

The Poetics of Confrontation: Fadhel Jaibi and the State in Pre-Revolutionary Tunisia

Vicki Ann Cremona

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the poetics of confrontation used by theatre director Fadhel Jaibi, particularly through his performance *Yahia-Yaïh- Amnesia*. It uses Michel De Certeau's concept of 'tactic' and 'strategy' from his book, *The Practice of Everyday life*, as a framework for analysis in order to show how Jaibi used performance as his tactic to oppose the regime's strategies in pre-revolutionary Tunisia, creating thereby a poetics of confrontation to challenge both the regime and the people who were subjected to it. It shows how Jaibi constructed the elements underpinning his poetics of performance by fusing the texts produced by Jalila Baccar with the physical work of the actors, playing particularly on rhythms of speech, action and sound. It explains how Jaibi integrated these elements into a politics of confrontation which included the audience. It discusses how, through his artistic work, Jaibi obliged the audience to confront the prevailing repressive reality as well as society's acceptance of the existing political situation and social norms. His poetics of confrontation targeted a change in perception, which rejected the limits imposed by the regime and coercive social forces in favour of democracy, anticipating and accompanying the social upheaval provoked by the Tunisian revolution in 2011.

Keywords: Fadhel Jaibi, *Amnesia*, Tunisian theatre, political theatre, censorship, confrontation, tactics.

BIOGRAPHY

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Fadhel Jaibi is certainly not the only theatre director to have brought politics and political denunciation to the Tunisian stage during a time of political intolerance and repression. Directors of companies such as Raja Ben Ammar and Moncef Essayem (Théâtre Phou), Taoufik Jebali (El Teatro), Ezzedine Gannoun and Leila Toubel (El Hamra), as well as others used their work to confront the regime before the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011. What interests me are the particular methods used by Jaibi to weave political concerns into a specific poetical form and content with which to oppose social tolerance of the 'ordinary' state of affairs that was imposed at the time by dictatorial politics. I have chosen to focus mainly on his 2010 production *Yahia Yaïch - Amnesia* (hereafter *Amnesia*) that concerns a minister's downfall, but which actually confronted Tunisia's dictatorial regime. The play was first staged just a few months before the sudden and swift revolution in Tunisia that ignited the Arab Spring and forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country on 14 January 2011, twenty-three years after he had assumed power in a bloodless coup.

I have chosen to apply Michel De Certeau's theory of practice, which shows the way persons confront massification by re-appropriating and individualising elements intended for mass culture, as a theoretical framework to discuss what I will call a "poetics of confrontation" in Jaibi's artistic production. I take poetics to mean the artistic force of a production, which is transmitted through textual and physical staging. Poetics of playing has much to do with the praxis of the persons involved in the

process of a performance, especially the actors and director, but it also comprises the way the spectator experiences the production. As Prentki, writing about the poetics of representation, maintains, "poetics, with all their contribution to the aesthetic development of form, play a crucial role in determining the content of a piece of theatre and further, what that content might mean in the collective and individual understanding of an audience".² Meaning for the actor is communicated through his/her action on stage, which determines the aesthetic quality of his/her presence, as well as the messages s/he wishes to transmit. The spectators' personal response determine their individual and collective contribution to the elusive process of meaning that is constructed during a performance. Although it does not immediately target change, poetics of confrontation certainly may help to stimulate it.

My discussion of poetics in performance does not intend to classify the elements that underlie play within performance in order to derive meaning, but rather to examine how these operate upon the spectator's perceptual montage and understanding of a performance. Taking *Amnesia* as a case study, I will try to show how through play, the director and actors used aesthetic choices in the text and staging as pointers to meaning that challenged the members of the audience to reflect critically on their life-experience. I will argue that Jaibi's poetics is principally based on confrontation that challenges social, religious and institutional power through performance.

In a dictatorial regime such as that of pre-revolutionary Tunisia, the context of playing led to a

conflict between the severe rules and controls imposed by the regime, and artists' efforts to maintain their artistic freedom in the interstices of these rules, generally by slithering in and out of the limits imposed by the authorities. Consequently, the analysis of the process of artistic production cannot be divorced from the political environment, especially in the case of artists such as Jaibi, who chose to challenge the regime by using, as the subject of their fiction, the reality faced by people on a daily basis.

Jaibi's poetics is elaborated around the development of a system where dramatic text and physical action are part of a single process of creation, which situates itself dialectically and critically in relation to real-life conditions in Tunisia. This study will show how Jaibi used poetics to 'ambush' the spaces held by Power and challenge the artificiality of daily life. It will discuss how he did this through the presentation of a parallel universe, often having a dream-like quality, and evoked through the actors' disciplined movements, poetic speech and contrasting rhythms. Jaibi's performance *Amnesia* will be used as an illustration of this confrontation, which was not limited to the verbal text, but incorporated in his *mise-en-scène*.

THE WEAK'S TOOL VS. POWER STRATEGIES

De Certeau analyzes in military terms the struggle between the powerful, who are "bound by [their] visibility" because they are the focus of everyone's gaze, and the weak who "must manoeuvre 'within the enemy's field of vision'".³ He shows how in an industrial consumer society, workers who are thought to be passively following established rules, in reality subvert those rules by using the time and raw materials given to them to produce industrial goods, to deliberately make something different that is not of any use to the producer and runs counter to his/her interests. The author calls this practice *la per-ruque* [the wig], and places it within the context of "strategies" and "tactics".⁴ I will be discussing tactics below, but I will first briefly outline strategy.

De Certeau defines "strategy" as "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated".⁵ Under the Ben Ali regime,

strategy was exerted by the state over theatre spaces, texts and staging through ownership and control. Most theatre spaces effectively belonged to the state. Tunisian theatre was subject to censorship until 14 January 2011; until then, all plays and productions had to obtain the approval of the National Commission for Theatrical Orientation. Jaibi called it the "Censorship Commission";⁶ it exercised censorship both on scripts and *mises-en-scène*.⁷ The commission was so repressive that after the revolution, the new Minister for Culture, Ezzedine Bach Chaouech, described it as, "a diabolic enterprise".⁸ In this reality, confrontational artists were subjected to "a systematic surveillance, a systematic vigilance and blackmail from the ministerial authorities".⁹ *Amnesia*, first staged on 10 April 2010, was only shown after an intense two-month battle between Jaibi and the state censors, which will be discussed further on in the light of his tactics.

Jaibi was one of the foremost Tunisian theatre directors to adopt "tactic" as a basis for his poetics.¹⁰ This "art of the weak", in De Certeau's words, occupies "the space of the Other" by manoeuvring "within enemy territory". To do this, it "vigilantly mak[es] use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers". Jaibi's poetics was his tool to fashion the element of "surprise" to ambush the authorities, and "trick" the audience into facing the abnormality of social situations, which were more or less tolerated or accepted as normal and everyday. Jaibi's tactics were applied not only against the regime, but also against a society that *allowed itself* to be repressed, or to repress through social norms or conventions.

On a material level, Jaibi deployed one of the "innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game"¹¹ by claiming performance spaces and subsidies from the state, or by deliberately occupying spaces which he then used to maintain his art and to show up political corruption or abuse.

On an artistic level, Jaibi used technique as his tactic. He rejected realistic staging and dialogue. The gradual elaboration of this type of poetics was based mainly on practical, intensely physical work. Jaibi has claimed that in the seventies, "the things we discovered, we discovered on the stage, in the text, around the text, in the project, rather than in

the reading of texts or the production of theoretical texts".¹² This approach demanded a 'painful' shift from more populist stagings to more 'difficult' performances, catering less to the people's tastes, but shaping and refining the work's aesthetic qualities.¹³ Aesthetics became his tool in later works that tackled subjects considered taboo, as in *Amnesia*, where he criticised corrupt and abusive political power through a fictitious situation that he used as his *perruque* for his underlying intention, that of denouncing Ben Ali and the people's passiveness. Jaibi himself has stated: "I told my wife [the actress, Jalila Baccar]: I want to stage the trial of Ben Ali. She told me: go and see a doctor."¹⁴ Doctors were to feature prominently in the play, which takes place mainly in a psychiatric asylum.

The fact that the play was finally performed at a time of powerful state control and police censorship cannot simply be attributed to the support Jaibi received from the then Minister of Culture, Abderraouf El-Basti, himself a former engaged actor and director. Nor did it depend solely on the foreign support that Jaibi received at various times when his work was threatened, although foreign attention to and staging of his productions did help to constrain the authorities and caused them to treat his productions with added caution. As De Certeau points out, where strategy is the property of the strong and tactics belong to the weak, the weak transform strategy into tactics.¹⁵ Jaibi's tactic was to use artistic expression to penetrate artistic spaces held by the state, and there, produce a "theatre of resistance which challenges the taboos, the prohibitions, and all that is politically correct".¹⁶ In De Certeau's terms, Jaibi used poetics as a "guileful ruse", by "poaching" the space surrounding the power structures and using it to construct a performance that played on and with them. He wanted to score an advantage in the eyes of the audiences he hoped to rouse to consciousness. At the root of his poetics lay, as Jaibi claimed, the will to "speak out loudly, defy censorship, defy daily threats, in our performances. We were the first to be exposed to censorship, to the prohibition of our performances. We stuck to our positions and we are somehow identified with the vivid conscience of these young rebels".¹⁷

THE ELABORATION OF JAIBI'S THEATRE 'TACTICS'

Ridha Boukadida has pointed out that Tunisian theatre artists are always obliged to take up a position vis-à-vis the following elements: "for or against the State's political action, for or against tradition [or] the return of a certain socio-religious tradition, for a passive or modernist attitude, and lastly, for or against the adoption or rejection of known and recognized models and techniques of creation, which have been tried out and proved effective in the West and elsewhere."¹⁸ Jaibi's elaboration of a poetics of playing has had to take all these aspects into account.

Jaibi's years in France as a student helped to lay down the foundations of his confrontational poetics, through his training as well as through his experience of the cultural politics in Paris following the events of May 1968,¹⁹ which reinforced his belief that culture can bring about change. He retained from this experience a critical stance vis-à-vis political reality, which played a determining role in his artistic choices and was to become a through-line of all his productions. Speaking about the Nouveau Théâtre, which he co-founded in late 1975, Jaibi stated: "Our thinking, our approach has always been defined in relation to power itself, and in relation to the cultural power of the Other."²⁰ Foreign training enabled Jaibi and other Tunisian artists to pursue a search for a new type of approach to playwriting and staging. However, Jaibi stated that "every time, I was searching for a theatricality, a fashioning of fiction which would be proper to me, which would be the expression of myself, my fantasies".²¹ To do this, Jaibi would "call upon a technical heritage and theoretical references" but "find [his] own synthesis".²²

Jaibi's poetics were also formed by his 'on the ground' experience in Gafsa, a poor mining town in the south-west of the country. On his return to Tunisia from his studies in France in the early 1970s, he and a handful of other young theatre-makers who had also studied abroad, were called upon by the Minister of Culture, Chedli Klibi, to create a regional theatre in Gafsa. Jaibi has described this experience as a "sort of human artistic powder magazine".²³ He observed the communication strategies

adopted by mining workers turned trade unionists²⁴ to deliver clear messages to everyone – from colleagues to students – by using “poetry, music and a particular type of language in their union speeches”. In his words, he had to put aside all he had learnt and “learn how to walk, how to speak, how to state things”. He would use the lessons he derived from this experience in the elaboration of his dramatic form and content.

Jaibi’s confrontational tactics of dealing with taboo subjects through art have not always proceeded smoothly. In *Khamsoun* (2006), the first of a trilogy also comprising *Amnesia* (2010) and *Tsunami* (2013), the director pointed an accusing finger at ‘islamic’ violence at a time when discussion on issues concerning religious fundamentalism was not allowed. The play also provided a critical reading of Tunisia’s history from the acquisition of its independence to the time of the play’s production. The play’s span of fifty years inspired its title, which literally means fifty. Performance of the play was forbidden on Tunisian stages at the time of its production when Jaibi refused to make any concessions to the state censorship authorities nor carry out any of the 286 cuts to the play that he had been ordered to make. Thanks to Jaibi’s international connections, it was premiered at the Théâtre Odeon in Paris on 7 June 2006.²⁵ This forced the authorities to allow the performance to be shown to Tunisian audiences some months later. It raised much polemic about various issues, including the wearing of the ‘islamic’ veil by women in Tunisian society.²⁶

As stated previously, the performance of *Amnesia* was delayed for two months. Once more, Jaibi refused to change anything in the performance and again threatened to premiere his production abroad. This time, Jaibi exploited the state’s reluctance to attract the kind of bad international press it had received for *Khamsoun*. Thanks to this tactic, and the backing of the Minister for Culture, the play was finally premiered in Tunis in April 2010. After its successful presentation at the Festival d’Avignon, the play was restaged in Tunis in November, one month before the revolution took place.²⁷ It was performed again during the revolution, when as one of the actors, Karim el-Kefi recalls, “spectators could no longer distinguish between theatre and reality”

given that the theatre, situated near the Ministry of the Interior, was full of tear gas and protesters seeking shelter.²⁸ With hindsight, the production was seen as premonitory. Today the artists who produced it view it as “an archival memory of the past”.²⁹

The trilogy was completed in 2013 by the production *Tsunami*, where the director worked with a troupe composed mainly of young inexperienced actors, to stage the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, and the threats and uncertainties it has left especially in relation to the status of women and the future of Tunisia’s youth. As Kamal Salhi points out, when troupes like Jaibi’s, “alter material emblematic of power relations and human possibilities, they are working politically, making and remaking their own culture”.³⁰

The long confrontational struggle for the performance of *Yahia Yaïch – Amnesia* started out from the play’s title, which is revealing of Jaibi’s tactical poetics. The director wanted to exploit the title as a tactic to point to the regime by creating a play on words. Initially, the play was called *Yaïch Yahia*. The name ‘Yahia’, which is currently used in Tunisia, actually means survival. The word ‘Yaïch’ [feminine: Taïch] has different connotations according to where it is placed. Placed in front of a name, it could roughly be translated into something resembling ‘Long live...’. In fact, before the revolution one could hear the cries of “Yaïch Ben Ali”, while during the revolution this was replaced by “Taïch Tunis” or “Tahia Taïch Tunis”. This implied that Tunis had been placed in a situation of distress and survival under Ben Ali, and would now begin to live fully under democracy. *Yaïch Yahia* could roughly be translated into ‘Long live survival’. The authorities made Jaibi change the name, so he inverted the order of the words into *Yahia Yaïch* (*Yahia* – but also *Survival lives*). This clash with officialdom caught public interest. The pun on the name did not go unnoticed, and everyone understood its true meaning, which summarised perfectly the state of affairs ordinary citizens had to put up with. *Surviving survival*, as the new title implied, meant putting up with dictatorship as though it was normal to live under such conditions. In addition, the black humour within the play itself reinforced this confrontation, because

it led people not only to laugh, but also to reflect. The subtitle *Amnesia* could be related to various realities: the dictator's amnesia *vis-à-vis* his repressive policies, the people's amnesia of brutal and oppressive action that took place in Tunisia.

JAIBI'S TECHNIQUES AS TACTIC

Jaibi's theatre is always centred on the here-and-now happenings in Tunisian society. To his mind, the focus of theatre should be the contemporary, in order to create polemic and provoke discussion. The forms he adopts are devised in such a way as to engage both actor and spectator "in that 'public opinion' and in the acknowledging of the responsibility of art to speak out politically".³¹

The director does not engage in narrative performances, where a story unfolds before the audience from beginning to end. He plays with his spectators by plunging them into and out of the story through his own elaboration of the brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Like Brecht, Jaibi rejects realist staging. Jaibi's *mises-en-scène* are made up of a montage of sequences which force the spectators to make mental leaps of time and space. This creates an effect of 'distanciation' whereby the spectator is made to stand outside the fiction, observe it, and take up a dialectical position in relation to what is happening on stage. Nonetheless, Jaibi's performances mirror the world of the spectator, and in so doing, "engage both actor and spectator in the construction of the world each lives, dreams and observes".³²

By generally situating the action of his plays in a dream-like atmosphere, Jaibi uses the unconscious as a tactical space to raise questions avoided by society and to cause his audiences to confront the social truths that are glossed over by the false appearances of a stable and prosperous situation. He sums up his vision of theatre in these words: "Theatre is not an art that warms the heart, that is there to please. It must inherit all that makes up man – including his dreams, fantasies and fears."³³

Jaibi's poetic tactics focus on the actor's physical presence; he stimulates "the actor's body, mind, speech, intelligence and emotion" to confront the public.³⁴ His work upon the body integrates techniques that are inspired from cinematographic

montage, dance, and videos. He works face to face with the actor, and has dispensed with what he terms the "crutches and props" directors employ to support the actor. Jaibi considers himself a mediocre actor but sees his role as "transmitting the flow to those who hold it [the art of acting] high".³⁵

In his work, which is at once personal and collective, Jaibi has long entertained a privileged relationship with Jalila Baccar whom he calls his "leading actress, companion in life and muse".³⁶ Jaibi and Baccar collaborate in the creation of the initial scenario, and Baccar then writes the script which provides the verbal basis for the dramatic text that is ultimately elaborated through physical improvisation. Baccar has explained this technique when discussing the production *Lem*: "We start out from a story, then we come back to the characters, we tell their individual stories, giving many details, which we may or may not keep [...] Then we start improvising so that the characters can slowly take shape, concretely, that is in space, and the characters are confronted with each other from the outset."³⁷

Jaibi's description of his work with actors is reminiscent of Grotowski's *via negativa*: the director subjects his actors to a process of elimination in order to obtain what he defines as "the essential". All visual and auditory elements, apart from those produced by the actor, are reduced to a bare minimum. Jaibi claims he learned this lesson in "poor theatre" when working in the straitened circumstances of Gafsa. The only ornaments or props on stage are those that are brought on to the empty platform by the actors themselves. Jaibi's bare stage emphasizes the way the actors fill it with their active presence through the rhythm and energy of their physical work. As Murray and Keefe point out, presence directs us to the actor's body and how it is constructed.³⁸ It expresses the body's openness to the immediate reality of the stage and audience.

Jaibi exploits presence tactically through lighting and the particular positioning of the actors, which has evolved to create scenes that resemble paintings, such as in *Khamsoun – body hostages*.³⁹ There, lighting divided the floor into separate or single sharply-defined spaces, and the alternation of light and shadow underlined the dilemmas faced by the population *vis-à-vis* the growing imposition of

hard Islamic public codes in the last years of Ben Ali's rule.⁴⁰ In *Amnesia*, the minimalist stage design was developed in collaboration with scenographer Kais Rostom. The use of stark colours – black and white for costumes and props, gray tones for lighting – was reminiscent of a film that is perhaps being played back in the dictator's memory.

THE POETICS OF *AMNESIA*

Jaibi's use of text and staging is constructed around the artistic confrontation with political or religious control. It is this that underpins the artistic force of his creation, because as he states: "Art is created in the immediacy of pulsions that one receives, of forces which one has to face, that can be of a material or spiritual nature."⁴¹

Jaibi used poetics to simultaneously confront the regime and the people. The composition of *Amnesia* comprised much experimentation with forms and stratagems aimed at challenging the public visually and emotionally in a performance which clearly contained a political agenda. Bacchar's text used poetical form as a tactic to tackle and denounce realities such as corruption, betrayal, money-laundering, police control and interrogation. The way these subjects were dealt with was aimed to subtly find echo with the spectators' life experiences, thoughts and emotions in the here-and-now beyond the moment of performance. However, the written text was also a springboard for action. The structure of the performance was developed on the modulation of rhythm through voice, sound and action. Physical expression provided a sense of active engagement both on the part of the performing actor and on that of the watching spectator. By means of his work with the actors, Jaibi elaborated a poetics of political and social confrontation that allowed him to shift focus from character to experience, engaging both actors and audience in reflection upon the experience of authoritarianism and exploitation.

Political control took many forms in Tunisia, a country that was aware of, but never really exposed to, a democratic process even after independence in 1956. Ben Ali's strategy was to cajole and coerce citizens into transferring decisions to him – especially those having consequences on their everyday lives.

He established distance by deploying strategies such as creating for himself the image of the benevolent father-figure through tightly-controlled media and publicity measures that included giant photographs of himself showing him in paternal poses. This was calculated to elevate him above the rest of the people as the one who knew best despite the everyday problems of how to survive while lacking jobs and money. A panoply of controls, from the police to the press, were applied to the tasks of persuasion, control and repression to ensure that people were made to believe, or at least, to appear to believe in the good will of their leader.

Yahia Yaïch, a generous loving father to his family, is also presented as a man who sees himself as a "an all-powerful being, like a spider who weaves his web at the four cardinal points".⁴² The play recounts any dictator's nightmare – the fall from power. Toward the end of the play, Yahia's voice offstage describes it as a nightmare, but what is implied is that he himself was the people's nightmare, and had to be dismembered before the nightmare could disappear: "I [...] wanted to emerge from this damned nightmare that was choking me [...] I saw Yahia Yaïch completely dismembered [...] [his body] scattered to the four winds... And I disappeared."⁴³

Through this tactic, the director carried out on stage what few citizens dared do openly – the denunciation of a dictator who could not be opposed directly in everyday life. However, he also challenged the citizens' passiveness towards their political realities right from the beginning of the performance, by means of action and mime. Sleep was represented on stage by the actors assuming and changing positions on white chairs, on the floor, or even standing, which produced a comic effect, even though the didascaly in the text specifies that this moment represents "eleven different nightmares, experienced simultaneously".⁴⁴ The sleep scene contrasted with the actors' slow unsettling entrance through the aisles, staring at the audience with fixed smiles as they advanced, and continuing to stare at it for about two minutes after they reached the stage. The comic effect ended abruptly when the almost-deafening sound of drumbeats imitating machine-gun fire woke the characters rudely and startled members of the audience. The main action then start-

ed. Towards the end of the performance, Yahia fell asleep on a black chair facing the audience, before being awoken by the other characters who toasted his birthday. As he exited, machine-gun fire roared again, while the actors stared at the audience in the final moments of the performance.

Various layers of meaning could be read into this framing of the performance and the development of the action itself. On one level, the actors' sleep could be interpreted as the everyday citizens' slumbering attitude *vis-à-vis* their oppressive political situation. On another, the actors' fixed stares could be read as a provocation, questioning the audience about their acceptance of the status quo. Yahia's voice offstage, used at various moments in the play, and the action onstage could be read as a confrontation with the regime, but also as a denunciation of the people's passivity. The gunfire could be taken as both repression and revolution – repression by power against protest, and possible revolt to change the situation. With hindsight, the final volley of gunfire assumed prophetic qualities; it foretold the volleys that would eventually rouse the whole of Tunisia.

Through his aesthetic choices and his actors' work, Jaibi uses poetics as a tactic to deliberately cause 'malaise' in his audiences. Through the overt and covert messages delivered through the text and the aesthetics of his staging, Jaibi obliges his audiences to consider their ethical choices, rather than hide behind the positions assumed and imposed by the regime. His performances are intended to generate "an ethical reaction [...] that life cannot be reduced to what one sees of it".⁴⁵

In a country where newspapers were susceptible to suppression and journalists to arrest, Jaibi's 'coup' was significantly to place the most virulent denunciations of the dictator in the mouths of the journalists in the play, accusing him unequivocally of corruption, nepotism, and insensitivity towards the poor. In the Journalists' scene, Journalist No. 6 uses the poetical medium to voice condemnation of the state of the country, particularly in the scene's concluding lines, which address the dictator directly:

"Woe betide the country
Whose minority tyrannises the majority
And whose majority is humiliated by a minority.
Where are you at with this country?"⁴⁶

The poetic language of the verbal texts written by Baccar and used by Jaibi is also their tool to resist demagoguery. In *Amnesia*, the choice of different languages ranging from classical Arabic, to dialectal Arabic, street language, Bedouin and French is reflective of the diverse languages bequeathed to Tunisian society through history, and now part of its everyday reality. Short dialogues often give way to long poetic monologues where situations are recounted, and political manoeuvres denounced. In certain cases, particular characters are created in order to produce added poetic effect, such as that of the female Doctor who has been pregnant for the past four years because her baby refuses to be born. The doctor's long monologue in the scene "Hôpital III", comes after a series of short, sharp questions and answers to Yahia, where the dictator denies feeling doubt or committing mistakes, and thanks God for having given him an iron will for the good of the country and the people. In the face of this assertion, the doctor expresses her baby's fear of coming into the world. She voices its fear of suffering harsh realities that citizens have to face – hunger, lack of love, lack of liberty of expression, disrespect of laws, intolerance and violence. Dialogues in the play often express situations which show up hypocrisy, disappointment or greed, denouncing thereby self-interest and immorality, for example when young Ouahid tells his mother that he has joined the party in order to find work. His task is to spy on and denounce people, "and put them in shit".⁴⁷

Yahia not only appears on stage; through his off-stage presence he situates the action, narrates what is happening around him, and describes his inner feelings, including the desire for revenge and deep resentment against those who have dispossessed or abandoned him or whose personal relationships have changed dramatically in his regard. This scenic stratagem not only provides added depth to the character, it helps the audience to associate the voice with a real dictatorial presence beyond the theatre by using the *peruque* of poetic language. The physical action taking place onstage communicates other aspects of what is being denounced. In the scene "Lagune 1", for example, Yahia laments off-stage that he is dispossessed of his personality and identity, while his daughter and her lover throw

themselves into each other's arms, only to despair at the loss of their privileges, and ultimately to express mutual mistrust, which culminates in her trying to shoot him and his final rejection of her because of who she is.

The actors constantly reshape the space through various scenic tactics, such as the use of props. Props – mainly white or black outdoor plastic chairs – are set up in various ways, conjuring in the spectators' minds the real-life spaces they evoke as well as their political significance. One space particularly evoked was that of the asylum which, in real life, was one of the places where political prisoners were kept. In De Certeau's terms, Jaibi uses space as a 'proper' (*propre*), meaning one that serves "as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it", such as adversaries.⁴⁸ This space of power becomes the fighting-ground where Yahia, who after being deposed has been thrown into an asylum, applies his energy against his adversaries, the psychiatrists-police who interrogate him.

Jaibi also uses props to generate rhythms. In this play, the various ways in which the chairs are moved around create a ballet of rhythms – slow, gliding movements, military marching steps, deft repetitive actions that make the chairs slide across the floor. Paper cups, brooms and buckets are also used in a rhythmical way. The music is minimal, generally limited to percussive sounds, except for the recording of the song *Happy Birthday*, a familiar tune to the audience that can be heard at any restaurant when a birthday is celebrated and the cake is brought in. In the play, it was used ironically to underline the celebration of the dictator's power.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

In times of tight political control, Jaibi deliberately opted to remain in Tunisia, and as we have seen, elaborated his poetical dialectics in open confrontation with political censorship. By attending this type of performance, Tunisians who lived in relative submission found a means to face up to the prevailing state of affairs. With hindsight, this was indicative of the determined, courageous stances ordinary people were to assume during the revolution. As Caroline Rooney points out in relation to Egypt,

far too often the West has lacked a "grounded understanding" of the ways in which literary culture in North Africa has long engaged "in a progressive struggle to 'make modernity possible' by creating its own forms through its specific aesthetic choices and ethical values".⁴⁹ Many North African writers and theatre makers such as Jaibi have elaborated their own poetics to oppose social injustice and promote social change, and continue to do so even after the revolutions that have traversed their countries.

On another level, Western support for Jaibi's theatre and his touring successes have provided an important tactical tool in helping him maintain his critical positions *vis-à-vis* powerful Tunisian authorities especially when attacked by censorship. Artists like Jaibi were treated with more caution by the regime also because they had acquired international prestige. Personal international relations, developed with the West through artists training abroad and by taking productions overseas, have played an important role in the defence of aesthetic and artistic choices of artists who have to deal with censorship and suppression in their countries.

Following the revolution, however, I would tend to echo the hard-hitting question asked by Norbert Bugeja in the introduction to his book on the Mashriq: "Are the ranks of postcolonialist thought today prepared to respond to these emerging realities by providing platforms for critical dissidence, vigilance and insight upon the new forms of collective spirit that are being forged across the region? Or will it extend the hand of collusion, sanctioning, among other aspects, the replacement of widely despised *anciens régimes* in the Arab world through a rehashed but equally crippling neo-liberalist agenda for the Middle East and North Africa?"⁵⁰

We have seen how poetics of confrontation is a means for artists to construct performance by using artistic tactics to challenge the political and social limits imposed by power structures. Poetics is also used as a means to oblige spectators to confront their daily experience of these limits, thereby doubling the immediacy of the performance with the immediate reality that provide context and meaning for the action on stage. In this way, it aims to stimulate the audience into abandoning passivity and provoking thought that may, ultimately lead to

change. One can only speculate on the interstices of power that artists like Jaibi will have to penetrate through their art in order to maintain their confrontational tactics and nurture their vision of a society in which all individuals can concretely practice freedom of expression.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) French Jesuit philosopher, who together with Jacques Lacan, was one of the founders of the Ecole Freudienne de Paris. His studies ranged over a vast number of subjects: philosophy, sociology, politics, psychoanalysis, mysticism. He came to public attention through his writings in May 1968. He taught both in France and the US.
- 2 Tim Prentki, "Introduction to Poetics of Representation" in *The Applied Theatre Reader*, Tim Prentki and Shiela Preston, eds., Routledge, London and New York 2009, p. 19.
- 3 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. by Steve Rendall), University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1988, p. 37.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 34-9.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 35-6.
- 6 Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Performance Traditions in the Maghreb*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2012, p. 213.
- 7 See Ridha Najjar, "Le théâtre tunisien en 1977" in *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord, Centre national de la recherche scientifique; Centre de recherches et d'études sur les sociétés méditerranéennes (CRESM)*, Editions du CNRS, Paris 1978, vol. 16, p. 936. http://aan.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/volumes/1977/Pages/AAN-1977-16_55.aspx (retrieved 12 March 2014).
- 8 Emile Rodes, "Quand les Artistes se jouaient de Ben Ali" in *SlateAfrique*, 11 May 2011, p. 1. <http://www.slateafrique.com/1665/les-arts-pour-contourner-censure-ben-ali> (retrieved 20 March 2014). All quotations from articles, books and interviews in the French language, which have no existing translation, have been translated by myself.
- 9 Ridha Boukadida, *Le Nouveau Théâtre par lui-même. Entretiens avec Fadhel Jaïbi, Mohamed Driss, et Jalila Baccar (1985-1987)*, Les Editions Sahar, Tunis 2011, p. 78.
- 10 De Certeau, op. cit., p. 37. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from this page.
- 11 Ibid., p. 18.
- 12 Boukadida, op. cit., p. 41.
- 13 Ibid, p. 45.
- 14 Priscille Lafitte, "'Yahia Yaïch', quand le théâtre rêve avant l'heure de la chute de Ben Ali" in *France 24*, 21 July 2011. <http://www.france24.com/fr/20110719-festival-avignon-yahia-yaich-amnesia-fadhel-jaibi-reve-chute-ben-ali-tunisie-theatre-proces> (retrieved 20 November 2013).
- 15 De Certeau, op. cit., p. 36.
- 16 Lafitte, op. cit., video of interview during press conference, Festival d'Avignon.
- 17 Pascal Paradou, "Amnesia de Fadhel Jaïbi, la révolution en Tunisie n'est pas tombée du ciel" in *Jeune Afrique*, 4 February 2011. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20110204-amnesia-fadhel-jaibi-revolution-tunisie-est-pas-tombe-ciel> (retrieved 26 November 2013).
- 18 Ridha Boukadida, *Trois Etudes sur le Théâtre Tunisien*, Les Editions Sahar, Tunis 2011, p. 197.
- 19 Personal communication, October 2010.
- 20 Boukadida, op. cit., p. 69.
- 21 Ibid., p. 60.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 All the quotes in this paragraph are taken from my transcripts of a two-and-a half-hour personal interview with the director that took place before the revolution, when he was working on the performance *Amnesia* in Spring 2010.
- 24 Historically, Gafsa had witnessed the founding of the first trade union in 1948, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT – the Tunisian General Labour Union).
- 25 The text of the play, in Tunisian, with French overtitles, was written by Jalila Baccar. It dealt particularly with religious fundamentalism and police behaviour during interrogations that supposedly were conducted to fight terrorism, and also tackled female identity and the question of the islamic veil. For an interesting discussion on the contents of the play, see Moncef Khemiri, "Khamoun, ou l'histoire de la Tunisie moderne au miroir du théâtre", 2009. www.limag.refer.org (retrieved 27 August 2014).
- 26 Tunisia boasted of an atypical situation in the Arab world with regard to women, due to the Code of Personal Status, approved in 1956 under Bourguiba, which aimed to establish equality between men and women.
- 27 I watched the play both at its premiere and just before the revolution.
- 28 Lafitte, op. cit.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Kamal Salhi, "Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia" in *A History of Theatre in Africa*, Martin Banham, ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 67.
- 31 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York 1988, p. 219.

- 32 Fadhel Jaibi, personal communication, October 2010.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid. Jalila Baccar, a renowned actress in Tunisia, is also a scriptwriter, dramaturg and co-founder of the theatre company Familia Productions. Born in Tunis in 1952, she studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Tunis, and worked with Jaibi and others in Gafsa in 1972. Together with Jaibi, she founded the company Nouveau Théâtre in 1976, which was replaced by Familia Productions in 1993. In the past, the couple have also worked with the film director Fadhel Jaziri who formed part of the company Nouveau Théâtre.
- 37 Boukadida, *Le Nouveau Théâtre par lui-même*, p. 181.
- 38 Simon Murray and John Keefe, *Physical Theatres. A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, London and New York 2007, p. 8.
- 39 In many productions, including *Khamsoun*, Jaibi has collaborated with the choreographer Nawel Skandrani.
- 40 Excerpts of the play may be found on: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGG_L5Tkq98
- 41 Fadhel Jaibi, personal communication, Spring 2010.
- 42 Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaibi, *Amnesia*, French overtitles for the original playscript, unpublished, 2010, p. 55.
- 43 Ibid., p. 67.
- 44 Ibid., p. 2.
- 45 De Certeau, op. cit., p. 17.
- 46 Baccar, Jaibi, op. cit., p. 63.
- 47 Ibid., p. 48.
- 48 De Certeau, op. cit., p. xix.
- 49 Caroline Rooney, "Egyptian Literary Culture and Egyptian Modernity: Introduction" in *Journal of Postcolonial writing*, vol. 47, no. 4, September 2011, p. 372.
- 50 Norbert Bugeja, *Postcolonial Memoir in the Middle East. Rethinking the liminal in Mashriqi writing*. Routledge, London and New York 2012, p. 2.