

From Page to Stage: Creating Original Theatre in Kuwait

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Writer Craig Loomis, Assoc. Prof. of English at the American University of Kuwait, published a book in 2013 called The Salmiya Collection. In it, he described the diverse experiences of everyday life in a part of the world not clearly known or understood by outsiders: Salmiya, Kuwait. His tales chronicle ordinary Kuwaitis, expatriot professionals, local students, parents, and children as they struggle to make their way in a complex and changing world. The collection's complex group of characters and situations resonated with me on a universal level, rather than just speaking to a specific time and place. I became convinced that the stories' themes of change and transition, and the tensions they cause, would resonate with a larger audience in our ever-changing world. First, however, Dr. Loomis' short stories had to be adapted to fit the theatrical structure of short plays. Writer Ken Downs, a former newspaper editor and current teacher, transformed the short stories into staged vignettes about daily life in the Middle East and, in particular, Salmiya, Kuwait. Several revisions later, the collection of short stories has emerged as nine one-act plays woven together as the full-length play, Long Ago and not so Far Away. Bringing this project together was not easy. Casting, rehearsals, rewrites, and weaving together both the pieces and the ensemble posed special challenges. This paper discusses how these challenges were overcome in our quest to create an original theatre experience about the Middle East—and life in general—that would be reflective without being alienating, and remain true to Dr. Loomis' vision and voice.

Introduction

I live, teach, and direct in Salmiya, Kuwait, a part of the world that is not well known or clearly understood by outsiders. The small theatre program at the American University of Kuwait is one of the few western-style university theatre programs in the Middle East. Many of my Arab students look upon theatre as little more than a showcase for their acting talents. Western-style

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discipline entailing commitment to the production and a theatrical ensemble is unheard of.

Community theatres such as the Kuwait Little Theatre, sponsored by the Kuwait Oil Company, have been around since at least the 1940s. They consist primarily of ex-patriot citizens producing dramas and musicals that cater almost exclusively to other members of the expatriot community. Although a few other theatre companies try to engage members of the local population as participants, they do not adhere to a western-style work-ethic because of the difficulty getting host country nationals to commit to a regimented work schedule. Local residents talk about occasional theatrical celebrations connected with a holiday, or new television productions that copy western concepts to make money, but original theatre that reflects current society is almost non-existent. Self-reflection, like taking pride in one's work, does not seem important to my students or the general public.

Despite this, I decided to mark the tenth anniversary of the opening of the American University of Kuwait with a Spring 2014 production that would ask audiences consisting largely of AUK students, faculty, and family and friends of cast members, to take part in a reflective experience as members of an ensemble creating an original drama about life in Kuwait. Bringing this project together was not easy. Casting, rehearsals, rewrites, and weaving together both the short stories and the ensemble posed special challenges. This paper discusses how these challenges were overcome in my quest, as Harold Clurman said in his book *The Fervent Years*, "to form a theatre that would educate the audience and contribute something to society" (Clurman, 1945, pp.194-195).

International theatre ventures have been in vogue in recent years. On March 11, a collaborative theatre project between the University of Iowa and the University of Baghdad brought together actors, writers, directors and translators from the United States and Iraq for a live, interactive, Internet-streamed theatre initiative that produced six original short plays about life in Iraq (Davidson, 2014a). Two days later, The University of Iowa and the Moscow Art Theatre produced six short plays for the virtual stage in a format identical to that used with the University of Baghdad. UI student Sara Cooper, who viewed both events, commented (Davidson, 2014c) that the most interesting feature of the events was "the many layers on which cultural exchange could be tracked." Another UI student, Gwendolyn Gillson, enthused that "the tensions in the plays were palpable in the audience sitting in the Iowa City theater, as though the performances on stage and the images on screen were reaching out and affecting the audience in ways only live theater can do" (Davidson, 2014b).

Last year, Iraqi female students at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani performed Iraqi-American playwright Heather Raffo's play *9 Parts of Desire*. According to the July/August 2013 issue of *American Theatre* magazine, the 2005 play attempted to "humanize Iraqis for American audiences," while new staging by American actor/director Jillian Armenante attempted to "show Iraqis to themselves." "To know that this was a popular play in the U.S. broke down stereotypes for [Iraqis] about who Americans are

and what we care about,” Raffo told the magazine (Weinert-Kendt, 2013, p.13).

Kuwaiti playwright, Sulayman Al-Bassam is founder of Zaoum Theatre Company in London in the 1990s and Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre Kuwait a decade later. His productions, which tour internationally, are designed, according to the SABAB website, “to engage with issues of identity, history, language and culture” in an attempt to link the Arab world to a larger global community (SABAB Theatre). According to a Web site that tracks cultural trends in the Middle East and North Africa, his works are seldom produced in Kuwait (“Kuwait:Theatre”).

AUK does not have the resources of the Moscow Art Theatre, nor the international audience of Al-Bassam. Still, I wondered whether it was possible to engage an audience in a social discourse about life in Kuwait. Was it possible to create theatre that would be reflective without being alienating, and would remain true to the vision and voice of a playwright? More important, could such a performance, as Aristotle suggested in *The Poetics*, speak on a universal level rather than just to a specific time and place (Ferguson, 1961, p.33).

The true inspiration for this attempt to stage an original play in what appeared to be a theatrical desert was *The Salmiya Collection: Stories of the Life and Times of Modern Kuwait*, a compendium of 46 short stories by author and AUK English professor Craig Loomis (Loomis, 2013). Loomis’ tales chronicle ordinary Kuwaitis, expatriot professionals, local students, parents and children as they struggle to make their way in a complex, changing world. I was convinced that his themes of change and transition would resonate with a larger audience.

The first step was to choose a selection of Loomis’ short stories to be rewritten in a theatrical structure. The job of transforming the short stories into staged vignettes about daily life in Salmiya (and by extension the world) would fall to Kendall Downs, a teacher, former newspaper editor, and frequent contributor to my productions. Loomis’ economy of style made the task easier.

The two writers and I were well-aware that the use of language involves more than logical discourse and grammatical structure. Loomis, as a short-story writer, and Downs, as an editorial writer, chose their words carefully. Loomis didn’t want the audience to lose sight of the fact that his stories are observations about our world in Kuwait, not critiques. Downs was concerned that his writing should remain true to the voice of Loomis’ short stories. As a former Communication teacher, I was well versed in Kenneth Burke’s caution about the social context of language usage and its function of persuasive appeal. Burke’s ideas about the function of language and, “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings” (Burke, 1952, p.41) echoed in my mind. I also wanted to present these vignettes as observations we could all relate to and laugh about together.

I was drawn to two stories about blue-collared workers in Kuwait, but we decided that it would be unwise to address the treatment of expatriot workers during our first foray into socially significant theatre in Kuwait. We also

vetoed stories that touched on controversial topics such as homosexuality. Something different happens when certain words are voiced in public rather than read in private. To put it simply, we were all aware that we were living in an environment where too much public self-reflection sometimes is discouraged. The Kuwait government allows U.S. television shows that feature violence, nudity, drugs and alcohol to be streamed into private homes by satellite TV providers, but the same government severely censors films and books that are intended for public display.

At the beginning of the process, I thought some sort of comparison between U.S. life and Kuwaiti life might be needed to fill out the evening. Not knowing how well the short stories would translate, I considered interweaving scenes from Loomis' stories with David Ives' one-act plays in *All in the Timing*. In the end, however, that device proved unnecessary because we found seven one-acts from *The Salmiya Collection* to act as the body of the play, bookended by two other Loomis stories that had not been published in *The Salmiya Collection*.

Dr. Loomis would suggest certain stories that he thought worked particularly well, and invariably they were the same stories to which we had been drawn. Then, Downs would redraft each story as a scene in a play script. Copies of each scene were circulated and re-circulated, tweaked and re-tweaked by each of us in turn as we proceeded cautiously through topics such as arranged marriages, segregated classes, jealousy, freedom, second wives, military service, and that most dangerous of territories: religion. The working play script was christened *Long Ago and Not So Far Away*.

The nine scenes could have been a disparate group. One scene consisted of two short stories played back-to-back because of the simple expedient that they both took place in a professor's office and involved universal issues: student tardiness and placement in developmental classes. Other scenes were set in a mall, at a pool, at the beach, in a coffee shop, outside an apartment building, and in an army recruiting center. Three scenes take place, at least in part, in a university classroom. Some characters appear only once, others have recurring roles, and more than once it is left to the audience's imagination whether a character is the same or different from one in an earlier scene (Downs, 2014). Traditional drumming that echoed Kuwait's seafaring past provided a unifying link.

Loomis largely engineered the order of the stories, with the exception of the opening and closing scenes. I found a story I thought would work as an end piece. *Old Men at a Seaside Café in Winter* centered around four old Kuwaiti men who gather regularly at a café near the Arabian Gulf to bemoan their changing world. This proved to be the most popular scene in the show, and a fitting close for the play.

Finding a piece to open the play proved more difficult. The story we finally selected was *The Teacher's Weekend Report*, which was first written in Cyprus and later published in the April 2014 edition of *Bazaar* magazine (Loomis, 2014, p.104). In it, a writer and professor struggles with one of education's more basic conflicts: a writer's passion for his work versus student

indifference to anything that isn't going to be on the test. As a result, the short story was only in part about life in Kuwait. Eventually, however, this vignette became one of our favorites.

As the process of revisions continued (only about three rounds of circulation were needed) I became concerned about the number of stories we wanted to include. Other faculty members, hearing about what we were doing, also made suggestions about favorite stories they hoped would be included. In the end, we probably could have used a few more scenes because the show ran one hour and fifteen minutes, plus a twelve-minute intermission. During the six week rehearsal period, however, the nine scenes appeared to be more than enough vignettes about life in Kuwait.

In honor of AUK's tenth anniversary celebration, I envisioned a cast made up of everyone I had worked with in previous productions. I thought this would lighten the load for students who had limited experience with the demands of a western-style production. In addition, it would ensure different international perspectives about the characters involved in the situations depicted in the scenes. The ensemble ultimately grew to twenty members, including the two writers and me. With the exception of a few students who had other commitments, everyone I had worked with before was involved in the final product. I made the decision that I would not meet with all the students each rehearsal. Instead, I would work with individual actors in different scenes each night, and then bring the ensemble together for the last week of rehearsals before the play opened. Some students were involved in only one scene, while others were involved in as many as five. Even though the average load was two to three scenes for each participant, in retrospect, this may not have been the wisest decision.

I had never attempted to adapt a short story into a production before this, but this rehearsal schedule seemed a logical way to maximize the number of actors I could choose from to create an ensemble. The downside to this choice was that it wasn't until the end of the process that the students began to feel like an ensemble creating a world of the play. The responsibility for creating the work fell largely upon Ken and me. The students were only exposed to the original author once during rehearsals, although toward the end Ken, as the other writer, became a way for the company to try to stay true to the intent of the original author. I was concerned that, as three westerners making decisions about the play, it would become our sole responsibility to inform and educate the audience. This was not the original intention, and I was concerned that we might inadvertently allow situations to develop that could offend local sensibilities. I wanted to stage a production that, like the plays of The Group Theatre, "had something to say" about the social, political and economic ills of a country (Chinoy, 1976, pp.474-5).

Most of the student actors had worked together on other productions, so the concept of teamwork was not alien to them, but the idea that they should enjoy being in a production for the sheer joy of playing on stage as part of a theatrical ensemble was still new to the participants. Luckily, their self-consciousness about engaging in certain activities on stage as a group became

evident (and then only partially) in just one scene. In that scene—the last—the ensemble played masked, horn-tooting clowns who actually were workers advertising free food at a new restaurant. The awkwardness came in part from the fact that the students, because of their own backgrounds, could not truly relate to the workers in the scene. As a result, teamwork, spatial awareness, physical coordination, rhythm, and timing all were skills that needed some honing for this scene. No other scene required this sort of teamwork on stage; however, they all had to work together quickly and quietly to change the sets between scenes. They eventually did the scene changing rather well, to the amazement of the audience, although I am told that backstage, not all of the participants were always as ready to work as a team as I might have wished.

Whether it is an older, Method-based troupe such as America's Depression-era Group Theatre or a more contemporary, Le Coq-based group such as London's Complicite, theatre companies all stress the importance of rehearsing with the actors all working together for an extended period of time so that they work intuitively and instinctively (Alexander, 2001, p.11). There is no way to fake this type of ensemble knowledge. It would be difficult to achieve in a six-week rehearsal period, even with the whole group meeting nightly, but trying to establish this feeling in the last week was made extremely difficult because of the inexperience with the group process of the students involved. To be fair to the ensemble, however, only one or two students didn't eventually come to understand the linkage that was necessary among the actors and the scenes. As one beginning student, Ali, stated toward the end of the rehearsal process: "Oh, I get it. All of these scenes are connected, and they're about us." Despite the fact that I had been saying this all semester, it was gratifying to have one of the minor players, who was in a number of different scenes, "connect the dots" and begin to understand what we were attempting to do with the production.

We also attempted to make the production interactive. I suggested a 'talk back' on Friday night with the two authors, the company and me. This was a foreign concept for almost everyone, but it went fairly well. In fact, during the Saturday matinee performance, when the audience did not laugh as much at the show, students wanted another 'talk back' to find out why. I did not have another full 'talk back' but, having become a bit concerned myself, I did throw out the question about the laughter during curtain call, and asked whether we had inadvertently offended. The mostly adult, mostly Arab audience reassured us that on the contrary, not only had they found the scenes amusing, they also had been a little saddened by some of what they were seeing. They were, in fact, reflecting on different moments in the production—exactly as we had hoped they'd do.

In addition, I had the students in my Introduction to Theatre History class collect instant feedback critiques from the audience about what they saw and what they felt as a result of the show. The students were inexperienced at implementing this part of their critiquing process, but they managed to collect some information from audience members. Their critiques provided some interesting comments about our use of language in the show.

One of the more controversial terms that we used in the show was the word “inshallah.” Dr. Loomis sprinkles Arabic words throughout his tales. The second scene in the play is titled *Inshallah and The Older Brother*. Everyone seemed to identify with the student use of the term in the play, but some people were concerned that we had not fully understood the cultural and religious meaning of the Arabic term. A number of the critiques commented on this particular word as a cause of some misunderstanding.

“Inshallah” literally translates as “God willing”, but as students in the audience pointed out in their critiques, in Islamic teaching ‘Insha Allah’ says that nothing will happen unless Allah wills it. So, the devout must say it whenever they intend to do anything in the future. Even among Muslims, there seems to be disagreement about the definition of the word. Some of my students agree with the way most western professors see the term, as something Muslim students use to get out of work by saying no without saying no. Others parse the definition and say that if you are willing to do your best, and you say *inshallah*, it means that if God is willing, it will happen. There is agreement that many students use the term wrongly as an excuse, and that this is a misuse of the word, but while I thought this was what the scene hoped to illustrate, some of the audience took us to task for misusing the word in the play. One of my students, however, got the point: “In my point of view using the word in the show was a bit wrong for Muslim people, but it was used in a way that shows that the professor doesn’t understand the word, which was fine, I guess” (Al-Qoud, 2014, p.2).

Communication in the Middle East can be, and often is, difficult to obtain. The fluidity of meaning in culture obfuscates the verbal and nonverbal symbols that allow people to function in society. To quote Burke, the way a person describes situations reveals “an attitude toward them” (Burke, 1961, p.3). Burke insists that authors are never completely conscious of all the relationships they form while in the act of creation. If it is true that words are modes of action, then the authors and I had an obligation to proceed very carefully as we created theatre in the Middle East. The local press covered the play, which is not necessarily the norm and made our dean extremely nervous. This happened at the last moment, on the very last day of the production of *Long Ago and Not So Far Away*. I was pleased by the coverage, and the experiment in staging an original, self-reflective theatre experience was largely a success, but I believe I now have a much greater appreciation for how careful one has to be when, as a guest, one holds up a mirror to someone else’s culture.

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