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National cultural history and transnational political concerns in Rasha Fadhil's *Ishtar in Baghdad* (2003)

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ABSTRACT

In Rasha Fadhil's 2003 play *Ishtar in Baghdad*, she has Ishtar and Tammuz, mythological figures from Iraq's ancient past, appear in Baghdad during the Iraq War, and has them experience many of the horrors associated with the American occupation, including being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison. This article demonstrates that, in writing the play, Fadhil attempted to engage audiences both in Iraq and across the wider world. Fadhil's attempt to appeal to Iraqi audiences was related to her employment of a common technique in Iraqi drama: discussing the political present by invoking characters from history or Iraqi mythology. But Fadhil broke new ground by 'mix[ing ...] legend and reality,' rather than keeping the action safely confined to the past or a mythical realm. Her play was also revolutionary in its focus on women within a story that, within Iraqi drama and media, would normally focus primarily or exclusively on men. Ultimately, the risks that Fadhil took have limited the play's appeal to Iraqi theatremakers and readers. Fadhil's play also aspired to touch and influence people across the wider world. Specifically, she wanted to use the play to expose and condemn the corruption and hypocrisy at the heart of American neo-imperialism.

KEYWORDS

Rasha Fadhil; Iraq War; Abu Ghraib; Iraqi theatre; Arabic theatre; world theatre; Mesopotamian mythology

Within world drama, having mythological or otherworldly figures appear in the contemporary world (whether in a ghostly or corporeal form) is not new. Prominent examples include many classic Noh plays from Japan but also more modern works such as *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), by Ireland's W.B. Yeats, *Top Girls* (1982) by England's Caryl Churchill, and – the focus of this article – *Ishtar in Baghdad* (2003), a three-act play written in Arabic by Iraqi playwright Rasha Fadhil. Like Yeats and Churchill, Fadhil brings such figures into the present day in order to comment on timely socio-political issues.¹ Specifically, Fadhil has Ishtar (an ancient Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, fertility, and war) return to earth with her husband Tammuz (the god of agriculture, associated with shepherds), because she is concerned about what has become of her homeland as a result of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by U.S.-led forces. After walking through the devastated streets of Baghdad and speaking to distressed Iraqi citizens, the two mythological figures are separately detained and tortured at Abu Ghraib prison by American military personnel. The scenes in the

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prison (some involving the two ancient deities and some not) reveal the psychological and physical torment being suffered by other, ‘mortal’ Iraqi detainees, both male and female.

Ishtar in Baghdad, which has yet to receive a full production,² was written in 2003 and was published in English translation in the Bloomsbury Methuen anthology *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* in 2017. In her introduction to the play in that volume, Fadhil explains her motivation for writing the script:

[T]he horrible events at Abu Ghraib and the violations committed by American soldiers there [...] have left a black mark on the history of Iraq. These soldiers tried to destroy the Iraqi detainees from the inside by submitting them to the severest physical and psychological degradation and, by extension, to desecrate Iraqi civilization itself, with its deep roots in the past. This painful incident inspired me to cry out [...] in opposition to those who invaded Iraq under the pretense of acting humanely, with the stated purpose of saving an oppressed people from a dictator. [...] I have called up Ishtar and Tammuz to bear witness to [...] the collapse of a present built on the edifice of history. (35)

As she emphasized in an interview with the present writers,³ Fadhil’s ‘cry’ was for ‘everyone’ to hear – that is, she was hoping that her play would ‘not only touch Iraqis’ but also the ‘wider world.’ This article uses close reading of the *Ishtar in Baghdad* script, as well as comments about the play from the author herself and from other leading Iraqi playwrights, to examine Fadhil’s authorial intentions and formal innovations in the piece. (Because the play has not received a full production, we do not have reviews to call upon when exploring these matters, as scholars normally would – hence our reliance on the playwright interviews.) Our analysis demonstrates that, in writing the play, Fadhil attempted to engage Iraqi audiences by plugging into – while also challenging – Iraqi cultural (including theatrical) traditions and by expressing the pain of Iraqis silenced by censorship and shame. She also attempted to engage audiences across the entire world by exposing and condemning the corruption and hypocrisy at the heart of American neo-imperialism. She believed that people in countries complicit in the occupation of Iraq (such as the U.S. and the U.K.), as well as people in countries that had suffered at the hands of American warmongers, would benefit from seeing the harsh realities associated with the U.S. military’s overseas (mis)adventures highlighted in drama.

Engaging Iraqi audiences

Fadhil stated in the interview with us that, in writing *Ishtar in Baghdad*, she was hoping to speak both *to* and *for* Iraqis. Fadhil explained that ‘the Iraqi media – and Arabic media, as well – were not covering’ the Abu Ghraib scandal or the other brutal aspects of the American occupation. ‘It was very dangerous to approach this area in the media or even in [creative] writings.’ As such, there was a need to draw her society’s attention to and decry the terrible events taking place at Abu Ghraib and across Iraq. But Fadhil also wanted to be ‘a voice’ for powerless people in Iraq, in order to express the anguish being felt by those who were suffering (effectively in silence) over what was being done to them by the American occupying forces. Iraq is a divided society, across religious and geographical lines, and therefore Fadhil knew that she would be ‘classified’ immediately as

coming from a particular perspective, but she also knew that these atrocities were affecting Iraqis from all backgrounds, and therefore she felt that she was speaking to and for everyone.

In order to be able to speak about ‘dangerous’ topics based on ‘real stories,’ Fadhil decided to fall back on an old Iraqi theatrical tradition: ‘using historical characters as protection,’ because ‘in the Middle East (and Iraq especially)’ you cannot speak about political matters ‘directly, unless you are hidden in some way.’ This has been the case in Iraq since Western-style plays first started being produced in the country in the 1880s. Frequently, when the Iraqi political atmosphere has been oppressive (for example, due to the autocratic rule of British-backed puppet kings between the world wars or, in later years, due to the dictatorial rule of Baathist leaders such as Saddam Hussein), it has been safest to comment on contemporary political issues by using historical events or mythological materials as metaphors.⁴ One of the most famous examples of this from the Iraqi dramatic canon is Adil Kadhim’s 1964 play *The Flood*, which ‘employs the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia to indirectly criticize the political and economic situation in Iraq,’ just one year after the Baathists ‘deposed and executed’ General Abd al-Karim Qasim, the leader of Iraq’s 1958 revolution against the British-backed Hashemite monarchy (Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma 2017, xv). Other important plays in this tradition include – among many – Abdul Majid Shawki and Fadhil al-Saidali’s *Fatih Amorja* (1923), Yusuf Al-Ani’s *The Key* (1968), and Ali Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi’s *What Was Now?* (1999).

However, Fadhil did not simply plug into this tradition: she also challenged it. As the aforementioned playwright Al-Zaidi noted in an email sent to the present writers on 23 March 2021, Fadhil broke new ground in her play by ‘mix[ing . . .] legend and reality.’ That is, instead of keeping the action safely in a mythological or historical past, she (in Al-Zaidi’s words) ‘extracts [mythological] characters’ such as Ishtar and her husband Tammuz ‘and seeds them into *reality* during the American occupation in 2003.’ She engaged in this ‘mash-up’ to emphasise the egregious nature of America’s transgressions. As Fadhil noted in the interview with us, Ishtar and Tammuz are beloved figures who ‘represent’ all Iraqi people, and, early in the play, these gods exhibit important Iraqi values, including neighbourly love (through the concern that the two characters show towards everyday Iraqis suffering under the occupation) and a profound respect for the past (through their repeated and reverential references to the land’s long history) (Fadhil 2017, 39–43). By showing us modern-day American soldiers brutally torturing these gods, the irreverent, even blasphemous nature of the American occupation, with its disregard for morality, human life, and history, is made crystal clear. What’s more, from a dramaturgical point of view, Fadhil ensures that audience members will mentally contrast the noble embodiments of Iraqi values in the form of these dignified gods as seen early in the play with the tortured and traumatized prisoners (and gods) included in the later scenes – therefore making concrete the damage that the American occupying forces have done to the spirits and bodies of countless Iraqi people.

Despite Fadhil’s attempt to appeal to Iraqi audiences, the play has never been produced in Iraq – even though she has a high profile as a playwright in Iraq (and across the Arab world) and does not normally experience any trouble in getting her work staged in her home country. What’s more, she notes that Iraqis have not even been ‘active readers’ of the play. Although she doesn’t ‘really know why’ this is the case, she has some theories. First and most obviously, there is the fear that some would have over producing

a work that features lots of nudity (sometimes sexualized) in a conservative society like Iraq. Second, there is the understandable reluctance that some might feel over staging a play that addresses contentious political topics so directly – as opposed to from an ‘angle,’ like most socially-conscious Iraqi plays produced during times when political tensions are high. Third, Fadhil believes that many Iraqis might be ‘sick of hearing about’ horrors associated with the occupation, given that the play unflinchingly ‘touches [upon] critically painful areas’ in Iraqi peoples’ ‘memories and [...] experiences.’

A potential final obstacle to the play’s production and success in Iraq might, in Fadhil’s opinion, be related to her radical focus on women in the play. Fadhil says it was a deliberate decision to make *Ishtar* the main figure (her husband is, in many ways, subordinate to her in the play) and to not just focus on the torture of male prisoners in Abu Ghraib but also on the rape and assaults being endured by the female detainees. In fact, Fadhil says it was the suffering that was being inflicted upon women that made the Abu Ghraib story more compelling to her ‘than the other [horrific] events’ related to ‘what the Americans were doing in Iraq.’

In an email sent to the present writers on 23 March 2021, Iraqi playwright Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri said that this focus on the suffering of the female Iraqi prisoners (and not just the male prisoners) was one of the most groundbreaking aspects of *Ishtar in Baghdad*: ‘The text raised and revealed several things, the most important of which is the rape of Iraqi women in the prisons of the occupation at that time, the sense of shame that befell’ those female prisoners, ‘and their wish [to . . .] die’ in response to that shame. While Iraqi playwrights and intellectuals might find the play’s central focus on a strong female character and its interest in the plight of female detainees powerful, Fadhil feels that it might also have discouraged theatrical producers and directors from taking on the play, given the highly patriarchal nature of Iraqi society.

In the end, despite her initial aims, it seems that Fadhil has spoken *for* Iraqis in this play but not really spoken *to* them yet (given the lack of productions and the relative lack of engagement with the play text in Iraq). This will hopefully change over time, and Fadhil still dreams of the play receiving a full production in her native land.

Engaging worldwide audiences

The destructive nature of the American occupation of Iraq was clearly relevant to potential Iraqi audience members and readers, but it was also relevant to people around the world – and Fadhil was keenly aware of this when writing the play. She told us that she was hopeful that, in addition to speaking to Iraqis, the play would ‘touch people everywhere.’ She specifically mentioned that she would love to see ‘American’ and ‘English’ audiences having an opportunity to see the play, as well as people in countries like Iraq that have suffered the effects of American neo-imperialism. After all, Fadhil notes, ‘the Americans’ commit serious atrocities ‘in whatever country they occupy,’ regardless of the (often benign) reasons they give ‘for the occupation.’

Fadhil’s specific reference to potential U.S. and U.K. productions is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it shows Fadhil’s keen awareness as a working playwright that New York and London are extremely important theatrical centers, and that success in those two cities can give your play much wider reach. However, it also shows her desire to speak to the two countries most implicated in the occupation. For, while Iraqis always refer to the conflict

as the ‘American occupation,’ the U.S. was actually assisted by U.S. President George W. Bush’s ‘coalition of the willing,’ the most prominent member of which was the U.K. (former colonial rulers over Iraq, it should be noted). One could argue that, if *Ishtar in Baghdad* were to be produced in New York or London, the theatres or theatre companies who take it on would be ‘preaching to the choir’ – that is, the people likely to attend the show would probably be liberals who are already critical of American and British militarism and human rights abuses overseas. However, Fadhil, like any playwright, hopes that, in the event of such productions, a wider sampling of American and British people would see her play. And she would want to touch those audience members emotionally and intellectually but also to express her distress over what has been done to her country directly to the citizens of the countries perpetrating those horrors.

Indeed, in the email already mentioned above, playwright Abdul-Kareem Al-Ameri guessed that, through this play, Fadhil was expressing heaven’s judgment on what was being done to Iraq: ‘When the writer invoked the gods Ishtar and Tamuz, [she] embraced an idea that went beyond human conflict . . . to include the angry sky [by which] I mean the wrath of heaven.’ Al-Ameri believes that Fadhil may have been inspired by ‘the Qur’anic verse’ in which ‘the angels question [...] the Creator,’ asking Him if he really made humankind fixated on ‘spoil[ing] the earth ‘and shed[ding] blood.’ Al-Ameri concludes that the play represents ‘heaven’s cry in the face of American tyranny after 2003.’ Having been informed of Al-Ameri’s observation, Fadhil agreed that raising such a ‘cry’ of judgment was indeed a motivation in writing the play. And who better to hear that cry than the primary perpetrator of those atrocities (the U.S.), the perpetrator’s collaborators (including, most notably, the U.K.), and those in countries who have also suffered at the hands of America’s military in the past? In this way, *Ishtar in Baghdad* seeks to address a global audience with political preoccupations that, given the U.S.’s superpower status, affect the whole world.

However, contrary to the impression that may have been given above, the play is by no means an angry, inarticulate cry of judgment. Indeed, as the close reading of the script below demonstrates, the play forensically exposes the devastation caused by the U.S. combining its cutting-edge expertise in various areas with their appalling (and perhaps willful) ignorance of Iraqi culture, Middle Eastern politics, and a rapidly changing media/news landscape. That aforementioned expertise includes what American psychologists, sociologists, and cultural anthropologist have told the U.S. military and the C.I.A. about Iraq’s sexual ethics/taboo and its ancient past, as well as the key role played by U.S.-based developers and programmers in creating new communications and media technologies. The aforementioned ignorance relates to the U.S. armed forces wantonly disrespecting Iraqi culture; the U.S. government deliberately framing the armed conflict in a way that prevents its military from admitting facts that do not fit a very specific narrative and agenda; and an initial failure by America’s leadership to recognize that the way that news and images are disseminated across the world has been changed drastically by the camera phone and the rise of perpetual news cycles and social media.

American expertise and ignorance regarding Iraqi culture

As noted above, in *Ishtar in Baghdad*, the ancient deities Ishtar and Tammuz appear in Baghdad during the Iraq War, and they experience many of the horrors associated with the American occupation, including being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison. Fadhil’s

depiction of the prison accords with several distinctive aspects of the actual torture conducted at Abu Ghraib, as noted by psychologists, social scientists, and first-hand witnesses.

First of all, Fadhil depicts the American officers and soldiers as possessing cutting-edge knowledge regarding how to break down prisoners, including how to specifically break down *Iraqi* prisoners. In the play, Fadhil notes the shame over being naked felt by both the male and female prisoners (44, 46, 47), and, at a certain point, the torturers threaten to render Ishtar ‘completely naked’ (48). (By that time, she has already been raped, but still wears torn rags.) Scholars have shown that the torture techniques used in Abu Ghraib were based on knowledge garnered by American psychologists over decades (De Vos 2011, 289). However, the U.S. military and intelligence services also called upon expertise from American social scientists regarding Iraqi sexual ethics and taboos, because such knowledge was found to be helpful in undermining detainees from this one, particular country. For example, knowing that Iraqi men and women are shamed by nakedness, ‘nudity’ (i.e. stripping the prisoners of their clothes and leaving them naked for extended periods) became a key part of the torture process (De Vos 2011, 303) during the Iraq War. This is why Fadhil is so focussed on the nakedness of the detainees (and the resulting shame experienced by them) in her play.

Fadhil also depicts forced intimacy between naked men in the play: the torturers insists that the naked prisoners ride on each other’s backs, as though one of the men was an animal. This practice is referred to in the play as the ‘Lion of Babylon exercise’ (42). Once again, this mirrors actual practices by the U.S. military and intelligence services at Abu Ghraib. Knowing of the stigmatization of gay sexuality in Iraqi society (including the widespread prevalence of ‘homophobic’ views [Puar 2007, 94]), the torturers at the prison not only left the men naked around one another, but also forced them into physical intimacy with one another.⁵ This included, as depicted in Fadhil’s play, having naked prisoners ride on each other’s backs. However, in the actual prison, the American torturers also anally penetrated detainees with instruments such as a chemical light or a broomstick and even ‘forced’ the male prisoners to engage in ‘sodomy’ with one another (Bond 2013, 2). While Fadhil does not show such extreme actions in her play, she is clearly aware that the American torturers were drawing on their knowledge of Iraqi sexual ethics and taboos to make their breaking down of Iraqi prisoners even more devastating.

The fact that the torturers in the play have named one of their techniques the ‘Lion of Babylon exercise’ (42) demonstrates that these Americans have acquired some surface knowledge of Iraqi culture. This reflects Fadhil’s awareness that experts were brought in to instruct American military and intelligence personnel about Iraqi culture. Such instruction even included making field trips made to important historical sites, and, in fact, there are well-known photos of groups of American soldiers posing by the famous Lion of Babylon statue. But, in having her fictional torturers adopt this name for their torture technique, Fadhil is suggesting that the Americans used this new cultural knowledge – like the expertise garnered from their psychologists and social scientists – as a weapon and not as a way of understanding the country they have invaded. Indeed, the name shows that they are not just insensitive about Iraqi culture but are also willing to desecrate it. The Lion of Babylon statue, located 85 km south of Baghdad and beloved of Iraqis, was built by the Chaldean Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC), and

this black basalt lion was meant to strike fear into the hearts of Babylon's enemies, by showing a lion trampling a man who is lying down. At first sight, the statue appears to have sexual connotations, and this is presumably what the American torturers in the play picked up on (and have decided to mock). But this statue is also meant to represent Ishtar; and – given that she is the goddess of fertility, love, and war – Fadhil's reference to the statue in the play manages to invoke the sexualized nature of much of the torture at Abu Ghraib, the horrors of the Iraq War more generally, and the U.S.'s blatant disrespect for and/or ignorance about the importance of key totems of Iraqi culture. After all, the soldiers in the play not only rape Ishtar, a figure representing love and fertility, they have even named an anti-Iraqi torture method after a sacred statue celebrating the goddess's association with local military prowess.

Despite having named a torture method after a statue associated with Ishtar, the American Officer and Soldiers in the play clearly do not know anything about her or Tammuz. In their ignorance, the torturers consistently fail to recognize their supernatural detainees' discussions of ancient beliefs from Iraqi mythology. (For example, Tammuz discusses 'the Ziggurat' which acts as 'the umbilical cord which connects the Earth to Heaven' (47), and this means nothing to them.) And, while it is not covered in Fadhil's play, another sign of American disrespect for and/or ignorance about Iraqi culture during the war was when its army allowed the looting of the Museum of Iraq. As Palestinian-Irish playwright Hannah Khalil demonstrates in her 2019 play *A Museum in Baghdad* (produced by the U.K.'s Royal Shakespeare Company), it is hard to tell if the U.S. Army allowed this ransacking because they didn't understand the museum's importance (i.e. they were ignorant) or they didn't care about it (i.e. they were showing deliberate disrespect).

It should be noted that some of the methods used against male prisoners at Abu Ghraib have their roots in practices already used against male Muslim detainees imprisoned by the U.S. at their Guantanamo Bay army base in Cuba, post-9/11. However, the torture at Abu Ghraib differed from that perpetrated at Guantanamo Bay in a few key ways. One significant difference was that, at Abu Ghraib, female military personnel were centrally involved in the torture. While Fadhil does not show female soldiers torturing the male prisoners (including Tammuz) in her play, a central focus of the torture perpetrated by her American characters is the emasculation of the Iraqi men. In addition to being treated like 'dogs' (43, 44) and 'horses' (45) – thus dehumanizing them and suggesting that they are inferior to their 'human' torturers – the male detainees are also made to feel weak as men because they cannot protect the women in their lives. At one point, the American Officer says to two of the men, 'If you don't [kneel], we'll make your wives, sisters, and mothers kneel down' (44).

By depicting such emasculation, Fadhil was demonstrating her understanding that, as Laura Sjoberg has noted, emphasizing the superiority of 'hegemonic American manliness over subordinated Iraqi masculinities' was the U.S.'s main motivation for using both female and male personnel to humiliate the Iraqi male prisoners (2006, 143). In many majority Muslim societies, social contact between men and women is kept to a minimum, which is why the Muslim male prisoners at Guantanamo Bay complained when they saw that the U.S. Army had women soldiers guarding them (Pilkington 2015). If merely being guarded and escorted around by women soldiers is problematic for many men from a Muslim majority country like Iraq, imagine the internal consternation and

psychological devastation caused by being sexually tortured by women soldiers, as the male prisoners at Abu Ghraib were. Feitz and Nagel (2008, 204) observe that the deployment of servicewomen 'to dominate' the male prisoners and to 'eroticize the torture' ensured that the Iraqi male prisoners were 'feminize[d]' (through role reversal); these scholars add that, thanks to Abu Ghraib, '[w]omen's sexuality has become a tool in an expanded military arsenal, a new form of war materiel [*sic*]. The new weapon is women's assumed unique sexual power to demean and humiliate enemy men' (213). As Sharon Friedman has rightly said, 'the sexual abuse of male prisoners in Abu Ghraib by American servicewomen further complicates any essentialist understanding of the linkages among gender, sexuality, war, and peace' (2010, 597).

The aforementioned sexual threat that the American Officer in the play makes against the 'wives, sisters, and mothers' of the male prisoners has extra force because of another key difference between the torture at Abu Ghraib and that which preceded it at Guantanamo Bay: at the Iraqi prison, women were also among those being tortured. In some cases, these were the relations of male prisoners. Fadhil depicts the female prisoners as not only suffering from physical and sexual abuse, but also shows them debating whether having been raped means that they are now adulterers and are therefore 'dishonor[ed]' (46). One woman insists: 'We did not commit adultery . . . We did not. They raped us! Bastards! Monsters!' (46). However, the women are under no illusions: they know that in their socially conservative society, they will be outcasts for having been 'dishonor[ed]' in this way and for bearing 'the children of adultery' (46; 47). As such, one of them sends a note to her parents, asking them 'to fire rockets and mortar shells on us as soon as possible' (46). The women live in hope that this death will come soon, so that they might escape their 'shame' and experience 'Allah's [...] purifying light' (47). Their wish is granted at the end of the play. American military intelligence would have been keenly aware of the highly conservative views regarding sex outside of marriage in Iraq and the ongoing issue of horrific 'honor killings' as punishment for (perceived) female promiscuity in the country. As such, the sexual violation of the Iraqi female prisoners was a deliberate tactic that they knew would psychologically undermine the female prisoners; they presumably hoped that even the threat of being 'dishonored' in this way would encourage the women to divulge information that could be useful to the U.S. war effort.

A third important feature of the torture at Abu Ghraib not present at Guantanamo Bay was the element of 'jouissance.' Jan De Vos claims that 'If Guantanamo stands for the ordered use of torture (informed by psychology), Abu Ghraib reveals the jouissance – the obscene underside and the perverse core – of the methods informed by psychology' (2011, 299). Such perversity is certainly shown in Fadhil's play. The American Officer and Soldiers 'laugh' (43–48) consistently as they torture the male and female prisoners, clearly enjoying the humiliation and pain that they are causing through their twisted games. And, like the torturers at the real Abu Ghraib, they 'snap photos' (47) of each other and of the abused detainees and seem to actually delight in the disturbing acts that they are committing. They even force Tammuz into the famous real-life pose captured on camera of prisoner Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh being tortured with his arms outstretched and a hood placed over his head.

American expertise and ignorance in their framing of the conflict

As shown in real life and in the world of the play, the framing of the Iraq War as *the* key battleground in the U.S.'s 'War on Terror' is an important example of American expertise and ignorance combining. Post-9/11, the U.S. authorities used their media expertise (i.e. their well-honed propaganda techniques) to impress upon the American public and upon their military personnel that Iraq was centrally involved in the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, and many Americans – both civilian and military – subscribed to this constructed, false narrative out of gullibility or ignorance. Fadhil suggests in her play that the U.S. authorities did a fantastic job of impressing upon their soldiers that they were in Iraq for one primary reason: to hunt down and destroy 'terrorists' – the same kind of terrorists who perpetrated 9/11. The American Officer and Soldiers keep assuming that the detainees (including Ishtar and Tammuz) are 'terrorists' (43, 44, 45) with a secret 'mission' (43, 45, 47). This blinkered vision prevents them from seeing what is happening before their very eyes and forces them to interpret everything in one very specific way. For example, whenever Tammuz mentions 'immortality' or 'Heaven,' the American Officer simply assumes that he is a 'suicide bomber' who is ready to die for his cause (43, 47).

Fadhil is keen to highlight this narrow framing of the conflict, because she wants audiences to understand that it enabled the Bush administration to embark on the Iraq War in the first place. In the wake of al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, there was a worldwide sense that America had suffered a terrible loss of face and needed to 'demonstrat[e] its power to allies and competitors alike' (Lieberfeld 2005, 4); therefore, military action was needed. Iraq's geostrategic location with nearly unsurpassed oil reserves made the U.S. think that – of all countries – it was best to invade Iraq, even though 1) al-Qaeda's leader Osama Bin Ladan was a Saudi who felt great 'hostility' (Bapat et al. 2007, 273) towards Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, 2) the terrorist organization had been based in (at various points) Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, and Afghanistan but never Iraq, and 3) none of the main organizers or hijackers involved in 9/11 were from Iraqi backgrounds. Scott L. Althaus and Devon M. Largio explain this bizarre shift in the U.S.'s focus:

In the days following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Osama bin Laden quickly became America's leading enemy. But as the Bush administration prepared its case for war against Iraq in the first half of 2002, officials began to avoid mentioning Osama bin Laden's name in public. At the same time, administration officials increasingly linked Saddam Hussein with the threat of terrorism in an effort to build public support for war. By the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks it appeared that this public relations effort had produced results beyond all expectations: several polls released around the time of the anniversary revealed that majorities of Americans believed Saddam Hussein was personally responsible for 9/11. (2004, 795)

As Althaus and Largio have shown, this shift in emphasis was related to both the Bush administration's attempt to manipulate media coverage by shifting the focus from Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein, but it was also related to the fact that – for many Americans in the wake of the First Gulf War of 1991 – Saddam Hussein was *the* 'baddie' in the Middle East and that many were already inclined to blame him for 9/11 immediately after it happened (2004, 795–799). Regardless of how exactly this shift in focus came about, it still shows the U.S. government's expertise at 'media manipulation': clearly, they

had done an excellent job of demonizing Saddam Hussein in the eyes of the American public since the early 1990s – i.e. after the U.S. stopped supporting him with money and weapons (including chemical weapons) through much of the 1980s (Kellner 2004, 41–64). Such ‘manipulation’ of the views of American citizens was greatly aided by the fact that the U.S. Department of Defense ensured that ‘the military consultants hired by [. . . U.S. television] networks had close connections to the Pentagon and usually would express the Pentagon point of view and spin of the day, making them more propaganda conduits for the military than independent analysts’ (Kellner 2004, 50).⁶ Among the U.S. citizens who fell victim to this manipulation were members of the American military, and the U.S. government, intelligence community, and military top brass worked hard to ensure that its soldiers believed that there was a direct correlation between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein – and that anyone they encountered on the ground in Iraq who wasn’t overjoyed to see U.S. troops deposing Saddam Hussein was clearly a ‘terrorist.’ As late as 28 June 2005, U.S. President George W. Bush was still linking the Iraq War to 9/11 in a speech to the troops at Fort Bragg in North Carolina: on that occasion, he ‘invoked 9/11 five times in his speech, and he referred to it by implication several more times’ despite the fact that he had ‘previously [admitted] that there is “no evidence” of a link between the attacks and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq’ (Baker and Milbank 2005). As Fadhil shows in her play, the result of this narrow framing of the conflict was that U.S. soldiers were kept ignorant of the true complexity and nature of Middle Eastern politics and the U.S.’s selfish motives for specifically targeting Iraq. It was deemed much easier to keep U.S. soldiers focused on a simplistic narrative regarding the conflict: that is, that they were in Iraq to battle the type of terrorists responsible for 9/11.

In Act Two Scene Four of *Ishtar in Baghdad*, Fadhil suggests that Iraqi resistance to the Americans is only to be expected, given the horrors endured by the Iraqi people not just during both Gulf Wars but also in between the two conflicts – in the form of the punitive, U.S.-enforced financial sanctions against Iraq (as decreed by U.N. Resolutions 661 and 687), the U.S.’s occasional bombing of Iraqi targets (including civilian ones), and the appalling after-effects of the depleted uranium used by the U.S. military on Iraqi civilians in 1991.⁷ Fadhil uses *Ishtar* to voice Iraqi protest against the American invasion but also to emphasize that the land is badly in need of *Ishtar*’s healing powers. She tells the American Officer that that she has ascended to earth ‘To renew the gift of life to my people, my country, my sons and daughters who were cut down by your iron weapons. I am the goddess of their fertility, joy, and growth . . . I am the goddess of heaven’ (45).

While *Ishtar* may have come to earth on a peaceful mission of restoration, that does not mean that she fails to understand why Iraqis would doggedly resist the Americans. *Ishtar* shows a keen and even visceral awareness that when a country is invaded by the foreigners not for the reasons claimed but in order to control oil resources and establish a regional power base, such resistance is inevitable. And she is bewildered by the American Officer’s inability to understand why many Iraqis might be angry at the terrible things the U.S. has done and continues to do in the country. She says to him: ‘I know this land. The history of every grain of its sand is in my blood. I almost hear its sands boiling with hatred and desire for revenge on you. Put your hand on its soil to feel the heat of its furious craving to swallow you’ (45). Such pleading for understanding is completely lost on the American Officer. The ‘fiery’ aspects of her defiant speeches only confirm the Officer’s suspicion that she and Tammuz are dangerous terrorists fixated on revenge

against the U.S.A. (he angrily strikes her multiple times and has her tortured further by his soldiers), and, because he doggedly subscribes to the U.S. government's narrow framing of the conflict, he once again fails to engage with the supernatural elements and ethical arguments included in Ishtar's stirring rhetoric.

American expertise and ignorance regarding 'new media' and shifting journalistic practices

In her play, Fadhil's handling of the disturbing photos taken by the U.S. military and intelligence personnel at Abu Ghraib picks up on the complicity of Americans in their own undoing. As noted above, she depicts the soldiers joyfully posing for and 'snap[ping] photos' (47) while engaged in torturing Iraqi detainees, and it's clear that they will be eager to share these images with others. It was by acting on that desire that America's neglect of human rights in Iraq ended up being 'expos[ed]' to the 'whole world' (42), as it's put in Fadhil's script. The U.S. soldiers presumably thought they would just be sharing the images with trusted friends and relations; they were ignorant of how quickly and how widely such photos can now be shared – thanks to innovations originating in the very country they were serving.

The real-life photographs of the abuse at Abu Ghraib, taken by U.S. personnel themselves, were first shown on the American television network C.B.S.'s magazine program, *60 Minutes*, on 28 April 2004. They were subsequently published in the 10 May 2004 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine as part of an article by Seymour M. Hersh, which included quotes from a secret report by Major General Antonio M. Taguba that detailed 'sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuse' at Abu Ghraib between October and December 2003 (Qtd in Hesford 2006, 30). The photographs quickly appeared on internet sites and in newspapers throughout the world and were shown and discussed at length on 24-hour television news channels. The U.S. government, intelligence community, and military were totally shocked by the sudden, widespread dissemination of this material. In his speech to a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the Abu Ghraib scandal in May 2004, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld huffily stated:

We're functioning [...] with peacetime restraints, with legal requirements in a war-time situation, in the information age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photos and passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had not even arrived in the Pentagon. (Qtd in Kennedy 2009, 817)

This was so disturbing to the American authorities, because they were used to 'controll[ing]' the narrative and exercising 'visual hegemony' over the images associated with their war efforts, including during earlier conflicts in the Middle East and in the run-up to the Iraq War (Kennedy 2009, 818). We have already noted how their skills at media manipulation had convinced large swathes of the American public that Saddam Hussein was responsible for 9/11. And, in terms of controlling the images associated with war in the Middle East, the U.S. authorities had long curated the images of Middle Eastern peoples to make them look 'Other' and 'uncivilized' to Western eyes, and had used the footage of the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11 to justify and market the 'War on Terror' across the world. (As Mondzain notes, historically, even the most

‘aniconic’ regimes which reject visual culture exert power through the manipulation of visual spectacle and engage in what she terms a ‘war of images’ [2003, 151].) But here was a situation where the U.S. was unable to control the narrative through slyly-disseminated propaganda or carefully-selected images. As Clare Finburgh (2017, 200) has written, while governments (including America’s) have ‘conventionally’ been very careful to keep ‘the most shameful sides to war’ out of the public view, in the case of the Abu Ghraib scandal, ‘US-led counterterrorist operations’ were exposed in all of their abject horror. She adds: ‘And to their credit, the dominant media, which tend to toe the state line, preferred to expose the abuses, rather than comply with a government cover-up’ (200).

Actually, the decision by media outlets to disseminate these images did not necessarily come from such an altruistic impulse. In his book *Televising War*, Hoskins (2004) shows that reporting the Iraq War was greatly affected by the public’s ever-increasing expectation and consumption of a 24-hour news cycle, as well as the quickly-growing importance of social media: media outlets had to keep up with a public desire for ‘instant gratification,’ resulting in round-the-clock reporting that mimicked reality TV (65). He goes on to suggest that the Iraq War involved ‘the prioritizing of image dissemination over news-gathering and time[liness] over content. Effective analysis and understanding were substituted with the self-evidency of immediate images’ (76). In practical terms, this has meant that the need to ‘feed the beast’ of public news consumption has resulted in a situation where the media has an increased role in shaping peoples’ understanding of the news – and that a government’s ability to control political narratives has been significantly diminished.

This is yet another instance of American expertise and ignorance dovetailing during the country’s involvement in the Iraq War. Americans had invented cable television and its 24-hours news cycle, and U.S.-based programmers had come up with most of the technological innovations associated with camera phones and social media. And these American inventions undermined the ability of the U.S. government, intelligence services, and military in its attempts to shape and control public perceptions of the ‘War on Terror’ – and of the Iraq War and the Abu Ghraib scandal in particular. It was a case of America being ‘hoist with . . . [its] own petard’ (Shakespeare 1877, 105). Once again, Fadhil’s play – through its handling of the Abu Ghraib photos and their dissemination – highlights an aspect of the Iraq War that reveals the U.S.’s ‘world-beating’ expertise together with the country’s maladroit (and immoral) approach to the invasion and its aftermath.

Conclusion

Rasha Fadhil’s 2003 play *Ishtar in Baghdad* was intended to speak specifically to and for Iraqis. In the end, its innovations have prevented it from finding purchase in the country where it is set. These innovations include its strong focus on women (through the central character of Ishtar and its interest in the female Abu Ghraib detainees), its willingness to tackle controversial political topics directly in a country where a degree of censorship still prevails, and its edgy use of nudity. But the play is also innovative within the canon of Iraqi drama in its ‘mix[ing] of legend and reality’ (to quote playwright Ali Abdel-Nabi Al-Zaidi). Such mixing is not unusual in world drama more generally – witness the plays from Japan, Ireland, and the U.

K. mentioned at the start of this article. However, it is not just the play's similarities to scripts from elsewhere in the world that give it transnational appeal. There is also the fact that it tackles political concerns which affect everyone on the planet, thanks to the U.S.'s superpower status and its fixation on intervening in conflicts across the world (often with selfish ulterior motives).

Fadhil uses her play to show Americans, their political collaborators, and those who have suffered the effects of U.S. neo-imperialism that it is a lethal combination of expertise and ignorance that often makes the U.S. so dangerous on the world stage. And Fadhil's play – a self-described 'cry from the heart' – also expresses to all the world the anguish (and anger) felt by the Iraqis who suffered greatly during the American occupation of Iraq. While Fadhil's dream of full productions of the play in the U.S., the U.K., and further afield has not yet come to pass, an increasing number of people are being exposed to the play's messages through its 2017 translation into English, its publication in an important Bloomsbury Methuen anthology, and its availability on the popular *Drama Online* database. Fadhil may yet achieve her dream of seeing this play reach and touch theatregoers across many borders.

Notes

1. In their plays, Yeats is reflecting on Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising, in which nationalist rebels rose up against British rule, and Churchill is casting a cold eye on Thatcherism and what she saw as increasingly common anti-feminist behaviour among successful 'career women.'
2. In an email dated 1 June 2021, Fadhil notified the authors of this article that she is only aware of one public performance of *Ishtar in Baghdad*. A translation of the play by Alyaa A. Naser was performed as a rehearsed reading on 30 August 2016 at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. The production was mounted by the La Trobe Student Theatre and Film society for the ACTIVATE FESTIVAL – 2016.
3. All of the direct quotes from Fadhil included in the rest of this essay come from this interview, which was conducted over Zoom on 30 March 2021.
4. Another popular way to comment on contemporary politics in an indirect way in Iraqi theatre has been to translate European plays which are relevant to timely issues. This tradition goes back to the first play by an Iraqi playwright to be published: Na'oum Fathalla Sahhaar's *Lateef and Houshaaba* (1892), based on a French source text.
5. Such torture is doubly traumatic for gay and bisexual Iraqis who have been forced to remain in the closet in their everyday lives as a result of the stigmatization of queer sexuality in Iraq.
6. Of course, this 'in' with the American media was exploited by U.S. warmongers in their attempts to justify the invasions of Iraq: they used their influence with an enabling U.S. media to promote the merits of false/manipulated evidence (garnered from the British) 'proving' that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and therefore posed a serious threat to the world.
7. The U.S. military would go on to use depleted uranium on Iraqi civilians in 2003, as well.

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