**Arab-American Theater**

Arab-American Theater is a general term that describes plays and performances by Americans of Arab descent written in Arabic and/or English from the early 20th century onward. This modernist movement breaks from Arab performance modes such as storytelling (*hakawati*), improvised poetry (*zajal*), and traditional dance forms (*raqs-al-sharqi*). These playwrights have adopted modern playwriting styles that combine Arab and Arab-American subject matter with American playwriting forms such as monodramas, one-act, and the two-act Realist plays. Although these plays are not generally experimental in nature, there is no doubt that the early Arab American playwrights Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Fares Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy all contributed to what is known as *al-Nahda,* or the Modern Arabic Literary Renaissance, that had a lasting impact on Arab arts and letters throughout the twentieth century. These plays are also forms of resistance literature that serve as protests against colonialist and neo-imperialist actions undertaken by foreign powers against Arab nations. Lastly, these plays are forms of what sociologists Omi and Winant call “cultural nationalism,” or a community focus on cultural elements which define collective identity and “peoplehood.” Arab-American Theatre has contributed to a rearticulation of Arab American identity that emphasizes hybridity and dual allegiances.

The appellation “Arab-American” was adopted after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War when a group of Arab intellectuals formed the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), an activist organization that worked to combat anti-Arab stereotypes and misinformation through mainly academic channels. The academic activism organized by scholars like Edward W. Said, Ibrahim Abu Lughod, and Elaine Hagopian would later transform into the artistic activism adopted by Arab-American poets, novelists, and playwrights. Through their dramaturgy and performances, these writers and performers espoused the values and political issues of the previous generation of scholars. Characteristics of Arab-American Theater include: plays that are written by self-identified Arab-Americans as personal reflections of their relationship between their Arab and American heritages; a response to the governmental persecution and/or media misrepresentation of Arabs and Arab-Americans; plays that focus on issues of assimilation, acculturation, and isolationism; plays that focus on issues of Arab identity politics, women’s rights, and queer subjectivity; and plays concerning the perceptions of Islamophobia and Arabophobia.

**Diasporic Beginnings**  
The first known Arab-American play, *Wajdah*, by Ameen F. Rihani, was written in 1909, but was never performed in his lifetime. Rihani was a member of *al-Rābitah*, or The Pen League, a group of immigrant Arab writers that formed in New York City in 1915. The group also included other Arab-American poet/novelists/playwrights Kahlil Gibran (also pronounced Khalil Jibran) and Mikha’il Na’imy. After the dissolution of The Pen League, Arab-American drama in the United States continued, though mainly written and performed in Arabic by amateurs in social/cultural clubs and churches mainly for Arab audiences. The first professionally staged play by an Arab-American playwright was S.K. Hershewe’s family comedy *An Oasis in Manhattan*, originally written and performed in 1965. Hershewe, an Arab-American of Lebanese descent, was also Director of the Playwrights Unit of the Actors Studio. The play was restaged in 1990 starring the prominent Arab-American actor Vic Tayback in one of his last stage performances.

**Non-Professional Arab-American Theater**

Arab-American Theater gained momentum in the 1980s-1990s when several Arab-American Theater companies were founded in the United States including: Michigan’s Baghdad Theater (f. 1985), *Firqat al-Yaoum* (sic Al Yawm) (Group of the Day) (f. 1987), the Arab Theatrical Arts Guild (f. 1988), *AJYAL* (Generations) (f. 1989); California’s Arab-American Children’s Theater Company (f. 1989), and *Al-Funun Al-Arabiya* (f. 1992). Writers like Husam Zoro, Hammam Shafie, and Faheem Sadi wrote plays for independent productions with limited engagements. Although the majority of these plays were never published or restaged, they anticipated the professional Arab-American writers and companies that succeeded them.

**Professional Arab-American Theater**

The devastating events of 9/11 changed the complexion of, and attitude toward, Arab-American Theater. As with the aftermath of the events of 1967, there was an increase of governmental surveillance, interrogation, and deportation of Arab-Americans. Subsequently, the tone and subject matter of Arab-American dramas shifted to reflect these changing realities. During the same period, more second-generation Americans of Arab descent adopted a self-proclaimed Arab-American identity and there was a renewed interest in Arab-American plays by American theatrical audiences and publishers. In addition, the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict led some playwrights and performers to create plays that opposed American intervention in Arab affairs. The first professional Arab-American Theater ensemble, *Nibras* (Lantern), assembled in 2001 and produced a verbatim-Theater piece titled *Sajjil* (Record), which dramatized both Arab and non-Arab reactions to the 9/11 attacks. Following the dissolution of Nibras, its members, who included artists Leila Buck, Najla Saïd, and Maha Chehlaoui, continued to create some of the most prominent works of Arab-American Theater. Three playwrights in particular—Yussef El Guindi, Heather Raffo, and Betty Shamieh—have had the greatest impact in the Arab-American Theater movement.

Egyptian-American playwright Yussef El Guindi holds a MFA from Carnegie Mellon University, and was playwright in-residence at Duke University. El Guindi’s plays include *Back of the Throat* (2004), *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (2006), *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2008), *Language Rooms* (2010), and *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* (2011). He writes primarily about the Muslim-American experience as viewed through the Egyptian-American lives of his protagonists. His plays, which range from Kafka-esque dramas to family comedies, focus on Arab-American family dynamics, the persecution of Arab-Americans, and intra-Arab conflicts among artists and intellectuals. El Guindi’s plays have garnered many awards, publications, and productions in several prominent American regional theaters.

Iraqi-American playwright and performer Heather Raffo earned her BA at the University of Michigan, her MFA from the University of San Diego, and she studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Raffo is best known for her solo-female performance *9 Parts of Desire*, which she both wrote and acted as a solo performance over a period of a decade. Through a series of personal monologues, Raffo’s play explores the lives of Iraqi and Iraqi-American women experiencing the First and Second Gulf Wars, and the 2001 attacks on New York City. Her play has been widely produced and published. Raffo and Arab-American musician Amir El Saffar later transformed the play into a performance titled *In Concert: Sounds of Desire,* which was developed by the Kennedy Center for their 2009 Arabesque Festival.She also wrote the libretto for *Fallujah: The First Opera on the Iraq War* for City Opera Vancouver.   
Palestinian-American playwright Betty Shamieh primarily focuses her plays on the Palestinian Arab and Arab-American female perspective. Her works include *Chocolate in Heat* (2001), *Roar* (2004), *The Black Eyed* (2005), and *Free Radicals* (2011). Shamieh’s female characters are strong-willed Diasporic subjects who reject the tyranny of the people and political systems that oppress the disenfranchised in Arab-American society. Her plays explore Arab-American dilemmas of filial/community expectation versus personal free arising from both non-Arab and Arab sources. In addition, her works confront more controversial issues such as rape, martyrdom, the condition of exile, and the effects of patriarchy on Arab women.

Other playwrights and performers like Nathalie Handal, Denmo Ibrahim, Jennifer Jajeh, Ismail Khalidi, and Jamil Khoury created plays, solo performances, and video plays that explore issues that are vital to the Arab-American experience. In addition, theatrical companies like Golden Thread Productions (f. 1996), Silk Road Rising (f. 2002), and Noor Theatre (f. 2010) have missions that includes staging plays by, and about, Arab-Americans. These artists and companies are redefining Arab-American dramatic literature and performance while providing unique perspectives for American Theater audiences.   
-Michael Malek Najjar

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**Photograph:**

Caption: A scene from *Precious Stones* by Jamil Khoury, directed by Michael Malek Najjar, Silk Road Rising (previously Silk Road Theatre Project), 2003. (Photo credit: Johnny Knight).

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