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Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 272 pp., \$90.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781137358974.

In the Palgrave Macmillan series, “Studies in International Performance,” Edward Ziter’s *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* joins a number of books that focused on Middle Eastern theater and performance, such as Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson’s *The Theatres of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria*,¹ and Sonja Kufteinc’s *Theatre, Facilitation, and Nation Formation in the Balkans and the Middle East*.² The series has also published books, which incorporate voices of Middle Eastern theater artists at home or in the diaspora as part of their overall argument. These books include Maurya Wickstrom’s *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism* and Yana Meerzon’s *Performing Exile, Performing Self*.³ The editors of the series must be commended for their attention to contemporary theater and performance about the region.

In English language scholarship on performance and politics in Syria, Ziter’s book lives in the company of the remarkable work of Lisa Wedeen in *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999) and Rebecca Joubin’s more recent book *The Politics of Love* (2013), both of which analyze the power of performance in television, everyday life, and spectacle in pre-revolution Syria.⁴ Ziter cites Wedeen’s ideas on “acting as if,” “licensed criticism,” and “*tanfis*,” which suggest that Syrians had knowingly played the role of good citizens to avoid the wrath of dictatorship. Thus, the regime knowingly permitted sanctioned forms of criticism to allow audiences to “blow off steam.” He also draws on miriam cooke’s notion of “commissioned criticism” to describe the complex relationship between Syrian artists and the state.⁵ Simultaneously, Ziter asserts the existence of an intellectual theatrical tradition of subverting

¹ Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria: Performance Traditions of the Maghreb* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

² Sonja Arsham Kufteinc, *Theatre, Facilitation, and the Nation Formation in the Balkans and the Middle East* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³ See: Maurya Wickstrom, *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism: Thinking the Political Anew* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Yana Meerzon, *Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴ See: Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Rebecca Joubin, *The Politics of Love: Sexuality, Gender, and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

⁵ See: miriam cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

authority in Syria. In doing so, he presents and interprets a multifaceted set of internal devices within Syrian theater in the years preceding the 2011 uprising and soon thereafter.

In this book, Ziter analyzes “Syrian theatre’s response to a state of exception that was widely, if implicitly, recognized as permanent” (11). He emphasizes that understanding the relationship between the artists and the state can lend “insight to the strategies of the Syrian uprising” (3). He does not claim to write a definitive historical narrative or to analyze the widest possible scope of texts or performances. On the contrary, Ziter draws his insights from a limited number of available published texts, scholarship, and historical materials, as well as, widely distributed edited-for television plays and activist performances primarily on YouTube, but also on DVD. Setting well-known playwrights and available plays in conversation throughout his analysis, he forgoes definitive historical chronology in favor of a thematic organization in five chapters under the titles: Martyrdom; War; Palestinians; History and Heritage; and Torture. Where necessary, he recounts relevant historical and political events to support his argument and to help the reader in contextualizing theatrical works in Syria’s modern history.

Ziter begins with a chapter on the theme of martyrdom. He provides examples of how Syrian artists addressed the government’s use of martyrdom as a unifying idea in Syrian nationalism. The lion’s share of the analysis focused on the work of the iconic playwright Muhammad al-Maghut, particularly in the aftermath of the 1967 war. In collaboration with actor Duraid Lahham, al-Maghut’s critique of the regime and the state of Arab affairs gained the pair fame across the Arab world during this period. Ziter presents a multi-layered reading of their collaborations, also linking the works to the plays of Saadallah Wannus and Mumdoḥ ‘Adwan. Further building on the theme of martyrdom, or more specifically the Syrian playwrights’ critiques of it, Ziter introduces us to some of the social media’s anti-regime efforts on YouTube, where the martyr is most often a civilian during the latest uprising and the ensuing war for survival. In this chapter, the reader is exposed to a debate on the idea of the martyr through theatrical works and online performances.

In Chapters 2 and 3, respectively entitled “War” and “Palestinians,” the author analyzes examples of works that addressed the state of war between Syria and Israel. The two chapters similarly reflect the Syrian artists’ identity crisis as the state failed to regain occupied territory, escalated a state of emergency, and disappointed its refugee populations. In both chapters, he explores texts by Saadallah Wannus, Mumdoḥ ‘Adwan, ‘Alī ‘Uqlāḥ ‘Arṣan, Muhammad al-Maghut, Mustafa al-Hallaj, and Farhan Bulbul. The analysis often returns to a few recurring motifs: governmental repression, failures of Arab leadership, and according to his reading, signs of occasional anti-Semitism. Although he provides a brief historical survey of the conflict with Israel, presents common Syrian critiques of Zionism, and shows tremendous sympathy for the struggles of the Palestinians, Ziter avoids explicitly aligning himself with the politics of any single playwright or political viewpoint. However, by legitimately holding up the work of Wannus as a standard for ethical treatment of this fraught subject matter, he maintains a clear anti-regime through-line. In doing so, he does not examine potentially relevant critiques of Israel by pro-regime playwrights in the chapter entitled, “Palestinians.”

The most valuable and engaging chapter of the book is “History and Heritage.” Ziter expands his exploration of Wannus’s body of work, focusing primarily on plays from the 1990s. The biographical details about Wannus as well as the three-period model of the playwright’s work provide an excellent context for the works discussed. Undoubtedly inspired by Wannus’s zeal and directness, Ziter not only freely condemns the Syrian regime, but also closely analyzes texts without self-imposed restrictions. He systematically shows

how the historical plays invoke images and negotiations of political myth, literary tradition, and folkloric heritage in order to speak to present-day political power structures. Throughout, Ziter's analytical interplay of the role of the *hakawati* (storyteller), Brechtian alienation, coffee-shop culture, revolutionary consciousness, political dissent, and Arab historical legends demonstrates his strong handle on Levantine history and the work of Wannus.

In the last chapter, entitled "Torture," Ziter selects plays and scenes depicting interrogations of common citizens. His examinations of two characters in particular, al-Maghut's Ghawwar in *October Village* and Darwish in al-Hallaj's *The Darwishes Search for Truth*, provide exemplary models of the theme of torture in Syrian theater. These "everyman" characters stand for the underclass, which constitutes the majority of the Syrian population. Ziter argues that the representation of the "people" is not the sole purpose of these plays. Rather, "Syrian theatre imagines resistance by short-circuiting the interrogator's power to unmake the world, and begin a process of imagining a different Syria" (236). The last of the examples in the chapter documents and describes Mohammed al-Attar's *Could You Please Look into the Camera*, which leaves many unanswered questions about the future of the war in Syria. Of note, this book does not contain a concluding chapter. At the end of the fifth chapter, Ziter concludes with three powerful, though rushed, paragraphs, where he updates the reader on select Syrian artists and ponders "the possibilities of theatre in an age of atrocity" (238-239).

Ziter's thematic survey presents a wealth of examples and engaging examinations of the artist's role as an opposing force to the state in Syria. The book adequately documents performed passages that will be very familiar to those who grew up watching the collaborations of al-Maghut and Duraid Lahham. The book is clearly intended almost exclusively for the non-Arab theater artist or scholar. Non-native readers and students of Arab culture will find this book useful. Native or fluent readers and researchers in Arab studies or comparative literature might be distracted by inconsistencies in translations and transliterations, but they are encouraged to read the book even though they were not Ziter's target audience. Although one must acknowledge the immense experience of the series editors, these linguistic errors confirm a need for editors and readers fluent in the original languages when publishing on prolific and contemporary foreign theatrical communities.

Ziter demonstrates immense knowledge of and insight into political performance in Syria, but his reasonable bias against the regime leaves out an overwhelming dimension of political performance in a country that deservedly stood as a guardian and promoter of Arab heritage, theater, and culture, even under oppressive dictatorships. Perhaps the lines of opposition between the dissenting playwrights, the pro-regime playwrights, and the regime are not as distinct or mutually exclusive as the argument and themes of the book have occasionally portrayed. In the introduction, Ziter states his awareness of this potential shortfall as he discusses his methodology and sources. For example, we see glimpses of this complexity in a discussion of the shifting position of the actor Duraid Lahham. I hope that there will be a future edition, perhaps a soft cover, which addresses not only these shifting alliances, but also major contributions of regime-allied playwrights and state-funded institutions. This book will serve as an excellent introduction for theater scholars, particularly those seeking a working model for researching and writing about Arab culture.

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