

# THE 434 - 101: Performing the MENA World

Autumn 2021; Mo/We 2:40 – 4:10 PM

Location: Theatre School 549

Instructor: Reza Mirsajadi

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<https://depaul.zoom.us/j/9571071841>

Office Hours: Tu/Th 2:30 PM – 4:00 PM and by appointment

(Reserve via [calendly.com/rmirsa/101](https://calendly.com/rmirsa/101))

## 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 quarter, 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 MENA theatre artists over the past one hundred years have used the stage to explore identities and speak to power. We will read plays that illustrate a diversity of perspectives, spanning the countries of Egypt, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Palestine-Israel, and Turkey, as well as diasporic productions staged in the United States, England, and elsewhere. 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

## Required Texts – Available on D2L

## 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. Discussion post (500-750 words).
4. Creative response.
5. Digital Guide to Middle Eastern Theatre Project: one encyclopedic entry with preparatory assignments, presented to the class.
6. Midterm self-assessment paper (one page).
7. Final self-assessment paper (two pages).

### **Participation:**

A great deal of the learning in this course takes place in the classroom. To participate effectively, you must be present, on time, and engaged in the discussion. If you are in need of asynchronous options for a particular class session, please reach out to me in advance to discuss how you can receive full participation credit without being present in person or on Zoom.

### **Attendance:**

- Attendance MATTERS in this course! Being absent will make it difficult for you to keep up with assignments. You are allowed two non-medical absences throughout the semester, which can be used for whatever purpose. If you are planning on using one of your absences for a session, please email me before class to let me know!
- As we work together to keep our community safe and healthy, you should not come to class if you have COVID-19 symptoms. You will not be penalized for such absences. If you feel ill, e-mail your instructor as soon as possible – ideally before the class meeting. Any assignments due that day should be turned in. Your instructor will give you asynchronous assignments (such as additional reading, videos to watch, and writing assignments) that relate to the topics of the day's class.
- For a single absence documentation is not required. If you must miss multiple classes, you must provide appropriate documentation to the Dean of Students Office that you sought treatment or testing. Upon verification from the DOS office, your instructor will do their best to help you catch up.
- 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 theatre of the real are an essential part of this class.

- Receiving attendance and participation credit for asynchronous engagement will require prior consultation with the professor.

### **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 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.

Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussion will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most reasonable accommodation based on your needs, contact me as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week or two of the course) and be sure to contact the following office for support and additional services: Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) #370, Student Center, LPC, 773.325.1677

### **Academic Integrity:**

The DePaul Student Handbook defines plagiarism as follows: "Plagiarism includes but is not limited to the following: (a) The direct copying of any source, such as written and verbal material, computer files, audio disks, video programs or musical scores, whether published or unpublished, in whole or in part, without proper acknowledgement that it is someone else's. (b) Copying of any source in whole or in part with only minor changes in wording or syntax even with acknowledgement. (c) Submitting as one's own work a report, examination paper, computer file, lab report or other assignment which has been prepared by someone else. This includes research papers purchased from any other person or agency. (d) The paraphrasing of another's work or ideas without proper acknowledgement." Plagiarism will result in a failure of the assignment or possibly of the course. If you are unsure of how to cite a source, ask!

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

Assignments are due by the start of class on the date stated, unless otherwise specified. If you are in need of an extension, you must reach out to me in advance to discuss your options. Assignments, participation, and the like will not be assigned letter or number grades in this class. Rather, we will engage in an emerging pedagogical style termed “ungrading,” in which the students establish collective and individual goals, then evaluate themselves based on these benchmarks. We will discuss this further in class!

### **Readings:**

There will be reading assigned for each class, which may encompass plays, films, critical/historical analyses, or YouTube videos. The reading/viewing must be completed before the start of class, and students should be able to discuss them in depth and with critical rigor. The readings indicated on this syllabus may change throughout the quarter based on students' progress and needs, but these changes will be conveyed by the professor at least two days in advance of the session.

### **Discussion Post:**

Each student will be required to respond to one day's worth of readings on our D2L Discussion page. This 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 both the play and critical reading for that session. 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.

**Responses should be posted on D2L 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).

### **Creative Response:**

Each student will be asked to share a creative response to one of the plays we are reading. Creative responses can take any form, from the visual arts (collages, mood boards, comics, drawings, sculptures), performing arts (musical performance or composition, interpretive dance, Happening), creative writing (spoken-word/poetry, monologue, fictional short essay), or anything else of your choosing (with instructor approval). Get creative and expressive! Allow the play to move and inspire you! Each student will select the play for their creative response at the start of the quarter (on a first-come, first-served basis). Creative responses will be shared at the beginning of each class.

### **DGtoME Project:**

This will be our class attempt to fill in what Suzan-Lori Parks calls the (w)hole of history. Individually, you will each contribute an encyclopedic entry on a significant play from the MENA World and its diasporas to the Digital Guide to Middle Eastern Theatre. A list of plays will be provided to the class, and student may choose among them on a first-come, first-served basis. A timeline for this project, article requirements, and its various due dates will be sent out in advance. Students will be asked to share their entry with the class during our final session on **Monday, November 15**.

### **Midterm Self-Assessment:**

Each student will submit a one-page, double-spaced self-assessment of their progress so far over the quarter. The self-assessment should:

- 1) Note some of the predominant themes that the student is noticing throughout class conversations and readings
- 2) Honestly articulate how the student feels they are doing in relation to the course goals and objectives that we outline as a class
- 3) Address areas of strength and set concrete goals for their engagement with the class material moving forward in the quarter

**The midterm self-assessment should be submitted as a .docx file by 11:59PM on Friday, October 8, via D2L.**

### **Final Self-Assessment:**

Each student will submit a two-page, double-spaced self-assessment of their intellectual journey over the course of the entire quarter. This self-assessment should:

- 1) Address which play, reading, or class conversation most excited them during the quarter, and why they found this particular topic so intriguing
- 2) Convey an overarching idea about MENA theatre and performance that they learned in this course that they will take with them moving forward in their education and careers
- 3) Honestly articulate how the student feels they have performed, both in relation to the course goals and objectives that we outlined as a class, and with respect to the self-assigned goals that they set midterm
- 4) Assign themselves a letter grade, then explain why they should get this grade based on their self-assessment and our collective class criteria.

**The final self-assessment should be submitted as a .docx file by 11:59PM on Friday, November 19, via D2L.** The professor will take each student's self-assigned grade and explanation into consideration when assigning final grades. That being said, if the professor disagrees with this self-assessment, the professor can adjust a student's grade (higher or lower, accordingly), accompanied by an explanation of justification.

## **WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

### WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

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Wednesday, September 8

**Introductions and Overviews**

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## WEEK 2: SITUATING THE MIDDLE EAST IN THEATRE HISTORIES

Monday, September 13

### **The MENA World and Theatre Historiography**

- *The History of the Theatre* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.), “The Rise of Islam” and “North Africa” (Oscar Brockett and Frank Hildy)
- Khaled Amine, “Performance Research in the Arab World: Between Theatrology and Performance Studies”

Wednesday, September 15

### **Orientalism and Muslim Rage**

- PLAY: *Disgraced* (Ayad Akhtar)
- Introduction to *Orientalism* (Edward Said)
- “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (Bernard Lewis)
- OPTIONAL: “Erasing the Middle East: White Gatekeeping and the Painful Path of Progress” (Ali-Reza Mirsajadi) (<https://howlround.com/erasing-middle-east>)

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## WEEK 3: INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE AND THE “PRE-MODERN”

Monday, September 20

### **Puppetry and Medieval Cairo**

- PLAY: *The Love-Stricken One and the One that Inspires Passion* ('Ibn Dāniyāl)
- Introduction to *Theatre from Medieval Cairo* (Carlson)

Wednesday, September 22

### **Ta'ziyah and Persian Performance Aesthetics**

- Excerpt from *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* (Zarilli et. al.)
- VIRTUAL EXHIBITION: “Rebels and Revels: A Photo Exhibit” (<http://go.umd.edu/RebelsandRevels>)

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## WEEK 4: MODERNISM AND PERFORMING THE WEST

Monday, September 27

### **Local Politics and the Western Canon**

- PLAY: *The Comedy of Oedipus: You're the One Who Killed the Beast* (Ali Salem)
- Excerpts from *Hamlet's Arab Journey* (Margaret Litvin)

Wednesday, September 29

### **Reframing Western Influences**

- VIDEO: *Hamlet* (Arash Dadgar and Shohran Ahmadzadeh) (<https://vimeo.com/382861686> ; password: Pitt)
- “Reading *Hamlet* in Tehran: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Politicizing” (Ali-Reza Mirsajadi)

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## WEEK 5: CANONICITY AND PROTEST

Monday, October 4

### **Metaphor (and Misogyny!)**

- PLAY: *The Fate of a Cockroach* (Tawfiq El Hakim)
- “Tawfiq al-Hakim: A Pyramid of Arabic Drama” (Riad Ismat)

Wednesday, October 6

### **Historical Repetitions**

- FILM: *The Death of Yazdgerd* (Bahram Beyzaie)
- Excerpt from *The Modern Middle East: A History* (James L. Gelvin)

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## WEEK 6: WARZONES AND TRAUMA

Monday, October 11

### **Ancient Cosmology and the U.S. Invasion**

- PLAY: *Ishtar in Baghdad* (Rasha Fadil)
- Excerpt from *Frames of War* (Judith Butler)
- Excerpt from *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (Wolkstein and Kramer)

Wednesday, October 13

### **Palestine and Testimony**

- PLAY: *The Gaza Monologues* (ASHTAR Theatre)
- VIDEO: *The Gaza Monologues: A Documentary Film* (Kahlil Almuzaian) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1ZJKv-SuuQ>)

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## WEEK 7: HOMELANDS AND REVOLUTION

Monday, October 18

### **Staging the Arab Spring**

- PLAY: *Comedy of Sorrows* (Ibrahim El Husseini)
- “Making Revolution Everyday: Quotidian Performance and Utopian Imagination in Egypt’s Streets and Squares” (Sonali Pahwa)

Wednesday, October 20

### **Turkey on the Brink**

GUEST SPEAKER: Melis Aker

- PLAY: *Field, Awakening* (Melis Aker)

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## WEEK 8: RADICAL GENDER, RADICAL SEX

Monday, October 25

### **Mysticism and the Erotic**

- PLAY: *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* (Sa'dallah Wannous)
- “Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in *Bareed Mista3il*” (Dina Georgis)

Wednesday, October 27

### **Her Name Was Inanna**

GUEST SPEAKER: Ezzat Goushegir

- PLAY: *My Name is Inanna* (Ezzat Goushegir)

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## WEEK 9: STORIES OF REFUGE

Monday, November 1

### **Refugees in the MENA World**

- PLAY: *The Child* (Naghmeh Samini)
- “What We Do Not Say But is Still Heard” (Amir Reza Kohestani)

Wednesday, November 3

### **MENA Refugees in the West**

- PLAY: *The Jungle* (Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy)
- “Syrian Theatre in Berlin” (Margaret Litvin)

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## WEEK 10: DIASPORIC LIVES

Monday, November 8

### **The New Generation**

GUEST SPEAKER: Martin Yousif Zebari

- FILM: *Layalina* (Martin Yousif Zebari)
- “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet Abdallah and Ahmed: Musings about Arabs and Muslims in American Theatre” (Yussef El Guindi)

Wednesday, November 10

### **Queer Families**

GUEST SPEAKER: Sharifa Yasmin

- *Close to Home* (Sharifa Yasmin)

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## WEEK 11: CONCLUSIONS

Monday, November 15

### **The Road Ahead**

## **APPENDIX: DEPAUL COVID POLICIES**

### MASKS AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

By city and university policies, everyone is currently required to wear a mask indoors on campus and throughout Chicago. There are no special room capacities or distancing requirements. Please respect the safety and comfort of other class members and distance as much as is possible.

You are encouraged to wear your mask outdoors when you are in close proximities to others.

Refusing to wear a mask indoors on campus may lead to removal and/or academic sanctions including expulsion.

### FOOD AND DRINK:

Eating and drinking is not allowed in classrooms unless you are sipping water through a straw under your mask. We will plan to take breaks for nutrition and hydration.