prison for his political views, though nowadays he enjoys a great artistic reputation in the Arab world. Syrian painters have exhibited regularly in Beirut and, with the Gulf States opening up to art, their exhibitions can be seen in fairs and galleries in various parts of the Middle East, often with rather high asking prices. As Miriam Cooke noted, the government pays little attention to visual arts because they do not attract the majority of the population. Moreover, the censors are probably too ignorant to know that visual arts are a language that can carry a political message. In fact, some of the best Syrian painters denounce political oppression in the grand tradition of political art. There are also a few sculptors who exhibit both in and outside Damascus, and are much appreciated.

Miriam Cooke's book on dissidents in Syria exceeds its original purpose by opening the door to Syrian intellectuals, writers and filmmakers. It points to a crucial problem – the abuse of power that has turned that nation into a police state – and opines that Syria, with all its richness and diversity, deserves better. Given real peace, both inside and outside its borders, Syria could again become a center of creativity, culture and civilization. **AJ**

## Nahda's Children

### Conscience of the Nation:

### Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt

By Richard Jacquemond

Translated by David Tresilian

The American University in Cairo Press, 2008, 355 pp

### BY MICHAEL NAJJAR

The specter of the great Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz haunts Richard Jacquemond's "Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt." In Jacquemond's conception, Mahfouz is the greatest example of the drama of the modern Egyptian writer who expresses "the gulf that never seems to get any narrower between his prophetic ambitions and the extreme difficulty he has in disseminating his work, whatever the form that the censorship might take."

Jacquemond's book addresses the major opposing factions in the intellectual field – religious and secular – and how they



struggle over the spiritual direction of Egyptian society. To become the “conscience of the nation,” a writer must practice what Jacquemond calls “the legitimate field of literature” – a fusion of creativity and commitment, of aesthetic innovation and political and social engagement. This fusion is most prominently seen in the Arab novel, “an important form of expression for the collective imaginary.”

Jacquemond’s scope of study covers the major events in Egyptian literary history from the 1960s to the present day (the book has been updated with a postscript since its original publication in French several years ago). In addition, he covers

many genres including poetry, novels, short stories, journalism and the theater. Jacquemond states that his aim is to describe and analyze the major aspects of the Egyptian literary idea of the writer as the conscience of the nation and of literature as a mirror of society. By taking his readers on a historical journey from the pre-colonial moment through the present day, the author concludes that the Egyptian literary field is immune to the phenomenon of the “death of the great writer” that has been

experienced in the literary spaces of Europe and North America.

Jacquemond, an associate professor of modern Arabic language and literature of Provence, France, presupposes the reader’s knowledge of modern Egyptian history. Those without familiarity with this period might find it difficult to navigate the changes in state political control from pre-colonial Egypt to the present day. Jacquemond also addresses the marginalization and separation of women’s writing in Egypt, stating that “critics unceasingly complain of the stereotypical representation of ‘female literature’ in critical writings by men, and continue to reject the labeling of their work in this way.” One wishes that, instead of further isolating women’s writing by placing it under its own sub-category in his own book, Jacquemond had incorporated their works into the same discussions in which he analyzes male writers.

To his credit, Jacquemond does spend time discussing regional writers, Nubian literature, and the Cairene literary scene. This gives the reader a perspective on why certain writers such as Mahfouz, Toufic al-Hakim, and Yussef Idris achieved their legendary status while others were relegated to relative obscurity. He also includes several helpful appendices which consist of a comprehensive list of Egyptian writers and critics, and state literature and prizes from 1958-2006.

Jacquemond clearly states that it is less a matter of what can or cannot be written or published, than who has the authority to write and publish in Egypt. The structures of censorship are manifold, ranging from state censorship to “street censorship” to what he calls “Islamization from below.” Despite these pressures, he demonstrates that there has been a quantitative explosion in literary production and a feminization and

internationalization of the literary field. Given all of these contradictory and conflicting elements, Jacquemond leaves readers with the ambivalent impression that the future of Egyptian literature is one that “will have many happy years ahead of it, both for better and for worse.” **AJ**

## Tackling Taboos in Chicago Setting

### Chicago

By Alaa al-Aswany

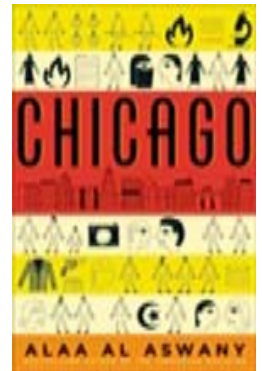
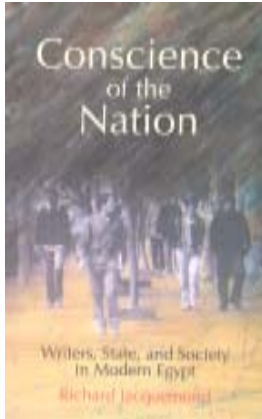
New York: Harper Collins, 2008, 400 pp

**BY SUSAN MUADDI DARRAJ**

On October 22, 2008, I listened to an interview of Egyptian dentist-turned-journalist-turned-novelist Alaa al-Aswany on NPR’s “The Diane Rehm Show.” During the interview, Rehm addressed the sexual themes in al-Aswany’s latest novel, “Chicago”: “In your books...you’ve written explicitly about many taboo subjects, including homosexuality and abortion. Why do you believe you have not been silenced as a result of writing about such things?”

Al-Aswany responded that “Arab literature has not been presented to the West properly,” and pointed out that for centuries Arab literature has tackled so-called “taboo subjects.” Indeed, in “Chicago,” al-Aswany handles sexual themes in a straightforward manner, such as in the case of Shaymaa Muhammadi, a female Egyptian studying at the University of Illinois Medical Center, the situation that anchors all the main characters together. Shaymaa is a histology student, deeply devout but sexually repressed. In her early 30s, she is frustrated that, despite having lived a decent life, she remains unmarried – especially since girls she knows who were morally “loose” are enjoying their lives with loving husbands and children. When she meets Tariq Haseeb, a fellow Egyptian student – also deeply devout, also sexually repressed – they engage in a friendship that quickly turns romantic. They justify their sexual exploits – which fall just short of intercourse – by quoting religious law to one another; indeed, they spend so much time together, trying to enjoy one another while not feeling guilty, that Tariq begins to fall behind in his studies.

Most of the other characters also have sexual problems, such as Muhammad Salah, a professor who left Egypt years ago, married an American woman, and now regrets having abandoned his friends who stayed and fought for rights and democracy in Egypt. His regret is affecting his sexual life with his wife, ultimately leading to their separation. Salah spends nights alone in his basement, wearing the (now tight-fitting) clothes and shoes in which he first arrived from Egypt. Another character, Nagi al-Samaad, arrives in the United States on a student visa; one of his





first actions is to order a call-girl from the phonebook. Later, he becomes involved with a young Jewish woman, and he spends much of his free time with her, making love and discussing politics. Yet another sexually troubled character is Marwa, the wife of the Egyptian Student Union president Ahmad Danana, who cannot stand her husband's rough, animalistic way of forcing himself upon her; she begins to endure their lovemaking sessions by imagining him as another man and dreaming of a route to divorce.

Al-Aswany also doesn't shy away from political themes; indeed, those he juxtaposes – the discrimination in Egypt against Copts, the racism in the U.S. against African Americans – offer revealing parallels. Others are handled more overtly in this novel: a spy network, of which Danana is a part, operates with a stunning amount of power in Chicago, keeping tabs on the activities and relationships of the Egyptian-American population. Meanwhile, Nagi al-Samaad, from his relatively safe perch in the United States, advocates vigorously for greater freedom and the end of the authoritarian Egyptian government. During a conversation with another Egyptian American, al-Samaad spouts phrases like, "The regime in Egypt is despotic and corrupt and it persecutes all Egyptians, Muslims and Copts... All Egyptians are suffering from discrimination so long as they are not members of the ruling party." Later, al-Samaad finds himself in trouble when he coordinates a demonstration against the visit of the Egyptian president (never named, but a clear – and almost comical – reference to Husni Mubarak) to the campus.

Some of the dialogue becomes didactic at times, for example when Nagi tells his Jewish girlfriend, "Read the history. Jews lived under Arab rule for many centuries without problems or persecution. They even enjoyed the trust of the Arabs, as evidenced by the fact that, for a period of a thousand years, an Arab sultan's personal physician was most likely to be a Jew." Yet the range of characters, both Egyptian and American, created by al-Aswany is breathtaking in its scope – the drug-addicted daughter of a professor, the despairing wife of another – and aims to portray Chicago as a city teeming with diverse and conflicting ideals and desires. The structure of the novel, offering the perspectives of almost all characters, and the unapologetic exploration of sexual and political themes ensure a satisfying and engaging read. **AJ**

## Covering East and West Veil Debate

### The Veil

Edited by Jennifer Heath  
University of California Press, 2008

### BY SIMONE STEVENS

Whether worn as a headscarf or a *neqab* that covers the whole body, the Islamic veil has sparked controversy and interest among Westerners both prior to and since the terrorist attacks on September 11. It was also debated among Arab and Muslim reformists and intellectuals as far back as the beginning of the

last century. Recently the veil debate has been rekindled by controversial legislation passed in France and Turkey. Partly to promote assimilation, France passed a law in 2004 making it illegal to wear religious symbols, including the hijab, in public buildings such as schools. In secular Turkey, where the president's wife dons the *hijab*, Parliament has found a solution that eases restrictions that were imposed on veil-wearing after Atatürk's time.



Historically a symbol of a woman's faith, the retiring of the *hijab* has been associated with the process of Westernization. For some, the garment has transcended its traditional religious symbolism, becoming a metaphor for Middle Eastern gender politics and even repression, since it is ultimately men who decide if, when, and where it will be worn.

"The Veil," edited by Jennifer Heath, is a collection of essays by 25 authors of varied background and approach – some basing their work

on personal experience, while others adhere to academic disciplines. Some scholars see the veil as a symbol of oppression and cultural regression, but not Mohja Kahf, whose essay begins, "It is like a second skin to me. It is supple as a living membrane and moves and flows with me. There is beauty and dignity in its fall and sweep. It is my crown and my mantle, my vestments of grace. Its pleasures are known to me, if not to you." The book also draws attention to the wide range of veils in existence, lest one think that the much-photographed *abaya* and *burqa* were the only alternatives. The authors remind us that Orthodox Jews wear head scarves, Catholic nuns use habits, and that there are even veils worn by men. The compilation additionally explores the complexities of integrating the veil into the Western world.

There is a strong current of defiance running through the book toward what it terms "Western imperialism" and its political use of the veil. Writing of post-9/11 Afghanistan, Dinah Zeiger asserts, "The removal of the veil from the women in Afghanistan constitutes a necessary step in the American nationalist agenda to remake the Middle East in the Western capitalist mold."

Another contributor, Aisha Lee Fox, points out that women in Muslim countries have historically been locked in vicious cycles of mandatory veiling and unveiling, depending on the political climate of the time. In "Concealing and Revealing Female Hair," Ashraf Zahedi writes, "In July 1980, the Islamic regime began implementing 'compulsory' veiling as part of the regime's agenda to institutionalize and exploit the female identity espoused by the authenticity movement. It promoted wearing the veil as 'moral cleansing.'" Zahedi reminds us that more than 40 years earlier, in 1936, "The Shah legally abolished the veil... He employed physical force, ordering soldiers to remove women's veils, sometimes tearing them off in public."

The book appears to cater to a Western audience that has genuine interest in studying and understanding the veil. But

the real source of discontent lies in the Middle East, not at a lecture hall somewhere in the United States. Sometimes the book takes on an apologetic tone, attempting to defend the *hijab* by, in turn, vilifying the West or the Arab nations for having sought Westernization.

Some of the book's more academic contributions tend towards jargonism, at the peril of losing the layman. For the most part however, "The Veil" achieves its goal of opening the discussion to a wider audience, introducing a plurality of perspectives and opinions, and serving as a reminder that this is a world in which there are as many answers as there are individuals. Heath closes with, "This book operates on myriad levels. In addition to sociopolitical discussions on the veil, it brings to light multiple perspectives, many highly personal. For that is where the veil begins. And that is where it should end. It belongs only to the wearer."

Naturally, the Middle Eastern perspective on the veil differs to some extent from that which predominates in the West. According to Mohammad Ali Atassi, author of several studies on the *hijab*, the debate on the veil in the Middle East is more rooted in indigenous social, economic and political factors than it is in the West.

A Syrian whose articles appeared in An Nahar Cultural Supplement, Atassi attributes the increased number of women wearing the *hijab* to internal Syrian politics, particularly since the early 1970s. The regime's policies amounted to overwhelming opposition of the veil. One example involves Rifaat al-Assad, former vice-president and brother of the late president Hafez al-Assad, who in 1981 resorted to violence as a means of compelling women to unveil when in public. As a result, the veil became a political symbol among Islamists and secularists alike.

Although the government later lifted the ban on the veil, the regime had, in the meantime, lost some of its power and legitimacy. In order to protect itself, the Assad regime has gone out of its way in the last three decades to tolerate Islamist groups that preach fundamentalist versions of Islam – which include, among other things, encouraging young women to veil.

In the case of Turkey as well, the trend of wearing – and the trend of removing – the veil tended to be more politically than religiously motivated. Yet, while the founder of modern Turkey, Kamal Mustafa Atatürk, strongly opposed the *hijab*, he never forced Turkish women to remove it, as did the military generals who succeeded him in the 70s and 80s. According to Atassi, the *hijab* was in any event worn less frequently at that time, as a product of progressivism and modernization. The actual statistics regarding the wearing of the *hijab* in Turkey may surprise some: "Turkish veiled women make up 60 percent, the majority of which wear the traditional *hijab* cover, while only 15 percent of these women wear the Islamic *hijab*," wrote Atassi.

The French and the Turkish legislations have ignited debates in both the Christian West and Muslim East. Most significant, however, is the reaction of traditional Muslim scholars and intellectuals who condemned France for executing a form of colonialism. Pointing out the hypocrisy of such outcry, Atassi

writes, "The best example is the Iranian and the Saudi reaction. Though different, the Wahabi Kingdom and the Islamic Republic agree to condemn France's decision in banning the *hijab* in their schools, and they are perhaps correct in their positions. But they did not pay attention to the fact that they themselves are following the same policy but in reverse, meaning any woman not wearing the *hijab* cannot set foot in universities or the public sphere," wrote Atassi.

In Atassi's eyes, Arab and Muslim reactions to the Turkish decision demonstrate a lack of understanding of the concept of individual freedom. Because of this fundamental confusion, they missed the real meaning of the decision taken by the Turkish Development and Justice Party to ease restrictions on wearing the veil. Atassi views such decisions as an affirmation of women's religious and individual rights, which include both the right to wear and not to wear the *hijab*. The celebration by both traditional Arab and Muslim intellectuals reflects monolithic thinking, illustrating a one-sided understanding of individual freedom.

Although some segments of "The Veil" may be presented in terms of an East versus West, the garment is exploited as a major political tool in the Middle East. Citing "God's will" as a means of encouraging or discouraging veil-wearing creates leverage for the party involved. It is no secret that religion has often been used for such ends, and that the interpretation of religious texts usually comes from those who are in power. As Atassi put it, God has given man the freedom to believe and not to believe, and since this is the case, shouldn't it be up to the woman to decide whether to wear or not to wear the veil, thus "the freedom of choice in dress should be the same as it is in belief." **AJ**

## A Critical Tribute to the Poet of Exile

### Mahmoud Darwish: Exile's Poet, Critical Essays

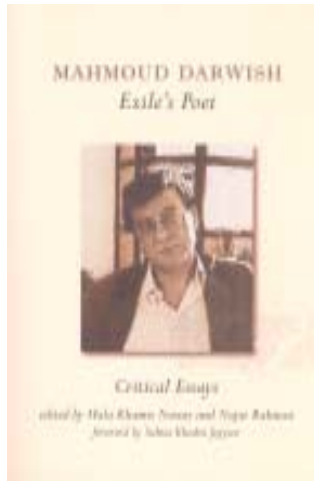
Edited by Hala Khamis Nasser and Najat Rahman  
Olive Branch Press, 2008. 377 pp.

#### BY LYNNE ROGERS

When the Arab world's most popular poet passed away in a hospital in Texas last year, the American media hardly noticed. Nevertheless, admired in Europe, particularly in France, one of his adopted homelands, and revered in Ramallah as the voice of Palestine, the prolific oeuvre of Mahmoud Darwish has been readily available in English thanks to his dedicated translators. Now a critical collection of 12 essays explores the evolution of Darwish's poetry. In her forward, poet and editor Salma Khadra Jayyusi acknowledges both Darwish's position as the poet of Palestinian identity – connecting the tragedy of his exile with the collective of the Palestinian people – as well as a modern poet who sheds "light on the universal experience of man." In their introduction, Hala Khamis Nasser and Najat Rahman stress that "Exile, in one form or another, has always been at the heart

of his creation,” and, “It is precisely the fragility of poetry that allows a space of possibility for those historically silenced.”

The first essay by Bassam K. Frangieh contextualizes Darwish’s poetry within the frame of modern Arabic poetry, identifying major themes and motifs, as these poets “give the people the vision that might change positively their social and political conditions.” Rahman’s essay looks at Darwish’s poetry after the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, a dramatic period of a second displacement for Palestinians, when Darwish’s poetic responses introduced the idea that “exile is perpetual,” and declared that “home is no longer constituted by land or people but by the possibility of a poetic gathering of voices.”



Faysal Darraj identifies several stages in Darwish’s evolution from a national poet to a poet “pleading for peace and reconciliation.” Sulaiman Jubran charts three stages in Darwish’s poetry by examining his use of the father. In a close

look at his love poems, Subhi Hadidi, the Syrian critic whom Darwish characterized as the best writer on him, points out the “sociological concerns” and the predominant theme of “lovers who are strangers to one another.” In a very close reading of both form and format, Reuven Snir illuminates the paradigms of Al-Andalus and biblical figures as Darwish converses with the past and other poets. Looking at Darwish’s deconstruction of biblical figures, Angelika Neuwirth highlights Darwish’s 1980 move to distance himself “from the martyr.”

The cosmopolitan Darwish spent his exile in both Arab and European cities, and Hala Nasser explains how he uses these cities metaphorically to reflect his yearning, his disillusionment, and his search for self. Sinan Antoon’s essay, almost a “p(r)oem” in and of itself, acknowledges Darwish as “one of a few poets still able to successfully inhabit the Arabic tradition, yet who always manages to take it to new horizons.” Antoon illuminates how the technical detail of language and the infrastructure of the collection “Do Not Apologize for What You Have Done,” voice Darwish’s defiant celebration of the journey. Jeffrey Sacks gives an informed summary of previous Arabic poetry critics Yumna al-Eid and Adonis as a preface to his own dazzling reading of the multiple sieges in Darwish’s “State of Siege.” For Ipek Azime Celik, Darwish re-presents the past as a “cultural product comprising heterogeneous anarchical components” and Stuart Reigeluth compares the repetition and return in Darwish with Mourid Barghouti, also a Palestinian writer. The collection closes with a frank 2005 interview with Darwish on his work.

In “Exile’s Poet, Critical Essays,” most of the scholars have been involved in translation, and they patiently explain the complexities of the original Arabic for the English reader, making

this collection a valuable library addition and ideal for those who teach world literature in English. Admittedly, some essays are overloaded with jargon which may put off the purist poetry readers, but the heavy use of literary theory also testifies to the depth of Darwish’s talent as a poet who continually enriches. This academic collection, which grew out of a panel at a Middle Eastern Studies Association conference, provides an array of secondary sources, some jewels of information in the endnotes and an extensive bibliography of cited works. **AJ**

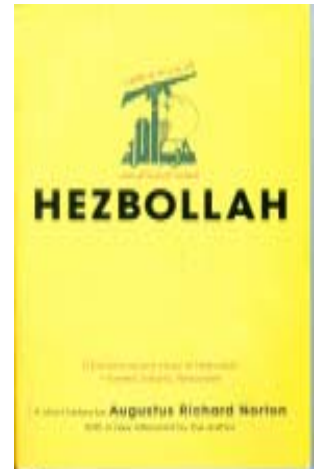
## Outside the Rubric ‘War on Terror’

### Hezbollah: A Short History

By Augustus Richard Norton  
Princeton University Press, 2007

**BY MICHAEL TEAGUE**

Readers of Augustus Richard Norton’s “Hezbollah: A Short History” can rest assured that his work is not ideological or doctrinal. On the contrary, Norton, currently a professor of international relations and anthropology at Boston University, is uniquely qualified to give such an account because he has worked with UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) in the early 1980s, where he witnessed firsthand the conditions that led to the emergence of Hezbollah from the Shiites of southern Lebanon. This is not Norton’s first book about Lebanese Shiites. He also wrote “Amal and the Shi’a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon” (University of Texas Press, 1987). This book offers an account of Hezbollah’s history, evolution, and military and political activities, strictly avoiding the well-worn jargon commonly employed in discussions of the group.



Throughout the book, Norton outlines a clear historical and socio-political background against which Hezbollah emerged, particularly revealing the period leading up to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1989).

The radicalization of Hezbollah did not take place in a vacuum. Norton explores the major events that led to the militarization of the movement, like the disappearance of Imam Musa al-Sadr on a trip to Libya in 1978, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. While it is commonly assumed that Hezbollah is a creature of Iran, and to a lesser extent Syria, Norton points the finger at Iraq, where many of Hezbollah’s leading intellectuals originated, as well as the directive from Iraq to infiltrate an increasingly secular Amal



in order to give it a more Islamic character. To an equal extent, the Israeli invasion of 1982 and subsequent occupation of Southern Lebanon are pivotal in the story of Hezbollah's militarization; Norton quotes both Ehud Barak as well as Yitzhak Rabin's admissions that these events provided the context in which Hezbollah was created.

Shiite religious rituals, the topic of Norton's third chapter, are discussed in terms of their political exploitation. This may come as a surprise to some readers who are not aware that these rituals were and continue to be manipulated by Amal and Hezbollah for political gain. Hassan Nasrallah, for example, uses the annual festivities as a pulpit to communicate his political agenda to his followers, and both groups use public rituals as a display of strength.

Norton rarely mentions Hezbollah without correspondingly broaching the subject of violence and terrorism. He discusses this in the last three chapters of the book. Norton begins his fourth chapter with the question: Is all of Hezbollah's military activity by definition "terroristic"? Hezbollah is often blamed for the devastating 1983 bombings of the American and French military bases in Lebanon, as well as participating in the hijacking of planes and kidnapping Western journalists. Norton is not so quick to accept the responsibility of Hezbollah in the Beirut bombings, and he points out that Hezbollah had not fully cohered until about 1984, thus requiring a more complex explanation for the authorship of these events. He does concede, however, that some future members of Hezbollah were perhaps involved in these activities in the first half of the 1980s, but at no point does Norton apologize for these events, nor does he claim that Hezbollah was morally correct in their involvement (for those readers who disagree, see the rather disingenuous review by Jonathan Schanzer, deputy executive director of the Jewish Policy Center, in *The Jerusalem Post*, July 20, 2007, where Norton is portrayed as engaging in "terrorist apologia" simply because he approached Hezbollah in a political-scientific mode, rather than merely politically in a manner that aligns with Schanzer's agenda. (Concerning Schanzer, it should be noted that he has been a colleague of Daniel Pipes in a number of organizations including Campus Watch).

That being said, Norton does place responsibility on Hezbollah and groups sympathetic to them for many terrorist acts, regardless of how deeply Iran was involved at the time. But when it comes to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, and its use of the South Lebanese Army to tame local populations, Norton assesses that Hezbollah was within its rights to resist, and that the violence employed in the service of this resistance falls outside the rubric of "terrorism."

Hezbollah's role in resisting Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon and its ultimate success in forcing Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2000 receives Norton's attention in the fifth chapter of the book. Also highlighted is the social and economic role played by Hezbollah, namely its solid network of efficient social institutions, such as hospitals, orphanages and micro-credit providers that help the group consolidate support of its constituency.

Norton's sixth chapter examines the 2006 summer war between Hezbollah and Israel. The destruction suffered by Lebanon in the summer of 2006 is widely known, but less known is that both Hezbollah and Israel had political motives for such a massive confrontation. Hezbollah wished to silence increasingly loud calls for disarmament as Israel was equally eager to intimidate Hamas in the occupied territories.

Norton's work is essential for those more concerned with an approach that rejects the rhetoric of the "war on terror." His historical and social analysis of Hezbollah's origin and subsequent evolution into its current manifestation is as objective an analysis as one can hope for – not to mention timely and fascinating. **AJ**

## Listen to Etel Adnan

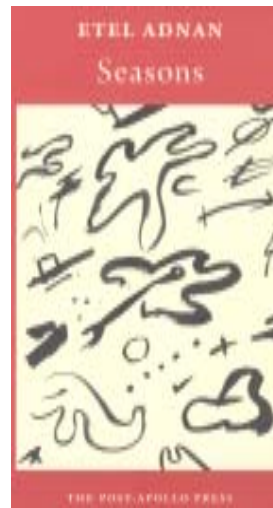
### Seasons

By Etel Adnan

The Post-Apollo Press, 2009

### BY MARK GRIMES

Listen to Etel Adnan's voice in "Seasons," her new book of poetry and meditations: "I want to walk in mountainous countries. Some nations are sitting and crying in front of screens larger than their borders. Their brains are starting to fall apart. I listen." And as she listens, she teaches us to do the same, though



it is quite challenging at first. For we quickly realize we are in the presence of a deeply intuitive, almost frenetically responsive mind. What are these "screens larger than their [countries'] borders?" Movie screens? Perhaps, if we are willing to accept the completely free license of the artist at work here. Imagine a movie screen larger than her native country of Lebanon, positioned in the sky above those timeless cedars, and revealing in anguishing replay the war of 1982. Shatila? Sabra? Again, perhaps. We do want a sense of logic, a sense of continuity, in what we

read – and this is not to be the case with Etel Adnan's "Seasons." No. We are to enter an exquisitely imagined and private world, where "the oak tree is growing with anxiety," and "no object can compete with a sound's intimacy."

Adnan's is also a very kinetic world, bordering on the chaotic. "Time passes from right to left. Planets intrude on the sky. A rain of daffodils appeases the drought." The earth is at once both the passive victim of an intrusion and a vigorously personified participant in the struggle for vivid life. Adnan's daffodils have



## A Gulf With a Past

the human quality of empathy, of seeking to pacify a land stricken by drought.

Elsewhere, her voice is intensely probing, questioning the very nature of existence. "Being is invisible to all of the senses, why are these senses then excluded from the promise of thinking? Or are they? Is adhering to one's own skin life's sole purpose?" Being and "invisibility" both contend with and complement one another. "Non-Being is the invincible force that pushes Being up the hill. The same with sorrow." There is a feeling of intense fear welling up from such lines. If Non-Being – death – is "invincible," what is to save us from defeat if not simply a fear of the thing itself? Fear pushes us up the hill. Likewise, if we succumb to "sorrow," will the shadow of Non-Being engulf us? "A woman goes to the cliff, and waits, standing, and non-visibility envelops her totally."

In the valley below this cliff, in the sky above, war has left a lingering wound on the landscape, on the innocent victims, and on the soul of the poet. "Clouds are war's first casualties. It's a time when the description of paradise leads the mind to insurrection, chaos. The sky looms big in shallow pools on broken streets. A four-year-old Iraqi boy has been amputated of his two arms after an American air raid blew up his quarter. When he woke up, he asked, 'When will I get them back?'" We're forced to witness, and we remember.

But memory is the cruelest faculty of the soul in such times. Empty wine bottles line a window sill. "Can one break memory the way one breaks stone with stone? Is memory's function to first break down, by its own means, then pick up the pieces and reassemble them, but clumsily, never in the way they used to be." The question is its own answer. To ask is to already know. But if there is to be any release, it is through language, through poetry. "For insomniacs, mind – while all other things are excluded – plays games with itself. Then language, in those nights, reveals itself as being our essential self."

And from those nights of revelation, Adnan seems to retrieve a sense of peace, acquiescence. "To run water in gutters and feed blue jays on berries is Nature's perfect balancing act." Such balance astounds us at times, until we detect a well-worn strain of bitter irony. This is not the peaceful life I would have preferred, she says, in essence. No, it is the life I've been asked and forced to accept. "Shiny red peppers! Green peppers! Women walk between tomatoes and leeks, in a season of war; that's not unusual. It's rather like swimming in the summer."

And, it is this tenuous balancing act that sustains Etel Adnan's vision and voice through the "seasons" of her years. "A childhood of thorns and roses." Winter, spring, summer and fall. "For the poor, winter is natural habitat, with pockets empty, depleted, belly empty, in an abandoned garden between the high-rises."

Etel Adnan's meditations, and her poetry, are there in this "abandoned garden," speaking to us, and for us, the lament we all must feel, with yet the hope we cannot deny, perched on "the cliff, and waiting." We all wait with her. **AJ**

### Building on Desert Tides:

#### Traditional Architecture of the Arabian Gulf

By Ronald Hawker

Wit Press, 2008 252 pp

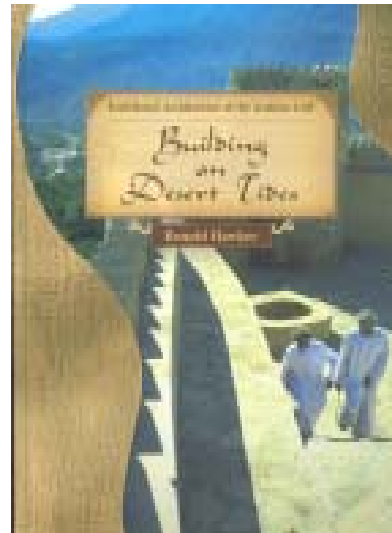
#### BY DORIS BITTAR

Through the side door of a broadly defined architecture, in an image-packed mock-textbook format, Ronald Hawker's "Building on Desert Tides" constructs a welcome and thoughtful history of the Arabian/Persian Gulf.

It is a comprehensive resource that embraces the layered and intertwined cultures that have built the region against the backdrop of competing colonial histories and recent dramatic socio-economic changes.

This book should satisfy the curiosity of historians, artists, architects and engineers, and give a comprehensive narrative

for the layman along the way. "Building on Desert Tides" is divided into strands that, at first, follow historical linearity such as discussing the roles of the Ottoman tentative toe barely reaching the edge of Basra, the Persian/Iranian enduring legacy, the self-aggrandized English role as the pirate patrol, the Indian "supply and demand" economic system of the pearl, gold and spice



trades, the Portuguese and Africans in Oman, and the Arab management of a land with fault lines from its spare number of diverse peoples. In short, this is a compact and complicated region whose low population until recent times created architecture with a small "a." It is important to bear in mind that the motivation to write "Building on Desert Tides" could not exist if not for the recent flood of wealth in the region.

Recent literature about the Gulf tends to promote its non-existent grand past as a way of shedding light on a progeny that urgently wants to understand or justify its present grandeur. When reading websites and museum promotional literature, it is as if the tribal/political leaders are eager to link themselves to a kind of continuum-of-importance between their ancestors and themselves.

In the process, questionable revisionist and exaggerated histories have been created. Of course, what is truly interesting, and more appreciated by younger Emiratis, is the lack of such a

continuum. In fact, the abrupt contrast between a former parched pride and the current unprecedented abundance of oil is what is truly compelling about this region. We may wonder about the use of aqueducts within the oasis or the use of palm fronds and/or calcified coral in the building of dwellings, but the lingering issues are not examined by Hawker, though they are provoked by his book.

For example, the wonderment about how early structures may have influenced an architectural sweep whose current sloping elegant lines and austere planes may have inspired the Burj Dubai, currently the tallest building in the world, are not specifically linked.

Those questions are present, especially if you have recently experienced this dynamic region, and in particular, that most elegant of structures, the Burj Dubai. Its spiral, Tower of Babel-like, asymmetry eclipses all other skyscrapers built after the Chrysler and Empire State buildings. Ronald Hawker dutifully and diplomatically tells the region's story with little embellishment and seems most confident when discussing early building systems. The local formula for making mortar paste is found in unlikely materials, used to this day, such as calcified coral mixed with various white, rust or gray sand/mud.

This area of expertise dovetails the larger historical tensions and legacies. For the reader, structure and building materials are a respite to that history. His passages about structure and building materials are a pleasant diversion from that history.

The plentiful archival black and white photographs, small outline maps and blueprint diagrams are informative but haphazardly, seemingly without coordination with the text. This is a big book and a couple of large maps would have helped in explaining the historical eras and cultural relationships in the Gulf. Fewer but larger vintage photographic spreads would have made the book better.

One major purpose of Hawker's research, aside from cataloging structural and economic activities, is to create a historical continuum. This continuum does exist but Hawker overstates it. What Hawker fails to adequately consider are the cataclysmic contrasts of the recent past and its evolving present. Not long ago, its local and indigenous people were largely illiterate and living in tents.

As a result of a catapulted status, the unusual opportunity to have narratives told from humble beginnings to the auspicious present becomes and unexpectedly interesting tale. In this region, the past coexists as a present and morphing future. A kind of generational compression is at work: the metaphorical wrinkles of Bedouin life and the oral tradition sit proudly, albeit tentatively, beside finely starched *kafiyehs* and smooth postmodern attitudes.

What makes these places viable is the immigrant labor that in some cases composes the majority, who run the institutions near the top and dig its foundations at the bottom of the class ladder. Future research that attempts to define this region's unfolding phenomena is likely to refer to and build upon Hawker's work.

Don't be fooled by the narrow implications of its title: this book is a comprehensive review of a diverse peninsula where three continents meet. **AJ**

## Coming of Age Between Liminal Spaces

**Distant Train** (A Novel)

By Ibrahim Abdel Megid

Translated by Hosam M. Aboul-Ela

Afterword by Michael Beard

Syracuse University Press, 2007, 206 pp

**BY NAJAT RAHMAN**

Ibrahim Abdel Megid's lyrical novel appeared in Arabic in 1983 as "*Al-Masâfât*" (The Distances). A prolific Egyptian writer who has since been duly recognized (the Naguib Mahfouz Award and the Cairo International Book Fair Award), Abdel Megid emerged with this third novel as a confirmed literary talent. As the publisher recounts, Abdel Megid based the novel on his childhood memories of accompanying his father who worked as a railroad engineer.



Translated with sensitivity and care by Hosam Aboul-Ela, "Distant Train" tells the story of a besieged and

deprived community, caught in historical transition, situated in liminal space, between the oil-producing Gulf region and the unnamed City, between stagnant lake waters and the desert, "on a worksite in Egypt's western desert." Divided into six parts – "Celebration," "Metamorphoses," "Migrations," "The Desert," "The City," "The End Time" – the novel evokes the anticipation of a train, which sets in motion a cycle of transformation in the lives of the characters that leads mainly to departures. The departures lead to places that engulf those who have disappeared and do not return, mainly the desert and the city, and inevitably move to an "end time" in this story. The characters yearn for the much-awaited annual event, the arrival of a salvage train: "When last it came (it) brought with it foreigners, soldiers – and economic opportunity; then it stopped."

Abdel Megid tells the story from the alternating points of view of the different characters, and the diversity of perspectives reinforces the general condition of shattered lives. Section one closes with the beginning of the disenchantment: "...with the

morning they all knew how the night had ended and how the day of the train's return had begun." That night – the night of the women's exuberant dancing, when young Ali is first noticed by Suad, whose cuckold husband, Sheik Masoud will be found murdered the next morning in the mosque – Hamed and Gaber are first to disappear. "And neither the train nor the disappeared returned."

Ali sets out for the city in search of some answers about the train, about the disappeared, about himself. He thinks he has found Samira and Zeinab, but they vanish again, and he begins to suspect that the City has swallowed up all those who have disappeared. When he returns to the "twenty houses" after an absence of 11 months, he finds only the inspector. The inspector explains that a month before Ali returned, an eclipse of the sun had lasted several days. The inhabitants of all 20 houses disappear with just a handful of exceptions: Laila and Suad, who were hiding; the foreigners; and the workers taking the place of Hamed, Gaber, Zeidan, and Sheikh Masoud. "The superintendent said that once the sun finally came back out, a train carrying some policemen came to take whoever was left of the workers and their families to a remote site in the desert."

"Distant Train" tells the story of an abandoned and scattered community, unnamed, except for the designation of "twenty houses": "Twenty houses collected together... Anyone looking from a distance would say that some wonderful bond united them, and that a single intruder might tip the delicate balance... Twenty houses beyond the outskirts of the city completely surrounded by the lake waters on one side and the desert on the other." The inhabitants of the 20 houses remain unknown to each other: "In spite of living together so many years, and being tied together in so many different ways, the villagers knew nothing of each other's origins." The 20 houses are a rudimentary and fragile semblance of a community. Here, time is unmarked, except that it involves wars, arrests of student protestors, and "enemy infiltration of the homeland." The inhabitants of the twenty houses seem to live on the margins of history and reality.

Moreover, they do not comprehend the significance of the train and what befalls them. When they seek answers, they find none: "What was this train that it could cause all this misfortune?" Their questions return incessantly, as they wonder "about the significance of the trains filled with Europeans... about the armies from behind the windows... about the armies passing in every direction." Fareed, the student from the City, turns to Sheikh Masoud, the spiritual leader: "What does it mean that we're between the lake waters and the desert and the railroad, and the trains come and go, but for some reason we've picked out the one filled with salvage?" Hamed turns to his wife Zeinab: "I asked (Sheikh Masoud) to give me some idea where our people had come from... what hunger are we trying to feed off of? Here we are trying to restore the railway, and we don't even know why the trains run on it." Zeinab also asks Hamed, "Is it true that whoever chases the foreigners' trains never returns?"

The novel recalls such narratives of magic realism as Juan Rulfo's "Pedro Paramo," which also narrates a community's haunting decline. The blurring of reality and imagination is

intriguing in a novel where the effort to reach truth consumes most of its characters: "It was that oppressive drive to distinguish the truth from the lies that threatened to kill so many." Many are indeed killed: Fareed, Arfeh, Sheikh Masoud, Hamed, and Gaber. At the end of the novel, Ali returns to the city, the only one left, now that Suad has also disappeared: "All the old images raced out of his mind, and he screamed from his innermost depths, 'Who is left for this wild young man now?' and he knew he had bid farewell forever to the age of dreams and imagining." The end of the novel signals the return to "reality" and to the maturation of a promise. Ali's coming of age, emerging out of the rubble, seems irresistibly allegorical for a political and social awakening. **AJ**

## Taha Muhammad Ali: Journeys and Returns

**So What: New & Selected Poems, 1971-2005**

By Taha Muhammad Ali

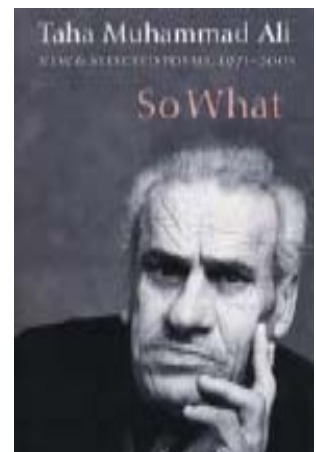
Translated by Peter Cole

Copper Canyon Press, 2006

**BY ZAIID SHLAH**

If poets have been charged with the task of rekindling in the reader an intensity of emotions experienced under extraordinary experiences, then Taha Muhammad Ali's "New & Selected Poems, 1971-2005" stands as a fine literary achievement. Peter Cole, with the aid of Yahya Hijazi and Gabriel Levin, precisely renders the work into English. He does not merely attempt to convey loss or exile to the reader, but through the honest narration of the story he guides the reader into a historical moment, where the reader is asked to participate.

Muhammad Ali's work struck me in its candor and heft; his images are often colored with the smell and taste of the colloquial experience: "he'd serve them eggs / sunny-side up, and lebneh fresh from the bag" as in the poem "Abd el-Hadi Fights a Superpower." He works predominately through metaphor, conceit and imagery; but to celebrate only the simplicity of his language belies its intelligence and how expansive it can be, as revealed in the poem "There Was No Farewell": "we didn't receive our share / of sleeplessness— / so where / would wakefulness have come from?"; or from the poem "Warning": "my happiness bears / no relation to happiness."





Here the reader is presented with an expansive and not easily grasped truth, which calls for further meditation and reflection.

Though the poems appear lyrical in form and cadence, the story is paramount, as it would be in a parable or folk tale. But Muhammad Ali, steeped in the nuanced Arabic literary forms, also adds to and heightens the conversation of love and loss in his treatment of the *qasida*, particularly in the tender poems addressed to Amira, as in “The Fourth Qasida,” which weaves elegantly from nostalgic memory to the journey and ends in the sorrowful return:

Amira!  
When our loved ones leave us,  
as you left,  
an endless migration in us begins,  
and a certain sense takes hold in us  
that all of what is finest  
in and around us,  
except for the sadness,  
is going away,  
departing, not to return.

The total range of emotions expressed in this collection goes far beyond melancholy, loss, despair and outrage, so any review of Muhammad Ali’s work would be incomplete without commenting on his honest, wry, sometimes self-deprecating sense of humor as in the poem “Where,” which is one of many exploring the origins and purpose of poetry:

And how could I  
possibly know  
when I am  
barely able,  
by the light of day,  
to find my pencil?

Levin contributes an intimate introduction to this collection, befitting the attention to detail the translators have given Muhammad Ali’s work,

The volume also includes an informative account of the translations written by Cole. As with any successful collection of poems which spans several decades, this collection piques further interest in the poet and his individual volumes. Yet despite the multiplicity of contradictory emotions and stories captured here, the one that looms largest is the affirmation of beauty and life; that is, these poems invoke a people who at once wish to negate a life lived under catastrophic events, but also bravely come to terms with it, and then struggle to preserve it, with all the love and dignity any people should want from their history. This is beautifully rendered in the powerful, long poem “The Falcon”:

What baffles me,  
my sadness,  
is why you’re so much

greater than I am—  
deeper than my wakefulness  
and more remote than all my dreams! *AJ*

## Small-Town American In Lebanon’s Civil War

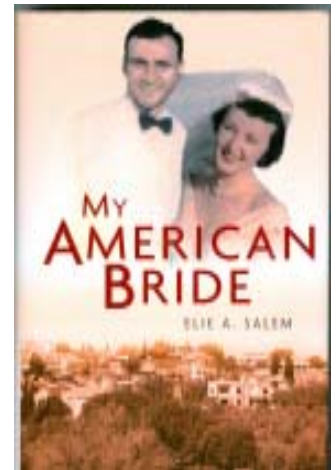
### My American Bride

By Elie A. Salem

London: Quartet Books Limited, 2008. 280 pp.

**BY SARAH A. ROGERS**

“My American Bride” by Elie A. Salem is a love story – between a man and a woman; a Lebanese and his homeland; an American woman and her adopted country of Lebanon. Certainly, a love story is not what one might expect from the autobiography of Salem, the president of the University of Balamand in North Lebanon and former dean of the faculty of arts at the American University of Beirut (1974-82) and minister of foreign affairs (1982-88). Yet “My American Bride” poignantly interweaves Salem’s life journey – his doctoral studies in the United States, his Lebanese village marriage to a young woman from a small American town; and his academic and political career – with the historical transformations of Lebanon through its bloody civil war (1975-1990).



The autobiography begins precisely at the moment the reader expects – Salem’s first glance at the youthful Phyllis Sells on Florida Avenue in Washington, D.C. in October of 1951: “In an unexpected flash, I realized she belonged with me. Although I risked only a quick glance, it revealed that her eyes were kind, somehow sad, and remarkably piercing. How could it be that I saw so suddenly and so clearly that I would spend my life with this girl? Yes I truly did. God, I love her! We will be together – build a home, join our families, raise children.” Salem’s determined conviction, accompanied by Sell’s persistent curiosity, would enable the two to accomplish that and so much more. The first half of the book, however, details the more romantic tale of their courtship in the United States, introducing a central theme of the book – the humorous, touching, and occasional mishaps of cross-cultural encounters.

For readers familiar with both American and Arab cultures, Salem’s first experiences in the United States are quite amusing. Rather than order his lunch at the diner through the “menu by

numbers,” Salem attempts a leisurely conversation with waitress about the food, rendering Salem frustrated and his waitress cranky. When he nonchalantly rests his hand on his male friend’s arm, his American companion mistakes the gesture for a homosexual advance and punches Salem. The ensuing fight nearly results in Salem’s arrest. Yet just when the reader expects the greatest of cultural clashes – Salem’s arrival at Sells’ home in Pottstown, Pennsylvania – we are surprised by the ability of both Salem and the Sells’ family to witness the similarities of values between two families from geographically removed places; small-town America and the village of Bttram in North Lebanon would be brought together by the Sells, Lutheran immigrants from Germany and the Salems, Greek Orthodox Lebanese. In fact, only the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War prevents the Sells from happily retiring in Beirut with their daughter, son-in-law, and extended Lebanese family.

After deciding to get married – in itself not without its own battles, mostly the result of Salem’s father who had sent his son to the U.S. to study, not to marry an American – Salem and Sells settle onto a directed path. (Sells, of course, immediately wins over Adil Salem upon her arrival in Bttram.) Salem finishes his doctoral dissertation on the *Khawarji* with Sells typing the text, and in the process she begins her study of Arabic. Salem then returns to Lebanon, sending for his fiancée after securing a job at the American University of Beirut.

Dedicated to her husband’s career and raising a family in Lebanon, Salems move to Beirut equipped with the language, her husband’s cultural introductions, and a positive attitude. Although she encounters a few surprises upon her arrival in the village – Salem’s description of their village wedding and his American bride’s response is one of the book’s highlights – Sells successfully navigates the turbulent terrain of life abroad. Indeed, even Salem makes a few social missteps after such a lengthy period in the United States, much to his father’s dismay.

The Salems remain in Beirut for several years before a brief interlude in the United States, raising a family of four in the meantime. In 1961, the family permanently settles in Beirut and embarks on a most interesting adventure. In the second half of the story, the Salems are once again traversing challenging territory but this time it is less cultural and more political. In nearly all aspects of their lives, from their house situated on the border between a Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim community in Baabda to their students at AUB, the Salems confront the escalating political tensions of Lebanon in the years subsequent to the civil war. In this way, “My American Bride” is a beautiful testimony to the dedicated efforts of individuals to promote political and social change through avenues other than violence in the midst of civil strife.

In addition to being a love story across cultures, “My American Bride” is filled with the anecdotes one might expect from the autobiography of a prominent figure in politics: Ronald Reagan had little attention span, Bashir Gemayel’s tutelage under Salem, and Philip Habib’s love of stocked refrigerators. These small revelations are juxtaposed by Salem’s thoughtful decision to refrain from sharing Phyllis’ last few months alive – her premature death from cancer is the reason for Salem’s writing. “I

do not wish to write about her last three months with us,” he notes. “There is too much pain for me, too much of the private to put down on paper.” This final act of intimacy in an autobiography is exceptionally moving. The reader can only be grateful that Salem chose to share their life together: A journey joyfully filled with vodka martinis, loving support, family and friends, successful careers, political activism, and even adventures in village architectural restoration. **AJ**

## Capturing the Surreal With a Triumphant Sleight of Pen

### The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy

By Frances Khirallah Noble

Syracuse University Press, 2007

#### BY THERI ALYCE PICKENS

Just like her collection of short stories, “The Situe Stories,” Frances Khirallah Noble works primarily with the grandmother, *situe* in Arabic, as the guide of her main character, Kahlil Gibran Hourani. The grandmother as a guide for life is a trope common to most ethnic American literature: she tends to be beloved by most (if not all) and provides immeasurable wisdom from her own rich life experience. *Situe* in Noble’s “The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy” isn’t much of a departure from this stock figure, but her ethereal presence and her bumbling grandson keep this novel from becoming a cliché.

“Belly Dancer” traces the mid-life crisis of an optician, Kahlil Gibran Hourani. His misadventure begins when he follows a belly dancer to a competition in Las Vegas. Rogue government agents abduct him, and he finds himself lost in the desert and has a run-in with a transsexual who transports Mexican immigrants into the United States. At times, the writing feels a bit theatrical because Kahlil jumps from one sitcom-worthy event to another. It is the dead and sardonic *Situe*, who appears and reappears at will, and the likeability of Kahlil that keeps this novel from reading like a Larry David creation.

Noble’s text is certainly exciting and fun to read. The constant misadventures belie the main themes of the text. At its heart, “Belly Dancer” focuses on aging and the possibilities within a post 9/11 America. With the former, Noble examines the fears that accompany getting older, some of which crystallize



in Hourani's following of the belly dancer, Jane Plain, and others which take place in conversations with minor characters.

Hourani's run-in with the rogue government agents illuminates the very negative – and very real – possible consequences of racial profiling for Arab Americans. Given the clumsy nature of the main character, the agents' cruelty and racism become all the more alarming. Noble's sleight of pen ensures that this episode appears plausible without sacrificing the magical realism created by Situe's presence. Other episodes, also because of their plausibility, point to a surreal post-America for racial, ethnic and sexual others.

Sometimes the shift between the unexplainable and disturbing (to say the very least) realities appears unconvincing; at other times, the shift creates a surreal reality that demonstrates Noble's obvious skill at storytelling. "Belly Dancer" is a smorgasbord of stock tropes, socio-political commentary and magic realism, but it is only Noble's creativity that preserves the flavor of this linguistic feast. *AJ*

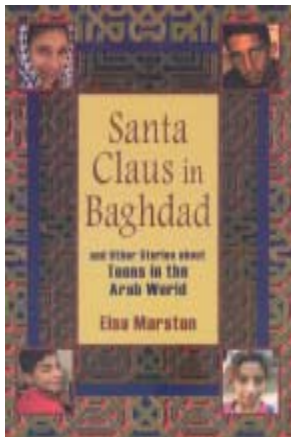
## Stark Realities of Arab Youth

### Santa Claus in Baghdad: And Other Stories About Teens in the Arab World

By Elsa Marston  
Indiana University Press, 2008

**BY D. W. AOSSEY**

Few things in life are as engaging as the exploits of young people, and in "Santa Claus in Baghdad," Elsa Marston captures the trials and travails of the Arab youth with exceptional spirit and clarity. In this ambitious collection of stories the reader finds a host of sympathetic characters struggling with life's many challenges from school kids in Baghdad who manage to gather enough money to buy their teacher a treasured book, to a Syrian girl of 15 facing a father's pressure to marry, to a Palestinian boy dealing with his own mortality as a relative's olive grove is razed by the Israeli bulldozers.



Each story is located in a different Arab country and the author relates them in a lyrical style that animates their surroundings. The reader is soon transported to a schoolhouse in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, to the urban clutter of Cairo, or to an ancient Roman theater in the ruins of Dougga outside Tunis. And in these various locations one can't help but appreciate that life in so many parts of the Middle East remains difficult for young and old alike.

Yet beyond the uncertainty confronting the Arab world, and Arab youth in particular, one common theme stands out – that hope and a brighter future will transcend the stark realities of the present. And ultimately, in addressing the basic issues that face so many, this excellent collection serves as a fitting tribute to the aspirations of the Arab people, and to the next generation as well. *AJ*

## Market Demands, Nationalist Ideology and Brazil's 'Turko' Population

### Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil

By John Tofik Karam  
Temple University Press, 2007

**BY PAULINE HOMSI VINSON**

"Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil" by John Tofik Karam is an impressive contribution to the field of ethnic studies in the Americas. Theoretically nuanced, this engaging ethnography is nonetheless accessible to the general reader.

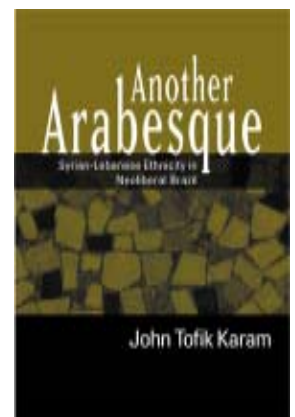
Karam introduces his readers to the history of Syrian-Lebanese emigration and ethnic identification in Brazil. Noting the transformation of the term "Turko" from a derogatory to a more or less neutral referent to Brazilians of Syrian-Lebanese heritage, Karam explores the ways in which ethnic identity in Brazil has evolved over time.

More specifically, Karam describes the ways in which Syrian-Lebanese descendants in Brazil have both benefited from and engaged with the promotion of Brazil's more recent neoliberal economic policies. At the same time, he reveals the ways in which those same neoliberal policies have contributed to the shaping of Syrian-Lebanese ethnicity in a Brazilian society that insists on its claims to racial democracy.

Navigating among wide-ranging topics such as clubs, food chains, national trade policy, political corruption, television soap operas, education and ethnic tourism, Karam elucidates the interconnections between nationalist ideology, market demands and ethnic identity.

Moreover, by frequently juxtaposing Syrian-Lebanese ethnicity in Brazil with Arab-American ethnicity in the United States, Karam also opens a space for comparative ethnic and diasporic studies.

"Another Arabesque" rewards its readers on many levels. Not only does it provide much insight into the construction of





Syrian-Lebanese ethnicity in Brazil and its relationship to neoliberal state policies, it also offers new ways of looking at the construction of Arab ethnic identity in the United States. **AJ**

## Music in Free Verse

### Taqsim

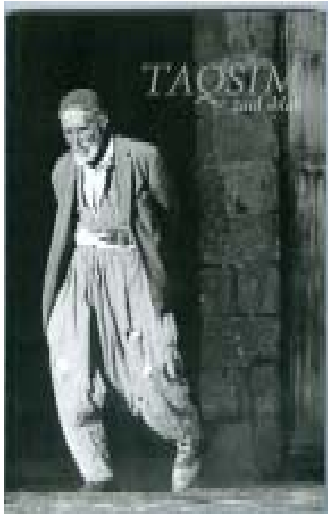
By Zaid Shlah

Zenane Independent Media, 2006

### BY THER □ ALYCE PICKENS

Zaid Shlah's "Taqsim" remains true to its title; it is a free-form melodic improvisation by a solo artist and a solo instrument. When poet Nathalie Handal comments that the text sings, she is quite right, for the text hinges on sound.

You cannot only hear the music of the *oud* and the beat of words, but the structure of the text itself creates its own rhythm. The entire text is composed in free verse, but the verse is far from consistent, a characteristic of the composition that certainly adds to "Taqsim"'s charm. Some of Shlah's poems create a pulsating rhythm. For instance, part one of the six-part title poem presents variations on the theme of leaving. He writes, "leave intentions and reflections, leave/the bodies as they pass, leave the couch,/leave the river, leave the grass, leave the/gaze – it's not to know; leave listlessness."



Part of the surprise of the collection is found in the varied and multiple figures that populate Shlah's poems. He draws on such influences as Rilke in "Letters to a Young Bride," and one can see Nietzsche and Heidegger in "Impressions from the East." He interrogates the act of reading William Blake and draws on Joyce in his poem "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Immigrant Arab." This

eclectic mix of famous personae does not function as a crutch for Shlah's pieces; rather, the author wields them to create a new poetic space. "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Immigrant Arab," because of its candor, manipulation of sound and disruption of conventional notions of creation, is one of the most brilliant pieces in this collection.

Although it is difficult to characterize the particular mood of this improvisational text, there are two recurring images woven throughout, which point to a few main themes. In Shlah's use of the color red, he illustrates the nuances of pain, loss, love, and passion. The image of the poplar trees symbolizes change and creativity, appropriate given the fact that the poplar is a

deciduous tree. These may be typical themes for any poet, but Shlah's form and specificity save this collection from being completely trite.

Some poems do strike the wrong note, so to speak, when the content veers into being solipsistic and images become prosaic. However, the collection as a whole shines, especially when Shlah picks apart phrases and deconstructs the banal. For instance, in "Letters to a Young Bride," he rescues his subject from being a simple objectified beloved: "'My girl,'/and that this will have pleased/you, is not enough, will provoke the/scoffers into fits of rage, for what/ownership have I over you, to what end/does your pacified self serve mine?" **AJ**

## The Art of Storytelling Revisited

### My Thousand and One Nights: A Novel of Mecca

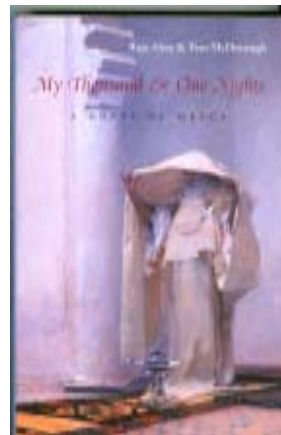
By Raja Alem & Tom McDonough

Syracuse University Press, 2007

### BY HILARY HESSE

The conventional depiction of Arab women as oppressed shadows in an austere world finds a vibrant alternative in Raja Alem's and Tom McDonough's "My Thousand and One Nights." In fact, the prose is at times so sensuous and ornate, the characters so gushing with life, that the Western reader strains to believe that the piece actually sprang from Saudi Arabia. Add to this the fact that the novel's most colorful "character" may well be the holy city of Mecca, and we are confronted by something of an anomaly indeed.

The story wraps around the ebullient Jummo. Following her from childhood to middle age, we meet numerous other characters along the way, including the elusive dervish Sidi Wahdana. A symbol of the animal self as well as fate, Sidi tends to show up at moments of transition or upheaval, with his great love for Jummo a constant throughout.



As narrator, Jummo's niece seldom makes references to age, and even less often to time. The book reads like a pre-modern tribute to Mecca, not the least for its preoccupation with magic and traces of pre-Islamic mythology. The authors' general resistance to concrete time underscores their commitment to creating an extraordinary world, one in which scientific laws do not necessarily

apply. Consequently, the reader is uneasily jolted into the present with the mention of the 1979 seizure of the Great Mosque.

Alem and McDonough pay particular homage to the art of storytelling, with the narrator alternating between addressing

the famous Hassan of Basra from the “1001 Arabian Nights,” and a more mysterious entity called “you.” The novel is a celebration of language in both form and content, as the narrator rapturously describes the creative power of words. Elaborating on this, the narrator insists that knowing another’s name confers spiritual power over that individual. When she learns Mayjan’s name, for example, Jummo begins tormenting him by embroidering his initials on his clothing, insinuating that she possesses him. The other characters guard their names with the same zealotry that people routinely guard their hearts, as if freedom depends upon anonymity.

Because so much contemporary Western literature is plot driven, this book may not command a wide audience here. Its plot developments are subtle and do not drive toward a climax; most of the struggles are internal. What this novel does possess, however, is a dauntless sense of joy that says “yes” to life. It is a rich linguistic tapestry depicting a unique world and worldview. The book might also serve as a tool for teaching students of literature about such conventions as symbolism, foreshadowing and alliteration. Above all, perhaps, “My Thousand and One Nights” reinvents and challenges our assumptions about a world that has been the subject of much curiosity and speculation. **AJ**

## Forging Myth Beyond Food and War

### Arab on Radar

By Angele Ellis  
Six Gallery Press, 2007

**BY ZAID SHLAH**

In “Arab on Radar,” Angele Ellis reveals acute observations, sometimes personal, sometimes political, in intelligently written lines about issues such as identity, family and war. In some of the most memorable poems, the recovered and reimagined Arabic language impresses itself upon the reader. For example, in the poem “Banadura” we see this American writer of Arab and Italian heritage reclaiming the Lebanese dialect as a way of forging myth and deeper understanding:

...the flavor  
of pure summer back to the original Garden,  
the knowledge we were meant to devour.

We hear the heavy accent of her grandfather pronouncing it “bound” instead of “pound,” the voice transforming the weight of the tomato into a mythical fruit. Its roots nourish her Arabness and her identity, despite her American present.

But Ellis also applies this varied complexity to war. During a time of war and injustice, the poet takes on the job of reconnecting human consciousness with its devastation: “the tears of the universe / are neither rain nor stars / they are bombs.” Ellis invites contemplation without overly dramatizing war; she reveals its complexities and its unjustness, its cause and its effects on both the innocent and the guilty.

In the opening poem “Arab on Radar,” she brings some of this complexity of the Arab predicament in the post 9/11 world to bear: “. . . except that the pain of denial persists like a blip on the/ screen of consciousness in every war.” Ellis’s poem skillfully renders this predicament of constantly being on “Radar.”



Ellis’s poems are better and richer the second and third time, and she writes beyond the topics too often broached by Arab-American writers, such as food and war. She engages the reader with thoughts on love and traditional problems with romantic notions of the English lyric; her reply to Mary

Oliver’s “Wild Geese” is but one example.

In this slim volume of poetry, Ellis writes with the confidence and skill of a mature writer, surprising as this is her first book of poetry. In particular, her multiplicity of verse forms, blank verse and interesting modulations on the *ghazal* are worth taking the time to unravel. **AJ**

## Contributors

**Shawqi Abd Al-Amir** (“Monkith Saaïd: Fingertips Grasping Space,” p. 12) is a Paris-based Iraqi poet, critic, and editor.

**Bandar Abd Al-Hamid** (“Sculptor Monkith Saaïd Before His Passing: Searching For Balance Between Art and Life,” p. 16) is a Syrian poet, critic, and editor of a quarterly review of Arab cinema.

**Etel Adnan** (“The Artist In Syria,” p. 34; “Poet’s Journey to Libyan Past,” p. 52) is a novelist and poet.

**D. W. Aosey** (“‘Deportation Nation’: Visual Migrations,” p. 32; “Stark Realities of Arab Youth,” p. 46; Building the Future While Embracing the Past,” p. 50) is a novelist and writer based in Southern California.

**Sami Asmar** (“MESTO – Western Classics, Ethnic Fusion in Full Orchestra Format,” p. 31) is a California-based writer, space physicist, and musician.

**Rima Barakat** (“Abstract Sculpture Cropping Up in Beirut’s Public Spaces,” p. 14) is a Lebanese-based art critic.

**Doris Bittar** (“A Gulf With a Past,” p. 41) is an artist, academic and critic. Her art is housed in several museum collections.

**Brigitte Caland** (“Animated Film Jars Memory of Sabra and Chatila,” p. 28) is a Los Angeles and Paris-based writer, translator and a contributor to this magazine. She translated Edward Said’s

“Out of Place” into French (“*A Contre-Voie*”), published by Le Serpent à Plumes (2002).

**Susan Muaddi Darraj** (“Tackling Taboos in Chicago Setting,” p. 36) is an author and editor whose essays, book reviews, and fiction have appeared in the *Monthly Review*, *Baltimore Magazine*, *Al Jadid*, and others.

**Christine Eid** (“Lebanese Immigrants in Australia: Growing Up in a Culture of Taxi Driving,” p. 6) is an established TOW, a research and interdisciplinary arts practice that includes sculpture, moving-image, installation and written works.

**Simone Fattal** (“The Minbar of Saladin: An International Saga of Islamic Art,” p. 56) is an artist, critic, translator and the owner of the Post-Apollo Press.

**Bobby Goulshan** (“Speaking Out Against Tribal Injustice,” p. 25) is a musician and freelance writer based in Sacramento and Los Angeles. He is a graduate of the UCLA Department of Comparative Literature.

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**Hilary Hesse** (“The Art of Storytelling Revisited,” p. 47) is a Los Angeles based-writer.

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**Salam Mir** (“Maps and Ruins: History as Mythical Creation,” p. 27) is Assistant Professor of English at Lasell College in Newton, MA.

**Michael Najjar** (“Nahda’s Children,” p. 35) is a doctoral candidate at UCLA in the Theater and Performance Studies program with an emphasis on Arab-American theater. He is co-editing the first anthology of Arab-American/ Arab-Canadian Drama.

**Theri Alyce Pickens** (“Capturing the Surreal With a Triumphant Sleight of Pen,” p. 45; “Music In Free Verse,” p. 47) is working on her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at UCLA, with an emphasis on Arab-American and African-American literature.

**Najat Rahman** (“Coming of Age Between Liminal Spaces,” p. 42) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Montreal. She is the author of the book, “Literary Disinheritance: The Writing of Home in the Work of Mahmoud Darwish and Assia Djebar” (Lexington Books, 2007).

**Lynne Rogers** (“The Season of Tayeb Salih – Crossing the Boundaries,” p. 8; “Occupational, Political Hazards of Free Speech,” p. 25; “A ‘Feel-Good’ Documentary,” p. 28; “A Critical Tribute to the Poet of Exile,” p. 38) is a professor and author of many articles on the Palestine question which have appeared in professional journals and books.

**Sarah A. Rogers** (“Small-Town American in Lebanon’s Civil War,” p. 44) is an art historian who specializes in modern and contemporary art of the Arab world. She is currently a Terra Foundation Post-doctoral fellow at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, where she is researching American artists working in Beirut, Lebanon during the Cold War.

**Mahmoud Saeed** (“In Memoriam: Suheil Idriss,” p. 13) is an Iraqi novelist who has published 20 novels and short story collections. Many critics consider his novel “Zanka Bin Barka” one of the best Arabic novels of the 20th century.

**Mamoun Sakkal** (Illustration of Tayeb Salih, p. 8) is an artist, calligrapher, and type-designer from Syria, based now in Bothell, WA. He is a Ph.D. candidate writing about the use of Arabic calligraphy in modern art and design.

**Andrea Shalal-Esa** (“Kennedy Center Festival Underscores Growing Interest in Arab Literature,” p.10; “Connecting the Dots, Ahdaf Soueif on Arabesque Festival, translating Arab literature, Arabs as cultural producers,” p. 20) is a Washington-based journalist with a great interest in Arab-American literature.

**Zaid Shlah** (“Taha Muhammad Ali: Journeys and Returns,” p. 43; “Forging Myth Beyond Food and War,” p. 48) teaches English literature and composition at Solano Community College. His first book of poetry, “Taqsim” (2005), is currently in its second printing (Frontenac House, 2006).

**Simone Stevens** (“A Woman’s Experience of ‘Justice,’” p. 26; “Covering East and West Veil Debate,” p. 37) is a California-based writer.

**Michael Teague** (“Outside the Rubric ‘War on Terror,’” p. 39) is a Los Angeles-based writer and graduate of French Literature from the University of California, Irvine.

**Pauline Homsy Vinson** (“Market Demands, Nationalist Ideology and Brazil’s ‘Turko’ Population,” p. 46) is an adjunct assistant professor. Her publications include articles on Arab women writers and translations from Arabic to English.

**Rewa Zeinati** (Translator of “Two Poems by Mahmoud Darwish,” p. 9, and “Three Poems by Ghada Samman,” p.22) is a poet, translator, and journalist. She holds a B.A. in English literature from the American University of Beirut and M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Missouri.



# Building the Future While Embracing the Past: New Directions in Arab-American Art

BY D. W. AOSSEY

## **In/Visible: Contemporary Art by Arab American Artists**

Edited by Salwa Mikdadi  
The Arab American National Museum, 2005

## **Etching Our Own Image: Voices from Within the Arab American Art Movement**

Edited by Anan Ameri, Holly Arida  
Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007

## **Telling Our Story: The Arab American National Museum**

By Ismael Ahmed, Anan Ameri, Maha Freij  
The Arab American National Museum, 2007

Once a hallmark of our collective social consciousness, assimilation into Western culture and society has recently taken on new meaning. In the wake of escalating domestic and international conflict over the past decade, we suddenly find ourselves standing before the looking glass, repeating what we should have known all along: if we, as Arab Americans, don't define who we are and what we stand for, someone else will do it for us. And nowhere is it more important for us to take a stand than in the true heritage of our people – the arts and culture.

Three recent books on the subject, "In/Visible: Contemporary Art by Arab American Artists," "Etching Our Own Image: Voices from Within the Arab American Art Movement," and "Telling Our Story: The Arab American National Museum," address this issue with a fresh perspective and an eye toward the future.

Showcasing the exceptional talent that Arab Americans bring to the visual arts, "In/Visible" examines the work and ideas of fourteen notable contemporary Arab-American artists. Initially exhibited at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, in October, 2005, two primary themes emerge in this retrospective. The first is a distinct message defined by an overarching sense of conflict and struggle; a heightened sense of urgency as it applies to the "new world order." The second is a notion of the sublime; a universal connectedness historically encapsulated in the calligraphy and infinity of Islamic art and the rich, majestic iconography of the various Eastern churches.

Both of these themes are well represented in this wonderful collection. The bold power of suggestion detailed in the concept art of Emily Jacir and Miriam Ghani, and the otherworldliness expressed in the photomontage of Doris Bittar and Rheim Alkadhi, a tangle of distant memories and nebulous dreams, instill in the viewer the discord that permeates the Arab-American psyche. In the calligraphy of Wasma'a Chorbachi and the

expressionism of Kamal Boullata, Abdelali Dahrouche, John Halaka and Helen Zughaib, a sense of unity and the sublime emerge as points of departure.

Connecting these two worlds are Nabila Hilmi, Sumaya Samaha and Afaf Zurayk, infusing ambivalence and ambiguity into the tone of their art, a reflection of the uncertainty of our world and that of our ancestors. Realism bordering on Pop Art and the cult of

personality speak out in Yasser Agour's portraits, contrasting with Mohammad O. Khalil's eerie abstractions, dark structures which express a foreboding past, present, and future. The unsettling impressions in the work of Athir Shayota complement the formal yet strangely ambiguous sculpture of Amina Mansour in this exquisitely rich compilation.

Expanding on the Arab-American creative experience, "Etching Our Own Image" is an eclectic collection of essays and personal narratives examining contemporary Arab-American involvement in a broad range of performing, literary, and visual arts. Self-direction through creativity is the primary chord struck throughout this interesting compilation as Arab Americans seek to create a cohesive artistic identity. This high-minded study addresses key topics: Speaking truth to power in poetry, cross-culturalism through the immediacy of theatre, and Hip Hop as a medium for social commentary – in particular as it relates to our Arab-American youth.

The rich artistic and cultural heritage left to us by our forefathers is a tough act to follow, though, which exposes a very esoteric issue. Simply put, the artistic and cultural tradition so woven into the soul of the Arab society leaves Arab-American



"Making Kibbeh on Sunday Morning"  
by Helen Zughaib from "Etching Our Own Image"



"Chapters 1-5: Vitrine 1" by Amina Mansour from "In/Visible"

artists searching for a compass as they seek to both embrace yet resist the past. “The majority of Arab-American musicians are either mainstream Arab entertainers or revivalists,” Karim Nagy observes on the subject of innovation in Arab-American music, for example. Put another way, we erect our own formidable barriers as we incorporate our heritage into a new artistic paradigm.

“Etching Our Own Image” is ambitious in scope as it also tackles Arab-American literature, the visual arts and Arab art collectives and comedy – perhaps overly ambitious, haphazardly covering too much ground and, at times, seemingly kaleidoscopic in nature. Nevertheless, the narratives and perspectives offered in this interesting volume are significant, and the editors redeem themselves by faithfully expressing the issues and challenges that confront contemporary Arab-American artists, as well as the promises that such challenges behold. A quote from a passage Gregory Orfalea’s “Shall We Gather In the Mountains?,” frames the heart of our shared dilemma: “I asked my cousin why he wasn’t shining both (of his flashlights) on the treacherous path, he said, ‘I’m preserving the batteries.’ There is a lot of preserving the batteries among the Arab Americans. Couldn’t we just blast out those flashlights full bore and to hell with the batteries?”

The final volume in this set sponsored by the Arab American National Museum is “Telling Our Story,” a comprehensive look at the Arab American National Museum itself. Far from a boring tome on some dusty institution, “Telling Our Story” is an excellent visual tribute to a unique and interesting museum.

The beauty of this book is that it truly captures the depth and breadth of the Arab-American impact on American society starting with the Moroccan slave Zammouri, thought to have landed in Florida around 1528, through the waves of Arab immigrants flocking to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the success stories of the Arab Americans throughout the decades.

Of course, as “Telling Our Story” so aptly details, Arab Americans represent an extremely diverse group of people and cultures – from Yemenis to Iraqis to Syrians and Somalis and Sudanese and all the peoples of North Africa, Copts, Chaldeans, Sunnis and Shiites, Druze, Orthodox Christians and Catholics alike – and yet at some innate level we tend to think of ourselves as one people. Connected by a common language, the cornerstone of our Arab heritage, the ethnic and cultural diversity represented within the Arab world astounds and in many ways represents the greatest feature of Arab Society. As “Telling Our Story” convincingly articulates, our diversity is the greatest legacy of Arab-American society, as well.

Having visited the museum personally, I can attest that “Telling Our Story” does justice to the spirit and message of this wonderful institution and while, to a certain degree, the book assumes a “feel good” quality – it promotes high profile Arab-American personalities that we all know and love: Jamie Farr, the inimitable Corporal Klinger on “M\*A\*S\*H”; NFL Quarterback Doug Flutie; consumer activist Ralph Nader; and everyone else in between – it nonetheless collects essential rare photos, facts, and anecdotes covering all aspects of Arab-



Etel Adnan from “Telling Our Story”



Naomi Shihab Nye from “Telling Our Story”



Donna Shalala from “Telling Our Story”

American life that the reader would be hard-pressed to find in any other single volume.

Making no apologies for who we are and from where we come, “Telling Our Story,” like “In/Visible” and “Etching Our Own Image,” projects a constructive, uplifting, and dignified

message in addressing our Arab-American cultural identity and artistic aims, and all three titles are highly recommended. **AJ**

## Poet's Journey to Libyan Past

### Amorisco

By Khaled Mattawa  
Ausable Press, 2008

**BY ETEL ADNAN**

Khaled Mattawa has a new book of poetry. These are poems of a new maturity, one that nowadays we particularly need in poetry. They move between an intimate tone and a mysterious detachment. They are an unveiling of the self, and information on the world. Then, they move on – or backwards – as if to create a frame for the poet's soul. Rightly titled "Adulthood," this last section is a journey into the past of his native Libya, its emperors and its ruins, ("the ruins are not ruined," he writes), a place that enlarges his imagination to the world's dimensions (although it hurts him profoundly). In this ancient land he realizes – with poignancy and erudition – that he's now more cosmopolitan than native son, and that he is both, and neither, in startling clarity. **AJ**



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## A Conversation With Ahdaf Soueif

*Continued from page 22*

the syntax, the structure of a paragraph, I would stay with the author.

### Are you planning to translate any more books yourself?

No, because I'm already having tremendous difficulty finding the time to write my own work. I'm involved in trying to find superlative translators, in trying to establish a team of people who are bilingual and bicultural and have a talent for it. So rather than sit down and translate a book myself, I'm trying to work on creating a group of translators.

**Part of what happens when Western readers read books like "In the Eye of the Sun" or "The Yacoubian Building" is that they generalize and take those books to be representative of all of Egyptian or Arab society. It's in conversation with people's stereotypes. Translation can play into that too.**

Well, you have the politics of selection for a start. What is it that gets translated? Why do publishers go into hysterics over "*Banat el- Riyadh*," for example? If everything that was being published in Arabic was being translated into English at varying levels and being published, that would be great. I wouldn't have a problem with that, because there it all is, a huge selection and the English-language reader can pick and choose. But it isn't like that. So the selection process and the level of translation become tremendously important. **AJ**

## Arab-American Film Making

*Continued from page 5*

"Amreeka" is not a political film, but instead a story about a Palestinian family immigrating to a small town in Illinois. However, "Amreeka" also depicts many scenes in the West Bank, and because of this an element of controversy is introduced into the film. Dabis said of the experience of gaining funding: "There was also this fear that an Arab American making a film about Arab Americans would be inherently biased. They said it would be better if it were put in the hands of a non-Arab American."

The question was asked in the daily online Jewish magazine the Tablet by Marissa Brostoff in the article "Is a film about Palestinians inherently political?" In that article, Christina Piovesan, co-producer of "Amreeka," said that the film is not political. "If the perspective is that of a woman who's trying to help her son, and the very fact that she's living in the West Bank is controversial, I don't know what to say about that."

Brostoff comes to the conclusion that paradoxically in "Amreeka," "from some political perspectives, both left and right, it's quite possible to say that the very fact of Muna's [the main character of "Amreeka"] living in the West Bank is controversial."

It's a hurdle that Dabis's peers at Columbia University probably don't have to face, since the equivalent depiction of a Chinese-American or Mexican-American experience is not typically charged with being political.

In the end, Dabis turned to Abu Dhabi-based film studio Imagenation, a subsidiary of the Abu Dhabi Media Company. As reported in The National, also owned by the Abu Dhabi Media Company, "Imagenation has pledged US\$1 billion for production of feature films and digital content over the next five years. Its aim is to make award-winning, commercially successful films, with a target of six to eight films per year."

The question remains: may there be strings attached to investments from the Middle East? Although no censorship to Dabis's material was reported, it does not seem unlikely that political or religious resistance to certain subject matters may yet arise from investors in the Middle East. **AJ**

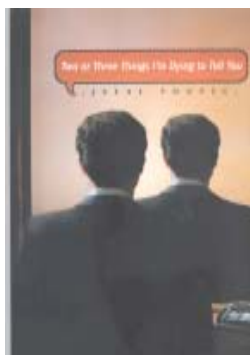
*Cultural Briefings is compiled and edited by Al Jadid staff*



## Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell you

By Jalal Toufic  
145 pages. \$20  
ISBN 0-942996-55-0

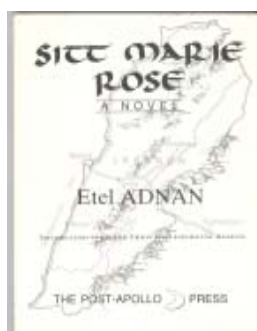
What was Orpheus dying to tell his wife, Eurydice? What was Judy dying to tell her beloved, Scottie, in Hitchcock's "Vertigo"? What were the previous one-night wives of King Shahrāyār dying to tell Shahrazād? What was the Christian God "dying" to tell us? What were the faces of the candidates in the 2000 parliamentary election in Lebanon "dying" to tell voters and nonvoters alike? In his sixth volume Jalal Toufic goes on investigating his environment with his magnifying lenses. "There is nothing else in literature like it," writes Publisher's Weekly. He is an "amazing writer" says Richard Foreman.



## Sitt Marie Rose

By Etel Adnan  
1978, 1989 \$11  
ISBN: 0-942996-27-5

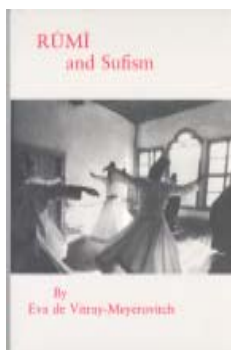
"It has become clear that maps of the Middle East and their accompanying texts have failed to account for the religious, economic, and political divisions that rage within these borders, defined in history by people who did not live there. 'Sitt Marie Rose' visualizes the struggle in Lebanon in terms of ethical borders that the West never sees, presented as we are with pictures of the 'Arab morass.' Adnan gives sterling credence to a moral and political literature, a literature that sets out to inform." – New Women's Times



## Rumi & Sufism

By Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch  
Translated from the French by Simone Fattal  
Illustrated with 45 photographs, charts, and maps; index and bibliography  
1989 2nd edition, 167 pages. \$12.95  
ISBN: 0-942996-08-9

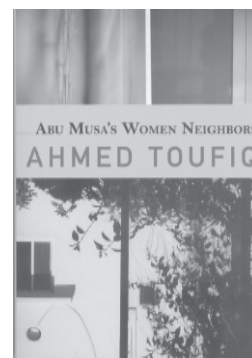
"In this fine volume all of the arts come together in a splendid unfolding of all that is Rumi Sufism. The photographs and paintings play against vibrant prose, and open all of the locked doors leading to the universality of Rumi and his teachings. The great care taken in the translation is a marvel unto itself." – The New England Review of Books



## Abu Musa's Women Neighbors

By Ahmed Toufiq  
2006, 338 pages. \$18  
ISBN 0-942996-56-9

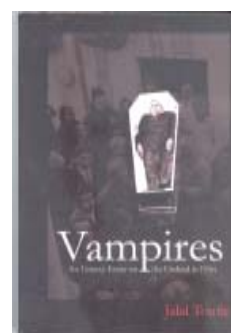
"Abu Musa" is a novel translated from the Arabic by Roger Allen and is an unforgettable book. Abu Musa is a Sufi saint whose Maqam can still be found in Salé, a suburb of Rabat, Morocco. Ahmed Toufiq has recreated the circumstances of his life. He tells his tale with love and care for the history and culture he depicts as well as a tender exploration of the human soul. Toufiq made it accessible to a modern and international audience. Already a motion picture in Morocco, the novel is to have a German edition soon.



## Vampires: An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film

By Jalal Toufic  
With color and black and white photographs.  
295 pages. \$26  
ISBN 0942996-50-X

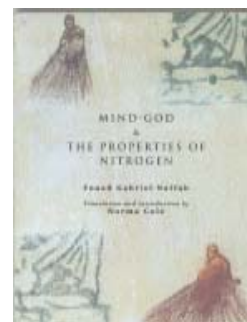
Jalal Toufic uses the metaphor of cinema and the character of the vampire in particular in order to read the historical period we are living in the Arab East right now. The vampire is the character that most renders the situation in Lebanon and the whole region, living "disaster surpassing disaster." Drawing on altered states of consciousness, films, psychiatric case studies and mystical reports, the author tackles many dubious yet certain characteristics of the undead state, and analyzes the current Lebanese art and political scene through these lenses, and his encyclopedic mind joins it to the whole history of cinema. An absolute must for the readers and teachers of modern Arab cultural studies.



## Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen

By Fouad Gabriel Naffah  
Translation and Introduction by Norma Cole; Pastels by Irving Peltin  
2006, 96 pages. \$24  
ISBN 0-942996-53-4

Lebanese poet Fouad Gabriel Naffah's "Mind-God and The Properties of Nitrogen" charts the mind's progress through the material world to the realm of pure spirit. Crystalline and elusive, his poetry frustrates our tendency to consume form and meaning whole, without first appreciating the subtleties binding them more closely together. Fouad Gabriel Naffah is one of the great poets still unknown in the U.S. to be discovered at last thanks to the masterful translation of Norma Cole. Cole further distills the text, disintegrating and reintegrating its spirit into English. Beautifully illustrated by Irving Petting, who contributed five pastels for the cover and inserts.



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## Saga of Islamic Art

*Continued from page 56*

*madrassas* and so on. One of them was the use of words, thence, the immense development of calligraphy. The second was to turn to abstract art, using geometry as the language capable of depicting the inner harmony and rules that sustain the universe, i.e., God's creation and its manifestations.

The artists in the Islamic world turned to geometry, not because the depiction of the human image was forbidden, but because the abstract image was, on the one hand, the most adequate way of rendering the unknown and infinite image of God, and the inner structure of the universe on the other. Geometry was able to create an image that is at the same time infinite, like God, and like God in his manifestations. The pattern, also like God's word, can be interrupted at any moment and you can still see it developing, the way a word in the Koran represents, alone, a sentence, or a chapter, or the whole of the Koran. One element is enough to indicate the whole. Also a geometric pattern develops evenly around a center, whether it is a circle, a triangle or a square, the way the world developed out of the "big bang."

As religion suffuses everything in the Muslim's life, which comes from the obligation of praying five times a day, one is never too far from God. Sacred art is on every object produced for daily life, whether it is a lamp, a brass box or a tile. Painting in Islam is present mostly in books, and sometimes on tiles and mosaics. The artists preferred to use it in books that could be protected from dust and light.

As a metaphor for universal order, the pattern was to become the cornerstone of Islamic art. This geometry used these calculations to make visible the universal harmony, the unity of structure found in the same way in fossils, galaxies, floral leaves – in one word, representing the unity of existence, *wahdat al-wujud*, which was the philosophy being taught in educated circles in Aleppo and Damascus at the time of the construction of the Minbar of Saladin, i.e., the 12th century A.D. The pattern is built on an inner grid, which seems to appear and disappear like the two sacred names of Allah, the Apparent and the Hidden. Mathematicians developed algebraic formulas to make manifest the geometry they needed.

The project could not have come to its happy conclusion without the work of many different people. The first and most important of them is the groundbreaking work of a British artist and lecturer, Keith Critchlow, who published a seminal book in the 1970s, "Islamic Patterns": "My education had introduced me to the Platonic World view and the importance of geometry... and I had grasped very early on, that geometry was not just a practical art for making things but had a deeper, more profound meaning. Any Islamic pattern is a challenge to the mind and that part of our consciousness that wants to know how such a thing came about. This was my own starting point. I felt sure the transmission had come via the Hellenic civilization – and later came to confirm this by reading the works of Sayyed Hossein Nasr."



A rare photograph of the entire original minbar, by K. A. C. Creswell.

At Sayyed Hossein Nasr's suggestion, he recorded his ideas, with drawn examples in "Islamic Patterns." A leading expert on Islamic science and spirituality, Hossein Nasr recalls: "The book had the effect of spreading the word that Islamic geometric art is not merely decorative or ornamental as the Western art historians viewed it, but that it was far, far deeper, philosophically, practically, and most importantly, cosmologically." Critchlow had grasped the essential nature of sacred geometry and furthermore had mastered its practical application. He reassembled the building blocks of the ancient craft, describing figures common in Islamic art, connecting them to their origins in the world of nature and discovering how they could be constructed. In one example, it is only in the 1980s that research in the world of physics came up with the term "quasi-crystalline" to describe the way five-fold symmetry could cover a surface evenly. "Islamic Patterns" showed that Muslim craftspeople achieved this 1,000 years earlier.

Hearing the Prince of Wales lecture about the lost art of guilds and artisans, Critchlow wrote to him describing the program he had developed at the Royal College of Art, where he was teaching. The prince was immediately interested, and their

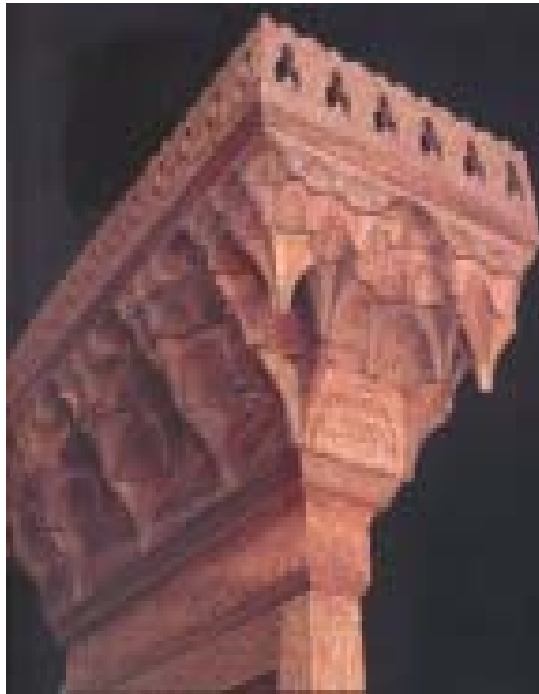
*Continued on next page*

## Saga of Islamic Art

similar interests led to the creation of a school in England: The Prince's School of Traditional Arts. The prince describes his intentions thus: "I've felt instinctively, for a long time, since I was a teenager, that we'd somehow succeeded in fragmenting the world and dividing it all up into components parts which had no relation to the whole picture, and all I wanted to do was to try and find a way of reintegrating all these shattered elements, so that people could once again start to see the whole picture." It is now a flourishing graduate school based in Shoreditch, East London, with established outreach programs in several countries, like Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The story builds from there. Years later a Jordanian engineer, Minwer al-Meheid, finds Critchlow's book in a Damascene bookshop. Minwer felt he had at last found something he had long been looking for. It gave him the key he had been seeking in his own search toward understanding Islamic art. He spent hours on his computer developing these patterns ad infinitum, making them his own. It was just at that time, in 1994, that he heard King Hussein of Jordan was making yet another appeal for entries toward building the Minbar of Saladin. Minwer applied; he won but was not given the project. Again he applied, and only after three tries was he finally given the project.

He knew he could draw the templates for the construction of the minbar, but finding artisans capable of realizing the project was going to be the big problem. His quest took him first to Aleppo, where the first minbar had been built. Deeply disappointed, he could not find any real descendants of the former guild. After traveling throughout the Islamic world, he put together a team comprised of Turkish, Egyptian, Moroccan



A detail of the muqarnas — canopy above the doorway of the minbar.



The wars of the 12th century left their mark in a series of remarkable castles and citadels, including this one at Aleppo, in present-day Syria. Begun in the 10th century, it was later fortified by Nur al-Din and played an important role in the struggle against the Crusaders.

and Indonesian artisans. He brought them to Jordan, where they worked together until the minbar was finally reconstructed. The artisans had to be capable of the greatest precision in three major elements of Islamic art: geometry, biomorphic design and calligraphy. All require a considerable level of skill. The geometric designs that cover most of the surface are composed of many pieces, some of them very small, with inlays of ivory and ebony. For these, precision is essential, since the tiniest error would be multiplied until the whole pattern is destroyed.

The biomorphic shapes, based on curves, spirals and entwined forms, come from the plant kingdom. These arabesques were one of the first decorative forms to appear in Islam, some being recorded just 60 years after Prophet Muhammad's death. These flowing designs represent the folding and unfolding of growth, life and time. In Minwer's words: they constitute "an abstract, symbolic language through which the traditional artist uses plant shapes in magnificent rhythmic networks that play universal melodies, governed by precise geometric rules and laws, inviting the eye across its intricacies and spirals in a meditative journey to the Origin of its existence, which is Oneness."

When the minbar was finally reconstructed in 2006, after 40 years, it was impossible to take it to Jerusalem as there was another war between Israel and its neighbors. Six months later, however, the patience and dedication of the Jordanian royal family, the School of Traditional Arts in England, Minwer and his team were able to see their efforts reach their goal: to take the new minbar and install it in the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem.

This tremendous saga, which contains history, geometry and art criticism is illustrated with drawings, charts and examples that make the underlying principles easier to grasp. It is a must for every person interested in seeing all these subjects under a defining true light. **AJ**



# The Minbar of Saladin: An International Saga of Islamic Art

BY SIMONE FATTAL

## The Minbar of Saladin

Reconstructing a Jewel of Islamic Art.

Edited by Lynette Singer  
Thames & Hudson.

With 213 Illustrations, 145 in color.  
Forewords by HRH The Prince of Wales And HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan.

This is more than a beautiful book. "The Minbar" is the story of a quest to rediscover the lost meaning of Islamic art and the lost knowledge of the ways to make it. It reads like a thriller. At the same time, it is a book on Islamic art with mass appeal, telling us where this art, as craft and knowledge, stands in the world today.

In August 1969, an Australian citizen, who later was to claim insanity to explain his conduct, burned the *minbar* of the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, called the Minbar of Saladin. The minbar had stood there since the 12th century, untouched by time and war.

The man gutted the minbar with petrol. His aim was to burn the entire mosque down to hasten the coming of the last judgment.

The minbar is an encased ladder, placed near the *mihrab* – the niche that indicates the direction of prayer – that the imam climbs to give his address to the faithful. That minbar was ordered by Nour al-Din, the ruler of Damascus and Aleppo during the Crusades, to be placed in the Al Aqsa Mosque to mark the celebration of the victory over the Crusaders, and the freeing of the holy city from their rule. Nour al-Din died before it could be placed properly. His successor, Saladin, was the one to do it, and it became known as Saladin's Minbar. It was



A 20th century depiction of Saladin's entrance into Jerusalem in 1187.



The new Minbar of Saladin.

made of wood, with inserts of ivory and ebony. Pieces of wood were put together without any glue or nails, and were carefully embossed with calligraphy and ornaments. Its scale was daunting: 19 feet high (6 meters), and 13 feet deep (4 meters), a majestic presence in any space. After it was burned in 1969, King Hussein of Jordan, being the traditional custodian of the holy site, vowed to have the minbar reconstructed in exactly the same way. This reconstruction seemed for a long while impossible to achieve.

To reconstruct the Minbar, one had to reconstruct the elaborate patterns inscribed on its different sides. Artisans and designers tried year after year, and during each attempt, the patterns drawn would invariably destruct when expanded on a large scale. The painful conclusion to this was that the precious knowledge of creating patterns that could sustain expansion had been lost.

Islamic art, and I speak solely about the sacred art here, is based on one simple principle, that God, Allah, is the great Unknown. One cannot give any rendering, or approximation of him, as one does not know him. Neither Moses nor Muhammad were able to gaze at him; when Moses tried, he saw mountains crumble instead.

That notion led artists, architects and artisans to devise two principles on which to base the decoration of the monuments in mosques,

*Continued on page 54*