

ack

Arab Stages

[Visit Journal Homepage >](#)

Volume 16 Fall 2024

An Interview with the Iraqi-born British playwright Hassan Abdulrazzak by Hadeel Abelhameed

By Hadeel Abelhameed

Published: November 1, 2024

[Download Article as PDF](#) ↓

An Interview with the Iraqi-born British playwright Hassan Abdulrazzak by Hadeel Abelhameed



Photo courtesy of Hassan Abdulrazzak

What does it mean to be a multinational Arabic playwright? How far can the intercultural background and the transnational life experiences under incompatible sociopolitical contexts fashion the playmaking process of international theatre makers like Hassan Abdulrazzak (b. 1973)? These questions and more shaped the discourse of this interview that was conducted with Abdulrazzak on the 31st of July 2024, and edited for length and clarity. Abdulrazzak was recently elected as a Fellow of The Royal Society of Literature (RSL) on the 12th of July 2024, making him one of the few Arab literary figures who are RSL's Fellows today. The election process demands at least two substantial literary works that should enjoy "outstanding literary merits." Abdulrazzak's repertoire since the premier of his first play *Baghdad Wedding* in 2007 has been received with "almost universal acclaim." I understand this "universality" as a universalisation of Arabic local and regional issues through portraying the other half of the story about Arabic societies. Abdulrazzak's theatrical imaginaries correlate with the sidelined cultural and social realities of Arabic peoples. For example, the unorthodox characters under the most critical political ruptures like the Iraqi gay and chaotic Salim in *Baghdad Wedding*, or the Egyptian middle-class couple Layla and Hisham who duplicate the state's corruption in their marital life in *The Prophet*, or through depicting marginalised "heroes" like the Palestinian Ahmad Tobasi in *Here I am*. When I encounter these characters, and many others, I realise that Abdulrazzak's characters are capable of encapsulating the contradictions and diversity of Arabic micro-politics that are experienced in the mundane every day. We discussed limitations on theatrical freedom, noting different kinds of restrictions in SWANA countries, Europe, and the USA

Hadeel Abelhameed: Congratulations for being elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. How did you learn about it?

Hassan Abdulrazzak: I got an email from my agent saying that the president of the Royal Society has a letter, and whether she can send me the letter. It informed me that I've been elected to be a Fellow. I didn't really know much about the election process, but it looks like there are several Fellows who have to nominate you, and then your name has to go through a process before you become a Fellow. I knew one of the Fellows whom I suspected was behind this nomination, but I still do not know the other Fellows. It is an honour to be recognised by your peers who are already part of this Society, and the fact that they put your name forward, and then it gets chosen. It is significant.

HA: You signed with the pen of Lord Byron, right?

Abdulrazzak: YES! They tell you by email that this is what the setup is going to be like, and you have to make a choice. They list a number of writers. I knew from the beginning that some people decided on the day, but I knew that I wanted to go for Lord Byron. First, because it's the oldest pen. Secondly, I have a fondness for Lord Byron because of two things. His poetry was some of the earliest poetry I read in English when I was a teenager, and in my late teens. Secondly, I briefly mentioned him in *Baghdad Wedding*; my first play. I felt like it was appropriate to choose his pen. I know that some people said, "Oh, he's a problematic figure." Well, T.S. Elliot is another problematic figure, you know. So, I decided to go for Lord Byron.

HA: As you are talking about problematic literary figures, there is the question: Is it really necessary to know what their, let's say, political and personal stances are? Does that influence the creative output that they share with humanity, because their works are part of human heritage? But then you, you go back to read, what did they write specifically under post-colonial or feminist lenses that can deconstruct literary works and classics.

Abdulrazzak: I think we live in a world that is based on judgement that is accelerated by social media, and people can just give their opinions very quickly. You know, people get cancelled very quickly and their reputation never recovers. I can see a kind of a pathway: you do not dismiss everything about the person's opinions. If they have racist or misogynist opinions, obviously, you take those opinions into account when assessing their work. But you also look at what remains of value in their body of work. Sometimes reading someone that antagonises you is of more value than reading someone with whom you fully agree. It's a balance, like holding two things in your hand.

HA: Talking about two things in one hand, you are a scientist and a playwright! How do you juggle that?

Abdulrazzak: Well, I am talking to you while I am in one of the meeting rooms at the research centres of Imperial College. This is my day job. Until I wrote my first play *Baghdad Wedding*, writing for me it was kind of a hobby. I published a few poems, a couple of short stories, and I had some online publications. And, my uncle was Mahmoud Albayaty who passed away and was a short story writer. Actually, he wrote two novels, one was published posthumously. He had an influence on me growing up, so, I just fell into writing which was always kind of a passion of mine. But I came to the UK at the age of 13, a very delicate age, so my English was not good enough to take literature and study it properly. I studied English as a foreign language. I ended up going into the sciences that were kind of accessible and easier, but I kind of maintained a love of literature and a love of writing that is why I continued writing. I started writing seriously when I wrote my first play, and that took me into a whole other world, into the world of performance and acting and working with actors and working with directors. It was not a planned thing. It more or less just happened.

HA: You were asked in one of your earlier interviews about when do you usually decide to switch from Arabic into English and vice versa? And you said when you are thinking or talking through an Iraqi character, you "think" in the Arabic language, you go back to your "Iraqiness." So, that's another challenge; to rewire from one language to another is actually to jump to another culture, the way they think, the way they act, the way they live and see life. Is it still a challenge?

Abdulrazzak: Now, I think it is more challenging! At the beginning it was really very عفوي. It was just spontaneous, showing my bilingual skill, and I didn't think so. It came kind of naturally to me what the language would be. I knew that I wanted to convey something about that language and so it was peppered with Iraqi phrases. For example, if two English speaking characters were in England or elsewhere, or even alone in Iraq speaking English, their language would be less peppered with the Arabic phrases. Over the years, I thought a lot about language. Should I put in Arabic phrases for this? If yes, what's the significance? What am I trying to say? Are they speaking on their own? Are they together in one space, and are they speaking in their native language? And how do I convey that?

HA: I can see this also because the themes and contexts that you choose for your plays are so diverse, ranging from naturalism to science fiction. The technique might be verbatim, or a pure creation of your imagination or even hybrid. How do you approach these different theatrical techniques and themes?

Abdulrazzak: Well, this happens again, gradually, one thing leads to another. For example, *Baghdad Wedding* was completely from my imagination. My second play, the *Prophet*, I did interviews. It was about the Egyptian revolution, and I interviewed a lot of people in Cairo a year after the revolution in January 2012, gathering a lot of research and so I had a lot of testimonies based on that. However, we were not planning to do a verbatim play. There was one person in particular that gave me a testimony that really kind of sparked inspiration. So, I wrote a monologue that is there in the pieces that is very much kind of rooted in that interview and the reality of what I was told, and what it was like to be on the streets in the revolution in Egypt. The play *Love, Bombs and Apples* was not entirely about Palestine, it's a series of stories, but the first monologue was an anecdote that was shared with me by a writer. And we were sitting in a cafe, and he told me this funny story, and it just stayed in my head. Then, I did pure verbatim in my play *The Special Relationship*, which was based on interviews with people that were deported from the United States. The play was basically their interviews edited and put together. That is the hardest play I've ever written. It was the hardest project I've ever done. And I salute anybody that does Verbatim theatre. I really admire the skill. The people who do it really well are amazing. I think for me, verbatim theatre is much harder than making stuff up, because you're more in control of making stuff up. There is a power to verbatim because you are telling stories of what happened to real people. It's a great way of investigating something.

HA: I can see that it's the theme itself that encourages you to choose what technique you use in the play. If you are talking about detainees, we are talking about a social class that is very marginalised who are victimised twice. First, because they are detainees in deportation centres and second because they are demonised by the dominant narrative about them in the media. So, the theme would indicate which technique you would choose?

Abdulrazzak: For me, there were a couple of things I did when I decided to do the play *Special Relationship* as a verbatim. First, I met people who were outside of my writing comfort zone. I've written up to that point mainly about Arab and, not extensively, about Western characters. So, when I carried out interviews for that, I felt that there was a danger in fictionalising the experience of people whose lives are very different from my own. Of course, everybody has the right to fictionalise whatever they like, and so on. But for me, at that particular moment, I felt, no, it's one of the reasons why I wanted the verbatim technique. Secondly, the stories themselves were just incredible. They had this kind of feeling of, you couldn't make it up. And I met, particularly, a woman who disappeared later on. She was like a cowboy, like it's the closest thing I've come to meeting a real-life cowboy. She had a cowboy hat when I met her and she had an adventurous life and she'd done all sorts of things, but also, there was something lovable about her. The two hours I spent with her, stayed with me all this time. I think about her a lot, and I wanted to do more with her story. To this day, we don't know where she went or what happened. Like the cowboy, walking off into the sunset, just disappearing from view. Her story was so compelling, and had such elements that, you know, you couldn't make it up. She had been a witness to various things that were really interesting. The verbatim is going to give us so much power.

HA: Then, what about your choice of playwrighting science fiction?

Abdulrazzak: I have written two plays for students that were performed by students in Drama schools. One was called *Sea Things* which was set in the future and was based on a kind of place of refuge for climate change refugees. It was inspired by an earlier play I had written in Sharjah, UAE called *Dhow Under the Sun* where I was asked to do this project for young people from all over the Arab world who were going to submit a project on how they make a play. They had a very specific remit, which was 50:50 men and women, a cohort of 35 actors. I was asked not to make the play political. Now, of course, we got away with a lot of politics. Initially, I pitched a story about refugees, and people in charge said: "Well, that's a bit political. We don't want to get into regional politics." And then I said, "Well, I'll set it in the UAE, and it will be about climate change refugees, not refugees of war." We decided that everybody was going to act in their own accents. Even if they were siblings. So, the politics did come into a metaphorical way. I reconfigured the play later on and created *Sea Things*. I created a completely different set of characters, a completely different plot. There were certain elements that were inspired by that earlier play, and they were both set in the future, looking at climate change. It was set in the future, but really it was about the present. So, different kinds of techniques for different audiences and different actors who are excited by different themes.

HA: You mentioned censorship, Hassan, and you know how censorship plays a significant role in Arabic theatrical life because Arabic theatre is political. Whatever you do, it ends up having a political message. What do you think of censorship? Do you find it curtailing force? Or does it give space for creativity?

Abdulrazzak: I've experienced censorship in both worlds. I've experienced censorship in the Arab world. That was the example I just mentioned, this example in the UAE. But in the Arab world, it's funny how it works. But because it's so blunt, sometimes you can get around it. I'll give you an example: in this play with 35 actors, I had a scene where there was a group of women who tried to protest against the dictator of the camp. He wasn't called the dictator of the camp, but he was kind of the person running the camp, who was controlling all the power. And they protest in the scene by belly dancing outside the store, preventing people from going in or out. And I thought that was my way of doing it. But, somebody in charge came and looked at the scene and said, "we can't have belly dancing on stage, cut it out or replace it with something else." Well, what else can we do? We're in the middle of rehearsals. "How about chanting?" he said. So, we ended up having a scene that looked like an Arabic demonstration instead of the belly dancing that I tried to do, which was my own self-censorship, so, we had even a stronger scene. Another time I had my Palestinian play, *And Here I Am*, in a festival in Cairo, and just before the performer was going to go on stage, a man from the censorship office came on and said, "Oh, by the way, you've got to cut out this and this and this and this." Luckily, I had a fantastic director. She's English but she's lived in the Arab world, and knows how these things work. She just went, "Yeah, of course, we'll do it, yeah, please come and watch the performance." And we cut nothing, and the censor didn't care. I've had censorship in Britain. I've worked on a small project with the British Museum. They had taken out the Rosetta Stone as part of their exhibition, and they put various kinds of statues and tablets and so on. And our task as writers was to write for each character, and I picked two. The remit was you write something about the character in the past and something that has an equivalent in today's world and I ended up writing about a priest in ancient Egypt, it was audio piece pieces, and that was recorded. I wrote the second piece set in a contemporary Coptic Church. The British Museum got very nervous, and they went and consulted with the Coptic Church which was very happy with it. They were like, "Oh, wow, something is written about us, that's great!" It wasn't critical, but it was kind of a tense piece, it had dramatic tension. The British Museum ended up not recording the play, just in case something bad happens or whatever.

Yeah, institutions here in the West can censor as well, if they think that they're gonna get in trouble. The biggest subject that I believe is under censorship right now is Palestine. When you come from the region, and you write about Palestine it is different. If you're an American playwright who is writing about Palestine and doing a kind of both sides are good or bad, then you can get away with it, and your play could even end up in

the National Theatre. But if you are coming with a point of view, and have a take on it, then it becomes much harder. Can censorship be an inspiring thing? One could use allegory to deal with the conflict and create a play that would have a longer shelf life. That is the kind of thing that opens up possibilities. One of the playwrights I admire massively is Carol Churchill, and I've had the privilege of meeting her on several occasions and talking to her. She is the mistress of metaphor on the stage. Churchill writes political plays like *Far Away* and other plays that are steeped in politics, but they don't seem like they are. Instead, they come across like dark fairy tales. And I really aspire to write in that way. So, you can get around censorship by using something metaphoric, but at the same time, you create something that might have a longer shelf life. Because it's not rooted to a particular moment or wedded to a particular situation that might one day be over. I think the metaphor allows for longevity of a play, and it's just more interesting, because it makes the audience engage in the game of trying to decipher the play.

HA: Exactly, you are relying on your audience. There is a hidden channel between you and the audience. It's just like, I know what that means. It is an amazing moment, isn't it?

Abdulrazzak: It definitely is. I think writing in a metaphoric way is very exciting. I hope to develop plays with that approach.

HA: How do you see yourself being from the second generation of migrants? You were born in Prague and lived most of your life in London. Your roots are from Iraq. How do you see this combination of three different cultures? How far do you mobilise these different contexts into a play?

Abdulrazzak: I often think about things in terms of a story that sparks. I try not to think about the complexity of my identity, because if I do, it could be crippling. I lived in Iraq from the age of three to the age of eight. And that's the strongest memory of Iraq. I didn't go back to Iraq till 2019, a lifetime later. Obviously, I had a continuity with Iraqi society and a lot of my relatives live in Amman. You go to Amman, which has suburbs that are like a Little Iraq, you know. And there is a Little Iraq in London as well. And I'm sure it's the case as well in Australia. I know that because I was in Australia as well. I know that there is a community there. It's not the same as living in Iraq. What kind of stories can I tell based on that identity, is something I think about. Do I have the licence to tell stories of people living in Iraq, for example. I believe you have the right to tell any kind of stories, as long as you do the work and the research. What can I allow my identity to dictate? Right? My starting point is much more organic than that. I'm writing a musical called *The Shadow World* that's got some scenes set in Yemen. The musical is inspired by a book with the same title about the arms trade, but I don't have direct experience of Yemen. It's not a country I visited. Rather, it's something that I'm reaching with my imagination with some research and interviews to do it that way. At the same time, I've created a character who's Yemeni British. So, I feel I've got kind of around that with this approach. Her identity would be something that I can tap into because it's kind of closer to me, I think.

HA: Nearly every piece I read about you, or even when you introduce yourself, you usually say "I'm of Iraqi origin." Do you think your audience, when they come to see your plays, have in mind "I'm going to see a British-Iraqi play" or "I am going to watch a semi-Iraqi theatre"?

Abdulrazzak: Actually, the Iraqi community is not usually theatre-enthusiast. It is mainly oriented towards poetry and so on. Sometimes I wonder what this specific person will think of this particular scene? Or sometimes I have, I hope, certain people as a select audience in my head, and I wonder what they would think of a certain scene or a certain play. They might come and see a play because the play is set in Iraq. They might do it just simply because of that. But I would really like to think at the end of the day, I've got to tell interesting stories that can compel a wide audience. And I am against the idea of putting ourselves in boxes. You can utilise your own culture, but you have to try and write the best piece of work you can. Make it as compelling as anything else by anybody else. Obviously, I come from an Iraqi family, both of my parents are Iraqi. I have cousins here, aunts, uncles. My Iraqiness is just a fact of life. This is who I am. But am I as Iraqi as somebody like Jawad Allassadi? You know, I don't have that experience. Obviously, when he's going to write a play while living in Iraq, he's going to write a very different play, because he is tapping into different things. He knows his audience. He's doing different things. Maybe if he did one of my plays like *Baghdad Wedding* on stage in the National Theater, nobody might like it. I can't always gauge how something will be perceived, or go down. Especially critics here, they're a very, very strange bunch. Like sometimes you think: "Oh, I know this critic. I know what they will like." And you could be completely wrong. You write a play and then they completely dislike it or like it. So, I think if you spend a lot of time trying to anticipate all of that, it's not good for the creative process.

HA: I'm thinking about *Baghdad Wedding*. It premiered in 2007, four years after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. But the whole story is hilarious. So funny. It's a comedy talking about different people from what the UK audience knows or hears about Iraq. Those men are very progressive figures, modern, open minded. I felt that you wanted to say something different from what UK people hear in the mainstream about what's happening in Iraq, or life in Iraq, even before 2003.

Abdulrazzak: Definitely with *Baghdad Wedding*, I felt very compelled to show the Iraq that I know. That meant the characters were in Britain, they went back to Iraq and so on. I wanted to show a side that I knew, the mainstream did not know about Iraq. And I think at the time, you know, the predominant image of the time that I wrote the play was that vandals were taking things from ministries and running with them. And there was a kind of a sense that Iraq is a very primitive country with some strange people who do primitive things, very uncivilised and so on. And of course, we as Iraqis know the reasons why this happened, and we know the political and sociological reasons for the looting. Iraqis, when they were on the British stage, were marginal to the story, like in *Stuff happens* by David Hare. I wanted to write against this play. Again, this goes back to the point of the value of being provoked by people you don't agree with. There was definitely a drive to present another version of Iraq. Now that version also challenged some Iraqis, because there isn't one Iraq, just like there isn't one Britain, or one Australia. It's your take on it. I think it was the BBC that one day interviewed me, and they interviewed somebody who had just arrived from Iraq. This young man said: "Well, nobody drinks in Iraq." Well, no! There are people who drink and some of them even drink excessively. That's not the population, but that is a group. I said "You have your experience in Iraq, and I have the experience that I know of Iraq. There isn't really one Iraq." It's important to try and show different aspects of not just Iraq, but Arab culture, because there is such a terrible stereotype. There is such a kind of narrow representation. I don't know what it's like in Australia, but in the UK, if a character is a Muslim woman, she must be wearing a veil. Well, there are so many other Muslim women, practising Muslim women who are not hijabi. Why do we always have to have this represented? I'm not against hijab, when it's worn by choice, but it cannot be the only way to represent Muslim women.

HA: That's amazing. I loved *Baghdad Wedding*, and I noticed that it was broadcast for BBC Radio, then you co-authored it as a film with Nick Drake, right?

Abdulrazzak: Yeah, we tried. We worked on it for a number of years. It almost became a film, but unfortunately, the project didn't happen. And the rights are sitting with the big company that took it, and it's become an impediment to getting it made.

HA: It was also produced in Australia. How did it end up there?

Abdulrazzak: The Belvoir Street Theatre read about it, and decided to mount their own production in 2009. It was a fantastic production. They were very hospitable. They hired an Iraqi woman who was involved with helping the actors with the accents, and also galvanising the Iraqi community to come and see the play. They did everything right. I was very impressed by them. And one of the actors who had a minor role, Osamah Sami, He's like a big star in Australia now. He started with a small role in *Baghdad Wedding*, but he was very talented. I could tell this guy was going to be a star.

HA: Thank you so much, Hassan. Would you like to add something?

Abdulrazzak: I would just like to add, I've been fortunate to make theatre for a wide audience. But I really think there are a lot of Iraqi theatre makers who, for various reasons, maybe language barriers or other reasons, work for the Iraqi community only. And I think they're unsung heroes. They make shows every now and then, whenever they can, for the Iraqi audiences. And I, I just hope that one day there will be a kind of an archive where this would be documented—especially the people who didn't get their dues, you know, who didn't get reviewed, or gain recognition in the societies where they settled. And I think there's so many people who love theatre, who do theatre, who save up a bit of money and then put on a play for the community. The two prominent examples in London are Ronak Shawki and Ahlam Arab. I just wanted to mention them. And yeah, I hope there'll be some kind of recognition for their work.

HA: Yeah, I totally agree with you, Hassan. I just submitted an article about seasoned Iraqi theatre makers in Australia. They face endless challenges to present or produce Iraqi plays that would premier on the Australian multicultural stage. Accordingly, their repertoires are not nationally recognized. It is not only the language barrier as you put it. Rather, it is the lack of knowledge about funding norms, for example, and so many other power dynamics that limit their creativity. I argue that the same struggle here in Australia is the same in other Global North countries like Europe, US and Canada. Thank you so much for bringing that to our attention.

Abdulrazzak: Thank you.

About The Author(s)

Dr. Hadeel Abdelhameed is a Senior Research Fellow at Monash University/ Faculty of Education, examining the revamps in educational and cultural policies that aim to reinvigorate the theatre culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Her research focuses on twentieth and twenty-first Iraqi theatre, postcolonial and feminist theory, memory studies, and national identity. Her recent article "The Rashid Theater in Baghdad: The Drama of a Nation" examines the spatial memory in Iraq by focusing on one of the Iraqi National Theatres, the Rashid Theatre. Abdelhameed is also interested in the performative dimension of social movements. In support of the women's contribution to Iraqi Tishreen protest movement, Abdelhameed has co-authored a book chapter, "Mothering the Protest: Gender Performativity as a Communication Mechanism in the Iraqi Protest Movement" for The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media, and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa (2023). She is a co-convenor of the Arabic Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research/ IFTR, and is on the Advisory Board of the journal Public Humanities. She is the founder of the Iraqi Women Academics Network IWAN_Iraq. Currently, she guest editing a special issue of GPS: Global Performance Studies about Iraqi theatre since the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which will come out in 2026.

Arab Stages

Arab Stages is devoted to broadening international awareness and understanding of the theatre and performance cultures of the Arab-Islamic world and of its diaspora.

The journal appears twice yearly in digital form by the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center of New York and is a joint project of that Center and of the Arabic Theatre Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research.



[Visit Journal Homepage](#)

Table of Contents

An Interview with the Iraqi-born British playwright Hassan Abdulrazzak by Hadeel Abdelhameed

A Roundtable Review: Returning to Haifa at Golden Thread Productions (2024)

Review: GUERNICA, GAZA: VISIONS FROM THE CENTER OF THE EARTH. By Naomi Wallace and Ismail Khalidi

Performance Review: The Tutor

Review: OF KINGS AND CLOWNS: LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN THEATRE SINCE 1967 By Tiran Manucharyan.

Review: PLAYS OF ARABIC HERITAGE. By Hannah Khalil

Attribution:

Entries under this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license.

© 2023

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, The CUNY Graduate Center

365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309 | ph: 212-817-1860 | mestc@gc.cuny.edu

