

Al-Naqqāsh, Mārūn النقاش (1817-1855)

Mārūn Al-Naqqāsh is often seen as the father of modern Arabic drama. He was born in Sidon, but grew up in Beirut. After a traditional education comprising detailed studies of Arabic language and literature as well as law and foreign languages Al-Naqqāsh decided to travel. His first journeys took him to Damascus and Aleppo, and then in 1846 he travelled to Egypt and Italy. In Italy he became fascinated with European theatre and on his return to Beirut he decided to write and produce a play. Drawing on his deep knowledge of Arabic culture in addition to influences from his journeys, Al-Naqqāsh produced *al-bakhīl* (The Miser) (1847). The five-act play was inspired by Molière's *L'Avare* but included features from puppet and shadow theater, two popular genres in Beirut at the time. Before obtaining permission to build a theatre, Al-Naqqāsh used the courtyard of his own home as a stage and engaged friends and family to take part in his plays. His brother Niqūla Al-Naqqāsh also contributed plays for the theatre. The success of *The Miser* encouraged Al-Naqqāsh to compose a second play, *Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-mughaffal aw Hārūn al-Rashīd* (Abū 'l-Ḥasan the Simpleton or Hārūn al-Rashīd) (1850). This time he based the main plot on a tale from *The Arabian Nights* but continued to refer to *L'Avare*. Al-Naqqāsh's two plays were well received and he was recognized by his contemporaries as the person who had brought theatre to the country. In 1851 Al-Naqqāsh produced what would be his last play, *al-salīt al-ḥasūd* (The Envious, Impertinent One). Like his earlier two plays *The Envious, Impertinent One*, was a fusion of western and eastern cultures. The plot borrowed from *Tartuffe*, *Le Misanthrope* and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Molière, but was filled with references to Arabic culture and tradition. Al-Naqqāsh also made use of Arabic musical heritage; in *The Miser* no fewer than 105 well-known tunes were incorporated creating an operetta like play, a form of theatre Al-Naqqāsh thought would be more attractive to the Arab audience than a play based on spoken dialogue only. Al-Naqqāsh also used his knowledge of language and poetry to write rhyming dialogue of different types, and made use of the levels of the Arabic language, from the various vernaculars to the formal standard Arabic, to distinguish between characters. A pioneer in Arabic drama, Al-Naqqāsh encouraged others to write and produce pieces for the theatre. He was also careful to write detailed directions for his plays. In addition to his plays, which were put on both in Beirut and in other major Arab cities, the terminology Al-Naqqāsh coined and his thoughts on how to introduce drama to the Arab public remained in use far into the twentieth century.

Collected Works

Al-Naqqāsh, N. (ed.) (1869) *Arzat Lubnan* أرزة لبنان (The Cedars of Lebanon), Beirut: al-matba'a al-'umūmiyya.

Theatre Plays

al-bakhīl البخيل (The Miser) 1947

Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-mughaffal aw Hārūn al-Rashīd أبو الحسن المغفل أو هارون الرشيد (Abū 'l-Ḥasan the Simpleton or Hārūn al-Rashīd) 1850

al-salīt al-ḥasūd السالط الحسود (The Envious, Impertinent One) 1851

Further Reading

Allen, R. (ed.) (2010) *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography: 1850-1950*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Carlson, M. (2013) 'Negotiating Theatrical Modernism in the Arab World', *Theatre Journal* 64 (4): 523-535.

Dorrigo, R (2006) 'Intertextual and Intratextual Processes in al-Malik huwa al-Malik by Sa'ad Allah Wannūs' in Luc-Willy Deheuvels, Barbara Michalak-Pikulska and Paul Starkey (eds.) *Intertextuality in Modern Arabic Literature since 1967*, Durham: Durham Modern Languages Series.

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