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Arab Stages

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Arab Stages is devoted to broadening international awareness and understanding of the theatre and performance cultures of the Arab-Islamic world and of its diaspora.

The journal does not seek to be exclusive nor to promote any nationalist or religion-based agenda. In strictly geographical and political terms, the journal will be devoted to theatre and performance material from the member states of the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and also diasporic literature from around the globe created by former residents of those states or their descendants. Moreover, both the operative adjectives "Arab" and "Islamic" should be understood here to demarcate, primarily, a general cultural area of scholarly exploration and negotiation. Investigations of material from the many non-Arab and non-Muslim communities located within the Arab/Muslim world are welcomed by the journal.

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Articles, interviews, and play translations should normally fall between 4,000 and 8,000 words. Performance and book reviews should fall between 800 and 2,000 words. We are especially interested in studies and reviews of recent or contemporary work.

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Arab Stages

Volume 19 · Spring 2026

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Table of Contents

Articles

Reframing the Past: Situating Mesopotamian Theatrical Traditions Within a Cross-Cultural Performance Continuum — 1
Amir al-Azraki

Gen Z Theatre from Turkey Taps into Repertoires of Millennial Resistance: A Comparison of the Short Festival Plays *Helezoni* and *Orange* — 27
Deniz Başar

Performance Reviews

The Clown, by Mariam Basha — 52
Reviewed by Marina Johnson

Dodi and Diana, by Kareem Fahmy — 57
Reviewed by Jovita Jacob Selwyn

Almonds Blossom in Deir Yassin, by Hanna Eady — 62
Reviewed by Marina Johnson

Book Review

A Movement's Promise: The Making of Contemporary Palestinian Theatre, by Samer Al-Saber — 66
Reviewed by Hadia Mousa

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Reframing the Past: Situating Mesopotamian Theatrical Traditions Within a Cross-Cultural Performance Continuum

Amir al-Azraki

Abstract: This article repositions Mesopotamian ritual and dramatic practices within a broader cross-cultural history of ancient performance, challenging theatre historiographies that have traditionally marginalized non-Greek traditions. Instead of seeking to establish beginnings or precedence, the study examines Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian performance forms as complex and historically situated practices that combine ritual action, mythic narration, embodied movement, and structured dialogue. Drawing on linguistic evidence, ritual sequences, archaeological contexts, and a substantial body of Iraqi scholarship rarely acknowledged in Western discourse, the article reinterprets the Akitu festival, the Sacred Marriage, the Descent of Inanna, city laments, and Sumerian disputation poems (*adamin* and *tesitu*) as examples of organized performative expression shaped by distinct social, political, and religious environments. Particular emphasis is given to the dramaturgical sophistication of the disputation poems, which function as competitive and adjudicated verbal contests and display striking affinities with contemporary modes of agonistic expression. By foregrounding interconnection, mutual influence, and the plurality of ancient performative traditions, the study argues for a more inclusive and intercultural theatre historiography. This approach positions Mesopotamian performance within a continuum rather than a linear narrative of development and underscores how ancient societies used embodied and communal practices to negotiate meaning, authority, and identity, demonstrating that theatricality has emerged through multiple overlapping cultural trajectories.

Keywords: Mesopotamian performance, Sumerian disputations, Akitu Festival, Sacred Marriage, Inanna/Ishtar, Ritual drama, Theatre historiography

Introduction

The theatrical traditions of Mesopotamia—the ensemble of ritual-dramatic and festival performances attested in Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian contexts from the late fourth to early first millennia BCE—constituted a sophisticated performative culture. These traditions included impersonation and role-taking in ritual dramas, structured dialogues and disputations, lamentations with choral leadership, sacred-marriage enactments, and mythic re-enactments. They were performed in designated spaces (temple courts, processional routes, and festival houses), using codified movements, costumes, and props. Yet early 20th-century scholarship made few references to Mesopotamian drama and theatre, often dismissing the culture as "pre-theatrical." In 1925, for example, German Assyriologist and ancient Near Eastern religions expert Alfred Jeremias asserted that the development of myth into drama is only evident in traces within the Sumerian-Babylonian cultural cycle.[1] His limited examples included Chaldean festival performances, in which the myth of the dragon fight was enacted comedically; Assyrian festival plays, in which the king assumed the role of the dragon-slayer; and an Assyrian-Babylonian dialogue between a master and his servant, referred to as the "Dialogue of Pessimism."[2] Moreover, conventional theatre historiographies credited ancient Greece as the birthplace of drama, largely overlooking the possibility that theatre existed in other ancient cultures.

This marginalization or ignorance of Mesopotamian theatrical traditions, despite their ritualistic origins that parallel those of Greek theatre, reflected a Eurocentric bias that historically prioritized Greek theatre as a source and a foundational model. This bias not only shaped and distorted European scholarship on ancient theatre traditions, but also influenced scholarly discourse in Iraq, where a majority of Iraqi theatre scholars—especially those educated in Western institutions during the mid-twentieth century—embraced Eurocentric historiography with little critique. Modern Iraqi theatre was founded by scholars and Christian clergy trained in the West, such as Sami Abdul Hamid, Haqi al-Shibli, Ibrahim Jalal, and Hanna Habash, whose reliance on European models for teaching, translation, and production practices often reinforced colonial frameworks, even as a smaller group of voices pressed for recognition of indigenous traditions. As Khalid Amine points out, colonialism fostered divided loyalties and contributed to epistemic violence, a "Eurocentric eclipse, if not exclusion, of other peoples' performance traditions" within theatre studies: "Borrowing western historiographical models without critiquing their claim of universality and exclusivist tropes," Amine argues, "amounts to a new kind of colonialism."[3]

Other obstacles have also contributed to gaps in scholarly understanding of Mesopotamian theatre traditions. One such obstacle is disciplinary compartment-alization: the archaeologists and field epigraphers who recover and publish sites, and the philologists and linguists who edit and translate cuneiform sources, are rarely in

dialogue with theatre historians and performance theorists. Another obstacle is that the field of Mesopotamian studies is vast, and scholarly focus has often been on other aspects of the culture, such as religion, politics, and social structures, leaving the performative dimensions of Mesopotamian material underexplored. Political instability, and destruction due to wars, invasions, and natural disasters, has further complicated the study of Mesopotamian theatre, posing significant obstacles to archaeological efforts. The volatile political climate has made it difficult for scholars to access important sites and artifacts that could provide crucial insights into ancient performance practices. Moreover, under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi government's nationalist agenda influenced how Mesopotamian heritage was presented and researched, sidelining certain aspects of cultural history, including theatre.

Even today, financial, logistical, and security challenges continue to limit archaeological work on Mesopotamian heritage. Former Minister of Culture, Tourism, and Antiquities Dr. al-Hamdani indicates that Iraq is currently home to approximately 15,000 archaeological sites, of which less than 2% have been excavated, and with the potential for additional discoveries in the future.[4] Promising sites for further exploration include some documented yet still under-analyzed ceremonial structures: the *bit akitu* at Babylon, the Eanna precinct at Uruk, and the Ekur temple complex at Nippur. While well known in Mesopotamian studies, these sites have not yet been systematically examined through the lens of theatre and performance history. Future research that integrates archaeological, philological, and performance-theoretical methods could reframe them as central nodes in the history of ancient theatre, rather than as ancillary ritual space.

Yet it would be misleading to suggest that scholarship on these issues is completely absent. A substantial body of research has traced Near Eastern mythic and ritual continuities into Greek literature[5] and has examined performance elements within Sumerian and Akkadian texts. Moreover, a number of Iraqi historians, archeologists, and theatre scholars, utilizing evidence from early twentieth-century Western archaeologists and historians, have long argued for the significance of Mesopotamian theatre.[6] Among the most significant contributions are those of Awni Karomi, Fawzi Rashid, and Mohammed Sabri, whose works remain untranslated into English but collectively advance an important counter-narrative. Karomi argues that ancient Iraq possessed dedicated performance spaces, most notably the *Bayt al-Tamthil* (“House of Performance”) at Uruk, which he reads as evidence for a theatrical tradition structurally distinct from temple ritual.[7] Rashid postulates that theatre existed in ancient Iraq prior to Greece, proposing that the *Descent of Inanna* reflects an early performative tradition necessitated by limited literacy and the need to integrate myth with communal life, and citing 1967 excavations at Uruk as material evidence of ritual spaces potentially linked to dramatized representations of the underworld.[8] Sabri goes further by theorizing the

Babylonian theatre as an indigenous innovation predating Hellenistic influence, describing it as a multifunctional structure for ritual, spectacle, and athletic display.[9]

While these works constitute a crucial foundation for any inquiry into Mesopotamian performance, my approach diverges in both scope and intention. Unlike Karomi, Rashid, and Sabri, whose studies sought to challenge the aforementioned Eurocentric bias by demonstrating that theatre existed in Mesopotamia prior to ancient Greece, I am not concerned with questions of origins or precedence. Rather, I aim here to reframe Mesopotamian theatre traditions within a cross-cultural continuum of ritual and performative expression that emphasizes interconnected developments, reciprocal influences, and shared performative vocabularies across ancient civilizations. I examine Mesopotamian theatrical traditions as a historically specific constellation of practices that can be usefully studied through the lens of more recent advances in performance and theatre history, particularly cross-cultural approaches that situate ancient performance within interconnected ritual and cultural systems, and that highlight the emergence of performance traditions as a widespread and multifaceted human phenomenon rather than as the innovation of any single civilization. By illuminating the significance of underrecognized research, including Iraqi scholarship, on Mesopotamian theatrical traditions, and by interrogating the intersections of Sumerian dispute texts, ritual enactments, linguistic and architectural evidence, this article provides new and innovative observations, such as the striking parallels between Sumerian disputation poems and contemporary battle rap, which highlight unexpected continuities in performative traditions and underscore the enduring relevance of Mesopotamian cultural legacies.

Linguistic Evidence for Mesopotamian Theatre Traditions

Lexical evidence preserved in the *Assyrian-English-Assyrian Dictionary* suggests the presence of organized performance practices in ancient Mesopotamia.[10] A cluster of terms relating to performative activity including *epšētu* (n. act), *epāšu* (v. perform), *mašālu* (v. mime), *mēlulu* (actor or player), *riqdu* (dance and dancing), *aluzinnu* (clown/jester),[11] *mupaggianu* (n. mimic), and gendered performers such as *mummillu* (actor) and *mummiltu* (actress or dancing-girl), may indicate that performance was recognized as a distinct form of social and ritual behavior, potentially extending beyond entertainment into broader religious and communal contexts. Terminology associated with material culture and performance settings further supports this interpretation, as terms such as *kuzippu*, *nalbašu*, *talbuštu*, and *tēdiqu* (costume), *kutmu* (mask), *šumaku* (prop), *duʾu* and *h̲utû* (platform), and *lulīmu* and *mardītu* (stage) imply designated performance environments. Likewise, *taklimtu* (drama and spectacle), alongside distinctions between *dabūbu* (dialogue), and *dāgilu* (spectator), suggest formalized presentation and performer–audience interaction.

The distribution of these terms across general lexical compilations, rather than within single literary or ritual texts, suggests that performance-related vocabulary formed part of wider linguistic usage. Although such evidence cannot confirm the existence of theatre in the modern sense, it supports the hypothesis that Mesopotamian societies maintained structured performative traditions involving specialized performers, audiences, spatial organization, and staged or ritualized presentation.

One possible contextual illustration of the broader semantic and cultural range of performance-related terminology may be found in literary and theological interpretations of the goddess Inanna–Ishtar. R. Harris has drawn attention to the significance of play (*mēlulu*) within the characterization of the goddess, suggesting that playful and performative elements formed part of her divine persona across multiple spheres of activity. The interrelationship between play, performance, and ritual underscores the goddess's multifaceted role in transcending social norms and reasserting divine order. As Harris notes, "Play (*melulu*) is an integral part of Inanna-Ishtar's personality. She is 'the player (*mummiltu*) par excellence.' The semantic range of the Akkadian word for play includes dancing and acting and […] involves the arena of war, for her playground was the battleground." Harris quotes, among other things, a text in which the phrase "the play of Ishtar" is used as a euphemism for "battle," and also highlights the connection between "play" and the carnivalesque elements of the festival of Ishtar.[12]

Moreover, play and performance are framed as vital elements of Mesopotamian ritual, as evidenced by the presence of portable stages, referred to as *littum riqdi*.[13] These platforms were used during performances that had religious, ceremonial, and possibly theatrical functions, reinforcing the idea that the act of performance was central to religious worship and social rituals. The *littum riqdi* suggest that these performances were more than artistic expressions; they were instruments for enacting divine narratives, involving both gods and humans in the broader cosmological drama.

Another word that relates to theatre props is *melammu*, masks, which were associated with gods, royals, or demons (see Image 1). A.L. Oppenheim explores the Akkadian concept of *melammu*, traditionally understood as a supernatural aura, and argues that it also refers to physical masks used in religious performances. He associates *melammu* with ritual practices in which priests donned masks to embody divine or demonic beings during ceremonies, including instances where priests wore these masks in cultural theatrical representations before the worshippers of Ishtar.[14] Thus, *melammu* not only signified divine radiance but also played a key role in theatrical and ritualistic performances in Akkadian culture.

Image 1: Clay mask of the demon Huwawa [Humbaba]. Old Babylonian period (c. 1800–1600 BCE), from Sippar (Abu Habba), Iraq. British Museum, Museum No. 1883, 0118, AH.2598. Credit: ©Trustees of the British Museum Shared under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 license, no changes made to image.

Oppenheim mentions different types of masks, including lion masks (*zumar labbi*) and fish masks (*zumar nune*), used by priests in ritual performances. He references Akkadian texts describing how specific priests, particularly the *kurgarru* and *assinnu*, wore masks as part of ceremonial and theatrical enactments. For example, in the Ishtar festival in Uruk, priests appeared as "lion-men" (i.e., wearing lion masks) in ritual performances. Moreover, he notes that some priests, such as those involved in exorcisms or magical rites, donned masks to embody supernatural beings, likely to intimidate spirits or symbolize divine presence. Oppenheim connects these masked performances to broader Mesopotamian religious practices, arguing that the masks served not only as disguises but also as tools to invoke divine power and create awe in ceremonial contexts.[15]

Performance of Rituals and Myths

The roots of Mesopotamian drama trace back to early agrarian and pastoral communities of the Neolithic and Ubaid periods, where ritual practices were intertwined with hunting, herding, and the first stages of organized agriculture. In these early communities, ritual performance provided a medium for engaging with deities, ancestors, and non-human forces. Through song, dance, masking, and procession, participants enacted relationships with the natural and divine worlds. Rather than representing a linear evolution from 'animism' to more advanced forms, these practices reveal layered cosmologies in which new political and theological emphases (such as royal ideology) were grafted onto longstanding performative grammars. As Mesopotamian urban life developed, anthropomorphism took center stage, and rituals evolved. By the second millennium, kings and community representatives acted in these dramas, with love and marriage symbolizing the bond between the people and the fertility powers, strengthening social and psychological ties.[16]

The history of Mesopotamian performances reveals how older traditions persisted while being reinterpreted to meet new political and religious needs. Fertility rites, lamentations, and mythic reenactments continued to coexist, but rulers and temple elites

adapted these forms strategically to assert authority, consolidate communal identity, and dramatize cosmic order. For Thorkild Jacobsen, this shift mirrors a broader transformation in Mesopotamian religion from a nature-based system to one dominated by political forces, moving from democratic pluralism to monarchies and, eventually, exclusive nationalist ideologies.[17] In this sense, dramatic expression developed not through linear evolution but through the appropriation and exploitation of existing practices to serve changing cultural and political agendas. A parallel can be observed in fifth-century Greece, where inherited ritual and mythic frameworks were re-purposed to sustain civic ideology. This framing emphasizes continuity and adaptation, situating Mesopotamian theatre within a dynamic continuum of performance responsive to specific historical conditions.

As we shall see in the following sub-sections, examples of this adaptive process are found in Babylon's *Akitu* festival, where the king ritually embodied Marduk to dramatize divine victory and legitimize his own rule, and in the Sacred Marriage rite, where older fertility rituals were re-staged to anchor royal authority in cosmic order. Similarly, Battle Drama reconfigured inherited mythic motifs into a political performance celebrating the birth of the nation. These cases provide insight into the cultural fabric of Mesopotamian society, and illustrate how Mesopotamian drama appropriated existing ritual forms to serve shifting cultural and political agendas.

Enuma Elish and the *Akitu* Festival

Enuma Elish (also known as *The Seven Tablets of Creation*) is the Babylonian creation myth, the title of which is derived from the opening lines of the piece, "When on High." Composed in Akkadian during the late second millennium BCE and preserved most fully on seven tablets from the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, *Enuma Elish* was ritually performed at the *Akitu* festival. The *Akitu*, the origins of which go back to the third millennium BCE in Sumerian cities such as Ur and Lagash before becoming central in Babylon, functioned as both a religious and political spectacle.[18] In the third millennium BCE, Sumerian *Akitu*-type festivals were often celebrated twice yearly, at both the spring and autumn equinoxes. By the first millennium BCE, however, the Babylonian *Akitu* had become standardized as a spring festival in the month of Nisan (the start of the Babylonian New Year), when the *Enuma Elish* was performed.[19]

The myth tells the story of the great god Marduk's victory over the forces of chaos and his establishment of order at the creation of the world. Marduk, the chief god of the city of Babylon, defeats the elder goddess Tiamat and brings order to chaos, and thus becomes the Lord of the gods of Heaven and Earth. In analyzing elements of cultic drama at *Akitu* festival, Erich Ebeling asserts that "the events were not only pantomimically represented but also made comprehensible to the devout audience through a more or less detailed dialogue between the main characters and the chorus."[20]

Although the evidence is fragmentary, a number of scholars have proposed reconstructions in which the *Enuma Elish* and related mythological narratives were integrated into cultic performances during the Akitu festival. Ritual texts and later scholarly interpretations suggest that these narratives were not confined to silent symbolic action but may have involved structured spoken exchange and ritualized dialogue. On the basis of fragmentary ritual texts, Ebeling argued that elements of the creation myth were enacted within a cultic drama, involving verbal interaction between principal divine figures and a group of priests functioning in a chorus-like role, rather than through pantomime alone.[21]

Within this framework, mythic events were made intelligible to participants and observers through a combination of recitation, lamentation, and symbolic ritual action. Descriptions of the Babylonian Akitu festival emphasize its visual and performative dimensions; as Lauren Ristvet notes, "the resulting spectacle was imposing, colourful and even comic."[22] Lexical and ritual references, including terms such as *littum riqdi*, further suggest that these performances could unfold in temple courtyards and along processional routes rather than in a single fixed space. As the Akitu was a civic-religious festival central to urban life, such ritual performances likely addressed a broader public audience, including priests, officials, and assembled citizens. While these reconstructions remain necessarily speculative, they support the interpretation of the *Enuma Elish* as functioning within a large-scale public ritual framework that combined "demonstrative and performative acts" with formal recitation and symbolic enactment.[23]

The drama begins when Belet-ili, dispatched by Marduk's consort Zarpanitum, embarks on a frantic search for the god. Along the way, she encounters a priest from Borsippa, who joins the search as rumors spread of Marduk's vanishing. Meanwhile, the citizens of Babylon, fearing the loss of their divine protector, cry out for Marduk's return, praying to Shamash and Sin (gods of the sun and moon, respectively) for intervention. The turning point occurs when Marduk's lifeless body is discovered at the Bab Ka-bu-rat gate, with a goddess mourning by his side. The nature of his death remains unclear, but symbolic rituals suggest the involvement of chaotic forces. This revelation triggers civil unrest in Babylon, with rebellion and grief overtaking the city. Marduk's death is reported to Zarpanitum, whose intense mourning underscores the tragedy. In response, rituals are performed to restore Marduk's strength and to petition Shamash and Sin for his return.

Although the Akitu festival unfolds through a sequence of ritual actions that parallel themes of crisis and restoration found in the *Enuma Elish*, these actions are best understood as cultic ritual rather than theatrical drama.[24] The king was ritually identified with Marduk, although only at specific points within this sequence, rather than across the entire narrative arc. The disappearance, mourning, and symbolic endangerment of Marduk belonged primarily to the mythic and liturgical register of the festival and were

articulated through recitation, lamentation, and ritual gesture, not through direct enactment by the king.

The king did participate explicitly in the ritual, however, most notably on the fifth day of the Akitu, when he underwent the well-attested humiliation rite before the statue of Marduk in the Esagila. During this rite, the high priest would remove the king's regalia, strike his cheek, and compel a declaration of innocence; the king's ability to shed tears functioned as a divinely evaluated sign of Marduk's continued favor: "if the tears flow, Bel is friendly; if no tears appear, Bel is angry."[25] This moment does not dramatize a mythic battle or represent Marduk's combat with chaotic forces but instead ritually enacts the king's submission to divine authority at a moment of cosmic uncertainty, establishing the conditions for the subsequent restoration of order.

Later in the festival, particularly during the procession to and from the Akitu house and the ritual "taking of the hand of Bel" (Days 8–11), the king appeared in a restored and legitimized role that reflected Marduk's reassertion of cosmic and political order. These actions aligned the king symbolically with Marduk's victory over chaos, yet they remained ritual affirmations rather than mimetic reenactments of combat with figures such as Kingu or Tiamat. The king's role was thus episodic and symbolic, embedded within a broader sequence of cultic actions rather than constituting a continuous dramatization of the creation myth.

Early claims that the Akitu festival involved a dramatized representation of Marduk's death and restoration derive largely from the interpretive framework of the early twentieth-century Myth–Ritual School. Within this paradigm, cultic action was assumed to function as a ritual reenactment of mythic narrative, and the Babylonian New Year was accordingly reconstructed as a dramatic performance of *Enuma Elish*. The most influential formulation of this view appears in the work of Svend Aage Pallis, who argued that the Akitu festival as a whole was "represented dramatically," with priestly personnel, processions, and symbolic acts rendering the myth present through ritual performance rather than through narrative recitation alone.[26] Pallis's reconstruction drew attention to the festival's ordered sequence, embodied actions, and public intelligibility, and for much of the twentieth century it provided the standard point of departure for discussions of Akitu ritual form.

Subsequent scholarship, however, has increasingly qualified these claims. The evidence for the staging of the Akitu ritual remains fragmentary and largely indirect. The primary sources consist of Seleucid-period cuneiform ritual instructions, references to the recitation of *Enuma Elish*, and associated liturgical prayers, all of which prescribe ritual actions (such as the humiliation of the king, the removal and restoration of regalia, and the procession of divine statues between cultic spaces), without supplying stage directions or narrative cues sufficient to support a mimetic dramatization of myth. Archaeological evidence, including the Processional Way and the Akitu house outside

Babylon's walls, confirms the existence of architectural settings designed for movement and public ritual visibility, but it does not preserve evidence for dramatic props, costuming, or enacted divine combat. Later Assyriological scholarship has rejected interpretations of the Akitu as theatrical re-enactment, viewing its rites instead as symbolic affirmations of divine and political order. This position was later synthesized and reframed by Jonathan Z. Smith, who emphasized the festival's function as a historically contingent ritual of cosmic and political rectification.[27] Within this framework, the description of the Akitu as a "performance" refers to the bodily, public enactment of symbolic gestures, movements, and speech acts, rather than to theatrical drama in the modern sense.

Sacred Marriage

The Sacred Marriage appeared in the third millennium BCE as a Sumerian cultic rite through which the king enacted a bond with Inanna to secure fertility and well-being.[28] Public elements (offerings, processions, ritual purification, and adornment) preceded a private union enacted by the king and a designated priestess representing the goddess. The ceremony was accompanied by a love-song repertoire whose dialogic and lyrical form indicates performed speech and song, rather than silent recitation.[29]

Comparative evidence indicates that the *hieros gamos* functioned as ritual drama, staged by kings, priests, and cult personnel (singers, dancers, musicians) and articulated through processions, spoken exchanges, and chorus-like refrains.[30] Within the Sumerian corpus, the Sacred Marriage is likewise voiced and embodied: organized love-song cycles (marked by performative rubrics such as *balbale*, *tigi*, *kungar*) present dialogues/monologues with responsorial refrains, embedded in a sequenced choreography—processional approach, ritual bathing and adornment, bed preparation, and the king's escorted entry to the goddess's inner space (often at Eanna)—after which the festival reopens, to banqueting, music, and public rejoicing.[31] Read together, these sources warrant interpreting the Sacred Marriage as efficacious ritual performance: codified actions, roles, and sounds whose enactment renews agricultural abundance and confirms kingship in the public, cultic sphere.

This framing helps clarify how later scholars have interpreted the rite's evolution. Thorkild Jacobsen argues that this Sacred Marriage Drama was an early immersive ritual which later developed into a highly structured performance, reflecting broader shifts in Mesopotamian society. To describe the later iterations of the Sacred Marriage as a "performance," however, is not to suggest that it lost its ritual efficacy or became aesthetic spectacle alone. The hymns, processions, and liturgies continued to be understood as acts that ensured fertility, divine favor, and cosmic balance. What changed was not the belief in efficacy but the *mode* of enactment: from a participatory rite in

which participants embodied Inanna and her spouse Dumuzi, to a temple-centered performance where king and priestess acted as representatives of the gods.

Like the Dionysian plays in classical Greece, which invoked a god and effected catharsis through language and ritual action, later iterations of the Sacred Marriage retained a performative force that linked the community to divine powers. The distinction, therefore, is not between "real" ritual and "aesthetic" performance, but between different ways of staging divine presence. As Richard Schechner has argued, performance is best understood as a continuum that encompasses ritual, play, and theatre, all grounded in what he calls "restored behavior," that is, twice-behaved, rehearsed actions that can be replayed and recombined across ritual and performance.[32] From this perspective, the Sacred Marriage was not "mere ritual" or "mere theatre," but a hybrid enactment whose force lay in both efficacy and representation.

As Mesopotamian society became increasingly urbanized and politically stratified, religious thought shifted toward more anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine. Gods that had once been experienced through diffuse forces and direct embodiment were now imagined as distinct personified beings, often organized into divine "families." Yet this was not a clean break. Traces of earlier animistic traditions persisted in healing rites, local practices, and temple ceremonies, and elements of direct divine embodiment remained possible within the liminal space of ritual. By the third millennium BCE Sacred Marriage ceremonies became increasingly institutionalized under temple authority and within temple settings, accompanied by formalized hymns, musicians, and priestly oversight, thus aligning religious performance with emerging urban political structures. By the first millennium BCE, earlier fertility enactments had developed into new forms such as the Battle Drama, which Jacobsen describes as a "political drama celebrating and reaffirming the birth of the nation as a divine achievement."[33] Surviving hymns and liturgies from the Sacred Marriage provide glimpses of these performances: songs of Inanna's desire for Dumuzi, ritual dialogues between king and priestess, and choruses that integrated the wider community into the drama's effects.

Descent of Inanna into the Underworld

The Descent of Inanna into the Underworld is a Sumerian myth that narrates the descent of the goddess Inanna (Ishtar, in Akkadian) into the Underworld to overthrow its ruler, her sister Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Dead. However, following the removal of her adornments, Inanna perishes, and her corpse is suspended on a nail. The god Enki restores Inanna to life, but she must deliver another living human in exchange for her freedom. She selects Dumuzi, her spouse, who is abruptly transported to the Underworld. In response to the pleas of Dumuzi's sister, Geshtinanna, his circumstances are somewhat ameliorated: he is permitted to remain in the Underworld for only a portion of the year, with his sister assuming his role for the remaining duration.

Iraqi historian and archaeologist Fawzi Rashid argues that theatre existed in Iraq before the Greeks, using the myth of Inanna's Descent as evidence. He suggests that, given the limited literacy in ancient Mesopotamia, the myth must have been performed, rather than merely read, in order to engage the public and to connect everyday life with religious teaching, thereby increasing social cohesion.[34] Indeed, the mythic text contains dialogic exchanges, role substitutions, and ritual laments that are inherently performative in structure and would lend themselves to live enactment.

To further support his argument, Rashid refers to archaeological findings in Uruk in 1967, where excavations uncovered a structure with three concentric stone walls, which he proposes may have symbolized the entrance to the underworld in a public performance.[35] Additionally, as Karomi notes, the *Bayt al-Tamthīl* ("House of Performance") at Uruk, though situated near the temple of Inanna, is architecturally distinct from the cultic precinct, indicating a space deliberately demarcated for communal gathering and spectacle (hence its name), rather than exclusively for worship.[36]

Similarly, the Babylonian theatre associated with Nebuchadnezzar II offered a large, multifunctional arena used for ritual dramas, athletic events, and mythological reenactments during civic festivals such as the *Akitu*. While these are structurally distinct from Athenian theatres, they nonetheless represent performance spaces—arenas intentionally structured to accommodate audiences and enactments—which substantiates the claim that Mesopotamian culture embedded performance within both civic and sacred life.

As many scholars have noted, narrative and mythic performance forms occur in virtually every ancient culture, from Egypt to Anatolia and beyond. To avoid conflating these diverse traditions, this study uses the term "theatre" in a specific sense: not merely the existence of story or ritual, but the development of architecturally or socially demarcated spaces where communal enactments were staged before an audience. This distinction allows us to separate general ritual or narrative expression (practices shared widely across ancient societies) from the more focused phenomenon of theatre, where myth, ritual, and spectacle intersect in settings designed for spectatorship. In this light, Mesopotamian examples such as the *Bayt al-Tamthil* or the Babylonian theatre can be considered "theatrical," while also acknowledging that their forms and functions differed from the later Athenian model.

To further support his argument that theatre existed in Mesopotamia before the Greeks, Rashid also outlines potential connections between the myth of Inanna's descent to the underworld and early Greek plays such as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. His analysis suggests that recurring motifs shared by *Inanna's Descent* and *The Oresteia*, such as neglect, substitution, divine intervention, and sibling loyalty, may point to thematic continuities or indirect cultural echoes from Mesopotamian traditions, raising the

possibility that Greek tragedy was shaped in part by earlier Near Eastern performance forms.[37]

Nonetheless, while the parallels with *The Oresteia* are suggestive, the Eleusinian Mysteries (and their mythic focus on Demeter and Persephone) provide a far more convincing and historically grounded analogue to *Inanna's Descent*, since they ritualized the *katabasis* motif within a performative cultic context rather than a later dramatic retelling. Recited and ritually enacted during the Mysteries, the *Hymn to Demeter* staged the cycle of loss, *katabasis*, and renewal in a manner strikingly parallel to the Sumerian narrative: both traditions employ ritual substitution, seasonal suffering, and the cyclical return of fertility. As Walter Burkert has shown, the Mysteries drew on a repertoire of descent motifs that circulated across the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, with katabatic themes functioning not only as mythic narratives but as ritual dramas of transformation enacted before communities.[38] Burkert emphasizes that antiquity itself recognized these resonances, with Greek tragedy (such as the choral invocations in *Seven Against Thebes*) reflecting patterns known from Mesopotamian ritual laments and healing ceremonies.[39] From this perspective, the Demeter/Persephone cycle offers a closer and more productive comparative frame than sibling motifs alone, since its ritualized performance within the Eleusinian Mysteries directly parallels the communal dramatization of cosmic order, divine suffering, and seasonal renewal found in *Inanna's Descent*.

Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest known works of world literature, survives in multiple languages and recensions because it developed over nearly two millennia across different Mesopotamian cultural and linguistic contexts. Originating in the late third millennium BCE as independent Sumerian poems about the hero "Bilgamesh" (later known as Gilgamesh), these narratives were later synthesized into an Akkadian epic during the Old Babylonian period and subsequently adapted into Hurrian and Hittite translations in Anatolia. The best-known form, the Standard Babylonian version edited by Sin-leqi-unninni (ca. 1300–1000 BCE), represents a deliberate literary reworking of earlier material that shaped the epic's theological and philosophical emphases. Scribal copying, translation, and editorial revision across centuries produced the textual plurality evident today, preserved in hundreds of fragmentary tablets from Nippur, Ur, and Nineveh. This complex transmission history explains why *Gilgamesh* reaches us in divergent forms that reflect the evolving linguistic, religious, and intellectual traditions of the ancient Near East.

The epic follows Gilgamesh, a powerful yet tyrannical ruler, whose friendship with the wild man Enkidu transforms him through shared adventures: most notably their defeat of Humbaba, guardian of the Cedar Forest, and the slaying of the Bull of Heaven

sent by the goddess Ishtar. When Enkidu dies as divine punishment, Gilgamesh is overcome by grief and fear of mortality, prompting a quest for eternal life that leads him to the immortal flood survivor Utnapishtim. Ultimately, he learns that immortality is reserved for the gods and that human meaning lies in wisdom, compassion, and the lasting works of civilization. Across its many recensions and translations, the epic reflects evolving Mesopotamian conceptions of kingship, friendship, mortality, and the search for understanding in the face of death.

Image 2: Relief, *Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba at the Cedar Forest*. Photo credit: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, via Wikimedia Commons. Shared under a Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 license, no changes made to image.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was not only transmitted through written tablets but also rooted in the ritual and performative culture of ancient Mesopotamia. While there is no textual evidence for formal or Western-style stage dramatizations of the epic, the ritual contexts of Mesopotamian festivals (particularly the Babylonian *Akitu*) suggest that mythic narratives were embodied symbolically through processional and ceremonial performance. As Judith E. Filitz argues, the *Akitu* ritual demonstrates how ancient ceremonies could occupy a liminal space "between ritual and theater," combining corporality, multi-sensual ostentation, event, and representation within a religious framework.[40] Such performative qualities help explain how mythic stories could be enacted through gesture, music, or costume as part of communal expressions of cosmic renewal. Professional singers (*kalu*) and lamentation priests (*naru*) likewise performed mythological and royal compositions in temple settings, emphasizing the oral and performative dimensions of Mesopotamian literature. Iconographic scenes of Gilgamesh wrestling a lion (emblems of divine kingship and cosmic order) echo this tradition, showing how the epic's imagery participated in a broader culture of ritual performance rather than in Western-style theatrical dramatization.

Mohammed Sabri argues that artifacts such as cylinder seals, clay tablets, and carved stone figures further illustrate the theatricality of these performances.[41] This argument highlights the performative dimension of Mesopotamian myth, in which artistic

representations of figures such as Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Humbaba convey movement, gesture, and symbolic embodiment (see Image 2). Cylinder seals frequently depict scenes that correspond to episodes from *Gilgamesh* (most notably the hero's combat with the monstrous guardian or the divine bull)—compositions that evoke ritualized struggle, rather than static illustration. While none of these objects can be shown to represent actors or staged performances, their iconography (muscular confrontation, divine insignia, and recurring motifs of heroism) suggests that Mesopotamian art visualized mythic action as part of a broader ceremonial and religious aesthetic. The existence of terracotta masks of Humbaba, such as those discovered at sites like Sippar and Nippur, further supports the idea that ritual impersonation and embodiment played a role in Mesopotamian religious practice. In this sense, Sabri's notion of "theatricality" captures the experiential quality of these representations: they translate myth into embodied form, revealing a ritual imagination that predates but anticipates later traditions of performative storytelling.

The epic's moral and theological dimensions cannot be attributed to the early Sumerian religious framework nor to any single belief system, however. Much of the material known to us has been transmitted through later Akkadian, Babylonian, and even Hittite versions, reflecting centuries of adaptation across Mesopotamian and Anatolian cultures. Its exploration of human defiance against divine limits, the pursuit of immortality, and the redemptive power of friendship and loss reflects a dynamic dialogue between changing cultural values rather than a static doctrine. Its enduring themes transcended local religious orthodoxy, allowing *Gilgamesh* to remain a living and evolving part of the Mesopotamian ritual and cultural imagination.

Adamin/Tesitu: Sumerian Battle Rap

Certain Sumerian-language literary texts preserved in Old Babylonian manuscripts were composed and transmitted with performance in mind. As Paul Delnero observes, a key distinguishing feature of these texts is their likely intended use for performance. This is demonstrated by the presence of "performative rubrics and subscripts in the texts themselves," "a highly syllabic orthography to indicate how the words in the text were to be pronounced during performance," and an "Old Babylonian liturgical source which includes musical glosses."[42] Oral recitation was a pervasive feature of ancient textual culture: apart from administrative or inventory lists, nearly all Mesopotamian compositions were read aloud to listeners. Yet, as Delnero's analysis makes clear, the Sumerian disputation poems differ from ordinary oral reading in their formal design and explicit performative cues. Their alternating dialogue structure, ritual refrains, and notations referring specifically to *a-da-min-se,* "the performance of a disputation," reveal that these were not simply pedagogical recitations but dramatized enactments, probably staged within temple-schools (*edubba*) or at cultic festivals. In this sense, they represent

a specialized form of performance that bridges the worlds of ritual, education, and theatrical expression, embodying a more deliberate and structured dramatization than other texts examined here.

While reading about early Sumerian literature and theatrical practices in ancient Iraq, I was struck by a fascinating performative tradition that resonates with what in modern terms is known as battle rap, a genre where performers engage in verbal duels, trading boasts and insults in rhythmic, improvisational exchange. This is not to suggest that such forms are uniquely modern; on the contrary, the art of competitive verbal performance appears across a wide range of ancient and contemporary cultures. From the Sumerian *adamin* and *tesitu* disputations to the Greek *agon*, the Arabic *munafarat* and *naqaʾid*, Norse *flyting*, and West African griot rivalries, verbal contest has long served as both entertainment and a test of intellect, memory, and creativity. The analogy to battle rap is therefore not meant flippantly, but rather to illuminate the enduring human impulse to dramatize competition through public poetic exchange, a performative continuity that bridges ancient Mesopotamia and the modern stage.

The Sumerian genre of "dispute" (*adamin; tesitu* in Akkadian), studied in the *edubba* (the Sumerian tablet-house or school, dating back to before 2000 BC), shares striking similarities with battle rap. *Tesitu* was performative, burlesque, and often described as "contests (between) two" or "contests in speech"—that is, disputation poems, meant to be performed in communal occasional and festivals. Enrique Jiménez notes that external evidence for such performances, while limited, does exist: two Ur III documents mention deliveries "for the performance of a disputation" (*a-da-min aka*) and "for a disputation" (*a-da-min-se*). These documents probably refer to the enactment of a disputation performed in the context of a cultic or festival event.[43]

From the first half of the second millennium BC, eight fascinating Sumerian disputation poems emerge, each with a notably theatrical flair. In these dramatic verbal duels or dialogic drama, two rivals face off in a battle of words, each striving to prove their superiority. The structure of these contests echoes the format of a stage performance, with carefully crafted exchanges designed to showcase wit and rhetoric, and with a judge (a god, like Enlil or Enki, or a human authority figure, such as king or a schoolmaster) delivering a final verdict on the contest. The participants often represent contrasting elements of the world, creating vivid and symbolic characters: the Tree squaring off against the Reed, or the Hoe battling the Plow, each antagonist embodying its own essence in the contest. These verbal sparring matches extend beyond the agricultural sphere, with dramatic confrontations between metals (Precious Metal vs. Copper), seasons (Summer vs. Winter), and even professions (Farmer vs. Shepherd). Some disputes involve more complex roles, such as school personnel and graduates, or animals (Bird vs. Fish). At times, the poems present unexpected pairings, such as a crop plant confronting a Ewe, in a clash of categories.

Adil Hashim, professor of ancient Iraqi history, postulates that ancient Iraqi society was marked by significant ethnic diversity, with the indigenous Sumerians alongside the Semitic peoples who migrated from neighboring regions. Over time, these groups merged to form a unified culture. However, Hashim argues that conflicts and differences occasionally emerged, both between and within these groups. These societal tensions, such as the clash between urban and nomadic lifestyles or class and profession divisions, were often symbolically represented in Mesopotamian literature, especially in the form of debates/*adamin*.[44]

One particularly striking example presents a showdown between two city lords, Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna, where the entire city becomes a stage for their intellectual and political contest. Claus Wilcke examines the theatrical dimensions of this poem, arguing that it blends elements of epic narration with dramatic performance. He identifies four internal textual features that point toward performative enactment, each observable within the text itself. First, the repeated use of demonstratives and deictic pronouns. For example, when the narrator commands, "*Let him come here!*" or says, "*There he stands before the gate of Aratta!*" the phrases function like stage directions, orienting audience and performers in space. Second, the ergative marking of animals (e.g., "The ox drives the plow," "The lion seizes the prey") may signal that these actions were represented mimetically by human actors. Third, the absence of a dominant central character allows fluid shifts in voice and perspective, supporting multiple speakers or roles. Finally, rapid scene and character changes (e.g., moving from Enmerkar's city to Ensuhkešdanna's court and back again) suggest a performative sequencing of acts.[45] Taken together, these textual markers lend credence to Wilcke's claim that *Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna* was not simply recited but staged, as a kind of civic or ritual performance.

Another example is a verbal duel between school staff and graduates, where two characters take turns delivering speeches in which they boast of their virtues while hurling insults, often escalating into harsh and abusive exchanges. This exchange was meant not only to display rhetorical skill but also to entertain and amuse, perhaps as a way to offer relief from the otherwise monotonous routine of classroom life. These compositions were invented by Sumerian scribes, who would compose, copy, and have them read by students.[46] Among the well-known disputations are those between school graduates named Enkita and Enkihegal, in one case, and Enkimansi and Girnishag, in another. To illustrate the performative dynamics of Sumerian disputation poetry, the following example pairs a passage from *Enkita and Enkihegal* with a rap-like reinterpretation that reimagines its rhythm and verbal combativeness in a modern idiom.

Formal translation of the Sumerian text:
You have a harp, but know no music,
You who are the 'water boy' of your colleagues.
Your throat can't sound a note,
You stutter your Sumerian, can't make a straight speech,
Can't sing a hymn, can't open your mouth—
And you are an accomplished fellow![47]

My "rap-ified" translation:
You got a harp, but no music to show,
Water boy to your crew, that's all you know,
Your throat can't hit a note, you're fallin' apart,
Stutterin' in Sumerian, can't even start,
You can't sing a hymn, can't open your mouth,
When you try to speak, all we hear is a drought,
And you call yourself accomplished, man, what a sight!

Similarly, battle rap operates as an agonistic performance form, structured around confrontational verbal exchanges in which two or more MCs, typically from the African-American community, assert dominance through verbal dexterity, creative wordplay, and strategic insult. Just as *tesitu* was designed to entertain and display rhetorical prowess, battle rap serves a similar purpose in contemporary culture, providing a space for performers to showcase their linguistic skills, often pushing the boundaries of humor and aggression. Both forms, in their respective eras, seem to recognize the power of words not only to challenge and insult but also to entertain and bond the participants and the audience through a shared appreciation of verbal artistry.

More importantly, *tesitu* can be seen as both entertainment and social criticism. School sketches often depict exaggerated characters like the complacent professor, obsequious students, and bullying teachers, figures that serve as satire rather than reality.[48] This satirical tone suggests that *tesitu* was not just about competition, but also a critique of societal norms and the power dynamics within education. Similarly, battle rap today uses sharp wordplay and insults to address issues like inequality and identity, offering both entertainment and social commentary. Both *tesitu* and battle rap employ exaggeration and humor to critique societal flaws, using verbal contests as a form of both performance and social reflection.

The comparison to modern battle rap is not meant to suggest a direct historical lineage but to serve as a heuristic analogy for understanding the performative nature of Sumerian disputation poetry. Both forms rely on competitive verbal display, improvisation, audience response, and performative embodiment, core elements that

precede and anticipate later theatrical traditions. In the context of a pre-Greek performance culture, *adamin* and *tesitu* can be viewed as proto-theatrical genres, in which social, political, and ritual tensions are dramatized through staged verbal contest rather than narrative representation. The analogy to rap performance thus tries to sharpen my central argument: that ancient Mesopotamian literature possessed a developed sense of performative competition, role-play, and audience engagement that laid the cultural groundwork for theatrical expression.

The Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur

The Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur is an ancient Sumerian poem that mournfully describes the destruction of the city of Ur, lamenting the fall of its civilization and blaming the gods, particularly Enlil, for the devastation, with the goddess Ningal often depicted as weeping and pleading for mercy on behalf of her people. It is considered a prime example of a "city lament" from ancient Mesopotamia, detailing the city's desolation and the suffering of its inhabitants after the catastrophic event. As John Jacobs explains, the Sumerian city laments were "historically embedded texts, designed for repeated performance at a specific time and place," to ritually reenact the death and the rebirth "not only of the city per se but also of the house/temple-city-universe."[49] Through this performative lamentation, the city itself becomes a speaking, suffering figure: "over the course of the evolution of the genre… the personified city comes to lament its own fall."[50] Moreover, as Mary R. Bachvarova argues, key motifs first expressed in Mesopotamian city laments were later adapted in the *Iliad*, where earlier versions of Troy's destruction were absorbed into its epic narrative.[51]

The Lamentation, a 435-line Sumerian text drenched in sorrow and divine anguish, illuminates the ritual roots of performative expression, where religious practice and dramatic storytelling intersect. Composed in response to the fall of Ur (c. 2000 BCE, with the lament composed shortly thereafter), the work extends beyond literary lament to a ceremonial act of grief and supplication, belonging to a ritual performance tradition: Sumerian lamentation priests (*gala*) chanted such compositions aloud within temple contexts, employing formal vocal techniques, and likely accompanied by ritual instruments, alongside communal participation. The lament's structure (with its alternating voices, refrains, and responsive cadence) suggests a choral mode of delivery that guided collective emotion, akin to the Greek chorus. While the text does not explicitly record gestures, ritual mourning practices in Mesopotamia included weeping, raising hands in prayer, and prostration, widely attested in liturgical sources and visual depictions of lament rituals.[52] Thus, the text's vivid imagery and emotive language would not have remained confined to the page; it functioned as an embodied, communal expression of grief before the gods, where speech, voice, and gesture merged into a sacred performance.

In many ways, *The Lamentation* echoes the hallmarks of Greek tragedy. The heightened emotional intensity of the dialogue, the deep sense of divine justice, and the human suffering that results from it resonate with the works of Sophocles and Euripides. As Edith Hall observes, the Greek vision of suffering was one element within a wider cultural sensibility shared across the eastern Mediterranean, where diverse ethnic and linguistic groups interacted two and a half millennia ago. In this context, Greek tragic poetry, with its themes of divine wrath and human vulnerability, shows clear affinities (e.g., tone and content) with older traditions, including Mesopotamian literature such as *Gilgamesh* as well as the Old Testament.[53] Just as in Greek plays, the gods here are active participants in the drama, not distant figures, and the cosmic consequences of their actions unfold before a suffering human populace.

Yvonne Rosengarten has argued that *The Lamentation* is not merely a religious or liturgical piece, but rather an early form of drama, akin to Greek tragedy. She highlights several key aspects that suggest the text was intended for performance, rather than just recitation (the latter implies the oral and often solemn and formulaic delivery of text, while the former suggests a more embodied and communal act, involving stylized vocal delivery, emotional expression, musical elements, and ritual staging within a sacred setting). These aspects include the text's vivid emotional content, the use of choral lamentation and the use of the chorus to guide the audience's response, and the central role of the goddess Ningal, who interacts with the divine in a manner similar to a theatrical protagonist. The text's emotional range and repetitive and symbolic language, along with musical accompaniment, further support the idea of a staged event.

Ultimately, Rosengarten proposes that *The Lamentation* should be seen as an early form of religious theatre, possibly performed in Sumerian temples, and predating Greek tragedy. This challenges the traditional view of the text as solely a religious document and invites consideration of the dramatic and performative elements in early Mesopotamian culture.[54] Karomi, who directed a staging of *The Lamentation* in 1974 at the Academy of Arts Theatre in Baghdad, highlights the enduring power of the ancient text in performance: the production, he said, "proved its performative potential—which knows no limits—and affirmed that its philosophical idea remains relevant to this day"—no mean feat for a text written in 3000 BCE.[55]

In these ancient lines, one does not merely encounter expressions of grief over the fall of a city; rather, one witnesses the emergence of a dramatic tradition. *The Lamentation* shows how early Mesopotamian communities used embodied, communal performance to stage crisis, mourning, and renewal—practices that resonate with, but are not reducible to, later Mediterranean forms.

Architectural Evidence of Mesopotamian Theatres

Iraqi scholars have proposed that the *Bayt al-Tamthil* at Uruk, the *Akitu* House, and other urban venues reflect early Mesopotamian performance architectures. As already noted, the city of Uruk reveals evidence of a dedicated performance space in the vicinity of Inanna's temple that functioned independently of religious drama. Moreover, while the extant theatre at Babylon is Hellenistic in date, some scholars read it as a hybrid structure layered onto long-standing local performance traditions rather than a purely exogenous import. Theatre professor Mohammed Sabri takes the argument a step further, arguing that the Babylonian theatre was not built under Alexander the Great, nor was it a replica of Greek or Roman theatres. Instead, according to Sabri, it was an independent and innovative Mesopotamian structure, designed for religious rituals, performances, and athletic events.[56] The site under discussion lies within the ruins of Babylon, roughly 85 kilometers south of modern Baghdad. Excavations led by Robert Koldewey between 1899 and 1917 uncovered the remains of a Hellenistic-style theatre near the Processional Way and the Ishtar Gate. Stratigraphic and architectural evidence identified the building as a Seleucid or early Parthian construction, dating between the mid-2nd and early 1st centuries BCE,[57] and later investigations confirmed that assessment: the Nebuchadnezzar-stamped bricks should not be taken as evidence that the building dates to the sixth century BCE. As Olof Pedersén explains, the theatre "was constructed in the south-western part of the Homera hills, which … consisted of fills from the demolition of the ziggurat before its planned rebuilding … where a Greek theatre was constructed on part of the fill."[58] Yet these findings may indicate that the theatre at Babylon was a cultural hybrid, reflecting both Hellenistic architectural forms and the needs and traditions of the local Babylonian community.

Nevertheless, Mohammed Sabri's interpretation provides a postcolonial rereading of this evidence. He acknowledges the Hellenistic form of the extant structure but emphasizes the continuities with indigenous Mesopotamian performance practices that pre-dated Greek colonization. Thus, the Seleucid theatre did not appear *ex nihilo*; rather, it was superimposed upon an existing local tradition of ritual and communal gathering, transforming the space into a hybrid arena that merged Greek theatrical conventions with Babylonian ceremonial functions. Such a synthesis aligns with broader cultural patterns of the Hellenistic Near East, where Greek civic architecture often absorbed and recontextualized native symbolic forms. Sabri's argument thus reframes Babylon's theatre not as a Greek import but as an instance of cultural adaptation, expanding the discussion of ancient performance beyond a Eurocentric narrative of Greek origin to a more intercultural history of theatricality in Mesopotamia.

Conclusion

Before Athens institutionalized theatre in the 5th century BCE, Mesopotamian societies had cultivated rich performative traditions that intertwined ritual, myth, and dramatic spectacle. These traditions, embodied in the *Akitu* festival, the Sacred Marriage, *The Descent of Inanna*, the Sumerian disputations, and *The Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, demonstrate a deep awareness of performance as both sacred act and communal expression. Figures such as Ebeling, Karomi, Rashid, and Sabri have each illuminated different facets of this performative world, from the ritual re-enactments of cosmic renewal to the architectural and linguistic traces of dramatic practice. Together, they reveal a culture in which performance was not peripheral to social or religious life, but central to the articulation of cosmic order, kingship, and identity.

The purpose of this study is not to replace one narrative of origin with another, nor to position Mesopotamia as a rival to Greece or any other ancient culture. Rather, this paper argues for the recognition of Mesopotamian performance traditions as part of a broader, interwoven history of theatricality that spanned multiple ancient civilizations. When viewed through this wider lens, the dramatic and ritual performances of Mesopotamia, Greece, and elsewhere in the ancient world appear not as competing beginnings, but as parallel articulations of the same human impulse to perform meaning into being.

Recognizing Mesopotamian drama, therefore, expands the frame of theatre historiography. It invites us to move beyond linear genealogies and toward a more plural and dialogic understanding of performance history; one that acknowledges exchange, convergence, and independent innovation. As archaeological discoveries continue and collaborations between theatre historians, archaeologists, and philologists deepen, further evidence may emerge to clarify how these early practices intersected across regions.

In this broader vision, the Mesopotamian contribution to theatre history lies not in claiming primacy, but in demonstrating that the performative imagination (ritualized, communal, and creative) has always been a shared human inheritance, reframed here as one that transcends civilizational boundaries. From this perspective, re-centering Mesopotamia within this interconnected landscape may enrich our understanding of world theatre as a complex, evolving network of traditions rather than a single, Western-centered lineage. Performance, as these early cultures reveal, has never belonged to one civilization alone; it has always been a dialogue among many voices, each shaping the art of theatre in its own time and form.

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[1] Alfred Jeremias, *Babylonische Dichtungen, Epen und Legenden* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1925), 30.

[2] The "Dialogue of Pessimism," a Babylonian poem dating from around 1000 BCE, is often interpreted as both an existential reflection and a comedic satire targeting social hierarchies and the educational system. Franz Marius Theodor de Liagre Böhl suggests that the Master-Slave Dialogue may have functioned as a form of ritual comedy performed during the Babylonian New Year Festival, akin to the Roman Saturnalia. This reversal of roles, where the slave assumes the position of the master, points to a theatrical performance infused with satirical commentary. See Franz Marius Theodor de Liagre Böhl, *Anthropologie réligieuse*, ed. C. J. Bleeker (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 47–48; "Dialogue of Pessimism," *Electronic Babylonian Library*, Corpus L II.4 (Standard Babylonian recension), trans. Benjamin Read Foster, https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/2/4/SB/.

[3] Khalid Amine, "Decolonizing Theatre History in the Arab World," *Horizons/Théâtre* 12 (2018): 10-25, at 12.

[4] Abdul Ameer al-Hamdani, "Iraq's Heritage: An Update," online lecture, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, 6 January 2021, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDrca7zbGH0.

[5] Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, trans. Margaret E. Pinder (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Martin L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[6] Awni Karomi, "Utruha fil Masrah al-Iraqi al-Qadeem" [A Thesis on Ancient Iraqi Theatre], *al-Aqlam*, no. 6 (March 1979): 3–7.

[7] Karomi, "Utruha fil Masrah," 5.

[8] Fawzi Rashid, "al-Masrah Babili wa Lais Ighriqiyan" [Theatre Is Babylonian, Not Greek], *al-Mawrid* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 66–67.

[9] Mohammed Sabri, "al-Masrah al-Babily: Tarikhuhu, Tirazuhu wa Khasa'isuhu" [Babylonian Theatre: History, Design, and Features], *Al-Academy*, no. 74 (February 2016): 74–75.

[10] I do not claim expertise in the languages of ancient Mesopotamia, but I have consulted Simo Parpola, ed., *Assyrian-English-Assyrian Dictionary: Cuneiform Edition* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press/Eisenbrauns, 2023), 4, 11, 25, 30, 33–34, 37, 41, 80, 82, 94, 96, 101, 121–22.

[11] For more on this term, see Maddelena Rumor, who points out that the *aluzinnu* was a Mesopotamian comic performer (an early jester) whose role centered on parody, mockery, and boastful incompetence. He appears in temple and court contexts, performing songs, dances, humorous recitations, and satirical impersonations of experts such as healers, diviners, and scholars. Rumor further postulates that this figure is directly connected to the Greek ἀλαζών (*alazôn*), noting that the Greek term has no convincing Greek etymology and closely matches the phonetic shape and comic function of *aluzinnu*. She argues that both characters share the same defining traits—exaggeration, deception, and comic pretension—and that the Greek braggart likely reflects a cultural and linguistic borrowing from the earlier

Mesopotamian tradition. Maddalena Rumor, "There's No Fool Like an Old Fool: The Mesopotamian *Aluzinnu* and Its Relationship to the Greek *Alazôn*," *KASKAL* 14 (2017): 187–207.

[12] Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30, no. 3 (1991): 261–78, at 274.

[13] Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "An Oration on Babylon," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 18, no. 1 (1991): 9-22, at 19–20.

[14] Adolf Leo Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u) (t)u* and *melammu*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 63, no. 1 (1943): 31–34.

[15] Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u) (t)u* and *melammu*," 31–34.

[16] Thorkild Jacobsen, "Religious Drama in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Hans Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 76–77.

[17] Jacobsen, "Religious Drama," 77.

[18] Wilfred George Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 3–6; Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvii–xviii; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 167–77.

[19] E. A. Speiser, "The Creation Epic," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, edited by James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 60.

[20] Erich Ebeling, *Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen der Babylonier*, Part I: Texts (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1931), 41.

[21] Ebeling, *Tod und Leben*, 41.

[22] Lauren Ristvet, "Between Ritual and Theatre: Political Performance in Seleucid Babylonia," *World Archaeology* 46, no. 2 (2014): 264.

[23] Sam Mirelman, "The Babylonian Akitu Festival and the Ritual Humiliation of the King," *ANE Today* 10, no. 9 (September 2022), https://anetoday.org/mirelamn-ritual-humiliation-king/.

[24] By "ritual" and "theatrical performance" I refer to analytical aspects of the same Akitu festival sequence, not to separate events. Following Richard Schechner, ritual and theatre may be understood as points on a continuum of performance rather than mutually exclusive categories; see Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 70–74. The Akitu is fundamentally a cultic rite of renewal characterized by fixed procedures and ritual efficacy, while also exhibiting embodied, demonstrative, and public dimensions that can be described analytically as performative, rather than theatrical in the modern sense.

[25] Jonathan Zittell Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams," *History of Religions* 16 (1976): 1–17, at 3.

[26] Svend Aage Pallis, *The Babylonian Akitu Festival* (Copenhagen: Hovedkommissionær A. F. Høst, 1926), 253–65.

[27] Smith, "A Pearl," 6–8.

[28] Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 49–50.

[29] Kramer, *Sacred Marriage Rite*, 63–66, 67–78.

[30] Inge Nielsen, *Cultic Theatres and Ritual Drama: A Study in Regional Development and Religious Interchange Between East and West in Antiquity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2002), 39–41.

[31] Pirjo Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage in the Light of Comparative Evidence* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2004), 30–47 (for the performative rubrics *balbale*, *tigi*, and *kungar*; and for alternating voices and responsorial refrains), 92–106, 151–66 (for ritual sequencing: the processional approach; bathing/adornment; the nuptial bed; Ninšubur's escort into the goddess's inner

space at Eanna), 185–206 (for the post-union banquet, music, rejoicing); cf. Inge Nielsen, *Cultic Theatres*, 39–41 (for processions, spoken exchanges, chorus-like refrains; and the roles of kings, priests, and cult personnel), 52–53 (for the major processions, including the city-to-*Bīt Akītu* route).
[32] Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 324.
[33] Jacobsen, "Religious Drama," 77.
[34] Rashid, "al-Masrah Babili," 66.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Karomi, "Utruha fil Masrah," 5.
[37] Rashid, "al-Masrah Babili," 71–72.
[38] Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 68.
[39] Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 109–10.
[40] Judith E. Filitz, "At the Threshold of Ritual and Theater: Another Means on Looking at a Mesopotamian Ritual," in *Teaching Morality in Antiquity: Wisdom Texts, Oral Traditions, and Images of Virtue*, ed. T. M. Oshima and Susanne Kohlhaas (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 233–34, 241–44.
[41] Mohammed Sabri, *al-Masrah al-Iraqi al-Qadim* [The Iraqi Ancient Theatre] (Baghdad: Dar al-Arif, 1991), 38.
[42] Paul Delnero, "Translating the Untranslatable: The Role of Akkadian in the Sumerian Liturgical Corpus," plenary talk presented at the American Oriental Society Annual Meeting, Portland, 18 March 2013, 8.
[43] Enrique Jiménez, *The Babylonian Disputation Poems: With Editions of the Series of the Poplar, Palm and Vine, the Series of the Spider, and the Story of the Poor, Forlorn Wren* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 15–16.
[44] Adil Hashim, personal interview, 18 March 2025.
[45] Claus Wilcke, *The Sumerian Poem Enmerkar and En-su keš-ana: Epic, Play, or? Stage Craft at the Turn from the Third to the Second Millennium B.C.* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2012), 18–33.
[46] Christopher J. Lucas, "The Scribal Tablet-House in Ancient Mesopotamia," *History of Education Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 305–32.
[47] Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 222–23.
[48] Cyril John Gadd, *Teachers and Students in the Oldest Schools* (London: University of London, 1956), 36.
[49] John Jacobs, "The City Lament Genre in the Ancient Near East," in *City Lament: Commemorating Destruction in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Ann Suter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 16, 19.
[50] Jacobs, "The City Lament Genre," 30–31.
[51] Mary Rosalie Bachvarova, "The Destroyed City in Ancient World History: From Agade to Troy," in *City Lament: Commemorating Destruction in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, ed. Ann Suter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36–78.
[52] Mark E. Cohen, *Balag Compositions: Sumerian Lamentation Liturgies of the Second and First Millennium B.C.* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1974), 5–7; "The Lament for Sumer and Ur," *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL), University of Oxford, text no. c.2.2.3, https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr223.htm.
[53] Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.
[54] Yvonne Rosengarten, "Au sujet d'un théâtre religieux sumérien," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 145 (1968): 117–60.
[55] Karomi, "Utruha fil Masrah," 5.
[56] Sabri, "al-Masrah al-Babily," 74.

[57] Daniel Thomas Potts, "The *politai* and the *bīt tāmārtu*: The Seleucid and Parthian Theatres of the Greek Citizens of Babylon," in *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident*, ed. Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum et al. (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 244.
[58] Olof Pedersén, *Babylon: The Great City* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2005), 158.

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Gen Z Theatre from Turkey Taps into Repertoires of Millennial Resistance: A Comparison of the Short Festival Plays Helezoni *and* Orange

Deniz Başar

Abstract: This article traces the changes to the alternative theatre field in Turkey since the 2013 Gezi Park Resistance until today, documenting the reasons for and outcomes of the erosion of that field due to growing authoritarian neoliberalism. Through auto-ethnography, among other methods, the writer tries to meditate rhizomatically on the relationship between alternative theatre in Turkey and repertoires of resistance embodied in 2013, and re-embodied in protests triggered by the illegal imprisonment of elected İstanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on 19th of March 2025. Tracing the lineage of the 19th of March protests, a Gen Z-led movement, back to the millennial-led movement of Gezi, the article investigates the living heritages of the alternative theatre field in Gen Z theatre, which persist despite the strategic damage to the field which took place through the past decade. Arguing that these re-embodied, ever-growing repertoires of resistance are best *archived* in their sensibility by young people's theatre works, the writer shares her insights into two short plays from 2025: *Helezoni* and *Orange*. Both plays were made by ensembles of emerging theatre practitioners, who were pushed into working in 2020s neoliberal spaces, due to the strategic and authoritarian erosion of the 2010s' alternative theatre field, and both plays challenge the neoliberal authoritarianism policing their lives and censoring their work, in ways legible to people who have embodied knowledge of the local repertoires of resistance.

Keywords: repertoires of resistance, Gezi Park Resistance, 19th of March 2025 protests in Turkey, alternative theatre, Gen Z theatre, queer theatre

A Personal Introspection, in the Form of a Literature Review

I have been teaching in various theatre conservatories in İstanbul, such as Bahçeşehir University and Maltepe University, as contract faculty, and as part of independent theatre workshops, such as Performance Ecologies, since 2022. Since 19 March 2025, I have encountered most of my students, and some of my own university professors from my BA degree in Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University's (MSFAU) Urban and Regional Planning Department, through the on-going protests. I feel unnamable things in my chest when I think about the fact that I was my students' age when the Gezi Park Protests[1] happened in 2013, as I was writing my MA thesis on the alternative theatre field of İstanbul (Başar, 2014), and how that whole experience changed who I am today.

A fellow theatre scholar working on the performance field of contemporary Turkey, Zeynep Uğur, notes the ways in which the alternative theatre field that emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s provided sociological foreshadowings of the Gezi Park Protests. Uğur then traces the aftereffects of Gezi on the alternative theatre field:

> [T]he Gezi movement can be traced back to the alternative theatre practice in Istanbul which was already in existence prior to the protests claiming autonomous spaces in the city for artistic creation and sociability. In other words, it provides an alternative history to analyse the sociopolitical transformation of citizens claiming their ownership in the city. Furthermore, alternative theatres become spaces of political resistance in the aftermath of Gezi (Uğur, 2022, 122).

The logic of cause and effect is unapologetically *ouroboros* in contemporary Turkey. Gezi transformed my personal relationship to the city and independent theatres too, as a sense of urgency sneaked into all of my daily practices. The "here and now" of a revolutionary moment redefined the "here and now" of performance for me within my body as a "performing remains" (Schneider, 2011). It was the end of my first year in my master's degree when Gezi happened, and I remember many things about June 2013 along with how I—miraculously—managed to write my graduate papers in between regularly being tear gassed in Taksim. Starting from late 2011 I was captivated by the alternative theatre scene which was introduced to me by a crush who was working as a volunteer dramaturg in this habitat. As life goes, this crush led to the other—the much, much bigger one—which redefined my life.

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[1] For an overview of and commentary on the 2013 Gezi Park protests, see Özkırımlı, 2014; David & Toktamış, 2015; Gürcan & Peker, 2015; Koç & Aksu, 2015; Yücesan-Özdemir, 2016; Hemer & Persson, 2017; Tüfekçi, 2017; Ağartan, 2024.

I took it onto myself to make sure the world knew about it. I agree with Uğur's reading above: alternative theatre—as a field—was a foreshadowing of Gezi (it was indeed one of the many[2]). I underestimated the impacts of taking part in this kind of resistance, as many young people in their 20s do, but it caught up to me gradually: with immense waves of migraine and body pain (see Başar, 2022 for an academic reflection;[3] see Başar, 2025 for an artistic reflection), and in forms of chronic workaholism as I attempted to document, academically and artistically, what was happening (see Meerzon, 2024; and Ülgen, 2024 for semi-academic meditations on my artistic outputs). I wrote my MA thesis in Boğaziçi University (BU) between 2012 and 2014, a personal turning point in my career that made me the social scientist that I am today, if not the artist (for that, the real nod goes to MSFAU). BU, a historical, prestigious, landmark university, has been under heavy attack by the AKP government since 2021 (see Tekay, 2022; and, Altuğ et al., 2025), the year that I returned to Turkey to do my postdoc in BU through an FRQSC scholarship. My postdoctoral supervisor Emine Fişek was forced into quitting her tenure job after a long fight with AKP-enforced rectorate around the time my funding ended in 2023.[4]

I produce most of my academic work in English, about the political performances and performativities of Turkey in the AKP era. I give into the colonial hegemony of Anglophone academia as strategic choice: I need other ESL scholars like me to learn about what has been happening here.[5] Yet I struggle about where to begin. How can I make the connections that are obvious for us—insiders—visible to outsiders? Here is my attempt.

What Came Before and After 19 March 2025

On 19 March 2025, the elected mayor of İstanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, was taken from his home for multiple alleged crimes, including "threatening and targeting persons involved in anti-terrorism activities" (Tecimer, 2025). A wave of nationwide protests started in the subsequent months, as more and more elected mayors were taken from their homes across Turkey for belonging to opposition parties against the 23-year rule of the AKP and Prime-Minister-turned-into-President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The preview of this authoritarianism was particularly tested in the 2019 elections, when İmamoğlu

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[2] See Yücesan-Özdemir, 2016, for a survey of other events that foreshadowed the Gezi Park protests.

[3] Also see Christina Banalopoulou's discussion of the government's "suffocation policies" and "politics of asphyxiation" (2024).

[4] Emine Fişek has been the Research Associate and Project Leader of ERC Project: THEAGENT - Theatre and Gentrification in the European City in Austria since 2023. See Fişek, 2026.

[5] The limitedness of translations of Turkish plays into English makes it a challenge to start a larger scale discussion in Anglophone academia about the theatre field in Turkey; this has directly impacted my career trajectory, developing me as a translator and a translation editor. For a survey of Turkish play anthologies available in English, see Ergil and Yanıkkaya, 2026.

became mayor for the first time (see Felix, 2019; and Demiralp & Balta, 2021). Surely this episode of the history of Turkey will be written in detail in the near future, and after less than a year, the first academic articles are already circulating. Here is a quote from one:

> When he was detained on March 19 (he would be formally arrested a few days later), İmamoğlu was the presidential frontrunner of the Republican People's Party (CHP), which leads the political opposition to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. While the next presidential election is not for another three years, İmamoğlu had been leading Erdoğan in opinion surveys. Now the 55-year-old mayor sits behind bars, facing the possibility of a long prison term (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2025, 106).

As I revised this article at the end of 2025, citizens of Turkey were updated on this infamous case by learning through various media outlets that the "prosecutor seeks 2,352-year jail term for Istanbul's mayor" (Tuncer and Blackburn, 11 November 2025).

Just as the timing gap between journalism and academic response has rapidly decreased in contemporary Turkey, the timing between journalism and artistic response has shortened too. Perhaps this is because many intellectuals of the country, artists, journalists, and academics, collectively feel the responsibility (and burden) of documenting what has happened, increasingly and overwhelmingly, over the past two decades. We don't have the time to digest, and we almost always have to respond urgently. Perhaps this should be kept in mind as one reads this piece too, that Zeitgeist in contemporary Turkey is of urgency and urgency only.

Then how does this Zeitgeist inform our lives? It means that hundreds of thousands of people live in a constant state of being ready for mobilization. As generative modes of activism have been directly attacked by the government since the early 2010s, and as they have been eroded through the daily reality of social and economic crisis of the early 2020s, our mode of action today is becoming more reactive. Like a fraudulent chess game, when the government makes a move, the people counter-move, en masse in at least the hundreds of thousands, and face the consequences. As Amnesty International reported on the 19 March protests:

> Following the CHP rallies, law enforcement officials used unnecessary and excessive force to disperse the crowds and according to the authorities, detained 1879 people, either at the location of the protests or from their homes, between 19-26 March across the country. By the end of March, over 300 people—mainly university students from different provinces including Istanbul,

> Ankara and İzmir—were remanded in pre-trial detention while hundreds of others were subjected to judicial control measures, including house arrest, foreign travel bans and reporting requirements. In Istanbul, seven journalists covering the protests in Saraçhane Square were detained in raids of their homes on 24 March (Amnesty International, 2025, 1).

In the days that followed 19 March, many lecturers and professors in the university where I now work were left helpless as their students were detained without any legal procedure. We reorganized, pushed the authorities to start the legal process, tried to stay in solidarity, of course. Yet the burnout remained.

> Amnesty International documented several instances of unlawful use of force by law enforcement officials against peaceful demonstrators between 19 and 26 March, including beating, kicking and dragging protesters on the ground and the unlawful use of water cannon, pepper spray, tear gas, kinetic impact projectiles, often at close range directly targeting individuals at the head and upper body that led to numerous injuries and hospitalizations. All the information collected was assessed in accordance with international standards and the pertinent legal obligations the Turkish state has under the treaties it is a party to (Amnesty International, 2025, 2).

Perhaps it was the morning of 21 March when a friend, who is an expert Ottoman historian, came to our shared office and cried her heart out as some of her students were detained and the legal support hadn't caught up yet. What does this do to you, really? To people who are dissidents but also mothers, fathers, friends, teachers, Ottoman historians, and theatre artists. What does it actually do to your nervous system, to your dreams, to your understanding of what it means to be alive?

My focus is very rhizomatic these days, and it is not out of choice. I regularly google how long Salazar ruled Portugal (36 years), Franco ruled Spain (36 years), Mussolini ruled Italy (22 years), Pinochet ruled Chile (17 years). I google how many years have passed since the so-called Islamic Revolution in Iran (47 years). I do statistics. I want to find a logical future projection as an academic. We call fortune telling "statistics" in academia.

Fast Forward to June 2025

I get two invitations from my former students, current colleagues, to attend two different short play festivals. One is DasDas Theatre's, which took place between 12-15

June (Image 1); and the other is Zorlu PSM Studio Shorts Festival, 14-15 June (Image 2), which is the final result of a seven-month long residency for young playwrights and directors. DasDas is a multi-functional venue with multiple black box performance spaces created by a group of well-established stage artists (actors and musicians), running since 2017 in the Metropol İstanbul shopping mall, aiming to cultivate new audiences within a particular upper-middle class. Zorlu PSM, designed as the first "performance center" of Turkey, is located in a luxury shopping mall, Zorlu Center, which was designed by starchitect Emre Arolat and opened in 2013. It was built through well-documented labor abuse[6] and the direct support of the government, which allowed the illegal building of the colossal shopping mall in the center of one of the busiest districts of İstanbul.

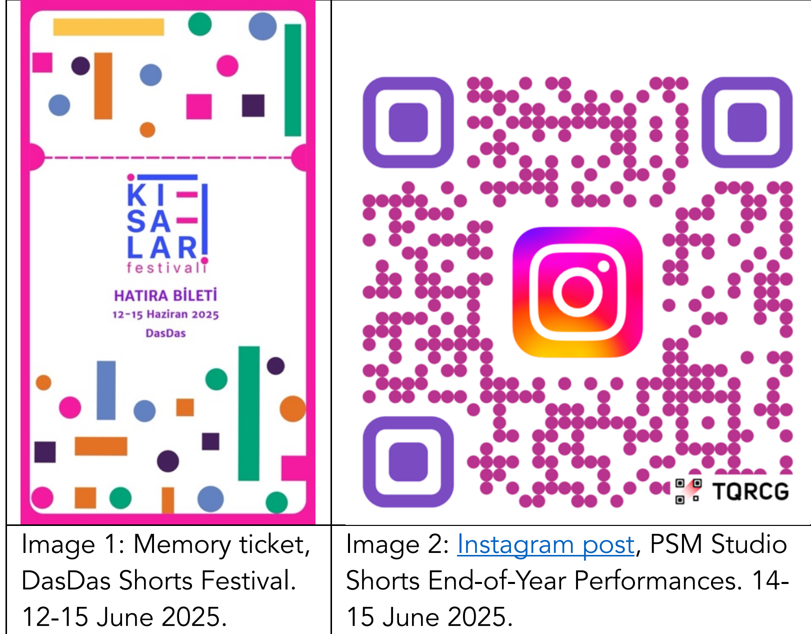

Image 1: Memory ticket, DasDas Shorts Festival. 12-15 June 2025.	Image 2: Instagram post, PSM Studio Shorts End-of-Year Performances. 14-15 June 2025.

The structures of the two festivals are quite different: DasDas invites theatre students and new graduates living in İstanbul to showcase their new experimental and devised works, whereas Zorlu PSM Studio selects artistic interns in the beginning of an academic year and works separately with directors and writers to make meaningful artistic pairs who create a series of short plays at the end of the year.

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[6] Curiously, these Zorlu Center cases, well known to the Turkish-speaking public, are not translated into English. Let me offer a translation of a short news clipping from 2012: "At the Zorlu Center construction site, which has turned the Beşiktaş district into a massive construction zone, a tragic worker death occurred. According to eyewitness accounts, the worker fell from the 22nd floor of the building and was killed. The Zorlu Center, which was sealed off when the construction reached the 4th floor, and then obtained a permit in one day without the approval of the Beşiktaş Municipal Council and the Chamber of Architects, continues to be the scene of tragic events. [...] It is unknown whether Zorlu Center officials obtained a work permit for working on Sunday [the day that worker's death happened]. The Beşiktaş Municipality is also maintaining silence on the matter. According to claims by local shopkeepers and eyewitnesses, this tragic death is not the first at Zorlu Center. Local residents claim that there have been fatal work accidents at Zorlu Center before, but all of them were kept from the press." Translated from the source: "Zorlu Center'da işçi ölümü!" [Worker death in Zorlu Center], Beşiktaş Postası, last modified May 14, 2012. For readers who know Turkish, see *İş Cinayetleri Almanağı 2012 [Almanac of Worker Murders],* BirUmut Yayıncılık, 2013. This book and its serials from the same activist publication house will allow readers to see what a large-scale issue this is in the construction-dependent economic development model of the AKP, where workers are seen as disposable, work safety measurements are consistently lacking, and the construction companies where work accidents repeatedly happen face no disincentivizing punishments.

On 14 June 2025, at 9:15pm, I am at DasDas to watch *Helezoni* (Image 3), a short play by new graduates and current students of Bahçeşehir Conservatory, having been invited by my former student Seray Üstündağ; and on 15 June 2025, at 8:30 pm, I am at Zorlu PSM to watch *Orange* (Image 4), invited by the playwright, Baroj Nejdet Babat, whom I met through the Performance Ecologies project. I want to talk about these two pieces together because they are both created by theatre artists in their early 20s living and working in Turkey, and struggling to form their artistic voice in an atmosphere that is becoming more and more dreadfully oppressive and monopolized with each passing day.

Image 3: *Helezoni* (poster)
Project Design and Performance: Buse İlker, Seray Üstündağ, Yağmur Başak
Text: Collective
Text Supervision: Doruk Öztürk, Diyar Çiler
Assistant Director: Diyar Çiler
Sound Design: Buğra Nayir
Lights: Alp Özer
Video Design: Eray Devrenk
Poster Design: Doğa Erdağ
Date & Time: 14 June 2025, 9:15 pm
Place: DasDas Stage

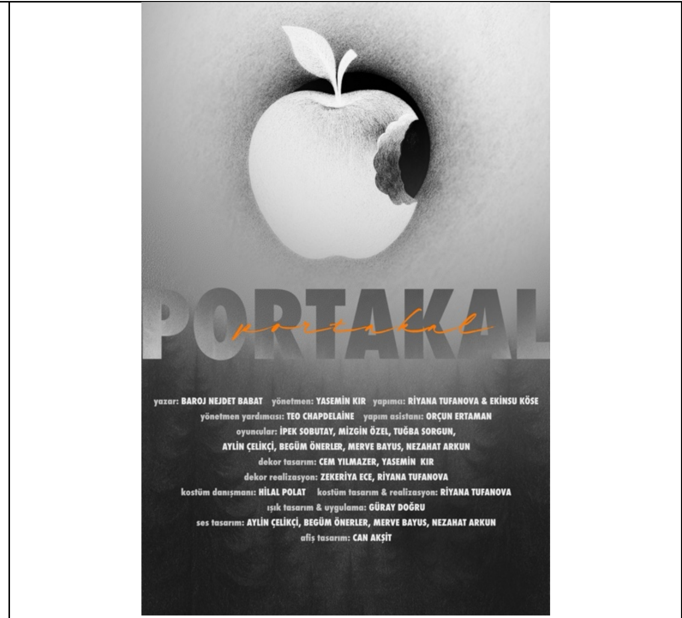

Image 4: *Orange* (poster)
Playwright: Baroj Nejdet Babat
Director: Yasemin Kır
Producer: Riyana Tufanova & Ekinsu Köse
Assitant Director: Teo Chapdelaine
Assistant Producer: Orçun Ertaman
Performers: İpek Sobutay, Mizgîn Özel, Tuğba Sorgun, Aylin Çelikçi, Begüm Önerler, Merve Bayus, Nezahat Arkun
Stage Design (SD): Cem Yılmazer, Yasemin Kır
SD Realization: Zekeriya Ece, Riyana Tufanova
Costume Supervisor: Hilal Polat
Costume Design & Realization: Riyana Tufanova
Light Design & Application: Güray Doğru
Sound Design: Aylin Çelikçi, Begüm Önerler, Merve Bayus, Nezahat Arkun
Poster Design: Can Akşit
Date & Time: 15 June, 2025, 8:30 pm
Place: Zorlu PSM

These shows took place almost back to back, in two completely different parts of İstanbul, yet both inside luxurious shopping malls. I remember how in early 2010s my generation was proud of the bohemian nature of found spaces being turned into little black box stages in Beyoğlu[7]. In a palimpsest, I quote my (earlier) self:

> A significant episode in the contemporary theatre scene of Turkey began around 2008 (Başar 2014), when a generation of emerging young artists started renting small flats around the Beyoğlu district of İstanbul, which is known to be one of the most cosmopolitan, historical, and, possibly, the liveliest part of the city. These artists were locked out of institutional theatre settings because of the lack of formal theatre education (most of them were trained in universities' theatre clubs while studying other things) or because of their ideological differences with the theatre institutions (Başar 2014, 152). In Beyoğlu, they began to create ensembles and write in the small black-box stages that they collectively made together. Only on these alternative stages and through their new plays, a variety of characters from contemporary Turkey (such as Kurds, LGBTI characters, and urban women wearing headcloths) started to appear on stage. This was a breath of fresh air in the theatre field of Turkey, circumventing the Leviathan-like bureaucracy of state theatres and municipality theatres, and the cheap populism of commercial comedy theatres and other private establishment theatres (Başar, 2021, 196).

I remember both the vibe and the hype: Many of us were in our 20s or early 30s, some of us were emerging theatre professionals, some were either bachelors or graduate students in the diverse academic ecosystem of İstanbul (before the brutal attacks on academia after 2016, which aimed and partially succeeded in creating a monoculture[8]), and there was a smell in the air that blended theatre and activism, and in return redefined both of these categories as immediate life itself. Yet I don't mean to romanticize this era; it was a precarious heterotopia, just as Gezi was. But heterotopias, "[a]s a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation[s] of the space[s] in which we live" (Foucault,

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[7] See Şeyben, 2021 (especially "Section III: Decentralized Theatres") for a good discussion of the relationship between authoritarian urban transformation and alternative theatres. Also see Fişek 2018 on the representation of gentrification and capitalist investment on the stages of alternative theatres during the 2010s. Ironically, the venue discussed in this 2018 article, GalataPerform, was closed during the pandemic, though the ensemble continues to work. Additionally, see Fişek et al., 2026.

[8] See Akıncı, 2018 to follow the reasoning of this claim.

1986, 24), die hard. In parallel to my above reading of the era, Zeynep Uğur comments on the same phenomenon as follows:

> In the early 2000s, the alternative theatre scene gained a new momentum with the increasing number of theatres spreading around Taksim. The founders of these theatres are commonly inspired by the avant-garde of the 1990s; however, their own personal trajectories are different. Almost all of them take their roots from university theatre clubs instead of conservatoires or theatre departments. Thus, socialisation emerges as a mobilising motor. To 'create their own space to be able to make theatre as they want' is an often-repeated phrase in the interviews that I conducted in Istanbul. A young audience profile, mostly college students, adhered to this emerging theatre (Uğur, 2022, 137).

We used to look down upon the idea of moving into shopping malls (also see Aydoğan and Ayhan, 2026, to trace the sentiment). In a little more than ten years so much has changed, with so much trauma.[9] The bohemian and underground theatre infrastructure—built outside of state-governed institutional theatres and profit-oriented commercial theatres[10]—to which many people contributed with sweat, blood and tears has (mostly) collapsed under a regime that has become increasingly authoritarian. This regime has been very strategically targeting Beyoğlu, particularly since 2011, but the scale and insidiousness of the attacks has multiplied exponentially every year, as Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robbins, among others, point out:

> At first glance, the Beyoğlu Cultural Route (*Beyoğlu Kültür Yolu Projesi*) [a large-scale re-development project launched in 2020 by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism] may appear to be a good investment of resources, with the potential to enhance the cultural life of the city. […] What it represents is, in fact, an intervention on the part of the central state, intended to impose its own ideological priorities, both economic and political, on the cultural life of the city (Aksoy and Robbins 2023, 40).

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[9] For more on this claim, see Ejder, 2019.

[10] See Şeyben, 2021 (especially "Section II: Subsidized Theatres") to understand the impact of AKP on institutional theatres of Turkey. Also see Adak and Altınay, 2018, to have a sense of the historical cultivation of the current day theatre ecosystem of Turkey.

Meanwhile, hand-in-hand with the current regime, large corporations such as Zorlu Holding have started to invest in the performing arts in İstanbul, and as a miniscule compensation for this exploitative capitalist shift, these new organizations started creating spaces (extremely limited ones) for up-and-coming theatre artists. Yet, quite obviously, these spaces fail to make up for loss of the grassroots independent theatre scene of 2010s. That's why I am burdened by history at age 36, when I come to see the shows of my former students in their early 20s; yet I also feel a complicated brew of emotions, knowing what they might be feeling since 19 March 2025. My internal compass oscillates between the joy of solidarity and mourning of the loss of innocence. But being in one's early 20s means having hope, because that age group does not yet have the luxury of the 30s and 40s for being comfortably hopeless.

A Brief Cross-Tracing of Repertoires of Dissident Performance and Protest Culture

The two works that I watched back-to-back are stylistically and dramaturgically very different from each other. *Helezoni*, which is a made-up word based on the Turkish appropriation ('helezon') of the Latin word *helix*, is a devised work, fragmented in a 1990s-postmodern fashion, comfortable with being misunderstood. *Orange*, on the other hand, is much more structured: there is a text, there is a story, and there is even an invented folk tradition and ritual embedded into the performance.

I go through my private mind-library of rhizomatic references, to see where I attach these performances in the global network of everything I know about theatre. *Helezoni*—interestingly, despite having an American gloss to it (à la Wooster Group and Tim Burton)—strictly lands in the German, especially Berlin-based, realm of theatre making: I reach and grab Robert Wilson's Berliner Ensemble productions, Rimini Protokoll's fragmented dramaturgies, and of course Bertolt Brecht's pre-Second World War take on cabaret. In the realm of Turkish theatre, the only distant relative I can think of for *Helezoni* is Şahika Tekand's body of works, which are also rooted in 1990s İstanbul (see Dinçel, 2023).

A day later, *Orange* takes me to references from across Europe, and strictly avoids any feel of Americanness. I grab Yorgos Lanthimos' 2009 movie *Dogtooth*, the 2023 book *She That Lay Silent-Like Upon Our Shore* by Brendan Casey, and–of course–García Lorca's last play before his assassination in 1936 during Spanish Civil War, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. The world that playwright Baroj Nejdet Babat and director Yasemin Kır created also reminds me of the aura of early 2010s in İstanbul; I am reminded of Şamil Yılmaz and Pelin Temur's plays from Mek'an Sahne (see Onat, 2025) and Mîrza Metîn and Berfin Zenderlioğlu's works, performed in Kurdish with Turkish surtitles, from Şermola Performans.[11]

[11] See Baş, 2015; Akar, 2018; Metîn, 2019; and Şeyben, 2021 (especially "Chapter 6: Battle on Many Fronts: The Case of Şermola Performans") for an analysis of the Kurdish theatre scene in İstanbul during the 2010s. Beyond

Both pieces want to speak to the world they live in, and to the state of contemporary Turkey, but where *Helezoni* uses metatheatricality through 1990s-postmodern fragmentation to do that, *Orange* goes back to ritual to seek metatheatricality as a form of the sublime. These are both strategic dramaturgical choices to tap into the *repertoires of resistance* of Gezi, which was actually both a palimpsest and a transcendence of all previous left-wing resistance movements in Turkey (see Verstraete, 2019 & Başar, 2022); which is why the main title of this piece is "Gen Z Theatre from Turkey Taps into Repertoires of Millennial Resistance."

Helezoni

Helezoni has four parts to it, strictly separated by a male voiceover that introduces the numbered sections, which are loosely connected. All sections are devised by the woman-majority team, which includes many queer collaborators, and the only prior information the audiences have about the show is that it is devised from the premise "fascism everywhere". The first section is a Grimm-style tale, written mostly by Diyar Çiler, within the parameters the group decided on, a tale about a group of animals living happily in a forest, accompanied by AI-generated images which straightforwardly aim to tickle the cognitive response of the uncanny valley (reminding me of Rimini Protocol).

The wording of the tale is tethered to the taboo themes of the *repertoires of resistance* of Gezi, which was partially reenacted in the 19 March protests.[12] For instance, the tale uses 'pepper' to stand in for 'tear gas', and the phrase 'factory of emotions that produce hope,' which can mean both 'state propaganda' or 'revolution', almost-alluding to many things, almost gesturing towards a creeping danger, but all in a purposefully ambiguous manner. As the tale goes on, stage creatures in the form of acting bodies start to occupy the stage, filling it with mundane acts of prepping for the performance, such as putting tape down to mark the exact boundaries of where the performance will take place. Their physicalities range from fairies to witches. Defining the boundaries is important, to be able to cross over them later.

The second section starts with three Tim Burton-esque (or Robert Wilson's take on the Faustian theme) stage creatures taking over the stage fully (Image 5), after listening to the same tale with us, while working and commenting on the tale, their sudden and explosive laughter echoing around us. These stage creatures move in a stylized manner and have choreographed movements and fragments of speech that they throw at us. In

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these works, to understand the general state of Kurdish theatre in Turkey, see the body of publications of Duygu Çelik, which are listed below.

[12] It is telling that many of the banners in 19 March protests referred to Gezi. Here are some examples: "Biz Çapulcular Yeni Gelmedik Geri Geldik" ["Us Chapullers Didn't Arrive Just Now, We Only Came Back"], "Gezi_2.0", "Çapulcuların Çocukları Büyüdü" ["The Children of Chapullers Grew Up"] (Peker, 2025). "Chapullers" (*Çapulcular*) means "looters" in Turkish. Initially a pejorative that the government applied to the Gezi protesters, it was later adopted by protesters as a badge of honor.

the darkness we hear a witchy voice yelling "catastrophe! nein!" which marks the beginning of this second part while introducing the linguistic heteroglossia of the piece.

Image 5: *Helezoni*. Photo credit: Volkan Aykaç.

Adding German into the mix perhaps alludes to both the Brechtian aesthetic and the horrors of fascist propaganda's aesthetic (such as *Triumph des Willens* [1935]). The vocabulary they break apart is embedded in our own political moment, and their gestures showcase a repertoire of the streets, of the military training that we all received as part of our compulsory physical education classes in Turkey, and of the acting education they all received, creating counterpoints. Then they locate us in an urban square through their scattered descriptions. Is it Taksim Square where the 2013 protests happened, located next to Gezi Park? Or is it Saraçhane Square where 29 March 2025 protests took place[13]? Is it Tiananmen Square in 1989? Is it Tahrir Square in 2011? Is it Vali Asr Square in 2022? Where is this square? Why are they there? And more importantly, why are *we* here, with them? But we don't stay in the square: a video is projected alluding to the now aged practice of zapping amongst TV channels, which always censor what

[13] See Akgöz, 2026 for a history of protests at Saraçhane Square.

happens in squares.[14] The TV glitches, and a quote from early 2010s leftist band Bandista intervenes with the commercials.

After this oscillation between the lived reality of urban squares and censored TV, the third section reaches towards the internet as a public sphere, immediately interconnected to urban squares, which speak a different tune than the commercials on TV (because "the revolution will not be televised," as Gil Scott-Heron once said).

The third section opens with video which showcases this realm of the internet, which is completely different from the AI-generated video in the first section. This video was made by Film and TV undergraduate student Eray Devrenk, with clear care and passion. It was interesting for me because this video, less than four minutes long, pulled out so much of my personal history—the burden of history I tried to unpack in the beginning of this article—along with other things that I didn't know yet, but immediately recognized their meaning through the overlap of images. Banned LGBTQ pride walks in İstanbul, highlighted with police clashes; conservative Islamic 'family' protests, backed by the government, against LGBTQ pride walks; the suicide videos from 2014 and 2015 of kind individuals (like Mehmet Pişkin—see Başar, 2022, 181, n.10) and trans activists like Mehtap Zengin, who just said that they could not take it any longer; the 2016 military coup attempt which paved the way for the three-year-long state of emergency and legitimization of human rights abuses; wild-fires; wars; more wars; the 6 February 2023 earthquake that turned into a massacre, due to corrupt planning decisions; world leaders lecturing cameras on *their* borders, *their* wars, *their* hierarchy of people, and all the things that I can't, and perhaps don't want to, remember, to be able to stay functional. The video ends with a pop culture twist, a short scene from *The Hunger Games*, where Jennifer Lawrence yells at us "if we burn, you burn with us." The actors don and doff a variety of accessories—ropes, hair pins, etc.—at the front of the stage as this video rolls behind them (Image 6). We don't hear most of the sounds of

Image 6: *Helezoni.* Photo credit: Volkan Aykaç.

[14] Such as the infamous penguin documentary, broadcast on CNN Turk during the first days of the Gezi Protests, while people were being brutalized by the police almost immediately outside CNN Turk's own corporate building (David & Toktamış, 2015, 19).

these videos, à la Thomas Ostermeier; a solo drummer playing from a recording keeps the beat of the performance going.

The final section makes yet another metatheatrical move. The actors change their acting style completely: they are actors now in a rehearsal room, they play, and then they wash their makeup in front of the audience (Image 7), and conclude with movement choreography. The stylistic break comes when Seray Üstündağ comments on the fact that her taping work in section 1 of the performance was indeed not a good job, as the tape is laid in a wavey nature. People laugh here; the gesture of this stylistic shift is a powerful one. Seray Üstündağ untapes the stage. Now the entire stage, even perhaps

Image 7: *Helezoni.* Photo credit: Volkan Aykaç.

the back stage, even perhaps the foyer, and beyond the shopping mall, the streets and the squares, belongs to the actors. They perform a series of trust falls, an act of catching each other at the exact moment of falling, which is an acting practice, and a very necessary skill in a revolutionary moment. (We have learned very well in Turkey exactly what happens when no one catches you in a trust fall.) When they wash their makeup together, almost in a ritualistic manner, it is a moment of catharsis. Yet it is also an uncanny catharsis in this postmodern show with no conclusion, no predefined faith hovering over the characters, and/or the actors. The final choreography is of exhausted bodies, going through choreographed stage actions as they fall apart, and fall down in a lump on the ground, to—maybe—rest a little.

In the talkback session after the performance of *Helezoni*, the group talks about what made them devise this play. I am humbled by the experiences they have survived in their young age, and especially shaken by learning that assistant director Diyar Çiler is a survivor of the 6 February 2023 earthquake. What they choose to tell, I am here to listen. I also think about how the name of the play gestures towards the psychedelic nature of living in this global Zeitgeist, how violence is so close, but how much we are alienated from the impact of it *unless* it hits us directly and immediately.

Orange

The day after *Helezoni*, *Orange* tells another story of our times. Playwright Baroj Nejdet Babat is a very young queer and Kurdish artist from Şırnak[15], who received their BA in Munzur University, and was introduced to the Performance Ecologies team by our colleague Asst. Prof. Duygu Çelik.[16] They have a soft voice and gentle manner always accompanied with a kind smile, which might at first sight hide their deep theoretical knowledge on gender and queer studies, exceeding many of the theatre scholars I encounter regularly. Director Yasemin Kır does justice to this nuanced gem of a text, with all the performative areas she explores with the design team and performers.

Image 8: *Orange*. Photo credit: Cem Gültepe.

Orange takes place in an imaginary village that only grows oranges and nothing else (Image 8). No other fruits are allowed to grow in the

[15] Another point of introspection: The main character (Toprak) of my first award winning play in Turkey, *The Itch*, was also from Şırnak. See Başar, 2024 for more on this play; and see Onat and Başar, 2025 for more insight on the nature the contest.

[16] See works cited for a list of Duygu Çelik's works on Kurdish theatre in English and Turkish.

village, and villagers (especially women and children, who are not allowed to leave) can only eat oranges. Only adult men are allowed to leave the village, and when they are gone, the village is ruled by a deep-cutting matriarchy that leans on a much deeper-cutting patriarchy. Mothers are the gatekeepers of the community; they indoctrinate their children about the importance and singularity of oranges, and tell fearful stories of wild boars that roam around the village[17] to make sure the children won't go out, seeking a different fruit—or a different life (Image 9). The ecologically problematic idea of monocultures—i.e. growing a single crop in a large piece of land—as represented through the intense singularity of oranges in the play, also serves as a metaphor for fascism.

Image 9: *Orange*. Photo credit: Cem Gültepe.

Babat's text is unapologetic when it comes to using ancient tools of theatre, such as the chorus. In *Orange*, the chorus is composed of the village women, who give life to land, who protect, who harvest oranges, but who also oppress through their gazes and exert intense control through shaming, gossip, and their collective power to break the will of young people. In this village of oranges lives a young girl whose name is Cennet (a real name in Turkish which means both *Paradise* and *Heaven*). Cennet wants to break

[17] The imagery here is reminiscent of the 2019 Turkish movie, *Sibel*, and its use of the wolf mythologies of the Black Sea region.

free from both the monoculture of oranges and from her oppressive mother, who forbids her from ever being curious about the outside world.

This mother figure seems to have walked in from the world of Gabriel Garcia Lorca. She casts heavy curses upon women who dare to disobey the monoculture, and tells gruesome stories about what has happened to them outside the village. Supposedly, the wild boars that roam right outside the limits of the village do not necessarily kill young women; rather, the violence described by the mother sounds much more like kidnapping, rape, and forced marriage. The choice of animal is loaded too: pigs are *haram*/sinful in Islam. The mother acts like the head of the chorus in Greek tragedies, and the chorus sings with her, collectively cursing the unnamed and mythologized women who disobeyed once upon a time, and were doomed to unspeakable fates. All the while, their songs cherish the monoculture of oranges.

Image 10: Merve offers Cennet an apple. *Orange*. Photo credit: Cem Gültepe.

Just when Cennet is toying in her loneliness with the idea of escaping, an outsider comes, another young girl, from a neighboring village which only grows apples. This new friend, Merve, secretly sneaked out to take a long walk in the forest and discovered Cennet's village of oranges, and she is curious to taste this new fruit. Merve starts visiting Cennet secretly and regularly after that first contact, and their friendship knowingly hints to the audience that a homoerotic romance develops between them. (I wonder how much more openly queer this performance could have been if we had been in an independent space, outside of this shopping mall, deep into Beyoğlu, surrounded by the dirty walls of found spaces turned into black box theatres, surrounded with will power and solidarity, maybe

a decade earlier. Sure, the performance might have been less clean, less polished, but it would have not pulled back from naming things, as they should be named in honesty.) Merve also tells Cennet that the boars in the forest are not dangerous—it is the humans that are dangerous, and that she is particularly scared of orange-trading men. (Isn't it always one of the most difficult confrontations to realize your community can be the big bad wolf in someone else's story, and that they might be right to see you that way?) When Merve offers Cennet an apple (Image 10), she finally eats it—which is a direct allusion to the apple of Adam and Eve, which according to the three major monotheistic religions leads to the famous couple's exile from heaven.

Image 11: *Orange*. Photo credit: Cem Gültepe.

From here on, there is a dramatic twist, one that is welcomed by the foreshadowing of the allusion of Adam and Eve's apple—a twist that only early twentysomething artists can do, who are not beaten down by *the* dramatic structure, *the* dramatic canon and *the* conventional beauties of tragedy. After eating the apple Cennet goes back to her mother and village women and confronts them about their oppression, about their chosen and insistent ignorance, about their own evil (Image 11). She sings the prayer of the apple that she learned from Merve as she does this, and the chorus along with the mother try to silence her with the prayer of the orange village. Cennet sings longer and louder than them, and eventually leaves the monoculture of oranges with Merve, hand in hand, to find other fruits, together.

Conclusion: An Interdisciplinary Introspection

What does it mean to be in your early twenties in Turkey today? How does it differ from my early twenties? What is lost, what is gained in time? Below I quote my younger self, from a point in time when I was doing a first round of calculations for answering this question.

> I agree with Uruguayan political scientist Paulo Ravecca who claims that 'situating disciplinary introspection through personal introspection may open fruitful paths to interrogate and unravel knots of experience made of knowledge, power, and politics' (2019: 166). My own history is entangled in the history of contemporary Turkey: I was one of the protestors in the Gezi Park during June 2013 like many people I know, and the experience influenced—and perhaps shaped—me in multiple ways (Başar, 2022, 192).

19 March 2025 and its aftermath has shaped this generation of theatre makers. Many gestures of dissidence remained little-changed, yet meanings of these gestures shifted considerably over a dozen years: while we covered our faces in Gezi primarily to protect ourselves from the tear gas, this generation went to Saraçhane covering their faces primarily to protect themselves from government profiling. GenZ's experience is different from ours as they try to fit their artistic and political perspective into a corporate institutional system that we managed to escape to some extent fifteen years ago, but that ecosystem is gone (for now). Today, answers escape me. Yet I stay with the questions as they grow and multiply like rhizomes, and wait for the right time, alongside my young colleagues. Because who knows? Formulating the right question could be the right answer to our times, by triggering the tsunami wave of a paradigm shift.

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THE CLOWN. *By Mariam Basha. Directed by Kamal El Basha. El Hakawati Theatre, Jerusalem. August 28, 2025 in person, September 11, 2025 via WhatsApp video.*

Reviewed by Marina Johnson

The clown paints his face to become someone else —
to live in another reality.
With white paint, a few colors, and a red nose,
he can turn tragedy into comedy.
He can walk into a hospital room,
where someone lies dying,
and turn him into a laughing child.
He can enter a refugee camp
and make it a festival.
…
He paints his face,
puts on the nose —
and for a moment,
he's allowed to dream again.[1]

The Clown is a gripping one-man play that delivers far more than its simple title might suggest. At its center is Sobhi (Ezzat Al-Natsheh), a Palestinian clown performer whose painted smile conceals a churning inner world of joy, humiliation, pain, hope, and unrelenting self-doubt. The play follows Sobhi, who is haunted by the traumatic car crash that happened to him and his friend while they were driving to a birthday performance in the rain. Throughout the monologue, Sobhi argues with a second voice, "the Clown," a manifestation of his inner critic, that alternately mocks, seduces, and confronts him about his lifelong need to please others, his humiliation and bullying, and his guilt over surviving when others did not. As Sobhi recounts memories of family violence, political repression, and the daily humiliations of life under occupation, the clown persona becomes both a survival strategy and a trap that feeds on others' laughter while concealing his despair. By the end, Sobhi briefly removes the red nose in an attempt to

[1] My translation, from Mariam Basha's script.

reclaim himself, but ultimately puts it back on, acknowledging that the cycle of performance, masking pain with laughter, will continue.

I first encountered this work in rehearsal on August 28, 2025, at El Hakawati Palestinian National Theatre while I was in Palestine. Two weeks later, on opening night, I was already back in the United States, so my friends helped me watch the performance via a WhatsApp video call, a surprisingly intimate way to witness the performance from afar. I could hear my friends laugh and cry throughout the performance as they sat in the red velvet seats of one of my favorite theatres, while I laughed and cried from my couch in the US. I was grateful for the solution that allowed me to witness a play I had been anxiously anticipating by a team I hold in high esteem.

The play's concept originates with Al-Natsheh himself and draws directly from his life story. He shared the material with Mariam Basha, who crafted the script and served as assistant director and choreographer alongside Kamel El Basha, who directed the production. I had previously collaborated with Al-Natsheh on *El Manshiyyeh*, which I co-directed with Samer Al-Saber, but I've also known him for years through his work with the famed Jerusalem clown duo Zaatar and Sim Sim (he is, of course, Sim Sim), as well as his collaborations with Red Noses Palestine.[2] A little-known fact about Al-Natsheh–he keeps a nose on him at all times because sometimes someone around him needs joy, and he is just the one to deliver it. Also, he is often recognized in public as Sim Sim, so the nose allows him to get in and stay in character with/for the kids who recognize him. Al-Natsheh is quick-witted, intellectually agile, and an extraordinarily funny performer. This piece, however, revealed a different register of his artistry.

In the opening moments, he applies his makeup onstage, transforming himself into the clown before the audience's eyes and setting the tone for the performance to come. The text of the play begins with Sobhi describing a fragmented memory of being in a car accident and the feeling of being trapped and unable to scream as the other person in the car dies. He asks: "Why was it me who stayed alive? … I'll never know what he wanted to tell me."[3] This tragic car accident serves as one of the play's anchoring images, its rain-soaked violence symbolizing both literal and psychic rupture. Rain becomes a recurring motif that is at once cleansing and wounding, a metaphor for memory, endurance, and the cyclical nature of grief. Water washes over the narrative as Sobhi attempts to peel back the layers of performance that shield him from his own vulnerability.

Interruptions are key to the play. Phone calls frequently interrupt the scenes with people calling Sobhi to offer clown jobs, and we see that he is constantly negotiating

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[2] Red Noses Palestine is a branch of Red Noses International, which employs local clown-doctors to perform in hospitals for sick patients.

[3] My translation, from Mariam Basha's script.

work under stressful conditions. In the series of phone conversations, the difficult circumstances of work as a clown are revealed: short notice, low pay, unsafe environments, and often unrealistically high expectations. Other memories also intrude, contributing to the play's fragmented nature. For instance, Sobhi recalls being eleven years old and living with his grandfather, who burned his belongings and constantly insulted him. This bullying carried over to other facets of his life, as he remembers being bullied by his peers for his height and appearance.

Image 1: Ezzat Al-Natsheh on stage at El Hakawati Theatre in Jerusalem. Photo credit: Mohammad Basha.

The crux of the play lies in the interruptions where Sobhi speaks with "the Clown," a figure who interjects, comments, argues, and mocks him. They volley between dark humor, confession, and near-prayer, their exchanges revealing a fractured sense of self shaped by personal trauma and the suffocating pressures of social and political life. The Clown criticizes Sobhi for being too kind, for letting people walk over him, and for depending on others' approval. Sobhi tries to defend himself, but the dialogue shows how entangled they are. At times, the Clown sounds like a bully; at other times, he praises Sobhi and even becomes affectionate. Their battlesome relationship is at the center of the play, and it was what I, as an audience member, wanted to know more about.

In a quieter scene that reveals his inner turmoil, Sobhi prays aloud, asking God for relief and strength (Image 1). As he speaks, he reflects on what a clown can do, such as bringing laughter to hospitals and refugee camps, offering brief moments of joy amid hardship. These reflections frame the emotional spine of the play: memories of childhood humiliation, emotional neglect, and constant belittlement for failing to embody the

expectations of masculinity. Those wounds follow him into the present, where he struggles as a clown who barely makes ends meet, trapped in a society that relies on him for laughter yet mocks the very profession that sustains him.

The Clown, both tormentor and truth-teller, relentlessly probes Sobhi's insecurities, accusing him of cowardice, failure, and complicity in his own suffering. Their confrontation builds toward the play's central question: whether Sobhi's clowning is an act of degradation or a source of purpose. Near the end, the Clown urges Sobhi to "take off the nose." Sobhi removes it, and the Clown insists that without it, he cannot exist. Sobhi resists, declaring that he is "done performing," and attempts to walk away. Yet in the moment of refusal, Sobhi recognizes what gives his life meaning. He chooses to put the red nose back on—not as submission, but as an affirmation of the role he has claimed for himself.

> *Without this… who am I?*
> *Without the laughter… who remembers me?*
> *Maybe the clown is the only part of me that's still alive.*

The stage's visual composition echoes the play's themes. The scenography was deceptively minimal. At the center of the stage lay a patterned carpet that served as a grounding place for the story. Upstage right sat a mound of pastel balloons, eight or more in various soft colors, an oddly cheerful counterpoint to the psychological terrain of the piece. On the opposite side rested a wooden chair draped with a ukulele, topped with a rubber chicken, and accompanied by a red-and-blue striped stand for a computer. The center was left open, allowing the dueling figures, Sobhi and the Clown, ample room to spar, circle one another, and, in Sobhi's case, to dance. Al-Natsheh transitioned between the two characters simply by sharply turning; when he faced stage right, we knew the Clown was talking in his aggressive and often belittling voice. When he faced stage left, Al-Natsheh was the one in the lead, responding and reasoning with the Clown. The production extended this sense of divided identity into the costume itself. The costume design sharpened the performance's tonal dissonance: a one-piece clown suit with light blue sleeves and hip pockets, bisected into pink on one side and yellow on the other, its bowtie reversing the colors so that pink and yellow contrasted each other. The result was both whimsical and faintly disquieting, perfectly attuned to the play's oscillation between humor and unease.

Kamel El Basha's direction provides a steady hand throughout the production, while Mariam Basha's choreography introduces dances that offer moments of levity and deepen the play's emotional texture. Al-Natsheh's acting is remarkably agile, shifting seamlessly between characters—signaled subtly by whether his hair is tied back in a ponytail or left down.

What makes *The Clown* so resonant as a production is the intimate character study at its core. Laughter emerges as both lifeline and trap: an act of resistance against despair, yet also a performance demanded by others that gradually erodes the self. Through the protagonist's exchanges, the play exposes the gendered and political dimensions of his pain, revealing how patriarchal expectations of strength, the violence of occupation, and the indignities of precarity conspire to "castrate" him emotionally and spiritually. Ultimately, *The Clown* becomes a haunting meditation on what it means to continue performing joy in a world that constantly humiliates and silences. Blending absurdist comedy with piercing confession and poetic repetition, the play offers a powerful and unsettling portrait of identity under pressure—an unforgettable image of a man struggling to endure, create, and hope while caught between the demands of the world and the echoing chambers of his own mind.

Reviewer: Marina Johnson (Marina-Johnson.com) is a PhD candidate in TAPS with PhD minors in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and the Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, and the Certificate in Critical Consciousness and Anti-Oppressive Praxis. Prior to arriving at Stanford, Johnson received her MFA in Directing and taught at Beloit College for three years. Johnson continues to work as a director and dramaturg while also co-hosting *Kunafa and Shay*, a MENA/SWANA theatre podcast produced by HowlRound Theatre Commons. During her most recent fieldwork, she directed several productions with Al Harah Theatre and taught directing workshops at ASHTAR Theatre.

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DODI AND DIANA, *by Kareem Fahmy. Directed by Reginald L. Douglas. Mosaic Theater, DC. September 23, 2025.*

Reviewed by Jovita Jacob Selwyn

Kareem Fahmy's premiere of *Dodi and Diana*, directed by Reginald L. Douglas and produced by the Mosaic Theater in DC, was broadly advertised as a "sexy, thrilling new play, where fate, royalty, and passion collide!" This collision took the form of "astrological doubling", using astrology as a non-realist dramaturgical device to link the titular royals to its central characters. Through this device, Fahmy evokes a sort of mystic, almost mythical sense of reincarnation, using it as a lens to examine "the most intimate aspects of marriage and love" (Mosaic Theater trailer).

Image 1: Paris Ritz Hotel Room in Mosaic Theater's production of *Dodi & Diana* by Kareem Fahmy, directed by Reginald L. Douglas. Scenic design by Shartoya R. Jn. Baptiste and lighting by Sage Green. Photo credit: Chris Banks.

The production certainly primed the audience for seduction: the entire stage was a dimly lit, opulent Paris Ritz hotel room, brilliantly designed by Shartoya R. Jn. Baptiste. The space was bathed in gold shades; brass frames adorned the walls, textured drapes lined the windows, and at the center, a king-size plush bed was draped in luxurious silk sheets and pillows (Image 1). The space felt both indulgent and claustrophobic, a gilded chamber where seduction and entrapment coexisted.

Married couple Jason (Jake Loewenthal) and Samira (Dina Soltan), whose simmering sexual tension was undeniable, find themselves confined inside this lavish yet liminal space, at Jason's instigation. Under the guidance of an astrologer, Jason repeatedly insists that leaving the room at any time during a mysterious 72-hour convergence—culminating in a solar eclipse—will bring their relationship ill fortune. The eclipse, in Fahmy's narrative world, intentionally coincides with the twenty-fifth anniversary of Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed's fatal car crash. This reference is subtly foregrounded in the opening scene: the space remains concealed behind curtains and darkness while projected car headlights cut through the stage. There is a sudden flashing of lights followed by the sound of a crash, reenacting the trauma of the accident. A few minutes later, the curtains open and Jason walks up on stage. This performance sets up Jason and Samira as mirrors to Dodi and Diana's infamous interracial relationship. Fahmy takes this doubling a step further by linking the couple to Diana and Dodi through astrology, labeling them "astrological doubles" to imply that their relationship is governed by the same celestial forces and perhaps destined for a similarly dramatic or scrutinized fate.

Jason and Samira's forced confinement within this box of a hotel room reveals a great deal about who they are, what they want, and how their repeated patterns reflect signs of an unhealthy marriage. On the surface, their relationship appears to be laced with overflowing love and devotion to one another. The graceful and smooth choreography of their intimacy, directed by Sierra Young, plays a huge part in shaping the overly saccharine image. Their bodies move with elegance, each anticipating and responding to the other's speed and momentum. Their arms and legs intertwine in a series of twists, turns, and movements that feel sexually intimate, rushed yet tantalizing, rough yet delicate. The constant kissing, caressing, and touching in seemingly alluring ways (Image 2), evoke a sense of unease to witness these intimate

Image 2: Dina Soltan as Samira and Jake Loewenthal as Jason, on day one of being trapped in the hotel room. Photo Credit: Chris

moments. It feels voyeuristic, as if one were invasively peering into the private life of this intensely in-love pair, whose constant physical affection borders on the cloyingly enviable.

However, this abundance of physical affection paradoxically reveals an underlying emotional hollowness. The incessant need for touch and proximity begins to feel like a desperate attempt to fill a void. Whenever Samira wants more than just kissing and caressing, Jason finds a way to interrupt the moment and withdraw, as if deliberately avoiding sleeping with her. They often lie half-naked, sprawled across the bed and entangled with one another, but the encounters always end on an awkward note. Throughout the play, Fahmy consistently makes us wonder if their attraction alone is powerful enough to sustain their relationship. After a certain point, the couple slip into a relentless loop of attempted intimacy so repetitive and insistent that it becomes painful and unbearable to watch. This loop reveals the deep imbalance in their desires: Samira craves deep emotional and physical connection, often initiating sex, while Jason, racked with insecurity, cannot bring himself to sleep with her while sober.

Alcohol and drugs become important in exposing the fractures within the relationship. Jason strikes a clandestine deal with the hotel bellboy, slipping him a generous sum of money to procure drugs. When the substances finally arrive, Jason and Samira consume them along with copious amounts of alcohol, and the scene transforms into a woozy, altered state. This shift is rendered vividly through expertly executed lighting, designed by Sage Green. The hotel room lapses into a nightclub-like atmosphere, saturated with electric blues, neon pinks, and chartreuse greens that pulse across the stage. The fast- shifting lights paired with booming pub music create a sensory environment that mimics the dizziness of intoxication, making the audience feel as though the room itself is spinning.

Within this heightened atmosphere, Jake's and Dina's performances expand physically and emotionally. Their movements become looser, more urgent, and more reckless, allowing the scene to surge towards a feverish climax. In their intoxicated haze, the couple finally collapse together, spent. But when the light and sound shift again to the ordinary hotel room, indicating the start of a new day, sobriety returns and so does stark clarity. The fragile connection they briefly achieve during inebriation disintegrates once again. Restless attempts at connection, failed stabs at intimacy, and the slow surfacing of frustrations, insecurities, and long-buried resentments create the play's momentum: a cyclical, suffocating rhythm that mirrors the eclipse's slow movement toward totality.

The play's engagement with astrology places it in conversation with a long lineage of theatrical cosmology. In Greek mythology and even Shakespeare, eclipses were understood as omens, especially for rulers, and horoscopes were thought to reveal one's innate character (Sondheim). And yet, even in that world, sometimes the will remains

free. Fahmy gestures toward this tension between fate and agency by tethering Jason and Samira to the royal love story of Diana and Dodi. The dramaturgical premise suggests that while the interracial, hyper-public couple of the 1990s were undone by forces far beyond their control, Jason and Samira, who remain confined, anonymous, and ordinary, might yet choose differently. And yet, to my utmost chagrin, this play refuses that resolution. Instead of embracing each other with renewed clarity, Jason and Samira remained mired in their unresolved resentments, leaving the allusion provocatively incomplete.

While frustrating, this uncertainty does lead to a limited degree of dramaturgical success. Astrology fills the world of the play, but it never fully controls the story: the idea of Jason and Samira as "cosmic doubles" nudges them toward repeating a tragedy, yet it does not seal their fate. Instead, the play forces both characters to confront the insecurities and secrets that gradually pull them apart. Jason carries guilt over accidentally killing Samira's dog, and that Samira weaponized the incident. Samira in turn has hidden her potential overseas acting opportunities, knowing that they would sharpen Jason's sense of inferiority and that he would not want her to go. These layers of messy toxicity prevent them from building the secure and healthy relationship they both desire. Their point of breakdown comes from the discovery of fractures within their relationship, not from the stars. In this way, astrology functions as both a mythic frame and a psychological alibi: in the claustrophobic environment of the Ritz Paris suite, the

Image 3: Dina Soltan as Samira's astrological double, Princess Diana, and Jake Loewenthal as Jason's astrological double, Dodi Fayed. Photo Credit: Chris Banks.

astrological layer creates a formal tension that holds the production together. This friction is imperative to the play's design, mirroring the instability of the marriage itself; the setting is glamorous and yet restrictive, because it turns out that Jason and Samira's relationship is, too, a beautiful trap (Image 3).

In the end, the play *Dodi and Diana* does not deliver a fully resolved mythic parallel nor a neatly coherent naturalistic drama. Instead, it offers a fractured portrait of two people caught between who they are and who the world tells them they might be. The play succeeds best when showing the grinding pressure that external narratives and internal wounds exert on an intercultural marriage. Even if it fails in uniting its loftier ambitions, it remains a compelling exploration of how the sexy and thrilling collision of fate, royalty, and passion conspire to shape, and sometimes destroy, the intimacies we build.

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ALMONDS BLOSSOM IN DEIR YASSIN. *By Hanna Eady. Directed by Hanna Eady. Cherry Street Village, Seattle. October 25, 2025.*

Reviewed by Marina Johnson

Hanna Eady's *Almonds Blossom in Deir Yassin* is a haunting work of memory and moral reckoning, a four-character play that moves fluidly across time, psychic space, and geopolitical terrain. Rather than a straightforward historical drama, Eady constructs a piece that unfolds "in the Palestinian memory, in Gad's head, in Israel, in Palestine, and on the site of Deir Yassin." The result is a play that refuses temporal linearity and narrative comfort, embodying instead the fractured condition of a history too long repressed. In this production, the living and the dead share the stage as the massacre's silenced testimony presses insistently against Gad, a former soldier who was present at the massacre, and his faltering attempts at justification and forgetting.

Seattle-based Dunya Productions deepens the resonances inherent in the text by situating it in the former Cherry Street Mosque, a nearly century-old building that has served at different times as a Jewish school, an Islamic school, and now as the emerging Cherry Street Village—a joint endeavor among interfaith and arts organizations. As the city's Central District undergoes rapid transformation, the effort to restore this building as a community hub becomes an act of preservation and imagination, resisting the erasures that urban development often produces.

Set on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the 1948 Deir Yassin massacre, the work insists that memory is not past; it is a present tense, a haunting that continues to shape those who survive and those who inherit. At its center is Gad, an aging Israeli man tormented by visions and memories he cannot control. He is the last surviving member of his military unit, which had been involved in the Deir Yassin massacre. His psychiatrist, Dr. Levi, accompanies him to the site of the former village, now a mental institution, in an attempt at therapeutic exposure and in preparation for a celebration honoring him at that site. Instead of resolution, the visit collapses the fragile border between hallucination and haunting, seemingly summoning Amal and Zidan, a father-daughter duo who initially appear as ghosts, but gradually reveal themselves as embodiments of history and truth.

Amal uses poetic and incantatory language to cut through Gad's rationalizations as he denies his past acts. Her exhortation, "Come out of the darkness… show your bloody hands," is both an accusation and an invitation to confess. As an audience member, I was not certain to what extent Amal was real; she seemed to always occupy a

liminal space that defied categorization. Was Amal both a living 70-year-old woman and a ghost who haunted Gad? In my interpretation, she was simultaneously a ghost, a memory, a witness, and a child.

To have the main Palestinian character occupy this opaque space seemed odd, as the Israeli characters seemed to occupy very specific characterizations. Dr. Levi, a representative of institutional authority, attempts to manage Gad and his deteriorating mental state, offering medication and rehearsing the script he is expected to recite at the ceremony honoring him and his military unit. But her own encounters with Amal destabilize her certainty. Her insistence that Gad focus on his own mental well-being, divorced from historical reality, reveals the limitations of psychological frameworks that avoid political truth. The past demands to be confronted, through the presence of Amal and Zidan. The script's interplay between the psychological and political gives the play its charge.

The dramaturgical structure slowly builds toward the play's devastating reversal: Zidan, the elderly Palestinian man we think is Amal's father, confesses that he is not what he seems. He reveals that he was once a Jewish Irgun fighter who participated in the massacre. Zidan was shot and abandoned by his fellow fighters, only to be rescued by Amal's father, who placed a keffiyeh around his neck before being killed moments later. Mistaken for a Palestinian because of the keffiyeh, Zidan adopted a new identity, "Zidan Yassin," raising the infant Amal as his daughter. Zidan's confession thus resonates as both personal tragedy and collective indictment, exposing how violence reverberates across generations and identities. This revelation reframes the relationship between the two characters and transforms Amal's presence onstage from that of a protected child into a living embodiment of the history Zidan carries. Amal's final proclamation, "HOPE! That's my name," echoes through the theatre not as naïveté but as an insistence on memory and the continuity of Palestinian presence. Dramaturgically, this shifts the audience's attention from the perpetrator's confession to the persistence of Palestinian life, positioning Amal's declaration as both a reclamation of narrative and a gesture toward the future.

Eady, who grew up inside the Green Line, belongs to a lineage of Palestinian theatre that uses fractured temporality to counter attempts at erasure.[1] Yet *Almonds Blossom in Deir Yassin* is distinctive in its focus on interrogating the psychological architecture of denial among its Israeli characters. In the United States, there has been a necessary dialogue on the representational discourse of plays from and about the SWANA world. While essential, these frameworks sometimes sidestep deeper questions of historical responsibility, narrative control, and the ethics of staging political trauma.

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[1] "Inside the Green Line" refers to the territory that Israel took control of after the Nakba, demarcated by the 1949 Armistice Line, which was often drawn in green ink on maps.

Eady's play pushes these conversations further. It challenges audiences, particularly American ones accustomed to consuming stories about the Middle East through a humanitarian or apolitical lens, to confront the structural and historical specificity of Palestinian dispossession.

Visually, this production was simple but striking. The stage was dominated by a single bare almond tree, its branches twisting upward like an arrested gesture. Leo Mayberry's projections animated the tree in slow, subtle transformations; blossoms emerged, trembled, and fell. Mayberry expanded the visual field with images of Palestinian landscapes—terraces, stone walls, olive groves—and later with horrifying scenes from Gaza. These projections anchored the story within a broader continuum of violence. They reminded viewers that the ghosts of Deir Yassin are not relics of a distant past but part of ongoing dispossession and massacre.

The performances were uniformly strong, with Nabra Nelson's Amal at the center. Nelson brought extraordinary depth to the role. Clad in a richly embroidered Palestinian thobe, she embodied Amal with paradoxical stillness and volatility: Her gestures were small but precise, her shifts between tenderness and accusation seamless (Image 1). Her voice, resonant and controlled, carried the weight of generations. She was not just a character; she embodied a lineage.

Image 1: Nabra Nelson as Amal and Tom Wiseley as Gad. Photo Credit: Samia El-Moslimany.

Tom Wiseley's portrayal of Gad was also compelling. He captured the character's oscillation between rationalization and collapse, his voice revealing layers of denial, fear, and yearning for absolution. Wiseley also designed the lighting and served as production manager, a testament to Dunya Productions' collaborative ethos. Alyssa Norling's Dr. Levi brought sharpness and restraint to her role, making the character's clinical rationality feel both chilling and heartbreakingly inadequate. Bradley Goodwill's Zidan, with his quiet gravitas and understated emotionality, grounded the play's final confession with devastating clarity.

The sonic landscape, composed by renowned Palestinian musician Habib Shehadeh Hanna, enriched the production. The music was aching, ritualistic, and melodic, and it served as both emotional undercurrent and narrative guide. It marked shifts in time, underscored moments of confrontation, and imbued the performance with the weight of ceremony. Dramaturg Ed Mast provided accessible and essential context for audience members unfamiliar with Deir Yassin, available both in the program and in the lobby; this helped situate the play within a broader political and historical frame. On opening night, the post-show conversation led by organizers from No Tech for Apartheid extended the production's reach, connecting the themes of historical complicity to contemporary technological infrastructures that enable state violence. The conversation echoed the play's refusal of closure. It demanded that audiences remain unsettled, recognizing that the past is not dormant but animated, always insisting on return.

In the end, *Almonds Blossom in Deir Yassin* offers no catharsis, nor does it attempt to redeem its characters through forgiveness. Instead, it insists on truth-telling as the precondition for healing. It invites audiences to bear witness not as passive observers but as participants in an unresolved story, one that continues to shape the present through its echoes, absences, and persistent calls for justice.

Reviewer: Marina Johnson (Marina-Johnson.com) is a PhD candidate in TAPS with PhD minors in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and the Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, and the Certificate in Critical Consciousness and Anti-Oppressive Praxis. Prior to arriving at Stanford, Johnson received her MFA in Directing and taught at Beloit College for three years. Johnson continues to work as a director and dramaturg while also co-hosting *Kunafa and Shay*, a MENA/SWANA theatre podcast produced by HowlRound Theatre Commons. During her most recent fieldwork, she directed several productions with Al Harah Theatre and taught directing workshops at ASHTAR Theatre.

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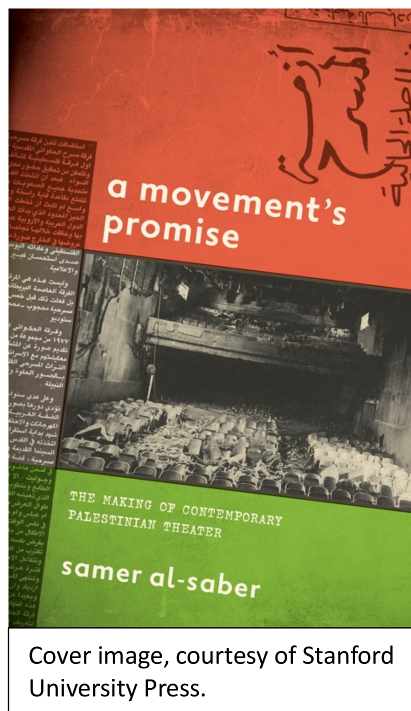
Samer Al-Saber. *A Movement's Promise: The Making of Contemporary Palestinian Theatre* (Stanford University Press, 2025). Pp. 328. Hardcover, Paperback, E-book.

Reviewed by Hadia Mousa.



Cover image, courtesy of Stanford University Press.

To preserve a certain memory and keep it alive, it's important to tell its story. This is what Samer Al-Saber accomplishes in his significant book, *A Movement's Promise*. He begins in a humorous tone to define the word "movement," aiming to avoid misunderstandings associated with its usual violent political connotations. After establishing this concept, Al-Saber provides justification for his selection of theatrical groups by detailing their histories.

Focusing his research on Jerusalem and Ramallah, Al-Saber encountered difficulties in finding sufficient information about older groups. The challenges stem from the Nakba (the disaster) of Israel's occupation and its consequences from 1948 to 1967. As a result, the author chooses to start his meticulous archival and ethnographic research from the year 1967, since the Palestinian theatrical movement was largely absent before this time.

In the first two chapters, Al-Saber uses anecdotes and stories from artists to historicize the cultural Palestinian landscape and the political context from which the theatrical movement emerged after 1948. The early groups, which were short-lived, primarily targeted a Christian audience. One example is the Jerusalem Players Group, established by Haidar Al-Husseini, whose productions were mainly in English, although there was one performance of Eugene O'Neill in Arabic.

George Ibrahim, who later founded Al-Kasaba Theatre—considered the largest group in Ramallah—was initially an actor and trainee in the Jerusalem Players Group. In chapter 3, covering the years from 1970 to 1973, Al-Saber highlights Ibrahim's background as an actor in Israeli radio and television. Ibrahim eventually started his own group, The Theatrical Artistic Group, in the early 1970s, later renaming it Balalin (The Balloons) in 1972. This group became one of the longest-lived and most popular,

primarily targeting children and young audiences. Due to the occupation, artists faced significant challenges in securing venues for theatrical and cultural events. As a Christian working for Israeli Radio and Television, Ibrahim was able to obtain the necessary permissions to perform in specific locations, such as Al-Omariyyeh School. Unfortunately, this new group eventually disbanded because they could not establish a stable financial position from which to produce plays. Additionally, the expanding control of Israeli military forces led to the dissolution of many Palestinian groups that had emerged during the 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter 4 treats the following five years, 1973 to 1977, when several new theatre ensembles were formed, including Dababis, known for its theatre of resistance; the Palestinian Theatre Troupe (1973–1996); The Palestinian People's Theatre (1979–1983); and Sanabel People's Theatre (1983 to present). Each of these groups had its own unique style and attributes, but most presented realistic plays, whether comedic or tragic. They also incorporated al-dabkah, an indigenous Palestinian folkloric dance, into their productions. In 1973, several of these groups collaborated to organize the first theatrical festival in Ramallah. In addition, they established an artists' equity organization, the Association for Work and Development for the Arts, which served as an alternative to the absent Palestinian Ministry of Culture. They also published a theatrical magazine called Al-Masrah (The theatre), which helped document their movement and fostered a critical discourse in the 1970s. However, the situation for these groups worsened, as noted by Al-Saber, who documents artists getting arrested and expelled from Palestine. One such artist, Al-Kurd, was arrested twice before being forced into exile.

Reaching a pivotal moment in this tragic narrative, chapter 5 focuses on El-Hakawati ensemble, one of the most renowned groups in the history of contemporary Palestinian theatre. Al-Saber details El-Hakawati's prolific history from 1977 to 1987 under the leadership of François Abu Salem, discussing the historical context, the restrictions and obstacles they faced, as well as examples of their productions and themes based on interviews with the group's artists, including their critiques of the ensemble.

This methodology is applied to many other groups as well. A crucial issue that arose alongside the external challenges faced by Palestinian artists was the deep divisions among them, which led to the disappearance of most ensembles formed in the 1970s, compounded by a lack of permanent theatrical spaces. Al-Saber addresses this issue in chapter 6, covering the years from 1981 to 1984. During this period, El-Hakawati experienced its golden era, successfully transforming a burnt cinema into a stable theatre space. With financial support from Europe and the United States, this building became a national cultural center, allowing Palestinian artists to take leadership of the venue and rename it the Palestinian National Theatre. One of El-Hakawati's most significant achievements during this time was touring their productions in European countries and

the United States. However, they faced new challenges, including biased reviews of their productions through an orientalist lens and the difficulties of performing in front of diverse audiences from various nationalities and backgrounds.

Al-Saber returns to George Ibrahim in chapter 7, which focus on the years from 1984 to 1986, and documents the various groups Ibrahim collaborated with, including Masrah Al-Shoke, Firqat Al-Funoun El-Masrahiyyah, and, finally, Al-Kasaba Troupe.

Unfortunately, during the Intifada from 1987 to 1990, the events unfolding in the streets had a profound impact on all theatrical groups. El-Hakawati, in particular, experienced significant internal conflict. As chronicled in chapter 8, it's noteworthy to mention that two new groups emerged: Sanabel and El-Warsheh El-Fanniyeh. Besides the well-known companies, there were also smaller groups that struggled consistently to achieve financial stability and secure rehearsal and performance space.

Finally, in chapter 9, Al-Saber compares the declining prominence of El-Hakawati Theatre with the rising success of Al-Kasaba Theatre, which Ibrahim was preparing to make his final destination in Jerusalem during the Intifada period. This new venue featured a co-production between Palestinian and Israeli artists of *Romeo and Juliet*, presented as a reflection of the Oslo Peace Accords. The challenges faced by the production led Ibrahim to remark, "Peace was just on paper and doesn't exist in our reality," a sentiment supported by the events that followed in the years after the early 1990s up to the present day. In its conclusion, this book briefly mentions the emergent groups and theatre directors of the last twenty-five years. A comprehensive discussion about them would require another book.

Al-Saber's primary objective is to present information about the founding generations of Palestinian theatre, which is particularly significant given the limited number of publications on Palestinian theatre, in English or Arabic. He has succeeded in documenting and analyzing the productions of this earlier movement within its economic and political context, which is an ambitious goal given the considerable task of translating excerpts from journal reviews and conducting ethnographic research. Indeed, Al-Saber situates the Palestinian theatrical movement as authentic and impactful in this important work.

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