**Distinctive Features of Theatrical Experimentation in the Work of**

**Syrian Playwright Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī**

**Abstract**

This article examines the phenomenon of Arabic theatre of the absurd in the 1960s and 1970s, and shows that by adopting the idea of “experimentation” and “pollination” of the Arabic theatrical soil, its pioneers attempted to construct an Arab theatrical identity or dramatic form with a new vision. Two plays from Syrian writer Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī, *Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdām al-ʿAsharah* (The Ten Drums of Execution) and *al-Mutʿah 21* (Pleasure 21), serve as case studies that situate modern Arabic theatre experimentation in what Homi Bhabha has termed a hybrid “third space.” This “third space” is the result of the dialectic notion of moving beyond mere Arabization of ‘the absurd,’ and the search for local distinctiveness by establishing an innovative Arab theatrical identity liberated from Western imperialism. What, then, are the distinctive features of this experimentation, and how does it redefine Arab theatrical identity in the temporal, cultural and social context? Both experimentation and the absurd manifest themselves by effecting a “displacement” of numerous concepts, the most important of which include place, dialogue and character alienation. They then reproduce all of these in an “interspace” which reflects the various identities within the theatrical text through both rooting and cultivation.

Keywords: theatre of the absurd, Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī, Arab theatre, Third Space, Syrian Literature

The concept of the identity of the Arab theater and the definition of its features formed a basic pillar in the theoretical, intellectual and applied theatrical discourse from the early 1950s until the 1970s.[[1]](#endnote-1) In these years, playwrights concerned themselves with the issue of rooting Arab theatre in order to confront the Western theatrical model that prevailed at the time. The idea was to promote an Arab theatre with its own, local, distinctive identity/ethos/aesthetics? that would serve as an alternative to theatre modeled on contemporary Western formulas, which had reached Arab countries via translation, borrowing, adaptation and production .Citation Beginning in the mid-1950s, an important debate emerged on the need to adopt vanguard theatrical forms, since theater was being created in the Arab World in a context in which there were no new rules or systems existed on which to base a different kind of Arabic dramatic writing. Citation? Furthermore, there was/critics identified?? a need to base such writing on new theatrical traditions and artistic forms which would highlight the Arab identity of the theatre. During this pivotal period, theoretical and practical theatrical efforts in Syria? Where? Across the Arabic speaking world? Be specific. were spearheaded on two levels. The first this article calls ‘rooting,’ or the quest to affirm an aesthetics of Arab theatre consistent with contemporary issues in Arab culture and society. In this sense theatre was meant to give voice to aspirations of the time, and at the same time draw inspiration from Arab heritage by putting it to use as content or form.[[2]](#endnote-2) The second level of change this article calls ‘cultivation,’ which theatre writers and critics understood as absorbing a Western theatrical experience and using it as a model, either as a written text or as a performance.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Looking at work written, performed, and critiqued in the 60s and 70s, a distinct aesthetics or dramatic form emerges, created by what amounts to—at the time—a new vision of theatre. These steps were an attempt by Arab playwrights to fill the vacuum that had emerged in the realm of Arabic theatre by going beyond the practice of producing Western “clones” through dependence on translation and Arabization alone, and instead defining a distinctive Arab theatrical identity as a rejection of cultural colonialism.

 The basic reason for this dynamic lies in the search for a distinct identity in the process of interaction and exchange among cultures, or what is known as “acculturation.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Within the framework of the acculturation and modernization undergone by Arab theatre, a more powerful culture (that of the West) had left its mark on a weaker one (that of the East). Consequently, as became apparent between the 1950s and the 1970s in particular, there was a need to define features of Arab theatre informed by both the accumulated knowledge of the West in this field, and by an authenticity that involved drawing inspiration from the Arabs’ own cultural heritage and store of knowledge.[[5]](#endnote-5)

 Over time, a dispute arose among Arab playwrights and literary theorists over the concepts of rooting and tradition and the means of applying them. There was disagreement, for example, over how to employ artistic theatrical tools, and ways of drawing inspiration from tradition. Needs citations. The reason for this dispute may be found in the differences which existed among political systems and social fabrics from one country to another, despite their shared sense of national affiliation. Such differences may have led to contrasting ways of understanding the nature of rooting and cultivation as well as disparate forms of Arab theatrical expression which reflected differing views on how to draw inspiration from tradition, ways of modernizing theatre, and the relationship between Arab theatre, experimentation and modernity.

ʾIkhlāṣī, who is viewed as one of the most prominent Arab proponents of theatrical experimentation, is of the view that Arabic theatre is rooted in the encounter between European and Arab culture that took place via Arabization and the influence of Western texts.[[6]](#endnote-6) Thus, ʾIkhlāṣī recognizes the impact of Western theatre on his own formation as a playwright despite his attempts to free himself from the influence of modern European civilization.[[7]](#endnote-7)

According to ʾIkhlāṣī, the need for experimentation in modern Arabic theatre inevitably developed out of its exposure to the West, as it was based on the desire not to clone the Western experience. He states that the themes addressed in theatre are, for the most part, universal—such as love, death and the human struggle with Fate. But in the search for theatrical technique, regional experimentation with dramatic themes becomes the tool through which Arab theatre arrives at appropriate local forms.

Through this vision of modern Arab theatre, which is founded upon the concept of experimentation with a view to transcending Arabization and a search for the local features of universal ideas, ʾIkhlāṣī does not offer a clear, definitive vision of the concept of rooting and the means of establishing it. Instead, he offers a concept of experimentation and its tools which enters the sphere of hybridization, which interweaves local theatrical techniques with comprehensive universal ideas, thus giving this theatre its own distinctive character.[[8]](#endnote-8)

 In response to the various forms taken from colonialism, researcher Homi Bhabha has proposed what he terms ‘hybridity.’ The presence of a colonial power generally leads to simultaneous exchanges and dissonances between the colonizing and colonized cultures. In its attempt to reinforce its hegemony, a colonial power will strive to create a culture which corresponds to its own. When this attempt fails, the practical result tends to be a new, hybrid identity which integrates elements shared by the dominant and subordinate cultures.[[9]](#endnote-9) This new identity is located in what Bhabha terms ‘the third space.’ This ‘third space’ may be viewed as a liminal region with particular features that combine the two cultures, thereby negating the assumption that any culture could be described as ‘pure’ or ‘essential.’ The concept of the third space thus conflicts with prevailing assumptions about the unchanging nature of cultural identity. Instead, it supports the post-colonial thesis that the purity of any culture or identity is subject to dispute. In Bhabha’s view, the importance of hybridity lies in its being the ‘third space’ that paves the way for other possibilities.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī: Experimentation and the Pairing of Artistic Styles**

In what follows I will be examining two of ʾIkhlāṣī’s one-act plays: *Ṭubūl al-Iᶜdām al-ᶜAsharah* (The Ten Drums of Execution), and *al-Mutᶜah 21* (Pleasure 21).[[11]](#endnote-11) Although these two texts differ in both internal and external features, they are similar insofar as they both constitute experimentation. Both accommodate Otherness, producing a textual world that “expands” to include the Other within the Self. This is made possible by the “flexibility” of the textual space and its capacity of for experimental hybridization, allowing two Selves which, although dissimilar, nevertheless intersect and produce a new experience that accommodates two Selves rather than only one. To achieve this ʾIkhlāṣī uses variable linguistic and artistic features rather than a fixed or set theatrical form or style, which sets the stage for a new artistic aesthetic. Looking at XXX, (absurd?) YYY (names?), ZZZ (imagined spaces?), we see how both plays pair styles to achieve this doubling of the self.

IT IS NOT CLEAR HOW THE PARTS OF THE ESSAY BELOW FIT TOGETHER, MORE IMPORTANTLY IT IS NOT CLEAR WITHIN EACH SECTION HOW IT SHOWS THE CENTRAL IDEA OF HYBRIDITY AND NEW SELF-NESS THROUGH PAIRING AND EXPERIMENTATION…. THE SECTIONS NEED TO BE SLIMMED DOWN, REPETITION NEEDS TO BE CUT OUT, AND A LOT MORE SIGNPOSTING NEEDS TO HAPPEN TO TURN INTERESTING SECTIONS INTO A COHERENT ARGUMENT

 Both *ʿAsharah* and *21* feature themes that come from the theatre of the absurd and absurdist philosophy, the tragedy of modern man, meaninglessness, and extreme alienation and loneliness. However, these two plays also depart from the theatre of the absurd in numerous ways. The first blends techniques from the theatre of the absurd with romanticism and surrealism, while the second pairs the absurd with realism and science fiction.In *ʿAsharah*, the playwright presents mysterious events about which he does not provide complete details; nor does he provide sufficient background for the recipient about the characters, the nature of the events, or the place and time. All we know is that the time is unspecified (“one day”), as is the place (“a cave in a kingdom somewhere”), and as for the characters, we have no clear background about them.

The play is confined to a closed space, a cave, and the dialogue takes place for the most part between the man and the woman, lovers imprisoned in the cave and waiting for a death sentence to be carried out against them for an unnamed transgression. The writer gives us no information about the circumstances surrounding this sentence, or about the accusation leveled against the man and woman. Similarly, there is no temporal or geographical reference of relevance to the events. Rather, from beginning to end, the playwright maintains a strict economy of expression, thereby creating an atmosphere of ambiguity, mystery and intense poetic imagery on the level of dialogue, gestures, and description alike. In the absence of contextual clues to events, behaviors, time and place, the text engenders a feeling of abstraction, evoking vague meanings and tensions that arise from the lack of clarity and surreal, dark romanticism.

In *21* events take place at an undefined time (“one time”), and in a place referred to as “the Pleasure 21 Club.” Events revolve around twelve characters: three men who sing continuously, a beautiful woman with no breasts, a glum man who teaches philosophy, a bartender, a doctor, an old woman known as “the owner of the plastic coffin factory,” a trainer, a giant black man in a cage, a club manager, and a man coming from elsewhere who informs them of a tragedy in the offing. The plot takes shape through both minor and major events. The play opens with a gathering of all the aforementioned characters at the Pleasure 21 Club for the purpose of waging “a battle for pleasure,” which is to say, in order to manufacture pleasure in a mechanistic world where human experience and relationships are devoid of warmth and emotion.

Come back to the point? Remind the reader how experimentation and style hybridization has created something new here?

**The absence of names and their significations**

In a literary or theatrical work, names tend to serve as linguistic signs, providing clues to characters’ personality traits and behaviors. Consequently, a name may serve as the first in a series of portals through which the recipient becomes acquainted with the work’s characters.[[12]](#endnote-12)

By contrast, ʾIklāṣī provides the reader with no introduction to either play’s characters. They have no features whatsoever, external or internal. Also, one notes that the number of active characters is minimal: a man, a woman, a prison guard, a king, and ten priests who do not take part in the plot. Most of the dialogue takes place between the man and the woman in the form of intense poetic-surrealistic images with no clear meaning, interrupted only by a short incidental exchange between the couple and the prison guard.

 The absence of names helps to create the ambiguity and mystery in which events are cloaked. The man and the woman have no clear identity, while the description they are given from the beginning reinforces the play’s nightmarish-absurdist-surreal atmosphere. This description reads as follows:

Two lumps of humanity—a man and a woman—are bound to the cave wall, which drips with moisture, while moss lends the place a blue-green hue. Both the man and the woman are clothed in simple white robes covered with large spots indicating how long they have remained in this place. They cannot move. All they can do is speak in hushed tones, their eyes fixed on the cave opening, and recall memories from the past … The clouds part, freeing the light coming in through the opening from its desolation … Failure hovers over the beginning of a new attempt.[[13]](#endnote-13)

 This is the sole description we are given of these two characters, whose anonymity underscores the undefined nature of the dramatic struggle featured in the play. We do not know what they are accused of or what penalty they will face. It is clear, however, that they have been stripped of all volition: two entities with no choice but to muse over the past and wait for their sentence to be carried out. This absence of names, and the ambiguity of their description, represent an absence of identity on one hand and, on the other hand, a means of establishing that the protagonists are victims who have been deprived of the ability to defend themselves either existentially or materially. The situation thus assumes the presence of an oppressive power which exercises tyranny over them. The character of the prison guard, who appears at the end of the play, also lacks any concrete description apart from the statement that he is “diminutive, his neck adorned with a necklace that looks like a medal bestowed for dedicated service.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

 This character, representing the voice of the ruling authority, appears to be an active figure in the play alongside the king and the ten priests, who are never absent from the scene thanks to the formal and psychological descriptions of them. Although no material or psychological description is given of the prison guard, the brief portrayal provided by ʾIkhlāṣī indicates the presence of two opposing poles and a hidden struggle between them. The first pole is that of the man and the woman and the crime they have committed (some unspecified rebellion which, as we learn later, was a carnal sin), while the second pole is the ruling authority, embodied in the prison guard who will carry out the punishment against them.

Prison guard: May the evil within the two of you repent.

Man: Your medals will increase with our death.

Prison guard: My medal is my loyalty to the king to whom we are subject.
Long live the king!

Man: Long live the prison guard.[[15]](#endnote-15)

 The phenomenon of anonymity also features in the second play discussed here, *al-Mut****ʿ****ah 21*, with the mayor’s daughter, a “perpetually beautiful” woman with no breasts, a glum man and a giant black man, an elderly woman known as “the owner of the plastic coffin factory,” a doctor, and a strange man who comes to the club and warns people there that the end is near because a bizarre compound is spreading on the wind and exterminating people one after another. Amid a state of tension and angst, people continue to die, and the beautiful woman, having spurned the glum man’s overtures, releases the giant black man from the cage, and the two of them head for the jungle in search of a new life.

 This text thus brings together nameless characters who have nothing in common but the quest for “pleasure” in a place which is quickly transmuted into a space governed by phantasmagoria, absurdity, perversions and a sense of threat. This space reveals two worlds: one, of modernism embodied in scientific experiments and expanding knowledge, and the other, of individual alienation, fear, tension, frustration, distortions, and the desire to be freed from the mechanistic world into a realm of primitivity (the new ‘jungle’).

 In this manner, Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī creates an experimental space for the representations of place which integrates and accommodates both the material-real and the modernist-imagined. In this way, experimentation becomes a flexible tool through which an integrative space can be formed:

1. The cave (the material-real place) determines the physical space as a site for the occurrence of the events and the nightmarish, macabre atmosphere which will be confronted by the recipient. A cave somewhere in the kingdom, it arouses a sense of disturbance, tension and fear due to the unknown nature of the space, which also has a mental dimension—the imagined and the nightmarish. As a result, space has general characteristics which are difficult to translate into actual theatrical practice. Nevertheless, they are linguistic signs that reinforce the nightmarishness of the place, impacting the recipient’s state of mind and expectations. It is a place that is deliberately ill-defined, marked by inactivity, ambiguity, dampness, utter silence, and muffled light. These terms prepare the way for a terrifying unknown in the offing, after which a conversation begins between the man and the woman, the protagonist-victims, as they await their death sentence in the cave. These two dimensions of the place are then integrated into a third, inter-dimension in which the recipient constructs an overall imagined space for the theatrical text in which the place—the theatrical site—and the theatrical directions inserted by ʾIkhlāṣī with their intensified symbolism, poetic feel and surrealism, foster an atmosphere of terror, meaningless and ambiguity and, in turn, one of confusion, loneliness and forlornness. The space thus becomes inclusive of the aforementioned two spaces as an inseparable part of the structure of the nightmarish mood engendered by the theatrical text and its tragic events.
2. The club, which is the space in the second text, constitutes the concrete place in which the protagonists meet. By virtue of its second, psychological-imagined dimension, this place is transformed into the site of “the struggle for pleasure,” or the manufacture of enjoyment in a world ruled by mechanistic forces and a lack of warmth in human emotions and relationships. Then, by virtue of its third and more inclusive dimension, the space passes through a process where it becomes an expression of reality and the quest for utopia through the creation of a phantasmagorical atmosphere combined with the absurd and alienation in the framework of ʾIkhlāṣī’s experimental writing process.

The varied mechanisms and themes employed in this experimental theatrical text commingle to produce a hybrid work which, fluctuating between science fiction and nihilism, takes us through successive pendulum swings between reality and utopia by manufacturing a milieu of phantasmagoria kneaded together with absurdity and alienation. BRING THIS BACK TO THE MAIN ARGUMENT….

The anonymity of the characters ushers us into the realm of generality, stylization and symbolism. Rather than being personalities with a context of their own, they are abstract entities that represent general human types steeped in alienation and obscurity (good vs. evil, ruled vs. ruler, crime vs. punishment). Thus, we sense the despair of deliverance, which brings us back to the idea of the theatre of the absurd and the symbolic nature of the pessimistic characters, who epitomize the human tragedy, people’s awareness of their aloneness and alienation, the nightmarish nature of existence, and the inevitability of death.

**Construction of Imagined Spaces**

 In order better to understand the nature of dramatic space in *Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdām al-ʿAsharah*, we need first to specify the nature of the text and its overall ambience, which, as noted earlier, tends toward melancholy, frustration and futility. The author has infused the atmosphere with nightmarish elements through the instructions and directions he places in the text, as well as though a romantic-surrealistic mood conveyed via poetic intensity and brevity. This blend generates a hybrid text with experimental modernist characteristics in which all of these levels (the absurd, the surreal, and the poetic) harmonize to create a vaguely defined tragedy in a fluid time and place. Nevertheless, through this harmonization the author makes a statement about the absence of justice and the dictatorial nature of oppressors who would carry out a death sentence against a man and a woman who have committed a transgression about which we know nothing. This statement about the pervasiveness of injustice and the unquestioning bias demonstrated by both the prison guard and the priests in favor of the king’s verdict is conveyed on all three levels, while at the same time delineating the nightmarish dramatic space.

This process of delineation takes place through one of the most outstanding elements in the play, as the instructions and comments which ʾIkhlāṣī places in the body of the text form part of a linguistic process which reinforces the discourse of phobia and frustration, while at the same time influencing the recipient’s construction of the text’s dramatic space. From the beginning, the conversation between the man and the woman fosters a mood of uncertainty, dread and desperation. The man tells the woman that despite their long incarceration inside the cave, he still loves her. But before she can reply, the author interjects a comment laden with symbols which intensify the nightmarish atmosphere of melancholy, distress, and premonitions of death.

Let us look at the following examples:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Descriptive terms/statements inserted by the playwright as directions and instructions** | **Page/s** | **Meaning within the Theatrical Field/Domain** |
| StillnessDisappointed silencePerplexed silence | 50-51 | Silence and stillness constitute an active element of the prevailing mood of tension. The still, perplexed, disappointed silence represents the inward, psychological space of characters anticipating a death sentence. |
| Spiritual lassitude | 50 | With this expression, the writer brings the recipient to a poetic, romantic plane which results both from the prolonged wait within the cave, and the loss of a sense of time. |
| The silence is a roar which fills the place.The din of the guards subsides.Drops of water monotonously lick the floor. | 52 | Here work is being done with auditory signals relating to events, as well as the combined use of words with meanings that appear to be contradictory (silence/roar, din/subsides), and figurative language (drops of water that lick the floor). This combination of opposites within a single phrase reinforces the sense of the physical space known to the recipient (the dank cave that gives rise to fear) as opposed to the unknown external space (outside the cave, where actual movement is taking place). |
| From outside there comes a cry of pain as though someone were enduring a cruel corporal punishment for a sin of the flesh | 53 | The overall dramatic space of the play (which is marked by fear, dread, bewilderment, despair, a sense of sin, punishment and tyranny, all of which mingle in some scenes with a sudden sense of hope, love and optimism) is reinforced through auditory and tactile signals (screaming, dank silence, the clamor of the guards, drops of water, a wolf howling, snowy gales, intense hunger, cold, lostness, stillness), and contradictory signals, all of which have a negative impact on the recipient. The repeated signals conveyed through these descriptions and similes are basic codes corresponding to the overall dramatic space and suggesting the absurd and surreal. |
| The cry dissolves into the sea of dank silence, while the clamor of the guards once again accompanies the mechanical motion of the drops of water, and the man and the woman fix their eyes on the wall. | 54 |
| A cry from someone else, shriller, like the howling of a wolf being pursued by snowy gusts whose speed conveys a sense of ravenous hunger and deadly chill and loss. | 54-55 |
| A period of calm silence | 55 |
| The woman’s eyes roll back in fear as a snake begins crawling toward her and the man, eventually climbing up the woman’s body. | 61 | Bodily signals (eye movements which generate fear) and mythical symbols harken back to the original sin (the appearance of the snake which climbs up the woman’s body). Here, the woman’s sin—consisting of the use of the body—is reduced to a code, while tied symbolically to the snake as the symbol of the Fall and its punishment. |

 The recipient constructs an imagined space for the theatrical text in which place—the theatrical space and directions inserted by ʾIkhlāṣī in a manner that relies on intensive symbolism, poeticism elevated to the level of the surreal, verbal economy, and a milieu of terror, meaningless and uncertainty—fosters a language of bewilderment, forlornness and desolation. Hence, these instructions constitute an inseparable part of the play’s nightmarish dramatic space and tragic events.

As for the introduction, it functions in the theatrical text as one of a number of important textual thresholds leading into a literary work. The introduction has sometimes been referred to as a “paratext”, or “parallel text” in view of its intimate connection with the work in question, and the preparatory messages it bears in relation to the work’s more subtle meanings.[[16]](#endnote-16) An introduction might simply consist of quotations from the works of other writers, or be penned by the author of the work in question.

 In *al-Mutʿah 21*, the introduction helps readers to understand the meanings of the text before delving into its particular worlds. The importance of this introduction lies in its having been penned by the author himself, who conveys his vision of the work in his own words rather than relying on those of others. He states, “And Adam and Eve left the polluted land for a new Paradise.”[[17]](#endnote-17) The introduction thus begins with a reference to an ancient myth through the symbolic figures of Adam and Eve, who are associated with the story of the Fall and Original Sin. Here, however, ʾIkhlāṣī refers to an alternative to the realm into which Adam and Eve were driven due to its being a “polluted land” unsuitable for human life. ‘Pollution’ is a symbol with multiple meanings, including corruption, evil, alienation, widespread sin and so forth. In this introduction, ʾIkhlāṣī presents his vision of post-reality, or a new Paradise” which offers an alternative to Earth.

 Readers can be expected to associate this introduction with the second threshold of the theatrical text, that is, the title: “Pleasure 21.” The association is clear in that the two thresholds share a common theme: the search for a utopian alternative to current reality. The New Paradise is manifested in the search for pleasure, embodied in “the Pleasure Club”, which is a physical space invented by its owners for the purpose of searching for enjoyment and an escape from boredom.

The second link between the introduction and the body of the text is found in the conclusion, where the breastless woman decides to leave with the giant black man (the slave imprisoned in the cage) for the distant jungle, which is understood to be a utopian place that provides an alternative to both the club and the city where they live:

The woman disappears out the window and is followed by the giant black man. The glum man weeps briefly, and then falls silent. The curtain is lowered and a light breeze blows cheerfully through the trees in the distant jungles.[[18]](#endnote-18)

 This closing connects with the introduction by means of the following symbols:

* *The new paradise*: The distant jungle as the utopian location which serves as an alternative to Earth.
* *Adam and Eve*: The giant black man and the beautiful woman, who embody the search for a new freedom after the giant black man’s (Adam’s) experience of prison, and Eve’s experience of having no breasts.
* *The polluted land*: The place where people come together in search of pleasure but which, by the time it is abandoned by the giant and the woman, is littered with those who have died from the lethal compound.

**Dialogue: Between Surrealism, the Absurd, and Poetic Intensification**

The surrealist school was founded upon the desire to be free of the forms of conscious reality, as a result of which artists and writers resorted to exuberant imagination, the unconscious and dreams, highly ambiguous symbols, and exaggerated verbosity, expression and illustration. Litterateurs—prosaists and poets alike—relied on dream writing, highly poetic language and discussions of the soul, the self and melancholy by means of what has been termed “automatic writing.”[[19]](#endnote-19)

 Automatic writing might be described as the writing of ‘rants’ or ‘ravings’ in which the stream of consciousness flows uninterrupted, uncontrolled, and uncensored in surrender to memories, mental associations and perceptions which come in free and spontaneous succession. Such writing is an inward means of objecting to and demolishing reality, expressing the writer’s sense of exhaustion and frustration at the pressures with which he is faced in the wretched outside world.[[20]](#endnote-20)

 The surrealism manifested in *Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdām al-ʿAsharah* is based on the establishment of an absurdist vision that relies on ambiguity, obscurity, poetic intensification and an organic interconnection among contradictory entities within the framework of a tragedy faced by two human beings who have committed a vile deed, the exact nature of which we are told nothing in the beginning. ʾIkhlāṣī thus places greater emphasis on the protagonists’ internal struggle than on their external struggle, highlighting the philosophical-absurdist dimensions of their experience by introducing the themes of isolation, alienation and emptiness, the victory of the unconscious, the tyranny of the unknown, and the arousal of fear. All of this becomes apparent through dialogue which relies on suggestion and symbolism rather than on logic, clarity and explanation, as well as an abundance of unfamiliar terms and linguistic constructions. Examples of these phenomena may be found in the beginning of the dialogue, where the man and the woman await the arrival of the “Justice Commission” to pronounce the verdict:

Woman: (with spiritual lassitude) And when will they arrive?

Man: When will who arrive?

Woman: The Justice Commission.

Judges: The heads with the flowing hair.

Man: The Institution of Truth with the thousand eyes, and on their ears the tails of the extinct horse to shoo lies away.

The woman: Are you afraid?

The man: Afraid? Didn’t fear die last year? The porcupine stabbed it in its liver, so it fell on its head and shattered to pieces. Didn’t you see it?[[21]](#endnote-21)

 The tone of the dialogue is critical, searing, and cynical. However, the style of automatic writing adopted by the author is not subject to the censorship of the conscious and the logical in terms of descriptive sequencing and the relationships among words as governed by a set linguistic law. The grotesque, surreal depiction of “the Justice Commission” as a dishonest, hypocritical entity is ridiculous because it is based on illogic (as in the words, ‘And on their ears are the tails of the extinct horse’). In addition, the depiction of fear as having been stabbed in its liver by a porcupine is a sardonic figurative description that violates the familiar laws of linguistic logic and verbal collocations. One also notes the variety and number of bodily references (heads, the thousand eyes, ears) which allude to violence and death—stabbing, fear, falling, shattering, and so on. All these elements intensify the overall tragic atmosphere which heralds the two protagonists’ execution at the end of the play. In short, the surrealism conveyed via verbal images intensifies the play’s dramatic space, which is founded upon the sense of fear of what is to come.

By shifting between the macabre, the absurd, and the dreamy, the dialogue maintains a kind of balance in the text, thereby preventing it from turning utterly absurdist and surreal, or deviating entirely in the direction of romanticism. As such, it combines the two genres in such a way as to form a hybrid text in which elements from these distinct trends interact to reinforce the sense of impending tragedy. The dialogue also contains a number of relatively long passages in which the woman recounts events without any surrealist, macabre or absurdist elements or techniques. This fact adds another dimension to the hybridization in this theatrical text, where a realistic style blends with the absurdist, surrealist and romantic without being subject to specific rules:

Woman: I defied an outmoded system in which a female progeny is forbidden to enjoy timeless glory… and to give her existence to a man who operates by his reason to establish his own existence.

I gave up that phony happiness.

For your sake I gave it up …

And so did my father!

…

I was deceived by the enormity of things

A procession would attract me, and a detachment would guard me … a command obeyed, and a woman whose every request is met.

…

My sister was awarded a medal

She informed on a man who wrote fine poetry.

They broke his magic pens….

And cast him into the jungle of madmen.[[22]](#endnote-22)

 This retrospective narrative style, by means of which the woman returns in several places to the essence of the sin, reveals that what the writer wants to do here is to define the essence of the sin being referred to. The author implies that the sin to which reference has been made was a love relationship between a high-born young woman who was heir to a kingdom and a simple man whom she had described as “noble.” The young woman had apparently given him her body in a kingdom where such an act was viewed as a sin deserving of punishment. Here we see the symbolism of the snake, the woman and the original sin—the sin of the body. However, the author allows the woman an opportunity to defend herself. She says:

I know I committed no wrong.

I gave you what is beyond my existence.

Was that wrong?[[23]](#endnote-23)

Here the man turns the sin of the body and the fall into wrongdoing into a victory over the body, thereby shifting away from the accustomed concept of sin:

In its frivolity and foolishness,

The body is pulled to and fro by sorrows.

So we killed it. We killed it and we were victorious.

Did we have a will?[[24]](#endnote-24)

 Following this, the author brings us back inside the cave via the symbolism of the snake in the universal myth connecting the snake and the woman: “The woman’s eyes roll back in fear, as a snake begins crawling toward the woman and the man, eventually climbing up the woman’s body.”[[25]](#endnote-25) However, the woman does not feel it, and the man urges her to maintain her composure, because “nothing can awaken dead blood.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

 The author’s use of the snake and his rereading of the myth of the Original Sin in the context of this modernistic play reveal a critical stance that reconstructs the relationship between the woman, the man and the sin of the body by eliminating their sense of guilt, despite the fact that the ultimate outcome is their death.

 Symbolism emerges anew through another entity which prepares the way for the play’s tragic ending. The entity concerned is a bird which the man and the woman have been waiting for, expecting it to rescue them from the cave and from their awaited punishment. References to this bird give rise to expressions of optimism and hope throughout the play. As the end approaches, however, it becomes apparent that this bird “with the strange head” is not a savior at all, but rather, an “eye-eater.” Hence, its presence serves further to highlight the nightmarish, absurd nature of the play’s overall ambiance:

Man: I knew [you would arrive]. Come forward, rescuer, come forward.

(The bird has ripped through a net which had put a damper on hope, tingeing it with despair.)

…

Woman: (overcome suddenly by a feeling of terror) It’s the eye-eater!

Man: The eye-eater!

(It hovers with savage, harmful intent.)

Woman: Oh my God—even that opening!

Man: Close your eyes! Even with the eyes we awaited its coming.

(They close their eyes. The bird continues to hover.)

Woman: Oh my God! Nothing remains.

(Screaming hysterically)

 I want to die! I want to die![[27]](#endnote-27)

 The symbol of the eye-eating bird points to a bewildering irony: That which was expected to be the savior has revealed itself to be still another element of threat, and that which was supposed to spark optimism and hope of a happy ending is transformed into a vehicle of tragedy. Once again, a single scene combines hope with despair, the desire to live with the anticipation of death. After opening with an invitation for the ‘rescuer’ bird to come forward, the scene ends with a hysterical scream, a desire to die, and the inevitability of death as the voices of the priests and the king (the ruling voices) are heard dispassionately declaring the king’s commands:

King: Let them be torn limb from limb. No one will rebel thenceforth.

Voices: Vile is the man who is ungrateful for his blessings! Vile is the woman who loses her chastity! Vile is the land that brings forth flowers! Dross will remain the master of wisdom.[[28]](#endnote-28)

 Shifting to the types and multi-layered functions of dialogue in *al-Mutʿah 21*, we note that the play's dialogues are based on a foundation which merges themes from science fiction with mechanisms from the theatre of the absurd. The effect of this mixture is a text that fluctuates between dissonance and inconsistency, irony, and scenes both terrifying and comical, together with exaggeration, distortion, and departure from the familiar.

 In this text, ʾIkhlāṣī makes use of certain science fiction themes. Thus, the doctor and the elderly woman who manufactures plastic coffins—both of them key characters in the play—suddenly begin talking about a flask containing a strange compound of the doctor’s making that will annihilate everything:

Elderly woman: What? What? I want to know everything.

Doctor: If a little of this compound were released into the atmosphere, it would turn it into something like spider’s webs.

Elderly woman: And then?

Doctor: Then everything would be over.

Elderly woman: What would be over?

Doctor: The lives of those whom we do not want to go on living.

[…]

Elderly woman: How many people would it kill in an hour?

Doctor: An unlimited number, as many as I wish.[[29]](#endnote-29)

 This dialogue marks the beginning of a dramatic struggle that will drive both events and subsequent dialogues among the other characters. These later dialogues all contribute to the state of terror that grips the minds and hearts of the characters in search of deliverance from certain death. In these dialogues, Ikhlāṣi transmutes a scientific discovery from a means of serving people into an instrument of destruction through two characters who represent death: a doctor who strives to demonstrate the success of human reason through its arrival at a scientific discovery that threatens humanity, and a coffin manufacturer who fears death, but longs to become better acquainted with this discovery.

Science thus infuses the play with an atmosphere of melancholy and a state of alarm and meaninglessness as it threatens people’s safety and their very lives. Hence, in search of a better, more secure place now that technological advancement has failed to ensure human welfare, ʾIkhlāṣī makes use of the new jungle (a symbol of the New Paradise) as an alternative to the age of scientific discoveries and their dangers.

 The entrance of “the stranger” who has come from a distant city constitutes another turning point in the movement of events toward the protagonists’ death. The stranger informs the elderly woman that the substance is spreading on the wind, and that it will annihilate everyone. Instead, however, ʾIkhlāṣī chooses to place his criticism of human knowledge as a threat to human existence on the lips of the glum philosophy professor and the beautiful woman:

Glum man: What does all this mean? Is this the failure of the human race?

Doctor: Rather, it’s the success of human reason. We’ve established new principles for life!

Woman: What principles do you mean? For the wind to blow in our direction and everything to be over?[[30]](#endnote-30)

 The glum man’s choice of a philosophical-sounding phrase (“the failure of the human race”) conveys a profound disappointment with the state in which humanity now finds itself—alienation, an absence of values, threats to human safety, tepid human relationships, and unspeakable cruelty—and which manifests itself in a search for pleasure and entertainment at any cost. This frantic search is seen in the character of the giant black man, who is treated like an animal in a cage and made to undergo the most heinous forms of torture while the people in the audience, having lost touch with their humanity, take pleasure in the spectacle. The sole exception is the beautiful woman, who feels compassion for the black man and releases him from his prison in the end. These details are made clear through the author’s directions and comments:

Looks of pleasure are etched on the club members’ faces. Some of them are greedily chewing gum, while others sway ecstatically to the black being’s screams. The place is charged with the thrill of titillation.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The ‘trainer’ cracks the whip. The black man cries out in unbearable pain.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Everyone laughs with delight with the exception of the woman, who takes pity on the black man.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The woman presses her flat chest to the bars and runs her hands over them. The black man gazes at the woman.[[34]](#endnote-34)

 We find that the dialogues divide themselves into various types. Some are so lengthy and redundant as to be boring, other so short, condensed and concise as to be incomprehensible; some arbitrary and meaningless, others playful and sarcastic, sudden and spontaneous. All of them, however, fall within the realm of the absurd, which is based on life’s monotony, a sense of ennui, and the incapacity for self-determination. The only way out is to play with words and phrases, resorting to games, mockery, and diversion in response to life’s absurdity and one’s sense of helplessness and futility.

 Set against the backdrop of the three men’s ridicule, the manager welcomes the woman to the club. Their dialogue is full of code mingled with burlesque on the part of the three men, who continuously repeat what is being said and fill the theatrical text with codes, symbols and games. For example, the beautiful woman, who also happens to be the mayor’s daughter, comes into the Pleasure Club and, impressed with the idea of “struggling for pleasure,” decides to join. The club’s manager announces with veiled sarcasm, “The daughter of the engineer of spirits, the mayor of our illustrious town, has become a member of our club.” The three men then repeat what the manager just said, thus lending an air of hilarity to the scene without attempting to explain the words, “The daughter of the engineer of spirits.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

The conversation between the manager and the woman is interrupted by a digression in which, with unjustified hilarity, the three men suddenly mention the story of some gnats mating. The beautiful woman then chimes in with a comment on how gnats are creatures that carefully time their pleasure.

The trio: And now, gentlemen, you will witness the most modern approach to love demonstrated by two tiny gnats who reached puberty one day and mated. They mated with such skill, it was a remarkable thing. And they don’t get bored!

The woman: I love their enthusiasm for maintaining the timing of their pleasure.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The manager then joins in the conversation directly, going on at length about the story of the two gnats, which were trained by a coach he hired at great cost.

 Because of the three men and their repeated joking, this dialogue is filled with unwarranted merriment and laughter. The laughter makes no sense and has little to do with the events of the play. The arbitrariness of the conversations and the constant digressions are exaggerated, mechanistic and surreal, and despite their frequency and variety, they point to the characters’ alienation, boredom and loneliness, since they disrupt the continuity of the personal communication among those engaged in conversation.

The irrationality, surrealism and absurdity that mark *al-Mutʿah 21* reveal themselves in numerous places in the text. These phenomena can be observed, for example, in the bizarre conversation that takes place between the manager and the trio of men around a painting that hangs in the club, and which shows a large mosquito oozing blue blood:

Manager: Our sacred mosquito was stabbed in the heart by the spears of illusion. The mosquito! The mosquito has died!

The trio: One night, the illusion attacked our mosquito and caused its royal heart to bleed. Let us sing as sorrow fills our eyes with tears. The mosquito has died for us![[37]](#endnote-37)

The trio constitutes an inseparable part of the dialogues, functioning as commentators whose remarks combine irony, absurdity, and poetics. The riotous mood they foster reaches the point of hyperbole and mechanistic expression ungoverned by the rules of logic. First we have their absurdist prologue:

The trio: Ha … ha … let all of the gentlemen, and friends of gentlemen, sing.

Someone: Down with the bees!

The trio: Down with the bees that urinate bile![[38]](#endnote-38)

This is followed by the use of language so intensely poetic as to be illogical and incomprehensible: “His name fell inadvertently and he was afflicted with boredom. We spread him in the yellow sun till his color was gone.”

The play’s absurdity is further intensified by the dialogue between the doctor, the glum man, the elderly woman and the young woman, whose polyphonic chatter does nothing to drive the dramatic struggle. On the contrary, it testifies to the disjointed nature of their exchange, which provides scattered bits of information none of which has any bearing on the others. For example, we have an abrupt transition from a conversation between the manager and the woman to an exchange among all four characters without any introduction or preparation. After the elderly woman introduces herself as “the owner of the plastic coffin factory,” the doctor moves on immediately to talk about the white flask, and the group starts speculating about its contents:

Manager: What’s in that flask, esteemed doctor?

 Glum man: It contains that thing that disturbs people’s tranquility.

Elderly woman: Is it death?

Doctor: It’s something.

Elderly woman: Against death?

Doctor: There’s no point in guessing. It’s something real.

Glum man: What’s real?

Doctor: This flask.[[39]](#endnote-39)

 Despite the outer appearance of such dialogue as entertainment, it is an entertainment steeped in absurdity, as it hints at death or the terrifying unknown. These characters do not converse in a studied, logical fashion. On the contrary, they speak with a freedom and spontaneity that border on the inscrutable and surreal, which in turn point to unknown, frightening entities. Entertainment thus becomes a means of escaping tedium.

By contrast, the dialogue between the doctor and the elderly woman is characterized by its relative length, the ordinariness of its language, and the absence of metaphor and symbolism. It also lacks the hilarious interference by the three men or the other characters. As such, it constitutes a pivotal point in the theatrical text’s dramatic structure, as it is the first conversation which moves the struggle forward, directing events toward terror and death:

Elderly woman: Talk to me, talk to me. What I wouldn’t pay for this lovely compound! Show it to me. Let me run my fingertips over it. Let me, please…

Doctor: [cautiously] No, I won’t do that until we’ve agreed.

Elderly woman: Take whatever you want, but just let me see it.

Doctor: If a little of this compound were released into the atmosphere, it would turn it into something like spider’s webs. Then everything would be over. Do you see the air particles, Madame?

Elderly woman: No, I don’t see anything.

Doctor: Doctor: You’re bound to see them. Shall we try? No, let’s try with the others.[[40]](#endnote-40)

 This dialogue in particular exhibits directness, an absence of poetic form and intensity, a clear topic of conversation, and a normal, reasonable pace. However, the ‘cross’ we encounter in most of the dialogues between the poetic, the metaphorical, the symbolic, the mechanistic, the absurdist and the realistic, as well as between fast-paced and slow-paced, leave the dialogues floating in a chaotic nebulousness. The result is a movement that reflects the characters’ anxiety and fear of boredom and, as a consequence, their quest for dynamism and variety even in conversation, which is marked frequently by digression, meaningless, and discontinuity.

 The second point in the text that drives the dramatic struggle toward its conclusion is the dialogue between the newly arrived stranger, the elderly woman, the doctor and the young woman. The actual threat posed by the white flask is presented by the stranger, who informs the other characters that death has begun sweeping over the city and has come to annihilate them all just as it annihilated his own town. Here we return to a multi-tiered dialogue in which the voice of the doctor who promotes science at the expense of humanity mingles with that of the elderly woman (the voice of death):

Doctor: (shouting forcefully) The experiment succeeded! Woe to failure! I’ve brought it down!

Elderly woman: (embracing the doctor). We made it! I’ve got no more time for enjoyment. Let’s get to work![[41]](#endnote-41)

The dramatic struggle moves more clearly here than it did in previous passages by virtue of the rapid pace of events and the prevailing state of chaos.[[42]](#endnote-42) The newly arrived stranger recaps events, saying, “She and I were sitting under the walnut tree. The girl of the chants—lovely as succulent reed stalks—pointed toward the sky. We had been making love when suddenly she cried out in terror, ‘Look!’ I looked, and the sky had turned into a spider’s web, as though the air particles had become visible to the eye.”[[43]](#endnote-43)

The play concludes with the dialogue between the glum man and the young woman, which lacks any reference to death, despair, alienation or meaninglessness. In it the breastless young woman throws away her doll and strives for life. Rejecting everything with any connection to the old world (including the glum man’s request to let him come with her), she heads for the jungle as a New Paradise where she will live with the giant black man:

Glum man: Take me with you, Miss (falling to his knees)! Take me with you. I love you! I want to have children with you and, through them, to restore life again.

Woman: It’s too late, Sir.

Glum man: I can’t walk anymore. Please help me, Madame.

Woman: No help would be of any use now. I need my strength to leave. I can’t bear the sight of this graveyard anymore. (addressing the black man) Will you come with me?[[44]](#endnote-44)

 This turning point embodies ʾIkhlāṣī’s understanding of transformation, as he centralizes the marginal and marginalizes the central, thereby redefining “the New Paradise” via the young woman (the symbol of imperfect beauty), the giant (the symbol of brutishness and slavery), and their choice of the jungle as a utopian home. Through the use of polyphony, a diversity of artistic forms, a stylistic hybridization of the absurd, the surreal and the symbolic, and a multiplicity of dialogues, voices, linguistic registers, and events, the author conveys the characters’ sense of alienation from place and time and their desire for freedom.

**Conclusion**

 As we have seen, Walīd ʾIkhlāṣi’s experimental style is based on mixing and hybridization in that he borrows the style and themes of absurdist playwrights, then combines these with other styles to form an experimental ‘collage’ which yields new meanings and messages. Aiming at a treatment of conflicts that arise among the various forces within human society, Ikhlāṣi marshals the absurd in order to deconstruct preconceived identities and accepted existential molds. Through its rejection of a monolithic ‘perfection,’ the hybridity introduced by Ikhlāṣi’s theatrical works paves the way for a new theatre of the absurd.

This hybridity goes beyond Western definitions while at the same time coexisting alongside them. It is an absurdist, non-stereotypical reading of the whole of human behavior, a reading emerging from divergent visions that deconstruct stereotypical thinking about the world or what it will become. Place and existence in Ikhlāṣi’s texts are a map which conveys heretofore unfamiliar spatial realities borne out of the cartographic experiment. The map in this context is a magnification of the existential experience of place. This definition of ‘map’ and its central function gradually brings it out of the realm of simulation and into that of doubt, absurdity and experimentation.

Ikhlāṣi’s absurdist texts contribute nothing to drawing a map of the Arab world. However, they form a groundwork for questions, artistic experiments and aesthetics. Both *Ṭubūl al-ʾI****ʿ****dām al-****ʿ****Asharah* and *al-Mut****ʿ****ah 21* are representative of the experimental trend in theatre. In them ʾIkhlāṣī has borrowed themes, styles and techniques from surrealism, absurdism, realism, and symbolism, thereby creating an open, hybrid theatrical form whose content does not rely on the adoption of one particular current to the exclusion of others. This tremendous marshalling of styles lends the works an air of ambiguity and mystery which links them to the modernist style of playwriting, particularly as it pertains to the playwright’s tendency toward intensification, economy, and the invention of unfamiliar linguistic structures and terms, all of which have the effect of unsettling readers and situating them in a nightmarish and sinister setting.

 In this way, these texts reproduce the relationships between place and the means of depicting or representing it. Lacking an approximate or analogue value, their purpose is not to produce an exact replica of place, existence, or obvious referential relationships but, rather, to re-employee these tools by means of experimentation and the absurd to generate discussions, interpretations, and alternative spatial and existential realities that would not be accessible via traditional maps.

Instead, we have “institutional maps,” that is, maps that are drawn and controlled by ʾIkhlāṣī’s form of experimentation, which involves a search for a new theatrical formulation with linguistic and artistic features whose aim is not to lock in a specific theatrical form based on a single theatrical style, but, rather, to provide the foundation for a new theatrical aesthetic. As we have seen, this is due to ʾIkhlāṣī’s view of experimentation as a vital part of any culture that seeks to evolve and break free of dominant forms. Such experimentation is characterized by a call to dismantle things and reconstruct them in keeping with the needs of twentieth-century society and the implications of current conditions for human culture, perspectives and requirements. In this manner, experimentation becomes a trend by means of which the playwright addresses social shifts in non-traditional ways.

It is important to situate Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī’s writing within the context of experimentation, because this concept, as will be clear from the previous analysis, is the focal point of his modernist vision, which includes reduction and poetic intensification, syntax as a primary feature of sentence-building, as well as reliance on the technique of shocking the reader and breaking with the familiar through the use of streamlined and cryptic poetic images in dialogue. The aforementioned features are intimately connected with surrealist-experimental methods of poetic writing, which relies on spontaneity, a focus on characters’ inner worlds, and a rejection of the fixed rules and laws of the sentence. In addition to adopting some formal and substantial aspects of the theatre of the absurd, ʾIkhlāṣī borrows from other artistic forms as well, thereby producing texts which provide us with varying expressions of modern man’s tragedy.

Being a relationship among alien elements which challenge traditional methods of classification and arrangement, hybridism may appear to be untamed and meaningless. It may even be perceived as disrespectful of established authority, since it deconstructs styles which promote totalitarianism. It shatters the primitive unity of the ‘perfect’ and defines it in terms of two systems at once: the existing system, and the system of the possible: the alien system which allows us to unearth coincidences and unsung similarities. ʾIkhlāṣī’s hybridistic approach to the theatre of the absurd clashes with the modernist tendency to stress the principles of order, purity and cleanliness, placing its emphasis instead on the ‘messy’, ‘noisy’ process of blending alien entities that would normally be thought of as incompatible. This blending process endeavors not to exhaust possibilities, but to maximize them, and in so doing, it presents a new kind of fertility born out of ‘chaos.’ʾIkhlāṣī’s brand of theatre strives for neither homogeneity nor social and cultural distinctiveness but, rather, for fruitful encounters among the world’s vast variety of ethnic and cultural elements.

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1. It bears noting here that the earliest signs of preoccupation with the identity of Arab theatre and the creation of a local distinctive for it appeared with the foundational, revivalist generation of modern theatre in the nineteenth century (specifically, with Mārūn al-Naqqāsh and the speech in which he introduced his first play), during which time the emergence of channels of communication between East and West fostered a growing familiarity with Western theatre and attempts to borrow from it. In that era of renewal, this communication highlighted the need to search for theatrical contents and forms that would both reflect the social problems and phenomena of the Arab world, and keep pace with Western intellectual and theatrical currents. However, this preoccupation was not yet sufficiently mature on the level of either practice, which was still influenced and enthralled by Western theatre, or theorization, to embark on the experiment of establishing a theatrical identity grounded in Arab thought and culture. Such maturity did not develop until the 1950s-1970s with the appearance of theatrical conceptualizations and texts founded upon the call to adopt the Arab heritage in both form and content in a quest to affirm the authenticity and distinctiveness of Arab theatre. See: Shmu’el Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in The Medieval Arab World* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1992), 160-163; Khālida Saᶜīd, *al-Istiʿārah al-kubrā fī shiʿriyyat al-Masraḥah (The Great Metaphor in the Poetics of Theatre)* **(**Beirut: Dār al-ʾĀdāb, 2008), 113-134. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See: Ḥūriyya Muḥammad Ḥamū, *Taʾsīl al-Masraḥ al-ʿArabī: al-Tanẓīr wa’l-Taṭbīq (Rooting the Arab Theatre: Theorization and Application*) (Damascus: Manshūrāt ʾIttiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab, 1999), 5-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On the term cultivation and its problems in its early stages with the pioneer generation, see: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin Zaydān, *ʿIshkāliyyat al-manhaj fī al-Naqd al-Masraḥī al-ʿArabī* (*The Problem of Curriculum in Arab Theatrical Criticism)* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-ʾAʿlā li’l-Thaqāfah), 70-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. According to literary critic and scholar Muḥammad Kharmāsh, “The developments witnessed by Arab literary thought, both old and new, could not have come about were it not for its interaction and mutual exchange with global literary trends or the processes of acculturation which afforded it [Arab literary thought] a place in the ranks of cross-pollinating ideas.” See Muḥammad Kharmāsh, *Dawr al-Muthāqafah fī Tajdīd al-Fikr al-ʾAdabī al-ʿArabī al-Ḥadīth: Muʾtamar al-ʾAdab al-ʿArabī wa’l-ʾĀdāb al-ʿĀmiyyah Bayn al-Taʾthīr wa’l-Taʾaththur* (The Role of Acculturation in Renewing Modern Arabic Literary Thought: The Conference on Mutual Influences between Arab and World Literature) (Irbid: ʿĀlam al-Kutub al-Ḥadīth, 2001), 58. See also J. W. Berry, “Acculturation,” in: *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research,*  J. E. Grusec and P. D. Hastings (eds.), (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015), 520–538. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Authenticity is simply a new formulation which integrates a set of known elements or principles with the significance of the present. As such, the call to authenticity is a call to interpret heritage (as a reservoir of ideas and perspectives) in a contemporary manner which contributes to progress in the direction of the future rather than the past. See Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *al-Turāth wa’l-Ḥadāthah: Dirāsāt wa Munāqashāt* (Tradition and Modernity: Studies and Discussions) (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabiyyah, 1999), 35-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ʾIkhlāṣī was born and raised in a literary environment thanks to his father, Azhar graduate ʾAḥmad ʾIkhlāṣī, who worked as editor-in-chief of *al-ʾIʿtiṣām*, a monthly magazine that came out of Aleppo in the early 1930s. ʾIkhlāṣī’s father contributed in a major way to the boy's love of reading and writing on the academic level, thus providing him with an even greater store of cultural capital. Even so, ʾIkhlāṣī specialized in Agriculture rather than Literature. He studied at the University of Alexandria’s Faculty of Agriculture from 1954 to 1958, and its Institute of Higher Studies from 1958 to 1960. In addition to his literary career, ʾIkhlāṣī worked as a funds collector at the Directorate of Religious Endowments, was an employee at the Directorate of Economics in Aleppo, and lectured in Humanities and Economics at the University of Aleppo. He worked for the well-known newspaper, *al-Mawqif al-ʾAdabī*, *al-Ḥayāh al-Masraḥiyyah* magazine, and the journal *al-Maʿrifah*, as well as writing stories, novels, articles, poetry and plays. His short-story publications in the 1960’s included “Stories of the Year 1963” (*Qiṣaṣ ʿĀm 1963*),” and “Blood on a Dust-Colored Morning” (*Dimāʾ fī ’l-Subḥ al-ʾAghbar*) (1968), while his novels included The Winter of the Dry Sea (*Shitā’ al-Baḥr al-Yābis*) in 1965, and The Beautiful Woman’s Embrace (ʾ*Aḥḍān al-Sayyidah al-Jamīlah*) in 1969. In 1965, he published two short plays entitled “The World Before and After” (*al-ʿĀlam min Qabl wa min baʿd*), “The Ten Drums of Execution” (*Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdām al-ʿAsharah*), “A One-Act Play” (*Masraḥiyyah fī faṣl Wāḥid*), and “Pleasure 21” (*al-Mutᶜah 21*). Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī achieved global fame with the translation of his works into more than one language, and the performance of his plays in numerous Arab countries. He was recognition by the literary establishment as well in subsequent years, receiving the 1989 Arab Writers Union Appreciation Award; the first Cairo Forum Award for the Short Story in 1991; the Medal of Honour at the Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival in 1992; the Municipality of Aleppo Award in 1996; the Sultan al-ʾUways Award during its fifth session for Culture, the Novel and the Play in 1997; and the Syrian Merit Medal, premium class. The cultural, social and literary capital ʾIkhlāṣī had acquired thus contributed to his prominence and influence in the theatrical field, which legitimized his vision of the meaning of experimentation and the absurd while shifting the traditional understanding of the theater. It is worth mentioning here that ʾIkhlāṣī consistently stressed the fact that he had been influenced by both West and East. He clearly acknowledged his debt to Maupassant, Chekhov, Tawfīq al-Hakīm, Henrik Ibsen and Shakespeare, as well as his love for George Shehadeh, Najīb Maḥfūz and Māzinī. (See: Kāmpil, Rūbirt (ed.) *ʾAʿlām al-ʾAdabal-Muʿāṣir*(*Encyclopedia of Contemporary Arab Writers*), Vol. 1. (Beirut: al-Sharikah al-Muttaḥidah lil-Tawzīʿ, 1996). The cultural and literary mélange which so influenced ʾIkhlāṣī was manifested in his concept of experimentation, which he saw as a test of theatrical tools’ capacity to achieve the appropriate form for ideas. This is what led to the diversity in his experimental playwriting, which combined numerous artistic currents. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. According to ʾIkhlāṣī, European civilization constituted an ideal expressed through Greek theatre, Shakespeare’s plays, and later through the works of contemporary playwrights the likes of Eugene O’Neal and Arthur Miller. He holds that Western civilization was a “compulsory” source of the arts and theatre. See Walīd ʾʾIkhlāṣī, “*al-Naṣṣ al-Masraḥī Bayn al-Taᶜrīb wa’l-Tajrīb* (The Dramatic Text: From Arabization to Experimentation),” *Lawḥat al-Masraḥ al-N*ā*qiṣah: Abḥāth wa Maqālāt fī al-Masraḥ* (An Incomplete Portrait of the Theatre: Studies and Articles) (Damascus: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfah, 1997), 8-11. (This article appeared separately in: *Journal of Theatrical Life*, Damascus**,** Ministry of Culture, 2nd issue, Fall 1977.) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. According to Muḥammad Nadīm Muʿalla, Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī produced richly in the context of the Syrian theater, listing important plays such as *al-ʿĀlam min Qablu wa min Baʿd*, *al-Laylah Na`labu* (Tonight We Play), *Yawma ʾAsqaṭnā Ṭā’irat al-Wahm* (The Day We Shot Down the Plane of Illusion**)**,*Qiṭʿat Waṭan ʿalā Shāṭi’ Qadīm*(A Piece of Homeland on an Old Beach), *Sabʿat ʾAṣwāt Khashinah* (Seven Rough Voices**)** and others. Nevertheless, he failed to leave his mark on the theater because his was not a unique voice. Similarly, Farhan Bulbul praised ʾIkhlāṣī’s theatrical experiment, but stressed how minor ʾIkhlāṣī’s role was in the dual processes of rooting Arabic theater and moving it from the realm of tradition to that of innovation. See: Salih Tur, “Syrian Theatre”, *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi,* 1, 2 (2010), 290. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha, " in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference***,** ed. Jonathan Rutherford )London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990(, 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī, *Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdām al-ᶜAsharah. Mukhtārāt Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī* (The Ten Drums of Execution: Selections from Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī), (Beirut: Dār ʿAṭiyyah, 1999); and Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī, *al-Mutʿah 21: Mukhtārāt Walīd ʾIkhlāṣī* (Beirut: Dār ʿAṭiyyah, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Raqīq, *Dirāsāt Taṭbīqiyyah fī’l-Sard* (Applied Studies in Narrative), (Ṣfāqis: Dār Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Ḥāmī li’l-Nashr, 1998), 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ʾIkhlāṣī, *Ṭubūl al-ʾIᶜdām al-ᶜAsharah*, 49-50. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Textual thresholds such as the introduction, the title, the dedication, the prologue, comments and footnotes have been classified generally as accompanying texts or parallel texts which play a role in the reader’s understanding of a text’s distinctive features and fundamental meanings, as they spur the reader to formulate specific questions about what he or she is reading. See ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Ḥajmarī, ʿ*Atabāt al-Naṣṣ, al-Bunyah wal-Dilālah* (Text Thresholds: Structure and Meaning), (al-Dār al-Bayḍāʾ: Manshūrāt al-Rābiṭah, 1996), 7; Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean. "Introduction to the Paratext." *New Literary History* 22.2 (1991): 261-272;‏ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. ʾIkhlāṣī, *al-Mutʿah 21*, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Automatic writing, or automatism, is a surrealist technique which gives the reader a sense of surprise and suddenness, the function of which is to create a new aesthetic poetic image which deviates from the logical rules and forms of writing. See Edward B. Germain (ed.), *English and Surrealist Poetry* (Westminster**:** Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), 67; and Joon Seog Ko and Dong Yul Chom, "The Principles of Yeats’ Poetics: Automatism and Automatic Writing," *The Yeats Journal of Korea* 61 (2020), 63-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. ʿAbd al-Rāziq al-ʾAṣfar, *al-Madhāhib al-ʾAdabiyyah ladā al-Gharb* (Literary Schools in the West), (Damascus: Manshūrāt ʾIttiḥād al-Kuttāb al-ʿArab, 1999), 202-205. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. ʾIkhlāṣī, *Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdam al-ʿAsharah*, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., pp. 56-57. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 72-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. ʾIkhlāṣī, *al-Mutʿah*, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 88 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 89 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Struggle may be viewed as a component of a dramatic work, since there has to be a conflict among opposing forces which leads to a resolution that is either comic or tragic, happy or sad. See Kamāl al-Dīn ʿĪd, ʾ*Aʿlām wa Muṣṭalaḥāṭ al-Masraḥ* [Luminaries and Terminology of the Theatre], (Alexandria: Dār al-Wafāʾ li’l-Ṭibāʿah wal-Nashr, 2006), 406-407. The struggle in this play is that between the characters and ennui, and between them and deadly scientific discoveries (hence, death itself). It ends with an unanticipated tragedy (unlike the death of the two protagonists in *Ṭubūl al-ʾIʿdām al-ʿAsharah*, which is announced from the very beginning)—namely, the death of the characters who had come to the Pleasure Club seeking to kill boredom and find liberation and a life of ease and luxury. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)