Brecht in Algeria: On the Question of Influence in Kateb Yacine’s Late Theater

NEIL DOSHI
University of Pittsburgh
doshi@pitt.edu

ABSTRACT

This article questions the formative role that Bertolt Brecht is regarded to have had on Algerian writer Kateb Yacine’s political theater in the 1970s and 80s. While Brecht did indeed play an important role in Algerian theater in the post-independence era, the assumption that he singularly shaped political theatrical forms in Algeria masks the particular trajectory of Kateb’s work. Focusing specifically on his play *Mohamed prends ta valse*, this essay revisits the broad historical and political contexts of Kateb’s theater to underscore the particularity of his practice after 1971 and to broaden the limiting analytic frames that cast his work in Brechtian terms. Attending to the important influence of local folk forms and Marxism-Leninism on Kateb’s practice, I call attention to both the multiple vectors that shaped his work and further question the flattening effect of metropolitan theater histories that decontextualize Brechtian practice as they ascribe influence.

In 1970, the poet, novelist, and playwright Kateb Yacine returned to his Algerian homeland after an extended stay in France and voyages abroad to Indochina and the Middle East.¹ By then, Kateb had earned renown as the “national” author of Algeria, whose reputation was founded on important works like the theater cycle *Le Cercle de représailles* (1955) and *Nedjma* (1956), a novel acclaimed by critics as the “authentic” expression in French of an Algerian nation. International fame awarded Kateb only limited recognition domestically, however, and he remained deeply conscious of the fact that language politics and prevailing illiteracy rates limited his readership in Algeria. “My name is known like that of a boxer, a star,” he admitted, “but the books say nothing in particular to the people since they haven’t read them” (qtd. in Arnaud, “Kateb Yacine et le théâtre” 138).² Kateb had first traveled to France in 1947 on a voyage that he described as one into “la gueule du loup” ‘the jaws of the wolf’ and his subsequent peripatetic career saw
him travel widely, departing from and returning to Algeria several times. But he intended the 1970 return to be definitive; having established himself as a “public author” abroad, he would now resolutely seek to engage with Algerian audiences. He opted to cease writing for publication and committed himself to producing political theater in local languages, for a broad Algerian public.

The decision to focus on theater was equally motivated by politics in post-independence Algeria. In Kateb’s eyes, the newly installed national elite had neglected to foster the growth of a democratic civil society and had thereby betrayed the impoverished Algerian population. Through performance, Kateb sought to develop a cultural form that would address the Algerian people as it gave voice to their history and desires. After initially collaborating with the group Le Théâtre de la Mer (Theater of the Sea) and producing proscenium-stage plays, Kateb founded his own troupe in 1975 and began experimenting with popular, mobile theater. Named Action Culturelle des Travailleurs (Workers’ Cultural Action or ACT), Kateb’s group practiced a theater that employed minimal props and spare settings for performances in public spaces, workplaces, and rural areas, in front of audiences with little or no access to modern drama. Produced in the local dialect, ACT’s ironic, parodic performance drew widely from both mainstream “elite” and popular cultural forms to deliver a trenchant critique of the political forces contributing to the social ills of the Algerian people.

In critical overviews of Algerian cultural history and the broad assessments of his oeuvre, Kateb’s career is commonly understood as following a trajectory that moves toward Brechtian practice and the dominant tendency is to consider his career as spanning two distinct phases: the tragedies, novels, and poetry that comprise his production prior to 1970 and the popular, Brechtian theater that he turns to later in life. Crucially, however, in interviews and his nonfiction writing, Kateb resisted associations with the German playwright/theorist, calling attention to the local forms and collaborative practices that inspired his group’s production. Despite the fact, many literary historians and critics persist in reading various degrees of Brechtian influence in Kateb’s work. In a weaker sense, Kateb is associated with Brecht in ways implying affinity and that loosely describe Marxist theater in general. In a stronger sense, Kateb is seen as malgré-lui turning to a Brechtian idiom. For instance, as the article on Kateb in the Oxford Companion to French Literature suggests, “Kateb’s early dramatic style is Brechtian and the later plays in French and Arabic continue and exaggerate this trend, even bordering on political caricature of the sort found in so-called ‘guerilla theatre”’ (France 421). Such assessments of Kateb’s theater parallel more general, global narratives of postcolonial drama that describe Brecht as playing a singular and enabling role for theater activists engaged in revolutionary cultural praxis.

In more specialized works on Algerian theater, critics offer a more nuanced, but still discusssable assessment. In his important texts on Algerian theater history, for instance, Ahmed Cheniki addresses the Brecht-mania that swept through the Algerian theater scene in the 1960s and 1970s. As Cheniki explains it, Brechtian practices closely aligned with political questions of state socialism debated in the context of post-independence Algeria. As Cheniki is careful to point out, Brecht was understood and adapted in a number of different ways that often significantly diverged from the “method” he practiced. The attention Cheniki pays to the multiplicity (and heterogeneity) of what is called Brechtian practice
usefully supplements the broader body of work that has sought to understand Brecht's importance in former colonies. Despite the keen insights he offers however, Cheniki seems to commit the same faulty use of Brechtian terminology that he describes: he acknowledges Kateb's clear statements rejecting the utility of the V-effect ('alienation' effect) for an Algerian public, but nonetheless insists on the presence of Brechtian forms in Kateb's didactic plays. He writes:

[This technique [the alienation effect] is not absent in Kateb Yacine's theater. The actors frequently take a certain distance with regard to the characters they play: they take on different roles, communicate directly with the public, halt the narrative, and restart, thereby creating gaps, which are the fundamental spaces of the "V-effect." We are not at all convinced by the negative judgment of the technique which is still strongly present in the narrative space of the popular storyteller. (68)]

The discussion problematically echoes the general ways Brechtian concepts have been misconstrued when taken out of context. As critics like Michael Patterson and Peter Brooker have suggested, what Brecht pursued was "de-alienation" of the bourgeois spectator and not a mode of performance that would necessarily detach the audience from the action on stage. The insistence on locating Brecht in Kateb's theater repeats the gesture of much of the criticism that affirms global Brechtian influence by construing Brechtian practices as transportable modes or tools that are operable in different contexts. Though Cheniki never asserts direct influence, his description of Kateb's practices in the terms of epic theater effaces the specific contexts and political motivations behind Kateb's work.

Focusing specifically on his play Mohamed prends ta valise (Mohamed Pack Your Bag), this essay revisits the broad historical and political contexts of Kateb's theater to underscore the particularity of his practice after 1971 and to broaden the limiting analytical frames that present his work in Brechtian terms. Attending to both the historical links that shaped Kateb's vision and the local practices that constitute the core of ACT's performances, I draw on (and adapt) Edward Said's notion of worldliness to retrace the contingent circumstances, times, and places of Kateb's theater and to recover the multiple affiliations that shape ACT's practices. To shift from questions of influence to questions of "world" in Saidian terms involves a critical vigilance to the field within which Kateb's plays act and are acted upon. Such a perspective considers global discourses of political theater as comprised not of vectors of influence that run from West to East or North to South, but rather of innumerable contact zones and complex networks of exchange. By resituating Kateb's radical theater in its particular postcolonial contexts, therefore, this essay calls, first, for a reassessment of how Kateb has been assimilated into a metropolitan vision of theater history and, second, for a broadening of the language and perspectives of these histories that remain limited by schemas that discount global discourses of political theater in favor of problematic Brechtian frameworks.

The general perception of Kateb's work as being heavily influenced by Brecht is due, in no small part, to the important role played by Jean-Marie Serreau, who directed Kateb's Le Cadavre encerclé in 1964. Along with Jean Vilar and Roger Planchon, Serreau is recognized for having played a key role in introducing post-World
War II French audiences to Brecht through both stage productions and the translation of key texts. In 1955, Serreau arranged a meeting between Brecht and Kateb, who had just completed the text for the tragedy *Le Cadavre encéclé*. It was a brief encounter that Kateb described as follows: “I told Brecht that, for me, the play [Le Cadavre encéclé] was a tragedy, and my words seemed to have stuck. Brecht suggested that he did not think that we lived in an era of the tragedy. I responded: ‘At present in Algeria, we are living a tragedy, and it is about that which I write’” (qtd. in Gafaïti 30). In light of this early conversation—and disagreement—Kateb’s subsequent turn to didactic, comic theater has been read as a convergence with Brechtian practice, motivated in part by the early collaboration with Serreau.

Of course, one would expect that Kateb would have been exposed to Brecht’s methods through Serreau and indeed, his turn to a theater that engages in a materialist critique resonates with Brechtian drama. But the notion that Kateb’s convergence with Brecht is more than simple affinity flattens the richness of what Serreau brought to the collaboration. In addition to his work on (and with) Brecht, Serreau is also known for launching the “New Theatre” of Adamov, Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet, a body of drama that he valued for its grotesque farce and in which he saw a liberating alternative to the classical theater. Further, Serreau resisted Brechtian orthodoxies, preferring instead to shape his theater in response to the specific contexts in which he worked. Indeed, his work with Kateb and later with Aimé Césaire was motivated by his impulse to continually seek out new inspiration for the French theater. Kateb does indeed credit him for training him in theater production, but one might question what version of Brecht Serreau might have mediated and if his work with Kateb might not also have been shaped by the “New Theatre.” Clearly, questions of influence have obscured the complicated genealogies and affiliations out of which Kateb’s work evolves. In this dissenting reading, one that resists the assimilation of Kateb’s work into modernist theater traditions represented by Brecht, I envision Kateb’s work evolving out of cultural practices shaped not only by Serreau, but also by the politics of Third World Marxism, through which Kateb looked to Vietnam for inspiration in his work. To situate the importance of Kateb’s visit to Asia, I turn to his play *Mohamed prends ta valise*.

Produced in collaboration with the theater group Théâtre de la Mer, *Mohamed prends* focuses on the mass immigration of post-independence Algerian workers to France and the hardships that they faced abroad. After a premiere in Algiers in 1971, Théâtre de la Mer toured the play in France, where it was staged in factories, worker’s dormitories, and schools. The play was subsequently adapted by ACT, who performed it numerous times in Algeria and completed a second tour in France. By 1975, the group claimed to have staged the play in front of over 350,000 spectators. Performed in dialectical Arabic, it underwent frequent revisions in response to audience feedback and actor improvisation. The available text is a French version assembled from actors’ notes and fragments of an original drafted in both Arabic and French.

The drama frames the history of emigration to France within the global history of colonialism, nationalism, and the founding of the Algerian nation-state. The thirty-nine constitutive, short scenes condense a vast history stretching from the beginnings of the European slave trade to the late twentieth-century moment of the play’s production. Through its multiple allusions, the opening scene vividly
underscores the vision that the performance presents, one in which colonial oppression is presented as the organizing principle of a vast, unfolding historical panorama. The play opens with a scene in which a slave-driver, a missionary, and a mufti (Islamic scholar) lead forward a group of slaves, played by the chorus. As the slave-driver's whip snaps in the air, the chorus situates the action with their song:

Here the work of colonialism
The mufti and missionary
At the side of the soldiers
In the name of heaven
Lead you to hell
Here the work of colonialism... (Kateb and Chergui 208)

The juxtaposition of the pith-helmet-wearing slave-driver, the missionary, and the mufti alludes to both the pre-European and Atlantic slave trade and the complicity of religious institutions in human trafficking and colonial exploitation. With little transition, such scenes flow into others that reference additional significant moments in colonial history—for instance, the French mandate in Palestine or the forced conscription of Algerian men into the French army during World War I. Resonance between such sequences depicting expropriation and colonial violence suggest patterns of repetition over time through modern history.

A series of episodes similarly addressing different moments of colonial exploitation flows seamlessly into depictions of the poor unemployed laborer, Mohammed who, unable to find work at home, leaves for France. At his departure, he is seen off by a group of workers—played by the chorus—who sing:

The youth of the country
Think of nothing but joining
The masses of emigrants,
And the unemployed are exported
To capitalist Europe
A sad human surplus
Wandering between train stations... (247–48)

The designation of the Algerian immigrant worker as “human surplus” (“triste surplus humain”), evoking the Marxian concept of “surplus value,” construes the worker as a commodity for export and affirms larger connections that Kateb and his group saw between emigration and the alienation of the worker under colonial rule. In a 1972 interview, Kateb elaborated on the subject, stating that “[a] war continues under the shadow of neo-colonialism. Before, the Algerian proletariat had a flesh and blood enemy: the colonizer. Now, he has a second enemy, the bourgeoisie and a quasi-feudal system that consciously organizes his emigration. This is political assassination” (Sarti 24). The assertion thinly veils a biting critique of Algerian developmental policy: as Kateb maintained, the accords facilitating the emigration of young men to France conveniently disguised the high unemployment and poverty rates at home that were symptoms of failed economic policy. Though the scene makes specific reference to the actuality of 1970s Algeria, its embedding in the overall arc of the play inscribes the particular history of Mohamed into the larger narrative of colonial exploitation.
The structure and language of *Mohamed prends* largely evolved out of Kateb's previous experience with his play *L'homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*, an homage to Hồ Chí Minh that was simultaneously staged in 1971 in Lyon and Algiers, at the Théâtre National d’Algérie. Whereas the Lyon production stressed movement and color to the detriment of the political discourse of the drama, the Algiers performance drew on a text translated from French to a version of Arabic that Kateb deemed too close to the classical dialect to be widely understood. This experience importantly shaped Kateb's subsequent desire to produce theater in popular dialects (see Arnaud, *Recherches* 575). In his period of experimentation with Théâtre de la Mer, during which the original idea of *Mohamed prends à travail* was collectively revised and (given Kateb's faltering Arabic) translated into a popular dialect, Kateb drew inspiration from his visit to Vietnam as he imagined the contours of a modern, popular, and political performance.

Historically, the French-Indochina war and Hồ Chí Minh's revolutionary call-to-arms were precursors to and an important inspiration for Algerian nationalists. For Kateb, the French defeat in Indochina was a pivotal moment in world history, one that he considered a signal to the colonized world. As Kateb suggested in a 1968 article:

> For the Algerian people, for all oppressed people, Điện Biên Phu burst like a bolt of lightning in a stormy sky. A colonized people had just vanquished on the battlefield the supposedly invincible great colonial power. For all the people who still endure slavery and humiliation, Điện Biên Phu was at once October and Stalingrad: a revolution on a global scale and an irresistible call to the wretched of the Earth. (Kateb and Kateb 312)

The remarkable statement places the 1954 battle of North Vietnamese independence and, indeed, the anti-colonial struggle, in general, in a chain of historical events that link the Russian revolution to the war against fascism. The global historical significance that the battle of Điện Biên Phu held for Kateb is echoed in much of his theater and reflects consonance of his beliefs with Marxist liberation theories of the 1960s and 1970s. This notion is captured most saliently in the above mention of “the wretched of the Earth,” referring to both Frantz Fanon's Pan-Africanism and, more broadly, to the global anti-colonial struggle.12

Such was the influence of Vietnamese history and Hồ Chí Minh's Marxism-Leninism that, by the late 1960s, Kateb had begun to refer to Algeria as the African Vietnam. In a speech delivered at a labor union congress in 1969, for example, Kateb suggested that “[y]ou are aware that the Vietnamese people are our brothers. We have led the same fight. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to visit the DRV and I tried to understand the impulses of our Vietnamese brothers, that which we lack to become the Vietnam of Africa...” (qtd. in Arnaud, *Recherches* 713–14). What was missing in Algeria, of course, was a leader like Hồ Chí Minh, a figure who, for Kateb, is singularly positioned to represent the Vietnamese people. In the same speech, Kateb continues, “I noted something very important regarding the leaders: Hồ Cho Minh, who passed half of his life in the movement, leads a very humble life, he wears rubber sandals and leads the same lifestyle as his people... He is conscious that if there is even the smallest gap between the leaders and the people, the revolution is in danger” (Ibid. 714). For Kateb, Hồ
Chi Minh seems to have incarnated the ideology of Marxist liberation theory. As major thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, and Hồ himself held, the political vanguard could only evolve out of a symbiotic relationship between the party and people.

Kateb's admiration for Hồ Chí Minh informed the fundamental questions he posed about the cultural domain and most appropriate artistic forms for a politics of the avant-garde. The events of his visit to the DRV provided a partial answer. By the late 1960s, the North Vietnamese government began to actively sponsor theater groups practicing traditional forms such as Chèo theater, performances of which Kateb was able to attend during his visit. A popular folk genre with a history that dates from the 10th century, Chèo narratives generally focus on the lives and folktales of rural people. The form is highly stylized, but also allows for improvisation, based on the requirements of the audience. The frequently comic plays are traditionally performed at ground level in open-air settings, in front of audiences who surround the performance area. Kateb was fascinated by what he saw and the dozens of pages of notes that he compiled during and after his travel to North Vietnam repeatedly mention this style of theater. As he observed:

The attraction of the Chèo rests essentially on the play of the actor. The universe is projected on the mat [where the play is staged] upon which characters evolve. The scene is unencumbered by décor and the action is sustained through gesture and song. The two chests that hold the accessories of the group as they travel also serve as elements in the representations: from one moment, they can be part of a royal throne, a student desk, or a mountain to be scaled. (7)

As subsequent notes indicate, Kateb valued Chèo for its intense focus on technique and symbolic gesture, the tools of the actor. Kateb suggests:

The folding fan is no simple accessory. Open or closed, it evokes meaning. For example, when it hides the face, the actor is imagined to be absent. There are no limits, no obstacles, neither in time or space. This is a free theater, where everything becomes possible with few means. Here, technique assumes its proper place. The poorest man in appearance is in fact the wealthiest, since he is divested of everything, but still capable, inventive, and ready for anything. . . . Constant contact is established between the stage and the spectator. No floodlights [or proscenium arch] separate them. The spectator is not passive: from his seat, he audibly expresses his opinion on the character who is acting who, in turn, can respond. (8)

For Kateb, theater like Chèo reflected in the cultural domain the role of the vanguard party that evolved through a dialectical relationship between political ideology and the spontaneous action of the people.

Beyond its capacity to capture the latent potential of its public, Chèo offered Kateb a theatrical model for staging historical events and facilitating the representation of links he saw between different forms of colonial exploitation. As he remarked:

Virtually the entire history—two millennia of it—is captured in the theater of Vietnam. Few people have been able to do as much. The old Vietnamese theater is entirely sung, and extraordinarily, it is truly popular. . . . Vietnamese theater
has a long tradition, and the play [that I saw] had been adapted over several centuries and recounted the history of the Troung sisters, who correspond to our Kahina. (qtd. in Gafaţ 32–33)

The comparison here between the Troung sisters, the Vietnamese national heroines who organized the rebellion against Chinese occupiers in 40 AD, and Kahina, the 7th-century Berber queen who led a resistance against Arab invaders, underscores Kateb’s enthusiasm for the form. Equally pertinent, the historical references indicate the major Marxist-Leninist thrust of his theater, in which history is envisioned as an ongoing anti-imperialist struggle. For Kateb, a theater that evolved in function of its public, while at the same time preserving histories of populist revolt, was crucial for the imagination of future possibility in a context where the Algerian revolution had been left unfinished. It would be a fallacy to think that Kateb simply adapted Chêo to the Algerian context. Indeed, he drew structure and techniques of pacing from it that facilitated the theatrical representation of a critical history. Further, Kateb recognized that its significance and attraction at the local level lay in its representation of a national history rooted in both the land and lives of the non-elite, rural populations.

The Algeria to which Kateb returned in 1970 lagged far behind in terms of the progress Kateb saw in Vietnam. At this time, Algeria had been subject to an unconstitutional government for six years: after overthrowing President Ben Bella in a 1965 coup d’etat, Houari Boumediene had abrogated the national assembly and annulled the 1963 constitution. Proceeding in this way, the authoritarian state attempted to neutralize opposition and as it began the process of constructing state institutions unencumbered by a priori doctrines and constitutional constraints. The formation of the Algerian state under the Boumediene regime and the reactivation of a nationalist discourse were largely predicated on the assertion of an Arabo-Muslim conception of the Algerian state over and against the actual diversity of the Algerian nation, in a process that Hugh Roberts has called “anti-national nationalism” (28).

The outcomes of post-independence nation building in Algeria, effected by a technocratic elite and carried out at the expense of the mass citizenry, parallels the post-independence outcomes of many newly decolonized states. As David Lloyd has argued, nation-states that arise out of nationalist movements and that are presumed to be the outcome of historical process can only admit certain types of developmental timelines. In this, movements whose struggles coincide with nationalism but whose contents are not completely aligned with the national cause are marginalized. Lloyd writes, “Other traits, which may indeed be incompatible with nationalism, such as modes of organization and communication and certain kinds of spiritualism, are relegated to the residual space of historical contingency. Here they constitute the non-sense, the irrepresentable of historiography” (178). As Kateb had acutely recognized, in the context of Algeria, what had been relegated to the margin of history was the pluralist notion of the Algerian people.

For Algerian artists like Kateb, who sought to develop modes of modern, national artistic expression incorporating folk forms, the conventional historical narrative holds that Brecht’s open theater was influential insofar as it offered an ideological basis for melding reflection on contemporary concerns with exploration of popular forms. This notion that there had to influence that conditioned
Algerian theater—whether through Brecht or any other playwright—is motivated in part by the consensus that the Islamic strictures on human representation limited the development of theater institutions in Arab-world countries. In this context, forms of orature and popular spectacle are seen as local nodes of performance that are theater-like in a broader context, whereas institutional, formal theater is seen as having a very recent history. My aim here is not to contest this broad history, but rather Kateb’s part in it. Kateb was, of course, aware of and in fact admired the work of the other great Algerian playwrights like Abdelkader Ould Adberrahmane (known as “Kaki), who, in the course of his career, both adapted Brecht and gained renown for his staging of the folkloric character Djo’ha. If, on the one hand, there is an international dimension to Kateb’s work that derives from his visit to Vietnam, I argue that there is a particular engagement with local forms and the theater institution in Algeria that distinguishes his trajectory, for which the historical tendency to read his work as Brechtian is inadequate.

In an incomplete transcript of a paper delivered in 1967-68 in Algeria, at a moment before he began to work with ACT but when he had clearly begun to imagine a popular theater project, Kateb suggested that:

What we want, and here I think of the works of Césaire, Leroi Jones, Peter Weiss, or Armand Gatti, is a resolutely modern theater that is avant-garde and directed to the greatest public possible, a theater that springs from the people and turns towards the masses without concessions—not a theater for escapism, not a closed theater for 300 bourgeois... but a theater of open space, a theater of the people, a theater that attacks and moves the spectator. And to illustrate this new theater, one can find no better example than that of Federico Garcia-Lorca, the Spanish poet assassinated by France [sic], who crossed Spain with a mobile troupe called “La báraca”... Here is true theater, and a true public. It is in this direction that we must work. (4-5)

The startling constellation of artists Kateb cites revolves around twentieth-century Marxisms mediated through literary and theater forms and it inscribes ACT’s work in a wide, if not global, tradition of political theater. All of the artists whom Kateb names were deeply invested in a public theater that sought not to reform the bourgeois theater as such (like Brecht), but rather imagined alternative forms of modern performance founded on a politics of inclusivity and rooted in local forms of performance. Kateb’s ideas are, in fact, echoed in the reflections that Amiri Baraka (aka Leroy Jones) offered regarding the Black Cultural Movement:

The Black Arts Movement and, with that the Black Theater Movement, wanted to create a poetry, a literature, which directly reflected the civil rights and black liberation movements. We wanted an art that was recognizably African-American (like Duke Ellington or Billie Holiday or Charlie Parker) that was mass-oriented, a poetry for instance that could come out of the libraries into the streets where the people were. Not a poetry whose very profundity was measured by who it didn’t reach, by who it was not relevant to. A poetry that was direct, understandable, moving, and political. And lastly an art that was revolutionary, poetry that would help transform society. (152)

Notable in Baraka’s comments is the fact that his conception of art and poetry is distinguished by its recognizably “African-American” character, through which a
critique of literary canons, cultural institutions, and high and low culture would be articulated.

Further notable is Baraka's use of the term poetry to refer to a seemingly broad range of genres. Like Baraka, Kateb insisted on a conception of cultural production that dissolved the boundaries between genres to stress the contribution of his public. Kateb rejected portrayals representing him as the national author of Algeria and sole playwright for ACT, choosing instead to underscore the collective nature of all of his works. As he responded in a 1972 interview, “A great author? I am rather a myth. I have represented up until now, one aspect of alienation in Algerian culture. I was considered a great writer because France had decided it” (Arnaud, “Kateb Yacine” 138). Such resistance to the notion of literary authorship was rooted in his particular vision of the relationship between writer and public. “If one wants to start a revolution,” he argued, “the writer must not express himself but rather enable others to express themselves . . . a writer must rather pass his time in making others speak . . . rather than imagining others in his mind” (Ibid. 148). Kateb’s statement highlights the importance of a “productive” public for his popular form. Of course, as critics like Susan Bennett have indicated, Brecht similarly sought to perform for wider (working-class) audiences and, particularly toward the end of his career, began to increasingly stress the productive potential of an audience. However, Brecht’s underlying method relied on the architecture of the prosценium stage and the initial separation of the actor and audience that would be progressively reduced during the performance. For Kateb and ACT, the challenge lay rather in developing a form of theater suited to changing environments, for a public accustomed to popular spectacle. As critics like Kamal Salhi have argued, ACT’s production hinged on its adaptation of the Ḥalqa form (88).

Meaning both “episode” and “link in a chain” in Arabic, Al-ḥalqa is a theatrical form popular in much of the Arabo-Islamic world, the shape of which describes public gatherings that encircle one or more storytellers, or meddah. Combining legend with bawdy stories, music, and dance, the traditional meddah plays an important role both in disseminating information and entertaining his public. In a typical performance surrounding the meddah, the audience enjoys the freedom to drift in and out of the space, where individuals can be recruited to play a part or be asked to voice an opinion. As Khalid Amine, and Marvin Carlson have suggested, the Ḥalqa mirrors the “morphology” of the North African city, which is normally arranged around a center square with many exits and entry ways. This observation sustains the continuity seen between the collective life of the community and the “social architecture” of this theatrical form that allows for a range of participatory action.

In a short text titled “The Sung Theatre” (“Le Théâtre chanté”), included in his notes taken in Vietnam, Kateb describes, in the language of a manifesto, the broad contours of the theater he sought to create and indicates how the Ḥalqa might have been incorporated into ACT practice:

True humanity, as it has appeared in the liberation struggles of the people of all continents, today reaches its mature stage. This is a new development [and] it will be now be necessary to contend with the slave and coolee who join the proletarian to besiege the old world and all that it places upon its shrine: its culture, language, and limited, retrograde theater.
The experiences of this theater aren’t useless. . . . One can use the classic repertory, delve into folklore, experiment with new techniques, and create a new resolutely political theater that reflects the fullness of life, without dogmatic constraints, and without sacrificing liberty of expression in either staging or criticism. (9)

The mention of the “slave” and “cooie” who join the ranks of the proletariat repeats the anti-imperialist Marxist ideology of much of his writing on Vietnam and the overall rhetoric is reminiscent of Fanon’s native intellectual seeking “the learning of the future” (Fanon 225). Yet further notable is the liberty that Kateb maintains. The theater he imagines incorporates from multiple traditions, inscribing the local struggle into the global movement. The Halqa constitutes one facet of an evolving production that emerges out of live performance. Of course, this, in itself, mirrors the language of internationalist Marxisms that envisage local struggle in terms of the global. But in regard to theater history, a full account of Kateb’s drama recognizes this multifaceted nature of productions to account for multiplicity rather than reaffirming a global Brechtian influence.

For Kateb, the Algerian revolution represented an incomplete project and, through productions with ACT, he sought to reactivate a vision of the nation based on the recognition of the heterogeneous and polyglot character of the population. ACT’s theater worked not only to interpellate the public into modern political life, but also to reinvent the terms of political critique and break down the developmental ideologies disseminated from the national center. In this regard, plays such as Mohamed prends belong to the types of radical cultural movements that Lloyd defines as those that, “. . . as part of their dynamic, demand that priority be given to local analysis, so also local cultural forms cease to be seen as atavistic survivals of primordial cultures and are rediscovered as functioning resources of their own irreducible contemporaneity” (188). By promoting a theater of dialogue and collective deliberation, then, ACT sought to open spaces for the local reinvention of the terms of political belonging and national identity.

The final scene of Mohamed prends captures in its action these complex links between the local and the global, the historical and the contemporary. The end of the play finds the protagonist, Mohammed, returning home penniless from France and the action opens with his wife alone in front of her home. She is successively approached by four characters who embody the dominant ideologies of post-independence Algeria and the pernicous forces of neocolonialism: the forces of Islam represented by Le Mufifi, the force of capital represented by Boudinar (whose name derives from the dialectical Arabic “abou,” meaning father, and “dinar,” referring to the Algerian currency), the force of law represented by the judge Le Caïd, and the French and Algerian technocratic industry leaders represented by the humorously named Pompez-tout (literally “pump everything” in reference to Algeria’s oil economy and to Georges Pompidou, French president from 1969 to 1974).

Each of the characters appears at Aïcha’s door with the intent of seducing her. The audience knows that she will not yield to their advances, but surprisingly, she invites all of the men to return to her house on the same day. At the appointed times, the men return; the Mufifi arrives first and Aïcha invites him into her abode. They are almost immediately interrupted by Boudinar and, in order for the Mufifi to save face, lest he be discovered seducing another man’s wife, Aïcha orders him
to undress and pose in her hut, as though a statue. The comedy is repeated with Le Caïd and Pompez-tout until finally, Mohammed arrives home to find four nude men posing in his small abode. As he stands flabbergasted, Aïcha says to him, “There is one man whom I love here. / The others are just stand-ins” (Kateb and Chergui 232). The comedy continues until Mohamed grabs hold of a stick and beats the interlopers out of the house. The chorus, which had earlier merged with the audience, moves back into the performance area to surround the four men. As the stage notes indicate, Boudinar and Pompez-tout slip away, but the chorus manages to tie Caïd with a rope and then, after handing the Mufti a shovel, watch him as he begins to work. Whereas the chorus, up until this point, had largely commented in ways that linked particular actions to broader themes, their action here directly intervenes in the scene. The tying up and forced labor effectively reduce the Caïd and Mufti to the level of Mohamed, the poor laborer, himself. Though Boudinar and Pompez-tout slip away, Mohamed closes the play promising to continue the fight against colonialism.

I dwell on this scene to convey, in small part, the slapstick humor and movement in the play, but also, importantly, to describe how, by forcibly expelling the men from his home, Mohammed effects what amounts to a destruction of national imagery. The scene, itself, transposes popular, comic Algerian stories about poor women who outsmart the wealthy, lascivious men who prey on them into an allegory of the destruction of the national idols. Beating Boudinar, Le Caïd, the Mufti, and Pompez-tout, Mohamed effectively severs all ties to characters that represent facets of a problematic national identity. As he expels the four figures out of the house, Mohammed indicates the gap between the ideology the characters represent—ideologies that affirm the spiritual and economic development of the Algerian state—and their actual perverse rapacity. Though characters like Mohamed and Aïcha are, in a real sense, allegorical figures of the disenfranchised Algerian population, Mohamed’s scheming, irony, and constant willingness to take on different roles to turn matters in his favor make him more than a symbol of a fixed, minority identity. The pedagogical aspect of the play lies, therefore, not in any assertion of finitude or in a recuperation of Algerian-ness, but rather in its indication of the limitations of post-independence national identity and the opening of the position occupied by Mohamed, symbol of a disenfranchised public, to definition by the viewer. Indeed, rather than positing the grounds for a totalizing Algerian identity, Mohamed prends focuses on the performance space itself as the site of transformation and meaning-making—a site where the basis of national identity is subject to renegotiation. In a context where idolatry is strictly forbidden (according to Islamic law), the fact that ACT would have represented the Mufti and Caïd undressing and posing as statues was, to say the least, provocative. I analyze this scene as one in which Mohamed does more than simply evict intruders—his actions reveal the Mufti and Caïd as actors whose roles are subject to judgment by the audience, who are placed in the position of “authorizing” the performance. Indeed, Kateb’s theater traces a complicated path between the global anti-colonial struggle and local Algerian politics.

Much recent criticism around Brecht has attempted to elaborate a more nuanced description of his career that considers both the ways he adapted aspects of Chinese theater and the productive role that his audiences played in performances of his works.15 This approach, tracing the genealogy of what has been
labeled “Brechtian,” merits further consideration in contexts like Algeria, where
the dominant characteristic of theater history seems to have been to associate
Brecht with any alternative to naturalist theater. In the case of Kateb Yacine, the
label of “Brechtian”—whether used as awkward shorthand to describe political
theater or as a label indicating influence—obscures the multiple affiliations that
shaped his work and his important investment in the politics of liberation theory.
Uncovering these complex links, I seek to reconsider influence as dialogue and to
indicate the richness of Kateb’s theatrical production post-1970.

NOTES
1. The name Kateb Yacine is a transposition of the artist’s birth-name, Yacine Kateb,
which was erroneously inverted by French colonial administrators. As a partly critical,
partly humorous gesture, Kateb continued to publish under the name listed in French
official records. As do other critics writing about Kateb Yacine, I will refer to the artist
by his actual surname, Kateb.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.
3. Regarding this idea of “betrayal,” Kateb maintained that “[it] is important to
understand that the Algerian people walk with a knife in their backs, that they have
been betrayed by their leaders. . . . The true martyrs are perhaps not the dead but
among the survivors” (Le Poète 35).
4. For example, in the otherwise excellent Remnants of Empire, Pamela Pears
suggests that “In fact, all of Kateb’s theatrical productions are similar to Brecht’s in that
he sees them as what the literary critic John Hodgson calls ‘weapons to bring about
social change’” (47).
5. For a critique of Brecht’s iconic status in Africa in particular, see Crow.
6. For further elaboration, see Kruger.
7. For a history of Brecht’s reception in France, see Dhoquios.
8. For an extremely useful reading of Kateb’s tragedies that also reflects on this
meeting, see Finburgh.
9. For example, see Aouadi.
10. Elisabeth Auclair-Tamaroff’s text remains the most important for any considera-
tion of Jean-Marie Serreau’s work in the French theater.
11. Emigration from Algeria accelerated after 1962, when the booming French
economy and rapid industrial expansion called for substantial additional labor power
(Stora 413). The French nation opened its doors to North African laborers who, eager to
escape unemployment and political instability at home, emigrated en masse to the for-
mer colonial center. Due to the bureaucratic incompetence of the immigration authori-
ties in France, domestic companies began to recruit—often illegally—workers from
Algeria. Algerian immigrant laborers (and particularly illegals) in France frequently
found themselves in deplorable, exploitative living and work conditions.
12. For a history of liberation theory in the context of Marxism, see Parry.
13. See Huu Ngoc and Borton.
14. For example, see Dahmane.
15. See essays in Martin and Bial.

WORKS CITED
Amine, Khalid, and Marvin A. Carlson. The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia:
Aouadi, Saddek. “Bertolt Brecht et Kateb Yacine: De l’opposition à la convergence.”


———. Notes Taken in Vietnam, ts. The Kateb Yacine Archives, Box KTB 3, Folder 15. L’Institut mémoires de l’édition contemporaine, Caen, France.


