



## الهيئة العربية للمسرح Arab Theatre Institute

Life is Theatre, and Theatre is Life

### Rafeeq Ali – Ahmad

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Today, more than ever, there is an urgent need for theatre. In the time of “inhuman” communication imposed by modern technology, the theatre becomes the place of human encounter par excellence, whether in terms of interaction between its workers, or between them and the audience, or between the audience itself when it leaves the hall crowded with ideas and questions. What is more beautiful than the heat of direct communication between human beings whom God has made into peoples and tribes to get to know each other and connect, that is to meet, debate and discuss everything related to their common life?

At a time when the dominant forces made it a time of the clash of civilizations, that need (for theatre) becomes more urgent, because our world is subjected to a systematic process of destruction by imposing a single dominant culture under the slogan of brutal globalization, which made the whole planet a huge “supermarket”, and the human kind is just a customer its value is measured by its purchasing power, not by its intellectual and creative power. In the state of this reality in which everything has become a materialistic object to be sold, the theatre stands being open to all arts, and able to benefit from all sciences, stands in the confronting front line, because it can never abandon the intellectual, spiritual and moral human values that constitute the essence of its existence and the secret of its continuity through time.

Although globalization in its true meaning is not as it is prevalent today, it means the openness of the world to each other, the interaction of human beings among themselves, and the cross-fertilization of cultures and ideas. The theatre represents the most important laboratory for this interaction between individuals and groups, and between people in their diversity and differences, isolated from their military or economic power, in a manner



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that preserves their intellectual, material and heritage wealth, and create a place of acquaintance and meeting for the sake of human peace based on the right of every nation to preserve their land, people, culture and all that distinguishes him from others.

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In the state of the faltering or lack of dialogue between political systems and governments, the role of intellectuals, writers and artists in bringing point of views of nations and civilizations closer together. Here the bet is renewed and recalled upon the fact that the theatre is the ideal model for this dialogue, based on the essence of the theatre itself, which is based on dialogue between the actors themselves, and between them and the audience, and before that between the author and his script, and the director and his theatrical performance. The entire theatrical game is nothing but a multi-form and multi-directional dialogue, always for the sake of the humankind and his right to a better life.

We renew our bet-on theatre, its role and meaning, and we realize that theatre in the whole world is experiencing a severe crisis, a crisis that is multiplied in the case of Arab theatre; because it comes within more general and comprehensive crises in politics, economy and society. But in isolation from the reality of the Arab situation, the permanent question we ask: When was the Arab theatre not going through or living a crisis?

In answer to this question, I allow myself to recall the recommendations that were issued more than forty years ago about the first theatre festival in which I participated in, in Damascus, and they emphasized the activation and development of Arab theatrical work in both form and content, stressing the necessity of searching for ways and methods to strengthen the relationship between theatrical work and the audience. From that day until now, nothing has changed, we are living the same crisis, the same discussions, the same recommendations and the same reality!



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There are many reasons that led people to stay away from the theatre, some of which are related to the general reality, and some are related to the people of the theatre and its makers. Moreover, if the theatrical works and inventions are the mirror of society, then the people of our societies do not see themselves or their reality in these works, one of the most important reasons for this alienation is the “alienation” that many of us have fallen into, as the imitation of Western styles by some theatricals out of the aspiration for “internationalism” and for prizes. Unfortunately, many Arab theatre festivals contribute to encouraging this phenomenon, as the halls are filled with theatricals participating in works that they call “elitist” in shadow of the unfortunate absence of the audience for whom they found the theatre, Indeed, some “theatricals” go in their strange and unjust theorizing to the extent of saying that the audience is against the theatre and the theatre is against the audience!

As if theatre is not enough for the many challenges it faces in the age of artificial intelligence, where robotic devices replace humans, and the artistic creativity faces the challenge of interacting with modern technology, the migration of a whole generation of theatricals to television works in search of a job and a source of livelihood or running after lost stardom. This creates a wide gap between the generations, and this led to the loss of an essential link between two generations: the pioneers and the youth. As is well known, direct communication between generations is an important and necessary matter that is not compensated by theories, lessons and books, no matter how good and valuable they are.

On the Arab Theatre Day, I can only ask about the reasons for the continued absence of artistic and theatre education from our school curricula, except for a few of them? And the persistence in the marginalization of theatre and its neglect by many of the ministries of culture in our Arab countries, and their failure to support serious and innovative theatrical works and projects under the pretext of budget scarcity and lack of capabilities, while we notice how large amounts of money are spent on superficial and consumerist trivial matters, as if nations and peoples rise and progress without their literature and arts, foremost of which is theatre!



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As for the major and permanent disaster, it is the continuous control of theatrical creativity, which is a control with multiple heads like a mythical being: the control of politicians, clerics, security men and other “men” standing as an impenetrable barrier in the face of one man, who is the man of the theatre wherever he is in this or that city, on this stage or elsewhere, and they put obstacles and stumbling blocks in his way. If one who watches people die with concern, then censorship of creativity is death itself, and it is the staunch enemy of theatrical action. Because creativity is the sign of freedom. There is no creativity without freedom, nor theatre, and no existence of life.

Censorship of any kind is an attack on the freedom of theatrical creator, because it disrupts his creativity and is condemned to be born dead. When the theatrical submits to the orders of the politician or the jurist, his role as a researcher, critic and interlocutor is disrupted and he turns into a mere “official” employee who receives instructions and implements orders... God suffices the “theatricals” from evil. Evilness of fighting!

No, this is not what the people of theatre want, nor is this what they are satisfied with or accept, because they are the first line of defence for freedom, just as they are the first line of defence for love, goodness and beauty, that is, about life by all means. Otherwise, theatre would not be the father of arts.

Talking about theatre on his Arab Day is a broad concept to talk about, as soon as you write an idea until her sister attacks your thoughts. From censorship to the weakness of the financial capabilities that builds a stumbling block and a main obstacle in the face of the theatre industry. Despite mentioning and praising all the morally supportive institutions and bodies that donate financially to Arab theatrical, there remains a legitimate apprehension that these theatricals will tend to produce “elitist” works whose goal of participating in festivals revolves around obtaining a material or moral prize.



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The real theatrical is obsessed with expressing, through theatre, his concerns and the concerns of his people does not stop at borders and difficulties, but always remains in constant passion and monitoring of the reality of his society, and in a merged relationship with his surroundings, he speaks the language of his people, but at the same time he opens up to the cultures of others to draw from them what enriches his experience, which brings him closer to his audience, brings people closer to his stage, and creates that desired dialogue and desired interaction.

I am addressing this letter to you, as I come from a country wracked by crises, calamities, and political and sectarian fragmentation. A country from the time of its glory, when it was called the homeland of the radiance of light, up to this day, its capital still lacks a theatre hall built and adopted by the state or local bodies from municipalities and others, in addition to the absence of production bodies supporting theatricals, with rare exceptions from here and there, however, despite the harshness of time, this city that cannot die (Beirut) still produces annually between thirty to forty theatrical projects that vary and are distributed among various schools and different theatrical styles. Even in the last two theatre festivals in 2017 and 2018, which were held under the slogan "Lebanese Theatre Festival" with moral and financial sponsorship by the "Arab Theatre Authority", eight theatrical works were selected out of more than twenty theatrical works that were presented to the public during the year after they were produced with budgets simple financial sponsorships, and with high enthusiasm and efforts by young people who are passionate about their belonging to the theatre, and their belonging to life.

I can say, based on my long experience, that theatre, despite all its suffering, is still effective, influential and attractive to the audience. Despite the psychological barriers imposed by artificial geographical borders, or imposed by politics and the interests of politicians, the creators remain in thought, art and culture to the best of their ability, and despite the narrow margins of freedom and possibilities, a good link between the segments of our societies and builders of bridges of communication and understanding between our nations.



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The theatre, as you know, despite its limitations and limited space, stands out, through the creativity of its makers and the imagination of its spectators, more spacious than life itself. It becomes a boundless space that contains all human existence, and at the same time remains a place for real communication and direct encounter between people of different tendencies, whims and ideas.

Perhaps the most pressing question that confronts us as Arab theatricals is how to reconnect what has been cut off with our younger generations who are looking forward to sharing this responsibility with us? Reclaiming the generation taken from "Social Media" and its own language, signs and symbols, and dispossessed from its language, culture and identity, is a difficult task that theatre alone cannot handle, but rather the task of all those involved in public affairs. But perhaps we, the people of the theatre and its makers, should, take to the streets and monitor people's concerns, worries and aspirations and turn them into attractive works of art that will be a mirror in which people see themselves without blind imitation of the West, nor drowning out the folklore, but according to Mahatma Gandhi's saying: I open my windows to all the cultures of the world, provided that they do not uproot me from my land.

We want to reconcile our youth through a simple theatre, not a simplified one, one that makes us see the image of our people and the reality of our societies. And for this theatre to be a glimmer of hope in the state of the darkness of extremism, with its two parts, fundamentalism and consumerism, and in the face of blind fanaticism and the growing hatred of man for his fellow man, and the collective devastation that results from this dark reality that is difficult to reform and rebuild.

We are in dire need of a theatre that destroys the psychological and geographical barriers between people, and builds bridges of mutual understanding between siblings.



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The theatre will not be able to achieve what it aspires to unless it is free, does not recognize censorship, and is not bound by borders, for it to produce and present what expresses our cultural and human identity, which creates a component of the identity of the entire world.

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We are victorious for the theatre and its freedom; we are victorious for life.

Translated by: Naia Ghannam