

Syrian Serial Drama: There's Hope in Sadness That Challenges War and the «Pennies» of Capitalism

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«So you think we should just accept it and live in sorrow? I say we have to live, never be sad... All that God sends our way is good.» This is how Warde (played by Karis Bashar) tries to comfort her neighbor Um Abdo, before bursting into tears: «Um Abdo... she's suffocating.» Warde is bemoaning the affliction of the Syrian war in the serial drama *Ghadan naltaqi* (Tomorrow We Meet), written by Iyad Abou Al Chamat and Rami Hanna and directed by Hanna. She is also bemoaning her displacement. She laughs, cries, suffers, remembers the war, experiences genuine love, is bashful and dances. Warde is that graceful sadness and the pain that Syrians encounter as a result of the war. She is the dreamy eyes of someone who genuinely «loves to love». Thus, the series (2015) depicted the war, its tragedies and its repercussions. The Syrian war has spared no home, leaving behind loss, death, suffering, displacement, pain...

Serial television drama has borne the brunt of part of the Syrian suffering as a result of the war. It has suffered wherever its makers have sought refuge. Syrian drama has been in a trough. That Syrian drama is in a period of stagnation is not surprising and we are not called upon as viewers to condemn this or declare its death. Serial drama has had its fair share of «Syrian sadness» and the weariness brought on by seven years of war. It has earned the right to make us wait for its return as we had previously waited for its series, without burdening it with our judgments and offering our unsolicited opinions to its artists. What we should do is hope that it rids itself of its sorrow and exploitative capital.

Despite all the suffering, most businessmen in Syria and abroad are driven only by capital and ways of investing it. At the end of the day, war – with its fragmentation, displacement and destruction – is a space where businessmen can pick up where predecessors left off or capitalize on the misfortune of Syrian drama. «Decisionmakers in Syrian drama are mostly people who know little about the profession and its true needs,» says Iyad Abou Al Chamat, Syrian actor and writer of *Ghadan naltaqi* and *Tango*. This is not surprising in a financial battlefield aimed at controlling a new market.

Those who are currently producing Syrian drama are businessmen and politicians who control the series industry – and hence its content – as a commodity to be sold and bought and subject to the whims of the market rather than that of art. This is true for all production sectors, even the arts. In the final decades of the 20th century, the private sector began to enter the domain of serial drama and the companies were owned by friends of the Syrian government or its inner circle.

The difference today is that following the 2011 events and the departure, whether voluntary or forced, of a large number of actors, directors, writers and even producers to nearby cities or European cities, the number of small and medium production companies has grown. This has happened under the banner of getting Syrian drama out of its predicament and bringing it back to its heyday. On the other hand, other large companies closed down. «I'm basically a businessman... and the



© A scene from the series Ghadan naltaqi

drama industry is one of the areas of my activity. We should be present on the market to restore the greatness of Syrian drama,» says the businessman Rida al Halabi about his return to Syrian drama production again through Cut Art Production, which produced the series *Hawa Asfar* (Yellow Air). Serial drama production is «one of my hobbies,» said al Halabi after a press conference to announce the release of *Hawa Asfar*, which he failed to distribute and run last Ramadan despite casting many Lebanese actors (Yusuf al-Khal, Fady Ibrahim, etc) along with Sulaf Fawakherji, Wael Sharaf and Fadi Sbeih.

Establishing companies has become a commonplace practice without any of them achieving a steady course in this field. *Imar al Sham* is a company founded in 2016 by Basem Zaitoun, a founding member of two engineering and real estate companies and a board member of Syria International Islamic Bank. Zaitoun says that he founded the company to bring Syrian drama back to its heyday. The company launched its own channel, *Lana*

(For Us), which aired the company's latest series *Al Waqwaq* (Wakwak) and other series. The channel is owned by Syrian businessman Samer Fawz, who has political clout and who has made a strong entry into the business world with huge acquisitions in Syria and abroad.

Sama Art International, a production company, was founded in 2012 by businessman and member of the People's Council Mohammad Hamsho, who appears in many political stories, without having anything to do with Syrian drama as a profession or an art form. Mohamed Kaband, director of Kaband for Art Production and Distribution (founded in 2007), is also a businessman and a member of the Syrian parliament. Maestro for Art Production was founded last year by the engineer Azzam Alian (no stranger to political stories either). There are many other companies established recently, with most of them with no more than one series under their belt.

So, many of Syria's drama production companies, which have grown in number, are owned by businessmen and politicians

who publicly claim to wish to bring Syrian drama back to its heyday. In reality, they seek to make financial profit and consolidate personal political influence or the influence of the regime they support. «Drama is made with pennies,» says Abu al Shamat about drama's current situation. Outside of Syria, some companies operate either through offices in Beirut or the UAE to produce series for a marketing share outside.

Ramadan has drained Syrian drama just as the war has, and plunged it further into a spiral of financial interests (offer and demand) and in a race of quantity over quality, further tightening the noose. According to Abou Al Chamat, it is very difficult to require a producer to shoot a 30-episode series in 60 or 70 days. «This goes against the production and artistic process as a whole,» he says. «What worked pre-2010 is difficult to compete with today, as audiences have more options now and most of them watch Netflix.»

Churning out shows to make it in the «Ramadan race» undermines the value of Syrian artistic production. As a result,

most works find themselves «out of the race» few weeks before Ramadan, as was the case with *Hawa Asfar* and other series. The release of some of them was postponed from last year, such as *Coma* or *Psycho*, starring Amal Arafa and co-produced by her. The drama production machine is financially oriented, buying a story and producing it with famous actors or «faces» and often releasing an artistically second-rate work.

This setback faced by serial drama was also exploited by television stations. These stations have set conditions on airing certain series and can refuse to run a series if it is fully a Syrian work. If a station does agree to run a Syrian series, «they prefer that it not to tackle reality or to deal with the circumstances of war,» according to Iyad Abou Al Chamat. «There's an attempt to trivialize drama content,» he adds, «It's a tacit agreement between the market and the stations to refuse serious works and demand entertainment for people. This is what was imposed on us as workers in this profession: either respond to market demands or find another profession.»

Syria doesn't have its own drama market, which gives rise to the need for foreign stations. Therefore, politics has a role in the problem of showing Syrian drama in the Arab world, especially after the war. Stations in the Gulf have given up Syrian drama as a political stance and response to the regime in Syria. Airing series and production have continued only in the UAE, where there is capital flow, and Dubai and Abu Dhabi stations have run Syrian works and sometimes produced them, such as the series *Al-Muhallab*. Yet, series produced there are not considered Syrian.

For example, the series *Bintithar al Yasameen* (Waiting for Jasmine) (2015), made by an exclusively Syrian team, was nominated for an international award as an Emirati series (produced by *Ebla International*).

There are less opportunities for showing serial drama and they are now besieged in terms of production, distribution and airing. Of the drama series that were released outside of Syria, Lebanon was present in most of them, either in terms of filming or production, with Syrian actors participating in series of Lebanese production, without being considered by the author of *Tango* as Syrian drama.

In Lebanon, Syrian artists tried to express their feelings, suffering, and the pain of war and displacement through largely independent musical and theatrical works. The quantity and artistic details of such attempts is not what matters, but rather their very existence.

Syrian actors take part in several Lebanese series. There are *Julia*, *Tareeq* (A Road) and *Al hayba* in two parts, in addition to previous series starring Abed Fahd and Taim Hassan, among others. «The production situation is better, in terms of the number of days of filming or financial possibilities, and has better distribution opportunities and higher ratings,» says the writer of Lebanese production *Tango* (Eagle Films). «It often lacks the depth that we could get if we produced a Syrian drama in a better situation... In a joint drama [production], we stick to setting.» Lebanese drama is no better than Syrian drama except in terms of production capital. Unfortunately, this has the upper hand in today's market. What matters to



© A scene from the series Hawa Asfar

Lebanese production companies is buying viewership with often poor scripts and acting in series driven by suspense. Drama is embroiled in politics, classes and capitalism considerations, as is the case in Syria, representing a certain class in Lebanon. The biggest issue it tackles is religious rapprochement between Christians and Muslims, albeit without going into detail. Comedy series are no better.

According to Abou Al Chamat, «there's joint interest». Joint drama series (which in his view is better referred to as Lebanese) are an outlet for Syrian artists who want to maintain their place in drama, «until Syrian drama is back in order». Yet this participation contributed to improving Lebanese drama, in terms of gaining actors with high artistic skills and in terms of stories with better plots than what was available before. But joint works are only a «temporary solution».

According to the writer, *Tango* (directed by Rami Hanna) is «a television series that aimed to achieve high viewership». «Tango is an impersonal story and I wouldn't call it a drama project,» he continues, «It is a series where we tried to be faithful to the content and make it to an acceptable artistic level.» Producers turn down stories of war and suffering of the Syrians and their daily lives, thus keeping serial drama makers from expressing what they are inclined to write about as a result of the war and their daily lives and the concomitant sadness and suffering. These themes are a 'headache' for all producers, according to Abou Al Chamat.

Many works bearing «Syrian sorrow» within their episodes did not see the light, but some of them aired, the most beautiful of which in terms of art and content is *Ghadan Naltaqi*. Naturally a beautiful work would come out from an earnest endeavor. «It was a very personal desire to express our reality as a people,» says the series writer, «We took on a project that we were experiencing, in its details, repercussions, feelings and pain. It was a very personal project for us and for Syrians... so I treated it as cinematic film.» This is the difference between Syrian drama and joint Lebanese

drama that aims for large viewership without tackling a realistic issue or story. The other side of the problem is that most drama professionals place a lot of blame on writers. At seminars in Syria held by actors such as Duraid Lahham and Mustafa el Khani (2017) with the Minister of Information, in addition to interviews with Syrian artists, most current writers are blamed for offering weak stories.

War does not impose certain standards, but rather all standards disappear and the field is open for exploitation, whether consciously or naively. Just like businessmen who seize the opportunity to exert control, a large number of writers rise to claim their place to a backdrop of insipid texts and the absence of old writers. This is happening during a war trauma whose results have yet to be dealt with before expecting recovery. According to Abou Al Chamat, most young drama writers present their works without having knowledge of how they should be written and stop at having an idea for a story. «When a writer learns how to divide the page, he immediately starts writing the first scene,» says Abou Al Chamat, «This is what has led Syrian drama to the place where we are today. Whereas the writers who know the techniques of the profession should be excused.»

The other writers will not bear the bulk of the responsibility. The work of writers in particular was not easy even before the war years, and this is recognized by actors and writers, some of whom still support the Syrian government. They believe that writers know the red lines and try not to overstep them. «Writers are excused. They walk a tight rope in terms of censorship and have to balance a set of formulas to please Gulf stations, their conscience as writers and their artistic desire to create good quality works,» says Abou Al Chamat. «While producers ask that they not choose narrow or problematic options; what producers care about is distribution.»

Censorship and political pressure have not loosened their grip on Syrian works during the war, nor had they done so before the war. Most series are subject to the whims of censorship authorities or those of production companies, and each hold

series (or most series) has a story in the background and political and financial interests, with greater dominance of the former. Today, the situation is no different, except in the fact that it is subject to market pressures that push them away from the suffering of the Syrians, and therefore consider them a commodity with no demand. There is also the pressures of the new producers, those who have amassed capital and power to enter a world where they see a new opportunity for profit and convey various messages – not realistic drama messages.

The war is still leaving behind sorrow in the countries of displacement and in all the circumstances that the Syrians are experiencing. But this sadness will not sap drama of the passion to get back to its feet. The war and its tragedy are the birth of something beautiful, and the desire and pursuit of healing.

Drama will not end for me or for fans who look forward to watching the «beautiful sadness» in the future nor for the writer of *Ghadan Naltaqi*. He sees that the adversity of drama as a period of introspection for the industry and its makers, that its recovery is «only a matter of time», and that the crisis it is facing will come to an end «because there is much talent, there are people with passion, there's a strong foundation». The solution to this drama crisis will come when people begin to wonder about the solution, according to the writer, and this is accompanied by the creation of a Syrian market that is not dependent on pleasing a station or the pity of another.

We will wait, and that is what we live for sometimes. We will wait for time to go by and then Syrian drama will reflect its sadness and passion that the war hides in texts that are sure to come. In our waiting, there's the usual hope and dreams small and big: for drama to lift from the narrow corridors and its suffering what would comfort its path, and to take from the capitalist system and its capital to work against it, i.e. unleash its passion and war sorrow in defiance.