

Ziad Adwan

## 'The place of intellectuals'

# The Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus between dictatorship and the market<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper explores how the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts (HIDA) in Damascus achieved an exceptional degree of prestige in Syrian cultural life. Although operating under a dictatorship in a conservative country, HIDA still enjoyed unusual margins of curricula autonomy and free expression in a country that repressed other cultural and educational sectors. Like in many socialist countries in the Cold War, Syrian intellectuals were challenged by several factors, chief of which was the ability to confront the dominant status quo without being accused of disloyalty. Yet, while the theatre institute became 'the place of the intellectuals' at the national level, the interpretation of intellectualism provoked controversies inside the institute between the acting and the theatre studies departments. It is argued that the rise of commercial television and the success of accomplished alumni were among the reasons that gave the institute its prominent position in Syria and in many other Arabic-speaking countries. These two antithetical developments – the rise of serialized television drama, and the changing status of the intellectual – played a significant role in shaping the image of the institute, its curricula and in determining the image of the intellectual in Syria.

### Keywords

Theatre studies, acting training, dictatorship, intellectualism, television series,  
socialist bloc

### Author

Ziad Adwan studied for an MA in Text and Performance Studies at Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and King's College in London, and then took a PhD in Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London; his thesis was on "Mistakes and Making Mistakes in Cultural Representations". Ziad's work comprises acting, directing and writing for theatre as well as academic research. He taught at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus/ Syria 2009-2013. Ziad is currently based in Germany and is

affiliated with the Global Theatre Histories Research Project, Developing Theatre (Building Expert Networks for Theatre in Emerging Countries after 1945) at LMU Munich, and publishes articles in several academic journals. Ziad co-founded TANWEEN Company for Theatre and Dance and has been directing theatre and performance projects in Germany.

---

*Published under the Creative Commons License CC-BY 4.0 All rights reserved by the Author.*

## Introduction

I taught at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts (المعهد العالي للفنون المسرحية) in Damascus between 2009 and 2013. One of the classes I took at the Department of Theatre Studies, where I studied between 1994 and 1998, when it was called the Department of Criticism and Theatre Literature, was called Theatre Laboratory. One of the main classes, it was left to tutors to teach what they wanted. Tutors have kept this habit since the department was opened in 1984, and when I took it, I taught Systems of Rehearsal, focusing on Stanislavsky, Keith Johnstone and Augusto Boal. Another class, which I also took at the department, was called a Subject related to Theatre. Tutors, also, enjoy the freedom to teach what they want. I taught Masks in Theatre and Introduction to Performance Studies.

In these two semi-free classes, I used to ask first-year students in the beginning of each academic year; what brought you to the institute, and why do you want to study theatre? What do you expect from us to teach you? And what are your plans after graduation? Some were interested in theatre and drama and wanted to organise their reading. However, most of the answers were a variation of ‘we are here because we want to study cinema, but since Syria does not have a cinema academy, we chose to study theatre.’ Some girls revealed that they wanted to study acting, but social limitations prevented them from fulfilling their ambitions, therefore they applied to the Department of Theatre Studies. I also recall some students who secretly studied at the institute so as not to upset their parents. In addition, the institute attracted many university students (as it is permitted to have a second academic education, while enrolled at the institute), given that many of them found the social and intellectual environments at the university unsatisfactory, therefore they apply to the theatre institute, as the latter enjoys a freer environment.

The answers to the question were more obvious at the acting department. Most of the acting students applied to the institute to become actors, and along with the rising popularity of Syrian television series, being in such a series became the most prestigious type of work. To Syrian acting students, and to Syrians in general, the word ‘work’ was restrictedly exclusively to employment at a Syrian television series.<sup>2</sup> They attracted not only actors, but also film directors, novelists, playwrights, satellite channels, businessmen and political leaders. Satellite dishes were permitted in many Middle Eastern countries in the 1990s, and Syrian 30-episode-television series became the most popular material to consume. Working on such a programme guaranteed a good income and popularity, and also guaranteed a wider margin of freedom to tackle social, political and sexual topics; a luxury that was forbidden for other arts and literature in Syria.

The acting students’ desires to extend their interests beyond theatre resemble patterns familiar in many countries, especially when cinema, and Hollywood specifically, attract acting students. Students and academics at theatre studies departments in other countries also find their departments questioned, beset with uncertainty regarding its disciplines and ideas of interdisciplinary; its technical and liberal efficiency (Berkeley 2004, p. 20), its demarcation from literature faculties (Bentley 1948, pp. 6-74), and its role in producing theatre performances (Dolan 1993, pp. 417-441). However, the students’ and alumni’s shifting interests did not prevent HIDA from becoming the most prominent theatre academy in the region at both academic and commercial levels.

The theatre institute in Damascus could claim acknowledgement through its curricula, and through its ability to provide the Syrian and the Arab theatre scenes with influential actors, trainers, academics, playwrights, directors, cultural administrators, and television stars. Coinciding with the decline of the theatre scene in Lebanon because of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), and in Iraq because of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), HIDA became a new destination for many Arab students, theatre professionals and academics. The institute also gained credibility when it became, arguably, one of the few Syrian educational institutions that were not affected by corruption and arbitrary rule in a totalitarian state, and when it maintained a certain level of freedom of speech and a free life style in a conservative country. Thus, in a country that controls and monitors all its sectors and citizens, the institute was given the right to be influenced internationally by Socialist ideologies, Western European philosophies and theatre movements, and to a certain degree by cultural industrial ambitions.

The dimensions of intellectualism under dictatorship are usually curtailed when the state blocks sources of knowledge, interferes in academic curricula, manipulates all media and imprisons its opponents. The theatre institute suffered least from this repression. While the institute's intellectual image was compromised at the national level, it provoked controversies inside the institute itself. For reasons to be discussed below, the two departments adopted oppositional standpoints. Controversies arose when the two departments disagreed on the interpretation of intellectualism and therefore disagreed on who possesses this prestigious description: the department dedicated to the pursuit of pure knowledge, or the one dedicated to professional training?

In this paper, I examine the foundation and the development of HIDA, and read the changes of the objectives and the curricula in relation to the rise of commercial television series and market forces on the one hand, and the changing interpretation of the intellectual on the other. I argue that while the theatre institute withdrew the intellectual label from the Literature Faculty at Damascus University, the institute was the place where the significance of intellectualism was destroyed and then remanufactured to harmonize with the state discourses. In the first section, I examine how the theatre institute became the 'place of the intellectuals' and how this image functioned in a conservative country that does not have a long theatre tradition and is ruled by a totalitarian socialist regime. In the second section, I discuss the curricula of the institute and the relationship to the local market and how TV channels as well as the two departments at HIDA signified and reproduced the characteristics and the image of the intellectual.

## History, Staff networks and the Oasis of Knowledge

Originally, when it was established in 1977, the theatre institute consisted of a four-year acting department only. Later, in 1984, the Department of Theatre Studies was opened, running also for four years. Although the institute is subordinated to the Ministry of Culture, it has the ability to grant its students an internationally acknowledged BA degree, an advantage some other Syrian faculties and academies could not provide. The strong bond to former socialist countries facilitated the invitation of several East European theatre makers to teach at the institute, and many Russian instructors served as 'experts' at the acting department for decades. The institute also signed cultural

agreements with several European academies and institutions (including the ITI), and was able to provide the alumni scholarships for postgraduate studies in Europe and former socialist bloc. Moreover, through European cultural centres and embassies in Damascus, the institute managed to invite many European theatre makers to give workshops.

When it was first founded, the theatre institute was located in Dommar, a small suburban neighbourhood in Damascus. Although the area was considered conservative, students and teachers recall safety and intimacy with the building and the neighbourhood. The building expanded as student numbers increased and when the Criticism and Theatre Literature department was opened. The institute remained there for about thirteen years, till it moved to the Opera House complex at the significant Omayyad Square. The new building (Figure 1) combined the two departments of the theatre institute with the Higher Institute of Music, and the Ballet School, emphasising the artistic and the ‘civilised’ image of the institute. Later in the 2000s, the Scenography Department and Technical Theatre Department were opened.



Figure 1: The Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus. Courtesy. Juan Jaan

Since theatre was still questionable in the region, not only socially, politically and religiously, but also economically and academically, applications for the institute were few when it first opened. Having higher education for free in Syria resulted in hundreds of students in Damascus University classes. When the theatre institute became popular and when the applications increased, the number remained below fifteen in each class. Applicants have to pass an audition, and they have to prepare two monologues (from an Arabic play and an international one) and a poem to recite before the jury; a procedure that does not apply to other Syrian educational sectors. The theatre institute students have also the right to live in the Damascus University campus, and they are provided with training clothes and books, and some are given a decent monthly stipend when they prove the need for it. The relationship between teachers and students has been, to a certain extent, informal, and, for instance, the institute organises a yearly football match between students and teachers, with the dean being the referee. There were also a few

cases when students managed to change their teachers, if these teachers were incompatible with students' ambition.

The first dean of the institute was the writer Adib Al-Lujami, who also served as the assistant of the minister of culture. Later, in 1982, Al-Lujami was followed by theatre academic Ghassan Al-Maleh, a regional editor at *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre (The Arab World)*, and the first Syrian to get a PhD in English Literature when he studied English Literature at Leeds University, then took his PhD at Birmingham University in late 1950s. When the institute moved to the new building in 1990, Iraqi musician Solhi Al-Wadi, who had been residing in Syria for a long time, became the dean of the theatre and the music institutes. The three deans had a strong connection with the Minister of Culture Najah Al-attar, who remained the minister for 24 years, and then became a vice president in 2000. Many give the deans and the minister the credit for keeping the institute isolated from external political, religious and social oppression.

The institute attempted to gather various experiences and influences, especially in the process of choosing the staff and formulating the curricula. Notably, the staff included theatre academics and professionals, who not only were not Ba'athists, but also were known for their criticism of political and religious oppression. The founders of the institute had studied mainly at the Faculty of Literature, and some of them had continued their higher education in Europe and the Eastern bloc. Nabil Haffar, who served as the head of the Department of Theatre Studies, studied English literature and then philosophy at Damascus University then took his PhD from Leipzig University in the GDR in Theatre Studies with a thesis on documentary theatre. Mari Elias and Hanan Kasab Hassan, who served as the dean of the institute between 2006 and 2008, studied French Literature at Damascus University then, got their doctorates at the Sorbonne in Paris. Kassab Hasan and Elias wrote an immensely detailed *Theatre Dictionary* (1997). Sadallah Wannous, studied journalism in Cairo and returned to Damascus in 1963. In 1966 he was granted a two-year scholarly trip to Paris to acquaint himself better with the French cultural scene. Fawaz Al-Sajer was trained at GITIS in Moscow and returned to Syria in 1972, and then in 1982 he received another scholarship to study for his PhD in Moscow. Nadeem Mu'allal also studied and took his doctorate at GITIS in 1983.

Through the ties Syria established with the former socialist bloc, many actor trainers studied in Bulgaria and Poland, and on returning to Syria, they occupied official positions at the institute such as Naila Al-Atrash and Hasan Oweiti who studied at The Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Bulgaria, Walid Quwathi who studied at the Institute of Art Studies in Sofia, Samer Omran who studied at the National Academy of Theatre Arts in Krakow in Poland and Ajaj Salim who studied at the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts. Equally, the institute, kept some ties with Western Europe, mainly with France and England, offering its alumni the opportunities to gain post-graduate studies at their universities, such as Jamal Soleiman and Fayed Kazak who studied at the University of Leeds.

The given academic freedom allowed the founders and the teachers to develop an ideal educational environment. When students learned about theatre figures and theatre movements they learned also about the politics and ideologies that contextualised these movements (we read Bertrand Russell when I was a student, and when I was teaching, students were reading Derrida and Deleuze). The reputation of the theatre institute attracted several Arab theatre makers as well as thinkers and academics to teach at the

institute, such as Sadik Al-Azm and Fatima Al-Jayoushi. The institute was a destination also for many Arab theatre makers to teach there too, such as Jawad Al-Asadi, Awni Karoumi and Mohamed Driss. Thus, following Lawrence W. Levine in his book *Highbrow/ Lowbrow*, when he explains the transition of Shakespearean plays from popular culture to high culture, language and the style were used to inculcate values and to express ideas and attitudes (Levine 1988, p. 39), which were hard to sell to average members of the community. The theatre institute thus possessed an esoteric language, ideology and practices and, to some extent, created a sense of ‘we-ness’ inside its building. This approach to knowledge classified the theatre institute as a privileged place of elites and intellectuals.

Levine argues that the immense reputation of Shakespeare could be used to help make the theatre itself legitimate (Levine 1988, p. 45). Theatre in Syria, as well as in most Arabic-speaking countries, has been always associated with noble ideas and practices to make it legitimate in the region. When it first emerged in the late nineteenth century, theatre was seen as a medium of resistance proclaiming freedom from the Ottoman and the European occupations. It was then seen as a means to modernise Arab societies when the nation states were established after WWII. Theatre propagated socialist and left-wing ideas and pan-Arabism when many Arab countries were ruled by socialist military regimes after 1967. And in the 1980s, theatre was associated with opposition and intellectualism. The association with cultural ennoblement continued until the 2000s when theatre became a symbol of democracy and civic society. Commercial theatre makers called their productions ‘purposeful plays’ while academics and leftist theatre makers called their plays ‘serious theatre’. Syrian state media and official discourses also celebrated theatre and labelled it the ‘holy place’ and the ‘father of arts’.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Syria played a significant role in institutionalising and professionalising theatre in the Middle East, whether through the Ministry of Culture initiatives, or through distinctive theatre makers, who were mainly the alumni of the Literature Faculty at Damascus University. The significance of the university faded in 1980s, and Damascus University, like all sectors in Syria society, including the Ministry of Culture, slipped into corruption and came under the control of Al-Ba’ath party and the secret police. The other cultural sectors were equally submitted to arbitrary control and corruption. The activities of the film clubs were sharply curtailed in the spring of 1980 as part of the regime’s extensive efforts to eliminate opposition to its rule (Weeden 1999, p. 113).

In *Ambiguities of Domination*, Lisa Weeden gives a thoughtful analysis of how the Al-Assad regime consolidated its power after 1970, and how, besides atrocities, it managed to control slogans and spoken and written metaphors. She states that ‘Asad is powerful because his regime can compel people to say the ridiculous and to avow the absurd’ (Weeden 1999, p. 12). Higher education and academia were influenced by these atrocities and the value of scientific research declined, and the relationship to knowledge at universities became ambivalent (Weeden 1999, p. 105). University faculties were controlled formally by the Syrian Students National Union, in the same way schools were controlled by the Revolutionary Youth Union. Besides monitoring their peers, these two unions, in addition to some teachers, were mainly the supervisors of the state-organized

'spontaneous marches' to glorify Al-Assad.<sup>3</sup> The theatre institute had none of these obligations.

When novelists were marginalised, filmmakers criminalised, the faculty of literature ridiculed, and many intellectuals arrested or exiled, the theatre institute remained, to some extent, untouchable. The theatre institute was founded in the same period of time when literatures faculties at Damascus University declined, but it was immune to corruption, to the direct interference of Al-Ba'ath representatives and to the intimidating gaze of the secret police. The Syrian Students National Union had representatives at the institute, and there were certainly some anonymous secret police members among the students, teachers, or the bureaucrats, but both had limited influence and were scarcely noticeable. Furthermore, there were several incidents when teachers managed to resist even the slightest interference from the union, and many teachers managed to protect their students from being arrested by the secret police.<sup>4</sup> Teachers and students enjoy a freer circulation of critical and oppositional ideas and also enjoy a free lifestyle in a socialist and a conservative country. The cafeteria at the institute, called the buffet (Figure 2), was a centre of intellectual discussions, knowledge exchange, and criticism of the state, a phenomena that was systematically destroyed in other Syrian cultural venues, when the regime prevented renovations and closed all the cafes at cultural venues.



*Figure 2: Naila Al-Atrash, Mari Elias and Hanan Kasab Hassan in the buffet of HIDA. Courtesy. Hanan Kasab Hassan*

The prestigious status of theatre in Syria was amplified when the respected art form was approached academically, and when the curricula fused Western European and Socialist experiences of the field. Even when Syrian television series became popular in the 1990s, students of both departments centred their enthusiasm on the latest international art house movies and literature and showed eagerness to improve their theatrical knowledge and stage acting skills. The curricula at the theatre institute, like international models, 'insist on unexamined discourses of high art elitism, as they prepare students to enter what is described monolithically as "the profession"' (Dolan 1993, p. 424) to use Jill

Dolan's words when she discusses the identity of theatre studies and its academic location in her article "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the "Performative"". Thus, the theatre institute was looked at as the place of high culture and professional knowledge, to the extent that it was commonly called 'the place of the intellectuals' or when the students and the teachers were labelled, sometimes sarcastically, 'the intellectuals of the institute'.

## A Journey of Intellectualism under Dictatorship

The word *mothaqaf* (متثقف; literally, intellectual) is considered in Arabic-speaking countries as problematic as it is in most cultures. As it is derived from *thaqafa* (ثقافة; literally, culture), *mothaqaf* became associated with writers, thinkers and academics, as well as actors, artists, directors and musicians. *Tathqef* (تثقيف; literally, to educate) extends the use of the term to include the educator and the educated, as was given in early 1920s theorisations of the modern state of Syria, and this meaning was noticeable in many commercial plays that labelled a university student as *mothaqaf*. Under dictatorship *mothaqaf* was directly interpreted as dissidents, and several Syrian groups initiated oppositional actions that were conjoined with *mothaqaf* such as 'the Statement of the intellectuals'<sup>5</sup> and 'the demonstration of the intellectuals'.<sup>6</sup> The image of the intellectual, however, in Syrian television series is reduced, simply, to the stereotypical image of someone who reads books.

In December 1998, students of the HIDA staged a sit-in protest in front of the US embassy in Damascus to condemn the American airstrikes against Iraq (code-named Operation Desert Fox). The distance between the institute and the embassy is not great, but to reach there, we had to cross Omayyad Square, the most sensitive area in the capital, which is surrounded by many public buildings: the Opera House complex, which includes HIDA, Al-Arkan (the Joint Chiefs of Staff), the General Organization of Radio and TV and the national library, (which is called Al-Assad Library). After crossing the square we passed next to Hafez Al-Assad's office, and then reached the American embassy. The sit-in lasted for about four hours and coincided with Hafez Al-Assad's speech at parliament. Puzzlement and perplexity surrounded the space around the embassy, which is located between Hafez Al-Assad's house and his office. Security forces and secret police members fenced us in and prevented people from joining the protest. Only the institute teachers were permitted in either to participate or to politely ask us to leave.

The puzzlement arose because police forces did not know what to do with us. What we did was in line with the state slogans (which opposed the US and condemned the airstrikes on Iraq), but Damascus was the only Arab capital that did not show any popular condemnation of the airstrikes, just because Syrians had stopped demonstrating and protesting for almost three decades since Al-Assad seized the power in 1970. The only sort of gathering permitted are the so-called "spontaneous marches" that glorify Al-Assad.

The assumption was, as we had genuinely initiated the sit-in spontaneously and without any official or governmental prompting or consultancy, the secret police would detain us and punish us brutally. But quite the opposite happened, the sit-in was welcomed by the authorities or what it was commonly called 'the leadership'. Then, after

two days, several governmental sectors, including Damascus University, received 'orders' to repeat what we had done. Buses arrived at the university and drove students to protest in front of the American and the British embassies, which are located in the same neighbourhood.<sup>7</sup>

That the secret police were puzzled by a small number of students can be attributed to special position the theatre institute has historically possessed under the Al-Assad regime. Normally, when all universities and school students are required to participate in the "spontaneous marches", the theatre institute students stay in their classes to continue their education. The oppositional tone that was tolerated at the institute was determined by several factors. Totalitarian regimes compel individuals to apply self-censorship and learn their limits. Like many practices under dictatorships, a safe oppositional discourse is usually conducted in oral form, as we used to do in the institute buffet. In his essay "Intellectual Life Under Dictatorship", Romanian writer Andrei Plesu, who served as the Minister of Culture and then the Minister of Foreign Affairs after the Romanian Revolution in 1989, seeks to answer the question of intellectual survival under dictatorship. Although he ends his article by wondering, if they did really survive intellectually under Ceausescu, Plesu describes the mechanisms and the sensibilities that made them believe their intellectual survival;

The need for culture springs from a primary instinct for survival and, at the same time, from the exigency of individual "salvation" in an environment interested only in collectivistic solutions (Plesu 1995, p. 62)

This instinct certainly resembles the Syrian intellectuals' determination to create a zone of intellectual thinking, real professional training, and a decent level of freedom of speech. Underlining Plesu's observation, to be under totalitarian regimes, intellectuals, as well as all people, should live as if the change of regimes seem almost non-existent. In these conditions, compromises have to be made between intellectuals and the official platforms of expression. Plesu, however, argues that in addition to humour and hope that are concomitant with the horror, 'evil cannot have a homogenous texture and be perfectly compact' (Plesu 1995, p. 63). This imperfection, Plesu adds is 'the strictly necessary condition for the adaptation to evil, with its unavoidable benefits and risks [therefore, to make intellectual life possible, intellectuals have to] profit from all the cracks of the system' (Plesu 1995, p. 64).

In Syria, like Romania, censorship was frequently modified, especially when the two countries moved from glorifying the ideology into worshipping only 'the father'. Plesu tells us that dictators 'distinguish themselves by the surprising interstices in which rules are suspended. The law can suddenly become lax for no apparent reason' (Plesu 1995, pp. 64). Despite the many similarities between the Ceausescu and Al-Assad regimes, Syria remains different from Romania and other Socialist countries, not only by the fact that Hafez Al-Assad remained in power and managed to pass power to his son when the socialist bloc collapsed, but by the specific relationship Syria has with theatre. On the one hand, theatre was a novel art in the country and it was circulated among a small number of people only. The majority of Syrians did not know about the theatre institute and many of those who knew about it, felt distant from it or rejected it.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the

institute established and stressed its professional reputation in the 1980s, at a time when no one in Syria dared to think of it being of danger to the regime. On the other, theatre carries the stamp of being a European refinement and high culture, and for a new state like Syria, it is one of the practices that can reflect ‘the Syrian civilised face’ as the state media terms it. Thus, at the theatre institute civilised practices remain in its civilised building.

In *the Representation of the Intellectual*, Edward Said argues that whatever one does it is done according to an idea or representation one has of him/herself (Said 1994, p. xv). When the theatre institute managed to sustain a certain level of freedom of speech under dictatorship, teachers and trainers were able to introduce their critical vocabularies and ideologies in their classes. They reflected either their communist sensibility, which was associated with the opposition, or their Ba'athist sensibility, which was associated with the regime's socialist ideology. Whether they inclined to communism or to Al-Ba'ath, both voices in the classes quoted Brecht's famous saying, adapting Marx, that it is not ‘the purpose of theatre to understand the world but to change it’ (Al-Zubaidi 1978, p. 5). This ‘mission’ was a challenge for the intellectual aspect of the theatre institute, especially when students and teachers were aware of the inability to enact a change in a country that proposes ‘taboos rather than models’ (Plesu 1995, p. 61). The function of the intellectual is problematized under totalitarian regimes, when these regimes control all platforms of expression, and ban any kind of independent newspaper, television channel, or even an individual voice.

Polish sociologist Marian Kempny states in “Is a Convergence between the East-European intelligentsia and Western Intellectuals Possible” that intellectuals are normally associated with ‘missions’, or ‘responsibilities’, which are generated from their ‘position of guardians of lasting and universal values [...] spokesmen for national society, a position which is still connected with their self-image of bearers of a solemn historical mission, or their special accountability for the whole nation’ (Kempny 1996, p. 299). Polish historian Jerzy Jedlicki also argues in ‘What’s the use of intellectuals’ that no one is an intellectual, but rather people become intellectuals and they take the role of the intellectual in different phases of their life. According to Jedlicki one becomes an intellectual when one transgresses the boundaries of his speciality and tries to acquire an influence on the minds and the conscience of his fellow-citizens, or quoting Sartre, when one ‘meddles in other people’s affairs’ (Jedlicki 1994, p. 102). Edward Said adds another challenging mission for intellectuals in the third world in *Representations of the Intellectual*. Intellectuals live in nations that are ‘always triumphalist, always in a position of authority, always exacting loyalty and subservience rather than intellectual investigation and re-examination’ (Said 1994, p. 36). On the one hand, the masses expect from the intellectual to commit ‘to the public mood for reasons of solidarity, primordial loyalty, or national patriotism (Said 1994, p. 32), and, on the other, the intellectual is to be ‘unusually responsive to innovation and experiment rather than the authoritatively given status quo’ (Said 1994, pp. 63-64).

Plesu explains that this sense of mission arises from the fact ‘that all Communist countries, except Russia and China, were small countries and the pride of a person born within a small culture is always hurt’. Plesu adds

The intellectual belonging to a small culture always behaves demonstratively: he must show that he is the equal of his colleagues belonging to big cultures, that he has kept abreast of the latest idea in fashion, that he is not deformed by provincial vices. His diligence is the diligence of exasperation, his ambitions are as great as his incurable frustrations. Such an intellectual never represents only himself. He has the fixed idea that he represents his country, that he is responsible for the image the culture of his people will have through him in the eyes of the world (Plesu 1995, p. 67)

In "Theatre Training Moscow Style", Joanna Rotté, published a diary-like account in the spring of 1991, just a few months before the collapse of the Soviet Union. In one of her meetings, she describes her meeting with Oleg Tabakov who was the chancellor of the Moscow Art Theatre School:

Tabakov explains that when admitting students, the school looks not only for talent but also for intelligence, the kind of intelligence that enables a person to think about people less fortunate than, and different from, oneself. He says they want their students to become desirous of changing the world for the better through the profession. At the same time, he is worrying that, with governmental support dwindling and theatres becoming part of a market economy, the school somehow must insure that their graduates will be able to "earn bread from this profession" (Rotté 1992, p. 83)

By 1991, the alumni of Damascus theatre institute, were not only able to earn bread but had become one of the wealthiest groups in the country, due to the openness of the Gulf satellite channels to Syrian television series. They were also able to provoke certain criticism in the television series and to demonstrate their knowledge in theatre productions, journalism and in television series.

## Representations of the Intellectual at HIDA, therefore in Syria

It was not until the protest against the American embassy in 1998 that the institute intellectuals really crossed their professional borders and interfered in the state's affairs by staging a collective action for the first time in the county in decades. The protest could claim to have posed some sort of challenge to the regime by harnessing the intellectuals' network of power, which is normally systematically weakened by the arbitrariness of state power (Plesu 1995, p. 64). Building on the rebellious action, many students organised similar protests inside the institute against the new staff, brought in under the reign of Bashar Al-Assad, who inherited power from his father in 2000. Gradually, the institute started to lose many qualities. Students and tutors were interrogated by the secret police inside the institute or in their houses and were constantly threatened by the new administration and the new bureaucratic staff. Also the 'authorities' began to interfere in the curricula, compelling many teachers to resign, including some of the founders.

Since the acting department was stable in its curriculum and was celebrated for its success at providing television actors, the interferences and the changes of the curricula

targeted the Department of Theatre Studies. The Department of Theatre Studies was blamed for the rebellion, taking into account the high number of its protesting students and teachers.<sup>9</sup> The department came under attack from several quarters, from the Ministry of Culture, the new dean, the media, and the acting department. Consequently, the rumours and the suggestions that the Department of Theatre Studies should be eliminated or moved to Damascus University became a real threat.

A tension re-emerged that had been latent ever since the Department of Theatre Studies was founded in 1984, seven years after the foundation of the acting department. When it was first founded, it was called the Department of Criticism and Theatre Literature. Influenced by European theatre movements and by semiology in particular, the academics who studied in Western Europe rejected the word criticism and succeeded in changing the name of the department into the Department of Theatre Studies in 1996. The step was accompanied by major changes in the curriculum, but the department never enjoyed a stability in its staff and its courses. The department is still commonly referred to as the Criticism Department. This label has its roots in the relationship the two departments have cultivated since the Department of Theatre Studies was opened. It was believed that its graduates would become critics in daily newspapers, and most of the alumni in the 1980s eventually did so. Conflicts developed when the acting students and teachers felt that they were the victims of the critical eye of the theatre studies intellectuals. The imbalance of the theoretical knowledge was amplified by another significant fact; when the acting students were in their early twenties, the theatre studies students were older, and most of them had finished a university degree before studying at the theatre institute. Avoiding practice and empirical knowledge intensified the theoretical background of the department, to the extent that even watching a play would be perceived as practice that disturbs the pure knowledge that comes from books.

Knowledge was a key concept in the processes of legitimising and institutionalising theatre in Syrian and in most of Arabic-speaking countries. In ‘Imaginary theatre’ (Adwan, 2019), an article I wrote about teaching and disseminating theatre in the Levant in the second half of the twentieth century, I argued that knowledge placed the playwright at the highest level in the hierarchy of the theatre scene, and explored how playwrights were seen as ‘cultural centres’, mainly because, in a country that does not have a long theatre tradition, theatre was accessed through its literary side. Many theatre makers and institutions in the Levant adopted an ideal description of theatre that was hardly recognised locally. This attitude continued when theatre was approached academically, and the art of theatre became more idealised. Academics excluded local practices for various reasons; a phenomenon that led ‘many students from different phases to describe the curriculum as a sort of imagination’ (Dawood 2009, p. 68).

When all of the founders obtained doctorates in theatre studies, and were originally alumni of the Literature Faculty at Damascus University, the theatre institute centralised the knowledge of European theatre and philosophy in its curriculum. The institute did not propagate pan-Arabism or attempt to authenticate theatre in the context of Arab culture, although Saadallah Wannous, who was one of the founders and the teachers, was associated with the initiative of authenticating theatre in the Arabic culture. The Department of Theatre Studies adopted a historical approach to teaching European theatre. Ancient Greek drama and performance were taught in the first year. In the second year, students learned about Roman theatre, the Middle Ages, Renaissance and

Shakespeare. In the third year, they read Classicism, Romanticism, Naturalism, and Realism, and fourth-year students focused exclusively on texts and performances from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Students, thus, had good knowledge of theatre developments and classical texts, but were disconnected from contemporary international theatre movements, and the practical side of theatre, which studies Meyerhold, Brook, Boal, improvisation, choreography, mask techniques, etc. Along with the emphasis on the classics and the history of text and performance, students read philosophy, psychology, history of art, sociology, literature and literary criticism. Living under dictatorship and being conditioned to excessive censorship, this openness to Europe was an attraction in its own. Plesu describes this desire as a form of subversion:

The obstacles – the interdiction against a number of ideas and methods characteristic of the spirit of the age (such as structuralism or psychoanalysis), labelled by Marxist criticism as "formalistic," "reactionary," and "bourgeois" – intensified intellectual curiosity and gave the more or less conspiratorial "transgressions" the prestige of political risk, the charm of unconventional options. To be a structuralist became exciting, to be a crypto-structuralist – that is, to sneak in between the lines principles and procedures of a structuralist type – became romantic (Plesu 1995, p. 62)

Disputes centred on what kind knowledge should the Department of Theatre Studies offer to its students. Alumni of the socialist bloc understood the department as the one that teaches general knowledge of philosophy, literature, arts, and ancient Arabic poetry. European alumni defended the reduction of this general knowledge in order to focus on European theatre, specifically twentieth century theories and practices. This ambition was obstructed because of a lack of materials to teach. Also, the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 diminished translation projects, as cultural institutions in Kuwait had been the main organisations since 1969 to offer the Arabic reader translations of international plays and theatre theories.

In 1991, the year the Socialist Bloc started to collapse, Hafez Al-Assad agreed to join the Gulf War international coalition against the Iraq occupation of Kuwait. The participation enabled an inflow of Gulf-states money to Syria to encourage investment, and the rise of Syrian television series was an outcome of this dynamic. The graduates of the acting department became the main stars in these series, to the extent that they competed with the established Egyptian stars. Besides, many alumni became leading directors, producers and heads of some local media companies.

The acting department curriculum enables the alumni to become high-profile entertainers<sup>10</sup> catering to Pan-Arab television consumers. The curriculum also provides basic knowledge of European theatre and philosophy, but like many international acting institutes, students spend most of their time in their studios practicing and rehearsing. Not being affected by the many changes at the institute, the curriculum of the acting department remained steady, and foregrounded Stanislavsky in its training. Classes along the four years were mainly devoted to body and voice exercises as well as acting classes. In the first year students read Stanislavsky and rehearse silent scenes. In the second year they work on animals and stereotypes. In the third year, they present full length plays to the public; it was conventional that in the first semester they present a

Shakespearean play, and in the second semester they present an American Realism play. In the fourth year, classes become less and students focus on working on a bigger production, which sometimes can be staged at the National Theatre, or at other significant alternative places like Damascus Castle.

The professional success of the acting alumni challenged the elitism of the theatre studies department and the latter became aware of its second-class status at the institute. Jill Dolan suggests that the reason of this drop in status is that theatre studies departments have ‘chosen to seal themselves hermetically from interdisciplinary invasions’ (Dolan 1993, p. 424). Thus, when the acting department was commercialised, the Department of Theatre Studies felt the necessity to sustain the intellectual qualities and characteristics, which the institute could have achieved since it was founded.

Arguably, the only place that did not celebrate the prestige of the television stars is the theatre institute itself, and the Department of Theatre Studies in particular. This generated reasons for the Department of Theatre Studies to seal itself hermetically, and this was seen as a virtue. It was/is believed that the knowledge they receive should not be affected by practice: either that allowed by a totalitarian regime or conditioned by the market. Their academic approaches did not treat theatre as a phenomenon, but placed it within epistemological contexts that obliged students to prove the knowledge they have rather than using it. In a country where the act of reading is considered suspicious, the theatre studies department alumni were doomed to face an ambiguous future. Institutionally, their status is also ambiguous; they cannot enrol in the artists’ union because they are not artists, and they cannot enrol in the journalists’ union because they are not journalists, thus they remain without a union.

With the collapse of socialist bloc in the 1990s the relationship to intellectualism came under critical scrutiny. Not only ‘being an intellectual is not itself a *profession*’ (Jedlicki 1994, p. 101), but also European ideologies, which the theatre studies department considered as being its cultural extension and background, started to lament intellectualism. Jedlicki describes how Polish cultural critics did not wait long before offering their diagnosis of the new national and world situation and to follow Europe and America in the production of eulogies to the death of the intelligentsia as a class. Jedlicki traces how the intellectuals, who were supposedly striving mafia-like for power, heralded the true end of the age of ideology, if not of history (Jedlicki 1994, p. 103).

In theatrical terms, this funereal attitude was announced in the fashion of pronouncing the death of the author, the death of the text, the death of character, and the death of ideology. The nihilist reading of life and art, was opposed by the celebration of commercialism and the changing meaning of success, profession, opposition, loyalty, and intellectualism. Television stars were invited to be within the spectrum of the individuals ‘with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television’ (Said 1994, pp. 12-13). Through constant appearances in television series and interviews, and in prestigious public events, the acting alumni were not only given the right to meddle in other people’s affairs but also were found ‘suitable for representing the best thought culture itself – and making it prevail’ (Said 1994, p. 29). Television stars were given permission to directly criticise some aspects of Syrian political and social life while intellectuals were censored or withdrew to the realm of their oral acrobatics (Plesu 1995, p. 69). In this context, alumni of the theatre studies department were seen as those who oppose for opposition’s sake and, to use Said’s

words, and were ‘always [...] beset and remorselessly challenged by the problem of loyalty’(Said 1994, p. 40).

With no ideology, power, medium, or a union to defend themselves, intellectuals and the theatre studies alumni became vulnerable to the attacks of the authorities, the media, the public and the acting department. Accusations varied from questioning the values of the theatre studies department to blaming it for disloyalty. The image of the intellectual, which typified the department, gradually transformed in daily talks, newspapers and television series, portraying the nihilist intellectual as a caricature. Acting alumni could get their reference of the image of intellectuals from their fellow colleagues who study with them in the same building. In addition, merging the two theatre departments with the Higher Institute of Music and the Ballet School in one building, intensified the approach of the theatre studies department, as being the department that takes in ungifted students that have no artistic skills.

In the 2000s, the gap between the two departments intensified and resulted in altercations, which sometimes involved the teachers, and also turned into open disputes in the local and regional press and media. A campaign, led by many acting teachers, aimed at closing the Department of Theatre Studies, or moving it to Damascus University. The step was widely rejected, and in addition to the bureaucratic complications, none of the students and teachers at the department wanted to be at the university, not only because of its infamous reputation for corruption and interference by the Al-Ba’ath party, but also because the threat coincided with a revision of the department’s literary and theoretical curriculum. It was necessary to fight for autonomy from literature departments and claim distinctiveness even at the expense of becoming somewhat insular and hermetic, a result that unfortunately became true of many departments of theatre.

In late 2000s and during the current war in Syria, the two departments found some bridges when producing commercial television series became difficult in the country. With the availability of internet, the return of more students who got their doctorates in Europe, and the development of a new market through the accessibility to foreign funds for theatre projects, specifically from the British Council, the French Culture Centre, and Goethe Institute, the Department of Theatre Studies managed to extend its awareness of its identity and its professional fields. The focus on cultural policy and management, dramaturgy and performance studies enabled the department to enter the profession while keeping the intellectual image of reading books.

## Conclusion

Since it was founded, the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus managed to possess some aspects of the intellectual life under dictatorship. While being the place of uncensored knowledge and professional training, the institute could reject monolithic discourses and practices, which were imposed on Syrian cultural and educational sectors. The main two departments at the institute, the acting and the theatre studies departments, disagreed on many topics, and the interpretations of intellectualism was one of these disputes. Encapsulating the intellectual image at the institute facilitated the processes of destroying the significance of intellectualism in the country and then reproducing it in a more obedient manner. When the acting alumni gained the attention

of the authorities and the public, the theatre studies alumni were doomed to face several challenges, including the threat of closing the department or moving it to Damascus University. There were many complications that would have arisen from enacting this step, among which were the resistance of the teachers, the alumni and the students, and the fact that this step would entirely eliminate the profession of writing and reading in an institute that claims to be intellectual and academic.

## Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Research for this article was conducted under the auspices of the research project “Developing Theatre: Building Expert Networks for Theatre in Emerging Countries after 1945” (funding ID 694559) funded by the European Research Council at LMU Munich. PI: Christopher Balme.
- <sup>2</sup> In his travelogue *Under more than One Sky*, Jordanian poet Amjad Nasser describes in detail how Syrian writers and artists mention the word ‘work’ (عمل) only to speak about television series.
- <sup>3</sup> Lisa Wedeen translates (مسيرات عفوية) as spontaneous demonstrations, but I suggest to translate it as spontaneous marches (Weeden 1999, p. 68).
- <sup>4</sup> Personal interviews with several teachers at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus conducted between March and September 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> In 2000, and a few months after Bashar Al-Assad inherited the power from his father, ‘99 intellectuals’ signed a statement that called for an end to the state of emergency, for legal protection for freedom of speech and assembly, and for political prisoner and exiles to be pardoned. Although it was titled the Statement of 99, it is commonly known as the Statement of the Intellectuals.
- <sup>6</sup> During the 2011 protests against the Syrian regime, many artists, journalists, students and alumni of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus organised a demonstration, which they called the Demonstration of the Intellectuals.
- <sup>7</sup> [http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9812/19/iraq.demos/index.html?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9812/19/iraq.demos/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD)  
19 February 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> Several interviews with the acting department alumni, who are prominent TV stars, speak of their ignorance of the theatre institute before they had been enrolled in it.
- <sup>9</sup> In fact, the theatre studies department triggered the demonstration against the American embassy and it started as a joke during the National Socialist Culture class to embarrass the teacher.

## References

- Adwan, Ziad. 2019. “Imaginary Theatre: Professionalising Theatre in the Levant 1940–1990.” *Journal of Global Theatre History* 3 (1): 1-19.
- Al-Zubaidi, Kais. 1978. *Theatre of Change/Essays on Brecht’s Artistic Method*. Beirut: Ibn Rushd Publishing House.
- Bentley, Eric. 1948. “Education and the Literary Heritage.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 19 (2): 67-74.
- Berkeley, Anne. 2004. “Changing Views of Knowledge and the Struggle for Undergraduate Theatre Curriculum, 1900–1980.” In *Teaching Theatre Today*, edited by Anne Fliotsos and Gail S. Medford, 7-30. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Daoud, Jean G. 2009. *Theatre in Lebanon* (المسرح في لبنان), 68. United Arab Emirates: The Arab Association for Theatre.

- Dolan, Jill. 1993. "Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the *Performative*". *Theatre Journal* 45 (4): 417-441.
- Fliotsos, Anne. L. and Gail. S. Medford, eds. 2004. *Teaching Theatre Today*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, 126. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Jedlicki, Jerzy. 1994. "What's the Use of Intellectuals?" *Polish Sociological Review* (106): 101-110.
- Kempny, Marian. 1996. "Between Politics and Culture. Is a Convergence between the East-European Intelligentsia and Western Intellectuals Possible?" *Polish Sociological Review* 116: 297-305.
- Levine, W. Lawrence. 1988. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press.
- Plesu, Andrei. 1995. "Intellectual Life Under Dictatorship." *Representations* (49): 61-71.
- Rotté, Joanna. 1992. "Theatre Training Moscow Style." *TDR (1988-)* 36 (2): 81-96.
- Said, Edward. 1994. *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Wedgeen, Lisa. 1999. *The Ambiguities of Domination*, 68. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.