



Dr Johnson's House

London's Theatre of The East

8 November 2019 – 15 February 2020

A collaboration by The Arab British Centre and Dr Johnson's House

- Inspired by Samuel Johnson's only play, *Irene* (1749), London's Theatre of The East will showcase new commissions by four contemporary Arab-British artists and writers.
- The project invites artists, researchers and the public to re-examine the historical connections between the Arab and Islamic worlds and London.
- Featuring an exhibit and event series including the first public reading of Johnson's *Irene* for 270 years, in partnership with Queen Mary University of London.

PRESS RELEASE: 24 October 2019, London

The Arab British Centre and Dr Johnson's House, neighbouring organisations based in Gough Square in the City of London, are delighted to announce the launch of their collaborative project *London's Theatre of the East*. Through an exhibit and event series including a dramatic reading and a roundtable discussion, the project invites artists, researchers and the public to (re)examine the historical connections between the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa and London, via the lens of Dr Johnson's 1749 play, *Irene*, set during the fall of Constantinople.

Four artists, designers and writers have been commissioned to respond to the historical context and content of the play, with the support of academic advisors including Professor Jerry Brotton, author of *This Orient Isle* (2016) and Professor of Renaissance Studies at Queen Mary University of London. The artists – Hannah Khalil, Nour Hage, Lena Naassana and Saeida Rouass - examined the period and influential encounters between London and the region from the 16th century onwards, when Queen Elizabeth I first encouraged trading with Muslim nations.

The resulting exhibition will feature the artists' original works alongside items of Johnsoniana, including: a rare first edition pamphlet of the script of *Irene* (1749), conserved with funding from this project; Johnson's first published work, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, (1735), a translated travel account by the 17th century Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Father Jerome Lobo, which demonstrates Johnson's early interest in non-European cultures; and *Rasselas or The Prince of Abyssinia* (1759), Johnson's only novel, inspired by this earlier tale of exploration, with descriptions of the characters' travels in Egypt, Persia, Syria, and Palestine.

There will be visual depictions from the period of our artists' research also, including an engraving from the series 'Remarkable Characters' by A Van Assen, on loan from the Worshipful Company of Mercers, in addition to a facsimile portrait of Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed

Anoun, the first Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I (1600), from the University of Birmingham Research and Cultural Collections.

Celine Lupp McDaid, The Donald Hyde Curator of Dr Johnson's House, explains:

"Through this exciting collaboration with the Arab British Centre and engagement of contemporary Arab-British artists, Dr Johnson's House is thrilled to present Johnson's (somewhat dubious) credentials as a playwright through perhaps his least known, and certainly least celebrated, work *Irene* (1749) and his retelling of the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. The talented artists we are working with offer a refreshing and welcome modern insight into Johnson's work and the themes which arise from exploring the long history of Arabs and Muslims in England, from trade to textiles to texts."

Research days led by academic advisors Professor Jerry Brotton (Professor of Renaissance Studies, Queen Mary University of London), Dr Matthew Birchwood (Senior Lecturer, Kingston University), and Professor Ros Ballaster (Professor of 18th Century Studies, Faculty of English Language and Literature at University of Oxford), highlighted the significant and often unknown history of encounters with the Middle East and North Africa and the impact on cultural life in England. In an accompanying publication, participating artist and playwright Hannah Khalil expresses her surprise to learn that Arabic scholarship was flourishing in England in the early 17th Century – evidenced by the fact that Arabic seats were established in Oxford in the 1630s. Her dramatic monologue, written especially for this exhibition, reflected this discovery and was inspired by innovations in printing and the radical steps taken to publish the first English translation of 'Alkoran', the Holy Qu'ran, in 1649.

The exhibition will also feature an installation by Lebanese fashion designer, Nour Hage, who was inspired by fashions in 16th- century England and the influence of the Silk Road on available materials. Novelist Saeida Rouass will exhibit her re-telling of the age-old tale of *Irene*, created following a residency at Dr Johnson's House and by using elements of Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755). Photographer Lena Naassana will present a series of staged portraits that explore the legacy of Arab immigration to Britain.

Nadia El-Sebai, Executive Director of The Arab British Centre says:

"At a time when the topic of migration is wrought with sensitivities, our collaboration with Dr Johnson's House exploring the influence of the Arab and Islamic worlds on our shared home - the City of London - is timely and welcome. *London's Theatre of the East* is the first project included in our new programme ARAB BRITAIN. The artists and academic advisors involved in the project have demonstrated just how exciting and necessary it is to re-examine our history, and recognise how interactions with the East have shaped our own culture and society."

The *London's Theatre of the East* exhibit will be accompanied by a series of public activities, including a dramatic reading of the play by Queen Mary University of London students, the first public reading of the play in 270 years. Visit Dr Johnson's House from 8 November 2019 to 15 February 2020 to explore these largely hidden histories of trade and migration and their impact on society and culture, rippling through to the present day.

London's Theatre of the East is part of Dr Johnson's House annual exhibition programme and the Arab British Centre's ARAB BRITAIN programme. It is supported by the City of London Corporation.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Key Dates:

- **7 November:** Press viewing 4pm – 6pm. To attend, please contact Becky Harrison at becky@arabbritishcentre.org.uk or 02078321310
- **8 November:** Exhibition Opens to public. General entry to house costs £7.
- **9 November:** Open Day, 2 – 5pm. Free entry for visitors
- **14 November:** Roundtable discussion with participating artists at 7pm (Doors open at 6.30pm). Chaired by Professor Jerry Brotton. £7 per ticket. For more information and to cover this event please contact becky@arabbritishcentre.org.uk.
- **19 November:** Open Evening 6pm – 8pm. Free entry for visitors
- **21 November:** A dramatic reading of *Irene* by drama students of Queen Mary University of London at 7pm (Doors open at 6.30pm). £7 per ticket. For more information and to cover this event please contact Becky Harrison at becky@arabbritishcentre.org.uk

For more information about events and activities please visit www.arabbritishcentre.org.uk and www.drjohnsonshouse.org

Artists include:

Nour Hage is an award-winning Lebanese designer of menswear, womenswear and accessories. She graduated in 2010 from Parsons Paris School of Art and Design (Paris College of Art) with a BFA in Fashion Design. After stints at Elie Saab and Oscar de la Renta, she joined the design team at Damir Doma in Paris. In 2012, she moved to Beirut, where she decided, aged 24, to start her own line. In 2014 she was awarded the prestigious Boghossian Foundation Prize. She regularly collaborates with design schools, other designers in various fields and even start-ups. She is based in London.

Hannah Khalil, a writer of Palestinian-Irish heritage, has staged plays include the upcoming *A Museum in Baghdad*, which opens at the RSC in October 2019, in addition to: *Interference* for the National Theatre of Scotland (March 2019); *Scenes from 68* Years* - shortlisted for the James Tait Black award 2017, which “confirms Khalil as a dramatist of compelling potential” (Arcola Theatre, London, 2016); *The Scar Test*, said to be “Political theatre at its best” (Soho theatre, London); *The Worst Cook in the West Bank* (Liverpool Arabic Arts Festival); *Bitterenders* (ReOrient Festival, San Francisco, 2015); and *Plan D* (Tristan Bates Theatre, Meyer Whitworth Award shortlisted). She is currently also under commission to Shakespeare’s Globe, London.

Lena Naassana is a documentary photographer and filmmaker whose work brings together her interests in comparative literature, ethnography and the visual arts. Lena was born in New York to a multi-cultural and multi-lingual family of mixed Czech/Syrian descent. She was educated in Cairo, leaving to read English literature and Czech at Oxford University. After graduating, she returned to Cairo and began working as a documentary filmmaker and photographer with local and international NGOs. These included humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF and Samusocial, as well as various non profits working on environmental, educational and agricultural challenges in Egypt. In 2017, she moved to Prague where she immersed herself in medium-large format film photography and darkroom techniques, under the mentorship of experienced Czech photographers. At present, she is completing an MA in Arabic literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. She

continues to pursue interdisciplinary projects grappling with themes of exile, alienation and nostalgia.

Saeida Rouass is a British novelist of Moroccan heritage. Her novella *Eighteen Days of Spring in Winter* (2015) is set in Cairo during the Arab Spring, and her first novel, *Assembly of the Dead* (2017), is a fictional account of the true story of the Moorish 'Jack the Ripper' set in Marrakesh in 1906, in the build up to the French Protectorate. She is currently working on the sequel, set in Fes during 1912. She has written for Newsweek, The Independent, Writers of Colour, Skin Deep and other cultural magazines. She is a 2019 Churchill Fellow, researching how women are impacted by hate groups and violent extremism and what that means for UK practice and policy.

About ARAB BRITAIN

Arab Britain is a long-term programme by The Arab British Centre that sets out to explore and document the history, achievements and experiences of Arabs in Britain. The programme aims to overturn preconceptions and challenge prejudices, retrace the ways the Arab world has influenced and shaped British culture and society, and celebrate the contributions of Arabs in Britain, past and *present*.

About The Arab British Centre

www.arabbritishcentre.org.uk

The Arab British Centre is an award-winning, non-political, non-religious, independent, UK registered charity which works to improve the British public's understanding of the Arab world.

The Arab British Centre organises and promotes arts and cultural events related to the Arab world from its central London premises and runs a number of initiatives in partnership with leading UK and international institutions. The Arab British Centre was named co-winner of the prestigious UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture 2012 for the 'various activities and events organised, within and outside the Centre, to promote a better understanding of the Arab culture and foster intercultural dialogue.

Since it was founded in 1977, the centre has housed and subsidised other like-minded organisations involved in Arab-British relations. The Arab British Centre currently supports; [Ashtar Al Khirsan](#), [Barakat Trust](#), the [Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration](#) (CDTC), the [Council for Arab-British Understanding](#) (CAABU), [Friends of Edward Said Conservatory](#), [Shubbak Festival](#), and [Zaytoun](#).

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About Dr Johnson's House

www.drjohnsonshouse.org

Dr Johnson's House is a rare, Grade I listed, small historic town house in the City of London, committed to celebrating and exploring the life, work and times of its former resident, the great wit Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784). A prolific writer who excelled as an essayist, journalist, poet, critic, biographer, and debater, he is best remembered as the author of the first comprehensive English

dictionary, his monumental *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). For over 100 years, 17 Gough Square has operated as a museum, welcoming visitors from all over the world interested in words and witticisms, and today runs a lively programme of exhibitions, events and education throughout the year.

The project *London's Theatre of The East* with our neighbours at The Arab British Centre is part of our on-going commitment to exploring - and putting into context - Johnson's life and work, while considering its legacy today in thought-provoking and engaging ways. Through this collaboration we hope our visitors will gain a greater insight into the history of Arabic and Islamic cultures in London and the representations of each other's cultures in both literature and art, using Johnson's only play, *Irene* (1749), as a springboard for research and (re)interpretation of hundreds of years of shared history.

Organised by:



Dr Johnson's House

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