



## Syrian Cultural Priorities

Conversations About Contemporary  
Cultural Practices

Syria as a Model (2017-2020)

Prepared and presented by  
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**Omar Abou Saada**  
Director and Playwright



## Omar Abusaada

Omar Abusaada is a Syrian director and playwright based in Damascus.

He completed his theatrical studies at the High Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus and worked as a dramatist, before moving into directing at a later stage. He co-founded "Studio Theater", a theatre company in Damascus, and directed his first work "Insomnia" in 2004.

He directed "Al Affich" in 2006; "Samah" in 2008, an improvisation with a group of boys in a juvenile prison; "almirwad wa almikhala" in 2009; "Look at the Streets ... This is What Hope Looks Like" in 2011; "Could You Please Look into the Camera?" in 2012; "Intimacy" and "The Syria Trojan Women" in 2013; and "Antigone of Shatila" in 2014. His piece "While I Was Waiting" premiered at the Kunsten Festival, Brussels in May 2016, and was selected to be part of the official program at the 70th edition of the Festival d'Avignon.

Abusaada directed "Iphigenia" in 2017 and "The Factory" in 2018 which was produced by the Volksbühne Theater in Berlin, and Ruhrtriennale.

Omar has introduced several ideas of contemporary writing, documentary filmmaking, and Theater of the Oppressed to a number of theaters in Syria.

He has performed internationally, including at the Lincoln Center in New York, Wiener Festwochen, Festival d'Automne in Paris, Spektakel Theatre in Zurich, Meeting Points, Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw, among others.

Omar has also held several workshops in the fields of contemporary theatre script writing and directing.

*Conversations About Contemporary Cultural Practices: Syria as a Model is a series of interviews conducted between 2017 and 2020, as part of the Syrian Cultural Priorities programme, prepared and rolled out by Ettijahat – Independent Culture. In this interview, I was pleased to speak to director Omar Abou Saada from Berlin, via Skype.*

**Omar:** Omar Abou Saada graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2011.

**Jumana:** Are you currently based in Berlin?

**Omar:** I am in Berlin at the moment, working on a theater project called "Iphigenia." It is a part of a trilogy on the Greek tragedies, rolled out in partnership with Syrian refugees. I had previously completed the Trojan Women and Antigone, and my current project is the last of the trilogy.

**Jumana:** In which theater in Berlin?

**Omar:** In the "Volkbühne" theater.

**Jumana:** How did you come up with the idea for such a project?

**Omar:** We started preparing for the new project after "Antigone." It was supposed to be executed in Turkey, as I had followed the migration route, and Turkey was the country where all migrant ships would dock. It is also at the heart of the incidents taking place in Syria. Unfortunately, we were unable to execute the program in Turkey. Therefore, we decided to head to Greece. I traveled to Athens and was received with acceptance and enthusiasm by several stakeholders. Nonetheless, the situation was extremely difficult, particularly in terms of securing official documentation and approvals for the people who needed them. We also experienced difficulties in entering refugee camps.

In other terms, the project exceeded our logistical capacities, despite having several supportive stakeholders. We then decided to go to Germany. We have two partner theaters supporting us. The show was scheduled to premiere in Hamburg, as part of the ITI festival, but due to the delay in Greece, we were unable to follow this through. We are currently only working with our German partner "Volkstheater", which decided to take care of everything, in cooperation with the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC). In the past, we used to handle the production ourselves, while our partners would make financial and logistical contributions. Now, however, our German partner is handling production, and the show has become part of the theater's repertoire.

**Jumana:** Does AFAC cover part of the production fees.

**Omar:** Yes, AFAC contributes to a small part of the production. But production fees are covered for the most part by "Volkstheater" theater.

**Jumana:** Do you work with refugees in Germany?

**Omar:** Yes, we currently work with female refugees in Germany.

**Jumana:** Were you set on working on a trilogy from the beginning?

**Omar:** No, but the idea came to mind after the first show, Trojan Women, was completed.

**Jumana:** How come?

**Omar:** Most Greek tragedies are trilogies. When I was working on "Trojan Women" in 2013, the refugee crisis had not yet taken over Europe. There were some refugees distributed between Jordan,

Lebanon, and Turkey. However, once the program was completed, the situation on the ground had started evolving, and a long Europe-bound migration route – one that I could trace – had started to appear. The situation started rapidly evolving after "Antigone". Practically speaking, when you work on a fruitful and successful project, you will be motivated to come up with new ones.

**Jumana:** What prompted you to choose Greek tragedies?

**Omar:** When looking at the current situation, my memory takes me back to Greek texts that I had previously studied at the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts. These contain a choir, which is an aiding factor when working with a large number of people. Moreover, events in these texts are based in the Mediterranean and tackle the relationship between the East, the West, and the war. They also use several terms that intersect with today's incidents. When reading these texts, people often feel that they are related to current developments. For me, it was a chance to re-interpret them in a more contemporary way.

**Jumana:** Have you only worked with female refugees? What did they think of the texts when they first read them?

**Omar:** Yes, I only work with female refugees. Their reception of the texts was excellent. You can notice that in the movie shot by "Yasmin Fedda," which documents the auditions and the way we worked. In Berlin, the situation was rather different; In Beirut and Amman, the majority of people we worked with had absolutely no background in theater. Some did not even know how to read or write, so their husbands or children would help them read the script. Nevertheless, their reception of the script was magical, as they strongly and effortlessly related to the story. It was as if they were watching a TV series, where they loved, hated, expressed empathy and anger, or even saw themselves in the characters.

**Jumana:** Why have you only worked with female refugees?

**Omar:** Frankly, there are several reasons. First, the project aims to recreate testimonials of the war in Syria. Over the past few years, the male voice dominated across all fields, whether in battle or through media coverage. It was therefore a good opportunity to give the female voice a better chance. Moreover, the female refugees we have worked with are extremely marginalized. It was a good idea to allow them to express themselves in central locations such as Beirut, Amman, and Berlin. This is particularly important, as shows are presented in central theaters and not in refugee camps. There are several artistic reasons that motivated me to do so. Working with marginalized people with no theatrical background urges us to reconsider some principle elements related to theatre, acting, the actor/actress' body, their voice, and their relationship with the story. I believe it is a good opportunity for me to reflect on theatre and on my relationship with art.

**Jumana:** Are you still in contact with the women you worked with in all your projects? What has this experience changed in their life?

**Omar:** After working with them on daily basis for two months, they have become my friends. I have a good relationship with them, and we are still in contact of course. As for how this experience changed their life, I think it is all relative. For example, after "Antigone" was shown in France and Germany, some women remained in Europe and secured their official documentation. They started learning the language, while others got married. For those who returned to the refugee camps, their lives remained the same. In reality, the women did not experience significant changes at the personal level, except for the artistic and psychological effects of being on stage, along with the relationship with one's body, as well as interacting with, using, and showcasing it. At the social level, I believe that this participation has provided women with some strength to stand before their families

and communities. Several women have started working as a result. If we wish to achieve radical and large-scale change, such projects will require further support, with follow-up by organizations at a later stage, not only at the personal and individual levels. The people we work with have complicated circumstances. For instance, when I worked in a prison in 2008, the youth I interacted with have started asking if I could provide them with job opportunities. Should there have been any follow-up by associations and organizations, the change would have been more prominent.

I personally am unable to provide the job opportunities that they were seeking, aside from hiring one of them to work with me as a production assistant in one of the plays that I later produced. As artists, we are aware of this problem. And while we try and search for a solution, it is extremely difficult to do so, as we do not always receive the cooperation we need.

**Jumana:** Interestingly, your current projects do not have a relief or developmental aspect. These are artistic projects at heart. But now that relief action through art has become a fundamental condition to receive support or funding after the revolution, where do you see yourself in this equation?

**Omar:** I have been undertaking relief work since 2008, before the revolution. Since then, I have had questions about documentary theatre and the documentary subject tackled on stage. I have taken great interest in the phenomenon, which had become the talk of theatres around the globe, whether the theme tackled is refugees or otherwise. Since 2011, I have worked on several diverse themes on Facebook, including prisoners and refugees. As for funding, back then, there were no associations or non-governmental organizations working in the field of relief action or with refugees which could support my projects. The only support I received was from theatres.

To be honest, I never found myself compelled to work with refugees for income. I can work with whoever I wish. At the end of the day, my projects are mine. I do not condemn this field. Before 2011, I worked extensively in documentary theatre, theatre of the oppressed (also known as interactive theater), and educational theatre. I can differentiate between the various types of theatre, along with the purpose of choosing each of them or working in one of them. I have also worked extensively in the past on workshops that carry a relief aspect, with refugees in Egypt and Jordan for instance, and I succeeded in situating them in the correct context. As for my current shows, they are not in any way related to relief or humanitarian work. These are shows with a purely artistic nature. They belong to documentary theatre and tackle artistic issues. If these works and shows simulated what associations are working on, they would have supported and adopted them.

**Jumana:** Let us talk a little about you as a director. What are the major transformations that occurred in your work as a director, from an aesthetic perspective and in line with new production terms and mechanisms? You have spoken about the complexity of putting shows together, particularly with people residing in different countries.

**Omar:** I believe this question should start with the change that 2011 brought to everyone, first at the humanitarian level; and second at the artistic level. We have all been affected by this change, but the most prominent of all changes was in our relationship with life and death. We have become closer to death and more attached to life. Our political awareness has also changed. In fact, before 2011, we saw ourselves as individuals trapped in the narrow space that is Syria; today, we perceive ourselves as humans living in the world as a whole. We realized, for the first time, that even the farthest incidents could influence the smallest details of our lives. Change affected our relationships, our questions

about the world, politics, and life. Naturally, this was reflected in my aesthetic approaches to art. I became keen on experimenting and tackling more diversified topics. My questions about the audience changed, but so did the audience, whether in taste or reception. It became increasingly difficult to satisfy oneself and the audience at the same time.

Before 2011, all my projects would show in Syria. I also used to travel and present my work abroad, but it was never a priority for me. I was more interested in presenting Syria. Now, however, the situation has completely changed. The audience has changed, and the linguistic factor gained a major importance. I now present my projects in Arabic to a foreign audience, which has allowed me to experiment more and become bolder and more courageous.

**Jumana:** In one discussion, you mentioned that what was happening in Syria was unfathomable, violent to an extent that cannot be represented or spoken of. What can an artist and theatrical director do vis-à-vis this unfathomable scene in Syria?

**Omar:** An artist must raise their awareness of themselves and of who they are. They must become a more effective activist in the world, and more attentive to what the media presents. They must also pay more attention to what they want to say, to think more of the truth and its meaning; therefore, during my work on "While I Was Waiting," I was careful to shoot the days in the city, which seemed normal to a certain extent, even days that were not regular, rather than shooting anything else. And it seems this has gone against all the images coming from the media, by reversing the expected. This raises questions about the truth and our relationship with the events happening around us. What's important is that we become more aware of ourselves and the world, and to spare no effort in becoming more efficient and believing in our capacities. This is the secret to how I choose my themes. I also think I have a characteristic that differentiates me from others.

As I constantly move between Damascus and other places abroad, I try to hold on to my relationship with the place. At the same time, I am open, I look at things from an outer perspective. This helps me maintain my position and my balance, become a part of normal life and adapt to the situation Damascus, the war, power cuts, or the sound of mortars. I can now work on projects outside this frame, and that is what I am attempting to do as an artist in this world.

**Jumana:** Most Syrian artists have left the country. Some are too shy to speak of a place they no longer know, others ask themselves the question of legitimacy, while others still imagine the country to be the same and believe that the problems they used to suffer from remain the same. What is your take on that?

**Omar:** I believe that each artist looks for solutions to these problems in their own way; My solutions may be different than those of others. I know some are still stuck in the moment they left Syria, but they might be aware of that and might be using it to try and solve these problems and create their own art. In other terms: My situation is different. It allows me to move between Syria and abroad. I trust the wit and awareness of artists, and I believe each is using their circumstances on purpose to come up with an artistic product. Everyone is trying to contribute, and it is necessary to continue enriching this movement through continuous work. However, the presence of Syrian artists on the global scene is rather weak or is weakened in comparison with what is taking place in Syria. Unlike what one might think, Syrian artists are scarcely present in the official programs of major competitions, particularly those that are under the spotlight.

**Jumana:** Is it perhaps because several events are tackling Syria, including exhibitions, conferences, and festivals? Even though this does not necessarily mean that the works presented are of high quality.

**Omar:** I am currently in Berlin, and I have not seen this abundant number that you mentioned of cultural events on Syria, in comparison with the scale of what is taking place in the country. As a matter of fact, outside eurocentrism, numerous events tackle Africa, Asia, or South America. And by this, I do not mean relief activities, as this does not fall into my field of specialty, but rather artistic and cultural activities. These are much less than they ought to be. Once again, I am talking about official events and competitions, and not accompanying events.

**Jumana:** Why is it so in your opinion?

**Omar:** For several reasons, including the fact that Syrian artists are not world-renowned. Before 2011, Syria was extremely inward-looking. Traveling was significantly hard and securing entry visas was nearly impossible. Dealing with foreign countries brought numerous risks and raised security questions. It was also difficult for foreign art curators to enter Syria, which led to a rupture in relationships. After 2011, however, some artists started spreading their wings, but this requires more time.

On another note, the isolation that Syria has witnessed over the last few years risks causing an estrangement with the development of contemporary art in the world. Political movements and their complex relationship with art and culture have also had a role to play in this regard. As a matter of fact, the majority of those who take interest in art and culture wish to limit them to the context of refugees and the refugee crisis, thus depriving this subject of its political essence and transforming it into a purely humanitarian subject.

In my opinion, the world is yet to give Syrian artists the attention they deserve. On the other hand, given how critical and sensitive this subject is, artists or independent art curators who have strong political awareness and a strong sense of the relationship between the events in Syria and the rest of the world, and who push in this

direction and contribute to the development of this talent, are not allowed to launch initiatives in this regard.

**Jumana:** Regarding the last point, you tackled the transformation of the ongoing events in Syria into a refugee crisis, and the re-enacting of what is happening inside Syria and in exile; whether in refugee camps or elsewhere around the world, along with the involvement of Syrian artists and authors and their sense of responsibility and desire to tell a certain story. Do you think Syria has now become an empty and destroyed land? Do you think that everyone is living abroad, turning Syria into the “land of exile”? How does a Syrian artist react to the unraveling events, whether inside or outside the country? How do art producers and curators deal with these issues? Are they providing an opportunity for these works to be showcased at a festival or forum, among others?

**Omar:** Actually, it is a complicated relationship that depends on each artist and the places or institutions with whom they cooperate. I personally deal with every association or festival differently. For example, after “Antigone” was shown at a small festival in Marseilles, France, one of the Avignon festival curators requested that I present the same show. At the time, the refugee crisis was at its peak, but I respectfully declined, as I did not think the time was right.

**Jumana:** How come you felt that a replay would be unsuitable?

**Omar:** Simply because what we say, and how and when we say it, is an extremely sensitive matter, for political and artistic considerations. I did not wish to replay “Antigone,” but I was working on another project in parallel and they agreed to showcase it. Therefore, the relationship between the artist and the producing art institution or the theatre in which the play is being presented depends on the association's

vision and the moment. We live in a fast-moving world, and artists are personally responsible for choosing the themes and their timing.

**Jumana:** You have experience and expertise in working with several Arab, European, and American institutions, among others. As you have previously mentioned: Syria was closed-off, and its citizens inward-looking. They suddenly found themselves around the world in Berlin, Paris, and other cities with endless opportunities. Is it possible that people would, at any time, stop thinking about the dimensions of these opportunities? And how do they translate at the intellectual and political levels? This matter is dangerous to the artist himself, as there is now a complete negligence and unawareness among artists, especially regarding their motive for presenting their work, given the current situation. I cannot but wonder: What will happen when the war in Syria ends someday?

**Omar:** I did a lot of traveling in 2010, for personal reasons to Serbia that had just gotten out of a ferocious civil war, which lasted less than the Syrian war but was by no means less bloody. During the Serbian war, many artists from Bosnia and Serbia rose to fame, as well as from neighboring areas that had ties with Yugoslavia. These artists tackled the war, and while some maintained their presence, others vanished completely.

As I mentioned: Syrian artists were able to find themselves. Most Syrian artists are currently in Europe. Those who now have a presence already had an audience before 2011. As for artists who rose to fame in 2011, some were talented and others were not, just like in any other art field. Therefore, while some continued working, others stopped, depending on the field and specific locations in which they operate.

I am not pessimistic about Syrian art itself, nor the continued empathy towards the Syrian demands and the Syrian cause, but I am sure that I will have my answer one day because I strive to do so. I

have taken interest in this cause from the beginning, back when I was a college student. Since then, I have been working on educating and developing myself and my art and I take it very seriously. In reality, the problem is simple as it is essential and fundamental. It defines our future as human beings and determines what will happen to us or how we will live.

**Jumana:** After hearing your answer, I noticed that I wrongly phrased the question regarding the initial problem, which was not about Syrian art alone, but about Syria as a theme for an artist, whether Syrian or not. There are several works on Syria by foreign artists. I particularly remember the famous artist Jonathan Little, who is known for his WW2 stories which he told from a Nazi officer's point of view. He also visited Homs in 2012 and published a book about his trip. There are also several other artists, even in pop culture. The problem could lie in the story of Syria as a theme of art.

**Omar:** I always remember what happened in Yugoslavia, as it is strikingly similar to the Syrian situation, which I had witnessed closely for quite a while. The civil war was the result of religious, confessional, and ideological factors. We often witnessed foreign interference and were impacted by the relationship between different countries around the world, and by the conflict between the USA, Russia, and Europe. They all follow the same mechanisms and methods employed in Syria. The bloodshed is the same and the violence similar.

I always thought about this subject, and about what was going to happen in the future. And then I look at the current events. Last year, we performed in Serbia and then headed to Bosnia. We talked and deliberated with a lot of people. It is where we found the most interaction from the audience, and that is probably because they understood and related to the story, as it is remarkably similar to what they had endured. It was as though they had traveled back in time,

and replayed, in their memory, their own stories and events. How does this reflect on Yugoslavia? It highlights how people can move on from their problems and change and shows that their future lies ahead of them and that life is not over yet.

This example gives a glimmer of hope that not all doors are closed. On the contrary, life goes on, and people are happy now. It is a similar experience that took place not long ago and lasted for a similar period of time. Besides that, tells us the story of art and the old and new generation artists, some of whom are still active until this day.

It is worth mentioning that the only major difference between the Yugoslavian and Syrian situations is that the political works of Yugoslavian artists were much more impactful than those of Syrian artists. They presented high-quality, beautiful and political work, in a powerful, bold, and straightforward way, both in Yugoslavia and abroad. Theater, cinema, and contemporary arts, among others, played a rather effective role at the national and international level. It provides a good example for Syrians artists on how things should proceed. This type of art is very different from relief work. I do not have much information on the developments in non-governmental organizations in this regard, as I do not relate to it.

I personally am not against any kind of activity. On the contrary, I support and approve all works of art. It is of course better for people to continue working. Yes, there are bad shows, but this should not cause any major damage, as long as there are good shows, even if in fewer numbers. The situation was pretty much the same before the war, which didn't cause any problems at the time. What is the current situation like? The national theater present untasteful and uninteresting shows. Why has this become a problem today? Last year, I had a long discussion about refugees in Germany. When people say, "there are a lot of shows about refugees," according to what benchmark has this been determined? Is it related to the number of refugees,

the number of theater performances, or amateur performances in Germany? All of these represent small numbers, in comparison with shows that tackle other themes. All we need is a little awareness and knowledge to contain the problem.

**Jumana:** This statement or critique has provoked many Arab, non-Syrian artists, perhaps because of the status of Arab shows in Europe or non-Arab countries in particular.

**Omar:** Through the experience of war and art, many Lebanese artists rose to fame during the war and tackled that very subject. Today, they are spread all over the world and are in a much better situation than Syrian artists. There is absolutely no room for comparison. Some examples worth mentioning would be Walid Raad, Rabih Marwa, Lina Saneh, and many others who produced high-level art that was also related to the war, and which helped promote their work. I am sure they were aware of that.

**Jumana:** Isn't that related to grants? This makes artists from other countries wish for a disaster to strike their homeland in order for them to be under the spotlight.

**Omar:** The subject of grants is a sensitive one for two main reasons. First, the number of grants offered to Syrian artists was much less than what it was supposed to be. For example, there is the AFAC grant for theater, a well-renowned grant which supports twelve artists every year. The number of Syrian artists who were offered this grant is relatively low. Therefore, I do not see any preference in favor of Syrian artists due to their situation. The grant curators tend to select artists objectively based on the artisanship of their projects. Another aspect that personally bothers me is that support for Syrian artists should be ten times greater of what is currently offered. When I was in Syria, it

was rather easy for me to find a place to rehearse or to secure actors. Today, I have lost everything, and I need ten times the support I needed before. No one wishes to live a disaster; I think we all need to stand in solidarity with one another and cooperate further. There are several shortcomings on that front.

**Jumana:** What is the reason behind that lack of support and empathy towards Syrian artists?

**Omar:** The main reason is political. When it comes to Arab populations, behavioral reasons come into play; Our culture is not familiar with this sense of mutual support and solidarity. On the contrary, in our region, we find that social behavior is rather aggressive and selfish. We are unable to acknowledge one another or the younger generation.

**Jumana:** most of the Arab international channels are no longer interested in broadcasting TV programs that tackle the daily Syrian reality.

**Omar:** This has been the case since the beginning. Everyone working in TV drama is aware of it. The situation is rather clear when it comes to television. It presents purely commercial programs, which aim to reach the highest number of viewers, irrespective of their opinions and backgrounds. The objective in this case is to produce a program that is acceptable to a wide spectrum of people. Therefore, it is better to avoid adopting stances or tackling subjects that people do not want to hear, with the exception of ISIS, as it is a topic that all people agree on and that can be easily exhausted commercially. The Syrian issue, on the other hand, is more complicated and causes a lot of disagreement. It is therefore best to avoid debating it. I find this to be logical, and it is understandable from a cultural perspective. Television is an entertainment tool and should be regarded as such. Art and culture, on the other hand, along with their political essence, are a

much more critical and controversial realms, which take on numerous dimensions.

**Jumana:** You spoke earlier about the audience's reception, how you would address them and the topics to be tackled? You also mentioned language and translation. Of course, there is always the translation of words, but there is also the translation of culture. When you are telling a story that took place in Damascus or Homs for example, you are not only translating the language, but the context of the story as well. And since local references are extremely clear and trivial for us, which perspective do you adopt to determine what should be added, either visually or to the script itself, in order to explain the context to recipients who are mostly non-Syrian?

**Omar:** Your reasoning is on point. We artists do so for sure. It is absolutely normal, and this has been around throughout the history of theater. Theater consists of the relationship between the performer and the recipient. An artist should undoubtedly think of themselves, but they also have to keep the audience in mind. We have enough awareness of the place and the audience to whom we will be presenting. For instance, last year, when I was working on the play "While I Was Waiting", I knew beforehand exactly where and to whom it would be presented. I was aware of the fact that this play would be mostly performed in Europe, and that most of the audience would be foreign. Therefore, this audience requires more information and aiding factors in order to assimilate the play. This is why the show presented an excess of information. The same show was performed in Beirut but was remarkably different than the one showcased in Europe.

Practically speaking, the most challenging obstacle to our current plays is the language. The shows I put together largely depend on the script. At the same time, I think that the translation screen undermines the level and impact of my work. A joke becomes irrelevant and the

idioms unintelligible. This differs from literary translation, where an author has room to think and contemplate. In theater, this luxury is unavailable.

**Jumana:** Do you think you would ever present performances in a foreign language, such as German, English, or French, among others?

**Omar:** I am not entirely sure to be honest, probably in English, as it is an international language and I can speak it fluently. At the moment, I am not thinking about that. I have other concerns, which have to do with the continuity of my work. If I decided to return to Damascus, which is something I am considering, I would not have to work in a foreign language.

**Jumana:** May I ask why you are considering returning to Damascus permanently?

**Omar:** I have my personal reasons. I simply feel happy when I am there. I could do the simple activities that I love.

**Jumana:** Will you stop presenting your shows abroad?

**Omar:** If by that you mean show production, then yes. However, I would not mind recycling shows, as this is what I used to do previously. I used to work in Syria locally, but did not reject any opportunity to present my shows abroad.

**Jumana:** How will you recycle your shows abroad? What about censorship?

**Omar:** This does not represent a hindrance to me. I can work under such conditions and can tolerate censorship. What I am seeking is comfort at a personal and psychological level.

**Jumana:** I cannot help but wonder where your personal experience stands vis-à-vis your general experience in working on your projects. You, Omar, your story and what you have been through, from your days at the Institute until this very moment. How much of yourself is integrated into your artwork? I also wanted to touch base with you on questions related to integration, identity, and the relationship with the new audience, but I believe you have already answered that question.

**Omar:** The majority of my artwork is personal. I am someone who has never appeared on stage, even though the opportunity has presented itself multiple times to me in the past, including when I was working on the play “Antigone” for example, but I did not take the opportunity for art-related reasons.

I only appeared on stage once, as a personal experience. In 2013, I worked with a friend of mine, Sudanese actor Yasser Abdullatif, on the show “Intimacy,” which indirectly tackles his life and story in Damascus. Ayman Al-Agha asked me to play myself, which prompted me to ask myself a few questions.

This is one of the art dilemmas I personally face and attempt to solve as a personal experience and as a body on stage. I still do not know, however, whether I will ever be on stage. It is a complicated technical aspect that revolves around one’s personality, potential, capacity, and desires. As for my personal experience, it is always reflected, whether directly or indirectly, through my work, and that is extremely important for me.

**Jumana:** There is a subject I would like to inquire about. It has to do with content and programming. What do events and cultural activities have to say about Syria? What is the prevailing general narrative regarding the situation in Syria, irrespective of the media narrative, and what is being presented in exhibitions, theaters, etc.?

**Omar:** There could be a general narrative, but I am personally not aware of all of points of view. This narrative perhaps derives from

war. We might not understand what is going on. This discourse is a general and common one, but what I see is an opposition between points of views that reflect the different perceptions of politics and art by people residing abroad. This is highlighted in how I choose the type of show I would like to put together, the artist I would like to host, and why. The artist should clearly express their views on culture, art, and politics. Despite the extensive media coverage, I do not think that it truly reflects the situation on the ground. The world is home to numerous opposing currents in this region which we, ourselves, are part thereof.

**Jumana:** Is the Syrian artist a witness or an observer of what is happening? Assuming they are the victim, according to philosophical and anthropological studies, they are at the heart of the incidents. They are considered the victim and the survivor. It is said that Syrian artists bear witness to history. However, this statement is problematic, particularly in light of writings from WWII onwards, where a lot of effort has been invested into defining the term “witness” as a person who was at the heart of the incident. What is your opinion on that?

**Omar:** Syrian actors, including myself, are at the heart of the problem. We assume the role of witnesses. We are undoubtedly affected, and we react to the incidents we witness. Even if some of us present shows that are relatively unrelated, they are still reactions to the events they have witnessed. The problem lies in the word “witness,” as it gives a sense of lack of involvement, as is the case of a witness in a court of law, talking about what they had seen without partaking in the crime. A witness assumes an innocent position and enjoys peace of mind. We, on the other hand, are accomplices. We bear part of the responsibility. This is why I would rather not be defined as a witness, as it exempts me from any responsibility.

**Jumana:** There is one subject that we have not yet discussed, particularly that you are currently active and are holding shows related to Syria from Europe. In your opinion, how can the recipient, whether French, German or Serbian, who lacks information on the local Syrian context based on which you have organized your show, reflect that onto their own context, stories, history (including the history of the place), and other post-colonial issues? Have you engaged in such discussions with specialists and foreign audiences, including the Serbian audience which you have previously mentioned?

**Omar:** Absolutely, and on so many levels. Following the show in Brussels, discussions with audiences mainly revolved around the relationship between family members there, in comparison with the relationship presented on stage. They felt as though families from both cultures are in fact similar. This encouraged them to ask basic questions regarding social status, family, and the relationship between its members. For specialists, these types of questions and debates are always on the table, depending on the person, their history, and the show they watched. What we have not yet discussed and highlighted is colonialism and the relationship between two cultures. It is a significantly important topic that warrants further discussion. I do not perceive things from the point of view of East and West. The world contains different power hubs that have relations with other, more global rather than geographical hubs.

My perspective is the fruit of my work and personal experiences, rather than reading and research. The matter is different and complex. It is not public, but rather private and stems from different people and trends, which are largely represented in my field. I am currently familiar with all the theaters and who they represent. I no longer see things from a traditional colonial perspective based on the relation between East and West. Nor do I necessarily prefer discussing them based on cultural relationships and using outdated concepts. Take

Orientalism for example. The world has completely shifted, along with the flow of information. Tools that were effective in the past are no longer suitable for measuring today's developments.

Several principles are being rethought, but I also believe that there is continuity in history. Breaking the centrality of European presentation in theater festivals dates back to their foundation some 20 or 30 years ago. Brussel's "Kunsten Festival des Arts" is one of the pioneers in this regard.

This is achieved by welcoming shows from various parts of the world, raising questions regarding art itself, sampling, and taking the audience and its relationship with the show into consideration. This policy has been implemented for some time. What we see today is some sort of continuation. Nowadays, several shows are imported from the Middle East. Although they remain little, Syrian shows have increased in number. Part of this policy came as a result of the unraveling events. As a matter of fact, the latter have imposed themselves, and the audience has questions to ask. The budget was also available at the political level. Therefore, importing such shows, whether in theatre, cinema, or otherwise, can help attract additional or different audiences. For instance, there is a general awareness that numerous Syrian nationals are living abroad. Thus, it would be good to present Syrian shows in order to attract this new audience, in addition to the regulars. I have also personally experienced this. Last year, we presented a show at the "Kunsten Festival des Arts" in Brussels, I should have been presenting at the festival since 2007, as I had been invited to the festival but could not travel at the time.

This is proof of continuity. It is not something new, but rather continuous. Perhaps it has become clearer nowadays, according to a specific way of thought that, as mentioned earlier, breaks European centrality and attempts to host shows from all over the world, all within a clear political and cultural program.

We can also find another type of inward-looking people who refuse to receive anything from the outside world or to listen to a show in a different language. We do not see them as we do not interact with them. But unfortunately, they do exist and represent the majority. Hence, I believe that institutions have changed their point of view. But it is perhaps because they started taking more interest and became more curious or willing to stand in solidarity with others.

All of these humanitarian elements are available and put together at varying degrees. When we say that a theatre festival has imported a show, we are talking about those who work in it and support it. Events are generally organized based on agreements, pressures, or the will of supporting entities and donors. The whole process is significantly complicated. Syrian artists should seek to attend such global events, as this will help improve their level of work and help them understand the modus operandi of the institutions that organize them.

**Jumana:** Could you tell us about how the "While I Was Waiting" show tour was organized? This was particularly striking.

**Omar:** When we were showing "Antigone", we were invited to present the show by the Avignon festival and the Kunsten Festival des Arts. At the same time, I was working on a show together with the Zurich festival, which I had previous ties with, as I had taken part in the Jury in 2012, in cooperation with a different German festival called "Theaterformen." I informed the "Avignon" festival that I wished to work on a new show, instead of presenting "Antigone", and the festival curators agreed following negotiations. At the same time, the curators of the Kunsten Festival des Arts in Brussels agreed to the new show. Thus, I had several upcoming features at different festivals. Moreover, when we were presenting in Marseille, we needed a show producer. Luckily, I was able to find someone who had ties with the Festival di Napoli and who proposed presenting the show there. As for the

remaining features, they consisted of invitations from festival curators who had seen and liked the show. As a matter of fact, the show will be presented at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and in Japan, as managers of these festivals had seen the show and invited us to take part in their festivals.

**Jumana:** What I have noticed is that the more Syrian or Arab shows they watch, the more opportunities there are for project owners and others, as a result of the curiosity this generates.

**Omar:** Of course, this is the case all over the world. The more artists there are, the more room there is for their peers. However, the participation of Syrian artists remains low in number, even though they do not lack any capacities or qualifications. Perhaps it is because we are inward-looking people and that the receiving audience is scarce.

**Jumana:** We are, however, acquiring new working mechanisms as artists and cultural producers. I believe we have progressed rather quickly. As you have mentioned, some people are lucky, having had ties and cooperated with foreign cultural centers in the past. This probably explains why they have progressed more than others.

**Omar:** There are indeed supporting factors that come into play, but what I meant was that we need to work more and provide more opportunities for others. The more shows we put together, the more results we achieve. We need to think positively and avoid conspiracy theories. We have to focus our energy on improving our performance. We do not lack artistic capacities, but our production mechanisms still fall behind. Artists do not have enough experience to utilize them in creating major works that rise up to the level of large festivals. Major institutions are also not providing enough support in this regard.

**Jumana:** Perhaps this issue has to do with post-colonialism. In other terms, why is difficult, or nearly impossible for some individuals from certain regions around the world to produce a movie or a show, or to be able to go on tours, or sell a project to a prominent TV channel?

**Omar:** What I have previously mentioned partly answers your question. In addition, our way of life in Syria has not allowed us to come up with the concept of production companies, contracts, and financial and administrative transactions that allow us to work. For instance, in order to be able to sell a show, I have to have a bank account, and the state should have tax agreements with other countries. This is not the case in Syria. There are also other major problems we and other people who live in a similar situation face. In Iran for instance, the same economic problem prevails. People always have to rely on European mediums, which have contributed to bolstering their artistic level. The same goes for us Syrians. We now rely on European mediators and try to establish intermediary, albeit non-original, companies. However, we still lack contemporary production mechanisms. This is the essence of the art industry that we lack. As we no longer have production companies and lack the necessary intermediaries, we can no longer work.

**Jumana:** The number of Syrian artistic works on the international scene is much less than it should be, given the situation in Syria. The prevailing shortcomings are not only due to the lack of international support, but also to local production expertise. Thank you Omar Abou Saada for this discussion.

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