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THE PLAYS OF WALID IKHLASI: A STUDY IN THEME AND STRUCTURE

City University of New York

Ph.D. 1983

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THE PLAYS OF WALID IKHLASI:
A STUDY IN THEME AND STRUCTURE
by
ADMER G. GOURYH

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University
of New York.

1983

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1983

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THE PLAYS OF WALID IKHLASI:
A STUDY IN THEME AND STRUCTURE

by

Admer G. Gouryh

Advisor: Professor Daniel G. Gerould

This study examines the drama of the Syrian playwright Walid Ikhlasī, analyzing each play to show how its structural elements are organically bound up with its theme. Discussion of both Western and Arab dramatic modes show how Ikhlasī both experiments with Western dramatic forms and draws on elements peculiarly Syrian or Arab. Ikhlasī's attempt to synthesize European and Middle Eastern dramatic forms and techniques is considered in relation to the socio-political and cultural changes in the Arab World.

The introduction traces the historical development of modern Syrian drama, and defines Ikhlasī's position amongst twentieth-century Syrian playwrights. A brief account of Ikhlasī's short stories and novels is also included.

The body of this study is divided into five chapters by theme. Chapter I focuses on the plays that deal with the national question, i.e., national unity and national independence; the protagonists in these plays symbolize the collective or the nation. Chapter II studies such political problems as the decay of feudalism, the degradation of a

bourgeois class, opportunism and bureaucracy, political repression and the defeat of democracy in Syria. The individual, seen as the product of both a social class and a political system, appears either as an opportunist or as a powerless and frustrated intellectual advocating responsible freedom and human justice. Chapter III examines plays on the social predicament, revealing the tragic effects of antiquated thought and traditions on the lives of young men and women. The conflict is mainly between the older and the younger generation. The plays of Chapter IV have philosophical undertones, focusing on issues that go beyond the social and political characteristics of any specific society. Man in these plays is confronted with fate, freedom, life and death. Chapter V considers plays that touch upon the predicament of artists and art in a society plagued with commercialism and censorship.

The conclusion summarizes and synthesizes the main points established in the earlier chapters and offers an overall evaluation of Ikhlasī's career as a playwright. There is also a comprehensive bibliography on modern Syrian drama and a bibliography of Ikhlasī's plays, short stories, novels and articles. An appendix includes original English translations of Al-Muta 21 (Pleasure 21, 1965), Sahra Dimogratia (A Democratic Evening Party, 1971) and Maqam Ibrahim wa Saffia (The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia, 1980).

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INTRODUCTION

Without doubt, Walid Ikhlasī is the most prolific and versatile writer in Syria. His writings include short stories, novels and plays. He began his career as a short story writer in the late fifties. The appearance in 1963 of his very first collection of short stories, Stories (Qussas) won him a reputation as a top writer in Syria and the Arab world. Since that time Ikhlasī has published eight collections of short stories. Lewis Young, the British Orientalist, describes Ikhlasī's short stories as being "characterized by considerable diversity in their technical approach, ranging from surrealistic impressionism to straightforward realistic narratives, and they even include animal fables."¹

Ikhlasī's interest in literary experimentation and his firm belief that "the idea forces its form on the writer"² led him to try his hand at different genres. In 1965, he published a novel called A Winter of the Dry Sea (Shitta

¹Lewis Young, "The Short Stories of Walid Ikhlasī," pp. 1-2, (unpublished essay given to me by Ikhlasī). An Arabic translation of this essay appeared in Al-Mawqif al-Adabi No. 108 (March-April, 1980).

²Mamduh Iskaf, "Hiwar Adaba Ma'a al-Masrahi wal-Rewai wal-Qass Walid Ikhlasī" ("A Dialogue With Walid Ikhlasī, Playwright, Novelist and Short Story Writer"), Mulhaq al-Uruba al-Ushui No. 7 (February, 1980), p. 9. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

al-Bahir al-Yabis), which aroused much controversy among critics and novelists. Several critics contended that Ikhlasī's novel had broken new ground in Arabic fiction, others that he had written his novel in the vein of the Nouveau Roman. Since 1965, he has published four novels.

The revival of Syrian theatre in the 60s motivated poets, novelists and short story writers to write plays. Ikhlasī's early infatuation with theatre and his constant search for new forms prompted him to try his hand at drama. In 1965, when Syrian playwrights were still writing realistic plays, Ikhlasī was experimenting with the avant-garde in The Ten Drums of Execution (Tubul al-Idam al-Ashra) and Pleasure 21 (Al-Muta 21). In these two plays, Ikhlasī breaks with the conventions of realistic drama and pursues surrealism and the theatre of the absurd. Since that time, he has published over 20 full-length and one-act plays: tragedies, tragi-comedies, and social and avant-garde dramas.

Walid Ikhlasī was born in 1935 in the Syrian province of Alexandretta. Soon after the cession of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939, his family moved to Aleppo. Ikhlasī's father was an educated Muslim imbued with progressive religious ideas and literary inclinations. During the French mandate, he supported the Syrian nationalist movement in its struggle for national independence against the French colonizer. When his literary magazine turned into a spearhead for criticizing the French authorities, the latter did not hesitate to ban it.

Thus Ikhlasī was born and raised in a family saturated with religious, national, and literary aspirations during a period of great social, political, and national turmoil. As Young points out, "The violent political events of his childhood (the Syrian general strike and the disturbances of 1936, the cession of Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939, the defeat of the Vichy French forces in Syria by British and free French forces in 1941) filled his early years with anxiety and have given a somewhat sombre cast to his later literary inspiration."³ Obviously, the political oppression exercised by French authorities upon Syrians moved Ikhlasī, but the question of oppressed and oppressor, of colonized and colonizer seems to have deeper roots in Ikhlasī's childhood in the form of father-son conflict. In an interview with a Syrian weekly, Ikhlasī states, "The question that struck me most was why was my father always right? Why does the strongest always control everything? The question of right arising from power shocked me. That is why I began to have a negative and aggressive attitude toward all kinds of oppression."⁴

Ikhlasī's consciousness of human freedom developed rapidly as he grew into a young man. Strong feeling for individual freedom haunted him and prevented him from accepting the strict discipline of the political movements he

³Young, "The Short Stories of Walid Ikhlasī," p. 2.

⁴Iskaf, "A Dialogue With Walid Ikhlasī," p. 1.

tried to participate in. Of his first meeting with a religious organization he said, "I was not permitted to talk. I decided not to go to the next meeting."⁵ About his second experience he states, "When I was a young man I decided to join a leftist movement, but when I realized that freedom of discussion was prohibited, I stopped thinking of joining any political party. I was afraid of losing my intellectual freedom."⁶ The issue of freedom--national and individual--preoccupied Ikhlasī during his childhood and young manhood.

As Ikhlasī grew into a writer, his infatuation with freedom and democracy took different forms and dominated his work. "I am rooted in the idea of freedom and democracy," he says in an interview with a Syrian magazine. "My life and most of my writings center around these issues."⁷ Ikhlasī even interprets his incessant search for new literary forms and techniques as an honest pursuit of freedom: "You always find me experimenting with literary forms so as to avoid falling into the trap of preconceived determinism."⁸ Because of Ikhlasī's focus on individual freedom and his overt support of democracy, however, Syrian leftist critics branded him the writer of the decaying bourgeois class.

⁵Ibid., p. 2.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

Before beginning a study of Ikhlasī as a playwright and his position among contemporary Syrian dramatists, perhaps a brief analysis of the aesthetic and thematic characteristics of his short stories and novels might give, on the one hand, an insight into his artistic and human world, and on the other, a deeper understanding of the diversity of his dramatic technique, a versatility evident in his short stories and novels.

Ikhlasī wrote his first short story, The Cock (Al-Dik), in 1954. But it was his first collection of short stories that earned him respect and admiration and put him in the forefront of Arab writers. Since that time, he has published seven more collections: Blood in the Dusty Morning (Dima fi al-Subh al-Aghbar, 1968); The Time of Short Migrations (Zaman al-Hijrat al-Qasirah, 1970); The Mud (Al-Tin, 1971); Astonishment in the Cruel Eyes (Al-Dahsha fi al-Uyun al-Qasiah, 1972); The Report (Al-Taqrir, 1974); Death of a Snail (Maut al-Halazun, 1978); and The Black Grass (Al-Ashab al-alsawda, 1980). Some have been translated into English, French, Russian and Persian.

These stories abound with structural and stylistic devices whose elements and motifs are drawn from such diverse literary modes as realism, symbolism, surrealism and allegory. Ikhlasī moves freely among these trends without adopting any one of them; however, his constant shift from one form of literary expression to another, sometimes within a single story, is so abrupt that, in the words of one critic, "one

can't trace a development in his work from, e.g., an earlier realism to a later symbolism, as one can in the case of the short stories of Najib Mahfuz."⁹ As Ikhlasī's short stories do not reflect a gradual development from one literary mode to another, the proper approach to them, as Young argues, is to discuss them "from the point of view of their recurring themes and his predominating modernist character as a writer."¹⁰

Young sees Ikhlasī as a modernist in the literary sense, that is as "an individualist who starts from a basic refusal to accept existing values, and whose vision of a confused human existence is reflected in his approach to fiction,... his use of devices such as interior monologue, abolition of serial time, stream of consciousness and so on."¹¹

The loss of meaning and the state of incarceration are among the recurring themes in Ikhlasī's short stories. His characters are often trapped in shocking and inexplicable situations. In "The Nightmare," for example, in a manner recalling Kafka's Metamorphosis the hero wakes up one morning to find himself tied up with thin strings and his hair nailed to the pillow. When he tries to call the police he discovers the telephone is out of order. He turns the tap on to drink, but no water runs. He shouts for help and men look up at him, but no one moves to find out what he wants. The story, "Crime

⁹Young, "The Short Stories of Walid Ikhlasī," p. 2.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

and Punishment," is a variation on this theme: a man is arrested by the police and asked to confess to a murder. Being innocent, the man refuses and gets shot. Here again Ikhlasī stresses the horror of inexplicable incarceration intensified by futile attempts at human communication. Another theme that runs through Ikhlasī's stories is that of personal identity and self-knowledge which some critics consider a reflection of the contemporary Arab's schizophrenic state. Ikhlasī also focuses on the corrupt and destructive nature of power in a number of his parable-like stories. Young argues that "among the most memorable of Ikhlasī's stories are his allegories. The finest of these is "The City of S.," an allegory, or perhaps more accurately a parable, on the theme of 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'¹²

The loss of Palestine and the agony of the Palestinian people are significant issues in Ikhlasī's short stories, novels, and plays. He devoted a whole collection--The Time of Short Migration--to the question of Palestine. In these pieces, he depicts the pain and frustration that Palestinians have experienced in exile and under occupation, as well as the sense of hope and pride that developed with the emergence of Palestinian resistance.

Khaldun al-Shama describes the style of Ikhlasī's early stories as "lively, spontaneous, witty, flowing so smoothly

¹²Ibid., p. 7.

and lyrically that his stories have a touch of poetry."¹³ In his later work, "one notices that he has invented a kind of story that tries to seize the glow of fleeting moments, very reminiscent of Norman Mailer's stories."¹⁴ Young also comments that "a blending of striking phraseology and allusions to nature, together with a sustained use of symbolism, produce what are in effect prose poems."¹⁵ Undoubtedly, the abundance of images, symbols, allusions to nature and fleeting impressions arises from his approach to fiction: like the impressionist painters, he does not analyze reality as a subject, but presents it in a series of sensations, modulated by consciousness. Thus reality is revealed by sense impressions, as a cluster of images the reader must knit together and give the required finishing touch to.

As we move to Ikhlasī's novels, the controversy over fictional forms and techniques becomes central and multi-dimensional. In 1964, when Ikhlasī published his first and most widely-discussed novel, A Winter of the Dry Sea, critics split into two camps: liberals and conservatives. The liberals praised Ikhlasī for veering from the traditional form of fiction toward the Nouveau Roman. The conservatives viewed

¹³Khaldun al-Sham'a, (Al-Shamis wal-Anga') The Sun and the Griffon (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1974), p. 146.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Young, "The Short Stories of Walid Ikhlasī," p. 7.

the novel as a total failure because it did not have the constituent elements of traditional fiction: it had a loosely woven pattern; it lacked a definitive action to which everything contributes; it had no end toward which everything moves; its characters were not apparently integrated with the plot. The liberals, for their part, judged the novel by its intrinsic laws and accordingly justified its departure from tradition. The conservatives chose to overlook the fact that every work of art has its own organic form and must be judged by the laws that govern that particular work.

A Winter of the Dry Sea has five loosely-woven parts. In the first, the loss of little Suzan in a car accident leaves an acute emotional void in Aziz's life. This motivates him to make a statuette of the child and display it in toy shops. He then meets Laila, a woman whose husband has deserted her and become involved with another woman. Aziz and Laila fall in love, but suddenly and for a trivial reason they part. In the second part, Lutishia, a sad, lonely girl, falls in love with Ahmad, a music student. As a war breaks out, Ahmad is murdered and Lutishia, who is expecting her first child, laments his sudden death. The third part presents Mariam, the grandmother who is plagued with a barren daughter-in-law. Mariam tries every possible way to help her daughter-in-law have a child, but in vain. As she passes a toy shop window she is taken by the statuette of Suzan. She goes in and buys it, but the shopkeeper tells her that the statuette is not for sale. In the fourth part, we meet Saud, a woman who falls in

love with a writer only to discover that he is using his relationship with her as raw material for a story. She gradually loses confidence in men because they are after her body. She too stands in front of a toy shop and wishes to have Suzan's statuette in her arms. In the fifth part, Aziz meets Salah, a writer of children's literature, who encourages Aziz to make mobile toys. A little girl goes into a toy shop to buy a doll's dress, but she doesn't have enough money.

This brief account of the main events and characters in the five parts of the novel suggests the haziness of plot, characters and action. Characters exist, but not through a solid and intricate plot. Several incidents occur, but simultaneously; none arises from an inner development or evolves out of a spiritual change in character. As the novelist and critic Abd al-Salam al-Aujaili points out, the novel's incidents dissolve and fade out behind a variety of images and metaphors. As the parts pile on top of one another, each one cancels out the other. The events metamorphose into a hazy atmosphere through which characters are seen as phantoms and incidents as dreams--an essential characteristic of the Nouveau Roman.¹⁶ This very atmospheric character and the fragmentation of character and events rendered the novel incomprehensible to the old guard. Besides, a sequential reading of the novel is impossible

¹⁶ Abd al-Salam al-Aujaili, Muqdimat li Shitta al-Bahir al-Yabis (Forward to A Winter of the Dry Sea) by Walid Ikhlas, (Beirut: Dar Auwa'idat, 1965), p. 11.

because of the simultaneity and arbitrary order of incidents. Unable to understand the meanings of incidents by following their occurrence temporally, the reader must approach the novel spatially; "by continually fitting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind, by reflective reference, he can link them to their complements."¹⁷ Thus, in the light of Joseph Frank's spatial approach, can be discerned the structure of Ikhlas's novel and its underlying pattern of relationships.

It is the frequently recurring motif of Suzan's statuette which knits the various parts together, the statuette which symbolizes the unfulfilled wishes of frustrated and unhappy people, a toy substitute for real loss. Throughout the story, all the major characters wish to possess Suzan's statuette. Another thread which runs through the novel is the rhythmic movement of the characters from positive to negative attitudes. Aziz has a positive attitude toward Laila which gradually develops into a negative one; Lutishia's love for Ahmad turns into pain and frustration after his death; Suad's positive attitude toward the writer turns sour later. Alternating currents of hope and despair pervade the story. There is also "similarity between the parts in terms of structural elements that are marked with graceful images, beautiful yet strange similes, fleeting and fascinating

¹⁷ Joseph Frank, The Widening Gyre: Crisis in Modern Literature (New Jersey: A Midland Book, 1968), p. 18.

allusions and absurd fantasies."¹⁸ However, the excessive number of similar structural elements, motifs, and rhythms in each part has loosened the unity of the novel and made it a bit repetitive.

Ikhlasī's second novel, The Lap of the Beautiful Lady (Ahdan al-Saida al-Jamila), was published in 1969. It was not written in the vein of Nouveau Roman. Unlike A Winter of the Dry Sea, this novel adheres to traditional laws and rules of fiction. In The Lap of the Beautiful Lady characters are part of the machinery of the plot; the nature and qualities of characters determine the action and the action in turn changes the characters, and thus everything moves forward to an end.

The Lap of the Beautiful Lady evolves around Ismail, an intellectual who teaches philosophy at a high school for girls. His daily contacts with his female students arouse his sexual desire, which preoccupies him to such a degree that he gives up his graduate study. The novel also focuses on Ismail's past, when he was an active member of a political movement which was mobilizing the masses against the French mandate. Their plan fell through and all were arrested. None of those who were interrogated and tortured gave out any secrets except Ismail. Since that time, Ismail has developed a feeling of guilt, a feeling which continually grows stronger. After he marries the wealthy, shallow Thakia, he quits his job and devotes his life to writing--living on her

¹⁸ Al-Aujaili, Foreward to A Winter of the Dry Sea, p. 12.

money. Ismail finishes writing a book in which he expounds his philosophy of man, time, history and the coming revolution. This book, he believes, will bring about radical changes in human society; Thakia argues that books are trivial things and can't change anything. Ismail deliberately leaves the manuscript of his book in a restaurant, imagining that it will be read by thousands of men and then returned to him. The book is in fact returned to him, but by Fikrat who, Ismail later learns, has had an affair with his wife. Ismail commits suicide.

The novel presents the effect of past events upon Ismail's present life. His writing of a book designed to change and improve man's future is nothing more than an attempt to atone for his betrayal of the movement and his failure to change his society in the past. His misery is intensified by his inability to convince his wife of the validity of his project, his failure to change the world through his writing, and his discovery that Fikrat was not attached to his book but to his wife. Furthermore, he is consumed by the feeling that the present is a gradual continuation of the past. His past presses so heavily upon him; his present robs him of any prospects of doing something--he commits suicide.

Certain symbols run through the novel. There is a citadel which Ismail refers to with pride, for it reminds him of the activities of his resistance movement. Whenever he sits with Thakia he remembers the citadel, whose qualities of solidity and steadfastness his wife clearly lacks. The

citadel, as one Syrian critic notes, "also symbolizes the past glories of Syrians."¹⁹ The book is another motif that assumes symbolic meaning. In that book, Ismail has included all the intellectual values that man needs, but the book does not draw the attention of anyone. The lack of reaction to the book signifies the loss of intellectual values and the obsession of man with material things. Even Thakia assumes some symbolic dimensions. Throughout the novel she stresses only physical and material needs; she is devoid of spiritual and intellectual potential.

Thus, The Lap of the Beautiful Lady depicts the state of Syrian intellectuals, their alienation and their failure to carry out their dreams in a world governed by material values and oppressive forces. Nevertheless, Ikhlasī does not consider the outside world as totally responsible for man's alienation. He also holds man responsible for making choices that deepen his alienation. Ikhlasī has shown Ismail in two situations: in the first, he found himself forced to betray his movement; in the second, he married Thakia. His marriage to Thakia was an act of choice, unlike the betrayal of his comrades. So the novel is an indictment of the objective and subjective forces that alienate man.

In 1975 Ikhlasī published his third novel, The Sorrows of Ashes (Ahzan al-Ramad). This novel aroused as much debate as

¹⁹Samar Ruhi al-Faisal, Malamih fi al-Rewaia al-Suriyah (Features of the Syrian Novel) (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1978), p. 39.

his first, and for the same reasons. Much of the controversy was about whether the novel has an organic and cohesive form. Evidently the failure of some critics to see the novel as an artistic whole arises from their notion that in fiction only the laws of cause and effect and of probability can hold elements together. They search for a temporally and sequentially ordered form, ignoring the variety of images, metaphors, sense impressions and other motifs that knit the parts together and create an atmospheric whole.

The Sorrows of Ashes consists of four parts. Each part is given a title: "Preface," "He," "She," and "They." The chaotic world of the novel is foreshadowed in the disordered and fragmented form of the preface. The preface has a telegraphic character: disconnected statements, descriptive paragraphs, nonsensical phrases and surrealistic passages are all jumbled together. Though some statements have meaning, that meaning does not evolve from a preceding statement nor does it contribute to statements that follow. These phrases or telegraphic pieces create impressions. They take on the form of images, and the images, metaphors and impressions pile up, to create a suggestive atmosphere which is grim and grotesque. The pervading images that run through the preface are of destructive wars, hunger, revolution, exploitation, ideological conflicts, anxiety, corruption and meaninglessness. Thus, the preface establishes the atmospheric background for what is to follow.

In the part entitled, "He," the world is seen through the eyes of a man called Ahmad. He came from a village but has settled down in the city. He is a college graduate. He hates his job. He still retains the honesty, innocence, and shyness of the villager. Nevertheless, the city has twisted him inside out, and he hates the village. He sums up his attitude toward the village and the city as follows: "I hate the country and the myth of purity ... I have become adjusted to city life. I have learned to hate ... I have gone to bed with hookers and learned masturbation."²⁰ His sense of aimlessness is evident: "I work to earn a living, but I have no objective in life."²¹ His restlessness and aimlessness are not inherent qualities of his character but the work of the surrounding world. His passivity reflects the oppressive nature of his society. He argues: "We have no power to protest because we are caught in a hateful, delicate situation. Who can yell at physicians and God? Who can say, 'No'?"²² Thus, the repressive forces of society exercise pressure upon Ahmad. Numerous barriers stand between him and his dreams. His sense of alienation grows so acute that even language fails as a means of communication. He says, "I know that people speak Arabic as I do, but it has become so difficult for me to

²⁰Walid Ikhlasī, Ahzan al-Ramad (The Sorrows of Ashes) (Beirut: Dar Abjad, 1980), p. 37.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 49.

understand some of the common words."²³ Ahmad's aimless and restless life changes slightly when he falls in love with Zainab, but in a world plagued with war, corruption, exploitation and repression, love does not last long.

In the section called "She" the reader comes to know the world through Zainab's eyes. Zainab is a college graduate. She falls deeply in love with a handsome army officer and marries him, but a few months later she finds out that he has betrayed her with another woman. She breaks up with him, lives a lonely life, and eventually comes to hate men because she believes that they are after her body. She turns to her girl friend Kalthum for physical pleasure. Working as a clerk for a commercial company, she gives up the painting which used to be her favorite creative activity. When she falls in love with Ahmad, she begins to paint again. Love leads her to the world of art, but her sexual liaison with Kalthum disturbs the tranquility of her life and undermines her relationship with Ahmad.

The final part, entitled "They," deals with the threat of Kalthum to the newly-born love between Zainab and Ahmad. Kalthum, a rash and possessive girl, is suspicious about Ahmad's frequent visits to Zainab. One day when Kalthum comes to visit Zainab, she finds her in bed with Ahmad. Swept by

²³Ibid., pp. 38-39.

jealousy, she tears to pieces the painting that Zainab was working on. Then she rushes to the kitchen, grabs a knife, and stabs Zainab. The latter, wounded, reaches for a bottle of gas and pours it on Kalthum. The three are engulfed in flames, then rushed to a hospital.

It is evident that the three parts entitled "He," "She," and "They" portray the private world of Ahmad, Zainab and Kalthum, but the anxieties of the individual sphere mirror the grotesqueness and destructiveness of the public world manifested in the preface. The tragic end of the three characters is a condemnation of their corrupt society; though Ahmad and Zainab are serious and honest in trying to establish an ideal human relationship, their failure is understood to be inevitable given the evil forces in their world.

The influence of Nouveau Roman on The Sorrows of Ashes is clearly manifested in the emphasis laid on atmosphere, images, metaphors and in the use of the third person pronoun. In the Nouveau Roman the distinctive characteristics of the fictive characters are concealed and their roles minimized. Characters are less deeply probed and the description of their acts and their outside nature is minimal. "The Nouveau Roman introduces man in the novel as a figure or a letter. Preservation of the fictive character demands that it be transformed into a pronoun because the pronoun will bring out the common denominator existing among a lot of people."²⁴

²⁴Al-Faisal, Features of the Syrian Novel, p. 53.

Certainly, The Sorrows of Ashes has broken new ground in the Syrian novel.

The Domestic Colocynth (Al-Handle al-Alif 1980) is Ikhlasī's fourth and last novel. As in his earlier novels, he depicts a world full of human frustration, repression and alienation. His characters are mainly drawn from socially oppressed classes (peasants and workers), but some are intellectuals. All of them are caught in an intricate and inescapable web. They live in a state of incarceration.

The setting of The Domestic Colocynth is Aleppo, the oldest and largest city in Syria. The events take place in two distinct areas: the palace, where the Prince and ruling family live, and an underground world inhabited by peasants, workers and intellectuals confined to caves, tunnels and basements.

In this novel, Ikhlasī introduces Adam, a typical storyteller, to a number of alienated intellectuals who frequently get together in a basement to chat, smoke and drink. Every night when they meet, Adam begins to tell the story of the Sculptor who left the city for a jungle where he enjoys a calm, stable and innocent life. Suddenly the Prince orders the Sculptor to return to the city to make a statue for him. As the Sculptor walks around the city and speaks with people, he discovers the sufferings of the people and the corruption of the ruling class. One day as the Prince pauses to watch the Sculptor at work, the latter feels that, rigid as it is, the stone he chisels is much smoother and more flexible

than the Prince's face. Carried away by sweeping hatred, the Sculptor kills the Prince and runs away, along with a Woman, through a dark underground tunnel. They face several difficulties, but finally succeed in finding an exit. Near it they find a crowd of poor people gathered around an Old Man, preparing a revolt against the monarchy. The Sculptor decides to return to the jungle, but because his beloved joins the rebel crowd, he changes his mind and joins it too.

The novel is realistic on the surface but has symbolic undertones. The setting in particular is quite suggestive. The basement or the underground world symbolizes, on the one hand, human suffering and oppression and, on the other, the unity and ability to mobilize which result from the experience of living within the lower depths. The basement is dark like a womb that bears the seeds of hope and birth. As for the palace, though high and brightly lit, it reflects human shallowness and emptiness. Always guarded by masked and armed men, everything in the palace operates according to a rigid system and in harmony with external mechanical laws. Furthermore, the Prince's palace which towers over the city, suggests the domination of a cruel minority over the deprived majority.

The other iterative symbol is the citadel which signifies history and national pride. Whenever the rebelling masses feel threatened, they take refuge in the citadel. The jungle functions throughout the novel as a symbol of purity and innocence, but it also indicates human isolation and lack of

commitment. The Sculptor's longing for the jungle reflects his hatred for the corrupt city and his passivity toward the human world, but he finally realizes that he cannot achieve his humanity except in a human world.

Ikhlasī's quest for new techniques is evident in The Domestic Colocynth. For the first time in Syrian fiction, a writer fuses fictional motifs of Syrian origin with elements drawn from western culture. Through the Storyteller (a typical Syrian device), Ikhlasī is able to distance the fictional incidents in order to make them resemble an ancient tale, and through the comments and reactions of those who sit around the Storyteller, he establishes a link between the past and the present. This link is also established through the character of the Teacher who is in love with Laila, the architect who strives to preserve the old city. The intellectuals' search in the cave serves as a counterpoint to the Sculptor's underground journey. And the Teacher's love for Laila is parallel to the Sculptor's love for the Woman who joined his pilgrimage.

The novel has a sad tone. It points out the loss of human ideals: the group of intellectuals which met in the basement disintegrates; the Poet gives up writing poetry and turns into a maker of crossword puzzles, the Painter closes down his studio and leaves for an unknown country in Europe; Laila abandons her dreams and hesitates to talk about her past interests; the Manager gets a job at a Syrian embassy in Europe. The characters' failure to carry out their objectives

indicates the destructive pressure exercised upon them. The loss of human ideals is an indirect condemnation of the evil forces that alienate man from himself and from his free choice.

Throughout the four novels discussed above, Ikhlasī deals consistently with the loss of self and the failure of human ideals. Man is always seen as a victim of inward and outward forces. Ikhlasī's characters are motivated by human ideals and try to live up to them, but they are not strong enough to stand up to the evils of their world. As a result, they either retreat, give up their objectives or end up exiled, jailed or murdered. But the phenomenon of loss or death does not arise from a nihilistic viewpoint. It springs from Ikhlasī's approach to literature in general and to its function in particular. In commenting on his frustrated heroes, Ikhlasī remarks, "My heroes, through their frustration and defeat, keep others from experiencing the same feelings and this is the essence of literary ethics."²⁵ He adds, "When a character in my stories dies, his death is meant to be life to others. His death must urge us to be more attached to life."²⁶ In other words, reading about defeated and frustrated men helps his readers liberate themselves from the sense of defeat and frustration.

²⁵ Iskaf, "A Dialogue With Walid Ikhlasī," p. 10.

²⁶ Nader Asfhanī, "Muqabla ma' Ikhlasī" ("An Interview With Ikhlasī"), The Cultural Supplement of al-Thawra No. 3 (March, 1978), p. 40.

Though Ikhlasī's short stories and novels are not the focus of this study, this brief analysis of their themes and techniques illustrates the diversity of his literary career and his incessant search for new formal and technical devices even before he took to playwriting. But one must particularly applaud Ikhlasī's dramatic experiments, for drama as a genre has no historical roots in Syrian culture. Though Arab drama originated in Syria around 1850, it did not live long enough to mature and take root. It did not survive Turkish oppression, and the few plays written then were amateurish adaptations of French drama. Soon after, Syrian theatrical troupes fled the country, most settling in Egypt.

Drama and theatre in Syria remained in a dormant state until the 50s, truly reviving only in the early 60s when the Ministry of Culture established official theatres in the country. Such troupes as the National Theatre, the Itinerant Theatre, and the Military Theatre are subsidized and supervised by the government. In these theatres, actors, directors, set designers and the managerial staff are regular employees receiving salaries from the government. The government also sponsors an annual month-long theatre festival in Damascus, during which theatrical troupes from various parts of the Arab world and Europe meet to present plays, give lectures, hold workshops and exchange thoughts about the latest developments in drama. Furthermore, in an attempt to encourage playwriting, the Ministry of Culture has established a financial award for the best plays as well as a publishing

center which puts out the work of Syrian writers. There are, of course, drawbacks to government support: the Ministry of Culture determines what will and will not be staged or published. Still, the spread of public and private theatres along with the moral and financial endorsement of the government did encourage Syrian poets, short story writers and novelists to try their hands at playwriting. Among those who excelled, in addition to Walid Ikhlasī, one can mention Mustafa al-Halaj, Mohammad al-Maghut, Ali Uqla Ursan, Murad al-Sibai, Sad-alla Wanus, Hassib Kaiali, Khalil Hindawi and a few others.

A brief survey of the work of each playwright, along with an account of his approach and technique, will shed light on current trends in Syrian drama, and help identify Ikhlasī's relationship to other Syrian dramatists and the key elements that distinguish his work from theirs.

It has been noted that the actual revival of Syrian drama and theatre occurred in the early 60s. But the existence of drama as a pure literary genre designed to be read rather than staged goes back to the 30s. In 1936, Khalil Hindawi wrote his first play, Harut and Marut (Harut wa Marut). He subsequently published more than twenty others. His early plays are based on stories drawn from Greek, Babylonian, Biblical and Arab myths; the central conflict as Farhan Bulbil, Syrian critic, points out, is between spirit and matter, heaven and earth, baseness and nobility, and art and

life.²⁷ Man is incessantly searching, challenging and questioning his own existence and that of God. Man's life acquires its ideal form by transcending what is familiar and known. Love figures as a creative force. The struggle between man and God gives birth to man's creativity. Hindawi has his heroes come into conflict with the objective world-order; their subjectivity acknowledges no power above itself.

But Hindawi wrote closet drama. He never conceived of his plays as stage productions; rather, he saw the dramatic form as an opportunity for Platonic battles of ideas, thus reducing the plays to a series of abstract, actionless dialogues between two characters in which narration substitutes for action or dramatic events. Instead of seeing an event unfolding before one's eyes, one hears it described by a character. Though Hindawi wrote a large number of plays, his work did not influence his generation, and none of his plays was ever staged.

Any serious study of Syrian drama must not overlook the contributions of Murad al-Sibai, who has been actively involved in the theatre for at least 40 years. From 1935 to 1975, he published 10 plays, both short and full-length, including comedies, social dramas and philosophical plays. In a play called An Ottoman Officer (Dabit Uthmani, 1935), al-Sibai dramatizes the traditional concept of marriage. Like

²⁷Farhan Bulbil, "Al-Adab al-Masrahi fi Suriyah: Khalil Hindawi" ("The Dramatic Literature in Syria: Khalil Hindawi"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 3 (Spring, 1978), p. 10.

Ibsen, he advocates the emancipation of women and equality of the sexes. In A Devil at Home (Shaitan fi al-Bait, 1962), he focuses on the difference between the conservative mentality which advocates rigid traditions, and the modern mind. The play advocates a notion of responsible freedom. In his later plays The Artist and Nature (Al-Fanan wal-Tabi'a, 1974) and Dream and Reality (Al-Hulim wal Haqiga, 1974), he deals with such philosophical issues as the relation between art and nature and the conflict between self and conscience.

In his early period, he wrote social comedy: his "comedies are based on paradoxical attitudes and play on words. Some farcical elements are used to externalize the hidden depths of the characters and to emphasize certain ideas."²⁸ In short, al-Sibai's plays fall into the category of realistic drama. His mastery of highly intricate plots reminds one of the well-made play.

Among the writers who were attracted to the theatre in the early 60s was Hassib Kaiali. He started out as a short story writer, but during his stay in Paris he made the acquaintance of Jean Vilar. He used to attend Vilar's theatrical workshops and rehearsals. In 1960 he took to playwriting. He has published a number of plays of varying lengths. In two of his plays I Will Return to Fight You (Sa'aud li-Uqatilkum, 1968) and The Child (Al-Tifil, 1968),

²⁸Bulbil, "Al-Adab al-Masrahia fi Suriyah: Murad al-Sibai" ("The Dramatic Literature in Syria: Murad al-Sibai"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 4-5 (Spring, 1978), p. 10.

Kaiali dramatized the Syrian revolt against the French mandate. In The Service of People (Fi Khidmit al-Shab, 1972), he unmasks the rottenness of a government organization pervaded by bribery and human degradation. His frustration as an intellectual is the central theme of Those Who Knock at the Door (Qarou al-Bab, 1972). In Your Opinion (Raiak, 1973), he makes fun of hypocritical relations between men and women. Love in its ideal and romantic form is the topic of the The Carpenter's Daughter (Bint al-Najar, 1968) and The Shepherdess and the Sultan (Al-Raia wal-Sultan, 1973). Though these two plays have a mythical framework, Kaiali's plays generally fall into the category of realistic social drama. They are structured around a series of minor events instead of a single unifying action or major conflict. The reduction of the dramatic action to a cluster of minor incidents causes his plays to lapse into a series of long speeches. Farhan Bulbil is accurate when he remarks that "dialogue occupies a large space in Kaiali's plays. It often slows down the action and its development. Besides, there are many unessential and nonfunctional details that loosen the structure of his plays."²⁹ Several of Kaiali's plays have been staged in Syria.

Like Kaiali, Mustafa al-Alhalaj was first known as a short story writer. In the 60s he took to playwriting, since

²⁹Bulbi, "Al-Masrah al-Suri: Hassib Kaiali" ("Syrian Theatre: Hassib Kaiali"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 9 (Summer, 1979), p. 11.

publishing six full-length plays and several short ones, all focussed on the question of freedom and justice in the social and political sense. The influence of existentialism is evident in most of his plays. Killing and Regret (Al-Qatil wal-Nadam, 1957) shows the Tunisian revolt against the French mandate. The hero of this play, after killing several French soldiers, reaches a moment of regret and loses faith in the revolution, then reviews his past attitude and makes new choices. Thus, the hero develops along an existential line: through his consciousness of his past he makes the choice to transcend it and prove he is a free individual. In a play called Anger (Al-Ghadab, 1957), al-Halaj focuses on the Algerian revolution, presenting both the tortured and torturer. The French soldiers develop guilt feelings toward the Algerian fighters and are torn between their formal obligations and their human feelings. Thus, the torturers suffer not less than the tortured; both are trapped in a situation that forces them to make new choices. A Special Night Festival for Dresden (Ihtifal Laili Khas li-Dresden, 1970) unmasks the evils of Nazism which led the allies to destroy the beautiful city of Dresden. In The Dervishes Search for Truth (Al-Darawish Tabhath an al-Haqiqah, 1970) al-Halaj, like Sartre, insists that revolution is the work of the choices of individuals and not of social classes. The Dervish is a merchant who revolts against the tyranny of his class, fighting and dying for classless society. Most of

al-Halaj's plays have been staged in Syria and received good reviews.

The name of Ali Uqla Ursan has been associated with the modern revival of Syrian theatre since the 60s. The head of the National Theatre in Syria, Ursan is a critic, playwright and director. The Night's Visitors (Zwar al-Lail, 1965) was the first of seven published plays. As a whole his plays are realistic, dealing mainly with social and political issues pertinent to the Arab world. In The Night's Visitors, Ursan condemns a tradition-ruled world which leaves no room for love. Hind, the heroine, falls in love with Adhad. When her brother finds out that she is pregnant, he murders her and her lover feels guilty for her death. The play exalts love and condemns tradition. In Prisoner 95 (Al-Sajin 95, 1972), Ursan criticizes Arab rulers and systems for keeping the masses trapped in poverty (1975). He blames the loss of national unity on the constant fight between right and left. Concern over Palestine is the theme of The Palestinians (Al-Phalestiniat, 1971), The Strangers (Al-Ghuraba, 1974), and The Mask (Al-Qina, 1975). In The Old Man and the Road (Al-Shikh wal-Tariq, 1971), two characters set out to find out the roots of social disorder. Their relentless search leads them to two conclusions: the Old Man believes that wealth and poverty are the result of luck while Jasser argues that man's misery is the product of the existing system and has nothing to do with luck. As the play progresses, the conflict between exploiter and exploited grows, the exploited masses gradually

acquiring consciousness of their cause. The play is a call for action and change. In Caesar's Content (Rida Kaisar, 1975), the relationship between the state and the writer is examined. Plautus stages a play in honor of Caesar. Unfortunately, it does not appeal to Caesar. Then Plautus writes a play about the slaves of Rome which arouses Caesar's anger. He orders Plautus' arrest but Plautus' friends convince Caesar to free Plautus and hire him. Plautus agrees, and feeling more content and secure, is coopted. The play condemns both the state's domination over writers and the compliance of the latter with the state.

Most of Ursan's plays follow the tradition of realistic drama. Only in The Mask, Bulbil comments, does he "blend fact with fiction and use symbols and suggestive objects along with some absurdist elements. He also employs elongated masks and some gestures and movements from the symbolist theatre."³⁰

Apart from The Mask, "the structure of Ursan's plays is carefully designed and moves according to the growth of action which arises from the conflict between two rival sides."³¹

Ursan has staged most of his plays himself, and they have received good reviews.

Realism and linear structure dominate most of the plays examined so far. Violation of this tradition appeared early

³⁰ Bulbil, "Al-Adab al-Masrahi fi Suriyah: Ali Uqla Ursan" ("The Dramatic Literature in Syria: Ali Uqla Ursan"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 13 (Summer, 1980), p. 10.

³¹ Ibid., p. 11.

in The Hunchback Bird (Al-Asfur al-Ahdab, 1967), a play by Mohammad al-Maghut who is credited with the invention of prose poetry in modern Arabic literature. The play has marked surrealistic characteristics. It is a series of disconnected scenes given atmospheric unity through a cluster of images and symbols. Everything is shrouded in a hazy and cloudy ambiance, but the general mood created is one of frustration and agony. In The Hunchback Bird, it is hard to distinguish the dehumanized world of man from that of animals. The play begins in an unknown desert and ends up in a court where children are savagely slain after an absurd trial. The emphasis on cruelty indicates Artaud's influence on al-Maghut. The Hunchback Bird is the first Syrian play ever to be translated into English,* but it has not yet been staged, probably due to its surrealistic structure.

His second success was the tragi-comic The Clown (Al-Muharij, 1973). It has an historical framework, but the structure is that of a play within a play, and the characters include the Clown, the Narrator and the Chorus. The Chorus entertains its audience with short plays drawn from the glories of ancient Arab history. In one, an Arab hero talks about the great conquests of the ancient Arabs. As he talks, the on-stage audience either laughs at him or turns a deaf ear. As they continue to make fun of him, his national pride

*The English Translation appeared in Modern Arabic Drama, ed. by Mahmoud Manzaloui (Cairo: American Research Center, 1977).

and his confidence in his Arab descendants fade away, creating a tragi-comic situation. "The play" says Anwar Salum, a Syrian critic, "presents an historical vision whose dramatic nature aims at destroying the conventional idea of a homeland, of a holy war and of knightly heroism."³² The Clown was staged first in Beirut in 1973 and had what is probably the longest run in Syrian theatre.

The late 60s saw attempts to break with Western dramatic modes. An urgent search for a drama with national roots and national identity prompted many playwrights to dig some dramatic elements out of Syria's antique heritage. As a result, such elements as the shadow play and the narrator found their way into modern Syrian drama. Sad-Alla Wanus and Walid Ikhlası were the first to search for and employ local motifs in their plays.

Today, Sad-Alla Wanus is regarded throughout the Arab world as Syria's most outstanding and innovative playwright. He is credited with the invention of what is called "political theatre." His dramatic theory has Marxist undertones and stresses the social and political origin of theatre. Wanus argues that "theatre was originally political and still is. Even when it overtly ignores politics or avoids dealing with political issues, it still serves a political objective, that is, keeping the masses from being concerned about their

³² Anwar Salim Salum, "Mohammad al-Maghout: Drama al-Hulim wal-Huria" ("Mohammad al-Maghout: The Drama of Dream and Freedom"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 4-5 (Spring and Summer, 1978), p. 57.

problems and keeping them from changing their condition."³³ Thus Wanus' main objective is to create a theatre "that changes, develops and deepens a collective consciousness of the historical process,"³⁴ thus urging the masses to be conscious of their conditions and aware of their power to change them.

The didactic, provocative and revolutionary role of Wanus' theatre is reminiscent of the Living Theatre and the Environmental Theatre. Like Richard Schechner, Wanus believes that "the origin of theatre lies in the actor and spectator united in a kind of ritualistic or social gathering."³⁵ The barrier between the auditorium and the stage should be removed and the theatrical event must occur either before or within the spectators' space of movement. But Wanus believes that a genuine interaction between actors and audience can't be carried out unless "the audience, its social class, its cultural conditions, its problems and sufferings are defined."³⁶ When the theatre addresses itself to the problems of a particular class, the union of actors and audience can be accomplished. To intensify a sense of collectivity and solidarity between actor and audience, Wanus adopts some of the techniques used in Epic theatre and Environmental theatre.

³³Sad-Alla Wanus, "Bayanat li-Masrah Arabi Jadid" ("Manifestoes for a New Arab Theatre"), Al-Marifa No. 104 (October, 1970), p. 27.

³⁴Ibid., p. 13.

³⁵Ibid., p. 8.

³⁶Ibid., p. 9.

He sees the performance as a shocking event effected by the use of alienation technique, intimacy, improvisation and partial communication between actors and audience.³⁷

Despite the breadth and modernity of his theories, however, Wanus has applied but few of his theatrical ideas to his own work. Though Wanus' early plays stress the social and political, the traditional technique of realistic drama is dominant with closely woven plots, solid action and highly developed characters. Only in his later plays, especially in A Gay Party for June 5th (Haflat Sumar min Ajil Khamsa Huzairan, 1968), does Wanus use some of the theatrical devices he developed and illustrated in his theory of "political theatre." In this play, ignoring linear mode and traditional use of plot, Wanus presents events, experiences and ideas about the 1967 war. The action occurs both on the stage and among the audience where, in an attempt to bridge the gap between audience and characters, Wanus seats some of his actors. Whenever a discussion gets heated on the stage, it draws a reaction from the actors in the auditorium, and as actors in the auditorium exchange remarks with those on stage, the audience loosens up and starts to utter words of approval or disapproval about what is happening on the stage. The barrier between the stage and the auditorium is further removed by the free movement of actors between them. Thus, Wanus was able to

³⁷Ibid., p. 22.

make the audience relax its conventional formality and to encourage their participation in the performance.

In The Adventures of Jaber's Head (Ra's al-Namluk Jaber, 1970), Wanus draws heavily on the storyteller in narrating and presenting some of the dramatic events. The storyteller is very popular in Syria. He is usually an old man who frequents Syrian cafes to tell stories as a means of earning a living. In an attempt to create a familiar social and physical atmosphere, Wanus sets the events of his plays in a cafe--a place frequented only by Syrian men. The storyteller narrates part of his story, then enacts the rest along with other actors. This performance before the cafe's customers turns the play into theatre-within-theatre, while those in the auditorium become an extension of the cafe's audience. Their reaction to the play must resemble that of the customers in the cafe; they are watching the same incidents and have a similar understanding about the storyteller's role and about what goes on in cafes.

Wanus' plays revolve around social and political questions. The conflict is between the ruler and the ruled, between the exploiter and the exploited. The events of his plays always occur within a social context, and the hero assumes a social and collective character. His characters, especially those that are drawn from the working class, develop along a Marxist line; that is, they gain consciousness of their social class and become aware of the historical

process of which they are part and through which they can change their world.

Now that the works of most Syrian playwrights have been examined, it is appropriate to consider Ikhlasī's position as a dramatist among his colleagues and what distinguishes his work from that of other Syrian dramatists. The first thing striking about Ikhlasī is the volume of his dramatic output, much larger than any other playwright in Syria. Above all, his plays are characterized by unprecedented thematic and dramatic diversity. Other playwrights tend to conform to certain dramatic modes--classicism, romanticism, symbolism, epic drama, etc. The dramatic schema becomes a sort of mold into which playwrights cast their ideas. In Ikhlasī's case, even when the same theme emerges, the technique differs from one play to another, and sometimes more than two techniques are synthesized in a single play. Ikhlasī also differs from his Syrian colleagues in his incessant experimentation with Syrian and Islamic dramatic devices, such as the storyteller, the shadow play and Islamic rituals, elements woven into such episodic and linear plays as: The Straight Path (Al-Sirat, 1976), Oriental Joy (Farah Shargi, 1977) and The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia (Maqam Ibrahim wa Saffia, 1980). Furthermore, nobody can deny that only in Ikhlasī's work converge such variations as tragedy, tragi-comedy, satire, mystery play, allegory, theatre of the absurd, episodic drama and drama à la Ibsen.

This dissertation will study the dramatic structure of Ikhlasī's plays, focusing on how constituent elements such as plot, action and character are closely bound with the themes of his plays. It will analyze individual plays in the light of both Western and Middle Eastern dramatic traditions, pointing out how Ikhlasī draws on both and whether the influence of particular European plays is evident in plot construction and characterization.

As the wide range of dramatic techniques and the constant shift from one dramatic mode to another makes it difficult--indeed almost impossible--to deal with the plays and their dramatic development in a chronological order, they will be approached from the point of view of their recurring themes which seem to break down into five categories, each of which is discussed in a separate chapter.

The first chapter focuses on the plays that deal with the national question, that is, national unity, national independence, and the liberation of occupied national lands. The hero in these plays (as in many history plays) is the public or the nation.

Chapter II considers the dramatization of such political issues as the decay and demise of feudalism, the degradation of the bourgeois class, opportunism and bureaucracy, political repression and the defeat of democracy in Syria. The individual is seen as the product of a social class. He is

either an opportunist or a powerless and frustrated intellectual advocating responsible freedom, human justice and the creation of a better world.

The focus of Chapter III is the social predicament. The plays examine the tragic effect of antiquated thoughts and traditions on the lives of young men and women. The conflict is mainly between the older and the younger generations.

Chapter IV deals with Ikhlasī's philosophical plays, those which focus on issues that go beyond the social and political characteristics of any specific society. Man in these plays is not the victim of any specific social and political order, but is forced to confront such issues as fate, freedom, life and death, science and man's destiny.

Chapter V considers plays that touch upon the predicament of art and artists in a society plagued with commercialism and censorship. As well as summarizing and synthesizing the main points established in the preceding chapters, the conclusion also offers an overall evaluation of Ikhlasī's career as a dramatist.

CHAPTER 1

THE NATIONAL PREDICAMENT

To understand the nature and orientation of present-day Syrian literature and drama, one must take into account the national and political conditions that have pervaded the Fertile Crescent since 1916. Without any doubt, the most traumatic event in the history of modern Syria was the implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916. According to this treaty, the Fertile Crescent was divided into five separate states governed by Britain and France: Iraq, Palestine and Jordan were reserved for Britain, and Syria and Lebanon put under French mandate.

This division created the context for several serious problems, the most controversial of which was the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which promised the Jewish people a national home in Palestine. After 1917, the Jews, with the support of Britain and other Western countries, began to immigrate to Palestine. The Jewish flow into Palestine made the Palestinian people apprehensive and suspicious of the British mandate. Tension and fighting rose and fell in almost direct relation to the ebb and flow of Jewish emigration. The British-French plan not only divided the Fertile Crescent, it also aroused racial and religious antagonisms within each

political entity. For example, French policy in Lebanon emphasized the consolidation of different religious interest groups within the state and in the words of N.A. Ziadeh in Syria and Lebanon, "succeeded in creating a diversity of interests which drove people to enclaves."¹ Ziadeh argues that when France failed to achieve this same goal in Syria, she "created, for a short time, five 'states'. In both cases, there was an attempt to break down national unity."² In Iraq, around 1935, political and racial hostilities broke out between the Assyrian minority and the Iraqis. This developed into civil war when the Assyrians tried to set up an independent state in the North of Iraq. The Assyrians revolt was crushed and thousands on both sides were killed.

The national and political fragmentation of the region went on. Relations became strained between Turkey and the French in Syria because Turkey made national claims to the Syrian province of Alexandretta which, as Ziadeh states "was sacrificed by France to appease Turkey."³ This heightened the tensions and turned the Syrians of Alexandretta into refugees now living in Aleppo and other Syrian cities.

The loss of Alexandretta is almost forgotten, but other matters remain unresolved: from 1948 to 1973 four wars have taken place in the region between Jews and Arabs, taking the

¹Nicola A. Ziadeh, Syria and Lebanon (New York: Praeger, 1957), p. 50.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 58.

lives of thousands and creating hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees scattered in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. These four devastating wars have kept the region in a volatile state; the struggle for national independence and the loss of national unity have created alienation and political disorder.

The plays to be discussed in this chapter have a clear national undertone. They focus on historical events extending from the early 40s up to the late 70s. In a variety of ways, the three plays try to draw our attention to the active role of Syrian resistance against French rule, the loss of Palestine, the defeat of Arab armies in 1967, and the 1973 war between Israel and the Arabs. The plays call for national unity against all foreign forces that threaten the sovereignty and security of Syria and the Arab world. The Days We Have Forgotten (Al-Ayyam al-Lati Nansaha) was written in 1968, and presented in the same year at the Aleppo People's Theatre. It was the first play that Ikhlasi wrote about a national issue, and was no doubt written in reaction to the national despair that permeated Syria after the defeat of Arab armies and the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights. The play revolves around the Syrian resistance against the French mandate in the 40s, but the French occupation of Syria is an implied counterpart of the Israeli occupation of Syrian territories in 1967, i.e.. recounting the struggle of Syrians against the French in the 40s is meant to arouse the Syrians now against the current Israeli occupation of their land.

The plot of The Days We Have Forgotten is both simple and loosely woven. It has an episodic form with incidents that move in irregular curves and with little need for logical sequence. As the episodic structure of the plot makes the act of summarizing the story a little difficult and misleading, the outline of the scenes is more useful for understanding the disconnected sections.

In Scene I, a crowd of men (Chorus) is seen gathered in a courtyard. Khalid, a national activist, joins the crowd, expressing resentment against present conditions. As the Chorus recollects the resistance movement in the 40s, Khalid becomes concerned about the fate of those who helped him found the movement, and obsessed with the question of why he and his friends failed in the past. Khalid's wife, Muna, comes in urging him to be more concerned about his wife and children. This scene is interspersed with music, songs and national anthems.

In Scene II, Khalid is seen reading two letters, one from Radwan and the other from Husni. Both were active members of the resistance movement, but now in their letters they denounce their past involvement as childish. They also make fun of Khalid, who is still thinking of the 40s. Radwan is working hard in Brazil to become a millionaire and Husni has become the director of an American firm in North Africa. As the stage dims, Khalid is seen with Suffia, a Jewish girl he was in love with in the 40s. Throughout the scene music and national songs are heard.

Scene III takes us back to the 40s to see Khalid and his friends who founded the resistance movement. They are discussing how to blow up a French military camp. Then the stage dims and Khalid is alone reading a letter in which Radwan expresses shock about the Arab defeat in 1967. He apologizes to Khalid for the harsh letter he had sent him earlier. Khalid's wife comes in to remind him of their anniversary, but he ignores her and continues talking about how his friends were killed fighting the French. The incidents in this scene refer to the events of the 40s and 1967. Sounds of explosions and anthems are heard occasionally.

Scene IV finds Khalid and his friends talking Joseph, the Jewish shopkeeper, into selling them explosives. Then the five men discuss how to carry out their plan successfully. Husni decides to be responsible for destroying the military camp. The Chorus describes the enthusiasm of men, women and children for fighting against the French army.

Scene V, Khalid and his friends set up a fence of barbed wire. Husni moves stealthily behind the fence with explosives in his hand. At the zero hour, the explosives don't go off. As Adel goes to check them, French soldiers fire at him and at Fouad. Adel gets killed and Fouad is injured in his legs. The plan has fallen through and the five friends scatter.

Scene VI returns to the present. There is a newsstand at the corner of the stage, and Khalid learns that it is owned by Fouad. Khalid introduces himself to Fouad and they chat about

the old days when they were fighting the French Army. Fouad tells Khalid that the explosives they had bought at Joseph's store were fake, and that Joseph and his daughter Suffia fled to Israel.

In Scene VII are taken back to Scene I. Khalid and the crowd gather in the courtyard. Khalid is worried about the future. Suddenly the stage lights up and slips of paper scatter everywhere. The crowd picks up the leaflets and reads that the resistance movement in the occupied land has carried out several successful operations against the enemy. The curtain falls as the crowd sings the national anthems.

The outline above points out the episodic structure of the play, but Ikhlasi's episodic approach should not be confused with Brecht's epic technique. It is evident that, like Brecht, Ikhlasi violates the logically built drama which, through a gradually growing conflict, reversals, suspense and change, mounts to an inevitable climax. Despite a few incidental similarities, however, Ikhlasi's approach is different from Brecht's. According to Martin Esslin, for example, in Brecht's drama the musical numbers and songs "are introduced as entirely distinct ingredients of the play which interrupt its flow and break the illusion, and thereby render the action 'strange'."⁴ In Ikhlasi's play, music, songs and decor knit the separate sections together, consolidate the illusion of reality and further the audience's identification

⁴Martin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and His Work (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 135.

with the action. In Brecht's drama, music, songs and decor serve to demarcate the links between the separate scenes so that the audience can reflect and judge; in Ikhlasī's play they smooth out the transition from one scene to the next, leaving the audience more deeply immersed in the illusion of reality.

Ikhlasī repeatedly argues that his episodic technique is rooted in Syrian culture, that "the storyteller, the shadow play and the popular theatre of the late 40s have influenced my episodic plays more than Brecht's epic drama."⁵ In The Days We Have Forgotten, the Chorus, like the storyteller, narrates past anecdotes in an exciting and informative way. Occasionally, Khalid and the Chorus alternate by relating a story. The disconnected scenes of Ikhlasī's play and its slight plot are a variation on the shadow play. Furthermore, like the popular theatre of the late 40s, the disjointed episodes of The Days We Have Forgotten are interspersed with music and songs. Undoubtedly, the use of technique and devices drawn from folk literature lends a touch of originality to the play and helps the audience respond to it more enthusiastically.

A sweeping passion for the past, reminiscences about old and past incidents and historical exploration haunt Ikhlasī's characters and motivate the action--physical or mental. The Chorus initiates the recollection of the past: "Those who

⁵Admer Gouryeh, "Interview With Walid Ikhlasī," Aleppo, October 20, 1980 (Typewritten).

remember much live better."⁶ Then each character indulges in recalling incidents from the 40s. Sometimes characters alternately reflect back. Khalid recalls, "Husni was always shouting 'Down with the colonizers'."⁷ The Chorus elaborates: "The gang of young resistance men was planning during the night to carry out its operations during the day."⁸ All this also serves to identify characters and the spirit of the times. Khalid comments, "I was born near this neighborhood and played a lot in the citadel's trenches."⁹ The Chorus explains: "You were born in the dark days, between two wars."¹⁰ Occasionally these reminiscences are interrupted and accelerated by Khalid's key question, "I want to know the truth: Why did we fail?"¹¹ Thus, through briefly recollected anecdotes, narrated or enacted incidents, letters, soliloquies and discussions, the play provides an overall picture of the dramatic action and the prevalent atmosphere.

Nothing of substance occurs in The Days We Have Forgotten to motivate an action straining to an inevitable climax; no one does anything to Khalid to affect the course of his

⁶Walid Ikhlas, Al-Ayyam al-Lati Nansaha (The Days We Have Forgotten), (Aleppo, 1968), p. 6 (Typewritten).

⁷Ibid., p. 7.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 12.

life. However, instances of tension, surprise and irony run through the play as Khalid encounters Muna and, indirectly, his friends, Radwan and Husni; the encounter here is between one committed and those who are only concerned about their immediate needs. When Khalid is struggling with the failure of the resistance in the 40s, Muna surprises him: "The landlord wants the rent...you must pay the butcher's and grocer's bills."¹² Similar but more pungent and ironic instances occur in Scene II. Just as Khalid is praising Radwan's heroism, Radwan writes: "We were then poor and patriotic, but now I am seriously trying to become a millionaire."¹³ The second reversal lies in Husni's letter: "It is shocking that you are still talking in the manner of the 40s. Your national involvement no longer means anything to me."¹⁴ The play concludes with an exciting surprise disclosing the emergence of new resistance. Besides exploring the identity of certain characters and ideas, these surprises and reversals create a sense of excitement and expectancy.

In The Days We Have Forgotten scenes drawing attention to the national strife of the 40s alternate with episodes surrounding the national defeat of 1967. But the play stresses only two points: the atrocities of the enemy and the significance of national struggle against that enemy, thus

¹² Ibid., p. 11.

¹³ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

urging the audience to absorb the fact that the French army that occupied the land and intimidated its people in the past is not different from the present Israeli army that still occupies Syrian territories. The message is that as the Syrians of the 40s united against the French, the Syrians of today too must unite against the Israeli occupation of their land.

The national and collective character of the play is evident in the setting, the cast, the songs and the action. The setting is a popular courtyard in which the masses rally in the face of their enemies. The citadel overlooking the courtyard symbolizes national pride and steadfastness. The collectivity of the masses is reflected in the active part of the Chorus, and in the national songs and anthems interspersed throughout the play.

Ikhlasī's play has discernible rhythmic patterns, i.e., the recurrence of certain words, phrases, incidents and motifs create certain impressions. We repeatedly hear such phrases: "We should remember"; "We should not forget." Again and again as the action progresses, we hear: "I want to know the truth," and "Why did we fail?" Other rhythmic patterns arise from the alternating episodes of tension and relaxation and the frequent overlapping of present and past, but the dominant rhythm is created by the recurrence of national songs and anthems.

The emphasis in The Days We Have Forgotten is on the play's message: plot, action and character development are

subsidiary. Because characters are not motivated by an action through which they interact with others, they don't change. Ikhlasī wants his characters to describe and analyze the national catastrophe and to mobilize the masses against the occupier. Hence, the narrative and argumentative passages overshadow the dramatic effects and render the play didactic--didacticism which here serves to lift the sinking morale of the Syrians, whose army was defeated in the 1967 war.

Soon after the 1973 war between Israel and the Arabs, Ikhlasī wrote The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion, (Yaum Asqtina Tair al-Wahim, 1973). Though the incidents and ideas are drawn from a collection of short stories Ikhlasī published in 1970, this work is also akin to Ikhlasī's The Days We Have Forgotten in its episodic form and resistance movement theme. But this time most of the rules of linear drama are violated: besides the absence of plot and sequential order, each episode is so rounded and complete in itself that Khalid was bound to call his work a "theatrical show" instead of a play.

Before analysis of the structure and dramatic devices of this "theatrical show," a brief account of the main episodes and their underlying ideas is essential. The play is saturated with feelings of horror and hostility created by the torture and killing which is enacted before the viewer's eyes. Almost every scene presents one or two bloody events, and besides the actual brutal on-stage incidents, sounds of explosions, shooting, bombing and airplane buzzing are heard continually.

In Scene I, a captive Palestinian Commando is subjected to all sorts of indignities and torture. A one-eyed Israeli Officer (probably representing General Dayan) plucks the commander's eyes out and then chops his head off amid the joyful cheers of the general's Aids. All this infuriates the Spectator (a character who is planted in the auditorium). The Spectator believes that the one-eyed Officer deserves death. The Painter, who plays a narrator, argues with the Spectator that killing the Israeli Officer does not change the situation, and that those who intend to fight their enemies should learn more about them.

Then the lights dim and come up again on an old man talking to his three sons about what happened to the Palestinians who have been thrown out of their land three times in less than forty years. His sons vow that they will keep on fighting until their land is liberated.

In the scene that follows, some commandos are planning to blow up the main hotel in the capital. Soon after, explosions are heard and the one-eyed Officer orders his men to look for those who destroyed the hotel and killed several men.

In a scene set in a Palestinian court, three Judges are trying al-Zibag, a Palestinian commando who failed to carry out his assignment to blow up the house of an Israeli general. Al-Zibag succeeded in sneaking into the house, but when he saw the general's little girl playing with her toys, he hesitated. The three Judges conclude that al-Zibag did not betray his people, and his refusal to blow up the house accords with the

humanistic beliefs of the movement. Here the Painter comes in and proudly draws a picture of al-Zibag, symbol of the ideal fighter.

The humanism of the resistance movement is emphasized by the French Engineer who leaves his country and joins the commandos. Once he had fought against the Nazis and defended the persecuted Jews, but he and his friends say they are now fighting the Zionists who deny the Palestinians their national and human rights. As the French Engineer sets out to carry out an operation, Israeli soldiers shoot him down.

The brutality of the one-eyed Officer and his men reaches its height in the scene where the Commando is tied to a tree in preparation for torturing him. They poke fun at him and try to talk him into telling them the whereabouts of his friends, but he refuses to give out any secrets. They promise to set him free if he cooperates with them; still he refuses. When they fail to win him over, they savagely chop him up with their daggers.

The spirit of solidarity and sacrifice is the focus of Scene VII. Abu al-Nar, the Palestinian fighter, takes refuge in an Old Woman's house after blowing up an Israeli shopping center. When the Old Woman learns that he is a commando, she takes care of him, hides him in the basement, and orders her dumb son to wear Abu al-Nar's clothes. When the police come looking for him, they mistake her son for him. Thus the Old Woman has sacrificed her son to save the commando.

In the last two scenes, the one-eyed Officer and his friends begin to lose faith in their power. They feel that the world that supported them in the past has turned against them and they wonder if they have angered God. The Palestinians grow in number and strength.

In the last scene the one-eyed Officer is raging in a cage. He is still threatening the crowd around him. The Spectator in the auditorium can't tolerate seeing the one-eyed Officer alive, but the Painter explains that the power of the caged man lies not in him, but in what he represents. As he strips the one-eyed Officer of his mask and military outfit, the mighty torturer looks like a helpless, frightened midget, and the Painter argues that the mask and outfit are the things to be destroyed. The play ends with pictures of battles, shelling and bombing projected on the screen, and, finally, with the words: "Now we can begin."

The structural unit in this work is the full-fledged episode that gives the sense of a beginning, middle and end. Each episode introduces an issue or an event to be quickly developed, discussed and concluded, and the conclusion usually suggests a logical solution or reasonable evaluation of the given incident. Often the Painter, who functions as a kind of narrator, puts the finishing touches on the dramatized issue to make the message clear and effective.

Ikhlasi's dramatic approach varies from one scene to another according to the requirements of the play as a whole. Different techniques are evident even within a single scene.

In certain episodes, narration is used to relate some historical facts and background information. In others, can be found the dramatic action of linear drama. Occasionally, an episode is reduced to a series of discussions and arguments not different from what is seen in intellectual drama.

Ikhlasī also makes use of theatricalist technique in a few scenes; either the one-eyed Officer or the Painter stays on stage addressing the audience directly. Extreme theatricalism permeates the first and last scenes; the barriers between audience and characters collapse and we witness a dialogue between the Painter and the Spectator. Audience participation, though limited, brings the play a step closer to the realm of the "theatrical show."

In Ikhlasī's "theatrical show" the action is not limited to what the characters do and say on stage; part of it is presented through slides. The audience sees simultaneously the characters in action and pictures of battles and bombing projected on a screen to establish the state of war against which the dramatic action is set. Other cinematic influences can be detected in the flexible setting that allows the simultaneous occurrence of two scenes. Furthermore, an off-stage incident is sometimes indicated by recorded sounds, e.g., explosions indicating the four commandos have succeeded in blowing up a hotel. The use of audio-visual effects throughout makes the play more lively and exciting.

In The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion, Ikhlasī focuses on the Palestinian right to revolt against the Israeli

system. He portrays the Israeli armed men as haughty and ruthless. The one-eyed Officer describes himself as follows: "I am of the world. Who can deny that? My hands have access to everything. One hand is in the East, the other is in the West."¹⁵ He brags about his power to kill: "Death is a natural system imposed on those who violate the law of life. We are chosen to cleanse the environment of insects, rebels and terrorists."¹⁶ This enchantment with violence is also exhibited by an Officer's Aide: "We enjoy seeing you dismember the rebels as you did the schoolchildren--a head here and a torso there."¹⁷ Thus the Israelis are depicted as evil and brutal men whose only goal is to destroy the Palestinian resistance and the Palestinian people.

On the other side, we see the exiled and alienated Palestinians fighting for self-determination and national independence. Al-Zibag, the Palestinian fighter, explains: "For freedom we fight. We have never killed and will never kill for the sake of killing."¹⁸ The Palestinians of today are like the Jews of the past. As in the early twentieth century the Jews sought a homeland to escape persecution every where in Europe, so the Palestinians want to live in Palestine.

¹⁵Walid Ikhlas, Yaum Asqtna Ta'ir al-Wahim (The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion), Al-Mawqif al-Adabi No. 6-7-8 (October, 1973), p. 111.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 117.

The Painter illustrates the Palestinians' yearning: "I dream of peace and a calm life. I dream of a mother who does not lose her son, of a land planted with trees and wheat. I dream of colorful butterflies and singing birds."¹⁹ But fulfilling the Palestinian dream of peace and national freedom is not an easy task. In spite of the coup de theatre which culminates in the driving of the one-eyed Officer into the cage, the state of fear and hostility persists. The "theatrical show" ends with bloody battles projected on the screen--an indication that the state of war goes on.

Though The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion has an episodic structure, it differs from Ikhlasī's earlier play in its use of slides and recorded sounds to show the background of events or their occurrence off-stage. Again, dramatic events are overshadowed by extensive discussions and didactic passages which lessen the impact of the events and often reduce them to abstract rhetoric. Characters have little psychological depth; they are portrayed as either good or bad and their actions are often rendered incredible. Ikhlasī fails to turn the state of war into a metaphor reflecting the human situation, but only shows that war is created and perpetuated by the Israelis, and that the Palestinians have no alternative but to keep on fighting. If Ikhlasī tried to distance the historical facts and explore the devastating ramifications of war, he could have turned the situation into a parable of national and human dimensions.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 119.

Unfortunately, his one-dimensional approach to the entire situation and the characters makes his play principally a piece of propaganda.

In 1976 Ikhlasī published A Shot in the Back, (Itlag al-Nar min al-Khalf), his third play with a national motif. Devoid of the battles, bloodshed and flamboyant rhetoric that characterized his two earlier plays, Ikhlasī insinuates here that the tragedy that plagues Syrian national life stems from the internal contradictions among the rulers whose selfish interests and needs take precedence over national security and human welfare.

The playwright chooses the tragic mode to deepen consciousness of the deteriorating national condition. This national tragedy differs from his two earlier plays in that Ikhlasī's characters and events are shrouded in a mist of symbolism created to distance the dramatic events from contemporary reality, and hence--hopefully--to distract the censors from the covert assault on the ruling system. Furthermore, the symbolic motifs enrich the play's texture and open it to a wider variety of interpretations.

The earlier plays were structurally loose and sprawling; A Shot in the Back is more compact and more complex. The play adheres to the rules of classical tragedy--unity of time, place and action--and its linear structure is evident in the organically motivated action and character development. As in classical tragedy, the plot unfolds gradually in a series of discoveries, reversals and changes.

The plot is simple. An innocent, frightened Girl takes refuge in a house owned by a crippled Old Man. The Girl tells the Old Man that she has revolted against a powerful chieftain who enslaved her father and raped her. The chieftain's men have determined to kill the Girl if she refuses to return to their master. The Old Man calms her and assures her that he will protect her against any threat. The sound of the doorbell frightens the Girl. The Journalist comes in to talk to the Old Man and take a few pictures of the house which he describes as a civilized island floating in a sea of fake civilization. The Girl argues that the Journalist is one of the chieftain's men.

Muawia, the old man's son, introduces himself to the Girl. Muawia is a shrewd and cunning young man; he flirts with the Girl and tries to embrace her, but she does not respond. Then his two brothers, Mahdi and Amin come in. Madhi is a religious man and avoids any communication with women, but Amin, the older son who is a retired officer, greets the Girl in a friendly way and shows her around. He assures her that "those who enter my father's house enjoy safety." Soon after, the lights go off, and somebody knocks on the door. Amin responds to the knocking and returns with a wounded shoulder. The Girl's fears are confirmed and intensified, but Amin assures her that what happened to him has nothing to do with the chieftain's men.

The crippled Old Man develops a plan to protect the Girl. He orders each of his sons to stay a few hours with the Girl in her room until dawn. As Amin is on watch, there are sounds of shooting and the Girl expresses her belief that she is doomed to die at the chieftain's hands. While vowing to kill anyone who lays a finger on her, Amin's attraction to the Girl grows and he tries to win her affection.

Muawia's turn comes. He reassures her that a lot of security men are outside looking for the chieftain's men, but the Girl says that some of them cooperate with the chieftain. Muawia makes advances to her, urging her to run away with him to a world free of fear and full of joy and freedom. Her fears are heightened.

Mahdi is on guard. He talks to the Girl about man's need for faith in God and then tries to grab her from behind. Muawia comes in and Mahdi points his gun at his brother, but Amin and the Girl manage to calm them. Disappointed at what she has experienced in the house, she runs to the window; a bullet hits her and she falls dead. The Old Man grieves and holds his sons responsible for her death. Finally, he orders his sons to leave the house and bursts out crying.

On the surface the play is a realistic drama of substantial characters and well-marked conflicts. If the meaning is judged on the grounds that the action is motivated by realistic characters whose actions reflect their free choice, this is an existential play about a moral action, but with

the recognition of its symbolic dimensions, the play acquires new significance.

Throughout the play, both characters and setting are infused with images, metaphors and cultural, historical and national allusions. For example, the Journalist describes the house as "an island of civilization floating in a sea of fake culture."²⁰ The Old Man reaffirms this point. For him, the house is "a floating civilization and we must keep it from sinking."²¹ Furthermore, Amin tells the Girl that "ancestors lived in this house...Generations of fighters and leaders...all lived here."²² He adds, "Don't you believe that we can protect a Girl?"²³ One can easily see that the house stands for a homeland, a civilization and a history.

Images of national character types are evident. The Journalist calls the Old Man "an honest guard of the island of civilization"²⁴ and "the leader." To this the Old Man replies, "I was a leader, but I am crippled now."²⁵ The character representing the nation's enemies is the chieftain. The Girl describes him as a man who "has power to dominate any

²⁰Walid Ikhlasī, Itlaq al-Nar min al-Khalf (A Shot in the Back, Al-Mawqif al-Adabi No. 19 (August, 1976), p. 112.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 115.

²³Ibid., p. 116.

²⁴Ibid., p. 111.

²⁵Ibid., p. 122.

formal and informal group."²⁶ and she adds that one can "find his men even among security police."²⁷ Even the Girl's dilemma takes on a national dimension as Amin explains, "Your problem is no longer yours. If you give up, that means we give up too."²⁸ Thus, character identity and portrayal lead away from the substantial characters of realistic drama; their fate is determined by what they represent, by their symbolic roles.

The Syrian critic Farhan Bulbil, briefly commenting on the symbolic level of A Shot in the Back, argues convincingly that "the crippled Old Man stands for ancient history and the Girl symbolizes the homeland which the three sons fail to protect due to their conflicting views and lack of unity."²⁹ Certainly Bulbil is accurate in stressing the national dimension of the symbolic characters, but his interpretation of each character is slightly misleading and does not fully accord with what the symbols signify. For example, the Girl should not be mistaken for homeland because the latter has been constantly symbolized by the house or "the civilized island." The house is the homeland and the Girl stands for the oppressed masses of the nation. The chieftain and his men

²⁶ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Farhan Bulbil, "Al-Adab al-Masrahi fi Suriyah: Walid Ikhlasī" ("Dramatic Literature in Syria: Walid Ikhlasī") Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 7-8 (Winter, 1979), p. 54.

symbolize the enemy bent on destroying the Girl, i.e., the rebellious people. The three sons who have different ideological views represent modern Arab leaders who claim to be defending the Arab cause (the Girl), but in fact are immersed in their own selfish interests--the enemy tries to kill the Girl while the three sons are fighting amongst themselves. The crippled Old Man, as Bulbil argues, stands for history. The will of history can't do anything more than what the cripple does, that is, denounce his three irresponsible sons.

The impressions emerging from the symbolic aspects of character, setting and action are carefully integrated into the organic structure of the play. The exposition establishes an atmosphere of dread and menace. The house in which the Girl takes refuge is constantly exposed to external threat. As in symbolist drama, the state of fear is effected by such devices as sounds of shooting, unidentified phone calls, knocking at the door or a sudden blackout. Elements of surprise permeate the play. Ikhlasî exposes his characters to a series of unexpected incidents and shocking experiences in order to force them to open their eyes to the dangers that surround them. Yet only the Girl understands the real danger; the other characters' reactions are limited to verbal consolations and affection and numerous words of moral support. Thus the action operates on two levels; what takes place outside is always aggressive and destructive, depicting the dangerous nature of those who control the street; what

goes on inside the house is passive and mostly verbal, indicative of the selfishness and irresponsibility of those who have inherited history.

The inciting moment ironically comes when the crippled Old Man orders his sons to safeguard the threatened Girl. The proclaimed protectors wind up as suitors. The turning point in the play comes when each accuses the other of trying to seduce the Girl, and of course they end up fighting each other instead of fighting their enemy, thus causing the death of the frustrated Girl. The denouement brings the question of who killed the Girl to a point. The crippled Old Man holds his three sons responsible.

Ikhlasī does have reason to call his play a tragedy as its elements are constantly molded like those of classical tragedy. Compare Ikhlasī's design with the four fundamental tragic elements that Dorothea Krook in Elements of Tragedy singles out as representative of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy: 1) the act of shame or horror which precipitates suffering; 2) the tragic suffering that generates knowledge or insight into human life 3) the development of insight into the fundamental human condition; and 4) affirmation or reaffirmation of the human spirit.³⁰

In classical tragedy the act of shame or horror takes on the form of usurpation and murder, or betrayal and rejection. In A Shot in the Back, the three son's betrayal of the Girl is

³⁰Dorothea Krook, Elements of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 8.

indeed an act of shame. As in classical tragedy, the Girl's suffering not only culminates in tragic death, but arises from deep consciousness of herself and the world around her.

However, as in Antigone, where Creon, not Antigone, undergoes change and acquires new insight, so here the final affirmation of human dignity is not made by the heroine but by the crippled Old Man. His heightened understanding of himself and his three sons helps him denounce them, and this condemnation of their foul acts is an expiation of their violations of the human spirit and a reaffirmation of a human moral order.

Besides the fundamental elements discussed above, the play hinges on dramatic devices widely used in tragedy. Reversals, foreshadowings and surprises abound and effectively intensify its tragic tone. Through a series of reversals the action gradually discloses the hidden nature of the enemy and the three sons. The house--whose residents proudly describe it as the center of peace--turns out to be the center of fear and violence. The Old Man who is certain that his sons will protect the Girl must acknowledge that they are responsible for her death. The son whose religious beliefs are said to keep him from involvement with women thinks of raping the Girl.

The state of fear is also deepened by a number of surprises designed to shock characters and shake their unfounded convictions and claims. A series of foreshadowings runs throughout the play, heightening anxiety. The

prophetic character of the Girl further escalates the sense of danger and the likelihood of death.

A Shot in the Back is neither experimental nor inspired by the traditions of Syrian folk literature. Its form resembles that of Racinian tragedy in its compactness, restricted number of characters and strong adherence to unity of action, time and space; Ikhlasī's characters are trapped inside the closed world of rooms and the play's action aims at exploring their psychological depths. However, Ikhlasī's characters are not as fully individualized and as sharply contrasted as Racine's.

Though A Shot in the Back deals with a national question, it avoids the rhetoric of the two earlier plays; thought and meaning are either externalized in action or suggested by symbols, metaphors and visual effects. Behind the veneer of symbols, Ikhlasī expresses his indignation against Arab systems and rulers. Even the play's title A Shot in the Back implies an act of betrayal. The title insinuates that the Girl is killed by those who claim to be protecting her, i.e., the people are betrayed by their rulers.

All the plays of this chapter have clear national undertones. In The Days We Have Forgotten and The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion, national catastrophes are attributed to outside enemies while in A Shot in the Back, national disunity is the work of Arab leaders. The first two plays are written in reaction to the 1967 and 1973 wars; hence

their immediacy, didacticism and flamboyant tone. In The Days We Have Forgotten and The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion, Ikhlasi calls for unity against outside enemies; in A Shot in the Back, he blames national disunity on Arab leaders. The structural unit in the two former plays is the full-fledged episode, the focus is on historical facts whose national and political meanings are explained and discussed by the narrators: the chorus in The Days We Have Forgotten and the Painter in The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion. The structure of A Shot in the Back is identical to that of classical drama where each incident fades into the other to create an organic whole. However, though the emphasis in the latter is on the code while in the former it is on the message, The Days We Have Forgotten and The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion are more experimental and promising. Both make extensive use of the storyteller (al-Hakwati), and The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion extends the stage and its action into the auditorium by planting a character in the audience to converse with those on stage. More such theatricality will be investigated in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER II

THE POLITICAL PREDICAMENT

Since World War II, Syria has endured a considerable number of military coups and revolutions--eleven since 1949--which have contributed to keeping the Middle East in a state of disorder and instability. The first government after the end of French occupation, formed in 1947 and composed of tribal chieftains, wealthy traders and notables, did not last long. It was overthrown by Husni al-Zaim who initiated the first military coup and assumed power in 1949. Soon after, al-Zaim was dethroned by Adib al-Shishakli who suppressed political freedom and dissolved all political parties. More upheaval was created as a new coup took place in 1954. In 1958, Syria and Egypt united into one state which then adopted what it called socialism: land was nationalized, the feudal system was crushed and peasants and workers emerged as a new power. But the new state did not live long; it collapsed in 1961 due to political repression and mismanagement. A rightist group of army officers seized power and declared Syria an independent nation again. This group tried to restore the power and privileges of the upper class, but their attempts fell through as the Baath party in turn overthrew their regime and assumed full control of Syria. Between 1966 and the present three more coups occurred, but they were

internal to the Baathist party which continues to rule to this day.

The rise and growth of military regimes in Syria did away with the political structure of parliaments, parties and free elections. In the words of Morroe Berger in The Arab World Today, army elites "have found the Western democratic forms unsuited to rapid modernization of economic and social life."¹ Their strong desire for rapid social change "impelled them to become authoritarian, to stifle political opposition, and to organize the masses around the national goal...they have put forward."² In the plays covered in this chapter, Ikhlasi chronicles the succession of class interests which has ruled the nation since the 50s and the effects on the people ruled.

In 1975 Ikhlasi wrote A Piece of Homeland on an Ancient Coast (Qitat Watan ala Shat'i Qadim). The play observes the unities of time, space and action; it has a compact form and a structure which blends realistic and symbolic elements. The world of reality fuses with that of fantasy and fiction.

The play has a simple linear plot. It tells the story of a man called the Sea Dreamer. He is a poor, honest and idealistic man trying to run for a parliamentary seat. He is backed up by his fellow Sea People and other poor people. His principal objective is to spread love, dreams and freedom in his area. His opponents, the candidates of the ruling class,

¹Morroe Berger, The Arab World Today (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 365.

²Ibid.

have the support of the government and the wealthy. Noticing that the Sea Dreamer poses some threats to them in the election, they plan to get rid of him. Because their pretended concern about maintaining democracy keeps them from threatening him, they offer him money to pull out of the race. He refuses. They send the Seductress to dissuade him from running. She fails. Then the other three candidates, supported by the Mayor and the Police, threaten to deprive him of the land on which he and the Sea People live. When he realizes that he will lose the land (a rock stretching out across the sea), he decides to quit, provided they lease him the land. His withdrawal helps the other candidates to win easily. He stands on the rock and tells his fellow Sea People that the rock belongs to all of them. Finally, he and his men get on a ship and sail out to sea.

Ikhlesi's play is made up of six carefully-woven scenes. The first establishes the setting and general atmosphere, introduces characters and defines the scope of action, while the other five build up the conflict and explore its depths. The conflict is between the Sea Dreamer and his opponents who are bent on forcing him out of the race. Thus the action of the play focuses on the schemes to get the Sea Dreamer out of the election.

In the first scene signs of democracy are seen everywhere. The hero, exuding confidence, sets up banners and gives a speech to a crowd of his supporters. Suddenly it transpires that the Tourist who has been strolling around the

beach and giving money to the Crippled Beggar who supports the Sea Dreamer is an agent who is trying to win over some of the Sea Dreamer's voters. Further challenges are made by the Ship Owner who claims, "Had it not been for the democracy of our country, we could have deprived him of the rock and the coast too."³

The conflict between the vicious, corrupt candidates and the Sea Dreamer is reflected very beautifully in the texture and language of the play. Scenes of bribery, seduction, spying and power alternate with scenes full of innocence, dreams and love. The three candidates and the Mayor are always preoccupied with money, violence and evil, while the Sea Dreamer is seen either with the poor or with the Mermaid, who symbolizes love, dreams, and innocence. His infatuation with the sea is another indication of his love for freedom, and his language, studded with images drawn from the world of sea, wind and dreams, show his lofty character. His diction is soft and lyrical, his opponents' dry, direct and harsh, consistent with their materialistic nature.

The play also touches on the question of extreme idealism and the need for pragmatism to face the difficulties of the real world. The Sea Dreamer finds it hard to organize the crowd because the Sea People lack confidence and are extremely passive. They argue that "the big fish always swallows the

³Walid Ikhlas, Qitat Watan ala Shati Qadim (A Piece of Homeland on an Ancient Coast), Al-Mawqif al-Adabi No. 4-5 (August and September, 1975), p. 38.

small one,"⁴ and that "no poor man can defend the cause of the poor."⁵ Faced with such passivity and hopelessness, the Sea Dreamer nonetheless refuses to submit, continually trying to shape and mold the world according to his own dreams.

"Reality," he argues, "is a beautiful apple with a rotten core,"⁶ but a man must have dreams and he promises to provide his men with the dreams they need. Man can't live by dreams alone, they argue, but for him "dreams are the beginning of action."⁷ At the end both sides find themselves bound to modify their views of the world: the Sea Dreamer softens his extreme idealism and the Sea People gain some confidence in themselves and their candidate. Gaining the rock is considered just recompense for his withdrawal from the election. The rock constitutes the solid foundation upon which the crowd can wage its future struggle for freedom. "The rock," says the Sea Dreamer, "has become ours and from it we can set out without fear."⁸ The Sea Dreamer's gradual interest in keeping the rock arises from his feeling that if he does not withdraw from the race he is likely to be forced out and to lose the rock as well. His withdrawal from the race in return for the rock is clearly a compromise, but also indicates a gradual understanding of the world of realities because the rock is associated with the immediate needs of his

⁴Ibid., p. 43.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 41.

⁷Ibid., p. 49.

⁸Ibid.

fellow Sea People; it is the place where the boats are anchored and from which they sail.

Despite the realism of the play, some elements and characters have marked symbolic dimensions. For example, the rock that stretches out into the sea and to which the Sea Dreamer clings stands for the road that leads to freedom as symbolized by the sea; the Crippled Beggar who is sarcastic about the Sea Dreamer represents the passive attitude of the poor masses; the Mermaid who lives in the sea and often meets the Sea Dreamer connotes the beautiful world of dreams and freedom with which the Sea Dreamer is infatuated; the Ship Owner and the Rich Farmer represent the rich class which has the support of the government, itself represented by the Mayor. Finally, the Chief of Talk who supports the rich candidates stands for Syrian "democracy" which serves the interests of the rich class and those who rule.

Though A Piece of Homeland on the Ancient Coast has an action which penetrates everything in the play and out of which characters develop and change, the play sometimes lapses into didactic debates. The action of Ikhlas's play produces discussions which, especially close to the end, supersede action. Furthermore, the existence of representative figures embodying certain values and points of view is also reminiscent of discussion plays. Though such discussions slightly slow down the action, they are still organically linked with the essence and motive of that action.

In brief, Ikhlasī's play unmasks the social and political realities existing in Syria. Despite the fact that socialist forms have predominated in that country for almost 23 years, class conflict still exists and the bourgeois class is still quite powerful and working hand in hand with the system. The slogans of "freedom" and "democracy" have been lifted high, but have never been realized for any save those in power. Thus Ikhlasī's play is an assault on all kinds of social and political corruption.

In 1972, Ikhlasī's play Ascending Without Falling (Kaifa Tasad Don an Tag'a) was presented at the Aleppo People's Theatre. It received mixed reviews in part due to some weakness in acting and failure to maintain a consistent tempo, but had a run of almost three months--a very long run for a play in Syria. Ikhlasī has called his play a "dark comedy." Its evident serious and comic aspects and bitter sarcasm comprise a flagrant assault on social and political corruption in Syria.

The play is made up of a prologue, two parts in nine scenes and an epilogue. The two parts are broken into disconnected scenes, each of which contains two or three incidents. The sequence of scenes could be easily rearranged, for there is no action growing and straining toward an inevitable climax and, as in epic drama, one scene includes a discussion, another a narration, others recitation or realistic action. The theme is the only means of knitting these diverse scenes together.

A brief account of the major parts of the play will help make the plot comprehensible. In the prologue, the First Climber rushes to climb a ladder so fast that he falls. The cunning Muaid gives instructions to help the man ascend safely. The Second Climber rushes up the ladder and falls down. Muaid advises both to work together and suggests to them that one should kneel down so that the other can go on top of him to ascend safely. Neither agrees to kneel down for the other. As they quarrel and call each other names, the First Climber shoots the second and uses his body as a support from which to climb. When Muaid sees that the First Climber is moving up the ladder, he takes his pistol out and kills him. The First Climber falls on top of the man whom he murdered and Muaid proudly and joyfully begins to look for Muntasir, his master. Muntasir enters to share Muaid's pride and enthusiasm. Then both disappear.

In Part I, Scene I, the audience is introduced to Amal who has broken up with Muntasir, her husband. This scene provides us with plenty of information about Muntasir's background and character. Muntasir, now a professor of philosophy and sociology, earlier was a cultural attache in a Syrian embassy. He was fired for bribery, but soon after appointed a manager of a big firm where, according to Amal's accusations, he had love affairs with several of his secretaries. This position he loses after having embezzled the firm's money. Amal does not understand how the government, which is still investigating Muntasir's scandals, can give him a post as a professor at the university.

Muntasir is scheduled to give a lecture to an international organization and to talk on the air about the positive role of the family in society. As Muntasir dictates his speeches to Mua'id, he makes side comments about how the family is really a reactionary institution that hinders man's ambitions; marriage, after all, limits a man to having only one woman.

In Scene II, a Reporter from a radio station comes in to interview Muntasir. The latter puts on the look of a sober old man. He puts on a cloak, holds a cane, sits on a couch and reads solemnly from a book. When the Reporter asks Muntasir about the role of the family in society, he gives an elaborate answer emphasizing the need of modern society for a solid family unit; indeed, the very survival of modern society requires the preservation of family values, he argues.

Scene III presents Muntasir dressed in a revolutionary outfit, addressing a student rally about the revolutionary character. He insists that a revolutionary is one who bridges the gap between what he says and what he does. Every now and then his speech is interrupted by his student Raad, who knows him very well. Raad argues that man is either honest or dishonest. In an attempt to dissuade Raad from carrying on his hostile attitude, Muntasir shows fatherly affection toward his student, gives him a hug and urges him to work with the students planning a conference on social reform.

In Scene IV, Amal and Raad get together to discuss the means of putting an end to Muntasir's tricks. Raad says that his girlfriend has fallen under Muntasir's influence and asks

Amal to help him keep his girlfriend away from her ex-husband. Amal advises Raad to unmask Muntasir among his students at the university. She tells him that Muntasir's previous activities are still under investigation and urges him to supply the court with facts about Muntasir's intrigues.

Scene V shows Muntasir exchanging his revolutionary outfit for an elegant suit in order to meet Laila, his beautiful student who had been Raad's girlfriend. As Laila comes in, Muntasir is very affectionate and talks convincingly about his need for love, warmth and affection. They drink. He flirts with her. She is somewhat responsive. He tells Muaid that Laila has fallen into his trap.

Scene VI moves to a room where two Investigators are arguing about what to do with Muntasir's case. Piles of evidence have confirmed Muntasir's guilt; in spite of all the facts, the jury has failed to indict him. The Angry Investigator holds the jury responsible for the delay of Muntasir's indictment. The Calm Investigator believes that as long as Muntasir has influential friends in the government, no jury will take any action against him.

Scene VII opens with Muaid sitting in Muntasir's chair talking to his conscience, which takes the form of another person. His conscience urges him to compete with Muntasir, but Muaid believes that Muntasir is his friend and not his rival. Muntasir comes in to tell Muaid that the Investigators have been silenced by a big government official. When Laila's father, the Clergyman, comes to visit Muntasir, the latter

orders Muaid to hide the drinks. Muntasir agrees to marry Laila. Her father approves and vows to support Muntasir in the election.

Muntasir, dressed in religious garb and reciting religious phrases, opens Scene VIII. The Clergyman once more declares his support of Muntasir in the election, provided the latter advocates religious values and fights the agnosticism rampant among the students. As the Clergyman leaves, Muntasir takes off the religious uniform and orders a drink. When a crowd of people assembles, Muntasir makes a speech advocating the cause of religion and the rights of peasants and workers, and ends with a religious quotation.

Scene IX presents Muntasir at the university declaring his support for a revolutionary system. His future regime will abolish opportunism, bribery, mismanagement and exploitation. Before this lecture is finished, a high official tells Muntasir that he has been appointed a minister. Soon after, Muntasir takes off his revolutionary mask and decides to retaliate against those who tried to unmask him. As Muntasir is ascending the ladder, Muaid asks him to help his niece get a decent job. Then when Muntasir and Muaid are alone, two bickering political groups move from the auditorium to the stage; they negotiate their differences with Muntasir and decide to support him in his future activities.

The "Epilogue": the lights dim but Raad appears on the stage to tell the audience that the play is not over yet. "Put the lights on so that the truth will not dissipate," he

shouts. He urges the audience to help him stop men like Muntasir from using the masses and exploiting them. The curtain falls.

Ikhlasī, as mentioned earlier, calls his play a "dark comedy," but in the preface he points out that Ascending Without Falling "vacillates between dark comedy and satire."⁹ Apparently Ikhlasī is uncertain about the mold in which he cast his play. Certainly a play with structural patterns drawn from comedy, satire, tragi-comedy and epic drama can't remain loyal to the rules and requirements of a single genre. The play's heterogeneous structure has contributed not only to its vacillation between genres, but also to its deviation from the basic principles of "dark comedy."

What distinguishes tragi-comedy from satire? Karl S. Guthke argues that the tragi-comedy writer "tends to leave his audience not only in a state of indecision as to whether to laugh or weep, but also in a more profound and disturbing disorientation to the human condition."¹⁰ Obviously audience ambivalence about laughing and weeping is a clear indication of the fusion of the tragic and comic. Furthermore, the fact that the audience is left disoriented about the human condition means that tragi-comedy deals with human realities of perplexing and unresolvable contradictions.

⁹Walid Ikhlasī, Kaif Tas'ad Dun an Taq'a (Ascending Without Falling), Al-Aqlam No. 12 (December, 1974), p. 83.

¹⁰Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragi-Comedy (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 70.

Everything in Ikhlasī's play tends to fit comedy and satire rather than tragi-comedy. The play is peopled with eccentric characters of the type we find in comedies. Characters are either shrewd, cunning and vicious (Muntasir and Muaid) or dupes and fools (Laila and the Clergyman); among them stand the two raisonneurs (Amal and Raad). Audience reaction is determined by the fixed traits of each character and by what baseness and follies they display. The marked contrast between dupes and knaves and the incongruity between what a man is and what he pretends to be make the audience laugh. Ikhlasī throws no tragic figure into his world to make the audience laugh and weep; he presents no comic character trapped in a tragic situation; he creates no comic figure generating disaster for others. There is only a cunning and manipulative character who always succeeds in playing impressive roles that enchant his victims and make them fall prey to his designs. The tragic does not overlap or blend with the comic--in fact, it does not even exist. There is nothing tragic about Raad's failure to extract his girlfriend from Muntasir's clutches. Amal's and the Investigators' failure to get Muntasir indicted is neither tragic nor sad; their role is limited to unmasking Muntasir and the system that supports him, much as Elmire, Damis and Valere unmask Tartuffe. The only difference is that though Muntasir and the system are unmasked, Muntasir remains unscathed until the end, achieving one victory after another, while in Tartuffe, Damis, Valere and Elmire succeed not only in disclosing Tartuffe's

hypocrisy, but also in bringing about his defeat. Tartuffe differs from Ascending Without Falling in that it culminates in the renewal of the self and of social relationships, that is, Orgon discovers his own follies, sees through Tartuffe's hypocrisy and establishes a sound relationship with his family. Comedy always suggests a new life associated with marriage or some sort of happy ending, and the comic figure gains consciousness and understanding of himself and the world. In Ikhlasī's play none of the comic figures sheds his aberration and awakens to his better nature. The end reinforces the triumph of hypocrisy and opportunism.

Though the end crowns Muntasir's conquest, it also draws attention to the depth and breadth of corruption and to its cure. Ikhlasī, like most satirists, is not content with the mere presentation of rotten realities, but also strives to fight these realities from a clear and principled perspective. Guthke argues that "the satirist in his contempt of what is, knows, by contrast, what and how reality should be. This, in turn, means that his criticism...is leveled at reality from an unshakably firm standpoint, from a sure knowledge of norm and ideal."¹¹ Throughout the play the satirical attitude of Amal, Raad and the two Investigators towards social and political corruption implies an established moral norm. Ikhlasī appeals to reason, to what is moral and rational, as the standard against which to judge the evils and follies he sees. Amal

¹¹ Ibid.

explains to the Investigators that she fights against Muntasir because "he is an evil man and supported by a public institution."¹² As Northrop Frye says, "The satirist...attacks an evil man who is given a gigantic stature and protected by the prestige of the institution."¹³ The moral criterion against which corruption is measured in Ikhlasī's play is also stressed by Frye, who draws a distinction between irony and satire and argues that "satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured."¹⁴ Muntasir's hypocrisy and unscrupulousness are measured against Amal's honesty and conscientiousness, Laila's folly and emotional blindness are measured against Raad's reason and seriousness. The system's baseness is measured against the honesty of the two Investigators.

Thus, Ascending Without Falling seems closer to satire than to dark comedy or tragi-comedy. Certainly, its bitter seriousness, daring wit and humor and incisive ludicrousness are marked features of satire. Despite all this, however, the play's diverse elements and techniques make it look slightly disorganized. The variety of techniques blurs the rhythm and the atmosphere of the play. For example, in the prologue, the constant climbing and falling off the ladder is quite

¹²Ikhlasī, Ascending Without Falling, p. 97.

¹³Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 79-80.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 223.

farcical, while the grotesque murder of the two climbers is most typical of surrealistic drama. The episodic technique used in the rest of the play gives way to the inclusion of several unessential anecdotes and details which make the play a little repetitive, and the occasional lapses into lengthy discussion slow down the dramatic action and undermine the rhythm and the tempo. The sudden reappearance of Raad after the lights have dimmed is incompatible with the progression of action. The rise of Muntasir to the position of minister and his climbing of the ladder create a logical sense of ending because the action from the beginning centers around Muntasir's attempt to rise to power.

Nevertheless, Raad's lecture has a theatrical touch consistent with other scenes in which Muntasir directly addresses the audience or Muaid goes into the auditorium looking for Muntasir. Theatricalism is also evident in the scene in which two groups of men move from the auditorium onto the stage to find out where Muntasir stands regarding their problems. Certainly the removal of barriers between stage and audience serves to bring the spectators into closer contact with the social and political realities they are facing.

Ascending Without Falling is a bitter satire on the social and political corruption rampant in Syria and probably in other Arab countries. Obviously, in a society where bribery, back door influence and bureaucracy dominate, hypocrites and opportunists such as Muntasir and Muaid surface easily and seize power. By ridiculing the phony professor,

the fake candidate, the bribed cultural attache and the opportunist manager, Ikhlasi attacks all the corrupt institutions existing in his country, and shows that the disintegration of the individual is the outcome of corrupt institutions.

In 1971, Ikhlasi wrote A Democratic Evening Party (Sahra Dimokratia). The play first appeared in Al-Mawqif al-Adabi, a Syrian literary journal, and was republished in 1979 in a collection, this time with minor additions and changes in form and technique. Apart from the theatrical beginning and end and the use of alienation techniques added in 1979, the two versions of the play are essentially the same in structural pattern, events, plot, characters and dialogue. Both versions center around the corruption and degradation of the petit-bourgeoisie and the phony nature of Syrian democracy under which only the rich live in luxury thriving at the expense of the poor and deprived people.

The play under discussion is the 1971 version (see appendix for English translation), but mention will also be made of the minor structure and technique modifications in the second version.

Neither version of A Democratic Evening Party is divided into acts or scenes. Both appear to consist of an unpunctuated stretch of action with sequential order. The incidents either take on the form of games or role playing. Whenever a game loses its appeal or fails to excite the participants, it gives way to a new, more exciting one. Role

playing turns the stage into a theatre within a theatre: when some of the characters play roles, others become spectators; then, for the audience, it is a theatre within a theatre within a theatre. The sense that the play is a theatre within a theatre is even more evident in the 1979 version in which an acting troupe appears on the stage telling the audience that it will put on an exciting play. Furthermore, the use of alienation techniques in the second version has emphasized the idea of theatre-within-theatre and deepened the feeling of difference between reality and theatre and between the actor and the character he is playing.

The play tells the story of the young Architect and his Bride, the Contractor and his Wife, the Physician and the Lady, the divorced Lawyer and a bachelor Professor who meet at the Physician's villa for a drink and conversation. As the Architect sits back watching television, and others get involved in playing cards or chatting, a sense of boredom pervades the room and a squabble breaks out between the Architect and the Bride. In an attempt to kill boredom and keep the couple from bickering, the Lawyer suggests a game in which everyone can participate. As everybody approves of the Lawyer's suggestion, he asks the group to elect someone to run or preside over the game. He himself wins the vote. At once, he orders the group to line up behind him and imitate a locomotive.

As they play, the Bride trips and falls and others feel tired; so the Lawyer then stops the game and prepares his

group for a more exciting one. The new game calls for role playing or acting out: the Contractor takes the part of a belly dancer; the Professor plays the character of a drunkard; the Physician plays a comic role; the Lady plays a beggar and the Contractor's Wife sings. Only the Architect and his Bride fail to play their parts properly and make the game a little dull. The Lawyer stops the game and suggests another one--blindman's buff. The rules allow the blindfolded person to kiss the woman he catches. The Contractor, the first to be blindfolded, catches the Bride and she yields to his kisses. Then the Lady is blindfolded, but as she catches the Professor and tries to kiss him, he pushes her away in anger and denounces the game as cheap and degrading. He then proposes to run the game, but the Lawyer and others reject his proposal. When he fails to take leadership peacefully, he pulls a gun off the wall and points it at the Lawyer, threatening to kill those who deny him the right to run the game.

Gun in hand, the Professor forces each person to unmask himself. The scene takes the form of a court; the Professor is the judge, the others the convicts. The Professor investigates how the Contractor makes a fortune out of defective and cheap building materials. One of the Contractor's buildings has collapsed and under the rubble a poor family has been found dead. Furthermore, the Contractor, who brags about his honesty, turns out to be playing around with the Architect's Bride. When the Contractor's Wife chides

her husband for having an affair with the Bride, he reminds her of her own affair with a construction worker. As the Physician complains about the Professor's impeachment of his guests, the latter asks the Physician to admit that his obsession with money was behind the death of a woman whom he denied an operation because she did not have enough money. Then the Professor makes the Architect admit that he did not marry his wife because he loved her but because she had a lot of money and property. When the Lady denounces the Professor's act as immoral and impolite, the latter orders her to strip off all her artificial eyelashes, her lipstick, and her stockings. As she is about to take her dress off, three Masked Men with guns in their hands come in and order the group to line up against the wall with their hands up. They take the Professor's gun and search the rest, taking their money and jewelry. They tell the group that the Professor has failed to run the game, so they will take over and start anew. The curtain falls as the Masked Men spread out in the house, each of the group blaming the other for what has happened. Finally, the Architect is heard shouting, "Shall we stay motionless, letting them do whatever they like to us? Let us move...I am fed up with this. I can't stay so."

Study of the play's construction furnishes clues to its content, to its implicit and explicit message. Certainly the play takes on the form of games like gambling, dancing, drinking, role-playing and flirting, because such games suggest the reckless and irresponsible freedom characteristic

of bourgeois democracy; the trivial, shallow and aimless games that make up the play correspond to the aimless, phony and indifferent nature of the characters who typify the petit-bourgeoisie. And of course the play's title, A Democratic Evening Party, suggests the spirit of a cheerful party which permeates the beginning of the play.

If the play makes use of games to represent the world of freedom, pleasure and affluence in which the petit-bourgeoisie lives and prospers, the sudden replacement of free games by a series of forced, satirical trials indicates the decline of bourgeois democracy and the rise of a revolutionary order. The trials conducted by the armed Professor unmask the rotten and inhuman character of the petit-bourgeoisie and show very clearly that their notion of freedom and democracy serves only their own interests.

At the end, the image of the forced trial as opposed to free games is carried into a military take-over as the three Masked Men break into the villa. The force that the Professor used to disclose the corruption of his class turns in the hands of the armed men into a means of arresting and robbing people of their possessions. The armed Masked Men are left unidentified, but Ikhlasî paints them to look like most of the military who rule in Syria and other Arab states--uneducated but clever at robbing and controlling the people.

The three democratic patterns portrayed in the play parallel the three political stages that Syria has gone

through since independence. The first government was mostly made up of the bourgeoisie, traders and landlords. Their political system was based on "democracy," free enterprise and freedom of speech. In the late 50s, progressive intellectuals--motivated by socialist and radical ideas and supported by some in the armed forces--replaced the bourgeoisie, but soon after, their role began to shrink and now the military has become the dominant force in the country.

The sudden shift in Ikhlas's play from delightful and farcical games to relatively horrifying events is neither accidental nor unjustifiable. The play contains recurrent signs which anticipate fearful events: the unexpected barking of a dog outside or the presence of guns on the wall and a dispute over whether guns provide one with security or not are a foreshadowing of ominous incidents. The Professor's excessive drinking and his inclination to keep himself aloof from the rest further increases the sense of tension and fear. Little ironies also contribute to the shift from relaxation to tension: the dog said to be barking at a passer-by of course heralds the arrival of the armed men; the Physician who insists that guns provide him with security ends up against the wall; the Lawyer who invents games for entertainment creates a situation of fear and tension. Thus, foreshadowings and ironies succeed in shifting the focus from the relaxation of game playing to the fear and tension of a state of siege.

Certain dramatic aspects of A Democratic Evening Party echo Sartre's No Exit. Both plays provide an unpunctuated stretch of action devoid of scene division, and the action is not externally motivated but grows out of the characters themselves. Only at the end of Ikhlas's play is the action interrupted by an outside force. In both dramas, characters play the roles of the judged and the judge, the tortured and the torturer; they rationalize and justify their past deeds and deny responsibility for them; they try to relate only incidents of their past life which make them seem honest and authentic. As Inez in No Exit tears off the mask from Garcin's face and confronts him with his concealed cowardice, dishonesty and murder, so the Professor in A Democratic Evening Party unmasks the love affairs and crimes of the Contractor, the Physician, the Architect and their mates. Furthermore, as Sartre's characters fail to find exit, Ikhlas's characters end the play trapped in their villa.

But here the similarities end. While Sartre is primarily concerned with the "self" in relation to the "other" from an ontological viewpoint, Ikhlas focuses on the false and corrupt relations among members of a social class from a purely socio-political perspective. Ikhlas may well have been influenced by No Exit, since Sartre's influence presided over the intellectual scene in the Arab world from the late 50s to the 70s. Al-Khatib, a scholar who writes about foreign influence on Syrian writers between 1937 and 1967, argues that "French existentialism continued to appeal to young Syrian

writers who traced the writings of Sartre, Camus and Simone de Beauvoir through translations made available by the Lebanese publishing house Dar al-Adab."¹⁵ By the 70s, Arab intellectuals had access not only to the entire works of Sartre and Camus, but to the critical writings of such existential critics as Francis Jeanson, R.M. Albéres and Maurice Cranston.

The political changes and land reform in the late 50s marked the fall of feudalism and the rise of peasants as a new strong force endowed with economic and political privileges. Deprived of their lands and other social and political powers, feudal families were reduced to helpless and useless people often exposed to the growing threat of peasant retribution. The decay of the old economic order was soon followed by the decay of feudal ideas and values which drove feudal families into a state of discontent, tension, corruption and disorder, and eventually led to their disintegration.

The terminal stages in the decay of feudalism and the rise of a new order are the focus of The Crazy River (Al-Nahir al-Majnun). The play first appeared in an Iraqi periodical in 1976, then in a book published in Syria in 1980. Ikhlas's play, critics argue, is influenced by Chekhov's plays, especially The Cherry Orchard, for it deals with a world in transition, with the frustration and suffering of a feudal

¹⁵Hussam al-Khatib, Subul al-Mu'athirat al-Ajnabia wa Ashkaliha fi al-Qussa al-Suriyah (Manners and Modes of Foreign Influence on Syrian Fiction) (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1974), p. 66.

family as its world disintegrates around it. The Lady in The Crazy River is the counterpart of Chekhov's Ranevskaya (owner of the orchard), but the latter is not as strong and domineering as the former. The garden that withers and the plant that the gardener chops down at the end of The Crazy River are reminiscent of Chekhov's scenes. Both plays contain innumerable references to time and to catching the outbound train. The destruction of the Lady's well and the garden are not different from the loss of the orchard: both stand for the end of an era and its way of life. The Sea Gull, too, has put its mark on this play. Ikhlasi's depiction of Jalal's tragic character and suicide parallels that of Treplev; neither is able to realize his existence as an independent man. Both are overshadowed by their strong and selfish mothers. Furthermore, Afat's betrayal of Jalal with Dr. Nizar is apparently modeled on Nina's betrayal of Treplev with Trigorin.

Some of the similarities between Chekhov's later plays and The Crazy River go beyond subject matter and character to dramatic form and technique. Like Chekhov's plays, Ikhlasi's is neither an action nor a plot play. It can be called an indirect-action play, that is, the major action takes place off stage. What we see on stage is either the consequences of the primary action or the characters' reaction to it. In other words, the tension created by the off-stage action motivates the inner action or the mental and spiritual reactions. Furthermore, as in The Cherry Orchard, incidents

and their sequence are not part of an intricate plot, but symptoms and reflections of a persisting social condition. Above all, an atmosphere and mood of suffering and frustration dominate both plays.

Regardless of Chekhov's influence, however, Ikhlasi deals essentially with problems peculiar to Syrian history and society. The Crazy River is the drama of a strong, selfish and domineering woman in her early sixties. The Lady once owned a lot of land and serfs and enjoyed enormous social and political power; during land reform she is stripped of her land and deprived of her other privileges, unlike Ranevskaya, who loses the orchard through her own incompetence and extravagance. Left only with a house and a well, the Lady comes to loathe the political changes that made the peasants a strong force. She constantly praises the old system and the good old days; she denounces the peasants as dirty, lazy and useless creatures.

Tension grows as the Lady denies the peasants the right to use her well. The district's sheriff mediates between them, but in vain. She insists that she will not let the peasants take a drop of water. Her arrogance is also reflected in the way she deals with her husband, son and daughter. She intimidates her son Jalal and makes him feel utterly useless. Jalal's weakness and lack of power bring upon him the resentment of his wife, Efat, who betrays him with other men. Having discovered his wife's treason, Jalal commits suicide. His sister, Hala, breaks up with her second

fiance, falls in love with a Stranger and runs away with him. Jalal's wife leaves the house for parts unknown. The peasants, failing to talk the Lady into letting them use the well, blow it up.

Despite all the misery that the family experiences, the Lady insists on the justice of her cause and attitude. Nothing has changed, she says; she will dig a new well. Ali Big, her neighbor, decides to leave the village for the city because he can't cope with the changing conditions anymore. The Lady tells Ali that he is changed but the world is still the same. Fateh, the sheriff, declares his failure to control the situation and resigns. Turki, the lady's ex-manager and aide, admits that things have changed and none can challenge the peasants. The Lord, the Lady's husband, who remains almost silent throughout the play, vents his anger upon his arrogant wife and leaves for the city. At the end, she stands alone repeating, "I am still the strongest...nothing has changed."

The first thing that strikes us in The Crazy River is the extensive allusions to the process of decay that engulfs the worlds of nature, of the individual, and of human relationships. Symptoms of aging, sickness, withering and deterioration permeate the whole play. The Lady states, "The house is getting old and needs renovation."¹⁶ Fateh, the

¹⁶Walid Ikhlas, Al-Nahir al-Majnun (The Crazy River) (Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa wal-Irshad al-Qawmi, 1980), p. 15.

sheriff, continually complains about the deterioration of his health, "Illness has no mercy on anyone including me...I suffer from liver and kidney ailments."¹⁷ He tells everyone that he is tired and his horse has aged. Ali Big tells the Lady, "Age has surprised me very quickly and I can't fight back anymore."¹⁸ Hala addresses the Stranger, "I assure you that I have aged."¹⁹ The Gardener complains, "There is no safety anymore; even the roses that I planted have been destroyed."²⁰ Gradually, the plants in the garden wither and the Gardener is heard chopping them down. The Lord is deaf and can't communicate without a hearing aid. The Lady can't function at the end without leaning on a cane. Symptoms of disintegration in human relationships are evident in the lack of communication between the Lord and his wife and between the latter and her son and daughter. Variations on the decay of human ties are indicated by Efat's betrayal of her husband and the latter's suicide, Hala's failure in her two engagements, Nizar's divorce, Ali Big's loneliness and the Lady's self-centeredness and utter arrogance.

The play depicts the decay of the old order as part of the process of change; in the thoughts, arguments, and actions of the characters is perceived the impact of changing realities

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

upon them. As the Lord thinks of going out hunting as he did in the past, Fateh warns him, "The new regulations are strict and bar hunting."²¹ Hearing the news of a murder in the valley the Lord remarks that "no one would dare commit a crime as long as I was there; the old days have passed."²² Constant arguments about whether things stay still or change run through the play. As the Lady brags about the beauty of the valley, Fateh says sharply that "it is no longer as interesting as it used to be."²³ When the Lady insists that it is still the same, Fateh flares up: "My mind has changed, my body has changed...everything has changed."²⁴ As an Old Musician enters the garden, the Lady with confidence tells everyone, "This is how he looked twenty years ago; he has not changed at all."²⁵ She then adds, "You see...I have not changed and nothing has changed here."²⁶ The Lady's friend remarks calmly, "Everything changes."²⁷ Thus, the word "change" functions like a refrain; and as the action progresses, characters grow more aware of their changing world and more adverse to the Lady's rigid convictions. Only she

²¹Ibid., p. 21.

²²Ibid., p. 20.

²³Ibid., p. 108.

²⁴Ibid., p. 110.

²⁵Ibid., p. 56.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

remains apparently unaffected, insisting that only man's thinking changes, not the real world.

The process of change that hits the aging world and leaves it a shambles creates a void in the life of its people. Nothing is left for them to cling to or depend on. A sweeping sense of alienation, loss, detachment, dislocation, loneliness and resentment haunts them. Their only dream and means of survival is escape. Hala asks, "Father, why are we here? Nothing is left for us here."²⁸ And when she sees the train she says, "I will get on the train one day and go beyond the mountains and never return."²⁹ The feeling of being a stranger in his own home motivates Hala's father to leave for the city: "When shall we return to the city? We have become strangers here."³⁰ Misery and loneliness lie behind Ali Big's flight: "I will go to Europe and look for my son and hang around."³¹ The search for escape from yesterday is the dream of the Stranger: "I want to get on the train and go to a city beyond frontiers."³² Thus the drive for escape which preoccupies these characters symbolizes the end of an era and the absolute elimination of a class.

Decline and death are woven, too, into the play's form and structure. In an attempt to capture the fluidity of life

²⁸Ibid., p. 15.

²⁹Ibid., p. 10.

³⁰Ibid., p. 14.

³¹Ibid., p. 48.

³²Ibid., p. 93.

and time, Ikhlasî minimizes the traditional functions of action, plot and character development; instead he draws attention to the persisting situation. Characters don't carry their objectives through a traceable forward movement à la Ibsen. Action and character development are not in the context of a plot and the sequence of events is less significant to the plot than to the expression of conditions. Suspense and expectation occur, but without punctuating the sustained situation or focusing the audience's attention. The structure is almost reduced to expositions and allusions. The plotless exposition of repetitive patterns of incidents--innumerable departures and arrivals, long, leisurely conversations, allusions to the passing trains and the setting sun, withering trees and changing nature--all correspond to the state of fluidity and change.

Such traditional ingredients as love, revenge, treason and suicide exist, but they are divested of their dramatic significance: they don't function as part of an intricate plot nor do they create an atmosphere of suspense, surprise and expectation. Though such incidents further the action, speed up the pace and fulfill the function of a climax, all seem less significant than the atmosphere they interrupt. Regardless of how tense and horrible some of these incidents are, they are seen as symptomatic recurrences of a degenerating world, marking its routine of change and disintegration, not breaking it.

The question of mutability can also be detected in the gradual reduction and elimination of actual objects and characters. There is a kind of degenerative process manifested in the dramatic action in the transformation and elimination of people and things. For example, the garden, a little disorganized at first, is later destroyed. In all the social scenes, the large number of characters who gather and mingle gradually decreases; some die, some disappear and others run away to the city. The last scene ends with the Lady standing alone. A generation passes, an era dies.

Throughout the play, visual, and verbal rhythmic patterns help create the dramatic situation and suggest what is likely to happen. The state of decline and ineffectuality is established by the endless recurrence of the words, "tired," "old" and "sick." The drive for escape and the passage of time are emphasized by the constant passage of the train. The mutability of reality is pointed out by the repetitions of words such as "change" and "alter." The sense of dislocation and alienation is made felt through the utterance of such phrases as "nothing is left" and "strangers we are here." Lack of communication is evident in a rhythmic pattern of action--the Lord's endless switching off of his hearing aid. Characters communicate through countless pauses and silences, and often talk past each other. Occasionally, young characters address the Lady's empty chair in an attempt to vent their anger and hatred. Thus the recurrence of rhythmic patterns fixes in the audience's imagination impressions of change and decay.

The language of The Crazy River is marked by simplicity and suggestivity; it is designed to serve and accentuate the atmospheric nature of the play. Only when the dramatic situation turns tense and involves confrontation between two characters does language become straightforward and dramatic in the sense that its impact on the audience is immediate. But when tension subsides, language is less direct, more poetic, more appropriate to the lost dreams of the characters. The poetic effect of the language arises from the careful choice of words for connotative effects and the many images of frustration and suffering.

The structure of The Crazy River is basically realistic, but some of its elements function as symbols, and others gradually acquire symbolic meanings. For example, the hill and the valley are indicative of two conflicting classes; the hill represents the higher class (feudal rulers), the valley designates the lower class (peasants). Occasionally, Hala and Jalal express their strong desire to cross the river which they have been scared even to swim in since they were children. Here the river stands for the fluidity of life and the ever-changing world. Crossing the river means overcoming the old fears and opening up the new changing world. The other symbol that runs through the play is the train which suggests the motion of modern time for which Hala is yearning. The Lady's chair, which is often described as an old throne, acquires symbolic dimensions. This chair which the young characters resent and try to smash connotes the old system

that the new generation strives to destroy. Thus these four symbols suggest motion, conflict and revolt against the established order.

Though the main events in the play are set against the social and political background of the late 50s, the movement of action gradually transcends the limitations of the immediate historical events and lends itself to different interpretations. What is initially historical and social develops into something of a broader humanistic and more universal nature. The political contradictions between the rigid feudal order and peasants in revolt takes the form of conflict between those who view life and reality as mutable entities and live accordingly, and those who defend the immobility of social and human realities and oppose any possible change. Ikhlasi's play succeeds in turning what is historical and social into something timeless and universal without undermining the former. In other words, the universal evolves out of what is originally social and historical.

One final remark about some of the symbols in The Crazy River: the symbolic meanings of the Lady's "chair" and the "river" are made perfectly clear to us through a series of allusions and associations, but Ikhlasi finds it necessary to write dialogue in which the characters directly discuss these meanings--so no one will miss the point! The decoding of such symbols weakens both their symbolic function and the associations they arouse. But apart from this minor shortcoming, the play is probably Ikhlasi's best.

Though the four plays considered in this chapter deal with similar social and political issues, their techniques and style do not reflect any gradual development from one mode to another. The dramatic diversity that characterizes these plays demonstrates Ikhlasī's persistent interest in experimenting with different genres and techniques. However, emphasis in these plays is manifestly laid on themes and characters rather than on plot or actions. Even in The Crazy River, which differs from the rest of the plays in technique and style, action and plot are minimal and overshadowed by mood and atmosphere. Characters in these plays are exclusively drawn from certain social classes and political institutions. These characters are either type or stock figures designed, developed and explored mainly to describe and disclose the corruption and disintegration of the class or the institution that they represent. In The Crazy River, the situation is slightly different; characters are presented both as social types and as human beings of universal nature. In this respect, The Crazy River is a leap forward.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOCIAL PREDICAMENT

The plays under consideration in this chapter focus on the conflict between the individual and the network of social traditions within which he operates. Since World War II, deep-rooted traditions, norms and value systems have undergone tremendous changes as a result of political and socio-economic conditions coupled with the Syrian government's emphasis on modernizing the education system and expanding schools in rural areas to eliminate illiteracy among peasants. Such changes had considerable impact on the relations between the individual and his family, sect, or tribe. The rigid norms that subjected women to men and the individual to a social unit began to give way to the independence of the individual.

The structure of Syrian society, like all other Arab communities, has always been collective. "The family and the tribe," as Morroe Berger notes, "have been the social units through which the individual has related himself to others and to governments."¹ The strong family code determines the role of the individual and his loyalties. Even marriage--in the West a relationship between two individuals--is "chiefly a joining of two families rather than of two individuals.

¹Morroe Berger, The Arab World Today (New York: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 33.

Family life is shaped by the older generation for the younger, and by the desire and values of the men imposed upon those of the women."² Thus the father is the ruling figure in the family; children, male and female, owe their parents total obedience; women are subordinate to men and easily divorced, should the man so choose. The total subjugation of women and the privileges conferred on men by Islam led to the spread of polygamy in Arab countries.

In such a rigid society, where individual freedom and self-assertion are taboos, the social unit becomes the source of morals and man's behavior is measured by adherence to established norms rather than compliance with his own conscience. "The Arab morality," says Sania Hamady, "depends on the pressure of an audience... 'What would people say' is the main criterion for his choice."³ Hamady adds that it is the fear of shame rather than of conscience that impels the Arab to conform to group standards.⁴ Morroe Berger is right that Arab communities "encourage acts that are approved merely because they are traditional and not because they are useful from another or changing standpoint,"⁵ and that this drives the Arab man "to harbor two major contradictory impulses; egotism and conformity. The first takes the form of extreme

²Ibid., p. 100.

³Sania Hamady, Temperment and Character of the Arabs (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1960), p. 35.

⁴Ibid., pp. 34-35.

⁵Berger, The Arab World Today, p. 121.

self-assertion before others, pride and sensitivity to criticism. The second is reflected in obedience to certain group norms which are resented, and an inability to assert independence as an individual with confidence or finality."⁶ Today, with the gradual erosion of rigid norms, the individual has become more conscious of his identity and more inclined to model his morality after his own image. The individual's struggle for self-assertion in the face of restraint and repression is the focus of the plays considered in this chapter.

The destructive impact of tradition on the individual who tries to violate the norm or establish his own values attracted Ikhlasī's attention as early as 1965 when he wrote his one-act play The Ten Drums of Execution (Tubul al-Idam al-Ashra). Ikhlasī calls his play "an avant-garde drama." In fact, it is the first Syrian play that does away with action, plot, conflict and character development. Rather, it is an organized structure of images, themes and statements that constitute a kind of symphony which creates impressions of an irresolvable contradiction.

In spite of the absence of action and plot, one can still catch a glimpse of a story in the scattered incidents and disconnected speeches about the Woman of royal blood who falls in love with the Man of a lower class. Both are jailed in a dingy cave on charges of violating the established norm.

⁶Ibid., p. 136.

Chained to the cave's wall, they focus their attention on a hole in the cave's ceiling. Every movement around the opening rekindles their hope and makes their waiting bearable. When some light comes through the opening, their feeling and desire for each other build, but as the cave dims, the Woman begins to feel the futility of waiting while the Man looks at the hole with increasing fear that no one will come to free them. Moments later, they hear the screams of a tortured man and think that he too has violated the order of society. They discuss how much torture and pain they can tolerate, but as they watch a leak in the cave's ceiling, they talk about their past lives and memories and how torture cannot keep them from loving each other.

They hear more screams; they try to be defiant, but instead start reminiscing about their love life and struggle against social barriers. Hearing royal music, the Woman recalls her life in the castle, how she hates royal luxury and appearances and the evil and corruption that dominate the castle. She speaks of her sister who has been awarded the badge of honor for informing against a poet; those in power broke the poet's pen and threw him into "the forest of madmen." Her beloved quietly sings of the beauty of love. When the Woman asks him whether his frustration means regret, he collects himself and argues, "Our will has killed fear."

Soon after, a snake comes in and climbs over the Woman's body. As the door opens, the snake goes out and the Jailer enters, telling the couple that their death is near. The

Woman asks to hear a song, but the Jailer rejects her request. She asks him to allow her to change her position so she may see her beloved; the Jailer refuses.

When a shadow passes by the cave's opening, the Man rejoices, thinking that the "savior" has come to free them. As they begin to sing, a huge spider spins a web around the opening, making it look like a prison window. Suddenly, a bird of prey lands on the hole and tears apart the spider's web. The cave lights up and the Man shouts in joy, "He has come; the savior has come." The bird hovers over the couple's heads as though trying to pluck their eyes out. Fear and despair reign. The Jailer comes in, chases the bird out and says the King has arrived. Knowing that they will die, they poke fun at the Jailer and shower love and passion on each other. The King enters the cave with the Priests, and the Jailer reads the indictment, and the Man and Woman die.

The affinity of The Ten Drums of Execution with the European theatre of the absurd is evident in its structure, language and atmosphere. Ikhlas's circular structure is marked by the recurrence of particular incidents and gestures, statements and phrases, moments of joy and despair. As in absurdist and surrealistic drama, unexpected and unmotivated incidents abound, e.g., a snake climbs the Woman's body and a bird of prey hovers above the couple's heads. Frequently the sequence of events is either interrupted or destroyed by the intrusion of nonsensical gestures, phrases or incidents, as in this exchange:

JAILER: (Reading the indictment) You are charged with violating the spirit of time and challenging the system...

MAN: How is your family, sir?⁷

The other characteristic that relates Ikhlasī's play to the theatre of the absurd in general and Genet's in particular is his use of ritualistic ceremonies with social and political implications. Above all, the structural division--the beginning, middle and end--seems to follow the pattern of absurdist drama. Emphasis is on the middle where almost everything occurs. The beginning is minimal, meant neither to identify characters nor provide exposition. The end is slighted; it occurs when everything seems to have been exhausted.

The spirit of revolt of avant-garde drama permeates much of the language of Ikhlasī's play: non-discursive language and the absurd passages are juxtaposed with figurative lines imbued with poetic images and realistic and discursive speeches; realistic patterns are used in passages that provide information about the characters and events. Here, for example, is the Woman's description of her violation of the norm:

I have challenged an old system that prevents a woman of royal descent from marrying a man who uses his mind and realizes his existence.⁸

⁷Walid Ikhlasī, Tubul al-Idam al-Ashra (The Ten Drums of Execution), in Al-Alam min Qabil wa Badu (The World Before and After) (Damascus: Dar al-Fan al-Hadith al-Alami, 1965), p. 31.

⁸Ibid., p. 22.

Logical discourse is sometimes abandoned for romantic moments or memories:

WOMAN: When the roses in our garden
blossomed, I knew something happened
here, inside me. And when they
sentenced me to death, I felt a new
wonder.⁹

When time weighs heavy on the Man's mind, his language dissolves into metaphor:

MAN: Listen to time,
Do you hear it?
It moves forward;
it pulls us toward the end,
(shouting) stop, you wild quick
horse.¹⁰

The Woman resorts to imagistic language in describing the perverted heroism of her brother:

WOMAN: My brother is a hero;
he chokes colored fish.¹¹

The Man's language sometimes disintegrates into surrealistic phrases devoid of logical signification:

WOMAN: Are you afraid?

MAN: Afraid? Did not fear die last year?
The hedgehog stabbed it in the liver;
it fell on its head and smashed.
Have you not thrown it out?¹²

In absurdist drama, characters talk past each other, speaking in non sequiturs. In Ikhlasī's play, however, characters achieve this effect by alternation of forms: one

⁹Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹Ibid., p. 24.

¹²Ibid., p. 14.

employs a standard discourse to develop a thesis while the other speaks illogically:

WOMAN: I just realized why they charged us.

MAN: The demon has come and devoured the songs.¹³

Furthermore, despite the absurd or surrealistic phrases scattered through the play, most of the dialogue functions within the realm of logic. For example, after the Man says, "The demon has come and devoured the songs," the Woman continues to argue rationally. The Man asks her, "Why have they charged us?" She explains and he at once follows her line of argument and presents more reasons. The absurd elements are overshadowed by the discursive speeches which focus our attention on the social and historical facts (social classes and traditions) that underlie the whole play. The situation in Ikhlesi's play is no more than a social problem arising from the rigid and stifling tradition, which lends itself to logical discussions carried on in discursive language.

Though Ikhlesi's language sometimes diverges from that of the theatre of the absurd, the dramatic situation and the structure create an atmosphere similar to that of Waiting for Godot. Like Beckett, Ikhlesi reduces the action of his play to the act of waiting. Estragon and Vladimir are waiting for Godot; Ikhlesi's Man and Woman are waiting for their "savior." The stage in Waiting for Godot is bare but for a tree that may

¹³Ibid., p. 36.

be seen as symbolizing hope; Ikhlasi's setting is an empty dingy cave with an opening in the ceiling that may also be seen as signifying hope. The vacillation between hope and despair, certainty and uncertainty, highlighted by the boy's arrival in Beckett's play, is paralleled by the bird's arrival in Ikhlasi's play. The "savior," like Godot, fails to come and the waiting is ended only by the couple's execution. The attitude of Ikhlasi's characters toward the "savior" is similar to that of Beckett's characters toward Godot: Vladimir's optimism and belief in Godot's arrival parallel the Man's certainty of the "savior's" arrival, while Estragon's doubts about Godot are similar to the Woman's qualms about the "savior." Furthermore, like Estragon and Vladimir, the two are often lethargic and move with difficulty. Like Beckett, Ikhlasi tosses out a theme for his characters to toy with, then abandons it for something else. Both sets of characters make up stories about the delay in the expected arrival. The famous phrase that describes the situation in Beckett's play--"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it is awful"¹⁴--echoes through Ikhlasi's play. The Woman repeats, "There is no chance of escape."¹⁵ In both plays, man is faced with frustration, despair, isolation and constant grappling with death.

¹⁴Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1954), p. 28.

¹⁵Ikhlasi, The Ten Drums of Execution, p. 36.

The similarities between Beckett's play and Ikhlasī's are probably not accidental. Ikhlasī's reading of Waiting for Godot, either in English or Arabic, must have made a deep impression on him.

Though The Ten Drums of Execution lacks a story that communicates a social and moral message and shows no interest in presenting characters caught in conflict, it still provides several clues to understanding the social and political situation, the nature of the subdued conflict and the forces involved in it. The jailed Man describes the situation as totally controlled by eternal and supernatural laws:

Everything around us is preshaped, like an
eternal mold producing life, bread and tears.¹⁶

The rigidity and immutability of the world are symptomatic of a theocratic order represented by the church and state and reflected clearly in the ritual ceremonies conducted by the King and the Priests during the couple's execution. Aspects of the despotic nature of theocracy are manifested in the oppression of intellectuals. The woman ironically describes what happened to a poet:

WOMAN: My sister was awarded the badge of
honor because she informed against a
man who used to write lovely poetry.
They broke his enchanting pens and
threw him into the forest of madmen.¹⁷

Along with political oppression comes the stifling role of social traditions which assign the individual certain tasks

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

to perform and determine his relation to his family, sect and class:

WOMAN: I have challenged an old system that prevents a woman of royal descent from marrying a man who uses his mind and realizes his existence.¹⁸

In such a sterile world there is nothing new of any depth or substance. The couple uses the metaphor of light and floating objects to describe the all-pervasive superficiality:

MAN: Nothing is seen but the foam.

WOMAN: Nothing floats but the foam.¹⁹

But beneath the surface of the old and stagnant world lies the potential for a new force, a quest for the depths, suggesting their longing for freedom and substance, as symbolized by the sea:

MAN: The king of the depths am I!
And you are the unique pearl of the sea.²⁰

The Woman tries to break away from established norms and identify with such prohibited desires as a banned song, while the Man struggles "to create life without mold," an open and dynamic world. But their revolt is doomed and the rebels are destined to destruction lest their mottos stir up others:

KING: Chop their limbs up so that nobody will revolt anymore.²¹

¹⁸Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., p. 38.

²¹Ibid., p. 45.

"Death to the enemies of order,"²² say the Priests, for in a theocracy man may be sacrificed to preserve order. Thus, though the play starts when the potential for conflict is already exhausted, the motivation and context for such conflict have clearly been defined by the couple's violation of traditions. This violation expands into a conflict between the individual and his family, sect and social class, and then develops into a clash between the individual and the establishment. On a more abstract level, the struggle is between the new and the old or between inherited values and self-chosen ideals.

Time and space in The Ten Drums of Execution are left undefined. Ikhlasī describes the setting simply as "a cave in a kingdom" with no historical or geographical context. However, the alliance of the despotic King and the ruthless church against individuals in revolt and new ideas are characteristic of medieval Europe. Ikhlasī sets his events in a European-Christian rather than Arab-Moslem context in order to escape censorship and divert the attention of Moslem fanatics away from his attack on their religious ideas. In fact, the destructive part played by the medieval church and state is simply an objective correlative of the devastating impact of religion and the Arab military states upon the individual, who still cannot stand independent of family, sect, religion and social class.

²²Ibid.

Some elements in Ikhlasī's play seem to have double functions, creating atmosphere as well as supplying symbolic dimensions. For example, the snake climbing the Woman's body creates a state of horror, but once the Man asks, "Have not we conquered the snake?,"²³ his statement sparks a series of associations. The snake becomes a symbol of old and inherited fears that society had imposed upon the two in the past and from which they are now free. The second symbol is the bird of prey which connotes the nearness of death. A third symbol is the spider. Its constant presence enhances the feeling of isolation and loneliness and its growing web around the cave's opening symbolizes the gradual loss of the hope suggested by the light that used to come through the opening. In short, the three symbols emphasize the endless grappling with the state of hopelessness and death that underlies the whole play.

In The Ten Drums of Execution a violation of traditions is the immediate cause of the couple's death, but in Alone Against the City (Wahdahu Thid al-Madina) observation of the norms and the force of poverty are portrayed as the source of all evils. The burden of tradition and poverty weighs men down and forces them to abandon their moral values for immoral ways and means. In such a world, what distinguishes an honest man from a dishonest one is not the good deeds of the former but the fact that the misdeeds of the latter are concealed behind social masks while the honest man's are displayed, labeled and exaggerated.

²³Ibid., p. 30.

Alone Against the City (1970) was published in Al-Marifa, a Syrian literary journal. Two years later it was performed at the Aleppo People's Theatre. It had a relatively long run and received a number of good reviews. Unlike The Ten Drums of Execution, this play is realistic and has a linear plot. Though longer than a one-act play, Ikhlası observes the technique of the one-act play and focuses on a simple incident and a small cast of characters. We have a gradual and logical unfolding of the story, and the events and characters develop along the line of cause and effect, concluding with a climax near the final curtain.

Though the play falls into seven scenes, it does not call for curtains or blackouts because there is only one incident which occurs in one place. The seven scenes unfold as follows:

Scene I introduces the setting, situation and characters. The Old Man, who is by profession a plumber, tells his Wife that a woman was threatened by a Murderer on the phone, and the government has offered a ten thousand lire reward for his capture. When his Wife claims that the Murderer killed forty people, the Old Man argues that the Murderer killed in self-defense. Afraid of what has been said about the dangerous Murderer, the Wife wonders if the authorities will succeed in arresting him. The Old Man calms her down.

The Wife tells her husband to be more flexible with their son Kamal, who wants to marry and needs their financial support. The Old Man argues that when he was a young man and

decided to marry, he worked hard and saved money for his wife's dowery. Suddenly a voice outside warns that the Murderer is hidden in the neighborhood, and the people should lock their doors. Believing that thieves and murderers don't break into poor houses, the Old Man refuses to lock the door and wishes to meet the Murderer to learn more about him. The noise and bustle on the street bother the two, who wish they had curtains on their windows. Both complain about poverty. Then the door opens and Ahmad, of the secret police, comes in.

Scene II introduces Ahmad, the Old Man's friend. He is tired and restless, and complains that he can't relax until the Murderer is arrested. He admits that he will use every conceivable means to liquidate him. Ahmad's warning against the dangers of the hidden Murderer causes the Wife to worry about Kamal, who has not come home yet. The Old Man complains about the miserable house in which he lives and praises Ahmad's luxurious house. When the Wife asks Ahmad why he broke with his fiancée, he pretends to be very busy and leaves to look for the murderer.

In Scene III, Kamal comes. His mother invites him to have dinner, but he says he's sick of eating the same food everyday, sick of being poor. He will join the police, arrest the Murderer, and win ten thousand lire with which he will marry and buy a comfortable house. The Old Man denounces Kamal's plan as evil but he understands that Kamal, like other men, is looking for a better life. Kamal leaves quickly despite his mother's pleas.

In Scene IV, the Murderer enters the house, pistol in hand, warning the old couple not to budge or shout. He checks the house and asks for something to eat. They offer the Murderer food and vow not to betray him. Trying to test the loyalty of the Old Man, the Murderer tells him that he can make ten thousand lire if he just tells the police about his whereabouts, but the Old Man denounces it as dirty money. When he urges the Murderer to put an end to his criminal behavior, the latter argues that no matter what he does, the crimes of the whole city are blamed on him. He says that he has not killed a single man intentionally, but admits he is determined to kill the man who lured him into committing crimes. All men have faults, says the Old Man; his are visible but those of others remain hidden. He tells the Murderer that Ahmad is likely to return; the Murderer says that Ahmad is the very man he seeks to kill. Noises are heard. The Murderer hides under the bed. Kamal comes in.

In Scene V, Kamal insists on capturing the Murderer, turning him over to the government and getting ten thousand lire. His father deplores his plan, but Kamal, dagger in hand, says he will live no longer as a miserable worker without a wife, and rushes out.

Scene VI shows the Murderer coming out of hiding. The old couple tells him not to take what Kamal says seriously. The Murderer understands Kamal's motive and assures them he will not hurt their son. When he was a little boy, he tells them, he hit another boy because the latter was nicely dressed

while he was in rags, and quit school because he did not have enough books, notebooks and pencils. Later he married a thoughtless woman whose endless demands forced him to think of making quick money. Stealing and robbing were made possible for him by Ahmad, who protected him in exchange for half of what he stole or embezzled. Now, however, Ahmad has realized that the government is determined to discover the Murderer, so he has decided to kill the Murderer to conceal his collaboration with him. Voices are heard outside, and Ahmad comes in with a gun in his hand.

In Scene VII, Ahmad threatens at gunpoint to arrest the Murderer, but the Old Man begs Ahmad not to kill him. The Murderer says he has given documents that indict Ahmad to a friend who will turn them over to the government. Ahmad denies the existence of anything that can prove him guilty. As Ahmad tries to force the Murderer out of the house, several shots are heard and Ahmad falls to the floor severely wounded, but manages to fire at the Murderer. Both Ahmad and the Murderer die. When the police enter the house, the old man shouts emotionally that they are all sinners. A little later, he confesses to his Wife that he too has stolen money, but that no one knows about it. The curtain falls.

The structural patterns and types of characters in Alone Against the City seem to have been modeled on detective stories. Ikhlas's play hinges on a series of crimes, all ascribed to the shrewd Murderer who must be caught and punished. Hence dramatic searches and investigations and

chases which culminate in the death of the man and a policeman. Despite the detective story elements, however, Ikhlasi's play is not simply thrills and superficial chills. Instead, it puts plot and action in the service of exploring serious and profound content. The question of who committed the crime and how--central to any detective story--is here subordinated to the question of why a crime is committed.

The play provides much information about the setting, the characters and their social background. The first thing we encounter is the image of poverty, which permeates the play and underlies its action and characters. There is the shabby house whose windows have no curtains to block the noise and bustle of the busy street, disturbing the peace of the Old Man and his Wife. Both complain about the life they lead. The Wife repeatedly expresses her need for curtains while the Old Man says, "I wish we could spit on this house and move to another one."²⁴ The pain of poverty stings when the Old Man learns that Kamal, his son, wants to marry and needs his financial support. "Try to make him understand," he tells his Wife, "that we are poor. If we stop working a day we will starve."²⁵ Kamal's resentment is even stronger than that of his parents. When his mother calls him to eat, he turns away in disgust: "Beans and cheese...beans and cheese...if I die

²⁴Ikhlasi, Wahdahu Thid al-Madina (Alone Against the City), Al-Marifa No. 105 (November, 1970), p. 135.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 137.

one day, it will be because of beans and cheese."²⁶ Thus, poverty is the background against which characters and their behavior are judged.

Poverty, social conditions and traditions not only constrain man's freedom but also force him to make choices against his will and resort to crime for survival. Social constraints are so powerful that they make the Old Man say again and again, "There is no man without sin."²⁷ In the context of Ikhlesi's play, sin has no religious connotation and is not inherent in man's nature; it is the outcome of concrete and definable causes. When the Wife thinks that murder is inherent in the Murderer's soul, the Old Man explains, "He is a human being like us; he has not become a murderer without a reason."²⁸ He tries to demonstrate the fluidity and mutability of man's nature: "Who knows what he could have become had he gone to school and had his conditions not forced him to commit such crimes?"²⁹ The play shows that man is liable to sin, but is also able to transcend sin by adopting a new attitude. The Old Man is a case in point. After all, at one moment of his life he acted almost like the Murderer because he faced poverty and marriage traditions. "I was a strong young man," he says, "but I had no money. I

²⁶Ibid., p. 148.

²⁷Ibid., p. 156.

²⁸Ibid., p. 139.

²⁹Ibid., p. 136.

wanted to marry you, so I had no other choice but to steal."³⁰ Ikhlasi does not try to rationalize or justify the theft; he is interested in showing that the Old Man has moved beyond his past and become a different person. Like Sartre, Ikhlasi sees the present full of opportunities for new choices and actions and man's future dependent on what choices he makes in the present. Man's past is not the cause of his damnation unless he makes his present a continuation of that past.

The question of crime and punishment occupies a central position in both the detective story and Ikhlasi's play. In Alone Against the World, who judges whom and on what basis take on philosophical dimensions. The idea that all men have sinned brings into question the validity of the judging institutions. The play, through a series of incidents and discussions, indicates that not only the individual but society as a whole is plagued with the destructive impact of necessity: "Who has not sinned? Who has not stolen? We are all thieves and murderers."³¹ Ahmad, who is assigned the role of chasing and killing the Murderer, turns out to be his partner. Here Ikhlasi seems to be denying the legal institutions their right to judge the individual. Ikhlasi, in the spirit of Christ, calls upon the individual to reflect upon himself and scrutinize his inner depths before judging others. Feeling the injustice exercised against the Murderer,

³⁰Ibid., p. 166.

³¹Ibid.

the Old Man repeats Christ's words, "Let he who has committed no sin cast the first stone."³² The ideal of sound judgment is presented through the Old Man, who sets up his conscience as the criterion against which he judges his past deeds and transcends them by making genuine humanistic choices.

Though Ikhlasi observes the general rules of the one-act play, he sometimes forgets that there is insufficient time for more extensive character development than the single incident demands. His attempts to dig out the hidden past of his characters, to justify their actions, lead him to use a narrative technique that loosens the plot and detracts from its intricacy and excitement. More damage is done to the play by the inclusion of some abstract and didactic discussions ostensibly for the clarification of ideas. I believe such shortcomings could have been avoided had Ikhlasi designed a plot to produce dramatic images or events capable of suggesting visually what has been stated abstractly.

The blind adherence of the individual to the values and traditions of the collective takes the form of fatal force in Ikhlasi's one-act play, Fate Scratches Its Head (Al-Qadar Yahiku Rasahu, 1973). The individual relates to others through his social unit and what it represents. He acts in accordance with the image that his group assigns him. When he fails to achieve his goal, he commits suicide to demonstrate his loyalty to the rules and values of his unit.

³² Ibid.

Fate Scratches Its Head has five scenes. The play observes the unities of time, place and action; it has a small cast of characters and, like the previous play, is based on a single incident. A detailed account of each scene follows. The setting for the entire play is Nizar's studio. In Scene I, Uncle Zaki admires the beauty of the statue which Nizar is still working on. Nizar is making a statue of Afaf, whom he loves, but she is engaged to his cousin Asaad, an army officer. Uncle Zaki believes that Afaf could have loved Nizar if the latter had tried to express his feelings for her. Nizar thinks that Afaf loves his cousin and nothing can change her mind. Uncle Zaki describes Asaad as spoiled, conceited and possessive. He wonders if Afaf is happy in her engagement, for a rumor has spread in the town about how badly Afaf is treated by Asaad. As Uncle Zaki leaves, Nizar contemplates the statue and admits that he loves Afaf, but does not and will never have the courage to tell her.

In Scene II, Asaad comes in dressed in an army uniform looking tense and restless. In an attempt to calm him down, Nizar offers him a drink and begins to talk about their childhood and how they cared about each other. He reminds Asaad of the pigeon's nest which he had found, but which Asaad took away from him by force. Nizar emphasizes the importance of giving; he decides to finish the statue and present it to Asaad and Afaf on their wedding day. Asaad argues that Nizar doesn't have enough time to finish the statue because he has decided to marry today at seven o'clock at Nizar's studio. He

declares that he will kill himself if Afaf and her parents don't show up at seven o'clock. Denouncing Afaf's parents as stupid and reactionary, he holds them responsible for keeping Afaf from seeing him.

The stage dims and spotlights are alternately thrown on Nizar and Asaad, each light accompanied by a voice off stage stressing man's need for reasons and logic and condemning hasty decisions. The stage lights up and Nizar and Asaad continue their discussion. Nizar, in a friendly manner, tries to talk Asaad into being more sober and rational, but the latter argues that he has sworn by his military honor to kill himself if Afaf does not come on time, and that it is fate that determines man's destiny. Nizar argues that man's will determines everything. Only one hour remains. Nizar assures him that Afaf will come, and asks Asaad to give him his pistol, but Asaad refuses. Then the door opens and Afaf's father comes in. Asaad feels comfortable and more optimistic.

In Scene III, Afaf's father tells Nizar how Asaad has no respect for family traditions for he has kissed Afaf in public and thus jeopardized the family's reputation. He explains that he has ordered his daughter to come to the studio at the appointed hour, but the question of marriage is to be decided by Afaf and Asaad, not by the latter alone. Asaad insists that the wedding will be held today--otherwise he will kill himself. The stage dims, lights fall on Asaad and Nizar alternately, and again the off-stage voice makes sarcastic

statements about Asaad's oaths and decisions. Once more, Asaad argues that fate determines man's future.

In Scene IV, Uncle Zaki comes in trying to persuade Asaad to be patient and flexible with Afaf, who will come momentarily. Nizar and Uncle Zaki beg Asaad to put his pistol aside. Reflecting for a little while, Nizar admits that he has learned a lesson from Asaad's problem--not to promise to do a thing he can't do or make an oath he can't keep. When Asaad asks him if he has made any promise, Nazir says that he loved a girl a long time ago and pledged to love her as long as he lived, but now he feels that he can free himself from that oath. Uncle Zaki praises his decision. It is getting late, and Asaad thinks that Afaf is not coming. She must come soon, says Nizar, and goes out to buy flowers. Asaad holds his pistol and addresses the statue with pain and frustration. Soon after, Nizar comes back telling Asaad that Afaf has arrived.

Afaf, her father and Uncle Zaki enter the studio as Scene V begins. Denouncing Asaad's threat to kill himself as uncivil and irrational, Afaf daringly rejects the idea of a seven p.m. wedding that evening. When Asaad argues that her parents have forced her to take such a stand, Afaf asserts that she is mature enough to decide for herself, that Asaad always considered her inferior and took for granted that she should act according to his orders and instructions without hesitation.

The stage dims, a silence permeates everything, a light falls on Afaf and a Voice off-stage repeats, "Love is giving without taking because he who is loved gives too." The stage lights come up and Afaf thanks Nizar for the statue he made for them. As Asaad begins to threaten, Afaf and her father leave. Asaad feels totally abandoned and humiliated, so Nizar decides to go out and talk Afaf into coming back. Left alone, Asaad takes his pistol and shoots himself. Coming back and seeing Asaad dead, Afaf and her father feel guilty. No one, says Nizar, is responsible for Asaad's death; his own ideas have killed him. Nizar admits to Afaf that he loved her, but that love was extinguished with Asaad's death. Amazed by Nizar's pledge, Afaf argues that men are always chained by ideas and fate. Nizar says that men choose freely what fate orders. Afaf leaves and Nizar remains alone on stage until the curtain falls.

In his instructions to theatre directors regarding his play, Ikhlasī describes Fate Scratches Its Head as a "realistic play hinging on a philosophical basis with heroes tied to a force arising from the self and fate."³³ Certainly fate here is not an invisible, supernatural power; it takes the form of heredity and childhood drives that motivate man's actions and dominate his thinking and feelings. The exposition sets forth carefully the basic characteristics of

³³ Ikhlasī, Al-Qadar Yahiku Rasahu (Fate Scratches Its Head), Al-Marifa No. 140 (October, 1973), p. 147.

the two major characters and the obsessions that rule their lives. Uncle Zaki, who has known Asaad since childhood, describes him as "spoiled, conceited and infatuated with possessing everything."³⁴ Remembering how Asaad deprived him of the pigeon's nest when both were still children, Nizar tells Asaad in a joking manner, "You have a strange power of possessing whatever you lay your hands on."³⁵ Asaad's possessive and compulsive character is contrasted with Nizar's altruistic personality. Nizar is driven by a will to give. When Uncle Zaki advises him to be more concerned about his own needs, Nizar argues, "Man's strength lies in giving, not in taking."³⁶ Associated with the inherited drives is the characters' tendency to make unbreakable oaths and promises which both determine the course of their lives and keep them from making new choices. In Scene V, Nizar's promise not to marry is a case in point. Uncle Zaki warns against such promises: "The oath is the harshest thing in life because it acts as an unbreakable bond."³⁷ Thus the exposition provides an adequate account of how the characters are shackled by heredity and tradition.

The action and its motivation are not more than a variation on what has been described in the exposition. Even the plot seems to be modeled on Nizar's story of the pigeon's

³⁴Ibid., p. 149.

³⁵Ibid., p. 152.

³⁶Ibid., p. 150.

³⁷Ibid.

nest. For example, the young Asaad's drive to take the nest by force is similar to his determination to marry and possess Afaf. Nizar's readiness to give up the nest is analogous to his abandoning of Afaf at the end. Asaad's threats against Nizar in childhood are identical to his threats against Afaf's family. Nizar's early amicable and generous attitude towards Asaad remains unchanged. Obviously the drives that motivate the two incidents are basically the same, but the context has elaborate social and philosophical implications.

The action of Ikhlasī's play focuses on whether Asaad will commit suicide or not. From beginning to end the waiting for the crucial moment of suicide is filled with confrontations between Asaad and other characters, waiting rich in suspense and expectation. Variations of pace and rhythm are effected either by Afaf's delay or by anticipation of her quick arrival. Asaad's determination to kill himself is sometimes softened and his tension thrown into relief, but the hope that Afaf will accept his terms always seems slim despite Nizar's optimism. In a series of discussions between Asaad and Nizar and between Asaad and other characters we come to learn why Asaad decides on suicide: his compulsion to do whatever he likes, which brings him into direct conflict with Afaf's family. Afaf's father tells him that he should have some respect for family traditions, and Asaad answers, "To hell with family traditions."³⁸ The conflict is intensified by Asaad's

³⁸Ibid., p. 153.

insistence on getting married in two hours whether or not Afaf wants to do so. Afaf's father says that "when it comes to marriage , it is not you alone who decides but my daughter too."³⁹ Finally, in reaction to Asaad's rigidity, Afaf tells him, "I am not your doll; I have my thoughts and rights."⁴⁰ Asaad stresses his love for her; Afaf argues, "You love me in your own way and that is what I don't like."⁴¹ Here Ikhlasī contrasts Asaad's compulsion to possess Afaf with the latter's search for a relationship based on love and mutual understanding. The deep-seated possessive instinct drives Asaad to commit suicide as a cover-up for his loss of face and dignity. He argues that "Man's dignity is much stronger than any other feeling."⁴² For him, what counts is not love, but how to preserve injured dignity. He is an army officer and must act according to the convictions of his group; hence he swears by his military honor to kill himself. When Nizar tries to talk him out of it, Asaad says that he has sworn by his military honor. Thus, besides being chained by his possessive drive, Asaad can only see himself through the eyes of others, i.e., his military peers.

The plot lends itself to some philosophical debates related to whether Asaad's suicide and the changes that he and Nizar go through are the work of fate or the result of free

³⁹Ibid., p. 160.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 168.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 156.

choice. Asaad argues, "Fate determines our life and destiny."⁴³ Nizar explains, "It is your will that determines your destiny, only your will."⁴⁴ Nizar had made an oath and abandoned it, and "now I feel much freer than before."⁴⁵ Even after Asaad's suicide, Nizar argues that no one is responsible, that "his thoughts have killed him."⁴⁶ However, the irony lies in Nizar's final decision rather than in Asaad's, for he himself finally adopts an attitude no different from that of Asaad. Before Asaad's dead body, Nizar takes an oath, "I swear to you by what you and I believe that I will respect you feelings. Afaf was yours and will remain yours."⁴⁷ Afaf is shocked by Nizar's sudden decision and says that he has fallen into Asaad's trap. No, says Nizar, "We choose our destiny by ourselves...Fate awaits a gesture from us. When we insist on doing something, fate scratches its head and the blow comes."⁴⁸ Thus, man is neither totally free nor fated; he is conditioned by his surroundings, yet within those limitations he can make new choices.

The philosophical arguments occasionally used in the play to explain certain points are extraneous, especially when the

⁴³ Ibid. p. 158.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 165

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

meaning has already been suggested by the action or pointed out through characters' behavior and interactions. Passages loaded with abstract concepts take away from the dramatic impact of the language and destroy the spontaneity of the dialogue. Here is a speech by Nizar that exemplifies this tendency: "The idea of life is that of the creator and the created and the originator and the originated."⁴⁹ This language hardly springs from the experience and consciousness of the speaker; rather it echoes the ambition of Ikhlasī to convey a philosophical idea.

Another shortcoming of this play arises from the off-stage Voices (chorus), which is meant to explore the inner turmoil of characters, but which is in fact ineffective and useless because it essentially repeats what the characters say or do on stage. Furthermore, when the chorus tries to hint at what is likely to happen, it lessens the suspense. Ikhlasī could easily have avoided these weaknesses had he worked out his plot more carefully and made his theme develop within the framework of concrete action or events.

In Oriental Joy (Farrah Sharqi) Ikhlasī brings into focus the destructive impact of tradition on the lives of young men and women. The older generation which cherishes the established norm is pitted against the new one which seeks the creation of new values drawn from its own experiences and indicative of its own needs and identity. The play emphasizes

⁴⁹ Ibid.

the human, genuine, and rational motivations of the new morality and how it renders the individual an independent entity trying to transcend the rigid social unit that poses its inhuman and irrational norms as an infallible and eternal absolute.

Oriental Joy appeared in Al-Mawqif al-Adabi, a Syrian literary journal, in 1977. In June 1978, the play was staged in Baghdad (Iraq). The production ran more than two months and received a number of good reviews. Ikhlasī does not call his work a play; instead, he describes it as "a theatrical show that relates an ancient tale in dialogue and singing." The structure of Oriental Joy is episodic and includes choral chanting, dancing, singing, narrative episodes and highly dramatic scenes. In other words, the form bears close resemblance to popular theatrical entertainments that revolve around love stories and have social and didactic messages.

Before analyzing the structure of the play and how its constituent elements function, a brief account of the action will be useful. The play has a prologue and two acts. The prologue is made up of a preface and three episodic scenes dramatizing an anecdote interspersed with songs, dance and narration. Act I is entitled "The Tale" and comprises five scenes; Act II is called "A Pagan Joy" and extends to fourteen scenes.

The setting of the prologue is an Arab quarter in which people hold wedding parties. In the preface, the curtain goes up on an empty stage. Then a group of actors accompanied by

the Belly Dancer, Drummer, Singer, Flutist and the Newly-wed Couple move from the auditorium onto the stage, led by the Fortune-teller. When the Couple takes their seats, the Fortune-teller reads palms and foretells the future. The Singer sings about the joy of marriage and some actors repeat the song after him. Leading the Couple to a platform, the Fortune-teller wishes them happy times and the crowd on stage repeats his words. The Belly Dancer sprinkles some incense over the Couple's heads as they disappear. The bustle quiets down.

In Scene II, the actors sit in a circle; the Singer mumbles a song associated with the Newly-wed Couple; the actors, acting as a wedding audience, repeat the words after him. When the song is over, the Fortune-teller walks around reading palms, and then tells the story of how marriage came about and how Adam felt lonely and depressed, but Eve's arrival filled him with warmth and affection. He then states that love and marriage have lost their meaning since they have been ruled by laws and traditions. Women have been turned into commodities judged by their class, wealth or physical beauty. As applauding, dancing and singing start, the Fortune-teller comes in with a monkey; he makes the monkey play the role of a rich man and show how men marry.

A huge scale occupies the center of the stage throughout Scene II. On the right side of the scale sits a Girl dressed in ancient costume; the left is empty. Near the scale stands an actor playing her Father and two actors ringing bells and

peddling the displayed Girl. The Fortune-teller points at the girl saying, "He who pays more owns her." The Father offers encouragement, "She is a virgin...trained to run a house...knows washing, cleaning and cooking." He adds that only he who has money can take her. The Merchant who has accumulated his money through smuggling proposes to marry the Girl; he puts a sack of money on the empty scale. The Girl's Father asks for more. The Merchant adds another sack but to no avail. Searching for love and family life, the Worker pledges to the Girl's Father that he will work hard and make his daughter happy. The Father turns him down. A man with a doctoral degree is turned away. Then a wealthy Old Merchant comes followed by two men carrying sacks full of gold. The Old Merchant fills the left scale with gold until it outweighs the Girl. Asked if he will divorce his four other wives, the Old Merchant agrees to abandon them for the sake of the Girl. Suddenly, an actor comes in telling the Fortune-teller that he wants to play a lover in a true-life story. As he begins to speak, the stage dims.

The setting of Scene III is a town square inside which the crowd is holding lanterns and green branches. The Lover appears on one side of the stage, his Beloved on the other. Silently, slowly, they move to the center of the quarter. A love song is heard from a distance. The Lover asks his Beloved, who is staring into the distance, "Why did you do that?" She begins to disappear. As he tries to follow her, the crowd closes in on him, urging him to tell his story from the beginning.

As we move to Act I, Scene I, the love story begins to unfold. The setting becomes a modern house where the Girl lives with her rich Father. The Lover and the Girl are trying to find a way to talk her Father into approving their marriage. Obsessed with the ideals of modern marriage, the Lover refuses to make any compromises. The Girl urges him to show flexibility and understanding in talking with her Father. Both are tense and worried as the Father knocks at the door. The Girl leaves for another room wishing her Lover good luck.

Scene II takes place in the same room. The meeting is fraught with difficulties, especially after the Father learns that the Lover is an intellectual and a writer. He refuses to marry his daughter to a man who is neither an heir nor the son of a wealthy family; he tells the Lover that the meeting is over and he should never again raise this question.

In Scene III, the Girl tells her Lover that she heard the conversation and feels badly about the rude way he was treated. In a fleeting moment of joy and sadness, they embrace. Off-stage, Voices exalt their love. Carried away by their feelings, they vow to turn their love into a living reality. The Girl decides to challenge her Father and the Lover pledges to love her forever as they address each other as "husband" and "wife."

Scene IV presents the Girl in a long monologue interrupted by off-stage Voices which reflect her inner worries and what the world might think of her if she persists in loving a man her Father despises. She insists on being

herself and is determined to remain loyal to her love, but the voices remind her of "what the people will think and do." The scene is a dialogue between ego and id.

In Scene V, the Girl and her Father are chatting. The girl argues that love brings happiness, but money brings money. He says that she is his only heir, and he therefore wants to see her married to a man who will protect her and safeguard her wealth. The Father says that three men have already shown interest in her and the best should be chosen. The Girl refuses his suggestion and insists that nothing can extinguish her love; the Father slaps her, and leaves in anger. As she leaves, she pledges to make her Father and the man who marries her pay very dearly for this. Then the actors led by the Fortune-teller come out and occupy the stage. Wondering if the actors are optimistic or pessimistic about what is likely to happen, the seer suggests that they wait and see. The stage dims.

Act II is divided into two sections: private and public; the first is the bedroom of the Newly-wed Couple; the second, above the first, is a hall where the crowd celebrates the wedding.

The first scene opens with noise and singing. The Fortune-teller precedes the crowd, holding a censer in his hand, followed by the Belly Dancer, singers and actors. Then comes the Father, followed by the Bride and Groom. The Groom looks happy, the Bride dejected. After a short performance of dancing and singing, the Fortune-teller praises the Couple and

offers his blessings. Before the Bride and Groom enter their bedroom, the Father kisses his daughter and decorates her neck with a precious necklace. He urges the crowd to drink and make merry.

In Scene II, the stage is the bedroom. The Groom is so happy and excited that he admits he could not picture himself in a private room with his Bride, whom he has known for only a week. He flirts with her and makes advances, but she does not respond. He offers her a drink. She takes it and pours it on the floor. He tries to embrace her, but she turns away.

Scene III shows the crowd talking, drinking and eating; the Father entertains his guests; the Belly Dancer is performing and the Fortune-teller is reading palms. He holds the Father's hand and says that his palm lines are made of steel, suggest relentless determination, and a tendency toward making quick judgments. The Father argues that his decisions are wise and he wanted to see his daughter married before he died. One guest whispers to another, "He could have married her to a better man." Another says, "He married her off to put an end to her affair with a poor man." The Fortune-teller stops the gossip, declaring that it's time to see the chastity towel. (In Middle Eastern culture, a white towel stained with blood is passed around after a couple spends a few hours in bed. The stained towel indicates that the girl was and is no longer a virgin.)

Scene IV opens with the Groom kneeling before the Bride, begging her to loosen up and smile at him. He claims that she

is the only girl he ever has loved and promises to do everything to make her happy. She says she can never bring herself to love him; the Groom responds that virgins are always shy and awkward when it comes to sex. The Bride makes fun of chastity and finally admits that she loves someone else. The Groom is deeply shocked by her confession.

The crowd is involved in dancing and drinking. The Father, in his joy, orders his servants to sprinkle gold coins over the guests' heads. The guests rush to pick them up, but the Fortune-teller does not budge, refusing to take a coin before he has seen the chastity towel.

Scene VI takes us back to the bedroom where the Groom laments that the Bride's prior loss of chastity will be a disgrace to the whole family. She urges him to spread the scandal. He softens and agrees to a compromise provided she promises to love him and forget about her past affair. The crowd is waiting for the towel. The Groom searches for a solution.

In Scene VII, the crowd is absorbed in drinking. The Belly Dancer is flirting with the Bride's Father, trying to remind him of his youth and his need for a wife. He says he is no longer young enough for a new wife and that his life is devoted to business. She moves on to the Fortune-teller and gives him a kiss as he demands to see the chastity towel.

The Bride is trying to avoid taking off her clothes as Scene VIII opens, but without being too obvious about it. The Groom is excited, but still worried about how to get the towel

stained with blood. The Bride sarcastically tells him that the whole matter can be solved by sticking a pen into his earlobe and staining the towel with his blood. He does so and proudly throws the stained towel to the crowd.

In Scene IX the crowd is joyous. Guests congratulate the happy Father. The Fortune-teller gives his blessing to the rite that has been performed with the blood of chastity. The Belly Dancer moves around the Singer and picks up more gold coins. The Father orders his servant to throw more coins. "Happiness," he says, "comes from gold."

The next scene shows the Groom almost naked chasing the Bride who refuses to go to bed with him. He says he can't control his desire. She asks him for a drink. He insists that he has the right to possess her body. Love, she argues, knows no possessions. As he continues chasing her, she slips and falls. He catches her and rapes her. A short scene follows in which the bride's crying is mixed with the loud singing and dancing of the crowd.

Scene XII shows the Bride in bed with her clothes torn off. The Groom is smoking. Berating him for raping her, she hears from him that he has acted like a husband. She insists on telling everyone what he did to her; he blurts out that the man who had an affair with her must be punished first. Overcome by the revelation that his wife was not a virgin, he threatens to kill her. She warns him that her Lover is coming; he squeezes her neck until she falls. He realizes he has killed her, and shouts out that a criminal has come and

murdered his wife. The Father embraces his dead daughter, saying that he knows the murderer. He bursts into tears. As the stage dims, the guests begin to leave.

In Scene XIII we find the Father in despair, the Fortune-teller deep in thought, and the Groom describing how the criminal came in and tried to kill him. He shows the crowd his torn clothes. Suddenly, the Lover enters, gun in hand, accompanied by two Friends. He has come to save his love, but when he learns she is dead, he rages and threatens to kill the murderer. The Father and the Groom accuse him of the crime. The Lover asks the crowd to help him find the murderer, but no one utters a word. Forcing the crowd to leave the room, he takes his beloved in his arms and cries; he then takes from his pocket the last letter she wrote and reads, "They are plotting to destroy our love. Please, come quickly." He sadly addresses his beloved as the land that closes her eyes...the land that dries but never dies. Walking with her body in his arms, he screams, "Death to the enemy!" At that moment, gunshots are heard; the crowd has been fired on and everyone falls dead. The stage dims except for a spotlight focused on the Lover's face, a torment of savage hope and pain.

As the final scene of the play opens, the dead crowd gets up slowly. The Fortune-teller says the Lover's story is terrible; he expected a happy story to entertain the crowd. He urges gaiety, and the crowd sings as it leaves the stage.

In writing Oriental Joy, Ikhlasi experiments with dramatic devices drawn from both Islamic culture and Western drama. The influence of Islamic rituals is most evident in the ceremonial scenes. The first scene of chanting between the Fortune-teller and the acting group as the Newly-wed Couple appears on stage resembles the traditional exchange between a Moslem priest and a crowd inside a mosque. The Fortune-teller's blessing of the couple, the crowd repeating "amen" after him, the burning of incense and the palm reading all parallel Moslem wedding and social ceremony rituals. The Fortune-teller as narrator is not different from the director in the popular Syrian theatre of the 40s, who provided the audience with a short account of the story, then called upon the actors to play it. Like the latter, the music, dancing and singing in Ikhlasi's play stresses ceremonial and ritual aspects which appeal to an Arab audience.

However, despite Ikhlasi's extensive use of Islamic dramatic devices, he does not depart from Western traditions. Apart from the episodic and rather ceremonial prologue, Oriental Joy adheres to the linear form that determines sequence and development of incidents and creates the sense of a beginning, middle and end. Furthermore, the conventional structure of Western drama is evident in the play. The first few scenes of Act I serve as exposition, presenting the characters, their relationships and plans. The conflict between the Girl and her Father disturbs their world and leads to action. The turning point occurs when the Groom rapes and

murders the Bride; the climax comes when the Lover arrives and discovers the death of his beloved. Thus, Ikhlasī's play combines the linear mode of Western drama with the rituals and ceremonies of Islamic dramatics.

We note that Ikhlasī's play has two seemingly independent plots: one is episodic, underlying the prologue; the other linear, knitting together the incidents of the two acts. Despite the existence of some superficial differences between the two plots, they are thematically identical and create similar impressions. The first aims at showing traditional marriage in ancient Arab society. The archaic atmosphere is effected through extensive chanting, fortune-telling, dancing and narration of the story of Adam and Eve. The destructive impact of rigid traditions on women in archaic times is reflected in the auction of the Girl and the Father's total control of the situation. The prologue is devoid of action and conflict to stress the state of total helplessness in which the Girl lives. In the second plot, more elaborate and organized, Ikhlasī introduces a similar situation from modern Arab life to point out the similarities and differences between the past and present. Characters are better developed and there is more action and conflict, for today's heroine is more conscious of her personality and more determined to fight for her freedom. However, the weight of tradition and male supremacy stifle her aspirations and bring about her death. In both plots, then, women are victims of rigid norms and brutal oppression. The fact that the Girl in the first plot

is sold and in the second murdered suggest that the play ends where it begins; the circularity of form shows the continuation of man's inhumanity to woman from the past into the present.

The dramatic principle throughout the play is the alternation of public scenes with private ones. Such alternation is determined by the play's theme, and meets the requirements of its form. Since the play takes the form of a wedding, the ceremonial aspects are shown in public while the intimate life of the Newly-weds is confined to the private scenes. The private scenes are sequential and the development of action and characters moves through a series of surprises toward a logical climax. In other words, the conventional linear mode of Western drama dominates the incidents of the private scenes while the public scenes are repetitive, ceremonial and devoid of developing action or conflict; their succession does not indicate change or movement toward a climax.

The episodic nature of these scenes accords with the aimless and frivolous character of the crowd whose primary interests are drinking, dancing, and gossiping. The public scenes are the domain of Islamic rituals filled with chanting, fortune-telling, palm reading and belly-dancing. This abundance of Islamic dramatic devices shows the sway of rigid traditions over the crowd, while the private scenes register the revolt of the individual. At the end, the despair and frustration of individual revolt is overshadowed by the

aimless crowd. After the murder, the crowd takes over the private scene and singing rapidly replaces mourning. Obviously, the public ending also indicates the precedence of tradition and of the group over the individual.

In Oriental Joy, we are always made conscious of being in a theatre. The illusion of reality is often destroyed either by breaking down the barrier between stage and auditorium or by role playing and the notion of a theatre within a theatre. For example, Ikhlasi spreads out his characters among the audience and, as the curtain goes up, actors move from the auditorium onto the stage; the Fortune-teller brings in an actor and orders him to play roles. At the end, the gap between actors and characters is made visible in a public scene: the crowd is fired on, falls dead, and then wakes up. The Fortune-teller and his men make comments to the audience on the Lover's story. The sense of theatricality is mostly felt in public scenes and the prologue due to the presence of spontaneous dancing and singing; the representational aspects are markedly evident in the private scenes when the story unfolds sequentially.

The complexity of a structure in which archaic elements merge with modern ones, ritual flows into reality, the public alternates with the private and the linear overlaps with the episodic and narrative, has a sharp impact on language and meaning. In the prologue where an ancient Islamic atmosphere is created, language--especially that of the Fortune-teller--draws heavily on rhyme and rhythm and religious imagery. This

very language turns into chanting as the crowd repeats its "amen." The language loses its rhythmic touch when it slides into narration. Emphasis shifts to description and informative details. In the scene where the girl is displayed for sale, language is more lively and dramatic, but devoid of any poetic touch. Obsession with material and physical needs burdens the language with images of money, gold, flesh, and sex. The poetic language of the early scenes dissolves into more simple, realistic, brisk and dramatic lines as the play delves into the modern love story. The search for individual fulfillment is reflected in the constant recurrence of the first person singular pronoun in the Girl's speeches; the abundant use of the first person plural pronoun in the Father's and Groom's speeches emphasize conformity to tradition. Lyrical language emerges at the end of the play as the Lover addresses his beloved's body. The language of the public scenes is mostly conversational. Only when the Fortune-teller begins palm reading does the chit-chat of the public scenes take on a lively rhythmic touch. Otherwise, the conversation shows the shallowness of those who advocate the social norm.

Oriental Joy draws our attention to the changes that the Syrian family is going through as social traditions begin to erode and the individual becomes more conscious of himself as an entity independent of a whole, be it family, tribe or class. Ikhlas centers his play on the question of marriage, which the old generation still sees as a bargain struck between two families of equal status, while the new generation

views it as a relationship worked out between two independent individuals. The Father and the Groom represent the advocates of the inherited order; both accept the established norm as the criterion against which man's behavior must be judged. When the Father finds out that his daughter's suitor is an intellectual and writer, he denounces him, "You support the destruction of what is old and genuine...society rebukes this kind of behavior and thinking."⁵⁰ When his daughter refuses to marry the man he selects for her, he wails, "Oh, God! What has happened to our great family! Is it possible that all our glorious traditions will collapse?"⁵¹ Deviation from social norms is considered not only evil but irrational. A wedding guest learns that the bride has had an affair with a poor intellectual: "What insane girls we have! They abandon riches for intellect."⁵²

Marriage based on social class is emphasized in the play. The father complains to the suitor that he is "neither an heir nor a son of a wealthy family."⁵³ Acting in accordance with standard practice is taken for granted; hence the Girl's affair is a disgrace both for her Father and for her Husband, who says, "I looked forward to this marriage, but my dignity

⁵⁰ Walid Ikhlas, Farrah Sharqi (Oriental Joy), Al-Mawqif al-Adabi (April, 1977), p. 82.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁵² Ibid., p. 89.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 81.

is soiled."⁵⁴ The Girl's loss of chastity is a disgrace not to one person but to a whole family or tribe. The Groom speaks the truth when he says, "I have saved you from a scandal. Don't you know that I have done you a favor? I have protected your dignity and that of your family."⁵⁵ Thus, any act that complies with a priori standards constituted by family, class and inherited values carries legitimacy.

Opposite the conservatives stands the radical generation, represented by the Girl and her Lover. For them, the individual is the ultimate criterion by which man's needs and deeds must be judged. The living reality takes precedence over the abstract ideals of family or class. The play posits love as a unique feeling resisting all social molds. The young lovers insist that "Our love should not be crowned by a traditional engagement,"⁵⁶ and that "Love should no longer be determined by family ties."⁵⁷

Breaking with the norm necessitates challenging its defenders. When her Lover is turned down by her Father, the Girl seeks retaliation, "My father challenged us; we should challenge him as well."⁵⁸ She also confronts the age-old family right to select a husband. "Who chooses," she asks her

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 91.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 80.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 84.

⁵⁸Ibid.

father, "you or I?"⁵⁹ The process of questioning extends to the sensitive issue of chastity. A girl in a Middle East community is generally judged on the basis of her virginity. With a loss of virginity comes loss of respect and social status. The Girl attacks this value system, "It is not a scandal that love is killed, but it is a scandal that a woman lost her virginity."⁶⁰ Thus the entire play revolves around this conflict between those who consecrate the old and defend the supremacy of family and class, and individual attempts to destroy the collective along with its ideals which stifle the individual and deprive him of his right to choose.

The mere fact that Ikhlasi takes the risk of employing Islamic rituals in his play and tries to demonstrate their dramatic and theatrical potentiality indicates his genuine search for a drama of national origin and identity. Because it is an experimental work, the play suffers some minor shortcomings: it fails to establish a balanced rhythm because of heterogeneous elements and multiple techniques. For example, the linear mode underlying the private scenes creates a rhythm through a pattern of tension and release, the alternation of which produces a sense of change within progression; in the prologue and public scenes, however, where the progression of ceremonies lacks the principle of opposition and development, a feeling of monotony rather than

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 91.

a real rhythm is effected. But apart from these minor weaknesses, which can be minimized in production, Ikhlasī undoubtedly demonstrates a broad understanding of how to use Islamic ritual in drama.

The social issues that dominate Oriental Joy and the dramatic conventions that govern its structure are elaborated upon more intricately in The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia (Maqam Ibrahim wa Saffia). Here, the sacrifice of the individual, love and affection on the altar of tradition, religion, superstition and tribal and political rivalry makes up the action and theme. In The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia, more than in Oriental Joy, Ikhlasī draws on Islamic rituals and folkloric ingredients. The play is based on a love story that originates from the social climate of the conservative classes of Aleppo in the 40s; then the realistic story spills out of its social boundaries into a mythical realm of Biblical origin. The evolution of the real into the mythical is noticeable in the development of the plot and the play represents a fusion of realistic episodes with purely ritual and ceremonial scenes.

The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia first appeared in Al-Aqlam, an Iraqi literary journal, in 1980. A year later, it was published in Syria, along with Oriental Joy, in a book entitled On Killing Birds (An Qatil al-Asafir). Ikhlasī's departure from the traditions of Western drama and his attempt to explore Arabic or Islamic rituals as new dramatic potentials motivated the League of Syrian Theatres to consider

The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia "a drama of Arabic origin and identity" and for that very reason it was included in the repertoire of 1981-82. On December 15, 1981, the play was staged at the Al-Hamra theatre in Damascus by the Syrian director Mahmud Khithar. The production turned out to be a total failure, and was denounced by Ikhlasī as a distortion of his play. Critics blamed the play's failure on the director, who emptied the text of its ritual and ceremonial elements and reduced it to a simple love story. Scenes in which a chorus invokes God or commemorates pilgrims were recorded rather than presented live. The scenes of the shadow play, the prayers at the shrines and the examination of Saffia's chastity were all dropped; the nonillusionist effects were removed and the illusionist aspects emphasized. The setting lacked the necessary mobility and thus became monotonous. Some critics commented on the poor casting and worse acting. The play ran less than five weeks.

The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia has a complex structure replete with material drawn from the shadow play, epic theatre and, above all, Islamic dramatic devices. The play has a clear episodic form with a prologue and two acts. Before analyzing the diverse ingredients and how they function to create a whole, a descriptive account will be helpful as a basis for understanding the relation of form and content.

In Scene I of the prologue, a courtyard in a popular quarter is decorated with banners and flags signifying both religious ceremonies and preparation for an election. Voices

commemorating the return of pilgrims mingle with talk about elections and candidates. The chorus (a group of actors), led by the Chanter, invokes God, as the Mayor announces the arrival of righteous pilgrims. Then the stage is occupied by Sheikh Saleh and the Teacher, who agree that the pilgrims go to Mecca to purchase righteousness with money; in essence, they argue, the pilgrims are worse than the leaders who receive them. Saleh leaves. After the Teacher tells the audience the story of Saleh and how he serves the mosque and takes care of the shrines, he identifies himself as an actor, and he and the Chanter agree to present a short play about Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac, to God.

In Scene II, we see the screen of a shadow play at a corner of a raised platform. Two shadows play Abraham and Isaac (Ismael in Islam), as a storyteller introduces the tale and occasionally comments on or explains incidents. A chant of supplication accompanies the shadow play. Lights dim.

In Scene III, actors take down the screen and reset the stage. The Chanter argues that Abraham was put to the test, but that he was finally rewarded. Now, he says, is the time to find out what happened to Ibrahim, who suffered a great deal while everyone stood idly by. The Teacher tells the audience he has a motive for playing a role in the play of Ibrahim and Saffia. The story is true, he says, urging the audience to take action against those who oppress the individual. The Chanter claps his hands, and the actors appear and set the scene as a shrine.

In Scene I of Part One, Ibrahim and Saffia meet and express their love for each other and discuss their future plans. Saffia is afraid of being seen with Ibrahim, for she does not have her parents' consent; therefore, she decides to go home before her father inquires about her. Alone, Ibrahim describes his love for Saffia. As he leaves, Hablat, who has spied on the couple, comes out of hiding and says that what he has witnessed will shock the town's notables. Lights dim.

Scene II shows actors preparing a courtyard scene while the Teacher wonders if there will be another tryst. As the quarter's leaders sit surrounded by their aides and supporters, Abu al-Kaif, a drug dealer, finds out that Abu al-Rus, a cattle merchant, is intent on marrying Saffia, whom he loves. Hostility breaks out between the two. Abu al-Kaif challenges Abu al-Rus to a duel, but when the latter's armed aides rush to his help, the former backs down. Akram, a government officer, intervenes and calms the men down, reminding them of their old friendship and their need for unity against the opposition party. To settle the differences between them, Akram tosses a coin. As a result, Abu al-Rus wins the right to marry Saffia. Hablat comments that Abu al-Rus has won a girl whose mind is occupied with another. Abu al-Rus takes this for an insult and threatens to beat him if he refuses to clarify his point. Asking for money in return for what he has to say about Saffia's affair, Hablat receives it, praising Abu al-Rus' merits and wishing him good luck.

In Scene III, the setting is the mayor's office. Leaders and notables, including Abu al-Rus, Abu al-Kaif and Hablat are present. Helping Abu al-Rus to don his cloak, the Teacher addresses the audience, wondering if that garment will bring joy or anger, and notes that Saleh's arrival will create great tension. As Saleh arrives, he asks the leaders why they call on him. Abu al-Rus says he is insulted by Saleh's rejection of his gifts, for he is interested in Saleh's daughter. Saleh rejects the proposal on the grounds that the latter is too old for his daughter, and that he has four wives. Abu al-Rus is furious and decides to retaliate. Hablat claims that Saffia is in love with Ibrahim, the orphan.

Scene IV takes place in a guesthouse in which Abu al-Rus, Abu al-Kaif, Akram and the Mayor talk tensely. Ibrahim's affair with Saffia has defiled the sanctity of the shrine and the quarter; the reputation of the quarter must be salvaged by punishing him. Abu al-Kaif claims that such a disgrace can only be cleansed by bloodshed. The Mayor puts Akram in charge, and endorses his proposal to take measures against Ibrahim and charge him with smuggling drugs. Everyone approves of Akram's plan and praises him.

In Scene V, actors reset the shrine. Saffia enters stealthily, searching for Ibrahim. Finding him, she asks what drives him to run away, and he explains that the police have charged him with drug smuggling. Saffia suspects that Abu al-Rus could be plotting against him. Hopeless and frustrated, Ibrahim asks Saffia to leave him and think of her

future, but she insists that she loves him and promises to bring him food in his hideaway. Of course, Hablat has been spying on them. The lights dim.

Scene I of Part Two occurs in a courtyard where banners, posters and pictures of candidates indicate that an election is underway. The Teacher explains to the audience that the actors are constructing a scene in which there is nothing on stage but banners with slogans about democracy. He explains the link between Ibrahim's story and the election: the leaders are strong supporters of the ruling party. Abu al-Rus (working as a scene designer) states that if he and his men belonged to Saleh's opposition party, they could not destroy Ibrahim. His men reiterate the advantages of siding with the ruling party.

In Scene II, Abu al-Rus, the Mayor, Akram and Abu al-Kaif seem to be waiting for someone. Akram assures them that Ibrahim can't escape justice, and Abu al-Rus reiterates the moral and patriotic reasons for Ibrahim's liquidation. When the Mayor draws the leaders' attention to the necessity of winning the election, Abu al-Rus assures him that no one dares to vote for the opposition party. As soon as Saleh comes in, Abu al-Rus asks him to support his candidates. Saleh does not give a clear answer and seems to disagree with Abu al-Rus over the latter's candidates. When Abu al-Rus asks him about his daughter's affair with Ibrahim, Saleh flairs up and rushes to beat Abu al-Rus. The Mayor calms him down and explains to him that what Abu al-Rus says is an established fact, but Saleh

can't bring himself to believe it. He pledges to support the ruling party and kill his daughter if they prove that she is involved with Ibrahim. Hablat testifies under oath that he has seen Saffia and Ibrahim in the shrine. Saleh, humiliated and disgraced, promises to kill his daughter and cleanse the shrine and the quarter of this disgrace. The leaders advise him to make sure that his daughter has had an affair and urge him to check about her chastity. Saleh feels that Saffia must be killed.

In Scene III, the actors set up a new scene representing Saleh's house. Midwives gather to examine Saffia's chastity. Feeling the pain of losing face, Saleh is anxious to know the result of the medical test. Soon after, a midwife comes in assuring Saleh that his daughter still retains her virginity. The leaders suspect the medical test. Committed to his pledge, Saleh takes a knife in his hand and screams like a wild animal, asking God's curse to fall upon his daughter. Lights dim.

Scene IV is the shrine where Saleh intends to kill Saffia. He asks Saffia to seek God's forgiveness before facing death. She refuses to do so, arguing that she has committed no crime. As he draws the knife, Ibrahim comes from behind and takes it from him, then offers himself for a sacrifice. He puts the knife in Saleh's hand saying, "Kill me and satisfy the leaders' thirst for revenge." Saleh is moved and gradually comes to sympathize with the couple. He decides to take an animal for a sacrifice, imitating the Biblical

ending of the story of Abraham and Isaac. He gives his blessing to the couple and leaves.

Scene V takes us to the courtyard in which the notables are gathered. Abu al-Rus says Saleh has fooled everyone; his daughter is still free and flirting with Ibrahim. All agree to avenge the reputation of the quarter. Abu al-Rus tells the leaders that he has seen in his dream a new shrine built on top of the old one. Then everyone recites passages from the Koran.

In Scene VI, the actors rebuild the shrine, in which Ibrahim and Saffia are hidden. The Teacher explains that Abu al-Rus volunteered to pay the expenses of reconstructing the shrine. As the architect begins to build the walls, a subdued coughing issues from within the shrine as the couple begins to suffocate. The coughing intensifies as the walls close around them. When the building is completed and Ibrahim and Saffia are buried, Abu al-Rus begins to sing and Abu al-Kaif shouts cheerfully.

Scene VII, the final scene, shows the shrine covered with green branches. Saleh addresses the saints, expressing his longing for the buried couple. A man comes into the shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia, asking for help that would enable his barren wife to bear children. Another man addresses the saints, saying "By the name of Ibrahim and Saffia's shrine, oh God, help my wife have a male child." The voices of people singing in praise of Ibrahim and Saffia are heard from afar.

One may easily infer from the juxtaposition of scenes interspersed with choral passages, religious rituals, narration, recitations, a shadow play and dramatic incidents that Ikhlasi's play adheres to the rules of episodic drama. The play's departure from the linear form is also noticed in the emphasis laid on theatricality. The impression of being in a theatre is created by the narrator (Teacher) who conducts an acting group--a device Ikhlasi uses to decrease audience identification with characters.

The narrator addresses the actors, instructs them and works with them; he tells the audience that he is a character in the play: "Did it not give me personal enjoyment, I would not have agreed to play such a small role in this play."⁶¹ Ikhlasi has set the narrator several tasks. First, he supplies a brief account of what is expected to happen: "After a few minutes, Saleh will appear and anger will play a significant part."⁶² Second, he makes the connections between one issue and another: "The problem of Ibrahim and Saffia is entwined with the election."⁶³ Third, the narrator urges the audience to get involved and to work for the cause of justice: "I know you will go out and think about it as soon as the performance is over." He asks, "What can be done or how can we put an end to man's sufferings?"⁶⁴

⁶¹Ikhlasi, Maqam Ibrahim wa Saffia (The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia), Al-Aqlam No. 6. (March, 1980), p. 307.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 307.

Of course, theatricality--manifested in the narrator's addresses to actors and audience--intensifies the spectator's consciousness of the theatre, motivates him to reflect upon what is shown, and inhibits his identification with the characters. When the narrator departs, however, the actors merge with their characters in such a way that they can no longer be separated. The actors' impersonations are further enhanced by light effects, music and decor, effecting an illusion of reality that drives the audience to empathize with the actors/characters.

Despite such elements as choral passages, recitation, ritual ceremonies and theatricality that determine the play's episodic structure, the story is not reduced to a series of disconnected scenes, each rounded and complete in itself. Besides having thematic unity, the episodes suggest the existence of a structural pattern very much akin to that of linear drama. In other words, the organization of scenes indicates sequentiality, and the dramatic development unfolds in a number of suspense-filled moments and surprises leading gradually to a climax.

The prologue is an exposition of the ritual and political atmosphere within which characters and events exist and develop. It also provides the mythical framework--the shadow play--along whose lines the love story evolves. In the first two scenes, we are introduced to the characters' backgrounds, objectives and feelings for one another. Action is triggered when Abu al-Rus clashes with Abu al-Kaif over Saffia. This is

the inciting moment in which we learn what the play will be about. Abu al-Rus' victory and the right to marry Saffia are called into question by Hablat's passing comment. Suspense builds as Hablat withholds information about Saffia's affair. Abu al-Rus' uncertainty increases when Saleh turns him down. Hablat's disclosure of Saffia's affair contributes to the rising action and determines the nature and forces of the conflict. The turning point comes when Saleh is faced with his daughter's scandal and decides to kill her to avenge the honor of the quarter. Tension continues to build, reaching a climax when Saleh pulls out the knife to slay Saffia. Ibrahim's arrival at the critical moment makes the climax melodramatic and brings out the resemblance between the Biblical myth and the contemporary love story. Soon after, tension subsides and the couple's death is overshadowed by the young people's transformation into saints, their shrine becoming an altar of supplication. Thus, we can see that an organic plot creating a sequence of events that move in a straight line underlies the episodic structure of the play.

Ikhlasī introduces the myth of Abraham and Isaac near the opening of the play and saturates the atmosphere with ritual, ceremony and other elements to focus on the analogy between and convergence of myth and reality. The play abounds in characters and anecdotes that are transfigurations of Biblical events. For example, both Abraham and Saleh are pious, righteous, and devoted to the service of God; share the position of priesthood; respond to God's (the leaders') will;

take their children to sacred sites for sacrifice; vacillate in doing the deed; rescue their children, kill animals in their place and acquire sainthood in the process. In fact, the mythical anecdote, in the end, is so accurately duplicated that it loses some of its naturalness and looks rather mechanical.

However, the striking similarities between the scriptural story and its modern counterpart should not make us overlook the distinctions between them. Ikhlasī has after all set his story against a background of social realities peculiar to his society, while the Biblical stories are parables. Nothing in the social world of Abraham drives him to sacrifice his son; he is motivated by his faith in God. Society and social traditions substitute for faith in the love story. Social rigidity and distorted norms force Saleh to kill his daughter. The play points out that even when Saleh acts like Abraham--convinced that God wants him to keep Saffia alive--society will not tolerate Saleh's violation of its laws, which must be worshipped and obeyed no less than God's. Thus, the compassionate God of Abraham and Saleh fades away, replaced by the merciless laws of man. The individual is no longer judged on merit, but on total compliance with established norms. Thus any deviation generates horizontal conflict between man and society as distinct from vertical conflict between man and God. Obviously, Ikhlasī's portrayal of the individual as powerless arouses our indignation against the oppressing and dehumanizing forces and traditions of society.

If traditions and religion are important aspects of the play, the political undertone is no less conspicuous. In a short preface to The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia, Ikhlasī describes the events of his play as having taken place in Syria during the 40s. But the play explores certain conditions that remind one of the late 70s. Ikhlasī pretends to be dealing with a dead era, for he is attempting to pull the wool over the censor's eyes. But, in fact, his description and dramatization of the election campaign and the ruling party's methods of supporting its candidates certainly refer to the present situation, in which a single political party rules and the opposition suffers harassment and is actually barred from engaging in political activities. Incidents such as accusing and persecuting Ibrahim or entangling Saleh in public and political affairs are symptomatic of the Syrian military system. Ikhlasī introduces the election incident as a metaphor for a social and political trap. It starts out as an apparently free race in which people can compete to achieve some of their interests. Gradually, the system's priorities come to the fore and the interests of the wealthy leaders dominate and finally control the the race, and turn it into a vicious trap in which the individual is caught and crushed. Thus, the play exposes the phony and inhuman nature of the political order, and tries to unmask the hypocrisy of the notables who cooperate with the system, using their fake religious appearances to achieve their greedy ends. All this, of course, consecrates the

existing conditions and consolidates the position of those in power.

I mentioned earlier, in passing, that the League of Syrian theatres was impressed by The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia and considered it a drama of distinct Arab origin and identity. Certainly the abundant, careful use of Islamic dramatic devices in Ikhlasī's play is both unprecedented in Syrian drama and still foreign to other Syrian playwrights. Here, Ikhlasī not only demonstrates a mature understanding of the nature and function of the Islamic heritage, but also shows mastery in using it as an integral part of the dramatic structure. Being conscious of the nondramatic aspects of Islamic rituals, he selects a Biblical myth of internal conflict and models his realistic plot accordingly. Setting the characters and events against a deeply religious and traditional background, Ikhlasī leaves ample room for the play of ritual and ceremony. For example, the pilgrims' return in Scene I is effected through rituals conducted and exchanged between a chorus and a character, exactly like those used when Syrian Moslems receive their pilgrims returning from Mecca. What makes this scene original is its potential for creating histrionics through ceremonies consistent with religious occasion, and rich in visual effect.

Among the different Islamic dramatic devices injected into the Western form, one should mention: 1) the shadow play and the choral chanting against which it is set; 2) instances of praying to saints at the shrines for fertility and

fulfillment of love, etc.; 3) rituals of verifying Saffia's chastity; 4) interspersions of moments of prayer and recitation; and 5) modes of Islamic sacrifice, presented in the scene where Saleh attempts to kill his daughter, and in the concluding scene where the couple is buried alive amidst a crowd chanting and reciting verses from the Koran.

The Islamic dramatic devices are consistent with the dramatic ingredients of the Biblical story and the plot that develops along its line. Ikhlasi selects rituals that are both indicative of Islamic culture and consonant with the religious atmosphere of the scriptural story. For example, the invocations, prayers, chanting and sacrificial practices that permeate the Biblical anecdote are consistently employed in the development of the entire plot. As in Oriental Joy, Ikhlasi uses a kind of ritual that reduces the conflict to an inner tension, driving the major character, Saleh, to abandon action for passive but fervent prayer, supplication and worship symptomatic of the man of God. Furthermore, the grotesquely exaggerated way of presenting Islamic dramatic devices in certain scenes satirizes the distorted and corrupt practices of those who allege to advocate religion.

The orderly organization of scenes, the constant shift from theatricalism to illusionism, the fusion of ritualistic and realistic elements and the sense of change and progression originating from the alternation of tension and relief within the single scene all indicate the existence of careful rhythmic patterning. One such pattern is noticeable in the

division of the play into public and private scenes. While public scenes present the domain of the collective ruled by social traditions and political concerns--a domain devoid of human warmth--the private scenes introduce the realm of the individual where love and affection prevail. The shift from the theatricality of the narrator to the illusion of reality created by the immediate identification of actors with their roles in each scene also establishes a rhythmic pattern. A similar effect is produced when ritualistic scenes slide into realistic ones again and again.

Rhythmic patterns also underlie the dramatic action as it proceeds and develops within the single scene and throughout the play as a whole. They take on a form of tension alternating with release, eventually effecting change and progression. A clear example of how the rhythmic pattern operates within the single scene is evident in Part One, Scene I, when a fight breaks out between Abu al-Rus and Abu al-Kaif over Saffia. Tension builds up rapidly, then is gradually released as friendship is restored. When Abu al-Rus wins the right to marry Saffia, his joy and expectations rise high only to be brought down by Hablat's comment on Saffia's affair. In Part Two, Scene III, tension builds as midwives try to check Saffia's chastity, and is dissipated by the news of her innocence. In Scene IV of the same part, Saleh's intense desire to kill Saffia heightens the state of horror, but Ibrahim's sudden arrival softens the atmosphere and gradually establishes full calm. This very calm begins to

precipitate more complications in Scene V, as the leaders find out that Saleh has not killed his daughter. Tension intensifies throughout Scene VI, to be later dissolved in Scene VII.

This process of alternation of stress and relief which constitutes the substance of the rhythmic pattern also establishes a link with the rhythm of the Biblical myth whose structure reveals the same rhythmic patterning. The tension between Abraham's love for his son and the obligation to give him up is relieved by his faith that this sacrifice is God's will. Thus, the alternation between opposites that produces a pattern of tension and relaxation further consolidates the rhythmic and atmospheric unity of the play.

There is no doubt that Ikhlasī in The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia has succeeded not only in dramatizing a social problem of Islamic origin and Biblical background, but also in giving it a form indigenous to Islamic culture and based on its dramatic devices. Ikhlasī must be given credit for having the courage and talent to experiment with the national heritage and introduce it into the dramatic domain.

One final remark on the plays examined in this chapter should be made. They are social dramas dealing basically with social issues pertinent to Syrian and Arab communities. Emphasis in these plays is laid on the growing tension between the individual and the collective as a result of the former's revolt against the norms and values of the latter. The plays also criticize the destructive and dehumanizing role of

traditions and stress the human aspects of individual freedom and the need for self-realization.

The other thing that strikes us in these plays is the diversity of their dramatic modes and techniques. The shift from avant-garde technique in The Ten Drums of Execution to the linear mode of realistic drama in Alone Against the City and Fate Scratches Its Head, then to the use of Islamic heritage in Oriental Joy and The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia demonstrates Ikhlasī's interest in experimentation and his search for form consistent with his theme. Regardless of how similar the topics of his plays are, the specificity of each determines its form--an idea cherished by Ikhlasī.

CHAPTER IV

THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

The introduction mentions three qualities that distinguish Ikhlasī's drama from those of other Syrian playwrights, namely: a) his experiments with a variety of Western techniques; b) his injecting Arabic and Islamic dramatic devices into Western forms; and, c) above all, his strong effort to make Syrian drama deal with universal human issues beyond the limits of local socio-political problems.

The human and the universal are the two main themes that Ikhlasī has sought to deal with in the plays discussed in this chapter. In plays such as Pleasure 21, Tonight We Play, Oedipus and Garden Song, man's predicament is the central question. In an attempt to imbue his plays with universal tone and atmosphere, Ikhlasī sets them either against a broad unidentified background or in a Biblical and mythical context. Though some of his characters are drawn from Syrian society, all function as human symbols. Unlike characters of social drama who face certain ephemeral problems, here characters represent mankind trapped in situations beyond the individual's capacity to conquer. In Pleasure 21 and Oedipus, though man is deeply immersed in science and technology, his fears and worries resemble those of the ancients facing the forces of fate. In Tonight We Play and Garden Song, man is

surrounded and confronted with the relentless forces of history and divine will. Throughout these plays some sort of a new fate seems to be hovering over man's head, but the yearning for life and self-realization remains man's endless struggle.

Like his earlier plays, the works in this chapter illustrate his broad knowledge and understanding of Western drama and his endless experimentation with its techniques. Traces of the theatre of the absurd figure markedly in Pleasure 21; Garden Song is modeled upon the mystery play and draws its theme from the Bible; both classical and modern versions of the Oedipus myth have left some imprint upon Ikhlesi's Oedipus; and Back to Methuselah appears to have inspired Ikhlesi to write Tonight We Play. Allusions to the particular plays that seem to have influenced Ikhlesi's work will be made occasionally to point out similarities and differences.

Ikhlesi's concern with purely human issues first crystallized in a lengthy one-act play called Pleasure 21 (Al-Muta 21). It appeared in 1965 along with another play in The World Before and After (Al-Alam min Qabil wa Badu). Pleasure 21 shows the West preoccupied with science and technology, consumed with material drives, devoid of human warmth, and swamped in meaninglessness.

Ikhlesi characterizes Pleasure 21 as an avant-guard play and there is good reason for doing so. The play is, to a great extent, written in the vein of the theatre of the absurd

and uses a number of absurdist and surrealist devices to explore and emphasize the incongruities and absurdities of the human condition. Nevertheless, it remains a traditional drama in several important ways. Though the play often violates sequential order, a sense of linearity underlies certain events.

The play opens in a social club where Three Men are singing, and describing how two tiny fleas make love and never get bored. The club's Manager boasts about the exorbitant cost of the flea trainer, then announces that a unique program will be given in honor of the Beautiful Woman. The Depressed Man and the Physician talk about the club's meditation room; the Three Men shout, "down with philosophy, down with medicine." The Beautiful Woman wishes to be entertained so the Physician takes a tube of white liquid out of his pocket and asks the guests to guess its content. The Beautiful Woman asks if somebody can recite poetry, and as the Depressed Man improvises with "My name has by mistake fallen in a deep well," the Beautiful Woman settles in a corner, holding a doll close to her breast as if suckling a child. In response to a question from the Depressed Man, the Beautiful Woman says she has a daughter studying at a private school. He introduces himself as a teacher of philosophy, expert in instructing his students how to waste time. His students' heads, he says, are bright, shiny, ugly boxes.

Preparations for the party are underway. In the center of the stage sits a huge cage with the Black Man trapped

inside. Next to it stands the Trainer with a whip in his hand. The Depressed Man tells the Beautiful Woman that there is not enough time left and asks her to make love to him. On the other side of the stage, the Physician explains to the Old Woman that if an amount of the tube's dust spreads through the air, it will kill those he designates. The Old Woman agrees to buy the tube.

Then the Trainer cracks his whip and orders the Black Man to juggle and entertain the audience; the Black Man remains motionless, then bangs on the cage with both hands. The Depressed Man urges the Beautiful Woman to love him before it is too late, but she retreats to a corner to suckle her doll. The Manager, searching for a way to amuse his audience, hears the Three Men saying, "Change your program, change your life. Dullness invades the city like an army of ants." The Depressed Man walks his black cat and the Old Woman talks the Trainer into selling the Black Man to her. When the Physician argues that there is no point in buying or possessing things, the Beautiful Woman insists on buying the Black Man.

The Waiter announces the arrival of the Newcomer who warns them that death is coming and they should run away as the Physician shouts that his experiment has succeeded. Then the Newcomer describes how death has invaded his city and people are running away for their lives. The Physician brags that he and the men with him will not die; the Newcomer argues that the wind of death does not distinguish among people. The Manager asks the Trainer to order the Black Man to play and to

amuse his people. When the Old Woman claims that the Physician can stop the wind, the latter admits that he never thought of the wind but that something must be done to stop death.

A feeling of horror pervades the club: the Manager tells each one to write down his will; the Beautiful Woman argues that no one will read the wills when the city vanishes; the Physician claims that "the fittest will live." Coming close to the Beautiful Woman, the Newcomer tells her that death has become a reality and he wants to make love to her before he dies. Scared at the specter of death, the Old Woman yells at the Physician, and falls dead. The Physician orders the Waiter to close the doors and windows. He complies, leaving the room, but returns to tell the club's members that the Manager is dying. The Beautiful Woman decides to run away, but no one shows readiness to follow her. The Physician admits his failure to find a solution to the danger of death. As the Trainer gets closer to the cage, the Black Man grabs him and chokes him to death. Fear of death sweeps the stage. The Newcomer has a coughing fit, then falls dead. A moment later, the Waiter suffocates and dies. Getting bored, the Depressed Man asks others to read poetry. The Physician feels tired and powerless; he asks the rest to forgive him, then dies. Moving close to the cage, the Beautiful Woman asks the Black Man to run away with her; she opens the cage and they climb out the window into the jungle, leaving the Depressed Man behind. She then feels that her breasts are "flowering like mountain

narcissus." The curtain comes down as a mild wind toys with the tree branches of a distant jungle.

A quick glance at this plot is sufficient to show us how different dramatic devices and techniques have entered into the formation of Pleasure 21 to the point that it is difficult to fit the play into a distinct category. The play has a lot in common with the several forms of Western drama.

Facets of German expressionism are reflected in the following ways: first, in how subjective feelings are given full play resulting in distancing characters from the objective world; second, in effecting an atmosphere of chaos and horror; third, in introducing grotesque characters; and fourth, in including some free association. Above all, like expressionist drama Pleasure 21 is a statement of protest against the destructive science and technology of modern society.

Aspects of Greek drama crystallize in the use of chorus (Three Men) which sheds light on characters and events, and has the power to foretell the future. However, it is not immune to the corruption that has plagued other characters, and like them, is doomed to destruction.

In keeping with the theatre of the absurd, Pleasure 21 has no plot. There is little action and most of that is not driven by the logic of causality. Nevertheless, the play departs from the absurdist mode in that its characters are social types. The characters in Pleasure 21 belong to social drama in their anchoring and orientation. Their

characterization and roles turn them into types: the Physician represents scientists; the Depressed Man symbolizes alienated and noncommitted intellectuals; the Old Woman who owns a factory for manufacturing caskets and wants to use the Physician's discovery stands for greedy capitalists; the Black Man denotes the poor exploited class that strives for freedom; the Beautiful Woman searches for love and warmth. Thus, the identity of characters and their fixed roles determine the scope of the play and limit its meaning to a particular problem facing humanity. Characters of the theatre of the absurd are neither fixed in a specific culture or social order nor do they represent any human type; hence, their situation takes on a broad human dimension of both an existential and ontological nature stressing man's alienation and feeling of nothingness as an integral part of the human essence, rather than being the outcome of social and political conditions as it has been demonstrated throughout Pleasure 21.

In spite of the eclectic structure of Ikhlasī's play, it shares with absurdist drama its constant drawing on factual absurdities: a homosexual waiter, a flat-chested woman feeling her chest sprouting. The clownish aspects associated with the behavior of absurd characters are reflected in the activities of Ikhlasī's characters: three intoxicated men constantly babbling, men and women watching a pair of fleas making love, a trainer cracking his whip to make a black man juggle, a woman suckling a toy, a depressed man flirting with a woman when the world is on the verge of blowing up. Bizarre

semantic juxtaposition run throughout the play: the Depressed Man tells the Beautiful Woman that his pupils teach him philosophy and he teaches them "how to waste time," etc. In this respect, Ikhlesi's play bears obvious resemblance to the theatre of the absurd.

What distinguishes Pleasure 21 from classical and realistic plays is the emphasis it puts on the peculiar use of language. While realistic drama revolves around narratives presented through dialogues and monologues based on the principles of causality and logic, absurdist drama and, to some degree, Pleasure 21 violate the linear plot and use a language devoid of the brilliant repartee, witty passages, verbal reduction and lyricism that characterize linear drama. Characters in Pleasure 21 sometimes use the banal language of absurdist drama; they engage in everyday conversation whose linguistic deviance is evident in occasional disjunction created by the sequence of unrelated utterance exchanged by the characters of Ikhlesi's play. Such discontinuity is effected by the inappropriate answers given:

DEPRESSED MAN: Do you like to love? Do you?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: To Love! To Love. Yes, I love my daughter, I love her. Do you know how beautiful she is?¹

¹Walid Ikhlasī, Al-Muta 21 (Pleasure 21), in Al-Alam min Qabil wa Badu (The World Before and After) (Damascus: Dar al-Fan al-Hadith al-Alami, 1965), p. 60.

The occasional recurrence of seemingly sequential statements, in fact unrelated, illustrates the lack of communication:

THREE MEN: Cage bars stuck to his
 sides. He can't escape
 anymore. Bars surround us
 slowly and adhere to us.

DEPRESSED MAN: Let philosophy fall into a
 deep well.²

Repetitive exchanges run through the play lending the dialogue a rigid mechanical touch to stress the sense of monotony and boredom that pervades the situation:

THE WOMAN: "His name has by mistake
 plummeted and gotten wet.

DEPRESSED MAN: It fell and got wet.³

However, with the exception of a few scattered violations of linguistic sequentiality, causality and relevance, Ikhlasi's language is not too different from that of realistic drama, namely, statements are semantically and logically related and out of this is created a strong sense of continuity and congruity--as opposed to the disjunction and incongruity of absurdist drama. Ikhlasi's play does not undermine or devaluate language; it still exhibits the absurdity of man's condition in a language of sound syntactic and semantic structure. In other words, the absurd has not extended to language; it remains confined to human behavior and is reflected through a language that retains its

²Ibid, p. 56

³Ibid. p. 58

referential aspects--something violated and undermined in the theatre of the absurd.

Another point qualifying Pleasure 21 as an absurdist play is the use of bizarre incidents, weird and rather grotesque characters and unrelated and disconnected statements. But the play violates the circular plot of absurdist drama; its flimsy plot gradually tightens up, gains momentum, and thrusts toward a climactic end. Even the structural division of linear drama, namely, exposition, middle and end seem to underlie the play; such division is evident in the thematic and character development.

The first few pages serve as an exposition of characters, their backgrounds, their intertests and plans. References to the Physician's tube and its destructive function are often made; the Old Woman's intention to buy the tube and use it determine what the play will be about. Instead of a conflict of characters leading to rising action, the play provides a crisis of tension effected by the arrival of the Newcomer. Tension continues to escalate as more people die, reaching its climax with the Black Man killing his Trainer and running away with the Beautiful Woman. The conclusion establishes a status quo; it points out the destructive role of science and technology in a world ruled by indifference and passivity.

Furthermore, the continuous tightening of the plot and the gradual move toward a climactic end is accompanied by character development akin to that of linear drama. The frivolous and indifferent characters of the initial part

become more serious and conscious of the ominous situation at the end of the play. The Beautiful Woman changes from a careless and passive character into a more determined and considerate woman concerned not only with her own life but that of the Black Man: "I like to see him affirming his existence."⁴ The caged and helpless Black Man recovers his strength and succeeds in killing his Trainer. The Physician who claims that his experiment harms only those who are not fit to live ends up believing that he and his friends will die too. Thus, unlike the characters of absurdist drama who remain consistently unchanged, Ikhlesi's characters experience change and development exactly like those in linear drama.

In Pleasure 21, Ikhlesi presents a satirical critique of the technologically advanced West, focusing attention on its obsessions with scientific discoveries, material gratifications, and exploitation and oppression of the helpless masses. Throughout the play, in fact, characters are seen as aimless, devoid of genuine human feelings and preoccupied with perverted selfish needs. Pleasure is the catchword and the recurring motif in the play. Pleasure and money are the main axes around which the characters' lives spin. The Beautiful Woman praises the club's plan: "I like the struggle for pleasure."⁵ Even in critical moments when a threatening death is anticipated, pleasure is sought. The

⁴Ibid, p. 90.

⁵Ibid., p. 54.

Newcomer who constantly talks about death does not hesitate to make advances to the Beautiful Woman: "Shall we have an affair, Madam?"⁶ The counterpart of perverted pleasure is the Physician's distorted view of science. He admits that his invention is meant to put an end to "the lives of those we don't want."⁷

The destructive aspects of science are associated with the capitalist system symbolized by the Old Woman who views everything in terms of profit. When the Physician is reluctant to show her his invention, the Old Woman proposes to pay for the tube: "I will pay a very high price for this beautiful mixture."⁸ The deal between the Physician and the Old Woman takes on a note of cheap commerce. The Physician refuses to use his scientific discovery: "I will not unless we sign an agreement."⁹ The Old Woman agrees to sign the contract provided the destructive power of the tube is high enough: "How many people can it kill in an hour?"¹⁰ Thus, science and its human purpose are reduced to commodities.

A similar distorted view of human life is reflected in stripping the Black Man of his humanity and reducing him to an animal trained to juggle like a bear to entertain his masters.

⁶Ibid., p. 81.

⁷Ibid., p. 63.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

In brief, the play introduces a dark and gloomy picture of Western civilization. The fact that the Black Man liberates himself and the Beautiful Woman breaks away from the rest suggest a revolt against the existing conditions and a search for a better human alternative. The alternative is not a socialist society but a world free from the shackles of destructive science and social oppression.

If Pleasure 21 was meant to deal with man's condition in Western civilization, Tonight We Play (Al-Lailat Nalab) went a step further to include the entire human history from the Biblical time of Adam and Eve up through the present. Its 16 episodic scenes introduce different patterns of social and political changes that humanity has experienced throughout history. It traces the development of man's civilization and man's consciousness of his position in the universe and his ceaseless attempt to maintain peace, freedom and integrity in a world plagued by tyranny and devastating wars.

Tonight We Play appeared in Al-Mawqif al-Adabi, a Syrian literary journal, in 1972. It has never been staged. In writing this play, Ikhlasi was apparently influenced by the episodic form, the abstract dramatists in general and by Shaw's Back to Methuselah in particular.

Ikhlasi's use of episodic technique is evident in his division of the play into disconnected, independent and self-sustained episodes, each presenting an anecdote or a parable in an anti-climactic manner, omitting suspense and ending the episode with a didactic message. As an epic

dramatist, Ikhlasi stresses theme rather than complications of plot and character development. The characters who repeatedly admit that they are playing roles inhibit audience identification. The Man asks the Woman, "What is your feeling about replaying the game?" She inquires, "What is my role?"¹¹ To emphasize the presence of a theatre, characters often interrupt each other to declare that they are only acting. The Man, disgusted with the situation, admits, "I am tired and bored. I can't carry on acting." The Woman comments, "Why do you stop? You have been playing your role very well."¹² Thus, the audience is often reminded of its presence in a theatre and that the characters are no more than actors playing roles.

Elements of the theatre of the absurd permeate the early scenes of Tonight We Play and reappear in the final scene. The bare setting often used in absurdist plays to suggest a desolate, hopeless and immutable state has its counterpart in Tonight We Play. Ikhlasi reduces the setting of the first six scenes and the final one to a ditch inside which a man and a woman are trapped. The ditch symbolizes a world deserted by God and reason. From Scenes VII until XV, the ditch is replaced by different settings. As in Waiting for Godot, the two characters that make up the cast of the early scenes are

¹¹Walid Ikhlasi, Al-Lailat Nal'ab (Tonight We Play), Al-Mawqif al-Adabi No. 1 (May, 1972), p. 304.

¹²Ibid, p. 326.

burdened with loneliness, despair and frustration; nothing is left for them except waiting:

THE WOMAN: What are you waiting for?

THREE MEN: To get out of here.

THE WOMAN: Let us get out of this ditch.

THREE MEN: We'd better wait.¹³

As in Sartre's No Exit, characters talk a lot about the different causes that precipitated their fall and repeatedly express their desire to get out, but they never try. In the final scene and after having played several roles, they return to their initial question:

THREE MEN: Why are we here?

THE WOMAN: Because we fell.

THREE MEN: Why did we fall? Somebody must have pushed us into a ditch.¹⁴

Their search for the cause of the fall avails them nothing. Like Vladimir and Estragon they think of committing suicide.

THE WOMAN: Let us commit suicide.

THREE MEN: Commit suicide.

THE WOMAN: By committing suicide we put an end to the problem.¹⁵

Their failure to commit suicide leads them to play a new game--that of hope. Unlike the absurdists, whose plays end

¹³Ibid., p. 297.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 334.

¹⁵Ibid.

where they start, leaving the audience in a state of confusion, Ikhlesi provides his characters with an outlet. His characters find out that no matter how barren the present is, the future is pregnant with new possibilities.

THREE MEN: You should imagine that what is
 coming is better than what has
 gone before.¹⁶

Though the play starts and ends with role-playing, the final game does bear a sign of change and a glimpse of hope consistent more with the end of linear drama than that of the theatre of the absurd. However, the bare setting, the general pessimistic tone, the repetitive style and the short exchanges in the dialogue are all characteristic of the theatre of the absurd.

The nature of the parables and anecdotes in Tonight We Play and their chronological order bear some resemblance to those of Shaw's Back to Methuselah. Both plays trace the history of mankind through the ages; both dramatists rewrite the Garden of Eden myth. Despite their different philosophical outlooks, there is a striking similarity between the way Shaw and Ikhlesi treat the Biblical myth.

In Back to Methuselah and Tonight We Play, the myth of Adam and Eve is stripped of its dramatic moments. God neither exists nor plays any role. Disobedience and remorse as dramatic ingredients are played down. Both dramatists present Adam and Eve like an ordinary married couple. As in Back to

¹⁶ Ibid.

Methuselah, the mythical element in Ikhlasī's play evolves and expands into historical realities such as the relationships between man and woman, war and peace, man and the state, and freedom and determination. Though each dramatist approaches his subject from a different philosophical perspective, the recurrence and treatment of identical issues can't be accidental. Ikhlasī must have read Shaw's play either in English or in an Arabic translation. His modeling of mythical and historical anecdotes to present his vision of human history indicates the influence of Shaw's Back to Methuselah. Ikhlasī does not conceal his admiration for Shaw. Asked about the dramatists that influenced his work, he admits, "I admire Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov."¹⁷

As I mentioned earlier, the structural principle of Ikhlasī's play is neither plot nor action nor character development. The play is based on a succession of independent scenes. (Key scenes are summarized below.) Such scenes are bound together by unity of theme and the constant presence of the Man and Woman playing roles. Within the unity of a scene, the anecdote does not always unfold itself linearly or follow the logical sequence of an organic plot. Often the incident dissolves into several disconnected segments whose meaning and relevancy are either explained by the couple or by the characters. Off-stage voices coordinated with pictures

¹⁷Admer Gouryh, "Interview With Walid Ikhlasī," Aleppo, October 20, 1980 (Typewritten).

projected on the backdrop provide background information and comments on events.

Scene I is a ditch in the back of which stands a wall with seven holes through which seven different faces peer. The Man is seen prostrate on the ground. The Seven Faces describe him as being faceless and unable to see and act. They add rhythmically: "There was no time, no speed and nothing existed. As the Man developed seven faces, time began to exist along with sin and death." When the stage dims, the sound of a falling body is heard. A new day starts. The Woman is seen lying on the ground. The Man asks the Woman if her fall has caused her any injury. When the Woman asks the Man to help her get out of the ditch, he argues that they can't move out and they have to wait. Playing on an instrument, the Man recalls meeting the Woman in a clinic. "There must be an exit," the Woman repeats. Then the Seven Faces utter, "Time passes, opens locked doors and closes open ones." The stage dims.

Scene II is a trench full of dead bodies and dirty water. A Wounded Soldier and an Officer are sitting talking. The Officer is angry over being in the trench. Sounds of shelling are heard. The Wounded Soldier wants to know why wars break out. While the Soldier wonders if there is a chance to get out of the trench, the Officer argues that they were singing the national anthem when they fell in the trench. He then recalls his beautiful wife. More shelling is heard. Some

bombs fall in the trench, killing the Officer and leaving the Soldier suffering loneliness. Darkness.

Scene III is the ditch in which the Man is sitting posing like a thinker and the Woman is playing on a musical instrument. Answering her complaints about his passivity and carelessness, the Man tells the Woman that he is busy reflecting upon past and future time. The Woman wonders if he is, like other men, fed up with her. He admits that he does not hate her but he is involved in making a contribution to human civilization. She then flirts with him and urges him to get closer to her. Tired of their pursuit of each other, the Man decides to relax and explains that their meeting has always been determined by physical needs. The Seven Faces repeat that from the beginning there is a Man and a Woman, Adam and Eve, and both constitute a whole. Suddenly the Woman frustrates the Man by asking for an exit. The stage dims.

Scene V is the ditch in which the Man and the Woman sit, backs to each other. The Seven Faces repeat, "Time passes despite despair." She believes that if they are worthy of life, they should do something. The Man insists that waiting is doing. Then the Woman talks about how loneliness moved Adam and Eve closer to each other. The Man suggests that they replay the game of life and that of Adam and Eve. Darkness.

Scene VI is a jungle in which the Man and the Woman are naked near an apple tree. The Man tells the Woman that they need a Devil to complete the play. The Devil comes in whispering in their ears. The Seven Faces peer through the

holes and sing a fast melody to which the Devil and Adam and Eve dance. The Devil throws an apple to Adam. He takes a bite and turns the fruit over to Eve. Then the two embrace and disappear. The faces repeat, "Man has fallen." Eve comes in again with a child in her arms. Adam and Eve look for a shelter. Pictures of a primitive house are projected on the wall. Suddenly, Eve shouts that her son killed his brother. The Seven Faces chant, "Violence...man kills his brother...man kills man." Darkness.

Scene VII is a jungle near which stand a few primitive cottages. Drums of execution are heard. Primitive men arrest a man and lead him to their Chief. The Chief calls the Captive the enemy of heaven and earth and orders him to kneel down. A Woman comes in begging the Chief to release the Captive. The Chief's men claim that the Captive was heard saying that a magician can't resurrect the dead and war is a crime that no one can justify. The Chief's men chain the Captive to a tree. The Woman cries, begging the chained Captive to retract what he says and believes. The Chief proposes to release the Captive if the latter compromises. Because he refuses to make any concession, the Chief orders his men to kill him. Before his death, he tells the Woman that his thoughts will survive death. Darkness.

Scene VIII is a Babylonian or Roman city. On a high platform stands a Woman. A number of men individually describe what they have experienced. The First says the situation is unbearable; The Second explains that since the

invasion of his land, he has become a slave; The Third states that no one can do anything. The High Priest talks with the Woman about the ominous future. She orders him to execute more slaves--then a light focuses on some men. The First Man argues that in the past men fought against tyranny; The Second Man says that slaves should stay silent; The Third Man explains that "we lost a battle but we should keep on fighting." Then a man comes in carrying a lantern shouting, "Where is the truth?" A man is heard saying that a mad man is trying to free the slaves. The Woman orders the High Priest and the slaves to arrest the Lantern Man. While being tortured, he shouts, "Lord, forgive them for they are not free." After he dies, the Slaves blame themselves for killing him. Darkness.

Scene XI presents a city on fire. Two Workers pace back and forth reading newspapers. The Man and Woman are in a corner watching. The Two Workers read the following: "Revolution sweeps the world...murder of a feudalism and destruction of idols..." Two more Workers enter reading: "The escaping king lost his head...The land sucks the blood of evil men." As the Man tries to join the revolutionaries, the Woman begs the Man not to go. He explains that bloodshed is expected in any revolution. He rushes to the front and shouts, "The revolution has succeeded and the masses must rule now. The revolution means more progress and construction." An Orator and his Aides insist that the revolution needs more

bloodshed. As the angry masses dance in a frenzy, somebody stabs the Man in the back. Darkness.

Scene XVI takes us back to the ditch where the Man and Woman are trapped. The Man says they have played all kinds of roles and the game is over but they are still in the ditch. They begin to dig a hole in the wall by using their nails. As one of the Woman's nails breaks, she stops digging. The Man tells her not to worry because it will grow again. They keep on digging as the curtain falls.

In Tonight We Play, Ikhlasī looks into the highlights of human history. He starts out with an account of the current state of man; he then turns to treat the mythical question in such a matter of fact way that one tends to see the mythical fall as a purely historical event. In other words, Ikhlasī does not conceive man's fall as being determined by God, and therefore, incapable of being transcended. The mythical fall is reduced to a philosophical and psychological matter. The problem is determined by how one looks at it. The solution lies in how man approaches the issue.

In the beginning, the Man believes that "regardless of what we do, we can't get out of this ditch."¹⁸ But the Woman insists that "there must be a solution, an escape. Come on, let us do something."¹⁹ In the final scene, the couple is

¹⁸Ikhlasī, Tonight We Play, p. 297.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 299.

still in the ditch, the Woman less determined and hopeful than the Man. She suggests they commit suicide and "put an end to the problem."²⁰ He suggests the game of hope as a way out of the ditch: "Close your eyes and dream of the coming moments. They are always more beautiful than those that have gone."²¹ Thus, hope provides them with a new incentive to carry on living and searching: "Let us carry on," the Man argues, "We should reach the path that leads us to freedom."²² Though the end of the play returns to the beginning, the couple's view of themselves and their situation is entirely different. It is true they remain in the ditch, but this time they are more optimistic and determined to find an exit.

As the play shifts from the mythical to the historical, parallel situations arise, but this time all of them are the explicit outcome of social and political conditions. Ikhlasī takes the audience on a tour through different historical stages to draw attention to man's suffering, alienation, oppression, exploitation, and revolt. In scene after scene, Ikhlasī introduces anecdotes and parables drawn from ancient and modern civilizations in order to explore the continuity of man's struggle for a better world and his quest for self-realization.

For example, in Scene VII, Ikhlasī presents a primitive tribe in which the law sanctions eating the flesh of captive

²⁰Ibid., p. 334.

²¹Ibid.,

²²Ibid., p. 335.

men and in which a belief that magicians can resurrect the dead is widely held. Though the social and historical frame of the parable is alien to modern culture, the human conflict between the individual who strives to create new human values and the tribe that tries to maintain the established norm is, in essence, eternal and bears upon contemporary life. The primitive man who breaks away from the crowd and remains loyal to his principles is another prototype of the existential hero. Like modern heroes, he argues, "At least I have said no and I have split the tribe into two camps."²³ As in the mythical section, the rebellious man stresses his belief in the future force of his thoughts: "My thoughts will issue loud shouting...and the people will look upward."²⁴ Again, the state of human incarceration persists but man's struggle and faith in a better future persist.

In Tonight We Play, Ikhlasi explores the existence of a "structural model" underlying all the social and political changes and developments in history. The model takes on varied forms according to the period, but the laws that govern the relationship between the forces that give rise to such a model remain practically immutable.

The model presupposes an opposition between two antagonistic forces: oppressed and oppressor; exploited and exploiter; old and new; the state and the individual. For

²³Ibid., p. 309.

²⁴Ibid.

instance, in Scene VII, the model points out a contradiction between the rigid tribe and the enlightened individual. In Scene VII, the emperor and the church are united against the Lantern Man who seeks the truth and advocates the liberation of slaves. In Scene IX, the empire as a repressive establishment is pitted against free thinking. In Scene X, a feudal system is seen in conflict with the peasants. In Scene XI, the revolution against the feudal state leads to the creation of a modern state.

But the revolution as a rigid organization betrays the individual; in Scene XII, the capitalist state creates two conflicting social classes: the rich exploiting class and the poor working class; in Scene XIII, the growth of capitalism gives rise to colonial wars. The strong nations invade and occupy small nations; in Scene XIV, the world is devastated by wars and the need for peace culminates in setting up the United Nations. The latter fails to solve the problems that arise between superpowers and the underdeveloped nations; in Scene XV, the electronic mind is seen capable of solving the most complicated issues but not that of hunger. Some people think the world is immutable; others believe it can be changed through concerted effort. Thus, the model of contradiction constitutes the core of events and underlies every scene.

However, Ikhlasi does not approach the historical process from a single, fixed political angle. His criticism of feudalism and capitalism does not favor socialism. The

principle of contradiction does not result in replacing capitalism by socialism or the rich class by the working class.

This exclusion of socialism from the historical process drew harsh criticism of Ikhlasī from two Syrian Marxist critics. They argued that "a play like this must necessarily contain a positive and future-oriented view of human history. How could a writer envisage the development of human history not leading to a classless society?"²⁵ Ikhlasī does condemn capitalism and defend the struggle of the working class, but he does not see the latter resulting in the creation of a classless society. The principle of contradiction, and the essence of the historical process, is presented as endless, and man's effort to eliminate human suffering and alienation as ceaseless.

Ikhlasī in Tonight We Play integrates the episodic technique with that of the theatre of the absurd. Through a series of separate anecdotes, he illustrates the full cycle of history and passes judgment on the institutions and systems that alienate mankind. By repeating the opening scene at the end (the scene in which a couple is in a ditch from time immemorial), Ikhlasī constitutes the circularity, repetitiveness and timeless mythical stage in which the Man and Woman can't understand or justify their timeless fall, endless wait and struggle--characteristics of absurdist drama.

²⁵Nabil Sulaiman and Bu Ali Yassin, Al-Adab wal-Aidulogia fi Suriyah (Literature and Ideology in Syria) (Beirut: Dar Ibin Khaldun, 1974), p. 151.

However, the end of Tonight We Play (following Scene XV) is a little abrupt: the circle of history, as experienced in the real world, does come to an end, but the dramatic pace and rhythm, the character development and the exhaustion of action don't indicate the smooth approach of an end. In the final scene, Ikhlesi makes the Man and Woman discontinue their role playing, as they claim to have gotten tired and bored. Some allusions to the couple's growing reluctance to carry on the game should at least have run through the play to pave the way for the decision in the final scene. Even the couple's decision, in the end, to play the game of hope does not require so much discussion since the image of struggling pervades most of the play.

If Tonight We Play serves to explore the concrete and discernible forces that shape human life historically, Oedipus (Oedib) deals primarily with the hidden and unconscious motives that underlie man's behavior and determine the course of his life. If fate results in the tragic fall of Sophocles' Oedipus, a similar relentless force is seen operating stealthily to bring about the inevitable catastrophe of Ikhlesi's hero. Ikhlesi's play argues that certain primeval forces are still functioning in disguise in the midst of a world remote from superstitions and dominated by scientific thinking and achievements. In other words, man is driven by forces that he cannot comprehend rationally but feels bound to accept.

Ikhlasī's Oedipus is the first dramatic treatment of the Greek myth in Syrian literature. Farhan Bulbil, a Syrian critic, describes Oedipus as "the most excellent of Ikhlasī's plays and one of the masterpieces of Arabic drama."²⁶ The play has a linear structure and a highly intricate plot. It falls in two parts and seven long scenes. Since it appeared in Al-Hayah al-Masrahia, a Syrian journal for drama and theatre, in 1978, it has not been staged.

Though Ikhlasī's Oedipus is influenced to some extent by Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Cocteau's The Infernal Machine, Ikhlasī's approach to myth is different from that of Western dramatists. The latter draw heavily on mythical material to construct their plays. They remodel the elastic structure of myths to suit the purposes of their creation. Further, to bring the myth to bear upon contemporary life, Western playwrights resort to anachronism, alteration of certain mythical incidents, the exclusion of some characters or the inclusion of others. Regardless of what the remodeling process involves; the major events and characters develop along the mythical line to emphasize the continuity of primeval trauma latent in human history and relevant to current experience--The Infernal Machine is a case in point. Anachronism is evident in Matron's political speech:

"...whose fault is it that we starve to death, that prices go

²⁶Farhan Bulbil, "Al-Adab al-Masrahi fi Suriyah: Walid Ikhlasī," ("The Dramatic Literature in Syria: Walid Ikhlasī"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 7-8 (Winter & Spring, 1979), p. 58.

up, and that bands of looters swarm over the countryside?"²⁷

The characters also speak anachronistically with modern informality. Introduction of alien events into the myth are noticed in the ghost scene which Cocteau has probably borrowed from Shakespeare's Hamlet. Despite all these modifications, anachronism and reshaping of mythical materials, attention is drawn mostly to truths that are larger than life. The mythical framework lends the individual hero the force of an archetype that embodies universal truth and encompasses all men.

In contrast to this tradition of plays based on myths, it is interesting to see where and how Ikhlasī's Oedipus does not have a mythical framework. Instead, the play has realistic incidents and characters drawn from the complex conditions of the twentieth century. Like Medieval dramatists who used real events and characters and shaped them into Biblical parables to convey and stress certain religious messages, Ikhlasī casts his realistic material into the mold of the Oedipus myth. He makes the plot unfold itself in events whose development and catastrophic end parallel those of myth. Here characters are not named for the qualities they represent as in the Medieval Everyman, but they are designed and destined to act according to the image of those in Oedipus Rex. Western writers reshape the mythical framework to explore the continuity of its significance in the present;

²⁷ Jean Cocteau, The Infernal Machine, Trans. Carl Wildman in International Modern Plays, ed. Anthony Dent, (New York: Dutton, 1967), p. 188.

Ikhlasī remodels the real world to point out its affinity with the mythical domain.

A brief comparison of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, and Ikhlasī's Oedipus will show how certain events and characters in the latter are modeled, in part, after their counterparts in the former. The following are some similarities in the two plays: the Oracle as the source of prophecy established early in Oedipus Rex parallels the computer center in the first scene of Ikhlasī's Oedipus. Suffian's sarcastic attitude toward the computer is not different from that of Oedipus toward the Oracle; Dr. al-Bahī's predictions of Suffian's catastrophic end echoes Teiresias's prophecies of Oedipus's tragic doom; Oedipus's mockery and criticism of Teiresias are reflected in Suffian's ridicule of al-Bahī. As Oedipus adamantly refuses everything related to the Oracle, so does Suffian regarding the computer. The murder of Laius prompts Oedipus to seek the murderer. Similarly--although later in the play--the disappearance of Sulaf's mother triggers Suffian's desire to learn more about her abandonment of her family. As the shepherd discloses Oedipus's identity, so does Muder in Ikhlasī's play; as the end of Oedipus Rex fulfills Teiresias's prophecy, the end of Ikhlasī's Oedipus is a consummation of al-Bahī's scientific prediction.

There are also similarities between Cocteau's The Infernal Machine and Ikhlasī's Oedipus. Ikhlasī follows Cocteau in giving titles to each scene and act. For example, Scene I is entitled "Prophecy" and Scene II is called "The

Divided Past." As in Cocteau's play, the scene title serves to designate the main event. Like Cocteau, Ikhlasi uses a chorus-like voice that relates what is going to happen before the action begins. However, the Chorus's speeches in Ikhlasi's play are not as detailed and descriptive as those of Cocteau's Chorus; they maintain some sense of suspense and uncertainty--something destroyed in Cocteau's. Ikhlasi also concludes each scene with a speech by the chorus, offering an overall judgment of what has happened with a focus on fate.

Modeling various dramatic events and characters after Oedipus Rex by Sophocles does not necessarily mean that Ikhlasi follows the latter's technique and style in constructing his play. Though Ikhlasi, like Sophocles, introduces a single dominating figure, Suffian, in relation to a number of secondary characters, Sulaf, Asma, Yazin, Al-Bahi and Muder, the linear form of his play is not as compact as that of Oedipus Rex. A scene by scene summary explains how Ikhlasi's plot unfolds.

Scene I is entitled "The Prophecy." The setting is an electronic center at a university where Dr. al-Bahi carries on experiments. The scene opens with a chorus-like voice anticipating a prophecy. Suffian comes in asking Sulaf, the secretary and his mistress, to guess why he is happy. When she fails to find out, Suffian tells her that his medical report shows that he is healthy and strong. They kiss each other. Soon after, al-Bahi arrives and Suffian follows him to his office. Al-Bahi talks at length about the advantages of

computer science. Suffian refuses to use the computer in geographical research. When Suffian underrates the uses of the computer, al-Bahi insists that his computer can predict man's future. Asked by al-Bahi to feed the machine with an account of his life in order to tell him what the future holds for him, Suffian denounces al-Bahi and his machine as superstitious. Dogged by al-Bahi, Suffian agrees to feed the computer with information extending from childhood to adulthood. After processing the information, al-Bahi believes that Suffian has not given him accurate information. Suffian grows more sarcastic when he finds out that the computer predicts that his daughter will become pregnant by him. He will also kill his son and fail in trying to kill himself. Before Suffian leaves, he explains to al-Bahi that he has no daughter and denies he can kill his son whom he loves more than anything. Then the Chorus asserts the computer's prophecy. Darkness.

Scene II is called "The Fragmented Past." The Chorus is heard saying, "The past conspires..." Suffian is sitting with Asma, his wife, while Yazin, their son, is talking on the phone arguing that he does not believe in luck or coincidence. Asma tells Suffian that the end of the story she has been reading is tragic. Before Yazin goes into his room, he tells his father that he will play Oedipus at school. Disappointed at what Yazin will play, Suffian argues that Oedipus Rex is full of superstitions and the teacher should select a better play. Suddenly, Yazin stands on a couch and plays part of his

role. In a rage, Suffian stops Yazin from playing. As Yazin goes into his room, Asma criticizes Suffian for not being ambitious and determined to be the chairman of his department. She then complains about their small house and their old car. Suffian argues that he is content with his job as a professor. As their argument gets heated, Suffian leaves. Then the Chorus states that sorrow is getting close. Darkness.

Scene III is entitled "The Rapture of Life." The setting is Sulaf's house. The Chorus announces that "love is near the verge of sorrow." Asked about his unexpected delay, he explains to her that al-Bahi caused him some unforgettable misery. Then they talk about their love for each other. Suffian then takes a scarf and wraps it around one of his eyes like a pirate; he paces around shouting with joy that "happy life is coming...nothing can defeat love." After a moment, he asks Sulaf if she thinks they will ever part with each other. She suggests that they consult the computer; Suffian rages and begs her not to mention that machine. She then turns the record player on and pulls Suffian to dance with her. While dancing, Sulaf asks Suffian about his past experience with women. He tells her that he never experienced love before; he also admits that he had an affair with a woman whose husband was impotent. When she sits in a corner smoking, Suffian asks her about her future wishes. She admits that she dreams of getting pregnant by him. As Suffian leaves, the Chorus repeats: "Love is near the verge of sorrow.." Darkness.

Part II, which commences with Scene IV, is entitled "The Fragmented Present." The Chorus wonders if the computer lies or speaks the truth. The setting is Suffian's house where Yazin is seen playing chess. After giving Yazin a guitar as a present, Suffian tells his son, "You are my only hope...I imagine you a perfect man embracing all the sciences and arts." Studying science, he would learn about other truths. Suddenly, Asma comes in ordering Yazin to put the guitar away and go into his room. As Yazin disappears, she tells Suffian that the people at the university talk about his affair with a woman. While Suffian denies this, Asma believes that their married life is crumbling. The Chorus wonders what the future holds for the couple. Darkness.

Scene V is called "Tragedy." The Chorus announces, "What will happen if the future arrives early today?" The setting is Sulaf's house. Suffian is sitting waiting for Sulaf. As Sulaf enters, she rushes up to him to make sure that Suffian is okay. The latter admits that he feels unhappy. To avoid listening to Suffian's complaints, Sulaf turns the record player on and begins to dance. While she is dancing Sulaf argues that though she is involved in science, she feels that Suffian is her fate. The mere mention of "fate" makes Suffian angry. In an attempt to amuse Suffian, Sulaf talks about the physical similarities between her and him. Suffian looks in the mirror and agrees that his eyes and nose resemble those of Sulaf. Then Sulaf brings Suffian her picture album. Sulaf goes to open it and Suffian withdraws to another room.

As Muder, Sulaf's father, enters, she tells him that she has a friend inside. Muder tells his daughter that he has lost his job as a salesman. When Suffian comes in and Sulaf tries to introduce him to her father, the two men look at each other trying to remember where they met before. Shocked by the fact that Muder is Sulaf's father, Suffian asks Sulaf to identify a picture of a woman in the album. When she tells him that it is the picture of her mother, Suffian collapses in a chair, muttering to himself that this is impossible. Suffian asks Muder to identify the same picture; Muder assures him that it is the picture of his wife and Sulaf's mother. Upon hearing that, Suffian screams painfully, telling Sulaf that her mother deserted her father because Muder was impotent. He adds that her mother had an affair with him for a year and she is his daughter; he is her father, not Muder. Sulaf in tears tells Suffian that she is pregnant and falls on the floor. Desperate and confused, Suffian leaves, damning the computer.

Scene VI is entitled, "Killing." The setting is Suffian's house. The Chorus is heard saying, "Your daughter is pregnant by you and you will kill the dearest one to you." Suffian is smoking and pacing the room in a rage. Asma warns him that if he does not tell her the truth, she will desert him. Suffian decides to put an end to his life. He takes a handful of pills and pours them in a glass of water. Before he drinks it, he remembers that he left Sulaf in despair. He goes out to see Sulaf but then recalls that she is his

daughter and pregnant by him. When he returns, he finds the glass empty and Yazin dead on the floor. He cries bitterly, holding Yazin in his arms. The Chorus repeats, "You seek death, but you will not find it."

Scene VII, which is the finale, is entitled, "Revenge." The setting is the computer center. Al-Bahi and Suffian are seen desperate, sad and silent. The Chorus says, "You wish death, but you can't die." When Suffian blames what happened to him on the computer, al-Bahi explains that the computer only discovers facts but does not result in the death of people. Suffian asks al-Bahi to order his computer to find him a way to die because he can't tolerate life anymore. Before Suffian leaves, he admits that happiness is an illusion and he can't bring himself to die. The Chorus repeats, "Everything is the work of man--the work of the greatest memory." Darkness.

An examination of the plot shows us that Ikhlas's Oedipus has the essential dramatic structure of linear drama. In Part One, there is exposition of characters and situations. This is where we become familiar with Suffian, al-Bahi, Sulaf, Asma and Yazin and their background, what they plan to do and what relationships and feelings they have for each other. The unexpected prophecy of the computer which disturbs Suffian's world initiates the "inciting point" and determines what the play will be about. Then, in Scenes II and III, the "rising action" evolves out of the various conflicting forces; Asma's greedy and demanding nature clashes with Suffian's content,

Suffian's disagreement with Yazin over playing Oedipus, and Sulaf's and Suffian's occasional worries over the future of the illegal relationship.

In Part Two, the conflicting forces escalate their fight: Asma bitterly attacks Suffian over the latter's affair with a woman at the university, and the sudden arrival of Sulaf's father further complicates the situation and discloses the real nature of Sulaf's relationship with Suffian, thereby dashing their dreams and leading to the "turning point." Soon after, intensity builds up rapidly, driving Asma to desert Suffian who in his turn decides to commit suicide, but his attempt results in the death of Yazin--a catastrophic event leading to the "climax" which fulfills what has been anticipated in the early part of the play. The final scene in which Suffian comes to al-Bahi for help and consultation, serves as the denouement of conventional drama. All the possibilities of action seem to have been exhausted and some kind of a balance is established. Both Suffian and al-Bahi have acquired a new understanding of themselves and the world. Both agree that there is an invisible and incomprehensible force functioning in the world and neither science nor reason can control it.

Alongside the similarities, however, there are of course some differences between the dramatic principles in Ikhlasī's play and the technique and structure of classical drama. The first thing that strikes us in Ikhlasī's Oedipus is the absence of an organic action. The play is interspersed with different physical incidents and events, but none of them is

the outcome of an action initiated and motivated at the outset. In Oedipus Rex, the moment the Oracle attributes the plague that sweeps Thebes to the unpunished murderer of Laius, Oedipus's motivation is formed and accordingly action arises aimed at finding Laius's slayer. Then everything that occurs in Sophocles' play, whether physical events or disputes, grows organically out of the initial action, and develops along its line, thereby creating a unity of action. No such thing exists in Ikhlas's play. Though the computer as Oracle disturbs Suffian's life and makes him constantly suspicious and angry at everything, reminded of the prediction, fate, and the myth of Oedipus, it does not create a motivation from which an action can spring and develop to encompass everything in the play. Ikhlas's Oedipus dissolves into a series of related events whose progression and development form a coherent story.

In creating the inner structure of his episodes, Ikhlas uses dramatic devices both to form a coherent plot and to create an atmosphere propitious to the unravelling of the mysterious Oracle. In each scene, we find besides the major incidents that other devices are planted throughout the play to effect impressions of what is likely to happen. These elements are carefully woven into the inner structure of the realistic episodes to draw our attention to the ways of fate.

The force of fate is made perceivable through the use of devices like foreshadowings, allusions, omens, prophecies, reversals and surprises. After Scene I, the social events

that pervade the play overshadow the computer's oracle, but allusions to what the latter signifies recur in Scene II. Yazin, on the phone, denounces luck and coincidence as superstitious. Then an evident hint at the computer's prediction comes from Yazin, who surprises his father by playing Oedipus. Suffian's subdued reaction to Yazin's enthusiastic playing foreshadows the catastrophic end that the oracle predicts for Yazin: "I like the play, but I am afraid that you will ruin yourself in it; I mean your time."²⁸ In Scene III, more echoes of the prediction recur, shedding more light on the invisible force of fate. In a figurative speech, Suffian hints at his tragic future: "I see the coast's people, those cruel barbarians, roasting an old horse who fell in love with a young mare."²⁹ Allusions to a fated love are often made by Sulaf in describing her relationship with Suffian. "I never accepted a planned fate like this before; nevertheless, I am happy and content."³⁰ She then likens fate to an ominous bird hovering over their heads. Close to the end of Scene III, Sulaf hints at her dream of getting pregnant by Suffian--something stated by the computer. A couple of reversals are planted in this scene to illustrate the implicit meaning of the computer's prophecy: Suffian's dream of seeing Yazin become a perfect man, an

²⁸Walid Ikhlasi, Oedib (Oedipus), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 4-5 (Spring, 1978), p. 69.

²⁹Ibid., p. 72.

³⁰Ibid., p. 73.

embodiment of science and art, and Yazin's argument that "there is neither luck nor coincidence in life,"³¹ are both reversed at the end. Yazin does not live to become a perfect man and dies by coincidence. Scene V presents another foreshadowing, reinforcing the computer's oracle regarding Suffian's failure to die. When Suffian explains that his love for Sulaf keeps him from thinking of death, Sulaf argues, "You will never die...men like you don't die."³² Whatever these foreshadowings, allusions and omens predict comes true at the end.

These predictive and allusive passages insinuate an impending event and create a sense of suspense (consistent with a play starting with an oracle), disclose the characters' attitudes toward the computer's predictions, point out how characters obsessed with reason frequently give way to fears of being the target of fate, and heighten the tension arising from the contradiction between what the characters think and what they feel.

In Ikhlas's Oedipus a consistent pattern of tension and calm recurs and alternates to create a rhythm within the individual scene and through the play as a whole. The sequence of scenes also produces a similar rhythmic effect. For example, while Scene I is relatively relaxed, tension

³¹Ibid., p. 75.

³²Ibid., p. 78.

risers in Scene II, to calm down in Scene III. More tension builds up in Scene IV, to subside in Scene V, reaching the climax of intensity in Scene VI, to be finally relieved in Scene VII.

Rhythm here does not arise from the repetition of sounds, words or phrases; it simply evolves out of a certain pattern of behavior whose recurrence produces an "attitude rhythm"--a phrase coined and argued convincingly by the American writer Kathleen George. In her book, Rhythm in Drama, George defines attitude rhythm to mean:

some regular recurrence and alternation of positive and negative expressions. Positive attitudes include speaking to someone, for someone, for something, asking questions of, making verbal gestures toward...Negative attitudes include avoidance of another character, (grunts, groans, silence, brief remarks), verbal gestures directed away from another character.³³

The attitude rhythm clearly manifests and repeats itself in each scene of Oedipus. For example, in Scene I, al-Bahi's positivism is reflected in his ceaseless efforts to convince Suffian of the advantages of the computer; Suffian's passive attitude is shown in his avoidance of the computer and his calling al-Bahi's experiment a "game." In Scene II, Suffian's negativity clashes with Yazin's active and positive attitude. While Yazin vigorously describes and plays Oedipus, Suffian, in an attempt to conceal his fears of what Yazin is involved

³³ Kathleen George, Rhythm in Drama (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), p. 82.

in, calls Oedipus Rex "superstitious" and Oedipus' involvement with his mother "disgusting." A similar situation arises when Asma criticizes Suffian's contentment and lack of ambitions. She argues and questions whatever Suffian represents. Failing to convince her, Suffian passively states, "Yes, I am lazy, I am content." Then, in order to avoid confronting her, he makes up some excuses and leaves. Instances of passivity and positivity appear occasionally in Scene III when Sulaf tends to explain the uses of the computer. Avoiding a discussion of the computer Suffian begs Sulaf not to mention that machine. In the same scene, when she describes her love as fated, Suffian mumbles to himself, "Will this continue long?" In Scene IV, Suffian's negative and resigned attitude is manifested in his brief answers to Yazin's endless questioning. When Yazin asks Suffian about what he thinks of fate, the latter replies, "What do you mean by such a question?" And when Yazin asks him if he loves Asma, Suffian remains silent for a moment, then answers, "Why do you ask such weird questions?" Having seen Asma coming in, Suffian mumbles, "Witch." As she continues asking him about the woman with whom he is involved, he answers either indirectly or very briefly. Pressured and annoyed by Asma's questions, he leaves. Instances of avoiding other characters and maintaining absolute silence appear in the opening of Scene VI, when Asma threatens to desert Suffian. The latter remains motionless and silent. Obviously, the existence of a rhythmic attitude based on the repetition of conflict between

the negativity of Suffian and the positivity of other characters underlies Suffian's constant fear and avoidance of confronting the issue of fate which haunts him from beginning to end.

Ikhlasī intentionally entitles his play a "tragedy." The constituent ingredients of tragedy are clearly inherent in its theme and structure. Following the tradition of tragedies that deal with the Oedipus myth, Ikhlasī's play focuses on the metaphysical existence of man, that is, what goes beyond the ephemeral and mundane. It presents man as a paradox trapped in a paradoxical situation, where his proclaimed free will and determination lead him to find himself a plaything of fate. Like tragic heroes, Ikhlasī's protagonist explores the darkest sides of human existence; he faces defeat, but before that defeat he becomes enlightened. Equally important in Ikhlasī's play is the existence of reversal, recognition and pathos--the three important organic parts inherent in tragic plots. Suffian's pursuit of happiness through his affair with Sulaf and his relentless challenge of the computer gradually bring about the opposite of what he anticipates. His happiness turns into sadness and his challenge turns into defeat. However, the reversal of the situation involves the process of shifting from ignorance to knowledge--something stressed in tragedy. In the end, Suffian comes to realize the existence of irrational forces which he formerly dismissed as superstition. Pathos in Ikhlasī's Oedipus arises from Suffian's irrational fears of the computer's oracle. Then his

suffering grows tremendously as Suffian recognizes the true nature of his relationship with Sulaf, reaching its zenith in the sudden death of Yazin.

Furthermore, Ikhlasi's protagonist possesses some essential tragic qualities: he is representative of a distinct group--the intelligentsia. Suffian is both a loving father and a dedicated professor. Like all tragic characters, he is vulnerable. His tragic flaw springs from his arrogant refusal to consider fate and everything related to the computer. Through Suffian's downfall and suffering, Ikhlasi attempts to arouse in the viewer feelings of pity and fear, but one's pity for Suffian's suffering and one's fear of facing the same destiny are somewhat hindered by the mechanical and calculated end. The play as a whole, however, fulfills the requirements of tragedy.

The principal theme that runs through Ikhlasi's Oedipus, besides that of fate, is a pattern of obsessions rampant in twentieth century life. Characters dominated by such obsessions either reduce human experience to strictly scientific facts and figures, or look at the complex universe from a purely rationalistic angle.

Equally important is man's constant preoccupation with material needs. Each character in the play represents an obsession. Al-Bahi approaches the universe from his computer's point of view. Suffian's rationalism dismisses everything he does not understand as superstition. Yazin sees the world governed by reason and logic and void of luck and

coincidence. Asma reduces human ambitions to material needs and comfort. The irony here lies in the fact that though characters view their world as a rationally ordered object apt to be understood and controlled by reason and science, the end proves exactly the opposite. Science only discovers what has already been fated, but fails to change the course of fate or eliminate its existence. The play, evidently, is not an attack on science as such; it only criticizes the tradition of subjecting every human phenomenon solely to scientific and rationalistic analyses or dismissing everything irrelevant to science and reason as mythical and superstitious. In other words, the play condemns the reductionist approach that blinds people from seeing that which goes beyond their acquired knowledge.

A similar metaphysical issue crops up in Garden Song (Inshudat al-Hadiqa), a play Ikhlasī wrote in 1979 and which is still in manuscript form. In a talk with Ikhlasī in Aleppo in October of 1980, he said that this play would be published soon, but he also argued that its appearance might give rise to tremendous controversies due to the religious upheavals that have swept Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab states during the last few years. The play has a religious framework; it focuses on the origin of sin and the fall of man. It explores man's violations of God's order. The play poses the age old dilemma of free-will versus predestination. The play also touches upon man's ceaseless search for God and points out the different motivations that lie behind such a quest.

Ikhlasī casts Garden Song in an allegorical form reminiscent of the European mystery play. Like the latter, the play has an allegorical plot replete with cycles connected with the idea of redemption presented through familiar Biblical events. Though characters are stripped of their Biblical names, their Arabic names allude to the Hebrew ones. In other words, characters represent God, Adam and Eve, the Devil and the three prophets: Moses, Christ and Mohammad.

In constructing his play, Ikhlasī manages to overcome the limitations of stereotyped plot and meager opportunity for character development that characterize the mystery play. From the very start, Ikhlasī manipulates the allegorical plot and imbues it with different social and historical elements to broaden the scope and provide more opportunities for character exploration. In the mystery play, characters and events are meant to function as iconic symbols, that is, each symbol bears a direct, unequivocal relation to the thing symbolized. In Ikhlasī's play, the symbol is open to different interpretations. As the play proceeds, characters and events change and acquire new dimensions. An analysis of the plot structure requires a summary to show where it converges with the mystery play and where it diverges.

In Act I, the setting is a gorgeous house overlooking a garden full of roses and trees loaded with fruits. The Father's regal chair stands in the hall below paintings portraying the development of mankind. Small and big toys are scattered around the hall. In a corner stands a podium,

behind which the Father stands to write in a huge notebook. While writing, he talks about his will that controls everything on earth. He then points to a doll and says, "You are beautiful, but don't deserve happiness." To another doll he says, "You have a confident smile, but that does not mean you have lasting happiness." He then chops off the head of a third doll, saying, "Your life has come to an end." As he sits in his chair, three sons line up before him after kissing his hand. Soon after, Mukhtar and Anis, his two other sons, come in. The Father tells them that he will go away and appoints Mukhtar to replace him. The appointment of Mukhtar as the head of the family arouses Anis's jealousy. When Anis opposes his Father's decision, the latter calls him "rebel" and orders him out of the garden forever. The Father warns Mukhtar against approaching women and of Anis' plotting.

Act II, Scene I, occurs in the same hall where the Father is about to leave. Before departing, he urges Mukhtar to be wise and careful in dealing with his brothers, especially with Anis whom he describes as the most intelligent one. Left alone, Mukhtar wonders why he is elected to succeed his Father; he is apprehensive of being responsible for such a difficult position. Suddenly, Anis comes in stealthily, proposing to help Mukhtar carry out his mission. He then goes out and brings in Haiat, an attractive woman. Introducing her to Mukhtar, Anis says that she is parentless, poor and needs food and shelter. Attracted to Haiat, Mukhtar rushes to the garden to bring her some fruit. Holding fruit in his hand,

Anis explains that the Father has forbidden them from eating it. He praises Mukhtar's courage and takes an apple and gives it to Haiat and another one to Mukhtar. Having eaten the apple, Mukhtar argues that he wished he had tried it before. While Mukhtar is embracing and kissing Haiat passionately, Anis sneaks out with a victorious smile on his face.

Act II, Scene II, shows Haiat sitting on the regal chair trying to cover her naked body, shivering. Stretching out her hands to Mukhtar, Haiat says that she and Mukhtar have become one. While they are in each other's arms, Anis is seen through the window smiling. Then Anis writes a letter to the Father describing how Mukhtar, the chosen son, has violated his will. Suddenly, all the clocks on the walls ring and Mukhtar wakes up, frightened, telling Haiat that the time of regret has come. He then explains that he has broken his promise to his Father. Strong winds and thunder storms are heard. Fear and confusion overcome Mukhtar and Haiat.

Act II, Scene III, has the same setting. The Father is sitting in his regal chair contemplating the place. As Mukhtar comes in, the Father denounces his involvement with Haiat as a violation of his order. He agrees that he will forgive his son provided he abandons the woman. Insisting that his love for Haiat is not a sin, Mukhtar refuses to desert his wife. Enraged, the Father expels the couple from the garden, arguing that Mukhtar and Haiat are forbidden to see the garden until the day of judgment. He then stands behind the podium, writing that Mukhtar has chosen his misery.

Act II, Scene IV, occurs in the same hall. The Father sinks in his chair with his head bent over in great sadness. He is mourning the death of his three sons. Mukhtar and Anis sneak in to console their bereaved Father. As the latter sees them, he orders them to go out. Anis tells the Father that Mukhtar has a son and needs his blessing. "No blessing can be given to the child of sin," says the Father. He then explains how he sent his three sons to the world to help man overcome his sin and there they were killed. Anis begs the Father to have mercy on Mukhtar. The Father argues that Mukhtar is doomed to suffer due to his violation of the law. While Mukhtar expresses his longing for the garden, Anis admits that he is content with being an outcast. Sitting in his chair, the Father orders his two sons to go out. Darkness.

Act III, Scene I, is a dim cave carved in a side of a mountain. Anis, Mukhtar, Haiat and their child are sitting in the cave. Giving Mukhtar a jar of wine, Anis urges his brother to cheer up and forget about the garden. In an attempt to stop Mukhtar from thinking about his guilt feelings, Anis claims that the future is full of hope and man's strength lies within and is contingent upon his offspring. He encourages Haiat and Mukhtar to have more children through whom they can increase their wealth and maintain a secure life. As Anis leaves, the spirits of Mukhtar's Three Brothers appear telling Mukhtar that he should follow in the steps of his Father. Confused, Mukhtar describes to them his poverty and misery and his fear of the future. Darkness.

Act III, Scene II, takes place in the same cave. Mukhtar is trying to fix a trap while Anis is watching him. Haiat is heard complaining about food shortages. Anis argues that his Father is so rich that taking a little of his wealth can't be noticed. Worried about his child and wife, Mukhtar decides to use all possible means to improve his life. Anis vows to stand by him.

Act III, Scene II, shows the cave during the night. New furniture is added and several jars filled with honey and fat are scattered about. Suddenly, Anis' spirit and those of his Three Brothers appear to converse with Mukhtar. Anis assures Mukhtar that from now on he will enjoy the pleasures of his work. The Three Brothers blame Mukhtar for stealing his Father's goods. Anis argues that sin is a relative question. Mukhtar claims that he steals for survival. The Three Brothers urge Mukhtar to repent and go back to the garden. Anis reminds Mukhtar of his Father's tyranny. As the Three Brothers and Anis disappear, Mukhtar is confused and torn between what Anis and his brothers say.

Act IV, Scene IV shows the cave during the day. Haiat looks pregnant and happy. Mukhtar assures Haiat that the new child will have a comfortable life. She wonders if Mukhtar has succeeded in meeting his father. Mukhtar admits that his Father refuses to see him and forgive him. Sensing his pain and frustration, Haiat calms Mukhtar down, saying that the future will be better and more hopeful. Then Haiat feels her

belly, believing that the time to deliver her child has come.
Darkness.

Act IV presents Mukhtar approaching the garden walls. He is now a mature and rich man. He addresses the nonpresent Father in a loud voice: "Don't you hear me? I am Mukhtar, your chosen son. Take me into your garden; I am ready to accept your terms." Then Haiat comes in telling him that he has been elected the administrator of the town. Mukhtar insists on seeing his Father. As Haiat leaves, the spirits of his Three Brothers appear, telling him that he has stolen and killed and is not worthy of the garden. Suddenly, Anis' spirit appears defending Mukhtar, saying that Mukhtar has killed for the sake of survival. One of the three urges Mukhtar to give up everything in order to be accepted by the Father. Mukhtar refuses to abandon his wife and children.

Frustrated, Mukhtar bangs the garden wall with his hands shouting, "You who conceal yourself behind a veneer of pride, come out for a moment and accept my weakness." Suddenly, we hear thunder; Mukhtar is frightened; the garden door opens and the Father's feet appear beneath an extravagant golden robe. The spirits disappear. Refusing to accept Mukhtar's repentance, the Father utters, "You have your fold, you belong there." Confused and frustrated, Mukhtar decides to build a garden and a house that can accommodate many people, especially the deprived. Once more, the spirits of his Three Brothers appear, but this time all of them vow to stand by

him. At the same time, the Father's voice is heard: "Don't leave Mukhtar alone; he always needs you." Darkness.

As I noted earlier, Ikhlasī does draw on the mystery play, but he does not merely allegorize a Biblical concept or thought as Medieval playwrights did. The scope of his plot is kept wide open and the involved elements diverse enough to imply both the Biblical allegory and the social and historical facts that underlie it. Furthermore, Ikhlasī breaks with the fidelity that Medieval dramatists have for the scriptural story and its didactic message. He takes liberty at reconstructing the Biblical plot and reinterpreting its meanings in a way that reflects both the spirit of time and his own philosophical views.

On the surface, the plot of Garden Song deals with a family in which the Father is challenged by the son. The unexpected mutiny drives the Father to expel his son from the fold. The social framework of the plot does not conceal the scriptural pattern that underlies the portrayal of characters and the arrangement and unfolding of events. Despite Ikhlasī's reconstruction, remodeling and addition of the given materials, the Biblical pattern of the plot remains dominant.

Moreover, the play provides ample scriptural descriptions and hints that testify to the latter's reality. For example, the garden as the original lodging of the family with a forbidden tree in it brings forth the image of Paradise. The Father who owns everything and controls the fate of his sons and that of time has figuratively the potential of God. Like

the latter who warns Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the prohibited tree, the Father warns Mukhtar not to approach women or follow Anis' instructions. The serpent that stands for the Devil is replaced by Anis who is described as the cursed rebel. Anis, like the serpent, allures Haiat and Mukhtar to eat the forbidden fruit. Like Adam and Eve, when Mukhtar and Haiat eat the fruit, they feel their nudity and begin to justify their action. The Father returns from his journey as God comes back to the garden to start an investigation. His expulsion of Mukhtar and Haiat mirrors that of Adam and Eve. The latter's life and suffering on earth are identical to what Mukhtar and Haiat experience in the cave. Mukhtar's longing for the garden and the Father resembles man's search for God through the recorded history of humanity. The Father's redemption of Mukhtar through the sacrifice of his three sons is reminiscent of God's redemption of man through his prophets and son, Jesus Christ. Finally, Mukhtar's oscillation between Anis and the Three Brothers echoes man's fluctuation between good and evil. Thus, the analogous aspects between the structure of Ikhlasī's plot and those of the Biblical story demonstrate the salient religious import of Garden Song.

After a look at the parallels, it is instructive to turn to the differences. Such modifications arise from the playwright's approach to the dramatized issues. Ikhlasī's philosophical vision of the question of man's fall can be considered "reconciliatory." That is, it is neither strictly

idealist nor purely materialist. He sees three forces always inherent in the very being of man. Though at variance, these opposed forces (body or matter, spirit and reason) are merged in man. Even characterization, dramatic conflict, and plot structure are conditioned by the sharp division and ceaseless clash of these forces.

As for the characterization, each character represents a distinct force. For example, Haiat symbolizes matter or body; she is a peasant girl, hence her bond with the earth and her preoccupation with material needs: "The hens no longer lay eggs."³⁴ She continues complaining: "Damn...The beehive has stopped producing honey."³⁵ Even her name, which means "life" in Arabic, implies life on earth. Meeting Mukhtar in the garden, she talks only about her need for food, shelter and comfort.

Anis is characterized as a pure rational force subjecting everything to strictly rational and pragmatic analysis; hence, his rejection of abstract spiritual values: "Sin is a relative question."³⁶ He also stresses rebellion and self-assertion: "You should rebel and be yourself."³⁷ Urging Mukhtar to be independent, he argues, "Only your will

³⁴Walid Ikhlasī, Inshudat al-Hadiqa (Garden Song), (Aleppo, 1979), p. 52 (Typewritten).

³⁵Ibid., p. 53.

³⁶Ibid., p. 57.

³⁷Ibid., p. 60.

makes your dreams possible."³⁸ In Arabic, Anis' name means "intimate", here connoting "intellectual intimacy."

The Three Brothers, Masud, Mahmud and Muti, allegorize God's messengers or prophets. Their names imply certain characteristics: Masud means favored by fortune; Mahmud means praised by God; Muti means obedient.

The Three Brothers advocate spiritual values and preach submission to God (the Father). They advise Mukhtar to "follow in the steps of the Father."³⁹ They reduce man's need to whatever is spiritual: "Your humanity lies in spiritual values."⁴⁰ In short, they represent the work of God in history.

The Father, whose part diminishes gradually after Mukhtar's expulsion from the garden, stands for God, the absolute power, knowledge and affection.

Finally, Mukhtar, the central character whose name means "he who chooses," symbolizes man in general. In him the three forces come together and clash. His choice is always conditioned by these forces: body, spirit and reason.

The dramatic conflict in Garden Song springs from the contradiction between the forces described above and around which Mukhtar's choices are centered. The play abounds in indications that Mukhtar has an undefined and unfettered

³⁸Ibid., p. 39.

³⁹Ibid., p. 50.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 69.

nature. His initial violation of the Father's will demonstrates that he has the potential for making free choices. However, these choices are not made in a vacuum. Mukhtar is situated, that is, his choices are conditioned either by material, spiritual or rational motivations. The tension created by the clashing of these forces arises from their association with values. For example, Mukhtar's affection for Haiat is judged by the Father on the ground that Mukhtar has abandoned the realm of "spirit" for that of "matter." Even Mukhtar's experience in the cave is not more than a variation on the former. His search for material survival brings him closer to Anis (reason) but also arouses the Three Brothers (spirit) against him.

Every choice means acceptance of one or two forces and negation or alienation of the third. When Mukhtar decides to seek forgiveness and reunion with the Father, his request is turned down by the Three Brothers (spirit) because Mukhtar refuses to give up his material wealth. Anyway, whether reconciliation of these bickering forces is achieved or not, Mukhtar remains the initiator of his choice: "In your hands lies the exit."⁴¹

As in existential drama, Ikhlasī shows man as the source of his own salvation and damnation: "Inside you lies hope and despair, desire and deprivation."⁴² Moreover, like Sartre, Ikhlasī establishes a link between choice and responsibility.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 43.

⁴²Ibid., p. 71.

The Father explains, "Man is responsible for his deeds."⁴³ Such responsibility is not before God; its scope is the human community because the future of man is rooted in man, not in God. The Father directs Mukhtar's attention to the human race: "You have your fold, stick to it."⁴⁴ Despite the rational assertion of Mukhtar's independence of the Father, his final decision to build a garden reflects his thirst for the lost paradise or for the spiritual sphere. Ikhlasī seems to believe that even when man becomes a purely rational or materialist being, his life will seek the sphere of spirit, or at least it will be torn between the three forces that underlie his choice.

Dividing the forces latent in man's essence into three distinct and visible entities does not necessarily mean that man can be categorized by any of them. Ikhlasī affirms that man constitutes an indivisible whole, but for dramatic, theatrical and Biblical purposes, he introduces each force personified. If these forces were internalized and brought out in a form of inner dialogue and monologue, much of the dramatic conflict would have been either abstract discussion or devoid of dramatic and theatrical effectiveness.

Moreover, Ikhlasī introduces his characters in three different ways in accordance with Biblical and historical facts. In Genesis, God, the Devil, and Adam and Eve were portrayed as individuals in immediate interaction; so are the

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Father, Mukhtar, Haiat and Anis in the play. As Mukhtar and Haiat are expelled from the garden (Paradise), they no longer have access to God (the Father); they enter the realm of history where they encounter the Three Brothers, that is, God's three prophets--Moses, Christ and Mohammad. Then after the Three Brothers die and Mukhtar moves to the city (symbol of modern life) he, like the rest of humanity, hears only the voices of the Three Brothers--something analogous to the voice of conscience or of faith. The shift from the concrete to the abstract accords with the historical development of religion. In short, the diverse portrayal of characters and the way the plot is constructed are in agreement with the dramatic, theatrical and scriptural needs.

While the import of a mystery play is primarily Biblical and to some degree social, Garden Song goes beyond this to critique the mystery plays' religious interpretations. Ikhlasi reads his own philosophical thought into the Biblical myth, turning Adam's fall into a natural process through which man humanizes himself without losing his spiritual capacities. He also uses anachronisms to extend man's revolt against God into people's revolt against the oppressive and exploitive forces that alienate him from himself and his needs.

For example, the Father who has absolute power and knowledge is said to be rich and dominant and in disagreement with Anis, his rebellious and disinherited son. Anis' identification with the poor masses who live around the garden and his constant plotting against the rich Father call to mind

the image of a revolutionary intellectual who breaks with his social class. Anis does stress his social bond with the poor masses when he meets Haiat: "We are all poor compared to what the Father owns."⁴⁵ His full support of the deprived is noticed in his talk with Mukhtar regarding Haiat: "Find her a job; just help her earn a living."⁴⁶ Even when the Father expels Mukhtar for violating his will, Mukhtar, in defending his marriage, stresses the social need that drives him to marry Haiat: "It is not a crime. She is a poor girl from the deprived quarter."⁴⁷ Living in utter poverty, Mukhtar, Haiat, and Anis become more obsessed with material survival and more inclined to challenge the wealthy Father. Anis emphasizes the rights of the poor to live decent lives. Addressing Mukhtar, who lives in a cave, Anis argues, "Why are you not worthy to live in a house like that of the Father?"⁴⁸ Anis, like any revolutionary, does not hesitate to use illegal means to undermine the material basis of the Father. Urging Mukhtar to steal some of the Father's belongings, Anis explains that the world is divided into two bickering camps: the poor and the rich or the weak and the strong: "You have two options. You either act like a lamb or like a wolf."⁴⁹ At the end, when Mukhtar overcomes his misery, he remains loyal to the poor. He decides to "build a great house and a garden--whose trees

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

provide shade for the people and the poor."⁵⁰ The lost paradise that Mukhtar tries to set up takes the form of a utopian city in which all people enjoy peace and justice.

Ikhlasī succeeds in creating a genuine allegorical drama that lends itself to both philosophical and social interpretations. His frequent manipulation and reconstruction of the original plot sometimes force Ikhlasī to lapse into an abstract discussion--especially at the end of the play. The first two acts that follow the Biblical sequence are lively and less argumentative. In Act III and IV, the scriptural plot wanes and gradually gives way to scattered philosophical arguments. Were it not for these shortcomings, Garden Song would rank among Ikhlasī's best plays.

To summarize: First, the plays in this chapter are characterized by the universality of their orientation. They are open to either current issues of universal human concern (Pleasure 21) or to timeless metaphysical questions whose vitality has never been exhausted (Tonight We Play, Oedipus and Garden Song). Secondly, despite the timeless problems considered in these plays, the historical context is not neglected. The universal is made historical through placing characters and dramatic events against a social and political background. However, though these plays could lend themselves to social interpretations, they cannot be treated exclusively as social drama without damaging their dominant universal

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

meanings. Here, the social context serves to establish a link between the primordial and the contemporary. Thirdly, Ikhlesi constitutes the timeless and universal by either drawing on a Biblical plot (Tonight We Play, Garden Song) or on a Greek myth (Oedipus). Finally, the gloomy atmosphere that clothes these plays is often tinged with a flicker of hope motivating man to continue searching for a better world.

CHAPTER V

THE ARTIST'S PREDICAMENT

Even before Ikhlasi took to playwrighting in 1965, he was deeply involved in promoting theatrical activities in Aleppo. In 1968, he supervised the establishment of the Aleppo People's Theatre, to be devoted to serious drama -- and independent of state supervision. His concern about issues related to art, its function and its relation to man and the state arose in part from the domination of theatre in the 50s by the actor and producer. Playwrights had no role because the theatres produced either slapstick comedies or musicals composed by hacks and actors whose sole criterion of success and failure was the box-office. Audiences knew nothing of plays dealing with social and intellectual problems. Farhan Bulbil, the Syrian critic, is correct when he says that "some of Ikhlasi's plays about theatre spring from his regret that in the theatrical movement in Aleppo commercial plays dominate the stage and capture the audience."¹ However, Bulbil neglects to mention that Ikhlasi's plays not only attacked commercial theatre but also lashed out against state control which came in the guise of subsidies to the Aleppo People's

¹Farhan Bulbil, "Al-Adab al-Masrahi fi Suriyah: Walid Ikhlasi," ("The Dramatic Literature in Syria: Walid Ikhlasi"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 3 (Fall, 1977-78), p. 39.

Theatre. These plays illuminate government use of the theatre as a propaganda tool. Because in such a theatre the artist can only convey what the state assigns him, in Ikhlasī's plays he is either a fraud prostituting his art or a man torn between what he wants to be and what he is forced to represent, and racked by guilt at his own compromises.

The three plays to be analyzed in this chapter are: The Pearl and Venus, Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music, and The Straight Path. Though they are cast in different dramatic modes and follow diverse techniques, their themes are similar, and their artist protagonists encounter similar problems. In the first play, the protagonist is a novelist who tries--and fails--to escape from the domain of reality into that of art; in the second, a playwright's respect for art and people brings him into conflict with his producer whose sole concern is the box-office; in the third, an actor's refusal of his assigned role wins him wide reputation among the masses, but arouses the wrath of the Director and the authorities and, trying to survive, he compromises his principles. Thus the last two plays unmask the repressive forces that encroach upon the artist's freedom and alienate him from his commitment to his art and the people.

In 1969, Ikhlasī published a long one-act play called The Pearl and Venus (Al-Lulu wal-Zahra) in Al-Aqlam, an Iraqi literary journal. Here he explores the interplay of art and reality and the dichotomy between fact and fiction. In each of the three scenes realistic anecdotes alternate with dreamy

incidents of symbolic significance. The play has a slight plot and minimal action; influenced by symbolist drama, it is rather evocative, suggestive, atmospheric. It shares certain characteristics with symbolist drama such as Villiers' Axel and also shows the influence of Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author. Here is how the plot unfolds:

Scene I takes place in a large room where the Writer lives. Through the window, the sky is seen studded with stars. Calm music is playing. Several paintings are hung on the walls. On the left is the Writer's study with shelves loaded with books. The Writer is sitting in a rocking chair and his Mistress is lying on the couch with a drink in her hand. Gazing into the void, the Writer wonders in a subdued voice, "What does the white bird, stealer of the almond's flowers, want? Yesterday, as it plucked a rose, its feathers were stained with blood and it fell." The Mistress asks, "Do you love me?" He looks through the window and answers, "I love Venus," and the Mistress says to herself, "He does not want to get married." As she moves passionately towards him, he backs away and orders her to sit far from him. Silence.

He describes his writing as something through which he transcends time; she says she is interested in being happy in the present. Silence. He suggests he read her the latest story he wrote, but every time he tries to read, she interrupts him. He tells her that the story deals with Salem and Zalikha who attempt to reach the zenith of love, but both seem to be concealing something threatening their

relationship. When she continues to interrupt him, he sinks into his thoughts and repeats, "What does the white bird want...?" She asks him why the birds get killed, but he begs her to remain silent and is again lost in thought.

In Scene II, the fictional characters of the Writer's story appear. The previous setting constitutes a foggy background for this scene. Zalikha, a thin, beautiful girl dressed in black, meets Salem, a man in his late 40's. Zalikha tells Salem that white stands for purity, red represents her desire for him, yellow symbolizes her jealousy, blue represents her longing for him and black connotes her concern about him. Salem urges her to go with him to a distant place where there is no fear. Silence. Both describe how they first met and fell in love. However, when Salem gets carried away with this love for Zalikha, she tells him that their relationship must come to an end because she feels guilty whenever she meets or sees Salem's ill wife. When Salem insists on loving Zalikha, the latter draws his eyes to the sky saying, "The stars are real pearls but we can't reach them. Everything else is fake like our dreams and happiness." She runs away from Salem.

Scene III takes us back to the first scene. The Writer is lost in reverie wondering, "What does the white bird want...?" Silence. He tells his Mistress that she bores him. Feeling that she is not wanted anymore, she leaves immediately. Sunk in his chair, the Writer indulges in a dreamy state, addressing the star Venus, the source of his

dreams and comfort. As the wind opens the window, the Writer becomes conscious of a beautiful girl in the room. She introduces herself as a character in his novel coming to find out why he has put her in an awkward situation. The Writer is enchanted by her and feels that she is the woman who can fill his void. She warns him that if he does not change her role, she will kill her lover's wife to put an end to their suffering. The Writer decides that she will become his beloved. Soon after, Salem comes in complaining to the Writer that Zalikha has abandoned him. The Writer explains that he changed Zalikha's role and Salem must go back to his wife. As Salem leaves, Zalikha starts to talk about Venus, her favorite star. Suddenly, there is a knock on the door. The Writer opens it to his friend who complains that he has been waiting for a long time. The Writer wants to introduce him to Zalikha, but as he leads him to where Zalikha was sitting, he cannot find her. He looks everywhere, but in vain. The friend argues that the Writer must have been indulging in reveries and tries to console him. The play ends as the Writer explains that Venus has kidnapped her and she will never come back.

As we see from this summary, Ikhlasī's play bears resemblance to symbolist drama in emphasizing the interplay of reveries, dreams and the commonplace realities of life. The primary action of the play is motivated by the protagonist's ceaseless attempt to escape from the prison of reality to the boundless realm of imagination, to the realm of Venus, the white bird and the fictional girl. The collision of visible

and invisible forces is dramatized by pitting the earthy Mistress against Zalikha, the symbol of purity and serenity. In keeping with symbolist drama, the play repeats such symbols as stars, birds, night, almond's flowers, Venus, anemone, and such phrases as "What does the white bird want...?" As in Maeterlink's Intruder, a window opens by itself and moments of silence and speech alternate throughout the play. The language, to some degree, is suggestive and allusive, intended to create a mood rather than evolve a narrative. However, despite the abundance of symbolist traits in Ikhlasī's play, we cannot consider it a pure symbolist drama. As it draws on symbolism, so it draws on other dramatic modes as well.

Certain dramatic situations in The Pearl and Venus conjure up images of Axel. The parallel between Axel and Ikhlasī's work may be sheer coincidence or the outcome of a romantic outlook shared by Villiers and Ikhlasī. Both Axel and the Writer romantically spurn material realities and ceaselessly search for spiritual satisfaction. Axel's resentment toward his materialistic cousin, Kaspar, and his rejection of Kaspar's appeal to enter into real life approximate the Writer's refusal to respond to his Mistress's worldly needs; Axel's devotion to Maître Janus, the seer, parallels the Writer's infatuation with Venus and the white bird--the pure realm of spirit. Sara, the beautiful girl who symbolizes occult knowledge, comes to the castle to fulfill Axel's spiritual dream; in a similar manner, Zalikha, the exemplar of purity, beauty and spirit, visits the Writer's

room and crystalizes his imaginative notion of life beyond reality.

There are even more substantial similarities between The Pearl and Venus and Six Characters in Search of an Author. Both revolve around art and reality and the difference between reality in art and that in the real world. Ikhlas's introduction of Zalikha as a fictional character coming to protest the way the Writer has portrayed her and made her suffer is akin to Pirandello's six characters who dispute the Manager's instruction and argue against the author's portrayal of their plight. Zalikha, like The Father in Pirandello's work, refuses to be caught in a situation of anguish just because of falling in love with Salem.

The organization of dialogue in The Pearl and Venus calls to mind absurdist drama. The dialogue of traditional drama is generally a series of sequential, semantically logical statements. But in Ikhlas's play (as in the theatre of the absurd), the continuity of dialogue is disrupted by sequences of unrelated statements exchanged between the Mistress and the Writer, creating the impression of their inability to communicate:

MISTRESS: Don't you like my weakness?

WRITER: Venus is still shining and people
there are good.²

²Walid Ikhlas, Al-Lulu wal-Zahra (The Pearl and Venus), Al-Aqlam, No. 2 (November, 1969), p. 125.

Even when the sequence of utterances is logical, inappropriate answers are often given:

MISTRESS: What do people do now?

WRITER: They are ready to sleep.

MISTRESS: (To herself) I don't feel like sleeping.

WRITER: Some prepare themselves for a tiring party.

MISTRESS: (To herself) Staying up late does not tire me.

WRITER: Workers and shopkeepers must be asleep by now.³

A few lines later, we discover that the Writer intentionally avoids answering the Mistress's question because he does not want to get involved physically for when she flirts with him, he backs away.

The recovery of sound logical dialogue coincides with the disappearance of the Mistress and the arrival of Zalikha. In the end of Scenes II and III, the dialogue is free of disjunctions and sequences of unrelated utterances.

It was noted earlier that The Pearl and Venus follows symbolist drama in stressing the use of recurring images and symbols to produce an atmosphere in lieu of a conventional narrative sequence. Hence, understanding the play's meaning and structure depends, in some measure, on explaining the meaning of symbols and their relations to dramatic structure. The two most pervasive symbols the Writer strongly identifies

³ Ibid., p. 123.

with are "the white bird" and Venus. Their associations expand and multiply as the play progresses. The bond between the white bird and the Writer is strong: "Who has buried the white bird inside me?"⁴ Moreover, the bird's potential to fly high in the sky parallels the Writer's longing for Venus, the remote mysterious star. As the bird is doomed to land and pluck the anemone (symbolizing passion and physical need in Middle Eastern culture) and to die, so is the Writer's return to reality inevitable. Neither seems to have enough power to stay totally detached from the immediate world, i.e., the bird-anemone dichotomy echoes the Writer-Mistress dichotomy.

As for Venus, its being remote, bright and mysterious calls to mind the world of dreams and fantasy. Its strangeness and particularity are stressed: "Life on Venus is different."⁵ Its association with art is indicated as the Writer sees Zalikhā: "You belong to Venus, don't you?"⁶ Thus, Venus stands for the world of imagination and Zalikhā is the artistic outcome of that imagination. The harmony between the Writer and Zalikhā springs from the fact that she is the work of his imagination, while he is in discord with his Mistress, a living mutable reality resisting compliance with his will and imagination. The friend who arrives unexpectedly at the end to interrupt the Writer's conversation with Zalikhā

⁴Ibid., p. 125.

⁵Ibid., p. 124.

⁶Ibid., p. 133.

represents an ever-present reality. In short, the play's symbols illustrate both the co-existence of and contradictions between illusion and reality.

These symbols are supported by the plot structure and the kind and sequence of anecdotes employed. The play opens with a short monologue showing the Writer's absorption in an illusive world which is soon pitted against the Mistress's realm of reality. The real is concrete, and presents itself in the Mistress's need for love and sex, while the unreal takes the form of suggestive passages and gestures. The scene ends up with the Writer describing his story and the Mistress interrupting him and drawing his attention to her importance.

In Scene II, all is reduced to romantic and suggestive passages exchanged between Zalikha and Salem --two fictional characters. Scene III starts with a tough confrontation between the Writer and the Mistress, but she is defeated, and, as she disappears, the scene slides into a dreamy scene with Zalikha, broken sharply by the reality represented by the friend's arrival.

Thus, we see that the reality-fiction dichotomy of the symbols is also materialized in the structural elements of the plot. Moreover, the frequent alternation and overlapping of realistic and fantasy elements lend the plot a musical structure. However, the end by crowning the reign of the real draws attention to the importance of the immediate lived existence which ultimately confronts the Writer.

The techniques employed in The Pearl and Venus have created some inconsistencies. For example, the use now of absurd dialogue, now of suggestive language and now of direct realistic passages creates linguistic dissonance. Furthermore, when the dialogue is poetic, it forces the reader to search for what it signifies, but it suddenly comes to a discursive passage, meaning fades away before it reaches the next line. The transition from one kind of dialogue to another should have been smoother and more balanced.

The other inconsistency lies in the portrayal of the Writer. He claims, in passing, that his work inspires the people and serves their cause, but throughout the play he remains immersed in his own dreams. This contradiction is left unexplained and unjustified, unless Ikhlası meant it ironically. However, this is too important an irony to be left for a single line.

If Ikhlası's major concern in The Pearl and Venus was to explore the bond between artist and reality, Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music focuses on the playwright's vision of his art in relation to theatre and society. Ikhlası's theme arises from certain misconceptions that have pervaded Syrian theatre and audiences for decades. Though Ikhlası thought his dream of a genuine theatre came true when he supervised the establishment of the Aleppo People's Theatre in 1968, it failed to eliminate the popular notion that theatre is only a means of entertainment. In response, this play not only unmasks the

corrupt and degenerate commercial theatre, but also expounds Ikhlasī's own views of genuine theatre.

Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music (Al-Samah ala Iga al-Jirk) appeared in Al-Aqlam, an Iraqi literary journal, in 1975, but it has never been produced. The play has an episodic structure falling in two parts totalling six scenes. The slight plot portrays a disagreement between a Playwright and Director over the nature and function of theatre. Trying to iron out their differences, each presents a theatrical scene to illustrate his notion of the best theatre. When an enacted scene pleases the Director and disappoints the Playwright, the latter does not hesitate to attack the show and stop its performance and order the Troupe to act out his playlet. Thus the play takes on a form of rehearsals involving a Playwright, Director and acting Troupe. The constant interruptions of these shows either by comments or direct interference of the Playwright and Director destroy the illusion of reality. Furthermore, the presence of a Spectator in the audience exchanging speeches with both Director and Playwright further consolidates theatricalism and lessens the representational aspects of the work.

The play is structured to show both the interior and exterior world of the Playwright: The stage is divided into an office (denoting the Playwright's outside activities) and a misty forest (suggesting his conscious and unconscious life). Out of this forest and onto the stage come the Troupe-- his mind's images-- to crystalize what true theatre is and is not.

In other words, the Troupe's function is to carry out the Playwright's vision of theatre as opposed to that of the Director and audience. However, the conflict is not limited to this divergent view, but is extended to the way the Director and the Troupe materialize a text on stage.

Scene I show the Playwright in his office turning over some papers carelessly. The Director is dismayed to learn that the play he planned to produce is not yet finished. The Playwright admits that he has torn it up and decided to search for the truth of himself, others, art and theatre.

In Scene II, as the two men are drinking and a melodious song describing the joy of dreams comes from afar, the Playwright talks about his need for inner satisfaction, while the Director speaks of man's need for success, fame and money, and reminds the Playwright of the success of his early plays in exciting the audience. The Playwright refuses to pander to the audience and the box-office; he blames the people's enchantment with trivial entertainments on irresponsible writers and directors. The Director's notion of theatrical excitement takes shape in a group of actors coming out of the forest. The lights shift from the two men to an Actress drinking and singing a sexy song, repeated by others. As the Young Man begins to flirt with the Actress, a Ghost followed by Three Men wearing death-masks appears. The Ghost addresses the frightened Actress, accusing her of killing him to have access to a lover. When the Ghost threatens revenge, the Playwright interrupts the show and denounces it as disgusting

and pointless. In response, the Director proposes to present another scene. The light falls on actors strolling aimlessly. One Actor is showing a European Girl around. While describing to her the history and culture of his country, he sneaks looks at her legs and praises her sensual body.

As the couple disappears, the Director explains to the Playwright that his work illustrates the conflict between Oriental and Western culture; the Playwright calls the comparison absurd. Now singing is heard, and a chorus is seen humming a tune. An Actor addresses an Actress as "the land that supplies my heart with love." She calls him "the loving cloud that quenches my thirst." Furious, the Director stops the show and denounces it as merely a return to Greek drama. Riots sweep the audience. The Actor in the auditorium shouts out that the people need fun, not philosophy, so the Playwright offers a new play. This time, it is a Patient asking his Doctor to operate on his brain for he wants to be mad so he won't have to worry about corrupt conditions that he can't change.

The Director stops the show, contending that the play's political overtones will lead the authorities to close down the theatre. The Spectator says no one is convulsed with laughter; therefore, the play is worthless. Asking the Playwright to avoid serious issues, the Director proposes a comic scene. As the lights focus on actors dancing to pop music, a Young Man dressed in folk costume makes advances to a student Girl. The Playwright is furious, but the Spectator

in the auditorium praises the play and tells the Playwright to stop insulting the audience.

Urged by the Director, the Playwright presents a new play set in a country in a state of war. A Soldier deserts from the army. His Mother accuses him of betraying his country and friends. Persuaded by his Mother, the Soldier goes back and gets killed, and the Mother is proud that her son did his duty. The Director shouts, "This is absurd. A mother pushes her son to die." The Playwright gives up writing.

Scene III opens with the Playwright lying unconscious in the forest, surrounded by the actors who maintain that they are abstract ideas in his head, and plead with him to make them flesh and blood. As they prod him back to life, he recovers and decides to write about happiness. Darkness.

Act II, Scene I: The Troupe bids farewell to a Friend who is leaving his city because he can't marry the girl he loves. The girl's father threatens to kill his daughter if she marries a man from a lower class, but the girl stands by her lover and they decide to get married. The Director appears to praise the play and asks the actors to arrange a traditional ceremony for the couple. An actor plays a Clergyman and conducts the marriage. Before the ceremony is over, the Playwright rushes to stop the show, accusing the Director and the Troupe of distorting his story.

In Scene II, a dream state sweeps the forest. A half nude Actress is expressing her love for the Playwright, though she admits that she is his creation and doomed to act

according to his will. When he asks her to be his beloved, she draws his attention to the fact that he portrayed her as the wife of one of the actors, who at this moment appears searching for the Actress. They argue and the Playwright shoots the Actor dead. The Actress disappears.

The Playwright tells the Director, in Scene III, that he is leaving for parts unknown, but urged by the Director to create, he changes his mind and decides to write about man's need for happiness. The Spectator shouts that the audience needs a play. The Playwright calls his new play, Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music.

We see that Ikhlasi tries to present his views of genuine and commercial theatre in the very form of theatre, employing a Troupe, a Director, a Playwright and an audience (represented by the Spectator) not only to effect a theatre that projects contradictory convictions, but also to call that very theatre into question. Those involved in the performance are conscious of their roles and the stage as a place for acting. The Director and the Playwright watch and comment on each show, turning the play into a play within a play. The breakdown of the barrier between stage and audience through the Spectator who argues with those on stage further eliminates the illusion of reality and leads to the creation of a theatre within a theatre. Thus theatricalism is stressed, to render viewers unable to identify with the enacted events and to incline them to reflect consciously on the various shows and ensuing discussions.

Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music focuses on how a true artist envisages himself and his art in relation to those who prostitute their art to avoid clashing with the establishment or with the naive and distorted notions of the masses. The Director sees art as anything that meets audience demands. Art, in other words, is modeled upon people's expectations: "I try to give the audience what it likes to see and hear."⁷ Here the artist is no more than a craftsman whose job is to project the image that society has of art. As a result, the Director refuses to set up the artist as a fit judge. For him, "The audience is the judge."⁸ The Playwright, however, contends that the artist must be free: "I want to write something that does not comply with others' convictions; I want something that gratifies my search for truth."⁹ Evidently, he does not view what people think and believe as consonant with his artistic truth.

Thus, whether or not the artist should write in conformity with social realities is the underlying issue in Ikhlasī's play. For example, the Director reacts negatively to the scene in which a mother urges her son who deserted the army to go back and fight. He asks, "Do you expect people to believe such imaginative things?"¹⁰ A work of art cannot be

⁷Walid Ikhlasī, Al-Samah ala Iqa al-Jirk (Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music), Al-Aqlam No. 8 (May, 1975), p. 9.

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 13.

written either in reaction to national and political needs or in response to the writer's vision of the world. The contrast between the Director's slavish adherence to reality and the Playwright's selective reality is best reflected in the scene in which a girl loves a man in violation of her father's will. The Director argues that such a story must end with traditional wedding ceremonies, while the Playwright insists on ending the playlet with the two asserting their love despite the father. But the Playwright's ending does not comply with what the audience sees in real life, and lacks the excitement associated with the finale in commercial theatre. Here the Playwright draws our attention to the particularity of artistic reality as opposed to the generality of life: "Everything on earth is part of reality, but art lies in selecting among these realities."¹¹ Thus his art remodels reality to serve the writer's purposes. Firstly, it is geared to fight the evil forces of society: "I want to exterminate the roots of corruption that lie inside man."¹² Secondly, theatre must serve the cause of justice and freedom: "I write about man's right to live free."¹³ Thirdly, theatre attempts to elevate man's spirit and draw his attention to the sublime: "I deal with the noble substance of man and with that which keeps man from degenerating."¹⁴ Thus, while the Director sees

¹¹Ibid., p. 9.

¹²Ibid., p. 13.

¹³Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 9.

theatre as a mere reflection of superficial reality whose main purpose is to entertain and flatter the audience, the Playwright asserts that theatre is an artistically arranged, conscious representation of reality committed to a human cause.

In Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music, there are characteristics of a thesis play: a problem is discussed; a solution offered; the excitement associated with plot unravelling and character development are subordinate to the message. Ikhlası portrays the current vogues in Syrian theatre through the Director's shows and arguments, while the Playwright's scenes serve as critiques of and alternatives to them, and then, as the play concludes, both the Director and the audience have come to appreciate the Playwright's work.

The play has the advantage of using the technique of theatre within a theatre to overcome the lengthy and dreary discussions that permeate a thesis play. Ikhlası succeeds, for example, in replacing most arguments by enacted scenes illustrating their essence. Furthermore, the alternation of scenes and their unexpected interruption create significant suspense and excitement. Finally, the play's title, Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music which the Spectator at the end denounces as contradictory and an attack against Arab culture, refers to a folk dance still appreciated by the older generation in Syria but abandoned by the young. The old al-Samah dance could stand for the old Syrian theatre that Ikhlası criticized. By

wedding al-Samah to pop music, Ikhlasî tries to modernize the old and charge it with new potentials.

The controversy over the relation of art (especially theatre) to society in general and politics in particular has not ebbed in Syria since the military seized power in the late 50s. What added fuel to the fire was the sudden transition of Syria from a West-oriented system to a so-called socialist state that sees Western democracy and the free press as the work of a decadent bourgeois society and a threat to the social and political interests of the masses. As a result, writing in conformity with the line of the state and that of the ruling party has become an obligation the writer is expected to shoulder. Any defiance of or even deviation from the state-imposed rules automatically expose a writer to censorship and persecution.

The contradiction between the artist's free commitment to his art and the cause of justice, on the one hand, and his feeling of being forced to serve the state, on the other, constitutes the central issue of Ikhlasî's The Straight Path (Al-Sirat). In this play, the artist, an actor, attempts honestly to live up to his principles, but the pressure exerted on him by social institutions forces him to play roles not of his choice. Realizing that his acting career serves the ruling class rather than a just cause, the actor develops guilt feelings and decides to leave the country. On the border, he learns that he is permitted neither to leave nor to

reenter his country, i.e., to practice his art or to escape into exile.

The Straight Path was published in 1976. During the winter of 1977, it was staged at the Aleppo People's Theatre by Iskandar Kini, a Syrian director. The production, which ran for a few weeks, was considered by theatre critics and directors--and Ikhlasi himself--to be a failure. Many of the reviews pointed out the poor cast and the absence of skilled actors. Ikhlasi shared these views, but he also blamed the director for taking liberties such as "eliminating major scenes and the conclusion, resulting in a loose and confusing play."¹⁵ Abd al-Fatah Qalaji, a well-known director and critic, wrote an intelligent critique of the production, attributing its shortcomings to the director's tampering: First, "the exclusion of the opening and concluding scenes in which an actor walks on a tight rope led to the destruction of the circular action. Secondly, the injection of violent and irrelevant scenes into the play has blurred its thesis."¹⁶ He then remarks that "the performance failed to effect the tragi-comic shades inherent in the dramatic events."¹⁷ Finally, he argues that "unessential and repeated dimming of

¹⁵ Ikhlasi, "Shahadit Katib fi Masrahia," ("A Writer's View of a Play"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 3 (Winter, 1977-78), p. 130.

¹⁶ Abd al-Fatah Qalaji, "Al-Sirat: Ikhtilal bain al-Nus wal-Ikhiraj," ("The Straight Path: Discrepancy Between Text and Production"), Al-Hayah al-Masrahia No. 3 (Winter 1977-78), p. 130.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 131.

the stage during the shift from one scene to another has shredded the work into fragments and hindered the flow of movement."¹⁸ In reaction to what Ikhlasī felt was mutilation of his play, he addressed a letter to the League of Arab Writers demanding that the relation between the writers and directors be regulated to deter the latter from tampering with plays.¹⁹

The Straight Path has an episodic structure with incidents that move in irregular curves and with little logical sequence. The disconnected events are strung together by the protagonist playing roles in every scene. This play is akin to Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music in its subject matter and technique. Chronicling the life and theatrical career of Abidou, a popular comic actor, Ikhlasī once more employs a theatre within a theatre and restricts the fifteen scenes to a series of theatrical shows, television series, commercials (filmed on the stage) and interviews. The energetic protagonist is the only character who changes, develops and acquires knowledge of himself and the world. The other characters, such as the Manager, Judge, Secret Policemen, Jailers, Prisoners, Journalists and Critics who are subsidiary and remain unchanged, represent certain social and political institutions against which Abidou fights.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ikhlasī, "A Writer's View of a Play," p. 132.

In his comments on the play's production, Ikhlasī points out, "I have written this play with the intention of removing the barrier between tragedy and comedy."²⁰ Writing about The Straight Path, Ali al-Rai, the famous Egyptian scholar and critic, praises Ikhlasī's play as "the best tragi-comedy I have read in Arabic literature."²¹ There is no doubt that Ikhlasī creates a dramatic situation in which serious and comic elements are combined. However, before analyzing the structure and techniques used in effecting tragi-comic atmosphere, it is essential to provide a brief account of the episodic plot.

In Part One, Scene I, two men are walking on a tightrope; one falls to the right, the other to the left. The theatre sweeper, an amateur actor, comes in and walks on the rope without falling. He introduces himself to the audience as Abidou, renowned as "the idiot." The theatre Manager enters and orders Abidou to pay a desert Sheikh because the leading actor fell sick. Feeling that Abidou is apprehensive and confused, the Manager calms him down and tells him to repeat his lines after the Prompter who will be behind the Sheikh's chair. Excited, Abidou takes a bottle from his pocket and drinks. Darkness.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ali al-Rai, "Walid Ikhlasī Katib Masrahi Yaid bil-Kathir," ("Walid Ikhlasī: A Promising Playwright"), Al-Arabi No. 234 (May 1978), p. 50.

In Scene II, Abidou plays a Sheikh. A Knight enters, addressing the Sheikh who does not answer. The audience laughs. The curtain is dropped and the Manager tells Abidou to repeat after the Prompter. The curtain goes up again and the Knight talks to the Sheikh who utters something, but in reverse, arousing more laughter in the audience. The Manager attempts to draw the curtain, but the excited audience stops him. Abidou addresses the audience, saying that he can't play a sheikh and pulls the Prompter out of his hiding place. The audience is thrilled. Abidou takes a bottle and toasts the cheering audience.

Scene III is backstage where two Journalists congratulate and interview Abidou. When the First Journalist asks Abidou about his birthday, he says, "I was born the day the last happy man died." In response to the Second Journalist who describes him as a gifted man, Abidou comments that he is "gifted in emptying bottles," and he passes the bottle around. Trying to draw the journalist's attention to Abidou's future projects, the Manager tells them that Abidou will be the star of the next play, and Abidou remarks, "Who will sweep the theatre?" Then an Actor comes in telling Abidou that a television crew is waiting for him. Darkness

Scene IV is a television studio where a children's series is being filmed. Abidou is playing an ass whom police are taking to court on charges of trying to hurt its owner, the Merchant. The Merchant testifies that the Ass pushed him off its back and trampled him. The Ass argues that it refuses to

let a greedy, exploiting Merchant ride it. The Judge decides that the Ass must be sentenced to one year's imprisonment. Darkness.

In Scene V, Abidou is preparing himself for a new play. Salma, a female journalist is taking pictures of him. She tells him how much the children like his television program, praises his serious satire, and promises to support him if he remains loyal to his principles.

Scene VI is a play called "Lovers Struggle for Life." As Abidou walks in a deserted town playing his violin, a beautiful Girl appears and dances to his music. She tells him that the town's people are plagued with hatred and hunger for money. Her Lover arrives. They are telling Abidou about the difficulties they experience because they belong to two different social classes. When the Girl's father arrives, he orders his daughter to go home and warns the Lover against meeting her. Abidou tries to intervene, but the Father denounces him as an intruder and attempts to hit him. At the end, Abidou urges the lovers to stick together. Darkness.

Scene VII: the Representative of an advertising firm offers Abidou lots of money to advertise certain products on T.V., but he refuses to cheat the consumer.

In Scene VIII, a television crew films Abidou playing the accused Ass in prison. The Three Prisoners speculate about the crime that has drive the Ass into prison. The Ass asks, "Have you ever thought about what led you into this place?" "It is fate, luck and God's will," they say. As the Ass

refuses to accept their excuses, they admit they have stolen to feed their children. Then the Ass tells them that he is in prison because he did not let the Merchant--whose greediness kept children hungry--ride on him.

Scene IX is a backstage press conference. In reply to a question about the situation of art, Abidou states, "We live in a decadent age. However, I am less decadent than all of you. However, I am also a bad artist because I have not yet said all that I should say." When the Journalist asks him about his future projects, Abidou answers, "I want to quit acting and be myself." Asked about his love life, Abidou looks at Salma and wonders if there is a woman who could tolerate looking at his ugly face. The stage dims.

Scene X takes place in the headquarters of the Secret Policemen. Abidou is rather apprehensive. As he tries to sit, the Secret Policemen pull the chair out from under him and he falls on the floor. They all burst into laughter. They give him a cigarette that explodes as he lights it. Having humiliated him, they ask him to make some jokes. The Chief enters and tells Abidou that he must either respect the system or lose his job. He reminds Abidou of his famous slogan that "no money can be accumulated legally;" Abidou interrupts saying, "Yes, it can be accumulated legally." As Abidou leaves the Chief tells him that "no one should know that we met." Abidou bows his head in agreement.

Scene XI finds Abidou alone speaking to himself: "They give me two options: money or jail...What shall I say to

those who admire me? Shall I say that merchants are honest and that lies lead to a better life? Shall I become a martyr? What is martyrdom for?" Giving up, he argues, "If people want a pleasant time, then I should entertain them." He bursts into tears.

Part Two, Scene I, is set in a film studio where commercials are being shot. The Manager argues that "Abidou is a wizard. If he says, 'I like that kind of biscuit,' the next day there is a shortage of that kind of biscuit." Abidou appears first advertising a playboy-type magazine, then soap, then detergent and then a school. Finally, he announces the manufacture of brand new plastic shoes. When Abidou tells Salma that all the commercials are fraudulent, she sneers that he is encouraging people to buy the products.

Scene II occurs backstage when the Chief of the Secret Police praises Abidou's work and presents the Manager with checks from several institutions which have booked the theatre. The Manager praises the Chief, and tells Abidou that official circles are nominating him for a national award. He flares up, insults the Manager and revolts. Salma is shocked to see Abidou changing so swiftly but he tells her that he can no longer prostitute himself.

In Scene III, the Manager is backstage watching Abidou playing the Beggar. Giving Abidou some money, the Merchant says, "We never forget the poor." Abidou takes the money and addresses the audience: "I am telling you the poor live off the rich." The audience laughs. He adds, "Those who believe

in the poor should be ashamed of me and should leave the theatre. Those who trust the merchants applaud a clown like me...Down with the art that is supported by merchants and brokers." The Manager draws the curtain. Abidou brags that he has become what he wants, and determines to leave the country.

Scene IV shows Abidou being checked by the border Guards who tell him he is not allowed to leave the country. After more investigations, they also determine that he is also not permitted to enter the country. Abidou belongs nowhere; he draws a line on the ground and walks on it like a circus man, repeating, "This is the game of the straight path...the game of balance. This is my land where I can walk freely without a permit." The stage dims.

The Straight Path had a beginning-to-end suspense line, but realizing that this is not enough to hold the audience throughout an episodic structure, Ikhlasi creates in-scene suspense as well. For example, in Scene II, one waits to see how Abidou will play the Sheikh, uncertainty heightened by his fluctuation between adhering to the role and violating it. A similar situation occurs in Part Two, Scene III, where Abidou plays the Beggar pretending to praise the Merchant: his flattery of the latter keeps viewers in suspense knowing he hates the rich. The accumulation of suspense in consecutive scenes culminates in the last scene: what will happen to the protagonist who constantly vacillates between stupidity and shrewdness, spontaneity and intentionality, ludicrousness

and seriousness and, finally, between resistance and capitulation?

Such fluctuation parallels the alternation of suspense and surprise. Within the scene, suspense is aroused by ambiguity and hesitation on the protagonist's part; surprise, on the other hand, derives from his propensity to disclose his true feelings and determination to rebel. Abidou's reluctance to play the Sheikh leaves uncertainty about his true character, but his sudden surprise (his departure from his role to address the audience) dissipates the uncertainty and exhibits his real intentions.

Obviously, The Straight Path is not an action play, i.e., it has no motivated action from which conflict springs and evolves sequentially into other scenes to bring about character development a la Ibsen. Of course, the broken sequence does not rule out conflict, but it does confine it to disjointed scenes whose growing intensity make possible change and development.

A quick look into the play's structure may help demonstrate how the dramatic elements function accumulatively. For instance, in Scene I, the attempts by two men and Abidou to walk on a tightrope, described as "the straight path," suggest a delicate and risky situation calling for cautiousness. The Manager's order to an unskilled actor to play a leading role establishes, from the outset, conformity/disorder contradictions. From Scenes II to IX, Ikhlesi shows Abidou challenging the status quo that his

opponents advocate: he is on the offensive, lashing out against the Manager, the Knight, the Merchant, the Judge, the Prisoners, the Journalists, an old-fashioned Father and an agency Representative. The intensity generated by the recurrence of such violations accumulates from scene to scene.

Scene X marks the inciting moment--something occurs to disturb the protagonist's world, suggesting what the play is going to be about and what course of action the characters will take. If the first nine scenes are an exposition of Abidou's exploits, the tenth exhibits his conformity to the system. The Secret Police bring him to his knees and force him to cooperate with the establishment. The conflict between his need to surrender cherished ideals to the existing order, exacerbated by police flattery, on the one hand, and Salma's denunciation of his double-dealing on the other, heightens Abidou's inner turmoil and leads to a "turning point" from which there is no return. In Scene III of Part Two, intensity builds and strains toward a climax, marking the final violation of his role and his condemnation of the ruling class. As in linear drama, the climactic scene provides a radical shift in the relationship between the protagonist and his opponents. Abidou again becomes a pursuer; however, his victory is momentary for the conclusion makes clear that his support of the masses arouses the government against him, and takes viewers back to the beginning where the protagonist is walking on a tightrope. Such an end emphasizes the continuation of a repressive situation resisting change.

The impressions associated with this circular mode are further sustained by a rhythm of alternating opposites such as constraint and ease. For example, in Scene I, a feeling of anxiety accompanies the attempts to rope-walk. Relaxation permeates Scene II as Abidou breaks with theatre rules and becomes himself. This sense prevails through Scene IX, but with Scene X calm gives way to tension which extends to Scene II of Part II. A relative calm arises in Scene III, followed rapidly by a pattern of constraint in the concluding scene. Thus, though producing expectations, the rhythm inaugurates the play and crowns its end with a state of constraint--a situation of futility and helplessness.

Regardless of how realistic The Straight Path is, the symbolic quality of the tightrope incidents can't be ignored. The brief, unmotivated acrobatic feats at the opening and closing, in no relevant context, do not lend themselves to realistic interpretation.

The tightrope is first described as "the straight path" which in the Islamic religion designates the path that God draws for man. It is also referred to as "the true game of balance,"²² and a third association arises when Abidou says that, "wherever we turn our faces, we encounter al-Sirat,"²³ meaning "sword." These significations are interrelated and

²²Walid Ikhlasī, Al-Sirat (The Straight Path) (Damascus, Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1976), p. 110.

²³Ibid., p. 9.

constitute a logical synthesis: "al-Sirat" is a predetermined path assigned to the individual by a higher force; any loss of balance exposes man to the sword's edge. Placing the tightrope at the beginning symbolizes restrictions forced on the artist by the establishment; the protagonist is persecuted because of his violation of rules and his failure to maintain that delicate balance. At the end, the tightrope suggests his reluctant acceptance of imposed restraints.

The circus itself suggests playfulness and entertainment. It has neither a message nor any social or political commitment. By walking on a tightrope, the protagonist appears to reduce the theatre to sheer amusement. When Abidou refuses this apolitical stance and uses the theatre for human purposes, the system rises against him. His persecution and the reappearance of the tightrope at the end symbolizes the triumphant return of the "circus" that the establishment favors and the defeat of committed theatre. Abidou's final resort to acrobatic tricks coincides with his forced exile. Thus, the tightrope represents the artist's alienation from himself, his art and his people.

Ikhlasî casts his play as tragi-comedy. He introduces alternating episodes of seriousness and humor. For example, while Scene X exhibits Abidou ridiculing the Secret Police, Scene XI portrays his bitterly serious sense of guilt. Abidou's vacillation between his real self and the roles imposed on him arouses first laughter, then tears. Humor is mixed with pity as viewers see Abidou, the comic

character, sliding into a tragic world. Abidou's comic use of his ridiculously disproportioned face make us giggle and cry, especially in the presence of Salma whom he loves, but of whom he--with that face--feels unworthy. Finally, the tragi-comic is built into the ironic course of events, for the play starts out comic and ends up bitterly cynical.

Ikhlasī is known for his liberal thinking, but in The Straight Path, he looks into issues from a more radical perspective. Ikhlasī draws his protagonist from the working class and supplies him with enough class-consciousness to stand by the poor against the rich. In Scene II, Abidou (the Shiekh) disagrees with the rich Knight over waging war against the gypsies, arguing that "they steal and kill because they are hungry."²⁴ Like Marxists, Ikhlasī attributes the gypsies' revolt to the economic condition. However, his solution for the problem remains basically reformist; instead of mobilizing the hungry gypsies against the rich, Ikhlasī suggests that the rich "feed them and they will become peaceful."²⁵

In Scene III, another Marxist concept is evident when Abidou argues that "no wealth can be accumulated legally."²⁶ He calls the Merchant "dishonest" for "he robs the masses and

²⁴Ibid., p. 23.

²⁵Ibid., p. 24.

²⁶Ibid., p. 29.

exploits their needs."²⁷ In Scene V, when Abidou comes across the rich Girl prevented from marrying below her class, he asserts that "the eternal problem is that of poor and rich."²⁸ Despite this approach, however, Ikhlasī does not hesitate to say that "the problem of love can only be cured by more love."²⁹ Once more, Ikhlasī drops the economic factor that precipitates the conflict. In short, despite Ikhlasī's drawing on Marxism to analyze certain social phenomena, he does not see class struggle as the means for the creation of a classless society. In Ikhlasī's world there will be classes, but the conflict between them must be eliminated peacefully, i.e., by making the rich understand and respond to the needs of the poor.

In The Straight Path Ikhlasī's satire of commercial theatre's detachment from people's problems and cooperation with the ruling class emerges from an ideal exemplified by Abidou, the committed actor in revolt. Ikhlasī contrasts the Manager--advocating theatre geared to profitable entertainment--with the protagonist-- supporting politically radical entertainment. While the Manager favors cooperating with the bourgeoisie as long as they serve his interest, the protagonist denounces them as enemies of the people, and calls for a theatre independent from the state. One can also infer

²⁷Ibid., p. 36.

²⁸Ibid., p. 47.

²⁹Ibid.

that Ikhlas's theatre is committed to fermenting change in society. The multiple obligations that he imposes on theatre certainly spring from his contempt of the growing totalitarian regimes in his country and the Arab world, and the mounting pressure they exert on the individual in general, and intellectuals and writers in particular. Abidou's incarceration and forced exile are a case in point. The helplessness and alienation trapping Syrian and Arab writers account for the anger and criticism levelled at those in power.

The Straight Path is markedly rich in humor, wit and puns. Humor arises either from Abidou's appearance (especially his unattractive face) or from spontaneous actions such as pulling the Prompter out from behind his chair. The protagonist's presence of mind and witticisms are crystallized in comically derisive lines, e.g., "I was born on the day the last happy man died."³⁰ Abidou continuously plays on words that are similar in sound but different in meaning, or uses one word with two or more meanings.

In short, the precarious situation of the protagonist--his vacillation between conformity and nonconformity, mask and self, hope and despair, freedom and constraint, i.e., his position on the tight-rope--which creates the tragi-comic effect of The Straight Path--projects an accurate, though sad picture of the plight of the Arab artist. His shaky position

³⁰Ibid., p. .

on social and political issues is often conditioned by the unpredictable nature of totalitarian Arab regimes, and the lack of political stability in the Arab world.

One final remark: The artist in The Pearl and Venus, Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music and The Straight Path is neither an ivory tower dweller nor a basker in the pleasure of creating an imaginative world. Instead of devoting his art to audience amusement, he tries to enlighten the people about their troubled realities, and to change them. In the first play, there is a return from the realm of fantasy to the domain of existing reality; in the second, the protagonist attempts to utilize his art in the service of people; in the third, the artist is determinedly involved in the process of changing the world.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion to this study will look into the historical conditions that prompted Ikhlasī and other Arab writers to explore the national and socio-political issues that swept their countries, and to use their national culture for ideological purposes. It will also explain how Ikhlasī and others were influenced by Western culture and where their writings diverge from that influence. It will also explore the question of commitment in modern literature, and Ikhlasī's view of it. Furthermore, it will point out how Ikhlasī's work (and that of others) gradually shifts from external enemies threatening Arab national sovereignty toward attacking the totalitarian and so-called nationalist Arab systems that encroach upon the individual and his right to realize his existence in a free and secure world.

The period from World War I until the late 40s (when the Arab states gained independence) and early 50s was rife with struggle and political tension. Arab nationalists appeared in 1920 calling for independence, unity and adherence to Arab and Islamic culture. The 20s also witnessed the spread of Syrian and Egyptian nationalism. The thrust toward Syrian unity was led by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (1932), whose ideology stressed the national unity of Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, and called for the separation of church

and state. This Party and the Baath Arab Socialist Party founded in 1940 had a great influence on the intellectuals. The 20s and 30s are also associated with the proliferation of socialist and communist movements striving for social and economic changes.

The expulsion of France and Britain from the Arab world in the late 40s did not result in national and political stability. On May 15, 1948, the day after Israel was declared a Jewish state, the British withdrew; this led to the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948-1949. Since then, a state of endless war has been created: national fears were exacerbated by the British-French-Israeli attack on the Suez Canal in 1956; the civil war in Lebanon in 1958 (and American intervention) increased the national worries of the Arab people; the collapse of unity between Syria and Egypt in 1961 was a disaster for Arab nationalism; the 1967 war between Israel and the Arabs resulted in Israeli occupation of new Arab lands; Iran invaded five Arab islands and annexed them in 1970; three years later, the Israelis and Arabs were at war again. In short, the years that followed independence were crowded with war and destruction and locked the Arab nations in a state of national insecurity and constant fear of internal and external threats.

Arab writers after World War II were preoccupied with the immediate needs of their nations. Because they could not dissociate themselves from national and political struggle, their writings served as a reflection of an historical era, as

an assertion of national pride, and as propaganda. Speaking of writers of all nations, H. Ernest Lewald, the American thinker, argues "that wars, invasions, occupations or territorial mutilations produce a corresponding emotive reaction on the part of the writer as cultural guardian."¹ Similarly, faced with the fragmentation of their nations, Arab writers tried to shoulder the just causes of their frustrated people.

But the involvement of Arab writers was neither spontaneous nor motivated simply by patriotic feelings; their reactions also reflected ideological consciousness and conviction. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the Palestinian man of letters and critic, describes succinctly how Arab writers came to view their societies from ideological perspectives:

As the sense of Arab nationhood developed and matured and Arab states became progressively more independent, what had come to writers by way of natural insight, emotion, or simple patriotism, began after 1940 to coalesce into a body of doctrine...a mixture of Western liberalism and doctrinaire Marxism operating as a unifying force, directing the writers' minds towards a greater clarity of purpose.²

To this Jabra adds the impact of existentialism: "When Sartre and Camus were translated and studied all through the

¹H.E. Lewald, "Introduction," The Cry of Home: Cultural Nationalism and the Modern Writer, ed. H.E. Lewald (Knoxville, University of Tennessee, 1972), p. 12.

²Jabra I. Jabra, "Modern Arabic Literature and the West," Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature, ed. Issa J. Boullata (Washington, D.C., Three Continents Press, 1980), p. 18.

50s, they took Arab intellectual life by storm."³ Sartre's writings had considerable impact on the emergence of "commitment" in modern Arabic literature. Jabra states that "'commitment' was now the key word, and a new magazine appeared in Beirut, Al-Adab (Literature), with 'commitment' as its message, guided mostly by Sartre's philosophical and dramatic writings."⁴ Since the 50s, then, most Arab writers have identified with the notion of "commitment" in literature--though each in his own way.

From the late 50s on Arab states suffered internal political instability. Pro-West regimes began to crumble and some were replaced by semi-socialist systems (Egypt, Syria and Iraq). Numberless coups d'etat and revolutions occurred and gave rise either to one-party systems or to military regimes. Faced with totalitarian states that restricted freedom of speech to those who supported the state and wrote according to official party line, writers split into two camps.

The committed writers became members of political parties, but there were those who splintered off as rebels, in their moral commitment against the corruption of power and its encroachment upon the free conscience of the individual, refused to be the⁵ spokesmen of any political grouping.

Literature by liberals was directed either against the corruption created by the state or against the state's encroachment upon the rights of the individual.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

As national and socio-political conditions left deep imprints upon Arab writers, so too has Western literature. In general, the Western impact dates from the period of the French and British mandate (1916), reinforced through the translation movement which started in the 30s. Jabra divides this influence into French and Anglo-Saxon, arguing that "the foreign influences that left their mark on Arabic writing before 1959 were largely French,"⁶ and that "it was in the early 1950's that Anglo-Saxon writers began to impinge on Arabic. Foremost among them was T.S. Eliot, whose influence was eruptive and insistent."⁷ While Jabra is referring to foreign influence on modern Arabic poetry, al-Khatib, the distinguished Syrian scholar, points out diverse Western influences on Syrian fiction:

From the late 50s to 1967, one can detect, directly or indirectly, the impact of writers such as Kafka, Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Camus, Sartre, Beckett and others on Syrian novelists and short story writers such as Zakaria Tamir, Yasin Refaieh, Adel Salum, Mohammad Haidar, Walid Ikhlas and Ghadat al-Saman.⁸

The influence of these writers is evident in both the form and content of fiction, and what is said about fiction is certainly applicable to drama since the latter is a relatively

⁶Ibid., p. 12.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Hussam al-Khatib, Subil al-Mu'athirat al-Ajnabiah wa Ashkaliha fi al-Qussa al-Suriyah (Manners and Modes of Foreign Influence on Syrian Fiction) (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1974), p. 112.

new genre in Arabic literature and its origin and development is influenced by Western drama.

In light of all this, Ikhlasi's work can be examined chronologically to explore its kinship with the changing spirit of the time in Syria and the Arab world. Though a chronological study cannot suffice to uncover the thematic or aesthetic development of Ikhlasi's plays, it does help locate his work in its proper historical, socio-political and cultural context.

Ikhlasi's first attempt at playwrighting was the outgrowth of his interest in new and experimental dramatic modes. He wrote Pleasure 21 and The Ten Drums of Execution in 1965 and called them "avant-garde plays." Inspired by translations, adaptations, productions and studies of plays by Beckett, Ionesco and Duerrenmatt, Ikhlasi was the first Syrian dramatist to write in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd. Al-Sadiqi, the Moroccan playwright and director, first translated and produced Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Ionesco's Amedee in 1957. The American scholar Irving Brown records that in the fall of 1962 Sad Ardash, the Egyptian avant-garde director, "hired amateur and professional actors and directors and scheduled productions of Beckett's Endgame, Ionesco's The Chair, Brecht's The Exception and the Rule and an 'experimental Egyptian play'."⁹ In 1963, the Lebanese poet Unsi al-Haj, translated Ionesco's Exit the King, and in 1964

⁹ Irving Brown, "The Effervescent Egyptian Theatre," in Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature, p. 333.

Munir Abu Dbis produced it in Beirut and Cairo. The impact of the theatre of the absurd on Arab playwrights was first noticed in al-Hakim's The Tree Climber (Yatali' al-Shajara, 1962) and Food for Every Mouth (Ta'am li-Kul Fam, 1963). Similar influence was cited by Adib al-Salawi, a Moroccan critic who points out that "though Moroccan dramatists did not excel in the theatre of the absurd, the latter left its mark upon the Moroccan theatre of the 60s."¹⁰ In short, Ikhlasī took up where those Arab writers left off.

Pleasure 21 and The Ten Drums of Execution bear some resemblance to the absurdist drama as understood by al-Hakim, Egypt's leading playwright. In trying to distinguish his own absurdist plays from those of the European theatre of the absurd, al-Hakim coins the term "irrationalism" by which he means "the presentation of the rational world in an irrational framework."¹¹ Ikhlasī's two plays--though full of factual absurdities, bizarre semantic juxtapositions, occasional disjunctions, unexpected incidents and unrelated utterances--have dramatic action set against a background of definable socio-political realities both changeable and surmountable, whereas absurdist dramatists are more interested in the ontological structure of life, in essences that are immutable, irrational, insurmountable and beyond time, space

¹⁰ Abib al-Salawi, Al-Masrah al-Maghrebi (The Moroccan Theatre) (Damascus: Wizarat al-Thaqafa wal-Irshad al-Qawmi, 1975), p. 158.

¹¹ Quoted in Richard Long, Tawfig al-Hakim Playwright of Egypt (London: Ithaca Press, 1979), p. 85.

and logic. Hence, their portrayal of the absurdities of the world takes on an integral absurd framework while in Ikhlasī's plays human incongruities are the immediate outcome of eccentric obsession either with twentieth century science as in Pleasure 21 or with extreme violation of rigid social norms as in The Ten Drums of Execution. The absurdity of events in these plays can be construed logically either through the frequent recurrence of discursive dialogue or through the straining of events toward a climax disclosing development and the possibility of transcending the given situation. Thus, Ikhlasī's two avant-garde plays are closer to al-Hakīm's version of the theatre of the absurd than to its Western model.

Writing in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd had lost most of its appeal by 1967. Interest in Brecht coincides with political and cultural emphasis on socialist thought in countries like Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Moreover, with the Arab defeat of 1967 and the ensuing national frustrations, Arab dramatists discovered that Brecht's epic technique provides the freedom to address their audiences, explain to them the national, social and political causes of the catastrophe, and teach them how to cope with it and transcend its consequences. Thus, Brecht's dramaturgy was their means to explore an immediate event and lift the sinking morale of their frustrated people.

Trevor J. LeGassick of Michigan University argues, not surprisingly, "that much contemporary Arabic writing in a

variety of fields deals closely with the Arab world's most fundamental concern, namely, the struggle with Israel."¹² Certainly, Arab intellectuals have often been preoccupied with the endless Arab-Israeli wars which have infused their literature with strong national and political sentiments. Ikhlasī's The Days We Have Forgotten is a case in point. Confronted with a national disaster whose ramifications weighed his people down, Ikhlasī chose an episodic form to explore freely the historical and political background of the 1967 war, connect it with the 1948 war, and teach his frustrated audience how to challenge and transcend the situation. Three more plays were written and produced in the wake of the 1967 war: A Gay Party for June 5th (Haflat Sumar min Ajil Khamsah Huzairan, 1968) by the Syrian playwright Sad-alla Wanūs, Palestinians (Falestiniyat, 1968) by another Syrian playwright Ali Uqla Ursan and Fire and Olives (Al-Nar wal-Zaitun, 1968) by the Egyptian dramatist Alfred Faraj. What distinguishes these plays from those written in the early 60s is the influence of Brecht, the departure from the linear form and the focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The structure of Wanūs's, Ursan's and Faraj's plays takes the form of disconnected and nonsequential incidents, documentary passages, narration, recollections, discussions and arguments occasionally interspersed with patriotic songs

¹²Trevor J. LeGassick, "Some Recent War-related Arabic Fiction," Middle East Journal 25 (1971), p. 491.

sung by chorus. Besides commenting on what happens, the chorus sometimes participates in the event to stress the collective nature of the struggle. Several passages in these plays documenting the historical events which occurred between 1948 and 1967 are followed by lengthy discussions and arguments. Occasionally, one or more characters address the audience and explain the message behind an event. In A Gay Party for June 5th, part of the action takes place in the auditorium where some actors rise to address those on stage. In short this play, like those of other playwrights in this period, written in reaction to an immediate event whose impact was still felt by the audience, was consciously political and, hence, marked by straight-forwardness and didacticism.

As the horrors of the 1967 war begin to subside and the national wounds begin to heal, Ikhlasī turns away from purely national and political issues to problems of a psychological and philosophical nature. He explores the writer's vacillation between the domain of reality and that of art in The Pearl and Venus (1969) and dramatizes the question of whether man's evil is inherent or the work of society in Alone Against the City (1970). In these plays Ikhlasī abandons the episodic form and its didacticism to adhere to a strictly linear mode of compact structure where the message is implicit in the organic development of action and character. While the protagonist in The Days We Have Forgotten is the collective, in The Pearl and Venus and Alone Against the City it is the individual. In the former play emphasis is laid on

the nation in relation to external enemies; in the latter, on the individual in relation either to social realities (Alone Against the City) or inner psychological conflict (The Pearl and Venus). Certainly, the latter plays are devoid of political propaganda because of the political calm and stability Syria enjoyed from 1968 to the beginning of 1970.

Ikhlasī's singling out of society as the source of man's corruption in Alone Against the City is further explored in A Democratic Evening Party (1971). Here Ikhlasī sees evil as the work of certain social classes. He identifies the petit-bourgeoisie as a greedy, degenerate and unscrupulous class thriving on the poor. The intellectuals, though socially members of the same stratum, are portrayed as standing by the deprived against their own class. The play symbolically chronicles the decline of bourgeois governments and ruling classes in Syria and the rise of the military. The final scene where a few armed men surround the villa, arrest the rich, strip them of their wealth and assume power, clearly alludes to the unexpected coup d'etat of 1970.

In the early part of A Democratic Evening Party, the series of entertaining games are slightly episodic and lend themselves to rearrangement. However, the sequence of events gradually gains momentum and its logical development is noticed in the straining of events toward a climax whose meaning is both realistic and symbolic. The synthetic nature of this play is the result of Ikhlasī's earlier experimentation with the episodic mode in the The Days We

Have Forgotten and the linear form in Alone Against the City and The Pearl and Venus. Such synthesis is also determined by the dramatic action: the episodic and loosely structured scenes of the early part are meant to show the loose, aimless and pleasure-loving life of the rich, while the growth of sequentiality and tightly structured incidents accords with the petit-bourgeoisie's gradual decline, loss of power and captivity.

This tradition of synthesizing techniques continues in Ikhlasi's plays. In Tonight We Play, for example, written in 1972, Ikhlasi molds mythical and historical anecdotes to present his philosophical vision of history in a manner likely to have been inspired by his reading of Shaw's Back to Methuselah. However, Ikhlasi's debts to Shaw are minimal and limited to his treatment of the Biblical myth and his shift from the latter to human history.

Ikhlasi's earlier experiments with the theatre of the absurd and the episodic mode are brought to bear upon Tonight We Play which, like The Ten Drums of Execution, has a bare setting and a couple trapped in a ditch waiting for deliverance; their movements are rather clownish and their language occasionally disintegrates into unrelated statements. As in The Days We Have Forgotten, Ikhlasi episodically chronicles historical events of universal character to illustrate the clashing forces that determine the historical process. What distinguishes Tonight We Play from Ikhlasi's earlier episodic plays is its emphatic theatricalism: the

couple playing roles frequently remind the audience that it is in a theatre, and emphasis is laid on theme rather than on plot and character development.

The 1973 war between Israel and the Arabs marks a shift from the state of frustration and humiliation that the 1967 defeat created to a national triumph and a state of exultation. Arab optimism was further enhanced by the growth of Palestinian resistance and its tireless fight for national liberation and self-determination. The national hero had become the Palestinian commando. In such plays as The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion (1973) by Ikhlasi, The Aliens (Al-Ghurba, 1974) by Ali Uqla Ursan and You, Israeli, It Is Time to Give Up (Ayuha al-Israili Han an Tastaslim, 1974) by Mustafa al-Halaj, the focus is on the Palestinian diaspora, on suffering in exile and under Israeli occupation, and on the struggle for a homeland. What distinguishes these plays from those written after 1967 is that markedly optimistic tone. However, the sympathetic attitude of the Syrian dramatists toward the Palestinians and their portrayal of the Israelis as brutal and inhuman sometimes turn their plays into pure propaganda.

Though The Day We Shot Down The Bird of Illusion is cast in the episodic mold of The Days We Have Forgotten (1968) and Tonight We Play (1972). it differs from the latter in introducing two new elements: "the narrator" and "audience participation." The narrator (who plays the Painter) provides information and comments on events and characters. Audience

participation takes the form of dialogue between the narrator on stage and the Spectator who is planted in the auditorium. The attempt to break down the barrier between stage and audience was first introduced to Syrian audiences in 1968 by the Syrian playwright Wanus in A Gay Party for June 5th. As for the narrator, Ikhlasī explains that he is modeled upon the manager/actor or manager of the theatre of the 40s in Aleppo where "he would stand in front of the curtain to explain the essence of the play and its objective."¹³ This play marks Ikhlasī's initial use of dramatic devices drawn from Arab heritage, devices he draws on more extensively in his more recent plays.

The shift from an episodic to a linear mode in Ikhlasī's case is determined by the play's content and the writer's orientation. Ikhlasī does not use form as a mold into which to pour his thought. He strongly believes that "content determines the form."¹⁴ This is apparent when we move from an episodic play like The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion to an organic drama like Fate Scratches Its Head, which was also written in 1972. Here Ikhlasī's interest in exploring what motivates his character to commit suicide explains his emphasis on plot, character development, compact form, limited cast and observation of the unities of time, space and action.

¹³Admer Gouryh, "Interview with Walid Ikhlasī," Aleppo, October 20, 1980. (Typewritten).

¹⁴Ibid.

In short, the process of unfolding the hidden psychological drives of a suicidal man lends itself more conveniently to the linear form.

Syria in the 70s witnessed acute internal upheaval. After the military coup of 1970, Syria gradually turned into a police state whose public institutions are dominated by every kind of corruption. Raymond A. Hinnebusch, an American social scientist, points out some of the anxieties that disturbed Syrian people in the 70s:

Political loyalties and personal connections often count more than skills and service, a notable aspect of which is favoritism shown Alouites...By the seventies...the party functionaries were themselves responsible for a share of the growing corruption, embezzlement, and influence-peddling which have come to plague all public institutions.¹⁵

Ikhlasī's Ascending Without Falling (1974) is an accurate dramatization of Hinnebusch's account. Ikhlasī clings to the episodic mode that gives him the freedom not only to portray the corrosive effect of the police state, but to satirize it with the intent of arousing the audience against it. Here disconnected actions operate within a plot, but not because they have any important causal relationship; incidents are included because they reflect aspects of the dramatized issue, e.g., the protagonist (Muntasir) is already a corrupt person, but Ikhlasī shows how he rose to high office step by step

¹⁵ Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Syria Under the Baath: State Formation in a Fragmented Society," Arab Studies Quarterly Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer, 1982), p. 188.

through a system of political loyalties, bribery and personal connections.

It was also corruption that prompted Ikhlasī to write Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music in 1975--this time the corruption that permeated the commercial theatre in Syria. Like Ascending Without Falling, this play adopts the episodic structure to criticize patterns of commercial performances and to suggest a new serious theatre as an alternative. The play is a series of playlets; their enactment, and the Director's and Playwright's comments on them, effect a theatre within a theatre. The character of the "narrator," whom Ikhlasī first introduced in The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion, appears this time as two "narrators"--the Director and Playwright who introduce the playlets and comment on their merits. Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music also shares the sense of audience participation created by a Spectator in the auditorium discoursing with those on stage. The arguments of the Director and Playwright weld the playlets together and sharpen the play's message. Finally, the Playwright's playlet--which wins the approval of both the Director and the Spectator who represents the audience--signals the victory of the new, serious theatre over the decadent commercial one.

Despite the similarity of issues treated in Ikhlasī's plays of a particular period, their form, technique and genre may differ. A Piece of Homeland on an Ancient Coast, for example, though written in 1975 when Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music was published, abandons the episodic structure of the

latter for a compact, organic mode. The straightforward attacks against social, political and cultural institutions in both Ascending Without Falling and Al-Samah Dance to Pop Music give way in A Piece of Homeland on an Ancient Coast to more subdued and indirect criticism expressed suggestively in a cluster of symbols, and through the development of action and character. Instead of highlighting facets of corrupt institutions and the suppression of democracy, Ikhlasī explores the change and growth that his protagonist experiences as he comes face to face with such institutions. Since the play focuses on the transformation of the idealistic protagonist into a mature, realistic character, Ikhlasī chooses an organic form where incidents arise out of motivated action, gradually converge, and come to a climax followed by a resolution.

If the protagonist in A Piece of Homeland on an Ancient Coast compromises his principles to maintain his gains, the intellectual in The Straight Path (1976) is brought to his knees by the authoritarian state. Ikhlasī writes The Straight Path during a period of persecution, imprisonment and torture of writers throughout the Arab world. H.A. Bouraoui, a Canadian scholar, speaks of the vulnerability of writers in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria: "If...the writer is honest with himself and insists on criticizing freely both internal and external structures, he runs the risk of exile or prison."¹⁶

¹⁶H.A. Bouraoui, "Creative Project and Literary Projection in Francophone North Africa," In Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature, p. 132.

Since Egypt signed the Camp David Treaty, dozens of Egyptian writers who opposed Sadat's policies live in exile. The prominent Syrian poet and playwright Mohammad al-Maghut still lives in exile. The appearance of two Syrian tragi-comedies (Caesar's Favor (Rida Qaisar, 1975), by Ali Uqla Ursan and The Straight Path, 1976, by Ikhlasī) dealing with the writer's relation to the state shows the significance of this issue for Syrian intellectuals.

The Straight Path's dramaturgy is no less revolutionary than its content. It echoes the revolt against Western dramatic forms that the Egyptian dramatist Yusuf Idris started in 1964. In a series of articles, Idris expounded the notion that each nation must have its own indigenous forms of drama, and that Egyptian playwrights should draw on Egyptian shadow theatre, the storyteller and other popular forms of entertainment. Idris' quest materialized in his play The Flip-Flop (Al-Farafir, 1964). A few years later, the Syrian playwright, Sad-alla Wanūs, successfully experimented with "the storyteller" in The Head of Mamluk Jabir (Ra's al-Mamluk Jaber, 1970). In 1973, Ikhlasī makes extensive use of the storyteller in The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion. Then, in The Straight Path, he draws on the shadow play.

Ikhlasī admits that his episodic plays "owe much more to the local storyteller (al-hakawati) and the shadow play (karagoz) than to Brecht."¹⁷ The shadow theatre as a popular

¹⁷Goury, "Interview With Walid Ikhlasī."

form of entertainment remained active in Syria and the Islamic world from the thirteenth until the second half of the twentieth century. Dr. Salman Kataye, a Syrian historian and theatre critic who has anthologized Aleppo's shadow plays, points out that "the last shadow theatre director, Mohammad Meri al-Dabagh, died in Aleppo in 1973,"¹⁸ Ikhlasî himself says that when he was a young boy he often went to the shadow theatre. The influence of the shadow play on The Straight Path is crystallized in its episodic structure, comic devices and portrayal of the protagonist.

The episodic plot of The Straight Path--composed of rearrangeable episodes, some of which could even be deleted--lacks the action and intrigue of linear drama and is in many respects analogous to the play of karagoz, the shadow play. Nuvit Ozdogru, the Turkish critic, describes the plots of karagoz as "episodic, with little intrigue and action. The stories are so loosely tied that episodes could change places or be eliminated or new ones can be added."¹⁹ In Chapter Five, the analysis of The Straight Path points out how the scenes in which Abidou meets the press can be rearranged, and the one in which Abidou is in a deserted town could be eliminated or replaced. Nonetheless, certain episodes in Ikhlasî's plan cannot be tampered with for they serve

¹⁸ Salman Kataye, Nusus Khayal al-Thil (Texts of Shadow Plays) (Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1977), p. 26.

¹⁹ Nuvit Ozdogru, "Turkey," The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama, eds. Gassner and Quinn (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), p. 866.

character development and create a sense of artistic wholeness. But in both karagoz and The Straight Path the emphasis is on the message rather than on the causal relations of incidents.

In The Straight Path Ikhlası certainly succeeds in reviving the comic tradition of the shadow play. The seven comic devices that Ozdogru sees characteristic of karagoz (comic gestures or movements, disguises, contrast and incongruity, exaggeration, slapstick, rhythmic movement and verbal witticism)²⁰ can all be seen in Ikhlası's play. For example, Abidou constantly drinks and passes the bottle around in the midst of serious conversation, or he repeatedly violates his role and chats with the audience. Like the hero of karagoz who appears in the disguise of a donkey, frog, or beggar, Abidou assumes the character of a sheik, an ass and a beggar. He vacillates between being honest and dishonest with himself and others, and his skillful tight-rope walking in the beginning and end constitutes a rhythmic movement. We have slapstick: Abidou pulls the promptor from behind his chair or he smokes an explosive cigarette. Finally, his puns and word play reflect a strong sense of humor. These activities, springing from Abidou's commonplace character, spontaneity, simplicity, ludicrousness and broad knowledge of his surroundings, are no different from the attributes of the shadow play's hero who, according to Ozdogru, "symbolizes the

²⁰Ibid.

common people--patient, simple, good-natured, but prankish and quite aware of what is going on."²¹ Both Abidou and his counterpart in karagoz used knowledge to satirize the corruption of their times. Alex Russel, a British physician who visited Aleppo in the eighteenth century and wrote The Natural History of Aleppo in 1794, points out that "karagoz was powerful in satirizing the stupidities of governments. I have known a pasha who was ridiculed by karagoz as he left the city. No judge was spared by his sarcasm."²² Russel might well have been describing Abidou's reaction toward the events of his world, and the reaction of the authorities toward him.

Though there are many similarities between karagoz and The Straight Path, Ikhlasi has succeeded in turning the comic figure of karagoz into a contemporary tragi-comic character; the protagonist of the shadow play ridicules the idiocies of his world without fear of victimization, but the institutions that Abidou satirizes turn against him and render him helpless.

The alienation and helplessness in which the writer is caught up in The Straight Path expands into the incarceration of a whole nation in A Shot in the Back (1976). The play is cast in a tight organic form full of symbols bearing on Arab disunity and the agony of the Palestinians. Probably the military attacks of Lebanese troops against Palestinian camps

²¹ Ibid.

²² Quoted in Salman Kataye, Texts of Shadow Plays, p. 24.

in 1975, and the Lebanese Civil War in 1976 inspired Ikhlasī to write his play. A Shot in the Back illustrates how the Arab states which welcomed Palestinian refugees, housed them and claimed to defend their cause in fact exposed them to internal and external persecution. As in The Straight Path, the heroine of A Shot in the Back is forced into a dangerous situation whether she remains inside or goes outside. The death of the heroine and the knowledge the Old Man gains at the end turn the play into a genuine tragedy.

As the state alienates the artist in The Straight Path, family and social traditions deprive woman of her right to act as an individual in Oriental Joy (1977). From the day Ikhlasī took to playwriting, he has been preoccupied with the question of the emancipation of woman. He examined this issue first in The Ten Drums of Execution (1965) and then in Fate Scratches Its Head (1973). In Oriental Joy, male chauvinism, family traditions and social classes are viewed as the roots of women's oppression. Here Ikhlasī departs from the absurdist technique of The Ten Drums of Execution and abandons the conventional form of Fate Scratches Its Head for an episodic structure replete with dramatic devices drawn from Arab and Islamic culture.

What distinguishes Oriental Joy from Ikhlasī's previous episodic plays is, on the one hand, its extensive use of the storyteller al-Hakawati and other dramatic elements of Syrian and Islamic origin, and, on the other, its intricate plot framed within an episodic structure. Unlike the storyteller

in The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion (who only furnishes background information and occasionally argues in favor of reason), here the storyteller is integrated into the plot and his multiple roles mirror his ancient ceremonial functions. Ikhlasi introduces the storyteller in the guise of a Fortune-teller and wedding-party master of ceremonies. Hence, he is involved in palm-reading, fortune-telling, chanting, incense burning, giving blessings, conducting singing and dancing groups and commenting on what is going on. In short, by wedding the linear mode to an episodic structure, Ikhlasi has demonstrated the efficacy of Syrian and Islamic dramatic devices.

Ikhlasi's recent preoccupation with more universal issues has led him to explore Greek and Biblical myths in his last three plays: Oedipus (1978), Garden Song (1979) and The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia (1980). Arabic plays with plots drawn from the Koran and the Bible go back to the 30s. Al-Hakim was inspired by Koranic and Biblical tales to write The Cavemen (Ahil al-Kahif, 1933) and The Wisdom of Solomon (Sulaiman al-Hakim, 1943). Taha Hussain's translation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex in 1939, and Gide's Oedipus in 1946 motivated three Egyptian playwrights to experiment with the Oedipus myth. In 1949, al-Hakim wrote King Oedipus (Oedib Malikun) to emphasize that the struggle in the Greek myth was not between fate and man's will, but between Oedipus' love for Jocasta and his realization that she was his mother. Al-Hakim's play was followed by The Tragedy of Oedipus (Ma'sat

Oedip, 1949) by Ali Ahmad Bakthir. He portrays Oedipus as an atheist who believes only in reason and will. Realizing that he married his mother, Oedipus repents and Tiresias leads him to the fold of faith as it is understood in Islam. The third play, You Who Killed the Sphinx (Anta yali Qatalet al-Wahish, 1949) by Ali Salem, has a socio-political rather than a metaphysical motif. Salem's play attributes the plague that sweeps Thebes to the monopoly of the temple and Jocasta's exploitation of the productive masses. The plague also symbolizes the impotence of Oedipus (i.e., the individual), for Salem insists that social and political change cannot be carried out without the concerted efforts of the people.

Where Egyptian playwrights, like their European peers, refashion the old myths to serve their own purposes, Ikhlasî molds realistic twentieth century incidents and characters along the lines of the myth. In other words, Ikhlasî reshapes the real world to draw attention to its affinity with the mythical domain.

Though Oedipus and Pleasure 21 differ in form and technique, they share a pessimistic tone. In both plays, man is haunted by scientific discoveries. If, in Pleasure 21, Ikhlasî warns against the consequences of exploiting science for sheer materialistic and political purposes, in Oedipus he shows that man's infatuation with science has neither contributed to his understanding of himself nor helped him control the hidden forces that shroud his future.

Aspects of Oedipus, written in 1978, are found in Garden Song, composed in 1979. This time, Ikhlasī remodels realistic characters and anecdotes along the lines of the Eden myth. Furthermore, the action in this play, like in Oedipus, operates on both allegorical and realistic planes. As the dramatic events recall the Oedipus or the Eden myth, they also echo the audience's experiences of contemporary social problems.

Oedipus and Garden Song not only share technique, but also explore an identical philosophical question. In the former, Ikhlasī posits science as an absolute against which the protagonists rail because of their involvement with women cast out by society (Oedipus) or God (Garden Song); however, the endings bring reconciliation between Suffian and al-Bahī in Oedipus and Mukhtar and God in Garden Song. Thus, the lost balance is restored.

Ikhlasī's interest in allegory and the Bible is seen again in The Shine of Ibrahim and Saffia (1980). In the form of a shadow play is presented the tale of Abraham and Isaac, and along its lines evolves the love story of Ibrahim and Saffia. Thus, as in the Garden Song, myth is used to cast a critical eye on modern Syrian and Arab social norms.

In The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia, Ikhlasī successfully integrates Islamic dramatic devices into the episodic form. Besides including choral passages, recitations, ritual ceremonies and chanting, he uses sermon-like fragments in the reception of pilgrims, in the narrator's appeal to the

audience to sympathize with Saleh, Ibrahim and Saffia, and in the clergyman Saleh's arguments with his opponents. Most notable is the evolution of episodic incidents into a sequential and organic whole. As in The Day We Shot Down the Bird of Illusion, theatricality is achieved by the narrator's constant communication with the audience and the characters' dismantling and constructing settings without a blackout. The Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia differs from the rest of Ikhlasī's episodic plays by focusing on a love story that converges with a Biblical myth, but like most of his social dramas, this play lashes out against the social and political corruption that threatens the people.

Thus, the chronology of Ikhlasī's plays mirrors the historical, political, social and cultural changes that have swept the Arab world since World War II. A study of the plays in relation to their Western counterparts shows how Western drama has influenced Ikhlasī, but such a study does not disclose technical or formalistic development. Though the last three plays fall into the category of allegorical drama, this mode cannot be considered Ikhlasī's final refuge if for no other reason than that it is not a developmental extension of his previous plays.

One thing that brings unity to plays so different in form, technique and theme is the recurring image of ensnarement and incarceration characteristic of the state of fear, suffering and repression created by authoritarian systems, rigid norms and corrupt social and political

institutions. Protagonists are either caught up in places where there is no exit or trapped in situations where destructive forces close in upon them. In The Ten Drums of Execution, it is a dingy cell where a couple is waiting to be executed. In Tonight We Play, the ditch in which a couple is trapped becomes a metaphor for man's condition on earth. The joyful residents of a villa become prisoners of unknown men in A Democratic Evening Party. The club in Pleasure 21 ensnares and chokes its members to death. Abidou's chosen exile, in The Straight Path, is reduced to a trap set by the authorities. In A Shot in the Back, a fugitive woman is murdered in a peaceful house that had welcomed her. The secure hiding place in A Shrine of Ibrahim and Saffia becomes the couple's grave. The bedroom to which the newly-weds retreat in Oriental Joy is a trap where the woman gets killed. Finally, in Alone Against the City, a man running from a corrupt town, trying to turn away from his criminal past, falls in a trap set by the police and gets killed. Thus, in all these plays, the protagonists either find themselves already ensnared or, as they struggle for survival, face inescapable exile, imprisonment or death.

Ikhlesi's dramas, it is clear, reflect a wide range of human interests and a variety of forms of artistic expression. Man in Ikhlesi's plays is anchored in the past or bound to the collective, or else is in revolt against the social structure and bent on projecting himself into a future shaped by his own ideals. Characters are both symbols and real people in all their baseness and beauty, with all their wild aspirations,

grueling frustrations and endless resort to compromise. This diversity is presented in a wide range of variant dramatic modes including classical, symbolist, episodic, allegorical and the theatre of the absurd. Ikhlasī's uniqueness lies in his daring to and being able to synthesize and integrate these modes and elements into a whole expressive of his objectives. Above all, Ikhlasī's exploration of the potentials of Syrian and Islamic dramatic forms and devices such as the narrator and the shadow play and his ability to fuse them with Western forms is a considerable contribution to both Arab and world drama.

APPENDIX

PLEASURE 21

BY

WALID IKHLASI

1965

Translated from Arabic by Admer G. Gouryh

TIME: One day.
PLACE: Pleasure Club 21.

CHARACTERS

THE CLUB MANAGER

THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: The governor's flat-chested daughter,
permanent Miss Universe.

THE DEPRESSED MAN

THE GAY WAITER

THE PHYSICIAN

THE OLD WOMAN: Owner of a casket factory.

THE TRAINER

THE BLACK MAN

THE NEWCOMER

THREE MEN CONSTANTLY SINGING

SCENE

(Three grey and smooth walls; two rooms for meditation. The doors are invisible; a large window overlooks a foggy scene of a distant wood. A painting of a huge insect from whose heart, penetrated by a long spear, blue blood pours. An opening leads to another section of the club.

Light arises from the ground. Means of entertainment are available for killing boredom. Music is constantly playing, often barely heard but sometimes intense.

As the curtain goes up, THREE MEN are seen in a state of intoxication, singing. The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN leans slightly as she looks through a microscope. The DEPRESSED MAN is in the room.)

THREE MEN: Ha...Ha...! Let all men of power sing!

ONE OF THEM: Down with the bee that urinates bitterness.

MANAGER: (Inside, receiving the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN)
We feel highly honored, honorable madame.

THREE MEN: Ha...Ha...! Let all men of power sing.
She is an honor to the MANAGER; she is an
honor to us...a total honor.

MANAGER: The daughter of the engineer of souls, our
outstanding governor, has become a member
of our club.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I like the result of struggling for pleasure.

MANAGER: It is one...

THREE MEN: (Interrupting the MANAGER) Gentlemen, now you will see the most modern way of making love. It is between two tiny fleas who grew up and married one day. They make love very skillfully. It is wonderful; they never get bored!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Mr. MANAGER, give credit to the man who trained the two fleas; they have given an excellent performance.

DEPRESSED MAN: (Looking out of the glass room) Do you admire the fleas, Madame?

MANAGER: A TRAINER from a distant country came to our club especially to train the fleas.

THREE MEN: The TRAINER of miracles came to us. He teaches bears how to juggle. He gives the fleas unforgettable lessons. Our TRAINER is from a distant country. He carried with him surprises to please our sullen hearts with unforgettable pleasure. (Singing slows down as conversation goes on among the rest.)

THREE MEN: The daughter of the architect of souls has joined our club.

MANAGER: The TRAINER has cost us a lot of money, but that is not important...

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Don't worry about the cost of pleasure.
What counts is the presentation of
pleasure. Does any of it persist?

MANAGER: We are dealing with this significant
problem.

THREE MEN: The MANAGER handles this problem with
extreme concern. He does anything he can
to provide pleasure for the members.

ONE OF THEM: God preserve our MANAGER.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I am proud of joining your club.

MANAGER: Madame,...there are many other kinds of
pleasures. You are welcome. Today, a
party will be given in your honor.

THREE MEN: Today is a holiday for us. The MANAGER
must be planning a big party.

ONE OF THEM: A horseshoe does not bring luck.

MANAGER: And the earth will play for you the song
of existence. (Calling the WAITER)
WAITER, go bring the great lady a drink
worthy of her. Let it be from the store
of fleeting pleasure. (WAITER comes back
quickly, bowing, and with respect offers
the lady her drink. Then he turns to THE
THREE SINGING MEN, handing them closed
boxes. They inhale their contents and
give them back to the waiter.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Long live the queen of holidays!

MANAGER: Our drinks, Madame, are half pleasure.
Today is a holiday for us. Hey, WAITER!
Today we have a great program.

THREE MEN: Today is a holiday in the club. Cheer up,
long live the queen of the holidays.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Looking at the painting) The insect
takes me back to an ancient story. Is it
a symbol of the club?

MANAGER: Our sacred insect was pierced with the
spear of illusion. The insect has died.

THREE MEN: One night illusion attacked our insect and
injured its royal heart. Let us sing
while sorrow fills our eyes with tears.
It has died for us.

MANAGER: Madame, please permit me to start. Do you
permit me?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (She is bent, looking through the
microscope) As you wish.

MANAGER: (Facing them) Ladies and gentlemen,
members of Pleasure Club 21. (As he goes
on, the members come in; the DEPRESSED MAN
joins them. All sit in comfortable
chairs.)

MANAGER: Ladies and gentlemen. today a lady, the
symbol of women in this country, has
blessed the ground of this lively club.
In honor of her, we shall present a unique

program of pleasure. No one knows, this moment might not return again!

DEPRESSED MAN: My colleagues, today I need you for a moment.

PHYSICIAN: I need you, too.

MANAGER: We want you to complete the pleasure program for our new member.

DEPRESSED MAN: I want to say...

PHYSICIAN: I want to say...

MANAGER: I have provided the meditation room for that purpose.

THREE MEN: The meditation room is made for both of you. Go, go! We want some pleasure.

ONE OF THEM: Down with philosophy.

ANOTHER: Down with medicine. (Childish joy overcomes the THREE MEN.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (While the MANAGER calms others down) We need something that makes us forget what lies beyond these walls.

OLD WOMAN: I agree with the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN.
(Introducing herself) I own a factory that manufactures transparent caskets.

THREE MEN: Even in death our sex organs are exposed, even in death!

PHYSICIAN: (Taking a tube of white liquid out of his pocket) Gentlemen, do you know what this tube contains? Do you know?

DEPRESSED MAN: Is it a drug?

PHYSICIAN: Have I disputed that?

DEPRESSED MAN: These tubes no longer attract the
attention of today's men.

OLD WOMAN: They may draw the attention of women.

PHYSICIAN: Oh, I wish you knew what this white tube
contained!

MANAGER: Respectable PHYSICIAN, what do you have in
that tube?

DEPRESSED MAN: It contains that which disturbs one's
tranquility.

OLD WOMAN: Is it death?

PHYSICIAN: It is...something.

OLD WOMAN: Anti-death?

PHYSICIAN: No need for guessing, it is something
real.

DEPRESSED MAN: And what is this real thing?

PHYSICIAN: This tube!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: We want poetry. Recite some poetry.

MANAGER: (With indignation) Poetry?

DEPRESSED MAN: (Singing) Sing me...

THREE MEN: Sing with him useless poetry.

DEPRESSED MAN: My name has by mistake fallen in a deep
well.

THREE MEN: His name has by mistake plummeted and
gotten wet. We hung it out to dry in the
yellow sun and it lost its color.

DEPRESSED MAN: It fell and got wet.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: How happy I am I love forgotten things.

OLD WOMAN: His name fell by mistake. We don't need poetry. It is boring.

MANAGER: We have wasted a lot of time. Let us celebrate our great lady's party. (The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN moves to a corner of the theatre, takes a small doll and holds it close to her breast as if suckling a child. As the DEPRESSED MAN approaches her, she hides the doll behind her back. The MANAGER helps his waiters prepare the party. The other characters are not aware of the MANAGER.)

DEPRESSED MAN: Do you have children?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I do not want to marry.

DEPRESSED MAN: I did not ask you about your social situation. I ask you about the number of children you have.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I have one daughter.

DEPRESSED MAN: Is she at school?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do you own a private school?

DEPRESSED MAN: I teach at a school of geniuses.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: What do you teach?

DEPRESSED MAN: They teach me philosophy!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: And what do you teach them?

DEPRESSED MAN: I teach them how to waste time.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: So, you get paid a high salary.

DEPRESSED MAN: My salary is beyond limit.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: You ask about my daughter. Will you accept her in your school?

DEPRESSED MAN: I don't think she needs my philosophy. I am telling you the truth, it will avail her nought. You are beautiful. That is enough. You are beautiful, Madame.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do you mean it? (After a while) I have not seen your school yet.

DEPRESSED MAN: They are young students, their heads are as big as bright platinum boxes shining in an awful way. Do you understand? You are beautiful, like a sea shore stretching through frothy waves. You are fresh.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Are there many students?

DEPRESSED MAN: Too many. I don't know. I have not counted them yet.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do you have children?

DEPRESSED MAN: I don't. I have a friendly black cat. To tell the truth, you are beautiful.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do you spend most of your time at school?

DEPRESSED MAN: My time is divided between the club and the school. I like the meditation room. To tell the truth, you are beautiful.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do you meditate for a long time?

DEPRESSED MAN: I contemplate the glass. It reveals what lies behind it. It is wonderful. Madame, do you like to love? Do you?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: To love! To love! Yes, I love my daughter. I love her. Do you know how beautiful she is?

DEPRESSED MAN: You are beautiful, do you know that?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I know; my daughter knows, too.
(Preparations for the party begin to bear fruit. A large cage with a huge BLACK MAN inside is placed in the middle of the room. Near the cage stands a tiny man who is the TRAINER.)

DEPRESSED MAN: Madame, there is not enough time left. Do you want to love?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do I? Who does not want to? You love classical poetry, is that not so?

DEPRESSED MAN: My name has by mistake fallen in an old well. They hung it out to dry in the yellow sun; it lost its color.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Do you like the color yellow?

DEPRESSED MAN: There is no more time, Madame, answer me. Do you want to love? (The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN goes away to talk with the MANAGER. On the other side of the stage there is a side view.)

OLD WOMAN: Hurry up, tell me about that tube.

DEPRESSED MAN: (From a distance) Put your tube back into its closet.

PHYSICIAN: Do you really want to know?

OLD WOMAN: (Quickly) Yes, yes, I do. I have read in your eyes a desire that has touched my heart.

PHYSICIAN: Do you really want to know? Nobody really wants to know. Nobody wants to, but I know you want to know!

OLD WOMAN: I do, I do! I have sniffed a strange smell arising from the white tube.

PHYSICIAN: Do you like the smell?

OLD WOMAN: Strange, it appealed to me. I want to know what it is; I want to know even if it will cost me a lot of money. Hurry up, tell me, it appeals to me.

PHYSICIAN: I spent so many years working silently in my white room. Thousands of tubes used to be laid out before my eyes, sometimes mixed up to the point of confusing me. Often failure blinded me, so I gave up. Then I repeated my experiments over and over again. At the end, I believe that I must get somewhere. Do you understand that, Madame?

OLD WOMAN: Tell me, tell me. I want to know more.

THREE MEN: (The voices sound like a background of the side scene) Tick, tick, we are not in a hurry! Tick, tick, those who seek haste will stumble, and the night should give way to the sun at the right time. Tick, tick.

PHYSICIAN: I spent several years to achieve this blend. It is the purpose of my soul.

OLD WOMAN: Death, is it not?

PHYSICIAN: (Frightened) You know the secret. How?

OLD WOMAN: I have read it in your eyes. Your two withered eyes have become like two rocks on a high mountain grazed by the rain and smoothed by the wind. Your eyes, sir, are my hope. I will pay you a lot for this secret.

PHYSICIAN: Do you know something?

OLD WOMAN: What, what? I want to know everything.

PHYSICIAN: If a little of this mixture spreads through the air, it becomes like a spider's web.

OLD WOMAN: Then?

PHYSICIAN: Then! Then everything comes to an end.

OLD WOMAN: What comes to an end?

PHYSICIAN: The life of those who we don't want to live.

OLD WOMAN: Tell me, tell me more. I will pay a very high price for this beautiful mixture. Show it to me. Let me feel it with my fingers. For God's sake, let me touch it.

PHYSICIAN: (Cautiously) No, I will not unless we sign an agreement.

OLD WOMAN: Take whatever you want, just let me see it.

PHYSICIAN: If a little of it spreads through the air, it will turn into a spider's web. Then everything is over. Madame, do you see the atoms of the air?

OLD WOMAN: I don't seen anything.

PHYSICIAN: You will definitely see them. Shall I try? No, let us experiment upon others.

OLD WOMAN: How many people can it kill in an hour?

PHYSICIAN: An unlimited number, as many as I want.

OLD WOMAN: Sir, I agree. Let us sign the agreement.

THREE MEN: (From the back) Businessmen excel in signing contracts. Their bargains burgeon, as the grain of rice quickly becomes a heap.

ONE OF THEM: Who wants to bet that the OLD WOMAN already has a heap?

THREE MEN: No one...no one.

PHYSICIAN: I spent several years until I discovered the secret of recreating existence. (As

the party starts, the PHYSICIAN and the OLD WOMAN seem to have signed the agreement.)

MANAGER: Members of the club, my miserable sons, I have brought you a new pleasure from a distant land. Now you will see the huge BLACK MAN and his skillful TRAINER present us with a unique kind of pleasure.

THREE MEN: Our ancient myths are full of information about hunting ceremonies. Then, the lion used to be hung aloft by the skin of its head. Today, gentlemen, we have a new program. Watch out, the cage is not firm enough.

MANAGER: Let the TRAINER begin his show. (The TRAINER takes takes out a whip, cracking it in the air to threaten the BLACK MAN. The latter is sad and motionless in his cage. The TRAINER again threatens him.)

DEPRESSED MAN: The BLACK MAN must be fascinated by your beauty, beautiful lady.

MANAGER: Begin. BLACK MAN, begin the entertainment. The party is given in her honor. Entertain us as long as she appeals to you.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: He seems to be sick. (The TRAINER cracks his whip, but the BLACK MAN remains

motionless. Then suddenly he gives vent to a cry very much like weeping. He bangs the cage with his two strong hands. He calms down as the TRAINER starts cracking the whip.)

TRAINER: (Bowling to the members) The BLACK MAN is my property. I trained him for many years; I toured the world and amused it with him. Would you like to see some dancing?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: We want to see history through his words.

TRAINER: (With pride) He has been taught many old things. (He cracks his whip and the BLACK MAN shouts.)

DEPRESSED MAN: Hearing poetry would be a beautiful thing. BLACK MAN, read us some poetry. (As the TRAINER cracks the whip, the BLACK MAN shouts as if reading poetry. Joy appears on the member's faces. Some of them are chewing on frankincense greedily, others are moving rhythmically with the Black Man's shouts. Pleasure invades the place.)

TRAINER: (To the DEPRESSED MAN) What did you order, sir? Poetry?

DEPRESSED MAN: (To the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN) There is not enough time, let us love...

BLACK MAN: (In a state of calmness, he sings) My mother is sad! And she has thrown her feet, chapped by her falling tears, upon the captive. I can't escape any more, the cage's bars are stuck to my ribs.

THREE MEN: Cage bars are stuck to his ribs. He can't escape any more. Bars surround us, slowly and adhere to us. We should run away before the situation is too late.

DEPRESSED MAN: Let philosophy fall into a deep well.

THREE MEN: Philosophy has fallen under the feet of insanity. Everyone chases escaped animals and shoots his arrows with exceeding skillfulness. His mother is sad and threw her chapped feet. We can't escape anymore!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (To the TRAINER) Does the BLACK MAN know how to speak?

TRAINER: He only repeats the voices of his past.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Let him tell us about his world, about his thick jungles, about the watery streams which move smoothly as snakes. Let him tell us...(The BLACK MAN focuses his eyes on the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN. The TRAINER cracks his whip.)

MANAGER: Don't look at our lady. Tell him not to look at her.

TRAINER: It is all right; it is all right. Ask him to talk. (The TRAINER cracks the whip; the BLACK MAN shouts with unbearable pain.)

DEPRESSED MAN: Madame, there is no time anymore. Down with philosophy.

THREE MEN: Philosophy has begun to take beauty into account. Let us wait and see the end. We anticipate neither happiness nor any pleasure.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (As the BLACK MAN cries out) Don't beat him, sir. (The group laughs with pleasure. The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN sympathizes with the BLACK MAN. Tears well up in the BLACK MAN's eyes.)

THREE MEN: Even the jungle men know how to cry. Even jungle men do not forget to cry.

MANAGER: (As the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN moves close to the cage) Stay away, Madame! He is dangerous! (The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN attaches her flat chest to the bars and feels them. The BLACK MAN looks at her.)

DEPRESSED MAN: Let us put an end to this trick. This is not pleasure. Let us go back to the microscope. Fleas are beautiful reality. Back to the microscope. (The TRAINER cracks his whip and the BLACK MAN lunges in his

cage, performing movements suggesting pain and frustration.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Getting closer to the DEPRESSED MAN.) It is true that there is not enough time.

DEPRESSED MAN: Do you want me?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I want the voice of history penetrating my bones, recreating me. (As the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN goes to the corner of the stage to suckle her doll, the OLD WOMAN motions the PHYSICIAN over with a nod of her head.)

PHYSICIAN: We should do something for the welfare of the coming days. (As the DEPRESSED MAN tries to get close to the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, the OLD WOMAN calls him.)

OLD WOMAN: How are your genius students doing?

PHYSICIAN: Schools will shut their doors in the face of students of ancient science. Now weeds will arise from the earth. We are bound to do something!

OLD WOMAN: Have you not prepared something!

PHYSICIAN: There is not enough time left.

DEPRESSED MAN: Not at all? And the time that goes...(The TRAINER notices that the members have lost interest in his game, so he puts the whip back in its place. The BLACK MAN sits on a tree trunk in his cage.)

MANAGER: (Shouting) Let us look for a new pleasure.

THREE MEN: Once upon a time, boredom spread. There is no joy anymore. Change your program, change your life. Dullness invades the city like an army of ants.

PHYSICIAN: Do you want to know what this tube contains?

DEPRESSED MAN: I will walk my black cat.

OLD WOMAN: And my dog will chase him.

DEPRESSED MAN: (In a low voice) I am fed up with you, OLD WOMAN, I am fed up with your transparent caskets. I am tired, I want to talk.

THREE MEN: Our teachers like lengthy speeches. We should be all ears.

DEPRESSED MAN: In the beginning, tumors were attacking my mother. I carried her in my frail arms and crossed the river. On the other side of the river, there was something like a cage. I looked at the cage and ran away. Tumors spread in the woman's sick body, and before I arrived she dried up like a summer pear; she dried up and fell. The current is driving her to other lands. There is not enough time left. I have to go.

THREE MEN: The current carried the summer fruit; the dried fruit was driven to a distant land.

DEPRESSED MAN: I have waited too long. There is not enough time left. The current passes and never comes back; the current does not return! The look never returns. I have kept on waiting.

PHYSICIAN: (Applauding) That is great, great. That is a beautiful speech.

DEPRESSED MAN: I came near a cottage and shouted. The cottage was like that cage. I shouted but no one heard me. I knew there was no use...(The voices of the three men drown his speech.)

THREE MEN: There is no use, no use.

ONE OF THEM: The current moves quickly and the foam vanishes.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (To the TRAINER) Will you sell me this?

TRAINER: What is it?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: The man in the cage.

TRAINER: His value is measureless.

OLD WOMAN: I can afford him.

PHYSICIAN: I need him for my experiment.

DEPRESSED MAN: Is not an auction a sort of pleasure? I will purchase him, too.

TRAINER: (Bewildered) I earn my daily bread through him. I will never sell him. (The

BLACK MAN in the cage holds his big head with both hands and looks miserably at the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I want him. I have bought him.

TRAINER: Madame, I can lend him to you, but I can't guarantee your safety.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: He does not look dangerous. (The BLACK MAN screams.)

TRAINER: Didn't I tell you?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: He declares his approval of my ownership of him.

DEPRESSED MAN: Congratulations, let me congratulate you on behalf of the club. Now you have someone to entertain you.

PHYSICIAN I think there is no point anymore in buying or owning things.

OLD WOMAN: I don't care, I have dogs.

DEPRESSED MAN: (To the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN) I have combed my black cat. I can offer it to you. Do you want it? He is smart, lively and shrewd.

TRAINER: I don't guarantee the safety of anyone. The BLACK MAN is wild. One day on the road, he ran away and killed three bears.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Wonderful, I like to see him affirming his existence.

DEPRESSED MAN: Once, I killed a dozen flies.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Ignoring the depressed man's comments)
When can I own the BLACK MAN?

MANAGER: (Decisively) He is going to be the club's
present to you.

THREE MEN: Now our great lady has something to amuse
her. She will tie him to the trunk of the
tree and talk to him every morning. He
can beat the ground with his feet and
cause a mild earthquake. Sing with me:
"We envy you, BEAUTIFUL LADY."

DEPRESSED MAN: The flies have turned wild.

THREE MEN: There are many things whose teeth turn to
tusks. Once, a fly was sucking nectar,
then it began to eat carrion. (The BLACK
MAN screams then returns to his
meditation.)

THREE MEN: The auction is set in motion and the BLACK
MAN holds his head with his hands, gazing
into the distance, looking back upon his
past--the past is leveled, and on it
fleeting memories roll. The bargain is
settled, the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN pays more
than anyone. We believe the BEAUTIFUL
WOMAN will win!

OLD WOMAN: I am sure the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN will win.

MANAGER: (To the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN) Madame, the
BLACK MAN is yours.

TRAINER: What about me, what is left for me?

DEPRESSED MAN: Train another man.

TRAINER: I need so many years to do that, maybe thirty years.

PHYSICIAN: (Angrily) Thirty years to teach him meaningless screaming? (BLACK MAN moves furiously in his cage, banging the bars with his hands.)

THREE MEN: Ha...Ha...Screaming, screaming! How much time does he need? Ha...Ha...

PHYSICIAN: There is no need to bargain. The BLACK MAN is yours, Madame.

OLD WOMAN: It is true, there is no need, the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN is definitely winning.

MANAGER: (Shouting) Our beautiful lady has what amuses her. Gentlemen, I am very glad!

THREE MEN: We are very happy, the beautiful lady has what amuses her.

THREE MEN: (After a short silence) And the flies are left for us, and the earth's lights caress our feet. How happy we are, the BLACK MAN will dance for her in a crazy way and she will applaud. (All of them are preparing themselves anew. The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN is in the corner hugging her doll.)

DEPRESSED MAN: (Bent over the microscope) Joy is over.
The BLACK MAN has won.

PHYSICIAN: You may take him, Madame, but can you?

OLD WOMAN: It will not last long. The siege is
advancing, that is wonderful, anyway. His
snake legs flow with force.
Congratulations, little one, but the siege
is coming...

DEPRESSED MAN: What siege? We were besieged once in a
citadel...Fear set it on fire, men
challenged death. Then fire lost its
danger!

PHYSICIAN: I am bored...I am leaving, so long.

OLD WOMAN: I will join you.

DEPRESSED MAN: Empty your white tube. You promised.

PHYSICIAN: (To the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN) Do you mind
lending me your BLACK MAN? I will bring
him back to you. He is strong, anyway.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: No. (After a moment) I am not interested
in him anymore.

THREE MEN: This...this is boredom...it is boredom.
(A state of continuous ceremony, everyone
amuses himself on his own.)

WAITER: (Talking to the MANAGER in an audible
voice after returning from outside) A
man, carrying in his eyes two pools of

insanity, is screaming at the door. Shall I kick him out?

MANAGER: Send him away. (Talks with the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN)

THREE MEN: Strangers disturb the tranquility of friends, bring bad news for free.

MANAGER: Send the stranger away.

WAITER: He says: "Woe to those who refuse to listen."

PHYSICIAN: Let him in, is he really crazy?

WAITER: I think he is sane, but probably suffered a nervous breakdown.

OLD WOMAN: Let him in, he has something to entertain us with. Come on! Let him in.

THREE MEN: Strangers always bring bad news for free.

MANAGER: I will meet him. He is probably the same man who gives out books by force.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: And what kind of books?

DEPRESSED MAN: Profane books about some saints.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Let him come in with his books.

DEPRESSED MAN: They contain some embarrassing pictures.
(He whispers in the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN'S ear.
She does not react. Voices from outside.
Rough knocking and screaming.)

OLD WOMAN: Let him in to entertain us. (As the MANAGER disappears, a man with the signs

of a sage rushes in as if the outside world is deteriorating.)

NEWCOMER: The spider, the spider...everything is over. (The club members, laughing, surround him as if they are recalling songs.)

NEWCOMER: All is finished, the sky has rained down the end, the spider...

THREE MEN: The spider plays a part in myths. It weaves its tales around a long pole of time...and we fall into their nets like flies--like flies we fall.

NEWCOMER: The wind is fast, death is coming. The plains surrounding this building will suffocate. Let us run away before the building suffocates.

PHYSICIAN: (Shouting vigorously) The experiment has succeeded, cursed is failure. I have killed it!

OLD WOMAN: (Hugging the PHYSICIAN) We have succeeded, I no longer have time for pleasure. Hurry up, let us work.

NEWCOMER: Listen, time has no mercy. The weeping flock digs up the road to here with its rough feet. Listen, you have no other choice except escape. (Horrible silence

pervades the club. The warning is marked with danger and seriousness.)

PHYSICIAN: Listen to this man, believe him. There is no other chance. You are the witness of my first triumph, you should be honored. I greatly appreciate your suffering.

THREE MEN: (With cautious speed) What surprises does the PHYSICIAN have for us?

PHYSICIAN: It is high time that I talk to you. The experiment has succeeded.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: What experiment?

DEPRESSED MAN: Your horrible tube spreads its dust in the air!

PHYSICIAN: (Taking the tube out of his pocket) This is the fruit of long experiments, and now my experiments in the neighboring city have succeeded. I see people there wound up with the good I wished them.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: What good?

NEWCOMER: (After he calms down) She and I were sitting under the walnut tree. The girl of hymns, beautiful as moist sugar cane, pointed with her finger to the sky. We were making love when she screamed with fear. "Look," she said. I looked. The sky was covered with spiders. The atoms of air looked clear, then rotted...

PHYSICIAN: Here is a scientific description of everything.

TRAINER: How did it happen?

PHYSICIAN: (Pointing to the tube) With a little of this in the air, everything will be done with.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: What will be done with?

PHYSICIAN: Life!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (With great fear) Life? This ends life?

THREE MEN: Woe to us, we never thought of the end of life!

DEPRESSED MAN: (Imitating) Yes, even a smaller tube can end life.

PHYSICIAN: There is no use in life going on like this.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Woe to you, PHYSICIAN!

PHYSICIAN: Woe to me? For what?

NEWCOMER: We were loving one another with ease when my sensitive ears heard the horrible screaming. The inhabitants of the city were crying violently and suddenly there was a silence. I ran away as ghosts of suffocated people chased me. I made the girl handle fear with wisdom. The air was like a dragon attacking people. The wind had mercy on me, it changed its direction.

It will soon get here. The wind is devastating.

PHYSICIAN: Wind? How can the wind rebuild the city?

NEWCOMER: Suddenly, as if the air was crucified by a sudden illness, absolute clearness changed into visible black atoms...horrible... horrible! Did the end get suddenly closer?

OLD WOMAN: (Beating the ground with her stick.) It is the end!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: End of whom? My end has not come yet.

PHYSICIAN: We...we will not have an end.

NEWCOMER: The wind does not seem to distinguish among people.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I will live to see my daughter learn everything.

THREE MEN: Are we going to survive to see our children master everything? Shall we be happy with their unlimited knowledge? (Dejection prevails.)

DEPRESSED MAN: What does all this mean, is it the failure of mankind?

PHYSICIAN: It is the triumph of the mind. We have laid down new principles for life!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: The principles of winds are blowing in our direction and putting an end to everything.

MANAGER: Let us play a new game. (To the TRAINER)
Order your BLACK MAN to do something.

TRAINER: (To the BLACK MAN) Do something.

MANAGER: Make him dance.

TRAINER: Dance, BLACK MAN.

MANAGER: Make him sing, let him amuse us.

TRAINER: Sing. He does not want to. He does not
want to dance, he will not do it.

PHYSICIAN: (Laughing as if he determines the
situation) What do you want now? My
experiments have awakened real death but
life remains for us. For whom? For us!

DEPRESSED MAN: And the wind? And the wind, gentlemen?
The wind!

THREE MEN: Does the wind know us; does it know us?

NEWCOMER: The wind is devastating. In less than
half an hour, the small spiders will reach
you. I will run away.

THREE MEN: The small spiders weave like their mothers
do. They are quick and active. We are
here motionless considering the earthquake
kind of dizziness. Thus we sleep!

MANAGER: Let us lock the doors and windows.

NEWCOMER: The ghosts know no limits. The air here
will be contaminated.

PHYSICIAN: Reason transcends locks and thick walls.

THREE MEN: High wind! It is horrible if the speed of wind increases.

ONE OF THEM: We are no longer interested in singing. The party is over. (Each of the THREE MEN holds his head in both hands and sits silently.)

TRAINER: (To the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN) Are you still interested in buying the BLACK MAN?

NEWCOMER: (Shouting) Don't you feel danger? I sniffed the smell of death earlier, and now I am trembling, aren't you? Are you not scared? (No one answers.) Is it not a dead city? (No one moves.) I see, it is a dead city.

DEPRESSED MAN: You, great PHYSICIAN, suppose the wind has moved your wonderful balsam to this place. Can you survive the danger? (The PHYSICIAN looks worried.) You did not figure out everything. I am telling you. You will be hit as we will.

OLD WOMAN: That is absurd; the PHYSICIAN can stop the wind, can't you?

MANAGER: Can't you, sir?

DEPRESSED MAN: I doubt it. The wind is crazy, fast as the devil. It rides on insanity. Nobody can challenge the wind, gentlemen. I give up.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Who gives up? We should do something.
(The PHYSICIAN bends his head.) And you,
PHYSICIAN, get your nice virus back or it
will kill you before it destroys us.

PHYSICIAN: Get it back? I have planted it with
confidence and hope. And now I feel...do
you know? I did not think of the wind. I
must...

OLD WOMAN: Think, think before the results of your
horrible thoughts attack us like mythical
eagles.

PHYSICIAN: My thoughts? A little while ago, you were
bargaining with me to apply my experiments
to people. My thoughts? How dare you,
you old lady of the thousand caskets every
day?

OLD WOMAN: Provided your thoughts don't hit me.

DEPRESSED MAN: Production will stop.

OLD WOMAN: In spite of everything, I am not ready to
die, at least not for the time being.

NEWCOMER: It is a pity that a woman like you should
die.

PHYSICIAN: I was striving for a better world. I was
trying to reorganize the world as it
should be, not to leave it as it is.

OLD WOMAN: (Shouting) We must now do something. (A restless movement pervades the club. It is fear and horror.)

DEPRESSED MAN: (Intoning his words) Let us write down our wills!

MANAGER: What a miserable happiness...What a miserable pleasure!

THREE MEN: (Lazily) What a miserable happiness...What a miserable pleasure!

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: What wills? Who will read them after the city vanishes?

PHYSICIAN: Those who are worthy of survival.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: You mean those who avoid breathing?

DEPRESSED MAN: (Closing his nose with his hand, almost suffocating) I am not worthy of...

PHYSICIAN: The fittest will remain.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Who can survive that wild air?

PHYSICIAN: (Desperately) You can.

DEPRESSED MAN: You miserable man! You wretched man! Who can repeat this after me? You wretched man!

MANAGER: (With great enthusiasm) Let us offer the BLACK MAN as a sacrifice.

DEPRESSED MAN: Sacrifice? For whom?

MANAGER: For the spider-plagued air.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Provisional gods! Sacrifices are to no avail. We live in a different age.

NEWCOMER: I personally will write down my will. I would like to die near you, BEAUTIFUL WOMAN.

DEPRESSED MAN: What about me? Where am I? The BLACK MAN is in a stage of rage.

TRAINER: It is death, the BLACK MAN sniffs the smell of death with strong sensitivity.

OLD WOMAN: (Weeping helplessly) I don't want to die. (Clinging to PHYSICIAN) Am I going to die?

MANAGER: Let us escape before it arrives. (With horror) I will escape. (After a moment he goes out.)

NEWCOMER: (Coming close to the BEAUTIFUL WOMAN) Death has become a reality, madame. Shall we have an affair of the heart? That is what I want. You are a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN and I have no self-control. Let us have a few wonderful moments. Shall we begin?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: We must have some courage. I am scared.

DEPRESSED MAN: My fair lady is scared. I am, too. Intimacy is a beautiful moment.

NEWCOMER: I have not used the word "Love" yet. It is true that it has lost its appeal; it has been petrified, but I love you. (Joyful) I have used it without hesitation. I love you...I love you,

beautiful lady. She kills me with the rapture of natural waterfall plunging from high mountains.

DEPRESSED MAN: I hate mountains.

OLD WOMAN: I hate death. I don't want it. You savage PHYSICIAN, save us from your bad thoughts.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: It has come early.

NEWCOMER: What?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Death...Death. (Like church bells)
Death...death...death...

OLD WOMAN: (Screaming) That is enough, (with pain) enough. (The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN is still intoning the word "death.") Don't get close to me, you frowning bald-head, don't chain me with your eyes. (Falling on the chair) Don't put me in one of those damned boxes. I hate transparent caskets. No one must see me after I die. Is that not so? Is it a promise? (Clinging to the mirror) The promise of a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, yes? I was beautiful like you. Men's eyes followed me wherever I went. I never thought of men as much as I thought of business...business, (screaming) you bald-headed, glass-eyed man! (Falling dead)

PHYSICIAN: (Checking her) The OLD WOMAN has died.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Died?

DEPRESSED MAN: Now the caskets are free from the taint of her prostitution. (The OLD WOMAN's death produces not so much horror as gloom.)

NEWCOMER: It has arrived. I swear, it has reached here.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Death...death...death...

DEPRESSED MAN: I have an appointment tomorrow. I don't think the wind is silly enough to cancel my appointment.

NEWCOMER: (With fear) Don't say it is silly! Don't say it again.

DEPRESSED MAN: What kind of faith is this...the wind?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Squeezing the doll with her hands) What kind of wind is that?

NEWCOMER: Like black weeds over a lazy river.

PHYSICIAN: (Behaving unexpectedly) Close the doors and windows.

TRAINER: Am I to blame? They said it was an honorary party. Then I was sentenced to death.

PHYSICIAN: Try not to let the wind sneak in, friends.

WAITER: (Enters with sadness suffusing his face)
I have seen the MANAGER at the club's door, clinging to the iron door, leaving no trace behind except his corpse.

PHYSICIAN: Died? The good MANAGER died?

NEWCOMER: It has arrived.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Shall we pray?

DEPRESSED MAN: What prayer?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: We should pray for our souls. Our souls are lost. Let us pray we may get some of them back.

NEWCOMER: I want to die at your feet.

DEPRESSED MAN: (Sharply) You idiot, you have no right to die whenever you want. Lie down near this OLD WOMAN. She is still thinking about the number of caskets to be produced. (To the OLD WOMAN) Peace to you.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I would like to go to my gardens.

NEWCOMER: I don't wish you the same end as the MANAGER.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: So, we should die here like rats in the underground pipes? I want some fresh air. Open the windows. (With extreme fear, she hugs the doll closer to her chest and handles it with great compassion.)

PHYSICIAN: (He laughs in helpless greediness as he takes the tube out of his pocket.) Shall I do it quickly?

DEPRESSED MAN: Come on, sprinkle your blessing over us. Put it under your wide nose and be joyful.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Joy! I used to be joyful. Now I don't think this can be happening in a single day like this. I am not frightened. Fear? Ha! (After a moment) How frightened I am. The little one is trembling. Don't worry, everything will go well.

WAITER: (Coldly) It seems these three fellows have stopped working.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: It is a collective death!

DEPRESSED MAN: It is fear.

PHYSICIAN: Death is like influenza. (DEPRESSED MAN sneezes.) It has infected you, too.

DEPRESSED MAN: My turn will come after yours. Is there not a hierarchy for men?

TRAINER: I have trained dozens of men and animals and I have forgotten to train myself to survive.

PHYSICIAN: (Going to the meditation room) I have to think. I want to be alone.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: We must get out of this dilemma. Can't we?

DEPRESSED MAN: He will definitely think of himself, of himself alone.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Angrily) What insanity! We receive a distasteful guest like this without taking action?

DEPRESSED MAN: Probably, the BLACK MAN has a solution.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: He has lost his warmth. The huge sun no longer shines on us. I want to feel its rays again. Who will come with me?

NEWCOMER: The sun tried to sneak in through the barbed wire on the window, but fell dead there.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Even the sun!

TRAINER: Let us train ourselves to face death.

DEPRESSED MAN: That takes a long time.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: One, two, three: die, beautiful lady.
One, two, three: rush to life,
(sarcastically) my will does not help overcome death.

DEPRESSED MAN: One, two, three: Wake up, OLD WOMAN.
Look, look, the OLD WOMAN is naked without dreams. I want to dream before I die.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: I will not die, I am strong.

DEPRESSED MAN: I imagine myself involved in a meaningless love. A mountain of fire here and flowing water there. I will wait, this dream must go on. (PHYSICIAN comes out of the meditation room.) PHYSICIAN, you interrupted my fantasy. I decided not to die.

PHYSICIAN: I have not found any solution. Thinking avails not, gentlemen. I must admit that

I failed to find any solution. (The TRAINER unintentionally gets closer to the cage, the BLACK MAN grabs him with his two strong hands. (The TRAINER falls dead.)

WAITER: (Fear increases.) The BLACK MAN has killed the TRAINER. (He clowns. Everyone stays away from the cage.)

DEPRESSED MAN: You did the right thing. Waiting was hard, anyway. (The BLACK MAN is sad again.)

NEWCOMER: (With fear) It looks like that creeping air has taken on its color and greediness. Shut it up...damn it, damn it! (Like someone suffocating, he falls on the ground.) Death is spreading (coughing strongly) death is spreading...death is...(After a moment he dies.)

DEPRESSED MAN: My competitor dies. Upon whom will the lot fall now?

PHYSICIAN: I want to atone for my faults. I am truly sorry.

DEPRESSED MAN: Go bury yourself alive.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: No use, no use. Open the windows and let it come in with its impudent soldiers. (She mumbles a military song. The WAITER comes in humiliated. Everyone looks at him.)

WAITER: I have seen it through the window. It covers the sky with horror. It will come soon. Gentlemen, my chief died a few minutes ago and no one mourned him. I would rather be killed by sorrow than by death. I wanted to grieve over his death, but I had no chance to do it. How atrocious! (He shakes his head as he grabs his throat, then falls on the ground.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Frustrated, sitting on a chair hopelessly) And now, after a little while?

DEPRESSED MAN: Let us return to the past. Let us read poetry about savage wars. The castles of salt melt. The knight runs on two wooden legs and behind him troops stumble. The bronze swords rust and are useless for decisive battles. The decisive is final and the final is decisive.

PHYSICIAN: Shall we cry? Tell me, madame, shall we cry?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Over whose life?

PHYSICIAN: Our life. I was thinking of establishing a new way of life. I failed! Now the end begins and I have not done anything valuable. Have I? I know I have not.

DEPRESSED MAN: You have created death of highest perfection. Some excel in casting bronze statues, others in melting them. Tell me, you friend of malignant diseases, are you content in your creativity? Don't answer. I will hear your answer after a little while, as you lie down there with those silent corpses. I will hear the song of your repentance springing from your hollow eyes. Then there is need for repentance and by that time, we will have packed up to go on an eternal journey. Are you happy, sir? Beyond doubt, joy will kill you.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: That is enough; you both leave, but I will stay.

DEPRESSED MAN: I will not go. Shall we stay together?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Wait for the time of wild freezing. Does the river wait for the ice to cover it? Do the hens seek their butcher? I will go, I will challenge like the oak tree of wild jungles. (She hugs her doll; she is confused.)

DEPRESSED MAN: I am tired. I will lie down here. You lie down beside me. Let us experience life before it vanishes.

PHYSICIAN: I will pray.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: For whom? For whom do we pray? Who is your god?

PHYSICIAN: I don't know. I don't know. (Weeping) I want to find someone to pray to. He may forgive me. (To DEPRESSED MAN) Lead me, man. Don't you have someone that forgives?

DEPRESSED MAN: (Pointing to the dead) Pray to them, kneel down and pray.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Find something that deserves worship.

PHYSICIAN: I want to cry forever.

DEPRESSED MAN: You weep over yourself. You weep because you will die soon.

PHYSICIAN: I want to forget all past days. I am an idiot. I set myself up as master over everything. I want to pray. (He bends over one of the corpses.) Do you forgive me? Do you forgive me?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Go away, your idiotic acts are forgiven.

DEPRESSED MAN: I will not forgive you and I will not kill you. I feel tired. It seems that it is advancing.

PHYSICIAN: (Weeping) Do you forgive me, miserable corpses? In the past, I sought a new world for you. Now I have lost everything. After a little while...(He is

assailed by a strong longing; remains lying over corpses, then dies.)

DEPRESSED MAN: Come closer, come closer, you who run fast. He has died. The death maker has gone. It seems that you and I are the last living ones. Shall we be the first living creatures, creating Adam and Eve anew. Look, Madame, we are still fighting. I still have a strong desire for you. (His strength ebbs.) What is happening to me? Men of genius will miss me. How are they going to spend their time without me?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (Going to the BLACK MAN) You still have power to resist.

DEPRESSED MAN: The BLACK MAN? He is strong as the wild oxen, but I...

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Anyway, I will leave. I will not stay here.

DEPRESSED MAN: Take me with you, Madame. (Falling on his knees) Take me, I love you. I want you to bear me sons with whom we can establish a new life.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: It is too late, sir.

DEPRESSED MAN: I can't walk anymore. Can't you help me, Madame?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Today, help is no use. I need my strength to leave here. I can't stand the view of this graveyard any more. (To the BLACK MAN) Are you coming with me?

DEPRESSED MAN: Don't release him. He will kill you.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: (She goes to the cage and opens it.)
Come, you are still strong!

DEPRESSED MAN: Don't release him! (The BLACK MAN is freed.) There is no hope anymore. The black air is lying near the window and the BLACK MAN is watching you. Beautiful lady, stay with me. (The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN is contemplating the calm BLACK MAN, examining his muscles, patting him on the chest. He is firm and breathes proudly, enjoying his freedom.)

DEPRESSED MAN: (Weeping) Will I not join you?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Stay away from me. Let us open the window. You are no longer my child. Oh!
(She throws the doll away, holding the BLACK MAN'S hand. She goes to the window, opens it. The air is seen playing with the branches of trees in the orchard. The BEAUTIFUL WOMAN breathes comfortably and rapturously as she gazes into outer space.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: It has not come yet. We should go,
anyway. (To the DEPRESSED MAN) So long!

DEPRESSED MAN: And me?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN: Stay with the dead. We are leaving. The
jungle is beautiful. I feel my breasts
flowering like mountain narcissus. (She
feels her buttock.) The wind has missed
the place. The blood is running in my
veins. I am so happy. (To the BLACK
MAN) Come on, let us go to the jungle.
(The BLACK MAN follows her. The BEAUTIFUL
WOMAN goes out of the window followed by
the BLACK MAN. The DEPRESSED MAN weeps
for a little while and then gives up. The
curtain comes down as a mild wind toys
with the tree branches of distant jungle
trees.)

END

APPENDIX

A DEMOCRATIC EVENING PARTY

BY

WALID IKHLASI

1971

Translated from Arabic by Admer G. Gouryh

CHARACTERS

A DOCTOR and his WIFE

THE DOCTOR: Fat and round, 50 years old, owns the house.

THE LADY: His wife, beautiful and nearly 40.

GUESTS

THE CONTRACTOR: A well-off real estate speculator, friend of THE DOCTOR, around 50.

THE WIFE: Of THE CONTRACTOR, nearly 40.

THE BRIDE: Young and coquettish, around 20.

THE GROOM: An architect, works for THE CONTRACTOR. He and THE BRIDE are newly-weds.

THE BROTHER: Of THE LADY, lawyer, divorced, around 40.

THE PROFESSOR: University teacher and close friend of THE DOCTOR and his wife. Bachelor, just past 40.

INTRUDERS

FIRST STRANGER

SECOND STRANGER

THIRD STRANGER

SCENE

(A large hall, noticeably luxurious and elegant. The front part is a spacious balcony. The other part contains a television set and a record player. The hall comprises two levels. On the upper level, THE BROTHER and THE PROFESSOR are playing backgammon; on the lower level there is a green table at which the DOCTOR, THE BRIDE, THE CONTRACTOR and his WIFE are sitting. THE LADY, who serves food and drinks, is in a corner of the hall. THE ARCHITECT is watching television. Music is heard from a tape recorder. Paintings and various weapons are hanging on the wall. The stage lighting changes. Everyone looks happy as the curtain goes up.)

OBSERVATION ON THE SCENE

(The breeze plays with the balcony's curtains, and the music expresses comfort and enjoyment. THE GROOM is seen watching an unchanging picture of a love scene on television. THE BROTHER and the PROFESSOR play backgammon. THE LADY is waiting on her guests, serving them drinks and food. She is friendly with everyone; she whispers in the ear of one and makes herself amiable to another. Sometimes, she sings along with the lines of song issuing from the tape recorder. The rest of the guests are sitting at the green table playing cards. CONTRACTOR and his WIFE are partners against the DOCTOR and THE BRIDE. THE GROOM sighs, then becomes quiet.)

THE BROTHER: (To the PROFESSOR in reference to THE GROOM'S sigh) Did you notice the happiness of married men?

PROFESSOR: It is unlimited.

THE BROTHER: But I personally, PROFESSOR, have abandoned it with preconceived determination and practice.

PROFESSOR: That should be an unpleasant experience.

THE BROTHER: You must definitely be lucky because you have not experienced it yet.

PROFESSOR: And I will not try it.

DOCTOR: (To the CONTRACTOR) Like your construction projects, always expand and aim high.

CONTRACTOR: It is your house that brings luck, it is not my doing.

DOCTOR: Luck would follow me even if I lived in a tent.

THE LADY: (To THE GROOM) Your wife is losing.

THE GROOM: Who does not lose?

THE BRIDE: (To her husband) What are you losing?

THE BROTHER: Do you hear? A love complaint.

PROFESSOR: You seem to be losing too.

THE BROTHER: I prefer to lose only at cards.

THE LADY: Those who win at cards lose in love.

THE WIFE: (Indignantly) But I am not losing in love.

THE LADY: You are only the exception to the rule.
Don't worry. It is foolish talk.

DOCTOR: (Gently) Let that be applied to those who
live under conditions like mine.

THE LADY: (Caressing her husband's head) Like mine,
too, dear.

THE BROTHER: We seem like strangers here, PROFESSOR.

PROFESSOR: Agreed. For me it's probably too late.
(He gulps down a glass of scotch.)

THE BROTHER: (Calling his sister) Dear sister, the
PROFESSOR'S glass is empty.

PROFESSOR: You mean your glass.

THE LADY: (As she pours) Bachelors drink a lot.

THE BROTHER: A toast to the most beautiful sister in
modern history.

PROFESSOR: (Raises his glass) A toast to THE LADY.

DOCTOR: Bachelors receive excellent attention, but
we...

CONTRACTOR: Losers are not paid enough attention,
DOCTOR. (To THE GROOM) Neither the
architect. (To the rest when THE GROOM
does not answer) He is lost in thought.

THE BRIDE: (Sarcastically) He is dreaming. He is
always absorbed in charts, books and
sleep.

THE LADY: He is also absorbed in you, my dear.

THE BRIDE: In me?

THE BROTHER: Did you notice, PROFESSOR? Did you notice?

PROFESSOR: A reverse image of love, hiding sadness behind it.

THE BROTHER: Reverse image? You must by all means explain this case from a psychological viewpoint.

PROFESSOR: When children fail to say what they really want, they mutter.

THE BROTHER: Children! Are THE BRIDE and THE GROOM children?

PROFESSOR: The beginning of love, lawyer--you who are preoccupied with people's sins--is something like the beginning of life.

THE BROTHER: PROFESSOR, I must admit that you are clever at dice and clever at convincing your students of what you want, but you should acknowledge that in marriage and love I am smarter than you.

DOCTOR: (To THE GROOM) It seems that I am bringing misfortune to your wife.

CONTRACTOR: (To THE GROOM without turning to him) Don't believe him. They win silently and lose noisily.

THE BRIDE: I will master "Tarnib" by practice and then we will win.

THE WIFE: (To THE BRIDE playfully) Your mind is too busy with you...How can you win?

THE BRIDE: My mind? My mind is in my head and nowhere else. (Tension begins to surface between THE BRIDE and THE GROOM)

THE LADY: (To THE GROOM, gracefully) Would you mind playing instead of my husband?

THE GROOM: I would rather watch television. Besides, I don't know how to play cards.

CONTRACTOR: (Laughing) Then you know other things. (All of them laugh except the bride and groom. A dog is heard barking outside.)

THE LADY: (As she looks over the balcony) Guests?

DOCTOR: Do you expect anyone tonight?

CONTRACTOR: Who would take the chance of visiting you without calling you up?

THE LADY: (Coming back from the balcony) I don't think anyone is there. Probably a passerby.

THE BROTHER: Who would be passing along your road? Your house is located at the end of the world.

THE LADY: Was it not your suggestion to build it remote from the people?

PROFESSOR: Don't take everything he says seriously.

THE BROTHER: Why not?

PROFESSOR: Because you generally criticize what you have previously approved.

THE BROTHER: I criticize no one. Furthermore, I don't care about whatever happens. Thus, PROFESSOR, I assure myself of not less than one hundred years of life.

PROFESSOR: One hundred years?

DOCTOR: Why not? Scientifically speaking, one hundred years is a natural thing.

THE GROOM: (Sarcastically) Oh!

THE BRIDE: He does not want to live one hundred years. He does not want anything.

CONTRACTOR: Personally, I am content with seventy years.

THE WIFE: Seventy? So that our grandsons will make fun of us?

THE LADY: Grandsons. (Sadness begins to show on her face.)

DOCTOR: (Sympathizing with his wife) I personally don't like children. Imagine if we had children, there would be nothing precious in this house, no chinaware or weapons...

THE BROTHER: (Interrupting) By the way, where did you buy that beautiful gun? Isn't it new?

DOCTOR: I got it from Beirut. Sometimes we need weapons. We live in a remote place.

THE BROTHER: (Checking the gun) What is it for, dear brother-in-law, if it is not used?

THE LADY: Why should we use a gun?

CONTRACTOR: To defend ourselves. There are undesirable strangers and burglars.

DOCTOR: Just having a weapon makes one feel secure.

PROFESSOR: Security, what security do weapons offer? Those weapons make me nervous. I wish you would decorate the wall with something else.

THE LADY: For more than ten years you have been seeing them on the wall and you never made any comment.

THE BROTHER: It is the impact of good scotch upon him, sister. By the way, the PROFESSOR'S glass is empty. (As THE LADY serves the guests, THE GROOM goes up and whispers in his wife's ear.)

THE BRIDE: You harp on the same string. You can sleep on that chair there or anywhere you like. (THE GROOM withdraws in embarrassment.)

THE LADY: Who is talking about sleeping? The party has not started yet, and you are thinking about sleep?

THE GROOM: Work at the construction site was tiring today.

CONTRACTOR: Sir, I will give you tomorrow off. Would you like that?

THE BRIDE: A day off? For what? He'll spend it in bed.

THE GROOM: Don't you spend your morning in bed?

THE BRIDE: I am a woman, but you are an architect.

THE GROOM: (To the CONTRACTOR) Did you like what she said?

CONTRACTOR: Why not? Isn't what she said true? She is a woman and you are an architect. (All are laughing.)

THE BRIDE: Unless you want to be the woman and I the architect. (They laugh again.)

THE GROOM: (Angrily) We had better stay as we are if that is possible. (Tension reigns. THE GROOM is angry and so is THE BRIDE. At this point, THE BROTHER intervenes to stop the dispute.

THE BROTHER: I think we will spoil our evening with this argument. We are dispersed, each one trapped in his own world. What do you think? Shall we play a group game instead?

THE LADY: I have no objection. I like the idea.

DOCTOR: You know a thousand games. Why don't you suggest one for tonight?

THE WIFE: Let's play the game of "salad"...salad in...

THE BROTHER: I suggest another game...(Thinking)

PROFESSOR: A legislative game.

THE BROTHER: Down with the law. Let us play...

CONTRACTOR: You suggest whatever you want and we will play it.

THE BROTHER: (Still thinking) What do you think of...but no...

THE BRIDE: We want an amusing game, one that is full of action.

THE BROTHER: (As if he has found a solution) What about the game of democracy? (Shouts of excitement and admiration, approving, disapproving, questioning)

PROFESSOR: True, the name of the game is democracy, but who is going to nominate himself?

THE BROTHER: Any woman or man who wants to nominate himself or herself.

DOCTOR: I withdraw in favor of our lawyer.

CONTRACTOR: And I withdraw in favor of him.

THE WIFE: We women can't compete with him.

THE BROTHER: But you have the right to...

THE WIFE: Therefore, I withdraw in favor of you.

THE BRIDE: I do the same. Come on, start the game.

THE BROTHER: Who still wants to nominate himself?

PROFESSOR: It seems that you are elected by a unanimous decision and there is no need for a vote. (Silence as the slips are distributed)

THE BROTHER: We must take a vote, anyway. (Each one writes on his slip secretly or publicly. The slips are folded and laid on the table.)

THE BROTHER: One of us should unfold the slips and announce the results.

CONTRACTOR: I will read out the slips.

THE BROTHER: Any objections? None. (CONTRACTOR approaches to unfold the slips and announce the name of the winner.)

CONTRACTOR: Mr. Sami. Dear Sami (Applauding) Blank slip (Voices of disapproval) Sami. Mr. Sami. The lawyer. (Applauding) Mr. Sami. The man of law. Thus the result is: Seven votes for Sami and one abstention. So, I declare Mr. Sami the winner of this election. (Applauding) Congratulations (Shakes hands with Sami, as does DOCTOR. The lady kisses him.)

THE BROTHER: Before I start the game, I would like to extend my thanks to those who placed confidence in me.

DOCTOR: I wonder who abstained from voting?

THE BROTHER: It is not in the rules of the game to ask such questions because democracy guarantees the voter full freedom.

THE WIFE: But this means that one of us does not approve of you.

THE BROTHER: But seven votes of eight is enough and now, dear friends I can perform my duty and announce the start of the game and its end.

THE BRIDE: Hurry up! Please begin. I am so anxious to see what happens.

THE BROTHER: Nothing serious will happen, my dear. (He stands at the front of the stage) As for the game which I superintend, I order you to stand in a row. (All line up except the PROFESSOR who is still in his seat holding a glass of scotch) I want all of you, including the PROFESSOR to line up. (The PROFESSOR lines up, still holding his glass.) Now you are the train and I am its driver. (He joins them to lead them as he imitates the sound of a locomotive. Everyone follows him, some laughing or imitating. They walk around until THE BRIDE falls down. CONTRACTOR holds her in his arms. They stop walking.)

DOCTOR: (Panting) Don't you have a game suitable for old men? May God forgive you. I am tired.

THE LADY: There are no old men among us. (Laughing) We want another game which can stir up our stagnant blood.

THE BRIDE: I am not tired but my high heels made me trip. (THE BROTHER goes to the front of the stage to address the group.)

THE BROTHER: As head of this party and as long as no one dares to oppose my orders (some approving applause), I demand that each one of you act out a short role. (Shouts of excited disapproval arise from some.)

CONTRACTOR: That's something I can't do.

THE BROTHER: No objection is allowed. I am the absolute master. Repeat with me: "You are the absolute master."

SOME OF THEM: You are the absolute master.

THE BROTHER: I want to hear this phrase clearly and vividly and in unison: "You are the absolute master."

ALL OF THEM: You are the absolute master.

THE BROTHER: Okay, we are progressing. And now (to the DOCTOR), my kind brother-in-law, you will be the first actor.

DOCTOR: (Objecting) But...

THE BROTHER: There is no room for "but" in our game. You are supposed to act out a role. Am I not lenient? (Applause) Come on we are waiting for you, sir.

DOCTOR: (Standing in the middle of the hall, hesitant) What about Yousuf Bik Wahbi?* (Applause with approval) "Amina, you murderess, where have you been until now?" (He stops acting and bursts into laughter, which makes others laugh too.)

THE LADY: Good heavens, you act much better than real actors do.

THE BROTHER: I hope he who excels in acting pledges not to act his role in real life. (Applause) And now, it is your turn (pointing to the contractor). Play for us. (Thinking)

DOCTOR: Let him play the same role.

THE BROTHER: That may spoil the game. (After a little thinking) Let him play the role of Tahia Karioka, the belly dancer. (Applause and laughter) Let us welcome Tahia Karioka, the international belly dancer. (He applauds.)

CONTRACTOR: This is cheating and bias. Why shouldn't I choose the actor I want to imitate?

*A famous Egyptian theatre actor.
(Translator's note)

THE BROTHER: Our decision is irrevocable. You have only ten seconds to start your dancing.

CONTRACTOR: Okay...okay. (After a moment) But where's the music? I can't do anything without music. (His WIFE and THE BRIDE sing and bang on wood in an attempt to create music.)

THE BROTHER: Now you have a band.

CONTRACTOR: (Protesting and complaining) But I don't have the essential flexibility, folks.

THE BROTHER: (With theatrical cruelty) He who protests must get out of the game. (CONTRACTOR sways reluctantly in an attempt to imitate the dancer to the sound of music and applause.)

CONTRACTOR: (Tired) I swear, by God, I have done my best.

THE WIFE: (As she applauds to the tune) Terrific, my husband is a master dancer and I did not know it! (The musical tempo rises as the brother urges CONTRACTOR to dance faster.)

CONTRACTOR: Have mercy on me folks. My bowels might get all knotted up from too much swaying.

THE BROTHER: (Decisively) That is enough...enough. (All of them stop acting but continue applauding and cheering.)

DOCTOR: Now it is the PROFESSOR'S turn. (Applause and approval)

THE BROTHER: The PROFESSOR. (Thinking) No, his turn has not come yet. It is the turn of our dear one. (Pointing to THE WIFE) I suppose you should play the role of Um Kalthum* as she sings one of her sentimental songs. (Applause, and she approves of the idea. She advances and stands near the brother on the upper level)

CONTRACTOR: Terrific...fantastic.

THE LADY: Listen, folks.

THE WIFE: Shall I sing unaccompanied?

THE BROTHER: Fancy us as members of your musical band. (He bows) You are the lady of song anywhere, and any time.

THE WIFE: (She hums happily, trying to adjust herself to the task of singing in a serious way) Give me my liberty..unfasten my hands. (She repeats this line, to applause.)

CONTRACTOR: Great...great. Encore, madame.

THE BROTHER: (Interrupting THE WIFE as she tries to continue) Since your freedom is chained,

*A renowned woman singer in Egypt.
(Translator's note)

we claim the right to move to our

PROFESSOR. (Applause)

PROFESSOR: Me?

THE BROTHER: Yes, you. Why not, has not your turn
come?

PROFESSOR: But I don't know how to act.

DOCTOR: Do I know how?

THE BROTHER: Which of us does not know how to act?

CONTRACTOR: Do you think I know how to dance,
especially oriental dancing?

THE LADY: It is an order, professor, and no one can
refuse it.

THE BROTHER: (Announcing the PROFESSOR'S role) The
teacher of generations is going to
present... to present... (Thinking)

PROFESSOR: But what can I do?

THE BROTHER: (As if he discovered something very
important.) He will play a comic role.

PROFESSOR: A comic role! Me?

DOCTOR: Why not?

CONTRACTOR: Comic...funny. Let it be extremely funny.

DOCTOR: It is going to be quite a hit.

PROFESSOR: I would rather sing for you one of the
songs of my childhood. That is all I
know.

THE BROTHER: We still insist on a comic role, extremely
comic.

THE LADY: Do part of the plays of Durid Laham.

PROFESSOR: I don't know them.

THE WIFE: Something of Najib al-Rihani.*

THE BRIDE: Charlie Chaplin...Charlie Chaplin.

PROFESSOR: Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know any of those things.

THE BROTHER: Play any character you choose.

PROFESSOR: I can't choose because I don't know any character.

THE BROTHER: (Thinking) Okay, we will find a solution.
(Motioning to the rest to meet with him apart from the PROFESSOR. The group looks as if it is negotiating while the professor stands calmly sipping scotch.)

THE BROTHER: We agreed, and for your sake, that you act a comic part of your choice and creation.
(The PROFESSOR seems to object) If you object, we will force you to play a specific role of our choice. (The PROFESSOR gives in.)

DOCTOR: Let it be about your life in the university.

PROFESSOR: That will not make you laugh.

THE LADY: About your private life.

PROFESSOR: Half of it is spent with you. (A moment of thinking) I will play a drunkard.

*A famous comic actor in Egypt in the forties. (Translator's note)

THE BROTHER: But you should play the role sincerely.

PROFESSOR: It's still early. I need another drink.

THE WIFE: I'd like to see a drunkard.

PROFESSOR: That is what I will do, right now. (He pretends to sway. As he approaches THE WIFE, she runs away screaming) I am drunk and tired. (He sways among the people. They move away) I am tired, bored, drunk, tired and bored...I am a king...I am a king who has lost his throne. I am a rusty throne, I am scrap...iron filings, nails and wornout screws. (He sits on a chair, absorbed in his exhaustion while everybody applauds. The scene seems to have become a little sad.)

THE BROTHER: (Applauding as he attempts to revive people's joy) We are applauding the genuineness of your performance, PROFESSOR. You were like a plant manager trying to act like an employee. Now I will introduce you to my outstanding sister. (Applause)

THE LADY: I! Has my turn come?

THE BROTHER: Dear, you will act the role...(After a little while)...the role of a beggar.

THE LADY: Beggar?

PROFESSOR: Why not? It is the easiest part a person can play.

DOCTOR: Begging is so difficult.

THE BROTHER: You are not going to beg for everything.

THE WIFE: What are the things one should ask for?

THE BROTHER: Food...clothes...and money.

CONTRACTOR: And what are the things one should not beg for?

THE BROTHER: Feelings...affection...and tenderness.

THE LADY: So, what kind of a beggar should I play?

PROFESSOR: Ask for what you need.

DOCTOR: I bet you will fail, dear.

THE LADY: I will beg for everything. (Applause)
Shall I start?

THE BROTHER: You can start. (The lady disappears in the other room, then comes back in the shape of a beggar with a deformed arm and leg.)

THE LADY: For God's sake, give me something, you beneficent men. (The DOCTOR throws her a kiss.) (To the PROFESSOR) Please give me a little of your philosophy, PROFESSOR.
(To the CONTRACTOR) Please, a four bedroom apartment, including a living room. (To THE GROOM) The children are hungry. A word of love, for God's sake.

(Applause follows as THE LADY assumes her real character.)

THE BROTHER: No one should worry about you. Your future is definitely guaranteed.

DOCTOR: You have talent, dear, that I was not aware of before.

CONTRACTOR: You should work with me when I present proposals to my clients.

PROFESSOR: (Drinking from a glass he poured himself)
It seems that our party is an opportunity for showing off one's talents. I personally don't have any talent.

THE LADY: You are a great drunkard.

THE BROTHER: Your talent is evident in your seriousness, which exceeds that of Egyptian sculptures.

THE BRIDE: But he mastered the role of a drunkard.

THE BROTHER: (Resuming his talk) And now comes the turn of the newly-wed couple. Tonight's surprise. (Addressing the young couple)
You are going to act a joint part.

THE BRIDE: Joint part?

THE BROTHER: A sentimental joint part..

THE GROOM: Sentimental? (Laughing sarcastically)
The performance will definitely fail.

THE BROTHER: I order you to play a sentimental role.
You are the lover and she the

beloved...hey, (asking) don't you remember some of the well known love scenes?

THE BRIDE: (Pointing at her husband) He doesn't remember anything...nothing at all.

THE GROOM: And you, what do you ever read? What could you remember?

THE BROTHER: Haven't you read a love story? Seen a film? Television? (He does not see any sign of response on their faces) But this will not keep you from playing a role.

THE GROOM: I will play my part alone.

THE BROTHER: You and she will play a joint role.

PROFESSOR: Let them play Romeo and Juliet.

DOCTOR: I prefer a scene from Kais and Laila.*

THE BROTHER: Anyway, I will prompt them and they will act the part. (He seats THE BRIDE on a chair, then makes the groom kneel near her. Approval and excitement from all present.)

THE LADY: Fantastic scene.

PROFESSOR: It needs conversation.

THE WIFE: Love without words.

DOCTOR: (Laughing) The loftiest meaning of love.

THE BROTHER: I will prompt them. (To THE BRIDE) When I point to you, you will repeat what I say. Okay? (To THE GROOM) You, too,

*The counterpart of Romeo and Juliet in ancient Arabic literature. (Translator's note)

okay? (Both make signs of agreement, but without enthusiasm)

DOCTOR: Let your words be passionate.

THE BROTHER: (To THE GROOM) My wonderful bird.

THE GROOM: (Coldly) My wonderful bird.

THE BROTHER: (To THE BRIDE) Yes...yes, my sweetheart. Here I am, finally, in your arms.

THE BRIDE: (Coldly) Yes, at last I am in your arms.

THE BROTHER: (Angrily) You have no right to change my words. I said to you: "Yes...yes, my sweetheart."

THE BRIDE: (Repeating like a parrot) I said to you: Yes...yes, my sweetheart. (Laughter blends with THE BRIDE'S anger.)

THE BROTHER: You will be ejected from this game if either of you spoil the performance. (The others approve of this threat.)

THE GROOM: (More freely) My wonderful bird.

THE BRIDE: (Coldly and sarcastically) Yes...yes, my sweetheart. Here I am, finally, in your arms.

THE BROTHER: (To THE GROOM) The years of separation have increased my love for you. What about you?

THE GROOM: The years of separation have increased my love for you. (Genuinely) What about you?

THE BROTHER: (To THE BRIDE) I? As for me, those years made me infatuated with you.

THE BRIDE: (With slight sarcasm) I? As for me, those years made me infatuated with you.
(THE GROOM senses the sarcastic undertones and is clearly in a rage.)

THE BROTHER: (To THE GROOM) Hold her hand and kiss it.

THE GROOM: (Sarcastically) Hold her hand and kiss it.

THE BROTHER: (Hastily, as the rest burst into laughter) I told you to hold her hand and kiss it, so (approaching THE BRIDE and kissing her hand, she gives in to him gently. When THE GROOM tries to do the same, she gives him her hand with evident coldness.)

THE BROTHER: (Prompting THE BRIDE) Your kiss has made me forget all the difficult days.

THE GROOM: (Without being prompted) And who can forget those days...Who?

THE BROTHER: Again, we went beyond our topic. It's no use. We must change tonight's program, otherwise I will lose my reputation as a master.

THE WIFE: We want a much more exciting game.

THE LADY: Action...We want action.

DOCTOR: A group game, don't you have a game in which we all can participate?

PROFESSOR: I believe this is enough.

THE BROTHER: I have not finished my term of office.
There is a long night ahead of us.

CONTRACTOR: Our PROFESSOR is getting tired. I don't
know what he would do if he had a wife,
children, land, business.

PROFESSOR: It seems that I can't put up with anything
except myself. Sometimes, I find even
myself too heavy to carry.

THE BROTHER: Okay, I know a wonderful game. We will
cast lots. The one the lot falls upon,
will be blindfolded and set to look for
someone while we run away from him.
Whoever he catches, he will kiss and
blindfold. (Applause and approval)

THE BRIDE: (Enthusiastically) I will start first,
blindfold me.

THE BROTHER: I said we will cast lots.

PROFESSOR: (As he gulps down his drink) We expect
more democracy. (The lot falls upon the
CONTRACTOR.)

THE BROTHER: (Calling upon the CONTRACTOR). Mr.
CONTRACTOR, owner of successful projects.
(Applause as THE BROTHER blindfolds the
CONTRACTOR)

CONTRACTOR: Wasn't that belly dancing enough and you
want me to run around?

THE BROTHER:

Now the game starts.

(The group runs from the CONTRACTOR amid applause and excitement. He then catches THE BRIDE who yields to his kisses with excitement, causing bewilderment which then rapidly gives way to a wave of applause. THE BRIDE is blindfolded. She walks around and catches her husband, who yields to her, but when she sees it is him attempting to kiss her, she responds coldly. THE BROTHER breaks the growing tension by blindfolding THE GROOM, who begins searching. He catches THE LADY, kisses her quickly and innocently amid laughter and cheers on all sides. Now the blindfolded LADY is searching. Everyone runs away from her except the PROFESSOR who stands far apart, drinking. THE LADY catches the PROFESSOR)

THE LADY:

I have caught you. Who are you?

DOCTOR:

It is the PROFESSOR, dear.

(THE LADY takes off the mask, leaning toward the PROFESSOR in an attempt to kiss him, but he throws his glass on the floor and pushes THE LADY aside with an impolite motion that scares her. Amazement prevails.)

PROFESSOR: I believe we must put an end to this silly game. (THE LADY is still bewildered. A tense silence)

THE BROTHER: What happened to you, PROFESSOR?

PROFESSOR: Nothing. I just wanted to stop this farce.

DOCTOR: (Reproachfully) You are about to ruin our party, my friend.

PROFESSOR: (Embarrassed as questioning eyes focus on him) It is the lawyer who has spoiled the game. He designed the game to serve his interests.

THE BROTHER: I designed the game to serve my interest?

PROFESSOR: And convinced us of the legitimacy of everything that happened.

THE BROTHER: Was not everything legitimate? I conducted the game after being elected unanimously.

PROFESSOR: Lies...lies.

DOCTOR: It is only a game, why are you in a rage?

PROFESSOR: Cheap passions have motivated all of you. You voted for passions.

CONTRACTOR: So you were the one who threw a blank slip into the ballot box.

PROFESSOR: So what? I am the one who refused to write his name on the ballot. Who can object to such a democratic act?

CONTRACTOR: You have deviated from a unanimous agreement among friends regarding a wonderful game.

PROFESSOR: At any rate, I don't believe in the validity of this game.

DOCTOR: The validity of the game lies in the fact that it was unanimously agreed upon, PROFESSOR.

PROFESSOR: Why couldn't someone else win unanimously? I was supposed to win.

THE WIFE: Why you?

PROFESSOR: (Disregarding the question) And that is what should happen now.

CONTRACTOR: But why you in particular? Why not the DOCTOR?

THE BROTHER: But you are violating the rules of the game.

PROFESSOR: You mean democracy! Then I will destroy the basic rules of this fake game.

THE BROTHER: (To THE LADY) Dear sister, I wish you had not been too generous. This is all because of drinking too much scotch.

PROFESSOR: It is one of the consequences of your rotten democracy.

DOCTOR: Let us play a game of Tarnib.

PROFESSOR: (With determination) I believe we should resume our game, dear DOCTOR.

THE BROTHER: All right, let us carry on the game. What is your opinion of...?

PROFESSOR: (Interrupting) I will conduct the game, not you.

THE BROTHER: Again he is violating the rules.

PROFESSOR: (Yelling) I said to you I will do it, not you. (Amazement and bewilderment in the room)

THE BROTHER: (With determination) As long as I have been elected unanimously, I will run this game. (With a nervous gesture, the PROFESSOR rushes to the rifle on the wall, grabs it and points it at THE BROTHER who is standing with the rest in a state of absolute perplexity.)

DOCTOR: Are you crazy?

THE BROTHER: What are you doing?

THE LADY: PROFESSOR...

CONTRACTOR: Illogical development, my friend.

THE BRIDE: (Cheering) Now the game has started.

PROFESSOR: (To THE BRIDE) I said to you I will run this game.

THE LADY: This is absurd, especially coming from you with a weapon in your hand!

PROFESSOR: Sometimes a weapon should be used, dear LADY.

CONTRACTOR: (In a low voice) Since things seem to be getting worse (to the DOCTOR) I believe we should leave. (He motions to his WIFE to leave with him.)

PROFESSOR: I am the one who gives permission to leave. Did I say the game was over?

DOCTOR: (Whispering to his wife) He drank far too much.

PROFESSOR: (To DOCTOR) I am not drunk, dear host.

THE BROTHER: It is midnight and I have to go.
(As the CONTRACTOR leads his WIFE out of the room, the PROFESSOR fires a shot smashing a piece of china, fragments of which fly everywhere. The people freeze in their places, frightened.)

PROFESSOR: Haven't I told you that I am serious about resuming the game?

THE LADY: (Bending over the broken china) You have broken it. (With pain) You have broken it.

DOCTOR: I wish you had not fired; this china cost a lot of money.

THE BROTHER: (To the PROFESSOR) Since you want to resume the game, ask the people to follow your instructions.

THE LADY: You have gone mad, you are definitely mad.

PROFESSOR: Insanity is sometimes necessary, dear
LADY.

THE LADY: What for...what for?

DOCTOR: (To THE BRIDE) I wish you had not started
this dangerous game.

PROFESSOR: (To the CONTRACTOR) We shall start the
game with you, you in particular.

CONTRACTOR: Me? Why me in particular?

PROFESSOR: I will start the game with you.

THE BRIDE: What kind of dance will he perform?

PROFESSOR: We will move a little back into the past.
Our game tonight implies a return to the
past. Come on, take us back to the
moments you and your WIFE were cheating at
cards.

CONTRACTOR: (Objecting) Cheat? I cheat?

THE WIFE: This is an insult, we don't accept it.
(To the DOCTOR) This man is insulting us
in your house and you don't do anything.
I don't accept this.

DOCTOR: (Pointing to THE WIFE) I can't do
anything except apologize.

PROFESSOR: Come on, tell us about your clever way of
cheating.

CONTRACTOR: I won't allow you to get carried away with
me. Just because you are a friend of the
DOCTOR does not mean you can get away with

it. With your academic degrees, you should not be behaving like this.

PROFESSOR: (Violently) I said, tell us about your cheating. Your cheating tonight and in the past. Take us back to the past.

THE LADY: PROFESSOR, what has happened to you?

DOCTOR: Tell me, did anything happen?

THE LADY: (Painfully) You are not acting like the friend of the family that was so proud of your calmness and deep thinking. You have changed.

DOCTOR: Please, stop this unbearable joking.

PROFESSOR: Do I sound like I am joking?

THE LADY: Then why did you change?

THE BROTHER: (Pointing to the rifle) Why not?

DOCTOR: PROFESSOR, you can be the master of this game, but without this gun, hi...what do you think?

PROFESSOR: (Ignoring the DOCTOR) The game has started and I warn those who are tempted to interrupt it. (To the CONTRACTOR) Come on, take us to the past...to your earlier days. Tell us in your well known clever way about anything you choose from your past.

CONTRACTOR: (Proudly) What about my past? A business man spends his money and health to build

himself up. Do you have any objection to that, sir?

PROFESSOR: Tell us in detail, about everything.

CONTRACTOR: Details, why details? Is this a court? I have not been in a court before.

PROFESSOR: These are the rules of the game. Details...Is it not better than the games of kissing and acting. (To THE BRIDE) Did I not outwit you?

THE BROTHER: No doubt about that. Go on, carry on your court of justice.

CONTRACTOR: I refuse to proceed with this silly game. (The PROFESSOR pointing the rifle at him) You look tired, PROFESSOR. Is it not better for you and us to...

PROFESSOR: (Interrupting) Is it not better for your behavior to be more flexible than your body?

THE BRIDE: (To the CONTRACTOR) What do you think about continuing the game?

PROFESSOR: And tell us some amusing details; tell us about the building called "Love Street."

CONTRACTOR: "Love Street"?

PROFESSOR: The building that has towering pillars like those in ancient temples.

CONTRACTOR: What pillars?

PROFESSOR: The building that collapsed one night.
(The CONTRACTOR is silent. People glance at him questioningly.)

DOCTOR: What is this? A puzzle!

THE BRIDE: Let us play a mysterious game.

PROFESSOR: (Resuming his talk) And in the basement lived a small family whose members loved one another.

THE BROTHER: Then?

PROFESSOR: Then, the building swayed like a dancer and the entire family was buried under the debris.

CONTRACTOR: What does that have to do with me?

PROFESSOR: A rumor had spread in the city. The city has now forgotten everything about the family that was buried under the debris.

CONTRACTOR: What does all that have to do with me?
Whether the building collapsed or not, that has nothing to do with me. (He is sweating) Do you see...do you hear what he says...what does it have to do with me?

PROFESSOR: Who said you are responsible? The court judged according to your wish. The CONTRACTOR was found innocent as a child, pure as jasmine. Tell us now about the arts of persuasion that one uses to save his skin.

CONTRACTOR: These are false accusations. Ask anyone about me. Out of one thousand bridges, buildings and roads, I built and supervised, only one collapsed. What does it have to do with me? You people, tell him not to hold me responsible. Let your conscience judge, PROFESSOR. Why should I be considered responsible?

PROFESSOR: It has been said that playing with proportions of iron and concrete produces more profit. Is that true? It is said that playing with proportions of iron and concrete can cause the death of some people. Come on. Tell us...

CONTRACTOR: I am an honest man and I fear God. I offer alms, never miss Friday prayers, and listen with reverence to religious sermons. Tell him, it is not my fault if a building collapsed.

PROFESSOR: (Smiling) Okay, let it be the way you want, but tell us now about love. (A sigh of relief springs from those present.)

CONTRACTOR: With such questions our game is going to be very exciting. What kind of love do you want me to talk about?

PROFESSOR: (Sarcastically) Puritan love.

CONTRACTOR: Shall I tell you about my love for my family and my WIFE?

PROFESSOR: What about the architect who works for you?

CONTRACTOR: (Looking at THE GROOM with affection) I like him as if he were my son.

PROFESSOR: And his wife who is like your daughter.

CONTRACTOR: Of course, she is like my daughter. (To THE GROOM) Is it not so? (THE GROOM nods approval.)

PROFESSOR: Tell us in detail, CONTRACTOR of good hearts; tell us the story of the man who talks a young man into loving a young woman.

THE BROTHER: God bless good men.

PROFESSOR: He then talks them into getting married.

CONTRACTOR: Then?

PROFESSOR: Then nothing. The young woman remains close to him...That is all.

CONTRACTOR: I could not understand a word of what you say, sir.

PROFESSOR: Therefore, you are bound to give more details about the subject..

CONTRACTOR: What details? I don't understand anything of what you say.

PROFESSOR: A good man like you meets a young man who has just graduated from the university and

has unlimited ambition. He tells him with a tempting smile, this is a suitable girl for you and here is a suitable job for you. The young man says as he catches his breath: I agree...I agree...

CONTRACTOR: I still don't understand anything.

THE WIFE: Who do you mean? My husband...

PROFESSOR: Stay where you are, madame. Your turn in the story will come soon.

CONTRACTOR: Just tell me what you want from me. What are you after?

PROFESSOR: (Resuming his talk) And the young man falls in the trap. He marries the girl and she remains close to the good man, the CONTRACTOR of good hearts. What is the result? Hearts...hearts, hearts get destroyed.

THE GROOM: (As if he realized that he is the hero of this story) Who are you referring to in your story?

PROFESSOR: Don't worry, young man. Your turn in the story will come soon. (To the CONTRACTOR) What do you think? Tell us all the details.

THE WIFE: (To her husband with anger) What does he mean? Is what he says true?

CONTRACTOR: (Trying to control his temper) Don't you see he is drunk? (The PROFESSOR aims the rifle at him) I don't understand what this man is saying. I swear I don't understand.

THE BROTHER: Interesting story. Something like that happened to me one day.

THE LADY: (To THE BRIDE) Do we have to back to painful past stories?

PROFESSOR: (To the CONTRACTOR) Now what is your opinion, do you want to tell us? I think we can amuse our guest with the details of this story.

CONTRACTOR: (Entreating) Is that not enough? You have already said enough.

THE WIFE: (About to attack her husband) So what he said was true. Admit that what he said is true. (More intensely) Admit it. I want you to prove to me that he is lying.

THE GROOM: (To THE BRIDE) Could what he said be true? (THE BRIDE turns away from him.)

PROFESSOR: (To THE WIFE) I don't think you need more details, madame. Now you can tell us a story. (To THE GROOM) My dear young man, you should be patient and wise. I admire the way you control your temper.

THE WIFE: What shall I say? Haven't you done enough?

PROFESSOR: There is an interesting story about a woman very loyal to her husband and to a construction supervisor. If you don't mind, tell us...

THE WIFE: Shut up, you have gone beyond your limit.
(The CONTRACTOR buries his head in his hands and his WIFE goes to a corner to smoke a cigarette.)

THE LADY: What are you doing...What are you doing?
(Going to console THE WIFE)

DOCTOR: PROFESSOR, no one suspected that you have a tendency toward unmasking and spreading misery among people. You who are wiser than Socrates and calmer than...

PROFESSOR: Great surgeon, don't count too much on talk. Your turn has not come yet.

DOCTOR: (Laughing) My turn? What shall I say? I will tell you how to open bellies to snatch patients from the talons of death. I have nothing to talk about except pain and misery.

PROFESSOR: (To THE WIFE) Madame, you are smoking too much. It is kind of a highly cultivated lady to have compassion on a poor construction worker.

THE LADY: Sober up. Your insults seem to grow bigger and bigger.

PROFESSOR: Insults! What insults? I have not upset anyone.

THE LADY: You have not upset anyone? Haven't you said enough? Maybe you enjoy torturing others.

PROFESSOR: Madame, I rejoice in nothing except truth. People's misery does not please me.

THE BROTHER: I did not realize that my suggestion would lead to such sorrow and misery. (To the PROFESSOR) Isn't this enough?

PROFESSOR: (Cold-bloodedly) Games must be completed. Isn't that so? (Suddenly the CONTRACTOR attacks the PROFESSOR, but the latter gives him a punch, striking him to the ground.)

CONTRACTOR: You are a coward...I don't understand how they allow somebody like you to corrupt university students with hatred and bad thoughts.

DOCTOR: (Trying to calm them down) Friends, friends, we are really mad.

PROFESSOR: To tell you the truth, CONTRACTOR of collapsing buildings, I pity you more than I ever did before.

CONTRACTOR: (Convulsively) Admit that you are lying, admit it and I will forgive you.

PROFESSOR: I have not said anything that requires lying. These were only stories.

CONTRACTOR: (To his WIFE) Is it true what he said about the construction supervisor?

PROFESSOR: What construction supervisor? I said it was only a story to pass time.

(The CONTRACTOR goes to his WIFE. They begin glancing at each other.)

THE GROOM: I know you aren't speaking the truth. I have respect and reverence for you, but I want you to repudiate whatever you have said.

PROFESSOR: But my dear young man, your turn has come. Tell us...come one, tell us about your wonderful marriage.

THE BRIDE: Who said it was wonderful?

PROFESSOR: Marriage should definitely be wonderful.

(To THE LADY) Don't I deserve another scotch? My glass is empty, as you see, empty as everything else.

THE LADY: Another glass and you will kill somebody.

PROFESSOR: Do I look like a killer, madame? My beautiful hostess, do I look like a killer? Perhaps this rifle signifies killing.

THE LADY: Then stop this game at once.

PROFESSOR: Don't I have the right to continue?

THE LADY: (Sarcastically) As long as you are holding a rifle you have the right to continue.

PROFESSOR: (To the THE GROOM) You have not told us the story of your marriage.

THE GROOM: From your personal point of view?

PROFESSOR: Let it be from your point of view.

THE GROOM: You have deprived us of our points of view.

PROFESSOR: Then tell us the story of an ambitious young man graduated from college who finds that life demands intelligence and the seizing of opportunities.

THE GROOM: Do you think it is easy for a university graduate to lose his ambition?

PROFESSOR: To lose his ambition or his dream?

THE GROOM: My dream! What dream?

PROFESSOR: Of what does an architect dream?

THE LADY: Of working and of a happy family.

PROFESSOR: He should dream of a new city, of a new pattern of architecture.

DOCTOR: Our friend takes us back to his platonic republic.

PROFESSOR: (Resuming his talk) Dreams of how to subdue the stones and build a civilization out of that.

THE GROOM: You talk like a philosopher.

PROFESSOR: That is my lot.

THE BROTHER: Philosophy and brandishing rifles in peaceful places.

PROFESSOR: The architect is a dreamer.

THE LADY: (Interrupting him) Dreams of bankruptcy. Is he an architect of dreams or of building?

PROFESSOR: (Reiterating) He dreams of new forms of buildings deriving their existence from earth and looking toward the future with unlimited ambition. If you were an architect...

DOCTOR: (Interrupting) If you were an architect you might have starved to death.

THE GROOM: And I don't want to starve.

PROFESSOR: Nobody wants to starve, but we should always dream.

THE BROTHER: I was dreaming of becoming an outstanding student and everyone used to say: "This young man has a future."

PROFESSOR: And suddenly you decided to become rich at the soonest possible moment.

THE GROOM: Why not? A car, a house, a beautiful wife and a bank account.

PROFESSOR: Now you have everything, but even faster than you imagined. Your richness is due to the wealth of the young lady and to the evident kindness of her relatives.

(Violently) The game is now, dear architect, to repeat ten times: "I am happy."

THE GROOM: (Laughing) I don't think that will benefit you, PROFESSOR, because I can repeat that one hundred times. (He jumps on the table and starts repeating slowly, then quickly) I am happy...I am happy...I am happy.

PROFESSOR: (As THE GROOM continues his repetition) This is real courage, ladies and gentlemen. I admit it honestly and let me congratulate you, brave architect. Please applaud the young man. (No one applauds. As THE GROOM repeats the phrase, he nearly collapses and bursts into silent crying. THE LADY rushes to him while the bride is standing restless and smoking furiously)

THE LADY: Do you like this? I did not know that your heart was driven by cruelty. (She takes THE GROOM'S hand to get him down

from the table as he continues sobbing and repeating the same phrase.)

DOCTOR: Is it not time to put an end to this cruel game? I ask you in the name of our lifetime friendship to stop this game.

PROFESSOR: (Impetuously) Stop it? Shall I stop killing--or do as you did one day?

DOCTOR: I suppose you are trying to charge me with something. I hope you will not say that I married a woman for the sake of her wealth. You know that I have made my wealth with these two hands and with my mind. Come on, I dare you to charge me with something.

PROFESSOR: I don't need courage. You are certainly a murderer.

DOCTOR: Murderer! (Laughing nervously) And whom did I murder? I am the one who saves people and you call me a murderer! Ask everyone; they will tell you, "This is the humanitarian man who saves people." I defy death and that is my job.

PROFESSOR: And you defy poor people too.

DOCTOR: Poor people, why should I defy them?

PROFESSOR: Dear...great surgeon, so you remember that woman whose husband came in begging you to operate on his wife and you, casually

smoking, refused to touch her with your blessed hand unless he paid first.

DOCTOR: (Confidently) Yes, I remember something of that sort.

PROFESSOR: So you still remember.

DOCTOR: Do you think I am running a charity?

PROFESSOR: (With deep sorrow) That woman died, great surgeon of cruelty.

DOCTOR: Death comes to everyone.

PROFESSOR: She died because she was poor.

DOCTOR: You talk like those hotheaded young men who talk about the revolution, equality and other ambiguities. You are supposed to be a wise man, PROFESSOR.

PROFESSOR: (Intensely) I said to you, the woman died because she was poor.

DOCTOR: Do you want me to shed tears over the death of a woman destined to die?

PROFESSOR: (With angry determination) I said she died.

DOCTOR: Then let us say the burial prayer.

PROFESSOR: (With extreme anger, he aims the rifle at the DOCTOR) I said the woman died, great man. (THE LADY rushes to stand between the two men. The PROFESSOR moves one step back and shouts in an attempt to curb his rage.)

THE LADY: Are you mad? You are playing with fire.

PROFESSOR: Which of us is not mad?

DOCTOR: We lost a night and won an enemy.

THE LADY: I'm going to scream if you don't stop this destructive game.

THE BROTHER: We have shouted, yet nothing has stopped, as if the game has been preplanned to go on.

THE LADY: (To the PROFESSOR) Please...I beseech you to throw the gun away.

PROFESSOR: (He seems to have calmed down) After your turn is over.

THE LADY: My turn? What do I have to say?

PROFESSOR: It is your turn to talk about your love life.

THE LADY: Love life. (With bitter sarcasm) I hope you don't think that I love anyone except my husband.

PROFESSOR: Tell us about your love which does not exist yet. Tell us about the thing that has not yet set your heart pounding. Tell us in detail about that which has not been born yet.

THE LADY: (Gloomily) It seems that our friendship is really over. Things are getting worse.

PROFESSOR: Our friendship! What is the use of friendship? Everything is finished. And

if you don't tell us, I will tell you about my love. (The last word falls like a thunder storm upon them. Their attention is focused on him.)

THE BROTHER: Your love! You unmask yourself, you remarkable bachelor. The PROFESSOR loves!

PROFESSOR: (Resuming) It seems that you will not utter a word. Then I am the one who will talk.

THE LADY: Go ahead, talk. What do you want to say?

PROFESSOR: You are the kind of woman that no one can resist falling in love with.

THE LADY: (Hiding her feelings) Then you love me.

DOCTOR: What?

THE BROTHER: Incredible!

PROFESSOR: And this is the worst thing I have done in my life.

THE LADY: Why? Am I not worthy of your noble love?

PROFESSOR: Because I imagine that if you were not married and someone fell in love with you but did not have your husband's intelligence, reputation and wealth, you would have preferred your husband to him.

DOCTOR: Does that hurt your feelings?

PROFESSOR: Hurt my feelings! She does not understand what love is.

DOCTOR: A friend of the family and he loves my wife! Philosophy seems to be devoid of morals, professor.

PROFESSOR: What do morals have to do with love?

THE LADY: When did you first love me?

PROFESSOR: Does the date mean anything to you? Love begins at a certain point in time.

THE LADY: Did you love me when I got married?

DOCTOR: Why not, since philosophy is unrelated to morality?

PROFESSOR: It was the day I saw you and talked to you before you left the university to marry this successful man.

THE LADY: Why didn't you tell me that you loved me?

PROFESSOR: Tell you? Why? I was happy near you.

DOCTOR: You entered my house by a trick.

PROFESSOR: Trick? What kind of trick? My acquaintance with you was pure coincidence and you were the one who invited me to your house.

DOCTOR: Who knows, probably you were trying to be a friend of mine.

PROFESSOR: Who knows! Everyone seeks what he needs whether he wants to or not.

THE LADY: You have chosen an inconvenient time to confess your love.

PROFESSOR: I had no time to think of love for I was always absorbed in books, research and writing.

THE LADY: A cowardly lover.

PROFESSOR: What I said is a fact. I am realistic.

THE LADY: (As if she remembered something)
Oh...that is why you refused to let me kiss you.

PROFESSOR: I refused to kiss you because you are likely to kiss anyone, anyone at all.

DOCTOR: I think, PROFESSOR, someone your age does not feel love so much as he feels his glands throbbing for the last time, seeking survival. I wish you did not love my wife and had not lost my friendship.

PROFESSOR: I have not won anything before and thus can't lose now. It is only a game; one time we win, another we lose.

DOCTOR: You flirt with her and hold a gun in your hand.

PROFESSOR: I want her to do as the others did before.

THE LADY: What did the others do?

PROFESSOR: They unmasked themselves.

THE LADY: What do you want me to disclose?

PROFESSOR: Disclose yourself.

THE LADY: Disclose myself?

DOCTOR: That is to say, you love your husband and
you don't love anybody else.

THE LADY: I have nothing to disclose. I am clear as
the sun.

PROFESSOR: Then disclose yourself...your body.
(Tension reigns.)

THE LADY: (Angrily) Are you crazy?

DOCTOR: Your inner world is much worse than I
could have imagined.

PROFESSOR: Why not, DOCTOR? (With cruelty to THE
LADY) You will perform the rest of the
game, step by step, taking off your
clothes piece by piece.

THE LADY: You are truly mad.

DOCTOR: I will not permit it.

PROFESSOR: I unclothed others before, and now it is
your turn.

THE BRIDE: (Joyfully) It is a striptease!

THE BROTHER: I don't believe you are serious.

PROFESSOR: Striptease, that's precisely the word.

THE BRIDE: What an entertainment!

THE LADY: (Fearfully) You want to take off my
clothes?

PROFESSOR: Precisely.

THE LADY: Stand naked before everyone here?

PROFESSOR: You begin to understand what I want.

THE LADY: If you truly loved me, you would not ask me to take off my clothes in public. You would have asked me to do so only for you.

PROFESSOR: That is impossible.

DOCTOR: (Indignant) You have gone beyond your limit. I warn you.

PROFESSOR: And I warn you, too. I will be very harsh with anyone interrupting this amusing game.

THE LADY: And if I refuse your arrogant request?

PROFESSOR: Just a little while ago I aimed the gun at something precious and destroyed it. I will not hesitate to do the same thing again.

(The DOCTOR rushes toward the PROFESSOR, trying to take the gun, but the PROFESSOR fires and the DOCTOR draws back frightened, as do the rest. The bullet does not hit anyone, but all are frightened. THE LADY remains in the middle of the stage looking at the PROFESSOR)

PROFESSOR: Was I not serious in what I said? Now, to the game, LADY. Take off your wig so we can see your real hair.

THE LADY: (While she is taking off the wig) You have definitely gone mad. What do you want to prove?

PROFESSOR: Take off your artificial eyelashes, please. (She removes her artificial eyelashes) Rub the mascara off your eyes. (She rubs off the mascara; her eyes look much smaller) Take the lip-stick off your lips. (As she rubs it off, she looks less beautiful than before)

THE BRIDE: This is a conservative striptease.

THE BROTHER: I believe it is the fashion.

PROFESSOR: The necklace and earrings. (She puts both on the table) The wedding ring and the diamond ring.

DOCTOR: What does this all mean?

PROFESSOR: Now take off your shoes (She takes off her shoes and throws them in the air) and your dark charming stockings. (She bends and takes off her stockings.)

DOCTOR: I wonder if we still have brains in our heads? I can't stand this. I can't stand it. Stop this comedy.

PROFESSOR: (To THE BROTHER) Please, dim the light.

THE BROTHER: (As he turns the lights down) Is it romantic or embarrassing?

PROFESSOR: (To THE LADY) Now madame, you can ask anyone to help you pull down the zipper of your dress.

THE LADY: I don't think I need anyone's help.

DOCTOR: (He sinks in his chair exhausted) I can't bear this anymore.

THE LADY: (As she stretches her hand around her back to pull the zipper) I think you are happy. (Her dress slides down.)

(The barking of a dog is heard, followed by shooting outside. Then the dog becomes silent. The attention of all is drawn to the balcony. Suddenly three masked men enter through the balcony's door. They point their guns at the people, who have frozen in their places, and the rifle falls out of the PROFESSOR'S hand.)

FIRST STRANGER: Please stay where you are. (To the DOCTOR) Your dog was wild and loyal, and I apologize for silencing it.

DOCTOR: Who are you? And how did you enter this place?

THE LADY: My dog is dead!

THE BROTHER: Our game is certainly over.

FIRST STRANGER: It is the beginning of our game and the end of yours.

DOCTOR: Who are you?

FIRST STRANGER: Your party spoiled our plan. Weren't you planning to see a movie tonight?

DOCTOR: We changed our plan at the last minute. We invited guests. But who are you? And what right do you have to enter this place?

FIRST STRANGER: You did not recognize us? (To the PROFESSOR) You did not master shooting, sir.

DOCTOR: I am bound to call the police if you don't tell me who you are.

FIRST STRANGER: We advise you not to do anything, just be silent. We have an important mission and we won't allow anyone to interfere with it.

DOCTOR: You are burglars.

FIRST STRANGER: You have not discovered something new, DOCTOR.

(He motions with his head and his two friends spread out in the room) At any rate, we don't blame you because your party delayed our mission. Now, ladies and gentlemen, turn your faces to the wall and hold your hands up. Any move means your death. Cooperate with us to carry out our mission. We promise to preserve your souls.

(As the people hold their hands up and move toward the wall, the strangers fan out through the room)

SECOND STRANGER: Shall we search their pockets?

FIRST STRANGER: Look for weapons. Pocket money is not important.

SECOND STRANGER: (Searching THE BRIDE) I found beautiful things.

FIRST STRANGER: Be polite so they can't accuse of of maltreatment.

SECOND STRANGER: (Laughing shamelessly) I'd rather have them curse us. Just let me search for these beautiful things.

THE GROOM: (To the PROFESSOR) Did you see, teacher?

PROFESSOR: What should I have seen?

THE GROOM: Your game.

DOCTOR: Your game of fast shooting.

FIRST STRANGER: The gentlemen's discussion is interesting. Please carry on your discussion. It does not impede our mission.

DOCTOR: Did you see, PROFESSOR...did you see?

PROFESSOR: It is your house that attracted those men...it is your wealth.

FIRST STRANGER: Do you think, PROFESSOR, that your knowledge is what attracted us?

DOCTOR: But what do you want? Take what you came for and leave.

FIRST STRANGER: Go on with your game.

DOCTOR: What game?

FIRST STRANGER: What did you call it?

THE BRIDE: Democracy.

(The other two STRANGERS are searching the place and the people)

FIRST STRANGER: (Ignorantly) Democracy! What kind of word is that? I have never heard it before. Please explain it, DOCTOR.

DOCTOR: Ask the one who invented it.

THE BROTHER: I have not invented anything. It is in every book. You have not heard of democracy?

FIRST STRANGER: Maybe; anyway I don't read newspapers.

THE BROTHER: You look like someone who supplies the papers with news.

PROFESSOR: I think I am tired of holding up my hands.

FIRST STRANGER: How come you did not get tired of holding a gun?

SECOND STRANGER: (Searching the PROFESSOR) He is not carrying a gun.

PROFESSOR: Do you expect me to carry a machine gun in my pocket?

FIRST STRANGER: In your head there is something more dangerous than a machine gun.

PROFESSOR: Is that a compliment?

THE LADY: That is the truth. There is an atomic machine gun in your head.

THIRD STRANGER: (Searching the physician, taking out his wallet and checking it) You're a doctor and bankrupt.

FIRST STRANGER: You idiot, such people always deposit their money in banks.

THIRD STRANGER: But I don't understand that.

FIRST STRANGER: What he has in his pocket is not our concern. (To THE LADY) Where is your jewelry, madame?

THE LADY: You will find it there, and in my room you will find the rest.

DOCTOR: And don't forget my diamond cufflinks.

FIRST STRANGER: You are very generous, DOCTOR. Are they precious?

DOCTOR: What?

FIRST STRANGER: Your diamond cufflinks.

DOCTOR: I don't remember how much I paid...five... six thousand lire...I don't remember.

PROFESSOR: Equivalent to what he makes in two operations and six check ups.

DOCTOR: (To the PROFESSOR) We did not realize that you are so resentful.

PROFESSOR: Resentful? What is there for me to resent?

DOCTOR: You resent me because I make more money than you do.

PROFESSOR: Thank God that medicine is a profitable job and patients don't bargain.

DOCTOR: (Angrily) You are a mean man.

PROFESSOR: And you are a clever merchant.

FIRST STRANGER: You both talk like professional politicians.

THE BROTHER: Did you notice gentlemen, we have become an object of ridicule to our intruders.

CONTRACTOR: I want to go home. (To the FIRST STRANGER) Sir, I am only a guest. Will you allow me to go home?

DOCTOR: (To the CONTRACTOR) So you are deserting us?

CONTRACTOR: Why should I meddle in all this. It is your house which is being burglarized. If you can't defend your house, what can you do?

DOCTOR: Thank you. I have discovered a loyal friend.

CONTRACTOR: What does loyalty have to do with it?

THE LADY: (Turning around to the FIRST STRANGER) I told you my jewelry is in there. Take it and stop this comedy.

FIRST STRANGER: Comedy! Why do you call it a comedy? We are performing a duty.

THE BRIDE: We are amusing ourselves.

THE GROOM: Amusing ourselves with what?

THE BRIDE: With the game.

THE GROOM: You idiot, what game?

FIRST STRANGER: We are completing the PROFESSOR'S game, young man.

THE LADY: Do you intend to play it in my house?

FIRST STRANGER: Is there another place we can play it, madame?

DOCTOR: Do you mean you want to stay here?

FIRST STRANGER: As long as you give us a welcome, we will stay here. (To the other two) Now is the time for reaping, men. Collect everything available you find. (To the party) And you can carry on your calm discussion and conversation.

(The curtain falls very slowly while the men of the party accuse one another.)

DOCTOR: (To the PROFESSOR) You are the cause of all this.

PROFESSOR: (To THE BROTHER) You invented the game.

THE BROTHER: I did not invent it. That is the way I learned it.

THE GROOM: (Shouting) We will remain immobilized like this while the STRANGERS do whatever

they like. Let us do something...I am fed
up with everything and can't go on like
this...

(He resumes his shouting as the curtain
finally falls.)

END

APPENDIX

THE SHRINE OF IERAHIM AND SAFFIA

A PLAY IN A PROLOGUE

AND

TWO ACTS

BY

WALID IKHLASI

1980

Translated from Arabic by Admer G. Gouryh

PLACE: A popular quarter in ancient Aleppo.
TIME: Following the time of independence.

CHARACTERS

IBRAHIM: A young miller, parentless and around 18 years old.

SAFFIA: A beautiful young girl, daughter of SHEIKH SALEH, 15 years old.

SHEIKH SALEH: A righteous man serving the quarter's mosque and the shrines.

ABU AL-RUS: One of the notables of the quarter; trades in cattle and controls the slaughterhouse, 50 years old.

ABU AL-KAIF: One of the notables of the quarter; trades in drugs, 45 years old.

THE MAYOR: The Sheik of the Bab al-Magam quarter; clings to the notables, 50 years old.

AKRAM: The head of police in the quarter; supports the notables and the ruling party.

HABLAT: One of the so-called dervishes, but very shrewd; acts as a spy for the notables and for influential men, 50 years old.

THE TEACHER: A storyteller who conducts an acting troupe which performs the play. The troupe takes the roles of aides, followers, chanter, mid-wives and a singing group.

PROLOGUE

SCENE I

(A quarter whose ancient houses overlook a courtyard. Narrow alleys branch out of it. Against the sky towers a minaret of a small mosque. Banners, decorations and flags are fluttering in the courtyard. Religious songs, in commemoration of the return of pilgrims mingle with talk about a parliamentary election. The quarter's people gather around the CHANTER and his men and sing popular religious songs.)

THE GROUP: Lord, You are the glory and the blessing of the creation; You are the ultimate hope; You make the rusty shine; You are the star whose beauty exceeds that of all planets; You are the sender of eternal truth.

CHANTER: Mali alla al-Bud sabru Yabaitha al-Amala;/ ya Ayuha al-Badru al-Thi Kamula;/ Tabkika Ain Muhib Anta Nathiruha;/ fa-Kaifa Istbari anka qud Rahala;/ ya Qurat al-Ain ana al-Buda Athqualani wa Qaraba al-Mut min Ainaia wa al-Ajala.¹

1. A mystic chant that loses meaning in translation.

THE GROUP:

O God, bless Mohammad our Apostle and bless His followers and friends. God, perfume his exalted grave...

(The CHANTER begins to recite a part of Mohammad's biography)

CHANTER:

The Apostle (may God bless and save him) was at Halima's. Whenever he would go out with the boys, Halima would wait and watch his return with her own eyes. She would welcome his return with joy and offer him the most beautiful smile. One day, he asked her the whereabouts of his brothers. She said: "My dear, they have gone to tend our sheep." Then he said to her: "Mother, let me go with them." As he put on his clothes and took his stick, she advised the boys to keep an eye on him. So, the apostle (may God bless and save him) spent the day with them while they tended the sheep. During the night, Halima went out to receive them. When he approached she saw that his forehead emitted rays of light and the sheep were keeping close to him like brides drinking tasty and delicious milk. She took him in her arms and said: "What kept you away from me?" His step-brother told her about the celestial signs and the incredible miracles the apostle

worked. "Mother," he said, "when our Qurashite brother came with us, every tree we passed greeted us with enthusiasm and whatever dry land we stepped on turned green and the empty wells filled with water. And as we passed by a valley full of wild animals, a lion approached us. When it saw Mohammad, it yielded to him and began to stay close to him."

THE GROUP:

May God perfume his tomb. O God, magnify the apostle and bless and save his kinsmen and companions. God lives, God lives.

(The Group led by the CHANTER, performs the rites invoking God. This ritual gradually grows more intense and its sounds become mixed with the crack of fireworks coming from a distance. The invocation rites go on for a short time.)

(THE MAYOR goes out to the edge of the courtyard, cheering and rejoicing.)

THE MAYOR:

The pilgrims have come back for Kaaba. Our righteous pilgrims have arrived. The pilgrims of the holy land have come back safely. (He goes out.)

(The fireworks continue along with the performance of the religious rites as the singing group moves toward the entrance of

the courtyard, then disappears. SHEIKH SALEH is the only one left in the courtyard. With wandering glances, he looks like a blind man. As he bumps against a chair we realize that he has poor eyesight. After a little while, THE TEACHER approaches him.)

THE TEACHER: All of them have gone. You are alone.
(SHEIKH SALEH does not answer) The cracking voices of bullets and cheers accumulate in the sky like a blessing.

SALEH: Join them, TEACHER...join them, they have a lot of food.

THE TEACHER: (Reprimanding) But when did I ever join them, SHEIKH SALEH? When?

SALEH: And who has not joined them? (After a moment) All those who have eyes and know the path follow them.

THE TEACHER: I can see the truth, that is why I am not with them.

SALEH: (Listening to the fireworks) Do you hear, my son? They are murdering the sky.

THE TEACHER: They rejoice violently and grieve violently. What cruelty!

SALEH: (With bitter sadness) And they kill with cruelty. (After a little while) O God forgive me. They are injuring your mercy with their unbearable baseness.

THE TEACHER: They go in caravans to buy mercy with money.
(Warning) Come on, uncle. Let us leave.
They will be back soon. Then supplication
issues from their guns, and bullets from the
mouths of the pilgrims and those who receive
them.

SALEH: May God forgive them.

THE TEACHER: May God forgive those who obey ABU AL-RUS and
ABU AL-KAIF-the two righteous pilgrims.

SALEH: What did you say, son?

THE TEACHER: I was just recalling a lesson that you and I
have forgotten.

SALEH: Men like you don't forget their lessons,
TEACHER.

THE TEACHER: We see and we learn...then we forget; there
lies the problem. (Looking around) Let us
leave before the courtyard gets crowded.
Then no room would be left for us. SHEIKH,
you must go home. You have suffered enough.
(THE TEACHER leads SALEH away, but comes back
quickly to the stage to address the audience
directly)

THE TEACHER: Ladies and gentlemen, there is our story for
the day. The good man I have just ushered
out of here is called SHEIKH SALEH. He is a
poor righteous man, serves the quarter's
mosque and takes care of the shrines around

the confines of the larger quarter. Such a job, it seems, makes one happy and wins him honor. But the shrines are only old stone buildings created to hold within their walls the mortal remains that people attributed to saints and pious men. For this reason, the place in which the dead are buried is called the cemetery of the good people. A large number of those buried there has nothing to do with goodness nor with good people. Gracious audience, it seems that the earth refuses neither a request nor a human body. I personally prefer to be buried in the wilderness near my village to which no respectable name is yet given. I hate big ceremonies especially after I have been involved in the strange play you will see soon. (He notices the CHANTER peeping at him from the stage corner. He addresses him: "Is it not strange Mr....?") (He then calls the actor by his real name.)

CHANTER: (Coming in) What happened to IBRAHIM and SAFFIA was quite strange and absurd. What happens to those who fall in love has become strange. What happens and what does not happen have become strange and absurd.

THE TEACHER: We don't want to talk more to the gracious audience. Let us start working.

CHANTER: I am not an actor; I am the CHANTER and I did my part at the beginning, but now I want to give my opinion of everything that occurs.

THE TEACHER: The audience's opinion is what counts now. Let us start.

CHANTER: Shall I start the chanting anew?

THE TEACHER: Let us start with the story of ABRAHAM, may God bless him.

CHANTER: (Like someone who remembers daily duties, he gets a large screen.) Let us start with ABRAHAM, God bless him. (They get ready to perform a scene along with other actors.)

SCENE II

(A screen of a shadow play theatre set up at the corner of a raised platform. Two shadows enact a brief expressive play. Rhythmic chanting of such phrases: God is great...There is no God except Allah...accompanies the shadow play.)

STORYTELLER: It was a horrible dream during which ABRAHAM, (God bless him) woke up frightened.

ABRAHAM: My Lord, if you command me, I am your slave. I can't disobey your order.

STORYTELLER: On that day, ABRAHAM (God bless him) woke up from his sleep and began to reflect upon his dream. Oscillating between fear and confusion, ABRAHAM discovered the truth.

ABRAHAM: Shall I kill my son? Shall I kill my beloved son, ISMAIL?

STORYTELLER: But ABRAHAM'S inner hesitation did not last long because obedience expresses real love for God and real submission to his command.

ABRAHAM: That is the will of God. Come closer to me, my son.

STORYTELLER: And the father told his son what he had seen in the dream.

ISMAIL: Do as you are ordered and you will find me, if God wills, obedient.

(ABRAHAM sharpens his knife as ISMAIL yields and lays his head on a rock. The chant of supplication quickens. Suddenly, a beam of light falls to the earth carrying a fatted calf. ABRAHAM holds the calf in his arms.)

STORYTELLER: ABRAHAM realized that the calf was to be sacrificed instead of his son. He knew he had passed the test. So he killed the calf and ISMAIL survived. (The chant of supplication slows down until darkness engulfs the stage.)

SCENE III

(On the platform actors are seen taking down the screen. THE TEACHER gives instructions.)

THE TEACHER: Let us set up the scene quickly.

CHANTER: (Stopping working for a moment) ABRAHAM was put to the test, then got rewarded, but our IBRAHIM! May God not let you suffer what he has gone through.

THE TEACHER: (To the CHANTER) Hurry up...hurry up. What happened to him might happen to you, to me or to anyone.

CHANTER: Everything happened to him while we were standing idly by, looking on and doing nothing.

THE TEACHER: (Participating in the work) Had it not been for my personal enjoyment, I would not have agreed, from the very start, to play such a small part in this play, then watch all these things happening to IBRAHIM and SAFFIA. Every night, I say to myself why did this happen? Very often, a fit of insanity comes over me. I feel like coming out of the backstage and grabbing someone by the throat. Then I realize that this is only make-believe. So, I go home and think it over. I recall every word and every incident

and ask myself, "If this happened before my eyes in real life, would I stand idly by?"
(To the audience) I know you will go out as soon as the performance is over and I understand you will think about it, but the sad thing is I will not be able to meet you again so we can talk and discuss together why such things happen, or what can be done or how we can put an end to the oppression of man, how we can eliminate violence and force which deprive man of his freedom and throw him in prisons whose walls let in no air or sun.

THE CHANTER: (Blaming) Come on, carry on the story to the end and disclose the secret of the play to the audience. (Claps his hands and a group comes in, lining up behind him) We will sing to the audience while you are finishing the set and the props. (Preparations are made to set up a scene near a shrine)

THE CHANTER: I wish I could receive a look from your eyes to heal my illness and my boredom.

PART ONE

SCENE I

(An old building is set up in the front of the stage. Its walls are heavy with the burden of time and damp moss. There is a small window near the shrine and a low door on the other wall, made of worn-out wood which lends the shrine an awful magic. The moonlight removes little of the loneliness that inhabits the place. Then comes the meeting of love which confers a friendly security upon the place. After a short while, a young couple will meet and live a few wonderful and serene moments. IBRAHIM is dressed in white, as though he has just left the mill in which he works; SAFFIA is in a bright cotton dress, her long braids caress her face and back tenderly and innocently. The couple plays hide-and-seek like children behind the shrine and try to catch the moon. When they get tired, they sit with their backs against the shrine's wall. From a distance, a voice is heard singing warmly, expressing young feelings of burning love.)

VOICE: I pray and weep in prayer as I remember her.
What woeful things are hidden in this place.

IBRAHIM: I truly like this place. I like its residents and visitors. (After a moment) As if God has employed heavenly singing to lift us above the crowdedness of our quarter.

SAFFIA: (Sighing) I like this place more than our quarter. It is safe and compassionate. (Flirtatiously) But I like the mill much more. I like the flour and those who deal with it.

IBRAHIM: The mill likes you.

SAFFIA: Does the flour bother you?

IBRAHIM: No, I was raised among the sacks of flour. It has inhabited my lungs and whitened my hair. (Both laughing)

SAFFIA: And what will turn my hair grey?

IBRAHIM: One like you, her hair will never turn grey.

SAFFIA: Does that mean I will not grow up and become old?

IBRAHIM: Of whiteness and purity you have enough, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: (With light sadness) Sometimes, during the darkness of night, I am anxious about my happiness.

IBRAHIM: Your happiness will never disappear, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: Are you not afraid that someone might see us here? (With an artificial joy) I am not frightened.

IBRAHIM: I came along the secret road and from behind the mosque's walls, SAFFIA. I am more concerned about you than about myself. (With sudden fear) No one is going to forgive IBRAHIM, the orphan, for meeting in secret the daughter of SHEIKH SALEH.

SAFFIA: But I am the one who ran after you; I am the one who led you to this place.

IBRAHIM: Don't forget that my eyes kept clinging to you wherever you went.

SAFFIA: Before any girl in the quarter, my eyes saw you.

IBRAHIM: A beautiful girl like you can't be overlooked by the eyes of men in the quarter.

SAFFIA: I don't see a man among them except you.

IBRAHIM: They call me the young miller, IBRAHIM the orphan.

SAFFIA: And my mother says: I am a child that has not completed 15 years of age. The child that still sleeps in her mother's lap.

IBRAHIM: (Joyfully) So, an orphan boy for a spoiled little girl. Is this not just?

SAFFIA: It is just and I don't accept anything else but that. (After a moment and sadly) But justice is missing. I can't see you except furtively and without my parents' knowledge. I am supposed to be at my aunt's house. What would they do if they found out I am lying?

IBRAHIM: (Drawing SAFFIA close to him) I will protect you.

SAFFIA: I know but how will you protect me?

IBRAHIM: I will fight the whole quarter for your sake, I will fight the whole world.

SAFFIA: Then, do you love me?

IBRAHIM: And you are still questioning, SAFFIA? The moon knows that I love you, and all the wild flowers know that...(Trembling) I see you in the whiteness of flour, SAFFIA. When your father leads us in prayer, I don't hear anything except your voice. O God, forgive me, for I repeat her name with yours and recall her whenever your name is mentioned. And if I read, I envisage her smile....

SAFFIA: IBRAHIM....IBRAHIM.

IBRAHIM: And when I go to my room behind the mill where there is no mother or father, I see you on the pillow as a father and under the quilt as a mother. (Addressing the shrine) Do you believe, sacred shrine, that I sniff her smell in the hot loaf and fancy her in the orange-flower water of birthdays. SAFFIA, O SAFFIA, you are a purity unmatched in the quarter or in the city and not even in the vast world. I see you in the sacredness of these blessed shrines. My longing for you

increases when I hear the morning prayer
resounding through my chest. So, I wake up
as the earth does when the first drops of
rain fall upon it. Then I shout in my room:
SAFFIA...SAFFIA. I hear you saying: IBRAHIM.

SAFFIA: (Getting close to him tenderly) IBRAHIM!

IBRAHIM: SAFFIA, you are my mother and father. (They
hold each other's hands and get closer.)

SAFFIA: I want to weep.

IBRAHIM: No one should weep except me, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: My blood should be sacrificed for the tears
of your eyes.

IBRAHIM: I will lay down my life for a hair of your
braid. I am the one who wants to weep.

SAFFIA: Why should you weep, twin of my spirit? Let
me weep instead and save your eyes for joy.

IBRAHIM: (Sadly) I am thinking about the future.

SAFFIA: I don't think of anything except you.

IBRAHIM: Does a poor boy like me have the right to
fall in love?

SAFFIA: All the prophets were poor, IBRAHIM.

IBRAHIM: But I am nothing but a poor miller.

SAFFIA: What do I own? I have become rich with your
love.

IBRAHIM: When it comes to love I am very rich. But
you have drawn the attention of several men.
Your beauty enthralled them.

SAFFIA: You are the one who preoccupies me.

IBRAHIM: (Joyfully) I am happy, happy as a prince.

SAFFIA: I will not be happy unless I am with you.
This is a vow I make before you and God.

IBRAHIM: (He kneels down before her) O SAFFIA...You
are my oath. I swear by you, I will lay down
my life for you. This is a pledge I make to
you.

SAFFIA: (Patting his head) When I first saw you, I
was still a child. Your eyes were suffused
with tenderness and nobility. I said to
myself, I want to see him always. Do you
remember...? You were delivering flour to
our house. When I grew up, I wished to bake
a loaf only for you.

IBRAHIM: For the sake of motherhood and fatherhood,
remain mine always.

SAFFIA: (Playfully) My child and my love, I will
remain yours and I will guide you.

IBRAHIM: (Pacing with rapture) Do you know what I
dream of, SAFFIA?

SAFFIA: Of a mill, a mill you run and own.

IBRAHIM: I am content with what I have. I don't crave
more money, but I hope when we grow older and
become parents, we will both come to this
place during the day. Do you know why? In
order that I may read you the Arabian Nights.

(Sighing) I was a lonely little child, thinking about going to school so I could learn to read whatever fell into my hands. I don't envy the boys who go to school everyday, but I wish I had learned more in order to talk about it. SAFFIA...if I had a carriage with two horses--no, one would be enough--I would take you all over the city and through the parks. I would like to stand on top of the citadel with you beside me and shout at the top of my voice: SAFFIA...my SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: And I will shout: This is my IBRAHIM. (They come together passionately, almost absorbed in a rapturous embrace.)

IBRAHIM: SAFFIA, SAFFIA, you are a pure rose.

SAFFIA: I am late, I am frightened that my father will come back from evening prayers and look for me. He does not want me to leave the house at night. He is afraid I may be harmed by the men of the quarter.

IBRAHIM: SHEIKH SALEH will miss me at tonight's prayer.

SAFFIA: (Getting ready to leave) Shall we meet (after a moment) after a week?

IBRAHIM: (Grumbling) A whole week. It is an age, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: But I see you every day. Don't you see me?

IBRAHIM: What is the good? I pass by your house every day abashed, with my head bowed.

SAFFIA: At least I can see you with my eyes.
(Hurriedly) I will leave you now.

IBRAHIM: I am frightened for you, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: Don't you wish me safety in your prayers?

IBRAHIM: May God keep you safe for me, you brave
SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: (Leaving) May God keep you safe for me, man
of the quarter.

IBRAHIM: (Alone) She has gone. A week seems like an
age. (Looking up at the sky) O God who is
in heaven, you ordained that I become an
orphan. Thus you deprived me of a breast
upon which I could have wept in moments of
despair. I will always kneel down before you
to keep SAFFIA and her love. (Entreating)
Lord, have mercy on this orphan. I thank
you, Lord. (He is leaving slowly from the
other side when HABLAT appears. HABLAT is an
old man marked with signs of insanity and
wickedness. He looks in the two directions
from which SAFFIA and IBRAHIM have gone out.)

HABLAT: The more we live the more we learn. IBRAHIM,
the orphan, and SAFFIA, daughter of SHEIKH
SALEH. (Shouting) O, where is the honesty

of religion. (To himself) This is a story...I swear by God, the turbans of leaders and pious men will blow away at such a story. (Shouting) O God...the land of saints and good men is profaned. (Darkness)

SCENE II

(Actors preparing the scene of the courtyard. While working, THE TEACHER speaks.)

THE TEACHER: I wonder if there will be another love scene. Everyone would like to be singled out for such. (The scene takes on the following shape: The leaders of the quarter are sitting in chairs surrounded by their supporters and followers. ABU AL-RUS and ABU AL-KAIF are puffing hashish in waterpipes. The time is late afternoon. HABLAT is standing in a distance watching.)

ABU AL-RUS: (Singing) Lama Bada Yatasna, Aman, Aman, Aman Hubi (Lahmu) Futna, Aman, Aman, Aman.

ABU AL-KAIF: You deserve happiness, ABU AL-RUS. You have the right. (To others) He has the right to be happy. (He keeps repeating the same phrase until he gets the consent of all)

THE MAYOR: ABU AL-RUS is the sheikh of young men and the head of the slaughterhouse in the quarter and

in the city. ABU AL-RUS must have news that makes us all happy.

ABU AL-RUS: Our MAYOR, like a man of God, knows the secrets of souls and what young hearts conceal.

ABU AL-KAIF: Our friend ABU AL-RUS, like a pious man, is always promised happiness. He is worthy of it. Those who disagree, let them drink sea water. (Everyone laughs and cheers.)

THE MAYOR: Come on...come on, ABU AL-RUS, cheer us up. All those who like you are waiting for the news. Is it not a new bargain in cattle? (A number of men working in the slaughterhouse pass through the courtyard, their clothes stained with blood, carrying sheep heads with dangling tongues; one of them is carrying a whole lamb.)

ABU AL-RUS: (Greeting the butchers and pointing at them as they disappear.) This is the answer, gentlemen.

THE MAYOR: A bargain of sheep heads does not suit you.

ABU AL-KAIF: Your men are carrying sheep heads. (After a moment) They are gifts...gifts.

ABU AL-RUS: Who can deprive me of the right to give gifts to those I love?

ABU AL-KAIF: (Talking to himself) For those I love!

THE MAYOR: ABU AL-RUS is the father of generosity. (ABU AL-KAIF is looking at him with cruelty and warning) The leaders of the quarter are men of generosity.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Like someone sensing evil) Your dear ones must mean a lot to you, ABU AL-RUS.

ABU AL-RUS: I treat every beloved in a different way.

THE MAYOR: O God give us affection...and a lamb with rosy flesh. (They laugh, but ABU AL-KAIF approaches ABU AL-RUS maliciously)

ABU AL-KAIF: It seems that you are longing for your wife. You must have pleasant memories of her these days.

ABU AL-RUS: I always have pleasant memories of her, my friend, but the gifts are for the fourth one.

ALL: (With bewilderment) The fourth one!

THE MAYOR: What about the third one? (Winking) The sweets served on her wedding are still on the shelf.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Knitting his brows) Honestly, you have three?

ABU AL-RUS: If God wills (as if guarding himself against outside evil) and guards me against envious men...

THE MAYOR: God bless such men.

ABU AL-KAIF: And the gifts are for the fourth one?

ABU AL-RUS: (Still in rapture) Gifts and my heart, dear friend, and sheep heads, plucks and thighs...all for her.

THE MAYOR: May God bless such men.

ABU AL-KAIF: You must be infatuated with her.

ABU AL-RUS: Totally absorbed in her love, ABU AL-KAIF. Your friend is in love.

ABU AL-KAIF: Who is the lucky one, this time?

THE MAYOR: ABU AL-RUS always knows how to choose.

ABU AL-RUS: I will tell you who she is, but don't get jealous.

THE MAYOR: Who can be jealous of the dearest man in the quarter?

ABU AL-RUS: Some do get jealous, MAYOR...some...

ABU AL-KAIF: (Aroused along with his men) To whom do you refer, ABU AL-RUS.

ABU AL-RUS: So-and-so.

ABU AL-KAIF: I don't understand.

THE MAYOR: It is certainly one of the opposition party.

ABU AL-RUS: (Challenging with his men behind him) You know where the gifts are going.

ABU AL-KAIF: To the house of SHEIKH SALEH.

ABU AL-RUS: Well done, my friend.

ABU AL-KAIF: You mean...SAFFIA...you want the daughter of SHEIKH SALEH!

ABU AL-RUS: You are right my friend. You understand the language of signs.

THE MAYOR: We did not understand anything.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Angry) But you have no right to do so.

ABU AL-RUS: What do you mean I have no right? Am I
disfigured or poor?
(The two men confront each other with their
men at ready behind them.)

ABU AL-KAIF: You have three women.

ABU AL-RUS: I am still acting in accordance with the law.
Say, do you intend to marry her?

ABU AL-KAIF: (Feels defeated due to ABU AL-RUS'S power
and the large number of his men.) I have
only one wife and she is sick as you know.

THE MAYOR: May God heal her.

ABU AL-RUS: (Grabbing ABU AL-KAIF'S clothes) Who is
richer, ABU AL-KAIF...Who is stronger?

ABU AL-KAIF: But I am younger than you. I am only forty,
you are over fifty.

ABU AL-RUS: Shall we wrestle?

ABU AL-KAIF: But I can provide her a better life. She
will not have anyone around except my other
wife, who will take care of her and treat her
like a daughter.

ABU AL-RUS: (Sarcastically) Better life! You are
involved in smuggling and were it not for us,
your life would be in constant danger. But I
am the leader of the slaughterhouse.

ABU AL-KAIF: You are insulting me. Do you insult your friend, ABU AL-RUS?

ABU AL-RUS: It is an insult and there is nothing to cleanse it except blood. (Pointing to his men who approach with knives in their hands.) Do you prefer knives or other weapons?

THE MAYOR: (Intervening) This is not the time to fight. The election is very near. (AKRAM, the head of the police headquarters comes in and greets them, but no one responds.)

AKRAM: What is going on here? I say hello, no one answers. The meeting does not seem pleasant. Where are the singers and the joy?

THE MAYOR: You came at the right time, Mr. AKRAM. You represent the government here and you should not stand idly by as a civil war is about to threaten our life.

AKRAM: Who? ABU AL-RUS and ABU AL-KAIF! I can't believe it.

ABU AL-RUS: (Still hostile) You have not answered me yet. How shall we straighten out our differences...do you prefer knives?

ABU AL-KAIF: (To AKRAM) Did you see? The son of my neighbor and my own lifetime friend threatens me.

ABU AL-RUS: You started this.

ABU AL-KAIF: And who challenged his friend first?

AKRAM: I don't understand.

THE MAYOR: I personally understand everything.

ABU AL-RUS: (Pointing at ABU AL-KAIF) But he does not want to understand anything.

ABU AL-KAIF: You were aware, ABU AL-RUS, that I was interested in the daughter of SHEIKH SALEH. God has given you enough women and they are healthy and fertile.

ABU AL-RUS: But I have no idea if she is interested in you.

ABU AL-KAIF: I have confided my feelings for her to you as a friend, but you did not treat me gently.

ABU AL-RUS: Life is a competition, my friend, and ABU AL-RUS never loses.

ABU AL-KAIF: Not between friends.

ABU AL-RUS: A competition even with myself. So, what is your opinion?

ABU AL-KAIF: (Angry and about to lose his temper) And I understand too how gifts should be given.

ABU AL-RUS: Are you challenging me?

ABU AL-KAIF: Life is a competition and ABU AL-KAIF is not accustomed to losing.

ABU AL-RUS: (Angry, pulling a cleaver from the sheath of one of his men) Select your weapon, ABU AL-KAIF. (AKRAM and THE MAYOR break them apart.)

THE MAYOR: Let us seek God's guidance; bloodshed is useless.

AKRAM: Shame on you. Two friends fighting one another and for what? For the sake of a girl!

ABU AL-RUS: But she is unique of her kind.

AKRAM: The girls of the quarter should all be sacrificed for the sake of maintaining your friendship.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Pulling his stick) You have chosen blood, ABU AL-RUS...I go for that.

AKRAM: (Shouting violently) What a calamity! We have lived to see brothers become enemies! What will the men of the opposition party think about us? They will say, the leaders of the shrine quarter fight one another over a woman. Women are bought with money, not with blood.

ABU AL-KAIF: Ask him who started the fight.

AKRAM: For God's sake, act like wise men.

THE MAYOR: There is a difference and it has to be straightened out. (Shouting cheerfully) Let us vote. Yes, let us vote and let the will of God put an end to your differences.

AKRAM: I agree with THE MAYOR. Do you accept what God foreordained? (The two opponents don't comment one way or another on the

suggestion.) Your silence indicates consent. Who opposes the will of God? No one. (He takes a coin out of his pocket) This is a coin. He who wins will take the girl. So, each one should choose one side of the coin.

ABU AL-KAIF: I want the picture.

ABU AL-RUS: The figure. (Everyone watches with fear and anticipation. AKRAM throws the coin up in the air while ABU AL-RUS stands there paying no attention. HABLAT'S eye follows the coin as it falls on the ground and THE MAYOR holds his hands up to the sky in supplication)

AKRAM: (Shouting with joy) The figure. ABU AL-RUS won the girl. (Noise on all sides. Men approach to congratulate ABU AL-RUS who seems like a cock while ABU AL-KAIF stands trying to keep himself under control.)

THE MAYOR: (Talking to ABU AL-KAIF) It is the will of God. Don't you think you should congratulate your friend?

ABU AL-RUS: God has ordained it. (ABU AL-KAIF approaches ABU AL-RUS) I have good luck.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Coldly) Congratulations, ABU AL-RUS.

ABU AL-RUS: (Shaking hands) You bear me no grudge!

THE MAYOR: (Cheerfully) Let us read the Fatiha in honor of restoring harmony to the quarter.

AKRAM: (Between the two opponents) Let us get united because our quarter is under supervision. (As they read the Fatiha, HABLAT makes a few incomprehensible signs, as if he wants to protest against something.)

ABU AL-RUS: Let us drink and have fun; let us rejoice.

HABLAT: Let joy and pleasant nights prevail. (He stops a moment as if he wants to announce some news) Gentlemen, the lover has agreed, but what about the sweetheart! (Silence falls upon them all.)

HABLAT: We have agreed, but we should know what the king and his daughter have decided.

ABU AL-RUS: (With anger, tries breaking the silence) What do you mean by what you have just said, HABLAT? (Grabbing HABLAT's clothes) I said, what do you mean by what you said, you ominous face?

HABLAT: (Freeing himself from ABU AL-RUS'S hold) I say things should be judged by their consequences and God reward the good. (Scared of ABU AL-RUS'S look) Congratulations, ABU AL-RUS. I saw you in my dream getting married in the shrine and the angels were sprinkling henna upon you. (Everyone laughs and ABU AL-RUS gets angry)

ABU AL-RUS: I don't understand you, HABLAT. You are sometimes fortunate and sometimes God's curse is upon you.

HABLAT: The blessing of the men of God and of pious men be upon generous and noble hearted men. (He stretches out his hand; ABU AL-RUS gives him some money.) Salute ABU AL-RUS with me, and ask God to grant him long life and make all beautiful and honest women fall in love with him.

THE MAYOR: Now we understand where delicious meat goes. To the sweetheart!

ABU AL-RUS: You are all dear ones, but God has ordained that we love beautiful women.

HABLAT: (Leaving) O God, let him be loved.

ABU AL-RUS: (Throws his shoes at HABLAT as the latter is leaving) He is amiable despite everything. (Everyone laughs as the lights dim.)

SCENE III

(The actors set up a scene of THE MAYOR'S office on the other side of the courtyard. THE MAYOR is absent. The scene involves only ABU AL-RUS and his followers, SHEKH SALEH, then HABLAT. THE TEACHER helps ABU AL-RUS to don his splendid cloak.)

THE TEACHER: Is this a cloak for joy or for anger? (To the audience) After a few minutes, SHEIKH SALEH will appear and anger will play a significant part. (He goes out and the scene begins and the SHEIKH enters and everyone gets up in respect for him)

SALEH: I hope everything is all right. You called me for a talk; here I am.

ESCORT: Gifts given by eminent men should not be refused, SALEH.

ABU AL-RUS: Shut up and have respect for SHEIKH SALEH. (To SALEH) You have insulted me, SHEIKH.

SALEH: You mean a lot to me, ABU AL-RUS, but I am not used to accepting gifts.

ESCORT: Fresh meat and sheep heads are signs of admiration.

ABU AL-RUS: Shut up and respect SHEIKH SALEH. (To SALEH) The Apostle accepted gifts, SHEIKH.

SALEH: I am only a poor man and should not be compared with the Apostle.

ABU AL-RUS: You are our Sheikh, the leader of the mosques and the blessing of the shrines.

SALEH: May God bless your perspicacity and desire to protect the dignity of our quarter.

ABU AL-RUS: (Annoyed) Let us come to the point. (He motions his supporters to stay away.)

SALEH: Have we been talking about irrelevant questions?

ABU AL-RUS: We spoke of gifts and I said that the Apostle accepted gifts.

SALEH: (Objecting) And I said you should not compare me with the master of the universe.

ABU AL-RUS: (Continues) Let us talk about the most significant gift.

SALEH: Your leadership and protection are the most precious gifts for us.

ABU AL-RUS: (Annoyed) I admire your intelligence, but let us lay our cards on the table.

SALEH: God forbid! I don't gamble.

ABU AL-RUS: (More annoyed) SAFFIA...SAFFIA, SHEIKH SALEH.

SALEH: What does SAFFIA have to do with this discussion?

ABU AL-RUS: She is the essence of it; she is what I want and seek.

SALEH: My daughter has nothing to do with this.

ABU AL-RUS: (Nervously) ABU AL-RUS wants to be related to you through SAFFIA your daughter.

SALEH: (Coldly as he makes the signs of praising the Lord) I don't recall that you have a son of marriagable age.

ABU AL-RUS: (Furiously) Who said I want to become related to you through my son?

SALEH: And I don't recall that you have a brother.

ABU AL-RUS: (With suppressed rage) Your intelligence has no limit, SHEIKH, but I have intellect enough too. So let us come to the point. You must understand what I want.

SALEH: I don't understand what you want. (Looking at the minaret) The hour of prayer is at hand. (SALEH is about to leave, but ABU AL-RUS grabs him.)

ABU AL-RUS: (With determination) I want to be related to you by marriage, SHEIKH SALEH.

SALEH: With whom do you want to be related!

ABU AL-RUS: With you, SHEIKH SALEH.

SALEH: For yourself! Three years have not passed since you married your third wife. What are you talking about?

ABU AL-RUS: I want SAFFIA for myself.

SALEH: My daughter SAFFIA, legally? What are you talking about, man?

ABU AL-RUS: SAFFIA is a ripe fruit and one should be anxious about her, SHEIKH.

SALEH: SAFFIA is too young and needs somebody to protect her, man.

ABU AL-RUS: I am her protector...I am, SHEIKH SALEH.

SALEH: You are the protector of this quarter and its leader. And God has rewarded you with enough wives.

ABU AL-RUS: I still act according to the law, and I am an eminent man. I have a lot of money, SHEIKH, and I can do anything.

SALEH: God alone can do anything, man.

ABU AL-RUS: (Angrily) Just try to follow what I say, SHEIKH. Try to follow and don't get me lost in the labyrinth of your intelligence. Our topic is your daughter and a legal bond.

SALEH: (Interrupting) It is illegal to marry a girl young enough to be your own daughter.

ABU AL-RUS: Is there anything of this in the law, SHEIKH?

SALEH: It is implicit in reason and logic and the law is reason and logic.

ABU AL-RUS: (Mockingly) If you were not a SHEIKH I would have said you are one of those renegades.

SALEH: Strange! Strange! You question my belief?

ABU AL-RUS: Is it reasonable for someone like me to reiterate such inconceivable thoughts?

SALEH: Is it conceivable that a man your age craves a girl young enough to be his own daughter?

ABU AL-RUS: (Turning to SALEH with flattery) Your lovely daughter has nobody except me to give her the best food to eat and the most elegant clothes to wear.

SALEH: Did I ever complain to you of hunger or any other need?

ABU AL-RUS: I will give her half of my wealth and the other half will remain with the other three.

SALEH: It is not fair, ABU AL-RUS. You should have a sense of justice. You have several sons and three wives.

ABU AL-RUS: But I will have only one, that is SAFFIA. The slaughterhouse and its income will be hers. I will transfer all my shops to her, and she will select her own gold and diamond.

SALEH: It is better to give your wealth to your family and relatives.

ABU AL-RUS: But I want your daughter and her family to share my endless wealth with me.

SALEH: We are all right, thank God! Only the wealth of God is endless.

ABU AL-RUS: (Controlling his anger) No wise man would refuse to marry his daughter to someone like me. If I had no respect for you, I would not have made the proposal.

SALEH: You are well known for being generous, ABU AL-RUS. (Ready to leave) God be with you and thank you for your generosity.

ABU AL-RUS: You have not given me your blessing. Shall we read the Fatiha?

SALEH: We read the Fatiha in order to reform ourselves.

ABU AL-RUS: So, we are agreed to read the Fatiha.

SALEH: Read it, ABU AL-RUS, it will benefit you.
But leave me alone.

ABU AL-RUS: Does that mean you refuse my request?

SALEH: Let it be so if that is how you interpret it.
(He leaves)

ABU AL-RUS: (Angry as a wild bull) Those who reject me
have not been born yet. (His followers rush
to him.)

ESCORT: Shall we read the Fatiha?

ABU AL-RUS: (Angrily) Read the Fatiha over the soul of
he who stands against ABU AL-RUS. (He pulls
a cleaver from the sheath of one of his
followers and brandishes it threateningly.)

ESCORT: Merely name the one who opposes you and I
will cut off his head for you. (HABLAT comes
in, stands watching ABU AL-RUS'S anger.
Soon he starts mumbling.)

HABLAT: Hash mash. Hami al-Kibash, Shukshik Fustiq.
Halabi Tuqtig.¹ Keep remembering him. He
never dies. He is eternal. He endows his
men with things they are not aware of.

ABU AL-RUS: (Annoyed with HABLAT'S unexpected arrival)
Stay away from me today, HABLAT.

HABLAT: You have never been more in need of me than
today.

1. A play on words that loses meaning in translation.

ABU AL-RUS: I don't need you, HABLAT. (He fumes with rage, pacing the place and his supporters follow him.)

HABLAT: It is true, you don't need anyone today except me.

ABU AL-RUS: (To himself) That senile old man will regret it. When ABU AL-RUS says he will regret it, that means he will regret and pay for it dearly.

AIDE: He will come to you creeping and asking for forgiveness.

HABLAT: May God punish you. You would make an innocent and graceful old man crawl...God lives.

AIDE: He who rejects ABU AL-RUS has to crawl and crawl.

ABU AL-RUS: Your friend, SALEH, refuses my request and I don't understand why.

HABLAT: I understand why. (Whispering in ABU AL-RUS'S ear) May God help him with his dilemma.

ABU AL-RUS: You call that a dilemma, somebody refusing the grace that God has chosen for him?

HABLAT: His dilemma is much bigger.

ABU AL-RUS: What do you mean? Have you been spying again?

HABLAT: But SHEIKH SALEH is in trouble.

ABU AL-RUS: You are still defending him. Get out of here before I tear out your bowels.

HABLAT: My bowels are torn to pieces for your sake.

ABU AL-RUS: Take him away before I put an end to his life.

HABLAT: My life is yours, ABU AL-RUS.

ABU AL-RUS: (Helpless) What do you want from me? Hurry up, tell me. (To his followers) Give him something and send him away.

HABLAT: I am the one who will give you a gift today. I am indebted to you.

ABU AL-RUS: What do you want to give me, you idio...? (To himself) Maybe SHEIKH SALEH has sent this idiot to tell me something.

HABLAT: Men like you never despair and should not get insulted.

ABU AL-RUS: Did you come to console me? I don't need people of that kind.

HABLAT: Yes, you need me. Send your followers away. I have something useful to tell you. (The followers move away at a motion from ABU AL-RUS.)

ABU AL-RUS: I will put an end to your life if your talk is meaningless.

HABLAT: We put an end to the life of those who block your way.

ABU AL-RUS: I sense several important things behind your talk.

HABLAT: Several things besides an injured honor.

ABU AL-RUS: Tell me everything you know or I will chop off your head.

HABLAT: You will always need this head because you need my affection and the store of news lying inside this head.

ABU AL-RUS: Does it have to do with SHEIKH SALEH?

HABLAT: It has to do only with SHEIKH SALEH and his daughter.

ABU AL-RUS: And what does SAFFIA have to do with you, you idio... (Getting cautious and milder) Come on, good man, tell me. Give us your blessings, HABLAT.

HABLAT: (Yielding to ABU AL-RUS'S friendliness)
SHEIKH SALEH should not refuse your request.

ABU AL-RUS: I have tried everything and still don't understand anything. How could the request of a man like me be turned down? I am ABU AL-RUS, the leader of Bab al-Maqam and the pillar of the government...

HABLAT: Because he is not a man. SHEIKH SALEH is not like all men.

ABU AL-RUS: I don't understand you.

HABLAT: Because you are a good man. Water moves underneath you and him and neither of you is aware of it.

ABU AL-RUS: No one dares to deceive me...who?

HABLAT: Your heart, ABU AL-RUS.

ABU AL-RUS: Try to be clearer. I hate vagueness, HABLAT.

HABLAT: It is true that you want the girl as your fourth wife.

ABU AL-RUS: I only want her as my wife.
(Silence reigns as HABLAT walks around ABU AL-RUS)

HABLAT: There is no power and no strength save in God. There is no power and no strength save in God.

ABU AL-RUS: Speak HABLAT, speak, otherwise my fire will hit you.

HABLAT: When was ABU AL-RUS a wolf eating the left overs of others?

ABU AL-RUS: (Yelling) Beware...beware of what you are saying, son of a bitch!

HABLAT: If you yell at me I will not speak at all.

ABU AL-RUS: (Controlling himself) What an ominous day! People are crazy, all of them are crazy.

HABLAT: The mad man is the one who leans his back against a mattress and assumes that he is leaning against a wall made of stone.

ABU AL-RUS: (Grabbing HABLAT and shaking him with anger)
If you don't make everything clear I will
tear your liver to pieces and give it to
beggars and poor people.

HABLAT: Who is poorer than me? (Feigning tears) You
want to give my liver to the poor while I am
bringing you everything that benefits you and
keeps you from evil.

ABU AL-RUS: What does SAFFIA have to do with all this?

HABLAT: (With a frightening and suspicious low voice)
IBRAHIM.

ABU AL-RUS: IBRAHIM!

HABLAT: (With more emphasis) IBRAHIM.

ABU AL-RUS: IBRAHIM...who is IBRAHIM? (Trying to
remember) IBRAHIM...there is no IBRAHIM
except the orphan who works in the mill.

HABLAT: It is true, there is no IBRAHIM except the
orphan, the employee of the miller.

ABU AL-RUS: (With more amazement) The employee of the
miller. What does he have to do with us?

HABLAT: (Maliciously) SAFFIA, the daughter of SHEIKH
SALEH...and IBRAHIM the miller's employee.

ABU AL-RUS: Do you mean...? (He seems to understand
HABLAT'S intention.)

HABLAT: That is what I mean.

ABU AL-RUS: (Raising his head angrily) And who told you?

HABLAT: These (pointing to his eyes) and these
 (pointing to his ears).

ABU AL-RUS: Does SHEIKH SALEH know about it?

HABLAT: If he has learned what has been going on
 behind his back and kept silent that means he
 does not deserve to be a prayer leader.

ABU AL-RUS: (To himself) SAFFIA...IBRAHIM (Shouting)
 Woe unto them...They have sacrificed the
 neighborhood's honor. (He motions with his
 hand to his followers. They come around
 him.) (DARKNESS)

SCENE IV

(An Arabic courtyard which ABU AL-RUS has
turned into a guesthouse. Shouting and riot
reign everywhere. The minaret overlooks the
courtyard and the muezzin has just finished
pronouncing the sunset prayer. ABU AL-RUS
and his aides, ABU AL-KAIF and his followers
along with THE MAYOR and AKRAM are seen in an
emotional state.)

ABU AL-KAIF: (Addressing ABU AL-RUS) You know, (to the
 rest) and you all know, that I don't rejoice
 at the misfortune of a lifetime friend. How
 can I do that for the sake of a woman? We
 are men who don't pay attention to malice.
 Malice is the trait of women and cowards.

ABU AL-RUS: The problem has nothing to do with a woman or malice. We are here to salvage the reputation of our respectable quarter. To maintain the dignity of the men of this blessed quarter. (To THE MAYOR) What have you done, MAYOR?

THE MAYOR: You treat some people nicely, they mistreat you in return. IBRAHIM, the orphan, did not keep friendship.

ABU AL-KAIF: And I am the one who asked the mill's owner to take care of him.

ABU AL-RUS: IBRAHIM, the orphan made fools of all of us.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Approving) He made fools of us.

ABU AL-RUS: Of me too.

ABU AL-KAIF: Of me too and of you and you. Woe unto us on the day we get taken by surprise.

ABU AL-RUS: An orphan and poor, yet he does not hesitate to defile the honor of the quarter which treated him so well.

THE MAYOR: May God punish him.

ABU AL-KAIF: That kid must be punished. (His followers take out their pistols.)

ABU AL-RUS: Punishment is my speciality. (His aides pull out their daggers.)

THE MAYOR: (Pointing to AKRAM, the police assistant)
The law is present with us. Let him have his say.

AKRAM: (Laughing) Do you think we should blame everything on that orphan?

ABU AL-RUS: Who else? He is the devil himself. He came to us hungry and we fed him. He was naked, we clothed him. He now has a shelter like anyone else, and I allowed my children to sit and talk to him...then...

ABU AL-KAIF: He betrayed the quarter and its honor. (He pats his friend on the shoulder) Your good heart caused all this. My kind heart, your heart are all full of affection, but this snake sneaks into our ranks and defiles our honor.

AKRAM: (With the calmness of a wise man) Is this not the fault of the girl's father? A sheikh and religious leader, yet he fails to raise his daughter properly.

THE MAYOR: Leave the SHEIKH aside and let us examine this problem.

ESCORT: He is a spy.

ANOTHER: a spy from the opposition party.

ABU AL-RUS: The graves of our saints and ancestors are shaking at the offenses inflicted upon our soil.

ABU AL-KAIF: The forbidden is impure and impurity can't be purified except by shedding blood.

ABU AL-RUS: Shedding his blood is lawful. (Followers get agitated and pull out their guns. At this point AKRAM intervenes.)

AKRAM: For what is the blood to be shed, men?

ABU AL-RUS: Blood and nothing but blood.

AKRAM: So you go and kill IBRAHIM, and the whole case is settled, hunh?

ABU AL-KAIF: One bullet in the head of the evildoer. Leave him to me.

THE MAYOR: Calm down, ABU AL-KAIF, and let the government men talk.

ABU AL-RUS: When did the government advocate the cause of honor or any other cause? It is my government and I know how it operates.

AKRAM: And has AKRAM, the police assistant failed to support the cause of honor or any other cause?

THE MAYOR: Did I not tell you to let the government talk?

ABU AL-RUS: Come on, AKRAM, give us a legal opinion as to what to do with IBRAHIM.

AKRAM: What legal opinion? The orphan has not committed the kind of crime for which one may be indicted. (Everyone is angry) Hearsay and your claims are not acceptable in a court of law.

ABU AL-RUS: Have I not told you that the government never does anything positive regarding the question of honor? Our fellow Mr. AKRAM sympathizes with the criminal. Come on, admit that you agree with him, not with us.

AKRAM: (Controlling his temper) I agree with you but you don't agree with me.

THE MAYOR: We agree with you, Mr. AKRAM.

ABU AL-RUS: It seems that you are defending the dissolute kid and approving his immoral act.

AKRAM: Why should I, being in charge of the security of the quarter, get involved in a love story of a young man?

ABU AL-RUS: Then I know how to restore our quarter's honor. (His men brandish their daggers)

ABU AL-KAIF: We are men, Officer AKRAM, and we don't need the law. (His aides brandish their pistols.)

AKRAM: (His laughter surprises all) Save your weapons for election day and leave the orphan to me.

ABU AL-RUS: (Sarcastically) To tweak his ear and then tell him gently don't defile the honor of the quarter again, otherwise you will get a whipping.

AKRAM: I should search the orphan's house in an attempt to find something forbidden.

ABU AL-RUS: I don't understand that.

ABU AL-KAIF: (As if he understood the officer's intention)
But I don't deal with kids like IBRAHIM.

AKRAM: But who said that you are the one who
supplied him with contraband?

ABU AL-RUS: (Seeming to have understood, he gets up to
hug AKRAM) What a shrewd old fox you are!

THE MAYOR: Have I not told you let the government take
care of these matters?

ABU AL-RUS: Long live the government. I will kill a big
ram for you.

AKRAM: (With perfect seriousness) No one thought
that IBRAHIM, the poor orphan, was involved
in smuggling drugs.

ABU AL-KAIF: A kid dealing in drugs and I have not learned
anything about him. (Laughing)

ABU AL-RUS: (After he stops laughing like the rest) What
is the punishment for drug dealers?

AKRAM: The law has not yet approved the death
sentence. But you will forget his name after
he spends a long time in jail.

ABU AL-RUS: Where is the conclusive evidence, ABU
AL-KAIF?

AKRAM: Thank God, it is available.

ABU AL-KAIF: Who would supply the government with evidence
except me?

AKRAM: Now, what is your opinion? Am I in agreement with him or with you?

ABU AL-RUS: With the truth, great hero...with the truth.

THE MAYOR: You never agreed with evil smugglers, Officer AKRAM.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Screaming but no one listens to him) And the girl, what is her punishment? (He repeats the question, others start to listen to him) What is the girl's punishment? Has she not participated in the crime?

AKRAM: But this has nothing to do with the government.

ABU AL-RUS: It has something to do with people of experience. (Sarcastically) Shame on SHEIKH SALEH. He is biting his nose to spite his face. (DARKNESS)

SCENE V

(Actors are setting up a shrine. Their work is accompanied by a voice of a singer. The night becomes dreary. Dreariness penetrates everything. The scene begins when SAFFIA comes in with a shawl on her head. She searches and calls IBRAHIM in a subdued voice. IBRAHIM appears. They hold each other's hands but IBRAHIM avoids embracing her.)

IBRAHIM: I did not expect you to get the letter and I had no hope whatsoever that you would come.

SAFFIA: I went mad when I read your letter. Tell me, what happened and why are you running away?

IBRAHIM: (Holding SAFFIA'S hand and taking her to the shrine's wall) Don't worry, SAFFIA, it is only a summer cloud and it will pass. I love God, he will never disappoint me.

SAFFIA: But what happened and why do you have to run away and hide? Did something happen and you did not let me know?

IBRAHIM: When one anticipates something that means it is likely to happen.

SAFFIA: I still don't understand. I am almost going mad.

IBRAHIM: They used to love me and they used to help me too. Then something happened that brought their hatred from its lair. Why do they do that?

SAFFIA: I don't understand anything. Hurry up, tell me. Today, I took a risk in going out.

IBRAHIM: And you should go back right now.

SAFFIA: Not before I know the truth.

IBRAHIM: The truth is as clear as the sun. They are looking for me.

SAFFIA: Why do they look for you? What have you done that forces you to hide? You did not commit any crime!

IBRAHIM: That is exactly what I don't understand. With my own ears I heard officer AKRAM telling them, search his quilt too. They ended up saying clearly that "IBRAHIM, the orphan, is dealing in drugs. He will not get away with it."

SAFFIA: (Sighs) You! Deal in drugs! (After a moment) It is a plot, IBRAHIM.

IBRAHIM: That is why I am running away. I know it is a plot.

SAFFIA: And who is plotting against you? Officer AKRAM!

IBRAHIM: That is impossible. A good man like AKRAM does not hold grudges.

SAFFIA: (As if she has remembered something important) ABU AL-RUS, the crude cattle merchant, must be the one who holds a grudge against you.

IBRAHIM: But why should ABU AL-RUS hate me? I did not harm him, but I heard them with my own ears saying that I am dealing in drugs and they say that they have found enough drugs in my house to put me in prison for the rest of my life. Something wrong must have happened.

SAFFIA: (Still trying to find an answer) ABU AL-RUS talked to my father about obtaining my hand in marriage.

IBRAHIM: (Scornfully) He asked for your hand!

SAFFIA: And my father turned him down.

IBRAHIM: He is your father's age. He is married and... (Like someone who remembers something) But no one knows that I want you. What a calamity. Do you think that I love you?

SAFFIA: But I love you. Why should we worry? Let everybody know.

IBRAHIM: Keep quiet, SAFFIA. Somebody may hear us.

SAFFIA: Are you frightened of my love for you?

IBRAHIM: I am concerned about you. Probably if your father knows about our relationship, he will forbid it and punish you.

SAFFIA: My father fears God and he who fears God never tears down the house of love.

IBRAHIM: (With a sigh) But we do not have a house to be destroyed.

SAFFIA: We will have a house, IBRAHIM...we will have.

IBRAHIM: (With a sigh) Poverty did not let us build a house. Besides, I am charged with dealing in drugs. How can we build a house while they are after me?

SAFFIA: (Reproachfully) Is it not love that builds a house?

IBRAHIM: Love builds up our spirit. (With pain) I don't understand the secret of this deadly hatred.

SAFFIA: Do you yield to hopelessness?

IBRAHIM: I imagine after I leave you, the owl will hoot in this place...It was once a place where I could see only birds chirping as if they were in paradise.

SAFFIA: You just said it was a summer cloud and it would pass.

IBRAHIM: And who will acquit me of a charge that may keep me away from you until I am old? I have no one in this quarter to say that I have been persecuted. I have nobody except you. You who can't utter a word about what is right or wrong.

SAFFIA: God always helps the persecuted.

IBRAHIM: But until the wrong is righted the future is dead.

SAFFIA: I am the future, don't worry. I will wait for you.

IBRAHIM: I don't want you to waste your youth waiting for a fugitive like me.

SAFFIA: My youth without you is an old age. I love you as a miller and a fugitive.

IBRAHIM: What a wonderful girl you are. (After a moment) I free you, SAFFIA, from all the pledges you made to me.

SAFFIA: (With determination) I swear I will always wait for you. I call upon this shrine and all shrines to be my witnesses. I swear by God that I will wait for you regardless of how long you stay away.

IBRAHIM: (Covering his face to hide tears) I know that. I know that you are like my mother and my father. You are the truth that bears witness to my innocence. You are the innocence that convinces me that life is still good and going on.

SAFFIA: (Embracing him like her child) Good IBRAHIM...Poor IBRAHIM. May God guard you against your enemies and against evildoers and the wolves of night. (Becoming aware) And where are you going to stay? You will live in cemeteries!

IBRAHIM: They are safer than our quarter.

SAFFIA: And how will you live and eat? How can I leave you alone?

IBRAHIM: You will be with me here in my heart. So I will not feel lonely or scared.

SAFFIA: (She puts her shawl around him) It may protect you against the cold of night.

IBRAHIM: (Touching the shawl reverently) What will your family say? Don't you think they will ask you about it?

SAFFIA: I will tell them that I dropped it.

IBRAHIM: With your shawl I will never get cold and through you I will never despair. You are late, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: (Preparing to leave) I will get you food whenever I can. How can I find out where you are?

IBRAHIM: Don't risk your life for my sake.

SAFFIA: Then for whom should I risk my life?

IBRAHIM: (Joyfully) One interrupted whistle like this (he whistles) and I will come out to you.

SAFFIA: (As she leaves) Take care of yourself for my sake.

(As she leaves, IBRAHIM stands alone. Then he squats, hiding his face with his hands. After a moment, HABLAT appears from a corner, watches IBRAHIM, then disappears. As IBRAHIM contemplates what lies around him, fear comes over him. He rushes to the shrine's door.)

(DARKNESS)

CURTAIN FALLS

PART TWO

SCENE I

(The scene occurs in the courtyard of the quarter. The actors are setting up a new scene. Posters and pictures of candidates indicate that a parliamentary election is underway in the country. A group of actors is getting training in acclamation and ceremonial singing. Another group is carrying and moving props to construct the scene.)

THE TEACHER: We are constructing an old scene in which there is nothing new except slogans referring to democracy. Some of you may ask about the relation between the election campaign and the story of IBRAHIM and SAFFIA. (To his friends) Have you finished constructing the scene? (They carry on their work) The election day is a month away, but the battle has already started in this quarter. The leaders of this quarter are prominent supporters of the ruling party, to which they can guarantee a large number of votes. (To the actors) Shall we start the show?

ABU AL-RUS: (Working as scene designer) If we belonged to the opposition party, we couldn't have put

an end to the offenses of IBRAHIM. We have the approval of our ruling party to take IBRAHIM dead or alive.

THE AIDE: (As he moves a piece of scenery) We should guarantee our party's success in the election, for its success means the resumption of wealth to ABU AL-RUS, to ABU AL-KAIF, to THE MAYOR and to me, too. I am so happy with my work in this quarter. I receive gifts that help men like me to face up to life. With regard to IBRAHIM, his case is settled and the success of our party means his final end.

THE TEACHER: Thus the problem of IBRAHIM and SAFFIA is connected with the election, which has already brought about the murders of several men whose perpetrators the law failed to condemn. I personally believe that once IBRAHIM is arrested and shot down, his death will be attributed to the fierce election campaign. Then the supporters who committed a few lapses will be acquitted for the sake of promoting democracy and justice. (To the actors) It seems that the scene is ready now. (He withdraws.)

SCENE II

(In the courtyard of the quarter, ABU AL-RUS, ABU AL-KAIF, THE MAYOR, the AIDE and assistants get together. They seem to be expecting the arrival of someone.)

THE MAYOR: Thank God! We have preceded all the big quarters in setting up the required embellishments.

AKRAM: Our generous MAYOR deserves all the credit for it.

THE MAYOR: Men such as ABU AL-RUS and ABU AL-KAIF deserve all the credit. Their goodness exceeded that of other leaders in the whole city. Oh, Lord, support our government and its supporters.

ABU AL-RUS: What news do you have, Officer AKRAM?

AKRAM: His description has been sent out to police headquarters and border posts. He can't escape our justice. The government is awake.

ABU AL-RUS: But I want to grab him with my own hands. We want him at our disposal so as to restore the honor of a quarter well known for its patriotism and its contribution to our national independence.

THE MAYOR: Long live independence.

ABU AL-RUS: Men like the one whose name I hate don't hesitate to undermine the moral values that

our ancestors cherished and were nourished by.

ABU AL-KAIF: They also resort to degenerate means in order to spread forbidden things among people. For such men there is nothing better than beating them and confining them to prison.

THE MAYOR: AKRAM will take care of that. The election is underway and we should focus our attention and efforts on the campaign.

ABU AL-RUS: There should not be such a thing as an election campaign. Who dares vote for other than pro-government candidates? (With yearning he looks at the edge of the courtyard) Where is SHEIKH SALEH?

THE MAYOR: He will come soon. He promised to come and he will come. (HABLAT shows up and ABU AL-RUS shows disappointment. HABLAT comes forward.)

HABLAT: (Announcing in a low voice) SHEIKH SALEH is coming. (All rise as if they are about to engage in a dangerous encounter. SHEIKH SALEH greets the crowd with a subdued voice and the crowd answers: "Peace be with you and may God have mercy upon you")

- SALEH: This looks like a war council. I see grim faces. There must be something serious.

THE MAYOR: Your presence here with us is a blessing,
SHEIKH.

AKRAM: And no discussion wins success without the
blessing of good men.

ABU AL-RUS: SHEIKH SALEH has always been with us.

ABU AL-KAIF: And he will vote for our party.

SALEH: Elections! It is still early.

ABU AL-RUS: We would like you to join us, SHEIKH SALEH.

SALEH: God is with the people.

THE MAYOR: That is what I always say about the
SHEIKH--he is with the people.

ABU AL-RUS: (With a challenge) We ask our SHEIKH to give
us a clear answer.

SALEH: Have I ever tried to give you an ambiguous
one, ABU AL-RUS?

ABU AL-RUS: (With extreme malice) I asked you once to
answer a legitimate question, you never did.

SALEH: That should be left for fate.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Intervening) And where is IBRAHIM, SHEIKH?

SALEH: (Interrupting him) What IBRAHIM? I don't
understand your question.

ABU AL-RUS: There is not other IBRAHIM except IBRAHIM the
orphan.

SALEH: What concern is he of mine?

ABU AL-KAIF: IBRAHIM has disappeared and the government is
looking for him.

SALEH: The government is here, ask Officer AKRAM.

ABU AL-RUS: (Earnestly) IBRAHIM, the orphan, SHEIKH.
IBRAHIM the criminal.

SALEH: What have I to do with him? The kid has disappeared.

ABU AL-RUS: Why did he disappear?

SALEH: Why do we die, why do we live? It is the will of God.

ABU AL-KAIF: Has he not disappeared because he is being hunted?

SALEH: That is what they say, is it not?

ABU AL-KAIF: Should we not believe?

SALEH: And who can disapprove what the government says?

ABU AL-RUS: You think the orphan does not deserve the charge.

SALEH: If what they say is true, he deserves the charge.

ABU AL-RUS: (With cold bloodedness) Don't you know, SHEIKH that IBRAHIM is charged with smuggling...?

ABU AL-KAIF: Don't you think he has violated the laws of the government?

SALEH: God knows the truth. Not everyone who violates the laws is criminal and not every free man is innocent.

ABU AL-RUS: May God preserve your life, our revered SHEIKH. You understand things so quickly.

SALEH: It seems that I don't understand very well
and I have lost my presence of mind.

THE MAYOR: You are full of blessing and knowledge,
SHEIKH.

SALEH: In fact, I don't understand but I want to
learn, kind MAYOR.

ABU AL-RUS: (To others) May God preserve our good
SHEIKH. He shows good intentions.
(Suddenly) Back to the orphan, SHEIKH. We
want you to show us where the kid is hidden.

SALEH: (Angry and shocked) What do I have to do
with the disappearance of an accused
fugitive. (Getting up to leave) It seems
that I made a mistake, I should not have come
here today. Peace be with you. (SALEH walks
two feet away; ABU AL-RUS follows him)

ABU AL-RUS: How do you deny your relationship with
him...? (After a moment) When your daughter
has an emotional relationship with him.
(Apprehensive silence permeates the crowd and
SHEIKH SALEH seems to be shocked.)

SALEH: What did you say, cruel one?

ABU AL-KAIF: He spoke the truth.

SALEH: So, you agree with his cruelty, you...(THE
MAYOR and AKRAM hold SALEH and calm him
down.)

SALEH: (To both) Have you heard...have you heard?

AKRAM: Calm down, SHEIKH, you are a wise man. Calm down and listen to the truth.

SALEH: (With pain) What truth...? This is a lie and falsification. They don't fear God anymore. Men of this quarter, don't you fear God?

AKRAM: Calm down SHEIKH. A wise man like you...

SALEH: (Interrupting) What does my daughter have to do with an accused fugitive?

ABU AL-RUS: (Coldly) Now I understand why you refused to let me marry your daughter...because she had an emotional relationship with the fugitive.

SALEH: (Putting aside his dignity and attempting to beat ABU AL-RUS, but AKRAM holds him back) Shut up, cruel one...enemy of God. (THE MAYOR holds him back, SALEH collapses) Admit you are lying..you are all lying. (He is faced with a silent crowd) Admit that it is one of your campaign tricks..Admit it and I will vote for you. I swear to you by the sacredness of these shrines that I will invoke God in favor of your campaign, just admit that you are all liars.

THE MAYOR: (With affection) We know that you support us but the truth is the truth.

SALEH: (Weak) Even you, MAYOR,...you the friend of my childhood...even you!

ABU AL-RUS: I don't lie to you. Just calm down and listen to the truth.

SALEH: (Bowing his head) And what truth is that which pollutes the houses of honest men with lies and slander. O God, I have no power to defeat them, but don't abandon me.

ABU AL-RUS: Calm down and listen, SHEIKH. What I am going to tell you is well known by all the neighbors.

SALEH: Neighbors...What do the neighbors know?

ABU AL-RUS: Ask them if you don't believe me. Ask officer AKRAM and THE MAYOR; ask any passer-by now; ask and you will receive the answer that helps you not to distrust us.

SALEH: I don't believe it...I can't understand anything.

ABU AL-RUS: IBRAHIM and your daughter...let us ask the eyewitness.

SALEH: (With pain) So there is also an eyewitness.

ABU AL-RUS: Saw them with his own eyes, SHEIKH...with his own eyes.

SALEH: (Trying to ease his pain) And the eyewitness is one of your supporters.

ABU AL-RUS: There is no one among my supporters who pays attention to the act of defiling the sacredness of the shrines.

SALEH: (Indignant) Slander. SAFFIA is my own offspring. My child has never led a dissolute life.

ABU AL-RUS: Then ask HABLAT, the good man.

SALEH: HABLAT! (HABLAT moves toward SALEH carefully.)

ABU AL-KAIF: HABLAT does not know what lying is. (HABLAT moves forward with more self-confidence)

SALEH: HABLAT is the eyewitness?

AKRAM: He saw them with his own eyes. Those two eyes which one day will be filled with earth.

ABU AL-RUS: Ask this good man HABLAT, SHEIKH. May God forgive those who torment their families and friends.

SALEH: (Staring at HABLAT'S face like somebody asking for sympathy) HABLAT!

HABLAT: (Rushing to kiss SALEH'S hand) With my own eyes, master..with my own eyes.

SALEH: (With injured pride) Where and when did it happen?

HABLAT: (Still trying to kiss SALEH'S hand) I swear by God, I saw them with my own eyes.

SALEH: (With determination) Where and when did it happen?

HABLAT: In the shrine, master.

SALEH: They used the shrine?

HABLAT: They would meet in moonlit and moonless nights.

SALEH: (Trying still to believe) You saw them with your own eyes?

HABLAT: (Withdrawing in humbleness) May God pluck my eyes out if I lie to you. I have no reason to lie, master.

SALEH: That is enough...that is enough. (Shouting in pain) O God take back my soul and relieve me of this unbearable pain. (He sinks in a chair; THE MAYOR comes consoling him.)

THE MAYOR: It is the will of God, SHEIKH SALEH.

SALEH: (Crying silently) I have never harmed anybody. Have I ever hurt any men or children? Why do I have to suffer this plague...why?

ABU AL-RUS: (With disguised meanness and malicious joy) Before you take action to cleanse the mud from our face and yours, I advise you to investigate more to make sure that what you heard is true.

ABU AL-KAIF: Let women and a midwife examine the girl to find out what the criminal did to her.

SALEH: Whether she is a virgin or not, it does not make any difference. (Standing with his customary pride) The whole noble quarter has been hurt...men, women and honor have been hurt.

ABU AL-RUS: Religion is hurt too, SHEIKH.

SALEH: Woe unto the man who murders the honor of this quarter.

ABU AL-RUS: God ordered us to be just and justice demands us to make everyone understand the crime of this murderer.

THE MAYOR: I don't think SHEIKH SALEH opposes the midwife and women examining his daughter.

SALEH: (Giving up) Then...then what?

THE MAYOR: Then it is up to you to decide, SHEIKH.

SALEH: (In helpless resignation) I will do whatever you want, but it is your duty to deal with IBRAHIM.

AKRAM: The government demands his head.

ABU AL-RUS: IBRAHIM'S head is the quarter's property and with it the quarter will restore its lost dignity.

SALEH: (Leaving slowly) O God, I am powerless to put you to the test. The decision is made and can't be cancelled...can't be cancelled.

SCENE III

(THE TEACHER helps the actors change the scene and set up a new one. Here, men may play the roles of WOMEN and a MIDWIFE, all dressed in black gowns. The setting is going to be SHEIKH SALEH'S house. The actors imitate women's voices.)

ACTOR: We have lived to see men turning into women.

SECOND ACTOR: Lucky is the woman loved by young and old men.

THIRD ACTOR: (He is playing a midwife character) Touching SAFFIA'S body with my fingers must be a pleasant experience.

THE TEACHER: From the first touch you will discover the crime, my aunt. (Laughing) Now, hurry up, examine the honor of our quarter.
(A piece of canvas is set up to separate off the part of the stage where the WOMEN examine the virginity of SAFFIA. On the other side of the stage SALEH is seen standing worried, pacing back and forth.)

SALEH: O God if you think I am doomed to suffer and live the wretched life of an outcast, please Lord have mercy on me and help me escape misery, wretchedness and exile. (He is paying attention to the movement that started with the struggle of the WOMEN against SAFFIA.)

SAFFIA: (Crying and struggling against the WOMEN who had come to force her to take her clothes off and have her lie on the floor) Leave me alone, you wicked WOMEN. (They touch her body) Help, father...help...come and help your innocent daughter.

SALEH: (With pain and confusion he resumes his prayer and supplication) God help us understand the known and the unknown and what you know. (SALEH'S supplication is mixed with the magical words of women and the muffled sound of SAFFIA'S crying and appeal for help.)

SAFFIA: Come help me, father. They will bring disgrace upon me...I am innocent, father.

WOMEN: What has been hidden is revealed now. The blessed girl is still virgin and retains her honor.

MIDWIFE: (With a loud voice) God protect us against evil. (SALEH is still silent and scared) We thank God for protecting our honor. Sing out, WOMEN, the girl has turned out to be honest and innocent. (The situation gets quiet and the WOMEN stand away from the girl who is in her underwear. She is deeply disturbed. SALEH is seen getting his ear close to the curtain.)

SALEH: Thank God...thank God.

MIDWIFE: (From behind the curtain) Thank God, SHEIKH SALEH, the girl is innocent and clean.

SALEH: (With a sigh of comfort) I knew...I knew that God would help me. (ABU AL-RUS and ABU AL-KAIF are seen standing in the background.

SALEH: (Calling on his daughter with affection)
SAFFIA, SAFFIA, you are clean.

SAFFIA: (With spiteful pain) Do you think the rose
is still fresh after it has been touched by
their hands?

SALEH: (With anxiety) Don't say that, my dear.
Come to me.

SAFFIA: (With a challenge) I want him, he is the
purest one among you.

ABU AL-RUS: (From a distance) Have you heard what she
said, SHEIKH? (SALEH confused) She wants to
go to him. (Shouting) Where are those
depraved WOMEN? They covered her scandal
with lies.

SALEH: What are you talking about, man? The girl is
clean and innocent. (The last WOMAN leaves.)

SAFFIA: (Shouting) I will wait for him because I
love him.

SALEH: Close your mouth against sin, SAFFIA.

ABU AL-RUS: Do you hear with your ears, respectable
SHEIKH?

SAFFIA: I love him and I exist for him. He has been
tortured by cruel men, but I will not torment
him.

SALEH: (Watching the two men advancing) Keep quiet,
SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: I am for him, that is my promise and I will die for him.

ABU AL-KAIF: The scandal is clear as the sun. (SALEH is trying to grab SAFFIA, but ABU AL-RUS keeps him from doing that.)

SALEH: Shedding your blood is admissable, you depraved girl.

ABU AL-RUS: Calm down, SHEIKH. Her blood should be shed in the sacred place where she met IBRAHIM, the criminal. Calm down, man and be wise.

SALEH: (Shouting like a mad man) You are murdering me, SAFFIA.

ABU AL-RUS: Kill her before she kills you and kills the virtue of this noble quarter.

ABU AL-KAIF: Killing her on the threshold of the shrine will wash away all the ugly sins.

SALEH: (Crying) May God have mercy on me and take away my soul.

ABU AL-RUS: You are authorized by God to take her soul away. (Giving him a knife) With this you can put an end to your pain and to the scandal of this quarter which loved and respected you.

SALEH: (Holding the knife) I have raised her in accordance with lofty morals. I have done all I could, but it is the will of God. (Screaming like a wounded animal) May God's

curse fall upon you, SAFFIA. (He falls at her feet crying.)

(DARKNESS)

SCENE IV

(The actors are constructing a shrine. The shrine of Abu al-Samaih is shrouded in a dreary darkness. THE TEACHER is contemplating the shrine.)

THE TEACHER: We weary you along with us, shrine. We make you present and eliminate you too.

ACTOR: We are the ones who get tired.

ANOTHER ACTOR: (Starting a popular song) O Haji Muhammad
Yo, Yo.

ACTOR: O SHEIKH SALEH, Yo, Yo.

A GROUP: Give me your knife, yo, yo.
To kill the girl, yo, yo.
Alexander has not died, yo, yo.
Left girls behind, yo, yo.

THE TEACHER: (Contemplating the sky) This is a suitable time for offering sacrifices and securing the quarter's blessing. (The scene starts when SALEH comes in. He is tired, mentally and emotionally. SAFFIA is walking helplessly before him. Both stand in front of the shrine.)

SALEH: Stand there, yes, there. Don't move. (After a moment) I don't want you to utter a word. Ask God for forgiveness. Read a few verses of the Koran that may ease the moment of death. (Hesitant) Don't forget the word of God. Ask God's forgiveness.

SAFFIA: Why should I ask God's forgiveness when I did not commit any crime? (With a challenge)

SALEH: And you still blaspheme, you dissolute girl!

SAFFIA: I don't blaspheme and I never did. I was born religious. You raised me according to the principles of religion and I will die religious. I don't fear anything except this world which is cruel and will remain cruel.

SALEH: What you did disgraced my name.

SAFFIA: When did pure love ever disgrace anyone, father?

SALEH: I am not your father. May God curse the day of your birth and the day you disgraced me. (Repeating) I am not your father...I am not your father.

SAFFIA: What did I do to make you deny me?

SALEH: No excuse can free you from the destiny that God has ordained.

SAFFIA: You mean the destiny which the quarter's leaders have ordained. The destiny that hatred has created.

SALEH: (Hesitant) The quarter's leaders are not decent men (affirming) but you have deviated from the right path and violated the dignity of this quarter and the chastity of women.

SAFFIA: I have done nothing that angers God.

SALEH: Shut up, you depraved girl. You still deny your relationship with that criminal.

SAFFIA: IBRAHIM was not a criminal and will never be. He is purer than all the men who rule the quarter. (With sadness) How poor is our quarter and how miserable are its poor people.

SALEH: You are still defending him. (Angry) Kneel down, SAFFIA. (She kneels down) Only your blood will cleanse my reputation and the quarter's honor.

SAFFIA: I don't fear being killed. Did Isaac fear death in ancient times?

SALEH: Your death is legitimate.

SAFFIA: Only innocence does not fear death in a cruel world. Death in the age of cruelty is innocence. Thus I meet my peers.

SALEH: (Weakness comes over him) Who taught you eloquence (Strongly) and you are approaching death? (After a short silence) Cursed be your deed, SAFFIA.

SAFFIA: Have I not read the Kcran; have you not taught me the prophetic tradition?

SALEH: I have taught you the noblest values and morals.

SAFFIA: And I used to hear you at night praying.

SALEH: I was praying to God for protection against evil men.

SAFFIA: My ears and my soul listened to your purity. (Suddenly) What happened to you, what made you listen to the merchants of rotten meat and drug dealers? (With tenderness and entreaty) Pay attention to us.

SALEH: (Rebukes his daughter and feels weak before her) Shut up, you have no right to judge people; you who have defiled your chastity.

SAFFIA: (Sarcastically) You have heard your midwife proclaiming my chastity.

SALEH: And I have heard how attached you are to that criminal who ran away with your honor.

SAFFIA: Does not your pure intuition tell you that IBRAHIM was falsely accused of dealing in drugs?

SALEH: Don't mention his name before me.

SAFFIA: He taught me that God really loves me. He is the purest of men and his heart holds no grudge.

SALEH: But he knows how to hurt men's feelings.

SAFFIA: He wanted to marry me legally and I knew you would never turn him down because you loved him. Have you not said to me that he reminds you of saints and the men of God?

SALEH: (Weakly) I had respect for his orphanhood.

SAFFIA: Was not the prophet also an orphan?

SALEH: (Angry) Not every orphan is a prophet.

SAFFIA: And not every orphan is a criminal.

SALEH: But he tried to defile the honor of our family and our quarter.

SAFFIA: Their anger flamed when you turned down the request of the meat merchant. They wanted to defile his purity and innocence. I love him.

SALEH: Don't say that. (He pulls his knife and she bends her head.)

SAFFIA: If there is no escape from death, let it come fast, father. May God forgive us.

SALEH: (He is so moved that he turned his eyes to the sky) If that is your will, Lord, give me enough courage to kill...the one I love.
(Trying to suppress his crying) Lord, you have given me the power to love, help me to stop loving.

SAFFIA: (Calling on him) Kill me, father, kill me.

SALEH: O God, don't discourage me.

SAFFIA: Kill me, father, kill me.

SALEH: O God (He bursts into tears as he pulls the knife) Allah is the greatest. (IBRAHIM comes from behind the shrine, rushes against SALEH, taking the knife from his hand and throws it away.)

IBRAHIM: Killing innocent people should be stopped. Are they not content with chopping my head off?

SALEH: (Getting up after his sudden fall) Who is it? IBRAHIM? What made you come here?

IBRAHIM: IBRAHIM is here because that is what God wanted.

SALEH: You have come to witness the consequences of your crime?

IBRAHIM: What have I done to make you kill SAFFIA?

SALEH: You have defiled the vessel for mean purposes and ran away.

IBRAHIM: What is the vessel I defiled? Do you consider my honest love...?

SALEH: (Confused) Why did you run away if you were innocent?

IBRAHIM: They brought a false charge against me. Do you believe them, uncle?

SALEH: I am not your uncle.

IBRAHIM: Even you, uncle! Was I not one of those who joined you in prayer and listened to your lessons?

SALEH: And SAFFIA (weakly) Why SAFFIA...?

IBRAHIM: God has blessed love. I wanted to be strong enough to ask you for her hand as honest men do.

SALEH: (With visible tenderness) That could have been the right thing and we could have avoided the scandal.

IBRAHIM: Everything would have turned out the same because the criminal who was after SAFFIA'S body would have made up something to hurt, you, me and SAFFIA.

SALEH: I would have refused his demands.

IBRAHIM: Then why do you kill your daughter?

SALEH: There must be blood to wash away disgrace.

IBRAHIM: In what kind of disgrace does this quarter now live?

SALEH: (With weak determination) There must be blood.

IBRAHIM: Let it be my blood.

SALEH: Your blood? (IBRAHIM brings the knife and gives it to SALEH)

SAFFIA: (Screaming) No...if blood is needed it should be my blood.

IBRAHIM: I will never let even the hem of your dress be touched. (He puts the knife in SALEH'S hand) Kill me and satisfy the quarter's thirst for revenge.

SAFFIA: My blood must be sacrificed for you.

SALEH: (Moved by what has happened) That is enough...that is enough, children.

IBRAHIM: (To SAFFIA) I will never let you sacrifice yourself for the sake of the hatred of a cruel quarter. Its law will not be applied to you, SAFFIA.

SALEH: That is enough...that is enough children.

SAFFIA: Kill me, father, and prove their victory. They made IBRAHIM a fugitive and handed you the knife to cut off my head and you grabbed it innocently.

SALEH: (Shouting) That is enough, children. I can't take any more. (He throws the knife away and sits with his head bent) God, don't abandon me.

IBRAHIM: (Approaching SALEH) It is time to be more sensible, uncle. I am here before you, do to me whatever you like. I have nothing in this world except SAFFIA.

SALEH: (As if discovering something for the first time, he shouts with joy) The knife was in my hand and my intention was to kill. Then you appeared at the right time. It is the will of God. Is it not the will of God that Isaac was saved and instead a ram was killed? You are the compassionate, the merciful one.

(He stands up) Listen to me, both of you.

(They come close to him) You, IBRAHIM, do you love SAFFIA as I do and as God conceived love?

IBRAHIM: (Confused) SAFFIA...SAFFIA, my uncle.

SALEH: Tell me. Tell me.

IBRAHIM: (Moved) SAFFIA is the star in the sky of my orphanhood. She illuminated the path of the truth that I had lost. She is my mother, uncle. She is the religious verse that I recite in my loneliness; she is the love I have never experienced before.

SALEH: And you, SAFFIA, do you want this good orphan?

SAFFIA: (Bashfully) Without him I feel I am an orphan.

SALEH: And I..there is no one else for me.

SAFFIA: We will always be here for you.

SALEH: But I want you to be for each other. You are completing a link in the chain of our life.
(Bowing his head) I am very ashamed of myself. I want to do something for you both.

IBRAHIM: As long as you know that SAFFIA is innocent, that is all we care about.

SALEH: But I want to do something dear for you.
(Thinking) I want to stay here.

SAFFIA: I don't understand.

IBRAHIM: Does that mean you...?

SALEH: (Interrupting) I have decided to fulfill the wish of truth. Let this sacred place be your home, and the site of your marriage. Come to me. (The young couple goes to him with incredible wonder) Their marriage is sanctioned by their own consent and willingness. God has created male and female to know one another and to understand friendship and love. You are the symbol of purity, my children. With your legal marriage, I will wash away all the bad thoughts that disturbed and tortured my life.

IBRAHIM: How are you going to face the quarter's men, uncle?

SALEH: I will stain my hands and clothes with the blood of an animal. And since SAFFIA is staying here, they will think that she has been killed.

SAFFIA: (She embraces her father) I love you, father.

SALEH: Forgive me, I could have committed an unforgivable sin.

IBRAHIM: The night of cruelty will not last long, uncle.

SALEH: Your stay in this shrine will not last long. Don't fear hunger, you will always get enough

for two days. (To IBRAHIM) Take care of her, son. (To SAFFIA) Be tender with him. (Seriously) Now let me conduct the marriage ceremony. (The couple comes closer to SHEIKH SALEH. The latter reads verses from the Holy Koran.)

(DARKNESS)

SCENE V

(In the quarter's courtyard, an angry crowd. ABU AL-RUS, ABU AL-KAIF, their supporters, THE MAYOR and AKRAM get together. HABLAT is standing away from them.)

THE MAYOR: (As if he is resuming a speech) Our party will sweep the election.

ABU AL-RUS: And who dares say the opposite?

ABU AL-KAIF: We will chop off the heads of those who betray us.

ABU AL-RUS: As SHEIKH SALEH chopped off the head of his dissolute daughter.

THE MAYOR: May God have mercy on those who have departed this world.

ABU AL-RUS: (Sarcastically) Who left this world for the second world?

THE MAYOR: Those who die get their reward.

ABU AL-RUS: (Angry) We are no longer men when we accept seeing our dignity going down the drain.

THE MAYOR: (Thinking along with the rest) Our dignity down the drain! What are you talking about, man?

ABU AL-RUS: (Even more sarcastically) I said that two heavenly doves are staying in the shrine of Abu al-Samaih. Have you ever heard of such a thing?

THE MAYOR: That is something that I heard from SHEIKH SALEH, but what does this have to do with what you are saying?

AKRAM: The elections have tired ABU AL-RUS. May God preserve his health.

ABU AL-RUS: It is my naivety that has worn me out and my good will that has made me look like an idiot. I am an idiot, fellows. Say, I am an idiot and I will give you a prize. (With anger) But you are not better than me. (Complete silence) Two heavenly birds living in the shrine! A divine gesture, is it not, gentlemen?

THE MAYOR: Truly, I don't understand what has been said.

AKRAM: I don't understand either.

ABU AL-RUS: I swear by my father's tomb that each one of you has consoled SHEIKH SALEH over the death of his depraved daughter. Gentlemen, you extended your sympathies to the lost honor of

the quarter. The honor which SHEIKH SALEH has murdered with his shrewdness.

AKRAM: What are you saying man, Do you want to say that SALEH has cheated you?

ABU AL-RUS: The imposter has fooled all of us. (Calling out) HABLAT, come here. (HABLAT comes) Tell the men, HABLAT, what you have seen and heard.

HABLAT: A heavenly bird sleeping in the arms of a male bird.

THE MAYOR: I can't make anything out of your symbols, you idiot.

AKRAM: You mean...

ABU AL-RUS: (Explaining) He means that SAFFIA enjoys the pleasure of lying in the arms of IBRAHIM, the fugitive. (Mumbling, protests, amazement and anger)

AKRAM: IBRAHIM!

ABU AL-RUS: Yes, IBRAHIM, Mr. Officer. IBRAHIM enjoys the grace of freedom and the pleasure of SAFFIA'S young body.

THE MAYOR: Do you mean SHEIKH SALEH lied to us?

ABU AL-KAIF: He deceived us. Who knows, maybe he was lying to us even in his prayers.

ABU AL-RUS: Continue, HABLAT.

HABLAT: They live in the shrine and SHEIKH SALEH supplies them with food.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Shouting) Two criminals living in our sacred land...the land of our saints. In our land the crime of adultery is committed?

HABLAT: They seem to be married.

ABU AL-RUS: And who is the witness of their marriage? Maybe the graves' wolves or the sky's birds.

THE MAYOR: In truth, I don't understand anything.

ABU AL-KAIF: We will never put up with such an injustice.

AKRAM: What are you going to do, ABU AL-RUS?

ABU AL-RUS: (He goes to his chair, sits comfortably and calmly) I have nothing in mind but the best, men.

ABU AL-KAIF: No good should be done for those who have defiled the quarter's honor.

ABU AL-RUS: (In great calmness) Now then, gentlemen, our God orders us to do what is good. God orders us to give alms and obey his order; God orders us to visit Mecca and we do as he orders. In my dream, I have seen all of us engaged in rebuilding the shrine of Abu al-Samaih. This must be a divine gesture and we must carry it out. The birds of heaven must have a comfortable shrine. (He orders his men firmly) You architects, start selecting the best stones. Tomorrow, we will celebrate covering the shrine with stones that express the respect we have for the

shrine and its saints. (Everyone begins to read the Holy Koran loudly.)

(DARKNESS)

SCENE VI

(Early morning; the actors are engaged in setting up a shrine. A tremendous movement covers the stage. Half of the shrine is almost built. ABU AL-RUS is in his chair smoking and leading the activities. On another side of the stage there is a group of singers and fencers. THE MAYOR and the officer occasionally take a puff from ABU AL-RUS'S hookah. THE TEACHER talks to the actors, then turns to address the audience.)

THE TEACHER: After a little while, a new wall is going to be built around the shrine and ABU AL-RUS has volunteered to pay the expenses and offer a number of lambs and calves to feed the leaders and the poor of the quarter. It is one of the memorable days of the quarter. (When THE TEACHER realizes that the scene is built, he withdraws.)

ABU AL-KAIF: (Scornfully) SHEIKH SALEH has not shown up. SHEIKH SALEH was supposed to attend the celebration of the rebuilding of the shrine.

Oh, I remember that SHEIKH SALEH does not believe in Abu al-Samaih's religion.

ABU AL-RUS: (Urging the architects) Hurry up, you lazy men.

ABU AL-KAIF: And close the windows so that dust does not enter the sacred shrine and pollute the atmosphere for the good saint.

(A subdued coughing issues from the shrine. The reaction of men varies. ABU AL-RUS and ABU AL-KAIF are sarcastic, THE MAYOR is worried, but the officer shows no signs of concern. IBRAHIM and SAFFIA are caught inside the shrine, frightened to go out.)

ABU AL-RUS: Expel the evil spirit that remains inside the shrine. This place has been neglected for a long time and it is our duty to renew it. (Calling out) Forgive our carelessness, Abu al-Samaih.

ABU AL-KAIF: (Looking off into the distance) It seems that SHEIKH SALEH will not show up.

ABU AL-RUS: Imposters don't pay attention to great shrines. (The shrine building is about to be finished. The coughing intensifies inside the shrine.)

ABU AL-KAIF: (Addressing ABU AL-RUS) History will praise your role in rebuilding the shrine.

ABU AL-RUS: Sing, men! (Cheering) God is great...God is great.

(A number of men get together and sing loudly. The fencers begin to fence. ABU AL-KAIF is shooting in the air cheerfully. HASLAT leads the singing group, followed by THE MAYOR and the officer. The new shrine is finished. ABU AL-RUS is checking it with an expression of contentment on his face. He then joins the singing group which continues singing for a long time.)

(DARKNESS)

SCENE VII

(Near the base of the shrine there are scattered green and dry branches and some flowers. SHEIKH SALEH appears from behind the shrine. He seems to have been walking around it. He walks slowly; he has lost his eyesight. He is addressing the shrine.)

SALEH: Have you been friendly with her, IBRAHIM? I know you took care of her until the last moment. My dear birds, I miss you so much. I am longing for you. (To himself) Could not I have done something to keep them from getting killed. (After a moment) Anyway, the neighbors would have killed them. Your

love annoyed the leaders of this quarter. They turned the shrine of purity into a grave reflecting their boundless cruelty. What the cruel men have built of stone shows the existence of evil. My weakness and the nobility of love are in one scale and the cruelty and ignorance are in the other scale. The scale of cruelty outweighed that of love. Nothing is left but the darkness inhabiting SAFFIA'S eyes. The cruel men are ruling now. Shall I visit your shrine or that of Abu al-Samaih? Maybe Abu al-Samaih died as a martyr, as you have died. Maybe oppression in his days was not different from ours. O God help me die here near these two martyrs. (Calling) IBRAHIM...SAFFIA, do you hear the supplication of an old man. (Shivering) IBRAHIM...SAFFIA, they are celebrating your murder. The quarter is celebrating the forgiveness of those who have committed unforgivable sins. (Hatefully) SAFFIA...IBRAHIM, do you hear me? I hear only axes falling on the flowers of goodness and on the birds of virtue. It is horrible...horrible. (He kneels down crying. Other men come in, moving toward the shrine.)

FIRST MAN: For IBRAHIM and SAFFIA'S sake, O God, offer my wife the power to bear children.

SECOND MAN: (Laying a green branch on the shrine and reading the Koran silently, then addressing the shrine) They don't let me marry the one I love, O God, let them have mercy on me.

THIRD MAN: I have been deprived of sons. By the name of IBRAHIM and SAFFIA'S shrine, O God, help my wife have a male child. (As the visitors disappear, THE TEACHER comes in to help SHEIKH SALEH get up.)

THE TEACHER: There is no use crying any more. Those who were killed are gone and those who won are winners.

SALEH: (Regaining his strength) But IBRAHIM and SAFFIA have not died. I can hear them in the prayers of needy people. I can also see them in the questioning of tormented men.

THE TEACHER: (Leading SALEH one stop) But I can still see ABU AL-RUS, ABU AL-KAIF or THE MAYOR and the officer. I see them beating the ground with firm feet.

SALEH: Do you fear them?

THE TEACHER: Nothing frightens me except the surrender of people to oppression.

SALEH: And who can resist the oppression of strong men?

THE TEACHER: (Listening to a new voice) Do you hear,
SHEIKH?

SALEH: (Listening) A wonderful voice.

THE TEACHER: They are on the other side of the quarter
singing in praise of IBRAHIM and SAFFIA.
(THE TEACHER and SALEH move in the direction
of the voice until they disappear. Then the
voice of the singer becomes clearer.)

THE SINGER: And SAFFIA'S tender affection for the orphan
exceeded the gentleness of a mother toward
her child. And IBRAHIM drew her closer to
his heart and said: "Don't panic, they are
rebuilding the shrine so that more people can
come closer to God." She then slept on his
arm and he read the chapter of comfort from
the Holy Koran.
(The voice disappears as darkness fills the
stage.)

THE CURTAIN FALLS

END

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- _____. Al-Tin (The Mud). Beirut: Dar Auwidat, 1972.
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