

Arab American Drama: Five Books that Inspired My Journey

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When asked by *Arab Stages* Book Review Editor George Potter about five books that shaped my thinking about Arab American drama, I immediately thought about the fact that there were no full-length books available about the genre when I began my doctoral dissertation on the topic. As a matter of fact, the very reason I focused my attention upon this burgeoning theatre form was because of the paucity of information available up to that time. We must remember that, although the first Arab American play, Ameen F. Rihani's *Wajdah*, was written in 1909, prior to that point, the entire history of Arab American drama consisted of one-off productions and publications. Like other immigrant communities, our theatre was not considered legitimate because it had no major playwrights with large bodies of work, it had no Broadway productions, it had no anthologies of plays, and it had no major prizes associated with it. Instead, Arab Americans have been creating theatre independently, and with little or no means of production, since the first recorded Arab American theatrical group, the Syrian Youth Society, staged the play *Andromak* in 1896.¹ The early plays by Kahlil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy, and Ameen F. Rihani were published in Arab American newspapers, but were never staged in their lifetimes. This might have prompted Edward W. Said to lament to Gregory Orfalea that, in terms of Arab Americans having any influence on the dominant culture, "the Arab American simply plays a very tiny, marginal, unimportant role."² Said's words rang true in his lifetime, but the burgeoning of this artform over the past decades has proven that this situation has changed over time.

No serious discussion of Arab American history, arts, or letters can begin without mentioning Edward W. Said's seminal work. Even though his book *Orientalism* is, of course, a

¹ Michael W. Suleiman, *The Arab-American Experience in the United States and Canada: a Classified, Annotated Bibliography* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian Press), 488.

² Quoted in Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press), 175.

masterwork, his essays “The Arab Portrayed,” which appeared in the 1970 book *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of June 1967: An Arab Perspective*, edited by the late Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, and his “Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Volume” of *Orientalism* were the foundation for my study of Arab American drama. In “The Arab Portrayed,” Said crystalized the very notions I had been wrestling with my entire life as an Arab American as I watched Arabs being perniciously misrepresented in films by filmmakers like Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Robert Zemeckis, and John Frankenheimer (to name only a few). In the films I watched by these directors, Arabs were always portrayed as evil, violent, terroristic, stupid, sex-crazed, and sadistic. This contrasted greatly from the films I grew up watching at home starring Omar Sharif, Fairuz, Farid Al Atrash, Faten Hamamah, and others. The Arabs I knew watching my parents’ VHS tapes sang, danced, played musical instruments, loved, laughed, cried, and mourned. By contrast, the Arabs in the movie theatres were Nazi collaborators, ruthless terrorists, vile leeches, and scimitar-wielding villains worthy only of a brutal death. Said’s essay begins with the two offensive caricatures of Arabs he encountered: the stupid and offensive Arab with their hands above their heads in a gesture of surrender, or the treacherous, sex-mad Arab intent on violating Western women and killing Western men. Said attributes these to British and French colonialist writings and the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War coverage, which pitted white Europeans facing off against a horde of native savages. He wrote, “As an intelligible unit in the mind, the Arab has been reduced to pure antagonism to Israel. The sheer mass of his numbers—against which, it seems, any injustice counts for very little—has been abstracted into unitary order, the better to deal with the uncomfortable moral demands his history and actuality might make.”³ He continues by stating that the sympathy one might feel for Africans or Vietnamese, Balkan nationals or Irish

³ Edward W. Said, “The Arab Portrayed,” in *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of 1967: An Arab Perspective*. ed. 1970. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 3.

nationalists, simply cannot be extended to the Palestinian Arabs. “In the mind’s syntax, then, the Arab, if thought of singly, is a creature without dimension. His history is obscure, for it is written neither in terms of institutions the Americans can recognize nor in a language he can read... What is most telling about Western consciousness of the Arab is how few ordinary categories of human existence seem applicable to him. Suffering and injustice, it seems, can never be his lot.”⁴ Said critiques scholars such as I.F. Stone, Theodore Draper, Joel Carmichael, Michael Walzer and Martin Peretz. In works like these, Said, states, “It is no accident, I think, that in America the representation of the Arab in accounts of the modern Near East relies so heavily on a simple, though to my mind seriously defective and malicious, conception of fact.”⁵ Said also blames “regional studies” programs that also diminish Arabs into factual statistics, rigid categories, and psychological conditions. Said ends his essay with the following notice: “There are signs, however, that with much of the Third World, the Arab has now fully recognized this as his predicament: he is demanding of the West, and of Israel, the right to reoccupy his place in history and actuality.”⁶

In his “Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition” of *Orientalism*, Said, speaks both of his advancing age and “diminutions in expectations,” and his faith in emancipation and enlightenment. He wrote, “My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that ‘our’ East, ‘our’ Orient becomes ‘ours’ to possess

⁴Edward W. Said, “The Arab Portrayed,” in *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of 1967: An Arab Perspective*. ed. 1970. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 4.

⁵ Edward W. Said, “The Arab Portrayed,” in *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of 1967: An Arab Perspective*. ed. 1970. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 8.

⁶ Edward W. Said, “The Arab Portrayed,” in *The Arab-Israeli Confrontation of 1967: An Arab Perspective*. ed. 1970. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 9.

and direct.”⁷ This radical notion of unmaking history and rewriting it melded perfectly with what I observed in Arab American dramas that recast and restaged the Middle East from our Arab American point of view, not the point of view of those outside of our community who wished to distort and misrepresent us. Given the horrors of the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan at the time, Said’s essay was a reminder that, for as much progress as we have made in this country, we were still basically viewed the same by the hegemonic powers that governed our nation. Said also wrote, “Therefore, it would seem to be a vital necessity for independent intellectuals always to provide alternative models to the reductively simplifying and confining ones, based on mutual hostility, that have prevailed in the Middle East and elsewhere for so long.”⁸ The plays and playwrights I read, studied, and witnessed, were the ones subverting stereotypes by providing the American theatre with fully dimensional Arab and Arab American characters who were not, by any means, perfect, but were just as fallible and wonderful as any humans might be. That humanism is what Said valued most in his essay when he wrote, “humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say, the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history.”⁹ That was what I saw in these plays—resistance against the inhumane films major filmmakers created that disfigured our Arab and Arab American histories.

In my desire to piece together this lost history, I turned not to books but to essays. The first important essay I found was by Ala Fa’ik, titled “Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community” found in Ernest N. McCarus’s book *The Development of Arab American Identity*

⁷ Edward W. Said, “Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition,” in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xviii.

⁸ Edward W. Said, “Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition,” in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xxiv.

⁹ Edward W. Said, “Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition,” in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xxix.

(1994). Here, Fa'ik explores how Arab American theatre has shaped the identity of Arab Americans. He examines “theater of different types: plays in Arabic by and for Arab-Americans, bilingual productions for wider audiences of both Arab-Americans and non-Arab-Americans, and professional productions in English for the general U.S. public.”¹⁰ For Fa'ik, the roots of Arab American theatre grew from Arab communities grappling with how to preserve their cultural heritage, such as the plays that were staged by the early Arab American immigrants. Although he cites the fact that there were some Arab American theatre troupes that preceded the 1970s, in this essay Fa'ik focuses upon the plays produced in the 1970s and the 1980s. He cites that Arab Americans came to the United States for many reasons: the pursuit of a better life and the flight from political persecution and war. Arab immigrants who settled in larger U.S. cities, therefore, also fulfilled the cultural needs of these communities by creating cultural and entertainment events. The amateur groups, mainly concentrated in urban centers like Detroit, Chicago, San Diego, and Los Angeles, presented plays in Arabic with various Arabic dialects, but in Fa'ik's opinion, despite the commercial success these productions achieved, they were artistically lacking. Some of the plays which dramatized life in the United States were based on assumptions and misunderstandings which, in Fa'ik's opinion, “perpetuates ignorance and misinformation.”¹¹ Fa'ik's article introduced me to the various amateur theatre groups that had been creating theatre of all sorts: political plays, social commentary plays, social justice plays, children's theatre, and his own playwriting. In his summary he wrote,

A study of the Arab-American theatrical movement does not reveal a high literary and artistically enduring quality right now, but it mostly does reveal attitudes, values, ideals, and aspirations of immigrants developing a community. It brings to light a new dimension to understanding the growth and development of the

¹⁰ Ala Fa'ik, “Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community” in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 107.

¹¹ Ala Fa'ik, “Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community” in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 111.

self-identity of an immigrant community in the United States. As a theater practitioner and scholar, I find the movement of evolving cultural character material of great value to be recorded and studied further... Arab-Americans in their developing theater are bringing their past and their values to the U.S. culture of which they are now a part while at the same time they struggle to maintain their own identity and to define for themselves what that identity is. To be an Arab-American, say these plays, is to be both Arab and American and, for the time being at least, to be neither.¹²

Fa'ik's essay provided a template for me, as an Arab American scholar and practitioner myself, for how to move forward in the discussion of these disparate works of art created by this vibrant artistic community. Unlike Fa'ik, I was writing in a time when there was a larger body of works by extremely accomplished playwrights like Betty Shamieh, Yussef El Guindi, Leila Buck, and Jamil Khoury. What was most exciting for me was recording the progression of Arab American theatre from the chamber plays of Gibran, Naimy, and Rihani, to the semi-professional work of S.K. Hershewe, to the amateur productions of the playwrights Husam Zoro, Hammam Shafie, and Fareed Al-Oboudi. What was also evident was the reflection of these works on the various "waves" of Arab American immigration from the early first-generation Syrian-Lebanese playwrights, to the plays of the first-generation playwrights in the 1970s and 1980s, to the second-generation Arab American plays of the 1990s and 2000s. I saw a longer trajectory of Arab American plays that was overlooked by Fa'ik, and one I wanted to explore in greater depth with my book-length project.

Another important essay that was published by Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson titled "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance," was published in the 2009 edited volume *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, edited by Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon. The essay begins with the history of Arab migration to the United States, the development of distinct immigrant communities, and the early theatre offerings they presented. The essay then turns to

¹² Ala Fa'ik, "Issues of Identity: In Theater of Immigrant Community" in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 117-118.

the post-9/11 situation and Arab American artists' response to negative media portrayals, the wars in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan, and the need to express hybrid identities. They note that the majority of the artists creating work during this time were women, saying: "Thus, even on this most basic level, current Arab-American theatre and performance is working to present a more accurate picture of Arab-American culture by contradicting the standard Western stereotype, according to which Arab women are widely if not universally oppressed and not allowed any voice or outlet for expression within Arabic culture."¹³ The article discusses several Arab American artists and groups including Yusef El Guindi, NIBRAS, and the Arab-American Comedy Festival, but the focus is primarily on women artists including Faiza Shereen, Etel Adnan, Heather Raffo, Betty Shamieh, Leila Buck, Elmaz Abi Nader, Soha Al Jurf, Rania Khalil, Kathryn Haddad, Lena Rizkallah, and Maysoun Zayid. "The majority of the plays and performances of these artists deal in one way or another with the negotiations of being Arab in America today,"¹⁴ they write. The authors examine plays like Shamieh's *Roar*, Khalil's *Flag Piece*, Rizkallah's *Layla's Sahra*, and Haddad's *With Love from Ramallah*. They also focus attention on female solo performances such as Al Jurf's *Pressing Beyond In Between*, Buck's *ISite*, Abi Nader's *Country of My Origin*, and Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire* as works of "autobiographical solo performances." They define this genre as, "a particularly popular medium for women theatre and performance artists, particularly for the exploration of the forces that encourage or discourage the formation of identity."¹⁵ They conclude the article by stating that these varied performances are making a significant contribution to American theatre, utilizing theatre to explore the tensions and identity formations of the Arab American community in the

¹³ Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson, "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance," in *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 209-210.

¹⁴ Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson, "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance," in *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 211.

¹⁵ Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson, "Current Trends in Arab-American Performance," in *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 213.

United States. “Their work has a therapeutic and educative dimension for themselves and their community,” they write, “but it has even more widespread therapeutic and educative work to do in the American culture within which it is created.”¹⁶ This final statement is one that landed most with me as I immersed myself in Arab American theatre and performance. While first-generation Arab audiences are drawn predominantly to plays and performances in Arabic that primarily feature humor and music, such as the works of Dearborn theatre makers Najee Mondalek’s *AJYAL Theatrical Group*, second-generation Arab Americans gravitate more toward the English-language productions of these second-and-third generation playwrights and performers of Arab descent. However, the largest audiences for Arab American plays and performers are actually non-Arabs. For them the plays are translations of the Arab experiences through the lens of Americans of Arab descent. That speaks directly to what Basiouny and Carlson refer to as the “therapeutic and educative work” in the American culture.

Another important scholar, Jack G. Shaheen, provided two major resources for my understanding about Arab and Arab American representation in his books *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* and *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*. Shaheen was a vociferous advocate for Arab and Arab American representation, especially when it came to Hollywood filmmaking. In his seminal book *Reel Bad Arabs*, he critiques nine-hundred films by major Hollywood directors, screenwriters, and producers that malign and misrepresent Arabs and Arab Americans. The introduction to this incredible study focuses on what Shaheen called “The New Anti-Semitism.” He explains, “I call it ‘new’ not because stereotypical screen Arabs are new (they aren’t) or because anti-Semitism against Jews is dead (it isn’t). I use the word ‘new’ because many of the anti-Semitic films directed against Arabs were released in the last third of

¹⁶ Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson, “Current Trends in Arab-American Performance,” in *Performance, Exile and ‘America’*, ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 219.

the twentieth century, at a time when Hollywood was steadily and increasingly eliminating stereotypical portraits of other groups.”¹⁷ For Shaheen, malicious stereotypical portrayal of Arabs on screen was not just an aesthetic matter—it had real-world implications in the way Arabs were treated in society and in world affairs. What I appreciated most was that Shaheen was not calling for a blanket approach that would only praise Arabs onscreen. To the contrary. He wrote, “I am not saying an Arab should never be portrayed as the villain. What I am saying is that almost *all* Hollywood depictions of Arabs are *bad* ones. This is a grave injustice. Repetitious and negative images of the reel Arab literally sustain adverse portraits across generations. The fact is that for more than a century, producers have tarred an entire group of people with the same sinister brush.”¹⁸ He breaks down the categories of the “reel” Hollywood Arabs into villains, sheiks, maidens, Egyptians, Palestinians, and gratuitous scenes and slurs. Like Said before him, Shaheen traces the beginnings of the pernicious stereotypes of Arabs in the media to the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries dating back to the late 1940s. The anti-Arab sentiment only grew over the successive decades and, by the time he wrote the book *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Shaheen writes, “Today, the stereotype’s power to inflict damage on innocent people is much greater than before 9/11. During times of armed conflict, stereotyping meets the least resistance; its mendacity most convincingly masquerades as truth, and it is most vigorously defended and justified as truth. Arabs have been so demonized that it has become impossible for some world citizens to believe they are real people; they are perceived only as the enemy, as terrorists, as the ‘other.’”¹⁹ In that book, he also challenges other stereotypes such as “Arab=Muslim”, Post-9/11 images, “Reel Bad Omnipresent Arabs”, and “Reel Political Implications.” He likens these films to the German propaganda of the 1930s, furthering

¹⁷ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press), 6.

¹⁸ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press), 11.

¹⁹ Jack G. Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press), XII.

governmental strategies to enforce stereotypes in an attempt to influence foreign policies. One of the most impactful chapters in this book is one titled “Real Solutions” whereby Shaheen calls upon us in the Arab American community to eradicate these stereotypes by breaking into the industry and becoming a key part of the production of these films, to major and excel in media studies, and to learn more about Arab American plays, to create documentaries that focus on Arab lives, and to hold an “Arab American Entertainment Summit” where creatives can gather to “recognize, contest, and correct images of the reel evil ‘others’” of Hollywood films.²⁰ Shaheen ends this book on a hopeful note, stating: “Change will come—one summit, one college film course, one character, one movie, one TV show, and one courageous imagemaker at a time... Keep the faith: New films will lead the way, illustrating that regardless of color, creed, or culture, we are bound together.”²¹ Shaheen’s optimism inspired me, yet, after struggling as an out-of-work director in Los Angeles for years, I must say that my own experience proved otherwise.

I hope this brief essay about the scholars and essays that shaped my understanding about Arab American theatre, film, and performances has been helpful. All our scholarship lies on the shoulders of those Arab Americans before us who took the time and effort to document the important and creative work artists in our community have been creating for over a century. Scholars like Edward. W. Said, Ala Fa’ik, Marvin Carlson, Dalia Basiouny, and Jack G. Shaheen are but a few of those who have guided my path as I’ve attempted to analyze, understand, and disseminate the works of these extraordinary individuals. Over time, I’ve had the opportunity to publish manuscripts, anthologies, journal articles, and play reviews as well as teach classes and direct plays to educate and enlighten others to the powerful and impactful work that is

²⁰ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press), 77.

²¹ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press), 89.

consistently produced in this country. Other incredible scholars are now adding to the understanding of Arab American theatre including Roaa Ali, Evelyn Alsultany, Dina Amin, Hala Baki, Waleed F. Mahdi, Somaya Sami Sabry, and others. Before I wrote my book, someone asked me “is there such a thing as Arab American drama?” My hope is that our collective works can prove once and for all that this question is ridiculous.



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