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## **Theatre in the United Arab Emirates**

### **Abstract**

In the Emirates the first theatre productions took place in schools, for example in the al-Qassimiyya school in Aš-Šāriqa. For Emirate schools and those teaching within them were to produce the actors and dramatists of latter years. Following the gaining of independence in 1971 the Ministry of Culture lavished financial support on the numerous theatre groups that were coming into being. In the 1980s there were already 14 histrionic troupes. The organisation of the Ash-Shariqa Theatre Days (Ayyām Aš-Šāriqa al-Masraḥiyya) is viewed as a breakthrough in the history of Emirate theatre, this had its beginnings in 1984. The aim of the festival was the development of theatre all over all of the Emirates, the promoting of the performing arts, the development of knowledge about the theatre and art amongst young people. The theatrical productions that were staged from the very beginning were connected with the social current of expression which diligently accompanied the economic changes. The dramas presented a society that was comprehended the aim of life and the status of individual family members. Dramatists in presenting concrete examples from the reality that surrounded them desire to inform one of, and to instruct society. For the discovery of oil changed and divided society, one that had hitherto lived from fishing and the trade in pearls. The young generation brought up in plenty is directed towards quick profits, comfort and a consumer style of life.

**Keywords:** United Arab Emirates, theatre, drama, literature

Ḥabīb Ġulūm al-‘Aṭṭār in the introduction to the book *The Development of Theatrical Activity in the Gulf Region* wrote that theatre occupied an important place within the societies of the countries of the Gulf. At present theatre in these countries has been equipped with advanced technological equipment which has enabled those connected

with it to follow the very latest achievements in the field of the performing arts. Besides the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts in Kuwait there has been opened a theatre faculty at the Sultan Qābūs University in Oman as well as at two Saudi universities: the King Sa'ūd University and the Imām Muḥammad Ibn Sa'ūd University. Finally in 1999 the Theatre Institute was founded in Aš-Šāriqa.<sup>1</sup>

The development of theatre in the countries of the Gulf has been connected with the development of schooling. And so the first production entitled *Al-Qāḍī bi-amr Allāh* ("A Judge from God's Will") took place in Al-Muḥarraḡ in Bahrain 1925 on the boards of the al-Hadāya al-Ḥalifiyya school.<sup>2</sup>

Equally in the Emirates the first theatre productions took place in schools, for example in the Al-Qāsimiyya school in Aš-Šāriqa. For Emirate schools and those teaching within them were to produce the actors and dramatists of latter years. Further development of theatre was to take place in sports clubs: Nādī al-'Umānī i Nādī aš-Ša'b wa-al-'Urūba in Aš-Šāriqa, Nādī Aš-Šurṭa and Nādī al-Ahlī ar-Riyāḍī in Abu Dhabi, Nādī aš-Šabāb in Dubai, Nādī an-Naṣr in Ajman, Nādī 'Umān in Ra's al-Khayma. Up until 1972 there were active within the United Arab Emirates twenty four clubs and in each of these there was a theatre troupe.<sup>3</sup> They did not always present plays. These were often merely sketches or occasional words and music pieces. The actors independently prepared the stage, the decorations and the costumes. In the day of no television or Internet these clubs fulfilled an exceptionally significant social role. The inhabitants met, talked, exchanged views. It was this very transfer of theatre from the schools to the clubs that resulted in its development. For actors did not have to be recruited from amongst pupils while the texts no longer needed to be confined to didactic matters.

The play by the Egyptian Maḥmūd Ġunaym *Al-Murū'a al-muqni'a* ("Sufficient Chivalry")<sup>4</sup> staged in 1955 is considered the beginning of the theatre movement in the United Arab Emirates. The first text to be written by an Emirate writer, by Sulṭān Ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī is the play entitled *Nihāyat Ṣahyūn* ("The End of Zion", 1958)<sup>5</sup>. This drama, in a similar way to the work by Ġum'a Ġarīb, entitled *Al-Islām wa-at-ta'āwun* ("Islam and Cooperation") and performed in 1959, generated a wave of demonstrations against the British. *Nihāyat Ṣahyūn* examines the problem of the Palestinian conflict while at the same time sharply condemning the British authorities. The play heats up the lively debate as to the future of the Arab world as well as the role of western powers

<sup>1</sup> Habib Ghuloom al-Attar, *The Development of Theatrical Activity in the Gulf Region*, United Arab Emirates 2009, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *Contemporary Arabic Theatre in Kuwait and Bahrain*, in: "Quaderni di Studi Arabi", No. 19, 2001, p. 168, Sami A. Hanna, *A Modern Cultural History of Bahrain*, Bahrain 1991, pp. 89–95.

<sup>3</sup> 'Abd Ilāh 'Abd al-Qādir, *Tārīḡ al-ḡaraka al-masraḡiyya fī Dawlat al-Imārāt al-'Arabiyya al-Muttaḡida 1960–1986*, Aš-Šāriqa-Abū Zabī 2007, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> This play is also found entitled *Ġābir 'Aḡarāt al-Kirām* (own name).

<sup>5</sup> This play also had the title *Wukalā' Ṣahyūn* ("Agents of Zion").

in the settling of the problems of the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Both plays were performed at the Folk Club (Nādī Aš-Ša'ib) in Aš-Šāriqa.

An exceptionally important role in the development and propagating of theatre in the Emirates has been played by the local newspapers: "Ar-Rūla", "Kawālīs" and "Al-Masraḥ".

Following the gaining of independence in 1971 the Ministry of Culture lavished financial support on the numerous theatre groups that were coming into being. It helped with the organising of workshops. New artists and directors came to the Emirates. Amongst whom it follows to mention: Al-Munšif as-Suwaysī, Ibrāhīm Ġalāl, Fu'ad Aš-Šaṭṭī, and Saqr Rašūd, who died tragically in an accident.

In the 1980s there were already 14 histrionic troupes. The most important of which is the National Theatre for Youth and Art (Al-Masraḥ al-Qawmī li-aš-Šabāb wa-al-Funūn) in Dubai. The idea to found this group was taken in 1972 while a year later it was already in operation as the first artistic body in the Emirates. Young people were associated with different clubs that put on plays under the auspices of the Ministry of Sport and Youth. One of the most important plays is: *At-Tubaḥ ḥā-al-marra* ("Forgive Me this Time") by 'Īsā Lūtāh and directed by Zā'in Ġum'a in 1987. The drama concentrates on one of the most important social weaknesses that is indifference. The author points to the lack of possibility for understanding between people, while man is not the only element in the Universe. He has to understand his transitory nature. For too much attention is paid in man's life to unimportant things and he consequently loses everything that has real worth. The most important things in life happen quickly and one has to be diligent so as not to miss them. Art appears to bring with it a message of understanding amongst people. It shows that man devotes too much time to an analysis of his own experiences and consequently becomes indifferent to the problems of others.

The play entitled *Laḥaẓāt mansiyya* ("Forgotten Moments") by the Iraqi dramatist Ġalāl al-Qaysī and directed by Ḥabīb Ġulūm in 1989 shows the heroine, one still in love with her husband, living in the hope of the return of her beloved. The day begins with thoughts of him. She does not feel the need to analyse the psychic state that has accompanied her since he left. She is filled with happiness and joy when she receives a telegram that he is returning. When it turns out, however, that the postman has given her another letter by mistake and the husband is not going to return to her she falls into sorrow and despair. Life seems to her to be an endless band of unhappiness which results in her inability to see in life any sense.

The members of the theatre under discussion came from various towns in the Emirates: Dubai, Aš-Šāriqa, Ajman, Ra's al-Ḥayma, Umm al-Qaywayn. The most eminent personalities include: 'Abd Allāh 'Alī al-Muṭawwa', 'Alī Abū Ḥalīl, Ibrāhīm Ġum'a, Ibrāhīm Ya'qūb, Ġum'a Ġarīb, Mūza al-Mazrū'ī, Sulṭān Aš-Šā'ir, Aḥmad as-Sayyid, Ḥammād Sulṭān.

**The National Theatre in Aš-Šāriqa** (Masraḥ aš-Šāriqa al-Waṭanī) was created in 1976 and became one of the most active places for theatre in the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>6</sup> 'Abd al-Ilāh 'Abd al-Qādir, *Tārīḥ...*, pp. 18–19.

Troupe members included: ‘Alī Ḥumays, Muḥammad Yūsuf, Ṣayf al-Ġunaym, ‘Abd Allāh al-Manā‘ī. The most important task of the group was the reactivation of cultural life in Aš-Šāriqa.

One of the most interesting plays of this group is the drama *Hal šakil yā Za‘afarān?* (“Is that What You Did to Zafaran?”) by the Qaṭarī ‘Abd ar-Raḥman al-Manā‘ī and directed by the Kuwaiti Fu‘ad Aš-Šaṭṭī in 1983. The hero of the play, Za‘farān, a peasant cultivating melons, under the influence of pressure exerted by his wife stops selling the goods in his village and goes to the town so as to cash in more favourably on his harvests. This is an opportunity for him to confront the simple life led in the countryside with the pace of life in the town. The author is on the one hand referring to the Biblical influence exerted by Eve on Adam, who persuaded him to eat from the forbidden fruit which finally resulted in their expulsion from paradise, while on the other to show people who stand before a dilemma and choice involving new life routes. They are not devoid of fears over prospective changes. Only adapting to the new conditions will enable them to occupy a higher position in the social hierarchy.

**The Dubai Folk Theatre** (Masraḥ Dubayy Aš-Ša‘bī) was founded in 1976 as a branch of the Dubai Association of Folk Arts and Theatre (Firqat Masraḥ Ġam‘iyyat Dubayy li-al-Funūn aš-Ša‘biyya). Among its eminent representatives are: Ismā‘īl Muḥammad, Aḥmad al-Anṣārī, Ġum‘a Mubārak, Samīra Aḥmad, Munā Hamza. The first performance was staged in 1977.

There have appeared within the literary output of the Gulf many works devoted to domestic staff and service. Their heroes are usually Asian servants. The subject matter being an echo of the sizeable influx of labour motivated by financial remuneration. The play *Maṭlūb ḥaddāma ḥālan* (“Home Help Required at Once”) written by Muḥammad Sayyid, and directed in 1984 by Aḥmad al-Anṣārī shows the situation and problems connected with the presence of immigrants in Emirate households. The greatest of these is the influence on the upbringing of children. Servants were on the whole of another religion, spoke different languages and represented another cultural tradition. The authors of the spectacle wanted to arouse in their audience a sense of responsibility for their children.

Human existence and the attitude of man to suffering is the subject of the play *Bū Mahyūs fī warṭa* (“Bu Mahyus in Trouble”) written by Ġamāl Sālim and directed in 1992 by Muḥammad Sayyid. The problem matter undertaken is one of the most important within the countries of the Gulf, namely the search for medical treatment abroad. This is connected with the unwillingness on the public in general to be treated by local doctors. They are witnesses to the inadequacies of the healthcare system in their country and know no peace until they have gone abroad. Foreign doctors appear to them to be more efficient and worthy of their trust. The dramatist attempts to convince the public, i.e. ordinary citizens to regain trust in local doctors and specialists.

**National Theatre in Dubai** (Masraḥ Dubayy al-Ahlī) was founded in 1981 (earlier it had functioned under the name of the Experimental Theatre (Al-Masraḥ at-Taḡribī). The company was joined by numerous young well educated enthusiasts something that found reflection in the high level of creativity produced. These included: Ġamāl Yūsuf

Maṭar, Ḥālid Aḥmad Ġawād, Ḥālid Ġum‘a, ‘Umar Ġubāš, Nāġī al-Ḥāy. Besides the staging of theatrical works, the organising of lecturers and literary meetings there were also promoted presentations for children.

The action of the play *Ġamīla* (“Jamila”) written and directed by Ġamāl Maṭar in 1991 is played out on the coast, for the inhabitants of the Emirates are daily linked to the seashore and the experiences of all of them are directed to the coast. This was the main motor of local life that gave the population employment, nourishment, rest, freedom, hope and a subject for stories. In the play the grandmother is the representative of the past and tells the grandchildren stories and resurrects the local legends. While the heroine of the drama is a beautiful girl whose father has put aside a rich dowry for whoever tries for her hand. Finally this is to befall poor Maġnūn, a boy from a social underclass, who unaware of the danger dives and in bringing pearls wins her hand. The father bound by his promise must give his daughter over to this good-for-nothing. The heroine equally does not object for her dream is to leave the family home. Once again it is shown what an important role is played in social relationships by breeding and wealth.

**The Umm Al-Qaywayn National Theatre** (Masraḥ Umm al-Qaywayn al-Qawmī) was founded in 1978. Its leading representatives include: Sa‘īd Sālīm, Ġāsīm Ḥalfān, Sālīm Sayfa, Sayf al-Ġawī. The theatre’s activity is presented by the play *Bidūn ‘unwān* (“Without Address”) written by the Egyptian Aḥmad Sālīm and directed by Sayyid Sālīm in 1986. Once again the authors have taken up the subject of the newly enriched society that has forgotten about its basic obligations. The protagonists are parents neglecting their children. Absorbed by the ‘dash for cash’ they have no time to bring up their charges, who fall foul of drugs and bad company.

The theatre movement in the Emirates is not limited to these five groups. We may note equally the activities of others such as: *Masraḥ ‘Aġmān aš-Ša‘bī* (The Folk Theatre in Ajman) and *Masraḥ an-Nādī al-Waṭanī li-aṭ-Ṭaqāfa wa-al-Funūn* (The National Club of Culture and Art) in Ajman, *Al-Masraḥ al-Ḥadīṭ* (The Contemporary Theatre) in Ash-Shariqa, *Masraḥ Ra’s al-Ḥayma al-Waṭanī* (The National Theatre) in Ra’s al-Khayma, *Masraḥ al-Fuġayra al-Qawmī* (The National Theatre in Fujayra), *Masraḥ aṭ-Ṭalī’a* (The Avant-Garde Theatre) in Khor Fakkan, *Masraḥ Kalbā’ aš-Ša‘bī* (The Folk Theatre) in Kalba, *Ġam‘iyyat Dibbā li-aṭ-Ṭaqāfa wa-al-Funūn wa-al-Masraḥ* (The Association of Culture, Art and the Theatre) in Diba.<sup>7</sup>

The activities of these many theatres prove that Emirate theatre is buoyant. Presently drawing more heavily on local Emirate texts, from the plays of Syrian dramatists such as Sa‘d Allāh Wannūs and ‘Alī ‘Uqla ‘Ursān or Egyptians: Sa‘d ad-Din Wahba, ‘Alī Sālīm and Maḥfūz ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān. There are also produced adaptations of western plays with minor adaptations to accommodate them to local conditions in order for them to be well received by local theatre goers.

The organisation of the Aš-Šariqa Theatre Days is viewed as a breakthrough in the history of Emirate theatre, this had its beginnings in 1984. The originator was Sheikh of

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Al-Attar, *The Development...*, pp. 87–94.

Aš-Šariqa, Sulṭān Ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī. The aim of the festival was the development of theatre all over all of the Emirates, the promoting of the performing arts, the development of knowledge about the theatre and art amongst young people.

A subsequent step in reply to the need for development of theatre in the United Arab Emirates was the founding in the 1990s of the Theatre Association (Ġam'īyyat al-Masraḥiyyīn), whose task is to combine in activities with the authorities aimed at achieving the greater financial and developmental possibilities. Besides the Association represents Emirate theatrical institutions abroad. It was also responsible for the organisation of theatre workshops, conferences, festivals, competitions and the popularisation of theatre amongst young people.

Without doubt Emirate theatre differs today noticeably from what it was in the past. It is an obvious fact that the movement has achieved a level of maturity both in the quantity and quality of the dramas written and produced. The originality of Emirate theatrical creators suggests that the period of infancy for this recently born art is already truly in the past.

The most interesting dramas of the last decade include: *Qabr al-wālī* ("The Benefactor's Grave") by Ġamāl Maṭar of 1998. The subject under discussion is a timeless one and recalls the novel by Ṭaha Ḥusayn *Šaġarat al-bu's* ("The Tree of Unhappiness") and the short stories by Maḥmūd Taymūr. The story takes place in a small village where rain has not fallen for a long time. The drought is blamed on the dumb heroine of the drama (in a similar way to how the son's ugly wife is blamed for all the misfortunes the befall the family in the novel *Šaġarat al-bu's*). They happen upon the village two men who desire to enrich themselves through the sale of the water they have brought on their donkey. When the animal dies they bury it under a nearby tree. Then the inhabitants of the village approach and while greetings of welcome are exchanged it starts to rain. The situation is a great blessing and saviour of the village. The inhabitants consider the guest to be sent from heaven, while the buried animal as holy remains (there are similar occurrences in the short stories of Taymūr, e.g. *Āmm Mitwallī* ("The Uncle Mitwallī"), *Šayḥ Sayyid al-abīt* ("Stupid Sheikh Sayyid"). The incomers decide to take advantage of the naivety of the people and to stay on in the village which results in many amusing situations. The drama is enhanced by local colour and folk songs. The subject is for certain to be repeated many times more as exploitation of the poor and the naive is prevalent in all times and places.<sup>8</sup>

The subject matter of the play *Wa maḍā ba'd?* ("And What Then") by Ḥabīb Ġulūm al-ʿAṭṭār from 2002 is the freedom of the word. It depicts an unhappy and lonely journalist who loses his job as a result of articles of a political nature. This event disillusiones him and forces him to give up on his youthful ideals. He shuts himself away in a room with a computer and piles of paper. After losing his wife – with who he assumes he is conducting a conversation – he feels lonely, he experiences a period of depression and cannot perceive

<sup>8</sup> On the basis of an interview conducted by Barbara Michalak-Pikulska with Bilāl Baddūr in Dubai 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2010.

the sense in life itself. His dead wife symbolises in the play the lost homeland, which is constantly present in the life of the hero. The room becomes his prison, in which he undergoes the loss of his individuality. He writes articles which he sells a budding journalist. Ḥabīb Ġulūm al-‘Aṭṭār’s play *Wa madā ba‘d?* was given an award in 2002.<sup>9</sup>

Upon reading the play reflections on the media come to the fore, the television and Internet, which play and will play a key role in the forming of ways of behaviour in Arab society as well as shaping outlooks. The author considers, in a way similar to many publicists and journalists within the Emirates, that the best way to fight the negative influences within the state is the development, modernisation and free functioning of the local media.<sup>10</sup>

In the works of the dramatists theatrical plays cease being a passive account of events illustrating traditional social life, but rather consciously undertake the question of man and his place in the contemporary world. Not only has the thematic scope of the dramatists broadened but also the differentiation of the roles of the heroes’ individual and social attitudes to the changes brought in by the current times. The quick arising of new rich districts that accompanies the economic development arouses mixed feelings in the older inhabitants. This is recounted by the play entitled *Šammā* (“Shammā”, 2003) by ‘Umar Ġubāsh. The heroine observes the destruction of the old houses and bazaars on whose place new building arise that reflect in their dimensions and splendour the newly enriched society. A woman experiences sadness, pain, helplessness and loss. In a similar way to the hero of Ḥabīb Ġulūm al-‘Aṭṭār’s play she also finds solace in talking to her dead husband. She is aware of her own distinctness and is tormented by the social regulations in force. The play is clearly linked to the economic boom which resulted in an influx of capital, labour and the construction of the cities. The new social class caused damage to the traditional model of life. Despite the fact that the generation of grandfathers and fathers still tightly held on to traditional values and religion this generation of educated sons was and is open to progress and civilisation.

The theatrical productions that were staged from the very beginning were connected with the social current of expression which diligently accompanied the economic changes. The dramas presented a society that was comprehended the aim of life and the status of individual family members. For from men there was expected strength, riches, a high social position, while from women total subservience, a conscientious fulfilment of domestic duties as well as numerous heirs which would consolidate the image of a woman as a wife and mother. Dramatists in presenting concrete examples from the reality that surrounded them desire to inform one of, and to instruct society. For the discovery of oil changed and divided society, one that had hitherto lived from fishing and the trade in pearls. The young generation brought up in plenty is directed towards quick profits, comfort and a consumer style of life.

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<sup>9</sup> On the basis of an interview conducted by Barbara Michalak-Pikulska with Ḥabīb Ġulūm al-‘Aṭṭār in Shariqa on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. F. as-Sayegh, *Arab Media must try to meet its social responsibility*, “Gulf News” 23.07.2004.

We also observe in Emirate literature the problems of struggled for independence along with those of Arab unity. This can be particularly strongly felt in the plays of Sulṭān Ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī. The drama mentioned at the beginning *Nihāyat Ṣahyūn* of 1958 undertakes an analysis of the Palestinian conflict to ultimately lay blame at the foot of Western powers for the undoing of the Palestinian people. Another play by Al-Qāsimī, entitled *'Awdat Hūlākū (Holaku's Return)* from 1998 plays out the action in the 13<sup>th</sup> century though events actually refer to the present day. Already in the Prologue does the dramatist make it clear that “In reading the history of the Arabs I discovered that what occurred before the collapse of the Abbasid Caliph is similar to that which is occurring at present within Arab countries. Therefore I wrote this play from the perspective of history in order to present our painful present”.<sup>11</sup>

The event in the drama are based on historical facts and relate to the taking of the Abbasid capital by the grandson of Chingiz Khan. The author shows the background of negotiations between the Caliph Musta‘ṣim and Hulagu and the crisis that subsequently arose. All the events end tragically – with the death of the caliph and the fall of Baghdad. The play exposes two heroes: the figure of the weak and naïve caliph as well as of the wise military leader Ad-Duwaydār. Caliph Musta‘ṣim in the face of danger escapes in the face of responsibility into pleasure and play. He is unable to behave in a dignified way in opposition to his commander who is prepared to sacrifice his life for the good of his homeland. Between them Al-Qāsimī places the figure of the traitor Ibn al-‘Alqām, the minister who has conspired with Hulagu in order to later become the marionette ruler of Baghdad. He is reduced to the rank of a physical object completely subordinated to the invaders in a way that later his son is also to be. The minister finally becomes aware of the immensity of the evil he has instigated but it is already too late. His place is taken by his son – bearing the self same name.

The play shows how weak and defenceless man can be in the face of history. The dramatist ponders the moral evaluation of his protagonists’ deeds, wherein the threat of which arouse raw instincts, rapacity and hypocrisy. For after all history is awash with the constant letting of blood, of victories, the defeated and death. Thus man is embroiled in history. It appears that subsequent generations are on their way to death. The past, the present and the future do not differ from each other. Therefore the play *'Awdat Hūlākū* by Sulṭān Ibn Muḥammad al-Qāsimī as a timeless quality to it.

In summing up it follows to state that within the course of a few dozen years Emirate writers have created a substructure for the dramatic arts in every possible meaning of the phrase. They have developed their own style and subject matter. They have shown contemporary society in the day of immense economic-social changes. They have been courageous enough to criticise backward traditions and customs, to expose naked rapacity and have analysed the behaviour of this newly enriched society regardless of the consequences that threaten them. They have become the witnesses of social, cultural and structural changes.

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<sup>11</sup> Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, *Holaku's Return*, Sharjah 2004, p. 5.