

## 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 Chitheer (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. Chitheer'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.

Chitheer's play belongs to what Iraqi theatre critics describe as "Image Theatre". It is a play which reveals the violent and the cruel reality of 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. Chitheer did 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 it. 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 presentation 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 Chitheer, Bassim Altayeb