The Powerful Voice of Women Dramatists in the Arab American Theatre Movement

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation traces the recent emergence of the Arab American Theatre movement, focusing on plays by women dramatists. It presents an overview of contemporary theatre and performances by Arab American women, and explores their focus on political theatre and identity politics, through an examination of works by fifteen contemporary women playwrights and performers. The emergence of this relatively large group of women theatre writers of Arab descent is a significant cultural phenomenon because their productions not only help to create and solidify an Arab American identity for themselves, they also offer this constructed identity to their audiences.

The political expression of this young theatre movement takes on different articulations, according to the different genres the dramatists use. The introduction presents Rania Khalil's silent performance piece *Flag Piece* and Suheir Hammad's collage performance *ReOrientalism*. Chapter one examines three autobiographical solo performances. Leila Buck's *ISite* and Nora Armani's *On The Couch* are theatrical presentations of the self through writing the story of lineage. Soha Al Jurf's *Pressing Beyond In Between* documents her visits to the land of origin in the Arab world, connecting her search for identity to the killing of her Palestinian aunt. Chapter two

explores the expansion from the individual search to the community. Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* is based on interviews conducted over a period of ten years with Iraqi women inside Iraq and in exile, while Nibras Group's *Sajjal* presents verbatim responses to the question "What is Arab?" based on fifty interviews with Arab Americans and other Americans. Chapter three discusses how plays by Arab American women dramatists deal with the negotiation of identity by second-generation Arabs in America, looking at two plays by Betty Shamieh, *Chocolate in Heat* and *Black Eyed*, and Laura Shamas' *Pistachio Stories*. Chapter four examines the comedy of Arab Americans, looking at the work of Maysoon Zayid and discussing the short plays presented at the Arab American Comedy Festival. The conclusion looks at the dominance of women's voice in this emerging theatre movement, and explores the aesthetic of this Arab American theatre.

I dedicate this work to my parents
who always believed that I would expand the limitations of what is.

To my mother Soheir Abdel Rahaman Howaidi,
without a Ph.D. she is a real Dr in the field of social work in Egypt.
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Introduction

The theatre of an ethnic minority can be used to study both the minority culture and the majority culture within which it seeks to define itself. Arab American theatre in the United States provides a particularly rich opportunity for such bifocal study because recent events have made the relations between the two, how each sees the other, a matter of deep concern on both sides. Arab American theatre has explored these concerns, as well as possibilities for increasing mutual understanding, in a variety of creative ways that can illuminate both the Arab American experience and the American experience in general.

The project of this dissertation is to trace the beginnings of the Arab American Theatre movement, focusing on plays by women dramatists. In it I will present an overview of contemporary theatre and performances of Arab American women, and I will explore their focus on political theatre and identity politics, through examining the works of fifteen contemporary women playwrights and performers. The sudden presence of this relatively large group of women theatre writers of Arab descent is a cultural phenomenon worth exploring, as their productions help in creating and solidifying an Arab American identity for themselves as artists, on one level, and in presenting this constructed identity to their audiences on another level.

Arabs in America (Before and After 9/11)

As a minority in the United States, Arabs have been described as the "most invisible of the invisibles."[1] Throughout most of the twentieth century Arabs were invisible in American society for a number of reasons. Many Arabs were invisible since they could "pass" because of their skin color, while others were early immigrants who assimilated quickly into American society and refused to teach their children their mother tongue in order to facilitate their quick integration. Working as peddlers and merchants helped some Arab immigrants connect to various sectors of the American society and to be incorporated into that society, especially when they shared Christian religious affiliations and frequented the same places of worship. Like many other immigrants arriving in the new world, some Arab immigrants lost their family names at Ellis Island, while others voluntarily changed their names or used the nearest approximation, such as Peter for Botros, or used shortened versions of their names that are easier to pronounce.

The invisibility of Arabs in the United States could also be traced to the fact that some among of the early waves of migration (1890- 1914) who came from the area that became Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria were listed as Ottoman, because the Ottoman Empire, which officially reigned over that area till the end of the World War I, issued their travel documents. In addition, Arab immigrants belonged to a number of sub groups, because of the large number of countries from which they emigrated. Some of them chose to adopt non-Arab affiliations, for example, some Lebanese, the largest Arab sub-group, preferred to be considered Phoenicians not Arabs. On the other hand, this invisibility was exacerbated because some immigrants were individuals or very small minority groups living within the network of other minorities in American society.

[1] Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), xix.

After the events of September 11, 2001, however, Arabs were no longer invisible. They were thrust into blatant "negative" visibility through the consistent portrayal of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners as the enemy in the mainstream media. Inside the United States, Arab Americans represented the "face of the enemy."[2] Still, this shift did not happen overnight; the soil had been prepared for it for a number of years. Systematically portrayed as barbarians, Arabs became the enemy in many Hollywood films, especially after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, as filmmakers could no longer use Russians in the role of the enemy. Arabs were a target as the fictional enemy because of a number of factors including the oil crisis, the assumed violence of Arab men, and the orientalization of Arabic and Muslim cultures. It is interesting to note that Arab men inherited the negative traits that used to be attributed to the Jews and the Blacks in the mainstream media: (miserly, devious, violent, and bestial) [3] and were often presented as dangerous and rough with women, while the representation of Arab women was confined to the roles of Madonna or Whore, either completely covered, or extremely revealed sexualized seductresses in a Harem fashion.

The main change following 9/11 and its aftermath was that the misrepresentation of Arabs became two-fold. On the one hand, Arabs were being presented as the barbarian enemy or the terrorists in fictional work, films and on television. On the other hand, in news stories there was continuous negative (re)presentation of Arabs, in the portrayal and depiction of events in Arab countries, as well as showing photos of potential suspects in

[2] Maha El Said,"The Face of the Enemy: Arab-American Writing Post 9/11," *Studies in The Humanities*, 30, no. 1&2 (2003): 200-216.

[3] Jack Shaheen offers an elaborate examination of Hollywood's negative stereotyping of Arabs, in his books *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Interlink Publishing Group, 2001) and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

terror activities in the U.S. This two-fold mispresentation compelled many artists of Arab descent to respond, as they felt a responsibility to present a more accurate depiction of Arabness, outside the framework of the "war on terror."

Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11

The early theatrical responses of Arab American artists, like Nibras' *Sajjal* (2002) and Suhair Hammad's *ReOrientalism* (2003), focused mainly on presenting Arabs in such a way as to normalize the experience of Arab Americans, equating it with that of other (ethnic) groups, in an attempt to find points of similarity. Later plays addressed more complex aspects of the Arab American experience in an attempt to break the silences surrounding some aspects of Arab representation, and they shed light on false notions, such as the uniformity of Arab's positions and reactions to current events or the portrayal of Arab women as silent, covered, and oppressed victims in their societies. The project of most Arab American playwrights (regardless of the genres they use) is political, ranging from addressing identity politics inside the United States to the implications of the political situations facing Arabs in their homelands, and in many cases joining these two.

One of the concerns of the emerging Arab American theatre was to address the pressure experienced by Arab American communities in the United States. This pressure included the detention of hundreds of Arab Americans and Arab immigrants without charge, and the deportation of many Arabs – often without notification – which broke up of families and destabilized communities. This, in addition to the obligatory registration of all adult males born in Arab countries, created a state of emergency within the community. In this atmosphere, the cultural expression of Arab Americans acquired more importance and urgency. The theatre written and performed by Arab Americans, since the

beginning of the twenty-first century has reflected the changes in the position of the Arab American community. In response to 9/11, the current wars in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan, their repercussions globally and locally, and the backlash against Arabs and Muslims, Arab American artists increasingly started to write and present plays and performances that tackled the complex political realities they were experiencing. First and second-generation Arab American solo performers, ensembles, professional actors and writers have presented theatre work exploring both their identity in American society and their connections with their ancestors' land. These performances target wider audiences beyond the Arab American community, trying to shed light on the complexities of these hybrid identities, and to rectify stereotypical misrepresentations portrayed in the media. Arab American artists utilized the theatre to stage stories from areas of conflict in the homeland and to perform some of the stories that are often ignored by mainstream media. These performances often challenged the usual media representation of Arabs, giving Arab American artists agency in presenting their own experiences and re-defining what Arab is. This makes their theatre a form of resistance and a way to counterbalance the stereotyping and misrepresentation.

Women play a significant role in this emerging Arab American theatre movement. Although there is a large number of male performers, as well as a few male writers, the dominant voice is that of women playwrights. In this dissertation, I will present an overview of the contemporary theatre and performances of Arab American women through examining the works of fifteen contemporary women playwrights and performers. This emergence of a large group of women dramatists of Arab descent in the first few years of the twenty-first century is an important cultural phenomenon that

operates differently with different audiences. These performances clarify Arabic and Arab American themes and problems for general American audiences, at the same time they help shape the identity of their Arab American audiences, who see images of themselves and their stories on mainstream stages.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in issues related to the Middle East and the Arab world, and a considerable number of publications on topics relating to the Middle East, Islam, Arabs, and Arab Americans. Yet, there has been no work documenting the theatre of Arab American artists, apart from Ala Fa'ik's 1997 article "Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community," and a number of play reviews in the printed press and online. This dissertation is the first in-depth academic study on Arab American theatre artists, documenting the work of this emerging theatre movement.

The Scope of this Dissertation:

The project of this dissertation is to trace the beginnings of the Arab American theatre movement, looking particularly at the plays written by women, which focus mainly on identity politics or on the implications of the political situation in the United States and Arab countries on Arab Americans. This political expression takes on different articulations, according to the different genres the dramatists use to convey their message. In addition to the silent performance piece and collage performance which will be discussed in the introduction, Arab American women have used the autobiographical mode, documentary plays based on community interviews, plays with multiple characters, as well as comedic performances. A chapter will be dedicated to each of these approaches.

I will begin this study with a historical background of Arab American immigration and a look at the early forms of Arab American cultural production, when poetry was the dominant form of artistic expression, exploring how food was used as the main way to connect to the ancestor's land. Then I will look at the theatre production of this immigrant community, and the emergence of the woman playwright's voice at the end of the twentieth century. After defining the terms used in this work, I will look at some performances that I see as precursors to the contemporary Arab American movement, focusing on Rania Khalil's *Flag Piece*, and Suheir Hammad's *ReOrientalism*.

In chapter one, I will examine three autobiographical solo performances. Each of these one-woman performances revolves around the search for the writer/performer's identity and self through exploration of their roots. Leila Buck's *ISite* and Nora Armani's *On The Couch* are theatrical presentations of the self through writing the story of lineage and the family tree, tracing the ancestors before the performer's own life, reaching to the present moment. Soha Al Jurf's *Pressing Beyond In Between* documents her visits to the land of origin in the Arab world, connecting her search for identity to the loss of her Palestinian aunt's life.

Chapter two explores the expansion from the individual search to the community. Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* is based on interviews conducted over a period of ten years with Iraqi women inside Iraq and in exile. In this one-woman show Raffo creates a collage of the lives of these women, weaving their stories together to present a mosaic of the lives of these ordinary, yet exceptional, Iraqi women. On the other hand, Nibras Group's *Sajjal*[4] takes a different approach to documentary theatre. It is based on

[4] Sajjal is an Arabic word meaning: a record, or to record.

interviews with over fifty Arab Americans and other Americans from various ethnicities who were asked the question, "What is Arab?" and presents verbatim responses to that question.

Chapter three will discuss how plays by Arab American women dramatists deal with the negotiating of identity by second-generation Arabs in America, looking at two plays by Betty Shamieh *Chocolate in Heat* and *Black Eyed*, and Laura Shamas' *Pistachio Stories*. Each of these plays presents a different stage in the representation of the Arab American identity on stage, and the in development of awareness of this identity.

In a number of ethnic theatre traditions, comedy is used as a strategy to look at the self and to examine the stereotypes imposed by society. Chapter four examines the comedy of Arab Americans, looking at the work of Arab American comedian Maysoon Zayid and discussing the plays written or co-written by women and presented at the Arab American Comedy Festival during the first five years of its existence. The conclusion will look at the dominance of women's voices in this emerging theatre movement, and will explore the aesthetic of this Arab American Theatre.

Background

Arabic-speaking people have been immigrating to the United States in considerable numbers since the late nineteenth century. The immigration pre- and post-World War I was mainly from the greater Syria area. After World War II, the post-colonial situation, the political tensions, and armed conflicts forced many Arabs to leave their home countries and to search for host countries. Many immigrants came to the United States from Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, Egypt, and Iraq and a few from other Arab countries. Over the course of the twentieth century, the increasing numbers of Arab

immigrants started creating a cultural life in the new land. Starting in the early decades of the twentieth century, Arabic communities established social clubs, newspapers, and journals in states such as New York, California, and Michigan. Poetry had traditionally been the preferred form of artistic expression in the Arabic cultures, so it is not surprising that a new school of poetry, "the poets of Al Mahjar,"[5] was created by the immigrant community. These poets, led by Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931) who founded a society for Arab writers, revolutionized classical forms of poetry. Their work, written mostly in Arabic, soon became popular also in the Arab world, influencing poetry in their homelands and contributing to the new Arabic poetry movement by breaking with the metered and rhymed classical forms.

Early cultural production of Arab American immigrants was concerned with finding ways to connect to the Arabic home culture and with establishing links between the different Arab communities of the diaspora. Later, the artistic work of the second and third generations dealt with the complex relationship to the American host culture, as well as with retaining the ties with the countries of origin. Many Arab American writers foregrounded their Arabness by writing about food. Much of the poetry, short stories, and fiction published in the second part of the twentieth century revolved around a central image of preparing, cooking, or consuming food provided by the mother, the grandmother and sometimes the father. Even the titles of anthologies of works by Arab American writers reflected this, with titles such as *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poetry* (1982), *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (1988), and *Food for Our Grandmothers*: *Writings by Arab-American*

[5] Mahjar is an Arabic word meaning "place of immigration."

and Arab-Canadian Feminists (1994). This easily digestible form of culture focused on connecting to the family and grandparents' traditions, and on finding solace in food and in kitchen culture. Writing about food provided a safe way to create connections with their home culture; at the same time food was a bridge to the American reader, who might not have experienced much Arabic culture apart from the food that was being popularized in the new international cuisine: hummus, falafel, and grape leaves. Consuming the food/culture of the other (Arabs) created a sense of familiarity and common points of reference that Arab American writers used to normalize their experiences and to find an entry point to reach their readers. These works rarely tackled the pressing issues: war, occupation, stereotyping, misconceptions and discrimination. This tradition continues in some contemporary fiction produced by Arab Americans in the twenty-first century. A clear example is the work of Diana Abu Gaber, whose popular novel *Crescent* (2004) and her memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005) both center around food, not just as a metaphor, but as the main project of the work, complete with recipes.

Although poetry was their main cultural expression, Arab American immigrants wrote some prose and produced plays. Early plays revolved around Arab history and were performed in the cultural clubs, churches, and community organizations, in an attempt to preserve Arabic traditions and culture in the new world, to connect the community to its roots, and to demonstrate their pride in its heritage. All the plays were performed in Arabic, usually in the dialect of the majority of the community.

In the later part of the twentieth century, Arab American theatre became more visible as amateur groups presented plays about the lives of Arab immigrants. In

Dearborn, Detroit and other cities, Ajyal Theatrical Group performed comedies, in Arabic, dealing with the complexities of living in the new culture. These include *What a Shame* (1989), *Smile You're In America* (1994), *We Became American* (1996), and *Come See ... Come Saw*, (1998). In Los Angles, Arab American artists presented bilingual theatre and musical theatre, like Hammam Shafie's *Where to Ramallah* (1987) and the Arab American Children Theater Company's *The Festival: A Musical Play in Two Acts* (1989), while the Chicago Actor's Project Theater presented Fareed Al-Oboudi's *Portrait of a Suspect* (1988).

Most early Arab American plays were comedies, following the farcical Egyptian model of exaggerated caricatures, and were performed in different Arabic dialects. The comedy originated from situations the immigrants faced in a new community with different social and cultural values. These plays were targeting Arabic audiences and people of Arab descent who understood Arabic. Gradually, more of the plays were presented partly in English, attempting to engage the new generation of Arabs born in the United States who did not speak Arabic fluently. As with the early stages of other ethnic theatres, most of these plays were amateur attempts, performed mainly for the community and advertised in community publications and social meetings. They were not presented as major works of theatre and were not aimed at reaching broader American audiences. Arab American writer and critic Ala Fa'ik observes that "Arab-American theater is rapidly moving from an exclusive form of entertainment with appreciation only by Arab-American audiences into an art form with broad general interest for all Americans."[6] At

[6] Ala Fa'ik, "Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community" in *The Development of Arab-American Identity* edited by Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994**),** 108.

the end of the twentieth century, Arab American theatre was making stronger attempts to reach audience, beyond the Arab American community.

> In the last decade Arab-Americans have increasingly produced theater dealing with the Arab-American experience, theater of different types: plays in Arabic and for Arab-Americans, bilingual productions for wider audiences of both Arab-Americans and non-Arab-Americans, and professional productions in English for the general U.S. public.[7]

Arab American theatre was not only reaching wider audiences, it was also expanding to include women's voices.

In the Arab world, many women write fiction and poetry, yet women dramatists are rare. It is thus significant that Arab American women are finding a strong voice in the diaspora. Arab American women writers of poetry and fiction have long outnumbered the men in anthologies of Arab American writing. Defying the notion of the silenced Arab woman, the last years of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a number of women playwrights such as Faiza Shereen, Elmaz Abi Nader and Etel Adnan, while the twenty-first century brings to the forefront a large number of women dramatists, as well as writer/performers like Heather Raffo, Betty Shamieh, Soha Al Jurf, and Leila Buck among others.

The majority of contemporary theatre pieces written by Arab American women clearly parts with the food tradition of the earlier poetic work, and presents unabashedly political statements that address the critical situations in the home countries and in the host country. This new generation of Arab American women writers is not only moving beyond writing about the "baklava" and "tabbouli," it is also transcending its earlier

[7] Fa'ik, 107.

fears, since the worst of these fears came true in the realities of the post 9/11 world. In this world, Arabs are considered "evil" with wars against them gaining government and public support, while Arab Americans are targeted and scrutinized. This emerging movement creates theatre that tackles these problems. The plays examined in this dissertation belong to different genres, yet they all share a political concern. Whether they focus on identity issues, on correcting negative stereotyping of Arabs, or on the impact of current conflicts on the artists or their family members, all these plays carry a sense of urgency. The topics they are discussing are of interest not only to their communities, but to American society at large, because a significant part of the public and political discourse centers around the problems in the Middle East, and because there is a pressing need to understand this "other."

These plays by Arab American artists offer a unique perspective about the inner working of this minority group, and its connection to the American society which provides an important addition to the cultural/political fabric of the United States. A clear example is the performance of *9 Parts of Desire* in the Arena Stage in Washington, DC, in 2007. In talkbacks after the performance, the playwright/performer Heather Raffo was often asked by an audience comprised mainly of civil servants and government employees "What should we do in Iraq? Should we stay or withdraw?" The authenticity of the play and its complex perspective on the current and previous war in Iraq leads the audience to consider the Arab American artist as authority, a representative voice for Iraqis, a source of information and a reference.

Even comedy does not shy away from dealing with topics such as war, terrorism, or racial profiling. The plays and stand-up routines find humor in the critical situations

facing Arab Americans, of which many Americans are unaware. For example, comedian Maysoon Zayid informs the audience that the American government is doing her a personal favor by rounding up all adult males born in Arab countries for the obligatory registration, so that it will be easier for her to pick a husband. By using this situation to elicit laughter, Zayid brings more awareness of a discrimination largely unknown outside the Arab American community.

The Male Voice

Although the major voice in the Arab American movement is that of women, a few male dramatists are contributing to the popularity of this emerging theatre movement.[8] Most of the work of Arab American male artists can be seen in the Arab American Comedy Festival, which presented new voices, such as Sam Younis' *Brown Town*, Dean Obiedallah's *And Now a Word from Our Sponsors*, next to experienced writers like Michael Scassera's *Significant Romance in Compressed Time*, and Youssef El Guindi's *Granade*.

Outside the framework of the Comedy Festival, Egyptian American playwright Yussef El Guindi is one of the most prolific contemporary male dramatists. He wrote a number of radio plays and adapted some short stories into plays. His original plays and adaptations including *Karima's City, A Marriage Proposal, Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda's* and *10 Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*, are often performed in festivals

[8] It is interesting to note that one of the strong upcoming voices in the New York theatre scene is that of the Egyptian American Stephen Adly Guirgis, who emerged through the Labyrinth Theater company, and had many award-winning plays produced in major off Broadway theatres including: *The Little Flower of East Orange, Our Lady of 121st Street, In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings* and *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*. I would not include Guirgis' work with Arab American dramatists, since he does not identify himself as Arab American, and does not present his work through the framework of this movement.

and regional theatres. His recent plays tackle the precarious situation of Arab Americans. *Back of the Throat* (2006), which had successful runs in major cities in the United States, explores how a friendly inquiry by two government officials into the affairs of an Arab American writer, following a terrorist attack, devolves into a full-blown investigation of his presumed ties to terrorists. His latest work *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* premiered at San Francisco's Thick theatre (Summer 2008).[9] This comedy addresses the negative media representation of Arabs through the character of an actor who is being persuaded by his Agent to accept the role of terrorist in an upcoming Hollywood blockbuster.

Jamil Khoury, another Arab American male playwright, founded the Silk Road Theatre in Chicago with Malik Gillani to respond to the rising anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments across the United States following the attacks of 9/11. Khoury and Gillani's project attempts to use art to counter the rising Islamophobia and xenophobia as well as the negative representation of "Middle Eastern people." [10] Khoury wrote *Precious Stones*, which premiered at the Chicago Cultural Center's Studio Theater in 2003. The events of the play takes place in Chicago in 1989 against the backdrop of the first Palestinian Intifada, when two women, a Jewish American and a Palestinian American, come together to organize a Jewish/Arab dialogue group and end up falling in love. Another noteworthy male voice is Ismail Khalidi, who wrote and performed *Truth Serum Blues*, a play that tries to make sense of the chaotic world post 9/11 from the perspective of an Arab American man who is detained in Guantanamo Bay.

[9] This play was produced by Golden Thread productions, a not-for-profit organization established after 9/11 to present cultural work from Middle Eastern countries, including Israel.
[10] Khoury's choice of terminology.

Terminology

The terms “Arab,” “Middle Eastern,” and “Muslim” have been used interchangeably to refer to a large group of people with a complex history, geography, and ethnicity. In this study I will use “Arab” and “Arab American.” I choose not to use “Middle Eastern” because it reflects a Western perspective, placing the West as the reference and evaluating the world from that point of view. The term “Middle East” also tends to erase the Arabness of North Africa and South West Asia, which used to be referred to as the “Arab World” until the establishment of the state of Israel in the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, not all Arabs are Muslims, and, although most Arab countries have a majority Muslim population, Islam includes many more countries and ethnicities that are beyond the scope of this project. I will use “Arab American” because it is important to bring visibility to both the “Arabic” and the “American” component of this community’s identity. I will not hyphenate the term Arab American. I prefer to drop the hyphen to mark an inclusion of Arabs in American society, the same way the terms Italian American or African American are spelled, reflecting their status as an integral part of American society.

The plays discussed in this study are all written or co-written by women playwrights who identify themselves as Arab Americans. They are of Arab descent, which means that the writer, or one, or both of her parents (and in one case, grandparents) are immigrants from an Arab country. The main character or characters of these plays are Arab or Arab American and the main project of each play concerns Arab related issues**.**

Some of the plays discussed in this dissertation were created by artists who grew up in Arab countries and immigrated as adults, others by artists who were born to Arab

parents or grandparents but raised in the United States. I would like to characterize artists who are immigrants themselves, with formative years spent in Arab countries (the zero generation), as "Arab American" because the Arabic part of their identity is foregrounded, while I would call artists who were born and raised in the United States (second and third generation) "American Arab", because their identity is often first as American, then as Arab. This is evident in their language use, as artists born and raised in the United States often do not speak Arabic or have a limited understanding of the language.[11] Of the plays discussed in chapter four, I would categorize the work of Ajyal Theatrical Group as Arab American, in contrast to the stand-up comedy and the work presented in the Comedy Festival, which is predominantly American Arab. An important exception is the play *Layla, Leila* written by Ahmad Amer, Marie-Therese Abou-Daowd, and Ahmad Ibrahim and some aspects of the work of Lameece Issaq, who relies on the Arabic language for some of the humor in her plays. In spite of the differences between the work of Arab Americans and American Arabs, I will use the general term "Arab American" throughout this dissertation to avoid confusing the reader.

I see the events of 9/11 as the beginning point of the formation of a new identity for Arab Americans. The United States' reaction to these events and the repercussions of the American response worldwide created the conditions for this new identity. I acknowledge that the loss incurred by these events on the American soil is one wound in a time of many wounds, and although I am not interested in emphasizing this particular tragedy more than suffering and loss of life in other parts of the world, I see this as a

[11] In my research and personal interviews with a number of Artists of Arab descent it became clear to me that the majority of these artists are culturally American in their language, references, preferences, music choices and awareness of pop culture, yet many of them consider themselves Arab because of their emotional connections to the region.

defining/dividing moment in history. Many of the events that took place after 9/11 were in the making long before, and they have come to full power since, most of them affecting the lives of Arab Americans. The American political rhetoric of "good and evil" or “us versus them” was applicable not only to international affairs where it separated the United States and its allies from other countries, but it also created a tension at home, within the Arab American individuals and communities with loyalties to both sides of the divide. Officially, placing a large portion of the Arab American community in the position of “other”, by treating all men of Arab descent as suspects requiring obligatory registration with the authorities, systematized the singling out of this ethnic minority and its racial profiling.

Arab Americans were targeted through government procedures of detention, deportation, erosion of civil liberties, and surveillance of phone calls and emails. There was a strong backlash in society against people of Arab and Muslim descent, with resulting discrimination, violence, abuse, destruction of property and, in some cases, murder. The internal pressures were intensified in the international aftermath of 9/11: the bombing of Afghanistan, the war on Iraq, and the escalation of violence against Palestinians by the Israeli army, (the latter seen by Arabs as the United States representative in the region.)

All these political, governmental, administrative, and societal pressures put the Arab American community in a precarious position, on the one hand feeling a need for continuous self-justification and self-defense, while at the same time angered by the policies of the United States in the Arab World. In this atmosphere, some members of the Arab American community tried to mask their identities in order to protect themselves,

their families and their jobs, while many artists felt the necessity of forcefully claiming their Arab American identity.

After 9/11 many theatre artists declared that they were of Arab descent and began presenting theatre that discussed the pressing issues impacting their communities. Arab American artists searched for each other and started to work together, creating theatre troupes like the Nibras Theatre Collective. Through regular collaborations they formed alliances, creating a movement that birthed the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, which was launched in 2003 and became an annual event since. Festival co-organizers Maysoon Zayid and Dean Obeidallah state that "this festival is a way to dispel stereotypes. We try to do what we can through the art to define who we are, as opposed to others who don't know us, or don't want to know us, doing so."[12] Other playwrights and solo performers also attempted to tell the stories of Arabs and Arab Americans through their own perspectives.

This theatre work quickly gained momentum, grew in number, variety and popularity, from single performances and short showcase runs to long Off-Broadway runs, national tours, spots on televisions, and the increasingly successful Comedy Festival. In addition to the success of individual plays, the work of Arab American artists found a place in the spotlight at some major New York theatre establishments: the Public Theatre presented a two-day festival of plays by Arab Americans, and New York Theatre Workshop included members of Nibras in its "Unusual Suspects," as well as presenting "Aswat," a two-day festival of plays about Palestine. It is worth noting that one of the

[12] Rebecca Louie, "Arab-American Comics Find Cause To Laugh," *Daily News,* 14 October 2004. http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/2004/10/14/2004-10-14_arab-american_comics_find_ca.html (downloaded 2 December 2005).

five most produced plays in the 2007 season, according to *American Theatre* magazine, was an Arab American play: Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*. The growth and popularity of Arab American theatre is not only instrumental in providing an opportunity for Arab American artists to present Arabic and Arab American stories, it is also helping to create that identity and in solidifying a community around it.

My Position

I write about this new ethnic theatre movement as an informed insider in the Arab American community. Since I moved from Egypt to the United States in 2001 to pursue my Ph.D. I have been involved in the cultural activities of the Arab American community in New York City, which rapidly increased post 9/11 with the convergence of many artists and events in activities, such as the formation of the Alwan Cultural Center –which became a hub for presenting artwork from Arab countries, as well as the cultural productions of Arab Americans– and the establishment of a number of festivals, among them the Comedy Festival, and film festivals by Alwan, and ArteEast. There have also been regular Arabic music performances, art exhibits, and fundraiser events in New York City. I have been an active member in this community, an audience member, a follower of its cultural activities, and an organizer of some of these events. Apart from Nibras' *Sajjil*, I was able to watch productions or readings of all the plays discussed in this dissertation, sometimes even following different stages of their development from ideas or readings to full productions.

Out of the research for this dissertation came the Segel Center four evening series, "Playing with the Rules: Arab American Women Writers and Performers" that I curated to showcase the work of five Arab American artists: Elmaz Abi Nader, Betty Shamieh,

Heather Raffo, Soha Al Jurf, and Rania Khalil. I also directed plays for the Comedy Festival and other Arab American events, and produced a number of performances, including "Poetry from the Axis of Evil."

Being both an artist and a scholar gives me a unique perspective, that of an insider privy to the inner working of the Arab American artist community, as well as that of an observer and chronicler of its work and impact. This position allows me to put my hands on the pulse of the movement and to have access to reading play submissions to festivals, which are an important indicator of the direction and shape this theatre movement is taking. It also makes it possible for me to witness the development of plays, from an idea or a short sketch to a full-length play, and to register the subtle changes in the different versions of the work of artists. Observing the cultural production of Arab Americans over the past seven years leads me to believe that theatre by Arab American women artists is not just a passing phenomenon, as some reviewers have suggested. It is a movement, an ethnic theatre movement, with a unique mission, style, and voice which this thesis will explore.

The Theatre of Arab American Women:

The Early Plays:

Although this project will focus on theatre written and produced after 9/11, I will start by discussing some earlier plays to show the progress of this ethnic theatre. The first play written by an Arab American woman playwright was Faiza Shereen's *The Country Within*. This only play by Shereen was written in 1991 and performed in a number of Arab American communities and some colleges, and was used in courses on Arab

American literature. It is a full-length play that explores how the traditions and social structures that new immigrants carry from their homeland, Egypt, direct their lives in their new country, the United States. The two protagonists, who love each other, are not allowed to be together because their families are separated by a large economic gap in the old country. These traditions not only influence the immigrants, but also control the lives of their children, since even the second-generation can not liberate itself from them. The play speculates about the possibility of a third generation free from the baggage of its ancestors.

Another early play is Etel Adnan's *Like a Christmas Tree*, written in response to the 1991 war on Iraq. Adnan, the well-known Arab American poet and fiction writer, borrows the title of her short play from how the news commentators described the explosions in Baghdad as looking "like a Christmas tree." This short play, which takes place inside an Iraqi prison during that war, presents exchanges between two prisoners with opposing points of view: an Iraqi butcher and an American journalist.

Elmaz Abi Nader's *Country of My Origin*, is a biographical work tracing the maternal ancestry of the poet and playwright. This piece that premiered in 1997 and won two Drammies (Oregon's Drama Awards) is divided into three acts, each describing the effects of immigration on the life of one woman in each generation of the Abi Nader family through the life of the grandmother, the mother, and the playwright as a child. The grandmother had to take care of her two girls on her own, in a remote village in Lebanon, after her husband left for United States. The first act traces the struggle of this woman, and her difficult passage as she follows her husband to the New World. The second act follows the mother, growing up in the United States, yet suffering from the pressure of

the old Arab traditions and family practices, and her return to Lebanon to meet her future husband. After getting married she faces strong pressure from the family in Lebanon, especially when they try to force her to prove that she was a virgin on her wedding night, while she refuses to succumb to this old tradition. The third act presents the experiences of the writer/performer as a child being refused acceptance at a Catholic school because she does not have a saint's name, and having her name changed throughout her school years. The child feels that the challenges of not belonging and not being accepted will come to an end when she is chosen as a flower girl in her cousin's wedding. But her hairy body does not feel right in the fairy dress and the family submerges her in a bath of bleach to lighten her dark hair and bleach her arm hair, forever shaking her sense of being accepted as she is.

Like the characters in Shereen's *The Country Within*, the three generations of women in *Country of Origin* are all affected by immigration and inhabit a liminal space between the two countries they have ties to. None of the characters is completely comfortable in either country or enjoys a strong sense of belonging. Abi Nader describes this condition in her article "Arab Here, American There" that comments on the diapsoric condition of the children of immigrants who are not completely accepted in either their original ancestral country or their country of birth. The connection to the country of origin often alienates the second-generation from fully belonging to their new country, while being born or raised in the new country separates them from their ancestral country because of the language barriers, economic privileges or different life style and value system. Those caught in the middle experience discrimination from both sides. All three plays are political, focusing either on the political situation in the Arab countries or on the

identity politics dominating the lives of Arab immigrants. These issues continue to engage the Arab American theatre in the twenty-first century.

The Beginnings of the New Movement

The first theatrical Arab American response to the aftermath of 9/11 differs greatly from the early plays discussed above. Rania Khalil's *Flag Piece* is a major shift in style, position and approach. The Egyptian-American mime artist, puppeteer, and director created her short solo performance immediately after 9/11 as a reaction to the American flags flying on New York buildings, on cars, and adorning people's bodies. Many Americans in New York, and in other places, felt the need not only to see or carry the American flag but to embody it by wearing it on T-shirts, hair bands, scarves, and pins. The flag was a strong marker to separate "self" from "other," an indicator of the move among "ones own."

In this piece, Khalil explores the relationship between a woman and the American flag. The woman, who slowly covers her hair at the beginning of the piece with her own jacket to create an image of a covered Muslim woman, salutes a small American flag as she flies it over her head. Eventually she moves the flag close to her face to cover her eyes, then she deliberately covers her mouth, with the flag acting as a mouth fold/ veil to silence her. After she tries to suck the pole of the flag, the piece ends with the pole going across her face, pushing her lips and deforming her face, while its top forces one of her eyelids open. This short one-woman silent performance piece presents some powerful images representing the suffering and marginalizing of the Arab American and the Muslim community because of the emphasis on patriotism.

It is significant that the artist does not use language in this performance, as the verbal failed to encapsulate the range of emotions evoked by the attacks and their effect on American society. Instead, Khalil chose a corporeal visual language, embodying the confusion and suffering of the Arab/Muslim community represented by the woman performer. The complex relationship between the performer and the American flag condenses the myriad of emotions, positions and identity issues of the community. The haunting image at the ends the piece, of the suffering face of the Arab Woman, deformed/ distorted by the American flag, sums up the pressure of the new realities and implications of the post 9/11 world on this ethnic minority.

I consider *Flag Piece* a precursor to the contemporary Arab American theatre movement, not only because of its timing, but also in its extreme distillation of the issues, problems and concerns facing this generation of Arab American artists. Most of the other plays in this study try, in one form or another, to engage with the tension between the individual and the American identity represented in the closing image of Khalil's performance.

Another example of the work of the Arab American theatre movement post 9/11 is *ReOrientalism*, a collage piece inspired by and presented as an homage to the work of Edward Said. This performance, produced by James Bau Graves is a collaboration between three artists: Suheir Hammad,[13] the Palestinian hip hop poet, wrote the text, Karim Nagi Mohammed created the visual projections and performed solo percussion, and Alan Shavarsh Bardezbanian performed Arabic music with his ensemble. The piece

[13] Suheir Hammad is known as the first Palestinian on Broadway because she was one of the main performers in *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam On Broadway*. This performance had a run from 14 November 2002 to 4 May 2003 at Longacre Theatre in New York followed by a national tour.

was conceived during the last days of Said's life and presented in a number of American cities following his death, featuring Najla Said, Edward Said's daughter.

ReOrientalism is a collage of various artistic genres: visual art projections, a short film compiling clips from Hollywood's stereotypical misrepresentations of Arabs displayed with the song "Captain Ahab the Arab," a live performance of an Arabic/Armenian music ensemble, a solo percussionist, and an actress performing the poetry of Hammad, in addition to a belly dance performance, songs of Om Kalthoum, projections of quotes by Edward Said, the reworking of Arabic music into a Hollywood Asian orientalist film, as well as projected images of Arab American celebrities who are part of the American mainstream.

The performance serves as an introduction to Arabs through music, images, songs, dance, and included teaching the audience basic Arabic rhythms and serving them olives during the recitation of a poem comparing different kinds of olives to different Arab countries. Though the main purpose of this performance is to present and normalize the experience of Arab Americans, by equating it with that of other groups and focusing on the similarities, it touches some of the contested topics like the veil, women's bodies and belly dancing, the post colonial condition and occupation. In the poem "They Think" Hammad engages with the American rhetoric regarding Arabs that asks, "why do they hate us?" and inverts the logic to present the Arabic perspective, correcting some of the misconceptions like Arabs are dirty, by mentioning that Muslims wash five times a day before their prayers. This poem lists some of the Arabic contributions to Western civilizations and poses some valuable questions:

> They say we are blood thirsty.
> Who dropped the atomic bomb?

> Who went to Vietnam?
> Where did the European Holocaust happen?
> Not in Jerusalem, not in Fez, not in Baghdad.
> Visit our suffering for once…
> Do you know anything about us,
> What you have done to us…
> Even what we have done to each other.
> What about our media
> Why do they hate us?[14]

Though the performance lacked a unified directorial vision, it presented some elements of the Arab identity: Arab sounds, music and dances, what Arabs eat, what they look like, and who Arab Americans are. It also juxtaposed quotes from Edward Said on representation with the way Arabs are presented in Hollywood films in extreme stereotypes, using the song of "Captain Ahab the Arab"

> Let me tell you bout Ahab the Arab, the sheik of the burning sand,
> He had emeralds and rubies just a-dripping off a him and a ring on every finger of his hand.
> He wore a big old turban wrapped around his head, a scimitar by his side.

The creators of *ReOrientalism* introduce their audience to some of the basic traits of this ethnic group, by trying to place the Arab American experience within the wider American context; meanwhile they problematize the representation of the Arabs in the Western Media, giving their audience some images of "regular" American celebrities and household names from Arabic descent to counterbalance the vilified mainstream media images of Arabs, leaving their audience with a wider range of ideas about Arabs and a

[14] Program notes for the performance, in the possession of the author.

literal taste of Arabness, through the olives they share with audiences in every performance.

ReOrientalism and *Flag Piece* foretell the direction of most of the Arab American theatre that follows in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Most performances follow either of these directions: on the one hand a search for an identity, an attempt to identify the self and explain the self to the other, or on the other hand an exploration of the complicated relationship of the self with the American culture. Some performances even tackle both topics, as the following chapters will show.

Chapter One: Autobiographical Performances

> "As a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices, autobiographical narration offers occasions for negotiating the past, reflecting on identity, and critiquing cultural norms and narratives."
> Sidone Smith & Julia Watson
> *Interfaces: Women/ Autobiography/ Image/ Performance*

In this chapter, I will discuss the work of three Arab American women theatre artists who use autobiographical performances as their mode of expression. In the twentieth century, autobiography became an increasingly important genre. Autobiographical performances emerged as part of the experimental theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, as a form of performance art. Many women artists, in their attempt to claim their artistic space, presented autobiographical works to express their unique experiences. In the rise of the women's movement and feminism, autobiographical solo performances or "autoperformances" [15] became a natural medium for women theatre and performance artists. This new form was significantly different from traditional theatre monologues, as Richard Schechner explains, "I don't mean monologues in the traditional sense of a one-person show, but in the more radical sense of using the person who is performing as the

[15] I use the term 'autoperformances' defined by Robert H. Vorlicky as "the convergence of autobiographical material, the physical presence of the individual, and the authorial "I" voice of the speaker" in his article "Marking Change, Marking America: Contemporary Performance and Men's Autobiographical Selves" in Jeffery D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, editors, *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 195.

source of the material being performed. Compressed into the single presence is author-director-performer." [16] Being the source of the material performed made autoperformances an obvious place for women's solo narratives: a space for telling their own stories, in their own words, through their own bodies.

Autobiographical theatre performances by women are more than just simple, transparent acts of mirroring the self, or of presenting narratives of the artist's life story. They involve a selective, self-representational process of heightened, condensed, well-chosen moments layered onto the multiple identities of the performers, providing a critique and a commentary on their assigned, as well as their chosen, roles. According to Peggy Phelan:

> Performance Art's most radical and innovative work often involves a thrillingly difficult investigation of autobiography. By rejuvenating the possible ways of presenting and representing the self, Performance Art has changed the notion of theatrical presence and widened the methods by and through which the self can be narrated, parodied, held in contempt, and/or made to be the source of revelatory vision and thought.[17]

Since "presenting and representing the self" were very important issues for women artists and performers, autobiographical performances became predominantly a medium for women.

Being both theatrical and personal was one of the "new approaches to the portrayal of characters' inner lives."[18] Having the woman's body in the theatrical space, in addition to using the first-person narrative, allowed the artists to "challenge the

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[16] Richard Schechner. *The End of Humanism: Writing on Performance.* (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 44.
[17] Peggy Phelan. "Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*: the Article." *Critical Texts* 5 (1988): 27-30, 28.
[18] Deborah Geis. *Postmodern Theatric[k]s: Monologues in Contemporary American Drama*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 37.

symbolic order by asserting themselves as 'speaking subjects,' in direct defiance of the patriarchal construction of discourse." [19] Since the 1960s, increasing numbers of women artists were willing to share their stories. According to Jeanie Forte, "the intensely autobiographical nature of women's performance has evidenced the insistence on a woman's ability to 'speak' her subjectivity."[20]

Since questions of identity and representations are central questions to Arab American women artists, autobiographical solo performance has been the approach favored by some of them. Like many other women solo artists, they represent themselves "in images created as alternatives to or comments upon the traditional images and roles they had inherited."[21] In their discussion of women's autobiographical performances Sidone Smith and Julia Watson propose that memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency are the main recurring themes in women's autobiographical works. In the case of Arab American autobiographical performances, these themes play a secondary role to the theme of conflict (political/ personal/ war situations/ genocide) the conflicting identities of the writer/performer, and her growth through political awareness.

In this chapter, I will explore how Arab American women solo performers use autobiography to foreground political stories from the home country, as well as to negotiate their identity while growing up between cultures. I will start by examining Suha Al Jurf's autobiographical solo performance *Pressing Beyond In Between*. Al Jurf's work is a clear example of the use of the personal autobiographical narrative to recount the

[19] Jeanie Forte. "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism." *Theatre Journal* 40.1988, 224.
[20] Forte, 224.
[21] Lenora Champagne. Introduction to *Out from Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990), xi.

larger political story of growing up Palestinian in the United States, and the influence of her various trips to Palestine on the shaping of her identity and sense of self. Then I will discuss Katie Leila Buck's *ISite,* which presents moments from her childhood in the Arab world, as well as some of the characters she encounters in the course of her journey. I will end by examining Nora Armani's usage of multiple identities throughout her autoperformance *On The Couch with Nora Armani*.

Soha A Jurf's *Pressing Beyond In Between*

Soha Al Jurf is a Palestinian American playwright and performance artist, born in Nablus, Palestine, and raised in Iowa City, in the United States. Al Jurf is a speech therapist and a trained opera singer. In her late twenties, she was struck by the lack of representation of the Muslim, Palestinian American woman's voice on stage; hence she made the decision to write her story as a performance piece. During the early stages of the writing, her aunt was killed in Palestine, and this incident became the central locus of the performance.

Pressing Beyond In Between is Al Jurf's first play. After performing it in different versions, in festivals, colleges and regional theatres, she decided to live in Palestine for one year, to connect with her roots. Upon her return to the United States, Al Jurf wrote two other one-act plays; the first, *Jalal Jalal*, is a two-character play revolving around the responses of an activist who just returned from Palestine upon seeing the body of one of her students on CNN. The second play is *Thong*, a short comedy for four characters about the exaggerated reactions of Arab American parents when they find a thong in their

teenage daughter's closet. These two plays are being revised by the playwright and have not yet been performed.

Unlike the two multi-character plays, *Pressing Beyond In Between* is an autobiographical theatre piece that the playwright performs herself, presenting her personal story and tracing her journey of growth. This solo performance explores the writer/performer's identity, her position between the two cultures, growing up as a second-generation Arab Muslim woman in America, as well as her relationship with her mother, her body, and her sexuality. One of Al Jurf's motives for portraying moments of her personal story is to politicize the personal through exposing some of the atrocities of the Israeli occupation in Palestine, especially through connecting her life to that of her aunt, who is killed in Palestine by Israeli soldiers. This performance could be seen an example of what Smith and Watson call " a form of resistance to assigned sexual and social roles."[22] The playwright uses the autobiographical mode to weave her personal story – negotiating an identity, and finding/defining a sense of self – onto the political narrative of the Palestinian struggle for independence. Al Jurf chooses to perform this play herself, in order to give voice to her aunt's story.[23] The aunt, who was a Palestinian peace activist, was shot by Israeli soldiers as she sat at the doorstop of her house in Nablus, Palestine. The writer/performer received the news of her aunt's murder while living in the United States and felt completely numb and helpless. Saddened by her loss, and not knowing how to express her anger and her rage, Al Jurf decided to intertwine her aunt's killing with her autobiographical one-woman performance. The writer uses the

[22] Smith, Sidone and Julia Watson, *Interfaces: Women/ Autobiography/ Image/ Performance.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 14.
[23] The program of the performance has a web address with more information about Abu Hejla, the peace activist's, life and death. (A copy of the program is in the possession of the author.)

theatrical space to recreate her connection with her aunt Shaden Abu Hejla, from her childhood until she hears the news of her aunt's death, thereby making the personal more political by creating a direct connection between her familial life and the explosive situation in Palestine. Al Jurf's personal life, which she enacts in front of the audience, is continuously shaped by the fact that she is Palestinian.[24]

The writer/performer uses religion as the starting point for her play. The performance begins during a visit to her relatives in the homeland. The first sound the audience hears is the engulfing sound of the call to prayer; then the performer enters the stage covered from head to toe in the Muslim attire (Hejab). Al Jurf examines the impact of presenting herself as a Muslim woman by scrutinizing her reflected image in an imaginary mirror in front of the audience:

> While my cousin went into the bathroom to perform the ritual washing, I caught a glimpse of my veiled image in the mirror; the image of a modern, Americanized woman, transformed into one of those mysterious Muslim figures you sometimes see, trailing after Saudi men with all of their luggage in tourist towns. Seeing my own veiled image reminded me that there are actual women under those veils.[25]

The technique of using a mirror serves Al Jurf in presenting multiple images of the self simultaneously. The audience visually sees the body of the performer covered in the Muslim attire, and, at the same time, they hear her surprise at her own reflected image,

[24] In the post show talkbacks Al Jurf mentions that her mother, who was living in the U.S. when she conceived her, traveled to Palestine to deliver her, so that the child would have a Palestinian identity card, and could have the "Right to Return". This leads to complications when the playwright lives in Ramallah in 2004-5. I attended the talkbacks during the Six Figures Theatre Company's Fifth Annual Artists of Tomorrow Festival at the West End Theatre, New York 27-28 September 2005.

[24] All references to the text are from an unpublished manuscript of Suha Al Jurf, *Pressing Beyond In Between*, in the author's possession.

and the insight she has about other women wearing the same garb. This rupture created between the self and the image of the self opens the space for questioning the self and its different representations, as well as others' projections and expectations. This is an example of how, throughout the performance, the playwright/performer moves seamlessly between the events of the outside world and the inside world of her feelings and reactions.

The performer's struggle with her identity as a Muslim woman is epitomized in her experience praying in a mosque during the Eid holiday prayer, and the tension between her feeling as an outsider and the spiritual transformation she feels as she takes part in the prayer. The spiritual connection she experiences with the Divine is disrupted by a stranger who insists that Al Jurf should hide the strand of hair showing through her head cover. This scene reveals two distinct attitudes towards religion: one is personal and spiritual, allowing the performer to experience a direct connection with God, while the other is mainly concerned with how the (female) body is presented during rituals. This is another example of how the performance alternates between the inner and outer worlds. The pull from the inner spiritual world because of the praying woman's limited interpretation of religion as a set of rules and restrictions, leads the performer to break away from the first image she presents of herself on stage as a covered woman. While saying, "God forbid I would actually reveal any part of this body into which I was born," in one sweeping movement she removes the veil to show her uninhibited body dressed in her second costume; a pair of slacks and a halter top that reveals most of the performer's back, neck, arms, and stomach. The quick shift from the covered body, with only the face showing, to the partly covered body acts as a shock to the audience that has accepted the

code the performer presents with her first costume. This rebellious quick change challenges the audience to see the "actual woman" under the veil and to confront the immediacy of her physical/ anatomical body in the intimate theatrical space. By liberating her body from the confinements of the veil the performer shows more agency in her self-representation, producing contrasting images of the self. Throughout the performance Al Jurf manages to reveal more than just the outline of her body; she peels away many of the layers of identity projected onto her.

Amelia Jones suggests that the obvious link between the artist and her body in visual and performance art is material and demands that both internal and external self, and self and other, be connected. Al Jurf creates these connections throughout the performance. She uses her body to question her multiple identities, which are layered within her imaginary anatomy and sociopolitical embodiment. The "use and adornment" of her body, she explains, "have been the subject of much contemplation and controversy throughout my life as a Muslim woman." The writer/ performer describes her body as "a complicated combination of Muslim restrictions, Arab traditions, Palestinian politics and American ideals. It's an elaborate collection of carefully-labeled boxes that have been pressed into me until they enclosed me." Al Jurf is aware of the labels and categorizations that society, family and tradition impose on her body as a woman. As a performer, she attempts to rupture these various embodiments in her negotiation of her multiple identities as a woman, as a Muslim, as an Arab, as a Palestinian and as an American. In many cases her political identity as a Palestinian is forced to the forefront. Whether she chooses or not, physically she embodies her genealogy: "I'm Palestinian. I never just talk about pot roast. The political reality that I represent is mapped into the cellular construct

of my skin, my eyes, my hair." This political/physical reality is presented through Al Jurf's enactment of her first journey, as a five-year-old, visiting the homeland.

On stage, she performs how her five-year-old body experienced the visit to Palestine for the first time and the humiliation she and her family experienced at the checkpoint at the hands of Israeli soldiers. A child's perspective makes it easier to show the absurdity of the situation at the checkpoint:

> My brother had just bought a new Rubix Cube before our trip, and I watched as the soldier tossed it into a bin filled with toothpaste and deodorant and other toys. My mother explained that the Israelis confiscated those items that they suspected might contain explosives. I was only five years old, but I remember thinking, "If he thinks there's a bomb in my brother's Rubix Cube, why is he casually tossing it into a bin two feet away from him, with all of the other potentially bomb-filled items?"

Similar to many autoperformances, *Pressing Beyond In Between* invites the audience to experience the world through the eyes of the performer, to be under her skin, and to journey with her through her experiences. Al Jurf expresses her sense of loss when, as a child, she was separated from her mother at the checkpoint. She conveys her feelings by going back to her body, which is then connected to her mother's body, naked in front of the soldier:

> One of these women placed her large, rough hand on my little arm, dragged me up to the soldier, pushed the soldier firmly aside, and ushered me into a dimly-lit corridor with a row of small dressing rooms. A curtain was lifted, and there was my mother, standing in her underwear, while a female soldier aimed a gun at her with one hand and waved a metal detector over her bare skin with the other.

The performer's trembling body, already feeling lost in a crowd of strangers, becomes more shaken by seeing her mother strip-searched. The performer moves from her five-year-old body to embody her mother in front of the Israeli soldier, as she is asked to hand over her sanitary towel. In one of the most uncomfortable moments of the performance, the performer represents her mother, as the audience shifts perspective to witness, through her five-year-old eyes, the mother being humiliated by the soldier.

In the following scene, the audience is introduced to the aunt, Shaden Abu Hejla, as well as to the grandmother. Al Jurf uses her body not only to map the conflict and to connect the separate identities, but also to embody her female genealogy through the consecutive portrayal of herself, her mother, her aunt and her grandmother. In the performance, the character of the mother and the aunt are contrasted. The performer's mother is a Palestinian woman who left the country to live in the United States, while the aunt refuses to leave even during the chaos of the Intifada:

> When I returned to Palestine the summer I was twelve, the first *Intifada* was beginning. Some of Khalto Shaden's neighbors were talking about leaving Palestine, to escape the chaos that would undoubtedly accompany the popular uprising. But Khalto Shaden wasn't budging. She stood firmly on the front steps of her house in Nablus, while tanks perused her children's playgrounds, and declared that the Israelis would have to kill her in her own home before they could ever force her out of Palestine.

Shaden Abu Hejla is presented as a symbol for resistance. The aunt is the woman/the land/the motherland/Palestine. Her position is clear politically and personally.

On the other hand, Al Jurf uses the character of her own mother to create comedy, with her exaggerated accent, strict attitude, and use of Arabic phrases that do not mean

much to the performer. The character of the mother is a reference point, as the person who lived in both cultures, and who embodies the paradigm of the old country, the Islamic traditions and dress codes, and the “dated” ideas. The character of the mother is at odds with the body of the performer. The revealed body of the performer, or her mention of a metaphorical nakedness creates a conflict with the mother who represents the rules, and the "other" way of living, referencing Qur’anic verses that are not intelligible to her daughter, and enforcing the rules. The mother is seen as confusing to the performer:

> My twelve-year-old mind quickly did the calculations, and concluded that a twelve-year-old girl is perfectly capable of liberating the people of Palestine, and if I don’t do it, then who will? I informed my mother that I would not be returning to the United States. I wanted to stay in the West Bank and fight.
>
> **“**Mom”:
>
> You want to stay where and fight what?
>
> Performer:
>
> I want to be a *fedayeea!*
>
> **“**Mom”:
>
> You want to be what?
>
> Performer:
>
> A freedom fighter. I want to join the struggle for the liberation of Palestine. At this point, my mother walked out of the room, shaking her head in disgust, leaving me in utter confusion. Wasn’t she the one who was bringing me here, to make me Palestinian? Shouldn’t she be proud of me?

There is no indication in the performance that the mother is proud of the writer/performer. The mother, who is not given a name apart from "Mom," is only criticizing the performer for what she says or does.

This scene is contrasted with the following scene when the performer, as an adult, is visiting a friend whose mother is interested in having a "dialogue" about the Middle East. The family scene in Palestine is paralleled by another family scene in the United States. The performer is out of place in both spaces: she is "other." In Palestine she is a child who is not part of the struggle of the people, because of the privilege of living outside the tormented land, and in the United States she is not seen as part of the mainstream because of her unusual name and affiliation. The performer exists in what Homi Bhabha calls "the third space."[26] She carves a space for herself mainly through her physical body that connects her to her femaleness as well as to her ancestry. Her body, whose genes are formed from Palestinian DNA, and whose life experiences are mainly American, carries the values of both cultures. In *Pressing Beyond In Between* Al Jurf writes a new history that connects both countries, a joint history that is mapped corporally as her body unites the two existences. This personal history offers competing narratives with no set reference point, without a single fixed authentic self, but with many layers of performative selves instead.

It is significant that all the characters in this performance are women. *Pressing Beyond In Between* is a woman's narrative, starting with the cousin having her period and the performer deciding to go to the Eid prayers alone: "I hadn't intended to go to the mosque to begin with, but now I felt as if I had to go, if only to exercise my privilege as a

[26] homi bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

non-menstruating woman." It then moves through the female genealogy of the performer and her connection to the motherland. Not only are the main characters in this performance all female, but the oppressive characters in the performance are women as well – the fearful Palestinian peasant women at the borders, the Israeli officer, and the friend's mother. There is no mention of the performer's father in the performance, and the brief mention of a lover is more an abstract idea rather than a real person; the lover does not even have a name. The whole performance is embedded in the performer's female body and in the world of women. It is interesting to note that some of the sections that were removed from the text were about an uncle, male cousins, and a male dentist, making the play exclusively about women.

Since the early performances of the play in 2003, the playwright/ performer has made substantial changes to the performance text, adding and removing various parts of the performance for various reasons. The final version of September 2005 includes more details explaining the characters' actions and reactions, which gives the audience a glimpse of the world through Palestinian eyes.

The first example is during the checkpoint scene. In the later text Al Jurf added, a segment about the Israeli soldier insisting that the mother hand over her female sanitary pad. The humiliation and the awkwardness of this situation push the realities of the occupation to the forefront. Another example is adding a new section about a cousin's death at age seventeen, after working with the resistance for five years. This short scene serves to present the struggles of children in Palestine during the Intifada, while giving Al Jurf the basis she needs to inform her mother that she is not planning to return to high school in the United States because she intends to be a freedom fighter.

More interesting is what was removed from the performance. The earlier versions of performance text included long sections about Al Jurf's reaction to her aunt's murder, what she was feeling and not feeling, and how her friends were more enraged than she was:

> But, this is my rage. I am showing it to you. It's what's under the manipulation of thought and word, the subtle game of giving, taking, never anything enough. It's the limit on the vastness, the border of the eternity, but what is underneath? It is the pain beneath the indifference, the part that wants to get through. The part that is desperate to be free. It's mixed in and muddled up with the helplessness.. with the resignation. I am Palestinian. Palestinians are killed every day. What do you want me to say? I don't want to serve as the representative for an entire people. I want to talk about pot roast. My aunt was Palestinian. Palestinians are killed every day. Let's talk about music or art. What am I supposed to do? Nothing can be done. Let's talk about independent films. Nothing can be done.

In the later version, this section and other similar parts were removed. The text of the performance was altered to reflect the changes in the life of the writer/ performer signaling her growth and the change in her approach to conflict. Al Jurf is influenced by her performance, which acts as a tool for her own healing. After months of repeating these lines in performance, I believe that she did not need them any more, as her grief for her aunt changed shape, especially after living in Palestine.

Al Jurf explains the reason behind removing this section from the play saying:

> As far as my rage is concerned...maybe I haven't found a way yet to tell a quick, clear, articulate story that will illustrate my rage. It's hard to capture rage, since, by

> definition, it seems to require a lack of some sort of self-awareness to experience it. The epitome of writing is that ability to have a meta-awareness of the situation you are in while you are experiencing it. That meta-awareness of the observer will, by its nature, diffuse rage. I'm still working on how to remember rage after it has occurred, to capture its essence later. That is also why I felt I needed an Act II; the seed of Act I was written from a place of compassion. I did not feel rage when my aunt was killed. I felt a connectedness with the universe.[27]

After spending a year in Palestine Soha Al Jurf wrote new sections about visiting the aunt's house after her death and meeting the Israeli activist who started a peace organization in response to Abu Hejla's death and named her own daughter "Shaden" after her. Yet, in the final version of the text as it was performed in 2005 in New York, these two additions were removed from *Pressing Beyond In Between*. After discussing the many events and emotions Al Jurf experienced during her long stay in Palestine, I suggested that the playwright/performer write about these experiences in a separate piece, which could be presented as Act Two of the play or as a separate play.[28]

Al Jurf's performance introduces the audience to the world of a Palestinian woman who is simultaneously negotiating her multiple identities: Arab, Palestinian, Muslim, and American. By developing the aunt's story, she offers the audience a human face to a political issue while attempting to provide more context to the question most Palestinian American face: "What do you think about suicide bombers?" It also sheds light on some of the intriguing concerns about Arabs and Muslims, especially women.

[27] Email exchange with Al Jurf, 2 November, 2005.
[28] I collaborated with Al Jurf and directed *Pressing Beyond In Between* presented by Six Figures Theatre Company's Fifth Annual Artists of Tomorrow Festival at the West End Theatre, New York 27-28 September 2005.

The performance also acts as a means of opening a discussion about some of the current political issues, and the talkback at the end of every performance allows the audience to probe and to ask for more details.

This performance is successful with both Arab American audiences and the general public, because Al Jurf gives voice to many of the problems Arabs experience growing up between two cultures, which are rarely discussed in art, or in public in general. The characters she embodies are lively, approachable, and often comedic. It is easy to sympathize with Al Jurf's troubles in her search for her self. The tension between her and her mother could be compared to that of any young woman growing up and trying to experience life independently from her family. Politically, *Pressing Beyond In Between* succeeds in portraying some of the turmoil of the life of Palestinians living under occupation. And for the general American audience, the performance sheds light on the life of a Muslim woman living in the West, as it answers some of the questions surrounding the veil. Toward the end of the performance, the personal is overshadowed by the political as the focus shifts to the death of the aunt, and to how the performer and American society deal with it. Al Jurf turns her performance and her body into a vehicle to share the story of her aunt and her people with the audience.

Temporally, Al Jurf starts her play in the near past, then moves backwards to some significant moments of her childhood – her visits to her relatives in Palestine at ages five and twelve – then moves forward to the moment of her aunt's death and what follows. In *Pressing Beyond In Between* the performer enacts each section of the play as if it is happening in the present moment, then she offers a commentary on it. After enacting segments of her life as they happened (or as she chooses to present them), the

writer/performer then offers a commentary on them from her current perspective, shifting from being the main character sharing her autobiographical narrative, to being a guide for the audience who helps it have insight into her world, how her mind worked as a child, how she felt in a particular situation, or how her family reacted to her.

Geographically, the performance moves between two locations: the United States and Palestine. Both places offer an insight into the psyche of the hybrid identity of the writer/performer: "though I spent relatively little time in the Middle East, those memories shaped me." Then the two worlds collapse into one, similar to the pressing that erases borders referred to in the play's title. These two distinct geographical spaces are merged into one in the life/psyche of the performer. The collapse happens when the aunt dies, which is an event in the country of origin directly affecting people in the host country. This merging is paralleled in other parts of the play.

The title of the performance, *Pressing Beyond In Between*, is derived from the scene where Al Jurf describes the melting of physical boundaries when pressing against the body of the beloved. She later compares the space between the bodies of lovers to that between nations, and is surprised the results are not similar. The pressing between nations, in this case Palestine and Israel, creates more boundaries. Al Jurf feels that the pressing between nations most often creates a boundary.

> Why is it, that, when I press my body against another human being, the boundary disintegrates, but, when nations are pressed together, they just keep pushing until a boundary is formed? Maybe it's because nations don't start out the process by being completely naked in one another's presence.

There are apparent parallels between the personal and the political in this comparison. Eventually both paradigms are blended as the political becomes extremely personal through the writer/performer's embodiment of her loss and grief for her aunt. All the layers of identity the performer moves through at the beginning of the performance are condensed to one: her political identity. Al Jurf's acute awareness of being Palestinian and the attempt to give voice to this cause becomes the focus of the last section of the performance. In this contest, the title of the play *Pressing Beyond In Between* depicts her search for a space to exist in between the conflicting sides. It summarizes the central balance of the play between the personal and the political, the search to find the space in between, a space in which the performer and those with hybrid identities can attempt to live in peace.

Leila Buck's *ISite*:

The second autobiographical performance I will discuss is Kathryn (Katie) Leila Buck's one-woman performance *ISite*. Buck, who is Lebanese American, interestingly, spent part of her childhood in Arab countries, not because of her Lebanese mother but thanks to her American father's diplomatic posts. She wrote the first drafts of her first play *ISite* in 1998, as part of her college acting graduation project, and later expanded the play and started touring with it. Since 9/11, and because of the growing need to understand Arabs, Buck has performed her piece in many festivals, colleges and conferences, mainly in the United States, but also in France, Belgium, Canada, Finland and China. She often uses the performance to introduce her audience to the Arab world

and follows the play with a talkback with the audience. Sometimes, she uses her performance as part of workshops on diversity and on living between two cultures.

Katie Buck, who works as a teaching artist in New York City schools, identifies herself mainly as an actor. She is one of the six original actors forming Nibras, the Arab American theatre collective discussed in the following chapter of this dissertation. Her work with Nibras galvanized her interest in oral history, which led her to start a project collecting and performing the stories of Arab and Arab American women, *Nisaa*. Currently, she is writing a new play (*Hakini*) about language and the loss of memory, based on her Lebanese grandmother's experiences, and developing *In the Crossing* about her experience in Lebanon during the war in 2006.

In 2004, Buck spent the summer in Lebanon studying the Arabic language. Upon her return to New York, she decided to change her name, and started using her middle name "Leila" as a first name. In the rest of this chapter I will refer to the artist using her current name, Leila Buck. The change of name epitomizes the search for identity that a number of second-generation Arab American artists went through, especially after 9/11. Living between two cultures – the culture(s) of the parents and the American culture the young artist is growing up in – artists often negotiate a fluid sense of identity, sometimes belonging to both cultures at once, other times not finding a place in either culture, and in some cases forming a unique third culture based on elements of both heritages. As a result of 9/11 and the creation of an image of Arabs as the enemy in the political and public discourse (reflected in the "Axis of Evil" and "War on Terror," and the actual wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) many Arab American artists wanted to connect to the Arabic

part of their heritage, to be identified as Arab, and to present Arabic-themed material.[29] In the case of Leila Buck, this is reflected in her desire to strengthen her Arabic language, to spend time in her mother's land, Lebanon, and to change her name as a marker of the alliance the artist desires to suggest and the image she wishes to project – that of an Arab.[30] This new (formed) identity, signaled by the new name, becomes more important when Buck acts as the sole representative of Arabic culture in many places where she performs her play, *ISite*.

The autobiographical performance *ISite* is structured as a journey of the artist into her past, where she revisits some of her formative moments as a child and young adult. The play is divided into sixteen short scenes, varying in length from a few lines to a few pages. This voyage is clearly indicated by the titles of the first and last scenes: "Take off" and "Touching Ground." The journey starts before the writer/performer is born; the first line of the performance is "I took my first international flight in the womb."[31] This short first scene ends with the question that sets the play in motion: "But where is home?" This performance could be seen as an attempt to answer that question for the artist, and for Arab Americans, especially for those with hybrid parents, who belong partially to both cultures and fully to none.

To answer the question "where is home?" Leila Buck takes the audience on a tour that spans significant geographical locations and central moments in her personal history, starting with her naming, in the second scene, "The Middle." Her American father

[29] This tendency by artists is contrary to what many Arabs and Muslims living in the United States did after 9/11: hiding their identities as Arabs and trying to pass as American or Latino/a often changing their names so as not to be identified as Arabs (Mohamed become Moe, etc.).
[30] In an interview with the artists 23 April, 2006 she commented on changing her name saying, "I wanted to represent, to be a face for Arab Americans and to be in solidarity with other Arabs."
[31] All references to text are to the unpublished manuscript of the play, a copy of which is in my possession.

suggests giving her an Arabic first name, and her Lebanese mother insists that the baby should have an American name. The mother's reasoning is "I want her to feel like she belongs, as an American just like you." To explore the sense of "belonging" Buck portrays a scene where, as a five-year-old, she is playing in a sandbox with other children, who mock her because she is singing in Arabic. In this third scene titled "Tongue Tied" the children identify Buck as "other":

> What are you, Arabic? Don't you know those people are dirty? Camel! Camel! Katie is a Camel! Camels smell.

Buck's five-year-old self decides to block that part of her identity and asks her mother to stop speaking to her in Arabic. In the same scene, the performer embodies her adult self as she is being questioned and criticized by a Lebanese relative for the lack of her working Arabic language. This part of the scene is presented in both Arabic and English; the relative (performed by Buck) speaks in Arabic, with a few English words, while the protagonist responds in English, defending herself. Her frustration at the lack of communication because of her limited knowledge of Arabic and her uncomfortable place between the two cultures is theatrically translated in the recorded voice in both English and Arabic, in the fashion of language learning tapes; "Where are you from?...min whayn anta? Min Whayn inti?" These last words of the scene reiterate the central question of the play: Where is home?

In scene four, "Passing," the performer experiences a sense of belonging during a visit to her parents who are posted in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Paradoxically, she feels a sense of belonging when she is hidden. Covered in "an abaya and ghata – body and head coverings" – the performer goes out with her mother to experience the local market. This belonging depends upon her silence. Her conditional belonging – "As long as I remain

silent, I belong" – is contrasted with another scene, set a few weeks later in the U.S., where Buck is walking in a housing settlement in Ocean City, Maryland. She describes people in the area as friendly, then wonders if they would be as friendly if her skin were darker and her accent "from somewhere farther away." Contrasting these locations within the same scene creates a sense of conditional existence in both worlds. So long as the writer/performer is silent and her "white" face is covered she can feel a sense of belonging in the Saudi market. This same "white" face is the reason she is accepted in the Maryland neighborhood. Though the performer is contrasting the two worlds, it is not difficult to recognize where she fits physically, and where she does not. Yet there is still tension within these categories. While in the market in Jeddah, she describes her eyes as both "foreign yet familiar" and she is amazed how well she passes for an Arab, under her head and body cover and the veil of silence. Buck wonders how covered women's children recognize them, and finds it "sad" that children identify their covered mothers through their shoes or smell. This musing immediately places her outside the culture in which she is seeking a sense of belonging. "I always find this so sad" re-positions Buck as an American, viewing the culture from the outside and placing a judgment on it. Although she looks like the other "covered" women in the Saudi market, she is separated from them because of the way she sees them.

The performer juxtaposes her experiences of walking in the Saudi market then in American streets. Her portrayal of a peaceful American neighborhood represents an "American Dream" of the private housing neighborhood with friendly people in the yards of their houses, birds on trees, "Porsches and pick-ups in the driveways." Whereas her

depiction of the Saudi streets suggests an "Arabian Nights" atmosphere of the Orient, focusing on the unfamiliar smells, sounds and tastes;

> Walking through the souk….I smell the garbage and the dates and the anis. I taste halawa…I hear the laughter and arguing over this or that price.

Her question, as she begins to take off her cover "So what makes me who I am? Is it my style? My hair? My Shoes? Or my Smell? Which do I want my children to remember?" is left unanswered as she moves through the American neighborhood and then to the next scene.

Continuing the search for her linage, the short fifth scene, "E Pluribus Unum," is a shift from Buck's voice to that of her Lebanese grandmother. Teta (the colloquial Arabic word for "grandmother") is being sworn in as an American citizen and is telling the performer and the audience why she loves America. This scene is performed to the background music of the American national anthem. After describing an idyllic scene of Independence Day the grandmother recounts what the judge, who was swearing them in, said:

> Preserve your heritage. It is because of dis dat we are richer dan <u>any</u> oder country, and our mind and heart are open to <u>any</u>ting. Just <u>keep</u> your <u>cul</u>ture, your <u>language</u>, your food, your beli<u>efs</u>, and <u>teach</u> dem, to your children. You are A<u>mer</u>icans now and <u>dat</u> is what made this country great.[32]

The tone of this scene also marks a shift from the performer's sharing of her personal autobiographical story, to the educational aspect of the play. Part of the mission of the

[32] Buck underlines words or parts of words in the text of the play to indicate the specific accent of her grandmother.

play is to educate the audience. This is highlighted at the end of the scene, where the "Star Spangled Banner" sound is immediately followed by the recorded language learning tape saying, "I am from the United States of America. Ana min al wulayaat al mutahida al Amreekeya."

The educational tone is echoed in the following scene, "Family," where the performer literally attempts to teach the audience the different Arabic words for every type of cousin, writing the words in Arabic on a board. This scene is also an exploration of the meaning of "home," during which the performer visits her American grandmother, who has been moved to a nursing home because of Alzheimer's disease.

Buck embodies her Lebanese grandmother, in the seventh scene, "Food," offering the audience a "platter of Lebanese finger goodies." While distributing the food to the audience, Buck recalls memories of food in her own childhood. Then she resumes the role of her grandmother, narrating a story about living in England that illustrates the ignorance of people at the time, about the location of Lebanon, and children's prejudices against Buck's mother. Teta recounts a frustrating discussion about the location of Lebanon with the principal of her husband's school at Scotland Yard. When the principal confuses it with Egypt, Teta tries to specify the location by referring to Cyprus. After failing in that attempt she says, "You know where Israel is? Yes, OK, we are north of Israel." The tension around using Israel as a geographical reference point is tackled through humor.

The eighth scene, "Small Talk," expands on the topic of the perceptions of Westerners about Arab countries. The entire scene is structured as a conversation at a party between the playwright/performer and her hosts, the Socialite and her Husband.

This comical scene shows more clearly Western assumptions and prejudices about Lebanon. When the Socialite expresses her "adoration" for Morocco, comparing it to "Club Med," Buck introduces another piece of family history – her mother's family is originally from Morocco. Then the conversation moves to Lebanon, and how it is "Very French, quite civilized." Tension arises when the Husband expresses his "concern about their level of advancement." The Socialite tries to defuse the situation, describing Lebanon as "precious" and asks if they have Club Med there for their next adventure.

The following scene, "Natural Woman,"[33] is one of three scenes in *ISite* where the writer/performer chooses to shift from the autobiographical mode to clarify her point through other narratives. However, there is thematic continuity between "Small Talk" and the ninth scene, "Natural Woman," as both reflect on how the Western mind sees the East. Both scenes involve a comparison between the performer's two cultures: Arabic and Western. Scene nine puts these cultures in direct contrast with each other in regard to the often-contested topic of women's bodies. Currently, some of the wars in the Middle East are being fought with the justification of liberating the women of these countries. This is a common orientalist mechanism: to invade an area in order to rescue the "oriental" woman from the "oriental" man. Buck uses this scene to shed light on the hypocrisy of the Western culture's superior position in regards to Arab culture.

In "Natural Woman," the performer portrays a college student who is miming getting dressed, while speaking on the phone to a friend. The stage directions of this scene read:

[33] Leila Buck often performs this scene separately.

> *As she speaks she is constantly primping, tweezing, applying makeup, drying and crimping hair, stockings, tight dress, ridiculous zippers, painful shoes, tweezing, shaving, push-up bra, and any other activities that symbolize the daily trials women go through in America.*

The performer's physical activities, in preparing her body to have the desired look, while discussing her classmates' anorexia, and dress codes, offer a comedic commentary on how Western women manipulate their appearance to conform to their cultural codes. This is directly contrasted with the supposed restrictions imposed on Muslim women, exposing the hypocrisy of the Western culture;

> Can you imagine, Muslim women can't just leave their houses as they are?! . . . . It is just so hard to believe that there are countries where women's bodies are treated like objects to be controlled and scrutinized for the benefit of men!

The comedic characteristic of the scene is highlighted through the use of the song "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" as the performer struggles to fit into tight constricting clothes.

The shift from "Natural Woman" to the tenth scene, "When I Was Omani," is not as smooth as the changes between the earlier scenes of *ISite*. There is no clear connection between these two scenes, and no textual preparation for the change of scene and subject matter. "When I was Omani" signals a return to the autobiographical; as it resumes exploring the liminal space inhabited by a child growing between two cultures. As a child, Buck spent a few years in Oman, where she believed she was Omani. Oman is the place she returns to again at the end of the play, in her search for connections between the different locations of the performance/her life.

This transitions to the eleventh scene, “Jeddo,” where Buck draws a portrait of her maternal grandfather, Jeddo, and narrates how he lost some of his soul when he uprooted himself from Lebanon to come to the United States. She compares him to the blue spruce tree he planted in his garden in Washington. She describes the last time she saw him, as he starved himself to death in a nursing home. In one of the most moving moments of the play Buck addresses her grandfather saying;

> Jeddo, I cry for your silence, and I'm sorry for your pain. I wish I could know how you felt here, so far away from the world that you knew. Through your death I learned the danger of clinging so strongly to one sense of yourself that without it you would cease to be.

The playwright believes that her grandfather is a part of her that she didn't know, saying “I can just find myself, if I can find the Leila in me.. then I can reach you.” Though Leila Buck changed her name from Katie, she still names her character in the play “Katie.” Finding “the Leila” is finding her Arabic roots, through which she can connect to her Lebanese Grandfather in spirit.

From the grandfather’s story the play shifts to that of the grandmother. “Searching for Eve,” the twelfth scene, traces Buck’s maternal ancestors, from her own grandmother, Teta, to her great-grandmother, Habouba, to humanity’s grandmother, Eve. This scene stems from a real experience the writer went through, when she was in Jedda, Saudi Arabia, and went on a search to find the tomb of Eve. She explains how the guards of the cemetery harass her and her mother:

> One of these men barks at my mother in Arabic, and while his words are unfamiliar, his tone is not. And although I am halfway across the world, I know exactly where I stand: I

> am the babe in the bar, the chick in the club, and the ass in the ad: I am the object of TEMPTATION.

This part of scene twelve resonates with scene nine "Natural Woman," connecting the place of women in society on both sides of the Atlantic.

In her real life experience Buck was not able to find Eve's grave, yet in *ISite*, she finds Eve's tomb, which is created on stage through the use of a small mirror that reflects the face of the performer, as well as some of the audience members. The playwright addresses Eve, asking her many questions that are left unanswered, and offers her an apple, "I like apples too. I brought you one, for old times' sake." To end the scene, the playwright/performer places photos of some iconic women throughout history around Eve's grave to "keep her company," then takes a big bite of the apple, and places it in front of the mirror.

Though the seed of this scene stems from an autobiographical experience, it does not connect organically to the rest of the play, particularly in its tone and style of writing.[34] The next two scenes depart completely from the personal story to educate the audience about Arabs and Muslims. Scene thirteen, "Prayer," is controversial, as the performer, who declares that she is not Muslim, nevertheless, attempts to "perform" the Muslim prayer. She describes the call to prayer as one of the beautiful sounds of her childhood. While her voice recites the call to prayer, her body does a partial imitation of the Muslim prayer "in her own way." Combining the two is not a faithful representation of the Muslim tradition since the call and the prayer do not occur concurrently.

[34] The playwright informed me that she wrote this scene before she wrote the play and adapted it later to *ISite*.

The performer's prayer is interrupted by the sound of gunfire. Although earlier she criticized how the Muslim prayer is portrayed in the American media – "In the U.S. we only hear a snippet of it, usually as background to the news of suicide bombing or the rise of Islamic fundamentalism," – Buck, in this scene, recreates the same association between Islam and violence. Without contextualizing this, the play moves directly to scene fourteen, "Sibling Rivalry," which describes the violence her cousin witnesses while visiting Palestine, then quickly mentions the Intifada, and the fact that Arabs and Jews are both Semites, inserting a phrase about Buck's husband, who is from a Jewish family. This scene does not fit in the overall structure of the play. The performer apparently feels compelled to address the Arab Israeli conflict as part of her concern to connect to the American audience. Yet, "Sibling Rivalry" seems to be tacked on to the play, as the obligatory mention of Israel and of Jews in any matter relating to Arabs. This short scene starts with the sound of gunfire and ends with the sound of air raid siren creating a perfect transition from one conflict to the next, as the scene moves from Palestine to Iraq.

The longest scene of the play, scene fifteen, "Courage Under Fire," depicts part of the playwright/performer'a childhood in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, during her family's diplomatic post in Iraq "as part of the U.S. support for Saddam's government." Fittingly, the scene begins with a loud thudding sound and Buck saying:

> They say that if you hear a scud land, you're okay. (With Ironic humor) And if you don't, well you're dead, so don't worry about it. Welcome to Baghdad.

After relating some of the antics of the diplomatic community in receptions and parties during the war, the playwright recounts some of her experiences as a child during the

attacks. This scene has the only Arab character in play who is not part of Buck's lineage, the family's cook, Jassem. He is portrayed as "one of the few Iraqis… who smiled." As a "miracle worker,", in spite of the scarcity of war-time, he is "hunched over a bowl of nothing, making the best with whatever he was given." The sixty-year-old man is "the only man in his family not dead or at war," so his job supports all his sisters, daughters and grandchildren.

In this scene, Buck compares her experiences during two Iraqi wars, as a child in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, and as a thirteen-year-old living in Canada watching the American bombing of Iraq. The humor of the first part of the scene is replaced by a sense of frustration and rage at seeing her childhood district be being bombed.

> I recognize the target. It's the guard tower that stood less than six blocks from my house. *(Rising from her seat in anger at the Television)* Military target?! That's the Mansour district, Norm. People live there! I know because I did. We passed that tower every day on the way to and from school and I'm watching my country blow it to bits on CNN?!

The playwright gives the impact of the war a human face as she connects the military target to the people she knew in Iraq, like "the family that found our dog Pepper when she was lost, fed her oranges and spoiled her for days," and "the muezzin who called us five times a day from the mosque across the street." She wonders if Jassem, her family's cook, survived the attacks.

This scene gets its title from a film by the same name, *Courage Under Fire*, which portrays the Gulf War, and references the same guard tower "just blown away as backdrop to the tragic friendly fire deaths of what, two Americans? Three?" The

playwright/performer expresses her anger about the perspective of war presented in the American media: “Never mind the hundreds of Iraqis scattered across the battlefield, two Americans died, let’s make a movie!” As Buck sits in the movie-theatre watching the film, she reflects on the strange feeling of being “surrounded by people crying just like me and realize we are mourning different people.” Then she shifts from the general political scene to the personal as the scene ends with a tribute to Jassem, by placing a candle for him while saying, “And I think of Jassem …. And all I can say, is that we don’t know the first thing about *real* courage under fire.”

In later performances of this play, Buck added an optional monologue to the scene commenting on the current war in Iraq and referring to the hybrid identity of the performer, “I have a hard time keeping up with all the horrors in Baghdad today – watching two countries that are a part of me collide.” The new ending of the scene reflects on the lives being lost in Iraq.

> We all know the names of Americans killed in Baghdad, and I mourn them, as I mourn the loss of any life. But today I want to share with you a name that has been a part of my life, and will always be. So this candle is for Jassem, and all the thousands like him whose names we will never know.

Buck kneels before the candle, as she did for the Muslim prayer, and says to the candle representing Jassem “Ma’a salam. Go with peace,” indicating that he must have died in the new war. In this scene the playwright/performer connects her life and personal experiences to the conflicting world she lives in, offering an insightful commentary on the impact of war on human lives. Meanwhile, she offers the audience an insight on the effect of the American wars on the lives of Iraqis, by invoking the character of Jassem. It

is worth noting that the only Arab character in the play, who is not a relative, is the family's servant, which reflects the performance's obliviousness to class relationships.

In the final scene "Touching Ground," the playwright revisits her childhood, playing on the sandy beach, by the ocean in Oman. She perceives the ocean as a unifying element of all the shores it touches. The ocean becomes a metaphor for the playwright/performer herself,

> Sometimes I feel like the ocean – (*She steps into the pool, holding its sides as she crouches there*.) It's touching so many shores at once that forms the shape of who I am.

The image of the ocean touching many shores seems to be the answer to the play's initial question "where is home?" The answer provided in the final scene is:

> We all take our shape from the lands that we touch. That's what home is I guess -- where you make contact with the earth.

This resolves the main quest of the play: the search for home and the negotiation of the performer's hybrid identity. The play ends with the performer carrying her suitcase as an indicator of her diasporic condition. Yet, despite of the classical, physical image of the diaspora, marked by the suitcase, emotionally, the playwright/performer finds a sense of home, through her identification with the ocean, in her contact with the many shores that shape her.

Overall, Leila Buck's one-woman solo performance, *ISite*, offers a sketch of several pivotal moments and characters in the life of the playwright/performer. Through the personal stories, Buck introduces the audience to some aspects of the Arabic culture and language, and comments on some of the bigger political questions. In the span of this

one-act play, the playwright raises fundamental questions regarding the diasporic condition, and offers insights into the interweaving of the personal and the political, especially through her unique position, and hybrid identity, as an Arab American, growing up in Arab countries where her American diplomat father is posted. Because of the wide range of themes Buck is attempting to cover in this play, she touches some of the issues without delving deeply into their complexities.

Nora Armani's *On The Couch With Nora Armani*:

The third performance I wish to examine in this chapter is *On The Couch With Nora Armani*. Nora Armani, who is of Armenian descent, was born and raised in Egypt. She decided to travel to Europe to study, then to the United States to try her luck as an actor in Hollywood. Although Armani is not Arab by blood, she is culturally Arab and she is the only writer discussed in this thesis who is a fluent Arabic speaker. Ethnically Armani refers to herself as "Egyptian, Armenian, American," as the flyer for her performance *On The Couch With Nora Armani* proudly advertises. This one-woman autobiographical play is also the first play Armani has written. She, meanwhile, had a long career as a stage and film actor in Egypt and Europe. Her play, which is a musing on love, career and the performer's diasporic existence, is thematically divided into two parts: the personal experiences, and the ancestors' stories. The writer/performer structures the play in the form of a journey on which the audience accompanies her as she recounts some highlights of her life: "let's hold hands and leap into the Wonderful World of Nora Armani." [35]

[35] All references to the play are to an unpublished manuscript, in the possession of the author.

As a performer, Nora Armani has a warm stage presence, and the format of the play – a chat with a woman on her couch, in the style of television talk shows – sets the scene for this informal atmosphere. The performance begins with a direct address to the audience, in which Armani invites everyone to share some of her favorite plays and poems, and encourages them to laugh or applaud. Then the performer refers to some of her frustrations when as she attempted to 'make it' in Hollywood as an actor, and to the main issues actors face there:

> It all boils down to appearance, identity and belonging. Who are you? Who do you know? And especially who knows *you*? Where do you come from?

These questions seem to address the complicated issue of identity. But, as this play is not primarily concerned with the search for identity, Armani quickly offers her answer to all these questions:

> I already come with a category all my own and no one knows about it: a female, born in Egypt of Western Armenian parents, educated in England, lived primarily in the USA and in France, with shorter passages in a host of other countries which we won't go into, fluent in several languages, two of which mother tongues, and *(taking on a sexy pose)* endowed with a host of special physical attributes.

Most of the first half of the play is dedicated to the actor's relationship with an old lover, who is supposed to be in the audience attending the performance.[36] This technique

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[36] Coincidently, when Armani performed her play for the first time in the United States, at the Segal Center of CUNY Graduate Center, one of the audience members was, in fact, an old lover of hers. Since then, she has reunited with him, and relocated from Europe to live with him in New York.

gives Armani a chance to recount some of her love interests, interspersing them with five poetry recitations, ranging from Shakespearian sonnets to contemporary Armenian poems, adding some crude jokes regarding men's use of toilet seats in different cultures.

The play changes tone completely in the second half, where Armani starts to tell some of the true stories of her ancestors' lives, struggles and deportation from Armenia in the 1910s, and their migration to Egypt. Later, she refers to the political atmosphere of Nasser's Egypt and the mass exodus of minorities in the 1950s. Even the nature of the humor changes in this part of the play because it stems from the family situations. In addition to sharing some of her memories as a child growing up in Egypt, the playwright recounts how her grandparents flee Armenia and eventually met in Egypt. She starts with the historical coincidence that brought her paternal grandfather to Egypt in 1914. After he missed the ship heading from the port on the Bosphorus to America, instead of waiting for another the following day, he boarded a ship that was headed for Alexandria on the Egyptian shores.

In this section of *On the Couch with Nora Armani*, the writer/performer presents a comedic depiction of some of the traditions of the Armenian community in Egypt in the early twentieth century. An example is the account of her grandfather embarking on a "wife hunt" and making *akhchigndess* (girl viewing) visits. Armani describes the protocol of these visits in details, offering an insight into how this cultural institution operated:

> Finally, the prospective mother-in-law, in order to show off her daughter's obedience, ordered her to serve the coffee. 'Akhtchig sourdjeh per!'[37]. . . . For her the most important thing was not to trip and fall or spill the coffee on her suitor unless of course she wanted to get rid of him. Then he

[37] Girl, bring the coffee. (Armenian)

> would taste the coffee she served him. Too sweet meant she liked him. Sour meant she couldn't stand him. But the girl's *real* interest lay in getting it just right because that was the coffee he was to drink for the rest of his life if ever he married her!

The tragic Armenian history also finds its place in this play, and Nora Armani swiftly moves from the comic depiction of "girl visits" to the massacres of the genocide the performer's maternal grandmother experienced:

> Her father, my great-grandfather, was a priest in Kayseri, in Anatolia. He was executed by hanging in 1915 at the onset of the massacres. His surviving kin were his wife and four daughters, my grandmother being the eldest. The five women had no choice, they had to leave; my grandmother held her baby in her arms. Her husband, my grandfather, was separated from them, along with all the other men in the village, recruited to dig trenches for Turkish troops or mass graves for themselves.

After describing how the performer's grandmother, who was a schoolmistress in her village, led the children through a secret passageway to a basement classroom used for the instruction of the forbidden Armenian language, Armani shares the ritual experience her grandmother and the children had every summer greeting the fruit trees at the beginning and the end of the season, bringing to life, on stage, some of the Armenian traditional songs and dances. Then the tone shifts to the forebodings of the autumn of 1914, as villagers said good-bye forever to the trees and the land which bore them:

> They were deported. She was deported, like millions of her compatriots. The march in the desert, the starvation, the

> selling of goods then bodies, the rapes, the massacres and other forms of man's inhumanity to man, had finally come to end with their arrival in Aleppo train station. Trainloads of Armenians were brought there from villages and towns along the rail tracks.

After Armani recounts this moving historical moment on stage, she connects it to her personal history, as her grandparents were re-united in Aleppo train station before they settled in Egypt.

The writer/performer interrupts the ancestors' narrative to get a tea tray, to revisit the love story with the man in the audience, and to count her alphabetical list of lovers. The blending of the personal and the political continues through the second-generation of Armani's lineage story, with her parents' courtship was marked by the political turmoil in Egypt before the 1952 revolution. Even the performer's birth is interwoven in the political history of the country of her birth, Egypt:

> France and Great Britain declared war and backing Israel attacked Egypt by land, sea and air. Nasser proceeded with further nationalization in the country and let down by both the UK and USA, finally turned eastward for support. That's when I was born.

On the Couch with Nora Armani then relates, in a humorous commentary, the mass exodus of the minorities from Egypt in the late fifties and early sixties, and how this affected the writer/performer.

The personal narrative proceeds to recount Armani's final departure, in hope of solving her problem of belonging. She aspires to become famous and rich in Hollywood, where "belonging would no longer be my problem since others would want to belong to my club." This 'plan' does not work, and her narrative moves from United States to

England, to revisit the love story that frames the play. There too, the writer/performer is faced with the same predicament of belonging: “while his friends took great pride in showing off their cultural and social connections and difference, I tried hard to hide mine, simulating inexistent affiliations to almost anything.”

At the beginning of this performance, the answer to the question of who the performer is seems straightforward. As the play evolves, this clarity is muddied by the complicated history and journey of the writer/ performer. Her clear sense of categorization, quoted earlier in this section, does not prove to be clear at all. Armani wraps up the evening’s adventure by describing her trip to Scotland, undertaken in an attempt to forget her lover, and ends the performance by another Armenian poem about the nostalgia of visiting the past. The final lines of Anna Akhmatova’s poem, *The Basements of Memory*, and of the play are:

> Let’s go home.
> Where is my home?
> Where is my spirit?

As soon as the poem is over, the performer starts belly dancing to Egyptian rhythms and the lights fade out.

As a writer, Armani’s project in this play has a number of layers. At the beginning of the performance she promises to shares some of her favorite poems, which she does throughout the play, yet she does not refer to any of her favorite plays as pledges earlier. Instead, she narrates some of the stories of her Armenian heritage, intersecting them with the tale of her unfulfilled love affair. The performer chooses the story-telling technique of narrating the sequences, rather than performing them. Using the tonality of the objective narrator distances the performer from the material, making her an outsider to the story

she is disclosing to the audience. Aiming to entertain her audience, Armani often uses an ironic tone to tell her personal story, positioning herself further away from her narrative, which makes her twice removed from the material, hence, hindering the audience from identifying with her characters. In spite of this, the performance succeeds in presenting a segment of Armenian history through Armani's revival of the stories of her ancestors, giving voice to this often forgotten part of humanity's brutal history.

In this play, the writer/performer is not only able to portray part of the Armenian culture, not only through the narratives of deportation, settling down, and another mass immigration, but she also managed to recapture the innuendos of that culture through evoking the Armenian language, poetry and songs. In addition, she presents some of the key moments of her life: in Egypt, England and the United States. On the other hand, though this play discusses the diasporic existence of Armenian émigrés and poses questions about identity and belonging; it does not offer an exploration of these topics. Armani's interest in the Armenian lineage is mainly for the dramatic material, not to probe the complexities of the diasporic identity, which differs greatly from the other two autobiographical performances discussed in this chapter.

Conclusion

Although all three performances discussed in this chapter present a woman of Arab background sharing her personal story, and recounting some of her family's narrative, and although all of them offer their reflections on the political situation at the time of their tale, the three autoperformances vary a great deal in the level of involvement of each artist with her material. There is a continuum of such involvement among the

three autobiographical plays. At one end of the spectrum is Suha Al Jurf's *Pressing Beyond In Between*, in which the writer/performer is fully involved in the material she is performing. Her connection to her tale is urgent and visceral. Her confusion, questions, identity negotiation, experience of political turmoil, and loss of a family member due to the occupation are immediate, and personally experienced. The audience witnesses the events of her life as they unfold on stage. Alhough she grew up in the United States, her numerous visits to Palestine connect her to her country of origin, to the extent that she dreams of joining the Intifada. Throughout *Pressing Beyond In Between*, the audience accompanies the writer/performer on a journey, witnessing her pain firsthand, and, as she embodies her mother being strip-searched at the border, the audience sees how the performer's body carries the humiliation of this experience she observed as a child. Al Jurf dramaturgically chooses not to relate how her aunt was killed, but rather to have the audience observe her as she receives the phone call informing her of the loss of her aunt and witness her shock and pain.

The performance starts with a prayer, which presents Al Jurf's negotiation of her connection with the divine and with her Muslim heritage. This prayer could be contrasted with Leila Buck's usage of prayer in her play *ISite*. Buck performs a shortened version of prayer, to show the audience how the prayer looks and sounds. The prayer reminds her of the sounds of the Arab cities she grew up in, during her family's diplomatic posts. Comparing these two prayer experiences and how they are presented on stage offers a way of contrasting the difference between the two plays. Al Jurf's experience is that of the insider to the Arab culture, which she claims as her own, while problematizing her American side. On the other hand, Buck's experience, as portrayed in the performance of

the prayer, is more external; she is guiding the audience as an outsider/insider. She declares that she is not Muslim, then presents her version of the prayer movement, while chanting the sound of the call to prayer, which makes it more a performance than an actual prayer.

It is not difficult to see that, in her autobiographical performance, Buck, who comes from mixed heritage, identifies more easily with her American heritage, while she attempts to strengthen the connection with her Arab background and to present the Arabic culture to the American audiences. Buck is removed from some of the stories she shares in *ISite*. A clear example is the short scene about the Palestinian suffering, through the eyes of one of her cousins, who witnessed a Palestinian woman being beaten by Israeli soldiers at a border check point, before the cousin is quickly rushed from the scene. This event is a several degrees removed, as the performer did not experience the suffering or witness it herself. Comparing this scene to Al Jurf's checkpoint scene clarifies the varying level of engagement each writer has with her material.

At the other end of this continuum is *On the Couch with Nora Armani*. Though this performance could be described in similar words to the two discussed above – an Arab American one-woman autobiographical performance, discussing the journey of the artist and referring to her ancestors – this play provides a very different angle on dealing with this topic. As a playwright, Armani's project does not address her complex heritage and the myriad of diasporic identities, rather it creates a vehicle for her as an actor to show her abilities, from poetry reading to belly dancing, while using the family story as dramatic material and dedicating a large part of her play to visiting a romantic story with an imaginary audience member. During the course of the play, Armani presents some of

her ancestors' suffering, but her choices as an actor and a writer of presenting the genocide story in the third person distances her and the audience from the situation. This performance is set up to entertain its audience with stories presented from the luxury of Armani's couch, evoking the television host formula.

The titles of the three plays reflect this continuum of involvement. Armani's title *On the Couch with Nora Armani* signals the familiarity and relaxed tone of the performance, while *ISite* points to the inward reflection on the place of the "I" and the concept of sight/site; meanwhile *Pressing Beyond In Between* suggests a deeper search "beyond" the range of expectation, evoking what is not easily apparent, as it is hidden "in between." This title also carries a sense of urgency which appears in its first word "pressing."

The project of each of these autobiographical performances is unique, as all three plays use the personal narrative to a different end. While Al Jurf's play is an opportunity to present the voice of a "Palestinian American, Muslim woman" on stage and to share some first-hand experiences of the struggle of the Palestinian people, Buck's performance is a reflection on the interaction of Arabs and the West, a comparison between the position of women in both cultures, and it shows some of the impact of the American war on Iraq. On the other hand, Armani's performance presents some of the Armenian struggle at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the main focus of the performance is the unfulfilled love story.

These varying projects target and draw different audiences. Since 9/11 *ISite* has enjoyed a successful tour of festivals, colleges, and conferences. Leila Buck markets her play to international conferences, especially those concerned with intercultural

understanding. As more audiences become interested in exploring what Arabs are, this play offers the audience a way of understanding something about the Arabic culture and about living between two cultures, through the eyes of the daughter of an American diplomat father and an Arab artist mother. Buck has lived in both cultures, and therefore, can share with the audience her perspective about the Arabic culture from a safe distance. This performance, in addition to its sense of humor in presenting sensitive issues like women's bodies, also offers a "taste" of Arabic food, as the performer, embodying her grandmother, shares a tray of Arabic sweets with the audience in every performance of the play. As a play *ISite* does not set out to challenge the audience, rather it attempts to allow it a more personal view of this part of the world through the writer/performer's experience as a child and her subsequent visits to her family's different post cities, leaving the audiences with some questions regarding their possible prejudices about the "other." On the other hand, *Pressing Beyond In Between* is a more challenging performance, as it confronts the audience with the demanding task of dealing with the Palestinian problem, through portraying an image of the situation that differs greatly from what the media presents. It also involves the audience emotionally in the killing of a sixty-two-year-old woman, sitting on her doorstep in Palestine, by Israeli soldiers. It is not surprising that. in spite of the recent growing interest in Arabic topics on stage, this play has not enjoyed wide performances due to its demanding subject matter.

Armani promotes her play, mainly, to the Armenian communities in the United States and Europe. This tightly-knit community has supported the play's performances in many cities in Europe and the States. It is clear from the content of the play, and from its liberal use of the Armenian language, in some cases with no translation that part of its

intended audience is Armenian speakers. Yet as this diasporic community carries multiple identities, in many cases Arabic, depending on where Armenians were [dis]placed, part of the project on this play is to relate to audiences from Arabic background.

As the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak writes, commenting on Armenians' clinging to history: "your crusade for remembrance… makes you part of a group where there is a great feeling of solidarity."[38] All three plays discussed in this chapter attempt to create a greater feeling of solidarity through remembering.

[38] Elif Shafak, *The Bastard of Istanbul* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), 179.

Chapter Two: Documentary Plays

Multi-character plays based on interviews are a form of documentary theatre that allows theatre artists to present various layers and multiple points of view, reflecting the complex realities of their subject matter. This form has become increasingly important in the contemporary political theatre scene. Some of its best known examples are Anna Deveare Smith's works – *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, and *Twilight: Los Angeles* – and Moisés Kaufman's *Laramie Project* with the Tectonic Theater Project. These and other documentary interview-based plays shed light on the experiences of the misrepresented and silenced, giving them a voice through theatrical performances. In these plays the format of enacted community interviews, performed by one or more actors, has been used to explore identity politics and notions of community formation. They have also allowed the troubled community a forum for healing, while giving others a deeper look into this community. It is no coincidence that Arab American theatre artists use this form to explore Arab American identity and to express some of the concerns of their community.

In this chapter, I will discuss Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* (2003 - 4) and Nibras Group's *Sajjil* [39] (2002) as artistic responses to the war against Iraq and the aftermath of 9/11. These plays present the stories of the unheard, marginalized, misrepresented, or oppressed Arabic and Arab American communities. While both plays are related to current events and are responding to the crises of 9/11 and to the war in Iraq, they also attempt to construct a sense of identity and community and to connect to the "other" by finding similarities in the shared human experience.

[39] Nibras is an Arabic word that means "lantern," and Sajjil is an Arabic verb meaning "to record."

Both plays could be seen as introductions to their communities, as they offer the audience a perspective beyond the usual stereotyping of Arabs, Muslims and Iraqis. They allow the audience to have some insight into the soul of these communities through the personal stories performed on stage. The placing of one character next to another, like mosaic tiles, creates complex images of the communities presented in these plays. The end result of presenting the various characters is a multi-dimensional image of the communities, in which the whole is larger than the sum of its parts.

I will start by exploring some definitions of documentary theatre, then I will look at the process of documentary theatre making in order to examine *9 Parts of Desire* in the light of this model, and to see how it works as a documentary play. I will also discuss the implications of the reception of the play during the continuing current war against Iraq, analyzing the simulation of documentary conditions in the media coverage of the Iraq war. Following that, I will look at the structure of the play and its characters, tracing the changes in the text and performance of the play. I will conclude the first part of this chapter by discussing how the play continues to evolve after its off-Broadway run.

Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*

Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* is partly based on interviews conducted over a period of ten years with Iraqi women inside Iraq and in exile. The play is a one-woman show, often performed by the playwright herself. Its main character, Layal, is inspired by an artist famous in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's regime. The other eight characters are women activists, artists, doctors, housewives, mothers, teenagers, mourners, and lovers. Raffo creates a collage of the lives of these women in which their stories are intertwined

giving the audience an insider's look into the lives of these ordinary yet exceptional Iraqi women.

One of the most prominent documentary theatre makers in the United States, Emily Mann, summarizes her documentary process saying:

> I go out and I find the event. I go to the place. I do a lot of work on it. I do a lot of research on it. I interview a whole lot of people. I find documents that have to do with that. Then I construct a play out of that. I'm working from life and it's very personal.[40]

Heather Raffo's process in creating *9 Parts of Desire* is similar to that of Mann. Raffo found an event, the 1991 Gulf War, [41] and went to the place where it happened. As she writes in her author's note, "*9 Parts of Desire* was inspired by a life-changing trip I made to Iraq in 1993."[42] There the playwright visited a number of sites that later appeared in the play:

> I visited the Amariya bomb shelter where many Iraqi civilians lost their lives when the shelter became a target in the 1991 war. I went to the Saddam Art Center, the modern art museum of Baghdad, and saw rooms and rooms of billboard-sized portraits of Saddam Hussein. Then I wandered into a back room and there was a haunting painting of a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. Her head was hanging, bowed, and there was a golden light behind her, like a sun. I stood motionless in front of the painting. I felt as

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[40] As quoted in Gary Fisher Dawson. *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft*. (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press), 1999, 5.

[41] From an Arabic perspective the current Gulf War is the third Gulf War. The first war took place between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, while the second was the 1991 war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait.

[41] All references to the text and production notes are from an unpublished manuscript of *9 Parts of Desire*, (version 84) given to the author by the playwright.

> though this artist had painted me exactly. The painting was titled "Savagery."

This painting was the creation of the Iraqi artist Layla Al Attar. Raffo was inspired by the painting and wanted to connect with the artist. The playwright started exploring her topic by researching Al Attar, and she discovered that the artist had been killed by an American air raid in June of 1993, a few months before Raffo's visit. In a manner similar to the process of the *Laramie Project*, in which the Tectonic Theater Project members investigated the life and death of Mathew Shepard by interviewing people who knew him and others who knew about his death, Raffo began to collect material about the artist. "I knew I would never meet her but I wanted to talk to other Iraqi artists who knew her and her work."[43] Raffo met and interviewed a number of women whose stories appear in *9 Parts of Desire*. However, she refuses to label her work and her process as documentary theatre. The playwright states that "with rare exception, none of these stories are told verbatim."[44] Nevertheless, many of the methods, processes and definitions of documentary theatre apply to Raffo's play. In the introduction to *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, Gary Fisher Dawson offers his definition of documentary theatre after summarizing the attempts of several previous writers to describe this form. Michael Renov identifies what he calls the "four tendencies" of documentary practice: "to record, to persuade, to analyze, and, to express."[45] All four tendencies can be easily found in Raffo's work. Dan Isaac suggests three purposes of documentary theatre: "to reflect anxiety, to leave an audience wanting to know more, and to document the past."[46] *9 Parts of Desire* accomplishes all three purposes. Similarly, Derek Paget states that documentary

[43] Unpublished manuscript of *9 Parts of Desire*, in the possession of the author.
[44] Dawson. 19.
[45] Dawson. 19.

theatre in the "Piscatorian tradition" is characterized by four major functions: "to reassess history; to celebrate accounts of localities, or marginalized groups; to investigate events and issues; and to serve knowledge and understanding."[47] Heather Raffo's play fulfills all these functions and it also meets Dawson's own definition of the purpose of documentary theatre, which involves "learning about, recalling, interpreting, or responding to a historical moment."[48]

In his article "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self" Jonathan Kalb observes:

> Documentary is perforce a loose concept. It's nothing more than a tacit agreement by artist and audience to meet on a chosen field of presumably factual reference; to make the rules tighter than that would drain it of dramatic impact.[49]

Following Kalb's suggestion of "loosening the definition of *documentary*,"[50] I find *9 Parts of Desire* closely connected to this genre. Though Raffo is unwilling to see her work as documentary, I believe it is. As Dawson notes "a play can be classified as a documentary play even though its author may not be aware that it is one."[51] There are many parallels between the process of creation of *9 Parts of Desire* and the method of documentary theatre. It is similar to documentary plays in terms of its aesthetics, structure, and the way it is performed and advertised. It has segments of life, as some of the stories of the characters come from interviews or personal conversations and from experiences the writer had with women of Iraq, both in Iraq and in exile.

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[47] Dawson. 19.
[48] Dawson. 19.
[49] Jonathan Kalb. "Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self" in *Theater 31.3*, (2001), 20.
[50] Kalb. 14.
[51] Dawson. 19.

The publicity for the performances emphasized that the play is based on "ten years of research," and it is "detailing the lives of Iraqi women." The Off-Broadway production flyers had the caption "The Women of Iraq have not been heard from...Until Now." This encouraged both audiences and critics to consider the production in documentary terms. *The List: Glasgow and Edinburgh Events Guide* stated that the play "chronicles the experiences of a multitude of Iraqi women," and Lynne Walker wrote in *The Independent*: "Raffo gets inside the hearts and minds of oppressed Iraqi women. Drawing on interviews and events of the recent past,"[52] while *The British Theatre Guide* described the play as "the most shocking testament."[53]

Though Raffo is opposed to comparing her work to that of Anne Deveare Smith, whom she admires and respects, there are many similarities in the styles of their performances. The structures of the plays of both artists consist mainly of a series of monologues presenting various characters, whom the playwright/performer impersonates, using simple props. *9 Parts of Desire* is staged in a way that allows the audience to perceive it as a series of authentic testimonies, and Raffo's skillful impersonations of the nine characters add to the feeling of meeting genuine Iraqi women on stage. It is hard to convince the audience that the characters on stage are pure literary constructs, despite the fact that some of them are largely created by Raffo. Like Emily Mann, who is "always challenging public history with living history,"[54] Raffo is working from life and the personal, challenging the history available to the public with the "living history" in the stories she presents, adding another layer to the fabric of reality. A clear example is the

[52] Lynne Walker. *The Independent*. 20 August 2003. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/nine-parts-of-desire-536514.html (downloaded 14 January 2006)
[53] *The British Theatre Guide*. 31 August 2003 http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/articles/310803a.htm (downloaded 14 January 2006)
[54] Dawson. 17.

testimony of "Umm Gheda," the only survivor from the Amariya bomb shelter, who shares the story of how she lost all her family when the bomb shelter was attacked by a double-bomb designed to strike bomb shelters and destroy those inside. Other narratives include the harrowing description of the torture inflicted by Saddam Hussein's regime and the disturbing tales of the detrimental effects of weapons like depleted uranium, used during the Gulf War, on the environment and on the health of the population, resulting in terminal diseases and large numbers of deformed newborns. All these elements lead the audience to assume that they are witnessing the experiences of authentic Iraqi women on stage.

Nevertheless, Heather Raffo's work is far from the verbatim or testimonial style; there are many elements in the performance that are created entirely by the playwright, including the main character of the play, Layal.[55] Raffo's work mixes fact with fiction, blurring the two dimensions. Hence, I categorize *9 Parts of Desire*s as a "semi-documentary" as it depicts the immediate debate in society regarding the war while adding depth and historical dimension to it through Hooda's narrative about other wars and people's struggle. At the same time, it fearfully anticipates the future implications of the war and bombings in the Doctor and Teenage Girl's monologues.

In addition to the ties between this work and the documentary theatre model, Raffo's process shares many similarities with ethnographic research. She describes how she collected the material that became her play, saying:

> My process was not one of formal interviews, but rather a process of living with, eating with, communicating compassionately and

[55] Though the initial spark for this play was inspired by the work of Iraqi artist Laila Al Attar, the character of the artist in the play, Layal, is the creation of the playwright.

> loving on such a level, that when I parted from their homes it was clear to all that we were now family.

Raffo's process of gathering material points toward contemporary ethnographic trends, marked by the researcher's shift from the role of the outside "observer" to that of "participant" sharing the lives of the subjects of research. Dwight Conquergood describes this development in ethnography as the "shift from monologue to dialogue, from information to communication."[56] The playwright/performer's position as a researcher in Iraq is unusual because she is both an insider and outsider to the culture. She is related by blood to her father's family members, most of whom live in Iraq. When she is in Iraq, with them, she is 'at home' with family, which differs from the traditional interview process. At the same time, she is American-born and raised and does not speak the language, which makes her an outsider to the culture, presumably able to see it more objectively and to observe its dynamics more clearly. The insider/outsider position allows Raffo access to meet Iraqis in their homes, and be part of the normal daily life of a household, while at the same time giving her the freedom to remain outside the details of daily life in order to register the cultural contradictions, nuances of existence, and the different styles of speech. Being simultaneously inside and outside the society makes the playwright a particularly qualified researcher, easily accpeted by people in the culture as one of them. At the same time, the community's knowledge that Raffo is not a permanent part of the society makes it easier for them to share intimate stories with her.

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[56] Dwight Conquergood. "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics." In *Communication Monographs* 58, (1991),182.

In spite of her close depiction of the experiences of Iraqi women, Raffo refuses to claim that her play is documenting the real. This denial becomes more interesting when it is juxtaposed with the prevalence of Reality TV, and the situation is further complicated by the Iraqi war coverage. The current media culture encourages the presentation of the coverage of the war on Iraq in terms of documentary performance, as the ultimate documentary reality show, including embedded journalists intended to authenticate it as 'real.' The news coverage of the war in the mainstream media and the embedded journalists create an illusion of the real, which belies the editing, manipulation, and censorship that takes place in that process.[57] On the other hand, and despite the continuous media coverage of the war, the audience hungers for the truth of what is really taking place in the war zone. The public has many questions regarding the realities of the Iraq war, the Iraqi side of the story, and the Iraqi death toll. In this culture of (mis)information, *9 Parts of Desire* fills a gap, feeding some of the audience's yearning for "true" stories they can relate to, through the play's artistic representation of the stories of Iraqi women living through and suffering the consequences of war. Raffo reworks the text of the play to include a response to the televising of war – "you can work out to the War in the Gym/ in the bar/ in the nail salon"– reflecting on the prominence of war coverage on television, making the world an "eye witness" to this modern tragedy.

As a living thing, this play is greatly influenced by its surroundings and it continues to evolve in response to current events. The geographical changes in locations, production circumstances, as well as the continuously developing war in Iraq are reflected in alterations to the performance and the script. *9 Parts of Desire* has more than

[57] This manipulation process was the subject of the play *Embedded*, presented in the Public Theatre in New York City, 2004.

nine lives. To date, the play has gone through one hundred revisions corresponding to the changes in venue, audience, the background political situation and in the author's reactions to these elements. These alterations signal the working process of the playwright.

To trace some of these changes it is essential to refer to the play's production history. Examining some of these revisions also offers a closer look at the developing concerns of the play. *9 Parts of Desire* was first developed with Voice Chair Productions under the direction and dramaturgy of Eva Breneman. It received its world premiere at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh 2003. The performance was moved to London's Bush Theatre, which published its first script. Theatre critics hailed it as one of the "five best plays in London." After some revisions the play had a short run in January 2004 at Queens Theatre in the Park, in New York under the direction of Jack Hofsiss. Then the dramatist made major adjustments to the text to suit the American audience. In May 2004, The Public Theatre selected it to be part of their *New Work Now* festival of readings where it was developed substantially under the direction of Kate Saxon. The newly-revised play was also presented in a reading in Alwan Center for the Arts, in New York. When David Fishelson, producer of the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre (MET), picked the play for production for the Fall 2004 season, he hired a new director and a new design team. In collaboration with the director Joanne Settle, Heather Raffo made major changes to both the characters and the pace of the play. This production received national critical acclaim, and a number of prizes, including the 2005 Blackburn Prize Special Commendation, and the 2005 Lucille Lortel Awards for Best Solo Show and Best Sound Design. This production played at the MET for nine months, had five extensions and was

a critic's pick of the *New York Times*, *TimeOut* and *Village Voice* for twenty-four weeks. In Fall 2005 the performance began a national tour, starting in the Geffen Theatre, in Los Angeles, and most recently had a run in the Arena Stage, in Washington, DC, Fall 2006. Because of the high demand for presenting this play in numerous regional theatres, Raffo agreed that other actors could perform *9 Parts of Desire*, and ,since Spring 2006, simultaneous productions of this performance have been mounted in different parts of the United States. Some of these productions followed the initial concept of having one actress perform all nine characters, while other directors recruited multiple actresses to play the nine Iraqi women, following the playwright's recommendations in her production notes:

> I am very excited, however, about the possibility of *9 Parts of Desire* being performed with more than one actor while still maintaining this sense of a single fractured psyche…. In considering the play with a multi-actor cast I would still encourage the doubling of roles. To cast for instance three women rather than nine.

In the rest of this discussion, however, I will focus on the performances acted by Heather Raffo, in collaboration with director Joanne Settle.

The 2004-2005 Off-Broadway production of *9 Parts of Desire* at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre had a multi-layered set, which influenced Raffo to change the script of the play:

> With Antje Ellerman's set design the stage became various levels of Iraqi society from the ancient to the modern, with tiles crumbling, layers of mosaic, bricks, books, carpets and sand-bags. At the center of the production was a river reminding us of Iraq's heritage as the cradle of civilization. The river was both mythic

> and functional, a symbol of a life giving source and of the darker underworld. Some characters inhabited one side of the great river, others leapt across it. Some characters washed in it, others baptized us in the first recorded creation myth telling of a great fresh water sea that lies beneath. Layal's paintbrushes came out of the river. Hooda's great pile of books and newspapers lined the river – they became Nanna's books and newspapers. Every single item on stage was a part of every character's life.[58]

In the earlier versions Raffo used the character of the artist, Layal, as the backbone of the play. Each of the other characters was presented as sitting in session, as Layal paints them. The structure consisted of a series of consecutive portraits/monologues by Amaal, Hooda, the Doctor, the American, Umm Gheda, Shorouq, and Nanna, who reveal their stories to the painter and the audience. Inspired by the layering of the set design, the later versions of the play offered a more integrated structure with less focus on Layal and her studio as the play's central location.

By the eighty-fifth version of the play (the version used for the MET production), the characters became more intricately woven. Layal, the artist in her studio in Baghdad, works for the regime, and is both supported and oppressed by it.

> Layal:
> Leave Iraq? . . .
> I fear it here
> And I love it here
> I cannot stop what I am here
> I am obsessed by it
> By these things that we all are but we are not saying.

Layal's character is juxtaposed to Hooda, the exiled artist in London, who is fully opposed to the regime and recounts some of its horrors.

Hooda:

I couldn't march with anyone who was pro Saddam.
I protested all my life, I was always political
even I was bourgeois - in '58 anybody who was intelligent
was communist.
When I lived in Beirut during their war I protested too,
everywhere I go there is a war. *(She laughs and hacks)*
I walked for peace in Vietnam,
I walked for Chile,
but this war it was personal, this war was against all my
beliefs and yet I wanted it.
Because Saddam
Saddam was the greater enemy than, I mean,
imperialism -

The earlier versions of the play suggest that these two characters were sisters, while in the latest version examined here they are put in opposition, with no clear reference to a familial connection. The dichotomy between the main characters, Layal and Hooda, is triangulated by the character of the American. The American, an Iraqi American young woman living in New York City, is the character that underwent the most radical change from the early versions of the play. Raffo no longer has her discuss her relationship with her boyfriend, instead, she is following the war coverage on television, in hope of getting information about her family, while openly questioning mass graves, the Abu Gharieb prison scandal and the American public's reaction to the war;

The American:

I'm on my knees

in the middle of my apartment
with my mom
on the phone
watching
I'm holding a rosary
watching
CNN
I want to pray
but I don't have
words
so I say their names
out-loud
Sarta,
Zuhair,
Hooda,
Zuhira,
Behnam,
Rebab

It is clear that the character of the American personifies Heather Raffo's experiences. Through the words of the American, the playwright makes allusions to her own family history, her frustrations at the war, using her cousins' names as her prayer.

Most of the other characters in *9 Parts of Desire* did not change: Amaal's monologue about her failed marriages and her longing for love, the Doctor's account of the effects of the weapons on the health of the population, and Umm Gheda's testimony on the destruction of life in the Amariyah bomb shelter are similar to their versions in the first script, yet their place in the text and the way they became woven together and interconnected to other parts of the play were altered to create a faster pace and a feeling of urgency.

Furthermore, the character of Nanna was expanded to offer updated commentary on the lootings and lack of stability in the new Iraq. One character disappeared from the American version of the play. Sharouqh, the young Iraqi mother who moved to New Zealand and had to struggle with raising her children in a different culture, was replaced by the character of the teenage Iraqi Girl, Samira, who dances to N'Sync and wonders about her father's disappearance. She gives a fresh perspective to the fears and frustrations of living and growing up under the American occupation of Iraq:

Iraqi Girl:
She doesn't leave the house
except to go to the market
with my uncle
and before she goes she covers her hair
she is afraid of getting stolen by gangs -
now they steal women for money
or to sell them.
I try to tell momma she won't get stolen
her hair is not that nice -
they only steal people whos [sic] families have money.
But she says,
"don't tempt your fates, [sic]
now they steal little girls to take them out of the country"!
Today I thought
maybe I should get stolens [sic]
so I could leave my country.

The epilogue of the play continues to be presented by Nanna, who is trying to make money by selling the last painting of Layal after her death. Yet this epilogue is updated to reveal current developments in the Iraqi society, like the looting of the National Museum.

Nanna:

You must buy, buy
you must buy.
I tell you
this her last painting alive
all the rest
they are burned dead in the museum
I run
I took it.
Our history is finish [sic]
so it is more worth
more worth.
….
I have to sell it
I have to eat
two dollar?

And the play ends with the haunting image of Nanna's outstretched hand, trying to sell Layal's painting, for two dollars to buy food, as a powerful commentary on the value of human life and art during war.

The changes *9 Parts of Desire* underwent reflect the playwright's sensitivity to her historical, geographical, political, and aesthetic environment. The first version of the play was written before the current war started in Iraq. As different wars against Iraq are layered over one another throughout the performances, one of the ironies of this historic moment becomes apparent; most of the references to President Bush and the war in the text, though to a different president and a different war still apply today, as there is another Bush and another war against Iraq. Some changes in the text also suggest changes in the playwright's perspective**.**

The play's earlier structure of framing the characters through the portraits of the painter mirrors Raffo's relationship as a writer/interviewer to the characters/women presented in the play. The first audience saw the characters through the blank canvas of the artists, which parallels the revealing of their stories to the interviewer. The play went through a major change in the wake of another war on Iraq and of the actualizing of this war as a daily reality on television. The playwright had little access to the women she had previously interviewed. This partially explains the changes in the character of the American, who functions as a bridge through whom the audience can access the play and see the war, as well as its effect on the Arab American woman whose connection to her family in Iraq is broken. This, also, corresponds with the position of Raffo as a playwright/actress, living in the United States, and unable to communicate with the women she presents on stage. The war developments and the destruction and chaos that followed in Iraq led to a third major change in *9 Parts of Desire* indicated in the addition of the character of the Mulaya, the professional mourner. The Mulaya's two monologues frame the play, connecting the stories of the women in the performance to the bigger story of a civilization's rise and decline, making the play part of the medley of sounds wailing for the end of life and hopeful for another beginning. The play starts with the Mulaya's words:

Mulaya:

Early in the morning
always early in the morning
I come to throw dead shoes into the river
without this river there would be no here
there would be no beginning
it is why I come.

This third change allows Raffo to shift the focus from the daily details of war, suffering, and survival to a mystical level; a poetic view of the Iraqi story as part of the story of humanity. The Mulaya's lyrical monologues transcend the limitations of the current situation in Iraq, linking the stories of these specific Iraqi women on stage to the bigger tale of women in modern civilization. Though her final lines, from the time that she steps into the river on stage until she is completely submerged in water, echo Layal's final monologue of disintegration and destruction, the energy of the Mulaya's words are different. They collect the fragments of all the other characters in the play, as a chorus of women in one body. The Mulaya's framing monologues (re)position this play, allowing it some freedom from its particular historical moment, so that it can be performed and appreciated long after the current situation is resolved. Thus, while most documentary plays are based on an incident or a series of events that took place in the past, this play attempts to cover an ongoing, changing and evolving situation, while offering a commentary on the complicated topics of oppression, war, love and occupation.

Raffo's position as an Arab American inside/outside both cultures allows her not only a unique access to the material while she is in Iraq, but also a rare opportunity to present this material to Western audiences easily. Being a blonde woman from Michigan, Raffo fits in a particular cultural image of the European-looking woman, which creates a sense of familiarity between her and the American audience. Being Iraqi American and belonging to both cultures simultaneously allows Raffo to create connections between the two cultures through her performance and her physical presence on stage. Embodying all nine characters, the playwright/performer presents both "self" and "other" in one body, diminishing the distances of difference. Her body, both American and Arab, becomes a

space for cultural connections, and her play acts as a bridge of understanding for possible cultural communication.

The performer moves from one character to the next as the stories flow one after the other, creating a sense of continuity between the various tales of the Iraqi women. Though the playwright compares her work to Ntozake Shange's Choreopoem *For colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow Is enuf,* I see more parallels with the structure of the *Arabian Nights* where the main story unfolds and leads to other stories. Raffo evokes Shahrazad, the main character and the storyteller of *The One Thousand and One Nights,* in Layal's first monologue.

Layal:

> "Either I shall live" - how does it go? Oh! Shahrazad! My favorite.
> "or I shall be ransom for the virgin daughters of Muslims and the cause of their deliverance from his hands to thine!"

In this parallel, Layal is compared to Shahrazad, who saved herself and the women of her country from death at the hands of King Shaharyar by weaving a story so compelling, night after night, for one thousand and one nights. Layal is attempting to save the women in her portraits, by embodying them.

Layal:

> Always I paint them as me
> or as trees sometimes like I was telling you.
> I do not ever want to expose exactly another woman's body
> so I paint my body
> but her body, herself inside me.
> So it is not me alone
> it is all of us

but I am the body that takes the experience.

The non-linear structure of *The One Thousand and One Nights*, in which the main story leads the listeners/audience to a myriad of stories, is similar to the format used in *9 Parts Of Desire*, in which the tale of one woman seamlessly becomes the tale of another. It could be argued that this nonlinear structure is a feminine structure, using a cyclical form, especially in the second part of the play, where the monologues of the different characters seem to respond to each other.

In this play, the story of each woman is separate, yet the culmination of the tales of the nine characters and the accelerating pace at which they are presented create a feeling of progress in the nonlinear narrative. This style of writing allows for a freedom of movement, presenting stories from different wars and time periods, through portraying the details of the lives of each of the women independently. A clear example is placing the destruction of the artist's studio, to create the mosaic of Bush the father, at the end of the play, although historically this precedes many of the other events mentioned in the play. The smashing /breaking down of the studio parallels the feminine structure of the play which, rather than a traditional theatrical climax, presents a collapse of the stories into each other, with a conflation of all the characters into one. This disintegration creates one shattered image representing the chaos in Iraq. The beginning of the performance reverberates with the end. It moves beyond a circular mode into a spiral. The cycle starts with Mulaya's first monologue and ends with her second monologue, which feels like the end of a cycle, but is also the beginning of another from a different place/ perspective/ position. At the beginning she is throwing things into the river, while at the end she herself is immersed in the water next to all the artifacts and things she threw in the river to purify, and to start a new cycle in the lives of the women of Iraq.

What unifies the stories on stage is not only the storyteller, who impersonates all the characters, but also her prop, the "Abaya" (the performer's cape). Metaphorically, all the stories of the Iraqi women come from under the same "Abaya"/cape, which the performer wears throughout the performance, changing the way she uses it for each of the characters she embodies. Nine characters appear from under that cover, four of whom appear only once on stage. The characters of Amaal, the Doctor, Um Gheda, and the Iraqi Girl are quick sketches; each tells a story that elaborates one aspect of life during the war. On the other hand, the characters of Hooda, Nanna, and the American appear repeatedly in the second part of the play, offering a commentary on current events, expanding the stories and presenting different perspectives on them. Yet these three characters are not multi faceted. Hooda, the artist/intellectual in exile, is allowed to share only her bitterness and anger at the regime of Saddam Hussein through her stories of the torture she witnessed before she fled the country, whereas Nanna recounts the changes taking place in society as it disintegrates under the pressure of the current occupation and civil war. While the character of the American shows more emotions as she follows the development of war, however, it is hard to see her as a developed personality beyond what she is representing in the play. Layal is the only multi-dimensional character in *9 Parts of Desire*, revealing both her weaknesses and her strength on stage, and allowing more than just a glimpse into her world. The audience sees different facets of her personality and hears her stories of love and betrayal, successes and failure, as well as her relationship with the political-cultural system, – that of a sadomasochist heroine and victim of the Iraqi regime. All these stories, wrapped as they are in the frame provided by

the Mulaya's two monologues, attempt to transcend this particular cultural/historical moment to offer a musing on civilization and war.

At the end of the performance all the characters are collapsed into one. When Layal starts breaking up her studio to make the commissioned mosaic, she breaks down the barriers between the characters, embodying all of them as she, herself, disintegrates. Breaking everything in the studio becomes the connecting act, the collecting of the fragments of all the other women back into herself. Rather than a divided personality, all the women become unified in the body of Layal, whose final monologue combines segments of the words of the other eight characters, forming one encompassing psyche. As the war developed in Iraq, this part of the play became representative of the civil war between the different factions of Iraqi society. The collapse of the characters can be interpreted as a reflection of Iraqi society's crumbling due to factional fighting and civil war.

In *9 Parts of Desire*, Layal embodies the struggle for self-identity and survival. She endures her husband shooting her and a bomb destroying her house, "even I should have been dead twice before I tell you/ but I'm not/ death is only teasing me." The audience learns that Layal is dead, at the end of the play, when Nanna tries to sell her last painting. The death of the main character is symbolic of the destruction of Iraqi society; a society that overcame several hardships before, but is disintegrating under the pressure of the current occupation.

One of the strengths of this play is that it does not attempt to take sides, or to justify one position over the other. Rather, it exposes what was happening, what is currently happening and some consequences of the successive wars on Iraq. It offers a

complex portrayal of the lives of the Iraqi people, which allows American critics and audiences on both sides of the issue, for or against the war, to use this play as a reference to support their position.

Another strength of *9 Parts of Desire* is the way Raffo uses language to depict the different speech styles of the nine characters. Apart from a few Arabic words in the Iraqi dialect, all the characters use the English language to communicate. However, each of the women on stage has a specific way of using the language. Some of the characters use broken English, nonetheless each of their broken English is different, forming a unique voice and style. For example, the Teenage Girl, uses the plural "s" at the end of many words, including verbs, while Umm Gheda does not use the article "the", or the plural form, and sometimes inverts word order:

Umm Gheda:

> Myself,
> I think they were testing bomb –
> these bomb had never been use before
> but it is special two bomb design for breaking only a bomb shelter.
> It is very purpose.
> It is very purpose.

Layal's English is very clear, but something in the usage of language and word choice conveys that she is not a native speaker, as do the Arabic words dispersed in her monologues, especially her constant use of "La" to say "No." On the other hand, Nanna's language is clearly broken, with sentences formed through grouping words together, sometimes without a verb. Moreover, in performance, Heather Raffo worked on creating a different style and dialect even for the characters who are fluent in English,

distinguishing even the two women who speak with a British accent: the Doctor, and Hooda.

One of the other devices used in performance is the sound of the Muslim call to prayer, heard in the background five times throughout the performance. To set the scene at the beginning of the play, the stage direction reads, "the first sound we hear is the dawn call to prayer." At the end of the play before Nanna's epilogue, "we hear the fifth and final call to prayer. Darkness, it is the end of the day's cycle." Besides the original Iraqi music and the street sounds, the call to prayer helps to create the atmosphere of an Arab city and frames the production with this Muslim culture marker. Using the cycle of five calls to prayer, which takes place within the course of a day, suggests the completion of a cycle, a day in the life of Iraq.

Islamic culture is also signaled through the title of the play, which the text and the program of the performance explain is derived from a quote by Ali Ibn Abu Taleb, husband of prophet Mohammed's daughter Fatima and fourth Caliph of the Islamic World after Mohammed. "God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave 9 Parts to women and one to men."[59] Ali Ibn Abu Taleb became revered as the first Leader of the Shiites sect of Islam. The massacre of his sons, Hassan and Hussien, in Karbala', in Iraq, is the dividing moment that split the Islamic faith into Sunnis and Shiites, which makes referencing him even more appropriate to the Iraqi context. Raffo was inspired by this quote, and was able, in this play, to present nine manifestations of desire through the nine characters of the play.

[59] Quoted in the performance program and the unpublished manuscript of the play.

Although *9 Parts of Desire* is concerned with the impact of war on Iraq, a large part of the play is dedicated to exploring women's desires. Amaal's monologue, which did not change during the various revisions of the play, focuses solely on her love stories, failed marriages, and her continuous attempt to find love. Pondering whether she should stay in Iraq or go back to London, she poses the poignant question, "maybe freedom is the better than peace?" This question about love and personal choices is pertinent in the context of war and the country's liberation from dictatorship. On the other hand, while the doctor's monologue exposes the impact of the war on the environment, the increased incidents of deformities at birth and the multiple cancers children endure as a result, its focus shifts to the personal as she reveals that her husband sits at home without his legs. "He can't make money sitting at home, what's left of the man, I can't even look at him now, he's my death sentence!" Her monologue takes on a different meaning as she discloses at the end of it that she is pregnant, leaving the audience with the haunting question about the possible future of her unborn child.

While it is easy to recapitulate some of the characters' desires – Amaal's search for a fulfilling love, the Teenage Girl's desire to have her father back, Umm Gedda's keenness on conserving the bomb shelter to keep the memory of her deceased family alive, Nanna's obsession with selling anything she can find to survive, Hooda's disdain towards Saddam Hussein's regime and her obsession with seeing it tumble down – it is harder to condense Layal's desire into one. The artist's character contains conflicting desires.

Layal is the multi-faceted character in this play. She flirts with various, sometimes conflicting, desires: to love, to be loved, to be free, and to be controlled. She is keen on

staying alive, yet she refuses to leave Iraq. Her insatiable desire for life is contrasted with her ability to defy death and later to embrace it. Though her presence on stage and her portraits of women as trees seem to symbolize life, there is something in her tendencies that is almost suicidal. She survives her husband shooting her when he finds out that she is having an affair with a man at art school, yet she continues having extra-marital relationships, including members of the regime among her lovers.

Layal:

Why am I alive?
To be made love to - passed around from one man to another
his cousin, his brother, the ministers of –

Through Layal's monologues, Raffo is able to unpack the notion of freedom and to reveal some of Western society's hypocrisy regarding women's freedom, and the assumption that Eastern women in general, and Iraqi women in this particular case, are not free. The playwright concludes in this monologue, that women in both Eastern and Western cultures are subjected to the same categorization regarding their sexual freedom that operates across all cultures to limit the freedom of women in regards to their sexuality.

Layal:

Your western culture, sister, will not free me from being called a whore
not my sex
women are not free
go home
you are cold, you are a cave
go back to your safety.

Layal's character also carries the conflicting desires of exposing the stories of the horrors inflicted on women by the old Iraqi regime, while at the same time working for

this regime, and painting its leader and symbol, Saddam Hussein. Her sadomasochistic desires are clearly reflected in her relationship with the system: "I have been raped and raped and raped and raped / and I want more." The artist registers the stories of the atrocities inflicted upon the Iraqi women through her portraits of them, yet these portraits are presented in her own image. Layal's insatiable desire for life and for preserving the women's stories in effect consumes them in order to represent them, alluding to the metaphor of ancient goddesses devouring the ones they loved.

In spite of the richness and complexity of the representation of the women in *9 Parts of Desire*, the first advertising campaign for the play's run at the MET Theatre Off-Broadway chose to present the play to New York audiences in orientalist terms, against the wishes of the dramatist and the director. The advertisements, flyers, and posters showed a woman's face covered in black, with only green eyes showing; the covered face is seen through barbed wire. The caption above read "The Women of Iraq have not been heard from … until now." The title was written both in English and Arabic, adding an exotic feel. This image exoticizes the Arab women and, in particular, the Iraqi women, offering the audience a chance to "unveil" their mystery. The covered woman with veiled face is being used, as an Islamic marker, to tap into the audience's expectations around what Arab (often conflated with Muslim) women are expected to look like. Though the play itself is far from "exoticizing" the condition of the women, the way its media presentation is thereby calling on the Western interest in "saving" Arab and Muslim women from their oppression.

Part of the success of this play could easily be attributed to the fact that it presents the stories of Iraqi women. During the Iraqi war, and in spite of the continuous

coverage of the war, including the imbedded journalists on the ground with the troops, there were very few stories about the lives of Iraqi and, in particular, Iraqi women. I would argue that this play would not have met with the same success, if it were discussing the lives of Iraqi men, because part of the audience is interested in hearing from the group they are assuming is oppressed and silenced: "the women." In this dynamic, women are seen as victims and presented as subservient, allowing the leaders of the "wars against terrorism" to claim that part of their mission is to "liberate the women." In this equation, Iraqi men are seen as the soldiers, the insurgents, the rebels, the ambush organizers and Saddam Hussein's supporters, while the stories of women are not represented. Hence once can assume that a play giving voice to the "silenced" women would draw a large audience to the theatre. Once there, however, the audience members witness a different representation of women on stage: all the women in this play are strong, lively, and full of desire for life, love and survival.

After its success in New York this play became representative of the voice of Arab women. Its writer and performer, held regular talkback sessions with the audience, using the play to discuss the current and evolving situation of the war in Iraq. During its latest run in the Arena Stage in Washington D.C. many of the audience members, employees of various government bodies, were asking the playwright/performer, "What should we do in Iraq?" connecting the play to the escalating chaos and deteriorating situation inside Iraq. They were hoping to find answers to the complicated problems of Iraq, in this performance, which they regarded as an authentic voice of Iraqis, by a playwright who is an authority on Iraq. This play was becoming more than just a work of

art; it was increasingly seen as a way to connect to the people of Iraq, through the "documentary" stories of the women presented on stage.

Nibras' *Sajjil*

The work of Nibras, the Arab American Artists Collective, presents a very different model of documentary theatre, which I will explore in contrast with *9 Parts of Desire*. Nibras is a group of young New York based theatre artists. This group, initially consisting of four women and three men,[60] gathered in the summer of 2001 in an attempt to create theatre work that represents their condition, as Arab Americans, negotiating two cultures. When the events of 9/11 took place, "there was a greater sense of urgency as the attention is being drawn to us [Arabs.] We thought about what could we do to help, and have people understand. This was the starting point."[61] James Asher, one of the group members at the time, had worked with Moisés Kaufman on the *Laramie Project*. Asher suggested the model of community interviews used by the Tectonic Theater Project to create the *Laramie Project*, and Nibras group members (Leila Buck, Maha Chehlawy, Omar Khoury, Omar Metwally, Najla Said, and Afaf Al Shawa) "jumped on the idea." The company began by interviewing people who were easy to reach, like their friends and family members. Then they expanded the circle of interviews to include random people on the street, or whoever crossed paths with them. Buck interviewed the person sitting next to her on a plane; Khoury interviewed Jehovah's Witnesses who knocked on

[60] The composition of the group changed over time; as some of its members moved to other locations or followed different pursuits. Currently, only three of the founding members are part of the collective, joined by an expanding number of new Arab American artists.
[61] Interview with founding member Omar Khoury, 5 June 2007.

his door to talk about the impact of 9/11. After two months of random, general interviews asking their subjects, “What is the first thing you think when you hear the word Arab?” the group members started targeting specific people: Muslim figures, educators, Arab artists and activists, known Arab figures living in America, like Edward Said and artist Samia Halabi, as well as Americans from other ethnicities to create a multi-layered narrative.

Nibras members collected more than fifty interviews and tried to find ways to group the material together to create a performance. They focused on themes that ran through the interviews, among them food, education, racism, the difficulty of growing up as “other”, and media manipulation; later they used these themes to organize the material, creating a sense of a loose structure. Their play *Sajjil* premiered in New York in 2002. Its open structure allowed for a number of different versions to be performed in various venues such as the Producers Club, Theatres Against War (THAW), Columbia University, and Wesleyan University. A shorter version focusing on the comedic parts was presented in the Arab American Comedy Festival 2003, while a full version was performed in the New York Fringe Festival 2003, where it won the Best Ensemble Performance Award.

Through their selection of material from the interviews, Nibras group was able to present a number of perspectives about Arabs in America, some from the point of view of Arab emigrants, and second and third generation Arab Americans, others presenting the point of view of interviewees from various backgrounds, including “white” Americans and other minority groups. Questions of race and identity are explored throughout this verbatim performance, where the conflation of Arab with Muslim is challenged through

presenting Arabs who are not Muslims, and of Muslims who come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The main question this work poses is, "What is Arab?'' Some of the interviews utilized in the performance address this question specifically. Using this entry point of trying to define what constitutes Arab, in the eyes of Arabs and non-Arabs, Arab sympathizers and antagonists alike, *Sajjil* literally "records" a wide spectrum of interpretations of "Arabness." Though this performance does not adopt any one definition of what is Arab, it offers a range of answers to what is "not" Arab. Through juxtaposition, parallels and opposition of characters, this play paints a picture that dispels stereotypes and distorted images of Arabs, as portrayed by the mainstream media, showing instead a different face/voice, and a multitude of images and perspectives on Arabness, and on what Arab immigrants experience in their host community.

The collage of interviews that forms *Sajjil* is arranged so that some of the characters answer each other's questions and complete each other's stories, reflecting on questions of origin and commenting on the political situation, the racial profiling, and the prejudices against Arab and Muslims after 9/11. The play begins with a prologue in which six characters offer quick highlights of the key ideas the performance explores. Act One starts with a conversation between Jaquie and Claire about their grandparents' origins. They discuss whether they came from Syria or Lebanon, deciding that since Lebanon was part of Syria at one time, then "it's no biggy." As they munch on Arabic food and mezza, the two characters share stories with their interviewer (James Asher) about how their mother "lied all her life" pretending they were French. The focus shifts to issues of discrimination against new immigrants, through the introduction of Alex and

Ayman. The positions of these two characters are contrasted: Ayman is a physical therapist, volunteering at the Muslim center to help provide an understanding of Islam, while Alex has a tainted view of Arabs and Muslims. This is followed by another parallel between Najah, the Iraqi restaurant owner who describes how, as a young pharmacist, she was married by proxy to an Iraqi doctor living in the United States, and the Palestinian American, Jennifer, who explains how her Irish mother went to Palestine in 1967, and met her Palestinian father and married him within weeks. This pair is followed by another: Tariq, who left Jordan at age seven, and Mariam, who came to the States as an adult in 1963, and could not find her staple food – plain yogurt. Though the narrative continues to focus on Arabic food, the introduction of characters from other ethnic backgrounds – the African American, Vince; the Hindu, Aroon – reveals other aspects of Arabness. In addition, some of the complexity of the political situation in the home country is addressed when Mariam tries to explain where she is from:

> Mariam:
>
> We grew up in Wes—what is *now* West Beirut, when I was growing up it was known as *ras Beirut*, uh, we lived in a neighborhood that was mixed, uhhh—um, Christians, uh, Muslims, Druzes, Jews, all lived in that area, everybody was friendly…We were Protestants. More specifically, my father's family was a Quaker family.[62]

This image of many religions co-existing in one country offers a different perspective from the mainstream portrayal of Arab countries as purely Muslim.

Nibras also exposes some of the pressure children from Arab families endure in their new environment. An example is the harassment Tariq experienced at school

[62] All references are to the unpublished text of the play, in the possession of the author. All ellipses are original in the text.

because he took “Hummus and pita bread and cucumber for lunch.” The theme of ethnic food is expanded through Aroon’s experience on a plane, where he is offered a hummus sandwich by the flight attendant. As this is unusual food on a plane, it raises the fears of Aroon’s wife: she suspects that the flight attendant is trying to discover whether Aroon can pronounce the word “hummus” correctly to test the possibility of his being an Arab. This allows for a seamless transition to a sequence on accents and languages in which Hala and Edward Said expose American society’s bias against the Arabic language. Hala recounts her experience with Sufis using Arabic words and chants with an Austrian accent:

> Hala:
>
> And it was so funny to see all these Americans doing Sufi movements and speaking Arabic but not realizing they’re speaking Arabic. But since he was Austrian …. la ilaha ill’allah …he had it “laa luu laa lee”. I was trying to be there but I was watching all these people thinking if you only knew whatchoo were saying.

This unawareness is juxtaposed with Edward (Said)’s anecdote about his publisher, who asked him to recommend books for translation into English. The publisher did not choose any Arabic books and justified this, saying, “We’re not doing anything in Arabic ‘cause Arabic is a controversial language.” This pre 9/11 attitude is heightened afterward, as Edward describes:

> Edward:
>
> And I’ve seen it happen, and it happened to me, that somebody will be sitting on a plane, and the case is uh—simply to be reading an Arabic book or newspaper, and somebody will come and say “could you put that away, it’s disturbing.”

Echoes of this story appear later in the performance in Ayman's experience, when he hands a book to a friend on a plane and is asked by security to step out of the aircraft. After asking for his ID the security supervisor explains that a passengers had reported that Ayman handed a book to his friend "in a suspicious way." These two incidents illustrate how Arabs and their language are culturally perceived as suspicious or dangerous in their host community.

When the question of what Arab means is addressed directly and presented in the performance, some of the answers from non-Arab characters like Vince, Alex and Bengt evoke the stereotypical images: **"**head garment,**"** "desert dweller," "a shiekish—with a turbin…. Like Lawrence of Arabia," "harems," "dark complected skin, uh, olive skin," "camel jockeys," "sand niggers" and " I think of the Middle East, I think of oil." Other interviewees of Arabic background offer qualities and characteristics evoked by the word "Arab." Hala focuses on taking care of others, "really caring about people in a way that seems to most Americans to be..to be a kind of, a little exaggerated." While Mariam refers to other traditional attributes: "Hospitality, friendliness, Sometimes obnoxiousness…we ask direct questions; the questions that you DON'T like."

These two different ways of characterizing Arabs are challenged by Elliot's response. Though he is not Arab by blood, as an Arabic language and literature professor he is well acquainted with the Arab world. Elliot's account refers to the divisions and biases within the Arabic culture, offering a perspective from inside the Arabic culture, which challenges the notion of homogeneity.

Elliott:

> I guess I think of Gulf Arabs, uh, mostly because of my experience in Egypt. So when I hear "Arab" I hear "Ah-

> rab", and "Ah-rab" always means, those people over there who are coming from…Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or something like that. And in that sense, I have…I have the stereotypical uh oil sheikh, uh…sort of guy in my mind.
>
> ….
>
> But, so that's interesting, because the word Arab means everyone from the eastern Mediterranean too.

Elliott's viewpoint is interspersed with comments from Jimmy, the Korean physician who grew up in Los Angeles, for whom the word "Arab" is connected to songs like "Aisha song. Aisha, Aisha, doo doo doo doo" and "Oh yeah, habibi, habibi." This segment of *Sajjil* also presents a geographical description of the Arabic region and its different parts, which could be seen as an attempt to educate the audience about the subdivisions of the area.

> Mariam:
>
> When *you* say "arab" I think of all the people in my--my own region which is known as the Meshri'q region -- the Lebanese, the Syrians, the Palestinians, the Iraqis, the *Egyptians*, ah--and the Khaleejees--which means the Sa'udi Arabians, Kuwaitis, Yemenis, etcetera *AND* the North Africans. The North Africans are known as the Maghareba.

After presenting different perspectives on what the word Arab evokes, *Sajjil* moves on to document the experiences of Arabs in the United States. The performance offers accounts of attempts by some Arab immigrants to assimilate or to forge a new identity in their host community. One example is Jaquie's mother's continuous efforts to avoid being identified as Arab. In her endeavor to extricate herself from the Arabic

identity, she tries to fool an admirer by claiming they are of French origin: “I told him that you’re French and that—the food you’re going to be serving will be French.”

Jaquie:

So we all sat down and had this French dinner that—that was Arabic but—but that is why we don’t know who we are half the time.

Discrimination seems to correlate directly with appearing as “other.” In the pool of interviewees for this performance, those whose physical appearance did not immediately indicate that they are “other” suffered less while growing up in the United States. Jennifer attributes not having many memories of ethnicity being an issue when she was young to her ability to blend in: “maybe that’s partly because visually I don’t necessarily stand out as a particular thing. So I wasn’t you know, labeled.” Similarly Tariq notes how it is easy for him to pass, and not to be categorized as Arab. On the other hand, some of the other characters with distinctive non-white physical attributes felt pressure to change the way they look and to try to resemble “regular” Americans. Jaquie and Claire’s mother made continuous attempts to change their appearance so that they might fit better into society. In addition to bleaching her girls’ body hair, she tried to change the color of their dark skin.

Jaquie:

Oh she did everything to me.

Claire:

She- she would put white powder on her face before she went to school –

Jaquie

Because I was the darkest.

Claire:

> Because she was the darkest skinned. And then she would take her to electrolysis and have all her hair pulled out.

This erasure of the markers of identity on the part of the parents, led to confusion within some young Arab Americans, as Jaquie articulates it; “that is why we don’t know who we are half the time.” When they grow up, some of them attempt to conceal their Arabic identity and even if they are pressed to disclose their background, they still avoid acknowledging that they are “Arab.”

> Jaquie:
> Well Lebanese sounds a little better than "Arabic"
> Claire:
> Than Syrian.
> Jaquie:
> Than Syrian. So if they say –then I'm - then I'm Lebanese because it sound a little softer than "Arab."
> "Arab" sounds to me more like a –
> Claire:
> Offensive.

Sajjil presents other cases of ethnic confusion, one obvious example is Tariq’s sister befriending Japanese students at school when in first grade.

> Tariq:
> We’re like the only Arab family in Harrison […] And my sister started hanging out with all these Japanese kids … we looked closest to like the Japanese people cuz everyone was so white and what not, *she thought we were Japanese*. (My emphasis.)

This unconscious attempt on the part of a six-year-old Arab girl, wanting to create a community for herself, hence forming alliances with people from other ethnic groups who look the closest to her physical appearance, corresponds to another account

presented toward the end of the performance, about an Egyptian in a Chicano rap group in Sacramento:

Elliott:

> It was a Chicano group, sort of Spanglish hip-hop stuff and, I realized that one of the guys, was this um, was this Egyptian kid. And he'd grown up in Sacramento or somewhere in the central valley and…he'd identified as Chicano because, he was brown and, no one knew what Egyptians were anyway there, and he just spoke Spanish. Ah- and then, sort of through Chicano nationalism, figured out what it meant to be Egyptian in, in this, in this context, which it means: forging alliances with other brown people.

These two examples of seeking alliances with other "others" represent the human yearning to belong to a group. In the case of new immigrants, especially those of young age, this desire is part of their survival strategies. In the case of the young Egyptian man in the Chicano group, his connection to this subculture helped him find a way to his own culture.

Sajjil offers other examples of connections between people of different ethnic minority groups, like the solidarity the African American Vince feels when he hears people attacking Arabs.

Vince:

> In the south I would hear guys talk about, […] You know, "Let's get **all** the A-rabs and get 'em all together and just git 'em all outta here. Ship 'em back home." Well, you know, that's the same as telling me. You know, cuz when they're saying that they don't know it but they're talking to

> me about sending me back to Africa.. in a sense. And….I don't **like** that. I don't like that at all. (original emphasis.)

Experiencing racial profiling, as an African American enables Vince to sympathize with Arabs, because he realizes that the treatment of both groups stems from the same basis of discrimination.

While presenting Arab Americans as part of the ethnic fabric of American society, the creators of *Sajjil* are careful not to paint a false rosy picture of the collaboration between all ethnic groups within the United States. This is evident in the account of Aroon, the Hindu:

> Aroon:
>
> God, you know I wish people knew that we don't—we're not Arabic you know it's kin—almost like you know here's a si—a quick course in uh who not to beat up that kind of thing, "don't beat us up."

In order not to single out the Arabs as the only minority suffering in the United States, *Sajjil* presents experiences of other ethnic minorities, in quick snapshots, highlighting some of the prejudices they suffer and the injustices they endure. The anecdotes from Iranian American Tanaz, Asian American Jimmy, and African American Vince serve as points of comparison in the complex fabric of discrimination in American society. The Italian American Antonino describes how he and his Italian friend were singled out/ sought out/ targeted because of their ethnicity when there was a problem at their Catholic school. The principal nun told them:

> Antonino:
>
> "We know that *you* did it because, you know, you guys are greasy *wops*", all that kind of stuff, and then said, " it's because of people, of people like you that we should have

> stopped letting immigrants in this country, letting immigrants *into* this country a long time ago." And, we, I was ten years old. I mean whaddoyou, whaddoyou, I don't even know what the hell that *means*.

The stories told by the characters from other ethnic minorities about their experiences with racial profiling and harassment parallel those of Arab Americans, implying that Arabs are not alone in enduring the effects of racial tension.

Structurally, the play is organized into a prologue, followed by exchanges between characters, usually grouped in pairs. The pairs are sometimes contrasted, and at other times they offer complementing points of view. The flow of the characters' exchanges, loosely arranged by theme, is interrupted by four episodes. Most of the characters appear throughout the performance, with the exception of the characters in the episodes. The first episode "Pita-gay and Basiyma" is mainly an dialogue between two high school students in response to questions from the interviewer. The episode shows the lack of knowledge about Arabs, their language, and their geographical origins:

Basiyma:

> why do all Middle East people have to come from Afghanistan? There's other places like, like India. Some people are hindus… some people come from, you know, Bangladesh… People are like, "You came from Afghanistan" – no, he's from Bangladesh… Some of them speak Arabic, some of them speak Hindi. What's the language from Bangladesh?

This episode also touches on issues of harassment and discrimination against Arabs, especially after 9/11:

Pita-Gay:

> Cuz like after September 11th they be—gotten scared cuz in my school sometimes they crack jokes, they be like, "Allah, allah allah" you know and stuff like that." Ignorant people. And on my block they raided a store.

Issues of confused identity and confusion of people from different Middle and South Eastern origins are expanded after this episode through the account/character of Tanaz

> Tanaz:
>
> So do you speak Arabic? I'm like, No...I'm Iranian…[*slowly; like its something she says ALL the time*] its a different coun--try, its a different cultu-- THAT doesn't bother me; it just BORES me. […]--I don't even really get annoyed, its just, you know, like, TIRESOME.

When Tanaz reveals to those asking about her background that she is Jewish she is often asked if she has an "internal struggle." These assumptions about nationality and religion are further explored through pairing the Iranian woman with a Lebanese man forced to deal with similarly narrow-minded perspectives.

> Malek:
>
> Whenever I get asked where I am from and I tell them I'm from Lebanon, the next question maybe 99.9% of the time they ask, so are you Muslim? […] it SEEMS as if this is the one-two punch. Every time they ask if you are an Arab, they, oh they wanna know.

Malek recounts his experience with a colleague, and how uncomfortable the colleague feels when Malek ask him the same question, "What is your religion?" This theme is pursued further via the comedic story of Hala, who raises her hand at school with both the Christians and the Muslims because each of her parents belongs to a different

religion. A confused school visitor asks her "which one are you?" When she replies that she is "half and half," he inquires, "Which half is which?"

To complicate the religious picture further, *Sajjil* presents the character of Gameela, a native New Yorker, whose parents converted to Islam during the civil rights movement because they felt that "Christianity was a white man's religion." In spite of her religious connections to the community, she still experiences discrimination from some Arabs because of her skin color. The relationship between Arabs and Muslims is explained by Ayman who declares that, "Arabs are a minority among Muslims" worldwide, and lists several non-Arab countries where millions of Muslims reside.

The second episode, "Jehovah's Witness," summarizes the views of a few of these missionaries on Arabs and Islam. It also offers interesting information about Arabic Jehovah's Witness congregations:

June:

> [A]s Jehovah's Witnesses, we have many congregations who are made up of Arabs. Okay?[…] In fact, right here in Brooklyn there's a small congregation and they speak nothing but the um, the, what's the language they speak? The Arabic language.

While the characters presented in the second episode try, at least, to show some tolerance and acceptance of the Arabs and Muslim, the following episode, "The Two Does," is an extreme attack on them by two men who refuse to give their names, referring to themselves instead as John Doe and John Doe Two.

JD:

> If we go over there and bomb someone they expect us to rebuild it - you rebuild .. it your selves. I don't believe in

the tax payers - the people paying the taxes can't build y'alls place up - we didn't ask you to come over here and bomb this place.

…

JD2:

That they just a bunch a crazy motherfuckers. Everytime they catch one of them son a bitches they oughtta bring him over to me let me shoot the son a bitch right there (JD chuckles) I'll kill the son a bitch right there. I - it wouldn't cost the state, the tax payers, the man whos working for a living it wouldn't cost him a damn thing - cause I'd kill the son a bitch let him - put him in the ground - burn him or do whatever we want to…

Their aggressive assault on Arabs and Muslims words take on a different dimension when the audience realizes where they are located:

JD2:

Right around here. Born and raised within ten miles of Palestine.

The two John Does fail to identify what their town in Arkansas is named after.

JD2:

It was Palestine (Paeslteen) When I first knowed it.

JD:

Jericho is on up here and Egypt is on up here also.

JD2:

I don't know where it' come from - I don't know where Palestine get it - I know an ol'boy can tell me though cause they run a survey on this town…. Jericho, Egypt, Palestine, Forest City, Wheatley, Springfield.

From intolerance and prejudice, the performance moves on to explore institutionalized racial profiling through the character of Mary, a Foreign Service Officer

who works in the State Department in Washington. Her commentary reveals more disturbing accounts of the treatment of and assumptions made about Arabs by the authorities in the United States. In her initial statement she describes her shock when she realized that the target practice mock figures are made to look like Arabs, which subconsciously institute Arabs as the enemy of the state. After exposing how the state is creating an image of the Arab as enemy, *Sajjil* reveals the mechanism of how the media manipulate information to enforce a negative view of Arabs in the fourth and final episode "The Man on the Street." While Kevin goes through a list of how Arabs are seen as evil, dark, shady, sneaky, and dishonest, Doris talks about his experience with a reporter from the New York Times

Doris:

> I said: "whatever we do I don't want it to be slanted. Tell it the way it is or don't tell it at all." The next day this article came out that slanted it which I have a copy right here my pictures in there the whole big deal. I got screwed in my interview asking the guy to tell it like it was and I don't appreciate it and I won't ever and the New York Times just screwed up a good honest interview is what they did. I—I still have got a sticker in my throat from being done that way. And you say "well they didn't lie" yeah but they didn't tell the truth and if yer not going to tell it the way it is leave it alone.

The manipulation of the story by the media becomes more potent when placed next to Kevin's continuous rant against Arabs.

Kevin:

> [T]he mass murders, the killing people, blowing up themselves, dropping bombs, running into pizzerias and

> blowing up, uh, uh, kids and their moms, and turning jetliners into missiles and, you know, slamming em into the side of financial trade centers and military thinkpad, uh, think tanks.

This interplay between the fabrication presented in a trusted newspaper and the perception of Arabs exposes the mechanism by which an enemy is constructed via the creation of a negative image of the other. Since most people do not know have access to sources that would inform them about what really takes place, they believe what they read as the truth.

The performance also discusses the central place of the Palestinian issue in how Arabs are perceived. The placement of the section on Palestine immediately after the exposing of the media as not always truthfully presenting what takes place is very significant; it implies that the way the American public perceives the situation in Palestine is likely to be affected by how the Palestinian story is presented to them.

Jennifer:

> [J]ournalism and economic development are s'posed to be two things where you're supposed to be able to be honest and objective and speak the truth, […] and whenever I tried to do those things on the Palestinian issue, like I would on any other issue – that's where I get stopped, you know I can say whatever I want about a lot of other issues, but as soon as it comes to "what about Palestine?" you know, most people, it hits a sort of a road block with them.

A large part of the identity of Arabs is connected to the Palestinian issue. This leads to tensions with the American establishment. Since the right of the Palestinians to their land, and to a decent life is widely considered threatening to the existence of Israel, it becomes a defining factor in the relationship between Arabs and the United States. As Edward

expresses it, “Arabs have been in a continual state of *war* with the United States, because of Israel.” To avoid creating an image of Israel as the enemy, however, the performance uses the words of Najah, who has friends “from both sides,” and who declares that “If they leave everything to the people? Tomorrow there will be peace in the world.”

The last pair of characters presented in *Sajjil* provides a look at the relationship between Arabs and law enforcement in the United States. Adil, a police officer from an Arabic background is paired with an Arab detainee in an American prison following 9/11. Adil, who is passionate about his work, is frustrated by the conflicting situation in which he finds himself after 9/11 “because of his ancestry.”

> Adil:
>
> I'm a sworn police officer – now I'm a terrorist too? Cause I'm Arab and I'm Muslim?… – What makes me any different besides my name? Are you better than me? More patriotic than me? I don't gotta prove myself to anyone.

Volunteering to help in the search for bodies at the World Trade Center site, digging for hours in unsafe conditions, he wonders, "is my father gunna have problem when he goes to work tomorrow?” Yet he holds an uncompromising position regarding detaining those who could pose a threat to society. He believes in “firm fair law enforcement.” This position is challenged by the moving speeches read from a letter by the Arab detainee describing his cell, his solitary confinement. The fact that he has not been charged with a crime, in violation of the doctrine of habeas corpus raises doubt as to the fairness of law enforcement against Arabs following 9/11.

In spite of the discrimination and the prejudices against Arabs there was a reverse reaction within the Arab American community, in which some members of the second

and third generation decided to become “more Arab” after 9/11. This performance includes a number of them, which is clear in Jennifer’s statement:

> I knew all that came along with it, I knew what a sort of...b-basically shitty position it was (laugh) to be in, you know? […]and I took it on[..] I mean once it -- push came to shove, and actually I was discriminated against because I was an Arab-- from then on I didn’t turn back, I mean if anything, I was more adamantly “I’m Palestinian, I’m Palestinian.”

Elliott also observes a similar phenomenon amont his college students, who discover their Arabic identity. Once they identify with their Arabness, articulating this identity becomes more problematic, as there are no clear channels to express it.

The question of how this newly-found Arab /Arab American identity could be articulated more fully and productively is left unanswered by this performance. With this “emptiness” hanging in the air, the performance offers an ending that summarizes its themes, with a few uplifting words of advice from some of the characters. Ayman reiterates how the Muslim community realized that they cannot afford to be isolated.

> Ayman:
>
> [I]f you are isolated, you givin’ the chance for people, to build up their own image about you. So you better take the initiative, you better come close to people, and let them know you.

In addition, Jennifer expresses her belief that people could change their views on an issue once they communicate with Palestinians. This is one of the objectives of this performance: to present several Arabs and Arab Americans, so that by the end of the performance the audience would have listened to their first-hand stories.

Adil's last speech mentions the younger Arab American generation which is assimilating into American society and finding a voice. Hala's final words offer a vision of Arabs "connectors" acting as "a bridge" between the different sides. Speaking like a true activist, Ayman advocates not blaming the government or other people but asks a "practical" question, "Tell me what should I, as a person, what should I do?" Here the performance seems to be giving agency to the individual in the face of the institution, yet questions such as the main inquiry of the play, "what is Arab?" are left unanswered.

Sajjil thus poses a number of questions, which it does not answer**.** In the end, this play succeeds more in presenting what Arabs are not, rather than what they are. Still, through the contrasting of images and testimonies by Arabs and non-Arabs, and by presenting a collage of images and perspectives on Arabs, and on what they experience in America, the play works to dispel some of the stereotypes and distorted images of Arabs, as promulgated by the mainstream media.

There is a clear parallel between the two Arab American plays discussed in this chapter in that both attempt to expose their audiences to the complicated issues surrounding their ethnic groups: Arabs, Arab Americans and Iraqis. Though the subject matter of both plays is very serious and somber, both plays employ humor in some sections.

Within the continuum of documentary theatre, at one end is verbatim theatre; presenting the exact words of interviewees on stage in the form of testimonies; while at the other end are artistically created characters loosely based on people the artists met, interviewed or researched. *Sajjil* falls at the verbatim end of that spectrum, as the Nibras Group's main objective was to present the exact words of their interviewees in

testimonial fashion: the text of the play is verbatim, with ellipses marking the company's editing of the original transcription. On the other hand, *9 Parts of Desire* is positioned closer to the other end of the spectrum, since Raffo worked from stories of real people, but crafted the characters of her solo performances with greater creative freedom.

Another difference between the two plays is their target audience. While *Sajjil*'s motivating question "what is Arab?" is trying to demystify Arabness and Arab Americanness to the American audiences, its performances attracted a large Arab American audience. For them, this play seems to validate their experiences and to create a sense of solidarity. On the other hand, the majority of the audiences for *9 Parts of Desire* were Americans seeking to know more about what is taking place in Iraq and hoping this performance would answer some of the questions and satisfy their curiosity about that country.

In regards to the construction of the Arab American identity on stage, both plays present a compiled identity of the communities they are exploring, namely Arab Americans and Iraqi women. The compiled portraits of one play and verbatim selections of the other present an image of identity that is rooted in reality. These performances provide an image of Arab Americans in American society, or of Iraqi women experiencing the war, which could be seen as more authentic than media representations of the topic, or artistic representations by non-Arabs. The subject matter is authenticated via the ethnicity of the writers/ performers which adds an extra layer of validity to the stories told.

Chapter Three: Plays by Betty Shamieh and Laura Shamas

While most Arab American plays of the early twentieth century focused on historic themes, and the comedies at the end of the century derived humor from the uncomfortable situations immigrants experienced in their new environments, a large number of the plays written by Arab American women in the twenty-first century tackle issues of identity. Evidently, the identity of this immigrant community and its representation changed, becoming highly politicized in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. In this chapter, I will look at the dramatic representation of Arab American identity on stage**.**

In less than a decade the representation of Arab American identity went through a number of changes that could be grouped in three phases: first, the struggle to exist and to carve a place for oneself in American society, which is very different from the culture of the parents; second, the tension between the old and new sets of codes, which reached an extreme and a point of fracture in the events of 9/11; third, the post 9/11 world and its impact on people of Arab descent. Each of the three plays discussed in this chapter presents a phase in the exploration of Arab American identity. Betty Shamieh's *Chocolate in Heat: Growing Up Arab in America* (2001) represents the first phase of trying to define the self as it exists between the two cultures. Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* (2006) presents the tension of the second phase that culminates in the death of the main character on board one of the 9/11 flights. Laura Shamas' *Pistachio Stories* (2006) explores the position of Arab Americans experiencing the culture of fear after 9/11.

A number of themes run through these three plays: integration and merging the two cultures, heritages of Arab Americans, issues pertaining to language, the

impossibility of love under the circumstances pressing this community, trust between people of the same ethnic group, issues of race and color, exposition of the suffering of Palestinians and Arab Americans, and sexual politics. Alhough the subject matter of the three plays are distinctly different, both Shamieh and Shamas weave personal stories with the larger political ones, thereby illustrating the impact of the political pressure on the individual.

A useful tool for analyzing the negotiation of cultural identity is the paradigm of descent and consent suggested by Werner Sollors. According to Sollors:

> Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of "substance" (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of "law" or "marriage." Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements, consent language stresses our abilities as mature, free agents and "architects of our fates" to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems.[63]

The tension between descent and consent is clear in the plays by Shamieh explored here.

Betty Shamieh's *Chocolate in Heat: Growing Up Arab in America*

Shamieh is the most produced of the current generation of Arab American playwrights. A number of her fifteen plays have had performances and readings in major cities in the United States and overseas. Her first play, *Chocolate in Heat* (2001), is a series of monologues illustrating some of the problems facing young immigrants in their host country. This play is representative of pre-9/11 writing about Arab American

[63] Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), 6.

identity. On the other hand, *The Black Eyed* (2006) is a post 9/11 play that offers a commentary on the position of Arabs, especially Palestinian women, by tracing four women from different historical moments, one of them a victim of the events of 9/ 11.

Though separated by only a few years, these two plays by Shamieh offer very different perspectives on Arab American identity, because awareness of identity, as well as the issues facing the community had changed dramatically post 9/11. The first, *Chocolate in Heat: Growing Up Arab in America*, focuses on the identity formation of young Arab Americans by presenting key events in the life of the protagonist, Aiesha, and of others who interact with her. The main concern of this piece is to shed light on some of the challenges facing a young Arab American woman whose parents are the product of a different culture and on her attempt to survive the harsh realities of discrimination against minorities living in the United States.

Chocolate in Heat: Growing Up Arab in America is divided into six scenes. The first five are separate monologues performed alternately between the actress and the actor; with both performers participating in the final section. All scenes begin with phrases projected on a screen. The first scene entitled "Need" starts with the projection of the FBI logo and the following words:

> Subject – Aiesha Haggar. Harvard student. Displayed a tendency towards violence. Several witnesses witnessed her snorting large amounts of cocaine.[64]

These projections frame the play, as the play starts and ends with projections. The final resolution of the play is projected on a screen that displays the fate of the character. Although half of the six scenes are not performed by the protagonist, Aiesha, and present

[64] All references to this play are from an unpublished manuscript obtained by the author.

information on her only tangentially, the projected captions in the voice of the FBI offer a running commentary on her activities, providing a connective structure for the play.

Scene one is a re-writing of the story of Cinderella. The modern tale of the Arab Cinderella includes the character of a real prince from an Arab country, a big party by "the Society" in the University, and even a missing shoe. Since the protagonist does not have the right attire for the party, her roommate sponsors her and buys her red shoes in the local consignment shop: “There I found my version of the glass slippers with their red spikes.” In this re-writing of the story, the shoes do not fit the main character from the beginning, indicating that she herself is a misfit in privileged society. The protagonist is separated from the rest of the privileged college community not only by her economic status but also because of her physical attributes, particularly her brown skin color. Elements of race and ethnicity are introduced early in the play: the main protagonist reasons that she was invited to this exclusive society because she “could play the part of the local exotique."

> I was a scholarship kid, complete with a picture of me in my college’s propaganda pamphlets that seemed to say “See this face! Here’s your proof we’re making outcasts like this one overeducated enough to know that they’ll always be underprivileged in this world!”

Parallels with the Cinderella story are suggested throughout the scene. The protagonist does not want the night to end, yet, instead of leaving with the Prince, she goes for a ride with a rich young man who brought drugs to the party. The man attacks her on the beach:

> He is spitting and yelling “Wanna know why I can kill you and get away with it?!” I want to answer “yes, actually, I

> would appreciate it if you could explain to me why that's the case" but he's gallant enough to answer his own question by saying "'cause you're just a brown piece of..." and I know exactly what that's about.

The protagonist's name is not spoken in front of the audience until a dramatic moment in her struggle to free herself from the man who is trying to rape her. She has an unmistakably Arab name, 'Aiesha':

> I'm about to stop struggling and number my way through it, just like how I get through the loneliness shade of darkness by counting each step to sleep. Until I hear my mother's voice saying "I named you Aiesha. It means 'she that lives.' Bite the apple, bite into the seed till you reach the need" and I did so, but I stopped when I felt it bleed.

Escaping her attacker by sticking her spiked heel in his right eye, Aiesha is picked up by a woman of brown complexion. Shamieh paints a vivid image using color: the contrast of the red blood of the character on the white mat inside the car, alongside the similarity between her brown complexion and that of her rescuer. The silence around what happened to her, though she is bleeding in the car, signals the understanding between the two women of color of the dynamics of oppression and of their underprivileged position in the hierarchy.

As in the Cinderella story, Aiesha leaves one shoe behind, "If Graham forces the only thing I left him on each girl in the kingdom, he won't find who he's looking for. That shoe never fit me." The fact that the protagonist did not belong in "society" is emphasized by the shoes not fitting her from the start.

The main focus of the second monologue, "Love," is the Arab Prince. Yet his character is introduced in relationship to the protagonist, Aiesha, who studies at the same

university with him. The scene starts with the projected caption: “Subject was known to repeat conspiracy theories. Interacted with several Arab nationals at Harvard, including the prince of….” This scene reveals the inferior position of Arabs regardless of their social stratum. It also comments on inter-Arab relations in the diaspora and how they are controlled by the politics of the old country. The male actor begins this scene by relating the unrequited love story of the Prince. What first appears to be a separate monologue is later connected to the first scene when the Prince mentions an encounter with the protagonist, Aiesha, in which he overheard her criticize his father’s regime and talk about how his father plotted the murder of his mother because he feared her popularity with Palestinians.

> I’m Palestinian, and Palestinian women don’t last long when they marry Jordanian royalty. Look at the guy’s mother. The king killed his own wife. Sabotaged her helicopter.

This scene also offers more personal information about Aiesha, “The few Arabic words she spoke revealed her family spoke the unmistakable dialect of a peasant.” The hierarchy and class issues of the old country continue to control the relationships between Arabs in the United States. This scene also serves to show Aiesha from a different perspective. Throughout the play the audience sees the protagonist from different perspectives: that of the Prince, the young man’s in the corner store, the FBI Agent’s investigating her, as well as her own recounting of her life experiences. Yet despite her complexity and the multi-faceted nature of her character, the dominant angle remains that of the FBI report which frames the play.

In a parallel to the incident of Aiesha's attempted rape on the beach, the Prince himself is subjected to discrimination and is attacked by a group of men. One of them insults him on the beach, "The water's toxic, you non-English speaking motherfucker." When the prince responds, the man hits him and throws him to the ground, showing that neither wealth nor status can protect Arabs, even royalty, from bias and harassment. At the end of the monologue, the Prince mentions Aiesha again, revealing that she left school after escaping her attack on the beach. Her chance for a better life through an Ivy league education was destroyed**.**

In addition to exposing the discrimination experienced by Arabs and Arab Americans, regardless of class, this monologue also shows the ignorance of many Americans about Arabs. The girlfriend whom the Prince showers with gifts and thousands of roses does not remember the country he is from: "You're a prince and all, but I don't want to move to Saudi Arabia," mistaking Jordan for Saudi Arabia.

The third scene "Ignorance" is introduced on the screen by "Subject had violent tendencies dating back from early adolescence. Showed an aptitude for math and science." This monologue, which is performed by the female actor, returns to an earlier phase of the protagonist's life and to the trouble she had at school as an adolescent. Because Aiesha is a good student, the social worker at school protects her from punishment by signing her up for an art class.

> "She called me a sand nigger. I had to fight her." I whined. "So people don't mess with me. Everybody got a group and they stick to it…. There ain't enough of my kind here for me to stick to - I'm a rare bird, flying solo, and I ain't looking to become extinct anytime soon." It was a lie,

> though. I fought with that girl over a boy. All my fights with girls were over boys.

Aiesha's reasoning shows a sense of humor, which Shamieh uses throughout the play. The funny remarks help ease the painful situations the characters face:

> "Why painting?" I asked.
> You scratched your initials into the face of that girl

Instead of art class, Aiesha is drawn by the music of the Jazz dance class, which she joins, undergoing dance training with the Red Dance Company. Aiesha is eventually chosen to perform a solo piece. During her performance some drunken audience members ridicule her, using her Arabic background:

> "Hey, Ai-ee-sha. I see your boobies. Ali Baba is going to get mad." was shouted up at me over the melody and it went downhill from there. Soon, they just started saying "Terrorize me. Terrorize me. Terrorize me," till I could not longer concentrate on the beat of the drum, the depth of my breath, or the feel of the floor.

When she runs off stage, the teacher challenges her to go back. She refuses saying, "People like me go to college." The dance teacher's response evokes some of the stereotypes about Arabs, contrasting them with the negative representation of Blacks:

> And people like you also blow shit up when you're having a bad day. At least when Black people go crazy, we do something reasonable – like rob a bank. Enough chit-chat about people like you and people like me. You don't let nobody scare you off no stage. Get out there, girl!

The teacher's response shows how stereotypes operate within communities of people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Aiesha refuses to go back on stage, saying she doesn't want to end up like here teacher, who is "Washed up at thirty-nine. Washed up and ignorant." The title of this

scene, “Ignorance,” comments on both the illiteracy of the dance teacher, and on Aiesha’s own ignorance, as well as the inability to transcend the stereotypes projected on her because of her ethnicity.

The fourth monologue, entitled “Sex,” is introduced through a connection to the protagonist, although she does not appear in the scene. The introductory phrases are projected on screen read, “Subject may have been the victim of abuse. A suspected sex offender…. in the area was reported, but was never tried and eventually hung himself.” The scene is a monologue by Ahmad El-Far, who is writing a book he thinks could protect women from rape, through field research with prostitutes on different kinds of rapists. Ahmed recounts how he confides in a friend of his who is a prostitute:

> She was the one person I told the real reason I always wanted to write an important book, a substantial book, a book that had nothing to do with the Middle East. Except that it had an unmistakably Arab name on the cover and everyone who read it would have to incorporate into their worldview that writing books like that is something Arab men do.

Ahmed, the Arab name, is a clear indicator of an Arab or Muslim identity, connected in the minds of most Americans with Middle East politics. The dramatist suggests that this name is associated in the minds of the general public with political activity or even “terrorism,” and introduces the “unthinkable” idea of having a man named Ahmed write a book about something else in a different field.

This scene is not a continuation of previously discussed characters or situations, but the events at the end of this scene set the stage for the monologue the follows.

It also tells the story of the sexual abuse the male character experienced as a child and of the impact this has had on his life: "Imagine being a boy who is molested. There's no room in any society – Arab or American – for a man to ever admit." Ahmad's mother molested him regularly as child, which damaged him emotionally, and made him incapable of having intimate relationships with women. His insecurity also prevents him from speaking out when his uncle touches a young girl, inappropriately, in his store. In the following scene, this girl is revealed to be Aiesha as a child. The sexual abuse of the Arab man as a child foreshadows what happens to the protagonist in the following scene.

The caption introducing scene five, "Justice," reads "Subject's father abandoned the family when she was seven. Subject's mother became reclusive. Had limited contact with the Arab community in New York." This provides information about what is not presented on stage, giving the audience some background on the history of the character. The fifth monologue goes back further in Aiesha's history, presenting incidents from her childhood. The central event of the scene is how an Arab shopkeeper in her neighborhood tries to tempt her by giving her expensive chocolate, against her mother's advice never to accept free gifts.

> The more I tugged away with all my weight, the harder he squeezed my hand around the chocolate bar. Then, I felt his thumb press upon my left breast quick as a hammer hits a nail. I looked at the other man and he looked away. As Lou let my hand go and I soared backwards against and out the glass door, I heard the roar of his laughter rush after me like a river, as Lou said "Take it, so you grow big tits like your mama."

The other man in her recounting of the incident is Ahmad from the previous scene, who wants to save womankind from oppression and rape, but did not interfere to stop his Uncle Lou from harassing the child.

Aiesha comes later to the store and smears "the words 'I hate you' a million times in melted chocolate on his window," planning to storm his store and stand silent before him, giving him the choice to either "apologize or kill me." But when she goes to the store the following day "the wind and the rain had swept the chocolate words away, so that only I could see the outlines of "I hate you" in my reflection in the glass." The fact that the shop owner was Arab did not prevent him from abusing the Arab girl, who learned that "you can't trust people just because they speak or look or pray or even love the way you do."

The theme of trust between people of the same ethnic background is fully explored in the final scene, "Instinct," which starts as a monologue by an Arab American FBI Agent, assigned to listen in on an Arab man who talked about justice in the Middle East. While listening the Agent realizes that the man is killing his daughter because she is dating. He responds by calling an ambulance, which exposes his cover, and as a result he is demoted in the "Company." In the longest scene of the play, the playwright explores a number of themes relating to trust and human nature. The main character wonders "What could make a family turn on itself? What did it mean that the sister defended the father for his actions at the trial?"

His obsession with the murdered girl turned to nightmares so that he had to stay with his sister, Samira, to have company at night. Shamieh uses the dialogue between brother and sister to shift the focus away from the "Arab mentality," deemed responsible

for the murder of the girl by her father, to expose the injustices women suffer in general, regardless of their cultural or social status. The dramatist unpacks the stereotype of Arab men's violence against women, by having an Arab woman, Samira, passionately recount examples of systematic violence and discrimination against women across many cultures revealing that the position of American women is not much better than that of Arab women.

After failing in his first mission of spying on the Arabic family, the next task of the Agent, whose name is not revealed, is to track a volunteer in the Arab Cultural Center in Brooklyn Heights, who keeps repeating the code word "Amal," meaning "hope" in Arabic. The Agent practices his grandfather's dialect, finds a job at the center, and eventually asks about the meaning of "Amal." Mohamed, the volunteer, tells him that the hope is the children studying in the center, some of whom are smuggled in from conflict areas in the Arab World.

> The women pick out young children who can pass for the pictures in their children's passports. The parents agree that it is the best thing to send them. The women bring the children back here and – in Brooklyn, Detroit, Chicago, all over - each family raises one or two of them. We are giving children hope and they are our hope.

The Agent reports the information to his boss, and when he tries later to celebrate his success with his sister, she is infuriated that he exposed the plot to save Arab children. She tries to go to the center to warn them so that they can hide the children from the upcoming raid by law enforcers, but he stops her by physically attacking her:

> I broke her nose with the first punch. I cracked a rib with second. Then, I cried and carried her to the car and we

> drove without sirens to the room of emergencies where we both went undercover. She played a clumsy woman. I played a chagrined family member.

The situation which disturbs him greatly at the beginning of the monologue, of an Arab father killing his own daughter, and the question he poses about how family members can hurt each other, are replicated in his own life, where he becomes the aggressor, committing physical violence against his own sister. The sister protects him in the hospital, as the daughter protected her father in the trial.

Another Arab American Agent discovers that "hope" is the code word for drugs, and arrests the smugglers. The connection between this scene and the rest of the play is revealed at the end, when the Agent is asked to interrogate a student who had been reported by a college professor for making radical statements about American policy in the Middle East in the classroom. This student is the protagonist of *Chocolate in Heat: Growing up Arab in America*, Aiesha.

> I thought it was stupid to waste time tracking loudmouthed kids who were clearly not threats of any sort, neither having the ability to organize a mass social movement, or having expressed the desire to use violence as a means for a political end. I voiced this opinion.

Aiesha is caught in the airport when she exceeded her credit limit trying to buy a ticket from Boston to New York. She is brought-in for interrogation by the FBI. During the questioning, the Agent notices something on her lips

> Actress:
>
> It's not chocolate.
>
> Actor:
>
> Oh. How…who did that to you?

Actress:

I fell down the stairs.

By repeating the exact same phrase his sister uses when she tells the doctor about the injury inflicted on her, the playwright creates a parallel between the position of the two women. This echoes the initial murder account of the scene, evoking not only the abuse of Arab women, but of women in general:

> She sat looking like my mother, my sister, like Dana, like every woman I've ever met. Just by the way she is looking at me it is clear that – to her – I am like every man she ever met and the men she has met have not all been good.

It is clear to the Agent that Aiesha will not be convicted by the police, for the mysterious death of the man who was last seen with her and who was hit by a car. Yet the Arab American FBI Agent wants to be careful, and to impress his boss, Khadija, the Libyan American woman, who is observing the interrogations:

> I could let her go…. but Khadija's sure she is dangerous. I can't be seen as untrustworthy. I can't be seen as soft.

Because they share the same Arabic identity, the Agent acts tougher toward Aiesha, preferring to err on the side of caution. The Agent does not say his recommendations at the end of questioning Aiesha, but the screen shows "Agent's Recommendation: Detain," and the play ends with a sense of frustration at the unfulfillment of the hope of a young bright Arab American woman who made it to Harvard and who had the promise of a better future, through good education.

Through the story of Aiesha and the people she interacts with, *Chocolate in Heat* creates an image of the life of Arab Americans living in the United States and dealing with the general problems of adolescence and growing up, and of their struggle in search

of identity in an atmosphere of hate and discrimination against minorities**.** The final monologue reveals a sense of disillusionment at the arbitrary detention of the main character, who had great potential, in order to protect the career of the Arab American FBI Agent. The ending comes abruptly in order to shock the audience. There is no explanation or time for catharsis during the performance, compelling the audience members to think about the play after it ends, perhaps to carry these questions with them into their lives.

Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*

The second play examined in this chapter is Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*. It depicts four Arab women from across the ages: the Biblical Delilah, a victim of medieval Christian crusaders, a contemporary Arab American, and a modern Palestinian suicide bomber. The Four women meet in the afterlife, where they struggle to come to terms with their lives and with the oppression they each endured.

The play's structure is similar to that of *Chocolate in Heat* in that it presents the story of each women, one at a time, without disclosing the event that connects them until the end. In the later part of the play, the Palestinian American Architect, who spoke the least in the first half and was described as "inarticulate" and a "retard," very articulately shares her story, revealing how she died on one of the flights during the attacks of 9/11. Alhough the events of 9/11 are an integral part of this story, as the protagonist of the play is one of its victims, the general focus of the play revolves around the discussion of sex, sexuality and relationships between men and women.

There are tensions between the characters, yet there is no major conflict between them. Three of them want to go into what they assume is the room where martyrs gather

in heaven, but are unable to take this step. They seek Aiesha's assistance to go in and find the men they want to meet. Delilah wants to meet Samson, the lover whose life she helped to end by revealing the secret of his invincible power, while Tamam wants to meet her younger brother, who killed several crusaders to avenge her honor after she was raped in front of him. It is not obvious throughout the play which martyr the Architect is interested in meeting.

During the course of the performance it becomes clear that the four women have Palestinian origins. The character of Delilah lived in the area that became modern-day Palestine, Tamam lived on the same land during the Crusades, Aiesha lived in Palestine under the current Israeli occupation, while the Architect was born in the United States to Palestinian parents. Though the characters belong to different historic periods, they all use the same style of language, which is modern, contemporary, and colloquial. The language is anachronistic, and many of the exchanges involving the historical characters are comparable to dialogue between female characters in American television sitcoms about sexuality and dating. Also there is no (geographic) distinction in the diction usage between the Arab American woman who lived in the United States and that of the women who lived in Palestine. Even the Chorus uses slang:

> Delilah:
> That would be tacky.
> Samson was a lot of things, but he wasn't tacky.
> He grabbed her and kissed her passionately.
> and she scratched and bit and pushed at him,
> he told her
> Chorus:
> "I like 'em kinky."

Delilah is presented as highly sexualized, using her sexual power to conquer Samson, who oppressed her people, but she is not the only woman in the play who is presented as a seducer. Tamam also uses her physical beauty to have access to her brother, who is imprisoned by the crusaders. Both women use their charms in the afterlife to seduce the Monkey-God in order to know the location of martyrs in heaven. Aiesha enjoys her interpretation of what she believes heaven offers a female martyr: chaste men, which is a twist on what the religious texts promise as a reward for male martyrs.

> Aiesha:
> I interpreted that to mean that if I blew myself up and took others with me,
> because no one would give a shit about my people's plight unless I did,
> I would have a hundred men of every hue.
> who were lined up like fruits at the market.
> ….
> Tamam:
> In what religious text did you find that if you blew yourself up you'd have a hundred men of every hue?
> Aiesha:
> Okay, my interpretation is a rather loose one.
> But, hey, it's heaven.
> That's what I believed, that's what I got.

During this exchange the characters reveal the meaning of the title of the play: *The Black Eyed* is a literal translation of the word used in the Quran to describe the beautiful virgin women whom martyrs would find waiting for them in heaven.

The focus on sexuality extends from exchanges between the characters to offering direct advice to the audience:

Delilah:

Women, what do you do when you want a man?
This is what I did and this is what I suggest.
Go to where he frequents.
Dress well, dress in a way that makes it obvious you are a
(pause) woman.
Men can never tell the difference
between a beautiful woman

Chorus:

and a person dressed like one.

Though all the characters of *The Black Eyed* are women, what moves the play is their search for their men. In the first half of the play the reason behind Tamam and Delilah's search is revealed, as they present the stories of the men they are seeking, Tamam's brother Muhammed, and Delilah's lover Samson. Aiesha briefly states that she is a suicide bomber who took her life and that of others for a cause. While each of the women is recounting her story, the other three act as chorus supporting her tale by representing other characters in it, asking questions, offering comments or finishing phrases. The Chorus is sometimes the three women who are not actively sharing their narrative, while at other times the Chorus's role is performed by only one or two of the women.

The second part of the play portrays the Architect's story through two fantasies, which she narrates to the audience. The first occurs when she meets an architect who is half Arab, whom she describes as "the Half-Breed." She fantasizes about marrying him, and how that would lead her to forsake her architectural work in order to care for her family, while her husband blossoms professionally through her support, he cheating on her all the while. The second fantasy takes place five years later, when the Architect

decides to go visit the Half-Breed. She had decided to lose her virginity with him when she turns thirty-five. Her fear of flying leads her to imagine being in a plane hijacked by Arabs. Through her eloquence in the Arabic language she is able to convince the hijackers not to harm the passengers and to help the Americans on board understand the suffering of her people by exposing the government's manipulation of the facts. She manages to save the day, which makes her a celebrity. Through these two elaborate fantasies the audience is offered an insight into the Architect's life and her fears, hopes and dreams living as an Arab in the United States. The details of her fantasies and neurosis present a depth of information about her life that differs from how the other characters are presented. The other characters are each summarized through one event: that of her death, or the death of the martyr she is searching for.

The Architect's narrative touches upon themes that concern second-generation Arab Americans, namely: living between two cultures, holding to tradition, representing one's people, explaining the home culture to the host culture, and the responsibility of and need for marrying people from the same cultural background to keep the lineage alive. Her fantasies reveal the importance of knowing the mother tongue that she herself did not learn.

In spite of the serious and grave situation created in her second fantasy when she realizes that the plane might crash, the sexual theme is the dominant focus:

Architect:
And I realize I'm going to die a virgin.
I'd stomp up to the
Chorus:
cock
Architect:

pit.

….

I'd get on that loudspeaker and say -

"Unfasten your seatbelts.

Chorus:

Motherfuckers!

Architect:

If this plane is going down,

someone is going down on me!"

The intersection between the stories of Aiesha and the Architect is clarified at the end of the play when the Architect explains that she saw a poster on an Arab-hating website with a photo of Aiesha, the suicide bomber, next to the photo of her only victim, a young Palestinian girl with the caption, "Finally, they are killing one another." Aiesha interrupts the Architect's narrative to recount more of her story, revealing how the group she was targeting moved after she detonated her bomb, and the only person left in the scene was the young girl who came with her mother to serve in an Israeli household. This explains why she is not welcomed in the martyrs' room. The two stories are connected further when the Architect's fantasies turn to reality and she realizes that the plane she took to meet the Half-Breed, on September 11, 2001, is *actually* being hijacked by Arabs.

Architect:

I thought to myself - will they put my picture next to the

man who ran past my row?

Under our pictures, will they write the words...

Aiesha:

Finally, they are killing one another.

During the hijacking, the Architect is unable to act out any of her fantasies, as she is incapable of using the Arabic language to save the plane or to establish communication

with the hijackers. Toward the end of *The Black Eyed*, the Architect reveals that the man she is searching for in heaven is a hijacker she had had eye contact with, but could not speak to. She is seeking him in order to ask him what words could have stopped him from doing what he did. Yet her search for him in the martyr's room is problematic since it assumes that these hijackers have done something commendable, dying for a good cause, which would give them martyr status.

Even though the playwright presents an intense moment in which an Arab American woman on board one of the 9/11 flights which is about to crash realizes what is taking place before other passengers are aware of it, the dramatic representation still focuses on the play's project of offering observations on male-female relationships.

Architect:

As the man tied up a stewardess....
I was thinking I like chubby men.
I don't trust men if they're too thin.
….

Aiesha:

I think you just don't trust men.

The events of 9/11 do not occupy as much space as the play's commentary on the Architect's virginity and on her relationships with men, which appear to be the main project of this play.

Though the main focus of *The Black Eyed* is sexual, the play refers to other issues, including the suffering of Palestinian women across historical and geographical boundaries, the guilt felt by modern Palestinians in the diaspora about the suffering of Palestinians under occupation, and the possibility of achieving a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli struggle through the establishment of one state called the United States

of Israel and Palestine. The play also tackles the sensitive topic of suicide bombers, evoking the notion that Palestinians are not the only people to use this form of resistance, as killing self to help a cause has existed throughout time and in various cultures, which the characters list as they refer to various groups of women waiting by the martyr's room: women from Japan, Iran, Ireland and elsewhere. The events of 9/11 are mentioned in the course of the play, yet they are not the focus of this work; rather they act as a backdrop, allowing the playwright to discuss the other concerns of the play.

Laura Shamas' *Pistachio Stories*

The final play to be discussed in this chapter is *Pistachio Stories*, which expresses the changes in the situation of the Arab American community post 9/11. The half Lebanese playwright, writer and mythologist Laura Shamas has written more than thirty plays. Her plays have been performed in a wide range of venues, from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History to the 2007 Junior Miss Pageant. A number of her plays are published in theatre anthologies, including a short version of *Pistachio Stories*, published in *The Best 10-Minute Plays for Three or More Actors* in 2005. The full version of *Pistachio Stories* was developed through the Lark Theatre in New York, which presented a reading of it in 2007. This play is also part of the 2008 season of the Golden Thread Theatre in San Francisco.

This plays differs greatly from the plays previously discussed in this chapter. It presents the atmosphere of fear that prevailed in American society following 9/11 and the impact of these events and their aftermath on people of Arab descent living in the United States. It also challenges media representation of Arab Americans, and explores some of

the conspiracy theories of the time. Shamas sets this play in a city on the West Coast of the United States, in 2004. Her choice of this particular historical moment is significant: 2004 witnessed not only the zenith of the war on Iraq, and the impact of the heightened security measures implemented by the newly-founded Department of Homeland Security, but also a presidential election. Throughout *Pistachio Stories* the playwright attempts to address stereotypes about Arab Americans, and to dispel them by presenting the lives of three well-educated second-generation Arab American characters. Faced by the biased American mainstream media coverage of the war on Iraq, they form a media watch group to bring awareness to others, including their liberal American friends. Though the main focus of the play is to expose the biases against Arabs and Arab Americans and to subvert them, it also offers some insight into the Arabic culture, by pointing out some of the historical and mythical connections between Arabs and the West.

Pistachio Stories is structured in the form of a thriller. The play starts with a mystery object – a bag of red pistachios – that one of the characters, Steve, finds by his car while his way to attend a media watch group meeting hosted by the Arab American protagonist, Ray. This triggers the events of the play, as the Arab American woman, Marguerite, had found a parcel containing two bags of red pistachios on her doorstep the morning after 9/11. Instead of watching al-Jazeera news coverage of the War on Iraq, the group discusses the implications of finding two similar objects, which are connected to the Middle East, as red pistachios originated in Syria. Joe, another Arab American man, offers several conspiracy theories to explain this coincidence. The play moves from the specific to the general, exposing the atmosphere of fear and mistrust in the United States after 9/11, and the loss of liberties in American society.

Similar to *The Black Eyed*, this play begins in a light tone, and the characters use modern and contemporary language. Marguerite recounts that she informed a colleague at graduate school about finding the bags of pistachios, along with a note addressed to a certain George saying, "You know what to do with these." Despite hearing about this incident for the first time, the two Arab American men, Ray and Joe, are able to predict what happened next, based on their experiences as Arab Americans in similar situations.

Ray:

Let me guess. She says something like: "Are you crazy? You're Arab-American. This is highly suspicious. You'd better call the FBI."

Joe:

Or she's more like "After what happened two days ago in New York, you'd better prove you're more American than Arab. Turn yourself in."

Throughout *Pistachio Stories* humor is used to lighten the impact of the intense situation.

Steve:

So did you yell at her, "Don't you dare talk to me that way, you waspy xenophobic elitist grad school biyatch-bigot!"

The banter and quick exchanges of American slang between the characters, using American slang, reflect a particular socioeconomic background, and their use of language and analysis of the situation suggest a high level of education.

Steve:

"Personae non gratae." Your Latin plural usage is such a turn-on, Fiona. God, educated people are always so…stimulating.

Marguerite does not go to the authorities to report the package of suspicious pistachios, for fear that she might be targeted. Instead, she eats some of the pistachios and uses the

rest to recreate her family's recipe of baklava. This play creates connections between politics, food, and culture, which I will explore further in the conclusion.

The playwright uses the technique of revealing what took place next, not through the words of the character going through the experience, but through others, in this case the other Arab American characters. This shifts the focus from the personal experience of Marguerite to a general commentary on the impact of the aftermath of 9/11 on Arab Americans. She is not the only person targeted, but a representative of a minority group that experiences extreme forms of discrimination. Joe and Ray list some of the experiences of Arab Americans, from hearing clicks on the phone and receiving mail that looks like it has been opened, to the feeling of being watched everywhere, even at home, to relatives disappearing without a trace. Joe retorts "Welcome to the Arab-American experience in the post 9/11 world." The play also reveals that the scope of the culture of fear and suspicion in American society post 9/11 expands beyond targeting Arab Americans to putting all of American society under surveillance. As Fiona comments, "everyone in America is being profiled. . . . First our library cards and then our credit cards." The dialogue of the first scene also shows the changed position of people of Arabic background living in the United States, even the second-generation who were being treated as "suspicious foreigners."

The atmosphere of mystery is evoked again in the second scene, as Ray and Marguerite feel there is a red surveillance car monitoring the activities of the group. When the group meets later in a café to discuss the situation Joe suggests that they could be followed by the authorities, who might believe that they are a sleeper cell, and that the red pistachios were their trigger. Ray, who is also Arab American, is the most reasonable

in refuting the conspiracy theories offered by the other characters. Scene three introduces a new character, Ben, a bartender in the café, who shows interest in issues pertaining to the Middle East. Steve expresses a romantic interest in him, and invites him to the following meeting of the group.

During scene four the group reconvenes to watch the Arabic news. The scene starts lightly, with music and dancing, then turns to the coverage of the War on Iraq. Laura Shamas uses this scene to dispel some of the stereotypes about Arab Americans. The three characters of Arab descent are well educated, fully integrated into American society and have full understanding of its dynamics and politics. They differ from the media representation of Arab, which often conflates Arabs and Muslims. The three characters are not Muslim, and they are not religious. They are funny, rational, and have a sophisticated analysis of the situation, yet their perspective is different from an American not of Arab descent, because they have an awareness of the complexity of the Arabs position and being perceived as the enemy.

Expectations surrounding the gender roles are also challenged. The Arab man, Ray, is the one who enjoys cooking, and hosts and entertains the group regularly. While waiting for Steve to arrive, they dance, but the belly dancing is performed by a woman of Irish descent, while Marguerite, who is second-generation Arab, doesn't know the dance.

> Marguerite:
>
> I never learned because I didn't want to fulfill a stereotype. That's the male fantasy of Arab-American women—belly dancing and barefoot.
>
> Fiona:
>
> Why can't I teach her how to belly dance? … Belly dancing

> is not stereotypical. It's powerful—an expression of female sexuality, reproduction and creativity.

The men, Ray and Joe also dance. Ray recounts how his grandfather used to belly dance in his village in the homeland. When the whole group is assembled they follow the Arabic news, projected in low volume, as Ray offers a translation of the details of an Arabic perspective on the war through which the characters seek "to stay connected to the world, and not just this administration's spinning of the invasion." Through the news, the playwright presents an update on the number of people killed in the war and a timeline of the casualties, showing the number of Iraqis killed, not just that of the coalition soldiers, as presented in the American mainstream news of the time. The news progresses to the illegal abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib, noting that around 50,000 Iraqis were held there initially, along with allegations of torture affecting 3,000 Iraqi civilians. The play offers no immediate commentary on these gruesome pieces of news. The group discusses coffee, tells stories about the Arabic origins of the word, and the Sufi's discovery of coffee beans in the Arab region. The events of Abu Ghraib, are evoked, but not discussed during the performance, leaving the audience to form their own judgment of what is taking place in Iraq. In spite of the weight of the news mentioned, it used mainly as a background to contextualize the situation of Arab Americans.

The short fifth scene evokes the possibility that Ben, the new member of the group, could be an undercover agent, planted by the authorities to infiltrate the group and to report on their activities. Ray warns Joe not to mention this to Steve, who brought the bartender to the meeting.

In scene six, discrimination against Arab Americans is clearly demonstrated in the incident Marguerite recounts concerning how her father was removed from a flight

because of his Arabic name, even though he was the one reporting suspicious behavior. The emotional weight given to this incident emphasizes the focus of the play on depicting concrete examples of the mania and fear prevailing after 9/11, which led to heightened security measures and more racial profiling. The tension escalates when Ben comes to the meeting carrying another bag of red pistachios. Joe confronts him about being an agent, infuriating Steve, who insults Joe and then starts a fight. This incident leads to the break down of the group: Steve leaves, and Fiona's husband refuses to allow her to participate in it. Subsequently, Ben also leaves the Café, without leaving further contact information, suggesting that Joe's suspicious about his role as an agent could be true. The collapse of the media watch group of concerned citizens suggests the disintegration of society under pressure of the new security measures, which target a section of the population. The tone of the play becomes darker, reflecting the frustration and disappointment of the three Arab Americans.

The atmosphere of the following scene, which takes place on a pistachio farm, is less charged. Ray, Joe, and Marguerite visit the farm in the hope of finding some clarity regarding the mystery of the red pistachio bags appearing to the characters of the play. Yet the lighter atmosphere of the outdoor picnic is subverted by a meta-theatrical commentary. The same actor who plays Ben also play Charlie, the pistachio farmer, and Joe comments on the physical resemblence between the two characters, to support his conspiracy theories.

The potential relationship between Ray and Marguerite referred to throughout the play comes to fruition, but the love relationship is presented at the end of the play, while Ray packs his bag to search for Joe, who has disappeared without a trace. The couple, are

separated just at the start of their relationship, implying the impossibility of love within the targeted community of Arab Americans. The brief moment of the two protagonists connecting is not given much emphasis in the play. Their union is presented to the audience in the background of the short scene about the disappearance of their missing friend, in an atmosphere of fear, and with a backdrop of continuous rain.

The mysterious disappearance of Joe comes as a surprise, which confirms the conspiracy theories he propounded throughout the play. The loss of Joe in the play exposes what happened in the United States after 9/11 – the disappearance, the detention, the deportations of hundreds of men of Arab and Muslim backgrounds. In the style of a thriller, characters continue to disappear. The group that started with five people, lost the two Americans after the fight. After the disappearance of Ben and Joe, the protagonist, Ray, also disappears when he goes in search of Joe. The final scene shows the last character remaining, the Arab American woman, Marguerite, being interrogated by the authorities. She is incapable of dealing with the intensity of the situation, and with the continuous rain, which is turning into a flood. She asks her interrogators to keep her in because she cannot face more rain outside.

What started as a realistic play, cast in contemporary language, involving many specifics like preparing and eating Arabic food, ordering particular kinds of coffee, and referring to nuances of modern living in the United States, changes dramatically by the end of the play. The rain, which begins in scene nine and continues till the end of the play, takes on a nightmarish dimension, evoking the Gilgamesh myth that Joe recounts to Marguerite during their visit to the farm in scene eight, in order to explain Ray's inability to be in a relationship with her, which Joe refers to as "his Gilgamesh complex."

Joe:

> To get that diagnosis, you've got to get a really good shrink who's well-versed in Middle Eastern mythology. I mean, Arab-American guys are too complex for those Western-biased shrinks who only know characters like Oedipus or Apollo.

The continuous rain at the end of *Pistachio Stories* evokes the biblical flood, which indicates the end of time. It also creates parallels between Joe and Gilgamesh, who, in the myth, was given a lot of power but was not able to use it because he got into fights with other forces. The complete change in the mode of the play is very powerful; it pushes the play from the realm of the personal to the general and political, then to a mythical level, the last denoting the nightmarish experiences of Arab Americans after 9/11. The play ends on a disturbing note: the nightmare of endless rain, the flood, and the loss of the three Arab American characters with no interference, support, or reaction from the rest of society. Marguerite's final monologue suggests that the loss of rights and the profiling are going to extend beyond the Arab American community to affect society at large.

Similar to the connections between the sexual and the political in *The Black Eyed*, the personal and the political are interwoven throughout *Pistachio Stories*, and the complexities of the situation in the homeland are reflected in the lives of the Arab Americans. An example is Ray's wife, who left the U.S. to live in Lebanon because she could not deal with the prejudices in American society, and was killed in a car bomb explosion there. The Arab American characters presented in the play are not naïve or simplistic. Though they might be jaded, confused, or frustrated, they try to do something to change their realty. The collapse of their group epitomizes the defeat of the liberal

tendencies in society under the pressure of the current atmosphere.

Laura Shamas first includes the concepts of disappearing Arab Americans, among other conspiracy theories mentioned throughout the play, but she frames them in a humorous context, making them part of the background of the chatter and the rumors. Once one of the Arab American men disappears, these theories take on a different weight – now they become a potential explanation as to why he is missing, along with hundreds of other Arab men. This play also presents a number of autobiographical elements, starting with the triggering event of finding bags of pistachio the day after 9/11, which Shamas herself experienced.[65] Many of the exchanges depicted in *Pistachio Stories* are based on personal experience by the playwright and her family, most importantly the incident of the father's removal from the flight.[66]

Pistachio Stories is the most overtly political play in this chapter offering a direct commentary on the political situation, evoking the presidential elections, commenting on specific figures in the American administration, examining the implications of 9/11 for civil liberties, and presenting details of the war in Iraq and of the events at Abu Ghraib prison. It also mentions the Arab homeland, sometimes mythically, other times as nostalgic reminiscing, yet it does not shy away from addressing the current tentative political situation in Lebanon, which leads to the death of Ray's wife.

Conclusion

The Arab American characters in the plays discussed in this chapter differ

[65] Phone interview with Shamas on 7 October, 2007.
[66] During the play reading in the Lark Theatre, Shamas' father attended and watched a dramatization of his experience for the first time.

significantly from each other in terms of their relationship to consent and descent . In *Chocolate in Heat,* Aiesha grows up immersed in a world controlled by rules of descent surrounded by non-integrated immigrants. Her attempt to move into a world of her choice (consent) is systematically halted because she is perceived as part of her ethnic group. Her potential for success in American society, through an Ivy league education, is aborted because of another Arab American, the FBI Agent. In contrast with to Aiesha, the Agent is not successful in his work because his connection to his descent is weak. His first mission failed because of the accent he used while under cover. His grandfather, who lived in Lebanon, was a refugee from Palestine, and retained the Palestinian accent. "So, when I insisted I was from Lebanon, Mahmoud knew I was speaking in an accent that no Lebanese man my age would dare use." He remarks on his connection to the language and to the culture of his ancestors saying:

> My grandfather taught me the language, but he could not translate the culture. I knew how to make the right sounds, but not what those sounds meant.

Language also plays a significant part in the tensions within the character of the Architect in *The Black Eyed*. She is pulled between two extremes – her background of Palestinian "descent," and her personality which is formed by "consent" to her American surroundings. Her inability to reconcile these two aspects of herself manifests in her failure to express herself:

> Architect:
> I don't speak hardly a lick of Arabic either,
> but I can make out the morsels that count.
> You will not know

that the only thing you've got going for you is
you have a chance of understanding
the two languages
I was born to learn and love.
Chorus:
Arabic and architecture.

The reason she boards the 9/11 plane reflects another tension between descent and consent: staying a virgin as her heritage requires versus the pressure to lose her virginity as a modern thirty-five-year-old woman living in the United States.

Pistachio Stories presents three Arab American characters who are comfortable in combining these two aspects: their heritage and their American culture. They are very successful in their "consent," yet they exist in a historical moment that vilifies them because of their descent. Their ethnic differences are illustrated in the food they share, the music they dance to, the news they want to follow, and the psychological complexities that stem from the mythologies of their ancestors, such as the Gilgamesh complexes.

The three plays examined in this chapter also demonstrate a progression which reflects the changes in the position of the Arab American immigrant communities pre and post 9/11. *Chocolate In Heat* portrays the problems of growing up as a minority in a community, with the parents providing few tools to help negotiate this world, which is new and troubling to them as well. This play could be the story of an immigrant youth, from any ethnic minority and it is not specific to a time period. The negotiations of the character of the Architect in *The Black Eyed* are those of someone living within the liminal space between cultures, fully aware of their expectations and limitations. Yet she is more anchored in the American host culture than the Arabic home culture, particularly because of her inability to speak Arabic, and the feeling of powerlessness this lack

creates in her. The connection Shamieh creates between the Palestinian American character and the Palestinian suicide bomber establishes a specific time frame, but the defining moment for this play is the events of 9/ 11, and the protagonist's death on board one of the planes at the hands of Arabs. By contrast, the three Arab American characters in *Pistachio Stories* are unmistakably living a post 9/11 reality. The trigger event – finding the first bag of pistachios – is linked to that day, and the lives of the characters are clearly affected by the changes that impacted American society after 2001. The succession of these three plays reflect a changing reality for immigrants of Arab descent living in the United States, from the marginal space this ethnic minority occupied, as an essentially invisible group, to center stage in the role of the enemy as presented in mainstream media and popular culture.

There are a number of connections between the plays, especially *Chocolate In Heat* and *Pistachio Stories*. The main characters of both plays disappear at the end of the performance. In the former, it is clear that the FBI is detaining the protagonist, in the latter, the two Arab Americans men disappear and the final scene is that of the female protagonist being interrogated by the authorities. It is interesting that both plays end with an Arab American woman going through an interrogation. Though the two plays are very different in style, mode, and approach, they both end with the detention of their protagonists. In both of them the characters are under scrutiny by the authorities, though it is clear to the audience that they are not dangerous characters, posing no threat to society. They are profiled because of their ancestry and their origins. These endings have a sobriety that puts an end to the humor used in both plays. The general dynamics of invisibility and discrimination against Arab Americans, depicted in *Chocolate in Heat*,

are expanded in *Pistachio Stories* to show how the Arab American community is specifically targeted, perceived and treated as the enemy of the State, in the context of a general atmosphere of fear and anxiety. The characters are aware of the hollowness of the claims regarding freedom and liberty in the United States. As Marguerite comments:

> Ray's gone to all this trouble … subscribing to an Arab news channel, probably putting himself on the Homeland Security Watch List by doing so.

There are fewer connections between these two plays and *The Black Eyed*, since the main premise of this play is four characters from different times meeting in heaven. Though they are all Palestinian women, the question of Palestine is not as central to the project of the play as are issues of relationship and sexuality, which are discussed anachronistically. It is worth noting that this play does not reflect a strong sense of friendship or solidarity between the four Palestinian women. Even the three who arrived as a team at the beginning start by saying that they have known each other a short enough time to be on good terms, but long enough to know that they will eventually hate each other. A number of tensions arise between the three women and Aiesha throughout the play, resulting in fights and a feeling of rivalry and lack of support among them.

Both *Chocolate in Heat* and *Pistachio Stories* contain references to food in their titles. Chocolate itself is a running theme in Aiesha's monologues: it is the way to tempt a child, and her weapon of revenge, as well as what the FBI Agent assumed is on her bruised lips. *Pistachio Stories* presents a number of incidents relating to food, yet the way food is presented breaks with the traditional way of addressing this theme: food as the main connection to the ancestors. Shamas illustrates an awareness of traditional representations of food as a way of connecting to the homeland, at the same time, she

establishes a strong sense of the political situation and of the implications of the changes taking place in society on the freedom and liberties of the general population, as well as their impact on the Arab Americans in particular. She thereby resolves the tension that existed in previous and contemporary work which focuses on either the political or the culinary; she tackles both tracks, exploring the political in food. This play strikes a balance between the political and the culinary. One example is what happens to Marguerite after she finds the pistachio bags. Rather than submitting the bag of pistachios to the authorities, she eats some of them, and learns her family's recipe for baklava to use the pistachios in it. Hence an object that initially evokes fear because of its connection to the Middle East, becomes a way for the protagonist to reconnect to her family's culinary tradition, and to literally consume and digest her Arabness. Another example is Ray's hosting of the media watch group, and his regular preparation of a feast of Arabic food, which becomes part of the background for the political conversation. The play also presents a long discussion about the roots of coffee, which Sufis in the Arab world discovered and used to heighten and intensify their spiritual practice.

The three plays explored in this chapter are specifically Arab American, not only because of the Arab American characters they present, but because of their focus on the concerns of these communities, their interest in concepts from Arabic culture, their tracing of the influence Arabs had on the West, and their use of some Arabic words in their dialogue. As Joe explains to Fiona in *Pistachio Stories*,

> Lots of Arabic words and customs have been mainstreamed into Western culture. Whenever you say the word "candy," you're saying the Arabic word "qandi."

In addition to evoking Arab mythology, this play also suggests a connection to the *Arabian Nights*. When Steve compares Marguerite to Scheherazade, and her unfinished story. Yet, unlike the magical atmosphere of Arabic fairy tales with happy endings, all the main characters in these plays suffer because of their Arabness. None of the three plays in this chapter has a happy ending, all three become Arabic "nightmares." The protagonists of two of the plays are detained, while the four characters of the third, who are already dead, are trapped in limbo unable to move forward. The plays discussed in this chapter all share a sense of loss, defeat and frustration that reflects the position many Arab Americans found themselves in the aftermath of the events of 9/ 11.

Chapter Four: Comedy Performances

This chapter will cover comedy performances by Arab American artists, which flourished following 9/11 and its aftermath. It will start with an introduction on Arab American comedy in general, offering an overview of the work of the main Arab American comedy group, followed by examination of the stand-up and theatre work of Maysoon Zayid, the most prominent female comedian. Then it will provide a survey of the activities of the Arab American Comedy Festival, and women's contribution to it, highlighting some of the comedy performances that focus on the negotiation of identity of Arab Americans.

The comedic performances of Arab Americans can be grouped into three categories: stand-up routines, sketches, and plays. This chapter will refer briefly to the first two categories and focus mainly on the comedic plays. Most of the plays discussed in this chapter are short plays, because they were presented through the Comedy Festival, whose format does not allow for long plays since it offers a number of plays and sketches in one program.

Comedy is the most popular form of contemporary Arab American theatre, with a large number of performers and plays and an enthusiastic, growing audience. The prevalence of the comedic mode in the young movement of Arab American Theatre, and the popularity of the stand-up comedian (a genre not known in most Arab countries) could both be connected to the Arab communities' use of humor to challenge their status within the power structure. One may see a similar phenomenon in recent feminist, gay and ethnic performances. In much of this work, comedy offers an opportunity to look at the self, to examine and dispel stereotypes imposed by society, and to present the self and

the community to the larger society in a non-threatening way. Humor presents a unique possibility to address sensitive and critical topics such as oppression of minorities, discrimination and racial profiling.

The Early Comedy Performances:

The early comedies presented by Arab Americans in the second half of the twentieth century focused mainly on their communities and were not concerned with addressing the general American audience. Some of the plays were in Arabic, others were bilingual or partly in English, attempting to engage the new generations of Arabs born in the United States who were not fluent in Arabic. As with the early productions of some other ethnic theatres, most of these plays were amateur, performed mainly for the community and advertised in community publications and social gatherings.

A good example of this style is the work of Ajyal Theatrical Group, based in Detroit, Michigan, which regularly presented (and continues to present) farces performed in Lebanese Arabic. The plays of Ajyal Group[67] follow the Arabic theatre model of three-act comedies with exaggerated caricatures. They are mostly written and directed by Najee Mondalek, founder of the group, in collaboration with some of the other members of the ensemble: Michael Mondalek, Ayman Safaoui, Hassan Haj, Rita Srour, Rodney Karromi, Jennifer Mashini and Rabih Jaber. Ajyal Group describes itself as the first Arab American theatre company.[68] In addition to entertainment, their mission is to provide quality Arabic theatre, arts and cultural experiences for Arab American communities

[67] Ajyal means "generations" in Arabic.
[68] This is indicated in their website www.arabamericantheater.com

throughout the United States and Canada. Because their work is geared toward Arab American communities, their performances start much later than the traditional eight P.M. curtain time, in order to accommodate the late shift workers in Michigan factories.

Their first play, *What a Shame* (Osotna Osa wa Hkayetna Jorsa), was performed at the Attic theater, Dearborn, Michigan, in May 1989 and toured nationally. Ajyal's second play *Students Nowadays* (Talameez Akher Zaman) was postponed several times because of the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and was never performed. In 1991, they presented the musical drama *Honest Thieves* (Hamiha Haramiha) in collaboration with Al-Anwar Dance Group. This performance coincided with Desert Storm and its repercussions in Arab American communities throughout the United States. In 1993, the group performed *Smile, You're In Dearborn* (Ibtasim Anta fee Dearborn). The following year, Najee Mondalek wrote and directed the successful play *Smile, You're In America* (Ibtasim Anta fee America), coincidentally debuting the character of the female protagonist Im Hussein. Out of necessity, Mondalek performed the role of the female lead Im Hussein when the company lost its main actress during performances. The success and popularity of this character led Ajyal Group to create a number of performances featuring Najee Mondalek playing the role of Im Hussein, who became a stable feature of the group's work.[69] Ajyal's subsequent plays revolved around Im Hussein and her husband Abu Hussein, and later introduced the character of her friend and neighbor Im Illias, (another female character performed by Michael Mondalek, Najee Mondalek's brother), and her husband, Abu Illias. The mishaps of these Arab immigrants were vividly portrayed in *We Became American* (Ta'amrakna Ya Sanadi) in 1996, and the

[69] Since its inception 15 years ago this character has became very popular in the Arab American community. The costume of Im Hussein (a floral dress, headscarf and big glasses) became a popular outfit for young men during the Halloween parades in Dearborn, Michigan.

skit series *Come See…Come Saw* (Ta'a Tfaraj, Ta'a shouf) in 1998.

Their most successful performance, *Me No Terrorist* (Ana Mosh Irhabeye), written by Najee Mondalek and directed by Ray Alcodray, was scheduled to be performed in the fall of 2001, but was postponed due to the events of 9/11. The show was performed in Michigan in May and October 2002 and its success there was the start of a fourteen-city tour in the United States and Canada. In a reversal of the old tradition of comedies from the homeland traveling to entertain the immigrants in their new communities, *Me No Terrorist* was performed in Lebanon in the fall of 2003. Its popularity with Lebanese audiences in Beirut led to another run in the summer of 2004. This was followed by a successful run in Sydney, Australia, in the fall of 2004. A sequel followed in 2005: *Arabic & Broud*[70] (Arabi we Rasi Marfou[71]), which successfully toured in the United States.

Most of these popular plays deal with the complexities of living in a new culture. The comedy arises from the situations the immigrants face in a new community with different social and cultural values, and much of the humor stems from attempts to communicate across the language barrier and from mistranslations. For the audience to fully appreciate the humor and puns of these plays they need to have a knowledge of both Arabic and English.

[70] The title of the play *Arabic & Broud* reflects the Arabic mispronunciation of the word "proud" as many Arabic speakers are not able to pronounce the sound "p" and often replace it with "b." This linguistic Arabic trait is exploited in the play, where a large portion of the humor arises from the language misunderstandings and mispronunciation (for example mixing "Beaches" and "Bitches").

[71] It is worth noting that although the play's main character is female, the title – which literally translates as "Arab with my head high" – adopts a masculine grammatical structure, with the noun "Arab" and adjective "high" a masculine form. It is interesting that the publicity for the play and the DVD cover depict the lead female character with her arm up (similar to early feminist iconography) yet the language does not reflect the female perspective.

The company's very successful performance of *Me No Terrorist* encapsulates the impact of 9/11 on Arab American communities, including the disappearance of a number of its members who were detained or deported by the authorities. This play presents the plight of a Lebanese woman who is trying to explain that she is a "tourist," and her mispronunciation leads representatives of the authorities to believe she is a "terrorist." In the atmosphere of fear following 9/11 she is arrested and detained. While she is in prison, her family and friends start a campaign to free her. They become famous as fighters for justice, but get carried away in their activities and forget her in detention. The simple Lebanese woman becomes a symbol of their cause, and freeing her would harm that cause.

The plays of Ajyal Group have a wide following, especially in their home base of Dearborn, Michigan, where there is a large Arabic-speaking community of new immigrants, consisting largely of Iraqi Chaldeans, Lebanese who fled the civil war, some later influxes of Palestinians and Egyptians. They are drawn to the area because of work opportunities in the automobile industry. Most of the new immigrants are used to the format of three-act farces, popularized by Egyptian comedies of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. These plays were followed seen the Arab World via television, and, later, videotapes. The immigrants continue to follow the latest Arabic plays through videotapes and DVDs. Ajyal Group's awareness of this demand and of the market for comedy in the Arab communities led them to tape their plays and distribute them, largely through Arabic ethnic food stores, in various American cities, thereby increasing their popularity nation-wide.

<u>Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy Routines:</u>

Another model of comedy presented by Arab American artists, which addresses wider American audiences, is stand-up comedy. Before 9/11, there were a number of comedians of Arab descent (primarily men) working in comedy clubs in various American cities, focused mainly in New York and Los Angeles. Since the beginnings of the twenty-first century the Arab American comedians started to draw more attention, and their comedy material began to explore a wider range of topics such as becoming the enemy, racial profiling and discrimination, in an attempt to deal with the pressing issues of the direct oppression befalling Arabs living in the United States. Currently, some of the comedians focus their routines on discovering their identity as Arabs following 9/11, others concentrate on the overt discrimination they experience in their country of birth. The stand-up comedians derive laughter from the absurdity of suddenly becoming the enemy within because of their names, their heritage, or their complexions. Ahmad Ahmad, for example, based his post 9/11 comedy routine on the fact that his name is "Ahmad Ahmad" and the fact that he cannot fly because of his name. In a series of jokes Ahmad exposes the discrimination Arabs and Muslims experience, particularly in airports and security checks: " 'Did you pack your bags yourself?' Yes. 'Then you are under arrest!' "

In addition to appearing in comedy clubs and talk shows, and participating in writing for television comedy shows, Arab American comedians have collaborated with each other and have presented their work in special events like the "Middle Eastern Comedy Bazaar" and special comedy tours. The Arab American Comedy Festival started by Maysoon Zayid and Dean Obiedallah in New York, in 2003, gave the comedians momentum and very positive press coverage. This spurred more activities including the

"Arab American Comedy Tour" featuring Zayid, Obiedallah and Ahmad Ahmad, Comedy Central episodes "The Watch List" and the very successful "Axis of Evil Comedy Tour."[72] The latter presents the work of three Arab American comedians, Ahmad Ahmad, Aron Kader, Dean Obeidallah, along with the Iranian American Maz Jobrani. It is worth noting that although Maysoon Zayid is one of the best known figures in Arab American comedy, she was not included in this successful ongoing tour. The producers said that she would not be able to elicit the same kind of laughter, because being a woman she "does not look like a terrorist."[73] This justification brings to mind the separation between women and men that existed in many comedy clubs: until recently women were not welcomed in the main venues under the pretext that they are not as funny as men, and in less hostile environments, they were given separate rooms with the justification claiming that they could only manage smaller crowds.

The stand-up comedy routines of Arab American comedians cover a large spectrum of material, ranging from personal stories – about the tensions of cross-cultural dating and communicating with parents who belong to a different world and have very different expectations, views, and pronunciation – to the political, recounting how their names and physical appearance exposed them to the suspicion of being terrorists in the paranoia of post 9/11 America. They humorously tackle aspects of the Arab American experience without sparing political figures in the United States or the Arab world from their sharp critique. In offering this political commentary, many comedians focused on the details of everyday cultural difference, such as the mess created by taking hummus-on-pita

[72] Due to the popularity of some of these tours, the performances are recorded, and the DVDs are sold by major retailers online, including Amazon.com.
[73] Panel with Maysoon Zayid in New World Theatre Conference: Intersections V, University of Massachusetts, 4 April 2008.

sandwiches to an American school. Helen Malik made light of the unique physical features of hirsute Arab bodies, suggesting that back waxing could be the most successful method of torture used against Arab men detained in Guantanamo Bay. Aron Kader's insights focused on cultural hypocrisy, commenting upon relatives in Jordan, who hate America, yet eagerly consume American-made products. Amer Zahr proposed a way to resolve the tension between George W. Bush and Islam through marriage: since Muslim men may be polygamous, Zahr recommends that one Muslim man should marry both of Bush's daughters. Though most of the humor stems from the comedians' sharp observations of the political atmosphere, the changes in society, or of dating and family situations, some of their work is self-reflexive and even self-critical, like the work of Dean Obiedallah and Ahmad Ahmad. Ahmad illustrates his position against the stereotypical representation of Arabs in the media, by recounting how he ridiculed the role of terrorist number four, for which he auditioned by caricaturing "Arab anger." Then with a sheepish smile he shares with the audience that when offered twenty thousand dollars for one week of work, he gladly embodies terrorist number four on the big screen.

The Comedy Work of Maysoon Zayid:

Maysoon Zayid is one of the most popular Arab American comedians. Even before co-founding the Comedy Festival with Dean Obeidallah, Zayid toured nationally and had a large Arab American following in the United States. In the last few years, she also started presenting stand-up comedy in several Palestinian cities, and most recently she co-organized a tour with other comedians in some Arab countries.

Zayid often starts her stand-up comedy routine introducing herself as "Palestinian Muslim virgin, with cerebral palsy, from New Jersey." Her comedy acts explore the concept of being an Arab American woman at this particular historical moment, finding comedy in the awkward situations during growing up within American culture and turning out to be very different from her family's expectations. Her routines revolve around her personal experiences in the dating arena and her attempts to find a husband in the United States and even in Palestinian refugee camps. Most of her jokes bring to the forefront her disability, making comparisons between her cerebral palsy-induced shaking and Yassir Arafat's. The personal and the political conflate in her work, when she tells of her turmoil at airports and the suspicions she raises, as an Arab who is shaking constantly, being dropped off by her father (an Arab man with strong resemblance to Saddam Hussein), who persistently evokes the name of Allah while wishing her a safe journey. Zayid remarks that if her plane crashes she would be blamed for it, because of her Arabic name, and Palestinian origin.

Zayid's main dramatic contribution is her autobiographical one-woman play *Little American Whore,*[74] directed by Kathy Najimy and Abby Marateck. It was presented outside the framework of the Comedy Festival at Comedy Central Stage Theatre in Los Angeles in 2006. The material, performance and presentation style of this play are closely linked to the comedian's stand-up routines.[75] Zayid presented some of the scenes from the play in stand-up format before using them in the theatre piece, blurring the boundaries

[74] When I was interviewing Maysoon Zayid for a program on the Comedy Festival to be aired on Egyptian National Television (11 February 2008), she did not use the title of the play, referring to it as L.A.W. because the translation could be offensive to Arab audiences.

[75] Zayid's stand-up performances in NY often start with her proclaiming herself a "Muslim virgin woman." After performing her one-woman play, she changed the beginning of her comedy routine, now remarking that, when she moved to work in L.A., she became a "Little American Whore."

between the two genres. The play is also performed in the same informal style of the stand-up work, with the performer sitting in front of the audience, recounting some of the humorous events of her life. Since she debuted the play, the comedian has been using sections from it in her routines, differentiating between the stand-up and the theatre work as the "jokey jokes, and acty Jokes."[76] One main difference between *Little American Whore* and Maysoon Zayid's regular stand-up work is the greater length of some of the episodes she presents in the play. Another distinction is the staging of the theatre piece, which utilizes different areas of the stage to indicate different scenes or locations.

The subject matter of the play covers the wide range of topics that the comedian usually tackles, from the personal to the political. She begins by introducing herself in her usual manner as a "Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey,"[77] and describing the town she grew up in, then quickly refers to the fact that her mother decided to go to medical school one month after she was born, leaving the care-taking of four sisters to the father, a "Homer Simpson" character. Zayid does not shy away from using stories about her disability to evoke laughter. She explains to the audience that her damaged brain sends mixed signals to her limbs that leave her shaking all the time. To illustrate this she steps down from her chair to stand in front of the audience silently, while her body moves uncontrollably. Releasing the tension in the room, humorously she comments on the shaking: "F…ing Exhausting!"

One of the moving moments of the performance is when the writer/performer relates that her father was told his daughter had to be able to walk in order to be accepted

[76] Zayid made this distinction while introducing her jokes in her presentation at the pre-conference of New World Theatre Conference: Intersection V, University of Massachusetts, 4 April 2008.
[77] All references to this performance are from the DVD of the performance, recorded live on 7 November, 2006 at the Comedy Central Stage at the Hudson, Hollywood, CA, in the possession of the author.

in public school. Because, as a child, Maysoon Zayid could not walk, she shows the audience how her father put each of her feet on his shoes and "walked her" to school, only to be told by the principal that the child needed to go to a special needs school. The father was enraged and threatened to "suit" the school. Zayid comments that "when an angry Arab man walks into your office, with his disabled daughter on his toes, evoking the name of Allah, you'd better listen." She was accepted into the public school, and vowed to learn to walk on her own. The performer then explains how she got cerebral palsy, which she clarifies is not genetic, or due to her parents being first cousins (which they are). It was an accident at her birth: the doctor was drunk at a Labor Day picnic when her mother went into labor, and mistakenly cut the oxygen from the child's brain for three minutes, causing brain damage.

Little American Whore covers many incidents in Zayid's life: from the details of her relationship to her siblings, who decorated their sister with cookie cutters, despite her bruising easily from chemotherapy treatments, to her father's encouragement of her mother's continuing education until she got a degree, followed by a divorce. It also explores the fear of her Arab father for his daughters growing up in American culture, and his attempts to protect them by setting strict rules such as "No boys," "No alcohol," "No tank tops," and "No tampons," so that they would not turn into "Little American Whores." The title of the play highlights the father's worry about his Muslim girls becoming corrupted by living in the United States. In order to preserve their connection to their heritage he sends his young daughters to Palestine every summer.

Similar to her comedy routines, Zayid's autobiographical play devotes a much space to dating, relating a number of experiences that end badly because the man's

parents cannot accept that their son would marry “a cripple.” From the personal the play delves into the political, with a quote from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish about the map of Palestine being a necklace around the necks of Palestinian women in exile. Zayid relates some of her experiences in the refugee camp where she worked with children: “My mission: to find a husband, my cover: working with disabled kids in refugee camps.” As she takes care of the urgent needs of the children, collecting donations from the United States to buy them glasses and shoes, the mothers of the children help her in her mission to find a husband by giving her an extreme make-over, waxing her, and putting her in stiletto shoes. She evokes compassion for the 700 children who are part of her project, yet does not let the audience settle into that emotion. She quickly undermines it by stating that she hates kids because they are disgusting and rife with disease, describing them as “filthy animals,” yet she still calls them her own.

Like the work of many male Arab American comedians, this play presents political topics, yet does not challenge the status quo with regard to gender roles, which reinforcing the ascribed male and female roles in society. In one of the most uncomfortable moments of the performance Zayid relates how her father was born amidst a flock of sheep. Alhough her grandmother was in labor, her husband sent her to feed the sheep, where she gave birth alone in the field. Upon her return to the house with a male child, her husband asked her to prepare him some food. Whether the event depicted is strictly autobiographical or exaggerated for comedic effect does not change the impact of the scene presented without commentary or contextualization. This incident of an Arab woman being ill-treated by her husband reinforces the Western stereotype regarding the lack of sensitivity of Arab men.

Most of the political comedy in this play stems from the perspective of the performer as a Palestinian American woman representing her subculture on stage through her own story, and her experiences in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Zayid's presentation offers no analysis, critique or attempt to challenge the status quo. This is consistent with the stand-up style which highlights ruptures and sheds light on the absurdities, but is not concerned with offering solutions.

It is important to note that not all the routines of Arab American comedians challenge stereotypes; many of them even reiterate cultural misrepresentations, particularly those based in gender. However, presenting material that exposes racial tensions, identity crisis and the plight of Arabs in America while making fun of their physical attributes or familial situations offers a refreshing change because it comes from the perspective of the Arabs themselves, shifting the reference point, and allowing a closer look at this subculture.

Arab American comedians have enjoyed great success in the United States, and have a large following in a number of American cities, and several Arab countries. The popularity of comedy performances can be linked to the Comedy Festival, which created the initial platform for presenting this work collectively, thereby galvanizing the efforts of Arab American artists who had previously worked in isolation from one another.

Women's Contribution to the Comedy Festival:

In 2003, during the increased intensity of post 9/11 cultural caricaturing and racial profiling of Arabs and Arab Americans, Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid started the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. In addition to showcasing the talents of

Arab American actors, comics, playwrights and filmmakers, the festival also seeks to dispel stereotypes, and create a space for Arab American artists to define themselves, rather than being defined. In addition, the festival strives to provide an alternative to the acting roles frequently offered in films and on stage to Arab American actors, which misrepresent their communities and their beliefs.

The continuity of the Arab American Comedy Festival over the past five years has created a space for Arab American artists to present their work and has helped in shaping the movement of Arab American theatre. Since most established Arab American writers do not focus on comedy, there was a lack of new comedic material. Consequently, several actors and comedians wrote short plays, which were presented successfully in the festival. This encouraged other performers, especially women, to put their ideas onto paper in the form of short plays and sketches. As a result, the majority of work produced by the festival was written by artists who were writing for the first time. In this section I will offer a chronological overview of the plays and sketches presented in the Comedy Festival, and will focus on some of the plays that engage with identity issues.

The First Comedy Festival (2003)

The first festival, in 2003, featured the work of stand-up comedians as well as some short films and plays. Three of these plays were expanded and had longer runs in the New York Fringe Festival: Sami Younis' *Brown Town* (mentioned in the introduction), Nibras' *Sajjil* (discussed in chapter two of this dissertation,) and Jana Zenadeen's *Live with Pascal and Chantal* (a parody of Lebanese television programs).

The Second Comedy Festival (2004)

The following year, the festival attracted more attention and wider audiences, with a larger number of Arab American comedians and more experienced theatre writers such as Yussef el Guindi with *Grenade*, and Michael Scassera with *Significant Romance in Compressed Time*.[78] The theatre segment also presented sections of longer plays by women: Betty Shamieh's *Black Eyed* and Kathryn Haddad's *With Love from Ramallah,* and introduced new theatre writers: Lena Rizkallah (*Layla's Sahra*) and Bethel Caram and Neil Potter (*The Grey Area*.)

Kathryn Haddad 's *With Love from Ramallah*[79] (2004) discusses the problems of assimilation and the challenges of immigration and occupation as experienced by a pair of separated lovers: Ziad in Minneapolis, in the United States, and his beloved Mona in Ramallah, in Palestine. The section presented in the Comedy Festival was excerpted from the parts written by Kathryn Haddad about the Palestinian immigrant working in a convenience store, dealing with different customers and interacting with two of his cousins: one a new immigrant, the other born in the United States. The three cousins offer different positions on assimilation into the American culture: Ziad is a Palestinian living in the United States for economic reasons, waiting to be reunited with his fiancée in Ramallah as soon as he can afford to return. His cousin Mohammed, on the other hand wants to forget his past and enjoy the luxuries of being American. The third cousin grew

[78] I directed Michael Scassera's play for the second festival, which gave me insight into the workings of the festival. The following year, I was asked to be the artistic director for the theatre segment. I declined as I found this could conflict with the objectivity and distance needed to write about this work critically. I remain involved through attending the play readings, selection sessions and fundraising events.

[79] The authorial credits of this play are complicated. Kathryn Haddad and Juliana Pegues co-wrote *With Love From Ramallah* as residents at the Minneapolis Playwrights' Center. The scenes that take place in Minneapolis were written by Haddad, while the scenes in Ramallah were written by Pegues. The text I obtained has only the scenes by Haddad, from which the Comedy Festival version was selected.

up in the United States, and although he does not speak Arabic, he tries to create a connection to his ancestors' land through reading its poetry and literature.

For the festival, Omar Metwally, the director of *With Love from Ramallah*, chose some comic scenes from the play, including exchanges between Ziad and his cousin Mohamed, who prefers to be called Moe,

> Mohammed:
>
> See you soon, dawg.
>
> Ziad:
>
> Dog? Did you just call me "dog"?
>
> Mohammed:
>
> It is not "dog." but "dawg."
>
> Ziad:
>
> What's wrong with you? What are you talking about?
>
> Mohammed:
>
> That's a good thing, Ziad. Dawg means "excellent friend."
>
> The rappers say this. It's very *(pause and slowly)* phat.
>
> Ziad:
>
> Fat?
>
> Mohammed:
>
> Yes, PHAT. You spell it in a different way, I think, but
>
> this one sounds the same. That means very first-class, Ziad.[80]

Mohammed advises his cousin to "talk like the Americans" in order to succeed, and "learn some of their limbo," thereby showing his own superficial knowledge of the language and culture of his host community. Mohammed dissociates himself from the

[80] All references to the text are from an unpublished manuscript obtained by the author.

struggle of the Palestinian people and uses his presence in the United States as an opportunity to forget about the "sad story" of his people. Ziad, on the contrary, keeps the connection to the homeland through an exchange of letters with his fiancée in Ramallah, believing in his duty is to keep the struggle and the hope for a better future alive. Though the third cousin, Samir, does not speak Arabic, he is connected to Arabic culture intellectually through his academic studies and his interest in Arabic poetry.

The following scene presents a humorous encounter with a customer who is deciding on the best food for her sick cat and wondering if Ziad had seen cats before coming to the United States. After she leaves the store, Ziad expresses his frustration about the limited knowledge his clients have about his culture:

> Ziad:
>
> *(Sarcastically, to himself)* Do you have cats in your country? Have you seen cats before you came to Minnesota? Cats? I never heard of them before I came here. Only in Minneapolis did I see such a thing. I was walking down the street one day and behind a tree, one jumped out and I screamed. 'What is theees?' I asked my smart American friend. It is called a CAT, Ziad, a CAT, he said. CAT, I repeated. And who would guess that now, two years later, I am lucky enough to SELL food for these animals. Who would have guessed it? Only in America. Only in America. Trying to get animals to drink water. Water. And me, selling food for cats who have problems with their you-know-whats.

Contrasted with the lack of basic rights of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, his customer's concern for the well-being of animals seems excessive and misplaced to Ziad. This scene also exposes the ignorance of the average American about other cultures.

Haddad wrote a number of dream sequences in *With Love From Ramallah*, and Metwally chose to end the play with one of these, depicting a surprise visit from the Palestinian President Yassir Arafat to Ziad's store in Minneapolis. In the scene, Arafat expresses his deep concern that Arab American stores in the United States are not selling the potato chips that have his face on them.

> Arafat:
>
> In fact, none of the Arab stores sell them in the U.S. My people have traveled to Cincinnati and Milwaukee, to Seattle and Spokane, to Los Angeles, New Jersey. They tell me that no one sells my chips. Where are my chips?
>
> Ziad:
>
> Your chips!?
>
> Arafat:
>
> If I can't count on the Arabs, who can I count on? Potato chips with my face on them. They are all the rage in Cairo. All the children love them. Children sit on the street corners and eat bags and bags of Abu Ammar chips.

The play was performed during the time Arafat was besieged in his compound in Ramallah by the Israeli Army, and its comedic commentary on the lack of Arab solidarity was very timely.

With Love From Ramallah's main project is comparing the limitations and suffering of the Palestinians inside the Palestinian territories with the frustrations of Palestinians who immigrated to other countries. The original play ends with a hold-up in the store, during which Ziad is killed by an intruder, while in Ramallah there is a raid on Ziad's fiancee's house, during which she is also killed while trying to protect her family.

The section presented in the Comedy Festival focuses on the lighter scenes and makes the most of the comedy that arises from cultural misunderstandings.

The second Comedy Festival also presented *Layla's Sahra* (2004) the first play by Lena Rizkallah, who had her acting debut in the first Comedy Festival in *Live with Pascal and Chantal*. The following year she wrote and acted in *Layla's Sahra*,[81] which portrays the preparations for the wedding of Layla, and the party before the wedding (*sahra*) which her Lebanese family is throwing in their house in Brooklyn. Layla is the first in her family to marry a non-Arab, and the play shows the cultural differences among the different generations and the members of the two families. In broad strokes, Rizkallah offers a comedic social commentary on Arab American culture: the grandmother living on the memories of the past, the mother trying to impress her new in-laws by preparing and ordering huge amounts of food; the bride who is more American than Arab, understanding the cultural traditions yet not appreciating them; the bride's sister who married an Arab man to please her parents, not realizing that he is homosexual; and the newly immigrated cousins who are immersing themselves in the club culture and enjoying the sexual freedoms of American society.

Rizkallah also tackles the delicate topic of the sexuality of Arab American women, who embrace the American way of living while trying not to offend their families.

> Samar:
>
> It took guts for you to bring him home. It meant that you were officially "dating" an American! And you know what that could mean…Sex before marriage! (mimicking Arabic

[81] *Sahra* is a Lebanese tradition where the family of the bride throws a party for the family of the groom one day before the wedding.

accent) My daughter is very good Arabic girl. She does not date (pause) but if she does, she respect herself and her body and her parents and her family and her village and her country and--

Layla: (laughing)

As far as Mom knows—or chooses to believe—Charlie and I end each date with a handshake and a hi-five![82]

Though Layla is in love with her fiancé, she has apprehensions about marrying a non-Arab. She tells her sister that she is afraid "this whole *sahra* is going to freak him out. My crazy family, all this ethnic food, all the traditions." Despite the fact that the protagonist and her fiancé both grew up in New York, culturally they are separated by their respective Arab American and Italian American heritages. Layla seeks the advice of her grandmother regarding marriage and Tata tells her that she was married at age fifteen, and found love and friendship in her marriage. She humorously expresses the closeness she felt with her late husband using an Arabic proverb that she translates as "two ass in one underwear!"

Food is an integral part of the representation of Arab American identity in this play. It is also a strong way to demonstrate aspects of Arabic culture and the generosity of its people:

Layla:

Lamb-S? How many lambs did you order Mom?

Mother: (innocently)

What? Only 5 roasted lambs…

Layla:

Five WHOLE lambs?! That's crazy? Are you trying to feed all of Brooklyn?

[82] All references to the text are from an unpublished manuscript obtained by the author.

Mother:

No, these people are coming to my house for my daughter's *sahra.* (innocently) I don't want them to starve**.**

The short version of the play, presented in the festival, captured some of the dilemmas of second-generation Arab Americans who are trapped between the old traditions and the new ways of living. Like the children of other immigrant communities, they are in constant negotiation between their parents' culture, and their contemporary American existence. The gap between the generations, and between the new immigrants and the second-generation, was articulated clearly in the humorous exchanges between the family members during the party preparations. The favorable reception of this play encouraged Rizkallah to expand it into a full-length play, which was performed in New York in the summer of 2005. It was produced by members of the team that produced the Comedy Festival. It also paved the way for Rizkallah to write other plays, which were presented in the following years of the Comedy Festival.

Similarly, the work of Bethel Caram and Neil Potter developed along with the festival. In the second Comedy Festival, the couple presented an excerpt from *The Grey Area*, a comedy routine about their relationship, which they had written and previously performed in comedy clubs. The success of this piece, presented as part of the theatre night, led them to write a number of short plays that were performed in subsequent festivals.

The Third Comedy Festival (2005)

By its third year, the festival became an annual event, growing each year in size and visibility, carving out a place for itself in the New York theatre scene in general, and in theatrical representation of American biculturalism in particular. By November 2005, the

third Comedy Festival had expanded to five evenings featuring thirteen stand-up comedians and six new short plays, four of them by women and one co-written by a woman, reflecting the prominence of women's voice in the Arab American theatre movement.

The short plays in the festival continued in general to resemble stand-up comic routines in aesthetics. Jana Zenadeen's *Love in Las Vegas*, for example, presents a newlywed odd couple: the bride, a pregnant Arab American stripper from Las Vegas, the groom, a closeted gay man from Lebanon. Dean Obeidallah's *And now a word from our sponsors* follows the format of an infomercial for a set of videotapes teaching Arab American viewers how to act more Arab.

On the other hand, Bethel Caram and Neil Potter's *Train* had more theatrical elements, depicting a young couple, George and Renee, heading toward a family reunion and musing about their families' joyous reactions to the fact that they have each found a partner of Arab descent. The play humorously examines the culture of fear, terror alerts, and security color codes as the couple's playful pondering is disrupted by their suspicions about four Middle Eastern men on the same train. They become baffled as to how they should react to what they think could be "suspicious behavior." George tries to report them to Security but cannot bring himself to do so, and jokingly explains to Renee that they might be relatives heading to the same reunion. *Trains* raises complex and intriguing issues about Arab American culture, but does not examine them in much depth.

The actor Lameece Issaq has performed in the Comedy Festival since its inception. In 2005, She wrote and performed in "*A*" *Date*, which portrays a dating service for Arabs and Middle Easterners living in the United States. In a series of short scenes

this play presents a selection of Arab and Arab American men and women looking for partners. They range from a Muslim lesbian to a man seeking his third wife. The main theme revolves around the attempt(s) of Miriam, the dating service owner, to set up her daughter Lamia with Maher, the son of her friend. The two young people oppose the plan, but when they see each other they realize that they have met before in the music performance world. Interestingly, neither of them had ever suspected that the other was also Arab American. Though the plot line is not new, it is used effectively to present the pressure young Arab Americans feel from their parents to marry within the same culture. In *"A" Date* Issaq creates an effective situation comedy tackling the generation gap, Arab American style, with a happy ending.

The third Comedy Festival also presented comedian Maysoon Zayid's first dramatic contribution, *Hi Joan!* This short play takes place in a post office where an Arab American woman tries to send a package of Christmas decorations to her grandmother, whose town in under siege in Palestine. The postal worker insists on getting a zip code or a country code, and the client is not able to provide this information since Palestine is not recognized as a country. After a long exchange, the postal worker decides to send the package to Israel. The misunderstandings in *Hi Joan!* humorously portray the problems and nuisances the political situation creates in the daily lives of Arab Americans and in the lives of their loved ones who live in Arab countries.

The sixth play in that festival was also written by a first time woman writer: Marie-Therese Abou-Daoud's *Next Year in Jerusalem* (2005) is a musical utilizing popular show tunes to describe the meeting of three characters: a Muslim, a Christian

tourist, and a Jew in Jerusalem. This ends up being part of a bad dream President Bush is having.

The Fourth Comedy Festival (2006)

By its fourth year, the Arab American Comedy Festival had become widely recognized as a major platform for showing the work of Arab American theatre artists. This was evident in the increasing number of play submissions to the festival. The organizers changed the format of the theatre night, renaming it "Sketch Comedy Night," to accommodate more theatre pieces and to be able to show the work in a larger theatre space.[83] The fourth festival included five short plays, and three very short sketches. Out of the eight pieces, three were written by women, and two were co-written by women.

The first co-written play is Bethel Caram and Neil Potter's *Dinner Game*[84] (2006). It depicts the conflict between the ethnic identity of a young Arab American couple and their interest in belonging to the American society at large. *Dinner Game* tackles a myriad of complex issues relating to Arab American identity, from the desire to belong to the host culture while keeping one's integrity and beliefs, to the war on terror, through a comedic framework that exploits the tension between the two couples with opposite political and cultural positions.

The protagonists Phil and Alex are a second-generation Arab American couple. Phil invites his boss, Jerry, and his wife, Courtney, to their house, and tries to prepare Alex for this meeting, describing Jerry as a "real red state Republican," and his politics as "bright red." Phil informs Alex that his boss does not know that they are of Lebanese origin, and convinces her to "take one for the team," listing all the material achievements that come

[83] Renaming the Theatre nights as "Sketch Comedy Night," allowed the festival to present the work in spaces larger than 99 seat auditoriums, while avoiding Equity's strict regulation on theatre productions.
[84] Though the play credits both of them, it is known that Caram is the writer of the pair.

from his job from a big house to a Mercedes car.

> Phil:
>
> I know I can count on you.
>
> Oh. Don't talk about the war, the Middle East or your Arabness.
>
> Alex:
>
> Are you serious?
>
> Phil:
>
> Yes.
>
> Alex:
>
> Why don't you just tell them I'm mute.
>
> You married a mute Lebanese woman.
>
> You felt sorry for her.[85]

Phil writes a list of topics that he wants his wife to stick to, Alex refuses, and tears the list to pieces. After a lot of persuasion, she finally agrees to play along.

The cultural, intellectual and political differences between the couples are explored in the following scene. The Arab Americans Phil and Alex are presented as equal partners, negotiating their relationship and their priorities, while the dynamic between Jerry and Courtney is very old style, and the language he uses to describe her is condescending: "sugar," "honey." The gap in values and world views between the visitors and their hosts is highlighted when Alex says she teaches Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Houston. Courtney responds:

> The Middle East, we always wanted to go there to see where the Baby Jesus was born.
>
> Jerry:
>
> But we decided we like living too much.

[85] All references to the text of *Dinner Game* are to the unpublished manuscript obtained by the author.

> Hell, if Jesus was alive today, I do believe he would live in Texas.

The hostile attitude of the Texan couple intensifies when they realize that the appetizers are Middle Eastern dishes. Jerry exclaims, "Hell, you didn't tell me we would be eating the food of the enemy."

In spite of being referred to as the enemy, Phil continues his attempts to belong, and to create common ground with his boss. He dresses in country club fashion, which his wife hates and his boss commends. He agrees with some of the his boss's statements and he even adopts Jerry's approach, calling his own wife "sugar," which does not go over well with her. When Alex expresses her inability to bear the insensitivity of their guest, Phil pulls her aside and pleads with her:

> Phil:
> Please, just give me one night. This is what America is about…sacrifice, playing the game….
> Alex:
> Selling out.
> Phil:
> Yes.

From the perspective of the visitors, Phil and Alex are "weird" because they have Moroccan Furniture and get *The New York Times* in Houston. Jerry thinks there is "something un-American" about them, while Courtney naively asks "What kind of an animal is a hummus?" The tension between the two positions (represented by Jerry and Alex) reaches it peak when Jerry, summarizing some of the sentiments Americans feel about the war on terror, says that the only way to win the war on terrorism is to keep going and get Iran, then Syria, to bring democracy to the whole Middle East.

Jerry:

> Actually it's pretty simple, only way to stop terrorism is to blow the whole fucking place up and give everyone a flat screen television and an air conditioner. Throw in a McDonalds, boom – they'll never curse us again.

Alex cannot tolerate her husband's acceptance of his boss's ideas about bombing the Middle East which he describes as "insightful." She demands the right to respond and her husband agrees when she threatens to withhold sex from. Alex lets their guests know her position on George Bush and the continuing war on terror. When Jerry asks "Phil don't you have a little Arab blood running through you?" Phil maintains his position saying "Yeah, a little…but Alex has a little more than me." And Courtney shows her surprise because the couple "look so normal."

The tension escalates when Jerry describes the war as part of evolution, comparing Arabs to American Indians, suggesting that it's time to adapt: "open a casino and play the game or it's off to a reservation." When Jerry asks them why all terrorists are Arab, Phil throws away his caution and aggressively responds to his boss saying:

Phil:

> Most human beings have a conscience and don't believe that blowing people up is the answer.

Jerry is surprised by the shift in Phil's position, asking which side he is on. Phil declares that he is on the side of not dropping bombs all over the world. The culmination of this intense exchange happens when Phil says that he does not like working for Jerry, and his wife says that he quits. But then the tense moment is surprisingly resolved when Courtney sings John Lennon's *Imagine* and makes everyone in the room hold hands. They agree to forget what happened and continue their evening plans to have dinner in a

restaurant.

The humor in *Dinner Game* stems from the well-drawn intricate situation, and the comedic tension is maintained through a divided stage, providing a space where each of the couples can voice their true opinions about the other. Though the tension is defused to create a comedic happy ending, it is clear that the disagreement is not resolved. The last lines of the play show Alex's attempt to make peace when she goes back to pick up the pieces of the list of approved topics for conversation that she tore up earlier and starts talking about television. This attempt fails, as they have different preferences in programming. The play ends with her asking about sports, in an effort to find common ground with their guests.

This play encapsulates many of the problems second and third generation Arab Americans face regularly in their professional and social lives, when they have to negotiate on a daily basis the possibility that revealing their ethnic identity could jeopardize their careers, or social contacts**.**

The fourth Festival also presented the short comedy *Leila Layla* (2006) written by Ahmad Amer, in collaboration with Marie-Therese Abou-Daoud and Ahmad Ibrahim. Like a number of other writers discussed in this chapter, the creators of this play have participated in previous Comedy Festivals and were inspired by the popularity of the festival to write this short play. Egyptian Filmmaker Ahmad Amer directed *Train* for the third Festival while Marie-Therese Abou-Daoud wrote the musical *Next Year in Jerusalem*.

The main project of *Leila Layla* is to humorously critique the performances of identity by Arab Americans artists, which the playwrights caricature and parody. The

collaboration of Ahmad Amer and Ahmed Ibrahim, both Egyptian immigrants, with Marie-Therese Abou-Daoud, who is second-generation Arab American, allowed the writers a unique position from which to offer a humorous commentary on the cultural condition of artists of Arab descent using their art work as a way to belong. Through the use of songs, children rhymes, quotations from plays and other cultural references (from both cultures) they presented a parody of Arabness as performed by second-generation Arab Americans. Having a team of playwrights who are both in and outside American culture gave this play a distinctive voice in the Comedy Festival, where most of the comedians and theatre makers base their humor on a surface knowledge of Arabic culture and language. Amer, Abou-Daoud and Ibrahim's depiction of the performance of identity, their parody of the awkward liminality of the Arab American artists and their command of the nuances of the colloquial language won their play the audience's selection award in the play readings preceding the festival. And *Leila Layla* was directed by Ahmad Amer and Marie-Therese Abou-Daoud for the Fourth Festival.

In quick snapshots the play follows the life of a young Arab American woman, from her birth through her youth and search for her roots and identity, presenting some of the pivotal moments of her life. This play adopts the framework of the Arabian Nights, which is presented in its humorous subtitle *A Tale of 9125 Nights*, Leila's age, in days, by the end of the play. Unlike most of the other comedy works in the festival that base their humor on the physical features and tastes of Arabs, reinforcing some of the stereotypes about Arabic culture, *Leila, Layla* presents a fresh look at the identity formation of this minority through self-critical observation of Arab American artists. Being immersed in

both the Arabic and American cultures, the writers of this play are able to comedically problematize the identity search itself.

The identity humor starts in the first scene, performed to the background music of "Thousand and One Nights." The Narrator, a Scheherazade character, in the style of the Arabian Nights, introduces the parents of the newborn child and their dilemma about what to call their daughter.[86]

> Father:
>
> Do not say Habibti. Say my dear.
>
> Mother:
>
> You're right my dear. We should not confuse her. She is 100% American now. I was thinking of calling her Jennifer

After some disagreement, the parents agree on naming their daughter Layla, because this name is "Egyptian and American at the same time." The playwrights use multiple styles of comedy, some based on the language, other on the situations, even some audio comedy. At the end of the first scene, the mother prays for her daughter in Arabic. When the father nudges her she translates her prayer to English saying, "may God open all the doors for you," which is directly followed by the sound effect of a door slamming. This comedic technique is used throughout the play, where the words of the performers are immediately contradicted by the actions or the sound effects on stage, which creates a humor that stems from the incongruity between what the audience sees and hears.

[86] There are parallels with Leila Buck's autobiographical play *ISite*, though the playwrights of both plays were not aware of the existence of each other's work.

The following scene explores the differences between the Arab American child and her peers in school. This is presented through a series of rhyming couplets, sung by the schoolgirls chorus, mocking Layla and her habits and behavior:

Girl Chorus:

I like peanut butter, I like jam,
Layla can't eat anything especially ham.
We like cars, we ride bikes,
Layla just takes camels day and night.

As a young woman the protagonist meets Jamal, an African American, who is in awe that she is "from the motherland" and flirtatiously describes her as "African Queen."

Layla:

African? I'm not African!

Jamal:

Do I have to teach my new Nefertiti about geography?
Egypt is in Africa.

Layla's ignorance about her ancestor's culture is shown through her orientalizing and over-romanticizing it: wanting to "ride camels at dusk" and do unlikely activities like "climbing the pyramids." Jamal encourages her to write about her roots for a Spoken Word performance, and she starts to discover her non-American identity. The shift in her identity is summarized in the words of the narrator:

Narrator:

Layla full of excitement began a new transformation. Writing day and night listening to Oum Khalthoum instead of top 40, while burning incense. Replacing her Brad Pitt poster with a King Tutankhamoun poster from the US tour. Layla never felt so grounded before as she memorized her

ten lines to share with the rest of the world.

The protagonist's short contribution touches upon many of the concerns that occupy the second-generation including: identity, the veil, being categorized as other, body images, and Arabness. Though the subject matter is serious, the playwrights derive a lot of comedy from presenting it in superficial language and funny rhymes:

-Ridin da train, you see a woman veiled
-Why you trippin sayin she don't wash her hair
-Course she do, Arabs are clean
-We the ones taught Europeans bout Hygiene

Layla's poetry is not well received, yet it opens the door for her self-discovery and growth.

In the following scene she meets Mohammed (Moe) who works at a hot dog stand.Though they have known each other for only two months, Mohammed starts talking to Layla about marriage. The humor is developed further as he kneels in front of her and starts sobbing that he needs "za Green Card. Ya mama I need za visa." Layla is relieved that he is not proposing to her. Before they can do anything about Moe's Green Card the Narrator recounts that two men in black suits knocked on Mohammad's door at four A.M. the next morning. The same comedic technique discussed earlier is employed in this scene, where the actions on stage are contradictory to the dialogue. While Layla asserts that "nothing can come between us," two men escort Moe off stage to deport him out of the country.

The deportation of Moe leads the protagonist into a new stage in her journey of growth and identity formation. She prepares to "fight for all her Arab brethren" to the

background music of the pan-Arab nationalistic sixties anthem "*Watani Habibi El Watan El Akbar*" (My beloved Country, The Greater Country). Layla wraps a Palestinian Kifiya around her neck and starts her physical training and doing push-ups on stage, then carries a banner with the slogan "Straight Arab Women in support of HAMAS." The Palestinian scarf and the militant training lead the audience to assume that she supports the Palestinian organization Hamas, but playing with these expectations the narrator reveals that Layla co-founded an organization to support “Homosexual Arab Men Against Sunbathing."

The final scene exposes the conflation of identity in the mind of the Arab American protagonist.

Narrator:

> As an African, Arab, Muslim, American, Grieving, female, who wanted her voice to be heard, Layla enrolled in an acting class.

The performance presents quick moments from the protagonist’s actor training, then the narrator announces that Layla is ready to “fulfill her duty.” With an audience of a hundred and three people, and an art critic from *Unshaven*, the local Feminist Newspaper, Layla premieres her one-woman performance piece “Take back the Humus!” In this parody of Performance Art, the protagonist stands silent on stage with a large plate of Humus in front of her on the ground. Then she starts her monologue with “Falasteen, Falasteen, where art thou my Falasteen.” Though the character of Layla is clearly identified as Egyptian American, the playwrights present her in the Palestinian scarf and

start her one-woman show with a monologue about Palestine, to comment on the identity of Arab Americans, which is often connected to the Palestinian problem.[87]

"Take back the Humus!" the performance within the play mocks the performance of identity as Layla describes her hair as her identity "I can dye it many colors but it's still my hair. Yellow, Red, Brown, Black, White." She uses all the markers of Arab American identity, mixing the cultural with the gastronomic: the pyramid, the Nile, humus, pita bread, dates, etc. In the course of the performance within the play, Layla begins to slowly spread the humus on her face like war paint, making the sound of *zagrouta* (ululating) confusing the sounds of happiness used in Arabic celebrations with the war cries of other cultures. As Bananarama's song "Venus" plays in the background, Layla sings along listing the chains of oppression she is intending to break, specifically her mother's oppression. She announces to the men of the world that she will be throwing her chastity key into the Nile. Her mother, who is attending the one-woman show, interrupts her performance, scolding her for mentioning her chastity.

When the narrator shows sympathy for the weak ending of the protagonist's performance, Layla, in a meta-theatrical shift, turns to the narrator and starts attacking her. The narrator tries to explain the she is on Layla's side:

> Narrator:
>
> Layla I know your future holds more happiness than you can imagine and more adventure than you've ever dreamed of. I know because this is my story. Layla I am you.

[87] Regardless of the specific location of their ancestry, many members of the Arab American community often assert "we are all Palestinian," in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and since 2003 Arab Americans show support to the Iraqis under occupation saying "we are all Iraqi."

Layla:

What, are you on crack lady?

The play ends with a Scheherazade style comment. “I hope you enjoyed our story this evening. *Leila, Layla, a tale of 9125 nights*.”

Amer, Abou-Daoud and Ibrahim chose to title their play *Leila Layla*, which is the name of the main character spelled in two different ways, indicating the tension in her identity, and playing with the notion of how Arab names are often mispronounced. To appreciate the full range of the subversive humor presented in this play, and the nuances of the parody and the intertextuality requires a bilingual, bicultural audience which is familiar with Arabic as well as American references. It is worth noting that a number of performers, and some of the producers of the Comedy Festival (though Arab Americans themselves), were not able to fully understand the humor in the play, treating some of the text as high poetry, rather than a parody, which confirms the speculations of Amer that “lots of Arab Americans have a strong need to belong…they often romanticize their roots.” [88] They high regard for anything that is connected to the home culture is fully explored in the poignant parody of the Arab American identity in this play.

Playwright/performer Lena Rizkallah wrote two pieces that were performed in the fourth festival: the short play *Living It Up In Long Island*, and the short sketch *Friends and Family*. *Living it up on Long Island* describes how a young couple, Silvia and Doug, decide to temporarily stay with Silvia’s Arabic family, to save money for their new condo. But the family’s interference makes life difficult for the couple. Rizkallah's short sketch *Friends and Family* offers a parody of a cell phone company advertisement “Arab

[88] Personal interview with Ahmad Amer on 10 February, 2008.

Friends and Family Plan," a wireless plan that offers special features and benefits exclusively available to Arab Americans and their Arab relatives in the homeland, evoking the government's surveillance of the Arab American community. Both pieces rely heavily on stand-up devices, and neither of them create a developed dramatic situation that parallels Rizkallah's second year contribution *Layla's Sahra*.

The Panel was devised by Nisaa', a group of Arab American women spearheaded by Leila Buck (her autobiographical play is discussed in chapter one of this dissertation). This play replicates a panel discussion moderated by a scholar, and presenting an Egyptian-American performance artist responding to questions from the audience. Most of the questions conflate Islam with Arabness, and push the artist to comment on issues beyond her expertise, like the veil, the status of women in the Arab world, and the political climate. This parody of panel discussions comments on the lack of knowledge by a large number of the American public, and sometimes even by moderators who seem to only want to discuss particular issues (like the veil and Arab women's sexuality) when the conversation revolves around Arab or Muslim women.

The Fifth Comedy Festival (2008)

The fifth Arab American Comedy Festival, the largest so far, was presented in January 2008,[89] in The Zipper Theatre, which allowed for all the activities of the festival (stand up comedy, theatrical performances, and film and as well as party nights) to be presented under one roof. The work of the comedians, in general, became more reflective in the writing and showed more maturity and experience in delivery, but the

[89] For the first four years, the Festival was presented in the Fall season. The dates ranged from October to November to accommodate for the changing dates of the fasting month of Ramadan, and the availability of theatre spaces and comedy clubs. The Fifth festival was presented in January 2008 to avoid conflicting with the NY Comedy Festival, and the schedule of the comedians' tours.

sketch/theatre pieces lacked depth and originality. Most of the eight theatrical sketches continued to follow the style of stand-up comedy, which can support an extended joke, but is often not enough to sustain a short play**.**

Another change was evident in the fifth festival and was clearly reflected in the advertising and program of the festival, which carried the title "Arabs Gone Wild." The logo for the first four years of the festival had the face of a camel with a scarf around its neck with the famous phrase, "I love NY." The advertisements for the fifth festival showed a number of camels standing on their back legs, removing the scarf and covering their bodies in embarrassment with black censorship strips. The content of some of the stand-up routines and of a number of the sketches also echoed that change, presenting more adult content and sexually explicit jokes, being even more liberal in using Arabic slurs and profanity. This change reflects a level of comfort on the part of the festival organizers and writers. In the first couple of years they were not sure what kind of reception their work was going to receive, but after four years of sold out performances and supportive reviews they relaxed more in regards to the image they are projecting and the kind of material they choose to present.

As in previous years, plays by women writers had a prominent place in the festival. Out of the eight theatrical sketches, four were written by women, and one was co-written by a woman. Three of these plays were authored by festival veteran writers/performers: Bethel Caram and Neil Potter's *After the Festival* and Lameece Issaq's *Samia's Cup* and *Neighborhood Nightly News*. There were also two sketches by new writers who previously participated in the festival as actors: Eman Ahmed's *Love Match* and Alia Tarraf and Tamar Vezirian *Beirut Hills*.

After the Festival is a comedic commentary on the Arab American Comedy Festival and current American politics. It presents an Arab American couple who have just finished attending the festival in New York. The wife is slightly uncomfortable that they might be watched because they went to the festival, and the husband comforts her. In a quick turn of events, the play reveals that the wife, who works as a news anchor for Fox news channel, is hiding Osama Ben Laden (an actor in the employment of the US government) in their basement. To the bewilderment of her husband, Dick Cheney pays them a visit to convince Ben Laden to perform in yet another tape "threatening American interests." Ben Laden accepts, but only after Cheney agrees to let him sing on the tape. The humor in this play stems from the absurdity of the situation, and the speculation on the connection between Osama Ben Laden and the U.S. government. Its comedic aesthetic resembles that of the stand-up comedy routines.

The three plays by Caram and Potter, written especially for the festival (*Train, Dinner Game, After the Festival*), all share common traits. There is a young Arab American couple at the center of each of these plays, and all have to negotiate the liminal space between their American present and their Arab background as they face tension because of their ethnic identity. This tension is often the source of the comedy, which is expressed through one-liners and quick banter between the central characters, and through a language that reflects the writers' comfort with American slang, and familiarity with American pop culture. In contrast with their first play, *The Grey Area,* which focused mainly on the relationship of a young couple, Caram and Potter's later plays reveal a greater awareness of the absurdities and ironies facing people of Arab descent in American society, especially the second and third generations, who are fully integrated in

that society. Some of the plays demonstrate maturity in using theatrical techniques (rather than the stand-up aesthetic) in developing the dramatic situation. This is particularly clear in *Dinner Game*, which makes the most of the writers' expertise in exposing the humor in relationships, as well as to the absurdities of the current Arab American condition, making the authors fourth Comedy Festival contribution their most theatrically sophisticated play.

The fifth Arab American Comedy Festival also presented two plays by writer/ performer Lameece Issaq: *Samia's Cup* and *Neighborhood Nightly News*. In *Samia's Cup*, Issaq creates a bizarre atmosphere surrounding a fortune teller who reads coffee grounds suggesting an oriental environment with a snake around her neck, incense burning, and weird curses that befall whoever dares to contradict her. A white American woman is illogically convinced by the fortuneteller to pay her a large sum of money in order to reverse the reading and release the curses. The second play *Neighborhood Nightly News*, in which Issaq plays the female lead, is a caricature of the American style news, presenting the news of the "alley" including sports, and gossip, as well as covering the activities of the advertisers and depicting the tension between the male and female news anchors. Both plays appeared to be highly improvised, utilizing stand-up comedy devices, with little focus on the characters or the dramatic structure of the play.

Both plays by new writers, Eman Ahmed's *Love Match* and Alia Tarraf and Tamar Vezirian's *Beirut Hills* are parodies of television programs. *Love Match* presents a young Arab American woman tricked by her mother into appearing on a dating television show. She ends up being matched to a man she doesn't like, at the persistence of the program host. *Beirut Hills* presents an exaggerated parody of another television program focusing

on gossip in Lebanese society. Both sketches draw heavily on the stand-up style, and offered forced situations with no dramatic strength. These sketches fall between the two genres: stand-up routines and comedic plays, and do not attain either the pointed commentary of stand-up, or the depth of theatrical presentation.

In spite of the slow evolution of the theatre component of the Arab American Comedy Festival, the festival as a whole has been successful in its mission of encouraging and showcasing the work of Arab American artists. The festival has emerged as a platform, "a space of their own," for Arab American artists to define themselves and their work, negotiate stereotypes, and joke about their own habits, fears, accents, misunderstandings, and the challenges of living between two cultures. The Comedy Festival has also been successful in creating and solidifying a network of Arab American artists who are co-creating, cross-pollinating, and performing in each other's work. Additionally, it provides the media with stories about Arabs and Arab Americans that relate to something other than crisis news. It has succeeded in attracting a regular yearly audience, which strengthens the sense of community in New York, and in Los Angeles where the festival is expanding. It is worth noting that since its inception, the festival has encouraged the work of first-time Arab American women writers.

Conclusion:

Alhough most of the comedy of Arab American artists is concentrated in the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, there is also a considerable amount of work that occurs outside the framework of this yearly event. Comedians show their work in regular comedy clubs, and stand-up engagements like “the Middle East Comedy Bazaar” and “the Brown Comedy Hour.” Since their appearance in Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit*

9/11, a large number of the Arab American comedians have had many appearances on television programs. The Comedy Central channel produced the exclusively Middle Eastern comedy series *The Watch List*. These comedians also presented the "Arab American Comedy Tour" and "The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour," both of which toured nationally and had commercially distributed DVDs. Due to the success of this work and the demand for comedy by Arab Americans, the Comedy Festival itself expanded to include the West Coast, presenting some of stand-up routines and plays in Los Angeles, and since 2006 the Festival has presented a run in Los Angles following that in New York.

There have been fewer opportunities for presenting comedic material in traditional theatres. One venue was through the New York Theatre Workshop festival ASWAT (2007), which presented new plays about Palestine. Among the works offered there were two very distinctive comedy plays *Food and Fadwa*,[90] and a theatrical adaptation of the political humorous memoir *Sharon and My Mother- in- Law*.

The Comedy Festival remains the main arena for comedic Arab American theatre work. The perseverance of the festival and its continuity over a number of years encourages new Arab American voices to write for theatre, as the plays discussed in this chapter reveal. Since this platform came into being, potential writers and emerging artists have geared their work toward it, writing new material in a format that fits the festival, because it is the only stable and guaranteed outlet showcasing the work of Arab Americans. The change in the theatre section of the festival, which was re-titled "sketch" night, had strong implications on the nature of the work presented. More plays adopted

[90] Jack Kader submitted the first version of this play to the fourth Comedy Festival, and it was not accepted in that year's festival. Since then he teamed with Lameece Issaq and co-wrote *Food and Fadwa*, which premiered in ASWAT, and was developed during summer 2008 through the New York Theatre Workshop.

the short sketch format, which uses stand-up comedy devices and moves away from the theatre aesthetic. These sketches, which vary in length, base their humor in one-liners or a joke at the end, which does not encourage theatrical situation comedies, or investigation of relationships or situations. The choices and preferences of the festival organizers also set the tone for the theatrical performances. Because most of them have a stand-up comedy background, their selections from the large pool of submissions favor the stand-up approach to theatre, encouraging a style and comedic aesthetic which is steeped in stand-up jokes while ignoring other comedy formats. This is not only reflected in the plays and sketches presented, but also sets the tone for the new material written, since writers cater their material to the style they think would most likely be supported and produced by the Comedy Festival. This unity of style, tonality and performances, coupled with the fact that most of the performers use the same accent to represent Arabic speaking people, help to create a "one voice" festival, rather than the multiplicity of voices presented in the early festivals, which offered work of more established theatre writers.

Nevertheless, the Comedy Festival has succeeded on many fronts. One of its major achievements is the positive media attention it has attracted. Dean Obeidallah remarks that after 9/11, the media had two stories about Arabs, one where they appear as terrorists and murderers, and a slightly better story where they appear as "alleged" terrorists and murderers. The Comedy Festival offers a different story about Arabs and Muslims, one that appeals to the media. There has been extensive coverage of the Comedy Festival in the American press, radio, television and online reviews, as well as

Arabic-speaking media.[91] Here Arab American plays and stand-up comedians ruminate on thorny issues of identity, stereotypes, political and racial tensions. When this reflection emerges through comedy, Arab culture seems less intimidating and more approachable. And as with any sub-cultural group, it is more appropriate (and funnier) to hear these jokes from the mouths of those referenced.

In addition to positive media feedback, the Arab American Comedy Festival has also succeeded in gathering a community of Arab American artists who support each others' work both inside and outside the festival framework. Promoting the work of Arab American performers through the festival have led to a number of comedians appearing in television series and television comedy shows, as well as some of the actors being cast in Broadway and Off-Broadway performances and getting bigger roles in films.[92] The festival has also created a community of audience members in New York, New Jersey, and Los Angeles that supports this work, and awaits it from one year to the next, ensuring that all the performances are sold-out, often before the festival starts. The Comedy Festival utilizes various techniques to build community and audience following. In

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[91] There has been an extensive coverage of the festival in various media formats, The Festival website lists a few: "Arab-Americans are never far from the headlines" Ian Munro, theage.com , Jan 14, 2008, "The 5th Annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival: Comedy with a purpose" Daniel Petrino, PunchlineMagazine.com, Jan 8, 2008, "Arab-American Comedy in New York: Routing Suspicions Prejudice with Humor" Carolyn Weaver, Voice of America, Nov 27, 2006. http://arabcomedy.org/news/press-clips.shtml downloaded on 20 November 2008.

[91] For example, after their appearance in the Second Comedy Festival, Omar Metwally, and Sam Younis moved to L.A. to pursue careers in film. Metwally has since starred in a number of major films including *Munich*, *Rendition*, and *Amsterdam*. In addition to the comedy tours, Maysoon Zayid appeared in Comedy Central's *The Watch List*, Adam Sandler's movie *You Don't Mess With Zohan*, *As The World Turns, Law & Order, MTV, NBC Nightly News, CNN, ABC's 20/20*. Waleed Zuaiter, one of the lead actors and the festival's co-producer recently starred in *Betrayed* at The Culture Project, The Public Theater Lab production of Naomi Wallace's *Fever Chart*, HBO/BBC miniseries "House of Saddam," feature film *Veronika Decides to Die*, Broadway: *Sixteen Wounded*. The Public: *Mother Courage* and *Stuff Happens*. Ramsey Faragallah played many roles in film including: *Michael Clayton*, The *Interpreter, Celebrity, Hollywood Ending, Small Time Crooks and Curse of the Jade Scorpion* and on TV: *The Sopranos, Flight of the Conchords, 30 Rock, Law & Order, Special Victims Unit, Criminal Intent, Third Watch, The Job, Hope & Faith*, as well as off-Broadway: *Betrayed, Guantanamo, Afterplay, Stonewall*, and *Orestes*.

addition to the festival itself, the organizers develop this community – using emails and list serves – through comedy events, and fundraisers for the festival and other causes. The festival also organizes play readings of festival submissions, where audience members can rate the plays. The "best play" from the reading is guaranteed a production slot during the festival, giving the audience a sense of ownership of the festival.

Although the comic, even farcical tonality of most of the work discussed in this chapter is far removed from the generally serious and even tragic tone of much current performance by Arab American women, the subject matter within these different genres is often remarkably similar, based as both are upon the exploration of conflicting identities and loyalties in those growing up between two cultures. Both present childhood stories, discuss the pains of growing up as an outsider to both cultures, and portray the frustrations of dealing with American friends, on one hand, and parents or relatives in their countries of origin on the other hand, neither of which have any clear understanding of the other. Yet, as seen through the examples discussed in this chapter, comedy offers a unique opportunity to artists of Arab descent to examine their condition, highlighting the absurdities of the tensions in society and commenting on the gap between their Arab heritage and the demands of their American life style, crystallizing the cultural conflict in a fresh perspective.

Conclusion

> I get this funny thing every semester: I get a student who comes to my office hours … who says: "I just found out I'm Arab American." Actually what they say is "I just found out I'm Arab."
> ELLIOTT, *Sajjal*

A few artists discussed in this work had expressed their Arab American identity artistically before 9/11. However, this event and its aftermath crystallized Arab American identity, foregrounding the Arabic portion of it, and in some cases pushing artists to articulate issues they were facing as individuals who are part of a marginalized, and sometimes ostracized community. While 9/11 increased the systematic discrimination against people of Arab and Muslim descent, it also generated an interest in these cultures and in people who originated in Arabic countries. This curiosity about "the other" initiated a demand for more information, books, art *about* Arabs and Muslims, creating an opportune cultural moment and a space for work *by* Arab Americans. There was an increase in the number of fiction and poetry publications by Arab Americans, and an even greater increase in Arab American visibility in the theatre with the appearance of many new dramatists and performers, especially women. This could be attributed to several factors. After discussing these factors, I will consider the circumstances that led to the prominence of political theatre in Arab American writing, summarizing some of the traits of the writing style and aesthetics of women writers. I will conclude by looking at some of the reasons behind the prevalence of women's voice in this emerging theatre movement and the latest developments of the movement.

The Political Aspect

While previous generations of Arab American theatre writers were not overtly political, most of the women playwrights discussed in this thesis have a clear political project. Earlier cultural production focused on presenting Arabic culture to audiences through connection to its traditions. This tendency persists in contemporary literature, a considerable part of it is still occupied with the search for roots through parents' and grandparents' stories about the homeland, often including recipes of the food they enjoyed as children. By contrast, recent theatre writers have broken away from that tendency and have established a firm political position that deals with current political tensions or identity politics. The political awareness of the emerging Arab American theatre artists is both internal and external. Their position as Arabs and Arab Americans in a society that is often hostile to Arabs compelled a rapid process of self-definition and encouraged an awareness of identity – a coming of age for these artists. At the same time, developments in the contemporary political situation inside the United States and abroad advanced the political sensibility of these artists and their sensitivity to events in Arab countries like Palestine and Iraq.

While 9/11 and its aftermath were the first impetus for the Arab American theatre artists to present their work, two other influential events relating to Arab countries helped shape the work of this group: the Israeli attacks on the Palestinian Territories, and the anti-war movement before and at the onset of the war on Iraq. A few months after 9/11, and while the war in Afghanistan was under way, the situation in Palestine deteriorated. Employing the same rhetoric of the American administration regarding "War on Terror," the Israeli army launched an attack on Ramallah, surrounding the headquarters of the

president of the Palestinian Authority, Yassir Arafat, and closing the crossings (the main entry points of food and provisions to Gaza and the West Bank), which led to near starvation of the Palestinian population there. The continuous portrayal of the Palestinian as terrorist, the uneven coverage of the siege of Ramallah and other towns in the Palestinian territories, the lack of support from the international community for the Palestinians, and the biased American government's support for Israel roused the Arab American community. In a show of solidarity with the Palestinian people, many of the artists and intellectuals who were not of Palestinian descent adopted the motto, "We are all Palestinians."

Meanwhile, the beginning of 2003 witnessed more pressure on Iraq, and stronger public outcry against the war. Many theatre artists expressed their opposition to that war, and the Theaters Against War (THAW)[93] movement was born from the public demonstrations to stop the war on Iraq. The theatre community in New York and other American cities was actively engaged in the political demonstrations. THAW encouraged the work of some Arab American theatre artists and presented early writings in some of the events hosted by the movement prior to and during the onset of the war on Iraq.

Members of THAW and other theatres were interested in addressing the pressing issues of the post 9/11 changing world, and in opening dialogues with representatives of the Arab American community. These theatres looked for plays about the Middle East and the Arab world, and found that there were few translations of Arabic plays available.[94] In addition to the demand by theatres, the newly founded Comedy Festival's

[93] THAW is an international network of pro-peace theatre artists responding to the United States' ongoing "War on Terror," aggressive foreign policies, and escalating attacks on civil liberties in the US and throughout the world.

[94] Though there are some translations of Arabic plays, many of them are out of print or not in circulation.

search for material by Arab American writers created a demand for new plays. The appeal of this material and the success of some of the plays encouraged more aspiring artists to put their thoughts to paper and write plays.

Changing Perspectives

Two of the plays discussed here were written before 9/11: Leila Buck's *ISite* and Betty Shamieh's *Chocolate in Heat*, but their significance changed when presented after that critical moment. As the image and position of Arabs in society changed, their cultural production in general, and their plays, in particular, acquired more urgency. The project of Arab American women artists changed as well. Instead of generally addressing a topic of interest to some audience members, they were challenging the dominant stereotypical images of Arabs in mainstream media by offering their American audiences a glimpse into their own world, with its fears, hopes, dreams and frustrations, humanizing the face of the 'enemy' and allowing audiences a better understanding of this section of the population. Soha Al Jurf recounts that often she is the first Palestinian her audiences have ever met in person. Her physical presence on stage and in post-show discussions is in itself (regardless of the content of her play), an important act of representation. The audience can then have a first-hand experience with a Palestinian woman who speaks their language (with a clear American accent), shares many of their American cultural references and, through her knowledge, familial and emotional connections to Palestine, is also able to offer a first hand account of some of the stories that are rarely presented to the American public.[95]

[95] There is parallel between the impact of the post show discussions of Soha Al Jurf's work and that of Heather Raffo, where audiences get a chance to connect to the performer as a representative of the culture of her origin.

While some of the plays examined in this dissertation focus on stories from the homeland, most of the plays, and especially the comedy performances, focus on the American part of the performers' identity, their experiences living in the United States, and the pressure of representing their communities. As second-generation writers, most of the artists have only emotional ties to their country of origin. Since they have not lived in these countries and do not speak their language, their view of their homelands is through the "American immigrant eye." An interesting example is *9 Parts of Desire*, which presents the experiences of a number of Iraqi women, yet it enters that world through the Iraqi American woman. This character provides the audience with a way to relate to the events of the Iraqi war through an American[ized] eye that is watching the same events the audience could be following in the media. This adds a different perspective: what it feels like to be watching the war progress if you have family under fire.

The Aesthetics of Arab American Women's Theatre:

The plays and performances discussed in this work share more than having Arab American characters as their focus. There are some basic traits that run through all the plays that could be seen as Arab American in style and aesthetics. Regardless of their genres, all the plays aim to educate their American audiences about Arabs or Arab Americans. The playwrights share with the audience some moments that inform their existence as Arab Americans, and sometimes show the audience how they, as Arab Americans, are personally affected by current political events. These plays perform a different role for their Arab American audiences, validating their experiences and giving

voice to their suffering or frustration, both with the current discrimination against the Arab American community and the oppression of their families in the Arab countries.

Formally, a number of performances, such as *Isite* and *On the Coach*, use storytelling techniques, evoking this ancient art, while other plays foreground the master storyteller of the *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade. Layal, the main character of *9 Parts of Desire*, not only quotes Scheherazade, but also identifies with her both as the storyteller and the imminent victim of oppression by the tyrant ruler. While Marguerite, the protagonist of *Pistachio Stories*, is compared to Scheherazade because of her unfinished stories, *Leila Layla* uses the format of the Arabian Nights, with Scheherazade as the narrator of the play.

Most of the plays also use Arabic words, even though the playwrights are not fluent Arabic speakers, to create a connection to their ancestors' land and language. *Pistachio Stories* not only uses Arabic words as part of the dialogue, it also dedicates sections of the play to discussing the Arabic roots of many words used in the English language like coffee and candy. The inclusion of Arabic in the dialogue has a different effect in comedy performances, which use some insults in Arabic, or create comedy via the use of Arabic profanity that only Arabic speaking audiences could comprehend.[96]

In addition, a number of the Arab American women plays examined here use the call to prayer in their performance text or soundscape as a clear marker of Arabic and Islamic culture. These are used for different purposes in different plays. While Al Jurf

[96] This practice is double edged since the more Arabic the performers use in the comedy routines, the more they alienate their American audiences. An example is the increased use of Arabic in some of the Fifth Comedy Festival performances, which created the effect of an inside joke that the general audience did not feel connected to. In *Decolonizing the Stage*: *Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama*, Christopher Balme argues that this is a conscious technique the oppressed intentionally use so that the oppressors do not understand.

chants the Eid prayers in the opening scene of *Pressing Beyond In Between* in order to set the stage for the tension between her sexuality and her connection to the divine within the contested space of her body, Leila Buck uses an abbreviated version of the Muslim prayer to introduce the audiences of *ISite* to various aspects of Arabic culture. While, Heather Raffo uses the daily five calls to prayer in specific parts of the soundscape of *9 Parts of Desire* to connect the rhythm of the play to that of a full day in the life of an Iraqi city, evoking an auditory connection to the atmosphere of Arab cities, where the call to prayer is part of the sound of daily experiences.

Theatre and Identity formation:

The theatre created by Arab American women artists is an attempt to create an identity, not only searching for the self, but also constructing a self. In the myriad of shifting identities that current generations from immigrant communities negotiate, and amidst the bombardment of media presentation of Arabs, there are no positive reflections of self in the culture. The collective work of this theatre movement helps in constructing a positive "Arab American self," by accumulation and layering of Arab American characters struggling to present themselves and their stories on stage**.** The fact that a number of the performances are autobiographical or based on interviews helps in the construction of this image. As Arab American audiences see echoes of their individual or community story on stage and as they build a connection with the characters on stage, they are able to extend their individual web of connection to other Arab or Arab American audience members who might be in similar situations.

The construction of the Arab American identity operates differently in each of the genres used by Arab American women playwrights. The autobiographical mode explored in chapter one starts from the self and tries to create connections to the writer/performer's family, then to the community in the land of origin. Each of these personal stories seems to interact with a major political event: the Palestinian Intifada, the Iraq Iran war, and the first Gulf War, the genocide of the Armenians and the exodus of foreigners from Egypt. The identities of Al Jurf, Buck and Armani are all impacted by their geographical, as well as ancestral, journeys.

These three autoperformances function in analogous ways. They identify the self, name, claim and present an identity, explain aspects of their stories of identity formation to the audience, then two of them hold post-show discussion about these complex issues. These discussions often take the process a step further, connecting the performer (as a representative of her ethnic group) to the current political concerns. In so doing, the Arab American writer/performer acts as a bridge to her cultural heritage, allowing audience members to walk in her shoes and to experience some of the incidents that shaped her and her culture.

On the other hand, the documentary plays discussed in chapter two present a compiled identity of the communities they are presenting on stage, namely Arab Americans and Iraqi women. The verbatim selections from interviews with and about Arabs in America in the first performance, and the compiled portraits of Iraqi women based on interviews by the playwright/performer in the second performance present an image of identity that is rooted in reality. Still, this works differently for different audiences. For an American audience, *Sajjil* offers an image of Arabs as presented by

fellow Arabs and Arab Americans, namely, as a group encompassing a wide range of personalities and perspectives. These portraits humanize Arabs, and shed light on their experiences that are rarely highlighted in the media. For Arab American audiences, this performance presents a range of characters with differing positions on their identity tension as both Arab and American, which provides the audiences with varying perspectives regarding expressing that identity tension under the pressure of the changes in society post 9/11, and chances for identification with the characters and some emotional release.

Chapter three reveals a continuum in the trajectory of Arab American identity portrayed on the American stage. *Chocolate in Heat* depicts an Arab American young woman tracing her youth and childhood in the U.S., as well as three Arab American men in different phases of their identity search. Shamieh's first play presents an early stage in the formation of Arab American identity, and how it operates under societal pressure. When the political climate changes post 9/11 the same dramatist shows different kinds of psyches: four women of Arab descent. The two modern ones are a Palestinian suicide bomber, and a Palestinian American victim of 9/11. Presenting the perpetuator of violence next to the victim of violence, both Arabs, is an attempt to balance the image of Arabs as solely responsible for violent acts and complicates the picture, since they are also at the receiving end of violence. The main character, the Arab American Architect, represents a later development in the character of the Arab American woman on stage, with a clear tension between her evolved American side and her under nourished Arabic side, that dominates her psyche.

Shamas' characters in *Pistachio Stories* are a clear expression of the changes that occurred in American society post 9/11, and of their impact on the lives of Arab Americans who became targeted as anti-American, and suspected just because of their ancestry and cultural heritage. This play confirms the fear and suspicion felt in Arab American communities after 9/11, dramatizing the detention of Arabs with no clear crime and capturing the culture of fear that prevailed in the society at large. The three plays explored in chapter three signal three different stages in the Arab American identity on stage: first, the struggle to exist and to carve a place for oneself in American society; second, the conflict between the old and new sets of codes, which reached a peak leading to a fracture (represented in the events of 9/11); and third, the portrayal of the post 9/11 world and its impact on people of Arab descent.

There are obvious differences between the characters in the plays of the first two chapters and those in chapter three. The former are based on the real, in the form of autobiography and documentary. The modus operandi of the "real" depicted on stage – "I experienced, witnessed it, or met someone who said this or witnessed that"– gives these characters more weight when it comes to representation of identity and its formation. This differs greatly from the fictitious lives created by the dramatists discussed in chapter three.

The continuum from the real to the fictional takes a different direction when it comes to comedy performances. The stand-up comedy routines discuss the identity shift, from passing as white, or being seen as unique and exotic, to becoming "terrorist" overnight. They highlight the difficult moments faced by Arab Americans. Many of the comedy routines are dedicated to exploring aspects of Arabness in the American society.

Although, the short plays presented in the Comedy Festival cover a wide range of topics, at the core of most of them are issues of identity. Using comedy to explore these issues helps disarm the American audiences, allowing them to connect to the humanity of Arab Americans; at the same time it gives Arab American audiences a chance to explore some of the challenges they face within a framework that makes these challenges easier to handle. Laughing at themselves and at their plight lightens the emotional load they are carrying in their continuous negotiation of identity in American society.

Creating Community

Arab American artists also create community by working together and supporting each other's work.[97] Through working on each other's shows, reading each other's work, performing in each other's plays, or attending rehearsals, readings and performances of other Arab American artists, theatre artists have formed a wide network of theatre professionals. This network helps in the casting, production and presentation of Arab American performances and acts as a sounding board for new ideas, and as a source of critical responses through panel discussions.

The voice of Arab American theatre artists gathers around it the Arab American community. Arab American plays perform the function of affirming the experiences, confirming the feelings of Arab American audience, thereby, helping them realize that they are not alone in these feelings. The emotional and social ties that are thus created help in building community, extending the connections not only to the characters/actors

[97] When Nibras was founded in 2001, each of the original founding artists had thought that they were the only theatre artist of Arab descent. One of their main missions, therefore, was to find and connect theatre artists of Arab background. After only a handful of years, a noticeable network of Arab American artists was formed. It is easy to see this in the work of the Comedy Festival, where a large number of artists write and perform in each other's theatre work, and support the stand-up comedy by volunteering in the events.

on stage, but also to members of the audience. The Arab American audiences who are drawn to these performances extend the community, by attending the fundraisers, and other community activities in support of the art work of Arab American artists, eventually becoming familiar faces to each other.[98]

Women's Voice

As women are perceived as silence[d] in the Arab world, there has been a particular appeal to 'revealing the mystery' and giving voice to that silenced group. This phenomenon is not exclusive to women of Arab descent. There are parallels with the popularity of other forms of cultural production by women of other cultures. A clear example is the rise in circulation of fiction by and about Asian women, as well as the increasing popularity of Iranian women's literature and memoirs, written or translated into English.

Another factor that contributed to the increase in the number of performances created by Arab American women is that some of the new playwrights are originally performers. While Arab American male actors were able to get roles in theatre and film (often playing the roles of terrorists), women actresses of Arab descent had fewer opportunities. Some of them, therefore, began writing plays in order to have roles to act. Others wrote their own stories as autobiographical performances. In addition, it is possible that the American host culture encouraged the voice of women writers, because it seemed less threatening than that of the men. In American mainstream media Arab men

[98] It is possible to track the Arab American artistic community and its following in non theatrical events such as fundraisers for Arab causes, music performances, cultural events, opening of galleries and art exhibitions, book readings and signings as well as social gatherings.

are perceived as violent and hostile, and are associated with terrorist activities. Following the same paradigm Arab women are presented as oppressed, silent/ silenced, and veiled. Similar to the orientalist approach, which attempts to save the brown woman from the brown man, there is a mechanism of "neo-orientalism" through which the American host culture welcomes the voice of Arab and Arab American women on stage, while allowing little or no space for the voice of Arab men.

The prominence of the voice of women in the Arab American theatre could also be attributed to the economic dynamics of the immigrant culture, where the men are expected to find traditional jobs to support their families, potentially freeing the women to play bigger cultural roles, to tell their own stories and the stories of their communities.

The Latest Developments:

Arab American women seized an opportune moment and took advantage of the demand for their work that was created following 9/11. Their work grew in importance and popularity in the first few years of the twenty-first century, with some of them managing to find a space for their work in more mainstream venues. The cultural activities of the last few months of 2008 suggest that these women have created a niche for their work. PBS aired a one-hour program about Arab American and Muslim comedy, *America at a Crossroads Stand Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age*, which premiered May 11, 2008, and featured Maysoon Zayid and two of the Arab American male comedians. Zayid also participated as a performer and delegate in the Democratic National Convention in Denver August 2008. Betty Shamieh had readings of three new plays, including a new commission from the Time Warner program in collaboration with Second Stage (*As Soon As Impossible*) June 2008, and a double bill event at the Segal

Theatre, October 2008 (*Again and Against*, and *Kingmaker*). Laura Shamas had a new play reading (*Chasing Money*) at the Public Theatre, November 2008. As part of the New York Theatre Workshop's Unusual Suspects program, Leila Buck worked on developing her play *In the Crossing*, about her experiences in Lebanon during the 2006 war, while Lameece Issaq and Jack Kader workshopped a full-length version of *Food and Fadwa* during the New York Theatre Workshop summer program in Vassar, which will have a reading at the New York Theatre Workshop on 15 December 2008.

In addition to the plays, and readings by some of the known writers, new Arab American women voices appeared. Jennifer Jahjah presented *I Heart Hamas* at the New York Fringe Festival, and Nathalie Handel had readings of new plays she is developing: *Oklahoma Quartet* and *The Stone Cutters*.

Another interesting development is the establishment of the Middle East America Playwright Award (MEA). Three theatre organizations from across the nation: Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco, the Lark Play Development Center in New York, and Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago, created a national new plays initiative, and awarded the 2008 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award to Adriana Sevan. This prize provides a $10,000 commission for Sevan to write a new play, with intensive developmental support from the Lark, possible productions at Golden Thread and Silk Road, and travel funds to be available at all stages of the process. Additionally, due to the outstanding pool of applicants, MEA has also honored both Leila Buck and Sinan Unel with the 2008 Middle East America Special Jury Prize.

As we can see, the work of this emerging theatre movement grew exponentially within a few years and created a space for itself, through the successful presentation of

powerful plays in extended off-Broadway runs and through the continually growing Comedy Festival. Arab American theatre, with women dramatists at its front, is gradually becoming an important part of the American theatre scene, with dedicated festivals and performances in mainline theatres like the Public Theatre and New York Theatre Workshop, as well as regional theatres and university theatres and academic centers. The upcoming Kennedy Center Festival *Arabesque: Arts of the Arab World* (23 February- 15 March, 2009) provides further evidence of a growing national interest, grouping works of Arab American artists with works from the Arab world. The theatre section will present Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* in concert form (*The Sounds of Desire*), and Elmaz Abi Nader's *Country of Origin*.[99] In addition, the preparations for the 6th Annual Arab American Comedy Festival are under way, accepting submissions for the upcoming festival (1- 6 May, 2009). The continuity of the Comedy Festival encourages established writers to create new works, at the same time that it provides a space for new voices to emerge and maintain the growth of the Arab American theatre movement. As this movement continues to expand and gain more ground it will play a larger role in the future of American theatre, and its growth will add another unique color to the rainbow of contemporary American theatre through the distinctive voice of Arab American women dramatists.

[99] I am directing this production of Elmaz Abi Nader's *Country of Origin* for the Kennedy Center Festival.

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