Meriam Bousselmi

What If Brecht Met Darwish?

Resonance and Subversion in Majdalanie and Mroué's Four Walls and a Roof

essay

Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Bobby Rogers

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By Meriam Bousselmi

Although I am a theatre-maker and had long been a "theatreholic," in 2025 I saw only one performance. Better not ask why. Beyond the structural exhaustion produced by shrinking cultural budgets and intensifying freelance precarity, I navigate German institutions as a Tunisian-born artist of Arab and North African origin, where rights, protections, and horizons of speech remain unevenly distributed. This intensifies a diasporic condition of double minoritisation (Ahmed 2012; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu 2018). Theatrical success, moreover, seems increasingly warped by voyeuristic economies and funding regimes that sideline artists' agency, bending theatre's emancipatory promise toward neoliberal compliance. Meanwhile, the spectacle of horror in Gaza and Sudan, spilling into Iran and Lebanon, is live-streamed and endlessly replayed. It saturates perception, wears down attention, exhausts language, and leaves us no longer the innocent spectators we once imagined ourselves to be, but something else: powerless witnesses, reluctant accomplices. What, then, can the stage still do without arriving too late, without repeating what it seeks to resist? What becomes of tragedy, and what remains of comedy, when catastrophe already occupies the field of perception? I warned you not to ask. You would suffocate before I could list all the reasons that have taken my breath away from theatre as a practice on Berlin's Potemkin stages. For artists in diaspora, the stage is never just a space of performance but also a question of address: from where, to whom, and through which traditions one dares to speak, and towards which one reaches in order to be heard.

Since my last performance, *Schuldmonologe: Portraits unschuldiger Personen und Objekte* [*Guilt Monologues: Portraits of Innocent Persons and Objects*] (Bousselmi 2023), at the Roter Salon of the Volksbühne in Berlin, I have found myself compelled to interrogate the conditions and purposes of my theatrical practice within Berlin's contemporary political and aesthetic

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configuration. At the same time, the means to continue have been withdrawn through funding cuts and a political climate increasingly hostile to Arab artists. So, I stopped going as a spectator too. Why applaud from the dark when one cannot step into the light? Until Berlin-based Lebanese artists Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué shifted my gaze back towards what a diasporic stage can still do amid catastrophe. Their performance, *Four Walls and a Roof*, which I attended on 27 June 2025 at HAU2, reminded me that resonance can itself become a form of resistance.

If this reading could be anchored in a single sentence, an admittedly impossible task, it would be the one I learned by heart from Stefan Zweig's *Montaigne* in its French translation: "Ce qu'il a cherché, il l'a cherché pour lui-même. Ce qu'il a trouvé vaut pour tout autre à proportion de ce que celui-ci peut ou veut en retirer" (Zweig 2019, 55). One might translate it as follows: "What he sought, he sought for himself; what he found is valid for others only insofar as they are willing or able to draw something from it for themselves." For me, this sentence offers the clearest entry into the ethics and aesthetics of Majdalanie and Mroué's *Four Walls and a Roof*. As almost the only Arab artists structurally anchored within HAU and widely recognised within the German theatre scene, they are able to convert that rare institutional access into a critical practice of resonance that redefines theatre's politics under conditions of representational crisis. Their work reawakens a dormant freedom. Historical reference becomes a living resource, circulating across time, language, and power in order to resist institutional expectations. Subversion traverses the performance, and its urgency arises from the offstage realities that render such resistance necessary.

Resonant companionships under censorship

During the post-show discussion, which I regard as an essential continuation of the performance, curator Lisa Deml, who had carefully prepared the ground for a resonant exchange, asked: "How did this project begin?" Rabih Mroué replied: "It started with a question we asked ourselves almost daily last year, Lina and I: Should we leave Germany? And if so, where to?" This was far more than a biographical aside. It marked the threshold from which the

performance emerged: at once intimate, artistic, and political. The question resonates beyond the private sphere because it condenses the conditions shaping artistic creation under pressure: safety, belonging, endurance, and the limits of speech. At the same time, it names a broader diasporic predicament: the experience of inhabiting multiple crises without secure ground in any of them. For those living across political and cultural worlds, the question of whether to stay is rarely merely geographical. It names a deeper dislocation: the strain of inhabiting realities that demand incompatible forms of presence, attachment, and speech. One remains where speech is still possible, even as its conditions become increasingly constrained. One turns towards elsewhere, yet elsewhere offers no refuge. As Stefan Zweig wrote from American exile in 1941, "I am here only because I am tolerated" (Seksik 2021-2022, 64).[1] I would add, dryly, for now. What takes shape under such conditions is less mobility than exhaustion: an ethical and affective fatigue produced by the tension between urgency and impotence, visibility and misrecognition, speech and its curtailment.

This question has become familiar to me as well. Having once chosen Germany for its promise of freedom and artistic possibility, I have found myself returning to it with mounting insistence: should I leave, and if so, where to? In Tunisia, President Kais Saied, who once taught me the foundations of constitutional law, including the limits of executive power, has since repudiated those very principles, refashioning the constitution according to what he alone defines as the national interest. Friends and colleagues in Tunis have been imprisoned for speaking publicly and articulating critique. Tunisia has also consolidated a racialised and militarised border regime aligned with European security interests. Its African migration policy, organised through arbitrary detention, forced displacement, and the externalisation of European border control, is sustained by EU funding and political complicity, turning Tunisia into a paid gatekeeper of Europe's frontiers. Colonial logics of dehumanising policing thereby reappear under the sign of national sovereignty and extend even to those tied to the state through citizenship (Ben Salah 2024). Germany, in turn, has constricted the space of political speech, particularly on Palestine,

1) Original French, as quoted in Laurent Seksik's article: "Je ne suis ici que parce qu'on me tolère." My translation.

and has become more hostile to Arab voices that refuse compliance. Across this double exposure, one inhabits intersecting regimes of silencing that produce a durable condition of political and affective exhaustion, disorientation, and estrangement.

Majdalanie and Mroué's question is therefore singularly theirs and yet legible far beyond them. To confront the urgency of that question in the present, they turn to long-dormant research material: Bertolt Brecht's appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee on 30 October 1947, one day before his departure from the United States. HUAC, the congressional body charged with investigating alleged communist influence in the cultural field, summoned nineteen figures in what became known as the "Hollywood Nineteen." Eleven, including Brecht, ultimately appeared, while the remaining ten refused to testify and became known as the "Hollywood Ten," later sentenced to prison. Brecht, the only non-citizen among those who testified, adopted a tactic of evasive compliance: he answered minimally and left immediately afterwards. This decision was later criticised as pragmatic self-preservation at the expense of collective solidarity. His demeanour nevertheless received approval from the committee's chairman, J. Parnell Thomas, who thanked him for his "good manners" and described him as "a good example to other witnesses" (Ceplair and Trumbo 2018, 322). The performance bypasses the ambivalence of Brecht's response in order to expose the hearing itself as a political ritual in which speech is not primarily a vehicle of meaning but an object of regulation. Majdalanie and Mroué's turn to Brecht becomes a practical search for companionship under censorship, a way of thinking with a predecessor whose artistic life was likewise shaped by coercion, suspicion, tactical speech, and the demand to survive politically without intellectual capitulation. *Four Walls and a Roof* reworks this archive by bringing Brecht's testimony, poetry, resistance songs, and strategic negotiations with anti-communist persecution into relation with the ongoing pressures from which the performance arises. Stefan Zweig's final gesture unfolds according to a similar logic. In 1942, stateless and exiled in Brazil as fascist Europe collapsed, Zweig turned across centuries and languages to Michel de Montaigne. In the *Essais* (1580), written amid religious wars, he encountered a mode of thought that remained open, self-revising, and inwardly free. What links Montaigne to Zweig and Brecht

to Majdalanie and Mroué is neither lineage nor continuity nor resemblance in any simple sense, but a companionship forged under pressure, across temporal distance, through which earlier figures become resources for enduring the present. I argue that *Four Walls and a Roof* renders perceptible an as yet unmapped genealogy of artistic companionship under pressure. It shows that under conditions of censorship, exile, or political intimidation, artists, poets, and thinkers turn towards others across time in order to keep open otherwise impermissible ways of speaking, imagining, and acting. Resonance, in this sense, exceeds identification, homage, quotation, and thematic echo. It names an ethics of thinking with others across distance. In this respect, my use of resonance both draws on and departs from Hartmut Rosa and Peter M. Boenisch. For Rosa, the central question is how a subject enters into relation with the world. Resonance names a transformative relation in which subject and world affect one another without collapsing into domination, indifference, or appropriation. As Rosa writes, resonance is "not an echo, but a responsive relationship" (Rosa 2019, 177). Boenisch shifts this idea from the sociological register of subject-world relations into the dramaturgical and theatrical one. For him, resonance in theatre does not arise through immediacy, harmony, or simple identification. It must be dramaturgically produced (Boenisch 2022, 85-86). This is why he conceives dramaturgy as "resonant interference" (Boenisch 2022, 85). Interference designates the operations that interrupt habitual modes of perception, reception, and relation. It unsettles automatic recognition and disturbs familiar ways of making sense. In doing so, it does not obstruct resonance. It creates the conditions for its emergence. Resonance, then, is not smooth communion, but a relation opened through interruption, detour, and reorientation. Theatre acquires its force, in this sense, by creating a shared space in which relations can take shape across difference without reducing difference to sameness. The resonance I articulate extends this line of thought in three directions. It is historical because it emerges under concrete conditions of censorship, exile, and intimidation. It is political because it sustains threatened capacities for speech, imagination, and action. And it is transhistorical because it turns towards earlier figures as companions for confronting and enduring the pressures of the present. Read from the crisis of speech and representation in times of genocidal denial, resonance becomes

Four walls and a Roof, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Rabih Mroué.

an artistic survival strategy through which the past ceases to function as archive and becomes a navigational resource for enduring the present. Once resonance is understood in this way, its stakes can no longer be confined to intertextuality. It does more than sustain thought. It participates in a dissensual process of subjectivation through which subjects are formed beyond identity and through relation under pressure. What emerges here is not identitarian

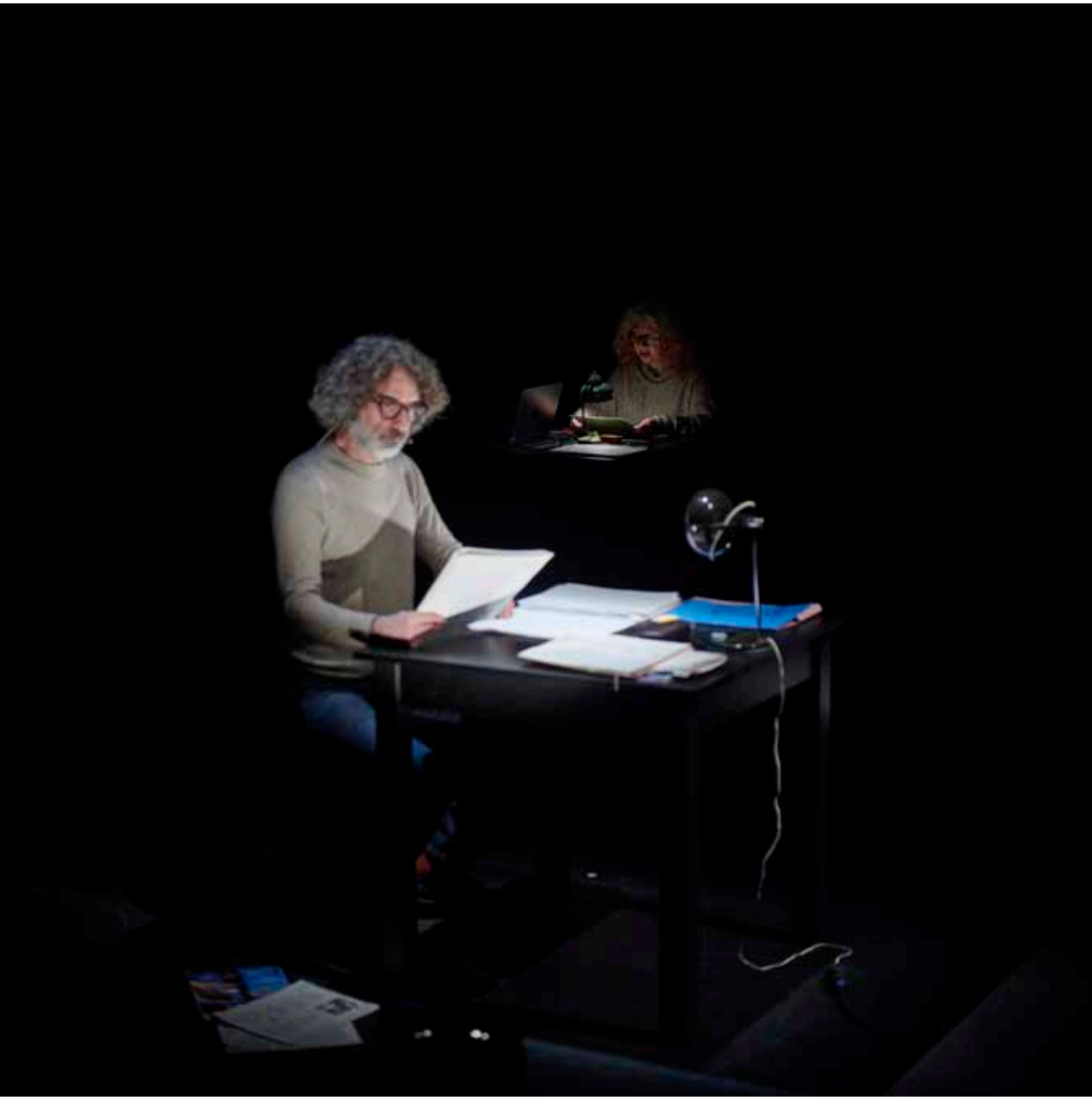
belonging, but a community of elective yet discordant allies: kindred disrupters, unfamiliar familiars, who across fractured temporalities and flickering stages stand in solidarity with one another. *Nostra res agitur*, as Zweig once wrote of Montaigne: their cause is also ours (Zweig 2019, 23). Accordingly, the audience does not stand outside resonance but is drawn into its field. In *Four Walls and a Roof*, unease becomes a shared mode of reflection. Majdalanie and Mroué do not universalise their predicament, nor do they claim to speak for others. They stage uncertainty while preserving its historical specificity. Yet by allowing it to appear, persist, and remain unresolved on stage, they open a space in which the audience confronts its own doubts without the comfort of resolution. What emerges is a provisional togetherness in not-knowing, a shared suspension in which doubt becomes generative. Resonance thus names not only the relation between Brecht and Majdalanie and Mroué, or between Montaigne and Zweig. It also names the process through which censorship, exile, and disorientation become publicly inhabitable and politically thinkable.

Scenic composition and the politics of speech

Four Walls and a Roof resists stable genre classification. It draws on theatre, lecture, and performance art without settling into a singular form. I call it a scenic essay. In the tradition of Montaigne, it proceeds through a paratactic montage that places Brecht's biography and writings in relation to Majdalanie and Mroué's reflections on the politics of speaking. It also activates a broader poetic and visual archive, including Darwish's poetry and photographic portraits of elderly Palestinians holding keys passed down through generations, images that embody their claim to the right of return. The result is a fractured yet resonant meditation on exile, dispossession, and political utterance. As Majdalanie and Mroué put it during the post-performance discussion, "We don't have a method, and that is our method."

The performance opens with a single table at the centre of the stage. Rabih Mroué enters, grips it abruptly, and pushes it towards the front edge, almost into the audience's space. The gesture is neither ceremonial nor symbolic. It is functional, driven by the irritated energy of someone already late

for the role he is about to assume. A bureaucratic process appears already underway, as though Mroué were stepping into something that precedes him.



Four walls and a Roof, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Christophe Berlet.

Yet this initial velocity does not lead into immediate interrogation. Instead, it gives way to an extended preparation. Once seated, Mroué postpones the expected beginning through a chain of bureaucratic micro-actions: he adjusts the chair, taps the table, wipes his glasses, fumbles with papers, opens files, flips through forms, stamps a document. Pages are sorted, signed, and sorted again. Through this accumulation of mechanical gestures, he appears less as an actor inhabiting a character than as a functionary inhabiting an office. The force of the scene lies in the way authority establishes itself before it speaks. Mroué's body articulates this logic through calibrated excess: too many adjustments, too much procedural insistence, too much regulation emptied of necessity. Authority emerges as a structure that withholds time while demanding submission to its tempo. Urgency is imposed on the subject, while the institution grants itself time. The scene shows how classification, waiting, and humiliation function as everyday techniques of rule. For those of us in the audience who have sat in the waiting rooms of immigration offices, the *Ausländerbehörde*, or other grey corridors of sovereignty, the sequence cuts deeper than satire. We recognise it too well. This version of power is ridiculous, yet oppressive in its familiarity. We laugh because we recognise the scene, yet the laugh catches in the throat. This is not comedy as release, but domination rendered visible in its routinised form. His movements do not simply compose a scene; they impose a regime.

Only after this procedural regime has been firmly established does the historical referent come into focus. Once Mroué begins to speak, it becomes clear that he is enacting HUAC Chief Investigator Robert E. Stripling's interrogation of Brecht. No clear act of transgression is established. Instead, suspicion is produced through a forced interpretation of Brecht's writings, affiliations, and presumed associations within a regime of accusation. This logic reaches the point of erasure: opposite the interrogator played by Mroué, Brecht never appears. There is no actor, no surrogate body, no visible interlocutor. Neither seen nor heard, he exists only as a figure summoned through directives and fixed phrases hurled into the darkness at the rear of the auditorium. He is instructed to answer only with "yes" or "no": no detail, no explanation, no elaboration. Speech is formatted in advance as compliance. Again and again, Mroué repeats the command, "speak into the microphone." Yet no voice

returns. The microphone, ostensibly an instrument of amplification, emerges instead as an instrument of regulation. Mroué's gaze and vocal projection alone sustain the fiction of confrontation, as though someone, somewhere, might still answer. The scene thus stages a form of structural violence at the level of discourse: a subject is summoned, positioned, and constrained without being granted the conditions of appearance necessary for response. What unfolds is an interrogation without interlocution, a trial without embodiment. Brecht appears only as a spectral effect of the interrogative dispositif itself. In this way, the scene exposes a theatre of accusation masquerading as a theatre of law.

Four walls and a Roof, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Christophe Berlet.

Mroué's acting is organised through a highly controlled performative score. It reminded me of Palestinian film director and actor Elia Suleiman's screen

presence in *It Must Be Heaven* (2019). In both cases, performance refuses full identificatory absorption into the role and instead sustains a calibrated oscillation between embodiment and reflexive display. Suleiman's muted screen presence stages the violence of occupation in an absurd register, using distance to circumvent the identitarian and dramatic expectations so often imposed on Palestinian artists. Mroué, likewise positioned as both actor and commentator, renders perceptible how regimes of questioning pre-emptively cast subjects as implicated and delimit the field of speakability. What is staged here is therefore not a mimetic reconstruction of Brecht's 1947 hearing. It is a subtler ruse: a way of addressing the present without stating it explicitly, and of making contemporary censorship and pressure in the face of the genocide in Gaza legible through a historical scene. This non-mimetic logic also structures the distribution of roles, language, and authority. A Lebanese artist performs an American authority figure interrogating a foundational German playwright who never appears. Authority circulates through Lebanese-accented English, dislocating its presumed origin, while the canonised figure of Brecht is reduced to spectral absence. Stripped of realism, this configuration unsettles normative cultural coordinates and opens the hearing onto a transhistorical and transcultural field of dissonant resonance. What comes into focus is no longer Brecht's singular case alone, but the durable logic of apparatuses that regulate who may speak, under what conditions, and at what cost. What the performance renders visible is what Brecht could only endure: accusation staged under the signs of simulated neutrality. Power, in this register, is not bound to a single identity or historical moment. It functions as a self-replicating regime, reproducing itself across contexts and languages through formats that claim legitimacy precisely by appearing orderly, technical, and necessary. Its rationale, invoked in the name of public order, security, and the so-called common good, becomes the alibi for silencing, surveillance, and control. "To protect us," as Majdalanie and Mroué repeat with ironic insistence, becomes a parodic refrain through which the justificatory language of power is exposed and indicted. Yet the performance does not stop at exposing the apparatus. It also marks the point at which containment fails. The couple falls silent on stage, apparently yielding to the system's demand. But Majdalanie insistently breaks the pause, asserting that keeping silent does not stop her thinking.

The scene thus discloses the excess that escapes regulation: the irrepressible return of thought as speech.

This logic extends beyond discourse to the scenography, where each medium amplifies, redirects, or displaces speech. At the visual centre of *Four Walls and a Roof* stands an oversized screen linked to a laptop on stage. Within this minimalist composition, the space remains in motion. Through sitting, standing, and shifting positions, the performers continuously recompose its geometry. Two elements, in particular, puncture the austerity of this arrangement. First, the piano introduces a distinct register into the restrained apparatus. Played live by Henrik Kairies, performing compositions by Hanns Eisler, it functions at once as anomaly and anchor. It interrupts the dryness of narrating censorship, exile, blacklisting, and visa bureaucracy through melodic fragments, counterpoints, and tonal displacements. In doing so, it preserves a remnant of beauty within a field structured by violence and carries aesthetic memory through the scene. Second, smoke drifting ghostlike through the light produces a shifting veil between superposed temporalities and regimes of perception. Yet neither element dissolves the scene's strict organisation. While the dramaturgy operates across transhistorical, translinguistic, and transspatial dimensions, the spatial composition remains tightly controlled. Descending from the ceiling, the metal lighting truss and curtain ramp compress the stage, lower the visual field, and impose a constricted frame of visibility, enclosing the scene like a painter's canvas. The result is double: compositional precision and suffocation. Then, in the break before the public discussion, the metal structures retract. The frame disappears. The space regains its height. The air shifts. What had been tightly framed, like a legal file or classified testimony, is left open to conversation, contradiction, and dialogue. This scenographic shift is more than technical. It enacts one of the performance's central propositions: that the conditions of perception are constructed, and that dismantling the frame, visually, politically, and epistemically, forms part of the work's subversive inventiveness.

Aesthetic instructions for dodging the censor

If I were to teach a course on artistic freedom under constraint, *Four Walls and a Roof* would occupy a central place as a study in aesthetic subversion. The performance treats censorship as material to be negotiated, exposed, and turned against itself. Majdalanie and Mroué use the access afforded by a central stage such as HAU with striking tactical intelligence, handling contemporary red lines with remarkable subtlety and playfulness. They avoid direct confrontation in favour of a strategic practice that probes the limits of permissible speech while minimising the risk of censorship. Throughout the piece, restriction becomes a compositional resource. (In)visibility is rerouted, meaning is reconfigured, and control is made perceptible through technical manoeuvres and ironic interventions.

One of the performance's most incisive subversive operations lies in the way it outmanoeuvres censorship by allowing a historically refused testimony to be enacted at last. When Bertolt Brecht appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, he had prepared a written statement but was prevented from reading it aloud. By deploying an artificially generated voice that simulates Brecht's own, Majdalanie and Mroué allow that suppressed statement finally to address a contemporary Berlin audience, reconstituted as witnesses to words once withheld. Whose voice is it when a synthetic Brecht speaks? What kind of undoing is achieved when censorship is reversed by imitation? What the performance reactivates is less an original voice than the scene of its interruption. If, with Derrida reading Celan, no one can testify for the witness, then the synthetic voice does not resolve that aporia (Celan 2014, 62; Derrida 2025, 32-41).[2] It stages it. What emerges here is the need to rethink testimony in the twenty-first century, as technological mediation reconfigures the relation between the non-substitutability of testimony, the act of address, and the horizon of response.

If the first manoeuvre turns sound against silence, the second turns visibility against restriction. In another sequence, Majdalanie and Mroué

2) Paul Celan's formulation "Niemand zeugt für den Zeugen" in "Aschenglorie" (1967), translated by Pierre Joris as "No one bears witness for the witness," is a key point of departure for Derrida's seminar *Témoigner* (1992-1993) where testimony is treated as bound to the singularity of the witness and to the fragile relation between address, belief, and response.

Four walls and a Roof, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Christophe Berlet.

discuss two photographs of Brecht seated in his office, luggage packed, already sensing the pull of exile. Majdalanie notes that posing for such a photograph in a moment of danger already constitutes a gesture of freedom. One image, taken in Berlin in 1933, shows Brecht near a window and can be projected. The other, taken in the United States in 1947, where the window disappears and the space tightens, cannot be shown because of copyright restrictions. The politics of visibility becomes the very field of play. To bypass this limitation, Majdalanie and Mroué work with the image that can be shown and use it to reconstruct the one that cannot. As they describe the second photograph in detail, they manipulate the first live on stage, altering the framing, the objects, and Brecht's posture so that the projected image gradually approximates the unavailable one. The operation is simple and precise: what the law does not allow to be shown directly returns through description, comparison, and live image manipulation. Restriction becomes the condition of access, as the invisible is reactivated through collective imagination. By manipulating what can be shown and narrating what cannot, they render the unavailable image

perceptible. The legal boundary exposes its own absurdity, as the audience ultimately sees more through reconstruction than through direct projection. The scene extends the tactic. Rabih Mroué adds, almost casually, "You can google it," underscoring the law's inconsistency: the image is one click away. In feigned spontaneous enthusiasm to demonstrate that ease, he performs the search live on stage, typing on a computer while projecting the screen in real time. For a moment, the audience watches the search unfold. The restricted image reappears through digital access. This displaces it from stage to screen, making the boundary perceptible through its own transgression. The same image is restricted in one frame and trivial in another. The performance exposes the inconsistency of copyright as a regime of circulation and control. Law functions less as coherent protection than as a fragmented, context-dependent apparatus.

Four walls and a Roof, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Christophe Berlet.

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Another subversive operation emerges when Majdalanie and Mroué wonder whether Brecht kept the keys to his office during exile. Behind them appear portraits of elderly Palestinians, each holding a key while remaining barred from return under Israeli occupation, their names unspoken and their histories withheld. No commentary. No explanation. No contextual framing. If the earlier sequence exposed the overregulation of Brecht's image through copyright, this one points to another asymmetry: Brecht's photograph is legally restricted yet historically named, whereas these Palestinian faces pass across the stage without identification. Their keys carry the history of a return still denied under Israeli occupation, yet the legibility of that history depends on the audience's capacity to read it. Not every spectator will do so. For some, the image may register only as visual composition, detached from censorship, inequality, and the politics of dispossession. A young man seated next to me, with whom I briefly exchanged impressions after the performance, responded to the sequence in purely aesthetic terms: he simply said that he liked photographs with keys. This reveals how quickly such images can be severed from the conditions they bear and received instead as visual composition, atmospheric detail, or even as the consumable texture of non-European faces. At that point, the image risks becoming décor, an element of aestheticised difference whose political weight remains unread. The sequence thus exposes the ambivalence of Majdalanie and Mroué's aesthetic. Precisely because it avoids direct confrontation and draws on layered transnational codes, its political force depends to a considerable extent on reception. It also raises a more difficult question: under what conditions can such images still transmit dispossession, and under what conditions do they slide into visual pleasure, abstraction, or exoticisation? Majdalanie and Mroué's aesthetic gains part of its force from indirection, restraint, and the refusal of didactic framing. Yet that very restraint also leaves the political charge of the image radically exposed to the competencies, desires, and limits of reception.

Keys, exile, and photographs of abandoned homes inevitably lead to the question of the border. "Fuck passports!" Mroué exclaims, quoting Mahmoud Darwish's well-known 1964 poem "Passport": "All the hearts of the

people are my nationality. So take away my passport!" (Darwish 1964).[3] The line detaches belonging from documents and invokes a relation that exceeds bureaucratic recognition. The operation unfolds through displacement. Inserted into a Brecht-centred performance, Darwish's verse reframes exile. European history cracks open to Palestinian dispossession. Majdalanie and Mroué reunite Darwish and Brecht as if they were each other's "indispensable friend" in Zweig's sense: strangers turned co-conspirators (Zweig 2019, 17).[4] Not in life, where exile, ideology, and history would have kept them apart, but on stage, where imagination crosses borders. Survival hinges on such figures arguing across centuries, and voicing history's silences in counterpoint. This proximity unsettles the partitions through which voices are assigned to separate regimes of legibility and belonging. Citation becomes a spatial operation: it forces borders into contact. In that crossing, the partition between "Western modernism" and "Arab resistance" begins to dissolve. Yet before the scene hardens into romantic certainty, Majdalanie cuts in: "Yes. Fuck passports. But that's naïve." The desire for borderlessness rises, then falters against material regimes. The problem lies in bordering machines, not identities. Thus, the performance does not stop at romantic borderlessness. It composes a practice of thinking across borders while keeping their violence in view. Majdalanie and Mroué articulate a form of relationality grounded less in identity than in solidarity. They remind us that freedom often exceeds what we have been trained to perceive, especially when we refuse to internalise assigned roles and their limits. Even when the space one is given has four walls and a roof, but no window, no door, and no visible exit, it remains possible to tilt the frame, shift the angle, and redraw the vanishing point. Aesthetic practice, here, does not escape constraint; it works through it, developing a repertoire of precise operations that displace what appears fixed. This is the force of *Four Walls and a Roof*: it creates, through aesthetic instructions for dodging the censor,

3) Mahmoud Darwish's Arabic poem "Jawaz-us-Safar" (جواز السفر; "Passport") was published in *Awraq al-Zaytoun* (أوراق الزيتون, *Leaves of Olives*, 1964), alongside the well-known poem "Bitaqat Hawiyya" ("Identity Card"). Its later circulation through performances and recordings by the Lebanese composer and singer Marcel Khalife, whose work has been central to the transmission of Arabic poetry and music of resistance across Arabic-speaking countries, may help explain the wide diffusion of an English version whose translator could not be reliably identified.

4) The expression draws on the original French in which Stefan Zweig describes Montaigne as "l'ami indispensable." My translation.

a transcultural resonance of exile that exceeds origin and opens possibilities beyond the parameters of control.

Exile unframed: towards transculturality

Four Walls and a Roof was presented under the curatorial label *Performing Exiles* (Berliner Festspiele, 19 to 28 June 2025), a programme that exemplifies a broader logic within Germany's cultural funding landscape: the differential classification of artists as "local" or "foreign" under the guise of thematic framing. Because the label is institutionally assigned rather than self-authored, it does more than describe. It operates as an anticipatory act of epistemic and aesthetic ordering, establishing in advance the horizon within which the work will be read, valued, and situated. Within that horizon, exile no longer appears simply as one possible thematic concern among others. It functions instead as a curatorial frame of artistic legitimacy. A cultural landscape in which all practitioners, regardless of identity, could present their work under equal conditions would indeed deserve to be declared an eighth wonder. On stage, works may address a common world and speak as if to an undivided humanity. Around the stage, application forms, funding criteria, and festival concepts reinstate prescribed origins, identities, and target groups. Universality is welcomed as long as it arrives with complete documentation. Passport, accent, biography, and geopolitical assignation function as filters of aesthetic recognition. Labels such as "exile", "diversity", "indigenous", and similar binarised designations circulate efficiently within this economy because they render alterity legible, governable, and consumable. Organised through oppositions such as centre and periphery, host and guest, self and other, these categories assign value through recognisable difference. By contrast, works that refuse coherent origin, singular belonging, and fixed cultural readability unsettle this classificatory grammar. They speak across languages, cite across histories, and move between contexts. Transculturality emerges here as a disturbance of the order through which cultural difference is administered. In a system where inclusion depends upon cataloguing, failure to fit a category easily becomes failure to fit at all. Cultural policy thus emerges as a technology for managing alterity. It organises proximity and distance, relevance and

irrelevance, intelligibility and marginality. It redistributes these positions repeatedly, deciding who is in, who is out, who is near, who is "nearest", and who remains far away. Inclusion thereby assumes the form of a rotating invitation rather than a durable right. Within such an economy, visibility depends less on what a work does than on what the artist can be made to signify. Curatorial expectation precedes aesthetic encounter. It is precisely this regime that Majdalanie and Mroué's aesthetic strategy seeks to dismantle.

Four Walls and a Roof does not simply conform to the assigned frame of exile; it turns that frame into an object of critique. The performance does not arrive carrying a biographical anecdote from Lebanon under the bombardments of 1978, 1982, 1993, 1996, 2006, or the destruction unfolding since October 2023, nor does it supply the art world with neatly tragic stories from the long imperial project called "Greater Israel" (Shohat 2026). No *Ausländerbehörde* humiliation is placed on display to lubricate institutional empathy. No personal wound is stylised into consumable evidence. The performance refuses the economy in which Arab exilic subjectivity must appear traumatised, narrativised, and affectively available before it can acquire cultural intelligibility. This refusal becomes legible in the work's central dramaturgical choice. Rather than centring the expected figure of the displaced Arab other, Majdalanie and Mroué place Bertolt Brecht at the centre of the inquiry. Brecht, as a canonical European male intellectual, carries none of the racialised and geopolitical markers through which contemporary cultural institutions habitually code the exilic subject. The result is no longer "Arab theatre in exile," but a transcultural and transhistorical inquiry into the mechanisms through which institutional and political power regulates speech, suppresses solidarity, manages dissent, and polices political appearance. This aesthetic choice does not conform to the demand that structures the reception of Arab artists in Berlin and across Europe. Even if it is rarely stated explicitly, four injunctions structure that demand: perform pain, narrate origin, render difference legible, package displacement as curatorial value. Such demands operate through the promise of inclusion while reproducing the terms of subordination. They convert historical violence into aesthetic currency and lived complexity into recognisable script. Through the figure of Brecht, the performance also exposes the filtering operations through which some forms of dissent are canonised

while others are pathologised as excess. Brecht, as the dissenter of yesterday, may be monumentalised as a safe emblem of critique, whereas the dissenter of today appears too political, too radical, too confrontational, or simply too much. Exile here no longer designates a biographical category alone. It names a differential distribution of legitimacy, intelligibility, and access to speech.

Within this reconfigured field, the performance's transcultural aesthetic acquires its critical force. To live between languages, geographies, and histories is not simply to accumulate references or switch codes at will. It is to inhabit a space where translation remains incomplete, and the self retains a partially untranslatable dimension. For artists like Majdalanie and Mroué, this in-betweenness becomes a site of friction and invention, where one language brushes against another and one historical archive resonates within another. Yet transculturality does not appear here as a celebratory horizon. It remains shaped by unequal regimes of mobility, surveillance, and recognition, marked by incomplete belonging and the persistent demand for explanation. To be called "global" is to be rendered legible as "other" in renewed ways. Fluency does not shield one from scrutiny; access does not ensure recognition. From this unstable position, marked by competing grammars of perception, *Four Walls and a Roof*, through its dramaturgy combining English, German, Arabic, and French, makes palpable the dissonance at the heart of transculturality. The work foregrounds interruption, semantic slippage, and the irreducibility of difference. In doing so, it exposes the hierarchies sedimented in language, the fractures of translation, and the materiality of speech as contested terrain. This is what makes the work a singular reactivation of Brecht's HUAC moment within the German context. Unlike George Tabori's *The Brecht File* (2000), staged at the Berliner Ensemble within the institution Brecht helped to shape and difficult to imagine under a curatorial label such as *Performing Exiles*, Majdalanie and Mroué intervene from a displaced positionality that they deliberately inhabit. When I asked whether they had experienced doubt or self-censorship in reactivating Brecht's American exile and juridical ordeal before a German audience, as Lebanese artists engaging a historical trauma rooted in the Nazi condition, Mroué replied, with a trace of humour: "We're not Brecht experts." The remark was less a disclaimer than a refusal of authorised belonging. In declining the position of an expert, Mroué also declined the

demand to earn speech through identity, inheritance, or institutional proximity. That gesture also appears to have shaped the work's reception. A sold-out performance that night, with more than half the audience remaining for the public discussion, testified to a collective attention that extended beyond the performance itself to the exchange with the artists. By contrast, when Tabori premiered *The Brecht File*, critic Stefan Keim described the audience's response as "höflichen Applaus" (polite applause) (Keim 2000). Stefan Steinberg went further: "A piece which fails to convince in any respect" (Steinberg 2000). This is not a hierarchy of works; it is a demonstration: resonance is not inherited, it is enacted. Its force, however, also derives from a position of relative access and assurance: from the recognition, experience, and artistic confidence that allow Majdalanie and Mroué to transform freedom of creation into a shared stage practice of passion and complicity.

Four walls and a Roof, Rabih Mroué and Lina Majdalanie, © Christophe Berlet.

Shaghaf (شغف): passion and complicity in Majdalanie and Mroué's stage practice

In *Four Walls and a Roof*, Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué embody an aesthetic mode that exceeds familiar categories such as interpretation, enactment, or representation. Their work calls for a vocabulary attuned to the intensity, reciprocity, and ethical exposure that shape their shared presence on stage. I propose approaching this quality through the Arabic concept of *shaghaf* (شغف). Rooted in *sh-gh-f* (ش غ ف), the term in classical Arabic denotes the *shaghāf*, the pericardium, the thin membrane enveloping the heart. To be *mashghūf* (مشغوف) means that love has pierced this membrane and gripped the heart's vital core. Shaghaf signifies existential attachment, an ardour threaded with infatuation, that may seize one through a beloved, an idea, a practice, or a form of life. In premodern Arabic poetry and in the Qur'an, it captures a relation of intensity in which the self yields utterly to what claims it, and devotion and absorption become one. Its semantic density resists translation into English, French, or German. English approximations such as "passion," "devotion," "ardour," and "obsession" capture fragments only. "Passion" isolates emotion, while *shaghaf* fuses emotional, intellectual, ethical, and existential force in a single pulse. In French, *ferveur* and *élan vital* come closer to its vital charge, though *passion* narrows it. In German, *Leidenschaft* bears the weight of suffering (*Leiden*) but misses the lightness, humour, and shared attentiveness dwelling in *shaghaf*. *Hingabe* touches its surrender, *Begeisterung* its spark, *Berufung* its gravity, yet none suffices alone. *Shaghaf* names an inhabited commitment in which practice becomes a mode of being.

Majdalanie and Mroué render *shaghaf* as performative presence: a palpable complicity born of life partnership, manifest in mutual attentiveness, tacit coordination, and trust woven from within. Their work favours commitment over mastery and process over product. Rather than performing completion, they expose thinking in action, sustaining an aesthetic of vulnerability that remains open to contingency and responsive to witnesses. But this freedom does not arise from affect alone. It is also sustained by concrete conditions of production. Majdalanie and Mroué are recognised and established artists. They work from a position of artistic credibility that affords them a relative

ease of movement within festival circuits and co-production structures. The project itself is scenically light, carried by the couple and only one musician. Such a constellation does not diminish the work's force. It clarifies one of its conditions of possibility: the freedom of this stage practice is inseparable from the structural supports, institutional protections, and reputational assurance that allow them to create without first having to prove their legitimacy at every step. One senses throughout that the project is made in pleasure. This pleasure is bound to the capacity to impose one's own artistic terms. As Mroué asserted during the post-performance discussion, they had already rejected, early in their Beirut years, any understanding of theatre as a duty to surprise the audience, outdo oneself, please a director, satisfy spectators or curators, or comply with the expected machinery of theatrical production. Majdalanie and Mroué do, to a remarkable degree, what they want. Their work does not bend anxiously towards seduction, overproduction, or demonstrative virtuosity. Even when certain scenes do not travel very far, their relaxed and playful attitude, at times almost like children playing without concern for winning, becomes part of what makes them convincing. Their stage presence does not strain after effect. It inhabits its own terms with confidence. This may well be one of the conditions of their *shaghaf*, through which I glimpsed a freedom I had nearly forgotten: the freedom to hold gravity with lightness, to turn pain into irony, and to continue creating amid collapse without surrendering to it. On their stage, *shaghaf* acquires political force through artistic agency. It preserves the capacity to create, think, and remain in relation under conditions that seek to produce fear, fragmentation, and silence. *Shaghaf* cannot be commanded, formatted, or consumed as a product. It names an attachment sustained from within while remaining inseparable from the material and institutional conditions that make such inner freedom inhabitable in practice. This is why *Four Walls and a Roof* does not submit to collapse, even as it fully bears its weight. Its stage practice responds to the unbearable through aesthetic form itself, through a composed irreverence that neither diminishes the violence it addresses nor allows that violence to shape it from within. It preserves the freedom to keep crafting wings, even when they are made of wax, and to keep stepping onto the stage even as the world contracts.

In watching *Four Walls and a Roof* that evening in 2025, I experienced a charge of hope, or more precisely, a renewed capacity for endurance. Lisa Deml gave exact expression to this affective register when she closed the discussion with the words of the Berlin-based Egyptian writer Heitham El-Wardany: "I feel unhopeful but not hopeless." I was deeply moved to witness Majdalanie, Mroué, and El-Wardany brought together in that moment as figures of thought, resonance, and political force. It was a beautiful moment, one that gave form to a sense of belonging I have long missed in Berlin and Germany. Their resonance rekindled my longing for cultural spaces still largely absent from Germany, where this emancipated Arabic-speaking diasporic subject can appear unreduced, uncontained, and unsilenced, and shape the world on its own terms within a shared and open cultural horizon. This essay emerged from that urgency as a modest gesture, joining hands in solidarity with all who claim the right to speak, to make, and to matter.

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