



**THE ARAB SHAKESPEARE TRILOGY**

The Al-Hamlet Summit  
Richard III, an Arab Tragedy  
The Speaker's Progress

**Sulayman Al Bassam**  
Introduced by Graham Holderness

B L O O M S B U R Y

# **The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy**

*Al-Bassam's reworking of Shakespeare's play is a brilliantly simple theatrical conjuring trick that has Elsinore fitting the current explosive state of Middle East politics like a silk glove. Guardian, on The Al Hamlet Summit*

*Al Bassam's astonishing text, which rarely echoes Shakespeare's words, but takes the story of Hamlet and reworks it in a rich new poetic version- the results are electrifying. Scotsman, on The Al Hamlet Summit*

*A punchy, irreverent makeover that retools Shakespeare for the world of Saddam, the CIA and the House of Saud. Guardian, on Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*

*Few works catch the various currents within Arabism and Islam such as Al-Bassam...it is seldom that one sees a Shakespearean reworking that is so consistently enlightening while also retaining considerable dramatic power. Financial Times, on Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*

*Never less than compelling... an illustration of how even in the middle of totalitarianism, art can carve out space to dissent. New York Times, on The Speaker's Progress*

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*By*

SULAYMAN AL BASSAM

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PROFESSOR GRAHAM HOLDERNESS

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**Sulayman Al Bassam** was born in Kuwait in 1972. He founded Zaoum Theatre in London in 1996, and SABAB Theatre, the company's Arabic arm, in 2002 with dramaturge and partner, Georgina Van Welie. Widely recognized as one of the leading and most outspoken contemporary Arab theatre makers, he produces work in English, French and Arabic and is regularly hosted at leading international venues across the world. Previous plays published in English include *Kalila wa Dimna – The Mirror for Princes* (Oberon Books, 2006).

**Graham Holderness** was born in Leeds and educated at state schools before attending Jesus College, Oxford. He has taught at the Open University, and at the universities of Oxford, Swansea, Roehampton and Hertfordshire. He is qualified to higher doctoral level in English and Drama, to doctoral level in Literature and Theology, and has published extensively in early modern and modern literature, drama and theology. Most of his 40 published books focus on Shakespeare, with particular interests in Shakespeare's history plays, Shakespeare and the media, Shakespeare editing, Shakespeare and contemporary culture and trans-national Shakespeare. His publications include: *D.H. Lawrence: History, Ideology and Fiction* (1982); *Shakespeare's History* (1985); *The Shakespeare Myth* (1988); *Shakespeare Out of Court: Dramatizations of Court Society* (1990); *Shakespeare: The Histories* (2000); and the trilogy *Cultural Shakespeare: Essays in the Shakespeare Myth* (2001), *Visual Shakespeare: Essays in Film and Television* (2002) and *Textual Shakespeare: Writing and the Word* (2003). His work on Arab Shakespeare has been published in journals such as *The European Journal of English Studies*, *Shakespeare Yearbook* and *Critical Survey*. Graham Holderness is also a novelist, poet and dramatist. His novel *The Prince of Denmark* was published in 2001; his poetry collection *Craeft* received a Poetry Book Society award in 2002; and his play *Wholly Writ*, about Shakespeare and the King James Bible, was recently performed at Shakespeare's Globe, and by Royal Shakespeare Company actors in Stratford-upon-Avon. He has also published research in literature and theology in journals such as *Harvard Theological Review*, *Journal for the Study of the*

*New Testament, Literature and Theology and Renaissance and Reformation*. Recent publications include *Shakespeare in Venice* (2009), *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury/Arden Shakespeare, 2011), *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and *Re-writing Jesus: Christ in 20th Century Fiction and Film* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He is an elected Fellow of the English Association, the Royal Society of Arts, and the Royal Society of Medicine. Graham is Professor of English at the University of Hertfordshire, and Sub-deacon at the Parish Church of St Michael and All Angels, Bedford Park.

# Contents

Introduction	viii
Timeline of Conflict in the Middle East	xvi
Author's Introduction	xviii
<i>The Al-Hamlet Summit</i>	1
<i>An Essay on Richard III, an Arab Tragedy; On the Burden of Text, Nation and Histories</i>	59
<i>Richard III, an Arab Tragedy</i>	73
<i>The Speaker's Progress</i>	135



# Introduction

Graham Holderness

1

*The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* is a uniquely innovative dramatic experiment accomplished by Anglo-Kuwaiti dramatist Sulayman Al Bassam. It consists of three adaptations, written and produced between 2002 and 2011, which transplant Shakespeare plays into the geography, culture and language of the Middle East. Here presented in English-language versions, these plays have been, and continue to be, performed in Arabic and English, to audiences around the globe.

The three plays were not originally conceived as a trilogy, but rather grew organically into a complex totality, as the dramatist's engagement with Shakespeare deepened and expanded. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was built on several earlier adaptations of *Hamlet*, and *An Arab Tragedy* written in response to a commission by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Nonetheless the three plays belong together, forming a uniquely comprehensive theatrical experiment. The three plays demonstrate an evolving response to the seismic political shifts that have disrupted the Middle East across this period, bringing both new freedoms and reinforced repression. And they comment upon one another, as well as their sources and their contemporary world. The plays adapted – *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *Twelfth Night* – are drawn from three of the major Shakespearean genres: tragedy, history and comedy. Each adaptation makes use of its source in different ways, mixing genres in a very Shakespearean way. There is a savage comedy in the satire of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, *An Arab Tragedy* plays out history partly as tragic farce, and *The Speaker's Progress* strikes a delicate balance between tragic containment and comic resistance.

These adaptations will appeal both to those interested in Shakespeare, and to those concerned with political and cultural

events in the Arab world. They work upon the Shakespeare texts to produce new and unforeseen meanings; and they fashion dramatic forms that reflect in innovative ways on contemporary world events. They can be read and performed in English to illuminate such events for English speakers; and they can be seen performed in Arabic for Arabic speakers eager to find in Shakespeare some enlightening reflection on their own diverse societies.

## 2

Sulayman Al Bassam is one of the world's leading Arab dramatists. Born in Kuwait, son of a Kuwaiti father and a British mother, he was educated in Britain. He speaks Arabic, and writes in English; his works are translated from English into Arabic by others, with his own participation. Al Bassam's theatrical works, however, have been performed right around the world, particularly in America and Europe, as well as across the Middle East and North Africa. He is essentially a global playwright.

He has created original works drawing wholly on Arabic culture and tradition, such as his play *Kalila wa Dimna – The Mirror for Princes*, a radical adaptation of allegorical animal fables which explored the mechanics of Empire and the narratives of power, and was performed, in Arabic, in Tokyo, and at London's Barbican Centre in 2005. The play strongly argued the case for cultural and religious tolerance in the modern Arab and Western worlds. Most of Al Bassam's theatrical critique of his contemporary world has, however, been effected through his adaptations of Shakespeare, which now together form *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*.

## 3

*The Al-Hamlet Summit* was first performed in English in August 2002, as part of the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, and in the same year won Best Performance and Best Director Awards at the 14th Cairo International Festival of Experimental

Theatre. Subsequently, as a result of a Japanese commission, the play moved into the Arabic language and undertook a world tour, playing in London, Singapore, Denmark, Seoul, Tokyo, Warsaw and Tehran. In his earlier experiments with *Hamlet*, Al Bassam had focused on adapting Shakespeare's text. *The Al-Hamlet Summit* by contrast jettisoned Shakespeare's language, and rewrote *Hamlet* into a modern English which attempted a concrete and objective translation of Arabic concepts and rhetoric into English, producing what the author called a 'cross-cultural construction'. The characters occupied a space akin to a political assembly, sitting at, and moving around, desks and chairs. In this new staging all of the characters were visible all of the time. Projection screens displayed the larger context of an empire desecrated by war.

Al Bassam's play maps a Middle Eastern political tragedy onto the template of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The key characters carry Shakespearean names, and occupy parallel situations within their own modern Middle Eastern world. Hamlet's father, the old ruler, has been poisoned, and his position usurped by Claudius his brother, who bore more than a passing resemblance to Saddam Hussein. Gertrude and Ophelia, Polonius and Laertes all play roles comparable to those of their Shakespearean namesakes, but redomesticated into an Islamic Arab context.

The regime is threatened, as Denmark is threatened at the beginning of *Hamlet*, by Fortinbras's troops lining the borders, and internally by the 'People's Liberation Brigade', which has been distributing leaflets claiming Old Hamlet was assassinated. Where Claudius in Shakespeare's play resolves the Norwegian threat by diplomacy, Claudius in *Al-Hamlet* responds with violence and atrocity. Fortinbras's army is backed by the West, 'armed with millions of dollars of foreign equipment'. Behind the suggestions of foreign intervention lies the West's greed for Arab oil (Claudius is obsessively concerned to protect the pipelines from sabotage). The West appears in the play in the shadowy persona of the Arms Dealer, who spoke English in the Arabic version, and was played by a woman in the English version. The Arms Dealer converses with, and supplied arms to, Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, Gertrude and, finally, Fortinbras. S/he will

provide weapons to anyone prepared to pay, even if s/he is arming opponents.

In a scene which is the equivalent of *Hamlet* 3.3, instead of displaying remorse and praying for forgiveness, Claudius voices what is virtually a religion of oil and dollars.

Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars. I have no other God than you, I am created in your image, I seek guidance from you the All Seeing, the All Knowing Master of Worlds, Prosperity and Order ...

At the end of the play Fortinbras clearly intends to sustain this policy and this faith: 'It won't be easy, terrorism is not yet defeated, but the pipeline will be completed within a year.' In response to this context of corrupt and repressive power-politics, characters such as Hamlet and Ophelia find strategies of resistance and subversion that belong to the contemporary context, rather than to Shakespeare's play. Hamlet becomes a jihadist, and Ophelia a suicide-bomber. Shakespeare's rotten Denmark becomes a corrupt Middle Eastern regime, and Shakespeare's tragedy of revenge a war of terror against terror.

#### 4

Al Bassam's next Shakespearean adaptation, his version of *Richard III*, was premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford as part of the RSC's 'Complete Works' project in 2007. The repertory consisted of 'mainstream' productions and parallel or alternative versions ('responses'). *An Arab Tragedy* was billed as a 'response' to Michael Boyd's production of *Richard III*, and was initially titled *Baghdad Richard*. The play was performed in Arabic (the first play in Arabic to be produced by the RSC), with the English text projected onto screens as surtitles, and with some scenes spoken in English. It was subsequently performed in Washington DC, Abu Dhabi, New York, Kuwait, Damascus, Paris and Amsterdam.

Although the play was set in an unnamed 'Gulf state', Al Bassam clearly did not want the play's frame of reference restricted, as

some reviewers suggested it was, to the Gulf monarchies. Hence he broadened the scope of the piece to include the whole Middle East:

More generally, the modern Middle East, like so many of Shakespeare's tragedies, offers a painful plethora of examples of how not to rule. Modern imperialism, tyranny, barbarism, oppression, plots, assassinations and civil wars are sadly becoming the rule not the exception in our region. The players in this grim game of politics, natural resources and strategic power are many, and like all the characters in *Richard III*, none are innocent; all have bloodied their hands.

Shakespeare's play is ripe for such analogies, replete as it is with arrests and executions, secret assassinations, political in-fighting and photo-opportunities, hostage-taking, character assassination and show trials, religious hypocrisy, forced confessions, usurpation, invasion and civil war. All these aspects of the plot were here 'Arabized' and transferred to the play's 'unnamed oil-rich kingdom or emirate'. The staging accentuated these parallels further. As in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, back-projected images fleshed out the contingent context of despotism, military action, clandestine surveillance. Al Bassam's Buckingham is a double agent, secretly liaising with the Americans as he ostensibly supports Richard's bid for the throne. The screens recorded his coded email communications. Richmond was portrayed as a platitude-spouting Christian US general who at the play's conclusion announces the installation of an interim government. At the final point of the drama, just before the theatre collapses its illusions and decants us back out into our own world, we are here transported from 1400 to 2003, from Bosworth Field to Afghanistan or Iraq in the embattled Middle East of the twenty-first century.

## 5

Al Bassam's most recent production premiered in New York in 2011. *The Speaker's Progress* used *Twelfth Night* as a starting

point to explore events in the Middle East. The play transformed Shakespeare's comedy into a satire on the political inertia of the Arab world, and a theatrical metaphor for the mechanisms of dissent. The production was strongly coloured by the 'Arab Spring', the succession of revolts against established regimes that have begun to rise up across the Arab world. Al Bassam comments:

A new history is finding its voice among the millions across the Arab world who stood up and continue to stand – and fall – for dignity and freedom after decades of shame and oppression. This play, forged at the cusp of these two eras, has the fortune – and the responsibility – to be one of its platforms.

In an unnamed Arab country theatres have been shut down and theatrical performance criminalized. From a lectern, a former theatre producer, played by Al Bassam himself, explains to the audience that what he is presenting is not a play, but a reconstruction of a 1960s production based on the story of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The costumes and set resemble a scientific rather than an artistic context, with the actors wearing laboratory coats. Men and women remain at a distance from one another. An ominous camera sits in front of the stage, suggesting universal government surveillance.

The 1960s production of *Twelfth Night*, we understand, had the radical spirit of its time, especially in its irreverence towards moral and political authority. We see parts of it in black-and-white film on a large screen onstage, and hear Shakespearean dialogue adapted to a radical contemporary agenda: 'Music is the food of love and love is the blood of freedom and freedom is the mother of progress ... How can you transform a country if you don't put women at its centre?' The government-sponsored revival played out on stage tries to empty the performance of any radical sexual or political content. But the actors run into trouble, simply by having a woman dress as a man. Shakespearean drama becomes a metaphor for radical dissent.

The reconstruction is performed by eight actors who are also 'not actors', the Speaker emphasizes, but 'envoys' from the Tourist Board and the Council of Virtue. Initially the actors obediently

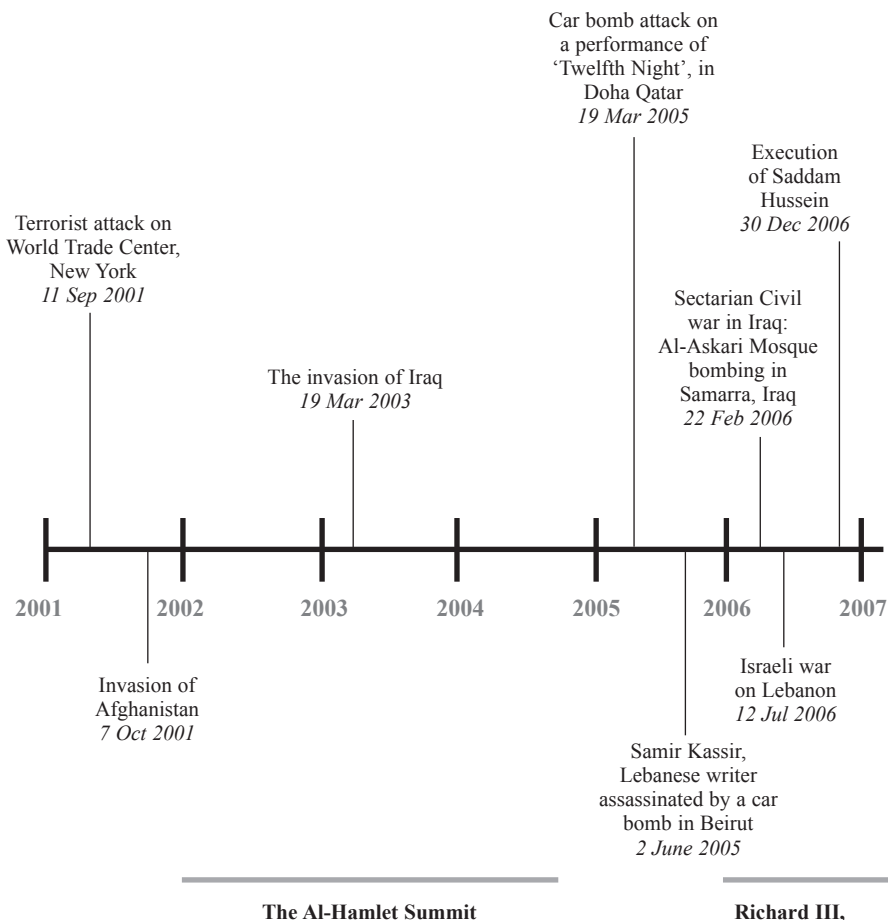
deliver the official programme. Gradually they begin to deviate from the script, and wander into politically dangerous territory. They burst into song; women change into dresses and take off their headscarves; they cry 'Freedom!'. People are arrested; voices are silenced; disobedience repressed. But the energy and humour of the Shakespearean drama continually explodes through the barriers of oppression. *The Speaker's Progress* is Sulayman Al Bassam's Arab Spring.

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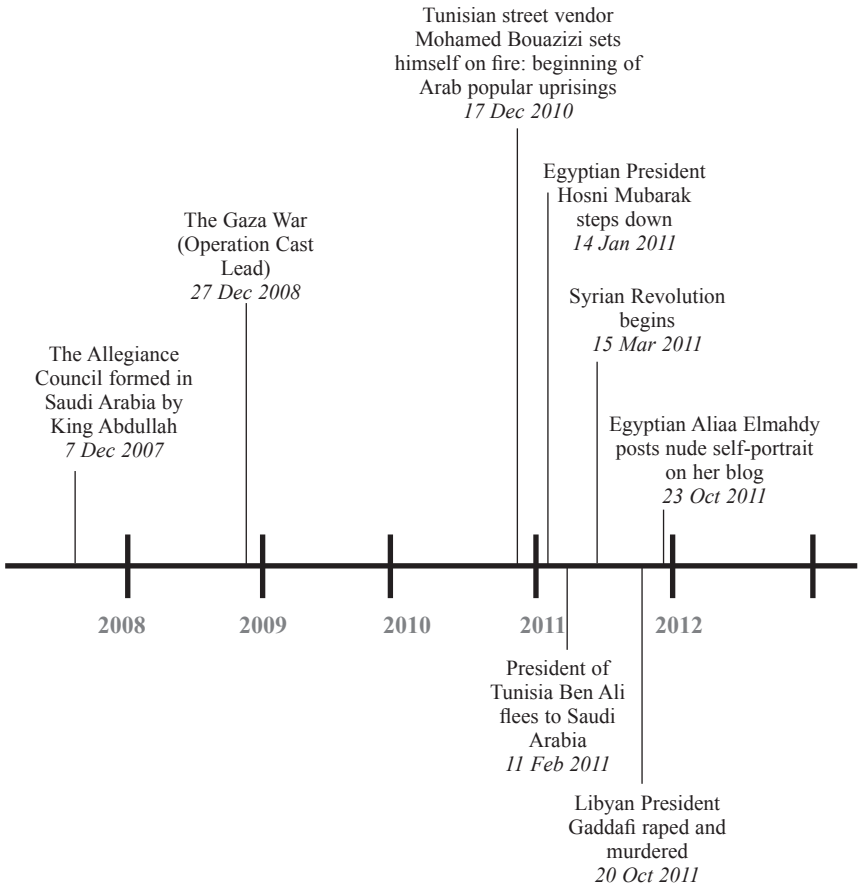
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# Timeline of Conflict in the Middle East



— The touring life of each production in the Trilogy.



**An Arab Tragedy**

**The Speaker's Progress**

## Author's Introduction

The great storm howls above – the people groan.  
The storm that annihilates the land roars below – the people  
groan.

*Lament for the City of Ur*

This Trilogy was created over a decade between 11 September 2001 and the birth of the popular Arab uprisings, known as the Arab Spring, which began in January 2011. The plays are informed and inflected by concerns, issues and events pertaining to my perception of the Arab world during that first decade of the twenty-first century. They also address the charged, airless and perverse relationship between the Middle East and the West.

The tension between what the Shakespearean play tells and what I felt needed to be told is the defining principle that runs through these plays. The three plays are built, in varying degrees, out of Shakespearean caskets. They draw heavily on the structure, characterization and tenor of their Shakespearean inspiration and are explorations of themes found in *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *Twelfth Night*. Extremism, corruption, power, kingship, identity, authoritarianism and sexuality are but a handful of the themes that attracted me to these texts, themes that gave promise of their potential as vehicles for politically charged, contemporary theatre pieces. But the conditions of creation and the radical violence of the world around me at the time of writing dictated a second, more urgent and highly contemporary prerogative onto these plays. It was this prerogative of urgency and relevance that led the texts to betray the Shakespearean text and explicitly flow into the particular moment of history – and geography – in which they were made. In this way, the plays carry the markings of the War on Terror, the Axis of Evil, Al Qaeda, Al-Jazeera, the birth of unfettered sectarian violence, invasions of foreign armies, oil at 130 dollars a barrel, military dictatorships, petro-fattened decadence, the collapse of old orders and the blasting effect of post-modernity on pre-modern societal structures.

The peculiar conditions of production that led to the creation and distribution of these works accentuated this tension. The plays

were written and developed inside the Arab world for performance at international venues in other continents. *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, first presented in English at the Edinburgh Festival, was remade between Kuwait and Damascus for performance at the Tokyo International Festival; *Richard III* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK and made between Kuwait and Beirut; *The Speaker's Progress* was made in Damascus, Kuwait and Beirut and received its world premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.<sup>1</sup> Here was war: there was peace. Here were rampant poverty and obscurantism: there were mild social tensions and universal literacy rates. And, as if by chance, here comes Democracy proudly rolling in on the back of a tank! The radical disconnect between what was happening inside the Arab world – see timeline above – and the relative stability and tranquillity of the cities where the works were scheduled to receive their premieres became a mirror, in my mind, of the disconnect between the Shakespearean tale and the tale that needed to be told.

The overriding question, therefore, was never whether the original texts needed to be adapted or not, rather *how* to make the Shakespearean text carry a distinct agenda, another authorial voice without marring the first and diluting the second. How to render *Hamlet* a story about the birth of Islamic religious fanaticism fuelled by domestic corruption and Western opportunism? How to make *Richard III* into a cautionary tale about a crisis of succession in a petro-dollar monarchy? How to make *Twelfth Night* into the story of secularism and tolerance in the Arab world being devoured by religious censorship and state authoritarianism? More generally, how to make these concerns legible and engaging to international audiences unfamiliar with contextual detail of the Arab world, whilst simultaneously maintaining the relevance and provocation I wanted to deliver to Arab audiences. In both *The Al-Hamlet Summit* and *The Speaker's Progress*, I developed new texts and guided the storytelling through this new channel. With *Richard III*, I needed a different approach; more adaptive than transformative, reliant more

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<sup>1</sup> The pieces, in their entirety, can be viewed online as part of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's World Shakespeare Archive.

on transposition than composition; the process of this approach is explored in the essay that accompanies the play in this volume.

*The Al-Hamlet Summit* and *The Speaker's Progress* were originally written in English for performance in Arabic. I was schooled in Arabic until the age of 11 and, as a result, read and speak fluently but have never felt comfortable writing creatively in Arabic. Given these circumstances, I needed to find an effective way of translating the texts into Arabic. What began as an apparently simple task led me into a labyrinth of linguistic possibilities.

Translating drama from one language to another is, in any circumstance, a delicate task. Diplomats speaking at the UN perform in formatted, clear, tidy, transparent language in order to avoid any unwanted misunderstandings with other delegates. Metaphor, simile, assonance, dissonance, rhythm, wordplay and other tools of rhetoric and poetry are all unwelcome guests in international forums. But in drama, thankfully, it's the opposite: words are valued for their opacity, their violence, and their capacity to mesmerize, captivate, shock and be ambiguous. Consider translating, for instance, the English idiomatic greeting, 'Alright?'. In the absence of a defined context one might proffer a neutral equivalent of 'How are you?'. But if we define the context further and put this greeting into the mouth of, for example, an illegal immigrant worker herded in to meet the Head of the National Immigration Service in a state where illegal immigrants are shot on apprehension, when this worker says 'Alright?' then 'How are you?' no longer works in translation. It lacks the brazen provocation and casualness of 'Alright?'. It lacks the forward energy and inappropriateness of 'Alright?'. One would need to translate the equivalent of 'Yo dude!' or 'Wassup, man!' to get closer to the meaning. Both these vernacular greetings, in turn, bring with them intimations of age (young) and geographical location (North America) that would need to be consistently levelled with the character and location of the events in the story. When a play is written from beginning to end in one language and then translated into another, a balance of tone and meaning becomes achievable in the translated play. But when the play continues to be written *through* the process of translation, the writing process enters into a kind of ping-pong dynamic where ideas in one language ignite new ideas in the other. New meanings,

new possibilities are created and new voices become heard through the migration into another language.

When I first started translating the pieces, I sought the help of venerable, certified translators. Every page that came back to me was like being hit over the head with hollow, dead wood. 'It's important', I'd object, 'that the Arabic carries a stylistic vigour, a modernity, a studied variety of tonal register.' 'But', the baffled, translator would reply, 'it's as accurate as it can be in Standard Arabic!' Standard Modern Arabic (S.M.A.) is a literary form of Arabic used across the Arab world in writing and formal speech. It is also the chosen medium of most twentieth-century Arab dramatists. Established and promoted in the early twentieth century, S.M.A. erases the idiomatic and vernacular aspects of spoken Arabic and successfully ensures understandability across wide geographical areas by proposing a whitewashed, comprehensible, standardized alternative. Partly as a result of this standard speak, today's Arabic is what's called a diglossic language. Different forms and varieties of the same language are used depending on the social context: a supremely Shakespearean linguistic model. The Arabic dialogue in the scripts needed to step beyond the Esperantan strait-jacket of linguistic uniformity and leap into the churning waters of the diglossic language.

This decision liberated the dramatic text on so many levels: suddenly an overwhelming plethora of possibilities opened. So it was that extracts of dialogue, scraps of monologue, outdated translations of Shakespeare glossed with pen and covered in rewrites would end up in diverse hands. I'd call on friends, associates, poets, religious authorities, lawyers to propose ways of saying things. Political slogans, jokes, dictums, sayings, pre-Islamic poetry, Quranic verses, words that stopped being said by women two generations ago, slang: all were bona fide conveyors of meaning. Later, at the rehearsal stage, actors would apply their performance instinct to layer, add detail, feeling and resonance to the texts. In this way, the Arabic performance texts became living palimpsests that accrued the input, graffiti and inflection of many scribes.

The resultant meanings in Arabic would often migrate back into the original English version of the text and I would re-engage with the ping-pong process of translation, feeding back into the

English version of the script ideas from the freshly altered Arabic script. Only over time and through the act of repeated performance would the shifting, morphing palimpsest settle and crystallize into a definitive, stable text in both languages.

These plays bear witness to and are the artefacts of the workings of a troupe.<sup>2</sup> A motley band of theatre makers and actors from diverse origins, generations, beliefs and tribes with no fixed address who came together consistently over many years – whenever circumstance and provisions allowed – with belief, conviction and courage to develop, enhance and perform these plays across the cities of the world that made us welcome. I'd like to thank the scholars Professors Margaret Litvin and Graham Holderness, whose interest and close attention to these works fed, over the years, into the ways in which the work developed. Finally, the continuity of vision, commitment and support that made this Trilogy possible was given by one person: the dramaturge of the Trilogy and my partner, Georgina Van Welie – it is to her that this collection is dedicated.

*Sulayman Al Bassam, 2014*

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<sup>2</sup>SABAB Theatre, [www.sabab.org](http://www.sabab.org)