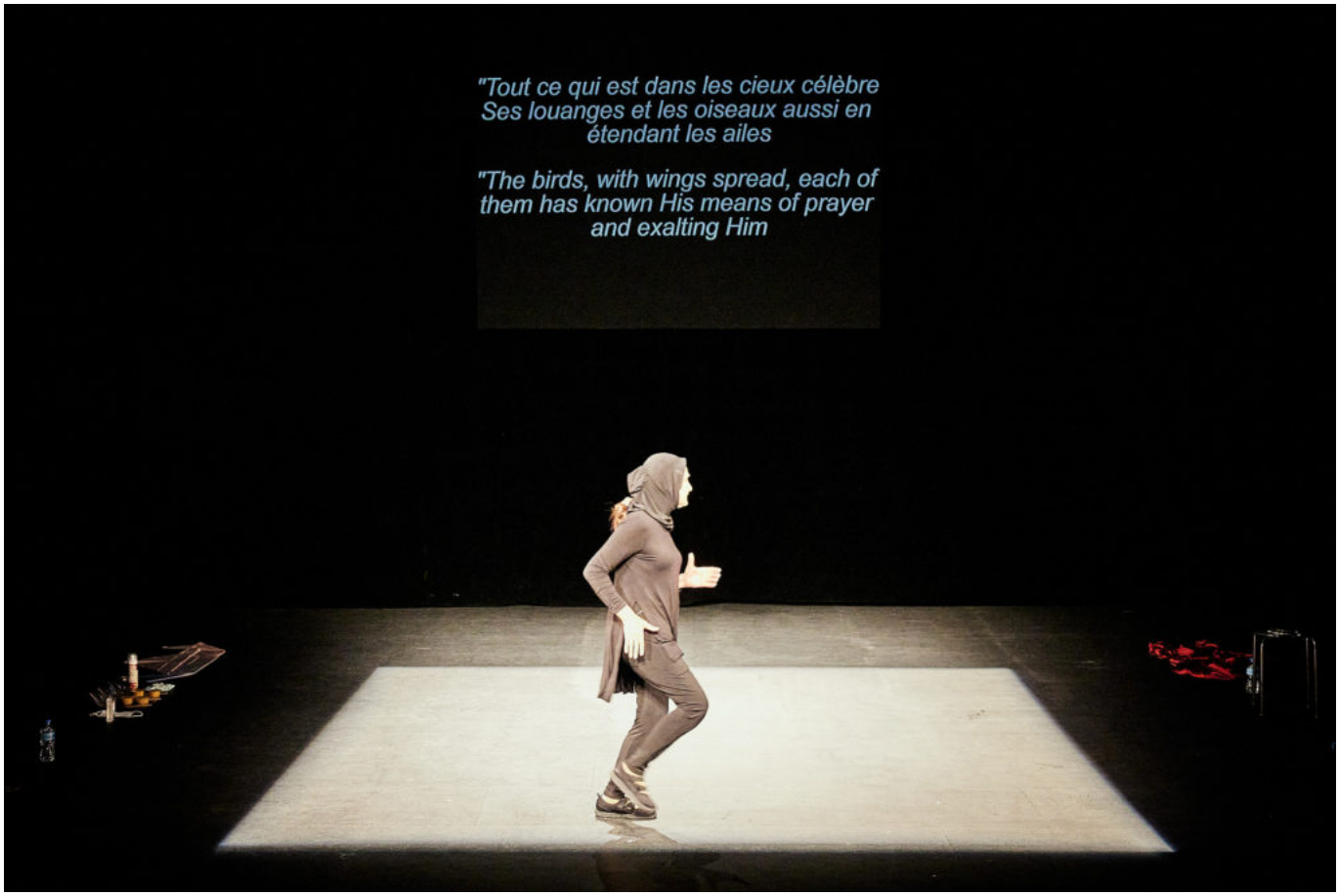
Performance Reviews: Arab and Middle Eastern Productions at the Avignon 2022 Festival



Jogging. Written and Directed by Hanane Hajj Ali. 2022 Festival d'Avignon. July 20-26, 2022.

and

Milk. Written and Directed by Bashar Murkus. Produced by Khashabi Theatre (Haifa), 2022 Festival d'Avignon. July 10-16, 2022.

Reviewed by Philippa Wehle.

Milk, written and directed by Bashar Murkus. Produced by Khashabi Theatre, photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage. Festival d'Avignon.

In the Fall 2022 issue of our sister journal, *European Stages*, reviewer Philippa Wehle presents a report on this year's Avignon Festival, which begins:

The Avignon Festival, July 7 to 26, 2022, director Olivier Py's last festival after an eight-year leadership, introduced new voices and unknown works by artists from many different countries. Nine out of the forty-one official shows were by artists from the Middle East.

Wehle reports in detail on two of the most notable of these offerings, and we reproduce those reports below.

Jogging, written and directed by Hanane Hajj Ali(pictured). Festival d'Avignon.

Jogging, by Hanane Hajj Ali from Beirut, a one-woman show by a fifty-something-year-old Lebanese theater artist, militant activist, playwright and performer, in Arabic with English and French supertitles, was especially intriguing. I was curious to know what she would reveal to us of her life and her experience of jogging in the streets of her city, taking the same route every day, and how she copes with the difficulties of living in a city where electricity is scarce, bread is hard to come by and only the political and privileged live normal lives.

Billed as a "theatre in progress," *Jogging* lived up to all of my expectations. Alone on a mostly empty stage, Hanane, a woman in black tights fit for a serious jogger, is gargling and performing warm-up exercises for her daily run. A few props – a coat, a plastic water bottle and a stool – are all she needs to set the scene. She repeats the sound "Kh…." in a series of vocal exercises as the audience settles in.

After a good ten minutes, she invites an audience member to join her and introduce the play. She connects quickly with her audiences. Would they care to taste the fruit salad she has prepared? Or would one of them introduce Yvonne, one of the female characters that Hanane embodies in the play? Would another hold her feet as she does her sit-ups?

Hanane finally introduces herself as "… the cool hijab woman married to the genius director who is the source of my headache and love!" "Men are known for lying," she adds. "But luckily you are before a woman." A woman who is a mother with four children. A woman who jogs every day to avoid stress and prevent osteoporosis. She begins to run and walk in a circle around the stage as she continues her story. Enlarged images of Beirut's ruined monuments accompany her. Beirut is seen as "a city that demolishes to build and builds only to be destroyed." As she jogs, birds are heard chirping, and pigeons are cooing as well as defecating on her.

As she runs and walks around the stage, she examines her life, a life “spent between mania and depression, fire and ash, adrenalin and dopamine.” She is an actress who dreams of great acting roles such as Medea, the character she has been obsessed with for a long time, a character who both attracts and repels her. She wonders who Medea is today in a torn city like Beirut.

Yvonne comes to mind. Yvonne, a real-life Lebanese citizen who decided to end the lives of her three daughters and then take her own. Hanane performs the letter Yvonne wrote to her husband before taking poison. It is in fact the note that Virginia Woolf left for her husband before she ended her life. In character as Yvonne, Hanane composes a song to Jason which she sings as she cuts out paper dolls in the shape of three little girls.

A great story teller, like Scheherazade, Hanane draws us in and holds our attention as she becomes the women in her stories. It is enough to don a raincoat or put on a blond wig or rub white cream on her face to inhabit them.

Later, she takes on the role of Zahra, a traditional young Lebanese woman who became a resistance fighter, dedicated to the cause, and was arrested and put into prison. Two of her children died in the 2006 war against Israel. Hanane performs her story without any sentimentality.

“Finally I will be Medea, the absolute woman,” she claims. “Finally I will live.” Medea, a woman who forces us to question ourselves and ask how far we would go to be able to respond to our suffering? This is the question Hanane leaves us to contemplate. . . .

MILK, a work in progress by Bashar Murkus and the Khashabi theater from Palestine, opens in quiet silence, on an empty stage. Billed as a modern tragedy, MILK is a wordless, movement-based composition offering a series of striking tableaux of women who have suffered the loss of their sons.

Strange pinging sounds come from the dark, as lights come slowly up on a stage floor made of dark foam sponge-like rectangles. Five women enter holding life-size wooden dummies in their arms. These are the mothers of war. They rock the lifeless bodies of their sons, bouncing them faster and faster on their knees until they can no longer bear their weight and have to let them fall. They undo the tops of their dresses exposing large false breasts, engorged with the milk they no longer need. One of them carries her dummy to a chair and sits while the others stand behind her. Holding him on her lap, she picks up another and another until her lap is covered. For a moment, the other women stand behind her as if in a family portrait. These are strange and disturbing images.

Smoke fills the stage as a pregnant woman, carrying a bundle of flowers on her back, walks to an area where she seems to create a cemetery/garden. In contrast to the tragedy of the opening scenes, there is music and laughter. The women change into silk night gowns and share the pleasure of eating oranges together. It begins to rain. The stage is inundated.

One of the women begins to pull up pieces of the floor. Carrying the wet slabs, placing one on top of the other, the women build a mound. Falling and slipping on the wet slabs, the pregnant woman makes her way to the top where she gives birth to the sound of dripping rain.

Philippa Wehle is Professor Emerita of French Language and Culture and Drama Studies at Purchase College, State University of New York. She writes widely on contemporary theater and performance and is the author of *Le Théâtre populaire selon Jean Vilar* (Actes Sud, 1981, revised editions in 1991 and 2016), *Drama Contemporary: France* and *Act French: Contemporary Plays from France* (PAJ Publications). She is a well-known translator of contemporary plays with a specialty in creating supertitles in French and English for emerging theatre companies. Dr. Wehle is a Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters.

Other Arab and Middle Eastern Productions at the 2022 Avignon Festival:

FROM ARMOUR TO JACKETS. By Kubra Khademi. July 7, 2022.

AND LAND, LIKE LANGUAGE, IS INHERITED. By Elias Sanbar, based on texts by Mahmoud Darwish. July 14, 2022.

IN TRANSIT. By Amir Reza Koohestani, freely adapted from the novel *Transit* by Anna Seghers. July 7-14, 2022.

SHAEIRAT (Poetesses) #1. By Henri jules Julien, Carol Sansour and Asmaa Azaizeh. July 16-19, 2022.

SHAEIRAT (Poetesses) #2. By Henri jules Julien, Soukaina Habiballah and Rasha Omran. July 16-19, 2022.

TOLD BY MY MOTHER. By Ali Charour. July 21-16, 2022.

Readers of *Arab Stages* will probably be curious about the other plays from the Middle East that Philippa Wehle mentions but does not discuss in detail. One of these actually originated in the French city of Lille, but is the work of an Afghan artist/playwright now living and working in that city. This is Kubra Khademi, who came to France as a refugee in 2015. In her performance piece, *From Armour to Jackets*, she uses a wardrobe of contemporary war-related coats to evoke the history and horror of conflict.

The remaining five productions all actually originated in the Middle East. *And Land, Like Language, is Inherited* is a jazz oratorio on the pain of exile based on the poet of the great Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish. It is performed by a six- person orchestra, a singer and Darwish's close friend and translator Elias Sanbar, who created the text.

In Transit, created by Teheran director Amir Reza Koohestani, is based on a German novel by Anna Seghers and deals with the common dilemma today of individuals trapped in the limbo of an international airport.

Shaeirat (Poetesses) *#1 and #2* is composed of two collections of poetry by contemporary Arabic women, presented in Avignon with French subtitles. *#1* was created in Haifa and Bethlehem and features poems by Palestinian authors Carol Sansour and Asmaa Azaizeh. *#2* was created in Casablanca and Cairo and presents poems by Moroccan Soukaina Habiballah and Egyptian Rasha Omran.

Finally, from Beirut came the dance-drama, *Told by My Mother*, by Lebanese choreographer Ali Charour. The play is the second in a trilogy on love, built upon Charour's memories of his own family and of the turbulent recent history of his country.

As Wehle suggests, the number of Arabic and Middle Eastern productions in Avignon this year was unusually large, but also worth noting was that most of them were created by women artists, whose contribution to the contemporary theatre of this region is particularly significant.

Marvin Carlson is the founding editor of Arab Stages and Sidney E. Cohn Professor emeritus of theatre and performance, comparative literature and middle eastern studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of many essays and books in theatre studies, the most recent of which is *Theatre and Islam* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

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