

controlling music after the Revolution;¹ Zuzanna Olszewska's recent, refreshingly non-Tehran centric work on Hazara poetry circles in Mashhad and elsewhere;² Hamid Naficy's rich encyclopedic treatment of the history, aesthetics, and thematic terrain of Iranian cinema;³ Hamid Dabashi's tireless endeavors to approach Iranian politics, culture, and thought from every imaginable angle;⁴ and William O. Beeman's anthropological analyses of diverse performance domains in Iran and their social dynamics.⁵ Being comprised of discrete, thematically complementary chapters of manageable scopes and lengths, it will resonate with graduate students but will be of equal use and accessibility to undergraduates as well as a lay readership. ✂

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EDWARD ZITER. *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Pp. 259. \$74.99 cloth. ISBN 9781137358974.

Edward Ziter's landmark *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* is not so much a political history of Syrian theater as it is

¹ Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "The situation of music in Iran since the Revolution: The role of official organizations," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 9, no. 2 (2000): 35-61; Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "Singing in a Theocracy: Female Musicians in Iran," in *Shoot the Singer! Music Censorship Today*, ed. Marie Korpe (London: Zed Books, 2004), 129-135; Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "Iran's Regional Music Traditions in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Overview," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (September 2005): 417-439; Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "Singing the Martyrs: Revolutionary and Patriotic Songs in the Repertoire of the Khorasani Bards," in *Musical Culture and Memory* (Musicological Studies: Proceedings, no. 2), eds. Tatjana Markovic and Vesna Mikic. Belgrade: Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music, University of Arts, 2008): 281-289; Ameneh Youssefzadeh, "Veiled Voices: Music and Censorship in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 657-675.

² Zuzanna Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

³ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 1-2 (Duke University Press, 2011); Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 3-4 (Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

⁵ William O. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions* (Los Angeles: Mazda Publications, 2011); William O. Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

(more importantly) an exploration of Syrian theater as political history. Tracing the broad arc of Syrian theatrical production over the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, Ziter brings attention to a rich theatrical tradition little known outside Syria and the Arab world. Drawing on a variety of sources, including texts, archives, and interviews with leading Syrian dramatists, playwrights, and actors, Ziter has crafted the most important work on Syrian theater to date in any language, showing the power of theater not only to reflect our times but also to shape them.

By design not an encyclopedic overview, *Political Performance in Syria* focuses attention instead on the engagement of Syrian theater and theater workers with the nation's troubled political history of the last half century, from the Six-Day War with Israel in 1967 to the advent of the ongoing violence in the country. Eschewing the format of a strict chronological survey, Ziter wisely opts for an analysis of moments in Syrian theater that reveal its important role in illuminating five key tropes or themes: martyrdom, war, Palestinians, history and heritage, and torture. Each of these themes – central to our understanding of modern Syrian history – forms a chapter in which Ziter mines the twists and turns of Syrian political history from 1967 until today through a close reading of selected texts. This approach gives us a deeper understanding of the major themes in Syrian drama, forging connections and revealing contrasts that a chronological history would miss. Given the ongoing conflict, perhaps the most important chapter – and the most harrowing – is the final one, “Torture.” Arguing that the Syrian struggle for dignity and basic human rights is long standing, Ziter reveals that theater has engaged with the theme of torture (unfortunately not only figuratively) for decades. Drawing on the work of Elaine Scarry, Ziter argues that Syrian political theater has promoted imaginative resistance to the totalizing experience of physical and emotional pain under torture and interrogation.

In writing that is refreshingly jargon-free, Ziter is a capable guide through a terrain fraught with misunderstandings. In addition to revealing the major themes in modern Syrian drama, perhaps the most important contribution of this work is to show how Syrian drama is part of world drama (even if we in the “west” do not know much about it). This becomes readily apparent not only in Ziter's frequent exploration of the work of playwright Saadallah Wannus (1941-97), perhaps the best-known Syrian playwright, but also in his careful reading of the texts of Mamduh 'Adwan, Mustafa al-Hallaj, Walid Kuwatli, and Muhammad al-Maghut, and the staging of such noted directors as Naila al-Atrash. Ziter reveals the complexities and

contradictions of a vibrant theatrical tradition in Syria, mainly in Damascus, but with some exceptions in Aleppo (Walid Ikhlas) and elsewhere, which continues despite the vagaries of war. His text is especially important for the light it sheds on recent works by, for example, the Malas twins, Mohammed al-Attar, and the *Abou Naddara film collective*, all important resistance artists working within Syria today. In focusing almost exclusively on theater, however, Ziter pays less attention to forms of political resistance in other media, from film and television to music and popular culture, which is a limitation on his text. To borrow from Lila Abu-Lughod, “the dramas of nationhood”¹ play out in Syrian arts across multiple media. Ziter does note that many artists working in theater also work in the mass media, creating conditions for resistance as well as cooptation that would be worth exploring in more detail. This would add to Ziter’s already important analysis of how artists navigate the contradictions of a state that, as Miriam Cooke notes, manages dissent through “commissioned criticism” (10) in order to forge consent.

A few minor points are worth addressing. Ziter does not provide all of the original Arabic titles for the texts under review, which would have been useful for Arabophone readers interested in the original texts. A consistent system of transliteration, while challenging, would also have been useful. Finally, Naila al-Atrash’s stunning production of Wannus’s “Historical Miniatures” (*Munamnamāt tarikhiyya*) was produced in the Damascus citadel in 1997, not 2007 (this reviewer having attended the production). These issues and a few typos aside (it’s “Kuwatli,” not “Kuwalti”) the text is clean and engaging and will be essential reading for students and scholars of Middle East Studies, world theater, the anthropology of the arts, as well as general readers hoping to learn more about this fascinating theatrical tradition – one that remains vibrant despite the enduring conflict in Syria. Ziter shows that indeed the current conflict offers yet more opportunities for creative and brave Syrian theater artists to confront the political history of their troubled nation. ✂

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¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).