RABIH MROUÉ

Looking for a missing employee

JAN 19- 21, 2012

A performance written and directed by Rabih Mroué

Performers: Rabih Mroué, Ghassan Halawani
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The Pixelated Revolution

JAN 22, 2012

Written, directed and performed by Rabih Mroué

English translation by Ziad Nawfal

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Dedicated to the Syrian people

A NOTE FROM OTB

Rabih Mroué floats between the mediums of theater, film and visual art without trying to. He comes from theater but long ago disassociated with it; visual art curators apparently surprised him when they first sought him out to participate in their shows; and somehow he co-starred in a really good movie (Je veux voir, 2010) with none other than Catherine Deneuve. At the center of his various works is an affable personality with a smile as large as his eyes are deep that makes him well suited to play an everyman, narrator or guide. This was part of the reason he was given the Spalding Gray Award in 2010 as an artist who exemplifies the spirit of the late monologist.*

While it may seem that programming Rabih provides us with an opportunity to learn about Lebanon, and its politics and societal issues, that’s not his aim as an artist. He has said he’s more interested in interrogating himself than any particular idea, place or person. As Rabih told Brendan Kiley at The Stranger, “I do not want to be an artist for the sake of provoking anybody—I only want to provoke myself.”

Rabih is performing two different performances while in Seattle. The first three nights of the run he will perform Looking for a Missing Employee, which is probably his most well-known show. Since this is his first visit to North America he thought it will give audiences a good idea of how he has been working over the years. On Sunday, he originally planned to perform a work called Hussein that is about his grandfather who was one of the most famous Marxists in the Arab world before he was assassinated in 1987. After the Arab Spring, he shifted his sites to a work-in-progress version of a new project entitled The Pixelated Revolution, which was inspired by the use of social media in the protests in the Middle East last year.

The New York Times wrote last week of Rabih’s “long overdue and too brief American debut.” We’re grateful to finally add Rabih’s voice to the ongoing conversation we have inside our theater. Welcome Rabih, Lina and Ghassan.

* Spalding Gray consortium partners include the Walker Art Center (MN), Warhol A), Performance Space 122 (NY) and On the Boards.

Sarah Wilke and Lane Czapinski
“Last Wednesday, an employee from the Ministry of Finance named RS deserted his family. His wife is claiming the right to know who is holding him. The disappearance of RS is not only a tragedy for his family but also shows a total lack of respect for the citizens who are his parents.”

Based upon real events, Rabih Mroué presents a piece of theatre about this troubling police case and related politic-economic factors, by tracing the “Truth” using newspaper cuttings.
BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO RABIH MROUÉ

1. Rabih is a multifaceted artist who has gained acclaim in the worlds of performance, visual art, and film. In the past year he opened his first solo exhibition in the UK (*I, the undersigned*), an exhibit that dealt with the current politics of the Middle East. 2011 also saw the US release of *Je Veux Voir*, a film that starred Rabih and legendary French actress Catherine Deneuve. The film is a tour of Beirut after the Civil War, with Rabih guiding Catherine through the destruction and the city’s attempts to rebuild.

2. One of Rabih’s trademarks in performance is playing the role of the unreliable narrator. In Looking for a missing employee he toes the line of truth and fiction in a way that forces the audience to continually question what is really happening.

3. Many of Rabih’s past works have explored facets of current life in the Middle East. When we initially programmed him in the season he had proposed a different work, *Hussein*, that took a look at the life of the most famous Marxist in Lebanon (also known as his grandfather). Give the happenings around the Arab Spring, Rabih instead opted to develop a new work: *The Pixelated Revolution*. Read more about this work, which addresses the Syrian Revolution’s use of cellphones.

4. In 2010 Rabih won the Spalding Gray Award. Presented by a consortium of theaters that includes On the Boards, Performance Space 122, the Walker Art Museum, and the Warhol Museum, the annual award recognizes a singular artist who is creating work in the same visionary spirit as Spalding Gray. Rabih is in the company of past recipients such as Radiohole and Young Jean Lee. Watch his acceptance video.

5. Rabih is a leading artist in the contemporary art field, but this is his first trip to the US. Before he got here, however, the New York Times released a feature on him, cementing his status as an important art star to watch. Then in 2011 CNN also released a story on him. Read the CNN and New York Times articles to get insight into Rabih and his work.
Rabih’s *Rabi3*: Mroué’s Oscillating Histories and Memorial Deconstructions  
Samer Al-Saber, PhD Candidate, Theater History and Criticism, University of Washington

Rabih Mroué is a performer of crisis.

Just over a year ago, confusion polluted the airwaves when many news channels began to report on unexpected events taking place in the Middle East. On 17 December 2010, the Tunisian Muhammad Al-Bouazizi had self-immolated to protest a state of economic and political despair, triggering many others to do the same in several Arab countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria. Earlier this month, a Jordanian man died at the hospital after he set himself on fire in downtown Amman, citing similar reasons. These gripping performances of protest set the stage for masses of political actors, various publics, to topple well-entrenched dictatorial regimes throughout the region in what became known as the Arab Spring. How can any artist represent events of this magnitude on stage?

Times of political change fuel cultural production, as do times of crisis. Yet, times of peace afford artists the opportunity to deeply reflect on issues of historical import and in some ways inspire the curiosity to unearth silent pasts. In both cases, artists must ask themselves whether they should engage critical historical junctures in the present or in the future, when they have gained the necessary analytical perspective.

Rabih Mroué’s work lives in a flexible time and space. It is both urgent and historical. His performances are never finished and they move freely between the present and the past. His productions of *Looking for a Missing Employee* and *How Nancy Wished that Everything Was an April Fool’s Joke* drew on events of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) over a decade after it ended. Yet, his current engagement with
the Arab Spring in *The Pixelated Revolution* sheds light on Syria’s activists who are recording ongoing violence on mobile technologies today. When Mroué discusses videos being captured by mobile phones or the image of a last living moment, burned in the cornea of a dying protester, he brings an alienated audience member into the eye of the storm.

If we were to let our anxieties and stereotypical perceptions of the Middle East melt away, we would notice that Mroué is not an exceptional voice in a violent static region; but rather, a common voice in a constantly developing one. Though he was influenced by the violence of a civil war that made the word Beirut synonymous with absolute devastation, his works have the maturity and depth of this uncertain region, which oscillates between the present moment and the wounds of yesterday. Mroueh re-visits historical events, rewriting and re-sequencing them, thus reimagining what many may call endless physical and epistemological destructions into organized serializations of slippery truths and fictions.

Some would argue that Mroué’s performances were a departure from the mostly Western inspired Lebanese theatre of the pre-war era and in many ways, an inspiration for emerging performance artists. He amplifies the role of the traditional Arab hakawati (story teller) by lecturing without relying on spectacle. Various media outlets have struggled to name the form of his “productions,” which have been referred to as performance art, theatre, plays or lectures. This struggle indicates an ongoing performative turn in Lebanon and in the Middle East in general, as if the naming of the type or style of the performance might eventually usher in a form, one that could be indigenous or even national. Very often, Mroué uses projections as juxtapositions, at times supporting the text and on occasion destroying it. His theatrical space is atypical, but chosen with economy. As he simultaneously alienates his audience by creating contradictions within his time, space, and argument, he draws them in with his characteristic charisma. Most importantly, he produces confusion and uncertainty in his audience by deconstructing memories that most may have taken for granted, and identifying
missing links in their unchallenged master narratives. *Looking for a Missing Employee* shows the artist’s obsession with absence. His emotional and intellectual engagement with the idea of the empty space one leaves behind compels him to compulsively collect ephemera such as missing person notices in daily newspapers, and to investigate the disappearance of a seemingly unimportant person. In the process, he privileges the personal over the established political history of the civil war. The performance becomes a distilled microhistory, like an unfolding living archive of unanswered questions. This documentary-style investigation normally presupposes that everything reported by the author actually happened in real life; however, Mroué tends to leave his audience wondering whether his reality and theirs are identical.

In reading these words and seeing the work of Rabih Mroué, some may hear Frederic Jameson’s mandatory slogan, “Always historicize!” In his latest works, Mroué repeatedly searches for the method to do so because he intends to remember and to remember what to forget, thus completing the memory in its entirety. He wishes to know if archives, personal, official, or otherwise, can fill the silence that follows catastrophe, or the absence that follows disappearance. He discusses the memory of the crisis, allows it to reemerge only to deconstruct it, and in performance, reproduces its ethical and moral contradictions. If anything, he establishes that he, the artist, the researcher, the thinker, is a legitimate archive for he is complex enough to entertain more than one truth, and fiction.

As a witness to Lebanon’s traumatic fifteen-year war, his society’s seemingly unresolvable sectarianism, and the Israeli invasion of 1982 and bombings of 2006, this artist brings unique qualifications to shed light on the hurricane of events unfolding throughout the Arab world. While his search for a missing employee will send us back into Lebanon’s past, the pixelated images of Syria will inform us of a painful present and an unpredictable future.
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Looking for a missing employee photos by Houssam Mchaimch