



Abdelkrim Berchid: Festive Theatre and the Post-Colonial Condition

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Director, playwright, theorist, and drama teacher, Abdelkrim Berchid,¹ (1943-) is the founder of the festive project in Morocco. His appetite for theatre has always been gargantuan. No Moroccan theatrical experience elicited as much crucial attention as did his festive experience, which has peremptorily announced a new direction in theatre-making in the Arab World. This is because he broached problematics that provoked rancorous disagreements inside the kingdom. More importantly, his avant-garde experience has largely dislodged several theatrical concepts and in their space carved ones that became in due course central to Arabic dramatic discourse. In fact, his theatrical experience has staunchly elbowed itself into prominence and pushed its way into academic circles in and outside the kingdom as it successfully evolved a new form of stagecraft to present the Arab post-colonial vision. Berchid would be wary of any introduction that presents him as a temporary monolith, or an ever-lasting hater of flux.

Berchid occupies a key position on the post-colonial theatrical map of Arab territories. He is a dramatist who combines creativity, criticism, and theorization. In Khalid Amine's words, Berchid is "...the most prominent representative theoretician, who has not only voiced his disavowal of the Western theatrical enterprise, but also presented a theatrical form as an alternative. This form is called the festive theatre" (Moroccan Theatre 106-107). Amine further elaborates: "Throughout his career, Berchid has produced a corpus of theoretical manifestoes and critical writings, polemical publications here and there, and most importantly, a corpus of plays—many of them related to the Shakespeare canon" (106-107). He thus deserves to be called the spiritual harbinger of the festive trend in the Arab-Muslim World. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his theorizations played an overarching role in the changes that altered the course of Moroccan theatre following the 1970s.

Without studying *Al-Ihtifaliya* (festivity)² and understanding its ideational and aesthetic/poetic frames of reference which prompted its establishment, one could hardly do justice to Berchid's plays. Yet it is Berchid's creative, critical, and theoretical writings that constitute these frames of reference. Can we therefore examine Berchid's plays and theatre

¹Editor's Note (*hereafter Ed. N.*): Author has preferred to use Abdelkrim Berchid over its alternate spelling - Abdelkrim Berrechid. The latter has been used in Don Rubin's edited *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, volume 4, The Arab world, Routledge, 1999.

²Ed. N.: On Moroccan Theatre in Don Rubin's edited *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, *Al-Ihtifaliya* has been translated as "celebration Theatre," but the author has interpreted the same as "Festive Theatre."

independent of festivity? Is it possible to explore festivity without reference to Berchid's creative, critical, and theoretical baggage? Festive theatre is best examined with recourse to both festivity and Berchid's whole corpus of theoretical baggage. This is to appreciate its merits and understand its complex system of aesthetics and poetics.

Festivity has preoccupied the minds of theatre practitioners and critics interested in histrionic arts since the 1970s. Nurtured in Maghreb as a problematic, festivity has presented itself as an aesthetic-ideational project capable of delineating a plethora of issues of solid germaneness to the domains of creativity, criticism, and theorization. This article sheds light on the reasons that pushed Arab theatre harbingers to think of a theatrical theory in light of which they could express themselves without feeling trapped in Eurocentric patterns. It also examines Berchid's keen interest in theorization and highlights festivity's aesthetics and poetics of difference.

The post-colonial turn constituted a critical stage in theatrical criticism in Morocco. It was during this stage that Berchid first attempted theatrical theorization and effected his festive manifestoes. This act of theorization would mark a new stage in theatrical criticism premised on a hybrid aesthetics that sought inspiration both from Arab-Muslim heritage and post-structuralist legacy. However, this theorization triggered an avalanche of criticisms and commentaries at a time when most theatre critics wondered whether theorization was even feasible or not. For example, Ahmed al-Iraqi declared that theorization requires "... the existence of quantitative and qualitative accumulations which could elucidate the necessary markers of theorization that shape the field's productions within the theatrical space" (25).³

When theatre critics were wondering whether Moroccan theatre had achieved these "quantitative and qualitative accumulations," Berchid forcefully affirmed that the new leap in Arab theatre had already been carried out:

With the advent of the 1970s, Arab theatre experienced a new leap, which will always remain new until it achieves the attribute of antiquity. This leap manifested itself in diligence, experimentation, research, and the serious endeavor to harmonize ideational theory with scientific practice. Therefore, Arab theatre has moved to 'the third stage,' namely the stage of looking for an ideational theory with both aesthetic and ideational dimensions (The Form of Arab Theatre 180).⁴

The truth is that the third stage to which Berchid refers clearly shows the correlation of festive theorization with the socio-political clashes that marked the 1970s with cataclysmic events on the national and international scenes. Such events include the emergence of the armed struggle in Palestine in 1965; the June defeat at Arab-Israeli war in 1967; the cultural revolution in China; May 1968 events in France; the fall of American imperialism before the Vietnamese forces; the hippy movement as well as the avant-garde movements, etc (Salem 4).

³*Idaa* [Enlightenment]— a periodical published by *Jam'iyat al-Aqni'a* in Fes, Morocco, Issue 2, May (1982), 25.

⁴See Also Abdelkrim Berchid, *al-Ihtifaliya: mawaqif wa mawaqif modada* [Festivity: Attitudes and Counter-Attitudes] (dar tinnel litiba'a wa nachr, Marrakech, 1993).

Prompted by all these events, the twentieth-century Moroccan theatrical movement produced a raft of manifestoes, papers, and publications that express a strong will towards theatrical theorization. In fact, this obsession with theorization was a common state of affairs in the Arab-Muslim world: Youssef Idriss, Tawfiq al-Halim, and Ali al-Rai in Egypt; Saad Allah Wanouss in Syria; Izz Din al-Madani in Tunisia; *al-Hakawati* Troupe in Lebanon; *Fawanis* in Jordan; *Saradiq* in Egypt (Ramdani, "Masrah" 13-14). The will to theorize came about when Arab dramatists felt that the Western theatrical model was alien to their environment and did not fit within their histrionic versions. The act of theorization is linked to their understanding of the problematic of 'theatrical origins.' Such an understanding enabled them to discern the exclusivist nature of Western theatre, which treated them as 'blank slates' and 'empty spaces.' With the benefit of this hindsight, the harbingers of histrionic arts in Morocco and elsewhere called for the return to the festive springs of Arab-Muslim popular legacies, and took the lead of putting forward the first foundations of Arab theatrical theory.

However, these harbingers failed to achieve such a goal because their theories lacked scope, comprehension, and clarity. This failure led some theatre critics to emphasize that theorization requires documenting oral materials together with establishing laboratories and clubs for experimentation along with theatrical researches. This process entailed inventing an 'original' formula for Arab theatre which had to be 'rooted' in Arab-Muslim ideational needs, cultural aesthetics, and social requirements. To this end, this theatre had to return to tradition, thanks to the collective efforts of dramatists, anthropologists, archeologists, and others in acoustic and optic fields (al-Nocayri, "Stage structure" 28).

Mohamed Messkin saw that these theorizing discourses were premised on reasonable justifications. First, a mixture of concepts and theatrical formula were made available owing to the spirit of adaptation which highly characterized the period. Second, there was an absence of a diligent pursuance, study, and criticism of problematics and phenomena which encourage genuine theatrical theorization. Third, theorization from within generated only a search for 'leadership' that gave birth to local theatrical trends. Fourth, there was a search for a solid theory capable of granting Arab-Muslim playwrights/dramatists historical as well as aesthetic legitimacy. Messkin contends that these harbingers' quest for a theoretical framework must be seen as a project that should reflect the concern for rooting their expressive forms in Arab cultural education along with finding a sui generis identity for their histrionic praxis: "The significance behind generating such a framework cannot become clear to us if this step is not taken first. Theatre is an act, and will always need a theoretical proof" (Present Absent 16). Messkin thus saw the various theorizations that appeared in the Arab-Muslim world as a project intended to engender a theatrical theory in light of which the Arab creator could masterfully perform his theatrical works. By calling these theorizations a mere project, Messkin alluded to the fact that these endeavours were incompetent to grasp the essence of the theatrical process which entails a clear conception capable of creating a coherent theatrical theory (16).

Berchid was aware of this challenge and continued to critique his contemporaries on this basis.⁵ He propounded the festive theory as an alternative to the existing theatrical models. He also realized that theory should be perceived as a project that requires the collective efforts of

⁵See for example Abdelkrim Berchid, *hodod al-kain wa lmomkin fi al-masrah al-ihitfali* [The Limits of the Actual and the Possible in Festive Theatre] (dar attaqa: Casablanca, 1985).

Arab researchers, creators, and artists. It was in this spirit that he published the first manifesto of festive theatre. In the manifesto, he criticizes existing theatrical models, explains his conception of the suggested model, and calls for ‘rooting’ theatrical formula in Arab-Muslim social imaginary. This won him fame and recognition because, in Hassan Lemniai’s words, “he shouldered the burden of defending the school of festivity” (Moroccan Theatre 7). The claims that his theorization and manifestoes were intended to create a theatrical trend for a particular social class have no bearing whatsoever on the truth which festivity called for. One has to see festive theatre as a formula and a model that boasts Arab-Muslim histrionic practices. Berchid confirms that “...festivity is not a mere theatrical current amongst other currents. Nor is it a mere part of a whole. It is rather Arab theatre in its entirety” (Critical Vaccinations 9). He even asserts that to renounce festivity would be to quicken Arab theatre’s fall into decay which would only shore up Orientalist trends. Indeed, this renouncement would only buttress Eurocentric tropes of empire by esteeming the appropriated Western theatrical model at the expense of the local one. To emancipate Arab theatre from Eurocentric shackles, Berchid calls for embracing festivity, which he sees as “Arab theatre in its entirety” (9). Despite his propagandist, if not centric, approach, Berchid says festivity should not be regarded as a school with followers (Festive Theatre 12).

Establishing dramatic discourse in Arab-Muslim culture was carried out in the spirit of a quest for a lost civilizational identity. This endeavour also aimed at dis-appropriating prevailing Eurocentric discourse, for the post-colonial condition imposed its intellectual burden upon Arab-Muslim consciousness to redefine itself and question the validity of Eurocentric theatrical projects which treated our performing traditions with excessive arrogance. Arab-Muslim ‘connoisseurs’ thus saw it fit to revolt against imperialistic thinking which stripped them of their civilizational identity and alienated them from within and without. Festive theatre championed this revolt and raised a plethora of relevant avant-gardist questions: is there an aesthetic philosophy particular to Arab creativity? Can Arab thinking attain independence without depending on the West? In this vein, Mustapha Ramdani maintains that

... these questions generated an avant-gardist movement in the field of drama, which started with creativity, criticism, and then theorization. When we talk about dramatic discourse, we automatically mean the entire structure of what we call theatrical performance; a structure that does not allow the separation of cognitive, ideological and aesthetic levels. (Theatre of Abdelkrim Berchid, 24)

Establishing this discourse was meant to induce a vision dissimilar to the prevailing one in terms of playwriting, direction, acting, performance, and stage-auditorium relationship. Old dramatic discourses, which prevailed thanks to rampant Western modernity, played an overarching role in marginalizing spectators not only through indoctrinating and producing them as docile bodies, but also through their emphasis on the use of the alien Aristotelian theatrical model. In this regard, festivity’s great significance resides in reconsidering stage-auditorium relationship with recourse to unprecedented aesthetics.

Festivity is best understood as a project that aims at actualizing a *sui generis* dramatic discourse premised on constituents firmly rooted in Arab-Muslim civilization. However, festivity should not be understood as a trend calling for innovation, which should *ipso facto* transcend old

formulas or models upon which new one(s) must be established. Festivity does not call for an innovation of this sort at all. It simply claims that Arab theatre during colonial times till the advent of the post-colonial turn could barely be called Arab because it functioned according to Eurocentric patterns and parameters that excluded national concerns and alienated Arab-Muslim cultures from within. Ramdani observes that festivity sees the discourse on this act of establishment to be remarkably connected to the issue of rooting Arab dramatic discourse, which could not be achieved without interrogating our social imaginary (Theatre of Abdelkrim Berchid, 25). The essential factors which prompted the appearance of the festive process can be listed as follows: 1) the absence of an ‘original’ aesthetic philosophy in Arab histrionic praxis; 2) the widespread emulation of theatrical performances; 3) the focus of Arab theatrical researches on trivialities rather than essences; 4) obliterating theatrical lineaments of local popular performing spectacles; 5) the failure of some Arab theatrical endeavours due to their focus on individual rather than collective work; 6) the urgent need for defining a comprehensive theatrical discourse that venerates Arab-Muslim identity and the need to create a theatre that unites people together; 7) the failure of amateur theatre to establish a coherent theatrical theory despite the weightiness and multiplicity of its performing experiences (Theatre of Abdelkrim Berchid, 25).

Though festivity rejects amateur theatre’s formula, it remains indebted to it in the last resort. Amateur theatre, which has been credited with setting up the cornerstone of modern Moroccan theatre, is an off-fringe theatre practice which is avowedly avant-garde. It is an experimental movement, which had drawn the salient lineaments of modern Moroccan theatre. These amateurs constituted a group of people—both students and professional workers—who championed progressive values and entertained aesthetic ambitions. They expressed Arab-Muslim concerns through purposeful performances that counteracted the consumerism of professional theatre, which ignored Morocco’s temporal-historical realities. In this way, amateur theatre can be seen as the brainchild of the national Moroccan culture. Remarkably, it was this theatre that gave birth to and nurtured the festive tradition.

With the advent of the 1970s, festivity came to ‘authenticate’ Arab dramatic discourse at the time during which Amateur Theatre was battling against the forces that were striving to distance it from its devoted audiences (Theatre of Abdelkrim Berchid, 27). By animating a direct interaction between art and society, festivity has elbowed itself into prominence as an effective histrionic movement in the history of modern Moroccan theatre. It regards Arab-Moroccan legacies as a fund which Arab dramatists can tap for aesthetic forms that could eventually give birth to a theatrical model markedly different from the Aristotelian one. It should be emphasized that festivity is not a mere *form* pertaining to theatrical techniques of playwriting and direction. It styles itself on a different *conception* of Man on the axis of history, economics, politics and arts. In this sense, festivity is not a philosophy confined only to theatre but is a broader theory concerned with human life as a whole. It aims at revolutionizing the Arab taste which was submitted to the terrible *Entfremdung*⁶ process that is driven by the forces of appropriation and commercialization.

Festivity should be seen as a theory with aesthetics rooted in Arab culture. Such aesthetics are, however, subject to change and are indeed adaptive. Because human life itself is

⁶Ed. N.: Sometimes translated in English as alienation or estrangement. Here, it refers to social alienation in the context of Karl Marx’s theory of alienation.

fleeting and ephemeral, festivity serves as a barometer of change in human life. It insists on experimentation because "...it seeks to accompany the progress of Man alongside the relentless movement of history" (Theatre of Abdelkrim Berchid, 27-28). The human taste evolves by virtue of this progress as do the conditions and mechanisms of human communication. In this sense, festivity becomes an open workshop that enables spectators to possess or control the aesthetic means of production. That is to say, it is by definition a theory for popular theatre.

In festive hermeneutics, the concept of *acha'biya* [popularity] resists all forms of political containment. It is this concept which explains why festivity refuses 'to present a theatre to the people' and why it insists on 'having this people, with the aid of a creator, present a theatre catering for their needs.' The latter gave birth to a theatre grounded in spontaneity which could be attained through the recipients' participation, while the former subjected them to a process of indoctrination. Festivity in this sense aims at emancipating its audiences from the alien forces of *Entfremdung* because the meaning of *popularity* in the festive philosophy relates to production, not consumption:

The question 'what's popular theatre?' has always yielded the answer that it is the theatre that meets with people in factories, markets, workshops, or crossroads, and that it is the theatre that addresses people with vernacular languages. I believe this answer would remain insufficient should we discard other significant sides of the subject matter. This understanding is by and large premised on the consumption principle as it equates consumption with popularity (Berchid, "Popular Theatre" 15).

To attain the level of *popular*, festivity revisits Arab-Moroccan festive legacies; namely ceremonies and customs. It is closer to the widest section of people, for it appeals to their common sense, concerns and daily life situations. It is a dramatic discourse that addresses the popular imaginary using simple popular mediums. Such a treatment of the popular is not arbitrary at all and has come to supplant the Aristotelian mediums of communication which fail to induce spontaneous theatrical interaction in Arab-Moroccan theatrical spaces. Festivity distrusts the Aristotelian histrionic formula that impedes visceral stage-auditorium interaction and presents theatrical performances as mere commodities. Amine notes that "... if the dramatic script is dynamic and the actor is free, the festive theatrical performance is informed by the same spirit of dynamism. It is not a passive representation that the audience sees in performance, but the festive performance event with all its multiplied participatory energies" (Moroccan Theatre 109-110). Hence, "Berchid's notion of performance as a collective game wherein stage and auditorium combine to constitute a unified platform of collective festivity, bringing about a de-constitution of the long-standing Western division between stage and auditorium" (109-110).

In the festive dictionary, performance is equated with consumption. Festivity offers *al-ihitfal* [celebration] as an alternative. Celebration suggests meeting, participation, and the collective (co)presence of celebrators. In this sense, festive celebration opposes consumerist performance. It is very similar to what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls "the actual performance" that "... emerges out of the encounter between performers and spectators, with unforeseen reactions

and responses constantly changing the planned course” (Interweaving cultures).⁷ These types of performances are characterized by a high degree of contingency because they “rely on autopoietic processes” that involve the bodily (co)presence of performers and spectators. The exact courses of these performances cannot be predicted or fully controlled because many elements tend to emerge during these performances “as a consequence of certain interactions” (Interweaving cultures).

It is for this reason that festivity rejects the sender-receiver duality which suggests that there are active creators *sending* messages to passive consumers *receiving* these messages. Spectators in the festive theatre are Boalian⁸ spect-actors who participate in the making of the festive spectacle along with the playwright, director, actor, and the technician. The festive theatrical performance transforms itself in due course into an artistic popular demonstration with all the celebrants partaking in the creation of its ceremonies, which are changing, open-ended and contingent. In his book *Hodod al-kain wa lmomkin fi al-masrah al-ihitfali* [The Limits of the Actual and the Possible in the Festive Theatre], Berchid outlines the ideological significance of the festive theory, the gist of which has been captured by Amine:

[Festivity aims] to change social relationships and liberate the individual from the state of reification through addressing all his human potentialities (intellectual, physical, emotional, imaginative...). The achievement of such liberating stimulus is effected through a transformation of the theatrical apparatus including the playscript, the actor, director, scenography, and the audience. (Moroccan Theatre 107-108)

It is on this basis that festivity rejects the Aristotelian understanding of the dramatic *text/telos*. The Aristotelian theatre, which is an author theatre, falls from favour in festivity’s scales due to its collective spirit, which treats the author as an element in the entire theatrical process. The author presents a project susceptible to alterations which the celebrants are freely entitled to undertake. These alterations are indicative of festivity’s open-endedness in terms of *time* and *place*: interventions of the celebrants may elongate or shorten the allotted time and may also expand beyond the defined theatrical place to include larger squares or big streets. The existence of a celebrant taking part in the celebration may perforce mean the existence of a dramatic text. Thus, there is no need for a rigorous author as long as the content of the meeting itself forms the text. It is this theatrical meeting that originates participation, discussion, argumentation, thinking, movement, change, criticism, etc. In Amine’s words, “...the dramatic script should be active and alive rather than a closed ensemble or sub-text that imposes its authority and closure on its materialization upon the stage” (Moroccan Theatre 108).

In classical theatre, the dramatic text is an indispensable element. The actors perform in light of the author’s directions and instructions, while spectators occupy the auditorium as

⁷See also Erika Fischer-Lichte ‘Culture as History: Theatre History as Cultural History’ in *Centro de Estudos de Teatro*, (2004), 1-14.

⁸Augusto Boal (1931-2009) is a Brazilian theatre director, drama theorist, and political activist. He is famous for his Theatre of the Oppressed, which combated oppression actively. For further information on Boal, see an interesting article by Shomit Mitter in Shomit Mitter and Maria Shevtsova (ed.), *Fifty Key Theater Directors*. Routledge, 2005, 102-107.

passive recipients. Festivity rejects classical theatre and regards it as an institution of indoctrination wherein stagecraft-statecraft cooperation happens without interrogation. Festivity calls for dismantling this cooperation by encouraging collective participation because dramatic discourse from the festive vantage relies upon the human presence represented by both the creator and the audience. This presence actively obtains its vitality and vigour thanks to the recipient who is treated as a mature person endowed with a faculty to think. Thus, the recipient is deemed an active force and is, in Adib Slaoui's words, "the end for which all the possible means and tools can be employed" (Festivity in Modern Moroccan Theatre 141). This shows how important participation is in festive theatre. If spontaneity and collectiveness are held in high esteem in the festive theatre, individualism has no place in the festive system of aesthetics. It dissolves individualism for the sake of collective self insofar as the object of the festive expression resides in elevating collective feelings as a way of overcoming all forms of exploitation and falseness.

Festivity rejects ready-made counterfeit narratives. It considers the dramatic script as "only a project that is to be fulfilled within a theatrical festivity," and as "...an unfinished product that needs completion through another writing, stage inscription" (Amine, Moroccan Theatre 108). In Ramdani's words, the dramatic work "exists already as a text and does not exist as a real event until it is presented on stage" (Festive Theatre Issues 32). At the heart of festivity's notion of performance lies the shift from theatre as a work of art to theatre as a physical event. Thus, essential to this project and to the shift from art object to art event is the collapsing of binaries headed by that of subject and object or in the case of performance—spectator and actor.⁹ It is in this context that festivity regards acting as a counterfeit act and therefore rejects it as a form of deception that aims at inveigling recipients into stagecraft-statecraft forms of power. It, thus, calls for a spontaneous diagnosis to lay bare and add up to the exposition of the corrupt practices of these false forms of power and submit them into debate. More than that, it sees *reality* as a form of falseness representative of actual reality's shade. It also considers individuals' relationships to one another in a society as mere representations of oppressive behaviour. Actual reality is thus left absent, and is only revealed at the moment individualism is exposed thanks to its spontaneous and automatic treatment of the other, that is to say, during celebration at which individual selves are held on an equal footing in the service of the collective self (Berchid, Popular Theatre 32). In a sense, "change and social praxis constitute key concepts in the festive theory," and "...theatrical festivity, then, is primarily an aspiration for a better future and an action of persistent change as opposed to fixity and stillness. This dynamism, according to the festive theory, should be manifested from start to finish in the theatrical chain" (Amine, Moroccan Theatre 108).

Due to the Aristotelian theatre's inherent one-dimensionality, which is indicative of its view of the recipient, festivity holds that this theatre should be relegated to the margin as a mere decorative form of consumption incapable of reflection and criticism. It presents its special mechanisms to address human reason and emancipate it from the shackles of consumption imposed by the proscenium arch theatre. Festivity aims to debunk such a model in the hope of dispensing the restraints that the former imposes upon both the creator, whom it turns into an

⁹This view is reminiscent of Herrmann's notion of performance. See Marvin Carlson, 'Introduction: Perspectives on Performance: Germany and America' in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York & Londres: Routledge, 2008), 1-10.

exhibitor, and the recipient, who is treated as a consumer. Suggesting an equivalent to this hegemonic stage, festivity endorses a liberal space capable of absorbing events with considerable spontaneity. Hence, a legion of stage directors such as Tayeb Saddiki (1938-2016) presented their theatrical productions outside the theatrical building. Armed with post-colonial consciousness of denial, these artists have become convinced that proscenium arch is a prison: 1) that imprisons creators and recipients with recourse to its histrionic deception; 2) dictates rules for the deceptive theatrical game; 3) imposes both the time and place of the game; 4) and even prescribes the mechanisms of scenography as the director is left with no choice but to completely submit to the prescribed place of production. It thus aims at rationing the scenography levels together with the performers' movement. This rationing act robs the performance of spontaneity and reduces it to acting and deception. In the end, it becomes a spectacle of tricks driven by illusions that run counter to celebration which, in turn, embraces the variegated concerns of the festive group without resort to make-believe.

Indeed several popular arts fall within the purview of festivity. These arts underscore the presence of the other—the recipient—because action according to festive theory is “... released and liberated. It is in that release that the festive play finds itself distinct both from its preliminary inscription on the page and from other narrative fictions that remain bound to the page” (Amine, Moroccan Theatre 109-109). In this sense, festive theory, according to Amine,

... puts much emphasis on the apparatus of making spectacle, and on theatre as a social happening and a living collective experience rather than on theatre as an exclusively written text or a literary genre. Changeability and openness exempts the producer from being confined to a literal representation or mechanical doubling of a dramatic script as a given presence (Moroccan Theatre 108-109).

Amine further notes that “...to highlight dynamism and movement in his plays, Berchid rejects the mainstream division of a play into acts, parts and scenes,” and “...invents instead a new appellation that alludes to the fact that he considers a playscript as a ‘living being with two lungs,’ for the play interacts with its receiver and his everyday life within the parameters of what Berchid calls the here and now of the festive event” (108-109).

The presence of spectators in festive theatre transforms the performative process into a popular conference in which decisions emanate from below. This presence challenges and exceeds anything stationary and unchanging at the levels of time, place, and action: *time* because the past is revived to continue in the present and future; *place* because celebration is a revolt against the fourth wall in the Brechtian sense; *action* because creators and spectators together transcend everything prescribed previously in order to give a chance to expressive spontaneity. This action can be construed as an endeavour intended to construct actual reality according to the requirements of reform and exigencies of the festive moment. This process elicits wonder and surprise as effective means to stir up recipients' feelings and dazzle their minds with complex situations. The act of using surprise and wonder also compels the recipients to exercise their critical faculty.

Feelings in the festive theatre are transitional. However, wonder and surprise are springboards to more active and effective action. Festive theatre can potentially destroy the

rationalism of things as it appears to the layperson. Despite festivity's fierce assault on Brecht's theatre, an assault justified under the pretext that it elevates reason at the expense of feelings, it remains true that festivity equally elevates reason, and regards it as one of the recipient's multifarious tools without which celebration's perfect quality is virtually unattainable. It follows that festivity's emphasis on this purported difference should be downplayed. Festivity, as Berchid sees it, should renew its tie with Epic theatre in the Brechtian sense, and challenge the wrong assumption advanced by some theatre scholars that festivity is predicated on dramatic theatre. Assuming that Epic theatre discards feelings, some theatre critics wrongly conclude that festivity is a theatre that discards reason and consequently falls into the trap of emotional, (melo)-dramatic and sensational theatre. These critics misread festivity because festivity, as a project, has not perhaps sufficiently underscored its ties with Epic theatre. Festivity and the criticism it has elicited need to be revisioned.¹⁰

An act of revisionism is warranted on both sides. Festivity is at odds with dramatic theatre. The latter arouses the recipients' feelings, involving them in a cathartic process of emotional purgation. Driven by feelings rather than reason, dramatic theatre constitutes a showcase of stagecraft-statecraft collaboration, as it aims to turn its audiences into docile bodies willing to mimic others. Festivity is the anti-thesis of dramatic theatre. It thrives on "...the comedy-tragedy duality that confirms the meaning of absence: the absence of the recipient as an active member at the celebration. It also confirms *ighiyab* [calumny or malicious gossip] which is the laughing of the present at the absent" (Berchid, "Popular Theatre" 35). In this sense, festivity sees dramatic theatre as "a shaking discourse" (35). Through comedy, festivity achieves "emotional detachment through laughing at anyone who is alien to us." Through tragedy, it prompts "...emotional attachment by making us feel pain through watching the tribulation of those closer to us" (Popular Theatre 35). Festivity suggests this dual tragedy-comedy division in denial because in both cases emotionality on the part of the recipient is achieved. When the nobles are watching, the topic of theatrical rendition is always comic and the actors are plebeians. When the plebeians are watching, the topic is always tragic and the actors are nobles. Feelings of pity for the plebeians and of dread from the nobles are thus generated thanks to the cathartic process of emotional discharge.

As an alternative to this division, festivity offers the concept of *al-Hafl* [celebration] in which both feelings and reason take part. The aim is to deepen the human vision towards man and reality in the hope of a better life characterized and governed by honest relationships. It offers an entertaining yet convincing spectacle in a bid to impose common relationships. In its quest for establishing a massive popular theatre that draws upon the variegated aesthetics and the rich legacies which the Arabs and Muslims have celebrated for centuries, and in an attempt to break away from the dictates of Greek theatre, festivity is a *sui generis* aesthetic formula. Although it embraces Arab-Muslim expressive formulas, it does not at the same time avail itself of the teachings established by Western theatre practitioners; namely Brecht, Piscator, Grotowski, Artaud, Pirandello, Craig, Brook, Kantor and many other avant-gardists of equal importance. Berchid maintains that the process of authenticating Arabic dramatic discourse cannot be achieved unless Arabs and Muslims turn to their advantage avant-garde theatrical experiences, which called for the return to Eastern theatre. Ramdani rightly notes that festivity relates the efficacy of authenticating Arabic dramatic discourse, first, for establishing dialogue

¹⁰See for example Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008).

with the Other in its totality and, second, for considering daily conditions of reality with all their variations and constancies (Berchid, "Popular Theatre" 36). It is this humanist character of festivity in particular that invited criticism and challenge to the festive view of theatricality. Its concepts of man and reality are very abstract. Indeed, reality from the festive vantage "has no permanent and exact size" (Adib Slaoui, "Festivity in Modern Moroccan Theatre" 106). One has the right to wonder which reality festivity entails! Yet despite the nebulosity surrounding some festive concepts, the concept of reality renders itself very palpable in festive theatrical performances; hence my contention that any study of festivity would lack objectivity should it discard its manifestoes and theatrical performances.

Berchid rejects parochialism and embraces the human formula in its entirety. Reality is never local but is always laden with various contradictions. In this vein, Ramdani observes that reality in Berchid's sense of festivity is "... the reality man experiences along with all its contradictions either inside or outside the nation. Perhaps it is this fact that justifies its rejection of the Epic as it (festivity) sees it (the Epic) as a formula treating society from the class struggle vantage, whereas struggle is of different types" (Berchid, Popular Theatre 37). Festivity, thus, rejects Brecht's treatment of actor/performer dyad as an ideological tool of indoctrination which preaches certain ideology through enthralling theatrical means on the grounds that the spectators are endowed with the capacity to absorb ideological discourses. Accordingly, this rejection is premised on the Epic's treatment of the recipient, who, instead of being granted the freedom to bestir himself and ask questions, think, and participate, is hampered with an ideology. This argument explicates Festivity's rejection of Brecht's *verfremdung* effect as a form of 'a totalitarianism of opinion.' It propounds what I may call *verfremdung* festive or what it calls *al-indimaj almonfasil* [separate fusion] which is a process enabling spectators to discover contraries and paradoxes by means of surprise. One has to understand why festivity regards the Epic as a platform of spreading mystification and deception in a manner reminiscent of the mass media.

This clear-cut festive stand on Epicization is fraught with much misunderstanding. It is very visible in the fact that Brecht himself had a clear attitude towards struggle and at no point did he intend his theatre to be similar to mass media. He always insisted that Epicization can be implemented through the conscious practice of the ideological attitude within the social class that determines the individuals' consciousness. Thus, it does not impose guardianship upon the recipient. To the contrary, it invites the recipient to participate as an active member and makes him question everything with recourse to *verfremdung* effect principle. Brecht does not put the recipient in a position to take a stance unless he is consciously convinced. It is for this reason that his theatrical performances had to do with the paradoxes filling actual reality, which force the recipient to take part in the existing struggle in a bid to push him to solve his problems himself rather than imposing upon him solutions from 'above.'

The Epic theatre's aesthetic role should not be overlooked in spite of its emphasis on ideological orientation. This is manifested in Brecht's insistence on associating entertainment with ideology in theatrical theorizations. He regards them as inseparable (Nacif, "Epic Theatre" 56). Therefore, despite its several merits, festivity has fallen as a result of borrowing the Orientalist system of representation and politics of dominance in what I may call *festive Occidentalism* which is informed by a certain will or intention to dominate, control, even to

incorporate, what is apparently a different (or alternative and novel) world,. It is within this conjunction that I define festive Occidentalism as an Arab-Muslim style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over Western theatre—or more precisely over Epicization—which is almost a festive invention. It is created—or, as I would like to call it, ‘Occidentalized.’ In other words, Epicization exists in festive discourses as an invention, a creation, a representation, thus, a misrepresentation. Hence, my definition of festive Occidentalism as a style of thought reposes upon ontological and epistemological difference(s) invented between two theatres: the Western and the Festive. In this sense, Occidentalism reposed on centrism is the inspiring ideology of festivity.

Festivity also has its own perspective on social struggle. All its manifestoes insist on transforming the theatre into a popular forum. Yet it rejects agitation and propaganda. This explains the criticism which wrongly regards festivity as an ideological form of conspiracy serving the feudal-bourgeoisie coalition. Such an impressionist critique has failed to grasp the thrust of Berchid’s project or in Ramdani’s words “...it does not transcend the husk of words in dealing with the phenomenon. It neither delves into the general context of festive theorizations, nor shoulders the hardship of pursuing festive theatrical performances as practical forms of these theorizations” (Theatre of Abdelkrim Berchid, 39). These critics refuse to concede that some amateurs made some mistakes when they turned their performances into ideological speeches. In their dramatic discourses, theatre troupes which featured in the Amateur theatre festivals may perchance realize the undue emotive energy of instigative bannerist styles used (40).

Although festivity came out of the womb of amateur theatre, it succeeded to steer clear of its pitfalls. Instead of resorting to bannerist styles, it seeks inspiration in the usage of simple tools discernable by the audience such as plain yet suggestive poetic language, folkloric dance, narrative and open spaces of traditional performing spectacles such as *al-halqa* and *Lbsat*, etc. These tools hail the actor/performer as the lord of the theatrical performance and release him from the restraints imposed by the script and the director to finally impersonate with full liberty “...the synthetic dynamic character: namely, the actor manipulates a set of different dialogues manifested in the actor-author dialogue, the actor-director dialogue, the actor-audience dialogue, the actor-character-in-play dialogue, the actor-real-character dialogue, and the actor-onstage-emergencies dialogue” (40). In light of the power granted to him by festivity, the actor enjoys an inventive energy without submitting to the mercy of the signed author-director compact, which, in effect, concerns the audience. In this sense, the actor does not play a role, nor does he diagnose an event or a situation. Rather, he impersonates the role he plays with accurate and sophisticated skills. When we start to doubt his detachment from the character he is playing, he consciously dissolves this doubt and detaches from that character. In the festive conception, these acts of impersonation and detachment are called *separate fusion* roughly corresponding to Brecht’s *verfremdung effect*, which is driven by detachment.

Some critics claim that the *separate fusion* principle generates catharsis and thus runs counter to Brecht’s *verfremdung effect*. Yet I fail to observe an elemental difference between the two concepts because both festive theatre and epic theatre suggest that the actor should detach himself/herself from the role s/he is impersonating the very moment the recipient becomes aware of the paradoxes involved. Also, both theatres insist on creating a distance between the recipient and what s/he is watching on the stage to make him/her aware of the impersonation tricks (41) I

argue that Arab-Muslim performing spectacles are run according to this separate fusion principle. For example, the narrator, encomiast or *al-hlayqi* coexists with the narrative events while the spectators flank his person. He addresses and has fun with them, approaches and distances himself from them for evermore according to the requirements of theatrical acting and the exigencies of *verfremdungs festive*. He impersonates his role with exact accuracy and high liveliness and returns to his real character with precise spontaneity and surprising facility. It is natural enough for festivity to avail itself of aesthetic mechanisms of Arab-Islamic performing spectacles, which constitute the backbone of festive theatre.

If the actor is the center of festive dramatic discourse, festive scenography levels tend to play functional roles. That is why festive theatre plays down ostentatiousness in scenery, lighting, music, and accessories. Scenography levels depend on economy and suggestion. The other devices function as helping tools to aesthetically prompt a successful communication. The actor exposes every theatrical trick by donning his masks or changing the stage décor before his spectators. This is to emancipate them from delusional ‘truths’ the performance may unintentionally create. In this sense, the festive actor gathers and summarizes all human relationships and dialogues including his dialogue with his actual reality because he exists at the crossroads of predominant relationships in his society. Yet he is not an abstract humanist endowed with an elusive-delusive character (Hassan and Chrif, “On festivity” 43).

In conclusion, the festive trend has imposed itself with unexampled insistency in the Arab-Muslim world. It aims at engendering an aesthetic-poetic philosophy for rooting Arab-Muslim culture in its time-honored legacies. Due to festivity’s gigantic influence on the Moroccan theatrical map, several experimental endeavours in the theatre have availed themselves of its aesthetic apparatuses and philosophical concepts. This interaction demonstrates festivity’s inclusive tendencies. Indeed, festive theatre is a theatre of pluralistic difference. It managed to breathe a new impetus in Arab-Muslim theatre, which paved the way for what can be called modernity in Arab-Muslim dramatic discourse. The modernity of festivity resides in its defiance of and revolt against all that is ready-made in a bid to create a future very different in terms of its aesthetics and intellection, ideology and cognitive knowledge. In the last analysis, it represents *a sui generis* theatrical theory that reflects Arab-Muslim post-colonial consciousness of denial. It has always aimed at rehabilitating the eclipsed theatrical identity of Arabs and Muslims including Moroccans.

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