

REVIEW: MANSOUR, MONA. *THE VAGRANT TRILOGY: THREE PLAYS BY MONA MANSOUR: THE HOUR OF FEELING; THE VAGRANT; URGE FOR GOING*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022. 162 + xi.

Mona Mansour's *The Vagrant Trilogy* edited by Hala Baki and Michael Malek Najjar, includes *The Hour of Feeling*, *The Vagrant*, and *Urge for Going*. Much in conversation with other texts (co)edited by Najjar such as Heather Raffo's *Iraq Plays*, *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi*, *Six Plays of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, and *Four Arab American Plays*, Baki and Najjar thoughtfully curate an insightful volume which notably contributes to a growing body of work by artists of Arab, Middle Eastern, North African, and Southwest Asian heritage in the American theatre.

These three one-hour dramas tethered by a common protagonist follow Adham from Palestine to London to a refugee camp in southern Lebanon. The first play offers audiences a portion of his origin story; the subsequent two plays illuminate each of two possible realities of what his life might be like, all depending on one important choice he faces – whether to stay in London or to return to Palestine.

The book's prefatory pages include a forward by Mark Wing-Davey, NYU Arts Professor, longtime collaborator to Mansour, and director of the New York Premiere of what he describes as this "major American trilogy" (ix). Following that, an introductory essay co-authored by Baki and Najjar gives relevant context on the playwright's own life, her research, and details on the piece's journey toward production in its current form. They next skillfully and succinctly introduce vital political background, especially surrounding historical events in 1967 which both, "reshaped the Middle East" and the events of the play (3). Finally, they offer summary of major plot points and foreground key themes in Mansour's trilogy. In "Displacement and Its Dilemmas: *The Hour of Feeling*" they describe the "difficult and life-altering" decision Adham has before him, finding himself "caught between the life he has in Palestine and the life

he dreams of escaping to” (3). In “Exile and Discontent: *The Vagrant*” they explain the pressure Adham faces to “be the voice of his people” and personal and professional retaliation he faces when his students and colleagues “misconstrue” his perspective (5). In “Liberation Lies Elsewhere: *Urge for Going*” they observe that “Adham would have been unable to find happiness no matter what occurred,” but that there may be hope for his daughter Jamila (7). In “Conclusion: Hope for a Better Future” Baki and Najjar posit that in “humanizing Palestinian characters, Mansour challenges the dehumanization of Palestinians” as seen in mass media representation (9).

In the “Author’s Notes” Mansour explains that each of the plays as featured herein is an edited down version crafted so that the three may be more easily presented together on a single evening. She suggests that all roles be portrayed by the same company of four men and two women, ideally all Middle Eastern, noting her “joy” in discovering what happens when “actors of color play the white people in England” (13).

In “Part I – The Hour of Feeling,” set in 1967, Adham, a promising young Palestinian scholar with a passion for the English Romantics (especially Wordsworth) has been offered an opportunity to give a keynote speech at an academic conference in London. His overbearing but deeply loving mother, Beder, invites their entire village to a party in his honor. While avoiding the gathering, he meets Abir, a captivating young woman. After a brief courtship and despite his mother’s discouragement, they marry. Abir accompanies Adham to London. After a simultaneously warm and intimidating reception from his English hosts, Adham’s speech goes incredibly well. On the same evening of his success, they hear news of the beginning of the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War. Adham and Abir must choose whether to stay in London long-term so

Adham can pursue a fellowship, or to return to the Middle East and attend to family matters. The young couple argues, Adham chooses to stay, and Abir leaves him.

In “Part Two – The Vagrant,” set in 1982, Adham has his PhD and is an instructor at the university. In this thread, Adham also struggles with bouts of anxiety and haunting memories of his past. He and Abir have been divorced for twelve years but remain friends. She is now engaged to an English-raised Palestinian man who Adham resents for his privilege. Abir and Adham argue because she feels he should be trying harder to bring his brother, who has been in poor health, to London. Adham is up for a promotion to Professor and receives ongoing pressure from senior colleagues to explore his Palestinian identity more in his approach to analyzing poetry. However, after a student accuses him of sympathizing with the IRA because of his Palestinian perspective, he is denied tenure. Mysterious dropped phone calls turn out to be from his older brother Hamzi whom he has not seen since young childhood when their mother fled the refugee camps with Adham. Hamzi was reaching out to check on Adham since he heard there had been bombings in London; he shares his great pride in and love for his little brother. Sometime later, the BBC news reports a massacre at the refugee camps in Sabra and Shatila and Adham understands his brother to be dead.

“Part Three – Urge for Going” is set in the 2000s, in a refugee camp in southern Lebanon. We learn, “this is a different Adham, a different life, a whole different reality, had Adham taken a different ‘fork in the road’ ...” (105). In this reality, Abir successfully convinces Adham to return home to see to his mother after his keynote speech in London. They, like thousands of displaced Palestinians, end up in a camp. They live there with each of their brothers and their college-aged children. Loving, warm, and distinctly comic family banter is juxtaposed with the harshness of the setting. We meet Jul, Adham and Abir’s son, who showed great academic promise and who

they dreamed might be a doctor someday until he suffered brain damage after taking a beating for taunting a soldier. Jamila, their clever daughter, is desperate to register for her Baccalaureate exams so she stands a chance at going to college. After Adham refuses to try to go to the West Bank to renew his passport so Jamila can register for her test, they argue and Abir tries to use her own papers to get her daughter registered instead. Jamila is successful and the play ends bittersweetly as she prepares to leave her family and pursue a life beyond the camps.

Following the plays is English Professor Diya Abdo's Critical Essay: "Conditional Texts, Conditional Lives: Mona Mansour's *The Vagrant Trilogy*." Abdo describes Mansour's trilogy as "conditional" and Adham's "conditional condition" as one which "mimics the Palestinian one" (147). She offers that the questions audiences witness Adham negotiating are questions many Palestinians living in diaspora painfully face – should they stay, or should they leave, and what are the implications of these decisions? Abdo subsequently shares a deeply intuitive and beautifully articulated close reading of these three plays, further opening-up Mansour's project with displacement, tokensim, and identity for Adham and his family. Abdo's perspective is an invaluable addition to this volume; her brilliant unpacking of Adham's vagrancy as illuminated by Mansour's engagement with Wordsworth's vagrant character in "The Ruined Cottage" is a must-read.

The book concludes with an interview between playwright Mona Mansour and the book's co-editors, Baki and Najjar. It gives unique insight into the writer's positionality and journey crafting these pieces. Mansour discusses her American upbringing, including some brief remarks on her family background and her father's Lebanese diaspora story. She observes that she found herself "writing into that injustice" experienced by Palestinians living in refugee camps without options to change their circumstances (154). The three then go on to discuss Palestinian and

immigrant narratives in the American theatre, some of the creative processes and collaborations which supported this piece, and additional topics and themes in *The Vagrant Trilogy*.

Readers will especially benefit from this volume's adroit synthesis of complex sociopolitical histories offered in the supplemental essays. These work well together to enhance appreciation for the richness of Mansour's storytelling and the complexity of the issues addressed in the worlds of these plays. The plays themselves utterly avoid the didactic; they rather present purposefully flawed and distinctly human characters. Their failings intertwined with their lovingness and then contextualized by the fraught and tragic circumstances through which they exist make for compelling and relevant drama.

Baki and Najjar's edition of *The Vagrant Trilogy* will be of particular interest to scholars and students of contemporary American theatre and MENA/SWANA theatre and cultural studies. It is also an essential reader for any producing entities enthusiastic to mount Mansour's work.

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