

Performance Research in the Arab World

(Politics and Ethics of historiography)

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“A double critique becomes at this intersection a border thinking, since to be critical of both, of Western and Islamic fundamentalism, implies to think from both traditions and, at the same time, from neither of them. This border thinking and double critique are the necessary conditions for ‘an other thinking’”.

(Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 67)

International theater research has long studied the world before undergoing its revolution from the inside. Should the world study back or, rather, perform back while striving for recognition? In the 1980s and 1990s, significant intercultural debates took place at the two sister organizations’ annual conferences -Performance Research International (PSi) and the International Federation for Theater Research (IFTR) – and drew forth new possibilities of a democratic interweaving of performance cultures across the globe. Still, within this global context, Arab performance cultures are hardly visible in the “universal narrative of capital -History 1”, typically edited out, forgotten, and otherwise often only mentioned on the borderlines between absence and presence. Arab performance cultures have often been relegated to the margin being discarded as peripheral. They only make sense when juxtaposed to European theater. Scholarship in Arabic theater today is further complicated by the existing body of world theater histories wherein Europe has always been the silent referent in world theater history. So long as theater scholars in the so-called East look up to Europe for meaning while Europe looks down on the rest as its antithesis, little can be achieved, and divisive dichotomies will continue to rip us apart, tear us down and pull us asunder.

However, with rising demands for further democratizing the discipline, new modes of writing theater history from below have emerged in the Arab world with an earnest desire for inclusion in an act of re-writing the history of theater. Obviously, “third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate...”¹, which perpetuates age-old divide between a knowing master and its apprentice. An inherent fallacy in this line of thinking lies in the very fact that this statement implies homogeneity and oneness, where homogeneity is impossible, of the West vs the East. And even here, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s attempt to interrupt the totalizing thrust of ‘History 1’ is immediately caught in a double bind and is soon problematized by Rustom Bharucha in the margins of his seminal essay “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare”. Chakrabarty’s “historicist debt to Europe had

overpowered his critique of Eurocentricity, so much so that (in my reading, at least) ends up 'provincializing Bengal'" rather than Europe.² By deploying the essentialized tone so characteristic of Orientalistic and Orientalizing discourse, theater scholars embarking on this venture wind up reproducing the same essentialist discourse, one that is so anchored in Eurocentrism it produces its own -ism.

The Arab theater scholar has become the translator of a body of writings that were "formed elsewhere and whose archeological questions, most of the time, he/she hardly doubts. Frightened by the intellectual production of the West and by a process of accelerated accumulation, the researcher is satisfied with constructing, in the shadow of the western episteme; a second knowledge that is residual and that satisfies no one"³, which ensnares him/her in the trappings of the West making the task all the more difficult and riskier. How can an Arab theater scholar speak of Western theater without losing his/her voice? The provincialization of Eurocentric theater scholarship can only be achieved by recovering the irreducible plurality and age-old interweaving of European theater with other histories and traditions. How to retrieve such repressed histories and articulate subaltern positions in their name without falling into the essentialist creed of 'wild difference', 'deviant nationalism', or worse, as Chakrabarty puts it, 'the sin of sins, nostalgia', still constitutes one of the fundamental difficulties facing postcolonial historians and critics.⁴ Our re-siting of the intercultural theater debate in the post-colony or the "Global South" raises the following questions: What is the task of Arabic performance research in the era of globalization? Is there still a global divide between affluent countries and wretched ones as far as theater practice is concerned?

We are constantly reminded of Frantz Fanon's conclusion in *The Wretched of the Earth*, wherein he repudiated the degraded 'European form' and called for something different: "Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe [...] For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man."⁵ With regards to the postcolonial mission, Fanon may be right, but his reliance on theoretical Marxism soon undermined his oppositional writing. Unlike Fanon, Chakrabarty ends up proclaiming "an anti-colonial spirit of gratitude": "provincializing Europe cannot ever be a project of shunning European thought. For at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincializing it only in an anti-colonial spirit of gratitude."⁶ Such spirit attracts our attention to an ambiguous compromise that is complicit with the radical West in its critique of Eurocentric underpinnings of consumerist modernity, along with the "universal narrative of capital -History 1."

This is precisely where the Moroccan sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi's concept of double critique is still effective in problematizing the very notion of the binary: Khatibi's call is similar to Fanon's, but his strategy deconstructs rather than reverses the language of Manichaeism. His line of questioning disrupts all sorts of binary definitions of Self and Other, East and West,

proffering new possibilities of being and being together. The aim is not simply to transcend simplistic Hegelianism by overturning its dichotomous relationship as in Europe/Africa, Occident/Orient, West/East, but to reveal the underlying ‘coloniality of power’ within European imperialism founded on the Hegelian premise that Africa “is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”⁷ The history of a whole continent was swept out by an arrogant/ignorant philosophical blunder. Such a philosophical snap has ever radiated in dominant western scholarship around Arab theater. It is echoed in H. A. Gibb’s preface to Jacob M. Landou’s classic study on *Arab Theater and Cinema* (drama is not a native Arab art), and in misleading scholarship that has been sustained by Westerners and Arabs beginning with Landou (1958) and continuing through John Gassner and Edward Quinn (1969), Peter J. Chelkowsky (1979), and Mustapha M. Badawi (1988), Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy (2003) among others.

Eurocentric thinking aside, Khatibi’s critique comes across essentially as a visionary border thinking that weaves in and out of philosophical lines of influence belonging to both the East and the West (while dwelling on the borders). By casting the West as the Other, Fanon runs the risk of homogenizing the multifold West into one single entity. Perhaps it is a tactical move on Fanon’s part in an effort to counter what he sees as Europe’s lack of differentiation of “silent societies” commonly categorized as “Third World”, “under-developed”, or “developing.” Khatibi’s call for a *pensée-autre* (a thought of difference) is a third path toward decoloniality, a double subversion that strives to elude “wild difference”⁸ and to decolonize the mind. This *pensée-autre* is a way of re-thinking difference and identity without recourse to essentialist absolutes and “isms”. It is an “archeology of silence” and a resistance of recuperation within a closed system. It is a bold act of writing back without writing off where both East and West can cohabit. The thought of difference requires a radical rupture to “escape its own theological and theocratic foundations which characterize the ideology of Islam and of all monotheism.”⁹ Meanwhile, it claims to stand on a different ground from the West; “for we want to uproot Western knowledge from its central place within ourselves, to decenter ourselves with respect to this center, to this origin claimed by the West.” The transgressive effects of such a critique as a subaltern form of deconstruction are already apparent in its transformation rather than passive borrowing from the radical West. “The Occident is part of me, a part that I can only deny insofar as I resist all the Occidents and all the Orientals that oppress and disillusion me.”¹⁰ In fine, with Khatibi’s take on the issue, singularity cedes way to plurality and duality to multiplicity, and grafting becomes the trademark of new epoch of exchange, interchange and change from within and from without.

Double critique calls for re-thinking the hegemony, or in Foucauldian terms positional superiority, of the Western subject as pitted against the subordination of abject object, the servile East, the lascivious backward Orient, the Third World, or any number of other names and epithets used by the West to designate areas that are not West, i.e. the ‘Global South’ as opposed to what Spivak once called “the Feudal North in-the-South” in a reiteration of the tropes of empire. It also calls for re-thinking the Maghreb, the home country, and considering it for what it currently is: a

container of multiple identities, a sedimental layering of performance cultures past and present, in permanent flux between moments of conviviality and tragic sublimity. The Maghreb has long been at the crossroads of civilizations, a point of intersection for various encounters, coveted by different powers, notably the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Spaniards, Portuguese, English, Arabs and Turks. Double critique is a decolonizing archeology that leads to an examination of the binary concepts of East and West, Occident and Orient, and the philosophical, metaphysical, and theological traditions propagated in each domain. This double-edged critique encompasses a deconstruction of critical discourses on performance that used to speak in the name of the Arab world but was informed by a deeply rooted Eurocentrism. In the meantime, the second critique is a reflection on the 'politics of nostalgia', and how the Arabs view their performance cultures. Double critique is an effect of a plural genealogy wherein one stages his/her confrontation of Self and Other, East and West. Khatibi often refers to himself as a 'professional foreigner'. The question, here, is very much related to the location of exile in an attempt to restore the postcolonial subject to his/her humanity, or humanity to him/her. Throughout his lifetime, he tried different genres of writings in an ever-lasting attempt to exile the consciousness of exile.

On no account does 'delinking' Maghrebi (and Arab) theater practice and history from Western 'Telos or Vorhaben' mean a recuperation and retrieval of a pure and original performance tradition that pre-existed colonial encounters, past and present, for such an endeavor would be a lost cause. Arabocentrism, Tamazighocentrism, Afrocentrism all inevitably lapse into inverted violence and danger-fraught quests for purity, an unattainable end. Does the possibility of returning to an 'authentic' state even exist? There is no way back to an authentic or pure state, since all locations are somehow contaminated and crisscrossed by various encounters, past and present. No route whatsoever can take us to the roots as such, for routes themselves were traversed by many an (un)known traveler. The Maghreb, as a case in point in the Arab world, is (being) made up of so many different cultural and historical influences and tributaries, and one cannot simply turn one's back on any of them, for, in so doing, one would be in denial of who one is. In fact, the Maghreb is not yet and will never be complete; it is always a process in the making and thus cannot be caught whole in any one moment. To claim otherwise would be a glaring aberration. In line with Erika Fischer-Lichte's inspiring Interweaving project, I believe that performance cultures absorb material vestiges, remnants, echoes, remains and tattoos of a silent history that is quite literally inaccessible until subjected to a decolonial archaeology. Double critique comes in to re-evaluate that very landscape, be it cultural or historical, and highlight the multiple crossroads and palimpsests of interweaving and underlying acts of writing under erasure. The history of world theater and of Arab theater, for that matter, is far from being a seamless narrative. It is so intricate; it cannot be simply compartmentalized or researched in isolation from the Western tradition. Neither can the latter be fully and utterly grasped in the absence of other theater cultures. Any serious undertaking(s) of the study of world theaters in the Arab world ought to do so with above in mind for it/them to spin out an all-inclusive informed and informative account of theater forms as contact zones.

Notes:

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History", *Representations* 37, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories. (Winter, 1992) pp. 1-26. pp. 1-2.

² Rustom Bharucha, "Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization", *Theater Journal* 54 (2004) 1-28. p. 21.

³ Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology", in Halim Barakat (ed.), *Contemporary North Africa: Issues of Development and Integration* (London: Croon Helm, 1985) p. 16.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History", *Representations* 37, pp. 2-4.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963) p. 312-316.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) p. 255.

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856) pp. 97 - 103.

⁸ "Let us name 'wild difference', the fake separation which casts the Other into the absolute outside. Wild difference definitely leads to frenzied identities: cultural, historical, ethnic, racial, national... It has condemned the West and made it a captive of hostility." [my own translation] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Double Critique* (Rabat, Oukad Publications, 1990) p. 30.

⁹ Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Double Critique: The Decolonization of Arab Sociology", in Halim Barakat (ed.), *Contemporary North Africa: Issues of Development and Integration* (London: Croon Helm, 1985) p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 13-14.

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