

# IMAGES, MUSIC AND DANCE IN CONTEMPORARY ARABIC THEATRE: PATHS OF MULTIMODAL PERFORMANCES IN MUḤAMMAD ABŪ 'L-SU'ŪD'S PRODUCTIONS

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*The use of images, music and dance in modern and traditional Egyptian theatre has always been closely linked to the practice of performing arts. In recent decades, these alternative languages have been used in theatre to overcome the limitations imposed by the prevalent use of words and to communicate with the audience on different levels (intellectual, emotional, empathetic). The aim of this study is to propose, in this context, an analysis of some examples taken from the repertoire of Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, paying particular attention to what the author and director desired to communicate to the audience and how he added meaning to his text through the use of these languages.*

## *Introduction*

«Mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects are examples of modes used in representation and communication. Phenomena and objects which are the product of social work have meaning in their cultural environments: furniture, clothing, food, 'have' meaning, due to their social making, the purposes of their making and the regularity of their use in social life»<sup>1</sup>. This quote from Gunther Kress lends itself to introducing the issue of multimodality in the theatrical and performative field. If we think of theatre as a complex and multifaced art combining words, body language, gestures, music, paintings, visual art, songs, etc., we easily understand how multimodality is an integral part of it. One can imagine a theatrical performance reduced to a single person, without scenography or music, even without a voice; however, the absence of these elements also assumes meaning and prompts the spectator to reflect on the significance the director intends to attribute to their absence. It is worth noting that Kress associates the idea of "resource" to the term "mode", or something to be used to create meaning. The path through which a particular act of communication is created, therefore, depends on which resources are available and can be considered appropriate in a specific social situation.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Kress, *Multimodality. A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*, Routledge, London-New York 2010, p. 79.

The main pillars of multimodality are strictly connected to the idea of multi-mediality and intermediality, and some critics even argue that (the) modalities are the main features of the media.

In this perspective, Elleström states that «there are four media modalities, four types of basic media modes. Something to acquire the function of a media product, it must be *material* in some way, understood as a physical matter or phenomenon. Such a physical existence must be present in space and/or time for it to exist; it needs to have some sort of *spatiotemporal* extension. It must also be perceptible to at least one of our senses, which is to say that a media product has to be *sensorial*. Finally, it must create meaning through signs; it must be *semiotic*»<sup>2</sup>.

The natural language that actors use on stage is but one of the different forms of communication to be found in theatrical performances, and even the use of the body has different facets and meanings. What we call the non-verbal communication system includes multiple forms of communication that can be accessory to each other or can be used to enrich meaning, such as gestures, facial expressions, interpersonal distances, voice intonation, attitudes and so on.

The use of the concepts of mode and multimodality – if all modes are used to create meaning – broaches the question as to whether some meanings are simply a duplication of what has already been expressed in speech or in writing, or whether they represent different and additional meanings, distinct from the other modes. If the latter is true, then the concept of “language” must be seen in a new light: no longer as central and dominant, fully capable of expressing all meanings, but as one means amongst others of creating meaning, each one unique. This amounts to a profound reorientation. In theatre and performing arts, especially since the last decades of the 20th century, all extra-verbal expressive modes have been taken into consideration as a vehicle for transmitting other, additional meanings often replacing the spoken word as the principal mode of expression. This does not only happen in the communication between the performers and the audience, but also in the infrascenic communication (characters communicating with each other). The characters interact with each other by virtue of a linguistic system, a paralinguistic system and a gestural system (kinetic and proxemic); the stage communicates with the audience through a series of intertwined systems (linguistic, paralinguistic, gestural, iconographic, literary), which also includes the chronological and the spatial organisation, the structure of the conveyed messages and the ideological context<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> L. Elleström, *The Modalities of Media II: An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations*, in Id. (ed.), *Beyond Media Borders: Intermedial Relations among Multimodal Media*, vol. 1, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2020, p. 46.

As far as the paralinguistic elements are concerned, Trager distinguishes two categories: the quality of the voice and vocalisations. The quality of the voice includes indicators such as tone, resonance and control of articulation, but also the heaviness or lightness of breathing, the tempo and pitch of sounds; while vocalisations are further divided into vocal characterisers linked to emotions (crying, sighing, laughing, whispering, screaming, sobbing), vocal qualifiers (timbre, intensity, extension), and vocal segregates or interjective utterances (inspirations, grunts, comments or interjections, tongue and lip noises). Likewise, silence also takes on an important communicative function, especially when associated with other signals. For example, in public speeches, when a speaker (or even an actor) uses the strategy of silence to attract attention when their audience appears distracted. In rhetorical studies, Paolo Valesio makes a further important distinction within silence: silence understood as interruption and silence understood as fullness. With regard to this first type of silence, it represents an interruption that throws the continuity of the discourse into crisis; it is an absence of communication and therefore contrasts the act of speaking: it is an interruption, a fracture, a detachment, a «brown, non-solar silence»<sup>4</sup>. Silence as fullness, on the other hand, is a totally different type of silence; it is a silence that communicates, that acquires its meaning by being inserted as part of the discourse; it is an unsaid that alludes to what could be said, a prolongation of the discourse in a way that is disparate to the spoken word.

Theatrical communication is *de facto* multimodal, multi-coded and intentional; indeed, every artistic production is intentional, in that it is conceived, studied and organised by someone who wishes to stage a text (intended in the most general sense possible). Artistic representation is also multi-coded in that it uses every possible type of code; suffice it to think of the variety of sign systems used during an artistic production<sup>5</sup>. Here, it is useful to refer to a schema that takes up the multilinear communication system as identified by Kowzan, who maintains that theatre takes place on multiple parallel lines, defined as lines of code. He enclosed the multiplicity of the codes in five directions of non-verbal communication: the body and space, facial expressions, the use of the voice, gestures, and proxemics<sup>6</sup>. All of these codes are used by theatre, dance and performing arts to produce meaning in a multimodal way, while incorporating a wide assortment of semiotic resources (language, music and body movements, etc.), intrinsically tied to the specific

<sup>3</sup> G. Bettetini; M. De Marinis, *Teatro e comunicazione*, Guaraldi, Firenze 1977, pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> P. Valesio, *Ascoltare il silenzio: la retorica come teoria*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1986, p. 381.

<sup>5</sup> S. Magnani, *Comunicare a teatro*, Omega Edizioni, Torino 1991; T. Kowzan, *The Sign in Theatre: An Introduction to the Semiology of the Art of the Spectacle*, in "Diogenes", 16, 61 (1968), pp. 52-80.

<sup>6</sup> C. Molinari; V. Ottolenghi, *Leggere il teatro. Un manuale per l'analisi del fatto teatrale*, Vallecchi, Firenze 1979, p. 57.

context and culture being depicted. In this perspective, another «focus lies on the communicative strategies deployed by different communities of practice, considering processes of production, distribution, and consumption of such texts in diverse spatial and temporal contexts»<sup>7</sup>. In approaching a theatrical performance, not only do we have to consider and analyse the space, time and place in which the text was written, but also those of the representation itself; therefore, the connection between the verbal code and all other kinds of multimodal messaging must be investigated, by sifting through the production of the performance to comprehend the entire play.

*The dramatic and performative production of Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd*

The present essay aims to investigate, from a multimodal perspective, the staging of the play *Ifriqiyā Ummī* (Mother Africa), written in 2013 by the playwright and director Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd (Muhammad Abou El Seoud), who directed it in 2017 at the theatre of Al Hanager Center for Arts, in Cairo. It was the last show he directed before his early passing at the age of 47, in February 2019. The text was published posthumously in 2022, along with his other pieces in a book series by the General Egyptian Book Organization<sup>8</sup>. The subtitle of this work is *'Āydah wa Mīnā wa 'l-Qiṭṭ Māḡū fī riḥlat al-'awdah* ('Āydah, Mīnā and the Cat Mago<sup>9</sup> on the Return Journey), and the author chose to make immediately clear the nature of the piece by writing under the full title the wording: *masraḥiyyah ḡinā'iyyah* (musical play). In order to understand this work, the performance and the multimodality therein concerned, we need to focus on the author's cultural education and artistic production, and on his artistic vision in the broadest sense.

Born in 1971 in Cairo, he graduated in Philosophy from Cairo University and during his academic years developed a passion for theatre. At the beginning of the Nineties, along with other students, he founded the theatre company *Šaḏiyyah wa 'l-iqtirāb* (Shrapnel and the Approach)<sup>10</sup> within the university setting, something not uncommon in Egypt even up to the present day. Right from the start he showed a particular sensitivity in combining visual arts with the creation of performances. His debut work was a theatrical reading featuring six actors, which he both wrote and directed, inspired by the painting *The Blind Leading the Blind*, or *The Parable of the Blind*, by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and presented at the second edition of the Free Theatre

<sup>7</sup> M.G. Sindoni; J. Wildfeuer; K.L. O'Halloran, *Mapping Multimodal Performance Studies*, Routledge, London-New York 2017, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, *Ifriqiyā Ummī*, in Id., *Ifriqiyā Ummī wa masraḥiyyāt uḡrā*, al-Hay'ah al-miṣriyyah al-'āmmah li 'l-kitāb, al-Qāhirah 2022, pp. 191-218.

<sup>9</sup> The word "Mago" is not to be translated, we will dwell on its meaning and the reason for its untranslatability later.

<sup>10</sup> The name of the company was translated into English by its founders simply as *Shrapnel*, and this is the name still typically used to refer to it.

Festival in Cairo in 1991. The first play he directed was *The Covent of the Bird's Mountain* at the Theatre Festival of the Faculty of Arts in 1992, which later became his first fully professional production. From then on his «philosophical and poetic streaks begin to interweave into a signature theatrical fusion of the highly literary and textual with the genuinely visual and scenographic. For Abul-Seoud the mind and the heart are one, visual and verbal constructions are organic twin aspects of the same metaphor, the same message. Such constructions were undoubtedly pioneering in the history of Egyptian theatre. One can comfortably say that Abul-Seoud's work pushed Egyptian theatre towards a new level of intellectual discourse and aesthetics»<sup>11</sup>. Throughout the rest of his life, his theatrical production was vast, composed of varied and rather challenging works from a conceptual and philosophical point of view. His university education and personal experiences, such as a two-and-a-half-year stay in Italy, undoubtedly influenced his artistic ideas and choices. He collaborated with and directed some of the most famous names of the contemporary Egyptian theatre and cinema scenes: Nūrā Amīn (Nora Amin), Ḥālīd al-Ṣāwī (Khaled El Sawy), Muḥammad Fārūq Ṣībā, and many others performed in his productions.

As the Egyptian critic Ġirġis Ṣukrī (Girgis Shukry) wrote in *Masrah al-ṣuwar bayna 'l-naṣṣ wa 'l-'arḍ* (Theatre of Images Between Text and Performance), the introductory essay to the volume of Abū 'l-Su'ūd's plays, his theatre «belongs in its wholeness to what is known as the theatre of images, which emphasises the importance of the qualitative dimension in the visual arts it deals with, such as drawing and sculpture. Thus, it introduces the theatrical experience in a temporal context into an experience activated by the impressions of the senses and dominated by the factor of place. "As is the case in modern visual art, the theatre of images is also atemporal, as it always distributes the temporal vision between abstract time and direct time"<sup>12</sup> even in works that are not devoid of a political character that reaches the point of satire. Also, other texts that he presented, written by writers from different theatrical trends and schools, entered the "Abū 'l-Su'ūd" theatrical laboratory, not for the purpose of preparation, writing, or the dramaturgical formula. He worked according to the vision of the theatre director, not just for the text, but for the scholar and through his tools, through his conviction represented in the image and its strength and influence, without abandoning the word and defending freedom in all its forms and manifestations. The result was a dazzling theatre in which he combined the image and the word, blending them with skill and enriching them with technology. This trend

<sup>11</sup> Nora Amin, *Obituary: Mohamed Abul-Seoud, an enduring icon of Egyptian theatre*, in "Ahram Online", 10/02/2019.

<sup>12</sup> Here Ġirġis Ṣukrī quotes from: B. Marranca, *Introduction*, in Ead. (ed.), *The Theatre of Images*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977.

would continue to be a basic feature in his works also at the level of writing and presentation»<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, we note that from the very beginning of his theatrical journey and until the end of his life, he continued to work on theatre texts and stage representation using words, envisioning gestures, performative acts, music, sounds and visual arts, such as sculptures and paintings created by others or by himself. This was the case with *Ifriqiyyā Ummī*, but also with shows such as *Biryaskā wa 'l-hurūḡ min al-mawt nahār<sup>an</sup>* (Priska and the Exodus from Death in Daylight)<sup>14</sup>, which was inspired by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's play *Ahl al-kahf* (The People of the Cave); however, Abū 'l-Su'ūd added contemporary poetry to the texts, a literary mode distinct from dialogue and song, and used tableaux and pictures as scenography, incorporating shadow play, dance and music along with the other elements. All these components served to convey the same message in different ways, while also adding new meanings that enriched the message expressed through words.

The first time I met Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, we were sitting in the cafeteria of Al Hanager Arts Center. It was August 2006 and he was staging *Antīgūn fī Rāmallāh* (Antigone in Ramallah) at the Center's theatre. The interview he granted me (forty minutes of stories, opinions and points of view on the various issues I was investigating) was one of the most enlightening for my research work into independent theatre. After that first encounter, I had the good fortune to meet him again more than once at performances or rehearsals of his shows.

In his message of condolence for the passing of Abū 'l-Su'ūd, the playwright, theatre critic and professor at the Academy of Arts of Giza Yāsir 'Allām (Yasser Allam) wrote: «One day in your show *Antigone in Ramallah* I heard the clanging of a frenzied swordfight between brothers of the same cursed blood. Was it really coming from the stage?! Live, unfiltered by a sound transmission device?! Or rebroadcast via loudspeakers?! The sounds of clashing swords created the sense of the tragedy I experienced. What creativity is there in seeing the warriors' vision while the events take place after each of them has finished off his brother?! [...] We heard the clash of swords live without seeing the murderers, where did the sound come from? It was a metal chain that someone – sitting in one of the corners of the stage – let fall rhythmically, creating the desired echo and effect. How did you know that this sound was capable of producing that?!»<sup>15</sup>. While it is well understood that he always cared about the visual elements of the scenography, he also

<sup>13</sup> Ġirġis Šukrī, *Masraḥ al-šuywar bayna 'l-naṣṣ wa 'l-'arḍ*, in Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, *Ifriqiyyā Ummī wa masraḥiyyāt uḥrā*, cit., pp. 6-7. All translation from Arabic are mine.

<sup>14</sup> This text was written by Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd in 1995, who also directed its stage production in the same year.

<sup>15</sup> Yāsir 'Allām, *Qad yatahaqqaqu ḥulmuka fī 'ālam lā ya 'rifu al-iḍṭihād lā ya 'rifu al-nukrān... Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd... wadā<sup>'an</sup>*, in "Masraḥunā", 598 (11 fibrāyr 2019).

incorporated the extensive use of foley sounds to communicate on a different level of emotional comprehension. During my research into independent theatre in Egypt, I was particularly struck by the extent of his artistic and cultural vision: his work was characterised by the overlapping of elements from different sources, cross-media experimentation and the contamination of genres and styles. He managed to mix traditional or ancient references with contemporary ones or those drawn from other cultures, both in his own texts and in his adaptations of other authors, such as Shakespeare, Lorca, Miller, Kundera, Pinter, and so on. At the same time, he used music as a key element in his creations, drawing from a wide variety of resources: from classic masterpieces to contemporary avant-garde, from European to Arabic music, from traditional to electronic music<sup>16</sup>.

For example, in the play *Biryaskā* (staged in 1996), the sense of temporal continuum was conveyed by Abū 'l-Su'ūd through the soundtrack consisting of music from different periods: excerpts from Bartok's *27 Choruses*, songs and duets by Monteverdi, madrigals, medieval Christmas carols, Gregorian chants, a Spanish song (*Hijo de la Luna*) sung in French, music by the German group Kadash, as well as some spoken parts from one of Laurie Anderson's albums. With regard to the visual part of the show, he projected famous images: the *Head of Medusa* of the Vatican Museums, *The Deposition of Christ* by Caravaggio, a view of Bernini's Colonnade in St. Peter's Square in Rome, Renaissance paintings, some modern Russian and Spanish sculptures. The representation of Miller's text *The Crucible*, renamed *The Left Foot of the Night*, was performed in 1997 with the projection of paintings by Bosch, Bruegel, Raffaello, and Magritte, and with music by Prokofiev, Lemêtre, Aubry, Billie Holiday, and Kadash, as well as Gregorian chants and Scandinavian music<sup>17</sup>.

In the weeks of the 2011 revolution and immediately thereafter, Abū 'l-Su'ūd developed a performance reflecting the events and emotional climate of that pivotal moment in Egyptian history. The work combined the recitation of poetry in Arabic, followed by its Italian translation, photographs taken by the artist in Alexandria during the January uprising and projected on stage by a video jockey, and original electronic music composed by the Italian musician Claudio Curciotti. This performance, held at the theatre of the French Cultural Center in Alexandria on 5 May 2011, was entitled *Egypt: Re-Born. Performance multimedia (Miṣr tūlad min ḡadīd, in Arabic)* and it recounted the emerging hope in crossover between documentary and art, through electronic music, video and poetry<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> C. Galal, *Il teatro indipendente al Cairo è Muhammad Abou El Seoud*, in "La Città Nuova – Corriere.it", 20 October 2014.

<sup>17</sup> A.R. Suriano, *Il teatro indipendente nella società politica egiziana. Nascita, evoluzione e prospettive*, Centro Editoriale Toscano, Firenze 2010.

## Ifrīqiya Ummī

As seen above, in some semiotic studies scholars have pointed out that there are four kinds of modalities: the material, the spatiotemporal, the sensorial (which are “presemiotic” and do not originate from rationality, but to some extent impact understanding) and the semiotic<sup>19</sup>. The semiotic mode is described by Elleström as «the frame for understanding representation. All media products are semiotic because if the sensory configurations with material, spatiotemporal and sensorial properties do not represent anything, they have no communicative function»<sup>20</sup>. When dealing with the theatrical field, one must approach both a literary genre (which can also be permeated by other modes of writing) and a performing art that combines different media and modes<sup>21</sup>. Obviously, one must also take into account that while the written text may be considered fixed, in that it can be retrieved and reread multiple times always in the same way, the representations of that text are impermanent, unique in their version and never reproducible in an identical way. For this reason, when we approach the analysis of a representation, it is necessary to refer to the particular occasion in a specific space/time in which we attend the show or in which the event was recorded. In this regard, we are looking at a video taken during a performance of *Ifrīqiya Ummī* staged in August 2017 and analysing the multimodal languages used by the director in his play from that point of view.

The time setting of the play *Ifrīqiya Ummī* is unreal, imaginary, magical and mythological, but also not precisely known, established or defined within the play itself. Owing to these characteristics, it is perceived as cyclical and reiterative. The text starts with the line «fī laylah min layālī al-ḥarīf... fī laylah šāfiyah qawī» (On a night of autumn nights... on a very

<sup>18</sup> On this play and performance see: Ġirġis Šukrī, *Masrah al-šuwār bayna 'l-naṣṣ wa 'l-'arḍ*, cit., pp. 5-6; <https://claudiocurciotti.com/2011/06/20/egypt-reborn-institut-francais-d%e2%80%99egypte/> (last accessed 24 May 2025).

<sup>19</sup> A. Lavender, *Modal Transpositions toward Theatres of Encounter, or, in Praise of “Media Intermultimodality”*, in “Theatre Journal”, 66, 4 (December 2014), pp. 499-518; J. Castaldi, *Refining concepts for empirical multimodal research: defining semiotic modes and semiotic resources*, in “Frontiers in Communication”, 9 (2024), p. 2; L. Elleström, *The Modalities of Media II*, cit., pp. 40-53.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> «In the 1930s and 1940s, the Prague Linguistic Circle theoreticians had already developed important debates on the semiotics of the stage. These linguists were under the strong influence of Ferdinand de Saussure and Russian Formalists’ structuralism. The theoreticians of this period had to deal with the fact that the study of theatre as language was a field to be explored considering the little theoretical contributions on this system». R.A. do Nascimento, *Yuri Lotman and the Semiotics of Theatre / Iuri Lótman e a semiótica do teatro*, in “Bakhtiniana”, São Paulo, 14, 3 (July/Sept. 2019), p. 208.

clear night), which recalls the opening formulae of fairy tales or popular stories. Even if it indicates the season, it seems to be used to convey a sort of time of consciousness or a state of mind of the characters who are setting out on a journey back to their home village. In this respect, also the space could be perceived and considered as mythic; indeed, the search for a place described so often in the play by the grandfather to his granddaughter and dreamt of by her, where one can find beauty, peace and harmony, sounds like the dream of every human being during their lifetime, representing a place that can only exist in memory or imagination. The two are travelling on a train along with other passengers, and all of them get off at an unspecified railway station. The place is immersed in fog and travellers move in lines through the two levels constructed on the stage by Abū 'l-Su'ūd.<sup>22</sup>

As in almost all of his shows, the author and director personally took care of the scenography down to the smallest details: the stage is divided into two levels with the rearmost part raised, so as to create another space in which the actors are clearly visible to the audience. This raised section also becomes functional for the projection of images, which act as a backdrop to what happens on the lower level to the front. When the actors walk in line, as if on the platform of the train station, they begin to descend towards the lower part, getting closer to the spectators. At the same time, the paintings created specifically for this scenography are projected behind them: various versions of the same subject, or even the same subject reworked with different colours and shades. The use of these technological media allows the director to project photographed images of paintings he himself has created, not only as a simple static backdrop, but as an integral part of the constitutive process of the meanings inherent in the performance. We see, in fact, the actors moving around on stage but at the same time our gaze is captured by the colours and the drawings, which sometimes add a dreamlike dimension to

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<sup>22</sup> I proposed elsewhere a more in-depth analysis of the space-time relationship represented in this text, and the significance attributed to it by the author himself. Resorting also to Bakhtin's chronotope, I argue for the need to criticise and abandon the dominant anthropocentric paradigm, which belongs to the contemporary historical context characterised by authoritarianism: «Through allegories, symbols, images, songs and fairy-tale transformations, new theories and critiques of capitalism and individualism are presented in a space-time that is no longer linear but conceived, in Einsteinian terms, like cones of light. With these assumptions, Abū al-Su'ūd's work involves symbols from the imaginative world of the jungle and codified animal roles, and then clarifies its critical position against the policies of multinationals that manipulate Africa using fundamentalism of all kinds and inter-tribal conflicts to steal from it and keep it in a state of dependence». A.R. Suriano, *The environment, the animals and the humans. An ecocritical analysis of Ifrīqiyā Ummī by Muammad Abū al-Su'ūd*, in C. Carpinato; M. Cassarino; G. Lalomia; P. Villani (eds.), *Narrare l'ambiente fra Oriente e Occidente/I*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli (2025), p. 112.

the scene. At other times, the combination of these elements plays a central role in interrupting the narrative time, when the characters stop, as if frozen, allowing the spectator to immerse their senses in the scenography and the music (sometimes even during songs, as we will see later). In the Seventies, the avantgarde stressed the importance of performance, with movement and body language playing as much of a central role as had been played by the word for centuries; however, with the technological experimentation of the Eighties, a practice of multimedia and technological scenic writing emerges, and with it an attention to artistic realisation (the work as representation)<sup>23</sup>.

Abū 'l-Su'ūd grew up and devoted himself to art during a period that saw the integration and the assimilation of the experiments of the previous decades, and he was inclined to overlap and blend different languages. He used his own paintings, on which he worked for three years at least – exhibited in 2014 – and took photos of them with his production assistant and photographer Muntaşir Bayūd. The actor Muḥammad Birīqa' told me in an online interview that «before writing the first scene, or even the very first word, he would draw the entire scene. Only then did he begin to write»<sup>24</sup>. As is therefore evident, he assigned a fundamental role to images, returning us to the profound meaning of Marranca's words: «tableau is so often the chief unit of composition. [...] Tableau has the multiple function of compelling the spectator to analyse its specific placement in the artistic framework, stopping time by throwing a scene into relief, expanding time and framing scenes. [...] The stillness of tableau sequences suspends time, causing the eye to focus on an image and slows down the process of input. This increases the critical activity of the mind»<sup>25</sup>. Abū 'l-Su'ūd remained faithful to his ideas as a theatre director, not only with regard to the written text, but also in maintaining his belief in the power of the image and its ability to communicate in a different way than that of the spoken word, without abandoning it.

The protagonists of the story – as can be easily understood from the subtitle of the work – are the young girl 'Āydah and her grandfather Muşṭafā, along with (or rather almost guided by) a speaking cat who calls himself a “magician” and accompanies them on their journey home, to the village of *al-balad al-lā-ayna* (the Land of Nowhere), together with Mīnā, a young man who wants to distribute the clandestine political newspaper *The Silver Fist* to peasant farmers in the countryside. The cat is one of the pillars of the entire structure of the play, and here it is necessary to focus on a significant detail in the reading and interpretation of this character, because Abū 'l-Su'ūd attributes the epithet of “Mago” (using the Italian word for magician), as a name, to the cat, who defines himself as a magician in Arabic. He is repres-

<sup>23</sup> A. Pizzo, *Neodrammatico digitale. Scena multimediale e racconto interattivo*, Accademia University Press, Torino 2013, pp. 3-42.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Muḥammad Birīqa', 23/02/2025 (unpublished).

<sup>25</sup> B. Marranca, *Introduction*, cit., pp. XIII-XIV.

ented as being magical: he speaks, he sings, he dances, he has nothing of a normal cat. When the other characters suddenly freeze, as if time itself were motionless, he is the only one not subject to this suspension and speaks directly to the audience:

أنا... وما أدركم مين أنا؟ أنا القط ماجو... ساحر؟ لا... مش أي ساحر... قط؟ لا... مش بس قط [...] أنا القط ماجو... ماجو الساحر... الساحر ماجو... أكل قليل ولا أنام أبدا... محارب مقاتل مغوار... لا بتراجع ولا استسلم ولا ألوذ الفرار... عايش أرقص وأغني وأنشد الأشعار.

Me... do you know who I am? I'm the Cat Mago. A magician? No, not just any magician. Cat? No, not just a cat [...] I am the cat Mago... Mago the magician... The magician Mago. I eat little and never sleep... A warrior, an impressive fighter... I do not retreat, I do not surrender, I do not flee... I live to dance, sing, and recite poetry<sup>26</sup>.

The fact that the author had a good knowledge of the language and, above all, an in-depth knowledge of Italian culture and literature (which is also evident from his biography) is not necessarily reason to justify the fact that he chose to assign a name in the Italian language to the most enigmatic and representative character of the play. We also find this peculiar choice in the case of a secondary character, who is defined as the “Lady of astronomical geography”, called *Lā Dāmā Stillīnā* (the Little Star Lady), represented as a luminous guiding essence to the young protagonist ‘Āydaḥ, to whom she predicts the future by consulting a crystal ball:

وتأخذ الخلفية بين النافذتين شكل دائرة الافلاك كما تصورها المصريين القدماء.  
لاداما ستلينا: ها تشوفي بس مش ها تفهمي... بس ده مش ها بطول  
بكره في يوم توصلي... مهما الطريق ها بطول  
جميلة الحكايات و الأغاني... من جد كلامه منقول  
بملاكي عزم وأماني... وثقة بكلام جميل معسول  
لكن الحياة مش أغاني... والطريق فيه الف غول. [...] عايدة...  
أسمك جميل... وكل حي فيه من اسمه علامة  
ويوم عودتك أصبح قريب و بكره توصلي بالسلامة  
بس لأجل ما يعود الغريب يلزمه يلاقي قابله الإشارة  
لابد تصفى الروح و تتفهم صح العبارة  
و تحرري نفسك جسم وروح من كل خوف و استنثاره.  
و تحسي بطاقة الكون و تختاري طريقك باستنارة. [...] لابد  
تلمسي وتحسي بكل قلب وجسم وروح طاقة الكون والطبيعة.

(The background between the two windows takes the shape of the celestial sphere, as imagined by the ancient Egyptians)

The Little Star Lady: Tomorrow, one day, you will arrive... No matter how long the road is.

Beautiful stories and songs... Whose words are really clear.

You have determination and hope... And trust in words as sweet as honey.

But life is not made of songs... And on the road, there are a thousand demons.

<sup>26</sup> Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, *Ifriqiyyā Ummī*, cit., p. 195.

[...] 'Āydaḥ (the one who returns)... Your name is beautiful... Every living being has a meaning in its name. The day of your return is near and tomorrow you will arrive safe and sound.

But for the exile to return, they must find a sign. The soul must be purified and the words must be understood exactly. You must free yourself, body and soul, from all fear and agitation.

You must perceive the energy of the universe and choose your path following the light. [...]

You must touch and feel the energy of the universe and nature with all your heart, body and soul<sup>27</sup>.

The Little Star Lady herself states that all names have a meaning, therefore the question arises for us as to what the meaning of these Italian words directly transliterated into Arabic characters and not translated is. It is true that the meaning of the names is made explicit by the protagonists themselves, or by other characters in the course of the narration, however it is also evident that the use of calques taken from other languages connotes them further. It would be interesting to delve deeper into this choice made by the author, as there is clearly some further significance. This is especially evident when we meet the two additional curious characters *al-Di'b al-Āṣiq* (the Lover Wolf) and *al-Būmah al-Rūmānsiyyah* (the Romantic Owl), named respectively Lūnzā and Brūṭṭah<sup>28</sup>. The word *brūṭṭah* in Egyptian Arabic indicates a person who is extremely shy and slow in her movements, almost blocked by shyness. The character's name, therefore, gives the reader an indication of her personality and allows the actor playing them to have a very clear indication of the way to represent them. The author, however, may have also been playing with the homophony of the Egyptian term with the Italian adjective "brutta" (ugly, feminine form), referring to the current belief that the owl, as we will see later, is certainly not considered a symbol of beauty.

Instead, I found no references in this language concerning the word *lūnzā*, which has aroused great interest in me, precisely because all the other characters are also defined by their names. It must be said that, throughout the work, the author has inserted words that do not belong to standard Arabic or to *'āmmiyyah miṣriyyah*, but are borrowed from English and Italian. The latter, in particular, was a language very well known and much loved by Abū 'l-Su'ūd. Given his broad knowledge of the culture and literature of Italy, I thought it would be interesting to search for possible references underlying the choice of this name. Talking about himself, the character says:

لونزا: أنا لونزا... مش مجرد ديب من بين آلاف الديابة... أمي أفريقيه و أبويا فهد جبلي من الصحرا  
البيضا... أنا لونزا... جاجوار... تايجر... بس محسوب على الديابة.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246-47.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed analysis of these characters and the relationship between the human and the non-human in contemporary Egyptian theatre, see A.R. Suriano, *The environment, the animals and the humans*, cit., pp. 97-115.

I am Lonza... not a simple wolf among thousands of wolves! My mother is African and my father is a mountain tiger from the White Desert! I am Lonza... a jaguar... a tiger... but I am affiliated with the wolves...<sup>29</sup>.

What seems conceivable is that the wolf's name is a reference to one of the three beasts that Dante encounters at the beginning of his journey through the "dark forest". I had the opportunity to check the books in the author's personal library and found there a copy of an Italian edition of Dante's work. In the Arabic version of *The Divine Comedy*, also present in Abū 'l-Su'ūd's library, the word *lonza* is simply translated with the term *fahd*, meaning lynx, panther, cheetah, as the character himself states in the above-mentioned lines. In addition to this element, which may only prove to be circumstantial, it is important to contextualise this character within what is written in the play in question: the author explicitly informs us that the characters move in a space defined as *gābah* (forest).

The presence of hybrid or cross-breed animals is not unusual in Arab tradition, for example the animal cited by Francesco Gabrieli as the son of a she-wolf and a hyena (the *sim*), of which Giovanni Canova reminds us: «The problem arose among scholars as to whether *sim*’, according to al-Ġāḥiẓ born from a wolf and a hyena, really existed or was a fruit of imagination. [...] He wrote to Jacob, who replied with a note in which he believed he had identified the *sim*’ as the *Lycaon Pictus*, confirming that the animal actually existed in Yemen»<sup>30</sup>.

Lonza then declares his love for the owl:

في المبارزة والقتال أنا باحكم نص غابة...  
لكن قصاد عيونك الرمادي البعيدة أنا عاشق من الغلابة...  
يقولوا عشقت أوحش حاجة. يقولوا عشقت أوحش ما في الكون  
و بأقوللهم دائما الغاوي أخرس والزاهد أطرش والعاشق كفيف مجنون.

With duels and fights, I command half the jungle. But before your grey and distant eyes, I am only a poor man... They say I have fallen in love with the most horrible being... They say I have fallen in love with the most horrible being in the universe. And I always answer that the seducer is mute, the ascetic is deaf and the lover is blind and mad<sup>31</sup>.

After a long pause, the owl overcomes her shyness and «sings calmly and wisely, thoughtfully and sweetly»:

يقولوا عليه أوحش ما في الكون... شؤم و عبيطة وفال وحش في فجر اليوم...

<sup>29</sup> Muḥammad Abū al-Su'ūd, *Ifriqiyyā Ummī*, cit., p. 206.

<sup>30</sup> G. Canova, *Francesco Gabrieli e la poesia araba antica*, in C. Lo Jacono (a cura di), *Francesco Gabrieli e il suo contributo agli studi arabi e islamici*, Accademia dei Lincei – Fondazione Leone Caetani, Bardi Edizioni, Roma 2022, pp. 42-43.

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, *Ifriqiyyā Ummī*, cit., p. 206.

جميل ورائع تكون عارف سمعتي... ورقيقة وحنونة نظرة عيونك ناحيتي...  
ساعات كثير ما اقدرش انام.. وأسهر عيوني مفتحة ومش قادرة انام...  
لونزا أنت بتقدر تنام؟؟ ربنا بيديك قبل الفجر أحلام؟

They say I'm the ugliest thing in the world... Disturbing, stupid and a bad omen for the new day... It's wonderful and incredible that you know my reputation... while your eyes are observing me with sweet tenderness... I often can't sleep... And I lie awake with my eyes wide open, unable to rest... Lonza, can you fall asleep? Does God send you dreams before dawn<sup>32</sup>?

The relationship between these two animal characters is symptomatic of a dimension other than the specifically anthropocentric one, in which the judgment they are both subjected to is the human one. In this play, they assert their own feelings and the centrality of their emotions, becoming active protagonists and not passive objects of the human will and gaze.

As for the scenic dimension, from the blacked-out stage at the beginning, accompanied by African music, drums, female voices and meowing sounds, we continue to interact with forest characters flowing, spinning and changing in the background on both the lower and upper levels – with the sinuous shadow of the cat singing and dancing as he introduces himself. Photographs of Abū 'l-Su'ūd's paintings are projected onto the dual-level upstage area, with the rear silhouette of the Cat Mago repeated three times in different colours, which continuously overlap and change. We see images of plants (forest and trees) and two animal characters move about on all fours and hop – an iconic contextualization of the space. When little 'Āydaḥ wants to get close to the animals her grandfather warns about the dangers of the forest (a symbolic allegory of life in general). His character is that of a blind old musician who travels with his niece and his instrument, representing the voice of prudence and wisdom. Aḥmad Yaḥyà, the actor who played the grandfather, told me: «The blind character in dramatic works is always the one with intuition and the ability to predict the future and what will happen. Being a musician, he is also a sensitive person and an artist with a different outlook, the one who senses danger at any moment and warns the caravan». In his opinion, Abū 'l-Su'ūd wanted to communicate that the journey within this continent of Africa «is a journey full of the dangers and the great events that this region of the world is exposed to, so he made the role of the grandfather blind and endowed with an intuition that allows him to predict all the disasters, dangers and great events that will happen»<sup>33</sup>.

The caravan of travellers, stretched out across the plain between two banks of forest, sings the song of this journey, as it continues on its trip towards the land of desires:

ماما أفريقيا... أفريقيا الجميلة الفتية

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Online interview with Aḥmad Yaḥyà, 24/02/2025.

صحرا وغابة ونهر وحرية. بعيدة المسافة... بعيدة السنين.  
 ماما أفريقيا... أفريقية الأسيرة الحزينة  
 قرية و ضيعة و واحة ومدينة... تهون المسافة... تهون السنين  
 ماما أفريقيا. أفريقيا الجميلة... للأمام للأمام... شرق و جنوب و غرب و شمال  
 أفريقيا الجميلة... أفريقية الأمان... للأمام للأمام... في عدل ومحبة وسلام  
 للأمام للأمام يا جنة سمرا... للأمام للأمام... بهمة وإرادة وإيمان  
 للأمام يا أحلى قارة... للأمام بعزيمة حرة.

Mother Africa... Beautiful, young Africa. Desert, forest, river and freedom... Far away... Far away for years. Mother Africa... Africa, imprisoned and sad. Village, town, oasis and city... The distance is bearable... The years are bearable. Mother Africa... Beautiful Africa... Forward, forward... East, south, west and north... Beautiful Africa... Africa of security... Let us move forward with justice, love and peace. Forward, forward, oh brown paradise! Forward, forward. With determination, will and faith. Forward, oh beautiful continent... Forward, free to choose<sup>34</sup>.

The Africa they sing about is a continent longed for in its natural beauty, a source of wonder and fascination, but it also symbolises the aggressive policies of humans towards other humans (Mīnā reminds us of this with his ideas of social justice and sharing), as well as towards other living beings and the ecosystem as a whole.

As Nora Amin wrote in her review of the show for “Ahram Weekly”, «one could easily wonder how Aboulseoud moves so easily from fable to political theatre, but his scenography and “fabulous” projected paintings serve as a catalyst to transform from one theatre style to another. In the same manner he is able to suddenly move to musical theatre and use at least one third of the performance as a space for a musical style that combines dance with backstage live singing and recorded music. Yet when the performance goes from the musical style to the dramatic dialogue of actors unfolding the plot, it feels as if the density and intensity of the theatrical act has suddenly regressed. The enthusiasm and vitality of the audience in the house decreases and the finale comes out of focus, lacking the impact of a theatrical peak»<sup>35</sup>.

### Conclusion

The performance is returned as a language capable of presenting reality through sequences of actions and overlapping images, of entirely resolving the distance between the visual and the theatrical. In this perspective, “seeing” and not “looking” offers itself as an all-encompassing experience capable of creating a total relationship with the world. In fact, the performative event asks those who participate to liberate themselves from the mere role of

<sup>34</sup> Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, *Ifriqiyyā Ummī*, cit., pp. 2014-15.

<sup>35</sup> Nora Amin, *Mother Africa: A Fable of Colonisation and Destruction*, in “Ahram Weekly”, 22/08/2017.

spectator, because it must not simply be seen but experienced. The audience cannot just observe, watch, issue verdicts, learn a concluding moral; on the contrary, they must be and feel involved on a more intimate level, they must understand that they and their very existence are the ones being talked about<sup>36</sup>.

The question of multimodality and the use of images therefore presents itself as one of the central aspects of this stage performance conceived and directed by Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd, which was his most important artistic project as a theatre director but equally as a playwright, scenographer and painter. He stated that it was his artistic dream at that point of his career; unfortunately for us, as readers and spectators, it was also his last. Looking at the lengthy journey of the representation of *Ifriqiyā Ummī* (more than five years passed from its conception to its final complete realisation), we clearly note that this was due not only to the impressive amount of artistic, dramatic, pictorial, photographic, scenographic, musical, and choreographic work involved, but also because the production of this incredibly complex and articulated show, which represents the artistic testament of one of the main pioneers of Egyptian, Arab and African theatre of the last forty years, was beset by numerous bureaucratic, administrative and organisational issues, which unfortunately also affected the final result<sup>37</sup>. However, all of this did not dilute the profound message conveyed by its author, director and scenographer, perfectly expressed by Nora Amin in her article: «Framed into three different and consecutive theatre styles: poetry with visuals then musical theatre then dramatic theatre, *Mother Africa* invests symbols within the imaginary world of the jungle and the coded animalistic roles, before it reveals its realistic political criticism of world corporations manipulating the old continent via fundamentalism and tribal conflict in order to take control over its wealth and refrain it from developing. [...] He creates genuine visuals that are projections based on his own paintings that served as an aesthetic foundation for the whole theatrical adventure. He creates a text that is poetic in colloquial Egyptian, and succeeds to reproduce the universal tradition of fable in an authentic Egyptian poetic tone»<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> M. Borriello, *Struttura non-matrixed e teatro delle immagini*, in "Mimesis Journal", 5, 1 (2016), pp. 53-63.

<sup>37</sup> «The Hanager Arts Center is reclaiming its history of independent theatre, it is again welcoming the generation that founded Hanager hand-in-hand with Hoda Wasfi in order to fuse the gap between past and present. Needless to say such an endeavour requires full financial support which is still lacking due to the traditional bureaucracy. *Mother Africa* could have been better served had it been released earlier with the necessary technical requirements». Nora Amin, *Mother Africa: A Fable of Colonisation and Destruction*, cit.

<sup>38</sup> Nora Amin, *Mohammed Abul-Seoud: The Revolutionary*, in "Ahram Weekly", 7/02/2019.



Muḥammad Abū 'l-Su'ūd with some preparatory paintings for “Mother Africa”.  
Courtesy of Dario Cincilla



Muḥammad Abū al-Su'ūd painting in his studio. Courtesy of Dario Cincilla.



Exhibition of paintings by Muḥammad Abū al-Su'ūd, held at Al Hanager Center  
in October 2014. Courtesy of Dario Cincilla



The character of Cat Mago captured during the show, played by Fahd Ibrāhīm.  
Courtesy of Muntaşir Bayūḍ.



The character of the wolf Lūnzā,  
played by Muḥammad Birīqa'.  
Courtesy of Muntaşir Bayūḍ.



The character of the owl Brūṭṭah,  
played by Munā Raḡab.  
Courtesy of Muntaşir Bayūḍ.