

Press Quotes:

"A fascinating and clever play, revisiting a Middle Eastern literary masterpiece, offering rare insight into a critical period and exploring how the two resonate in today's volatile world... It is powerful stuff."

Sarah Hemming, THE FINANCIAL TIMES

"Explosive, gutsy and brilliantly acted... It cuts deep"

Emma John, TIME OUT

-"The constantly flowing images that make up this piece are like shards of a broken mirror offering vivid glimpses into a Middle Eastern past and reflecting back to us our present. "

-"The resonances emerge powerfully... its eloquence is visceral and visual."

Sam Marlowe, THE TIMES

"A strange, almost hallucinatory sequence of theatrical power and beauty."

"Swirling images, a brilliant mix of video and eerie soundscape, and a use of the space that makes it feel as if the whole production is bleeding at the edges."

Lyn Gardner, THE GAURDIAN

"*The Mirror for Princes* is inventively staged, ferociously acted... through it, Al-Bassam asserts the power of stories themselves to bring about destruction - or creation."

Marina Warner, THE NEW STATESEMAN



The Mirror for Princes (Kalila Wa Dimna)

By SARAH HEMMING

Published: May 17 2006 03:00 |

The Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam chose to write *The Mirror for Princes* in English, fearing that if he wrote it in Arabic it would be denied a stage life because of the incendiary subject matter. English audiences should be grateful for his decision for a more mundane reason: were it in Arabic, I think we would have lost the plot completely. **It is a fascinating and clever play, revisiting a Middle Eastern literary masterpiece, offering rare insight into a critical period and exploring how the two resonate in today's volatile world.**

The piece is set in Iraq in about AD750, during the birth of the Abbasid revolution. As an empire emerges that will hold away for four centuries, so too literature: *The Mirror For Princes* by the poet Ibn Al-Muqaffa. As we meet him, Muqaffa is translating these ancient animal fables, intended as a book of advice for kings, from Persian into Arabic. He creates a beautifully written and profound piece of literature about the ethical conduct of rulers. His genius gets him a place at court, where the Calipha (ruler) finds counsel in the tales. But around Muqaffa's allegorical arguments for justice and peace, bloodshed and turmoil reign. His work starts being interpreted as a justification for slaughter and ultimately as a means of sanctioning his own murder.

The play shows the fate that has often befallen writers who oppose authority and explores the power struggles endemic to empire-building. As Muqaffa composes his "mirror for princes", so the play holds up a mirror to modern times, inviting today's world leaders to scrutinise their own conduct. **It is powerful stuff, given strong performances**, particularly by Neil Edmond as a witty, troubled Muqaffa and Simon Kane as a terrifyingly unpredictable Calipha. But it is also very dense. Performers write useful dates and place names on transparent screens, but at times this can just distract. There is much to take away here, but be prepared to work hard.

TIME OUT *****

The Mirror for Princes

Until May 27, [Barbican Centre](#)

Explosive, gutsy and brilliantly acted, Sulayman Al-Bassam's play is a must for anyone whose knowledge of Arabic literature begins and ends with '1001 Arabian Nights'.

Set in first-century Iraq, when pre-emptive strikes and political insurgencies were nothing new, Al-Bassam's play follows the story of Ibn Al-Muqaffa, a Persian poet whose name has endured thanks to his collection of animal fables, *Kalila Wa Dimna*. Bedtime reading for rulers, these jungle stories were actually politically charged allegories drawn from Muqaffa's own increasingly precarious experiences of a corrupt and bloodthirsty court.

Consciously echoing the powerplay and rich language of Shakespeare's histories, writer-director Al-Bassam creates an oppressive atmosphere on a set dominated by words, whether it's the Arabic surtitles or the notes being scribbled on the large Perspex chalkboards that dominate the design. Muqaffa is a timid hero, with only his wit and banter to protect him from the swords of his enemies, and Neil Edmonds makes him a thoroughly appealing one as he falls in love with Asia, a young revolutionary, and takes his first dangerous steps into the court on her account. 'We need you to stay alive,' she tells him. 'Excellent,' he replies, 'we have lots in common already.'

The more Muqaffa's star rises, the more he is in peril. Sworn against him is Sufyan, a jealous courtier who matches Muqaffa's skill in poetry with an equal gift for violence. There is adamantium-strong support in a doubled-up ensemble, none more so than Simon Kane who portrays both the newly crowned Al-Mansour, twitching with paranoia, and Muqaffa's ally, the blind poet Bashar. And Nigel Barrett's intemperate Sufyan is terrifying, becoming ever more animalistic until he is the scratching, licking beast of Muqaffa's tale. A discordant and frenzied climax doesn't quite deliver, but this is still **an evening that cuts deep.**

(Emma John, Mon May 15)

The Times *****

The Mirror for Princes

SAM MARLOWE AT BARBICAN PIT

(<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,14936-2175665.html>)

A semi-naked man bathes himself, spluttering and grunting, in blood; others growl and tussle on the ground like dogs. A kneeling woman weeps bitterly, and a sinister black-clad figure with the head of a jackal moves, impervious and watchful, among them. **The constantly flowing images that make up this piece presented by the Kuwait-based company Sulayman Al-Bassam theatre are like shards of a broken mirror offering vivid glimpses into a Middle Eastern past and reflecting back to us our present.**

The Mirror for Princes, written and directed by Al-Bassam, is inspired by stories that originated in India around 200 BC. They travelled to Persia and centuries later, by way of translation by a Persian writer, Ibn Al-Muqaffa, penetrated the powerful heart of the Arab world. These were animal fables intended to provide instructive parables for rulers, and they are here placed against the events of Al-Muqaffa's own fraught existence in 8th-century revolutionary Iraq.

With the country chafing under the Muslim rule of the riven and ruthless Abbasid caliphate, treachery, oppression, insurrection and sectarianism are rife. Al-Muqaffa is in love with Asia, the daughter of an Abbasid general. He wishes to marry her and is prepared to convert to Islam to do so; but her father will accept the proposal only if Al-Muqaffa will act as spy on his behalf at the court in Basra. He agrees and so seals his own fate.

The piece is dense and complex, so much so that it is sometimes frustratingly hard to follow. But if some of the historical detail is difficult to absorb, **the resonances emerge powerfully.** As the Abbasids set about building their triumphant holy city of Baghdad, Iraq drowns in gore. The play ends with a distraught Asia, who is haunted by terrifying visions of malevolent animals, delivering a chilling prediction of violence to come, while Baghdad burns with celebratory fires that presage the flames of contemporary warfare. Julia Bardsley's designs, which frame the action with reflective screens, gauzy black drapes and video imagery, add to the sense of a collision between ancient and modern, and the work is engagingly acted by a hard-working cast. It needs more focus and clarity; but **its eloquence is visceral and visual.**

The Guardian

The Mirror for Princes

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/review/0,,1774020,00.html>

Lyn Gardner

Saturday May 13, 2006

[The Guardian](#)

A few years back, Anglo-Kuwati director and writer Sulayman Al-Bassam scored a hit with *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, an intriguing Middle Eastern take on Hamlet. This latest piece is probably best described as a heroic failure. **Its final 20 minutes are extraordinary, as every aspect of the production comes together in a strange, almost hallucinatory sequence of theatrical power and beauty.** But the wait for this is long.

For most of the evening I felt as if I were fighting my way through an impenetrable forest where all the signposts are in a code I couldn't crack. Even with the help of a two-page synopsis, I kept getting lost. Inspired by the fables of the Persian-born writer Ibn Al-Muqaffa, one of the great works of classical Arabic literature, this piece focuses on the creation of the stories in Iraq circa 750AD, which as now was an era of unrest and revolution.

The self-deprecating writer finds himself caught in the conflicts between revolution and reform, and kings and courtiers, only gradually becoming fully aware that the pen can be mightier than the sword. "I sharpen it every morning," he tells the woman he loves. In the end, the only way he can be silenced is by death. The image of a man walled up in a graffiti-strewn glass box is one of the great moments of the evening, and speaks eloquently of writers who are censored and silenced everywhere. But for too long you are trapped between an indifferently acted and plodding historical drama and a multi-layered story laden with signs and symbols.

Still, at its climax, **the show finds its voice in swirling images, a brilliant mix of video and eerie soundscape, and a use of the space that makes it feel as if the whole production is bleeding at the edges.**

MARINA WARNER IN THE NEW STATESMAN (5/06/06)

newstatesman

Through the looking glass

Marina Warner

Monday 5th June 2006

<http://www.newstatesman.com/200606050036>

The oriental roots of Mickey Mouse and Brer Rabbit are a well-kept secret. But for centuries animal fables have bridged the divide between east and west, finds **Marina Warner**.

The celebrated polemic that Edward Said mounted in his 1978 study *Orientalism* has come under heavy artillery recently, and his attackers, in their often abusively personal animus against Said (Christopher de Bellaigue in the *Times Literary Supplement* takes a swipe at his *shoes*), do less than justice to an argument that his oeuvre develops - an alternative story about intercultural exchange and influence over *une longue durée*, as displayed so vividly in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. Said's thinking about culture enriched the polemical thrust of *Orientalism*, evolving his thinking and giving it nuance: I once went to hear him lecture at Cambridge on Berlioz's *Troyens* fully expecting scathing comments about the representation of Trojan barbarians (subalterns), but, instead, he dwelt admiringly on the opera's musical perfections.

There is a counter-narrative about the Orient and western culture, one opposed to hostility and greed as the operating dynamics of culture. It traces the mutual interrelationship of literature, stressing this symbiosis against ideas of ethnic fingerprinting and cultural clash. In this respect, Brer Rabbit and Mickey Mouse are the descendants of the jackal Dimna and his friends in the 8th-century Arabic story cycle *The Mirror for Princes*, also known as *Kalila wa Dimna* (Kalila and Dimna) after its animal protagonists. It reprises many of Aesop's fables, and both collections descend from a Persian version, itself deriving ultimately from the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, written in the 2nd century BCE. La Fontaine, the defining ironist of French worldly wisdom, willingly admitted his dependence on both Aesop and *Kalila wa Dimna*, but few people know that proverbial chestnuts about cunning and folly, such as "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing", "The Ass in the Lion's Skin", "The Raven and the Swan", "The Tortoise and the Eagle" or "The Lion and the Mouse", have non-western origins.

The animal fable as a principle of civilisation appears under the name of many western philosophers and moralists, including Swift and Voltaire. Ros Ballaster, in her study *Fabulous Orient: fictions of the east in England 1662-1785*, cites a wonderful example of such storytelling in action from the *Spectator* of 1712, where the essayist Joseph Addison relates how a cunning vizier tells his tyrannous sultan that he's been taught by a dervish how to understand the speech of birds. They spot a pair of owls haunting a ruin, and the sultan challenges his vizier to listen and report back on what they are saying. So the vizier approaches the birds, but comes back prevaricating and saying that he dare not tell his master. The sultan insists, naturally, and with a great show of reluctance the vizier tells him that the owls are discussing the marriage of their son and daughter, and they are bargaining over the dowry. The father of the groom demands fifty ruined villages. The father of the bride retorts that fifty is nothing; he will lavish on her five hundred. And the bird then blesses the sultan: "Long life to Sultan Mahmoud! While he reigns over us we shall never want for ruined villages."

When the vizier relays this to the sultan, the sultan is ashamed - so the story claims - and restores the places he has destroyed, ceasing to ravage his people. Addison remarks that "among all the different Ways of giving Counsel, I think the finest, and that which pleases the most universally, is *Fable* . . ."

The fabulist's art of covert political persuasion in a strategic effort to survive has returned strongly to the public arena: telling a story about cross-currents, encounters, imitation and

"PRESS DOSSIER 'KALILA WA DIMNA; THE MIRROR FOR PRINCES
SULAYMAN AL-BASSAM THEATRE
www.albassamtheatre.com

exchange between Muslim and other groups in history has inspired Middle East Now, a very full programme of art and activities at the British Museum, as well as the hugely ambitious Festival of Muslim Cultures, taking place nationwide over the coming year. (Its programme includes the play version of *The Mirror for Princes* as well as the exhibition "Bellini and the East", currently at the National Gallery.) Both have Middle Eastern money behind them - from Gulf states including Saudi Arabia - as well as, in the case of the festival, the backing of the Home Office and other UK supporters such as Prince Charles.

Storytellers offer "a place for the wise man to find himself", Walter Benjamin writes in his essay "The Storyteller", picking up a thread in the most ancient ideas about narrative. The act of telling has some part to play in enlightening the listener, and the narrator usually has a very important stake in the outcome. *A Thousand and One Nights* moves through a labyrinth of tales to lift the misogyny of the sultan who is poised to cut off the head of the storyteller, Scheherazade - and, eventually, it succeeds. These ancient stories strive to persuade in order for the storyteller to survive. Scheherazade is the most famous, but Aesop's biography - an imaginary Byzantine romance - also tells how he manages by the cunning of his tongue to emancipate himself from slavery.

Ibn al-Muqaffa, writer and courtier, a Zoroastrian-turned-Muslim, was the translator into Arabic of *The Mirror for Princes*; the Kuwaiti playwright/director Sulayman al-Bassam has placed him as the storyteller at the centre of his ambitious staged version. Al-Muqaffa practised the courtly art of fabulism with success for a time, and in his play, al-Bassam has braided together al-Muqaffa's rise with parables of statecraft featuring the rascally jackal Dimna and the loyal Ox, whom he shafts to rise in favour with his ruler, the Lion. Al-Muqaffa enciphered through these fables the ferocious struggles of the medieval Abbasid conquerors who established their fabulously wealthy tyranny over Baghdad and Basra in 750CE. Al-Bassam previously created *The al-Hamlet Summit*, and *The Mirror for Princes* also rings with Shakespearean power struggles (especially from *Macbeth* and *King Lear*) as we watch al-Muqaffa gradually lose influence over his prince, until he is imprisoned, tortured and killed on stage in a scene that recalls present-day horrors. Animal fables are intrinsically comic, however, and they don't really go with a Jacobean gorefest; masking and busking and puppetry (all brought into play by the production) also struggle against the passionate tirades declaimed by the international cast, and the lofty allegory that is being sought. ***The Mirror for Princes* is inventively staged, ferociously acted,** but baffling: who here is ruining the villages? **Mirrored screens bracket the action throughout, reflecting the audience and making us part of the action. But are we perpetrators? Victims? Is this a view from the Gulf of the war in Iraq now? Are the atrocity-drunk Abbasids vehicles for Saddam Hussein's regime? For the Americans and ourselves now? Or yet others in the conflict?** The play ends with a long, chilling curse on the city and people of Baghdad, spoken by the lover of Ibn al-Muqaffa, weightily named Asia.

As I left the Barbican after the London production, I saw the Iraqi ambassador's dark, shuttered car whisk away into the night, a police car latched on to it so closely it looked as if it were being towed. What effect does al-Bassam want to have - could he have - on this prince, on this listener? **In the midst of the complexities of Gulf politics, past and present, the shaping persuasion of his narrative remains inscrutable,** his mirror clouding up for me as soon as I wiped it. Except for one argument: about the power of stories themselves to bring about destruction - or creation. ***The Mirror for Princes* asserts the fabulist's *raison d'être*, to speak and survive, with possibly uncomfortable political consequences for al-Bassam himself.**

The Mirror for Princes runs between 12 and 17 June at the Oxford Playhouse, Beaumont Street, Oxford OX1 (01865 305 305). [<http://www.oxfordplayhouse.com>]
Phantasmagoria: spirit visions, metaphors and media by Marina Warner is published by Oxford University Press in October (£18.99)

Kalila wa Dimna: the animals

The lion and the ox Two friends between whom the crafty jackals Kalila and Dimna sow dissension.

The crane An envious character who tries to hunt like a hawk. As a result, he gets stuck in the mud.

The weasel Fights off a snake to save the life of a child. For his pains, he is killed by the child's over-hasty father.

The tortoise Hard-headed, he refuses to take the advice of his wise friends, the geese. 🐢

Kalila Wa Dimna - The Mirror For Princes

<http://writerspace.net>

Thursday, June 22nd, 2006 in [theatre](#)



The following is an account and brief analysis of a performance of Kalila Wa Dimna I saw on the 26th of May 2006. This is a more lengthy post than usual, and it has been quite some time in the making, but I feel it is warranted here to do even the slightest justice to what was a rich and complex performance.

Kalila Wa Dimna (The Mirror for Princes) was performed by [Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre Company](#) at the [Barbican Pit](#) from the 10th to the 27th of May, before going on to the Oxford Playhouse. The play was written and directed by Anglo-Kuwaiti Sulayman Al-Bassam in collaboration with designer and video artist Julia Bardsley, assistant director and performer Nigel Barrett (also a member of the Shunt Collective), lighting designer Chahine Yavroyan, and music composer/performer Lewis Gibson.

Before getting to the discussion about specific parts of the production, I want to explain the basic plot and background history to the play.

- **Background & Plot**

The play opens at the dawn of the Abbasid Revolution (750 AD) and ends just after the murder of the play's main character, the court scribe and creator of the Kalila Wa Dimna tales, Ibn Al-Muqaffa (circa 759-762 AD). According to the [entry in Wikipedia](#), 'Abbasid' (Arabic: **العباسيون** Abbāsīyūn) was the:

dynastic name generally given to the caliphs of Baghdad, the second of the two great Sunni dynasties of the Islamic empire, that overthrew the Umayyad caliphs from all but Spain. It seized power in 750, when it finally defeated the Umayyads in battle, and flourished for two centuries, but slowly went into decline with the rise to power of the Turkish army they had created, the Mamluks. Within 150 years of gaining power across Iran they were forced to cede power to local dynasties who only nominally acknowledged their power and cede the Maghreb to independent Aghlabids. Their rule was finally ended in 1258, when Hulagu Khan, the Mongol conqueror, sacked Baghdad. While they continued to claim authority in religious matters from their base

in Egypt, the dynasty's secular authority had ended. Descendants of the Abbasids live in modern day Iraq.

Amidst the Abbasid revolutionary fever that has spread throughout Iraq and neighbouring lands, the poet/scribe Ibn Al-Muqaffa and his fellow poet Bashar are walking through the streets of Basra where a grand, bloodlust reception for the first Calipha Al-Saffah and his elder brother Al-Mansour is being prepared by the governor of Basra, Sulaiman, and the scheming courtier Sufyan. Sufyan intercepts the wandering scribes and challenges their presence as Persian imposters, but Al-Muqaffa's alluring rhetoric wins Sulaiman's approval and grants them safe passage. Asia, cousin of Al-Mansour follows Al-Muqaffa and persuades him that he is needed in Basra to rally the people through the 'power of the pen' against the brutal Calipha and his general who threaten the lives of Umayyid sympathisers. Muqaffa is rapt by Asia's beauty and desires her love, but Asia is defiant and says "only in Basra would I love you". Her plea is for Muqaffa to infiltrate the Calipha's ranks and use the power of his stories to quell the tyrannical regime from the inside. Thus the fables of Kalila Wa Dimna become a political weapon, with a chance to change the political landscape. The history behind the Kalila Wa Dimna tales is complex and the entry in Wikipedia gives a mere whistle-stop tour of their history:

Kalilag and Damnag in Syriac or **Kalila wa Dimna** كليلة و دمنة in Arabic, is the name of the translation into Syriac of the Sanskrit Panchatantra literary work of fables originating in India. It was translated to Pahlavi Persian then into Syriac, then into Arabic, and from there to European languages. Thomas Irving (1980) further states that from North Africa the stories were carried south to Sub-saharan Africa, and on to North America by African slaves.

The book is about symbolic wisdom fables put in the mouths of animals. All the tales have a moral message, and many have a political undertone.

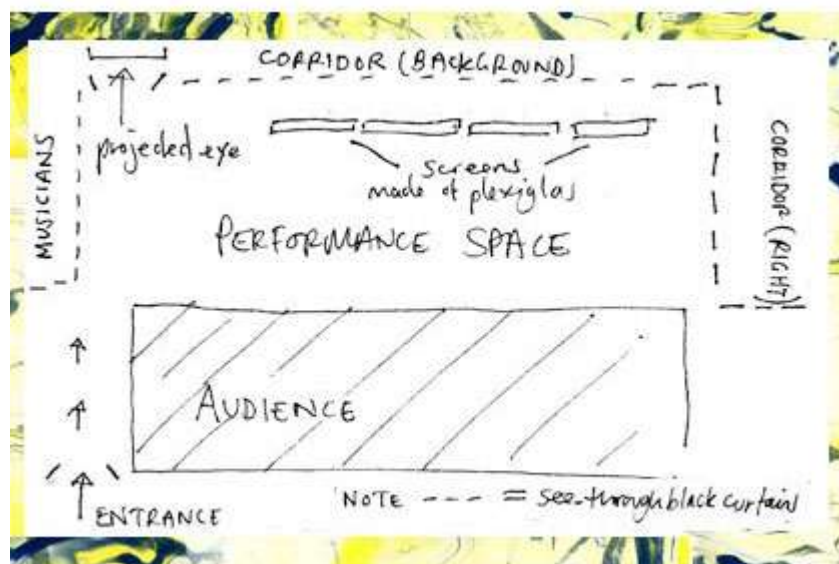
Two main figures are the jackals Kalila and Dimna (Sanskrit: *Karataka and Damanaka*). The main narrator is the philosopher (*Hakim*) Bidpai (Arabic: *Baydaba*, French *Pilpay*), who is asked for a fable by the king Dabshalim.

Later on in the play and Muqaffa has become the official court scribe and advisor to the Calipha. Al-Mansour demands a performance of Kalila Wa Dimna in honour of the military high-commander, Abu Muslim, but the performance is sabotaged and Abu Muslim killed. Al-Muqaffa is told by Asia that in one of her 'visions' his writing will cause a revolution and bring with it 'the real religion' and 'the real empire'. In reaction to her vision, Muqaffa pleads with the Calipha to retire from the court and take leave. This request is denied and Muqaffa and Asia are kept in a room under surveillance and forced to finish the animal fables. Muqaffa hears that his tales are spreading amongst the people, and the political messages are beginning to take root, just as in Asia's vision, but before Muqaffa can witness the effect of his words, he is summoned to court by Sufyan (now Governor of Basra) who tries Muqaffa for heresy

and Muqaffa is murdered. Asia and Bashar continue to spread the tales after Muqaffa's death in an attempt to put an end to Al-Mansour's empire.

- **The Space**

Entering the space, the first impression I got was one of 'depth' and 'energy'. The sense of depth came from the very simple yet effective use of black, gauze-like curtains drawn around the three sides of the stage (see the rough diagram from my notebook below). A simple change in lighting state would allow the curtains to invite or block the audience's gaze, adding the potential for distinctive 'background' and 'foreground' layers to the performance. Sometimes these background 'corridors' were inhabited by the performers, sometimes they were the object of video projections and/or puppet and mask scenes, but by isolating parts of the space in this way and superimposing them as alternate layers to the whole performance canvas, the audience experienced alternate, meta-theatrical narratives that ran parallel to the play's main story and action. Pluralism of action in space, in my view, is a pillar of any living, breathing theatre - it is part of the definition of a theatre 'environment'. Part of the reason for this is the way we perceive life as pluralistic - in any given situation there are a multitude of facets and angles, life is 'chaotic' in essence and exists in stark contrast to minimalism or singularity which is a man-made and heavily contrived state only sustainable and effective in short, sharp bursts. Finding the balance between the two states is vital in all art forms, and Kalila Wa Dimna is in that sense a well balanced piece.



The impression of 'energy' came from the live musicians tucked away behind the curtains stage left. Their space was small and barely lit by pilot lights; the effect was almost cave-like, a 'cave' in which the audience caught the occasional glimpse of silhouettes concocting mesmeric sounds. Live music, and the inclusion of the musician in performance is another pillar of the living, breathing theatre environment. Recorded sound is equally as valuable in contributing to the world of a performance, but by cancelling out the human source of the music we are stripping away another

layer of the kernel of theatre: the experience of other people telling a story - and music is like language, another storytelling device that covers the gamut of human emotion. I would have liked to see even more inclusion of the musicians in this piece, perhaps with heightened lighting states that bring the musicians into focus at key points.

- **Performance ‘Memory’**

In the main performance space there were four mirror-like (but transparent) movable screens arranged side by side, with a rough contour map of the Middle East, from Saudi Arabia to Iraq inscribed on them from the beginning. These screens not only served as a changing dynamic in the architecture of the main performance space, but they became locus of ‘performance memory’ - silent and statuesque.

As the play evolved, the ‘Jackal’, a wandering character wearing a full-faced black jackal mask, ‘orchestrated’ the history of the performance by writing pivotal words, expressions and diagrams from the play, over the screens, so that by the end of the performance when the screens were lined up right at the front of the stage and a beam of light moved slowly across them, the audience had one last look at the ‘memory’ of the play. It felt almost like a testament or epitaph to the life of the performance, a statement reminding us that life exists within the walls of this theatre and it is worthy of celebration and remembrance just as it is on the outside. I have seen the device of writing on stage used time and time again in performance, but never with this level of focus and integration into the piece as a whole. In *Kalila* the inscriptions enhance the environment, they bring texture to the set, and meaning to play, and they form the leitmotif of the power of the written word.

- **The mythical dimension**

The tales of *Kalila Wa Dimna* are “animal fables spun around the two Jackals and their dealings in the court of their king - the Lion. They are stories within stories; each tale unfolding and leading another beast’s dilemma, anecdote, tribulation.” (Excerpt from the Programme) The concept of a story within a story is what prompts the multitude of layers in Sulayman’s *Kalila*, not only physical layers with action in space but also psychological layers within characters and overlapping stories. One clear example of this is the Jackal character. This is a silent character, fully masked and dressed in black that roams freely around the space, at times intervening in the action in the main space by moving objects or simply watching other characters and, as mentioned before, by writing on the screens. The Jackal was extracted from the original *Kalila* tales, which feature a pair of Jackals, and personified/physicalised on stage. The form of this figure with its dark and mysterious demeanour, and the iconic shape of the mask was reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian god Anubis:



“The jackal-god of mummification, he assisted in the rites by which a dead man was admitted to the underworld. Anubis was worshipped as the inventor of embalming and who embalmed the dead Osiris and thereby helping to preserve him that he might live again.

Anubis is portrayed as a man with the head of a jackal holding the divine sceptre carried by kings and gods; as simply a black jackal or as a dog accompanying Isis. His symbol was a black and white ox-hide splattered with blood and hanging from a pole. It's meaning is unknown.

Anubis had three important functions. He supervised the embalming of bodies. He received the mummy into the tomb and performed the Opening of the Mouth ceremony and then conducted the soul in the Field of Celestial Offerings. Most importantly though, Anubis monitored the Scales of Truth to protect the dead from deception and eternal death.”(Quote taken from www.egyptianmyths.net)

Through its recurring appearance in ancient mythologies, from Egypt to India and probably other cultures too, the presence of the Jackal on stage is in some ways the representation of an archetype; a figure whose primary function may not be fully understood by the spectator (and indeed does not require the ‘infliction’ of clarity) but whose form with its mythological ramifications conjurs emotions that relate to a deeper/spiritual side of humanity. Thus, for me, the Jackal became a hinge between the animal tales of Kalila Wa Dimna being recounted and discussed on stage and the evocation of an underworld, a darker mythical element in the performance.

- **Poetry, formalism and anachronism**

Given the depth and multi-faceted nature of most elements I have discussed so far, it is unsurprising that the language of the play should also operate with varying modes and layers. The overall feel of the language was archaic in its formalism, deeply poetic with constant recourse to metaphor and simile and an acute awareness of rhyme and rhythm, and contrasted with moments of ‘anachronistic’ speech (in the sense of it feeling distinctly modern), especially from Muqaffa in his asides and casual dialogue with characters such as Asia and Bashar.

Two of the most arresting metaphorical images that remained in my mind after the performance were as follows. The first was in Act 1 scene 3:

IBN AL-MUQAFFA’: Three things are perilous: entrusting yourself to a woman, and be-friending Kings.

ASIA: What’s the third?

IBN AL-MUQAFFA': Testing poison for strength.

Particularly the last line quoted here, which for me portended to Muqaffa's fate; his words become his own poison that out-do him in strength.

The second was in Act 5 scene 5:

IBN AL-MUQAFFA': Palace. The perimeter is the halo and the palace is God.

BASHAR: Why is it on fire?

IBN AL-MUQAFFA': To see it! They used ropes of wool doused in tar. The sky is orange.

BASHAR: Black night opened its wreaking orange gob
Wide as an oven stoked on poor human sods!

Without the changes in register of language and the contrast they created in performance, this text could have suffered from being over-dense, but instead Al-Bassam never allows the audience to get too 'comfortable' with one style or tone and in this sense the language of the play has its own dynamic within the overall performance.

- **Multimedia**



As I mentioned in the beginning, this performance was the result of a collaboration between artists, one of whom brought a fascinating visual depth the piece through the use of video and image projections, this was [Julia Bardsley](#). Most notable were the projections of Arabic writing over the whole stage during major transitions, these moments worked as the 'glue' that held the hinges of the play together; then there was the more isolated video projection of a human eye - a very simple but strikingly evocative moment in the flow of the play. The eye, when seen up-close, has a rhythmical, mesmeric quality with the batting of the eyelid and the retraction/dilation of the pupil, it is also symbolic of the gaze - watching and being watched in a surveillance state and finally it represents the archetype of the all-seeing, omniscient god. In the latter sense the eye in *Kalila* reminded me of the great eye that appears between the hills of Hiroshima in Kurosawa's last film *Rhapsody in August* - it is the eye of the storm, of destruction, but also of knowledge and power.

- **Final Word**

I'd like to extend my thanks to Sulayman for his kind consideration and invitation to the performance. You will be able to see his latest piece of work, [The Baghdad Richard](#) as part of the RSC Complete Shakespeare Season from 08-17 February 2007 at the Swan Theatre Stratford-Upon-Avon.

Tags: [animal tales](#), [Barbican Pit](#), [Chahine Yavroyan](#), [fables](#), [Iraq](#), [jackal](#), [Julia Bardsley](#), [Kalila Wa Dimna](#), [Lewis Gibson](#), [Nigel Barrett](#), [Sulayman Al Bassam](#), [The Mirror For Princes](#), [theatre](#), [Zaoum](#)



قراءة الحاضر عو التاريخ

مسرحية «كليلة ودمنة» على خشبة الباربيكان

لندن: لؤي عبد الإله

حينما ذهبتُ لحضور أول عرض لهذه المسرحية يوم 10 مايو (ايار)، ظننت أنها ستدور حول حكايات كليلة ودمنة. وهي كما قرأها الكثير منا خلال مراحل عديدة من حياتنا، تقدم عبر الحكاية الرمزية التي يكون أبطالها حيوانات مختلفة الحكمة والنصيحة، وهي موجهة أكثر للملوك آنذاك مما هي للعامة وأصلها هندي، ثم ترجمت إلى الفارسية ليأخذها عبد الله بن المقفع ويترجمها إلى العربية بأسلوب رصين ومتحرر من ثقل السجع، مكتشفاً أبعاداً جديدة للنثر العربي. لكن المسرحية التي قدمت في لندن على مسرح الباربيكان كانت حول الكاتب نفسه، وحول تلك السنوات العشر الأولى منذ بروز الدولة العباسية عام 750 ميلادية و عام 759. وإذا كان هناك خط سردي يتابع الأحداث في حياة المقفع، الذي احتل موقع كاتب البلاط في زمن أبو جعفر المنصور، ثاني خليفة عباسي ومؤسس بغداد، فإننا نتابع أيضاً ما يعنيه تأسيس تلك الدولة التي استمرت حوالي خمسة قرون. فمع بروزها على أنقاض الدولة الأموية، طال العنف أولاً أولئك المثقفين الذين كانوا يتعاونون مع الأمويين، مثل عبد الحميد الكاتب، الذي خدم آخر ملك أموي. حيث يتم قتله في أول مشهد من المسرحية. وإذا كان ابن المقفع على استعداد للتضحية بحياته لإنقاذ صديقه، فإنه في الوقت نفسه يتقبل منطوق ذلك العصر. فهو يقول حينما يخبره عبد الحميد بمقتل عدد من المثقفين وتلون دجلة بالأحمر لثلاثة أيام: «إنها ليست حرباً، إنها مجرد ثورة صغيرة، ومعها يتم قطع رؤوس قليلة».

في وضع ابن المقفع كمتروجم لـ«كليلة ودمنة» وكاتب للوالي عيسى بن علي خلال تلك المرحلة الحرجة، إشكال عميق. فهو عليه أن يصطف مع سيده في مؤامراته لتصفية خصومه السياسيين، من عمه عبد الله بن علي إلى والي خراسان أبو مسلم الخراساني، الذي كان وراء انطلاق الثورة ضد الأمويين. وفي مساعي ابن المقفع لتحقيق الإصلاح وإنفاذ من يمكن إنقاذه من القتل وقع ضحية بيد أبو جعفر المنصور، ولم يكن صعباً إصاق تهمة الزندقة به لتقطيع جسده. لكن العرض لا يكتفي بسرد الحكاية عبر المشاهد المتتالية، بل هناك إمتاع بصري وموسيقي مع مزج ما بين فصول من حكايات كليلة ودمنة تنقل بالعربية وتترجم على شاشة بالإنجليزية أو بالعكس، إضافة إلى استخدام أقنعة الحيوانات ليهدم الفاصل بين جنود الخليفة وأبطال «كليلة ودمنة». مع مسرح سليمان البسام تتداخل وسائل التعبير المختلفة، ويتداخل ما هو متخيل وفتنازي مع ما هو واقعي. إضافة إلى ترك مساحات لذاكرة المتلقي لملء الفراغات التي يتركها النص. هنا يصبح المسرح كرنفالا حقيقياً يخاطب حواس المشاهد البصرية والسمعية أيضاً إضافة إلى مخيلته ومنطقه. ما أوحى به هذه المسرحية بشكل غير مباشر، هو ما يجري في العراق. فكان بناء دولة جديدة بعد انهيار سابقتها عمل يتسم بالكثير من الشرور والقسوة، وما نواجهه اليوم هو صورة عما ساد في بداية تشكل الدولة العباسية. ولعل بناء بغداد والإشارة إليها في المسرحية هي ربط بما يجري حالياً فيها. وهنا ينهل البسام من شكسبير ومسرحياته التاريخية، التي سعت إلى قراءة الحاضر من خلال شخصيات تنتمي إلى الماضي، وهذا ما يجعلنا نتلمس حضور شكسبير في أعماله المختلفة، مثل مسلسل الملوك السابقين لبريطانيا أو للأباطرة الرومانيين. كذلك فإن البسام سبق له أن اقتبس وأخرج مسرحية هاملت لشكسبير وقدمها بالعربية بعنوان «قمة آل هاملت» وفيها طوع النص لقراءة الحاضر العربي الحالي. ما هو جديد في فرقة سليمان البسام، هي أنها تضم ممثلين من بريطانيا والعالم العربي، وتشارك في صياغة أعماله قدرات عديدة في مجالات الفنون البصرية والسمعية من أكثر من بلد. وكأن الهدف من وراء ذلك هو استثمار كل ما أنجز من خبرات ومهارات في التجربة المسرحية العالمية الحديثة في تطوير التجربة المسرحية العربية. حصلت هذه الفرقة على جوائز كثيرة خلال السنوات الأخيرة، فقد فازت بجائزة ادنبرة مسرح الضواحي Fringe Theatre بينما فازت بأحسن إنتاج وأحسن إخراج في مهرجان القاهرة الدولي.



الأربعاء غرة صفر 1427هـ - 1 مارس

حاصلا على جائزة الدولة التشجيعية، ومشاركا في مهرجانات أدنبرة والقاهرة وطوكيو الدولية البسام: العمل الثقافي في نظر المؤسسة عمل هواة.. و"كليلة ودمنة" مشروع ملحمة تاريخية

كتب ماجد سلطان:

لن يكون برنامج المؤلف والمخرج المسرحي سليمان البسام لهذا العام من دون محطات جديدة ستأخذه إلى بعض العواصم والمدن الشرقية والشرق أوسطية والغربية بعمله الجديد " كليلة ودمنة" والذي سيشهد عرضه الرسمي الأول في العاصمة اليابانية طوكيو في العاشر من مارس الجاري. ومن المتوقع تقديم سبعة عروض في طوكيو قبل انتقاله إلى كيوتو في التاسع عشر من الشهر ذاته. إلى مجموعة من العواصم والمدن، ما بين الشارقة، وأبو ظبي، وبيروت، وبريطانيا في كل من غلاسكو ولندن وأكسفورد.

وقد بدأ تقديم ثلاثة عروض لكليلة ودمنة تنتهي اليوم الأول من مارس ضمن الموسم الثقافي الحالي لدار الآثار الإسلامية و عروض العمل التحضيرية ما قبل اكتمال العمل حسب تصورات البسام للعمل المسرحي، والذي يراه عملاً حياً متطوراً و قليلاً للتطوير مالم، ربما، يرضي طموحه الفني.

البسام الذي تحدث معنا حول عمله الجديد " كليلة ودمنة " و السابق والذي عرف العالم المسرحي موهبته وجهوده الفنية من خلاله، " مؤتمر هاملت " وقدمه في عدد من المهرجانات والعواصم وأعطاه شهرته التي تدفعه لتقديم أعمال لا تقل قيمة عن هذا العمل والذي لا يزال يمكن تقديمه إلى جانب عمله الجديد.

الطريق إلى النجاح

"لست سنوات كنت أكافح في إنجلترا بأعمال وتجارب مسرحية، ولأسباب عديدة لم أستطع اختراق "قصر النجاح"، فقد واجهت صعوبات في بريطانيا " يقول البسام، ويضيف " أول عمل ناجح استطاع تحقيق أثر كبير هو "مؤتمر هاملت " في إطار مهرجان أدنبرة الدولي عام 2002 والذي بدأ بمغامرة ذاتية وتمويل ذاتي. افترض فيها البسام من أحد البنوك ليقدم هذا العمل في مهرجان أدنبرة. وللمفاجأة فقد استطاع العمل تحقيق جائزة النقاد للابتكار في الإخراج والتأليف. وانتقل العمل إلى مهرجان القاهرة التجريبي في العام ذاته، وبتمويل ذاتي استطاع العمل تحقيق أفضل جائزتين من لجنة الحكام حينما أحرز جائزة أفضل إخراج وأفضل عمل متكامل.

على إثر هذا النجاح تلقى البسام وفرقته " زاووم " عرضاً لتقديم هذا العمل من وزارة الثقافة اليابانية عبر " المؤسسة اليابانية Japan Foundation على أن يعرض باللغة العربية في افتتاح مهرجان طوكيو الدولي. وقدم العمل في طوكيو في فبراير من العام 2004. ومن هناك بدأ صدهاء العالمي في المهرجانات المختلفة من مهرجان شكسبير في بريطانيا الى عروض أخرى في بولندا وسنغافورة. ولمدة سنة ونصف والعمل يتجول عالمياً ويحقق النجاح في كل مكان. فهو " العمل الذي تكاملت فيه كل عوامل النجاح " حسب قول البسام.

صعوبات الإنتاج المحلي

يعتقد البسام أن الإنتاج المحلي تواجهه صعوبات فهو لا يخفي انزعاجه في كل مرة أذكر له تجربة عمله المسرحي "المقايضة" وقد عرضت لليلتين فقط وبين العرض الأول والثاني مدة ثلاثة أشهر. والحقيقة أن كل من مسرحيته " ذوبان الجليد " و " المقايضة " بجميع العروض لم تتجاوز العشرة عروض (وكلا العاملين من إنتاج) 2003 قدمت الأولى ثلاثة عروض في الكويت وعرضين آخرين في العاصمة المصرية " القاهرة، بينما اكتفت الثانية بليتين.

ويعتقد البسام أن قلة العروض واحد من أهم الصعوبات، ذلك أنها تساهم بعدم انتشار العمل ونضجه واستقراره، "وكان العمل لا يستحق مع كل الجهد الذي بذلته فيه أن يعرض لأطول فترة ممكنة". ففي مثل هذه الظروف يحتاج العمل إلى تمويل إضافي و ميزانية أكبر لعملك في بيئة عدم استمرارية العرض، وكل هذا بعيد عن معايير شبك التذاكر، فالمعنى هنا هو قيمة العمل الفني".

ويعتقد البسام أن أسباب ذلك تكمن في عدم وعي الجهات المسؤولة بالثقافة. فميزانية الكويت للبرنامج والإنتاج الثقافي لا تذكر أمام الميزانيات الأخرى وهو يذكر كمثال على ذلك ما تصرفه الحكومة البريطانية على الثقافة، إذ تخصص الحكومة البريطانية مبلغ 320 مليون جنيه إسترليني سنوياً. ولا يخفي البسام بأسه من الوضع الثقافي والمسرحي في الكويت تحديداً في الوقت الراهن. وحينما تسأله عن الأسباب، يرى أن الأسباب تكمن في عدم وجود أي خطة مركزية موضوعة من أجل المسرح أو الأعمال الفنية الأخرى، فأى هوية لهذه الأنشطة ؟ ليست هناك خطة.

ولكن ماذا عن مهرجانات المسرح والجوائز التي تقدم خلالها ؟ ألا تعد هذه ضمن ما هو مطلوب لتنمية مثل هذه الأنشطة؟

ولا يجد البسام في كل هذه الأنشطة ما يعتقد مطلوباً، متسللاً بصوت عال " متى سمعت بأخر مرة عن شاب كويتي قال إنه سيحترف الإخراج المسرحي؟! إن لم يكن على استعداد لدخول معمة حالة العرض والطلب وإنتاج أعمال مسرحية للقمّة العيش. متى صدرت آخر مرة مسرحية كويتية ؟ كم عملاً يستحق أن يخرج وبالتالي يعرض بناء على رغبة الجمهور؟ كم من ممثل كويتي قادر على الوقوف مع ممثلين عرب ويأخذ ويعطي في عمل مسرحي في اللغة العربية الكلاسيكية ؟ كم من مرة أقيمت ورش مسرحية لتطوير هذه الشخصيات الفنية ؟ هل زادت عدد دور العرض المسرحية ؟ كم من هذه الأسئلة تمت الإجابة عنها؟!.

ويعلل هذا بدور الثقافة في المجتمع الكويتي والنظرة الخاصة الى العمل الثقافي الذي لا يزال في طور أعمال الهواة دون مفهوم الاحتراف والخطة ذات المراحل، وهذا بالطبع لا يعني أن ظروف الإنتاج الدولية هي من السهولة التي يمكن العمل فيها من دون جهود.

ويضيف سليمان " 10 سنوات وأنا أتعب على عمل الإنتاج الدولي. وهو موضوع تراكمي، استطعت من خلاله أن أراكم خبرة الإنتاج الدولي، وهو ما يدل على نجاح هذه الأعمال ثقافياً وفنياً وتجارياً".

كليلة ودمنة

وهذا ما حققه البسام لإنتاج عمله الجديد " كليلة ودمنة " إذ استطاع أن يجمع له منتجين من ثلاث جهات تبنت العمل فأول مرة تجتمع دار الآثار الإسلامية من الكويت مع مسرح البريبيكان البريطاني والمؤسسة اليابانية لإنتاج عمل. وبدأ المشروع بتكليف من دار الآثار الإسلامية بكتابة عمل حول " كليلة ودمنة ". والتفكير بالمسرحية من حيث كونها قصة مروية على لسان الحيوانات. ليكتشف البسام خلال التحضير للعمل، ومن قراءاته لصاحب ترجمة كتاب قصص "كليلة ودمنة " عبد الله بن المقفع شخصية تدعو للتفكير حولها. فقد وجد أنه من خلال هذا الكتاب وكتبه الأخرى مثل الأدب الكبير والأدب الصغير وكتاب آخر حول نظام مركزي للقوانين، كان يعد لمشروع مثل وزارة للعدل. وهو بالنسبة له أول من واجه مسألة دور المثقف في توجيه الدولة الإسلامية الناشئة، ودخل مخاض العملية السياسية وفي مشروعه الإصلاحي من أجل العدالة الاجتماعية، الجند والمحاكم، السلطة والخليفة في الدولة. كما يعتقد بأن ابن المقفع كان ينادي بوضع ما يشبه الدستور لتنظيم العلاقة بين الخليفة والأمة.

وهو أيضاً، أول من دخل في حوار عقلائي معها (السلطة) مازجاً إياه بمفاهيم دينية. وجاهد لمشاريع إصلاحية داخل الدولة الإسلامية الناشئة. هذا إلى جانب إمكاناته الفنية في تطوير النثر. فقد كان فناناً، كاتباً متميزاً. يتحدث بأكثر من لغة، إلى جانب كونه رجل تنوير. لم ينقطع عن نصح السلطة، وسعى لتأسيس معايير فكرية لدور الخليفة كقائد للأمة.

ولا يخفي البسام إعجابه بأسلوب ابن المقفع في " كليلة ودمنة " في النصيحة غير المباشرة، ونقله لفكرته بأسلوب غير مباشر. مما ساعد البسام على توفير تصور فني لتقديمها كعمل مسرحي.

ويعتقد البسام أن قصص " كليلة ودمنه " قابلة لأن تروى من قبل السلطة بطرق شتى وكل حسب طريقتة الخاصة. وهو ما أعطاه مساحة للخلق والاستخدام القصصية كتعبير عن الواقع واستخدام السلطة لها للتعبير عن أهدافها.

شكل العمل الفني وهويته

ثمة من يتساءل حول هوية العمل المسرحي والمسرح وما إذا كانت، (وخاصة مع ما يقدمه البسام من أعمال مسرحية هي عبارة عن إعادة خلق لعمل مسرحي شهير يسقط دلالاته على واقعنا والمعاصر) هي أعمال معبرة عن هويتنا وواقعنا وأصالتنا؟ فجملة من أعماله هي إعادة صياغة لمسرحيات شكسبير، مثل " مكبث / مكبث تحت فانوس 60 وات " هاملت / مؤتمر هاملت - هاملت في الكويت- قمة هاملت " وروميو وجولييت / المقايضة " ويعمل الآن على مسرحية " ريتشارد الثالث " بتكليف من الفرقة الملكية الشكسبيرية لتقديمها باللغة العربية وهو ما سيحدث للمرة الأولى في تاريخ هذه الفرقة العالمية".

وقال البسام: "مكونات الفعل المسرحي ثلاث هي النص، كونه بصرياً، لغوياً، و اللافظ - الممثل، وأخيراً الجمهور. ونحن قد أخذنا هذه التوليفة من طقس غربي. وهناك بحوث ومصادر تقول إن في منطقتنا الطقوس نفسها في الحضارات السومرية والبابلية كما أن للشاعر الجاهلي جانيا مسرحيا. وأنا أعتقد أياً كان أصله، في هذه المرحلة موضوعاتنا وموضوع أعمالنا هو الذي سيكيف لنا مثل هذه الأعمال".

ويضيف البسام "نحن نعيش في فترة تاريخية تطرح علينا مجموعة من القضايا مثل دور الفرد في المجتمع ودور هذا الأخير تجاه الفرد، علاقة الفرد بالسلطة،

لديكتاتورية، ومن هنا أرى ارتباطاً ضمناً بين المسائل المطروحة والحلول والمضامين الشكسبيرية.

ويقول "إن مشروعاً مثل "كليلة ودمنة" هو مشروع قصة تعود أحداثها إلى (133هـ-145هـ)، وهي عبارة عن ملحمة تاريخية. ومن خلال تصرفي بالأحداث والدراما. صارت تدور حول شخصية ثانوية هي حياة عبداً لله بن المقفع فلا شك أن في تركيب الملحمة التاريخية جوانب شكسبيرية تأثرت بها من خلال البيئة التي أعطتني الأسس ولكن هذه التجربة عربية. وهي تأتي ضمن مراحل من التجارب التاريخية لنضال الأشقر و قاسم محمد وسعد الله ونوس وآخرين.

ويعتقد أن الجانب الابتكاري الحقيقي لن يصل إلى الجمهور إلا حينما يقدم باللغة العربية.

ويضيف "حينما عملت على "هاملت" فقد عملت من أجل خلق تساؤلات حاضرة في الواقع العربي، وبالمعنى نفسه بالنسبة لـ "كليلة ودمنة" وليس من أجل إضافتها إلى رصيد الأعمال المسرحية. وإنما لعرض الأعياب السلطة الآن وراهنها.

ويمضي البسام في إيضاح تصوره فهو انطلاقاً من "هاملت" أو ريتشارد الثالث " أو باختياره موضوعاً من البيئة العربية، لا يقوم إلا باستخدام البعد التاريخي في خلق مناورة مع الجمهور، "مناورة فكرية" على حد نعتها لها. فأنت تشاهد قصة هاملت، ولكنك تشاهد الحرب الأهلية في لبنان، الطاغية في العراق، أو أي مشاكل يعانها المواطن العربي.

وهو بعد ذلك، يرى أن أسلوب الطرح يفرض نفسه على هذا العمل وبالتالي صيغة الفعل المسرحي المرغوب مع الطرح الدرامي والتناغم البديهي. وهذا البحث هو الذي يؤدي بك إلى تألف غريب. ذلك أن لكل رغبة تعبيرية شكلها الذي يتناسق مع أبعادها وأهدافها.

سليمان البسام في سطور

مواليد الكويت، 1972.

تخرج من جامعة أدنبرة عام 1994.

عمل كمساعد مخرج في لندن قبل أن يؤسس فرقة المسرحية "زاووم" عام 1996.

تأليف مسرحية "كليلة ودمنة" أو مرآة الملوك 2005، بتكليف من دار الآثار الإسلامية.

ألف وأخرج مسرحية "نوبان الجليد" 2003.

- ألف وأخرج مسرحية "المقايسة" 2003. بتكليف من الهيئة العامة للشباب والرياضة.
- حصل على جائزة الدولة التشجيعية لعام 2004، في مجال الإخراج المسرحي عن عمله المسرحي "مؤتمر هاملت".
- حاز وفرقة المسرحية "زاووم" عن مسرحية "مؤتمر هاملت" على جائزة النقاد الأولى في مهرجان أدنبرة الدولي عام 2002. وجانزتي أفضل عرض و إخراج من مهرجان القاهرة المسرحي
- التجريبي 2002-
- حصل على عدة جوائز ورشح ضمن أفضل عشرة مخرجين واعدین في مهرجان ديجون في فرنسا عام 1997.
- عرض في عدة مهرجات دولية، وفي عدد من العواصم والمدن العالمية وهو يطوف بأعماله المسرحية الناجحة