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Arab Stages

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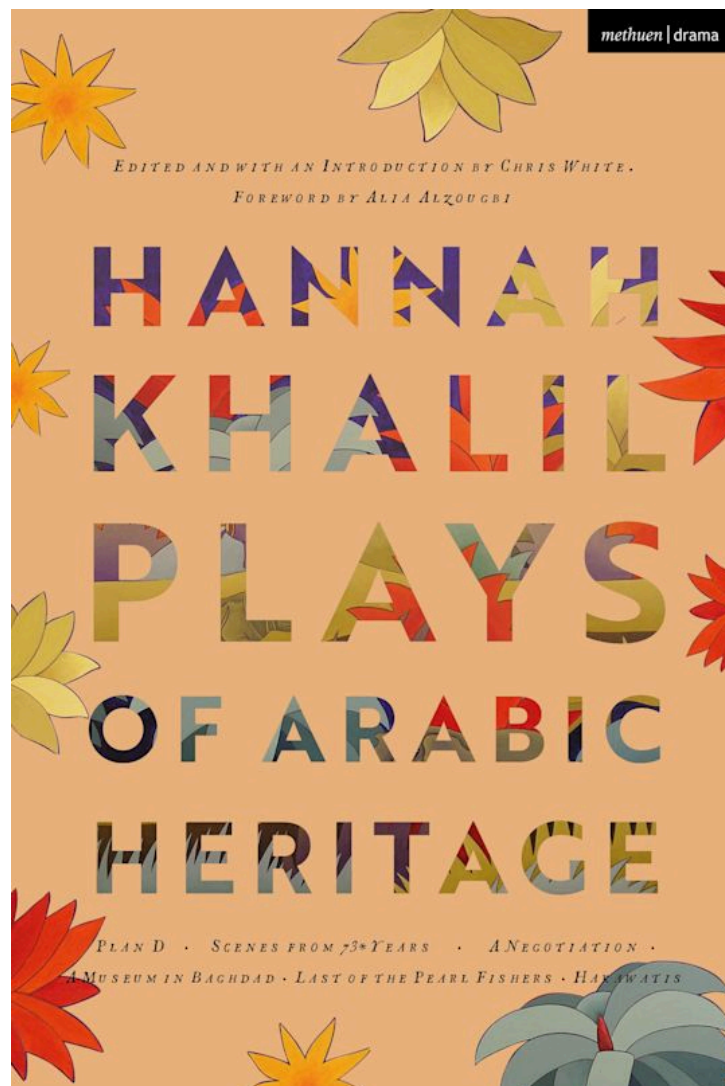
Review: PLAYS OF ARABIC HERITAGE. By Hannah Khalil

By Kari Barclay

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PLAYS OF ARABIC HERITAGE. By Hannah Khalil. Edited by Chris White. London: Methuen Drama, 2022; pp. 280 + xvi.



This collection features six plays by the Palestinian-Irish writer Hannah Khalil, framed with supporting material by editor Chris White and Khalil herself. The plays, *Plan D*, *Scenes from 76* Years*, *A Negotiation*, *A Museum in Baghdad*, *Last of the Pearl Fishers*, and *Hakawatis*, experiment with forms ranging from naturalistic drama to solo performance to kaleidoscopic vignettes to a radio play. One of a few collections of Arab diasporic drama by a single author, the book shows the playwright's range and how her work has shifted based on changing contexts. Alongside recent collections of plays by Mona Mansour, Heather Raffo, and Yussef El Guindi, *Hannah Khalil* adds a thematically rich and carefully crafted contribution to an emerging canon of published works by MENA playwrights.

Chris White's introduction situates each of Khalil's plays in the context of Khalil's biography and frames her work as intersectional feminist interventions, presenting "women telling stories the way they want to, 'free as birds'" (xvi). A forward by actor and producer Alia Alzougbi similarly connects Khalil's work with matrilineal storytelling traditions across generations of Arab women. Indeed, Khalil's work often present Arab women protagonists trying to navigate the specifically gendered dimensions of colonization, warfare, and sexual violence and to survive through storytelling. Khalil herself adds intros and outros to every play in the collection, revealing how she developed each play and how responses to one production often led to the next.

The book's first play, *Plan D*, depicts a family of farmers fleeing violence when military bombardment leaves a crater on their land. The title alludes to Plan Dalet, the Zionist military campaign of 1948 that displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and killed numerous others leading up to the founding of the state of Israel, but Khalil avoids temporal or geographic landmarks. Instead, she is deliberately "non-specific" and lets the play resonate with various audience experiences (4). As Khalil emphasizes, the play's first production at London's Tristan Bates Theatre led audience members, both Palestinians and others, to confide in her their stories of war and displacement.

These stories emerging from *Plan D* led directly to Khalil's next play, *Scenes from 76* Years*. This series of interwoven vignettes depicts—among other scenes—women defiantly picnicking in front of IDF soldiers, a man returning to see his pre-Nakba home and discover its new settler inhabitant, and an Israeli activist teenager telling her family about her decision to reject university and join in Palestinian struggle. Khalil fragments these stories, and some of the most poignant scenes are wordless stage pictures of Palestinians waiting at checkpoints. Past and present collide, as Palestinian life continues in stops and starts. The title's "years" reference the time elapsed since 1948, and its asterisk indicates that artists should update its title to reflect the ongoing count of years passed since the Nakba.

The next two plays in the collection, *A Negotiation* and *A Museum in Baghdad*, are companion pieces reflecting on museums and colonial plunder. The first is a short solo play about an Iraqi English woman who comes face-to-face with the Mask of Warka, one of the earliest representations of the human face, in the British Museum. As she experiences wonder and gratitude that Britain has kept it "safe," her father feels sorrow that his daughter overlooks its expropriation. The daughter starts to wonder if she, like the mask, has been removed from her Iraqi context. With its focus and scale, the play is one of the strongest in the collection and uses one person's encounter to unpack conflicting interpretations of "tarath" [sic]—heritage (122).

A Museum in Baghdad continues this reflection by focusing on two figures—Gertrude Bell, a real-life British archaeologist involved in founding the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in 1926, and Ghalia Hussein, a fictional Iraqi archeologist trying to reopen the museum in 2006 following looting during the Iraq War. Co-commissioned by the Royal Lyceum Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company, the play imaginatively collides timescales. Despite its high-stakes context, the play often leaves its characters' tough decisions up to the flip of a coin tossed by Abu Zemen, a kind of Father Time figure. Although sometimes caught up in its ideas, the play spotlights women trying to preserve heritage as regimes rise and fall "through the hubris and mismanagement of men" (170).

In *Last of the Pearl Fishers*, Khalil effectively uses the radio play format, which serves her writing style of quick jumps across space and time. Commissioned by BBC 4, this radio play is set in a community of wealthy ex-pats in Dubai, where Khalil grew up. The play follows Lillian, a white-collar English housewife, as she searches for her Filipina maid Celeste, who has disappeared without a trace. Khalil creates similar whodunnit structure to that found in Susan Glaspell's 1916 classic *Trifles*, as gendered objects reveal clues to the mystery. However, instead of merely highlighting gendered solidarity, the play exposes Lillian's inability to understand Celeste's position. Through Lillian's search, we witness the inequities of migrant labor in the UAE and the legal structures that uphold them.

The final play, *Hakawatis: The Women of the Arabian Nights*, is a playful subversion of *1001 Nights*. Leaving Scheherazade and King Shahryar offstage, the play imagines the king's other would-be wives awaiting their execution and spinning stories to help Scheherazade hold Shahryar off. The play's title refers to the Arab tradition of oral storytelling, and here women continue that tradition as a part of their survival. With stories ranging from dark to uproarious, *Hakawatis* is excellent, and it self-referentially comments on theater as a space of hope for women to build community, escape violence, and fight for their communities.

Demonstrating range in form and content as well as insights from the playwright, *Hannah Khalil: Plays of Arabic Heritage* offers a beautifully intimate reading experience where one gets glimpses into a playwright's journey and her artistic decision-making. Foregrounding stories about Palestine in *Plan D* and *Scenes from 76* Years*, the collection offers much-needed representation to complement anthologies such as *Stories Under Occupation* and *Inside/Outside: Six Plays from Palestine and the Diaspora*. Meanwhile, Khalil's work models coalitional thinking with other struggles in the Arab world and depicts women, like Khalil herself, trying to navigate injustice with humor, care, and a belief in power of artistic imagination. The book will be of great service to scholars and artists interested in Khalil's work, Palestinian and MENA diasporic drama, and plays that use history to explore our unwieldy present.

About The Author(s)

Kari Barclay (they/them) is a writer, director, and researcher who serves as Assistant Professor of Theater at Oberlin College. Their scholarship on theater, sexuality, and politics has been published in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Topics*, and *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, among other journals. Their book *Directing Desire*, out from Palgrave Macmillan in 2023, charts the history and politics of intimacy choreography and consent in contemporary U.S. theater. kari-barclay.com.

Arab Stages



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