

Saudi Arabia's Jawqat al-Masrah (Theatre Choir Club)

An Interview with Director Turki Bā'Issa

Richard Schechner



I know there are strong human rights issues in and coming from Saudi Arabia. There are also progressive artists whose work makes a difference. In November 2022, as an honoree of the Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt) International Theatre Festival for Youth, I saw Ahmad Al-Enezi's *al-Sujanā' al-abrūr* (*Free Prisoners*) performed in a public square. The play was in Arabic, a language I do not understand, so I took meaning from what I saw. Later I read a translation of the play. For this Western viewer, the dramaturgical meaning of *Free Prisoners* diverged from what the director/script adaptor told me the performance was about. In the second scene, the two women performers stepped out of their full-length robes, suddenly revealing costumes of horizontal white-and-black stripes, prisoner suits. The two women beat up the man and fought physically with each other. They performed with no hijabs, fighting and dancing, their hair flowing freely as they turned and shook their heads. This scene suggested to me both restrictions and liberation from those restrictions. What playwright Al-Enezi wrote and what director Turki Bā'Issa told me the actors were performing was something else: in the first scene, the women were the artist's wife and sister;

Free Prisoners was performed at SITFY, the Sharm El-Sheikh International Theatre Festival for Youth. Founded in 2016 by Egyptian director, actor, and theatre professor Mazen El-Gharabawy, the purpose of the annual festival is to make “a meeting and exchange place for youth theatre especially that developed in schools of dramatic art, universities, and training centers all over the world” (Gharabawy 2022). SITFY has competitions in street theatre, nontraditional spaces, monodrama, and ensemble productions. SITFY gives “top priority” to works devised by persons younger than 40 and to shows using nontraditional spaces. In 2022, SITFY received 350 applications from 50 countries. Among the productions selected were works from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Tunisia, Sudan, Russia, Armenia, Iraq, Morocco, Romania, Germany, France, Sudan, Italy, Mexico, and Armenia.

After participating in SITFY, Jawqat al-Masrah returned to a busy schedule in Saudi Arabia. *Free Prisoners* was performed 20 times in Riyadh during December 2022—in shopping malls, parks, and the yard of the Saudi Food Festival. Also in December, the group mounted Yasser Al-Subaie’s *A Grandson for Rent!* In January 2023, they reprised *The Shadow Play* by Waleed Al-Nahas. In 2022, for her role in that play, the Riyadh Theatrical Forum for Innovative Performances named Namāriq ‘Ādil “best actress.” In March 2023, as part of the Year of Arab Poetry sponsored by Saudi Arabia’s Theater and Performing Arts Commission, they staged Turki Bā’Issa’s *The Bride*. All the productions were directed by Bā’Issa.

in the second scene, they represented the artist’s paintings, once imprisoned in his mind, but now free. Several days after seeing *Free Prisoners*, I interviewed the director, Turki Bā’Issa, and performers Donya Al-Enezī, Namāriq ‘Ādil, and Hamad Junaydil. We engaged with the help of a translator.

RICHARD SCHECHNER: Why is your performance called *Free Prisoners*?

TURKI BĀ’ISSA: The script by Ahmad Al-Enezī is about the misfortunes of a visual artist (*fanān tashkīlī*, lit. “figural artist”). This artist suffers from auditory and visual hallucinations. These psychic problems are because of all the pressures in his life. An unsupportive wife who quarrels with his sister who supports the artist’s choices. These things come to him as hallucinations, which come to life during the play. They are the characters, which finally he transforms into paintings. The conflict between this artist and society is sublimated into the conflict between him and his art.

SCHECHNER: But why is it called *Free Prisoners*?

BĀ’ISSA: It is called *al-Sujanā’ al-abrār* because he’s imprisoned within the confines of his society.

SCHECHNER: Did you work on the script?

BĀ’ISSA: I worked on the composition as a dramaturg. I adapted the play, which was written by Ahmad Al-Enezī, our club member.

SCHECHNER: So what are the restrictions within this artist’s society that he’s free from?

BĀ’ISSA: His society’s view of art. They approach it as a thing without value, a thing that does not earn a profit. His society does not give him any security, any livelihood. This artist transforms his conflict into paintings. He may have been constrained by the society he lives in, but he was always free in his art. Still, his paintings became prisoners, imprisoned by the people of his society. The paintings were imprisoned because he abandoned them, left them in the hands of the people, after they had been free, after they had been in their natural state.

Figure 1. (previous page) In the second scene of Free Prisoners by Ahmad Al-Enezī, the figures in the Artist’s paintings (Donya Al-Enezī and Namāriq ‘Ādil) struggle with each other. Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, 26 November 2022. (Photo courtesy of the Sharm El-Sheikh International Theatre Festival for Youth)

SCHECHNER: (*To the actors*) Do you all agree with this interpretation?

DONYA AL-ENEZĪ,
NAMĀRIQ ʿĀDIL, HAMAD
JUNAYDIL: Yes, sure.

SCHECHNER: Why at the end do the women rip up his paintings?

BĀʿISSA: They are taking vengeance upon the artist for imprisoning the paintings, making them playthings in the hands of the people. Revenge for the mutilation to which they were subjected, after they had been free.

SCHECHNER: So who are the two women in the piece?

BĀʿISSA: They are the artist's sister and his wife.

SCHECHNER: And why are they costumed in striped clothes looking like prisoners?

BĀʿISSA: Those costumes are part of the second scene. In the first scene they are dressed normally. In the second scene, wearing striped clothes they are the artist's paintings.

SCHECHNER: Sometimes prisoners are, or were, dressed that way in the United States. Do they dress prisoners that way in Saudi Arabia?

BĀʿISSA: No.

SCHECHNER: Why did you select this costume?

BĀʿISSA: Our assumption is that the play concerns the absolute. It does not refer to a particular country. When you think of prisoners, you think of the stripes.

SCHECHNER: Okay. So the women actors are prisoners. And they're taking revenge?

BĀʿISSA: Yes.

SCHECHNER: You performed *Free Prisoners* in Riyadh?

BĀʿISSA: Yes.



Figure 2. In scene 1 of *Free Prisoners*, the Artist's frustrated Wife (Donya Al-Enezī) berates him as his supportive Sister (Namāriq ʿĀdil) watches from a distance. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 15 December 2022. (Photo by Abdullah Alfaki)



Figure 3. In scene 2 of *Free Prisoners*, the Artist's paintings turn on him. From left: the Artist (Hamad Junaydil), his Sister (Namāriq 'Ādil), and his Wife (Donya Al-Enezi). Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, 26 November 2022. (Photo courtesy of the Sharm El-Sheikh International Theatre Festival for Youth)

BĀ'ISSA: February 2022.

SCHECHNER: I think it would surprise a lot of people to see women performing without any kind of head covering. That's not the impression most people in the USA have of Saudi Arabia. And in your daily life, you do wear a hijab?

AL-ENEZĪ and 'ĀDIL: No.

AL-ENEZĪ: The law in Saudi Arabia grants great freedoms to women to wear what they want.

SCHECHNER: I thought it was against the law in Saudi for women to be in public without a hijab, maybe even also an abaya.

SCHECHNER: Without any headcover? How can you perform this piece in Saudi? I thought it's against the law for women to appear in public dressed this way.

BĀ'ISSA: There is no violation of the law, and all our work is carried out according to the freedom granted to us in the law. We work with an official license from the concerned authorities in our country. There is a great acceptance now of these forms of performance. There are great changes at the level of culture and entertainment in the kingdom. Artistic freedom has greatly increased.

SCHECHNER: So you performed *Free Prisoners* in Riyadh exactly as I saw it here in Egypt?

ACTORS: Yes.

SCHECHNER: How did audiences in the kingdom react to the performance?

BĀ'ISSA: They were very delighted with the first staging of the show. This is what encouraged us to stage it after that in Tunisia, and this is the third time, in Egypt.

SCHECHNER: When did you first do it in Saudi?

‘ĀDIL: This is not true, it may have been before, now it’s fine.

BĀ‘ISSA: In light of the kingdom’s “Vision 2030”¹ and its unlimited support for the culture and arts sector in an ambitious national project to enrich the cultural sector in Saudi Arabia, we are taking our rights to a high level, especially with respect to culture and the arts. A Saudi woman first appeared in the Saudi theatre in 2018.

SCHECHNER: A woman from your theatre?

BĀ‘ISSA: No.

SCHECHNER: How many people are in your group?

BĀ‘ISSA: The troupe has more than 40 actors, actresses, designers, and crew.

SCHECHNER: Was *Free Prisoners* a play brought to you or did you devise it?

AL-ENEZĪ: An author offered it to us, and ustādh [director] Turki adapted it for us.

SCHECHNER: You are the only director in the group?

BĀ‘ISSA: That’s correct.

SCHECHNER: Do you perform only in the street?

BĀ‘ISSA: Sometimes we stage shows in the proscenium theatre. But our group currently is activating street theatre in the kingdom.

SCHECHNER: What kind of street performances? What kind of plays?

BĀ‘ISSA: A recent one is *The Shadow Play*, which is a conversation about modernity and what was before modernity—a conversation between Colin Wilson, the English writer, and Charles Baudelaire, the French poet.

SCHECHNER: And who performed?

BĀ‘ISSA: Hamad and Namāriq.

SCHECHNER: (*To the actors*) Is acting how you earn your living? Or do you need other jobs to support yourself?

AL-ENEZĪ: For me, it’s only acting.

SCHECHNER: Who supports the theatre? Where does the money come from?

1. The aspirational “Vision 2030” was launched in 2016. For the full 85-page text go to: www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf. With regard to culture, youth, and women, the “Vision” states: “We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our prosperous economy. It is why we will support the efforts of regions, governorates, non-profit and private sectors to organize cultural events (22). [...] We will increase the number and variety of cultural and entertainment activities with the aim of opening dedicated venues to showcase our citizens’ myriad talents. We will also review our regulations to simplify the establishment and registration of amateur, social and cultural clubs (27). [...] Our economy will provide opportunities for everyone—men and women, young and old—so they may contribute to the best of their abilities. [...] One of our most significant assets is our lively and vibrant youth. We will guarantee their skills are developed and properly deployed. [...] Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy” (37). It remains to be seen how much of the “Vision” will be realized.



Figure 4. Spectators watching Free Prisoners in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 20 December 2022. (Photo by Abdulla Alfaki)

BĀ'ISSA: The Ministry of Culture's Theatre and Performing Arts Authority.

SCHECHNER: How many years has your group been in existence?

BĀ'ISSA: Two years.

SCHECHNER: And more than 40 people work full-time in the theatre?

BĀ'ISSA: The company members work outside the theatre. Except for Donya, she is an artist, this is her job.

SCHECHNER: Donya, do you act with other groups as well?

AL-ENEZĪ: Yes, with other groups too.

SCHECHNER: How long have you been a full-time professional actor?

AL-ENEZĪ: Now it's four years.

SCHECHNER: Why did you choose to become an actor? When you were growing up there weren't any women actors in Saudi, were there? There were plenty in Egypt, on the stage and in film and television, but not in Saudi. You're a pioneer. Your group is a pioneer. This is a new play. How did you decide to do this? What was your road to this?

AL-ENEZĪ: It's a business for me. I like film acting. I am schooled by observing Egyptian films. The business came by chance in the beginning. There was a commercial, just a

commercial for university students. Then after starting in commercials, bit by bit I began serials, short films, and after that, theatre.

SCHECHNER: And what is your story, Namāriq?

‘ĀDIL: I am debuting, I never tried theatre before. Like Donya, I performed mostly in commercials. The first time I performed in the theatre was in Riyadh this past month. I won the award for best actress. That was the first time, this is the second time.

SCHECHNER: And you, Hamad?

JUNAYDIL: Acting was a new discovery for me. I started making commercials. After that I developed more into theatre. That started a few months ago, in February 2022.

SCHECHNER: And Turki, how did you get involved? What training did you have as a director?

BĀ’ISSA: My main specialization is public law and political science; I obtained a master’s degree in that specialization from France in 2018. I have been working for years as a university professor in my field. My relationship with theatre started in middle school at the age of 13 as an actor. After that, in King Saud University [Jāmi‘a al-Malik Sa‘ūd]. But I did not receive an academic education in theatre. I work in theatre as an amateur.

SCHECHNER: Were you trained in a theatre class?

BĀ’ISSA: In theatre clubs. But then eventually there were some courses offered by King Saud University, Umm al-Qura University, and the Society for Culture and Arts, in Riyadh and Makkah [Mecca]. From them I received practical training. They took me by the hand and transmitted to me the ability to direct.

SCHECHNER: Any one in particular?

BĀ’ISSA: Yes, several. Zakī Yamānī from the Intermediate High School in Makkah; and Ayed Al-Baqami, Mishaal Al-Qadib, and Ahmed Al-Suhaimi from King Saud University.

SCHECHNER: What is your working process?

BĀ’ISSA: I go to the text in the beginning to see if it is fit for performance or not. After that I choose the actors and actresses.

JUNAYDIL: After Turki looks at the text, we actors gather together. We take about a week or two to read the text. We try to write down the truth of all the characters, their backstories.

SCHECHNER: And the staging?

‘ĀDIL: The director determines what character might be suitable for which of us. We begin long rehearsals. After each rehearsal, Turki gives us comments necessary to develop our characters.

SCHECHNER: How long between the time you first get the script and when you show it to the public?

‘ĀDIL: A month to two months.

SCHECHNER: What are your plans now?

BĀ’ISSA: We’re going to perform *Free Prisoners* 18 more times in Riyadh.

SCHECHNER: One more question. How did you get the name, Theatre Choir?

BĀĪSSA: Theatre Choir means an artistic group, and we chose this name to be a distinctive and unconventional name for our team. That was two years ago.

—Arabic responses translated by Kenneth Molloy

Reference

Gharabawy, Mazen El. 2022. "Sharm El-Sheikh International Festival for Youth, SITFY The Seventh Edition, 25th–30th November 2022." Press release, author's archive.