

Modern Language Center (MLC)

(AM/THTR 370) Culture, Politics, and Religion in Arab Theatre

Total Hours: 45

Recommended Credits: 3

Primary Discipline / Suggested Cross Listings: Theater Arts / Middle East Studies / History

Language of Instruction: English

Prerequisites: None

Course Description

This course offers a comprehensive exploration of Arab theater as an artistic medium reflecting cultural, political, and religious realities across the Arab world. Students trace the historical evolution of Arab theatrical expression—from early forms of storytelling, shadow theater, and popular performance traditions to the emergence of modern theatrical movements in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Through a curated selection of classical, modern, and contemporary plays, students analyze the ways in which playwrights have used theater to critique power, question authority, illuminate social issues, and represent lived experiences of Arab communities. By engaging with influential playwrights from Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and beyond, learners gain insight into the political symbolism, cultural narratives, and aesthetic innovations that define Arab theater.

The course integrates literary analysis, performance critique, and field-based inquiry. Students conduct interviews with local artists and audiences to examine how theatrical works resonate across generations and how theater continues to serve as a site for public discourse and cultural negotiation in Jordan and the broader region.

The course parallels AM/LANG 370 taught in Arabic but maintains distinct pedagogical objectives suited to an English-medium academic environment.

Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Describe the historical foundations of Arab theater and its early performance traditions.
- Identify major Arab playwrights, their works, and their influence on regional theatrical development.
- Analyze theatrical texts and performances through cultural, political, and religious frameworks.
- Evaluate how Arab theater engages with social change, modernization, political critique, and artistic resistance.
- Develop skills in dramatic analysis, including theme identification, satire interpretation, and structural evaluation.
- Conduct interviews and field research to understand popular perceptions of theater in Jordan.
- Apply comparative approaches to evaluate literary texts and performance-based interpretations.

Course Requirements

Students are required to complete all readings and assigned recordings before class. Assigned materials include plays, articles, and recorded theatrical performances ranging from three to six acts. Students are expected to demonstrate understanding through informed discussion, thematic analysis, and application of dramatic critique methods.

Assignments include:

- **Critical Analysis Presentation:** Students prepare an analytical PowerPoint presentation summarizing, interpreting, and critiquing an assigned play.
 - **Field-Based Assignments:** Students meet with theater artists and conduct interviews to explore contemporary challenges and perspectives.
 - **Reflection Papers:** Three papers connecting course themes with field observations and performance interpretations.
 - **Final Paper:** A research-based written analysis of an approved topic, comparing multiple works or examining a thematic thread.
 - **Final Presentation or Performance:** Students choose between presenting their final paper or performing a dramatic interpretation of selected scenes.
- Attendance for classes, guest lectures, and field excursions is mandatory.

Grading

Participation: 20%

Critical Analysis: 20%

Reflection Papers (3): 30%

Final Paper: 20%

Final Presentation/Performance: 10%

Readings

Representative readings include foundational and contemporary scholarly works, critical essays, and major plays central to the study of Arab theater.

Examples include works by:

- Tawfiq al-Hakim
- Sa'dallah Wannus
- Mamdouh Adwan
- Muhammad al-Maghut

- Walid Ikhlassi
- Roger Allen
- Marvin Carlson
- Salma Jayyusi & Roger Allen
- Robert Myers & Nada Saab
- Readings are provided as curated excerpts without external URLs

Additional Resources

Supplementary materials may include:

- Recorded theatrical performances
- Interviews with artists and playwrights
- Academic essays on Arab performance aesthetics
- Cultural criticism addressing satire, political commentary, and comedic traditions

These materials deepen contextual understanding and enhance theatrical analysis skills.

Outline of Course Content

Topic 1 – Introduction

- Critical analysis methods
- Historical overview of Arab theater
- Abbasid-era cultural influences

Topic 2 – Pre-Theater and Storytelling

- Khayal al-Zill (shadow plays)
- Hakawati (storytelling tradition)
- Ta'ziah (passion plays)
- Maqama literature
- Aragoz puppetry

Topic 3 – Abu Khalil Qabbani

- Foundational contributions
- Early political critique in theater

Topic 4 – Tawfiq al-Hakim

- Major works and themes
- Theater of the Absurd
- Social commentary and literary comedy

Topic 5 – Mamdouh Adwan

- Political critique and social marginalization

Topic 6 – Sa'dallah Wannus

- Political transformation and social critique
- Modernism in Arab theater

Topic 7 – Muhammad al-Maghut

- Satire and anti-colonial critique

Topic 8 – Walid Ikhlassi

- Political symbolism and government critique

Topic 9 – Contemporary Iraqi Theater

- War, occupation, exile, and modern narratives

Topic 10 – Comedy & Satire

- Social satire and popular comedic plays
- Art reflecting life vs. life reflecting art

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