Amazing Acrobatics of Language: The Theatre of Yussef El Guindi

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Despite the importance of minority rights movements and literatures of migration within the last century’s history of the humanities, no light has been shed so far on the life and arts of Arab Americans. While there is a tradition of Arab American writers and poets, it is often claimed that ‘Arab American Theatre’ was born on September 11. This article will start from general reflections on the development and forms of Arab American theatre in the United States and will in its main body concentrate on the works of Egyptian-born playwright Yussef El Guindi.

“Immigration is not for Sissies”
SAMIR in Language Rooms,
Yussef El Guindi

A New Arts Movement Is Born: Arab American Theatre

It is commonly claimed that Arab American theatre was born on September 11. While many Arab American playwrights who have gained influence and recognition within these last years are in their 30s and 40s, it is argued that only after 9/11 artists formed networks and started to focus their writing on issues relevant to their religious, ethnic and national belonging. Yussef El Guindi, who has already produced an entire oeuvre on the Arab American experience in post 9-11 US-America, points out that he shied away from addressing Arab American issues before the attacks as he would have hardly found a publisher or venue to produce his work. “For the longest time Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar. […] Then came 9/11. ‘Suddenly there were calls for plays.’”

If one looks carefully enough, there is a history of Arab American theatre that predates 9/11. One notable frontrunner is Golden Thread Productions, a theatre in San Francisco, which has been focusing on Middle Eastern theatre from its inception in 1996, and running an annual festival called “ReOrient” since 1999. Nibras, a network of Arab American theatre artists, garnered media attention with their debut documentary theatre piece Sajjil (Record!) in 2002, but the network had actually formed shortly before the attacks. Despite the fact that the aforementioned examples debunk the myth of a sudden birth of Arab American theatre, the impact of 9/11 can hardly be overestimated. Post 9/11 initiatives include Khoury’s creation of the Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago and several one-time festivals in New York City, such as Acts for Palestine in 2005, The Public Theatre’s New Work Now! Arab/Israeli Festival in 2006, as well as Aswat—Voices of Palestine presented by New York Theatre Workshop and Nibras in 2007. The festival that generated the most (international) media attention so far is the annual New York Arab American Comedy Festival that had its fifth run in January 2008. In his article “The Rise of Arab American Comedy” Dean Obeidallah, who joined with Maysoon Zayid to found the festival in 2003, reaffirms the importance of the date for recent developments: “The Arab American communities’ support of Arab American comedy can be tied directly to the post 9/11 climate in America.”

While Dalia Basiouny, a theatre scholar working on Arab American Female Playwrights, rightly finds that “one of the interesting features of the current flowering of Arab American theatre and performance is that a great majority of the participating artists are women,” this article—not diminishing the importance of such wonderful theatre artists and playwrights as Betty Shamieh and Heather Raffo, will concentrate on the works of Yussef El Guindi.

Seattle-based playwright El Guindi, now in his mid-forties, was raised in England after his family fled Egypt in 1963. Even though he later returned to his home country as a university student, he describes his Arabic as “rudimentary.” After graduating from American University in Cairo in 1982 he moved to the United States where he
received a Master of Fine Arts from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.\(^6\) While El Guindi had long been fighting for recognition with his early plays Hostages and Finishing School, his topical and highly politicized works have found a wide reception since 9/11. He was playwright in Residence at the Chicago Silk Road Theatre Project as well as at Duke University, where he taught playwriting for seven years. His plays have been published by Dramatist’s Play Service and Theatre Forum. In recent years he has been honoured with several awards for his seminal works Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith and Back of the Throat. He just received the A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) 2008 New Play Award for his most recent play Language Rooms.

While El Guindi, who is himself of Muslim heritage, most skillfully explores how the Arab American protagonist in Back of the Throat is violently transformed into “the other” and while he devotes an entire play, Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes, to the criticism of negative stereotyping of Arab and Muslim characters within the movie business, his plays such as Language Rooms and Our Enemies never lose the need for a critical analysis of his own community and thereby blur the lines between binary distinctions such as friend and enemy. His early work Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith created a heated controversy within the local Muslim community that finally resulted in the Cornerstone Theatre Companies decision to refrain from producing it. Far from falling into the trap of writing straightforward issue-driven plays, El Guindi’s greatest strength is the poetic quality and the wit of his language; that are characteristic for all his plays and most beautifully shown in his one-acts Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayedas and Karima’s City. Both are adaptations of short stories by Salwa Bakr and were originally performed together under the title Acts of Desire. The aim of this article is to introduce his major plays, distill recurring topics and motives and at the same time trace the evolution of his aesthetics.

‘. . . Like These Russian Dolls’—Language and Interrogation

A surprise even to himself\(^7\) El Guindi’s breakthrough to a wider reception and acknowledgment by theatres, press, and academia was his play Back of the Throat. The play sketches how Khaled, an Arab American writer, is “forced kicking and screaming” into the narratives of two FBI-agents. The agents search his house, interrogate him and confront him with witness reports linking him to a terrorist attack in Manhattan. El Guindi started writing the play shortly after 9/11, even though the immediacy of its subject kept him from finishing it before 2004.\(^8\) In the author’s introduction, published in Theatre Forum, he underlines the urgency of the play’s topic:

*Back of the Throat* began as a paranoid thought game. In those first few months after 9/11 as an Arab/Muslim-American one wasn’t quite sure where one stood. What laws were still in place to protect one from government inquisitiveness or from a government, rightly or wrongly, deciding to throw aside civil liberty concerns in the need to protect the country from an amorphous enemy whose potential for another strike was very real. In this climate, where one feared officials needing to look and act tough and avoid allowing more terrorists through the net, I personally, on a visceral level, found myself fearing a knock on the door. For no logical reason, I should add.\(^9\)

*Back of the Throat* was first produced in 2005 by Silk Road Theatre Project in Chicago. Subsequently it toured throughout the US and was translated into Arabic with a staging in Egypt (Cairo). The Chicago production augmented the fictional play with documentary aspects by strengthening the links to current FBI procedures and actual fears of Arab Americans, having discussions with real-life FBI agents as well as victims of accusations and discrimination as part of the rehearsal process.\(^10\) Retired FBI agents were also asked to attend post-show discussions and compare the play’s plot and depiction with their own experiences and FBI interrogation methods.\(^11\) Contrary to this approach, the Flea Theatre staging in New York in 2006 ignored questions of probability and realism in Back of the Throat, but fostered the sense of paranoia by setting the play on a tiny basement stage that allowed the verbal as well as physical violence against the most likable and multifaceted protagonist, Khaled, to make the audience shiver. El Guindi’s aesthetics, including elements and methods such as montage, flashbacks, dream sequences, poetic monologues and dark humour are decisive for the skillful balancing act of Back of the Throat, and warrant their own exploration later in this paper. El Guindi’s most recent play, Language Rooms, continues the mind game started in the Back of the Throat in many ways. Both plays will now be analysed in terms of their implied concept of America and American patriotism, of identity and the self as well as of the function and power of language.

*Language Rooms* is set in a Guantanamo-like facility. Nasser and Ahmed, both Arab-Americans, work as
translators and interrogators. Based on the transcripts of the “Khaled-interrogation,” Ahmed, who often distances himself from his colleagues, is suspected to be a sympathizer or spy. The interrogator is interrogated. The knot is tied closer when Ahmed’s father, Samir, is brought in as a captive and Ahmed is made to interrogate him, thereby finding out about his father’s betrayal of his family: Samir had been cheating on his dying wife. Ahmed loses his temper and shows his aggression against his Arab heritage thereby revealing his twisted position. He is forced into an isolation suit and box that earlier appeared in an expressionistic dream sequence, while Kevin, his boss, continues the interrogation. The drama ends with a poetic picture described in Samir’s final monologue: A romantic family-scene at the beach, which expresses their very personal version of the American Dream, the longing for a country that would make anything possible and heal any wounds, for a country that would make the young Ahmed forget he had almost drowned in the sea. The very last words—and the first words Ahmed learns to say in English—are interspersed with bitter associations:

I would point to something, sand, and you would repeat it—sand.—Sea—and then you: sea.—Sky…sky.—Family…family. Airplane…airplane…America…(slight beat) And I showed you in which direction. And you said, where? And I held you up high on my shoulders… and I pointed. (Hold for a beat. Blackout)

After 9/11 it seems impossible to imagine Samir’s hand pointing towards the USA without identifying it with the airplanes, and without misinterpreting his pointing as a threatening gesture of attack. The picture combines hope and fear, America appears as both a utopian land of strength and a fragile object of attack, it is idyllic as well as apocalyptic, it presents an Arab American family, whose members are all too human, and at the same time uncovers the stereotypes and prejudices that form our perceptions and readings. Language Rooms extends the ‘thought game’ of Back of the Throat by spinning the idea of the logic of interrogation out to the extreme, demonstrating how the interrogator himself turns into a suspect, and how trust and faith are excluded by a system that always assumes hidden layers of meaning beneath everything that is said: “That’s the trouble with what we do. We read too much into even harmless things. We imagine conversations going on beneath other conversations. When really we’re meaning exactly what we’re saying.”

The subject of interrogating suspects accused of having ties to or being actively engaged in terrorist plots is not the only link between these two plays. Language Rooms can offer itself to be read as a continuation of the earlier play by referring to the “Khaled file” and can suggest that after the interrogation at his house, Khaled was kept prisoner in a Guantanamo-like facility. Beyond all this, both plays share a set of features and motives. They express a double-edged image of America and address the phenomenon of exclusion that many Americans of Arab heritage or Muslim faith have been suffering in post-9/11 America. In both plays, the Arab American protagonists are sketched as patriotic Americans whose ties to the Arab world are to be considered rather loose and in both cases they are gradually alienated from their American identity and forced to merge with the image of the “other.”

Despite intimidation, the Arab American main characters keep their belief in their American Dream and strongly identify themselves with the United States. Even when Ahmed is taken captive in an isolation box, his father reassures his interrogator of his own and his son’s patriotism: “We are both—proud Americans. We love our new country.” Khaled, in Back of the Throat, even intended to call the FBI himself, as he considers it his obligation as a loyal American patriot. Starting to sense increasing pressure, he vocally and emphatically claims to be an American: “It’s my fucking country too.” In Language Rooms, Ahmed objects the established notions of being a “regular American” or a “real American,” referring to someone being born in America. Before losing his temper and unleashing a flood of swear-words, Ahmed claims that these terms contradict the American idea at its core: “It’s supposed to be instant conversion. Anyone who becomes a citizen inherits everything. Which means never ever having to say I’m sorry for being foreign-born.” The FBI agent Bartlett in Back of the Throat also underlines that the United States is an immigrant-nation that transcends issues of ethnicity, but at the same time he is taking it ad absurdum:

One more thing: at no time should you think this is an ethnic thing. Your ethnicity has nothing to do with it other than the fact that your background happens to be the place where most of this crap is coming from. So naturally the focus is going to be on you. It’s not profiling, it’s deduction.

He then adds that the focus group shifts every once in a while, meaning that all ethnicities are finally treated alike:
“Tomorrow it might be the Dutch.” It is one of El Guindi’s standard techniques to either merge inconsistent logics or spin out logics to such an extent that the conclusions drawn are indefensible while at the same time being completely compatible with the premises and rules of combination assigned to a logical system. Referring to *Back of the Throat* El Guindi himself has pointed out a certain “Kafkaesque element,”\(^\text{18}\) as “there is always a level of absurdity with any bureaucracy.”\(^\text{19}\)

One would, however, miss the point if one blatantly read El Guindi’s plays as artistic expressions of objection against exclusion and as claiming the American-ness of Arab immigrants. One would still unduly oversimplify his plays if one additionally reflected the double-edged image of “America,” being idealized as the object of the “American dream” and at the same time being questioned and satirized to the extreme. Though El Guindi’s plays address questions of an Arab American identity on a literal level, claiming characters’ status and value as American citizens and denouncing misrepresentations, accusations, and exclusions, and though El Guindi does address intercultural miscommunications and conflict zones of immigrant life in the United States, his plays effectively dig much deeper. While it is indeed important to add positive or—as El Guindi puts it—human representations “with warts and all”\(^\text{20}\) to prevailing images of Arab and Muslim people, his plays explore these questions on a more fundamental and political level, questioning concepts of “self” and “identity” as such. In the author’s introduction to *Back of the Throat*, El Guindi refers to uncomprehending spectators of Arab heritage who want an explanation as to why he had decided to create “such an ambiguous character in Khaled.”\(^\text{21}\) El Guindi amplifies his reflections on the issue by pointing out the main focus of the play and thereby its underlying conception of identity and self:

I am […] interested in how someone can be forced, kicking and screaming, into someone else’s narrative […] and then find himself unable to extricate himself from these stories.\(^\text{22}\)

In the end it cannot be decided if Khaled is guilty or not. He is caught in a web of narratives that distort any clear-cut differentiation between truth and fiction. Actors stay on stage when they are not in a scene, observing the stories unfolding around them. Despite the fact that in its Flea Theatre production changes of lighting and background music mark scene changes, it remains impossible to extricate subjective memories from cinematic flashbacks, dreams from constructions of potential scenarios, fiction from “reality.” Even though El Guindi creates multifaceted characters of high credibility, he subscribes to a poststructuralist conception of the “subject” as being a product of signs, caught within and defined by language.\(^\text{23}\) In El Guindi’s “language rooms” what is commonly called “reality” is just the most powerful construction or reading of a set of signs at that point in time.

These poststructuralist conceptions that deconstruct notions of “identity” and “self” are expressed most vividly in the metaphor of the Russian doll that is of importance in *Back of the Throat* as well as in *Language Rooms*. Giving image to Khaled’s transformations in light of an increasing number of accusations, Beth claims “It was like watching a man hide himself in one box after another; like those Russian dolls.”\(^\text{24}\) In *Language Rooms*, Ahmed’s supervisor describes the work of the interrogator as an art of language that aims at uncovering hidden layers of meaning, of unpacking Russian dolls.

KEVIN: Because what we do is an art, Ahmed. Those assholes may think otherwise. But what they don’t get is tha the people I’ve assembled here have the same profound love for this kind of investigation as I do. We want to know. We love unpacking people, so to speak, like those Chinese boxes, or Russian dolls[…]?

While the Russian doll in *Back of the Throat* is being constructed, the one in *Language Rooms* is being deconstructed. The parallels among the plots of the two plays, however, reveal that both motions are interchangeable and are finally merging into one. Any idea of a true root of the matter or of the character is defeated by the underlying conception of the metaphor: there will always be a doll within each doll, ad infinitum; there is no such a thing as a uniform subject; there is nothing that could ever be revealed as being the “truth.”

Language in El Guindi’s plays is the basis of any construction of reality. While language as a general capacity to speak and as a system of signs is the basis of all distinctions, the differences between several languages play an important role as well. The language one speaks determines one’s perspective on the world, and the translation of meaning from one language into another never works out with complete clarity. Ahmed’s colleague, Nasser, points out to Ahmed why he could fall under suspicion based on the Khaled interrogation. Ahmed had intended to pretend
being a sympathizer as a tactic to break the suspect’s silence. Nasser explains that despite Ahmed’s poor Arabic skills, it is the language they share that puts them “a beard trimmer away from the people they bring here.” He concludes that “we are who we translate to them. We can’t put on the disguise of the enemy as a tactic because we’re already wearing it. The language itself puts us in enemy territory.” While on the one hand language, following a constructivist perspective, bears the potential to deconstruct notions of identity and thereby seemingly nullifies ethnic categories such as “Arab American,” in El Guindi’s plays, languages, on the other hand, do serve as markers of differences that can never be equalized as translation becomes necessary and will never allow for the dissolution of an ultimate gap. In Back of the Throat it is also the Arabic language that links Khaled to the terrorist, Asfoor. His Arabic studying material attests to his intention to learn the language and to his interest in his Arab roots. The testimony of a librarian assures that there had been conversations going on between the two of them. A flashback or hypothetical construction of their meeting shows Asfoor proposing a deal to Khaled: they could help each other learning their respective languages as tandem partners. In the ambiguous final scene of the play, Ahmed and Asfoor are left alone on stage, and Asfoor ends with a poetic monologue stressing the importance and power of language:

When first I come to this country—I not know how to speak. How…even to say anything. […] I say, I must learn language that is everywhere. Language that has fallen on our heads and made us like—like children again. What is this power? […] I want to write. I want to write a book. In English. […] And one day, I say […] I might even teach it… I will teach language back. I will make them speak their own language differently.

Our Enemies’—The Power of Representation

El Guindi’s play Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes was first produced by Golden Thread Productions in June 2008. Barray, an agent, attempts to talk Ashraf, an Arab American actor, into auditioning for the Julius Steele movie “Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes.” The job offers generous payment and the chance to work with Ashraf’s most favourite director as well as a famous actress called Cassandra. The catch, however, is the plot and character profile of the role offered to Ashraf. The movie is overloaded with stereotypes and sketches the “Arab” as the evildoer and as the “other.” It confirms all prejudices and clichés currently strengthened by mass media. Ashraf claims that “there are enough stereotypes […] to create a whole new cartoon network” and even extends his criticism stating that he’d “settle for a stereotype now” as “at least that implies something two dimensional,” whereas “this is a monotype. Not even a type. There’s no such creature in the natural world that corresponds to my character. He’s a bad joke with real world consequences.” The play circles around the question of (mis-)representation and extricates a multiply interwoven relationship between images and reality. Trying to justify himself and criticize the movie project, Ashraf ends up mirroring the behaviour he at the same time tries to prove unrepresentative. Pointing a gun at the director Ashraf insists: “I’m not a gun-toting fanatic even if I’m behaving like one.”

As Language Rooms extends the ‘thought game’ of Back of the Throat, Our Enemies complicates the issues raised in Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes. In both cases the earlier play’s complexity is increased by transgressing the boundaries of a binary logic of “them against us.” Language Rooms portrays Arab American interrogators who are practicing torture as an interrogation technique. Our Enemies addresses a split within Arab American communities and sketches how Arab American writers and religious spokespersons are actively engaged in perpetuating negative media images and misrepresentations.

Our Enemies depicts the struggles of a young female Arab American writer, Noor, who is asked by her future publisher to make changes to her manuscript which would fit her story into mainstream narratives of Arab (immigrant) women. Her boyfriend, Gamal, has turned into an activist aggressively attacking spokespersons on matters of Arab and Arab Americans as well as on Islam, who are—in his view—reaffirming stereotypes and prejudices held up in mainstream media. He paints “whore” on the forehead of the Arab American writer, Mohsen, who is later going to try to talk Noor into committing to the mandated re-writes and finally ends up having a one-night stand with her, being caught—in an almost grotesque scene—in flagranti by Gamal, who hides his defeat by inviting them for a drink. Before starting Zen meditation therapy to cope with his anger and making amends to the people he had wronged, Gamal publicly humiliates Sheik Alfani by throwing his birthday cake into his face. Later he is being accused by Alfani’s son, Hani, who had left for a longer stay to Egypt to get familiar with his roots, of
having burned his father’s mosque down. The play presents “lively scenes of love and combat” (as the play’s subtitle tells us) that reveal how being attacked from various sides, Arab Americans in this most difficult situation are turning against each other, becoming their “own worst enemies.”

The focal points of this fight are questions of representation and identity politics: how Arabs and Arab Americans should or should not be represented as well as the determination of the relationship between Arabs and Americans.

As experienced by other minority groups before us, and today more than ever by Arabs, the media spotlight on ‘hot-button’ communities is often a double-edged sword. This attention, while providing an opportunity for recognition and understanding, is largely filtered through the lens of sensationalism. […] This places an enormous burden on artists, whose work is often asked to meet a myriad of political expectations. In the case of Arab Americans, Arab audiences are hungry for positive portrayals to balance the media; non-Arabs may see negative or even questionable characteristics as confirmation of those existing stereotypes. In this sense, both groups often place upon one story character, or artist the burden of representing an entire people.

El Guindi had his own share of problems revolving out of the tendency to generalize any depiction of an Arab American character in these most polarized times. The Cornerstone Theater in Los Angeles commissioned him to write a play, *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* that was supposed to be part of a five-part faith-based cycle. “This was to be their Muslim play,” El Guindi said. ‘They asked me to come to L.A., speak with people in the Muslim community, then to go off and write the play.’ […] El Guindi felt a certain pressure was on the show to speak for all American Muslims” and concluded that “no one play can do that.”

After a staged reading in a Los Angeles mosque, “the play was dismissed by some mosque members as being ‘unrepresentative’” and was subsequently taken out of Cornerstone’s program.

While *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* was censored by the local Muslim American Community in Los Angeles based on the fact that it breaks major societal taboos, including a gay son and another one who has lost his religion in its character list, and sheds a critical light on a Muslim family living in the United States, Arab American theatre artists need to be aware that their art meets restrictions from various directions. While local communities boycott plays, artists are also dependent on venues and theatres that present their work. El Guindi made it very clear that for the longest time there was simply no interest in Arab American issues and that he therefore did not address them. Since 9/11, theatres are inviting submissions, but the calls are as double-edged as the new book division focusing on the Mid-East in *Our Enemies*. While the editor argues that “We think this is a great opportunity for young authors like [Noor]. Writing about things that matter,” she at the same time demands Noor commit to far-reaching re-writes because the love story of a young girl in her adolescence might not so much be the “typical concerns of a young American woman,” but of “a young, Americanized woman. A young immigrant woman who is trying to strike out on her own and break away from her traditions.” Arab American issues are only considered interesting as long as they put the focus on the first part of the compound word and as long as they meet a set of pre-requisite narratives that end up being as reductive as the stereotypes they are seemingly countering. The editor also underlines that she can get her on “more shows if it’s your story. It would be a lot easier to pitch.”

Noor’s aesthetic and artistic skills appear to be secondary, as she is supposed to be hardly more—without devaluing often probably most well-intended projects—than a representative figure in an already written script. Noor assumes that the radio interview on the occasion of her book’s publication will immediately start with questions concerning neither the storyline nor the aesthetic strategies of her novel, but her personal background and the oppression of women in Muslim societies. Without giving it a chance, Noor interrupts the interview before it even begins, making crystal clear that the book is plain fiction and that she is not trying to make any “statement” at all. This intervention obviously forces the entire focus of the interview on exactly those issues she intended to circumvent. Arab American artists are trapped. Restricted in what can be addressed by conservative forces within their community, dependent upon editors and venues to present their work and thereby to meet mainstream narratives and demands, artists cannot escape even another kind of restriction which are forms of self-censorship. Arab American writers are trapped among the need to reach beyond clichés and create rounded and multi-faceted characters that subvert put-up dichotomies on the one hand and the risky consequences of any depiction of negative aspects or character traits that are easily employed to justify and reaffirm prevalent negative stereotypes on the other. Julius Steele, the director of *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*, replies to Ashraf’s concern
about the very negatively portrayed Arab in the movie what Ashraf’s solution would be. “Certain subjects are off-limits? Censorship?” The Arab American playwright Noor in *Our Enemies* complains:

Why is it that when a woman gets beat up in Texas or New Jersey, it’s a domestic matter and isn’t made to reflect on you as a man, an American man, or this country. But when a woman gets abused in the Arab world, it suddenly becomes an indictment of the whole region. An international matter and an excuse to make sweeping statements.

‘Such a Beautiful Voice…’—El Guindi’s Poetics

Taking the pitfalls of representation addressed in *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* as well as *Our Enemies* seriously, El Guindi’s plays would be harmed if scholars left out a thorough analysis of his aesthetics besides all aspects of content. In the author’s note to *Such a Beautiful Voice is Sayeda’s and Karima’s City*, two one-acts adapted from short stories by Salwa Bakr that deal with the oppression of women within Arab and Western societies, El Guindi emphasizes that firstly, “[b]oth plays are best staged if kept fluid, moving, with lightning changes where necessary, but no full blackouts between scenes.” and that secondly, “[i]t is much more effective if the men come across as human, and familiar.” These indications in a sense apply to all of El Guindi’s plays and create basic parameters of his work. El Guindi creates strong and multifaceted protagonists that are confronted with just as rounded and human characters. This is one aspect that makes it possible for his plays to address hot-button issues without supercharging them with ideology. Instead of being “issue-driven,” his plays are “character-driven” as well as “language-driven.”

Interestingly, as was shown earlier, El Guindi’s plays are character-driven but simultaneously subvert any possible understanding of a psychological realism and deconstruct notions of “the subject” and “truth.” His greatest skill may be the way he leads the audience through different stages of emotional involvement, the never linear development of suspense within his plays and the witty mergence of horror and humour. It is worth mentioning that despite the seriousness of their subjects all plays discussed in this article, except for the two one-acts, are being categorized as comedies or dark comedies. It is as if their irony and wit force the audience to bend with laughter though it might be awakened with a hurtful beat or stitch in the very next moment. El Guindi himself says, “life is a dark comedy. It’s perplexing, bewildering and funny. Humor has its own wisdom.” Reading El Guindi’s plays is like riding the rollercoaster or entering a haunted house—one never knows what is going to be around the next corner or when one might suddenly fall, but one is taken captive by the intense dynamics and changing rhythms of the plays. The surprise factor is only increased by the nesting of different narratives. The Russian doll is not only a metaphor that comes up in *Back of the Throat* and *Language Rooms* but it is the core of El Guindi’s aesthetic. His plays often unfold in a multilayered universe that combines dream-sequences, flashbacks, monologues and hypothetical constructions via cinematographic montage techniques. While it can generally be said that El Guindi’s is very much a cinematographic aesthetic, at the same time his plays could only ever work on a theatre as they live off the immediacy and physical closeness of reception. Additionally, his plays almost always include one or more poetic monologues that are highly theatrical and lyrical. Oftentimes, as is the case in *Back of the Throat* and *Language Rooms* these poetic monologues end the plays. One reason for this dramaturgical gimmick might be that El Guindi intentionally wants to leave audiences with complicated questions, not simple answers. As always in El Guindi’s work this could be taken even a step further. One might say that opposed to other artists who highlight the importance of asking questions instead of providing answers, El Guindi depicts answers to then reveal them as the even more complicated questions.

‘The Political Is Personal’—Stories That Need to Be Told

In “Finding Our Own Voice: The Politics of the Personal in Arab American Theater,” playwright and performer Leila Buck reaffirms the statement of Arab American filmmaker Vicky Moufawad-Paul that “[t]he political […] is the personal,” and thereby speaks for a large number of Arab American theatre artists that are producing character-driven and deeply personal plays. Later on in her essay, Buck poses questions that are decisive for the reception as well as self-conception of Arab American theater since 9/11: “Is it political to simply present an Arab woman in a hijab speaking her mind or a Palestinian character doing anything but a terrorist act?” and “Does our work have to
address politics directly in order to be considered political or to shape the politics of our world?"  

El Guindi, as most contemporary playwrights, shies “away from calling [his] plays political” as he does not want them to “be viewed as agenda-driven pieces.” As has been shown El Guindi’s plays are neither didactic nor preaching to a choir, rather they deconstruct binaries and all essentialisms, leaving the audience with the most complicated questions. Even though El Guindi immediately addresses current politics in the US, the aspects that mark his work as “political” would rather be the humanization of Arab American characters on stage at a time when “enemy combatants” are deprived of their civil rights and the questioning of the generation of meaning and the construction of identity.

While a number of Arab American playwrights try to edge their image by counterweighing negative media images with out-and-out positive representations, El Guindi’s plays ‘humanize’ their characters. Concerning his controversial play Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith, El Guindi states:

Some have asked me, why are you depicting a gay person and homophobia? There are so many other issues to deal with. But in order to humanize a people, you need to show them warts and all. Our humanity lives in our cracks and wounds. How can you affirm something, without talking about everything?

Without having the room to enter into deeper discussions on different concepts of political theatre, it seems obvious that understanding any Arab American performance as political would be too simplifying. El Guindi’s work however does not only humanize its characters and (even though this might not be a precondition for political theatre at all) addresses current events, but it also transcends facile questions and digs deeper into the way meaning is generated and worlds constructed. El Guindi is the most talented Arab American writer of political plays on the scene and it is only to hope that there will soon be far more stages inviting his amazing acrobatics of language.

Notes
1 “The more theatres like that [Nibras, Golden Threat, Silk Road Theater Project] spring up, the more inclined I am (and other writers I’m sure) to explore issues around immigration and the Middle East. Before the creation of these theatres, I was somewhat hesitant to tackle subjects that I felt would not get past the first reader at a theater.” Yussef El Guindi cited after: The Non-Traditional Casting Projekt, “Arab Americans in Theatre—an online roundtable discussion,” The Non-Traditional Casting Project, September 25, 2003, <http://www.ntcp.org/NationalDiversityForum/Roundtable/DinaAmin.htm> (23 October 2008).
8 Ibid.


13 While Arab Americans are fighting for recognition as an ethnic minority, it is striking how strongly artists and scholars are claiming their national belonging and American patriotism. On the occasion of the attacks’ first anniversary AAI published a leaflet called *Healing Our Nation* that included polls revealing that statistically Arab Americans were even more confirmative of government policies and the war in Afghanistan as Americans in general were. The leaflet includes photos of Arab Americans displaying American flags and of an Arab mother who has lost her son in duty on 9/11. Cf. Arab American Institute, “Healing the Nation—The Arab American Experience after September 11,” Arab American Institute, http://aai.3cdn.net/64de7330dc475fe470_h1m6b0yk4.pdf (23 October 2008).


16 Ibid. 29.

17 Ibid. 30.

18 “[…] this isn’t so much an echo of a literary source, as it is of what’s currently going on. The situation around the country and elsewhere has become Kafka-esque. It’s reality mimicking fiction. And Kafka’s fiction very early on captured the sense of getting caught up and lost in a huge and impersonal bureaucracy. Once your name is on “the list”, it’s very hard to get off it.” Yussef El Guindi, “Seattleplays Profile—Yussef El Guindi,” Seattleplays, http://www.seattleplays.com/yussef.html (23 October 2008).

19 2. Godu.


22 Ibid.


26 Ibid.


29 Ibid. 77.

30 Mohsen in Our Enemies: “We really have to stop hurting each other. It seems the one thing we do well—is be our own worst enemies.” Yussef El Guindi, “Our Enemies,” unpublished manuscript, 89.


35 Ibid.

36 Ibid. 13.

37 Ibid. 14.

38 Ibid. 91.

39 El Guindi, “Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes,” 84.


42 Ibid.

43 2. The Non-Traditional Casting Projekt, “Arab Americans in Theatre—an Online Roundtable Discussion.”


46 Ibid. 30.


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