

Critical Acts

Reactivating Medea in Hanane Hajj Ali's *Jogging*

Marina Johnson

Walking into the Ellyn Bye Studio, a black box theatre located within the Portland Center Stage complex, my eyes took in the warm glimmers of stage light that poured in focused streams onto the stage. Seated onstage on the floor was Hanane Hajj Ali, clad all in black with a matching hijab concealing her hair, facing stage right and away from the door into which audience members entered. As I found my seat, I took in the *mise-en-scène*: the square border of the playing space was demarcated by a smattering of props, sparsely outlining the area that would contain the play's physical action: two water bottles, one on either side of the stage, a tincture bottle, a can of whipped topping, four glass cups, and a piece of shiny, almost metallic red fabric. The light cast shadows on other objects, obscuring them from my view and further piquing my curiosity. The door closed, Hajj Ali took a sip of water, and then began.

I could barely contain my excitement at finally seeing Lebanese actress, author, and cultural activist Hanane Hajj Ali's one-woman show, *Jogging: Theatre in Progress*. I had the pleasure of speaking with Hajj Ali in a class I sat in on where she was a guest, but this was my first time seeing her perform live.¹ As a scholar of Middle Eastern theatre, I had been waiting for this moment since Hajj Ali won the 2020 Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award,

presented by the international committee of the League of Professional Theatre Women (LPTW), which first brought *Jogging* to my attention. Now, a little more than three years later, I escaped a misty gray day in Portland to see the first show of Boom Arts' 2023 season. My viewing experience was structured by one overarching question: How will Hajj Ali reactivate the character Medea and, in so doing, reveal how that character is constructed by the world around her?

Programmed by Executive Artistic Director Tracy Cameron Francis, *Jogging* became the company's first show presented in Arabic. In the program, Francis states: "Hanane is an artist and activist who truly embodies Boom Arts' mission to 'imagine new social and political possibilities through performance'" (Francis 2023). The audience was quite full, even on the last day of performances, and we were excited to see the text that Hajj Ali wrote in consultation with Abdullah AlKafri as dramaturg. *Jogging* began as a series of thoughts that swirled around within Hajj Ali's head as she took in the sights and sounds of Beirut on the daily early morning jogs she has been running most of her adult life. She then wrote a monolog-length version, which she performed in the 2016 Beirut festival entitled "Us, the Moon, and the Neighbors." Positive audience response and the offer of a

1. Two days before the performance, Hajj Ali spoke in Dr. Suhaila Meera's Topics in Global Theatre class at Lewis and Clark College, where I was a guest that day. Having just read *Jogging*, the students were excited about engaging with Hajj Ali in person. In 2021, for our Middle East and North African (MENA) theatre podcast, *Kunafa and Shay*, my cohost Nabra Nelson and I emailed Hajj Ali for the script of the play, which we planned to discuss in an episode called "Complicating Notions of Womanhood" on MENA women and their figuration in adaptations of theatrical texts.

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development process from Moussem Nomadic Arts Centre in Belgium allowed her to transform it into a full-length piece.

As soon as the house lights dimmed, Hajj Ali began her vocal warmup. The screen behind her was made visible as supertitles (translated to English by Hassan Abdul Razzak) were projected on the top portion of the upstage wall. The warmup emphasized the “theatre in progress” subtitle of the play, providing the audience an actor preparing, while simultaneously showing us a performance setting where, maybe, anything could happen. The performer activated her breath, diction, and vocal range using Arabic words. Most Arabic words are built on a three-letter root system, and she used each letter to activate a different part of her voice, all the while expressing words that set the stage for the play: “Kh d g (scratched) — Kh d r (numbed) — Kh d a (tricked) — Kh th l (let down) (7).”²

From the start, it was clear the audience would play an integral role in the performance. In the middle of Hajj Ali’s vocal warm-up, she pulled out a piece of paper and asked a volunteer from the audience to read the preshow speech aloud in English. It was not until that moment that I noticed two theatre technicians dressed in black holding wireless handheld microphones sitting against the wall stage right and stage left. They would head into the audience to amplify the voices of volunteers throughout the performance. The volunteer read the preshow speech in English as Hajj Ali continued her vocal warmup. Several minutes later, Hajj Ali asked for another volunteer, specifically a man. She chose one and he descended from the raked seating area onto the stage and, at her instruction, knelt across from where she lay on her back, holding her feet in place so she could begin her sit-ups. Hajj Ali talked as she completed her sit-ups, her voice becoming labored in the process. The sit-ups became rhythmic, as did her breath, revealing the physical exertion of her movement. She instructed the man to hold her feet tighter, all the while maintaining their eye contact. Her sounds became more and

more sexual until they reached a crescendo. Hajj Ali collapsed onto her back with her arms outstretched, thanking the man for his help. Laughter rang out in the dark theatre. It was the first of many moments when Hajj Ali, a hijabi woman in her 50s, subverted audience expectations.

Throughout *Jogging*, Hajj Ali plays several roles: herself, Hanane; Yvonne, a Lebanese citizen from Mount Lebanon; and Zahra, a traditional young woman living in Beirut’s southern suburbs. Aspects of the three women’s lives are revealed to the audience in relation to Medea. Although the performance is rife with references, especially to Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf, the main focus is Medea, the “mythical heroine” Hanane confesses to being obsessed with (13). In her talk with Professor Meera’s class prior to the performance, Hajj Ali admitted that she had not wanted to play the role in her early acting career, finding the character’s arc to be unbelievable—how could anyone kill their own children? She echoes a similar sentiment in the play, revealing that it wasn’t until her own son was struggling with his cancer treatment that she began to understand what it meant to grapple with the possibilities of a child’s death.

As she jogged in circles around the stage, the audience’s attention turned to her physical exertion and how vulnerable the body can be. Hajj Ali’s movement showcased her body’s enormous capacity for love, fear, hope, and, as she illustrated during her sit-ups, desire. In jogging through Beirut, something Hajj Ali does every day, she daydreamed that she smothered her own son to end his pain. It was that moment that necessitated Hajj Ali’s own exploration of Medea, despite the very different context in Euripides’s drama.

The myth opens with Medea and Jason’s arrival in Corinth, where Jason becomes close to King Creon. Medea has done everything in her power to help her husband’s ambitions, including killing members of her own family. However, she finds herself betrayed when Jason decides to marry Creon’s daughter. Abandoned and infuriated by his betrayal, Medea takes her

2. “Kh” here is one letter, *خ*, in Arabic. All quotes from the play are from the published script sold at this production of *Jogging*.



Figure 1. Hanane Hajj Ali, *Jogging*, Festival d'Avignon, 20–26 July 2022. Directed by Olivier Py. (Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage)

prettiest dress, dips it in poison, and sends it to the bride-to-be. As Creon's daughter puts on the dress, she bursts into flames and dies. Medea then kills her own children and flees, leaving Jason behind.

After telling Medea's story, Hajj Ali says:

[HAJJ ALI:] Medea not only attracts me but also repels me. She can drive you crazy. A mother could not kill her children like that no matter what Euripides and the Gods who made him say! When my son had cancer at age seven, I was crippled with fear. Because I loved him so much, I wished he would die so he would not suffer! From that time, Medea invaded me and I felt like I was a piece in the giant puzzle of her character. I searched for the other pieces in the stories of women I knew. I started to think how we can deal with such a myth. Who is Medea today in a torn city like Beirut? If the age of tragedy as a type of theatre is gone, why do I smell catastrophe every time I run on the streets of Beirut? (15)

Adding a long trench coat to her outfit, Hajj Ali turns to the characters of Yvonne and Zahra. Yvonne lived in Mount Lebanon and decided, in 2009, to end the lives of her three daughters, ages 13, 10, and 7. She made a poisoned fruit salad with honey, whipped cream, and rat poison. After they fell into a deep sleep, she recorded a tape, and then ate some of the salad herself. By all accounts, Yvonne's life was normal and happy. She was married to Elie who was working in the gulf at the time. No one could figure out why Yvonne had committed this act of murder-suicide. The only insight might have been on the tape she recorded but while in police custody it disappeared. Hajj Ali imagines what might have been on the tape, using Virginia Woolf's famed suicide note as a starting point:

[YVONNE:] I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. (16–17)



Figure 2. Hanane Hajj Ali, *Jogging*. Saleh Barakat Gallery, Beirut, 2016. (Photo by Marwan Tahtah)

Hajj Ali informs the audience that many people in Lebanon assumed the tape had to contain this sentiment, it *had* to be an illness that caused Yvonne’s actions—they just don’t happen in “our town” (17). While Hajj Ali once also thought Yvonne mad, she now engages seriously with Woolf. Instead of pretending such dark feelings are abhorrent, Hajj Ali analyzes a lineage of women who have “transgressed” and what their tales reveal in order to make visible the plight of each woman.

During this sequence, Hajj Ali gathered the makings of four poison fruit salads from stage right and stage left. The audience chuckled uneasily—were some of them really going to eat fruit salad while hearing about this murder-suicide? To assuage any fears, Hajj Ali opened the plastic fruit cocktail containers in front of the audience, pointing out that they were sealed and that she had not tampered with them. She emptied them into glass dishes, added several drops of honey from a bottle, and topped the dish with a heaping of whipped topping. As she spoke about Yvonne and her choices, Hajj Ali passed the dishes to four audience members who ate their fruit salads as the unhappy tale unfolded before us. Like Yvonne’s children, they trusted that the person serving them food had their best interests at heart. Through this act, Hajj Ali asks the audience to consider their own choices, to volunteer and accept food, and what it must have taken for Yvonne to exercise her own agency that fateful night.

As Hajj Ali continued to unravel Yvonne’s story, she took a piece of white computer paper

and began to cut into it. Moments later, she unveiled her creation—cut into the paper were three children, standing side-by-side and holding hands. The audience, for a moment, could imagine Yvonne’s little girls holding hands. As we glimpsed the cutouts, Hajj Ali revealed one sentence from Yvonne’s disappeared tape, leaked from the trial: “I’m gone, and I’ve taken my daughters with me so

they won’t suffer the torment I endured and so I can be certain they would be safe” (20). Then Hajj Ali lit the edge of the white paper ablaze, letting the ashes fall into a small pail. This image pointed to Medea’s poison dress setting Jason’s fiancé ablaze while also representing the killing of the children.

The final story of the performance was Zahra’s, a traditional young woman living in the suburbs of Southern Beirut who fell in love with Comrade Mohammad, a man she had met when participating in political activism. Her love for him and the Prophet Mohammad, for whom he was named, grew and grew. Like Medea, she left her family for him. Due to her activism, she ended up in prison, “pregnant with [her] son and the cause” (23). After having three children with him, she felt his affection turn cold, and he left her. She prayed to God not to let Mohammad’s actions lessen her faith in Him: “O God, be pleased with me and let me be the mother of a martyr. O God, let me and my children have a house in your paradise” (25). Two of Zahra’s children died in 2006 in the war between Lebanon and Israel. Her remaining child died in 2013 while fighting in Syria. This child’s death, however, was complicated by a letter Zahra received from him that revealed that he was not martyred as he knew she would be told. He was killed by his own people for not obeying orders to kill innocent civilians who stood in his path. The weight of these words was evident as Hajj Ali, playing Zahra, wrestled with what it means to be a mother whose children have all died without fulfilling her wishes for them.

Staying true to *Jogging*'s subtitle, "Work in Progress," Hajj Ali ends the performance in different ways, depending on geopolitical events. In the classroom conversation, she let us know that on Thursday night, she ended the play with a poem written by a young girl from Gaza who had recently been killed. In other iterations, she concluded with the poem "Home" by Somali British poet Warsan Shire, which begins, "No one puts their children in a boat unless..." ([2015] 2022). I was left thinking about what Ocean Vuong wrote about Toni Morrison's *Sula*, when Eva kills her own son "in an act of love and mercy I hope to both be capable of—and never know" (2019:222). The fact that there are numerous possible endings speaks to how timely these stories remain.

What unites these three characters, Hanane, Yvonne, and Zahra? Their stories interrogate different parts of the Medea myth. Yvonne killed her children to save them from the world, while Zahra was unable to preserve hers from the brutality of a world full of extremist political and religious ideologies. Yvonne died by suicide, while Zahra lived. *Jogging* asks us to think both locally and globally beyond sentimental notions of womanhood and motherhood. Perhaps this is what's most salient. By highlighting the choices mothers sometimes

must make, Hajj Ali allows for a deeper understanding of how and when women exercise their own agency.

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