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Yusuf Al-Ani's dramatic journeys and his theatrical cane¹

ABSTRACT

Providing an account of al-Ani's artistic development as both actor and playwright through his contemporaneous experience in the Iraqi theatre, Mehdi explores the role of folklore and theatrical realism in the manner developed by Bertolt Brecht, alongside progressive social and political concepts that all influenced al-Ani's works. The harmonization of experimentation between the native expression evident in al-Ani's writing and his directing, that is, the combination of originality and the folkloric aspect that captures the essence of the experience of the Iraqi individual provided the potential for Iraqi theatrical expression moving forward. The connection to al-Ani's commitment to see such conceptual commitments be expressed through an Iraqi idiom provided the theatre with intellectual respect amongst Iraqi intellectuals, while his efforts to professionalize and develop Iraqi theatre troupes and production capacities led to a growing regional and global reputation. This development provided great opportunity not only for al-Ani but also for the Iraqi arts broadly and the theatre in particular. By developing deep roots within Iraq's emerging public culture al-Ani supported Iraqi theatre-makers who followed to be afforded considerable opportunity. The debt that modern Iraqi theatre owes to al-Ani through his enormous talent and prodigious efforts to elevate the art form to the highest levels connects the artist to his society.

KEYWORDS

Yusuf al-Ani
folklore
theatrical realism
Iraqi theatre
Yusuf Yughanni
al-Miftah

1. Translated by Ghyath Manhel Alkinani.

Iraqi playwright and actor Yūsuf al-Ani has been honoured and celebrated for his lifetime achievements in drama. His distinctive contributions to Iraqi drama set out a direction in theatre that he has inaugurated and continued to add to and develop over the course of a seven-decade journey. This article is an attempt to track al-Ani's rich theatrical journey, highlighting its landmarks, turning points and developments and the impact that the works he has written and the roles he has performed have had on the theatre in Iraq. A few years ago it was through the theatre that I attempted to outline al-Ani's theatrical achievements and explore his remarkable career. I chose the title يوسف يغني *Yūsuf Yughanni* ('Yūsuf is singing') for my play in an obvious reference and tribute to Yūsuf al-Ani's well-known play عبود يغني *Abboud Yughanni* ('Abboud is singing'), in which he played the lead role.

From his early childhood, al-Ani was fascinated by acting. Deeply enchanted by this art form, he devised special techniques and postures, creatively engaging pronunciation and articulating feelings into words and performative actions. Acting and performing opened an expanded horizon for his talents – playwriting. With his refined artistic sensibility, al-Ani started picking utterances, character traits and moods from his home and neighbourhood surroundings, effectively transforming them from real life into the realm of creative writing and incorporating them into his scripts. Coming of age in a static, conventional society, al-Ani came into conflict with tradition. Amid intense cultural and political turmoil fuelled by contending leftist, nationalist and religious currents that dominated the public discourse of the 'homeland' and the 'nation', he aspired for a better future. Al-Ani joined the College of Law at the University of Baghdad, where he found himself mimicking and impersonating his Iraqi and Egyptian instructors, turning their lectures into dramatic and comic scenes that he performed for Jabr Al-Khawatir (The Goodwill Reconciliation Group), a group of friends who shared his interests in drama and performing arts. The group performed comic scenes and pranks reflecting life in Baghdad's old neighbourhoods and coffee houses. They specifically highlighted the suffering of the poor in their dealings with the state bureaucracy. Al-Ani's realistic performances proved successful and drew attention to his acting talent, to a method of acting that constituted a marked departure from the prevailing affected performances and pompous overacting of the time. The topics of his plays were successful in exposing the duplicity and social hypocrisy of traditional culture, allowing him to criticize and challenge such issues through his art.

In 1952 Ibrahim Jalal (1921–91) established the Modern Theatre troupe in Baghdad. Al-Ani, who was the secretary and an active member of the troupe, started acting and writing short plays for the troupe. Director Jasim al-Ubudi (1925–89) presented two plays for al-Ani: مؤتمر بيك *To'mur Baig* ('At your command, Bey') and ماكو شغل *Mako Shughul* ('No job'). Ibrahim Jalal directed al-Ani's play ست دراهم *Sit Darahim* ('Six Dirhams'; a dirham is a monetary coin unit in Iraq) and Sami Abdul-Hamid directed al-Ani's plays لو بسراجين لو بالظلمة *Lo bsrajeen Lo bil dhalma* ('Either two light torches or total darkness'), فلووس الدوة *Floos al Dawaa* ('Prescription charges') and حرملة و حبة سودة *Harmal and Habba Sawda* ('Rue Scent and black seed'). These plays, which were critical of the bureaucracy and the social conditions at the time, elicited a strong reaction from the government, which was suspicious of if not openly opposed to al-Ani's theatre activities. As a result, the authorities started monitoring al-Ani while tightening censorship of and restrictions

on his theatre productions. These measures can be understood in light of al-Ani's leftist leanings and concern for the common folks and underprivileged in his writing and acting. To avoid the censor, al-Ani started writing under a pseudonym. After a while, however, intensified government surveillance of his activities led him to leave the country and in 1957 he went into exile.

Following the Revolution of 1958, al-Ani made a strong come-back in his play *Ani Ummak Ya Shakir* (I am your mother, O Shakir!). The play marked a new beginning in Iraqi drama during the era of the first republic (1958–63), a beginning embraced especially by the distinguished directors mentioned above: al-Ubudi, Jalal and Abdul-Hamid. Representing the persona of a typical Baghdadi individual with its multi-layered heritage of culture formed over the ages, al-Ani gained national fame and stature for criticizing the state bureaucracy, noting the routine abuse of Iraqi citizens, the frustration that it led to and for exposing corruption in his plays. He did so in a style that was always expressive, oftentimes humorous and sometimes satirical. The government of the 1958 Revolution recognized al-Ani's talent and popularity and appointed him in the early 1960s as Director General of the State Board of the Cinema and Theatre. However, after the 1963 coup d'état al-Ani had to leave the country into exile again, moving first to Lebanon and then to East Germany. He would return after the 1968 coup to write in his distinctive dramatic language plays such as *al-Miftah* ('The key'), *al-Kharaba* ('The ruin'), *al-Shari'a* ('The moorings'), *al-Khan* ('The inn') and *al-Jouma* ('The spinning wheel').

The fundamental change brought about by the exile experience enriched al-Ani's texts with a spatial structure that was open to vast time spans. During the years of exile he honed his acting skills, which enabled him later to perform such complicated roles as the coachman in *al-Nakhla wa al-Jeeran* ('The palmtree and the neighbors'), Puntila in *al-Baik wa al-Sa'iq* ('The master and the driver'), an Iraqization of Bertolt Brecht's *Mr. Puntila and his Man Matti*, Ash'ab in *Baghdad al-Azal* ('The Baghdad of eternity') and al-Saqqa in *al-Insan al-Tayyib* ('The good fellow'), an Iraqization of Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan*. Al-Ani's acting was distinguished by a good-natured amiable spirit, abounding in vocal rhythms and physical performance that reflected the nature of the character(s) he played. Al-Ani's characters were intriguing to the audience because they tended to mix satirical representations of social conditions with a critical, common-sense level of awareness. These performative qualities were cast within a popular framework, as was best seen in his play *Soura Jadida* ('A new image'), which presents a new image of Iraqi and Arab society.

Upon his return from exile in Lebanon and East Germany, al-Ani wrote texts that differed from his pre-exile experience. In his 1968 *al-Miftah* ('The key'), he rendered a folk song into a theatrical performance that reflected the rhythm of everyday life in Iraq:

Oh wooden toy, move, move!

Take me to my grandparents

My grandparents are near Mecca [...].

Ed. note: These opening lines are translated into English by the British poet Alan Brownjohn as follows:

Swing me, swing me to and fro,
 Take me where I long to go,
 Where my grandfathers live still,
 On the outskirts of Erbil.

(Jayyusi and Allen 1995: 256)

In this way, this folk song or nursery rhyme became a dramatic story with aesthetic meanings and functions, giving the potential director the necessary visual and audio tools to rhythmically echo the daily life that the play attempts to capture. Al-Ani's 1970 play, *al Kharaba* ('The ruin'), is characterized by a historical narrative that deals with different epochs from the ancient times of Mesopotamian civilization through to the uprising of Najm al-Baqal in Najaf against the British occupation during the 1920 Revolution. Selecting political and historical documents related to the conflicts of the twentieth century, al-Ani approached these conflicts from a progressive ideological perspective. The play combined the use of posters in the style of Peter Weiss' documentary theatre, along with other theatrical techniques such as a narrator appearing in a sequence of scenes and commenting on the action, episodes of pantomime performance, dancing, folk songs, popular chants and revolutionary poems. All these elements were presented in a harmonious episodic sequence similar to what we see in Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre.

Thematically, in his early plays al-Ani used to highlight the ugliness of social reality that was based on injustice and the exploitation of the weak by the powerful. Thus, he depicted social problems such as unemployment, sickness, poverty and madness in a manner spotlighting these suffocating social injustices while cautiously hinting at their antithesis, an opposing and combative social consciousness. Al-Ani's new approach, however, was more direct, more overt. It was accompanied by the task of detecting the new signs and indications evolving in the social body and then bringing them to the fore. As an intellectual bent on exposing and subverting the dominant despotic class structures of society, al-Ani attempted to disrupt the hierarchy of authority in his theatrical projects, presenting a visual, acoustical and kinetic treatment of the narrative with a style of direction that aims at re-forming the audience's artistic and political consciousness of their class-divided social reality. From this perspective, al-Ani's 'hero' is a character who emerges from the common people, a commoner or toiler opposed to the bourgeois way of life, to use leftist terminology prevalent among many Iraqi intellectuals of the period when al-Ani was creating his works. Al-Ani saw his artistic mission as consisting of creating a cultural form to express the non-material (spiritual and psychological) dimensions of this hero (worker, peasant or civil servant), giving meaning to his life at the individual and social levels. It is worth noting that Iraqi drama directors who shared al-Ani's viewpoint concerning the necessity of unmasking the social and class conflicts and of upholding the value that the dialectical relationships of an open theatre have on its audience, adopted innovative styles of presenting the plays on the stage. They chose texts that reflected specific intellectual, ideological and linguistic situations, and framed them in aesthetic visual images and scenes embodying the characters' psychological dispositions that express conflicting patterns because of differing cultural and social backgrounds and interests.

Al-Ani expressed his critical tendency in his plays, with their distinctive popular Iraqi – to be more specific, Baghdadi – stamp or imprint. He wanted his protagonists to detest political injustice, socio-economic backwardness and the degradation visited upon human beings. Surrounded by traditional theatrical conventions, al-Ani found himself embracing a different theatrical approach from what was predominant at the time. This artistic achievement was creatively encouraged by the theatre makers Ibrahim Jalal, Jasim al-Ubudi, Sami Abdul-Hamid and Qasim Muhammed. This group of distinguished artists provided intellectual and artistic support to al-Ani, enriching his storehouse of theatrical tools and techniques and helping him refine his characterization skills and his awareness of character types: picking characters from everyday life and sketching their attitudes towards the world. These theatre practitioners reinforced his artistic desire to deconstruct patterns of realism, especially concepts such as socialist realism, and their manifestations in the theatre to incorporate them and dramatically reproduce them locally. Al-Ani, in other words, was attempting to create new theatrical interpretations of his aspirations, avoiding the pitfalls of conventions and the attachment to the past. Thus, his interpretations were different, versatile and original.

Modern Iraqi playwrights and dramatists have learned and benefited immensely from al-Ani's writings and acting. I was among those who learned from his experience, acting alongside al-Ani in the play *Baghdad Al-Azal* ('Baghdad of eternity') directed by Qasim Muhammed, *al-Insan al-Tayib* ('The good fellow') directed by Aouni Karroumi, in addition to some television episodes and series. When I came back from my study abroad I wrote my debut play يوسف يغني *Yusuf Yughanni* ('Yusuf is singing'), starting a new trend that I called 'Hypothetical Biography'. The play aimed at deconstructing the creative discourse of al-Ani's theatre and reconstructing it imaginatively to connect the artist to society. Al-Ani was excited and supportive of this approach.

One finds in al-Ani's experience significant turning points and transformations in his writing techniques and acting style from *راس الشيلة Ra's al-Shilila* ('The end of the thread'), his play of the early 1950s, to *نجمة Najma* ('A star'), his last play. In these plays, al-Ani's trajectory encompassed and moved between realist, epic, documentary and expressionist styles and techniques. I find in al-Ani the impact of two artistic muses in particular: Maxim Gorki (1868–1936) and Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), whose influence shaped his entire career from the realist *القاع al-Qaa'* ('The bottom') and *al-Khan* ('The inn') to the epic aspects of *al-Miftah* ('The key') and *al-Kharaba* ('The ruin'). What is important according to al-Ani is the harmonization of experimentation with the native and homegrown in writing and in directing, that is, the combination of originality and the folkloric aspect that captures the essence of the experience of the Iraqi individual. Here, al-Ani identifies with his personal dreams, unifying his artistic experience and folk sensibility in his dramatic achievement. In his late eighties, al-Ani was still shaking his cane spiritedly, having more to offer and ready for more of life, remembering the colourful days of his times in the theatre. Here he rested on the couch of his last scene, sipping the wisdom of the ages, singing of a homeland that retained its youth and freshness despite the tyrants, the money changers, the wars, the ordeals and time's trials and tribulations. At a ceremony honouring al-Ani, I looked at him throwing his cane joyfully to perform a well-deserved role, walking up to the stage to be honoured by his life-long friend and colleague Sami Abdul-Hamid and by Al-Sharqiyya (Iraqi) news channel in Amman, Jordan, where he had been living intermittently since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. His love

for acting engulfed al-Ani, leaving him often unable to differentiate between sadness and joy. The two sentiments have melted in his soul, his cane still undecided, hesitant between the two. However, I think it is pointing to the joy of humanity, the joy that envelops all and that opens a window for the theatre.

REFERENCE

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