

Unimaginable Future? Spectatorship and Metatheatre in Ibrahim's *Two Palestinians Go Dogging* (2022)

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Abstract

This paper examines Sami Ibrahim's play *two Palestinians go dogging* (2022) through the intersecting lenses of political dramaturgy and metatheatre, arguing that the play's formal strategies constitute a coherent politics of spectatorship that refuses both passive consumption and redemptive resolution. Drawing on Liz Tomlin's framework of political dramaturgies, the paper contends that Ibrahim constructs a metatheatrical apparatus that simultaneously demands and frustrates audience engagement, which positions the spectator not as witnesses to Palestinian suffering but as co-conspirators in its commodification. The play's dystopian setting is read through Maurice Ebileeni's theorization of Palestinian speculative fiction's "Sisyphean present," in which temporal stasis enacts the structural impossibility of imagining an alternative future under the ongoing colonial violence. The paper further argues that Ibrahim's deployment of postdramatic theatrical conventions, as theorized by Hans-Thies Lehmann and mediated through Tomlin's politics of perception, transforms the stage into a place of ethical unsettlement: spectators are

denied the consolation of moral clarity and are instead made part in the very mechanisms though which Palestinian trauma is rendered visible and then forgotten.

Keywords: political dramaturgy, metatheatre, Palestinian speculative fiction, spectatorship

Introduction

In *two Palestinians go dogging* (2022), Sami Ibrahim constructs a dystopian landscape that is at once absurd, politically charged, and heartbreakingly familiar. This play is set between 2043 and 2046 in a Palestine that is indistinguishable from its current condition, envisioning a future that is as stagnant as it is inevitable. It unfolds through a structure more reminiscent of a fragmented novel than a theatrical script; with twenty-eight chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue. The play is self-consciously performative and insists on the active complicity of its spectators. At its core, *two Palestinians go dogging* follows the lives of Reem and Sayeed in the wake of the Fifth Intifada and its aftermath, using “the lens of humour to explore how the everyday becomes political and the political becomes everyday in a conflict zone” (Ibrahim, 2022b, back cover). The play won Theatre Uncut’s Political Playwright award in 2019 and was originally scheduled to run at the Royal Court Theatre in 2020 but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It eventually received its world premiere at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in 2022, directed by Omar Elerian. The production featured design by Rajha Shakiry, lightning by Jackie Shemesh, sound by Elena Peña, and projection by Zakk Hein, with a cast that included Luca Kamaleh Chapman, Sofia Danu, Joe Haddad, Philipp Mogilnitskiy, Hala Omran, Mai Weisz and Miltos Yerole mou (Royal Court, 2022). Ibrahim’s work participates in the rich tradition of British

dystopian drama while drawing on Palestinian speculative fiction's distinctive temporal stasis and unresolved futures.

This paper examines how *two Palestinians go dogging* engages with liveness, audience and political engagement through a *Tomlinesque* lens of political dramaturgy. Ibrahim's dramaturgical choices construct a metatheatrical framework that both demands and frustrates spectatorship, reflecting Tomlin's (2019) observation that political dramaturgy often involves finding the balance between provocation and the spectator's capacity for resistance (p. 1). Ultimately, the play is less about imagining a possible future and more about demonstrating the (im)possibility of doing so under the weight of perpetual trauma and systemic violence, therefore creating a critical space for the spectator's ethical deliberation where "future actions [can] take a concrete form" (Tomlin, 2019, p. 18).

While Western definitions of dystopia often rely on catastrophes such as totalitarian regimes, technological breakdowns or ecological collapse, Palestinian speculative literature, as Maurice Ebileeni (2024) explains, tends to frame the future as a "continuation of the present conditions" as a result of "constantly advancing toward the void of nonbeing" (p. 1079). Ebileeni sustains that in a context of extreme violence and near annihilation the only thing that keeps Palestine and Palestinians existing is the present: the lack of real, material changes in their conditions of life, as well as the hardships suffered, make a more promising future seem impossible. Ibrahim's vision of Palestine in 2043 mirrors today's Palestine in its relentless violence and unchanged power structures. In fact, the power structures in Ibrahim's work are so identical to those of the present that Netanyahu is still in charge, albeit he has died and been brought back: "they resurrected him and his reanimated corpse became prime

minister” (Ibrahim, 2022b, p. 9). In *two Palestinians go dogging* there is no shift in geopolitical realities and no narrative of progress, instead, the play reaffirms what Ebileeni calls the “Sisyphean present”, in which temporality is frozen, and futures are deferred indefinitely (p. 1088, p. 1092). In parallel, British theatre has seen a resurgence of dystopian works, particularly post-COVID, as Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija (2024) notes, where plays, for instance *two Palestinians go dogging*, foreground “theatrical richness” while interrogating national and global anxieties (p. 248). Ibrahim inscribes himself into this double genealogy of dystopian British theatre and Palestinian speculative fiction by creating a theatrical world where future imaginaries are structurally impossible.ⁱ

But what happens in *two Palestinians go dogging*? Act one starts with Reem and Sayeed reading out a note from the playwright and then telling a somewhat comical anecdote told as if they were in a stand-up show about two Palestinian women going dogging who end up detained. This first act is confined to the year 2043 and it covers the events that incite the Fifth Intifada, that is, how Sara’s death (an Israeli soldier) at the hands of Jawad (Reem and Sayeed’s son) is used as a justification for the use of excessive violence in retaliation, resulting in the death of Salwa (Reem and Sayeed’s niece) and the revelation that Reem and Sayeed’s 12-year-old daughter Loubna had been killed by Sara.ⁱⁱ Act two also starts with Reem and Sayeed interacting with the audience and with a story of two Palestinians going dogging, in this case amidst the Intifada. This second act covers from 2043 to 2046, including the Intifada, ceasefire agreements and the confession that Sayeed did die at the beginning of the act. *two Palestinians go dogging* ends with Adam (Sara’s father) handing Reem a letter by the playwright where Ibrahim provides some self-criticism, both to himself and the audience, which will be analysed later. The structure of the play mirrors itself and ends in a

circle. As aforementioned, the play starts and finishes with Reem reading a letter from the playwright, acknowledging the artificiality of the performance and breaking what Ibrahim calls “the deal” (Ibrahim, 2022a), known in theatre studies as the suspension of disbelief.

Liveness and metatheatrical devices

The liveness of *two Palestinians go dogging* has different functions: it is a temporal or physical quality as much as a deliberate dramaturgical strategy that accentuates the constructedness of theatrical representation while implicating the audience in the mechanisms of storytelling. From the very beginning, the play announces itself as performance: Reem and Sayeed begin by reading a “note from the guy who wrote this play” (Ibrahim, 2022b, p. 3), establishing a contract with the audience in which all pretence of realism is suspended. This opening, which is reminiscent of metatheatrical traditions that date back to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, immediately disrupts narrative immersion and foregrounds theatricality as artifice (Stephen, 2022). This self-consciousness extends throughout the play, for instance, each chapter is introduced with its title being screamed, not read or spoken. It is not coincidental that Ibrahim insists on it (Ibrahim, 2022b, p. 2), this delivery defies narrative convention, shocks the senses, and repeatedly pushes the audience out of passive observation. I read this directive both as a stylistic flourish and a political act: the scream embodies the expression of desperation, frustration, urgency, and even the refusal to be ignored.

At other times, either Reem or Sayeed talk directly to the audience. For example, at the beginning of the play, Reem jokes: “No one is allowed to laugh. [...] I’m kidding – of course you can laugh. But only if I say something funny” (p. 4). This interaction signals the

play's constant awareness of its performativity and complicates audience engagement from the outset. Yet, this awareness is not only brought to the fore by characters breaking the fourth wall; stage directions also highlight it. At one point, Jawad is arrested for Sara's death and beaten up, Reem tells the audience "poor baby is covered in blood" and signals him to cover himself in blood "Go on then", which Jawad does "*He gets out a tube of fake blood and starts covering himself*" (p. 24), making explicit the constructed nature of the representation of violence in theatre. Another moment that exemplifies this point well is the beginning of act two, when Reem "*starts speaking Arabic*" but says aloud, "I'm speaking Arabic" though the script remains in English (p. 54). The sequence develops further when Adam, father of the deceased Israeli soldier Sara that drives the rise of the Fifth Intifada, attempts to join in: "Okay... I... am... speaking... Arabic... now. REEM Thank you. SAYEED You know he's still speaking English? REEM No he's not. ADAM I speak Arabic. REEM You see? SAYEED It sounds like English to me" (p. 58). Reem is trying to establish a deal with the audience, one where they will pretend everything that is being said in English is actually Arabic, but Sayeed keeps breaking the deal before it can even be established, further illustrating the performativity of the play.

Moreover, Ibrahim's use of theatrical genres such as stand-up comedy in act one "REEM *looks at the audience*. I'm starting with a joke" (p. 2); kids' game "Simon Says" in act one chapter one: Bibi Says, Bibi being a nickname for Benjamin Netanyahu (pp. 6-7); or game show parody in act two, chapter eighteen: DEATH-TOLL COMPETITION "WOOOOOOOOO! Are you ready? *No response*. I said: WOOOOOOOOO" Are you ready?" (p. 67), further develops this reflexivity. These stylistic shifts echo Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of postdramatic theatre and its "politics of perception" that deprioritize

linear narrative in favour of affect and disruption (Lehmann qtd. in Tomlin, 2019, p. 38). The play offers a cyclical structure, starting and ending with a letter from the playwright and the returning motif of two Palestinians going dogging. Reem also embodies this repetition stemming from trauma, as Caruth (1996) points out, trauma resists narrative time, instead it is experienced as a return (pp. 1-9). In Ibrahim's play, this return is literal: characters remain haunted by lost children (like Loubna), murdered family members (like Sawda) and political betrayals, and the audience is pulled into this looping temporality. Reem must keep going not because she sees a different future but because stasis, repetition, is all that is available. Furthermore, significant plot events like Sara's death or the Fifth Intifada are narrated instead of enacted. This dramaturgical distance converts theatrical action from representation to reflection, reinforcing the psychological disorientation experienced by the characters, and by extension, the audience. The spectators are pulled into this temporal loop, and Ibrahim draws their attention to the fact that narrative closure is an illusion. At the end of the play Reem refuses to conclude the story only to be interrupted by the literal explosion of rockets, evidencing that in *two Palestinians go dogging* there is no catharsis, only interruption.

All of this reinforces the play's relentless self-reflexivity and exemplifies what Tomlin identifies as a key feature of political dramaturgy: the tension between the artist's desire to provoke political change and the spectator's autonomy to resist ideological direction (Tomlin, 2019, p. 2). Rather than attempting to deliver a redemptive or coherent vision of the world, Ibrahim's play invites multiple, even conflicting, interpretations. It is this invitation that constitutes the play's political force, in Tomlin's words: political dramaturgies are "concerned with invitations to meaning, possibilities of affect and calls to action" (p. 2). Ibrahim leverages metatheatre not as a tool for moral instruction but as a mechanism of

ethical unsettlement. This aligns with Rancière's model of dissensus, wherein political art does not deliver messages but reorganizes the distribution of the sensible, exposing what can be seen, said, and felt (Rancière qtd. In Tomlin, 2019, p. 41). In this sense, *two Palestinians go dogging* is more than a play about Palestine; it is also about the limits of theatre as a medium of political representation. These devices of metatheatre in Ibrahim's work also operate through a principle that Cahill (2015) terms the "theatrical double reflexivity complex" where the spectator essentially co-constructs the metatheatrical event by perceiving its self-referential gestures (p. 2). By breaking the fourth wall repeatedly, Reem and Sayeed position the audience not as a passive observer but as an interlocutor. By signalling its own artifice through language jokes, the use of fake blood, or direct address, Ibrahim's play breaks down the illusion of theatre. In other words, he dismantles the boundary between performance and reality, encouraging spectators to reflect critically on both the content and their role in consuming it. This metatheatrical openness helps transform the audience into ethically engaged witnesses, rather than passive viewers. The world of the play exists because and while it is being performed; as it is called into attention in the letter at the end of the play that Ibrahim writes to Reem "*This is fiction. So your story has to end [...] I don't understand your world, I don't understand you – and once this theatre stops paying me to tell your story, I'll stop telling it*" (Ibrahim, 2022b, p. 105). This confession both collapses theatrical illusion, which has been broken many times already, and highlights the commercial, even exploitative, mechanisms of telling/consuming Palestinian stories.

In this very complex context, liveness is more than a temporal event, it becomes a site of political confrontation. Tomlin (2019) emphasizes that the dramaturgy of contemporary political theatre must consider "the spectator-subject of twenty-first-century neoliberal

capitalism” (p. 2). Ibrahim’s formal disruptions foreground the complicity of this subject: by attending, by watching, by clapping, the audience participates in the ongoing commodification of Palestinian suffering. Thus, the play’s liveness is a provocation, both a testament to presence and a reminder of absence: the absence of justice, closure, and a conceivable future and perhaps also a call to imagine a different future collectively.

The audience as co-conspirator

One of the play’s most radical gestures is its demand that the audience confront its own complicity in the Palestinian condition. If *two Palestinians go dogging* opens by implicating the audience in its narrative frame, it deepens this implication by positioning spectators as co-conspirators in the spectacle of Palestinian trauma. Through the play’s direct address, absurdist satire, recurring theatrical breaches, and the theatrical contract/suspension of disbelief constantly being invoked and broken, the audience is denied the comfort of distance. Instead, they are actively involved in the performance, called upon to witness, to judge, and to be judged. This mechanism reflects Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “emancipated spectator” who is no longer a passive recipient of a message but an active interpreter whose meaning-making reshapes the performance itself (qtd. in Tomlin, 2019, p. 41-42).

This mode of engagement is extremely visible in act one, chapter nine when Jawad is arrested. The arrest, which is violent and humiliating, is caught on video. Yet what follows is not a tragedy but a grotesque comedy of global politics: the video goes viral and appears on “BBC telly” (Ibrahim, 2022, p. 34) which triggers a wave of Western humanitarian outrage. “The do-gooders do good. International pressure. The plight of Palestine, et cetera, et cetera,

wonderful stuff!” Reem proclaims (p. 35). Her sarcasm unmasks cynicism: these so-called do-gooders do not resolve oppression, they aestheticize Palestinian trauma before forgetting about those who suffer under it. In this frame, Western spectatorship, particularly that of liberal or progressive audiences, is not seen exclusively as solidarity but as consumption of distant suffering for moral gratification.

This critique aligns with Tomlin’s political dramaturgies of spectatorship, where the audience’s position is not neutral but always ideologically charged. The spectators are not innocent; they are part of the apparatus that renders Palestinian trauma visible, commodifiable, and ultimately forgettable. As Ibrahim’s playwright-character/himself admits in the final letter, *“I don’t understand your world, I don’t understand you – and once this theatre stops paying me to tell your story, I’ll stop telling it”* (pp. 105–06). This shatters the implicit contract between the storyteller and the audience, collapsing the suspension of disbelief and leaving the audience ethically exposed. Ibrahim refuses to allow spectators neutrality and forces them to recognise their role both in the performance and in the real-world systems that perpetuate Palestinian dispossession.

The characters, who need the audience to witness their suffering, assert their agency by exposing the spectator’s voyeurism. Reem’s refusal to let the story end is not a plea for attention but a resistance to commodified tragedy, it portrays the future as “suspended” and narrative progression as “inert”, as it is common in Palestinian speculative literature (Ebileeni, 2024, p. 1079). Despite Reem’s efforts to put a stop to the end of the play, the story does end, with a rocket, abrupt, inescapable. The audience is invited, in fact forced, to imagine a future, but it is a future they cannot conceive. The audience, rather than leaving

with answers or even moral clarity, departs implicated and unsettled. Nonetheless, we should not overlook Reem's last message of hope: "I believe my story matters and you cannot forget a story that matters. And I believe things are a mess, but we can still find answers if we care enough to THINK" (p. 107) in favour of this reading. It is obvious that, on the one hand, the failure to imagine an alternative future is dramatized: the playwright and the audience are unable to prevent the rocket, and they are also unable to conceive a narrative that does not end in violence. As Ebileeni (2024) observes, the Palestinian future in speculative fiction is "not a blank canvas for utopian projection but a space marked by inevitable recurrence" (p. 1083). On the other hand, Reem's words seem to signal to the possibility of imagining new futures collectively, thus opening new avenues and giving the audience room to act.

Conclusion: Witnessing Without Resolution

Be that as it may, *two Palestinians go dogging* is not a play that wants to resolve. Rather, it seeks to reveal, to implicate, to unsettle. Through its layered dramaturgy, ironic humour, and refusal of narrative closure, Ibrahim constructs a theatre that is as much about watching as it is about being watched. Reem, Sayeed, and even the playwright occupy the stage only as long as we, the audience, allow them to. Being so, Ibrahim's greatest provocation may not be political, but ethical: what does it mean to witness suffering when the only possible future is more of the same? By staging the (im)possibility of imagining an alternative future, Ibrahim forces a reckoning with the real violence of political stagnation. The cyclical temporality, the breaking of the fourth wall, and the metatheatrical letters all converge to ask not whether a Palestinian future is possible, but whether we, on the outside of

this narrative, are capable of imagining one. And if we are not, then perhaps the rockets that end the play will continue to fall, not just on Reem and Sayeed, but on our conscience.

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ⁱ *two Palestinians go dogging* is also inscribed in the tradition of diasporic theatre. To further explore diasporic Palestinian theatre, see Malek Najjar, M. (2022). Recreating Palestine: Arab American Drama and Transnational Exilic Loss. *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, N° 170(1), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.170.0069>

ⁱⁱ **Sayeed** is married to **Reem**. Together they have two children: **Jawad** (son) and **Loubna** (daughter). **Salwa** and **Tariq** are Jawad and Loubna's cousins.

Sara is an Israeli soldier kidnapped and killed by Jawad. She's also responsible for Loubna's murder. Daughter of **Adam**.