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Akhir Yom (The Last Day): 'A localized Arabic adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet

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The textual and performance history of Arabic Shakespeare is almost as old as the history of Arabic drama itself. Classical Arabic did not have drama as a genre. Dramatic form as it is known to western audiences first appeared in the Middle East in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, there is no equivalent Arabic word for 'drama': the English word is phoneticised from the Greco-Latin term. Theatre historians, including Muhammad Mustafa Badawi,² 'Ali al-Ra'î³ and Ken Whittingham,⁴ tell us that drama was imported from the West. The reasons behind this absence are too wide and varied to be examined fully here but the renowned Arabic-Shakespearean scholar Jabra Ibrahim Jabra stated that 'as the Arabs became more politically alienated ... their thought[s] and literature were subject to a mounting impact from the West'.⁵ Interestingly, Arabic writers turned to Western traditions for inspiration. They began to express their own hopes and fears by *Arabicizing*⁶ European literature, the works of Shakespeare (English), Molière (French) and Goethe (German) being among the most popular. But more significantly, and since classical Arabic did not have drama as a genre, the importation of dramatic works was urgently required to enable an Arabic dramatic tradition to take root. Shakespeare's writings, among others, were assimilated into the language and he, like other European playwrights, played a significant role in establishing an Arabic dramatic field of study.

Romeo and Juliet was among the first of Shakespeare's plays to be adapted/translated into Arabic in the late nineteenth century. *Arabicizations*/translations of *Romeo and Juliet* were catalogued by Mahmoud F. Shetawi as follows: Taynus 'Abduh (1898), Najib al-Haddad (1901), 'Ali Ahmad Bakathir (1936, published 1942), Mu'nis Taha Husayn (1960), Muhammad M. 'Anani (1965), Ghazi Gamal (1978), plus three anonymous translations

(1959-1990).⁷We do not have a full history of Arabic performances of *Romeo and Juliet*, but we know that it has been performed regularly since Haddad's *Martyrs of Love* was staged in Cairo in 1891, which was in fact ten years before the text was published.

al-Rahbani Brothers, 'Assi and Mansour, together with the legendary soprano Fayruz, were amongst the most influential Middle Eastern performing artists in the twentieth century. The legendary Brothers' repertoire helped raise local Lebanese theatre to a world-class status.⁸ Consequently, the Rahbani name is not only familiar throughout the Middle East, North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, but it has also dominated the theatre and music scenes in these regions for over fifty years; to Arabic speakers, the Rahbani name is as familiar as that of Shakespeare's. The Brothers were prolific producers of dramatic works. Their repertoire included film,⁹ music, poetry and theatrical productions that had acquired a certain style which is easily recognisable by most Arabic listeners/viewers. The artistry of the Brothers received much critical acclaim; Jan Aliksan¹⁰ and Fua'd Badawi¹¹ were among numerous critics who praised the Brothers' work.¹² The renowned Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish called the Brothers' tribute to the Palestinian cause 'phenomenal'.¹³

Others, however, did not appreciate the Rahbanis' art. Ghassan Salamé, for example, argues that the Brothers' repertoire is full of nostalgia, idealism and romanticism.¹⁴ For Salamé, who is reading Lebanese theatre politically, the Rahbani Brothers had little to offer. Their rural settings, their 'lyrical songs of village [life] high up in the mountains [where] no misery, no war or immigration' problems are encountered, depict a utopian way of life.¹⁵ These settings could only have existed, Salamé claims, before the mass 'invasion' of migrants, who have since integrated into Lebanese society.¹⁶ 'The Rahbani Brothers' operettas', Salamé writes, 'aim at national cohesion against the invaders'; in the Rahbani plays the natives would fight through poetic discourse and not by the sword, which gives the Brothers' plays their unrealistic themes.¹⁷ However, the very fabric of Lebanese society is comprised of migrants who positioned themselves alongside the natives. Lebanon's

melting pot of ‘invaders’ from both East and West has given the country its cosmopolitanism and its multi-racial ethnicities. Before 1975, Beirut was famous for being ‘a city of ethnic, national, religious, and political tolerance’.¹⁸

It is reasonable to assume that Oussama al-Rahbani’s *Akhir Yom (The Last Day, 2004)* is the first Arabic adaptation of a Shakespearean play by a member of the Rahbani family.¹⁹ This paper is an examination of this recent Arabic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, which brings together eastern and western theatrical traditions. It also examines the dynamism of cultural exchange not only between East and West but also between local and global Shakespeares. Consequently, we are prompted to ask, what can Oussama Rahbani’s adaptation tell us about the cultural struggles and artistic exchange between East and West? How does *The Last Day* depict local (Lebanese), regional (Middle Eastern) and global cultural exchange? And how should we position this Arabic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in relation to the ‘metropolitan’ field of Shakespearean studies?²⁰

As the son of Mansour Rhabani, Oussama family name is instantly recognisable, but as a young artist he has been eager to establish his own artistic style and break away from the theatrical traditions that are associated with his family name. In *The Last Day*, Oussama brings together several traditions including the Rahbani musical flair and the mainstream Arabic adaptations of Shakespeare to appropriate *Romeo and Juliet* to his native Lebanese society. Almost every Arabic adaptation of Shakespeare includes either a sub-plot and/or extra characters that are unknown to mainstream students of Shakespeare. Ahmed Shawqi, for example, had a sub-plot in his 1929 adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Masra‘ Cleopatra (Death of Cleopatra)*.²¹ Shawqi omits the role of Domitius Enobarbus and replaces Aris with Helena. He then devises a sub-plot for Helena and Habi (another new character unknown to Shakespeare) which unfolds alongside that of Shakespeare’s play. Among those who have added extra characters to their Shakespearean adaptations are Mamduh ‘Adwan, who, in his *Hamalit Yastayqiz Muta’khhiran, Hamlet Wakes up Late* (1976), had two extra characters: *al-Mumaththil* (the Actor) and Lorenzo (with no

particular connection to the character in *The Merchant of Venice*). And, more recently, Sulayman al-Bassam included an Arms Dealer in his *al-Hamlet Summit* (2004). Similarly, Oussama Rahbani introduces a basketball match and several extra characters to his play, including Marie-Jose, Mustafa and Sa'id.

The Last Day is set in modern-day Beirut where Civil War wounds can still be felt and echoes of battle cries still rumble in every corner of the city. The plot depicts the tragedy of Shakespeare's lovers alongside Rahbani's sub-plot, which incorporates aspects of contemporary social, economic and political unrest in Lebanon. The rivalry in *The Last Day* consists not only of the family feud between Ra'i (the Montagues) and Matar (the Capulets) but also between two basketball teams, *al-Hikmeh*²² and *al-Riyadi*²³ whose names are those of actual basketball teams (Fig. 1). In his adaptation, Rahbani reconstructs aspects of the 2003 national basketball finals, where a riot broke out between the spectators, which underlined Lebanon's deepening political crisis. During the 2003 match, al-Riyadi supporters shouted 'Syria, Syria' and al-Hikmeh followers answered with 'USA, USA' – neither side cheered for Lebanon.²⁴ The balance of power in *The Last Day* hangs on the outcome of this basketball match.

In *The Last Day*, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, Zaheer Matar's (Tybalt's) killing of Malek (Mercutio) is the catalyst triggering the tragic deaths that follow. The duel between Mercutio and Tybalt in Shakespeare's play begins because Romeo refuses to take up Tybalt's challenge to fight. Moreover, it is Romeo's interference in the duel that causes his friend's death (Mercutio's last words to Romeo are 'why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm').²⁵ However, Oussama Rahbani alters the triangular relationship by making Malek an orphan (Mercutio is the nephew of the Prince, the highest authority in *Romeo and Juliet*) and by dramatising the personality clash between Malek and Zaheer Matar instead of Romeo and Tybalt. The reason for this change, Rahbani claims, is that 'Romeo does not want to be associated with street fighting' or family feuds.²⁶ By depicting the personality clash between the Christian orphan (Malek) and the respectable and

presumably Muslim gentleman (Zaheer Matar), as well as staging the basketball match that recalls the previous year's real-life basketball match, Rahbani highlights two important points: the division within Lebanon and the intra-cultural clashes, which are splitting the 'Arab world'.

The Last Day had its Lebanese debut in Casino du Liban (Beirut), where it ran from March to August 2004. The play was a joint Rahbani effort: it was created by Oussama, directed by his brother Marwan, and their father Mansour wrote the lyrics for the songs in the play. Despite the strong Rahbani family presence in *The Last Day*, the play is laden with Western artistic/theatrical expertise. For instance, Oussama appointed the Broadway choreographer Debbie Allen as master of movement.²⁷ Allen, best known for her role in 1980s *Fame*, had also played Anita in *West Side Story* on Broadway in the Minskoff Theatre (February 1980). It is not surprising, then, to find some parallels to *West Side Story* in the Rahbani production. Reviewing the play, Marlene Khalifa declared that 'Oussama westernised his music and dance in *The Last Day*',²⁸ and Dima Sa'd added, '[Debbie Allen's] choreography simulated New York's street dancing and basketball playing'.²⁹

Furthermore, due to the cultural complexities of Lebanese society, Rahbani needed to find a way of representing Christianity without using the symbol of the cross and of portraying Islam without using the word prophet on the Middle Eastern stage. Thus, Abuna Ayoub (Friar Lawrence) and his church were stripped of their Christian symbolism (Fig. 2). The reason behind this omission, Rahbani explains, was that he did not want 'to offend the Muslims in the audience'.³⁰ However, while the omission of Christian iconography might have been a 'Muslim-friendly' gesture, it did not stop Rahbani from having a jab at the divided Christian Church. For example, in order to persuade Abuna Ayoub to perform the marriage ceremony, Nadim (Romeo) threatens the friar by saying, 'If you don't marry us, I'll convert to [Greek] Orthodox.' To which, Abuna Ayoub replies, 'Just like that in one single leap; there are thousands of stages before you could become [a Greek] Orthodox'.³¹ Moreover, in his attempt to avoid representing Qur'anic verses on the

Lebanese stage, Rahbani inventively used musical notes, which rhythmically echo the opening words of the Muslim prayer: Allahu Akbar. By contrast, *al-Hamlet Summit*, which was written by a Muslim, was structured according to the five daily Muslim prayers: the title of each of the prayers makes a heading for each of the five acts in the play.³² The contrast between these two approaches to Islam in Arabic drama highlights the restrictions of depicting religion on the Middle Eastern stage, as opposed to the freedom of expression in western arenas. Moreover, the corresponding teams in *The Last Day*, al-Hikmeh, which is owned by Ra'i, and al-Riyadi, which is controlled by Matar, demonstrate the predominantly Christian Verona family rivalry being transposed onto the multi-religious twenty-first-century Lebanese stage. The transformation of the original family names is purposefully and significantly different: 'Ra'i', Rahbani explains, 'means shepherd, which can only be a Christian name, whereas *Matar* [which means rain] is a name that could be adopted by Christians, Muslims (Shi'a or Sunni) as well as Druze'.³³ It is within these contradictions and restrictions that Oussama Rahbani customizes Shakespeare's most famous love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, to suit the tastes of his native Lebanese society.

As a change from their family theatre tradition, the younger Rahbani generation is pursuing a lively interest in the contemporary issues of Lebanese society. Sa'd highlighted that 'Oussama [Rahbani] added to *Romeo and Juliet* without compromising Shakespeare's original'. Sa'd continued, 'this was a risky and brave move, which proves that the new Rahbani generation is not merely imitating their predecessors'.³⁴ Zaynab Hamud went further by claiming that 'Shakespeare received a Lebanese identity stamped with the Rahbani family seal'.³⁵ 'Abidu Basha, on the other hand, claimed that 'Oussama remained firmly within the Rahbanis' axis but he made a detour ... [In *The Last Day*,] he did not only write the tale of modern Lebanese society but he also wrote the story of his separation from the Rahbanis' trademark'.³⁶ Conversely, Simon Nassar objected to Oussama's choices by claiming that the 'introduction of dance undermines the intellectualism usually associated with the Rahbanis'.³⁷

The conflicting views of Basha, Hamud, Nassar and Sa'id underline the complexity of issues depicted in *The Last Day*, with regards to the received Shakespearean and the Rahbanis' fields of study. The extravagant set, costumes and perfectly tuned musical scores do echo the Rahbani Brothers' golden days. But Oussama obviously departs from the Brothers' *qasidah*-like³⁸ self-praising and idyllic settings by criticising Lebanese society (Beirut specifically) with its present-day post-Civil War, post 9/11 and the (then) complexities of Syrian occupation. Moreover, despite its international repertoire, *The Last Day* was written for local audiences with the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War in mind. For example, Sa'id is forced to relocate to Beirut because his house was confiscated during the war. He says, 'They took my home and exiled me ... to Beirut; the one who evicted me resides in my house'.³⁹

In order to represent modern Lebanese society, Rahbani admits to customizing '*Romeo and Juliet*'s dividing lines, miscommunications and rival factions'⁴⁰ to emphasise the post-Civil War division of Beirut. Sports, as Stephanie Marlin-Cruel has observed with regard to South Africa,⁴¹ are often used for political battlegrounds. But why dramatise the all-American game on the Lebanese stage? Oussama Rahbani explains that he made this choice because 'basketball in Lebanon is a college sport whereas football ... is a game for the streets. There is another reason why I wanted to have baskets', Rahbani continues, 'The basketball teams in Lebanon are politically and geographically divided whereas the football teams are spread throughout ... from east to west and from north to south'.⁴² Political, geographical and theological divides lie at the heart of the conflicts in Lebanon as well as the Middle East. Therefore, the American flavour in *The Last Day* springs from present day Lebanese society and not some attempt to mimic an American adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* for Middle Eastern audiences. The play depicts Shakespeare's lovers caught up not only in a political power struggle between two rival families, Ra'i and Matar, but also, in their corresponding territories defined by their basketball teams, al-Hikmeh (green) represents east Beirut and al-Riyadi (yellow) denotes west Beirut.

The invisible divide of Beirut in *The Last Day* is reminiscent of the geographical partitioning of the city during the fifteen years of civil war (1975-1990). When the Lebanese Civil War started in 1975, Berch Berberoglu writes, 'Beirut was transformed [almost overnight] from a city of ethnic, national, religious, and political tolerance to a contested terrain of factional battle that brought destruction and death'.⁴³ The Lebanese Civil War, adds Samir Khalaf, 'was everywhere and nowhere. It was everywhere because it could not be confined to one specific area ... It was nowhere because it was not identified with or linked to one concrete cause'.⁴⁴ Hence when it did stop for no apparent reason and with no conclusive winners, it left a kind of emptiness in the Lebanese psyche that, I would argue, remains apparent to this day. Moreover, Beirut's partition during the Civil War still divides the city into east and west. The plot of *The Last Day*, similar to that of *Romeo and Juliet*, is confined to the boundaries of the city, which confirms Samir Khalaf's statement that once the Civil War had stopped, Beirut remained divided between Christians in the east and Muslims in the west.⁴⁵ The geographical divide which split the city into east and west Beirut during the Civil War (1975-1990) had long disappeared by 2004, but the partition remains mentally imprinted on Lebanese minds. Hence, the two factions in the play, Ra'i (east) and Matar (west), fight for control over the invisible geographical divide of the city.

Partitions, Joe Cleary writes, 'are most likely to occur where ... societies have lost control over their own political destinies and are vulnerable to the wills of external superpowers'; they often take place in countries which have suffered some sort of military and social collapse, usually after a major war involving human suffering as a result of some catastrophe or 'violent circumstances'.⁴⁶ The term was defined by Stanley Waterman who argued that 'partition can be said to have occurred when two or more new states are created out of what had previously been a single [administrative] entity'.⁴⁷ Although the Cleary / Waterman model does not specify civil war as a cause for partitioning, the theory can be applied to post-Civil War Beirut; Lebanon suffered military and social collapse which

divided the city, as well as the country, not into different states but into factions. Nadim expresses the effect this had on his generation, by singing to Nesreen (Juliet), ‘You are from the west and I am from the east / Or so they have labelled us / So as not to [let us] dream of freedom’.⁴⁸

One of the reasons for partitions, claims Cleary, is to ‘secure self-determination for some groups, however, such self-determination is realised ‘at the expense of the self-determination of others’.⁴⁹ Hence, Syria’s continued occupation of the country after the Civil War had stopped made most Lebanese losers; they lost much of their independence. Malek cynically explains, ‘Our only blessing is our freedom’;⁵⁰ that is the Lebanese have, or are supposed to have, the freedom of expression, which was being suppressed by the ‘occupiers’. Consequently, apart from the obvious internal struggles between factions, parents and siblings, *The Last Day* depicts the occupiers as an invisible figure, which is identifiable by a dictatorial tone of elevated Arabic register, *fusha*.⁵¹ ‘The invisible ruler’, Rahbani explains, ‘is ‘Alawi. He has a harsh-sounding accent ... by which I portray the hypocrisy of Lebanese politics’.⁵² ‘Alawi is a Muslim sect that incorporates aspects of both Shi‘a and Sunni Islam; they have a concentration in Turkey and a base in al-Halab (Aleppo, Syria).⁵³ The current ‘ruling’ Syrian family belongs to this minority sect.

The lavish production of *The Last Day* (Fig. 3) opens with a simple but strikingly familiar playgroup song, ‘*Inti wahdi hmara*’, which translates as ‘You’re an idiot’. ‘The idea of the children’s song’, Rahbani explained, ‘is to encompass the spitefulness clearly practised in today’s Lebanese society. It is the note’, Oussama demonstrated on his piano, ‘that you need to get back to’.⁵⁴ Rahbani caricatures the malicious rivalry between the Lebanese politicians by depicting their juvenile behaviour, which exposes their weakened positions. For example, when al-‘Aqid (the Prince) calls a meeting between Ra‘i and Matar ahead of their upcoming basketball match, the two leaders refuse to speak directly to one another. Instead, each of them addresses al-‘Aqid by adding an epigraph of ‘Tell him’ to each sentence:

Matar: Tell him, keep political campaigning out of the game, and we'll have a peaceful match.
 Ra'i: Tell him, if he doesn't try to bribe government officials, we'll have a peaceful match.
 Matar: Tell him, no one is infringing on his territories.
 ...
 Ra'i: Tell him, I'm talking about spectators' votes not the players'.⁵⁵

The verbal marathon continues until al-'Aqid's mobile phone rings and interrupts them all. Complete silence. Then, speaking into the handset, al-'Aqid says, 'Yes Major General'. A pause before al-'Aqid replies: 'You tell them',⁵⁶ at which point he raises the mobile phone to face the audience. An authoritative voice with a distinctly harsh accent is heard over the tannoy addressing the Lebanese politicians, 'Stop you telling him and him telling you, you morons. I'm telling you, do what we tell you. That's it.'⁵⁷ The impact on the 2004 audience was chilling, as the unseen tyrant loomed large in the spectators' imagination. The harsh tone conveyed a sense of irony in the commander's order, which would have been comical if it had not been an accurate reflection of the socio-political state of Lebanon in the summer of 2004. Therefore, the exchange between Ra'i and Matar in *The Last Day* demonstrates that Lebanese leaders might squabble among themselves, but ultimately they crumble under foreign pressures. Although the volatile relationship between Ra'i and Matar is the undercurrent that drives the plot in *The Last Day*, the stage time that these two characters share is confined, as in Shakespeare's tragedy, to a number of monumental meetings; the first one is the confrontational scene, which ends with the telephone call from the mysterious dictator. Their subsequent meetings, similar to *Romeo and Juliet*, take place after the killing of Nesreen's cousin and, as the play ends, in the reconciliation scene following the tragic deaths of their youngsters. Yusuf al-Huwayik observed that 'love' in *The Last Day* suffers at the hand of 'politics and the victimisation of youth'.⁵⁸

Therefore, the personification of the totalitarian intruder in *The Last Day* is a manifestation of the rivalry between Ra'i and Matar that underpins the entire drama denoted by the children's tune 'You're an idiot'. 'Can stage drama really help solve

Lebanon's problems?', asked Huwayik in his review.⁵⁹ Perhaps not, but judging by the events that have unfolded in Lebanon since 14 February 2005, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, it would seem that the Rahbani's depiction of Syria as the unwelcome administrative and military force is at least insightful.⁶⁰

Flanking the Shakespearean core tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, Oussama Rahbani dramatises a light-hearted sub-plot that deals with some serious local issues. He devises two vital characters: Marie-Jose as al-Hikmeh supporter and Mustafa who is an al-Riyadi follower. Together, Marie-Jose and Mustafa depict aspects of the country's complex social structure. Marie-Jose, as the name suggests, is a Christian who comes from al-Ashrafiya, which is situated in east Beirut (a Christian stronghold during the Lebanese Civil War), whereas Mustafa is a commoner and a practical 'down to earth' west *Beirutian* ghetto inhabitant. While Marie-Jose portrays the epitome of feminine qualities in Lebanon's high society, Mustafa is the archetypal Middle Eastern male chauvinist.⁶¹ As Marie-Jose repeatedly displays her fluency in French, Mustafa typically cannot pronounce his *P*'s. (Arabic does not contain the letter *p* in its alphabets. Those unfamiliar with Latinate languages compensate by using the closest letter to *p*, which is *b*, instead.) For instance, Mustafa strives to model himself on the *007* star, whom he calls 'Bierce Bronson'.⁶² When Marie-Jose challenges Mustafa, or *Abu-Steve* (Steve's father) as she repeatedly calls him, on his bad pronunciation by saying, '*Non c'est faux*',⁶³ he lashes out at her in English by calling her 'artificial',⁶⁴ meaning superficial. Mustafa tries to adopt Western words to his vocabulary (a true sign of sophistication in Lebanon) but he neither uses them properly nor understands their full meaning.

Moreover, *Abu* is the Arabic word for father. It is customary for the father to take on the name of his eldest son. (This is common practice in countries across the region.) Hence Mustafa is, according to Marie-Jose, expected to call his first son Steve. Marie-Jose tries to disconnect herself from her Arabic inheritance by speaking French, but she simultaneously compromises her westernised upbringing by including the Arabic word for

father (*abu*) in her vocabulary. However, instead of giving Mustafa an Arabic name for his firstborn, she grants him a European one, Steve. Marie-Jose celebrates her cosmopolitanism by singing,

[My mother] brought me up French style
We spoke nothing but French
... if I cried, I cried in French

But she stresses:

Mais je suis très Libanaise
I love *tabuli* and *kibbi*⁶⁵

In this respect Mary-Jose relishes in her intercultural background; she does speak French, she even cries in French, but she is also a true Lebanese. Her love of the Lebanese national dishes, *tabuli* and *kibbi*, however, reminds us that if what nourishes their souls does differ, what nourishes their bodies remains the same in both east and west Beirut.

To Mustafa, Marie-Jose denies her ‘real’ Lebanese identity by incorporating French into her daily life; her ‘superficiality’, he suggests, is the consequence of her multi-cultural upbringing. However, for Marie-Jose, the West, symbolised by the French she knows, is actually a part of that Lebanese identity. But if Marie-Jose is superficial then surely Mustafa is a fraud; he admits to wearing the colours of his basketball team (al-Riyadi) only because they remotely resemble those of his favourite *football* team, Brazil, the very name of which he cannot pronounce properly (in an effort to sound sophisticated he says *Parazeal*). Moreover, Mustafa hides *Belé*’s (Pelé) shirt under his mattress for fear of being persecuted.⁶⁶ Between them, the characters of Marie-Jose and Mustafa depict the multicultural clashes of the post-Civil War Lebanese social structure, and highlight the colliding forces among the postcolonial Arabic speakers.

The Last Day challenges our perception of ‘Arab nationalism’,⁶⁷ since it depicts intra-cultural clashes instead of fighting ‘western colonialism’ and it questions inter-Arab relations. The Arabic idiom *al-‘Alam al-‘Arabi* suggests unity across Arab culture but the English translation, the ‘Arab world’, implies the Other.⁶⁸ *al-‘Alam al-‘Arabi* is made up of multi-customs and trends that are dynamically connected to political power struggles.

Rustom Bharucha observes a similar pattern in the Indian subcontinent.⁶⁹ He suggests that the term intraculturalism might be ‘the sharpest way of *puncturing* the *homogenized* categories and pretensions of the multicultural state’.⁷⁰ In its sub-plot, *The Last Day* does *puncture* the *homogeneity* of Arab nationalism, which highlights the instability of intra-cultural relations and the colliding forces that are apparent in the distinctively different cultural narratives of east and west Beirut. This in turn further highlights the depth of integration between East and West in Beirut.

The field of Shakespearean studies in post-colonised nations, such as those depicted in *The Last Day*, is addressed by Sonia Massai who claims that ‘changes’ to the field of Shakespearean studies happen ‘as a result of local contributions’.⁷¹ Shakespearean studies encompass the textual elements of the canon and the dramatic productions that include theatre and cinematic performances. Massai’s idea of ‘the field’ is taken from the field in cultural studies that was defined by the sociological theorist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, ‘The literary [or] artistic field ... is an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force’, which cannot be separated from its historical, cultural, or social positions.⁷² However, ‘the structure of the literary field [is]’, Bourdieu goes on to argue, ‘a field of forces’ as well as a ‘struggle’.⁷³

The field of Shakespearean studies, Massai, among others, tells us, is a ‘brand’ identifiable throughout the world.⁷⁴ But if Shakespearean studies is a field with its own ‘forces’ which have been globally recognised, then surely Shakespeare’s works are also a field, or I should say, each of his plays can be read as a field. *Romeo and Juliet* has a force of its own; the lovers’ story has acquired its own ‘afterlife’, since the play changes and evolves with each edition, with each adaptation and with each cinematic or theatrical production.⁷⁵ And what of *The Last Day* – is it not also a field with its own forces? If we try to rank these fields then surely Shakespeare becomes a *mega-field*, *Romeo and Juliet*, by comparison, is a *major-field* whereas *The Last Day* would be a *minor-field*. *The Last Day* is ranked lower than *Romeo and Juliet* because it is a local field that is trying to determine its

own position in the field of Shakespearean adaptations. Bourdieu does not mention ranking specifically but he does acknowledge hierarchical scales, which are affected by heritability within the fields.⁷⁶ Bourdieu argues that ‘every new position ... determines a displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants of the other positions’.⁷⁷ New positions mean newcomers to the field. *The Last Day* is a newcomer, which needs to assert its authority by producing something significantly different from other adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, some of which have been integrated into the field of Shakespearean adaptations – *West Side Story*, for example. These newcomers ‘occupy a dominated position in the dominant class,’ argues Bourdieu. ‘They are owners of a dominated form of power at the interior of the sphere of power’.⁷⁸

Like other newcomers, *The Last Day*, ‘must assert’ its difference ‘by endeavouring to impose new modes of thought and expression’.⁷⁹ How can *The Last Day* assert its authority among other minor fields? It depicts cross- and intra-cultural struggles and challenges territorial and artistic boundaries. What has it to offer to the field of Shakespearean studies? It confirms the instability and fluidity of the field, which is clear from the audiences’ reaction. Critics struggled to position the play: was it *West Side Story*? Was it a Rahbani production? Was it local (Lebanese) or global Shakespeare? These contradictions confirm Bourdieu’s theory about the ‘struggles’ within the field. ‘These struggles, whose goal is the preservation or transformation of the established power relationships in the field of production’, Bourdieu writes, ‘obviously have as their effect the preservation or transformation of the structure of the field of works’.⁸⁰ Therefore, *The Last Day* transforms as well as preserves both Shakespeare’s story and the Rahbanis’ artistry.

But what of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Rahbani play? Shakespeare’s plot is, in fact, embedded in Nadim’s and Nesreen’s accidental meeting, in their anxieties about their family names, their use of elevated Arabic and their suicide pact. For example, Juliet’s anxiety about the family names⁸¹ is echoed by Nesreen who, when asked by Nadim in *The*

Last Day about her family name, declares: ‘We’ve met, let’s leave it at that; names sometimes can kill’.⁸²

Moreover, the Arabic the lovers speak, unlike other characters in *The Last Day*, is both elevated and poetic.

Nadim:

The wind blew ... all the moths burned. This night’s metamorphosis stirs in my heart. I came to this feast like a wild raging beast full of hatred towards this household, but now I love it and every person in it.⁸³

Nesreen:

So this is it ... my only love springs from my only foe. How casually we met this evening, between us were armed men and check-points. Dear God, why did you permit this meeting? Was it for love or misery? Will I see him again? Or have the doors of consequences shut on us?⁸⁴

Together:

Who would have said my joyful worry
My only enemy, would become my only love

...

The Last Day. We burned in the cold,
Love rose in a slumber and stole our hearts.

...

We sank in [its] heat, oh what a wondrous joy.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the lovers’ suicides in *The Last Day* echo those of Romeo’s and Juliet’s. For example, Romeo says ‘Ah, dear Juliet, / Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe / That unsubstantial Death is amorous’.⁸⁶ Similarly, Nadim says, ‘She seems asleep. Your red lips and your rosy cheeks, death has failed to destroy your beauty. ... Tell me is death as fond of beauty as I am?’⁸⁷ Thus, the Shakespearean plot runs parallel to that of Rahbani’s subplot. The two structures weave in and out of *The Last Day*, which forms a newcomer to the field of Shakespeare adaptations.

The social, cultural and political issues in Rahbani’s play are specific to a historical period in Lebanon’s evolving society, that is, the last few months of the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon. Therefore, *The Last Day* is not only the last day of the lovers’ lives but it is also the last day of Lebanon’s struggle to free itself from Syrian occupation. If we are to take Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier’s definition into account then *The Last Day* is a typical adaptation of Shakespeare’s work. Often, Fischlin and Fortier declare, ‘the ... very contexts that produce culturally [and politically] specific readings of Shakespeare, are adaptations ... that make Shakespeare “fit” a particular ideology, culture, historical

moment, and so forth'.⁸⁸ Rahbani takes Shakespeare's plot of the two young lovers in a specific time/place and customizes them to fit Lebanese cultural and political paradigms in the early twenty first-century, and, by doing so, he creates a newcomer that contributes to the wider field of Shakespeare studies.

We can conclude that the three tragedies in *The Last Day* – social (Marie-Jose and Mustafa), domestic (Nadim and Nesreen) and political (Ra'i and Matar) – are agonisingly entwined and all are underpinned by the opening song 'You're an idiot'. The playground song reveals a sinister aspect of Rahbani's political theme: the city is threatened by Eastern dictators and not by Western oppressors. However, despite the hint of resistance towards the new occupiers of the country (Syrians), the struggle in *The Last Day* remains locked within Beirut and between its inhabitants. The spatial division that cartographically defines *The Last Day* has its roots in the imagined geographical divide of post-Civil War Lebanese society. It is the clashes between the civic divisions that contrast their imagined-spatial geographical divides. Thereby, *The Last Day* questions our perception of cross-cultural and cross-regional exchanges and it complicates the relationship between the self and the Other, between East and West and between the field of Shakespeare adaptations and the afterlife of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Evidently, there are some recognisable aspects of other 'metropolitan' appropriations of *Romeo and Juliet* in Rahbani's play; these include *West Side Story* in Debbie Allen's choreography and Baz Luhrman's 1996 film, *Romeo + Juliet* in the suicide scene (Fig. 4). However, *The Last Day* essentially reflects twenty-first-century Lebanese culture with its social, political and economic complexities. The play suggests that cross-cultural encounters breed multicultural ideas that tend to collide with intra-Arab-cultural traditions. Therefore, if we accept that Oussama cannot be separated from the Rahbani tradition, to which he is bound by hereditary means, and that *The Last Day* cannot be completely detached from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which is imbedded in the full

title of Rahbani's play,⁸⁹ then we should acknowledge that *The Last Day* is contributing to both the Rahbani and the Shakespearean fields of studies.

Notes

- ¹ Oussama al-Rahbani, *Akhir Yom, 'an Romeo wa Juliet li Shakespeare (The Last Day, based on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet)*. (Beirut, unpublished play, 2004).
- ² Muhammad Mustafa Badawi, 'Commitment in Contemporary Arabic Literature' in 'Issa J. Boullata, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature* (Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press Inc., 1980), pp. 23-44, here p. 25.
- ³ 'Ali al-Ra'i, *al-Masrah fi al-Watan al-'Arabi (Theatre in the Arab Homeland)*. (Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Watani lil Thaqafah wa al-Funun wa al-Adab, 1980), p. 53.
- ⁴ Ken Whittingham, 'Egyptian Drama (in Culture and Resistance: Cinema Drama)'. *MERIP Report* 52 (November 1976), pp. 13-19, here p. 13.
- ⁵ Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, 'Modern Arabic Literature and the West' in 'Issa J. Boullata, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*. (Washington: Three Continents Press Inc., 1980), pp. 7-22, here p.11.
- ⁶ *Arabicizing* is a term that is often used by Arabic scholars to suggest free translations.
- ⁷ Each of the translators/adaptors, including the three anonymous translations between 1959 and 1990, was called *Romeo and Juliet*; the exception being Haddad who called his version *Suhada' al-Gharam (The Martyrs of Love)*. See Mahmoud F. al-Shetawi, 'Shakespeare's Journey into the Arab World: an Initial Bibliography'. *Shakespeare Yearbook*, 13 (2002), pp. 442-99, here pp. 488-89.
- ⁸ See Ra'i 1980: pp. 245-53. See also in 'Abidu Basha, *Bayt al-Nar: al-zaman al-da'i' fi al-Masrah al-Lubnani (House of Fire; Lebanese theatre, the lost years)*. (London. Beirut. Cyprus: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 1995), p. 152.
- ⁹ The Rahbanis' filmography is the least known of their art works see Jan Aliksan, *al-Rahbaniyun wa-Fayruz (The Rahbanis and Fayruz)*. (Damascus: Dar Talas, 1987), pp. 139-44.
- ¹⁰ Aliksan 1987.
- ¹¹ Fua'd Badawi, *Jaarat al-Qamar: Fayruz wa Rahbani wa al-aghani (Neighbour of the Moon: Fayruz, the Rahbanis and the songs)*. (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qumiyah lil-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr, 1969).
- ¹² See Aliksan for reviews and views on the Brothers, pp. 277-320.
- ¹³ Quoted in Joseph Massad, 'Liberating Songs: Palestine Put to Music'. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32, 3 (2003) pp. 21-38, here pp. 27-28.
- ¹⁴ See Ghassan Salamé, *Le Théâtre Politique au Liban 1968-1973 (Political Theatre in Lebanon 1968-1973)*. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq, 1974), pp. 110-117.
- ¹⁵ Salamé, p. 34.
- ¹⁶ Salamé, p. 48.
- ¹⁷ Salamé, p. 49. Also in Ra'i, pp. 252-53.
- ¹⁸ Berch Berberoglu, *Turmoil in the Middle East: imperialism, war, and political instability*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 124.
- ¹⁹ In 1964, the Brothers produced a musical entitled *Baya' al-Khawatim (The Ring Merchant)*, which Ra'i related to *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, p. 247, but Aliksan's analysis does not support that claim, pp. 112- 13. For a Lebanese adaptation of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* visit Carakalla dance company who also adapted *Much Ado About Nothing*. <http://www.lebanonlinks.com/website.asp?id=8495&name=Caracalla%20Dance%20Group&cat=dance>
- ²⁰ 'Metropolis Shakespeare' is Martin Orkin's term for Shakespearean studies in Europe and North America. See Orkin, *Local Shakespeares: proximation and power*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1, 23.
- ²¹ Some critics have connected Shawqi's to Shakespeare's play, these Waddah al-Khatib (2001), pp. 260-62; Mahmoud F. al-Shetawi (1986), p. 66 n10; and 'Abdel Rahman Yaghi (1980), pp. 155, 164-171. I am not however convinced that Shawqi's play is based on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, I would argue that Shawqi's play is based on John Dryden's *All for Love, or the World Well Lost*, for two main reasons, *Masra' Cleopatra* begins at the battle of Actium and the two lovers are very conscious of their legendary love story; the love between Antony and Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play is almost a domestic affair by comparison.
- ²² Hikmeh means wisdom, which is also the name of the famous Christian school that has a reputation of exceptionally high standards.
- ²³ al-Riyadi means sport, named after an existing basketball team. But like his rival, Matar aspires to get on the board of another famous Lebanese secondary school. He asks Mousier Palmiteo (Paris) to fund the cost of obtaining a seat on the board of Lycée, which is a secondary French school in Beirut, in exchange for his daughter's hand (I. xi).
- ²⁴ The actual name of *Hikmeh* team is La Sagesse but it is evident that the team belongs to the Hikmeh school. Rahbani omitted the riot from his play. The incident was reported on the Lebanese Forces website 27 May and again 07 June 2003.

- <<http://www.lebaneseforces.com/news1may272003.asp>> (Accessed 07 June 2007). The incident was covered by Charles Storch, 'For drama, NBA Finals aren't in Lebanon's league', *Chicago Tribune* 18 June 2003.
- ²⁵ All references to *Romeo and Juliet* are taken from Brian Gibbons, ed., *The Arden Shakespeare*, 2nd series. (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), (III, i: 103-04).
- ²⁶ Oussama al-Rahbani, personal interview by Yvette K. Khoury, Café al-Najjar, Beirut, Lebanon, 16 August 2004.
- ²⁷ John 'Assis, 'Raqs fi *Akhir Yom*' (Dance in *The Last Day*) *al-Dalil*, 9-15 May 2004; also production programme.
- ²⁸ Marlene Khalifa, 'Min al-Shari' ila al-Hub' (From Street [Brawls] to Pure Love), *al-Nahar*, 13 June 2004.
- ²⁹ Dima Sa'd, "'Akhir yom'", qussat hubb tafdah hashashat al-salm al-ahli' (*The Last Day*; love story exposes the fragility of national peace) in *al-Balad*, 27 April 2004.
- ³⁰ Rahbani, Café al-Najjar.
- ³¹ (I, xxii) It is perceived that Greek a Orthodox is higher form of Christianity; therefore the believer would have to pass several obstacles before he is able to convert.
- ³² *Fajr* (فجر) dawn, *Dhuhr* (ظهر) after true noon, *Asr* (عصر) mid-afternoon, *Maghrib* (مغرب) after sunset until dusk and *Isha'a* (عشاء) Dusk (Bassam 2004).
- ³³ Oussama al-Rahbani, personal interview by Yvette K. Khoury, Oussama Rahbani's studio, Int-Ellias, Beirut, Lebanon, 20 August 2004.
- ³⁴ Sa'd in *al-Balad*, 27 April 2004.
- ³⁵ Zaynab Hamud, 'Romeo wa Juliet nuss mughayir bitwaqi' Rahbani, Shakespir fi "'Akhir yom"' sar ... lubnaniyan!' (*Romeo and Juliet* an Alternative Text by Rahbani; Shakespeare in *The Last Day* becomes Lebanese!) in *al-Anwar*, 1 May 2004.
- ³⁶ 'Abidu Basha, 'Hawl al-'amal al-Rahbani; *Akhir yom*: al-iftiraq 'an al-tajrubah al-qadimah min dun mughadiratha' (On the Rahbani's work: *The Last Day*, the separation from old experimentation without separating from it [family tradition]) in *al-Nahar*, 28 May 2004.
- ³⁷ Simon Nassar, 'Akhir yom, masrahiyat al-jil al-jadid min al-Rahabni' (*The Last Day*, a play by the new Rahbani generation) in *al-Riyad*, 24 May 2004. With regards to Nassar's comment Badawi wrote, 'Fayruz' with the support of the Rahbani Brothers 'is admired by the intellectuals' her songs have 'more depth, breadth and inclusiveness' of emotions than any other Arabic artist, *Jaarat*, p. 254.
- ³⁸ The Arabic odes (*qasa'id*) are much longer than their western counterpart and they were often written as praising eulogies of the poets' tribal leaders.
- ³⁹ (I, xxvi)
- ⁴⁰ Rahbani, Rahbani's studio.
- ⁴¹ Stephanie Marlin-Cruiel, 'Welding the Cultural Weapon after Apartheid; Bongani Linda's Victory Songqoba Theatre Company, South Africa' in Richard Boon and Jane Plastow, eds, *Theatre and Empowerment, Community Drama or the World Stage*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 94-124, here pp. 94-95.
- ⁴² Rahbani, Café al-Najjar.
- ⁴³ Berberoglu, p. 124.
- ⁴⁴ Samir Khalaf, *Cultural Resistance, Global and Local Encounters in the Middle East*. (London: Saqi Books, 2001), pp. 204-05.
- ⁴⁵ Khalaf, pp. 212-13.
- ⁴⁶ Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-state, culture and conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 3, 4, 21, 41.
- ⁴⁷ Quoted in Cleary, p. 19.
- ⁴⁸ (I, xx)
- ⁴⁹ Cleary, p. 11.
- ⁵⁰ (I, xxiii)
- ⁵¹ Stage direction (I, xxviii). *Fusha* is used on daily basis by Politicians as well as Arabic media.
- ⁵² Rahbani, Rahbani's studio.
- ⁵³ Dilip Hiro, *Inside the Middle East*. (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 105-107.
- ⁵⁴ Rahbani, Rahbani's studio.
- ⁵⁵ (I, xxviii)
- ⁵⁶ (I, xxviii)
- ⁵⁷ (I, xxviii)
- ⁵⁸ Yusuf al-Huwayik, 'Akhir yom ibda' jadid liUsama al-Rahbani yusawwir "'al-nikayat"' al- lubnaniyyah ... "'al-hikmeh"' wa "'al-riyadi"' 'ala al-khashabah' (*The Last Day*, Oussama al-Rahbani's new creation depicts the spitefulness of the Lebanese ... *al-Hikmeh* and *al-Riyadi* on stage) in *al-Diyar*, 18 April 2004.
- ⁵⁹ al-Huwayik.
- ⁶⁰ Hariri's assassination prompted the 'Cedar Revolution' which forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

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- ⁶¹ I am not suggesting that all men living in west Beirut are male chauvinists; only that Mustafa is depicted as such in this play.
- ⁶² (I, xxiii)
- ⁶³ ‘No, this is wrong’ (I, xxiii)
- ⁶⁴ (I, xxiii)
- ⁶⁵ ‘But I am very Lebanese’. Together *tabuli* (vegetarian salad) and *kibbi* (minced lamb and cracked wheat dish) are national dishes of Lebanon (I, xxvi).
- ⁶⁶ (II, xxviii)
- ⁶⁷ Salamé argues that the Arabs are united against the colonizers, p. 51.
- ⁶⁸ Moreover, when we mention Middle East we do not include Israel; we only cover those countries in the region that have Arabic the official language.
- ⁶⁹ Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: thinking through theatre in an age of globalization*. (London: Athlone, 2000), p. 63.
- ⁷⁰ Bharucha, p. 9, my italics.
- ⁷¹ Sonia Massai, ‘Introduction, Defining Local Shakespeare’ in Sonia Massai, ed., *World-Wide Shakespeares; local appropriations in film and performance*. London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-11, here p. 7.
- ⁷² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production, essays on Arab and Literature*, ed., Randal Johnson. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 163-64.
- ⁷³ Bourdieu, p. 183.
- ⁷⁴ Massai, p. 4. Some of the most influential writing on the topic include Michael Bristol (1990 & 1996), Barbara Hodgdon (1998) and Dennis Kennedy (1995).
- ⁷⁵ *Shakespeare Survey* seem to re-enforce the idea that each of Shakespeare’s plays is a field with its own forces through the journal’s publications of ‘*The Tempest* and After’ 43 (1991); ‘*Hamlet* and its Afterlife’ 45 (1992); ‘*Romeo and Juliet* and its Afterlife’ 49 (1996); ‘*King Lear* and its Afterlife’ 55 (2002); and ‘*Macbeth* and its Afterlife’ 57 (2004).
- ⁷⁶ Whatever Oussama Rahbani produces is subject to, what Bourdieu calls, the *habitus* he has formed either consciously or unconsciously. ‘The habitus ... is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions ... the dispositions of the habitus are “structuring structures” through their ability to generate practices adjusted to specific situations’, see Bourdieu, p. 5.
- ⁷⁷ Bourdieu, p. 58.
- ⁷⁸ Bourdieu, p. 164.
- ⁷⁹ Bourdieu, p. 58.
- ⁸⁰ Bourdieu, p. 183.
- ⁸¹ (II, ii: 33-34, 42-43)
- ⁸² (I, xviii)
- ⁸³ (I, xviii)
- ⁸⁴ (I, xix)
- ⁸⁵ (I, xix)
- ⁸⁶ (V, iii: 101-103)
- ⁸⁷ (II, xxv)
- ⁸⁸ Daniel Fischlin, and Mark Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: a Critical Anthology of Plays from Seventeenth-century to the Present Day*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 14.
- ⁸⁹ See note 1 above.

Figures



Fig. 1 © Copyright 2004 Studio Jammal, Beirut. The Basketball match in *The Last Day* depicts elements of the 2003 finals between al-Hikmeh and el-Riyadi teams where a riot broke out in the stadium in Beirut.



Fig. 2 © Copyright 2004 Studio Jammal, Beirut. Neither Abuna Ayoub, Friar Lawrence (Paul Sleiman) nor his Church show Christian iconography during the marriage ceremony of Nadim, Romeo (Youssef el-Khal) and Nesreen, Juliet (Rudy Daher) in *The Last Day*.



Fig.3 © Copyright 2004 Studio Jammal, Beirut. The extravagant production of Oussama Rahbani's *The Last Day* 2004; a truly global effort. Set design by Agnes Treplin (Berlin and London), choreography by Emmy Award winner Debbie Allen (New York) and directed by Marwan Rahbani (Beirut).

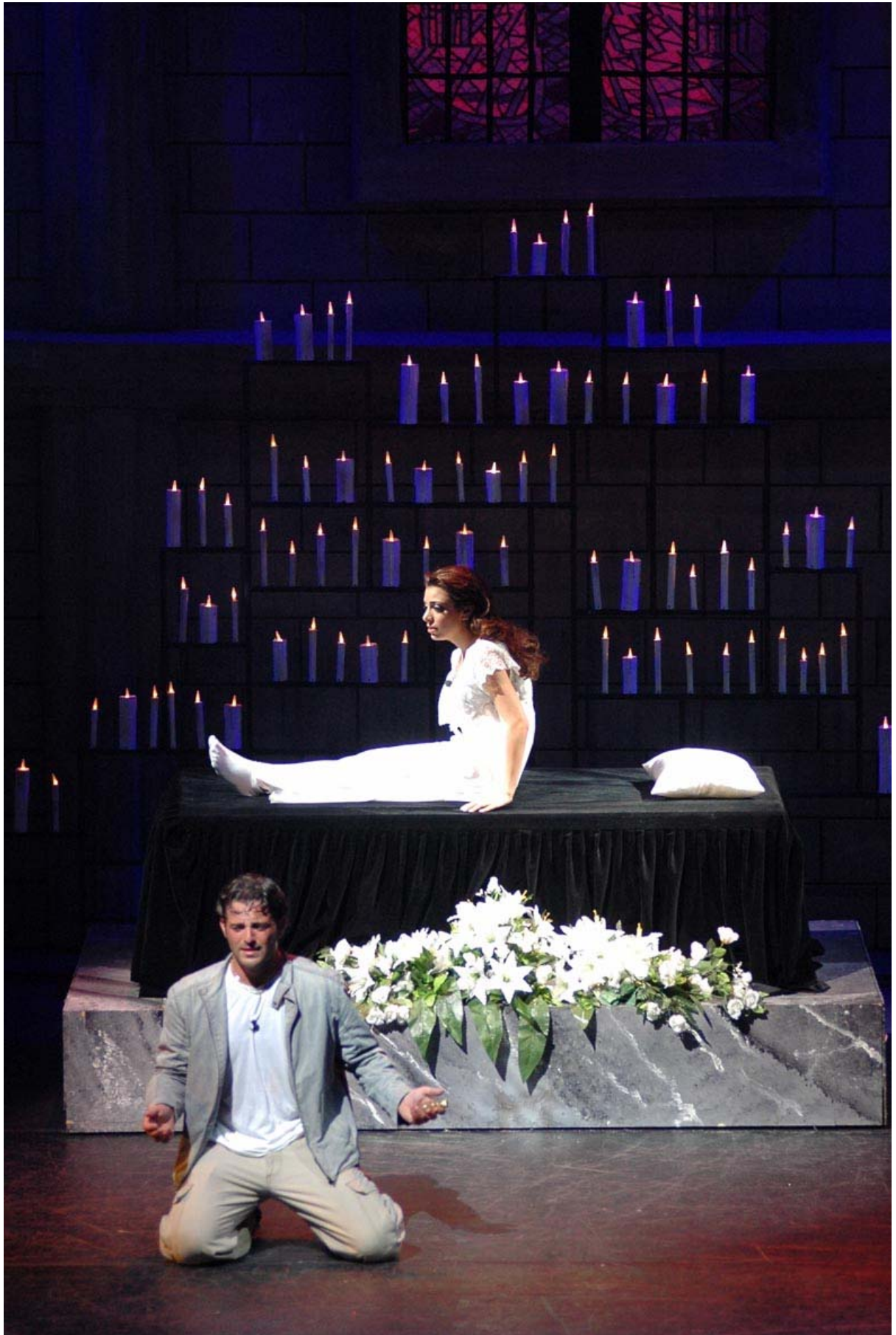


Fig. 4 © Copyright 2004 Studio Jammal, Beirut. The set of Nadim's, Romeo (Youssef el-Khal) and Nesreen's, Juliet (Rudy Daher) suicide scene in *The Last Day* bears some resemblance to Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996) without the Christian iconographies.