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Agency, Staging and Representation Strategies in Sulayman Al Bassam's *The Speaker's Progress*

Abstract: Sulayman Al Bassam wrote in 2011 *The Speaker's Progress*, an appropriation of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, as the third play of his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy. The urgency of making *Twelfth Night* into a story of secularism and religious tolerance – rewriting thus the agenda of the play with a different authorial voice – was dictated by Al Bassam's perception of the issues and concerns of the post 9/11 Arab World. Through an analysis of the text, and with references to the performance staged in Boston's Paramount Theatre, the article shows how this peculiar appropriation is the mixed result of interpretive histories of texts and of the interpreter's culture. As a matter of fact, the contemporary appropriation of *Twelfth Night* is represented on stage as the reconstruction of a 1963 performance of a liberal adaptation from a supposed Arab Golden Age. The screening of fragments of that past production provides a cue for the performers on stage to create a dialogue, in a metatheatrical doubling of the narration, between two completely different worlds, the past on film and the present of the contemporary Arab scene as it is interpreted by Al Bassam.

Keywords: *Al Bassam*, *agency, appropriation*, *Arab Shakespeare*, *performance strategies*, *trans-cultural dialogue*

On the evening of 19 March 2005 a small but composite audience of Western expatriates, of Palestinians, Lebanese, Eritreans, Somalis, and local Qataris gathered at the Doha Players' Theatre, in Doha, Qatar. The Doha Players company is a group largely formed by British amateur players which benefits from the support of the local community. That night they were putting on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, mounted in a colourful and lively Caribbean setting. The second part of the play had just started after the intermission, when a black Land Cruiser crashed through the front wall of the theatre and its driver accomplished his suicide terrorist attack triggering the explosive placed in the car and scattered dust and debris all over the building.[1] The bombing occurred on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, which US military directed from Qatar, probably as a way to revenge the pro-western attitude of Qatar government. The Doha Players Theatre may have just represented an easy target of Westerners and collaborationists to the berserk terrorist; however, they had gathered to attend a show in English, therefore in the language of the infidels, and for this reason, they also represented a symbolical objective. In the eye of the person(s) who planned the suicide bombing, they were inevitably connected to the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – led by Anglo-American forces – and with a global cultural supremacy whose influence in their distorted vision is inimical to Islam. As a matter of fact, whether it was planned or not, in the end terrorists also appropriated Shakespeare in what

[1] "Car Bomb Targets Theatre in Qatar", http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4365039.stm (accessed 1 November 2017); Oliver Poole, "Al-Qa'eda linked to bombing in Qatar", *The Telegraph*, 21/3/2005; Brian Whitaker and David Pallister, "British theatre director is Qatar suicide bomb victim", *The Guardian*, 21/3/2005.

we could define a 'conservative way': in spite of the numerous appropriations of Shakespeare that have been recorded in the Arab world, and also worldwide, which proved once again his plays are nowadays a "canonical world source",[2] as it happened his name, and the play that was staged in Doha, were associated to the pro-western policies against which they directed the bombing.[3] The language of Shakespeare was then read as an expression of the political discourse that dominates the contemporary world stage, therefore as an instrument of oppression. We know that the times when 'Colonial masters' imposed their value system through Shakespeare are probably definitely confined to the past, but the question whether Shakespeare's role as a global phenomenon in the cultural market has turned him into one of the powerful global icons through which local communities are progressively Westernized, has prompted several answers. Even though there have been a few voices who continued to speak in terms of an extended authority of his cultural centrality,[4] the large majority of critical analysis and studies on international Shakespeare receptions and appropriations have acknowledged different outcomes not be understood solely in terms of a progressive cultural impoverishment and erasure of local differences.[5]

Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey in "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism" recounted the Doha suicide bombing alternating and intertwining the empathic impressions of the tragic event with the analysis of *Twelfth Night*. They reread the text from the point of view of Malvolio to show that the reconciliation achieved at the end of the play is extremely fragile and easily threatened under the shadow of Malvolio's expulsion as an "inassimilable fragment". "In *Twelfth Night* innocence is constitutive and foundational", they write, "the play 'dallies with the innocence of love / like the old age' (II, iv, 47-8). But in the context described above it becomes harder to view the performance of *Twelfth Night*, in Qatar, ... as harmlessly innocent.... It is still possible to recall, now only has a faint echo from an old age, that celebration of *Twelfth Night* as a kind of prelapsarian festivity".[6] With the jihad threat hovering over, we live in the shadow of terrorism in a constant state of anxiety, and it seems innocence is not possible anymore in our society as well.

Holderness' and Loughrey's essay provided inspiration to the Kuwaiti-British playwright Sulayman Al Bassam for the third play of his Arab Shakespeare Trilogy.[7] In particular, their insightful reading of Malvolio partly suggested Al Bassam the political take on that character which is at the basis of *The Speaker's Progress*, his appropriation of *Twelfth Night*. Holderness and Al Bassam had already embarked on a scholar–dramatist collaboration, an interdisciplinary exchange that mirrors the cross cultural dialogue at work in the appropriation. Previously, Al Bassam's 'Arab' rewriting of *Hamlet*, *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, written in English and performed by a mostly British cast, won him a Festival Fringe First in Edinburgh – were it premiered in 2002 – and the Best Director and Best Production prizes at the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre in the same year. His

[2] Katherine Hennessey and Margaret Litvin, "Introduction", *Critical Survey*, 28 (2016), 3.

[3] See Whitaker and Pallister, "British theatre director is Qatar suicide bomb victim".

[4] See for instance Denis Salter, "Acting Shakespeare in Postcolonial Space", in J. C. Bulman, ed., *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

[5] Forms of colonial and post-colonial response to Shakespeare have been studied and analysed in various works. See for instance, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds., *Post-colonial Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2002); Sonia Massai, "Defining local Shakespeares", in Sonia Massai, ed., *World-Wide Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2011).

[6] Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism", *Critical Survey*, 19.3 (2007), 114.

[7] Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey,* 222. The name Al Bassam is often written with a hyphen. I decided to adopt the spelling without the hyphen as it appears in the volume of his *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama) and as he signs the Author's Introduction in thesame volume.

experimentation led him to discard Shakespeare language in search of a modern English into which rewriting *Hamlet* in an attempt to gain a specific and objective translation "of Arabic concepts and rhetoric into English".[8] The resulting product, in the author's words was a "cross cultural construction".[9] As Holderness wrote about it in the introduction, "Al Bassam's play maps a Middle Eastern political tragedy onto the template of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*"[10] (for instance, Hamlet becomes a jihadist,[11] 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). In 2007, The Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned Al Bassam *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* (initially conceived as *Baghdad Richard*) and when it played in Stratford it was presented as a 'response' – or alternative version – to Michael Boyd's *Richard III*. For this adaptation, Holderness offered specific advice to Al Bassam. It was written and performed in Arabic with just a few scenes in English, and it toured many different countries (for the record, it was the first time the Royal Shakespeare Company produced a play in Arabic).

Each adaptation makes use of its source in a different way, mixing genres and working on the Shakespearean text to produce new and possibly unexpected meanings through an exploration of universal themes such as corruption, power, identity, religious censorship and authority. Shakespeare's play became a vehicle for a politically and socially informed text. Since in an appropriation the nature of selves and texts is inseparable, as Joseph Margolis suggests, we should read it as an act of self-interpretation whose meaning is the mixed result of interpretive histories of texts and of the interpreter's culture.[12] This seems to be the case with *The Speaker's Progress*; as Al Bassam wrote in the Introduction to the play, "The radical disconnect between what was happening inside the Arab world ... and the relative stability and tranquillity of the cities were the works were scheduled to receive their premieres became a mirror, in my mind, of the disconnect between the Shakespearean tale and the tale to be told".[13] The fact that Al Bassam was sensible to the surrounding environment, from which his artistic creation was heavily influenced, doesn't mean that *The Speaker's Progress* is just a state-of-the-nation play. Sonia Massai, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural field', provides a useful model to understand the dynamic interaction between established modes of critical and theatrical production and strategies of appropriation. As she argues, "the boundaries of Shakespeare as a cultural field have not only stretched, but moved altogether", and therefore, "By stressing the fluidity of the field, its lack of any unilateral hierarchization and the permeability of its boundaries, Bourdieu provides a powerful model to describe not only the impact which world-wide appropriations of Shakespeare have on their audiences, but also [their] *raison d'être*".[14]

The urgency of making *Twelfth Night* into a story of secularism and religious tolerance – rewriting thus the agenda of the play with a different authorial voice – was dictated by Al Bassam's perception of the issues and concerns of the post 9/11

[8] Graham Holderness, "Introduction", in Sulayman Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), x.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Al Bassam's depiction of Hamlet seems to have in turn inspired Holderness for his reading of Malvolio.

[12] See Joseph Margolis, *Selves and Other Texts: The Case for Cultural Realism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State U. P., 2001), 156-66.

[13] Sulayman Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xix.

[14] Sonia Massai, *World-Wide Shakespeares*, 6.

Arab World, of a sectarian world which carries the signs of "the collapse of old orders and the blasting of post-modernity on pre-modern societal structures".[15] The challenge he faced was to succeed in provoking his audience and at the same time to make intelligible and engaging to an international playgoer a transposition so charged.

More than in the other two plays of his trilogy, in *The Speaker's Progress* not only did he appropriate Shakespeare, but also the Arab world as seen at the moment of transition into a new millennium. As Margaret Litvin noted, if in his previous Shakespearean appropriations "he has not always explained clearly whether his adaptations borrow, mock, or seek to transcend his bundle of stereotypes",[16] in his third and last he "successfully provincializes"[17] many Anglo-American stereotypes about Arab culture. The insistence on contemporaneity, stressed in *The Speaker's Progress* especially in the dialogue and the direct incitement to complicity with the audience, helped Al Bassam to get rid of outdated stereotypes and to comment "honestly (and thus of course provisionally) on a specific decade long slice of historical time (2001-2011) more than on the Arab world as a fixed geographic or cultural space".[18] The Arab world is therefore an ever-changing panorama in which Al Bassam presents his plays, whose composite audience influence their reception. After he completed the first draft of the play in 2010, that landscape was going through an even more profound change since in the following months the so called Arab Spring blossomed in many Arab countries. He couldn't have predicted the revolutionary transformations that would have swept across many Arab countries only a few months later and therefore the play needed to change to address a new audience in a transforming world.

The Speaker's Progress opened in New York in 2011 and even if the languages spoken in the performance were English and Arabic, according to Al Bassam, it was written with Arab audiences in mind rather than chiefly for Western spectators. As a matter of fact, he wrote it in English and subsequently he had it translated into Arabic. Despite the fact that Al Bassam was schooled in Arabic till the age of eleven, he has not enough confidence to write creatively in that language.[19]

The performance begins undramatically: on the stage, on a big white screen, are projected black and white images of an audience taking seats in a theatre: it looks like an archive film. This isn't so much a screening, we infer, as a *séance* (perhaps, after seeing what happens later, we could call it an exorcism). We are asked to respond to another audience from another time; the emphasis, then, at the very beginning is on theatre reception, on 'how' we look at or see rather than on 'what' we are going to attend, on how the meaning changes when the social and historical environment changes. This kind of confrontation brings out the question of audience agency. In the current cultural polarization of Western and Arab worlds it could be easy to go to an Arab production of a derivative text by Shakespeare driven by ethnographic curiosity, somehow expecting what the production is going to represent according to a preconceived belief. As Litvin remarked, this could be a

[15] Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", xviii.

[16] Margaret Litvin, "Theatre Director as Unelected Representative", in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 113.

[17] Ibid., 223.

[18] Ibid.

[19] See Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xx.

deadening experience for an audience ignorant of the artistic conventions at work in a challenging production leading to a series of misleading readings.[20] An unseen history is made visible to others, but at the same time risks perpetuating its separation by 'leading our subject out of the mainstream and into an ethnically bound corner',[21] as Sarah Dadswell acknowledges. In this case, theatre could work as a medium to promote a relocation of the audience's attitude or perspective, and could offer a moment to think about the various kinds of receptions and readings we can have during a play's run.

When black and white images fade out, a man in a dark suit walks on stage from behind the screen and gets himself to a lectern on the side of the stage. As a Speaker, he tells us he used to be a theatre maker but since in his own country the act of performance has been criminalized and all theatres have been shut down, he and his colleague artists have been forced into retirement. A series of emergency laws restricting liberties, comprising the suspension of the Internet, have been issued by the new government. But he is not asking for our sympathies nor is he complaining about the enforcement of such strict measures. He supports those actions, he denounced his previous work during the Artists' trials that have been taking place and he even offered to set fire to a theatre as a demonstrative act of faith for the new regime. As a matter of fact, he tells us theatre is an outdated medium "as a form of enquiry or representation"[22] in his society and will therefore meet us halfway "embodying our discourse in a language that you will recognize and understand whilst respecting the regulations that now govern our cultural expression."[23] The new regime doesn't allow acting anymore, at least in the dramatic tradition as we are used to know through recognizable characters. The post-revolutionary scene accepts only speakers as vehicles for a discourse, the language itself and the world it represents is the focus not the performer. Al Bassam's use of a narrator (interpreted by himself) seems to be a re-thinking of the location of narration, from character to 'speaker' embracing the 'fictional' of a reported speech.

The obvious effect of this position is to distance himself from the message and to attribute it to an absent elusive entity whose presence is embodied in the language of authoritarian stereotype.[24] This post-revolutionary conduct resembles quite a lot a post-dramatic performance strategy. The speaker/narrator explains the audience that they are not going to see a performance of a play but the reconstruction of a performance of a play from the past. What we have here is a stage product that functions through a play between the live and the recorded, giving as a result a complex hybridity of form. Since in his own country it is not possible anymore to act, it seems he and his colleagues have discarded the notions of 'character', of linearity of sequence, and the knowledge he asserts to have doesn't fully secure the authenticity and the authority of his voice. As a matter of fact, "confessions testimony may be central to the composition of the text, but they may be a game, an act, a playful bricolage, a fabrication and manipulation of

[20] Litvin, "Theatre Director as Unelected Representative", 109.

[21] Sarah Dadswell, "What is this Thing Called British Asian Theatre?", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 19.2 (2009), 226.

[22] All the quotations from *The Speaker's Progress* are taken from Sulayman Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 141.

[23] Ibid., 142.

[24] See Hans Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2006); David Barnett, "When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24.1 (February 2008).

imagined and experienced events",[25] as Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeny put forward. And it is not important whether the events revealed are true or real, what matters is that they are narrated and witnessed. One of typical features is the blurring of the differences between the 'acting' and 'being', between the 'fictional' and the 'real'. A connection to the characteristics of postmodern performance as noted for example by Tim Etchells.[26]

The Speaker informs the audience that short and ruined filmed scenes from a 1963 play (we will later discover it is an Arab adaptation of *Twelfth Night*) still circulate underground in segments of his society, generating "a mixture of nostalgia and civil disobedience".[27] What he is presenting now to this foreign audience are fragments of that film as proof of past mistakes, of a time when "revolution and, for that matter, theatre were all the rage"[28] spreading a deceptive and illusory image of false freedom. And where the film is damaged and scenes missing, he will have a company not of actors but of envoys (that is, other 'speakers' or narrators) from various Ministries, Leagues and Unions (there is just one Former Actress and she will later have a pivotal role), wearing neutral lab coats, to re-enact the damaged passages in a scientific reconstruction so as to expose all the corruptive potential of such a decadent cultural expression.

In a society where theatre is strictly regulated, even fragments of past productions can be subversive, their power is still feared and labelled as seditious: "Music is the food of love and love is the blood of freedom and freedom is the mother of progress",[29] as one of the characters says in the 1963 adaptation of *Twelfth Night*. What we are going to watch is the result of a meditation not only on Shakespeare's play but on its multitudinous history. I would like to put forward for consideration the often neglected fact that no play and no staging is original in itself and that over every staging of a play inevitably hangs the shadow of the other stagings which came before. The past and the present are in a dialogic relationship as we can see from the conversation between the filmed and the live. It reminds us that even when we alter the past, it is still hard to escape its ghosts – but also that the soul of that past performance lies invariably out of reach.

A buzz from the sound technician is the alarm signal to change scene and to assume the numbered positions as marked on a surviving promptbook. As the actors try to give flesh to the fading phantoms behind them, the production becomes largely a gesture-by-gesture duplication of what is happening on the screen behind.[30] The effect is of a constrained, old fashioned, clashing and often satiric attitude. But every now and then one or another of the performers will seem possessed, even just for a very short moment, by the spirit of that long-ago performance. We spot a crucial instant, then, "totally concrete and totally abstract" as Roland Barthes wrote. It is what he defines "the pregnant moment, [a] presence of all the absences (memories, lessons, promises) to whose rhythm History becomes both intelligible and desirable". It is a peculiar gesture, "or set of gestures, (but never a gesticulation) in which a whole social situation can be read. Not every

[25] Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeny, eds., *The Routledge Drama Anthology: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (London: Routledge, 2016), 709.

[26] Tim Etchells, "Diverse Assembly: Some Trends in Recent Performance", in Theodor Shank, ed., *Contemporary British Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994).

[27] Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 143.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 142.

[30] This strategy seems to have been taken from Wooster Group's staging of *Hamlet*, performed since 2006, where the company re-imagined Shakespeare's tragedy "by mixing and repurposing Richard Burton's 1964 Broadway production, directed by John Gielgud, reconstructing a hypothetical theatre piece from the fragmentary evidence of the edited film", http://thewoostergroup.org/hamlet (accessed on 10 March 2018).

gest is social".[31] For instance, at the heart of the social progress, evoked in the line mentioned before, there is a woman, Thuraya/Olivia: it is a 'social gest' in the present that evokes a unique vision of femininity in the past of the 1963 production. "The Golden Age metaphor for the catastrophic present", says Al Bassam, "is the fact that they allowed such 'liberty of proposition'".[32] It is something that would otherwise live only in the imagination, but in the "blessed bower" of the laboratory – where the reconstruction is taking place[33] – the envoys are protected and formally they don't have to act but just illustrate what the regime believes is degeneration. Notwithstanding, another social gesture like the cross dressing that will take place, when Fawz/Viola puts on the Captain's jacket to be presented to Turaya as an eunuch,[34] exposes the incongruities and fallacies of such an experiment to rewrite history. In spite of "the government-sponsored revival played out on stage [which] tries to empty the performance of any radical sexual or political content", I would say the sexual is indeed political in this case, "the actors run into trouble, simply by having a woman dress as a man. Shakespearean drama becomes a metaphor for radical dissent".[35] The female body, in such a context, is in itself a social gesture and a revolutionary act. The reconstruction, then, assumes the shape of a covert operation, it becomes the medium through which the Golden Age can be re-imagined in the present in a sort of postmodern association. With regard to the function of the historical, "the postmodern self-consciously 'replays' images of a past that cannot be known, but that can only be constructed through a play of entirely contemporary references to the idea of the past".[36] In fact, the supposed 1963 Gulf-Arab version of *Twelfth Night* is actually written and directed by Al Bassam and his metatheatrical move is a homage to the Arab tradition of Shakespearean mise-en-abyme. Through the isolated fragments of a reinvented past he wants to show that the only possibility to regain knowledge of a Golden Age where freedom was possible and the arts could flourish is through the imagination, through the eyes of the present audience. The form of the allegory used by theatre makers under the regime of Nasser, as exemplified in the incomplete relics of the past, could also work as an aesthetic critique here and now. Therefore, Al Bassam's effort to gain the audience sympathy in the situation he is presenting (also as the director/narrator of the outer play) aims at making them feeling part of the recollection, they should be aware of participating in something dangerous but engaging and being incited to complicity: "if the audience allows itself to accept that complicity, then the arena of complicity should be the horizon of the allegory. The boundaries of the theatre space itself",[37] as Al Bassam remarked.

There is also a camera placed on the floor front stage, from the Ministry of Information, recording the enacted reconstruction for "archive purposes only",[38] but it suggests they are under surveillance. Another audience, then, is watching live and commenting on the past production and the reconstruction; consequently, the theatregoers inevitably confront their judgement with the imagined audience of the

[31] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 173-174.

[32] Litvin, "Appendix. For The Record: Conversation with Sulayman Al Bassam", in Huang and Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, 234.

[33] On the scene, at the sides of a raised platform where the envoys perform, there are steel laboratory tables cluttered with various stage props.

[34] See Keir Elam, "The Fertile Eunuch: *Twelfth Night*, Early Modern Intercourse, and the Fruits of Castration", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47.1 (Spring 1996), for a thorough discussion of this theme in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

[35] Holderness, "Introduction", in Al Bassam, *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, xiii.

[36] Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan,1994), 20.

[37] Litvin, "Appendix. For the record: Conversation with Sulayman Al-Bassam", 225.

[38] Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress,* 146.

regime functionaries. The multiple readings of the performance and the multitudinous levels of its reception are inevitably intertwined.

What we see on stage are the representatives of an unspecified government, a portrayal of an unnamed nation and yet so full of recognizable features common to several inchoate, or imposed, democracies of our contemporary world. The risk of producing a shallow generalization, of showing the Islamic world as imagined or seen by a western eye is alarmingly there. But the metatheatrical doubling presented two completely different worlds, the past of 1963 on film and the present on stage, and therefore prevented any generalization about Arab 'culture' as a singular entity. Dan Rebellato suggests that theatrical representation is inherently metaphorical, its artifice always exercising the strategy of being "invited to see (or think about) one thing in terms of another thing".[39] Adaptation, accordingly, will always convey a metatheatrical hint since one text is seen and heard through another. If, as Rebellato argues, every actor is a metaphor for the character he impersonates, we should read the adaptation that attempts to recapture the spirit of the Arab Golden Age in the same way, that is as if "there is no make-believe involved, no amassing of propositional information, no artful subtraction from one to create the image of the other. We know the two objects are quite separate, but we think of one in terms of the other".[40]

[39] Dan Rebellato, "When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?", *Performance Research*, 14.1 (March 2009), 25.

[40] Ibid.

When we come to a comic scene at Thuraya's place, between Nishami (the housemaid) and Tagtiga (the drunken uncle) the sound of the dialogue of the 1963 archive film is suppressed and only the sound of the audience reaction is left so as to "clearly expose the corrupting intentions of the scene", since according to the Speaker the acting is irrelevant and it would only distract. In this case, what the envoys provide is an interaction with the audience of the past production (either far or near) dubbing the actors on screen. This voiceover produces an effect similar to what David Lane observed about adaptations: "[They] encourage a 'double-reading' for an audience, as we interpret the new, adaptive text in its own right, and its relationship to the source text as well".[41]

[41] David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2010), 183.

The Mullah Farhan of the video is what we suppose to be a stock character from classic Arab comedy, devised to mock his Islamist intransigence. In the reconstruction he is played by the Representative of the Tourist Board (RTB), a fanatic of the regime. In assuming that role, the RTB adds a feature of menace to his character; instead of the whipping stick of his counterpart in the film he waves a metre ruler, officially to check men and women remain at a safe 90 centimetres distance. But he appears, then, as the wicked schoolteacher who scares stiff his pupils. The metre also indicates a longing to control, to measure, the desire to provide restraint and respect for the rules. His intentions are frustrated because, as he plunges deeper and deeper into the reconstruction, he cannot help but reproducing the same weird moves of the stock character and therefore he assumes the same ridiculous attitude. We are sure that his pupils will mock at him as in the best school tradition.

The reduced version of the filmed adaptation of *Twelfth Night* has the dialogue compressed and only evokes Shakespeare language, so the exchange between Thuraya/Olivia and Fawz/Viola goes fast ahead:

> **Thuraya** What would you if you were you?
> **Fawz** If I were I?
> **Thuraya** If you were you
> **Fawz** Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
> And call upon my soul within the house;
> Write loyal cantons of contemned love
> And sing them loud even in the dead of night...

Until Fawz/Viola interpolates the dialogue with lines read from a red notebook previously given her by the Speaker, surreptitiously. The added lines are the following:

> I'd turn myself into a fruit seller
> And set my body aflame in the square
> I'd scratch your initials on the school walls
> Take a bullet to the chest and turn the gash
> Into a spring millions flock to drink from
> I'd chant your name through a year of Fridays
> Thuraya, Thuraya, Thuraya:
> Huriya Huriya Huriya!!![42]

They too explicitly, undisguisedly refer to the episode that set fire to the Arab Spring in Tunis' Tahrir Square. This deviation from the script leads the Former Actress into politically dangerous territory and her cry for freedom is brutally repressed. However, the tragedy doesn't happen and the actress is harshly silenced by the RTB; the Speaker acknowledges there has been a mistake and the action moves on to the Tourist Board Presentation. That is the moment for dramatic irony, as on the sound of Muzak, the RTB describes the beauty of his country, included unspoiled true Arab Springs while on the screen are projected images of country landscapes with leaping gazelles. At the end of the scene, the Former Actress is searched and fingerprinted, while the red notebook has previously safely passed from one envoy to the other.

At another moment in the reconstruction, in order to respect the safety 90-centimetre distance Thuraya cannot take the hand of the Blind Poet, therefore they have to resort to a stratagem: the two envoys stand on the stage unaligned, their back to the audience and at short distance one in front of the other. With the help of a floodlight, their shadows projected on the screen backstage give the illusion of them taking by the hand. The contact is only possible on the screen, now blank, where the past is living in the pre-recorded film as the only space of illusion (or better of imagination?) where desire can come true, where a presence is made of

[42] The author plays here on the homophony between the name 'Thuraya' and the word 'Huriya' which means 'freedom'. Freedom was shout in the performance which was anyway surtitled in English or Arabic, following the switch of the two languages during the performance. It is possible to watch a streaming recording of the production staged at Paramount Theatre at Emerson College, in Boston in October 2011, on the site of MIT Global Shakespeare: http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/the-speakers-progress-al-bassam-sulayman-2011/ (accessed on 1 November 2017). The present analysis is based on that performance.

absences. They walk keeping the same positions till they reach the screen, and then separate on the two sides to let appear a dark silhouette of a woman behind the screen vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

At the opening of the Second Act – whose title is "The Tyranny of the Text" – the responsibility for the actress losing her mind is given to the audience. Their silence is not neutral, but complicit since it has fed her "wayward imagination".[43] The spectators, acting as a "shrouded faceless mob", are therefore recognized as an active force whose energy has incited the actress "to loose her mind"[44] and whose silence advocated her cause. Therefore, the Speaker states that they must be educated and they must conform. This is a dangerous task for the envoys since it implies to carry on to the bitter end their task and it involves the use of the 1963 costumes.

[43] Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress*, 167.

[44] Ibid.

After a burst of laughing following a bawdy joke told by the blind poet, the Mullah/RTB annoyed by that chaos and anarchy tries to confront the Speaker who added up to it. While crossing the stage he notices something wrong and searches the papers on one of the laboratory tables finding the red book. That is the moment of revelation, the catastrophe. The Speaker, recognized as the undercover mastermind of the sabotage of the reconstruction, is forced to go behind the stage. The scene is underscored by a sinister, metallic sound adding suspense and anxiety on his destiny.

In the absence of the killjoy RTB, the envoys start to make use of the costumes and of the make-ups, prompted by the Representative of Writers Union/Drunken Uncle who incites them to discover the beauty of true interpretation of the scene for real effect. Furthermore, he covers with a scarf the surveillance camera. "No need to archive this. It is best retold by the heart"[45] he says while the lights dim and we are now in true representational staging, amateur style, but genuinely done. As we see on the screen the audience of the past that comes again to life, the cross dressed Blind Fool sings a traditional love song. It's a revolution from the past reviving in the body of the actors and of the audience of the present.

[45] Ibid., 171, the quotation cited is taken from the performance and it slightly differs from the printed text to which the footnote refers to.

Then, the Speaker re-enters holding a copy of Shakespeare's *Twelth Night*, it is clear he has been physically abused and he is now forced by the RTB to sign a confession which he reads:[46]

[46] The published text has it in English while in the performance he reads it in Arabic.

> I was the originator of the transgressive improvisation. I displayed wilful negligence in my duty towards the committee; I obscured the true origins of the 1963 play: an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, written in 1601. I have conspired with this foreign source. In my defence, I say only that my real intention was to highlight the majestic historical transformation prophesied in the Shakespearean play that brought, 40 years after this play was written, the Puritans to power in England. The Puritans, keen protectors of civic health and their nation's standing in the world, enforced the closure of all theatres that harboured the 'sinful' entertainment. England became a great nation because of the Puritans. Many scholars, religious and otherwise, verify this.[47]

[47] Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress,* 173.

When the RTB takes again the role of the Mullah, it is not easy to say whether he is pretending or he is for real. Paradoxically, he is the only one allowed to interpret his real self.

Introduced and summoned by the envoy's conventional signal of the revolution (that is by the lifting of the open right hand), the evoked Puritans come on the stage. The Representative of the Women League reads from the act of the English parliament establishing the closing of theatres dressed as a Seventeenth-century puritan, probably in the hope to draw a closer parallel to what happened at present and on 11th February 1647 as the Speaker announces. On the screen we see a huge portrait of Oliver Cromwell. An excited Speaker asks the spectators to intervene and bear witness of what is happening. They didn't ask to turn off their mobile phones, so he now urges them to use them and to record what is happening: they don't have to imagine to be anywhere else now, they just have to choose how to deal with the present. The theatregoers are therefore turned into freedom's surveillance eye, they could even stream the repression of the Mullah/RTB or just take pictures of it to be uploaded. The speaker's plea is possible because the RTB doesn't speak and doesn't understand English. That is why he is much worried they must follow the text, they must act in accordance with it, the one that has been approved and no improvisation is allowed.

When the 'real' acting starts we are in the bower of an Orange Grove. The same scheme as before is going over again, envoys declare what will be going on in an Epic style but the supposed alienation effect is not there anymore. What the envoys want is to use theatre, true acting, and not cold representation, to catch the RTB in a (mouse)trap. They are at war, they have been betrayed, their revolutionary ideals have been frustrated so now they are thrown back on theatre. The stage changes as changes the way of acting. The laboratory tables of the envoys are now behind a row of orange trees. The scene is more clearly recognizable as from *Twelfth Night*, a forged letter has been left centre stage for the Mullah to find it. Here we have the scene of Mullah/Malvolio misreading of the letter. The scene is very like the one in Shakespeare, it is played by the Mullah/Malvolio kneeling on the front of the raised platform (the stage within the stage) and a dark silhouette of Thuraya/Olivia behind the screen who first echoes the lines from the letter and then says as reading the content of it. The pun on general polysemy stretches further to include the fact that the Mullah/Malvolio doesn't speak English: "If only you spoke English", says the letter, "Cast off your chains of servility, better be deemed ridiculous than be reviled. What others call madness is to me modernity. Be modern, be free, be brave".[48] And further on, Nishami, who forged the letter, whispers in a microphone as continuing the reading of Thuraya/Olivia: "Speak in the language of Power: in the language of the mind: in the language of lovers – speak English, Italian, Cantonese, French: show me the gift of your tongue".[49] To which the Mullah/Malvolio interjects by saying in a menacing tone: "This is

[48] Ibid., 180.

[49] Ibid.

improvised", but then he pleasantly adds, "But I like it!".[50] He has started taking pleasure in the acting, and this is very dangerous: it could be more efficacious to show the corruptive nature of theatre but it could also end up by being corrupted. The stage direction states that from this point onwards it won't no longer be clear if the RTB is speaking in character or as himself. He is literally the shadow of himself: he is being dressed to woo the lady of the letter behind the screen and we see his silhouette. They make him speak in languages he doesn't know while he woos the lady, he is prompted by the other envoys (now all in costumes) who speak in micros and make him saying things like "J'aime les femmes aux têtes nue", "I can't leave under oppression. I want to defect",[51] believing he is asking for sexual intercourse, always according to Islam practice as he specifies. But the word "defect" has been said, and he is then imprisoned in a cage for high treason, for being a spy. He is questioned on the raised platform, the torture scene of the Counter Revolution, a very Shakespearean moment as the Speaker states. The Mullah/Malvolio is treated as a fallen dictator and in the end the Young Woman sings the chant of Arab Uprising. When the Mullah/Malvolio takes off the scarf blindfolding him during the scene, he goes out collecting his papers and uttering Malvolio's infamous malediction: "I will be revenged upon the pack of you", we don't actually know if he is in character or not.

Initially conceived as a caricature, in an analogy between the Puritan killjoy and moral fanatic, and the official from the anonymous Islamic State that forced the Speaker to abjure his artistic past, the figure of the Mullah/Malvolio goes over that monolithic block of religious ideology. It then splits in different currents as the ban on theatre is equated with a ban on freedom of speech and the Islamic nature of the imposition is removed, according to Al Bassam, from the outer story. Therefore, the Puritan analogy becomes a metaphor for state oppression less coloured by a unique religious faith. The Mullah/Malvolio is characterized as a priggish prim functionary, but one made confident and savagely terrifying in his very foolishness by the very role the regime asked him to play. The tension between him and the Speaker justifies the otherwise inexplicable function of the Speaker as the rebellion's heroic source, "with the Speaker-Mullah symmetry the play acquires a hero, a villain, and some troubling resemblances between the self-righteous practices of the two".[52]

Agency itself questions the audience alignment. It is possible to pity Malvolio and the Speaker for what they suffer not only for what they are, since they are certainly pathetic because they are so utterly cut off from everyone else by their anxious self-love and self-righteousness.

Al Bassam uses Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* as the inset play from which some major themes, elements and lines are taken. *The Speaker's Progress* is a play about change, about the process of change and transformation from one state of affairs to another. The playtext had evolved toward a darker ending but then, as the playwright said, he gave the ending a more optimistic spin in response to the Arab

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 184.

[52] Litvin, "Review of *The Speaker's Progress*", *Shakespeare*, 9.3 (2013), 3.

Spring, leaving it open-ended, still hopeful, but conscious that no post-Malvolio society will easily overcome its crippling past. He gives us the impression that we can't live as always on holyday, or in a festive comedy, we can't deceive ourselves anymore. But does Malvolio acquire self-knowledge? And the other characters? Even if in Shakespeare the finale of the comedy seems to point to reconciliation, to the convention of marriage – once the disguise is revealed and identity restored – we know that there is an individual who has been left apart. His exclusion from that society that is rebuilding a unity appears to be the irreconcilable dark side of the anxiety that agitated the story. It is not just a matter of religious orthodoxy. The very fact that Malvolio's vanity, his self-love prevails in his threat of revenge on the whole pack of them, could mean that Shakespeare "portraying puritanical Malvolio's notion of Providence as self-serving, [...] satirizes his character's belief in the unmediated, unearned, material blessing of the elect".[53]

Holderness and Loughrey are convinced that the fate of Malvolio is to be duped with false hopes since his appetite for status, wealth, and power tempts him with illusory aspirations and therefore he is doomed to experience disillusion. Nevertheless, as they point out, "Malvolio is the only character to be punished for his participation in a common destiny. He is the scapegoat, the victim who bears away with him the sins of the community". It is Holderness' and Loughrey's belief then, that the Western secular dream of materialist freedom, is the target against which Malvolio directs his threat: "Those who invest their existence in the expectation of perpetual pleasure, guaranteed happiness, the uninterrupted continuance of the game, will always be exposed to the resentment and resistance of those acquainted with anxiety".[54] In developing their reading of Malvolio, Al Bassam wanted to point out the dangerous outcomes that the irresponsibility of innocence can lead to on one side, and the self-defeat the excessive literalism of orthodoxies and the various form of State oppression are doomed to on the other.

The ethics of appropriation matter deeply and this case proves to be ethically complex. In order to make *Twelfth Night* into "the story of secularism and tolerance in the Arab world being devoured and by religious censorship and state authoritarianism" Al Bassam developed *The Speaker's Progress* into a new text and directed "the storytelling through this new channel".[55] Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin insist on the 'hybridity' of the Shakespearean accents when pointing to the fact that there is no single 'Shakespeare' that is reproduced on a global-scale; not only his work breeds 'hybrid' subjects, "but is itself hybridized by the various performances, mutilations and appropriations of his work"[56] generating multiple levels of hybridity as a potentially radical state, posing the conditions to "subvert the binaries, oppositions and rigid demarcations imposed by colonial discourses".[57] Arab theatre artists seeking to metabolize recent Arab-world events in or for the West have turned persistently to Shakespeare in particular – both from personal interest and in quest of a vocabulary their audiences can understand.

We then have to look for ethics in both the nature of intertextual and inter- or

[53] Maurice Hunt, "Malvolio, Viola, and the Question of Instrumentality: Defining Providence in *Twelfth Night*", *Studies in Philology*, 90.3 (Summer 1993), 278.

[54] Holderness and Loughrey, "'Rudely Interrupted': Shakespeare and Terrorism", 117-118.

[55] Al Bassam, "Author's Introduction", xix.

[56] Loomba and Orkin, eds., *Post-colonial Shakespeares*, 8.

[57] Ibid., 7.

trans-cultural relationship and in the political ideals they support.

Ethical appropriations as Jonathan Bate, implies, are those that use a genuinely dialogic approach to create liberatory political effects.[58]

The Speaker's Progress is "a play in the shadow of revolution", as the subtitle qualifies it, and the dark area projected on it is a territory still to be explored: "But how shall we live?" "I want to fly"[59] are the very two last lines of the play delivered by the two women that remain on the stage, leaving the audience with no easy answers.

Tom Ashbrook, who moderated the panel after one performance of *The Speaker's Progress* in Boston in October 2011, at a certain moment of the discussion asked Al Bassam: "What is your message?", to which he answered, "We worked hard to remove a message".[60] As an example of true political theatre the play investigates many issues rather than reifying a single concept, as I believe I showed; *The Speaker's Progress* is questing and open ended, unsettling, it draws on Shakespeare for a vocabulary of radical change and transformation, it deconstructs the elements of stagecraft and shows how the anti-production – that wants to oppose a reactionary exhibition of force – becomes a subversive demonstration that the power of theatre cannot be tamed.

[58] Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

[59] Al Bassam, *The Speaker's Progress,* 196.

[60] Amy Tighe, "Review of *The Speaker's Progress*", *Boston Area Small Press and Poetry Society Scene*, 13/10/2011.