

## EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE IN IRAQ: FROM CHITHEER'S *MASKS* (1979-1990) TO ALTAYEB'S *IZAYZA* (2014-2015)

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### Abstract

Theatre in Iraq can be considered as mainly political since its early beginnings in the late nineteenth century. The political nature of Iraqi theatre stems from the realization of Iraqi theatre makers of the influence of theatre on people. An obvious example is Yousif Al Ani's 1958 play, *Ana Umk Ya Shaker* (I am your mother, Shaker), which almost caused a revolution after the first performance. Such is the power of theatre for Iraqi theatre practitioners, causing the authorities to impose strong censorship over theatre since then. Nonetheless, Iraqi theatre makers such as Kereem Chitbeer (1961-2005), continued to experiment and produce theatre even in their own houses, though in many cases their texts existed for several years only on paper, without being staged. Chitbeer's *The Masks* is one of the experimental plays that had to wait for more than ten years before it was actually performed, because of its daring themes, in addition to the playwright's awareness of the personal risk that he was taking by writing this play. The play was written in 1979, yet received its first performance in 1990, in Iraq, after failed attempts to produce it during the 1980s.

Chitbeer's play belongs to what Iraqi theatre critics describe as "Image Theatre". It is a play which reveals the violent and cruel reality of the Iraqi modern history of war, lack of freedom, and miseries. He presents his message through a play that breaks every single rule for Iraqi traditional theatre, where the audience is led into a house full of movable images. In this stage/ gallery /theatre/ house, the audience embark upon a journey where they meet historical, modern, and symbolic tyrants, dictators, literary men, as well as ordinary people, telling their stories of pains and suffering. Chitbeer does not even spare Adam and Eve in *The Masks*, they recognize these miseries as their own fault from eating the wrong apple in the first place, and try in vain to fix their original mistake. This study reveals these and similar theatre practices which occurred until the recently performed play of Bassim Altayeb, *Izayza*. The latter is a devised performance that was developed through workshops led by Altayeb with a group of more than 50 young performers. The play consists of several episodes presented inside the yard and rooms of the traditional house of Iraqi Theatre Forum in Baghdad, where audience members are invited as guests. Inside this house, the audience has the chance to watch what goes on in the different rooms of the house. Some of these scenes allow only one audience member at a time, and the performer has a private conversation with them, thus creating a sense of intimacy and closeness. The play is based on the idea of "Izayza", which is a traditional Iraqi term for a curse or a spell that is cast on a house to start problems. The audience wanders around the rooms of the house to find out the problems this house suffers. The house represents Iraq in general, and the performers are representatives of the audience members in this house, that is, Iraqi society.

This essay tries to shed a comprehensive light on *The Masks* and *Izayza*, as plays about the consciousness of Iraqi theatre makers about their reality, as well as their determination to create innovative theatre practices to convey their messages. The paper will also briefly mention other theatre works by other theatre practitioners who tried to follow the same pattern of experimental and unconventional theatrical performances.

**Keywords:** Iraqi experimental theatre, theatre and politics, Kereem Chitbeer, Bassim Altayeb

## 1 INTRODUCTION

One of the prominent features of Iraqi theatre is its political orientation since its early beginnings in the late nineteenth century. One very distinguished example is Yousif Al Ani's *Ana Omak Ya Shaker* 'I am your mother Shaker', (1958) which almost led the audience to a public protest after its premier in Baghdad. It is this political nature that gave theatre its significance and flavour for all the Iraqis who were involved in it, making it a source of danger for the authorities who imposed all forms of religious, moral, and political censorship on it. During the Baath regime (1968-2003), theatre practice was closely observed and used for the purpose of promoting the wars which this regime involved the country in. Some Iraqi theatre practitioners found more than one way to avoid this severe control via highly symbolic play texts or by reserving their work for a selected elite whom they trusted. However, many Iraqi theatre practitioners fled the country under threats. The current paper focuses on the kind of experimental theatre created and developed by Iraqis which foregoes the conventional form of staged plays and breaks the fourth wall. These plays, such as *The Masks*, faced many difficulties; Chitheer needed to wait more than ten years to put the first performance of his play, while Altayeb worked very hard with his team for more than a year before the final production of the play in 2015. Yet, Izayza proved very successful with the latest production of *Izayza* in May 2015, when the play gained popularity with the public. That's why it ran for a number of weeks. This trend can be related to Augusto Boal's theory of his *Theatre of the Oppressed* when he says:

*The spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonist role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discuss plans for change- in short, trains himself for real action, in this case, perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it surely a rehearsal for revolution. (Boal 2008, 98)*

Neither Kereem Chitheer (1961-2005), nor Basim Altayeb (1977- ) are familiar with or intended to follow Boal's style, although the latter studied and worked in theatre abroad (Belgium), but they both believed in the power of involving the audience in the world of their theatrical works. Neither of these works required a direct interaction on the part of the audience members, but they certainly hoped for a reaction that is generated from the audience's close encounter with the world of the plays. They were definitely driven by the same questions that Jennifer Doyle finds it difficult to answer in her essay 'Introducing Difficulty': "Does the feeling come from inside the spectator or from the art work? Does an artwork represent feeling? Whose: the artist's or the viewer's? Does a work make feeling? How?" (Doyle, 2013, 4) Chitheer and Altayeb used their best resources to create different theatre practices with the aim of leaving an unforgettable impact, of creating a revolutionary reaction.

### **Kereem Chitheer's *The Masks* (1979-1991): Breaking Theatre Conventions**

*The Masks* is evidently one of Chitheer's most important plays, as his first published collection is entitled *The Masks and other Plays* (2001). It is also the only play that Kereem introduces in this book with a short critical article about his early career as a young theatre maker around the same time of writing the play, and he concludes the text with a few facts about his early attempts to produce the play in Iraq until its actual first production in 1990 in the north of Iraq. *The Masks* was first written in 1979, yet it remained as a hidden script until its first production in two theatre festivals in Iraq; as Awad Ali states in his "Kereem Chitheer and the theatre of Image" (2003) the first was at the Sixth Theatre Festival of Experimental Theatre in Baghdad (1990) at Theatre Forum building, then at the Fourth Theatre Festival of Experimental Theatre of the Institution of Fine Arts in Sulaymaniah, Kurdistan, in the same year. Chitheer states in his book that there had been three attempts to produce the play during the eighties. The first failed because of the war; the other two failed for mysterious reasons, such as when the rehearsals had been going very well with the support of Alressala Theatre Company, yet every effort was suddenly stopped when the stage and the headquarters of the Iraqi Theatre Company were burnt down by "mysterious hands" (2001, 116) Awad Ali's essay clarifies that even the production of the play during the nineties faced many problems. Among them is the withdrawal of many cast members days before the show, a matter that led Chitheer to present his play with two actors only and in front of a limited audience. Ali expresses his surprise that the play was even admitted to the festival in Baghdad and he explains that "the play texts that participated in this festival of this year had not been sent to the committee of censorship for some reason, in addition to that Kereem Chitheer did not present all his scenes before the committee of inspection of the festival, justifying that [...] he had not finished working on them". Such lucky coincidence led to the production of the play in Iraq. Ali stresses that "it is only good luck that among the audience there had been no secret reporters; otherwise they would have enjoyed the scene of Chitheer's being arrested." Chitheer left Iraq shortly after that performance and moved to Yemen, where he found more freedom for his theatre practice.

*The Masks* is a very radical play in terms of its form and structure. There is no actual storytelling plot that is revealed through the progress of the play. It is rather a gallery of enacted images that are framed in ten spaces within a house, Chitheer's own house, where the audience are led to watch different scenes by The Clown. The images that are shown in this house are images of human brutality, the impact of war on human lives, victories of dictatorship, and ruins, leading to the final image of Adam and Eve, discussing their first sin and ironically trying in vain to fix it. On page 95/5<sup>1</sup> of his book, Chitheer provides a diagram of his house as a hypothetical layout for the play and he points out that his scenes are in seven movements that are distributed through the ten spaces of the house, where spectators are invited to. The play opens with a kind of an exhibition of paintings and the play unconventionally asks the audience to be part of the show, by giving them the responsibility of cutting the opening ribbon of the entrance. This gesture clearly suggests that without this action of the audience there will be no play or no action to follow, thus the audience here are actually part of the characters of the play and implicitly share their guilt.

This layout is to be adjusted according to the space of the performance as Chitheer stresses in his text, stating that it was performed in an area of 1000 meter square in the production at Sulaymaniah, and then in an area of one meter square in Yeman in 1994, as the opening production at Al Maqueel Theatre (Chitheer 2001, 116/24).<sup>2</sup> With more than twenty characters, *The Masks* touches on ideas and issues that can be relevant to more than one country and community, as his characters vary from the brutal historical Arab leader of the Abbasid Era, such as AL-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf Al-Thaqafi, to twentieth-century dictators like Pinochet, Franco, Hitler, in addition to Lorca, the Spanish poet and playwright. Those characters are accompanied by a number of other characters of mad women and men, two characters with a missing arm and a missing leg, a journalist, an old man and a young man, and finally there is Adam and Eve who conclude the play. The paintings that open the play have very ironical titles where Chitheer is clearly mocking life severely, where comedy comes from pain and brutality. These include paintings like "Warm bath: A man with his head attached to many plastic pipes as he is sitting on a chair, washing his feet in bowl with the blood that is coming from the plastic pipes from his body" (96/6) or "Reduce speed: A frame in which there is a phrase saying 'reduce speed, turning point ahead of you; Heaven is meters away'" (97/7); or "Human relation: Many hands overlap, holding books, bottles of alcohol, cigarettes, pens, daggers, guns, hats and chains (97/7). Such paintings are presented as an introduction to the action of the play, where the playwright attempts to prepare his audience for the play. They introduce a journey that the audience members are about to take. Here Alex Sierz's assumption about 'in-yer-face' theatre can be fully fulfilled where theatre "can sometimes be an emotional journey that gives you a startling feeling of having lived through the experience being represented. This can tell you more about an extreme state of mind than just reading about it" (2001, 7). With Chitheer this journey goes beyond reading and watching it; it takes the audience inside the journey as they are moving inside it, especially when the characters are based on real people with familiar names, as well as ordinary people.

In his introduction to *The Masks and Other Plays*, Yassein Al Nussair sees *The Masks* as the nearest text to the concept of a play according to him, as it contains all the required ingredients of a text, dialogue, action, and mythology, that are based on old tales of worries, poets, mad people and even Adam and Eve. He further explains that "the main theme in Kereem Chitheer's plays is his choice of characters and events that are unfinished, from which he is looking for models for the complete circle of life in them and make them move in a destiny that is created from the current history to reveal the tragedy of people who were blindly led to meaningless wars" (Chitheer 2001, 13).

In *The Masks*, Chitheer is very careful in choosing characters that are well-known to the audience, a choice that might refer to his intention to make his characters as close as possible to the mentality and the reality of the audience. Such closeness adds much to the amount of directness of the play and its impact; such characters as those placed on the steps of the stairs speak familiar lines of far and near historical brutality:

AL HAJAJ. (On the first level, holding his sword high) I see some heads blossoming and it's time for the harvest; I am the owner. By God, I will take the brave for the guilt of the weak; and the right for the guilt of wrong, till you say to each other, run for your life, Saad, Saeed is dead.

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<sup>1</sup> The first page number belongs to the Arabic text, and second is the pagination of the English text of the play.

<sup>2</sup> I could not find any details about how Chitheer adapted the play to different spaces during the few times of production inside and outside Iraq, other than what he mentions in the notes for the play.

**HITLER.** (On the fourth level, making infamous Nazi salute, saying with his famous words over the tune of a military march.) I see the whole world as tanks like the eyes of Eva Braun. (102-3/11-12)

A poet like LORCA and a poem like Paul Éluard's "Liberty" (103/12) are also an essential part of *The Masks*, to highlight the two extremes of human actions of pure savagery and romanticism, especially when they are placed next to each other in the same Movement 3 on the stairs.

Ali describes Chitbeer's play as having what he refers to as an overlap of different levels of "fantasy, Surrealism, absurdity, and symbolism within [Chitbeer's] artistic texture. His atmosphere seems like a mixture of seriousness, mockery, satire, and tragedy, making it nearer to black comedy" (Ali 2003) This is represented in Movement 4 in which two men, one with a missing arm and the other with a missing leg, look for their limbs in a heap of cut arms and legs. The two characters are engaged in a serious, yet very ironic search for their limbs and once they find them, the two limbs are pulled away from them and disappear, leaving them reciting some lines extracted from a poem by Sergey Alexandrovich Yesenin: "In the crowded street, I walk alone/ I wipe the world's walls with my shoulders, in fear of the people around me and the bullies of the district. As if I have never been a bully myself, blocking roads for wanderers; here, I am gathering my memories. Farewell my bravery" (105/15). In this Movement, Chitbeer distributes the attention of the visiting audience between more than one scene in Room 6, as there is another action going on and the focus is shifted using lights to show a wardrobe and two men leaving it, emptying their bags of skulls, military uniform, and shoes and other stuff (105-6/15). They continue trying on some military clothes and medals and assuming the role of army officers in a band. Then the focus changes again to another corner in the same Room 6 where a drunken Old Man is telling his son, The Young Man, the story of a warrior who was lost in sea, yet there are people who claim that they saw him after his certain death, on another ship. The son accuses his father of being drunk and is unable to believe such a story. The father replies ironically: "Didn't I say, my son, he was a warrior...!" (107/16). Chitbeer, is here both reminding his audience of the romanticism of the idea of heroic figures, and mocking the idea at the same time.

*The Masks* is a play marked for its directness in the representation of its themes and actions.

Albdulhadi Sadoon expresses the same idea in his "Kereem Chitbeer in *The Masks and other plays*" when he states:

*In Kereem Chitbeer, there is a lot of the mixture between the practical description of the theatrical production and the game of the narrative employment of the theatre directness. Let me put (directness) between brackets as it does not mean the direct function, the cruel judgment, or the dry reality in the norms of our Arabic reader. It means much more than this. For me, it is the direct contact with confrontation. It means the desire to reveal publicly, meaning presenting everything in front of the audience.*

In addition to the obvious directness of the play created by breaking the illusion of fourth wall and leading the audience inside the world of the play, *The Masks* contains scenes that present different levels of directness, such as in Movement 5, where the characters are all mad, facing a journalist and bombarding him with questions about the miseries of the world. They ask the Journalist in what manner he conveys these miseries, and whether he is really aware of other people pain when he writes about their miseries, or, whether journalism is merely a profession that he practices while he enjoys a life of luxury:

**MAD PEOPLE.** Wear your glasses; you are definitely short-sighted. (They start bombarding him with many questions without waiting for answers.)

Hey Journalist, how many babies are born? And how many die per day?

[...]

Journalist, would you write an article about hunger before or after eating? Or would you write it while you are feeding your dog?

**JOURNALIST.** (Covers his ears with his hands) To this extent... Stop... Enough... This is enough... Enough (He leaves running away toward Room 8, and disappears.) (109-10/ 18-19)

Chitbeer goes further and even criticizes himself as a playwright for the brutality of his play and the amount of blood in it, when one of the characters of the play objects to acting his role because of the amount of blood imposed on him, as THE CLOWN explains to the audience. This takes place as early as when the audience

are taking their first tour around the painting: "Excuse me ladies and gentlemen. We'll close this hall because one of the characters is rebelling, inside" (97/7).

The character of The Clown is part of Chittheer's directness, as it can be quite confusing to determine whether he belongs to the world of the play or the actual world of the audience as he is the host of the show, who leads and comments on the action of the play. At the beginning of the play, he acts as the guide who is a sane person of the real world, apologizing for the rude behavior of an actor in Movement 1. He introduces the play as part of the characters' announcement of the insanity of the world: "Crazy, crazy, crazy.../ It is crazy, that they say the earth is round, / It is oval; at one of its ends there is an insane man standing and a sane man standing at the other end. But the mystery is who is who? Who is the sane and who is the insane?" (98/8). He then returns to be part of the actual world of the audience and reminds them of the objection of the actor, explaining that the latter cannot act the scene anymore. Furthermore, he agrees with the actor this time: "If you want the truth, he has every right to object. I, personally, would object if I were in his shoes. As a solution, we replaced this scene with another" (107-8/17). With this technique, Chittheer skillfully creates a character that provides a further link between the real world of the audience and the fictional world of the play, although in this case the two worlds overlap.

The two characters of Adam and Eve are presented in *The Masks*, ironically at the very end of the play, when they actually represent the beginning of humanity.

The play concludes with a sharp irony when The Clown tries to comfort the audience and encourage them to come to the garden, yet they are surrounded with death and chaos: "*dead bodies start moving and there are sounds of screams coming from the windows and door of the house behind the audience. Music, chaos, sounds of barking of wild dogs, crows and wild birds, accompanied by unstable lights*" (115/23). Meanwhile, The Clown reassures everybody, saying "Never mind... this world is fine" (115/23). This same irony characterises Chittheer's death, caused by a heart attack and not by an explosion, or by an act of terrorism as one would have predicted at that time in 2005 in Baghdad. Shaker Al Anbari explains Chittheer's death in his essay, "The Iraqi director Kereem Chittheer whose life ended in Hugo morgue", in the following terms: "Such death became strange in Iraqi today. It indicates that everything is fine, but everybody knows very well that things are not fine at all" (2006).

With dead bodies, weeping women, human limbs scattered, scenes of torture and executions, screams, skulls, and masked men, Chittheer is probably trying to "confront us with 'our own complicity', making 'us face the fact that something in us responds to it', forcing us to admit that violence is not foreign to our nature" (Sierz 2001, 19). *The Masks* exemplifies Antonin Artaud's "The Theatre of Cruelty: *First Manifesto*" (Artaud 2014, 68) which promoted direct contact between the audience and the actors. *The Masks* enacts a theatre practice that aims to "pursue a re-examination not only of all aspects of an objective, descriptive outside world, but also all aspects of an inner world, that is to say man viewed metaphysically, by every means at its disposal." (Artaud 2014, 65) According to Artaud, this is the only way that will enable us "to talk about imagination's rights in theatre once more." (65). Chittheer's puts Artaud's theory into practice by making the audience a central part of the action of the play and not merely passive spectators. Though there is no actual record of how much the limited audience of *The Masks* reacted to the performance of the play or if they responded when addressed, it is still stated in the text that they open the play, they move from one scene to another, and they are directly addressed by The Clown.<sup>3</sup>

### **Bassim Altayeb's *Izayza*: A Country Piled up in One House**

Bassim Altayeb (1977- ) is an Iraqi theatre actor, director, and a dancer. His *Izayza* (2014) is the first theatre work that he produced in Baghdad after his return from Belgium. In 2013, Altayeb started working on a series of workshops with a group of young theatre/drama students of the Institution of Fine Arts and the Department of Dramatic Arts in the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad. The group grew to more than 70 members aged between 16 and 22, which shows that the team was formed of mainly young members with very little, if any, experience in theatre work. During an interview conducted by the author of this paper, Altayeb emphasizes that *Izayza* was developed when participants were encouraged to talk about their personal difficulties and the stories of their families: the work was developed "with a team of 25 members through workshops that are based on movement and dialogue improvisation." (Altayeb, Interview, 2) After its first actual production in September 2014, the play received another and more popular production between April and May 2015. Altayeb and other theatre critics, state that *Izayza* is a play based on the art of performance, in which performers rely mainly physical movements to convey the idea they are presenting. There is no one name for the writer of the

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that Chittheer was only eighteen when he wrote his play with, very little knowledge, if any, about theatre abroad, other than that acquired through his teachers at the Institution of Fine Arts in Baghdad.

work, the programme of the play rather states the names of eleven performers and two children with no previous experience in performance, for the play is a collective work that is created by all the members of the show.<sup>4</sup>

Like Chittheer's *Masks*, *Izayza* invites its audience into a house, the building of the Iraqi Theatre Forum, which is a traditional Baghdadi house in the middle of Baghdad. The audience members are welcomed by the director as part of the performance and a couple of performers who are to guide them into the central yard that is surrounded by rooms on two floors. After a short introduction the audience, who are limited to 30 members at each performance, are divided into groups and led by guides to attend twelve short episodes performed inside the different rooms and spaces of the house. Altayeb termed these episodes as files and each audience member needs to open the files and watch. Therefore, *Izayza* can be described as a collection of short plays connected by a short introduction and a conclusion with dances and movements performed by all the performers and guided by the director of the play.

Another very vital connection between these twelve files is the title of the play, 'Izayza'. The word is well known to Iraqis as an ancient traditional term for an evil spell that can be cast on a house or a group of people to create problems and bad fortune. Traditionally speaking, *Izayza* is some sort of a small animal bone, usually a sheep, on which a certain spell is cast. It is then thrown on the house or the place where the problems should occur. The title of the play suggests that this house is a representation of the country itself, Iraq, and the audiences are appointed with the mission of wandering around the house to find out the location of this *Izayza* that is causing all the problems, wars, and difficulties in it. This theme is well presented in *Izayza* through the rooms, each presenting a conflict or a critical idea as the causes of the pains in this house; and the audience need to find the right solution to cure the pain that is most relevant to them. By doing so, the house, as a representative of the country, will find happiness. Ahmed Abdulhussein, a poet and a writer, sees the play as carrying two very essential features of any successful artistic work: "boldness and depth, and this play contained these two features with excellence" (Abdulhussein, 2015) Abdulhussein adds that "*Izayza* did not stop at showing us our retreat and nakedness in front of ourselves, it put us in a position where we are forced to have a stance. All of this in a breath-taking artistic work". It is quite significant to say that Abdulhussein was among a few names who led a demonstration against all kinds of corruption in Iraq in 2011, and he is again among the names who play a significant role in calling for and organizing the demonstrations that have been happening in Iraq since 31<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

The verity of the files presented in *Izayza* provides a space for many chances of identification for the audiences to reflect upon and react to. Some of these 'files' are presented by a single performer to just one audience member, such as 'A young man's suicide', 'The change hairdresser', 'Baghdad, the dream', and 'Spontaneous opinions'. These can be considered as very short one-to-one performances.

According to Samem Hassaballah, a theatre director, academic, and critic, the 2014 and 2015 productions of the play are similar except for "a few new scenes that were added to the new show with new characters" (Hassaballah, interview 1). Hassaballah stresses that the show is flexible enough to receive new ideas and themes and to be presented with some additions or even the deletion of some scenes without this affecting the main structure at all. Altayeb clarifies that there are three scenes specifically added to the second production:

*The scene of 'spontaneous opinion' whose main character is a boy of nine years old, dreaming of 'having a lower fence in their house and all the locks of the house are removed' this is a one to one performance. The second scene is the beauty salon 'the audience members are the customers of the salon' the aim of this file is that we don't need a beauty salon if we only tried to smile. The third is an installation 'a room full of different sticking tapes and music players are around the place playing the music of change'. This is inside the space of Izayza. And there were updates outside this space like cinema of Izayza for one individual, the game of snakes and ladders, and Chaplin in the space. (Altayeb, Interview 3)*

He further explains that as soon as the audiences arrive at the building they are inside the performance, starting from the outside garden, until they leave the building completely at the very end.

From its opening moments, the play invites reaction: "I have a surprise for you. I am sure you'll be happy about it. But before I tell you about it, I'd like to know, would you kill yourself or not? You, young women, would your

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<sup>4</sup> The names are: Bassim Altayeb, Ahmed Sadoon, Ahemd Naseem, Ameer Abo-alheel, Ameer Albassri, Ameer Abdulhussein, Haider Saad, Shrooqu Al-Hassan, Ghassan Ismael, Mustafa Al-Sagheer, Hind Nezar, Khalid Al Khalidi (a young boy), and Tara Monika (a young girl).

family cut your throat or not? And you, what would you say to your God?"(2) Until its very end the invitation is stressed: "Let's save what's left of us, we started to forget to smile. We should save ourselves; we started to forget the word 'peace'. Let's save ourselves, we started to make mistakes and forget to apologize for them. We need to save ourselves, we kept ourselves busy about the others and forgot ourselves. We must save ourselves we started to forget to be clear." (11) Dr. Awatif Naeem, a theatre practitioner and an academic, affirms that

*the show is based on communication, because the owners of the rooms and during their tales they address the recipients with words such as, 'do you know, you'll see, tell me which picture you liked more, do you know what this girl did', all these expressions are invitation to conversation; an invitation to question, alienate, and comment. Though the tales of these rooms are different, and said in different words, yet they are one. (Naeem 2015)*

Altayeb clarifies that "all the dialogues are already written for [the performers] in *Izayza*, yet the performer has the right to add and improvise with the recipient if they are asked a question" (Altayeb Interview, 4). Although he stresses that he did not particularly encourage the active interaction with audience, he acknowledges that the show is dependent on the actors spontaneously "feeling [...] the moments". There were many occasions when audiences asked questions and requested that the performer repeat a particular scene. Naeem clarifies that she, as a member of the audience, had the choice of refusing what was offered to her in more than one file (scene) and was given the freedom to act according to her own will as when she refused to wear the special glasses for the 3D cinema and chose not to take the crisps bag while watching what was shown on the screen; when she entered the room with the young man telling his family story she refused to take the seat that was offered to her by the actor and chose a totally different seat to watch the scene (Naeem 2015). Each file carries the significant notion that performers try to engage the audience either by imitating the audiences' own probable reaction to the situation or by confronting audience members with the responsibility of reacting to it, yet upon their own will.

In 'Female suppression' file, the actress welcomes a number of audience members into her kitchen where they sit around the same table with her while she is peeling and cutting vegetables. In this scene, she takes the side of conventional Iraqi society, in opposition to women who demand their right to education and to choose their husbands, fight hostility against women and believe in finding their own status and dignity. She gives the names of several young women whom she is planning to punish for what they have done: a young girl who has been raped and is to be punished for encouraging men to rape her; another who is to be punished for refusing to marry her father's friend who is more than 14 years older than her; a third for changing her religion to marry the man she loved; a fourth for trying to find a job to support her children after being abused by her drunken husband; a fifth for taking off her scarf at college, and a sixth for asking for women's rights. She tells those stories while expressing her anger through cutting vegetables, symbolically upholding the dignity of the society that is humiliated by the deeds of these women. Kareem Rahi, a writer, explains that the actress was actually "cooking a special dinner when she was cutting those ungrateful girls and throwing them into the unknown" (2015). Accordingly, the message of the scene reached its goal, especially as the actress does not attempt to preach change; she rather takes the side of traditional society by imitating their practice and reactions toward such women, whose only fault is asking for their rights. By doing this, the scene shows the audience their own conventional reactions and their consequences in relation to the rights of these women, revealing the amount of injustice these women suffer, which leaves the audience with the question of whether these women are guilty or if society is to blame for punishing them.

In "The change hairdresser", only one audience member enters at a time. The spectator is received by two young performers, Karam and Safa, who start asking the spectator if they wish to have a makeover to "activate lots of brain cells and make [their] face looks fresh" (6). They start showing the spectator many beauty products by famous trademarks that "most Hollywood stars use" (6), then suggest that the spectator should dye their hair and what kind of color might suit them. Then after a short discussion of the spectator's choices for the makeover, they conclude by whispering to each other while the spectator is sitting in front of them, confused, saying: "do you know why they made these creams and substances. They made them to make the person look beautiful. No one, not me or the best makeup artist would make you look beautiful, for you just need to smile to be" (6). The request to smile is one of the main requirements that Altayeb emphasizes as the aim of the play. He states that he relied on drama therapy while rehearsing the play and he wishes to use the same effect on his audience (Altayeb Interview 1). The guide who introduces the play in Act One preaches smiling as the only way to face and cure the tragedies of this house and build a better future:

*Now, close your eyes, you lady, close your eyes, you gentleman, close your eyes too. Close your eyes and smile, a smile with positive anger. Think of your daughter's smile, or your son's. Think of your*

*beloved's smile, or your mother. Keep smiling. You are safe here. It is your chance to smile. Forget everything that might disturb you. You are the first, keep smiling. Think of the smile of those young girls who were slaughtered and smile. Think of those young men who were killed and smile. Think of the smile of the coming generations that'll come after you and smile. And if your grandsons are born, don't tell them about the 8-year war or the story of hunger and the random killing upon identity. Don't ever think of telling them about the destiny of the 1700 young men who were not saved, this might make them lose confidence in you. And if they go to school don't teach them multiplicity of division, so that they can succeed in their lives. (3)*

Hence, the scene of "The Change hairdresser" is at the heart of *Izayza's* aims, and the fact that it is a scene for one audience member makes the impact of the request for a smile even more effective. On the other hand, as Haider Juma, states in his review of *Izayza*, drama therapy relies on the participation of the spectator and the performer within the same environment as both being principal participants: "this did not happen because of the pessimistic theme of the show that is of death and suicide" (Juma 2015). Yet the theme of suicide and death in the play came as part of conveying the reality of the society and the context in which the play is created, as therapy can only work by facing reality.

Death and suicide are indeed another dominant theme in *Izayza*. The surprise the guide promises the audience at the very beginning of the play turns out to be death at the end: "Now we reached to the surprise that I promised you, but please don't envy me for it. The surprise is that I'm going to die naturally" (12). Furthermore, one of the significant files of the play is "A young man's suicide" where one audience member is welcomed into the room of a photographer. As the title suggests the performer asks the spectator to help him find a way to die without blood or pain as he is tired of expecting death every day in an explosion or hostile accident:

*The matter is I decided to kill myself. Because I am so afraid of death and afraid that I will go out one day and get killed in an explosion. [...] I just need to die as a full body and my mother wash my dead body with her own hands. I want to choose death, happy with it. But I am scared. I want a way that is harmless, a quick death with no blood involved. (6-7)*

This shocking request is intensified because the spectator is invited to take a photo of the performer by putting his head inside an old-fashioned camera and it is at this moment that he is taken by surprise, finding himself face to face with the performer inside the box and facing the performer's request with literally no way of finding a space to think or refuse: "The spectator enters their head and is surprised to see the actors face in front of them just 60 centimeters away from their faces"(6). This shows one main intention of the play as to confront the audience with what they might otherwise avoid or ignore.

"A psychological patient" is another very interesting file of *Izayza*, when a group in the audience are invited into an ordinary room with some furniture to sit around a young actor. The actor starts explaining his medical history for the spectators and how he was cured of a pee reflex, severe anemia, and insomnia with the help of good doctors, "except for one disastrous sickness and it is contagious, not like others" (7). This disease turns out to be lying, being a hypocrite and two-faced person who never trusts others and never apologizes for his mistakes. At the end the actor thanks the spectator "for listening [as t]his helps a lot in [his] treatment"(7). This is a very direct treatment of an everyday fact in all societies, not only Iraqi, yet *Izayza* has the bonus of providing a chance for this small reserved community of Iraqis to talk about such diseases, and to listen to it being spoken about out loud. The intimate setting of the scene in a family room makes the story more realistic and close to the experience of the spectators.

In "Bad Education", the audience enters a classroom where the teacher (the actor) is giving a lecture about the changes that he would like to suggest to the educational curriculum in Iraq. The whole scene is based on satire and mockery of the current situation in Iraq as the teacher is suggesting that all educational subjects are to be replaced by subjects related to hostility and displacement as these are the new facts of Iraqi life now: "National Affairs to be replaced by Immigration", "Music Appreciation is to be replaced with PKC gun sound", "the subject of Geography should be replaced by the subject of Local and Regional Division", "Sports is to be replaced with the Jump, how one should jump if a nearby bomb exploded or how one should jump if he was chased by a car with no license plate", "Literature should be replaced by spirited songs, and "Morality is to be cancelled totally and directly" (7-8). The only exception is Mathematics, which

*is to be emphasised hundreds of times. This is the only subject that we won't change, so the citizen would be able to know the statistics of how many have left, or how many are able to appreciate the PKC, or those how were divided, or destroyed or jumped far away. We can change the name of the subject though into The Achievements, or from Mathematics to Reckoning. (8)*

Such satire is one of the reasons for Akaram Al Qassi to state in this review of the play that *Izayza's* main theme is "mocking the current bad situation and criticizing it [...] without providing a way of escaping this destruction in the country or the condition the country is going through" (Al Qassi 2015). On the other hand, it is possible to argue that by pointing out the pitfalls of the society and mocking them, the attention is drawn to these pitfalls that might have been unrecognized or ignored before. Recognizing them can be the first step toward treating them.

"Baghdad, the dream" is another scene for one spectator at a time, when this spectator is led into a dark room with sounds of traditional Iraqi music played in the background. The spectator is asked if they would like to see the person who is able to change the destiny of Baghdad toward a better future. The scene concludes with the lights being turned on and the spectators finding themselves in a room full of mirrors that reflect their own image as the saviour of Baghdad. Such an influential suggestion can leave a strong impact as when Abdulhussein uses this scene as the title for his review of *Izayza*: "*Izayza... Look in the mirror to know who your savour is*" (2015).

These are examples of perhaps the most significant scenes of the twelve total number of scenes of *Izayza*. Another is the file of "Prediction", which takes place on the stairs where the audience meets a beautiful young woman who offers funny yet very suggestive predictions for the future of Iraq such as, "I predict in 2090, Sunnis and Shias will have breakfast in Ramadan together at that same time", "I predict in 2070, Iraqi men will stop hitting their women", "I predict that in fifty years, Iraq will join the EU" (9). With each prediction, she climbs up the stairs until she disappears at the last prediction, referring to the difficulty of such dreams-like predictions, as with the current situation of the society, such dreams are almost impossible. In "Family Disintegration" file, the audience meets a young man, telling the story of a broken family, a husband and wife and their son, who is left torn between the two parents when they divorce, a little boy who witnessed their miserable life, to end up miserable himself. Both parents find a solution and a happy life at the end, but he is left "here" (5) unable to know where he belongs to when he is beaten and rejected by both families.

Another file is "A message to the director", where the audience meets a young actor, reading aloud a message that he is writing to the director of the play, objecting against the way the main actors treat extras and how they are using minor actors as toys and victimizing them:

*They are really ruining it. They talk about your ideas and try to apply them on us.*

*They deprived us from things we are sure you won't object to them.*

*I am sorry if I am bold, talking to you like this.*

*But there are poor people, and not brave enough to face you.*

*This is a big problem. (5)*

This message is an indication to the prayers that can be directed to God and religious ideas as they form a big source of the crisis, as they are misused and manipulated by many powers in Iraq. The last two files are "3D" and "Music and war", in which the audience faces the contemporary history of wars of Iraq since the beginning of the twenty first century with a 3D cinema, where they are able to feel the movement of the chairs with the action of the image on the screen and hear very loudly the sound of wars. Using cinema is one way to intensify and remind the audience of the amount of pressure, destruction and distortion their lives have gone through. *Izayza* concludes with the main guide announcing his surprise that he is going die naturally and he thanks all the governmental ministries for their contribution to this death. All the performers gather in the central yard, where they start to dance and jump around in hysterical movements to a loud Iraqi traditional wedding music, yet their slapping and dancing suggest the traditional mourning practices in Iraq. Naeem stresses that the end of the play leaves the audience confused as the performers are engaged in what seems a wedding of the man who is dying, while the music of weddings and funerals is mixed together. The audience are unable to recognize the moment for them to greet the performers as they would feel worried that those dancing characters might chase them too (Naeem 2015). *Izayza* does not require the audience to recognize and appreciate the efforts of the team of the play, but rather the recognition of the themes presented and the deep thinking about the way to solve these very deep crisis that Iraqi society is suffering, in this instance by finding the real *Izayza* within, and breaking its spell.

Many critics, such as Samem Hassaballah, Alaa Yousif, Akaram Al Qassi and others praised *Izayza* for being a well-organized work. Taha Rasheed in particular points out that the production company for the play consists mostly of amateur performers led by Altayeb, which proved to be a successful qualitative growth for Iraqi theatre in general (Rasheed 2014). Rahi adds that *Izayza* "belongs in its essence to theatre, yet it left the

subservience to contemporary theatrical traditions” (Rahi 2015). It is possible that that gave the show most of its power. Yousif, points out that the reasonable price the team set for the ticket of the play encouraged many to attend and this in turn raise the status of theatrical shows in the minds of the Iraqi audience (Yousif 2015). It is clear that the hard work of Altayeb and all of the team of Studio Nuqta (full stop studio), which has been the name of the group of Izayza, from early 2013 to late 2014, has paid off handsomely among the audience of theatre professionals and the general public.

## CONCLUSION

Between Chittheer’s *The Masks* and Altayeb’s *Izayza*, the practice of leaving the conventional stage and manipulating a whole building is gradually developed, for the purpose of more involvement on the part of the audience in the action of a theatrical show. Among the prominent experiments that Iraqi theatre witnesses is Dr. Awni Karoumi’s *The Hymn of the Rocking Chair* (1987), in which the audience are invited into a house, the same building of the Iraqi Theatre Forum, to listen to two women in two separate rooms reading letters from their lovers who were taken away from them by war. In this regard, Chittheer stresses that

*...any place is suitable for a theatrical performance as long as there is a possibility to manipulate the space, making use of its content, i.e. theatricalizing the space. This does not mean to delete its features, it rather means to give it a new feature. In this case, the audience becomes a main element of the performance and involved in it. The audience moves with the actor and the action inside the performing space. (Chittheer 91)*

Ina’am Jaber, a writer and academic, had the chance to attend Karoumi’s play in the 1980s and in her reaction to the play she wrote about the experience of being inside the theatrical performance with no stage to separate the audience from the performer as it “prevent[s] man [referring to a member of audience] from escaping his or her reality no matter how shattering it could be” (Jabber 1988). This is clearly fulfilled in these plays, especially when they are required to give responses even if by merely agreeing or disagreeing as in *Izayza*.

In her review of *Izyaza*, Naeem refers to another play of the same style, *Laoo* (If), written by her and directed by Aziz Khayoon, which made use of the same building to take the audience into a journey after they are received by the main actress; the final scene of this play is likewise in the central yard of the building (Naeem 2015). This is the reason why Hassaballah sees no innovation in the practice of *Izayza*. He stresses that the play can no longer be part of Iraqi experimental theatre as “experimental means invention. It is not enough for me to leave the theatre box to make a work an experimental one [...] one of the important definitions of experiments is (to break the convention and the creation of a new concept)” (Hassaballah, interview 6). Yet in the same interview he acknowledges that “*Izayza* was inventive when it comes to the organization of the space of the performance”. Such experiments, consisting of turning the conventional theatre space into a wider and more flexible space is still limited in Iraqi theatre, a matter that gives significance to every experiment in this field, especially when they prove to be as effective as *Izayza*, bearing in mind the difficulties Chittheer’s *Masks* faced for more than ten years to have its first production. According to Heddon *et al* (2012), “[t]his formal shift in the traditional performer/spectator divide can, quite radically, reallocate the audience’s role into one that receives, respond and, to varying degrees restores their part in the shared performance experience”(120). This is a shift that is undeniably needed for contemporary Iraqi theatre to re-establish its status as an effective theatre practice capable of reinvention and change.

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