

# THEA 2202 - Middle Eastern Theatre and Politics

Spring 2020; W 3:00-5:30 PM

Location: Cathedral of Learning 1627

Instructor: Dr. Reza Mirsajadi

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:30 – 3:30 PM or by appointment

Cathedral of Learning 1626

## Course Description

Still to this day, the Middle East is continually erased from global histories of the theatre. Given the pervasive Western view of Islam as an oppositional force to modernity and a source for “Muslim rage,” the region’s cultural particularities have been presumed ill-suited for the emotional complexity and humanistic qualities of drama. Over the course of the semester, this class will rewrite narratives on both Middle Eastern identity and the history and utility of theatre and performance in the Greater Middle East, with an emphasis on exploring the ways Muslim theatre artists over the past one hundred years have used the stage to speak to power. We will read plays that illustrate a diversity of perspectives, spanning the countries of Egypt, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Palestine-Israel, Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen, as well as diasporic productions staged in the United States, France, England, and Germany. We will interrogate critical theory by Middle Eastern scholars and artists, integrating these writings within understandings of Western performance theory, seeking to navigate the cultural poetics and semiotics of Middle Eastern performance. Ultimately, we will attempt to answer this question paraphrased from Audre Lorde: *How is one to dismantle the master’s house with colonial tools?*

## Course Objectives

- to develop a language with which to discuss issues of race, identity, colonial positionality, and society
- to deepen and probe one’s knowledge of Middle Eastern performance history and practice
- to explore ways in which theatre can function as a site of activism, protest, and revolution
- to foster a dialogue that honestly engages with theatre, history, theory, and lived experience
- to strengthen critical reading, research, writing, and analytical skills
- to develop an article-length piece of original research related Middle Eastern theatre and performance

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Careful, insightful reading or viewing of assigned plays and articles in preparation for class each day.
2. Active, thoughtful and intensive participation in class discussions and projects.

3. Weekly reading responses, ten total.
4. Wikipedia project: one encyclopedic entry and in-class presentation.
5. Final paper: 18-20 pages on a topic of the student's choosing

### **Participation:**

A great deal of the learning in this course takes place in the classroom. To participate effectively, you must be present and on time for class. Be advised, however, that participation is more than simply showing up for class. To receive full credit for participation, you must be prepared to engage in classroom discussions, share your work, and show knowledge of the readings.

### **Attendance:**

- Attendance matters in this course! Being absent will affect your participation grade and will make it difficult for you to keep up with assignments. You are allowed one absence throughout the semester, which can be used for whatever purpose.
- Please let me know if you must miss class due to illness, travel issues, family commitments, religious observance, etc. Absences for legitimate reasons are understandable, but I must be notified in advance, and more than one absence will lower your final grade.
- Your success in this course will depend on your engaged participation in class. Our discussions will be based on assigned readings, so it is crucial that you keep pace with assignments and prepare material for the day it is assigned.
- Regular and respectful contributions to our ongoing exploration of Middle Eastern theatre and identity are an essential part of this class.

### **Inclusivity and Engagement:**

Our goal is to collaboratively construct a class environment that fosters intellectual exploration and expression. We will be exploring material in this course that may include language or subject matter that is particularly emotionally charged, difficult, upsetting, or traumatic for members of the class. I ask that you be sensitive to yourself and your classmates. I also recognize that the nature of some of our material has the potential to cause individuals to relive traumatic experiences. Please see me if you experience apprehension about approaching particular readings, assignments, viewings, or discussions that stem from this concern.

Every student in this class will be valued and respected as an individual with distinct experiences, talents, and backgrounds. Students will be treated fairly regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, socio-economic status, or national identity. Issues of diversity will be an integral part of our class discussions, assigned readings, and assignments. We will approach our work in this course with a shared foundation of respect and a shared responsibility to ensure that an inclusive environment exists for all students. I encourage you to ask questions and/or to state any concerns you have -- either in class for further discussion, or privately with me -- about the sometimes sensitive, uncomfortable stuff that may emerge.

If you have any concerns or suggestions for improving the classroom climate, please do not hesitate to speak with me. If you have a disability that may warrant accommodations in this class, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources

and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-624-3346 (Fax), as early as possible in the term.

## ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments are due by the start of class on the date stated, unless otherwise specified; they cannot be made up unless there has been an excused absence, upon the discretion of the instructor. For every week day (not class day) an assignment is late, the grade for the assignment will be reduced by one full letter.

### **Readings:**

There will be reading assigned for each class, which may encompass play, films, critical/historical analyses, live performances, or YouTube videos. The reading/viewing must be completed before the start of class, and students must be able to discuss them in depth. Please bring the readings to class with you, whenever possible!

### **Weekly Responses:**

Throughout the semester, you will be required to respond to the readings for the class session on our Blackboard Discussion page. Your response can come from a place of personal reflection, but it is important that you use a scholarly voice and grapple with the arguments and ideas posed in the week's readings. Make sure that you cite the texts, use direct quotations, and be specific in your argument. This is not an exercise in summarizing; rather, you should build on the assigned reading, synthesizing them, taking a stance, and constructing a concise thesis with adequate support.

**You are required to write a total of 10 responses throughout the semester**, which means that everyone has three weeks off. **Responses should be posted on Blackboard by noon on the day that class is to meet.** An acceptable response will be a thoughtful analysis that synthesizes the readings and has a strong argument in 500-750 words (although you are free to write more if you are so moved).

### **Wiki-Scholars:**

This will be our class attempt to decolonize popular knowledge on Middle Eastern theatre and performance. Individually, you will each create a Wikipedia username, complete training through the online portal, critique an article, and add a line to an article of your choice. Then you will work on a new article (or a very under-developed existing article), choosing either a Middle Eastern or diasporic theatre company or artist. The timeline and due dates for the project are below, as are a list of subjects you might consider and the requirements for what to include within your articles.

#### **Grading (20% of final grade):**

Practicing the basics (username, tutorials, etc)	5%
Critique an article on its TALK page	5%
Add one sentence with citation to an article of your choice	5%
Submit your sources	15%
Final article	50%
In-class presentation	20%

**The final article will be graded for clarity, quality of information, and strength of resources. Make sure that whether you publish a new article or add to an existing one, you are adding at least 1500 words of Wikipedia content.**

### **Final Paper:**

Write an 18-20 page paper on a topic of your choice related to Middle Eastern theatre and performance. The paper should show original research and scholarly insight. Each student will meet with the professor midway through the semester to discuss their intended research project.

### **Note on Written Assignments:**

Unless otherwise stated, all written assignments should be 12-point font, Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri, double-spaced, and with one-inch margins all around. Please email these to [rmirsajadi@gmail.com](mailto:rmirsajadi@gmail.com) as a .doc or .docx file by 11:59PM on the day they are due.

## **GRADING**

Participation (attendance, effort, and involvement)	20%
Wiki-Scholar Project	20%
Weekly Responses	30%
Final Paper	30%

## **WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

### **WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION: THE MIDDLE EAST AND THEATRE HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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Wednesday, January 8

- Oscar Brockett and Frank Hildy, *The History of the Theatre* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.), “The Rise of Islam” and “North Africa” (pg. 66-67, 600-601)
- Zarilli et. al, *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, on Ta’ziyah (pg. 79-83)
- Khaled Amine, “Performance Research in the Arab World: Between Theatrology and Performance Studies”
- Marvin Carlson, *Theatre & Islam*
- Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*

Optional Readings:

- E. J. Westlake, *World Theatre: The Basics*, “The Middle East” (pg. 13-29)
- Hazem Azmy, “Egypt,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (pg. 116-135)
- Khaled Amine, “Theatre in the Arab World: A Difficult Birth”

## WEEK 2: ORIENTALISM AND ITS LEGACIES

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Wednesday, January 15

- Edward Said, *Orientalism*, “Introduction” (pg. 9-36)
- Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, “Introduction to the Vintage Edition,” “Introduction,” “Ch. 1: Islam as News,” “Ch. 3.2: Knowledge and Interpretation” (pg. xi-lxx, 2-79, 162-173)
- Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage”
- Adam Shatz, “Orientalism, Then and Now”  
(<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/>)
- Rayya El Zein, “Neoliberal Orientalism”  
(<https://soundcloud.com/status-7/rayya-el-zein-lecture-final>)
- David Everett, *Daranzel, or, The Persian Patriot*  
(<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N28056.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>)

Optional Readings:

- Samer Al-Saber, “Jerusalem’s *Roses and Jasmine*: A Resistant Ventriloquism against a Racialized Orientalism”
- Rayya El Zein, “Resisting ‘Resistance’: On Political Feeling in Arabic Rap Concerts”
- Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*

## WEEK 3: INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Wednesday, January 22

- Khaled Amine and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb*, “Orature” (pg. 17-27)
- Khaled Amine and Marvin Carlson, “*Al-halqa* in Arabic Theatre: An Emerging Site of Hybridity”
- Willem Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, “Ch. 2: Puppet Drama,” (pg. 62-81)
- Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*, “The Ta’ziyah in Performance,” “The Ta’ziyah Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” (pg. 98-147, 156-161)
- Bahram Beyzaie, *The Puppets*

Optional Readings:

- Anonymous, trans. Rebecca Ansary Pettys, *The Ta’ziyah of the Martyrdom of Hussein*
- Willem Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, “Ch. 1: Comic Improvisatory Drama”
- Amir Lashkari and Mojde Kalantari, “*Pardeh Khani*: A Dramatic Form of Storytelling in Iran”
- Farrokh Gaffary, “Evolution of Rituals and Theatre in Iran”

## WEEK 4: EAST MEETS WEST: “MODERN” DRAMA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Wednesday, January 29

- Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey*, “Introduction,” “Ch. 2: Nasser’s Dramatic Imagination,” “Ch. 3: The Global Kaleidoscope,” “Ch. 4: Hamletizing the Arab Hero,” “Ch. 5: Time Out of Joint,” (pg. 1-12, 35-141)
- Abdulaziz H. Alabdullah, “Original or Western Imitation: The Case of Arab Theatre”
- Ali-Reza Mirsajadi, “Reading *Hamlet* in Tehran: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Politicizing”
- Ali Salim, *The Comedy of Oedipus: You’re the One Who Killed the Beast*
- Arash Dadgar and Shohran Ahmadzadeh, *Hamlet*  
(<https://vimeo.com/382861686> ; password: Pitt)

Optional Readings:

- Farindokht Zahedi, *Henrik Ibsen and Iranian Modern Drama* (pg. 35-41, 50-59, 72-85)
- Marvin Carlson, *Arab Oedipus*, “Introduction”

## WEEK 5: MASCULINITY AND THE CANON: WRITING HISTORY

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Wednesday, February 5

- Riad Ismat, “Tawfik al-Hakim: A Pyramid of Arabic Drama”
- Tawfiq al-Hakim, “The Case of the Twenty-First Century”
- Saeed Talajooy, “Beyzaie’s Formation, Forms and Themes”
- Tawfik El Hakim, *The Fate of a Cockroach*
- Tawfik El Hakim, *War and Peace*
- Bahram Beyzaie, *The Death of the King*

## WEEK 6: MASCULINITY AND THE CANON: WRITING THEORY

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Wednesday, February 12

- Robert Myers and Nada Saab, *Sentenced to Hope*, “Introduction” (pg. xiii-xxviii)
- Assad Alsaleh and Sa’dallah Wannous, “Approaching Sa’dallah Wannous’s Drama: The Manifestos for a New Arab Theatre”
- Riad Ismat, “Alfred Farag and Sa’dallah Wannous”
- Sa’dallah Wannous, *An Evening’s Entertainment for the Fifth of June*
- Sa’dallah Wannous, *The Adventure of the Head of Mamlouk Jabir*

Optional Readings:

- Faisal Adel Hamadah, “Travelling Theatre: Saadallah Wannous’s Journeys between the Local and the International”
- Elias Khoury, “Hope Arising from Despair” in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (pg. x-xv)

- Jawad Al Asadi, “Remembering Saadallah Wannous,” in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (pg. 178-186)
- Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, “War,” “History and Heritage” (pg. 57-77, 147-193)

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## WEEK 7: WAR AND PRECARITY: AN IRAQI CASE-STUDY

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Wednesday, February 19

- Judith Butler, *Frames of War*
- Jasbir Puar, “Abu Ghraib and U.S. Sexual Exceptionalism,” in *Terrorist Assemblages*
- Jawad al-Assadi, *Baghdadi Bath* and introduction on the playwright (pg. 298-330) (<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pitt-ebooks/reader.action?docID=5606119&ppg=308>)
- Rasha Fadhil, *Ishtar in Baghdad*

Optional Readings:

- A. Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma, Introduction to *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (pg. xi-xviii)
- Rajiv Joseph, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*

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## WEEK 8: PALESTINE-ISRAEL

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Wednesday, February 26

- Samer Al-Saber and Yana Taylor, “Reflecting on Palestinian Theatre: A Resilient Theatre of Resistance”
- Hala Kh. Nassar, “Stories from under Occupation: Performing the Palestinian Experience”
- Rania Jawad, “Staging Resistance in Bil’in: The Performance of Violence in a Palestinian Village”
- Naomi Wallace, *The Fever Chart*
- Ashtar Theatre, *The Gaza Monologues*

Optional Readings:

- Hala Kh. Nassar, “Palestine” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama* (pg. 1029-1035)
- Susan Slyomovics, “‘To Put One’s Fingers in the Bleeding Wound’: Palestinian Theatre under Israeli Censorship”
- Erin B. Mee, “The Cultural Intifada: Palestinian Theatre in the West Bank”
- Jason Ritchie, “How Do You Say ‘Come Out of the Closet’ in Arabic?: Queer Activism and the Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine”
- Rania Jawad, “Ashtar’s Forum Theatre: Writing History in Palestine”\

## WEEK 9: STAGING REVOLUTION: THE ARAB SPRING

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Wednesday, March 4

- Riad Ismat, *Artists, Writers, and the Arab Spring*, “Introduction”
- Sonali Pahwa, “Making Revolution Everyday: Quotidian Performance and Utopian Imagination in Egypt’s Streets and Squares”
- Asef Bayet, “Plebeians of the Arab Spring”
- Katherine Hennessey, “Staging a Protest: Socio-Political Critique in Contemporary Yemeni Theatre”
- Ibrahim El Husseini, *Comedy of Sorrows*
- Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaibi, *The Trilogy of Future Memory* (excerpts)

Optional Readings:

- Dalia Basiouny, “Performance through the Egyptian Revolution: Stories from Tahrir,” in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (pg. 42-53)
- Edward Ziter, “The Clowns of the Revolution: The Malas Twins and Syrian Oppositional Performance”
- Nehad Selaiha, “The Fire and the Frying Pan: Censorship and Performance in Egypt”
- Charles Tripp, “The State as an Always-Unfinished Performance: Improvisation and Performativity in the Face of Crisis”
- Riad Ismat, *Was Dinner Good, Dear Sister?*

Wednesday, March 11

**NO SCHOOL (Spring Break)**

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## WEEK 10: IRAN: AFTER THE REVOLUTION

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Wednesday, March 18

- Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls* (excerpt)
- Torange Yeghiazarian, “Dramatic Defiance in Tehran”
- Marjan Moosavi, “Desacralizing Whispers: Counter-Conduct in the Iranian War Theatre”
- Amir Reza Koohestani, “What We Do Not Say but is Still Heard”
- Mohammad Rahmanian, *Interrogation*
- Mohammad Yaghoubi, *A Moment of Silence*

Optional Readings:

- Hamid Dabashi, *Iran Without Borders*
- Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution*
- Marjan Moosavi, “Performing and Conforming: Iran’s Fajr International Theatre Festival”

## WEEK 11: ON GENDER AND MIDDLE EASTERN FEMINISMS

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Wednesday, March 25

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches, Men without Beards*, “Introduction,” “Ch. 1: Early Qajar,” “Ch. 2: Nineteenth-Century Transformations,” “Ch. 5: Women’s Veil and Unveil,” “Epilogue: Feminism and Its Burden of Birth,” (pg. 1-60, 132-155, 232-244)
- Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, “Preface to the 2012 Edition,” “Preface,” “Ch. 1: The Subject of Freedom,” “Ch. 5: Agency, Gender, and Embodiment,” (pg. ix-xxiv, 1-39, 153-188)
- Roksanna Bahramitash, “Revealing Veiling and Unveiling”
- Naghmeh Samini, *Home*
- Fatima Gallaire, *House of Wives*

Optional Readings:

- Nehad Selaiha and Sarah Enany, “Women Playwrights in Egypt”
- Fadi Fayad Sheiker, “I Will Raise My Daughters to be More Confident: Women’s Empowerment and Applied Theatre in Jordan”
- Riad Ismat, “Ghada Samman: Mosaic of Memory”
- Anthony Shay, “*Bazi-ha-ye Namayeshi*: Iranian Women’s Theatrical Plays”
- Leila Soliman, *Egyptian Products*

## WEEK 12: ON QUEER AND TRANS BODIES

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Wednesday, April 1

- Josseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (excerpt)
- Jasbir Puar, “Preface,” “Introduction: Homonationalism and Biopolitics,” and “Ch. 1: The Sexuality of Terrorism,” in *Terrorist Assemblages*
- Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar, “Queer Theory and Permanent War”
- Dina Georgis, “Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in *Bareed Mista3jil*”
- Sa’dallah Wannous, *Signs of Rituals and Transformations*
- Amahl Khouri, *She He Me*

Optional Readings:

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*
- Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut*
- Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism”
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *Jins*”
- Sahar Assaf, “Political Theatre Between Wars: Staging an Alternative Middle East”
- Joanna Mansbridge, “The *Zenne*: Male Belly Dancers and Queer Modernity in Contemporary Turkey”
- Jamil Khoury, *Precious Stones*

## WEEK 13: ON LIMINALITY: REFUGEES AND MENA MINORITIES

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Wednesday, April 8 (**Due: Wiki-Scholar Presentations**)

- Miraza Metin, “Kurdish Resistance and the Dramaturgy of Fire”
- Sara Scalenghe, “Disability Studies in the Middle East and North Africa: A Field Emerges”
- Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “The Afro-Iranian Community: Beyond Haji Firuz Blackface, the Slave Trade, & Bandari Music”
- Margaret Litvin, “Syrian Theatre in Berlin”
- Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, *The Jungle*

Optional Readings:

- Mahroo Rashidirostami, “Performance Traditions of Kurdistan: Towards a More Comprehensive Theatre History”
- Mari Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage: Performance, Politics and Resistance in Iraq*
- Margaret Litvin and Johanna Sellman, “An Icy Heaven: Arab Migration on Contemporary Nordic Stages”
- Rose Martin, “Dancing in Exile: Performance, Protest, and the Syrian Civil War”
- ‘Izz al-Din al-Madani, *The Zanj Revolution*

## WEEK 14: PERFORMING MENA ABROAD: AFFECT AND THE DIASPORA

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Wednesday, April 15

- Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness* (excerpt)
- Jasbir Puar, “The Turban is not a Hat” in *Terrorist Assemblages*
- Hamid Dabashi, “Brown Skin, White Masks”
- Riz Ahmed, “Typecast as a Terrorist”
- Yussef El Guindi, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet Abdallah and Ahmed: Musings about Arabs and Muslims in American Theatre”
- Yussef El Guindi, *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*

Optional Readings:

- Jamil Khoury, “Beyond First Responders: Politics, Racism, and the Aesthetics of Arab American Theatre”
- Michael Malek Najjar, “Acting Arab/Arab acting: Reclaiming the Arab American identity through Aesthetic Choices”
- Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*
- Reza Abdooh, *Quotations from a Ruined City*