

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

A play offers a rare chance to forget the killing

By Rami G. Khouri

Many significant things related to the Middle East and its relations with Western societies happened Monday, some more significant than others.

Benjamin Netanyahu squared off with Barack Obama; Egyptian policemen were sentenced to jail for torturing Khalid Saeed to death in 2010; the aging Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika officially filed papers to run for a fourth consecutive term of office; Israel confirmed that the number of settlements doubled last year, reaching a 13-year high; along with a dozen other significant news items. Well, yes, these are all newsworthy developments, but I was able to step back from the news and experience an event in New York City whose consequences must be measured against a very different set of criteria than these political issues. I was fortunate to be able to attend the excerpted readings of the first English translation of late Syrian writer Saadallah Wannous' play "Rituals of Signs and Transformations." Not an earth-shaking event, you might comment, but as I watched with fascination the 45-minute performance, followed by a discussion between people involved in translating, directing and hosting it, I was struck by the tremendous power that cultural displays have to create appreciation and respect among Americans and Arabs, who otherwise spend much time mocking, abusing and killing each other.

The play's themes largely – but not totally – explain my fascination. Set in 1880s Damascus, it batters the deceitful and scheming political and religious leaderships of society, alongside moving episodes of sexual affirmation and transformation by both straight and gay men and women who are held together by a common thread: the power of liberating oneself from the constraints of oppressive social rules.

Written by a Syrian author in the 1990s, it captures human emotions and hypocrisy, social constraints, and political power relations that are reflected in perhaps every country in the world. But this cultural and creative power that affirms universal human attributes is virtually unknown outside the Arab world.

Beyond the thrill of the play and Noor Theater's wonderful production, I was equally impressed by how several quality institutions had come together to offer the public this reading and the illuminating discussion that followed. The Martin Segal Theater Center, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, hosted the event, under the able leadership of executive director Frank Hentschker. The English translation of the play and its first production in Beirut a few months ago largely reflected the work of two professors at the American University of Beirut – Robert Myers and Sahara Assad – along with Nada Saab at the Lebanese American University.

The result (amid the ugly news of wars, terrorism, starvation sieges, bombs and widespread political criminality across the Arab world) was a powerful reminder of the deep and textured humanity that defines the Middle East that I know, love and encounter every day. Only art and

culture can reflect this reality to other societies.

This play and three others were published Monday in English in the book “Four Plays from Syria: Saadallah Wannous” (edited by Marvin Carlson and Safi Mahfouz, published by the Martin E. Segal Theater Center). They remind us of the importance of both translation and theatrical arts as potentially immense forces in the transmission of culture and human values across continents.

On a freezing Monday evening in midtown Manhattan, I emerged from this experience with heightened respect and appreciation for the phenomenon that underlies all of this – the urban environment, with its grandeur, productivity and endless joys. It is in cities that hypocritical leaders in all spheres of society operate, and in cities where ordinary citizens perform extraordinary deeds as they assert their common humanity, their enticing individualism, and their determination to live in freedom and dignity. Cities also allow great universities to thrive.

Damascus, Beirut and New York combined across time and space to present this captivating display of the best they have to offer to us, and to each other. For that moment in time, the killing, castigating and bombing could wait. On that Monday evening in New York, Americans, Arabs and people from a dozen other lands touched and marveled at their shared humanity. They walked away richer, wiser and warmer. We need more of this, flowing in both directions.

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