

Staging the Nation

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Performance creates a set of conditions in which the potential for transformation is possible. It does so by unhinging us from our reality and inviting us to occupy a temporary space in which we can imagine alternatives to the status quo and form new structures of kinship. This also happens to reflect one of the primary goals of national and international cultural festivals, which is to celebrate constructions of national identity, heritage and pride.



Fireworks during *Kuwait 50/20* celebrations, 2011.
Image courtesy Barrak Alzaid.

Cultural events that operate within the sphere of state power and control can reveal the mechanisms that

uphold a hegemonic status quo. The past 30 years in Kuwait are indexed by two such major nationalist cultural endeavours: one that took place in 2001 and the other in 2011. 2001 marked the onset of Kuwait's term as the UNESCO Capital for Arab Culture, which coincided with the 40-year anniversary of its independence from Great Britain in 1961, and the tenth year since the country's liberation from the Iraqi invasion during the 1991 Gulf War. Numerous cultural activities were carried out across the country, and different weeks highlighted different aspects of the region's arts and culture. A number of museums and institutions were also inaugurated on the occasion, including the Museum of Modern Art, and Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah at the Kuwait National Museum, among others. For one year, Kuwait cast itself as a stage to celebrate its distinctive cultural identity and offered its neighbouring Arab states a platform to showcase art and culture representative of their own nations. This spectacle of heritage, staged on a global level, happened again in Kuwait in 2011, with 'Kuwait 50/20' – a celebration of 50 years since gaining independence, and 20 since the liberation. In both instances, theatre and theatrical aesthetics were appropriated to reproduce the ideology of the state by manipulating perception. A state-sponsored theatrical production of *Hamlet* was staged by Sulayman Al Bassam at the Al Shamiya theatre in 2001, while 'Kuwait 20/50' was marked by striking fireworks and a laser show that turned the iconic Kuwait Towers into a public stage a decade later.

My interest in these two events stem from the interpretive role of the audience in these national performances of identity, which needed the full engagement from the nation in order for the spectacles to achieve their complete meaning. In both cases, the nation performed a particular perception of itself to its residents (both citizen and non-citizen), its neighbouring Arab countries, and to the rest of the world. Kuwait utilized these national celebrations by turning itself into a theatrical stage of sorts, in order to construct and disseminate an identity that could be consumed and interpellated as the legitimate Kuwait. The intention behind the spectacle, it seemed, was to underscore the role of Kuwait's populace in contributing to the production of the identity of the nation state. At the same time, they obfuscated the particular history of trauma and violence that effectively formed Kuwait as an independent state, first in 1961, and then again in 1991.

The national celebrations of 2001 and 2011 in Kuwait evoke the 1997 World Theatre Day address at UNESCO's International Theatre Institute in Paris, delivered by Syrian playwright and director Saaddalla Wannous. In his address, Wannous offered an acerbic critique of globalization and its role in alienating people from themselves. He drew attention to the ruptures formed by globalization, ones which that thwart individuals' attempts to consider their subjective and affective experience of the world. Theatre, he argued, operates as a way to consider multiple and often contesting narratives that constitute history – acting as both a lens through which history can be critiqued, and a platform whereby history can be made and remade.^[1] This all brings to mind Louis Althusser's work on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) that identifies culture as one of 'a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions.'^[2] ISA thus become not only the stake but also the site of class struggle to interpellate a state's residents as subjects. It is this dual condition that this essay will investigate. Acting both for and in opposition to the state's efforts to erase trauma and negative affect, state expressions of national identity through historical commemoration offer a spectrum to which we might read a certain dichotomy within the performance of nation building that creates a space for potential transformation. After all, such sanctioned production of cultural labour acts in the service of the state, and marks a connection between ideology and the dream propagated by the state that compels its citizens to fulfil.

To view the events that take place during national cultural festivals as examples of performance offers a site of investigation as well as a set of interactions that can implicate and manipulate audiences, allowing us to explore

the role of this medium as a site for utopian political imaginaries. In her 2001 book *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan reflects on the phenomenon of utopia in live theatre as 'a phrase that does utopia in its utterance'.^[3] She writes:

Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense.^[4]

Although performance can help us to imagine a better world, it is not by way of representations of an ideal. Instead, Dolan argues that it is the way in which performance structures human relations and feelings that crafts audiences into participatory publics, and initiates our approach towards utopia. Critical content interjected within performances of these sort have the potential to catalyse thinking.



Fireworks during *Kuwait 50/20* celebrations, 2011.
Image courtesy Barrak Alzaid.

As mentioned, the 2001 array of nationalist cultural events in Kuwait featured a theatrical production: *Hamlet in Kuwait* an interpretation by Sulayman Al Bassam performed in the Al Shamiya theatre by the Zaoum Theatre Company, was the progenitor to a series of adaptations that explored the concatenation of Arab identity and a political imaginary. The play was further presented as *The Arab League Hamlet* in Tunisia in 2001, and *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, which was first presented at the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival in August 2002 in

Arabic with English subtitles. The trajectory of the play's narrative speaks to a rising sense of urgency and an increasingly refined articulation of the role of violence and inherited trauma on contemporary politics. In the final version of the play, which was presented in 2004 as a co-production with the Tokyo International Arts Festival, the characters are cast as delegates contained in a conference room in an Arab state at the edge of war. Al Bassam describes the critical valence of his work as follows:

As we observe the terminal phases of an Empire – the in-fighting, the bickering, the indecision – followed by its collapse and the birth of a New World Order, The Al-Hamlet Summit becomes a poetic and powerful critique of contemporary political scenarios. In directing the piece, I sought to bring out a precise and grotesque hyperrealism in the work.[5]

In contrast to more recent productions that broadly engage with the Arab milieu, the original 2001 production of *Hamlet in Kuwait* is geared towards a particular formulation of Kuwaiti society. Here, the gesture of performing rigorous and critical theatrical work in a local theatre in Kuwait amidst nationalist cadences of state-sponsored celebration cannot be understated. The play appropriated Hamlet's persistent mourning over the loss of his father and his subsequent paralysis and inaction as an apt allegory for the systemic inertia associated with Kuwait's own traumatic loss in the first Gulf War.

The ghost of Hamlet's father haunts the play, just as the first Gulf War and the trauma associated with the nine months of violence driven by the Iraqi occupation between 1990 and 1991, and the eventual intervention by a USA-led coalition of allied forces, haunts Kuwait. Nearly a thousand Kuwaitis were killed, and Iraqi forces captured over 600 others. The impact of tortured and disappeared Kuwaitis during this period was incalculable for this family-oriented society.[6] Despite efforts to find their whereabouts or determine their fate, as of January 2013, only 236 bodies of prisoners of war have been located and identified.[7] Collective and individual recovery from traumatic loss entails a process of reparation that necessitates psychological closure of the trauma committed. The production climaxed in its own violent and cathartic final act:

A 'Martyr's Gala' performed in the open air, with tanks and military hardware forming the backdrop to the play that was presented to 500 American troops, 20 kilometres south of Kuwait's border with Iraq.[8]

Intended as a catharsis for both the audience and the performers, the military's salute is an affirmation of the role violence plays in both warfare and in concretizing an identity validated by the state. The spectacle of militaristic violence is normalized within the boundaries of such performances. The production was not just performed for audiences to be passively consumed, but rather interjected into a particular social and political milieu intent on addressing the elision of trauma from national celebrations and articulations of history.

Al Bassam's adaptation of Shakespeare's play offered audiences a complex critique of their society, even as it hailed them to be more reflective, active citizens.[9] Al Bassam's adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy is a performance that manages to knit together the violence of war with a contemporary political imaginary, a piece of theatre that interrogates that very society's alienation from its legacy of war. Hence the tragedy of Hamlet was reoriented to highlight social and political parallels. The play's characters Claudius is the despot, ruling over a corrupt oligarchy, while Polonius is cast as the Minister of Information in the State of Denmark, obsessed with manipulating spectacle. In Act Three, King Claudius and Polonius discuss their perception of Hamlet's feigned madness, and Claudius resolves to spy on Hamlet, 'It shall be so: Madness in great ones must not unwatch'd go.' Following this, Al Bassam's script offers the following cue:

DENMARK NATIONAL ANTHEM, BOTH STAND DOWNSTAGE, FACING
FORWARD; MEN OF STATE.
EVENTUALLY THEY HOLD HANDS.
HITLER & GOEBBELS.

SAD BADDAM & TARIQ AZIZ.

Military dictators and their right-hand men are offered to audiences as both grandiose and human, perhaps an attempt to deconstruct the horrifying myth of Saddam.



Fireworks during *Kuwait 50/20* celebrations, 2011.
Image courtesy Barrak Alzaid.

In addition to political parallels, the performance looks at the role of media in constructing individual and collective identities. The adaptation features 'The Poli Show' the daytime talk show of Polonius, and the script's stage notes offers additional understanding of his role:

His hiding behind arras' (a rich tapestry, typically hung on the walls of a room or used to conceal an alcove) is a form of exposing people like the modern television platform. Here, we see him putting Ophelia on show as if she were a freak.

Polonius, Poli, presents truths and untruths through spectacle. He is constantly setting up the stage for further spectacles. Hamlet's use of the players, is an act of mediatic vandalism. There is a struggle between state information channels and Hamlet's 'pirate' media campaign. Hamlet is beloved of the

'distracted multitude' – he carries the potential of revolt. Poli, must up control and saturation levels of his State media channel in order to avoid embarrassment and contain the situation.

Al Bassam's Hamlet hacks into official media channels and uses his privileged access to thwart official lines of communication. The theatre's audience is presumably cast as the TV show's studio audience and confronts them with the state's efforts to control the messaging and suppress challenges to its authoritative voice. For the rest of this act, we are on a television platform inside the Poli Show that culminates with the national anthem. The performance hails its audience as an active body of citizens, and in so doing models of political critique.

HAMLET

Why have you brought me here?

HOST

What you saying now geezer, don't go loopy on me now.

HAMLET

Why have you got me on television.

HOST

You wanted to come to visit us and we is happy.

HAMLET

No, you've arranged this with the KING and QUEEN.

HOST

No arrangements bruv, you is a celebrity material.

The host of the talk show, as we can draw from the script, is an Ali G simulacrum – satire wrapped in satire – while Hamlet is depicted as a privileged dandy navigating the complex morays of high-level politics. The piece acts a metaphor for Kuwaiti youth who will inherit the reigns of the state and its political apparatus. However, with a quarter of Kuwait's population younger than 15, and the median age being 28 at the time of the play's performance in 2001, there is a distinct sense of disaffectedness resulting perhaps from a tacit forgetting of the violence that occurred in 1991. The response to the production challenges this impression since it was performed some 20 times to full capacity in Kuwait, playing to a mixed audience of Arabic and English-speakers – reflecting perhaps the need for a space to engage with others in the public sphere around questions of youth, politics and the haunting memory of trauma.

In speaking of his decision to choose Shakespeare, Al Bassam focuses on the political parallels that can be drawn from the plays, and on the classic literary status of Shakespeare that provides a kind of shield or mask for the radical dramatist: 'Shakespeare seemed a natural choice. In addition to being rich, malleable and volatile material, Shakespeare guaranteed me my "green card" past the Cyclops of the state censor and the prejudices of a largely conservative society'.^[10] *Hamlet in Kuwait* packed its politics within a Shakespearean play in order to enact, 'a cultural encoding that would allow the work's meanings to override the various linguistic, cultural and political barriers in Kuwait and permit its meanings to explode in performance'.^[11] Al Bassam deployed theatre to galvanise audiences in general (and youth in particular) to imagine a civically engaged Kuwait.

As *Hamlet in Kuwait* elucidates, the value of performance here is to draw associations between an imagined theatre responding to reality and recent histories overflowing with fictions. The work imposes an engagement and participation of its audience by first being a witness and then soliciting responses. Yet, the question remains: How do we track the affective turn that transforms an audience into an active one that effectively

results in transformation and societal shifts?

In 2011, a decade after *Hamlet in Kuwait* was premiered, Kuwait launched the 50/20 celebrations marking the 50-year anniversary of independence, and 20 years since the USA-led NATO intervention in the 1991 Gulf War. In contrast to a theatre piece that challenged the complacent status quo that Al Bassam presented ten years earlier, the 50/20 celebrations, rife with military prowess showcasing liberation, were notably uncritical and unreflective. Absent was any attempt to redress the violence wrought in order to assert independence from two separate colonial and colonizing powers, effaced instead by a celebratory fireworks display and a laser show set against the backdrop of the iconic Kuwait Towers. Located on a promontory jutting out from Kuwait City's coastline, the 1976 architectural brief for the towers describes the main tower and two secondary towers as 'architectural sculptures as well as functional necessities. They are the most visible aspect of the water supply and distribution network' that includes a set of 33 mushroom-like water storage structures distributed around Kuwait, with shaded grounds underneath intended as public space.^[12]



Fireworks during *Kuwait 50/20* celebrations, 2011.
Image courtesy Barrak Alzaid.

According to the Swedish architect Sune Lindström:

'the Kuwait Tower group refers to ideals of humanity and technology, symbolised by the globe and the rocket...[r]eference to the Islamic past through the minaret-like quality of the shafts and through the multi-coloured mosaic-like facing of the globes, recalling the tiled domes of historic mosques and shrines, was a welcome result of the completed design.'^[13]

Furthermore, the project text describes the tower complex 'chiefly as a symbol for the state of Kuwait and its fabulous development within a few years from a small town to a modern capital of world-wide fame.'^[14] This marks a hinge in the urban development and technical distribution of water, from river water in Iraq transported by boat and sold to consumers in goat-skin bags in the eighteenth century, to seawater distillation plants in the early 1950s and on to the 1965 project developing water distribution for the whole city.

Consequently, the Kuwait Towers are charged with this history of urban and community development, and an auspicious gazing towards the future. The state strategically anchored the fireworks show to these towers, and a combination of projection mapping and an LED mesh screen draped onto the Towers' spheres displayed a cacophony of images visualizing Kuwait's history and future.^[15] First, a circular emblem with the number 50 is repeated all the way up the façade, and the zero contains a flat image of the towers with the flag arced around the circle. The façade goes dark amidst a raucous and incessant soundtrack of Kuwaiti children singing a rousing song. Soon after, the projections show a spinning ball dropping on the surface of a sphere, and a running man spins it with his legs as it bounces virtuously between the spheres on two of the towers. This irreverence transitions to the surreal as a pair of eyes with light blue irises blink at the audience in 360 degrees of wonder. A countdown from 50 and a small coterie of fireworks transitions us to an array of historical footage of shipbuilders, pearl divers, fishermen and falconers thrusting us into a nostalgic realm. Soon geometric wireframes reminiscent of an oil tower mapped onto the base recall the transition from bucolic to material wealth.

Suddenly, the music gains an ominous tone as a gun's crosshair scans the Towers' spheres and settles on images of Kuwaiti terrain (including images of the towers themselves).^[16] Literal depictions of violence are done away with in lieu of a red glow, massive scrolling barbed wire and percussive fire that emitted from the sides of the Towers. The sequence climaxes in an array of fireworks and smoke while the iconic burning oil wells floats up. Finally, warplanes drop bombs in acts of liberation and, the sequence ends with a plane descending on Kuwaiti soil. Violence is conflated with the civic – the percussion of fireworks complements images that are literally set aflame by light and the pyrotechnics attached to the towers. It is a spectacle replete with irony. The promise of return that offered people hope during the occupation is redeployed as a mechanism to instill a collective form of being. This spectacle, replete with images that manipulate nostalgia and assert a particular narrative of the Gulf War, ends in a reclamation of the country by and for the people. However, without the United States' major investment in Kuwait's oil properties, occupation of our tiny state may have continued indefinitely.

The fireworks display engaged audiences as cohesive subjects by drawing their attention to a single element and so, the cross-class group can also imagine itself as a participatory public. Jill Dolan imagines the audience as a group of people who have chosen to spend an evening or afternoon together. This is in fact a powerful social choice:

Audiences form temporary communities, sites of public discourse that, along with the intense experiences of utopian performatives, can model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres.^[17]

The theatrical space thus has the potential for people to imagine themselves and imagine their ideal social condition – to activate a sense of belonging and the civic purely through the audience participation in the act of

bearing witness, or of spectatorship. As such, this articulation of the theatre creates a sense of community and conviviality when people are witnessing the same thing. Similarly, the mimetic quality of theatre operates as Wannous claims, 'through example and participation, [theatre] can teach us how to rebuild and recreate and how to engage in the dialogue for which we all thirst – the serious and comprehensive dialogue that should be the first step towards confronting the frustration that besets the world at the turn of this century'.^[18] But what do we make of the critical and utopian practice of hope in the face of loss? Who can access this utopia and for whom is this nation constituted, are factors that are highly mediated and policed by the state? The story told by the 50/20 celebrations focuses primarily on legitimizing the series of rulers projected onto the Towers as the symbolic figureheads of the state and the keepers of morality.

Such distinctly nation-oriented representations reiterate the audience's role as spectator and collaborator in the political imaginary of – and created by – the state. This imagines them as part of the civic space of the state, and yet a distinct and separate passive consumer of the political machinery. The state marks the audience as a passive viewer, unlike the work of Al Bassam who seeks to galvanize them. In the 2011 example, the audience is given a singular narrative that they are then assumed to regurgitate. This sense of unity and individuation is collapsed within the monolith of the nation that the denizens of Kuwait are required to occupy.



Fireworks during *Kuwait 50/20* celebrations, 2011.
Image courtesy Barrak Alzaid.

The aforementioned events place a great emphasis on story telling and temporality to signify the state's staging of nationalism in order to construct a unified history of the country. Aside from the content-driven connections

that braid violence, fireworks and politics in the two performances referenced here, each hails the audience, constructs them, or forces participation. Al Bassam's utopia imagines an active and engaged populace, while the state's fireworks are intended to pacify and mollify and distract. The 50/20 fireworks show takes a different bend by gazing directly on one logical trajectory of what constitutes collectivity; it attempts to craft a circumstance in which viewers can literally position themselves in relationship to that setting, however that viewer is set apart – if one gets too close, their body might shatter the constructed reality. How can the utopian performative translate into social action? If we are able to read through a theatre piece, shouldn't we be able to see through the performative ripples that emerge from political performance?

Understanding theatre as an interpretative tool in Kuwait is pivotal in this contemporary climate. While other societies roil violently, Kuwait maintains a veneer of comfort with the status quo, but that veneer is starting to crack. In both state performances described in this essay, grandiose music and shows of strength are projected against an outsourcing of national affect. Verisimilitude is discarded in favour of grandiose claims of identity, and each piece meditates on the disconnect between the symbolic capital afforded by praise and the material work that such praise necessitates to engage reflections on notions of collectivity, imagination and manipulated identities. The theatricality of spectacle is deployed to imagine a collective identity and to situate audiences within a performance that is embedded in the aesthetic of theatre, and within the practice of theatre itself. Under the state's performative apparatus, we are defined by false hope – at once an anticipated illumination and an empty promise.

[1] Eyad Hussami, ed., *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

[2] See: Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation' in *Monthly Review Press: Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (1971): <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>. Louis Althusser (1918–1990) was a French Marxist philosopher.

[3] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 173.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[5] 'Edfringe Snippets 5,' The British Theatre Guide website, 24 July 2002, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:b46-CU5jrMJ:www.britishtheatreguide.info/news/edfringesnippets5.htm+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=kw>

[6] See: Philip Smucker, 'New Clue in Kuwait POW Search,' *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1 May 2003, [http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0501/p06s01-woiq.html/\(page\)/2](http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0501/p06s01-woiq.html/(page)/2).

[7] See: <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2290129&Language=en> and <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-launches-investigations-into-pows-report-1.1071133>.

[8] See: <http://sabab.org/index.php?file=c-productions&iProductionId=61&pindex=yes>.

[9] Graham Holderness, 'From Summit to Tragedy: Sulayman Al-Bassam's Richard III and Political Theatre,' MIT Global Shakespeare website, 25 July 2013, http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/blog/2013/07/25/from-summit-to-tragedy/#_ftn15.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] See: <http://www.akdn.org/architecture/project/water-towers>.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNDciYCTUpQ>.

[16] Q8TripleS, 'Kuwait Towers Fireworks and Light Celebration 50/20 HD Part 1,' online video clip, *YouTube*, 2 March 2011, https://youtu.be/6MbY_oHb7is.

[17] Dolan, *op cit*, p. 10.

[18] Saadallah Wannous, 'Theatre and the Thirst for Dialogue,' *Middle East Research and Information Project Journal* 27 (1997): <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer203/theater-thirst-dialogue>.

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