CULTURAL EXHIBIT

The Sheep and the Whale

Ahmed Ghazali



Illustration by Carole Hénaff

The Sheep and the Whale was produced in 2001 at the Quat-sous theater in Montreal under the direction of Wajdi Mouawad and was published by Editions Théâtrales in Paris, and the Spanish translation in the magazine *Primer Acto Cuadernos de Investigación Teatral*. It has been translated into several languages and was subject of four more productions in Toronto, Montpellier, Brussels and Trier, and of numerous public staged readings.

In the middle of the Strait of Gibraltar, a Russian freighter collided with a boat of African stowaways. The sailors retrieve the bodies but neither Spain nor Morocco wants to receive them. Then began a long night of waiting and confrontation. Hassan and Hélène, a couple of tourists on board, find themselves in the middle of a tragedy which shakes up their marriage and make it appear as a reflection of the impossible relationship between the north and the south.

Translated by Bobby Theodore

The Invasion of Europe

4 AM. The same setting. The Survivor is still unmoving in the middle of the bodies. Hélène enters, dragging a large black suitcase behind her. Suddenly, a body sits up amongst the dead. Terrified, she screams and backs away before realising it is Hassan.

HASSAN, *sitting in the middle of the pile of bodies*: I wanted see what it's like to be one of

the dead. I lay down, closed my eyes and had a nightmare. Or was it a sweet dream? Every time I look at these faces, shivers go down my spine. I'm afraid of seeing someone I know. You were in my dream too; you were so far away.

HELENE, *in tears*: I'm sorry. I don't know what's happening to me. I don't want to see or hear anything anymore. I want to go home, that's all I want. I want to shut myself in my room, get in bed and try not think about what's happening!

HASSAN: Nothing's happening. This is a night like any other in the Straight. But I feel better here than on land. At least on this ship, we're equal: everyone is where they belong. I feel more real here, less stupid than in Paris.

HELENE: You're never going to set foot on land again!

HASSAN: That's a choice and I can't choose. I don't know how. I've tried. It's very uncomfortable to be sitting on the fence between two worlds. Roads don't go very far if there aren't any bridges to cross over rivers, seas or valleys. I am a bridge, and in times of war, bridges are the first things to get blown up.

The Survivor softly starts singing mourning songs again.

HELENE, *Covering her ears*: Why is it taking so long for them to come? We've been waiting three hours. If only they could drop us off in Gibraltar. We're almost there.

HASSAN, *after a bit*: We might be going to Tangiers.

HELENE, *tries to hide her surprise*: Really? Tangiers?

HASSAN, *trying to be as neutral as possible*: The Captain said so. If the Moroccans don't come for the bodies, we'll put into port at Tangiers and bring them in ourselves. Beat. We talked about visiting Morocco for so long and now…

HELENE: It's not my fault!!

HASSAN: That's not what I'm saying.

HELENE: It bothered you so much when we talked about going to Morocco, I started avoiding the subject.

HASSAN: You're right, it was hard for me. Do you know why? Have you ever tried to understand?

HELENE: You never wanted to talk about it. You never said anything.

HASSAN: The truth is you were never interested in knowing about who I am or where I come from. Have you ever thought about how the language we speak isn't my language at

all?

HELENE: I've asked you lots of questions about your culture. I even started taking an Arabic course. You're the one who discouraged me; you never wanted to speak Arabic to me.

HASSAN: I thought a tango class would be more fun. But that's not what this is about.

HELENE: Then what is it about? You can't even talk about it. How do you expect me to guess what you're determined to keep buried? Deep down you never thought I was good enough. You just see me as someone from the West, a Christian, an infidel, a French slut. So go! Go home! You've always been a stowaway, just like them!

HASSAN, *beside himself*: □□□ □□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□□ □□□ □□!

HELENE: What are you saying?

HASSAN, *furious*: □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□ □□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□ □□□ □□□□

HELENE: I don't understand. You're speaking Arabic!

Hassan realises he's speaking Arabic. He is stunned. Pause. The Survivor begins to sing a mourning song. Won over by the sweet melody, Hassan joins the Survivor in the song.

HASSAN: It started yesterday. I caught myself humming Moroccan songs. Then words started slipping off my tongue like pieces of wood coming off a wreck at the murky bottom of the ocean and rose up slowly, floating on the surface.

HELENE: Oh, Hassan. Hassan. I've never been able to say your name the way you like. I've never been able to say that Arab H that comes from the depths of your bowels. I tried when you weren't home. I practised so when you came in the door I could put my arms around you and call you by your name, the way your mother would have. Oh, that mysterious H, so hot, so deep…sing it for me again.

HASSAN, lets the sound of the letter out: □!

HELENE: Again.

HASSAN: □!

HELENE: You said that the most beautiful words in Arabic, the most sensual, all begin with the letter H. You taught me some.

Hassan begins to say some words in Arabic that begin with the letter H. He says them softly, putting a slight accent on the H the way someone who get pleasure from words would.

HASSAN: □□□□

HELENE: Life

HASSAN: □□

HELENE: Love.

HASSAN: □□

HELENE: Feeling

HASSAN: □□□□

HELENE: Affection

HASSAN: □□□□

HELENE: Homesick.

HASSAN: □□□

HELENE: Dream

HASSAN: You still remember!

HELENE: Yes, I remember, I'll always remember.

While they say the words, they move closer.

HASSAN: □□□□□

HELENE: Warmth.

HASSAN: □□□□

HELENE: Harem.

HASSAN, *they hold each other*: □□□

HELENE: Embrace.

HASSAN, *falling to his knees, burying his head in her breasts*: □□□□

HELENE: Milk.

HASSAN, *pressing his face against her belly*: □□□□

HELENE: Pregnant.

She falls to the ground, wrapping her legs around him.

HASSAN: □□□

HELENE: Menstruation.

HASSAN: □□□

HELENE: I don’t know that one.

HASSAN: I never thought of saying it to you before.

HELENE: What is it?

HASSAN: Whale, it means: whale. *We hear a whale singing. Pause.* There are some other things I’ve never told you. I’d like you to know them now.

HELENE: All right.

HASSAN: I entered France illegally.

HELENE: What?

HASSAN: Twelve years ago, I entered France illegally.

HELENE: You told me you had a scholarship.

HASSAN: I lied.

HELENE: You snuck across the Straight?

HASSAN: Yes. *Points to the bodies.* On a boat, like them. But, there was no storm that night. The moon was full and flooded the Straight. It was a magical night. My wedding night with Europe. When I saw the lights of Gibraltar get closer, I thought about one thing: How my ancestors, full of dreams, walked upon European soil thirteen centuries ago. Like them, I wanted Europe more than anything in the world.

HELENE, *in shock*: Why didn’t you tell me?

HASSAN: There are lots of things you don’t know. *Beat*. Jamila and Yilmaz, you know, our best friends, the Kurds.

HELENE: Yes.

HASSAN: Same thing. Illegal. All the way from Iraq.

HELENE: With their baby?

HASSAN: Yes. She was barely a year old. *Beat.* And Benjamin, our friend from Senegal.

HELENE, *dreading what she's about to hear*: What.

HASSAN: A freighter like this one, in a container like those. Dakar to the Hague. And there's Saïd from Mauritius. Crossed the Sahara on a camel all the way to Morocco. Then took a boat from Tangiers, like me. *Pointing to the bodies.* Like them. Yasmina, the Iranian…

HELENE: Yes.

HASSAN: Fake Greek passport. Her parents sold their house to pay for it. It was either that or she was going have her head cut off by fundamentalists. Farid from Tunisia– on a freighter. Tunis to Naples. Crossed the Franco-Italian border on foot. Antonio from Bolivia– a fake marriage to a Saint Denis prostitute. Wang from Vietnam…

HELENE: Why didn't anyone tell me?

HASSAN: Because…we want to forget. We wanted to believe we were important and were asked to come. We believed in this Europe. The world had to be rebuilt and Europe was the only place where we could rebuild ideas and thought; a much needed laboratory to experiment in. So we met in Paris. We were the ambassadors of our cultures and we were going to take part in the rebuilding. Europe, centre of the universe, France, centre of Europe. We believed. It's stupid, I know, now that I think about it. But we really believed. Coming back down to earth, Hassan looks at the bodies. I thought I could slip through without being noticed. I thought I could close my eyes and face North, listen to my Walkman full blast, clench my teeth and wait for it to be over. I told myself, "It only takes a few minutes to cross the straight." But now I know you can't escape destiny. And no matter how furious you are with destiny, don't forget you brought me here. Remember, we were supposed to fly to Paris but you forced me to board this ship. Tangiers was calling and you heard it.

Pause. The Survivor starts to sing mourning songs again. Hélène lets herself be rocked gently by the melody.

HELENE: For some reason I'm thinking about another life. And I'm scared. For the first time, I'm remembering mass from when I was younger. I'm thinking about death. I saw my body, lying on a wooden bed in a cave deep in a forgotten mountain. I'm thinking about all those old people who talk to their dogs, about my colleagues at the office preparing for retirement at thirty, all those young people who join cults or end their lives in the bloom of

their youth. I felt contempt for them. And now, I understand. I want to talk to them and ask for forgiveness.

HASSAN: We were dreaming Hélène! About the world. Without ever daring to look at it! *Beat*. You haven't gone near the bodies. You look at them as if they don't affect you. That's my life, our life. Come sit next to me, next to them.

HELENE: Please, stop.

He grabs her and drags her to towards the bodies.

HASSAN: If they were beached whales or seals, you'd have taken pictures. You would have caressed them tenderly. Get closer!

HELENE: Let me go!

But he drags her over to the bodies and forces her to her knees.

HASSAN: Look! It's the museum of humanity. Look at this one; he's a Berber. I can tell from the colour of his eyes. This one is an Arab. Here! A black African, and guess how I know, because they have blacks in North Africa too. Of course, he's the only one who isn't circumcised. Closer! Don't worry, they aren't rotting yet. Salted as they are, they'll stay preserved. Look! This one is older. I bet he's a highlander from Atlas. Look at his strong legs. Touch his hands; they're worn. He worked very hard.

HELENE: Let me go!

HASSAN: I have a surprise for you. You said it yourself, "I came here to share and see". Now you'll get what you've been asking for.

He picks up one of the bodies, sits it in front of him and undresses it above the waist.

HELENE: A woman!

HASSAN: Disguised herself so they'd let her come. All this for the good life. If only she knew! If only they all knew what I know about Europe. It's too late? They're already dead? Then how about the living? Let's find the ones who are still alive!

He drags her towards the containers.

HELENE: Let me go!

HASSAN: *He speaks to the stowaways, presumably in the containers.* Brothers! I'd like to introduce Hélène. She's from Paris. She'd like to welcome all of you to France. They're here. You don't see them but they see you. There in the dark, through the holes and cracks. They've been spying on you. They know everything about you. Everything you say, do,

think, dream. You want to see? *Loudly to the stowaways in the containers.* Where's she from?

We hear stowaways off-stage yelling and shouting like at a sporting event.

STOWAWAYS OFF-STAGE: Paris! Paris!

HASSAN: Her favourite colours?

STOWAWAYS OFF-STAGE: Red and Black!

HASSAN: Her perfume?

STOWAWAYS OFF-STAGE: Chanel Number 5!

He drags her into a passageway between the containers. He is trying to have sex with her. At first she resists then she lets him have his way.

HASSAN: Can you smell Africa? You've never been but you've taken the metro hundreds of times. You've probably been stuck with a bunch of Arabs or blacks at rush hour. You must have smelled the heat, the odour. That's Africa. Or do you remember the African restaurants we ate at? You said, "I love that smell, it takes me someplace, it moves me, it's mystical," and you said, "Take me to Africa! Make love to me in the desert, in a tent, on a sheepskin, under a palm tree, in between the dunes."

They come together. Hélène screams loudly right up until her orgasm. Just as she finishes screaming we hear the sound of someone pissing in one of the containers next to them. Pause.

HASSAN: What about our dreams now? What's going to happen to us?

HELENE: I want to go home.

HASSAN: They'll be in Marseilles before you. They'll be crammed into the stairs and the hallway. And when you get inside and triple lock your door, guess what's going to happen when you open your suitcase? A stowaway is going to jump out!

He barely pronounces the word suitcase when an almost naked black African jumps out of Helene's suitcase. Hélène screams and backs away. The African starts dancing and plays the bongo attached to his belt. At the same time, shadows emerge from the containers, slip in through the darkness and appear suddenly on the deck. They are stowaways who join the dance. Other stowaways emerge from the water, dripping wet and bloody. They climb over the railing and jump on deck. They close in on Hélène, encircle her and start singing and dancing.

HASSAN: Millions of stowaways are going to flock to Europe! They'll come from the East

and South. Blacks, Arabs, Algerians, Armenians, Bohemians, Brazilians, Chileans, Cambodians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Haitians, Russians, Persians, Peruvians, Romanians, Paraguayans, Uruguayans, Kenyans, Nigerians, Albanians, Cameroonians, Cubans, Angolans, Mexicans, Jamaicans, Moroccans, Vietnamese, Burmese, Iraqis, Gabonese, Sudanese, Lebanese, Togolese, Congolese, Chinese, Beninese, Tartars, Turks, Kurds, Moors, Centaurs, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Catharians, and all the barbarians! They'll come by air, sea, land, desert; they'll dig tunnels, crawl through sewers, and drop from airplane wings! Every tourist returning to Europe will carry one home in their suitcases! *Hysterical and wandering amongst the Stowaways.* Soon this Straight will be full of dead bodies rushing through the waters! A mountain of bodies will surface between Tangiers and Gibraltar. We'll be able to walk on top of the dead and cross the Straight in two hours! *He walks on top of the bodies while speaking. As he does so, they suddenly come to life, rising like a mountain out of water. Hassan finds himself lifted above their heads. Hands in the air, he screams.* Europe will be invaded!

Other stowaways emerge. Hélène is in the middle, they sing and dance around her. Everyone harasses her, pulls on her clothing, tearing off pieces. Hassan mixes into the crowd. Hysterical, he dances to all the different kinds of music and enters into a trance. Hélène shocked, overwhelmed, tries feebly to protect herself against all the invasive hands. She screams in terror. The circle grows tighter around her. She falls, screams one last time like someone falling into an abyss. The circle closes in on her.

Blackout

Literary Exhibit

Revolution on my mouth walls
Asmaa Azaizeh

Cities of Jasmine
Mohamad Bitari



Ahmed Ghazali

Ahmed Ghazali is a writer and founder of Jiwar Creació i Societat, a Barcelona-based cultural organization promoting creation and residency of artists. He pursued scientific studies in Rabat and Paris and worked as a geophysical engineer in the Sahara desert before devoting himself to playwriting. His first text, *The Sheep and the Whale*, was awarded the 2001 SACD Prize for French written drama. It has been produced in Montreal, Toronto, Montpellier, Brussels and Trier, along with numerous public readings. Since then, he has written several texts, some of which have enjoyed international success, such as *Timbuktu 52 days on camel's back* (Spanish edition by Editorial Icaria, 2005), *Crossings* (Catalan edition in Pausa magazine), *The sky is too low* and *Mellah*. Along with writing, he works as a museologist in the design and production of museums and interpretation centres, particularly in the Arab world.