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WHAT ARE YOU READING?
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I have fallen victim to a bait-and-switch scheme, one that I think is familiar to many academics. When first contemplating a life of the mind, I was essentially in search of an industry to fund my eclectic reading habits. The Academy welcomed me with the confident smile of a Ricky Roma. I was particularly enticed by the opportunity to talk (at length) about the books I had found while wandering in subbasements and forgotten annexes of research libraries, perusing used bookstores, or perhaps stopping at kiosks along the Seine during my lengthy summer vacations. That's not quite how it turned out. Instead, the only time I read a new book that isn't about talking steam engines or delinquent bunnies (and even then I often fall asleep before the final page) is because I have assigned it in a course. This is not what I expected, but it is satisfying nonetheless. Last fall I finished a number of good books just before teaching my classes.

I taught two courses during the fall 2010 semester, one on the modern drama of Syria and Egypt (in translation) and the other on English theatre in the Romantic period. I justified the pairing of Syria and Egypt through their shared histories (the brief unification as the United Arab Republic, the shared defeat in 1967, the overlap in the development of their respective security apparatuses, etc.). However, the truth is I focused on those two Arab countries because they have produced some of my favorite playwrights. I sometimes pair plays with other genres of literature, and this is where I get to be adventurous. *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design* by Malu Halasa and Rana Salam (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008) complemented plays by the Syrian playwrights Mamduh Adwan and Fares al-Thahabee, whose work examines female sexuality, domestic violence, and patriarchy in the Arab world. The book is wonderfully eclectic; it contains sociological analysis, extracts from interviews with workers in the industry, interviews with women from different economic classes, interviews with Arab cultural critics, product photography from manufacturers, and portraits of some of the more outlandish products the authors

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collected. (What does one make of a Tweety Bird thong that plays Happy Birthday when pressed?) It paints an image of a world in which women of different class backgrounds and faiths feel varying degrees of pressure to keep a husband interested; but it also depicts women who celebrate their own sexuality and who bring humor and playfulness to their intimate relations.

Walid Ikhlassi is one of my favorite Syrian playwrights, and so I was pleased to see that his collection, *"Whatever Happened to Antara?" and Other Stories*, had been translated by Asmahan Sallah and Chris Ellery (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, 2004). Virtually all of the stories, which are set in the Ikhlassi's hometown of Aleppo, are written in the first person, and with a similar voice—though the narrator is a different person in each. We are left with the sense of a single narrator transforming into different characters as he navigates through a wonderfully complex city. About half the stories are set during the French mandate and half after independence, and the persistence of corruption and political intimidation is a prevalent theme in the book. This theme, it should be noted, is a prominent feature of Ikhlassi's plays—from his early absurdist dramas, to the Brechtian works of his middle period, to the more realist plays that he currently writes.

Ali Salem's *A Drive to Israel: An Egyptian Meets His Neighbors* should be required reading for anyone who has given up on hopes for peace or who asks where are the Arab moderates (translated by Robert J. Silverman, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2001). The book displays the same intelligence, humor, and humanity that one associates with Salem's plays. The title is really a sufficient summary; what is noteworthy is Salem's compassion for his Israeli hosts, even when their assumptions about Egyptians put him at a disadvantage. The book is filled with smart observations on Israeli culture, and unveiled criticism of Egyptians and their government (though Salem's love of Egypt is evident throughout). The book was published in Arabic in 1994, a more hopeful time only a year after the Oslo accords. However, even then the book was a courageous act of engagement. Salem was harshly criticized in the Egyptian press, expelled from the Union of Egyptian Writers for promoting normalization, and he has not found producers for his plays or films since his trip. Nonetheless, his travelogue was a bestseller in Egypt.

When I teach a subject like English drama of the Romantic period, I hardly ever order books. Instead I rely on databases like Eighteenth-Century Collections Online or just plain old Google Books (though I continue to use the excellent *Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*). Even without the pressure of an impending class discussion, I somehow managed to read two recent monographs relevant to my teaching: *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting* by Frederick Burwick and *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787–1832: The Road to the Stage* by David Worrall. Burwick is rightly lauded within Romantic studies, and *Romantic Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) lived up to his past works. The book is organized around the tension that emerged in Romantic-era production between illusion and anti-illusion. Burwick identifies a theatre practice intent on denying its artifice (gesture as unconscious revelation of true intent, scene design that strove at illusionistic reproduction) but also one that was full of metatheatrical turns. These seemingly contrary features—like the mix of comedy and horror that he examines in Gothic plays—emerge as a defining element of the Romantic. As such, one of the great accomplishments of Burwick's book is its examination of the theatrical practice of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries under the rubric of Romanticism. Effectively, the book counters the lingering prejudice that the journeyman playwrights, critics, and actors of this period shared little with the "great" writers of the day. In fact, in its concern with problems of perception and illusion, Burwick's book has much in common with his earlier *Illusion and the Drama: Critical Theory of the Enlightenment and Romantic Era* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), which examines works by canonical writers in England, France, and Germany.

David Worrall's *The Politics of Romantic Theatricality* (Palgrave Studies in Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) similarly starts from the assumption that the ideas, activities, and attitudes that are associated with the word Romantic are at work in the popular theatre of the day. However, here "romantic" would seem to refer to the processes by which print and performance cultures created a vastly expanded public sphere, while contending with government efforts to limit the free exchange of potentially oppositional speech. In the case of the theatre, speech was carefully policed at London's three patent theatres and banished from the scores of illegitimate theatres. Worrall's book largely focuses on burletta, a theatre of song and recitative that was the only permitted form beyond the Theatres Royal. In the process he looks at the popular theatre's examination of political riots, race, and Cockney identity.

The book takes its subtitle from an 1827 acting manual and general theatrical "how-to," *The Road to the Stage; or, The Performer's Preceptor*. Certainly Worrall gleans a great deal from the manual; how fascinating, for example, to discover that in addition to the well-known use of burnt cork and lard for racialized characters, actors regularly applied a compound made from the mineral sesquioxide of iron. According to the manual, this reddish hue was appropriate for Othello (presumably on the assumption that the character is a North African Moor rather than a sub-Saharan African) as well as a range of roles popular into the nineteenth century, such as Bajazet from Rowe's *Tamerlane* (1701) and Rolla from Sheridan's *Pizarro* (1799). However, the true significance of the manual to Worrall's argument would seem to be that the frequently republished book signaled a huge theatrical culture entirely separate from the patent houses and open to a large number of aspirants. In short, *The Road to the Stage* is evidence of what Worrall defines as a "plebeian public sphere of drama" largely shaped by the patent theatre's monopoly over spoken drama (10).

Worrall's book suggests the reading habits that drew me to the academic profession. Anyone who could devote a chapter to the *Tom and Jerry* burlettas that preceded Moncrieff's better-known play of that title clearly has a constitutional affinity for archives and must delight in poking around old and unusual books. In the preface to his previous book, *Theatric Revolution: Drama*

Censorship, and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773–1832, Worrall noted that he wrote that book during his first and only sabbatical, one that followed twenty-five years of consecutive full-time teaching. Such conditions shape how a great many of us read. So much for book hunting along the Seine.