

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BÜCHNER IN THE ARAB WORLD

by

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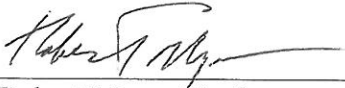
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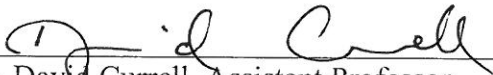
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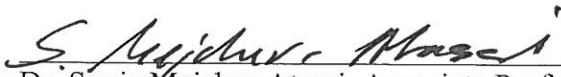
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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To speak of Western theatrical influences in the Arab world is generally to speak of Bertolt Brecht, William Shakespeare, and Samuel Beckett and the other exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. The work of Georg Büchner is rarely mentioned. However, Büchner is certainly an interlocutor in the Arab theatrical tradition. Productions of Büchner's *Woyzeck* appeared regularly following 2008 and especially after the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. *Danton's Death* was performed in 1970 at the prestigious Baalbeck International Theatre Festival and a translation appeared in 1969 in a prominent Egyptian theatre journal.

This thesis will attempt to reconfigure cultural memory in order to credit Büchner with having a significant role in Arab theatrical tradition post-1967 and to highlight the significant contributions this writer made to this tradition. It will also argue that Büchner's plays were an appealing choice for Arab audiences because Büchner attempted a heroic assault, despite his experience with the ever-present threats of imprisonment and torture, on the powerful, human and/or historical forces of repression. This thesis will also show that adaptations of Büchner's works alter certain aspects of the plays in order to address specific local concerns while at the same time preserving the powerful dynamic that exists in the works between intellectual pessimism on the one hand and necessity for revolution on the other.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Georg Büchner in the Arab world is a story of two chapters. In 1970, pioneering Syrian poet and translator Ali Ahmad Said Esber--better known by his pen name Adunis--was commissioned to translate Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death*, in preparation for its performance at the annual Baalbek International Festival. Only a year earlier, in 1969, prominent translator and literary critic Abdel Ghaffar Makkawi published the first Arabic translation of *Danton's Death* (*Mawt Dantun*) in the highly influential Egyptian theatre journal, *Al-Masrah*. With this translation, Makkawi ensured that 132 years after Büchner's death, his complete theatrical works were available to Arab audiences: Makkawi's translations of *Leonce and Lena* and *Woyzeck* had appeared together in 1965. The two translations of *Danton's Death* constituted the first chapter of the story. The second began in 2008 when Mustafa Murad's adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck* inaugurated the 17th Annual Cultural Palaces Theatre Club Festival in Cairo. In the years that followed, adaptations of *Woyzeck* were performed on Arab stages no fewer than four times, most recently in Morocco on January 11, 2015. This thesis will present the different adaptations of Büchner's work and attempt to answer the question: why were those plays chosen at those particular times?

Distinguished theatre practitioner Munir Abu Dibs, who founded the influential Lebanese Contemporary Theatre Troupe and served as its sole director, was responsible for choosing the plays to be performed at the Baalbeck Festival (Said 110). Explaining his choices, Abu Dibs claims that "one of the goals [he] had for choosing particular plays was introducing Lebanese audiences to the works that formed crucial turning

points in the history of theatre... [T]o be a turning point, the work has to form the peak of one period and serve as the herald of another”¹ (Said 110). Moreover, according to Khalida Said, Abu Dibs’ choices were influenced by trends in Arab cultural life as well the political leanings and modern theatrical outlooks of prominent members of his troupe, the Modern Theatre Company, and the festival’s Contemporary Theatre Panel (111). These influences can be traced, according to Said, by observing that Abu Dibs’ focus shifted from classical plays such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Sophocles’ *Antigone* to plays such as Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*, Ionesco’s *Exit the King* and Brecht’s *The Exception and the Rule*, all of which are critical works that highlight political reform (111).

These choices of plays are representative of Abu Dibs’ pronounced dedication to providing translations and adaptations of works by foreign playwrights: his choices also included a range of material by Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco and Albert Camus, among others. This pronounced dedication is itself a manifestation of a wider mass translation movement that occurred in the mid-1900s across the Arab world. Translation of Western drama had always played an important, even foundational, role in Arab theatre. Consider the fact that Muhammad Mustafa Badawi opens his book “Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt” with the statement: “It is an established fact that modern Arabic drama was borrowed from the West independently by Marun al-Naqqash in Lebanon in 1847 and by Ya’qub Sannu in Egypt in 1870” (1)². The authors of the *World Encyclopaedia*

¹ Translations are mine.

² In this quotation, Badawi meant European-style, text-based drama. He immediately qualifies his statement by adding that “the Arab world did have certain indigenous types

of *Contemporary Theatre, Volume 4: The Arab World* called the translation movement of the mid-1900s “the modern translation phase,” stating that directors and actors of the period turned, as their predecessors had, to Western cultural heritage when they found themselves without notable manuscripts or projects to produce (144). The mid-1900s movement sought, through translation and adaptation, to introduce traditional and experimental Western drama to Arab audiences and to incorporate elements of this drama-- which were perceived to be more “modern” and “advanced”- into the repertoire of Arab playwrights and thinkers.

Munir Abu Dibs could hardly have chosen a better play than *Danton’s Death* in order to fulfill his goal of introducing Lebanese audiences to works that manifested crucial moments in world theatre. Designated by Victor Price as “the best first play in world literature,” and by Julian Hilton as “the most remarkable play in European culture”, *Danton’s Death* is, on almost every level, a revolution (Price xiii; Hilton 58). In his book, *The Making of Modern Drama*, Richard Gilman argues that “by all the presumed laws of cultural development the plays of Georg Büchner ought not to have been possible in his time and place--Germany of the early 1830s” (5). Technical formal innovations abound in Büchner’s work. Arguably his most significant contribution to world theatre, Büchner’s “rejection of linear construction, logical development and casual

of dramatic representation at the time, some even going back to medieval Islam” (1). These types include “dramatic recitations by rhapsodes, accompanied by simple string instruments, of popular medieval romances composed in a mixture of verse and prose”, “the annual cycle of Passion Plays (ta’ziya) commemorating, sometimes in lurid, realistic detail, the massacre of al-Husayn”, “shadow plays” such as those by the “oculist Ibn Daniyal (1248-1311)” (Badawi 1-2).

connectedness” was uncommon and unheard of at the time (Gilman 10). “Buchner’s revolutionary stroke” was his “abandonment of casual, linear plot” (Gilman 203). It resulted in short scenes, many of which pass without contributing to any overall plot structure but which, nonetheless, seem to be self-contained and self-justified. Examples of these are what are known as the Marion episode in *Danton’s Death* and the Grandmother scene in *Woyzeck*. Characters such as Marion, the Grandmother and the Lady in the opening scene of *Danton’s Death* appear once as complete characters in themselves and then disappear, without having contributed to in any way to an overall plot, but nevertheless have added the flavour of their contributions to the overall mood and theme of the plays. Furthermore, the scenes themselves do not follow a linear plot: scenes--most obviously and significantly in *Woyzeck* (1836)--can be rearranged and presented in different ways. In most accepted versions of *Woyzeck*, the order of scenes is put together by the editor rather than the ones Büchner would himself have likely chosen.

Moreover, Büchner broke with the romanticism and idealism of playwrights and thinkers such as Schiller who reigned supreme in the Germany of his time. True to a lifetime of protest, Büchner revolted against the inflated rhetoric, idealistic prose and high-blown sentiments that characterised the works of the Schillerian-poets. The first formal manifestation of this break is the de-rhetoricised language Büchner employs in his work. Makkawi, in the introduction to his translation of *Danton’s Death*, points to the different levels of language on display in the play; beggars, singers, soldiers, wives, vagabonds and the “heroes” of the revolution themselves (Robespierre, Danton, Saint-Just and others) all speak in different ways and all of these dialects exist side by side in

the play (69). Makkawi also points to the songs and soliloquies that Büchner uses in his play, especially in the second act, and observes that Büchner uses these folkloric songs to establish and reinforce the play's characteristically fatalistic atmosphere that permeates every character on the stage (67). Makkawi comments that later playwrights such as Wedekind and Bertolt Brecht would learn from Büchner to use such songs in their own characters' conversations and would pass this innovative technique on to other contemporary playwrights (67). With this observation, Makkawi acknowledges the influence Büchner had on Brecht, who himself was a major interlocutor for modern and contemporary theatrical movements across the Arab world. However, Makkawi also makes the observation that the conversations of the characters in Büchner's plays barely ever meet or merge (69). This breakdown of communication (which can be exemplified simply by pointing to the Marion episode in *Danton's Death*, in which Marion relates the death of her first lover to Danton only to have him respond with a flirtatious comment) foreshadows the theatre of Anton Chekov, in which characters are often found talking past each other, as well as the absurdist theatre of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco, in which the same phenomenon can be observed. Makkawi points to the constant contradictions in thoughts, feelings and phrases (usually in the course of a single conversation) that run throughout the play, from the opening card game to Lucile's final suicidal shout, as a uniting force in the play (66). He gives the example of the very first exchange between Danton and his wife Julie, in which his despairing comment that people know little about each other is met with her faithful, gentle assertion that he knows her (67). These contrasts, according to Makkawi, echo Büchner's own internal struggle (66). For Makkawi, the basis of all the different rhetorical layers in Büchner's text are the result of Büchner's sharp appreciation of human suffering (69). Büchner's insight

was that, paradoxically, this suffering could be expressed far more effectively in a scientific, understated, clinical manner than with in a hyperbolic manner.

On another note, Büchner used his powers of observation--which were sharpened by extensive medical and scientific training--to create a realistic, raw and unidealised presentation of life as he saw it. had received formal medical training in Strasbourg and Giessen. He wrote a remarkable anatomical dissertation on the nervous system of the barbel, using the recently-invented microscope for his research. On the strength of this dissertation and a trial lecture on the skull nerves of fish, Büchner was awarded a doctorate without an oral examination by the University of Zurich as well as an appointment as a "Privatdozent," or lecturer, at the University (Price xii). Büchner's studies in medicine and natural history allowed him to develop psychologically complex characters. For example, Price asserts that Woyzeck's symptoms:--"the hallucinations (patterns in mushrooms, fire in heaven, voices coming from the wall), the disorientation, the swings from mental paralysis to panic action, the incipient paranoia"--are all described "with brilliant economy" by the anatomist-playwright and that "they mesh in with his poverty and social humiliations... to arouse Aristotelian pity and terror" (xix). Gilman, on the other hand, believes that "Büchner's studies in medicine and natural history were... the perfect complements of his investigations of political and social history and his direct experience of politics and society" (9). He goes on to argue that "they gave him a ground in what we recognise as an experimental and pragmatic method and habit of mind, which helped keep him free of prejudice and distorting idealism in his contemplation of the materials that were to go into the making of his art and into the choices he was to make for its realisation" (9). Makkawi concurs, stating that another

major difference between Büchner and the classicists is his refusal to believe that history progresses in a consistent and organic way towards a more open and advanced human civilization (67). Büchner's refusal to believe in this classicist fantasy is, according to Makkawi, compatible with the playwright's sensitive and pessimistic psyche (67).

Büchner's revolt against the exaggerated idealism of his predecessors and his clinical presentation of the unadorned reality that he saw apparently diminished his appeal to his contemporaries: only a heavily censored version of *Danton's Death* appeared during his lifetime, and his work sank into obscurity for fifty years after his early death. However, the same aspects of his work later fuelled his rediscovery and made him the extolled predecessor of the naturalist and Expressionist movements that became popular in Germany in the 1880s. Büchner's scientific, clinical investigation into the repressive political and social aspects of his material also later appealed to and influenced another playwright who would share both his extensive medical training and his passion for social reform: Bertolt Brecht.

Büchner's presentation of clinical detail goes hand in hand with his presentation of historically factual information: his plays were among the first examples of documentary drama. *Danton's Death* is a chronicle of twelve days in 1794. It relates specific events of a wayward French Revolution and concludes with the execution of Georges Jacques Danton, who had been a leading figure in the early stages of the Revolution, on the orders of his former revolutionary companion Maximilian Robespierre. The play derives most of its material and several of its key speeches from historical records such as those of Theirs or Mignet and from surveys such as Carl Strahlheim's *Unsere Zeit*

(*Our Time*), which covers the years 1789 to 1830 (Price xiv). *Woyzeck*, too, is based on historical events. Büchner apparently came across Woyzeck's case in the medical journal *Zietschrift für die Staatsarzneikunde*--a journal to which his father subscribed and contributed--in which the case was featured in 1825, as a result of the controversy surrounding it (Price xviii). Büchner's choice of Woyzeck as a protagonist made his last play "the first literary work in German whose main characters are members of the working class," which was another formal innovation on his part (Hughes 136). Before Büchner, "tragedy had been acclimatized to the middle classes" by Lillo, Lessing, and Schiller, but if members of the working class featured in plays at all, they served as "comic or picaresque relief, as in Ben Jonson or Middleton" (Price xviii-xix). His work set a precedent for the naturalist playwrights such as Gerhart Hauptmann, whose plays shocked their audiences by portraying squalor and depression among working people" (Hughes 136). Johann Christian Woyzeck, born in Leipzig in 1780, was the son of a barber. Orphaned at 12, he began an arduous journey in life, one that was characterized by poverty and economic need. He earned a meager living by taking casual jobs, fighting as a mercenary for several sides during the Napoleonic Wars and laboring as a worker in different places after the war ended in 1813. He also committed several minor thefts to support himself, ran afoul of the law on several occasions and developed an alcohol abuse problem. In his early forties, he took up with a 44 year- old widow named Johanne Christiane Woost, but she was unfaithful and preferred the company of other men to Woyzeck's. On June 2, 1821 Woyzeck followed Woost and another man to her house and stabbed her there. He was arrested the same evening and confessed to the murder. His plea of insanity, based on an account of the 'voices' that he said he heard,

was rejected. He was found guilty of murder and executed in Leipzig in 1824 when Büchner was 11 years old.

Büchner's seeming dependence on historical documents, however, is superficial. Makkawi, who acknowledges that a sixth of *Danton's Death* is copied verbatim from historical sources, nevertheless charges Büchner's contemporaries of short-sightedness because they could not find in Büchner's work anything but historical reportage (67). Makkawi states that it was only modern researchers—including himself presumably—who were able to recognize that Büchner appropriated his sources in the service of his own objectives (67). This view is still the dominant one in contemporary Büchner studies. For example, Victor Price, who details Büchner's sources, qualifies his analysis by stating that Büchner's apparent dependence on his source material is secondary to his employment of them in service to his own philosophical theme (xiv). Thus if one is to consider *Danton's Death* purely in terms of technical innovations, Munir Abu Dibs was certainly justified in his choice of the play as a landmark in world theater. The question that logically follows is: what are the objectives and philosophical themes that inform Büchner's work and that ensured his relevance in the Arab world, an environment culturally and temporally far removed from that in which he himself wrote?

As a result of the versatility and complexity that characterize his texts, scholarship of Büchner's works has combined approaches from across the range of literary criticism. In his article "Georg Büchner's Perpetual Contemporaneity," Patrick Fortmann states that Büchner's plays, his prose novella *Lenz*, and his pamphlet "The Hessian Courier" "transcend the conventions of [their] genres--historical drama, comedy,

social drama, novella and pamphlet--to such a degree that Büchner's texts reconfigure their forms" (16). Furthermore, Fortmann argues that "every work has been taken as a prism, refracting multiple perspectives on politics, aesthetics, science, nature, and religion" (16).

Critics approaching Büchner's work often employ the lens of biographical and historicist criticism that emphasizes the effect of Büchner's personal experiences and that of the socio-economic environment in which he lived and worked on his theatrical works. Hence, to better understand his political inclinations and outlook and how these inform his texts, it is important to relay the details of Büchner's experience of struggle against the repressive social and economic structures that dominated life in the city of Giessen, where he resided for a time. Abdel Ghaffer Makkawi devotes a chapter of his book *The Far Country (Al Bilad al Ba'ed)* to Büchner's attempted revolution in Hesse and to revolutionary pamphlet "The Hessian Courier," considering the understanding of this work to be required for any understanding of Büchner's theatrical works more generally.

Georg Büchner was born in Goddelau, in the Grand Duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt on 17 October 1813, the eldest son of the district physician. Though he would follow in his father's footsteps and study medicine at Strasbourg, the younger Büchner did not subscribe to his father's political positions. After serving with the Garde Napoleon as an army surgeon, had become a "devoted Francophile, devoted, however, not to the ideals of revolution but to Napoleonic strength and authoritarianism, a conservatism that was to lead to a serious rift with his son" (Crighton, 489). For the younger Büchner was

“an enthusiast for the revolutionary ideals spreading from the French uprising of 1830” (Crighton, 490). When he arrived in the more liberal city of Strasbourg at the age of 18 to study medicine in accordance with his father’s wishes, Büchner regularly attended meetings with several fellow medical students who were active in radical politics. However, he wisely played down this political involvement in the letters he wrote that he assumed would be read by his conservatively inclined father (Crighton 490). Büchner the son’s revolutionary activities took on a more personal and dangerous character when he transferred from the liberal, revolutionary atmosphere in Strasbourg to the stiflingly oppressive atmosphere of the German principality of Hesse. According to Hessen law, Büchner had to complete one year of his medical course at a local university in order to obtain the right to practice medicine in his home country. It is very clear, however, that Büchner immediately came to resent the petty despairs of living in Giessen after the stimulating intellectual atmosphere of Strasbourg. Radical political ideas such as his own were outlawed in Hesse, which was ruled by a corrupt autocracy and populated by impoverished masses (Crighton 490). It was not long before an outlet for his rage at such social inequality presented itself to Buchner. A friend--one of the few Büchner would have in Giessen-- named August Becker introduced the young radical to Friedrich Ludwig Weidig, a liberal politician and publisher.

In the service of Weidig’s political project, Büchner marshalled his considerable rhetorical power and fierce social indignation to produce *The Hessian Courier*, a political pamphlet urging the masses of Hesse to revolt. In this pamphlet, Büchner traces the social problems of Hesse to economics in a “devastating analysis of the economics of princely rule” and a convincing argument that the “true basis of oppression was eco-

nomic” (Crighton 490). The economic argument in the pamphlet marked it as “a forerunner of Marx,” of whom Büchner was, of course, a contemporary (Price x). Even Weidig’s toned-down version of the *Hessian Courier* was, however, not be allowed to reach the masses’ eyes and ears. (In spite of being a radical liberal publisher, Weidig felt the same need to vitiate Büchner’s rhetoric that other publishers would feel in later years. Two activists who were supporters of Weidig’s cause and friends of Buchner, including his close childhood companion Karl Minnigerode, were “betrayed and arrested while trying to smuggle 150 copies into Giessen from the printing works at Offenbach” (Price x). Büchner himself managed to evade arrest but returned to his family home in Darmstadt, aware that his discovery and arrest could only be a matter of time.

The effect of this experience on the composition of *Danton’s Death* has been noted by many critics. Büchner himself would famously remark that Darmstadt police officers served as muses for this play: he wrote his dissection of the French Revolution on the anatomy table in his father’s medical laboratory with a ladder propped by the wall in case he had to make a quick exit, all the while hiding the manuscript under his books whenever his father walked in. Victor Price believed that *Danton’s Death* was the play Büchner simply had to write because, despite his commitment to the revolutionary cause, “he must have had doubts, even as he wrote it, of the effectiveness of the *Courier*” (x). Makkawi, commenting on his translation of *Danton’s Death*, states that Büchner was preoccupied with the question “why did the French Revolution fail?” (67). Makkawi also claims that Büchner was certainly affected as he wrote by the failure of the revolution against aristocratic rule and feudalism in his own country as well as by the lack of revolutionary awareness in all levels of German society, whether among the

downtrodden peasants or among the disingenuous intellectuals who never failed to lecture on freedoms and human rights while children in their country starved to death (67). Likewise, Makkawi's interpretation highlights Büchner's disillusionment with revolution and his loss of faith in the enlightening progression of history (67). To support his argument, Makkawi uses another piece of Büchner's biography, namely his oft-cited letter to his fiancée Minna reproduced below using Price's translation:

...I feel as though I had been annihilated by the dreadful fatalism of history. I find a terrible uniformity in human nature, an inexorable force, conferred upon all and none, in human circumstances. The individual: mere foam on the wave, greatness pure chance, the mastery of genius a puppet play, a ridiculous struggle against an iron law to acknowledge which is the highest good, to defeat impossible...(Price xi)

Makkawi thus agrees with a number of contemporary Büchner critics who believe that for Büchner to write this play at the exact moment in his life that he did--under the duress of waiting to be arrested for failed revolutionary activities, overcome with the futility of what he and his friends had tried to do--he must have seen parallels between the situation he portrayed and his own. For example, In his article "Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*," Lee Baxandall notes that "in this chronicle of the Thermidor days of France, as Danton and the Girondist revolutionists are manoeuvred toward the guillotine by the Robespierre revolutionists, we perceive Georg Büchner's expression of the hopelessness of his own situation" (136). Büchner's own revolutionary ac-

tivities were put down by the oppressive authorities in Giessen he and his companions rebelled against and his Danton was put to death by fellow revolutionaries ostensibly after the revolution had succeeded in deposing the tyrannical ruling class. For Büchner, the ‘dreadful fatalism of history’ had ensured the futility, even absurdity, of revolutionary activities in both cases. Again, it is important to understand the way in which Büchner uses his historical sources to reflect his own experiences and convictions. Price asserts that Büchner’s Danton, for example, was, according to the existing evidence, very much like the historical Danton: “an engaging ruffian, dissolute, unscrupulous, and lazy, but good-natured and generous. His Hamlet-like refusal to act in his own defence, his reiteration of ‘They’ll never dare’ are factual,” but Price goes on to state that “in the play his motives are invested with the nobility of philosophic despair” (xvi). He also links the play’s “set of marvellous variations on the anguish of existence” and the fact that “it keeps on restating in newer, more compelling ways the basic theme that life is atrocious, morality non-existent, action pointless” to Büchner’s own “philosophical resonance” (xv). Furthermore, concerning *Danton’s Death*, he suggests that “the play reflects [Büchner]’s despairing perception that all human action is futile; and the very class for whom the revolution was made, the proletariat, is depicted as cruel and fickle (not that Büchner condemns it for that; its nature too is determined). In that sense, it is an anti-revolutionary work” (xvii). Therefore, it could be argued that Büchner saw that revolutions against tyranny and oppression were bound to fail one way or another. Not only was this true of his own revolution in Germany in the 1830s but also revolutions throughout history. They were doomed to fail repeatedly in the same way, ad nauseam, because history which “marches as though it were a parade, an inexorable, intimidating display of physical force and moral compulsion” is itself “in this sense...tyrannical

beyond specific tyrannies; political freedom, which is largely an illusion, is no cure, even where it might exist, for the deep unfreedom of the historical process itself” (Gilman 15). Like Makkawi, Gilman used the same section of Büchner’s letter to his fiancée quoted above to support his argument.

Makkawi acknowledges that Büchner “is the true father of modern theatre in its different trends and styles” (69). As will be illustrated in later chapters, Büchner’s works provided precedents for two major strands of modern theatre that were particularly influential in the Arab world: the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd. Büchner was also a communist pioneer in his country, Makkawi argues, as a result of his “revolutionary struggle for the downtrodden, the hungry, the oppressed and the exploited” people of his native country (69). However, Makkawi argues that Büchner’s theatre can not be pigeonholed as “realistic or naturalistic or communist or nihilistic or musical or poetic” but rather can only be understood as a combination of all these characteristics and approaches, simultaneously formed by them and deeper and more complicated than all of them (69). It is precisely this openness to a myriad of interpretations that gave Büchner’s work importance in the Arab world over one hundred and thirty years after his death.

Makkawi’s translation of *Danton’s Death* appeared shortly after the military defeat of 1967, which, in addition to its many economically and socially debilitating effects, had led to a significant decline in theatrical activity and translation in Egypt (Muhammed 17). The translation was timely because the specific aspects of *Danton’s Death* that attracted Makkawi’s attention, namely the themes of resignation, disappointment

and disillusionment on the one hand, and social rebellion on the other, must have resonated with Arab audiences following what was universally acknowledged to be a devastating defeat. Despite the fact that Makkawi felt obliged to include a comment justifying his inclusion of the scenes of *Danton's Death* that contain elements of eroticism and atheism, the self-doubting, despairing and disillusioned outlook of *Danton's Death* made it especially appropriate for Arab audiences in the late 1960s. Munir Abu Dibs understood the appropriateness of the play when he chose to perform it at the prominent Baalbeck International Festival in 1970. Despite the time lapse between the French Revolution and the Arab defeat of 1967, Arab audiences could still see parallels between the events portrayed in Büchner's play and their own situation. After all, though the events depicted are those of the French Revolution, critics agree that Büchner intended the play to be representative of certain episodic incidents that repeat themselves across history: in other words he wanted *Danton's Death* to be "not a historical epic but a drama about history" (Gilman 14). Moreover, Laura Ginters points to the "capacity of this dramatic text to be rewritten in each new production" and makes the claim that the play could be read as representative of twentieth-century German society rather than as an objective narration of the events of the French Revolution". Her point is valid for many reasons. First, Gilman points out that Büchner himself was "enraged" when the piece's first publisher added the phrase *Dramatic Images from France's Reign of Terror* as a subtitle (14). Gilman justifies this reaction by claiming that Büchner, in one of his letters, "makes it clear that the events of the French Revolution were not occurrences he wished to recover from the past in order to dramatise in the present--for reasons of one or another kind of perspective or instruction, let us say--but properties of an imaginative action that would rebuke history, turning it against itself and testifying to a new kind of

freedom from its pitiless claims” (14). The fears Büchner expresses are not specific to any period or culture but are rather representative of trends across human history. For example, Gilman points out that it is “not the wrong kind of values as enunciated by Robespierre and Saint-Just that dismays [Danton] as much as it is the human need to erect values into absolutes, abstractions which suppress sensual life, truth, idiosyncrasy, and all beautiful forgivable error, and which therefore exercise the most far-reaching tyranny over the self” (18). Another example appears in Act 2, scene 7 in which he gives Saint Just words--purely of his own invention--which give a “chilling insight...into the mind of a political fanatic: the awful farrago of inflated rhetoric, de-based logic, and inhumanity is put across with a mad sincerity worthy of Hitler” (Price xvii).

The popularity of *Woyzeck* is another matter. Beginning in 2008, an adaption of Büchner’s last play has appeared almost annually in the Arab world. This recent popularity is at least partially explained by a correspondence between Büchner’s socio-economic concerns in the play and the concerns of working-class Arab audiences in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions. Büchner belonged to a tradition of “socially-didactic” theatre in which the stage served as “a site of training in moral and political enlightenment for the masses” (Hughes 135). Hughes argues that Büchner, “influenced by the communist theories of Gracchus Babeuf and Henri de Saint Simon, sought to use theatre as a means of politically educating the peasantry” (136). In *Woyzeck*, as in his other works, Büchner takes “a remarkably firm stand with those who suffer, who are marginalised in the social order, silenced in the political arena, and crushed by the forces of history. To them and their lives, Büchner’s writings turn with

radical empathy, seeking human dignity amidst the turmoil of poverty and pathology” (Fortmann 16). A considerable number of people residing in Arab countries such as Egypt have also complained of a lack of democratic political participation. One of the political highlights of 2011 was the case of Mohamed Bouazizi, who worked as a street vendor in Tunisia, earning very little money and enduring constant humiliation from police officers who regularly confiscated his produce and harassed him for bribes he could not pay and who immolated himself in protest, inaugurating the Tunisian revolution. The parallel between this case and Büchner’s *Woyzeck* is clear; both endure constant humiliation enabled primarily by abusive relations of power. Bouazizi’s self-immolation galvanized the Tunisian revolution. It was a revolution of the type Büchner might have hoped to see in Hesse if Hughes’ argument that Büchner wished his plays to serve as instruments of political enlightenment in the communist tradition is valid.

However, as has already been demonstrated, social revolution in Büchner’s work is consistently combined with or undermined by philosophic despair and pessimism. Revolutions, for Büchner, replace one politically oppressive and hegemonic power with another ad nauseum but revolutions are nevertheless necessary because the alternative is silence and submission. Therefore, Büchner’s *Woyzeck* is best understood through the lens of Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory outlined in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which casts a pessimistic light on social revolutions previously unseen in Marxist thought. Adorno himself wrote a commentary on Büchner’s play and Alban Berg’s operatic adaptation, *Wozzeck*. James Martin Harding, in his article “Integrating Atomization: Adorno Reading Berg Reading Büchner,” summarizes Adorno’s argument by stating that Adorno subordinates the class conflict, which dominated the thought of

other Marxist writers, “to historical trends that--with unmistakably negative consequences--have circumvented the foundations upon which analysis of class conflict could serve as the basis for positive change” (3). The reason for this shift is “a perception of rising social uniformity, which, according to Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, is slowly eroding the possibility for oppositional stance” (Harding 3). In *Woyzeck*, this social uniformity that erodes the ability to oppose and revolt is present because “Woyzeck, too overwhelmed by divergent social demands to develop opposition to them, has not only to submit to the rigors of military discipline, but has simultaneously to submit to the constraints of being a specimen for scientific inquiry as well” (Harding 3). The two tasks are moreover “mutually exclusive” because the “constraints of the doctor’s experiment deny [Woyzeck] the sustenance he needs to perform his other work” (Harding 3). This lack of sustenance and of time effectively eliminates Woyzeck’s ability to rebel even as it simultaneously locks him into the repressive socio-economic position in which he finds himself. Furthermore, Adorno argues that “*Woyzeck* employs a discourse of humanism, whose terms it dismantles by developing their implications, i.e. by pursuing them to their logical conclusions and by exposing their susceptibility to tyrannical, repressive agendas” (Harding 5). This dismantling, which is itself a form of protest, is at work in *Woyzeck* as early as the first scene, in which the Captain adopts a higher moral position and uses it to humiliate the subordinate Woyzeck. Hence, the “means with which Woyzeck challenges the ideals and structures of social reform...is also a reflection of the social currents at the source of Woyzeck’s repressive situation” (Harding 6).

In his article “The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Büchner’s *Woyzeck*,” Richard Gray argues that interpretations of Büchner’s texts as “pessimistic retreats” on the basis of his statements concerning the fatalistic nature of history simply erase the “traces which assign to Büchner a place in that tradition of critical thought which dares strategic assaults on ideologically entrenched positions despite the staggering odds against the success of the critical endeavor” (79). The justification for these assaults is simply that this “‘negative critique,’ while aware of its own impotence, simultaneously recognises that the only alternative is silent affirmation of the status quo” (79). What makes Büchner’s plays an appealing choice for Arab audiences is the fact that Büchner attempted this heroic assault, despite his experience with the ever-present threats of imprisonment and torture, in an attempt to rebuke the powerful, human and/or historical forces of repression. Adaptations of Büchner’s works alter certain aspects of the plays in order to address specific local concerns while at the same time preserving the powerful dynamic that exists in the works between intellectual pessimism on the one hand and necessity for revolution on the other.

The engagement between Büchner and the Arab world, directly and indirectly through intermediaries such as Brecht, Adamov and others, has been a long and complex one with various aspects. The remainder of this thesis will look first at the numerous adaptations of Büchner’s *Woyzeck* by Arab playwrights and directors before and after the Spring revolutions of 2011, then look at the different analyses presented of Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* following the defeat of the Arab forces in 1967 and at the commentaries on the play published post-2011 that reveal its entry into the discourse surrounding the Arab Spring. The final chapter will consider Büchner’s legacy as car-

ried on by Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Adamov to playwrights and intellectuals in the Arab world. The thesis will conclude by suggesting some fruitful avenues for further investigation of this important but previously neglected area of research. Throughout this thesis will attempt to reconfigure cultural memory in order to credit Büchner with having a significant role in Arab theatrical tradition post-1967 and to highlight the significant contributions this writer made to this tradition.

CHAPTER ONE: *WOYZECK*

One of the earliest performances of Büchner's work in the Arab world occurred in 1967, when a German troupe visited Cairo and performed *Woyzeck* (Mohammad 30). An Arabic translation of each of *Leonce and Lena* and *Woyzeck*, both by Abdel Ghaffar Makkawi, had appeared in 1965. However, it was only in the new millennium that Büchner's last play achieved widespread popularity among Arab theatre practitioners and audiences. In Egypt, Mustafa Murad's adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck* served as the opening piece for the 17th annual Cultural Palaces Theatre Clubs Festival of 2008. In Qatar, theatre director Abdalla al-Turkumani presented his version of *Mandali*, Jawad al-Assadi's adaptation of *Woyzeck*, for the second time at the Fifth Arab Theatre Festival in 2013 after presenting it in 2012 at the Youth Theatre Days Festival (Ayyam Masrah lil-Shabab). *Mandali* was performed for the first time in 1996 under the direction of al-Assadi himself³. In the United Arab Emirates, in 2014, the Resuscitation Theatre produced *Al-Khayef*- literally 'the one who is afraid'- its 'updated' and 'Arabised' version of *Woyzeck*. The Resuscitation Theatre, based in Abu Dhabi, presents itself on its website as an "innovation company...[that] exists as a type of defibrillator for classic texts: beloved literature of the past is reworked into modern forms that are accessible to contemporary audiences."⁴ It focuses specifically on adapting experimental theatre into modern forms accessible to its contemporary Arab audience. Finally, at the time of this writing, the Theatre Chamates of Morocco is holding performances for

³ "Iraqi Director Dr. Jawad al-Assadi" (2003)

⁴ www.resuscitationtheatre.com

another adaptation of *Woyzeck*. This new adaptation was launched on 11 January 2015 for the 2015 edition of the annual Arab Theatre Festival.

Woyzeck relates the story of an economically underprivileged soldier, Woyzeck, who takes on a number of odd jobs alongside his military duties to provide for his partner and child: he serves as a barber for the captain of his regiment and as a research subject for the Doctor, who keeps him on a strict diet of peas and exhibits his worsening symptoms to medical students. He also hears voices and suffers from visions, a medical condition that may or may not be related directly to his experiences with the doctor. He is constantly humiliated; by the Captain, who points out his lack of virtue and mocks him for what he perceives as dimness and by the Doctor, who berates him for relieving himself against a wall and puts his deteriorating body on display to other students. The crisis occurs when Woyzeck's partner, Marie, engages in an affair with the Drum Major. Woyzeck's arguably worst humiliation comes when he is informed of her infidelity by the maliciously gleeful Captain and he is humiliated yet again when he is defeated in a fistfight by his partner's lover. Unable to relieve his suffering any other way, Woyzeck acquires a knife and uses it to murder Marie, the only convenient outlet for his anger.

In a short comment on *Woyzeck* in his 2005 book *Sound and Echo (al-Sawt w al-Sada)*, literary critic and translator Abdelwahid Louloua states that the play is primarily concerned with Woyzeck's "defeat in battles against his superiors' unconscious need to inflict torture and against internal psychological forces...he can not understand or control" (205). Louloua argues that *Woyzeck* is "a study in futility, distinguished by its dif-

ferentiation between the power inherent in Woyzeck's emotions and his inability to translate these emotions into action towards humane goals, an inability that renders them destructive" (205). As will be discussed below, most adaptations of *Woyzeck* in the Arab world in the years prior to and following the Arab Spring take inspiration from the frustration described by Louloua as well as the fear of oppressive and sadistic holders of power.

The appeal of Büchner's unfinished play for Arab audiences in the twenty-first century could be explained in part by the urgency of its themes; socio-economic exploitation and the ruthless oppression and humiliation of persons of low socio-economic standing. The appeal of the play, in the years before and after the onset of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, is based on an understanding of *Woyzeck* as essentially a drama of social criticism and on a concern with oppression as caused by factors such as economic deprivation, oppressive relations of power and humiliation based on low social standing. Socio-economic exploitation, oppression and constant humiliation had, after all, been the acknowledged driving forces of the Arab Spring revolutions. In her article "Youth, Gender, and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising", Diane Singerman argues that young people "in Egypt and the larger Middle East" have been "disproportionately disadvantaged" because they were "economically excluded by high unemployment and insecure jobs in the informal sector; they were politically excluded by authoritarianism and state repression; and they were socially excluded by the limbo of 'waithood' or prolonged adolescence as marriage and entry into adulthood was delayed, in part due to the high cost of marriage" (1). Moreover, Arab directors and playwrights have found the play particularly amendable to their own visions and to problems in their own con-

text. Adaptations of *Woyzeck* in the Arab world have tended to highlight and even (incredibly considering the bleakness of Büchner's text) exaggerate the humiliation, exploitation and oppression of *Woyzeck*--in certain cases to an extent that forces a melodramatic tone on the play--in order for the play to resonate more clearly with their audiences. Contemporary Arab adaptors pay particular and consistent attention to the character of the Captain--and to a lesser degree, that of the Doctor--and his exploitation of *Woyzeck* forms the crux of their adaptations. Makkawi--whose translations and analyses of Büchner's work will be discussed below--stated that in those characters Büchner combined "all his revolutionary energies of criticism against society and traditional social dynamics" (157).

The most frequently performed adaption of *Woyzeck* in the Arab world is Jawad al-Assadi's *Mandali*. Al-Assadi is a prominent Iraqi playwright as well as a prolific theatre director who, in addition to directing his own plays, directed productions of works by prominent Arab writers such as Saadallah Wannous and Mahmoud Darwish and European playwrights such as Brecht and Chekhov, staging them in different countries across the Arab world. He is also the author of several research articles on theatre. In *Mandali*, Assadi makes important changes to Büchner's text that highlight his own concern with social issues in Iraq. The first change is, of course, the name of the eponymous character. However, this change is not only to give a local flavour to the play. *Mandali*, the name of Assadi's protagonist, is also the name of a geographical area located on the Iraq-Iran border. A later director of *Mandali*, Abdalla al-Turkumani, speaking to Al-Seyassah newspaper claimed that the name was important because the citizens of *Mandali* were among the first to be forcibly conscripted into the Iraqi army, follow-

ing the onset of the Iraq-Iran war. This real-life anecdote echoes the original *Woyzeck* nicely because Assadi's Mandali was a barber, like Büchner's protagonist and like the historical *Woyzeck*, before he was forcibly conscripted into the military. Assadi's adaptation of Büchner departs from the original in one major and revealing way. In the original *Woyzeck*, the character of the Captain is a relatively minor one: he only appears in two scenes. He is portrayed as a shallow, petty commanding officer, eager to present himself as morally superior, contemptuous of his subordinates and all too eager to publicly humiliate *Woyzeck* with Marie's betrayal. Assadi's Captain, on the other hand, is a savage, tyrannical and unscrupulous military commander, who ruthlessly and routinely humiliates, berates and oppresses his troops and enforces obedience among them by threatening to shoot any dissenter all the while helping himself to their money, their land and their women. Assadi's move to demonise the character of the Captain in this way is a result of his own preoccupation with the military dictatorship in his country though he makes no textual reference to the specific Iraqi dictatorship and instead, seems to want *Mandali* to comment on military dictatorships in general. In an interview with Rebecca Joubin for *Al-Jadid*, Assadi states that after 28 years of forced exile, he returned to Iraq only after Saddam Hussein had been deposed and that in his play *The Baghdadi Bath* he wished to "address how Iraqis as a whole suffered in the shadows of Saddam's brutal regime."⁵ By significantly highlighting the oppressive nature of the Captain in his 1996 adaptation, Assadi used Büchner's text to express his own concerns for Iraqi citizens living under a military dictatorship he perceived to be as oppressive as his Captain.

⁵ "Jawad al-Assadi: Director Returns to Iraq to Find Nothing the 'Same'" (2005)

A modified version of *Mandali* was performed in Qatar as one of the highlights of the 2013 Arab Theatre Festival. This edition of the festival featured plays significantly concerned with revolution. The opening play, *The Last Performance (Al-‘Ard Al-Akheer)*, for example, featured a tyrannical lead actor challenging the audience to revolt against him, condemning them to remain under his dictatorship when they did not, involving and prompting the audience in a gesture reminiscent of Brecht’s epic theatre. The Festival also featured the play *Breakaway (Infilat)*, which concerns itself with the reactions of a young Tunisian couple to the Jasmine Revolution raging outside their apartment. Yet another play, *The Neighing of Clay (Saheel al-Teen)*, features a young female clay-artist provocatively challenging patriarchy and asserting her sexual desires openly. Consistent with this context, the director of the play, Abdalla al-Turkumani, sought to highlight the play’s social criticism and infuse it with revolutionary enthusiasm. The focus remains on the helpless soldier’s exploitation by an unscrupulous and ruthless military officer who employs exaggerated savagery in his dealings with his subordinate. Commenting on the event, theatre critic Nehad Selaiha explicitly states that “the whole adaptation aimed to condemn military dictatorships and expose their satanic methods of crushing the souls and bodies of individuals and distorting their minds.”⁶ Following his adaptation of *Mandali* at the Youth Theatre Days Festival (Ayyam Masrah lil Shabab) the previous year, Turkumani had been criticised in the play’s discussion panel for linking his oppressive military commander specifically with the Iraqi dictatorship by using Iraqi military uniforms and explicitly stating the connection in the

⁶ “Women Centre Stage” (2013)

brochure.⁷ Moreover, in a fit of Arab Spring optimism and revolutionary energy, Turkumani has his protagonist, Mandali, turn his blade on his oppressor and free himself of exploitation and terror. The triumphant ending bears little, if any, resemblance to Büchner's *Woyzeck*. The entire episode in which *Woyzeck* murders Marie is eliminated and replaced by the disposal of the military commander. Turkumani justified this choice by stating, in the panel, that his mission was to present the Mandali present in everyone, who "defends himself against tyrants"⁸.

Assadi's concern with oppressive military structures of power can also be found in Mostafa Murad's 2008 adaptation. Again, despite the fact that Büchner's Captain plays a relatively minor role in the play, Murad's adaptation gives the character as prominent a role as *Woyzeck* or Marie. However, in Murad's adaptation, the Captain is no longer merely a captain, he is now a full-fledged army general. Not only that, he is portrayed as a petty, violent military deity, a master puppeteer pulling the strings of every single character around him. Such a character could have reminded Arab audiences who saw the play at the festival in Cairo in 2008 of several heads of state ruling at the moment. High-ranking military officers who rose to or seized power only to turn into acknowledged dictators are almost a cliché in the Arab world. One of the explanations of Murad's choice of adaptation could be a continuation--two centuries after and thousands of miles away--of Büchner's theatrical condemnation of the social and economic exploitation conducted by unscrupulous persons yielding power.

⁷ " *Mandali ... a Human Condition Announcing the Arrival of an Intellectually-Mature Thinker*" (2012)

⁸ "The Panel for Mandali Approves" (2012)

Not all interpretations of the Captain by Arab critics are so overwhelmingly negative. For example, Makkawi evaluation of the Captain--who he claims is representative of the complexity characterising even Büchner's minor characters--is correspondingly more elaborate and sophisticated. Makkawi does point out that the Captain and the Doctor belong to "an extinct social class" and that they are representative of "dogmatic mentalities, corrupt morals and [in the case of the Doctor] a rigid strain of scientific study" (156). He also acknowledges that those two characters appear to be in thrall to a single engraved notion: "the Captain is a prisoner of his own aloofness which he considers a virtue and the Doctor is ensnared by a lust for experimentation" (Makkawi 157). Furthermore, he concedes that "Büchner painted [them] as caricatures and unleashed on them all the revolutionary energy with which he criticised the society and the traditions and norms dominant in his time" (157). However, Makkawi argues that those characters "are much more than ironic cartoons used to mock the society they represent...their personalities transcend the limits of wooden puppets" (157). For Makkawi, the Captain is a character full of enriching contrasts. On the one hand, he exhibits flashes of his enthrallment by love and sadness, by the emotional needs of the flesh and by the 'base' natural instincts which he deridingly claims motivate Woyzeck, and, on the other, he is programmed by the strict, inflexible definition of virtue that he himself preaches (Makkawi 157). Hence, the Captain's rigid definition of virtue transforms him into a seemingly content puppet parroting its lines while his confessed susceptibility to natural instincts lays bare his conflicted existence (Makkawi 157).

Al Khayef: Love and Loss at the Bottom of the Barrel, the Resuscitation Theatre's adaption of *Woyzeck*, differs from both al-Asadi's and Murad's adaptations. Textually, it is the closest to Büchner's original. Instead of a poor soldier, the eponymous character is a poor labourer and cleaner. Instead of a tyrannical military commander or sadistic general, the main antagonist is a bullying company executive. The concern is no longer with violent exploitation in the military institution but rather with economic and social exploitation of the type that occurs in a capitalistic system in which the gulf between classes is unbridgeable. This shift brings the threat of exploitation and dehumanization closer to working-class audiences and is again reminiscent of the socio-economic concerns of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, this adaptation realigns focus on the character of the doctor. Al-Khayef, in his desperation, agrees to be the subject in a test conducted by the local doctor, a character described in the pamphlet as "mad as a hatter". While possibly amusing, the description can not fail to negate a character driven by a complex desire for achievement and recognition, rendering him no more than a cartoonish villain bent on exploiting the desperate Al-Khayef for 'mad' reasons.

The presentation of the Doctor in *al-Khayef* reaffirms the presence of another character, arguably more oppressing than the Captain in Büchner's original text. The doctor seems to have no engagement with his research subject on a human level at all. He fails to register distress or convey any sympathy on several occasions, conveying only intense intellectual curiosity. He establishes early on that he believes certain emotions, such as anger, are unscientific. In his first appearance, he berates Woyzeck for not holding his water using an abstract pseudo-scientific statement: "man is the transfiguration of the individual urge to freedom" (Büchner 115). Later, he claims that "no, Woy-

zeck, I am not angry. Anger is unhealthy. Unscientific. I am perfectly calm. My pulse is its usual sixty and I say to you with utmost sang-froid: God forbid that we should feel anger towards a fellow human being” (Büchner115). Two aspects of the text, however, refute the doctor’s claim that he is not angry. First, Büchner specifically adds the stage direction “upset” to the doctor’s speech quoted above . Second, the doctor repeats his refrain “but, Woyzeck, you shouldn’t have pissed against that wall” not two lines after his claim that he is not angry (Büchner115). Büchner’s stage directions are sparse and using this aforementioned one, which so blatantly contradicts the content of the speech, suggests that he means to emphasize the Doctor’s hypocrisy. His anger, however, is only because Woyzeck was unable to provide him with the testing sample he needed for his experiments, and what Makkawi called his “lust for experimentation” is, therefore, unsatisfied. When emotions such as sympathy or, at least, consideration are asked of him, the doctor is unwilling to express them. This lack of empathy occurs on too many occasions to be considered anything less than a character flaw. He is happy to reply to the distressed Woyzeck’s “confidential” (Buchner’s stage direction) statement that “that’s when a terrible voice spoke to me” with an automatic, mechanical diagnosis: “Woyzeck, you have an aberratio” (Büchner116). Two scenes later, the doctor replies to the captain’s request “permit me to save a human life, Doctor” with “I’m in a hurry, Captain. In a hurry” (Büchner117). Later, when Woyzeck is confronted with his partner’s infidelity, the doctor is there to helpfully list all the visible symptoms of his distress: “Your pulse, Woyzeck. Your pulse. Short, violent, skipping, irregular”, “facial muscles rigid, tense, occasionally twitching. Behavior strained, excited” (Büchner118). “What a case!” is his final conclusion in a pivotal scene in which Woyzeck is finally driven to murder (Büchner119). Woyzeck himself is nothing more to the doctor than

“an interesting case” (Büchner 116). The doctor does not spare a thought about the human or social consequences of the distress he has observed. He merely notes its presence, just as he notes the presence of the terrible voices Woyzeck hears without a thought for his own responsibility. Because of his inability to see the consequences of the medical condition he observes and his unwillingness to help alleviate the symptoms he describes (this unwillingness disturbingly echoes his earlier response to the Captain’s request to save a human life), he is not a character to turn to for answers or for solutions. This is perhaps the reason why Makkawi seems to dismiss the Doctor as a representation of “a barren strain of scientific study”. Furthermore, in *al-Khayef*, the Doctor’s methodology of pointing out the obvious without conscious awareness of his context is parodied in the following exchange taken from the opening scene, an original addition to the play in which the Executive and the Doctor inspect the bodies of al-Khayef and his partner Maryam:

Doctor: Absence of scientific method, Executive!
Proceed empirically. By the use of the empirical faculty I
have been able to establish that this woman Maryam they
called her, had her throat cut and this man died by drowning
Executive: Oh marvellous- marvellous! To work
that out from him being found in the lake and her with her
head hanging off! (6)

On their pamphlet for the event, the organizers included their own comment on the significance of the play in a segment titled “The Play’s Relevance Today”. In their own words:

“In spite of industrialisation and the information revolution,
which offered so much promise to free people from the burdens of

basic existence, poverty remains with us and is just as prevalent today as it was when the play was originally written. In the face of so many advances in the Arab world poverty is still a serious issue. With poverty comes a host of other fundamental problems especially for those who try to abide by the law such as our main character. He takes on multiple jobs to support his family, yet this means he is never at home to be with his wife and child. She succumbs to the temptations brought on by loneliness and normal human desires. He reacts in an all too human way and so begins his descent into an inevitable spiral of desperation and destruction. Those around him expect him to live up to their expectations even though he doesn't have the means to do it. The adaptation illustrates the ever present spectre of poverty in societies that have the trappings of advanced nations, but when we look past that superficial sheen we see the failure to confront and resolve the important problems. We just try to bury them deeper, so that fewer can see them”

Envisioning *Woyzeck* as solely a play about poverty may have reduced the play to a single, valid though limited interpretation that does not begin to cover its fatalistic existentialism or exhibit its vertigo-inducing nihilism and absurdism. However, the organizers' statement shows that the play lent itself, once again, to an adaptation that reflects social concerns in a society very different from the one it was written for originally.

Arab audiences, then, seem to be more familiar with the social revolutionary side of Büchner. This phenomenon could partly be explained by analyzing the history of Büchner's reception by Arab literary critics. Abdel Ghaffar Makkawi was a prominent Arab author, translator and literary theorist who translated all of Büchner's theatrical works from German to Arabic. In his book *The Far Country (al-Balad al-Ba'eed)*, Makkawi commented on authors ranging from Goethe, Büchner and Brecht (whom he also translated into Arabic) to Chekhov and Pirandello. Makkawi did not only comment on Büchner's artistic works but also paid special attention to his other major work. An

entire chapter of Makkawi's book was dedicated to Büchner's revolutionary pamphlet "The Hessian Courier," which the young doctor-in-training wrote during his obligatory stay in Giessen. In this chapter, Makkawi provides his reader with historical tidbits about Germany of the early 1800s, the period during which Büchner engaged in revolutionary activity in Giessen, as well as significant biographical information about the author himself. Makkawi begins by contextualizing the situation in Germany, stating that the lack of political and economic equality and freedom in Hesse persisted despite the pervasive influence of slogans of equality from the French Revolution. These slogans inspired the 1813 revolution, during which farmers marched shouting for freedom and equality. Büchner, who returned to Giessen in 1834, would allude to this revolution, reminding the peasants of their defeat and the cruelty inflicted upon them by those of their sons and brothers who formed the bulk of the forces of Prince Ludwig's brother who violently put down their protests. Makkawi offers a short history of Büchner's involvement with Weidig and his establishment of a Society for Human Rights.

Quoting extensively from his Arabic translation of "The Hessian Courier," Makkawi makes several points about the nature of Buchner's activities, illustrating ways in which he differed from his collaborators and other revolutionary figures active during the period. Makkawi tackles the conflicts between Büchner and Weidig, pointing out that Büchner disagreed with Weidig's vision of a religious state and bitterly fought him over the changes to the text, especially the substitution of the word 'rich' with other words such as 'privileged.' This change infuriated Büchner because he chose the term specifically with the purpose of drawing a sharp, inflammatory distinction between the rich and the poor. According to Makkawi, this choice and this purpose prefigure "what

would later be expressed in Marxist documents” that “riches under a corrupt system are no more than a type of theft from the poor” (Makkawi 142). Makkawi thus names Büchner one of the forerunners of Marxist thought. Also, Makkawi points to Büchner’s belief that providing economic security and stable livelihoods, battling injustice and fighting a corrupt prince held a clear priority over campaigning for political rights and freedom of speech. This belief stood in clear contrast to the aspirations of other intellectuals and prevented the young activist from involving himself in protests organized by these intellectuals. Büchner even wrote to his family from Strasbourg on January 1, 1836 that he “definitely [did] not belong to the so-called Young Germany, the literary party of Gutzow and Heine,” adding that “only a total misunderstanding of our social conditions could make people believe it was possible to effect a complete reform of our religious and social beliefs.” (Edwards 134). Makkawi argues that Büchner believed revolutions to be instigated not by intellectuals, but by the people. Change had to start with the masses and work its way upwards across society. For that reason, Makkawi pointed out, Büchner believed that his pamphlet had to be written in language clearly understandable by the people. Only in that form could it serve its purpose, which was to raise awareness about the mechanics of economic and social exploitation and inequality and urge the masses to rebellion.

To analyse Büchner’s style and purpose, Makkawi offers his reader translations of significant portions of the *Hessian Courier*. Arab readers could have found brief reference to Büchner’s revolutionary economic-based argument in the prominent Syrian thinker Georges Tarabichi’s translation of David Riazanov, titled *Lectures in the History of Marxism*. Makkawi elaborates on this reference as he translates several segments

of the text, interspersing his argument with them. He opens with Büchner's famous opening statement "Peace to the Cottages! War to the Palaces!" He goes on to provide a translation of the first paragraph of *Hessian Courier*. In this paragraph, Büchner makes two points, both of which are central to his argument. He first states that the situation in the Germany of 1843 seemed to imply that the Creator had created peasants and workers on the fifth day and the royalty and nobility on the sixth day, ordering the latter group to extend their dominance over the former. Then, he goes on to contrast in dramatic terms the lives of peasants and princes. Statements such as "their sticks will smash your skulls if you dare think you are free men" and "these exploiters who draw their power from the blood they suck from your veins" (among a significant number of references to the Prince and members of his court as 'vampires') follow to exemplify the "reckless" and inflammatory tone that made the *Courier* a prohibited publication (Makkawi 137, 145). Most important for Makkawi, however, is to prove that Büchner's language consisted of "clear words that leave no room for doubt, easily understood by farmers, as comprehensible to them as the words of the Bible, words free from complex rhetoric or pretence" (145). In Makkawi's evaluation, Büchner succeeded in directing his powerful message to its intended recipients, not only in its content but also through its form.

An interesting side note that should be raised at this point is the pervasive influence of Büchner's younger brother, Ludwig Büchner, on Arab scientific and socialist thought. The younger Büchner was a witness to the rise of Marxism and Darwinism in Europe of the nineteenth century. He was himself a proponent of Darwinism and wrote a series of essays on the topic. He was, furthermore, a leading figure in scientific mate-

rialism. Büchner's essays on Darwin were translated into Arabic by a vastly influential Arab physician and thinker named Shibli Shummayil. Shummayil graduated from the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut as a medical doctor--a profession he shared with both Georg and Ludwig Büchner--and was described as "a militant proponent of materialism and scientism" and "from the 1880s, on, ...the foremost populariser of Darwinism in the Arab world" (Reid 184). Inspired in his philosophical view by Büchner's scientism, Shumayyil ranked himself amongst the socialist Darwinists and, most importantly, attempted to provide a scientific basis for his socialism (Reid 184). He "chose an organic analogy to illustrate his point: just as the whole plant or animal in nature benefited or was harmed by what happened to one of its parts, so in society each member had his special function and must cooperate with the others if the general welfare were to be achieved. Cooperation and competition, each in its proper place, were both in accordance with the natural laws which governed nature and society" (Reid 184). The attempt to establish the scientific basis for socialism is reminiscent of an influential writer and thinker who was influenced by Büchner: Bertolt Brecht.

In conclusion, Büchner's *Woyzeck* proved to be a very popular choice for Arab audiences as demonstrated by the numerous adaptations held in different countries around the Arab world. The material in itself spoke to the concerns of disgruntled people across the Arab world. *Woyzeck*'s humiliation by the Captain, the Doctor and the Drum Major resembles the humiliation that drove Mohammad Bouazizi to self-immolation. The economic desperation that drives *Woyzeck* to endure this humiliation and to risk his physical well-being and mental sanity by submitting himself to the Doctor's lunatic experimentation in order to provide for his partner and child also speaks to

the hundreds of thousands of Arab citizens living in poverty. However, it is Woyzeck's oppression by his military commander that resonated the most with fears of oppression, arrest, torture and humiliation in an Arab world dominated by military dictatorships.

CHAPTER TWO: *DANTON'S DEATH*

Analyzing the impact of *Danton's Death* in the Arab world is a more difficult task. Unlike *Woyzeck*, *Danton's Death* was performed only once, in 1970 at the annual Baalbeck International Theatre Festival. As mentioned before, it was translated into Arabic twice; by Abdel Ghaffar Makkawi in 1969 and by Adunis in 1970. Undeniably, *Danton's Death* is much more difficult to perform than *Woyzeck*. However, that said, *Danton's Death* managed to permeate discourse in the Arab world both post-1967 and post-2011. This chapter will investigate the concerns of Arab intellectuals with *Danton's Death*, as exemplified by literary and journalistic commentaries, to suggest first, that its absurdist and existentialist elements spoke to the disillusionment and despair of the 1967 defeat of the Arab armies and second, that its dialectical stance on revolution (as exemplified first by Danton's need to conduct a social rebellion and his despair over its imminent failure and second by the struggle between Robespierre and Danton) has been understood by commentators as an invitation to debate over the justification of revolutionary violence.

As mentioned before, Abdel Ghaffar Makkawi was the translator and literary critic who did the most to introduce Georg Büchner's work to Arab-speaking audiences. Makkawi wrote two interpretations of Büchner's *Danton's Death*: one was published in 1967 in his book *The Far Country* and the other served as the introduction to his 1969 translation of *Danton's Death*. The two interpretations are similar in some aspects but differ remarkably in their overall focus. For example, in Makkawi's initial interpretation

the characters are analysed as more or less embodiments of philosophical positions and their disappointment and disillusion is explained in terms of existentialist struggles whereas in the introduction to his translation, Makkawi concentrates more on the themes of disappointment and disillusion as products of social and historical forces and as representative of Büchner's experience. This shift in understanding can at least be partially explained by the 1967 defeat that triggered introspections of critical self-assessment, disillusion and disappointment among Arab intellectuals.

Büchner's work was hailed by Esslin himself as a forerunner of the Theatre of the Absurd, and one could argue that Makkawi's interpretation of Büchner's theatrical oeuvre is framed by the Esslin's theory of the absurd in theatre. It is necessary here to clarify the use of the term "absurd" as its definition and implications are by no means universally agreed upon. For the purposes of this analysis, the definition--based on the theory put forth by Albert Camus in his landmark essay "Le Mythe de Sisyphe"--and on the interpretations offered by the avant-garde dramatists whose work collectively constituted "the Theatre of the Absurd"--offered by Esslin himself in his article "The Absurdity of the Absurd"--will be used. Esslin states that the term 'absurd' itself is defined as "contrary to reason" and that it is used by Camus to describe actions, institutions and the human condition itself (671). Esslin explains that Camus uses this term "not because the human condition is funny, but because it is deeply tragic in an age when the loss of belief in God and human progress has eliminated the meaning of existence and has made human existence essentially purposeless and hence plainly opposed to reason" (671). It is important to note here that Camus formulated his theory of the Absurd as debates were ongoing about the French colonial position in Algeria. Furthermore, in the

Theatre of the Absurd viewers encounter “a world that has no purpose and ultimate reality [in which] the polite exchanges of middle-class society become the mechanical, senseless antics of brainless puppets. Individuality and character, which are related to a conception of the ultimate validity of every human soul, have lost their relevance” (Esslin 671). Makkawi’s interpretations of *Danton’s Death* highlight the aspects of the play that correspond to the ways Camus described by which the absurd can be glimpsed. These gateways to the Absurd are reproduced here using Muhammad’s summary of Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*. They are: the mechanical way in which one repeats his everyday life, the awareness of the passing of time and the inevitability of death, the sense of isolation from the natural objects around him, the feeling of personal alienation.

Makkawi understands Büchner’s characters primarily as performing “the mechanical, senseless antics of brainless puppets” that Esslin points to as a defining characteristics of characters living in an absurd world and notes that they are very obviously aware, especially in the final prison scenes, of the passing of time and the inevitability of death. Büchner’s characters are reduced to the roles of live puppets, manipulated by an invisible force they can not understand or control into performing roles prescribed for and forced on them: “they spend their moments on stage laughing, arguing, fending off boredom and trying to console themselves on their inevitable doom” (Makkawi 148). For Makkawi, however, there are two types of puppets. The first type, exemplified by Danton, is the one who is aware that he is being toyed with: he is torn between on “the one side, his reason, which tells him that as a human being he is supposedly free and on the other, by his awareness that his existence had regressed to a mere “thing” or

to that of a wooden puppet” (Makkawi 151). The invisible ‘force’ -which Makkawi identifies using Büchner’s oft-quoted letter about the dreadful fatalism of history- not only controls its victims’ actions: it also manipulates their thoughts. For any character who is aware of this power’s tyranny is locked in a oppressive mental state in which “everything he does seems empty to him and every exertion is useless and insignificant” (Makkawi 156). This awareness furthermore “paralyses” him and “his contemplation [of the truth that he is being manipulated] drains his resolve” effectively leading- as it does in Danton's case- to his fall (Makkawi 156). Makkawi’s other type of puppet is the one who is unaware of the fact that he is being toyed with: “they take themselves seriously even as they fail to recognise not only that they are playing [a game] but that there is an unknown power toying with their destinies” (Makkawi 151). This lack of awareness, Makkawi argues, makes these characters--examples of which could be Robespierre and Saint Just in *Danton’s Death* and the Doctor, the Captain and the Drum Major in *Woyzeck*--the closest of all the characters in the play to wooden marionettes (Makkawi 151). Furthermore, Makkawi’s belief that the characters in Büchner’s plays that are aware of their situation as puppets are inherently superior to those who do not have this awareness is parallel to Esslin’s belief that “the audience while recognizing itself in [the mechanical puppets acting in a complete void] can also feel superior to the characters on the stage in being able to apprehend their absurdity” (672). Furthermore, Makkawi makes several references to Büchner’s characters’ awareness of the pointlessness of their actions and pursuits, again aligning his interpretation of the plays with mid-twentieth century concepts of the absurd. Absurdity in theatre for Esslin also consists of seeing characters “reduced to mechanical puppets acting in a complete void” (672) which again creates parallels with Makkawi’s argument. Though it is important for

Makkawi that readers understand that these characters are not to be understood as “static, frozen characters who only do what they are forced to do by an external force” (149), he still believes they “move in a vacuum, dance on the edges of the abyss, stand on an uncertain ground that can open up at any moment and swallow them into its depths” (149). Furthermore, they “exist in a perpetual tension between opposites, swinging from one pole to the other having lost the balanced counterpoint of their existence” (149).

However, Makkawi refuses to ascribe to Büchner’s characters the lack of individuality and character that Esslin describes. In his analysis of characters such as the Doctor, the Captain, and Robespierre, Makkawi does suggest that individuality and character often lose their relevance as the mask of the ‘brainless’ puppet manages to repress both in the majority of occasions, sometimes with their own consent as it provides a comfort zone. However, Makkawi’s argument demonstrates--though he does not state it himself--that, as opposed to playwrights such as Ionesco and Beckett, whose characters are fashioned deliberately so as to lack individuality, Büchner only represses his own characters’ individuality. As Makkawi pointed out, Büchner’s characters struggle to uncover or repress their true authentic selves and impulses before they are all reduced to roles of puppets. Consider Maximilian Robespierre in *Danton’s Death*. Makkawi argues that “the custodian of the French Revolution wears the mask of the defender of its ideological ideas but he shows glimpses of the conflict that plagues his spirit and causes it to split into two halves each of which denies the existence of the other” (158). Citing instances during which Robespierre utters statements that seem to conflict with the rigid ideology he promotes in prosecuting the Dantonists, Makkawi argues that Robespierre’s

individuality has not yet dissolved in the face of the aforementioned rigid ideology: “The ideological fanatic is as human as others,” Makkawi argues, “and even as he struggles to repress [this humanity] for a future that had not arrived yet he soon tries to tear the mask that enfolds his heart apart and listen to the faint voice whispering in his ear” (Makkawi 158). However, another “servant of the revolution”--Saint Just--appears to recall the ideological fanatic and the moment is lost.

Makkawi’s interpretation also lines up with Camus’ notion of the absurd as Makkawi believes Büchner’s characters are routinely attempting to distract themselves from the inevitable death they are consistently aware of. Indeed, it is another Arab literary critic Abdelwahid Louloua who, in his book *Sound and Echo*, argued that the unifying purpose of *Danton’s Death* that drives the play from one scene to the other is the presentation of all the different aspects of one experience; what Louloua calls “the walk to death” (203). Louloua claims that the form of *Danton’s Death* would later be described by Brecht and Piscator using the term epic theatre, pointing to the scenario-structure of the work as well as the numerous different locations, characters and scenes, and arguing that *Danton’s Death* transcends anything Brecht and Piscator would later produce (203). Makkawi points out that characters in Büchner’s plays attempt to distract themselves from what they consider to be their unhappy but imminent fate by employing a number of strategies. In *Danton’s Death*, the ‘game’ --which Makkawi names “the game of fate”--is announced in the opening scene. “The characters--with Danton himself at the forefront--appear to be seeking a shelter through their play,” Makkawi argues: for even as they play their cards, they are themselves being toyed with by the “invisible force” that pulls their strings (Makkawi 153). The ‘live puppet’, Danton --

who is among the few characters completely aware of the fact that he is being pulled along by a current he can not control--employs sarcastic language and irony for two reasons. First, Makkawi quotes Danton's phrase "I flirt with death" in order to exemplify Danton's attempts to rob his situation of its seriousness (Makkawi 152). With phrases such as these, Danton strives to lighten the load of the very real danger around him and his companions and to console himself concerning his inevitable doom. Makkawi suggests that attempting to console themselves is an activity most of Büchner's characters indulge in (148). The second reason Danton employs irony and sarcasm is to create a distance from himself, again reminiscent of the alienation from oneself that Camus describes as a pathway to the absurd: this distance will allow him to "observe the role he is playing in the hope that he would come to understand the game he is destined to go forward with" (Makkawi 153). The 'game' Makkawi believes Danton is playing is worth explaining here in detail. Makkawi believes that Danton is playing a back and forth "without meaning or result" that shifts between "intellect and emotion and between depression and bitter irony"(153). The hopelessness of his situation is partly explained by the fact that he is constantly striving for two opposite and mutually exclusive states: on the one hand, there is his desire to be liberated from his past and on the other, his defiance against the fate that threatens him, namely death. His first struggle is to escape from the episodes in his past that haunt him, specifically his memories of the September massacres of the French Revolution in which he himself played a significant role. "Danton plays the game when he rushes around crying 'September!' He wants to forget, to erase his memory completely, and he states that he will not know rest or security except in his grave" (Makkawi 153). Hence, Makkawi's argument seems to be that Danton has an instinct towards and desire for self-destruction: if his death was the des-

mination the invisible force toying with him is leading him towards, then he would theoretically go willingly if only to rid himself of the memories of September. However, Danton is playing another game for he is motivated not only by his desire to forget but also by another desire--one that runs counter to the first--to defy his fate of dying. "He is playing another game when he regards his imminent death with sarcasm and hatred," Makkawi points out (153). When the death that promises the oblivion he seeks approaches, Danton does not greet it but rather strives to escape from its grasp. From Makkawi's argument, it can be deduced that this struggle between two mutually exclusive desires at least partially feeds the cutting irony and bitter sarcasm that characterise Danton's communications first with himself and then with the world around him.

Makkawi's initial interpretation was then framed by Camus, Esslin and their definitions of the absurd. The interpretation published in the introduction to his translation echoed the original in terms of its focus on disillusionment and despair but it gave significantly less attention to philosophical concerns and more to the social and revolutionary aspects of the work. This change came as a result of Makkawi's increased focus on the events of Büchner's life and on the mentality with which Büchner wrote *Danton's Death*. Makkawi uses Büchner's oft-quoted letter as a significant pillar of his argument in his book, he does not deal directly with the influence Büchner's personal experiences might have had on his writing except in the introduction to his translation of *Danton's Death* in 1969. Such an analysis, despite the clear dangers of placing significant importance on biographical information in the analysis of an author's literary work, places more importance on Makkawi's thesis concerning the general sense of hopelessness in *Danton's Death* specifically.

Shortly before he wrote *Danton's Death*, Büchner had published *The Hessian Courier*, “a fiercely partisan pamphlet” in which he argued that “the true basis of oppression was economic and that liberal proposals would merely lead to the replacement of one ruling caste by another” (Crighton 490). Brecht would later point out that “propaganda that stimulates thinking, in no matter what field, is useful to the cause of the oppressed” because “under governments which serve to promote exploitation, thought is considered base” (Brecht 146). Büchner--with statements such as “living under law and order means going hungry and living like a slave!”--was relentless in his criticism of the regime in Hesse-Darmstadt and in his calls for revolution and change. The authorities in Giessen certainly did not take kindly to Buchner's piece, despite the fact that it was toned down during editing. He was forced into hiding and his fellow activists and collaborators were persecuted and arrested. Though Büchner would escape, fleeing to Strasbourg “just in time to avoid arrest” in March 1835, J. L. Crighton reported in his article “Anatomy and Subversion: 150th anniversary of Georg Buchner's death” that days before he died of typhus, Büchner in “intermittent delirium...repeatedly talked of friends who were in prison in the state of Hesse-Darmstadt”, a hint at the long term effect his revolutionary activities had on his mental state.

Danton's Death, Buchner's next published piece, was written in his parents' home at Darmstadt during a five week period in which he hid from the authorities and awaited his chance to escape. The difference in theme of the revolutionary pamphlet *The Hessian Courier* and that of the bleak portrait of revolutionary France that is *Danton's Death*--written only a few months later--is startling. Makkawi, in the introduction

to his translation, points to Büchner's preoccupation with the question "why did the French Revolution fail?" as a key driving factor in the play (67). Makkawi also claims that Büchner was certainly affected as he wrote by the failure of the revolution against aristocratic rule and feudalism in his own country as well as by the lack of revolutionary awareness in all levels of German society, whether among the downtrodden peasants or among the disingenuous intellectuals who never failed to lecture on freedoms and human rights while children in their country starved to death (67). A.H.J. Knight in his book on Büchner states that the play, with its immense originality, "must have really been wrung out of him under the pressure of events..[not] just the external circumstances, but more particularly the emotions and despairs of the period before he fled" (71). Knight goes on to argue that the "shattering blow" Büchner received as a result of his political activism made him conclude "not merely that he must and should refrain from all political activity, but also that any political activity, in existing circumstances, was useless and hopeless" (71). It is a short step from there for Knight to state that Büchner's portrait of the incurably passive Danton was "no doubt partly a self-portrait" and that "at this unhappy and frustrated period of his life Büchner saw a resemblance between himself and the fallen French leader" (83). Furthermore, Knight citing Büchner's letters of the period as proof of his claim argues that "the real point of contact between Büchner...and Danton, is the disgust and satiety felt by them both" (83).

Disgust and satiety, alongside a painful awareness of the pointlessness of all actions, clearly characterize Danton's state of mind. As early as the fifth scene, Danton tells Lacroix that "the revolution is like Saturn, it eats its children" (Büchner 20). Later, he tells Camille and Lacroix that he "got bored in the end. Always wearing the same

coat, always pulling the same face--it's pitiful" (27), "I'd sooner lose my head than cut off other people's, I've had enough of it" (28). He ultimately claims that "life's not worth the trouble we take to hold on to it" (29). The theme of fatigue and satiety continues to run throughout the play. Informed that he is about to be arrested, Danton states that "they want my head. Well, they can have it. I'm fed up with these vexations. Let them take it" (Büchner 34). Later, after he is arrested and Lacroix demands to know why he did not warn the others, Danton simply but suggestively answers "what's the point?" (Büchner 45).

Büchner's quote in the fifth scene- "the revolution is like Saturn, it devours its children" - had particular resonance with one Arab journalist. Writing in al-Hayat newspaper, Ibrahim el-Aaress argued that Büchner's *Danton's Death* was controversial because in its analysis of the French revolution "it created literature's first 'anti-hero'..posed the dilemma of the individual's role in creating history" but most importantly, "it poses one of the dilemmas that will confound intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries namely: the right of the revolution to devour its children." The significance of this question in 2013 is paramount: the Syrian Revolution had spiralled into a fully-fledged civil war, the dictatorial regime of Husni Mubarak had collapsed but the demands of the people had still not been met and the security forces had massacred protestors in Egypt and in Libya, the revolution had also descended into chaos. Aarees states that Büchner presents the French Revolution, not for its own sake but as a classic example of a revolution whose protagonists and heroes turn on one another "each feeling it was his right alone to carry the flag of history as soon as

collective action had deposed the common enemy.”⁹ Again, this example is very important for the Arab context, in which similar events are happening. Aarees points out that *Danton’s Death* could be read as a “devastating crisis of faith in the mind’s ability to change the course of history” even as he unconvincingly argues that the play offers hope of a transcendental afterlife. However, the most important feature of the play for Aarees is the struggle between the protagonists of the French Revolution; Danton and Robespierre and their two conflicting outlooks on the revolution. Aarees points out that Danton no longer believes that the French Revolution can achieve its original goals, because the inviolable laws of history can not be changed in a day and because of this loss of faith, Danton prefers to dedicate himself to his personal pleasures rather than continue to participate in public matters. On the other hand, Aarees points out that Robespierre insists that virtue can only win through enforcing terror and he insists on ridding the revolution of all its ‘enemies’ even if that meant an endless bloodbath. This clash of ideas echoes the debate between Sartre and Camus over the political violence of communism that reached its peak during the war in Algeria. In this analysis, Aarees seems to align Danton with Camus who saw the “brutal and abstract calculus of murder... as built into some of the movements that claimed to liberate people from capitalist and colonial oppression” (Aronson 302). On the other hand, Robespierre aligns with Sartre who believed that “humiliations and oppressions, often masked” are “systematically built into daily life under capitalism and colonialism” and gave “his support for revolutionary violence and even terrorism” and who also believed that “non-violence only perpetuates oppression; violence, the tool of oppression is the only possible path to liberation (Aronson 303, 309). In his article “Camus versus Sartre: The

⁹ Al-Hayat (2013)

Unresolved Conflict”, Ronald Aronson argues that the debate is still unresolved and pertains to modern issues such as the United States’ response to the events 9/11 (303). Aaress’s argument shows that this debate, which is so crucial in the Arab world following the derailment of several of the Arab Spring revolutions, was prefigured by Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* which again ensures Büchner a place in Arab discourse following the Arab Spring.

The position Büchner himself takes is clear: despite his own personal indignation and his acknowledgement of the need for revolution, at the time of writing *Danton’s Death*, Büchner seems to consider revolutionary activities predetermined and futile. The lack of action is apparently inspired by a demise of idealism and a sense of the hollowness of various political slogans and idealistic beliefs that ignore the actual problems. Brecht, in his essay mentioned above, states that “times of extreme oppression are usually times when there is much talk about high and lofty matters. At such times it takes courage to write of low and ignoble matters such as food and shelter for workers; it takes courage when everyone else is ranting about the vital importance of sacrifice.” Büchner again and again points out or draws attention to the real economic problem behind the chaos and violence ruling in the French streets, mixing idealistic notions of liberty and equality (which demand that the people rise up against the aristocracy) with economic necessity and violence. Consider the citizen in scene two who states that “we’ll flay the hide from their legs and make trousers from it; we’ll melt down their fat to thicken our soup,” and another who cries out that “our wives and children are crying for bread, and we’re going to feed them with the flesh of the aristos” (Büchner 10,11). This theme runs throughout he play up to its last scenes when a woman cries out to

Danton's companion Herault "I'll have a wig made from your pretty hair" (Büchner 68). These three statements can hardly be interpreted solely as malicious taunts, for they are representative of true economic necessity and highlight the alienating and dehumanizing effects of starvation and deprivation. The statement also represents a distortion of idealistic values or, rather, it provides support for the notion that the entire revolution occurred for materialistic reasons. The aristocrats are not being driven to the gallows by the "ardor of justice" as Robespierre claims, but by economic necessity. However, and despite this truth, the crowds are easily derailed from their pursuit of a better life by the performative antics of the leaders of the revolution.

One of the best examples illustrating the exploitative nature of the oppressive parties, headed by Robespierre, is provided at the very beginning of the play. In scene two, Büchner juxtaposes three elements: the parents, supported economically by their prostitute daughter, are arguing as the mother makes a case for her daughter's "good" nature, the citizens are complaining of the poor living conditions and blaming the aristocrats and, finally, Robespierre, who is asking the people to march with him to the Jacobins'. In the next scene, Robespierre will speak of "virtue ruling through the Terror," but in scene two, surveying the situation, he makes the ominous statement that "your legislators are watchful, they will guide your hands" (Büchner 12). All of Robespierre's speech in the next scene aims at directing the citizens' anger towards the moderates. He does not offer solutions for their economic problems that have, for example, obliged the couple in the preceding act to prostitute their daughter. Instead, he turns the citizens' anger towards other sources and speaks of virtue, nationalism and republicanism. The legislators will look to guide the people's hands towards the elimination of all of Ro-

Robespierre's rivals, not towards satisfying their own basic needs. As stated above, Brecht argues that speeches full of lofty matters and demands for self-sacrifice are characteristic of times of extreme oppression, and courage lies in speaking of ignoble matters such as food for the lower classes. Danton, of all people, shows this courage in the play. His materialistic nature is mocked and denounced by crowds, especially when compared with the "virtuous" Robespierre. However, this response meets Danton only because the people have been indoctrinated to support positions that are against their own benefit by the self-sacrificing and virtuous proclamations of Robespierre. Danton is the only one who accurately sums up the situation of the people. His statement at his trial in Act Three, Scene Nine that "you want bread and they throw you heads! You thirst and they make you lap the blood from the steps of the guillotine!" is perhaps the single most clear-sighted and honest statement said to the crowds in the entire play. However, Danton gains support for only as long as it takes for the crowd to compare his 'base' materialism with Robespierre's virtue, for, as Brecht states, under oppressive regimes "it is base to be constantly concerned about getting enough to eat...base to doubt the leader when his leadership leads to misfortune..." (146). Despite Danton's proto-Brechtian argument in favor of satisfying the needs of those who constitute the crowd, these same crowd members turn against him in favor of abstract notions such as 'virtue'. Their behaviour is against reason--in other words, absurd. This same behaviour justifies, yet again, the disillusionment and despair that characterise the play's atmosphere.

In conclusion, Büchner's *Danton's Death* spoke to the disillusionment, despair and scathing self-assessment that characterised the Arab literary scene following the sudden and humiliatingly complete defeat of the Arab forces in 1967. However, in re-

cent times, it has re-entered Arab discourse, not for its absurdist elements but rather with its preoccupation with the possible justification of revolutionary violence.

CHAPTER THREE: BUCHNER'S LEGACY

Büchner's contributions to world literature could easily have been lost to history. He only lived to see *Danton's Death* published in what he considered to be an unacceptably mutilated form. None of his plays were performed on stage during his lifetime. His anti-idealist stance towards all aesthetic matters was unpopular in an era dominated by idealist poets and playwrights, with Schiller prominent among them. Furthermore, his de-rhetorized language, his position concerning the writer's function in society, his choice of a working-class, economically underprivileged soldier as a protagonist- the first working class protagonist of a play- and other formal aspects of his work apparently insured that his work went unappreciated during the period in which it was written. Interestingly, Büchner was a contemporary of Marx, and with the rise of scientific socialism and revolutionary sentiment in the years following Büchner's death, Büchner's choice and treatment of his material regained appeal. Furthermore, the rise of the "Theatre of the Absurd" during the period of the Second World War with its commentary on the meaninglessness of life and human action and its consistent theme of passing or 'killing' time and boredom both harken back to Büchner's statements in both *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck*. Büchner, then, was a forerunner of two of the influential distinct strands of contemporary theatre: the epic theatre of Brecht and the Theatre of the Absurd. Plays from both strains of theatre appeared frequently in the Arab world in the twentieth century, translated or adapted for local audiences. This chapter will discuss Brecht's importance in the Arab World and the influence of Büchner on Brecht to in an attempt to suggest that even as Brecht rightly receives critical as an important source of theatre in the Arab world ,

Büchner's contributions also played a significant role in contemporary Arab Theatre. It will also attempt to trace certain thematic and structural similarities between Büchner's work and that of prominent Arab writers such as Walid Ikhalsi and Saadallah Wannous.

In the article "German drama before Brecht: From Neo-Classicism to Expressionism", Löb states that "while it is dangerous to assume an organic evolution in the history of any artistic genre, it is possible to recognise a line running straight from Lenz through Büchner to Wedekind and thence to Brecht", (28) This line from Büchner to Brecht is relatively easy to trace. Writing in 1929, Edward Franklin Hauch, in his essay "The Reviviscence of Georg Büchner," explains Büchner's disappearance from the literary scene by stating that "the ultimately decisive factor in the revival of Büchner as a living and a vitalising force in the literature of Germany was one of those phenomenal consummations in the cosmic progress of the intellectual life that neither premature enthusiasms can hasten very much nor pedantic oppositions retard" (898). Namely, it was the recently emerging schools of naturalism and Expressionism that were drawn to Büchner's work (Hauch 898). Gilman points to Gerhart Hauptmann as the first prominent playwright to speak of Büchner. Hauptmann specifically focused on aspects of Büchner's work that enabled and justified his own "dramatic procedure" (6). Gilman goes on to explain that for Hauptmann and the naturalists Büchner was the "early organiser of a kind of drama in which human fate broke through social hierarchies and class distinctions to display itself in the persons of the least distinguished, most denuded souls" and that "Büchner's brilliant cold refusals of fantasy and myth-making, his clear, rational consideration of the

physical world as both non-illusionary and - if you went beyond its appearances- accountable reinforced the naturalists' theories of reality and of reality's relation to the individual" (Gilman 7). Gilman concludes by stating that "it was entirely understandable that a playwright who had seen ordinary life with remarkable steadiness and had refused to fantasise his way into anything 'higher' should have been hailed as a spiritual father of the naturalist movement" (Gilman 7). However, Gilman also argues that such a view of Büchner was too narrow and that the pioneering Frank Wedekind and, to a still greater degree, Brecht, were more able to grasp the complete implications of Büchner's innovative vision of theatre, which only occurred after the decline of the naturalist movement (7). In conclusion, after Büchner had remained unknown for almost fifty years after his death, he was rediscovered by Gerhart Hauptmann and the naturalists in the 1880's and passed on by them to Frank Wedekind "through whose published enthusiasm for *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck* Brecht seems to have come upon their liberating existence" (Gilman 197).

Meanwhile, Brecht's influence in the Arab World is significantly wide and pervasive. In Egypt, in particular, his theories and plays found a wide audience. In her dissertation, "Experimental Drama in Egypt 1960-1970 with Reference to Western Influence", Hayat Jasim Muhammad demonstrated that Brecht's epic theatre played a major role in Egypt's experimental theatre of the 1960s and cited epic theatre's "committed approach to dealing with social and political problems" as the primary reason behind its appeal to Egyptian audiences post-1952 (Muhammad 73). Furthermore, Muhammad shows that Brecht's plays and his conception of theatre were both studied in detail by Egyptian literary figures and traces his influence to

Egyptian authors such as Rashad Rushdi, Alfred Faraj and others (79). In his article “Brecht’s Theatre and Social Change in Egypt (1954-1971), Magdi Youssef justifies his appeal by stating that “the affinity between Brecht’s conception of theatre and the struggle for liberation of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America was obvious” and that in the Middle East in particular, “the success of Brecht’s reception corresponded to the social needs of the majority of the population” (1). Brecht’s Marxist commitment and subject matter mattered deeply to the primarily leftist intellectuals interested in performing and presenting his work to Egyptian audiences (Youssef 1). Youssef points out, for example, that a translation of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Abd er-Rahman Badawi was rejected because the conservative Badawi attempted to separate Brecht’s ideology and political commitment from the aesthetic aspects of his play, resulting in a woefully inadequate translation. Youssef recounts how a more complex translation was prepared by Salah Gahin in collaboration with Kurt Veth, one of the directors of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble (2). This translation not only followed Brecht’s original intentions and preserved the socialist element of his work, it also localised the dialogue, incorporating the dialects of Egyptian peasants and tunes familiar to the Egyptian audience (Youssef 2). In his commentary on Brecht in his book *The Theatre of Revolt*, Robert Brustein draws a line of influence from Büchner to Wedekind and to Brecht (233): “Brecht investigates the underside of life, exploiting- also like Wedekind, and like Büchner, too- the popular entertainments, culture, and expressions of the lower classes: proverbs, vernacular poetry, idiomatic speech, the variety theatre, the circus, the cabaret...” (234). This latter aspect, then, is another debt to Büchner, who pioneered the use of an underprivileged member of the working class as a worthy protagonist and employed folk tales and vernacular di-

affects as opposed to the high-flowing rhetoric employed by the prominent playwrights and writers of his time.

Gouryh confirms that audiences in countries like Egypt, Syria and Iraq- the Arab countries that throughout the sixties oriented themselves toward socialism- were interested in and attracted to Brecht's theatre (51). This interest did not fade after the 1967 defeat of the Arab armies left Arab intellectuals in a state of frustration and disillusionment. On the contrary, "Arab dramatists discovered that Brecht's epic techniques provided them the freedom to address their audiences, explain to them the national, social and political causes of the catastrophe, and teach them how to cope with and try to transcend its consequences" (Gouryh 51) .

Büchner's influence on Brecht has been traced by several critics. One significant biographical experience shared by both authors is frequently cited as one of the reasons behind similarities in formal aspects of their work. Gilman states that "in addition to their both having shared such early ripening genius, both studied medicine before turning to the theatre, a training which was to give their work unprecedented 'objectivity' and concreteness" (197). Büchner's realistic, exacting style and extraordinary powers of observation could both be attributed, at least in part, to his medical training. Löb argues that "in the period of Realism, when social actuality became a dominant theme, we find Brecht foreshadowed in discontinuous actions, unidealised characters and concrete historical motivation seen in Grabbe and in the politically radical Büchner" (28). He qualifies that statement by commenting that with Büchner's combination of "uncompromisingly realistic qualities with anticipations of

Naturalism and Expressionism”, Büchner’s contribution to Brecht’s ‘epic’ theatre “exceeds even Grabbe’s” (Löb 20). Büchner’s methodology consists of “self-contained episodes united not by causal continuity but by subtle correspondences and contrasts in the themes, characters, incidents and above all in the colloquial prose dialogue which thus acquires the richness of poetry” (Löb 21). In the *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Meech claims that “Brecht clings to that side of Büchner which influenced the German naturalists- his lack of romanticism and his ability to stare the truth of a situation in the face” (70). Gilman goes one step further: “Brecht’s whole artistic enterprise may in fact be thought of as the extension and reconstruction- after an interval of three quarters of a century- of Büchner’s.. Gilman takes the example of Brecht’s first play, *Baal*, to show that “the young Brecht seems to have fallen under Büchner’s sway” (202). Gilman points to the “short and narratively discontinuous scenes”, the “alteration of lyrical and declarative modes” and the “songs and soliloquies” in Büchner’s text that contain their own justifications outside the strict canons of plot” as proof of Büchner’s influence and particularly that of *Woyzeck* (202). Even more striking is “the abandonment of causal, linear plot... which it had been Büchner’s revolutionary stroke to initiate,” which Brecht carries further (Gilman 203). Other critics agree that this episodic nature of drama was one formal aspect Brecht owed to Büchner. In the *Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Meech claims that “the episodic ‘Stationen’ structure and filmic style of writing, as well as the varying depths at which the characters are realised” are both debts to Büchner in Brecht’s work (70). These dramatic innovations were carried through Brecht to influential Arab writers. Consider, for example, the work of prominent experimentalist Syrian playwright, Walid Ikhlas. Ikhlas uses an “episodic structure” consisting of

“rearrangeable episodes, some of which could even be deleted” (Gouryh 53). This formal aspect of Ikhalsi’s work is reminiscent of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, which was left by its author without a specific, rigid order to its scenes. The task of assigning a chronological order to the scenes was left to Büchner’s editors. Gouryh also argues that the one thing that brings unity to Ikhalsi’s repertoire is “the recurring images of ensnarement and incarceration characteristic of the state of fear, suffering, and repression created by authoritarian systems, rigid societal norms, and corrupt social and political institutions” (54).

On the surface, Büchner’s fatalistic, deterministic view of history could not be more different from the ideology behind Brecht’s epic theatre. One of the tenets of Brecht’s epic theatre was encouraging the spectator to view the events depicted on stage through the perspective of a critical historian. The purpose of adopting this perspective was, of course, instigating changes in the society outside the theatre. “Brecht calls for a type of theatre that generates new thoughts and feelings in the spectator and eaves him productively disposed, even after the spectacle is over...the desired aim is that the audience should intervene in the purposes of society and should itself change its thinking” (Subiotto 41). The enabling idea, for Brecht, is a scientific one: the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle which “he understood as acknowledging the impossibility of obtaining totally ‘natural’ conditions in which to conduct experiments: the very presence of instruments and observer affects the object under scrutiny and any measurement of a system must disturb the system under observation, with a resulting distortion and lack of precision in measurement” (Subiotto 41). However, what scientists would have considered a debilitating flaw, Brecht considered to be “an active corrective” in his theatre

(Subiotto 41). Büchner had himself written and attempted to distribute his pamphlet “The Hessian Courier” in an attempt to educate the masses in his home country about the socio-economic conditions perpetuating their oppression. However, after the failure of this endeavour, Büchner grew disillusioned about the possibilities of revolutionary activity and developed a conception of what he termed a dreadful fatalism of history that doomed all endeavours.

Despite these surface differences, both authors have thematic elements of both social revolution on the one hand and hopelessness and disillusionment on the other in their repertoire. In his article “The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Büchner’s *Woyzeck*”, Richard Gray makes the argument that though the experience with the *Hessian Courier* convinced Büchner of the futility of revolutionary activity at the time, he himself remained indignant about the conditions of oppression in Hesse (79). Furthermore, Gray argues that “by maintaining that Büchner’s insights into the ‘fatalism of history’ signal a turn from political engagement to pessimistic retreat, scholars simply erase the traces which assign to Büchner a place in that tradition of critical thought which dares strategic assaults on ideologically entrenched positions despite the staggering odds against the success of the critical endeavour” (79). Despite the hopelessness of the so-called assault, Büchner conducts it anyway if only because “the only alternative is silent affirmation of the status quo” (Gray 79). In his early theatre, Brecht also exhibited strains of disgust and despair, hopelessness and pessimism. Robert Brustein states that Brecht’s early drama belongs to what he calls a “Neo-Romantic” movement that is also exemplified by Büchner and Frank Wedekind, a “tradition defined by its opposition to the lofty moral postures and messianic stances of the early German Romantics” (233). Brustein

postulates that Brecht incorporates Büchner's horror at historical fatalism in his early drama (235). Brustein also argues that in the early stage of his career Brecht does not believe that a human being, to whom he assigns very little value, "is capable of heroism, morality, freedom, or anything more than the cynical pursuit of his own advantage" (241). Significantly, for all of Brecht's "scorn of Romanticism in its more positive forms, his own Romantic temperament can still be glimpsed in his subjective poetic attack, in his ferocious bitterness and disillusionment, and, especially, in his unremitting rebellion against the straitened conditions of modern existence" (Brustein 241). Nor does Brecht's later commitment to Communist ideology, despite resulting in a more optimistic world-view, completely replace his earlier feelings of disillusionment: "Brecht's Communism, then, is less a substitute for his early Neo-Romanticism than a layer superimposed on top of it- his rational ideology emerges as the dialectical counterpart of his irrationalism and despair" (Brustein 251). Hence, Büchner set a precedent in his combination of social indignation and rebellion on the one hand and angry disillusionment and despair on the other for Brecht's theatre.

Brecht was not the only writer influenced by Büchner who also exhibited his combination of social revolution on the one hand and disillusionment and despair on the other. Arthur Adamov was cited by Martin Esslin as one of the leading exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd, alongside Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. The French avant-garde author was familiar with Büchner's work and considered him, along with Shakespeare and Chekhov, one of the best dramatists in world literature (Esslin 178). As early as 1948, Adamov had seen his adaptation of *Danton's Death* performed at the Avignon Festival (Esslin 182). Esslin, who formulated the theory of the "Theatre of the

Absurd”, cited Büchner- who he labels “one of the greatest dramatists of the German speaking world”- as one of the forerunners of this theatre (529). Esslin argues that through *Leonce and Lena* which deals “with the futility of human existence that can be relieved only by love and the ability to see oneself as absurd”, Büchner set a precedent for the absurdly comic strain of the Theatre of the Absurd (529). Esslin also demonstrates how Büchner, through *Woyzeck*, pioneered another type of the Theatre of the Absurd, namely “the violent, brutal drama of mental aberration and obsession”: “[I]n the grotesque nightmare figures that torture the helpless Woyzeck (above all the doctor who subjects him to scientific experiments), and in the violence and extravagance of its language, *Woyzeck*, is one of the first modern plays- the germ of much of Brecht, German Expressionism, and of the dark strain of the Theatre of the Absurd exemplified by Adamov’s early plays” (530). There are certainly thematic similarities between Büchner’s work and Adamov’s. For example, the theme of “the futility of human endeavour” runs through a number of Adamov’s works (Esslin 197). The theme dominates, for example, *La Grande et La Petite Manuvre*, in which “the active, self-sacrificing struggle of a revolutionary leader is shown to be as futile as the passivity of a tormented victim of hidden psychological forces, who is compelled to execute the shouted orders of invisible monitors who drive him to the gradual loss of all his limbs” (Esslin 183-184). The futility of revolutionary activities is reminiscent of Danton’s position in *Danton’s Death*. Furthermore, the revolutionary leader’s speech at the conclusion of the play- in which he reveals the brutal methods the revolutionaries used to get their victory, methods that led to the death of his own child- is similar to the torment Danton is exposed to after he orders the September massacres. If Adamov’s career is to be understood as “the development of an existentialist avant-garde author to a political-

ly committed, left-wing writer with clear Marxist preferences” (Fischer 97), then *La Grande et La Petite Manuvre* would certainly be listed in the “existentialist” phase, or under Esslin’s “violent, brutal drama of mental aberration and obsession” after *Woyzeck* (Esslin 530). In *Le Ping Pong*, two men, Arthur and Victor, develop an obsession with a pinball machine they play in a café in their youth, and soon afterwards it takes hold of their lives. They spend their time attempting to improve it, playing on it and arguing over it to the point of complete isolation: “their interest in the society around them is dictated by the relevance of political and social developments to the rise or fall of pinball machines” (Esslin 198). Esslin comments that “it is in losing themselves to a thing, a machine that promises them power, money, influence over the woman they desire, that Victor and Arthur waste their lives in the futile pursuit of shadows” (198). Esslin also points to the childishness of the game of ping-pong and points to the stark contrast between this inherent childishness and the “utmost fervour, seriousness and intensity” with which “a number of the characters in the play are destroyed in the service of the organisation, or in its internal struggle for power” to highlight the absurdity of the situation (199). The pinball machine, however, is not only a pinball machine but a symbol for other ideals and pursuits that people commit themselves to: Esslin questions whether “most of the objectives men devote their lives to in the real world- the world of business, politics, the arts, or scholarship- are essentially different from Arthur’s and Victor’s dominating obsession” (173). However, if Esslin considers *Le Ping Pong* to be one of the masterpieces of the Theatre of the Absurd, Fischer considers it to be, along with *Paolo Paoli*, as “a turning point in [Adamov]’s career, a first break away from the absurd theatre to a more concretely political, social and historical drama (Fischer 97).

However, it is in the *Le Printemps 71* (1960) that Adamov fully exhibits the combination of social revolution and despair that marked the work of Büchner and Brecht before him. In his article, “The Ideologies of *Le Printemps 71*: Adamov’s “Metamorphosis” Reconsidered”, Fischer questions the dominant conception of this work (and Adamov’s later work) as a repudiation of the absurd, existentialist outlook that dominated his early plays. The dominant conception is built on Adamov’s interpretation of the Paris Commune of 1871 which “emphasises the Marxist view of history according to which the example of the Parisian revolutionaries, even in their defeat, shows the way to the victory of the working-class movement in the future” as well as “the prima facie evidence of *Le Printemps 71* and the remarks of its author about his artistic and intellectual development” (Fischer 98). However, Fischer argues that the work can not be understood properly through a strictly Marxist interpretation that does not take into account “the existence of elements in *Le Printemps 71* which can only be understood as remnants of Adamov’s pre-Marxist consciousness, in terms both of existentialist ideas and of the dramatic forms of the absurd theatre in which these ideas found their artistic expression” (98-99). Prominent among these existentialist ideas is the theme of futility and hopelessness. Just as Büchner postulated the existence of an unknowable force controlling human destiny, Fischer argues that “the Commune seems to be doomed from the very beginning because the revolution is confronted with an invisible enemy, time, that appears as some abstract, absolute entity outside of human control and that is of necessity always ahead of any human effort” (100). Fischer also points to Adamov’s presentation of “the futility of the Communards’ fight for existence and for a better world: their defence measures are useless because they apply to situations which no longer prevail, and their socio-economic decrees are already outdated upon publication

because of the changed political balance of power” (100). Again, the combination of a launched effort for improvement of socio-economic situations and the futility of such an effort is reminiscent of Büchner’s work. The character of the Poor Girl is, for Fischer, also another remnant of Adamov’s philosophy of the absurd (101). Like the common people in *Danton’s Death* who suffered from poverty and hunger under the King and continued to prostitute their daughters in order to feed themselves after the overthrow of the aristocracy, so the Poor Girl in *Le Printemps 71* “stands exactly in the centre of the dramatic conflict: her fate illustrates the oppressive, dehumanising nature of the old regime and the failure of the new system to establish social conditions that put an end to the exploitation of man” (Fischer 101). Like Woyzeck, the Poor Girl, who fails to profit from the new world order imposed by the Paris Commune even though it was strictly meant for people of precisely her social position, is a “suffering, helpless victim who at all times during the play remains the object of political forces she can not comprehend” (Fischer 101). Hence, this play which, on the surface, presented a committed, political fight for a better socialist state contains underlying elements of pre-determinism and despairing futility.

A significant number of Adamov’s works have been translated into Arabic. Farouq Abdel Kadir’s translation of *Le Ping Pong* appeared in the al-Masrah issue of September 1968 (Mohammad 291). In 1970, the year Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* was performed in the Baalbeck International Festival, al-Masrah published an obituary for Adamov, discussing his place in world drama, in the July-August edition. The obituary was accompanied by Shafiq Maqqar’s translations of each of *Le Grande et La Petite Manoeuvre*, *L’Invasion* and *La Parodie* (Mohammad 294). Mohammad also reports that

prominent Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim, in the introduction to his play *The Tree Climber* (which contains absurdist elements), “refers to the new theatre of Ionesco, Beckett, and Adamov stressing that, during his stay in Paris (1959-1960), he saw these plays, read them, and read about them” (143). Wannous, another vastly influential Syrian playwright, encountered Adamov's work (along with that of other dramatists belonging to Esslin's tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd) when he served as a cultural journalist in Paris. Wannous himself stated in a comment on Hakim's *the Tree Climber* that “Hakim, in this play, uses some of the devices of the Theatre of the Absurd” (Mohammad 147).

It is interesting to note that Adamov's transformation from an existentialist, anguished theorist to a Marxist writer occurred as “a result of the defeat of the French colonial army in Vietnam (Dien-Bien-Phu, 1954) and the Algerian war of independence, which led to a sharply antagonistic ideological polarisation of public opinion and concurrently to the destabilisation of the IVth Republic” (Fischer 106). Fischer concludes that “it is doubtful whether in 1960, at the height of the Algerian crisis and at the time of his writing *Le Printemps 71*, Adamov had discarded all his previously held doubts and apprehensions about historical progress” (106).

Nevertheless, if Adamov's career can be understood as shifting from a predominantly absurdist and existentialist outlook to a predominantly Marxist and communist one, then the case of prominent Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous can be understood as moving in the opposite direction. Wannous began his career by writing a significant number of his plays in the tradition of Brecht's epic theatre. However, after the

defeat of 1967, which affected Wannous very deeply and very hard, disillusionment crept into his work, even as he continued to launch an attack on corrupt, regressive societal ideals and structures. Hence, like Brecht and Büchner before him, Wannous' work did not consist solely of the themes of revolution and social upheaval but combined those with a certain disillusionment and despair. Consider Wannous' *"The Elephant, your Majesty!"* (*Al-Feel ya Malik el- Zaman*). However, like Büchner's *Danton's Death*, *"The Elephant, Your Majesty!"* casts a pessimistic eye on revolutionary activities and expresses a certain disdain for the very class for which a revolution is conducted. The disdain, however, is tempered by an appreciation of the difficulty of rebellion and of the difficult social and political circumstances. The play starts when the king's pet elephant- a vicious creature running loose and unchecked around the city- tramples a seven year old boy and kills him. This horrifying event, described in detail, is only the latest in a series of unfortunate incidents instigated by the elephant, the audience soon discovers. The incident drives Zakariyya, the play's only named character and possibly a representative of the public intellectual, to attempt to gather the people in order to submit a complaint to the king. He prepares them for the meeting, insisting that they must all speak in one voice. They agree to present their complaints together after he gives the signal by saying "the Elephant, your Majesty!" However, on arrival, the people are humiliated by the emperor's guards and when admitted into the presence of the king, they lose their ability to speak. Zakariyya attempts several times to get them to speak by repeating the agreed upon phrase but to no avail. Finally, after he has repeated the phrase a number of times, the king loses patience and threatens him with corporeal punishment at which point, Zakariyya- disgusted by his companions' betrayal- informs the king that the citizens are worried about the elephant's loneliness and

asks the king to import a wife for the elephant, to propagate its race. Destroying the fourth wall by shaking off their personas on the stage and addressing the audience at the conclusion of the play, the actors inform the spectators that they are themselves actors, performing the play so that they too will or can learn from it the reason why there is a huge number of elephants in the land. This attempt by Wannous to educate his audience points to Wannous' belief that change is possible, but the elements of the play itself seem to challenge this belief by showing the futile efforts involved in attempting to incite people to a revolution they do not have the power to conduct despite their desperate suffering.

Wannous' *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* is a clearer example of this ever-present dichotomy between pessimism and attempts at social revolution. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut had caused Wannous a personal shock that resulted in a ten-year hiatus that ended 1989 with *The Rape*. *Rituals* appeared in 1994. The play tells the story of Mu'mina, whose transformation from an oppressed, shackled daughter and wife into a high-class prostitute who achieves liberation through her body sparks off a series of transformations around her. Her ex-husband, the leader of the Notables, has been disgraced after being discovered dallying with a prostitute though his reputation has been salvaged by the machinations of his rival, the Mufti, to ensure the continued domination of religious authority. Abdullah, however, is transformed by the experience and follows a path to Sufi enlightenment. Meanwhile, all around Mu'mina, characters set off on their own transformations. The play itself has been interpreted as an attack on "religious hypocrisy, political domination and gender domination" the "complexly entwined facets- and pillars- of the same oppressive patriarchal political order" (Litvin 121).

However, even as Mu'mina manages to transform herself and reach for her inner self and even as her rebellion challenges this patriarchal order, the play itself ends in disaster for all characters involved, with arguably the singular exception of Abdullah. Mu'mina is killed by her brother, the Mufti is driven insane with his unfulfilled love for Mu'mina, the local tough who transformed his appearance to match his reality as a homosexual in order to please his lover is rejected and driven to suicide and Izzat Bek, the police officer who refused to affirm the lie the Mufti spun to save Abdullah's reputation, is tossed in jail and driven insane as well. Abdullah only achieves happiness by turning his back on society and on the material world and devoting himself to contemplation of God. Although Mu'mina's assault on oppressive patriarchal structures was necessary because the only alternative was silent consent, it still led, not to freedom or improved freedoms, but to disaster and chaos. Though *Rituals of Signs and Transformations* is generally understood as moving away from the Brechtian epic theatre, it could possibly be explained as an echo of Brecht's early work which was marked as much by his irrationalism and despair as by his committed assault on the oppressive conditions of social life and which itself was, according to Richard Gilman, "the extension and reconstruction" of Büchner's artistic enterprise.

In her article "From Tahrir to 'Tahrir': Some Theatrical Impulses toward the Egyptian Uprisings", Margaret Litvin reports on a Cairo production of *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*, stating that "artists seeking to get a grip on fast-changing events [during the Egyptian uprising of 2011 and afterwards] have turned to a perhaps unexpected resource: scripted quasi-historical drama" (120). Litvin states that with this choice, the artists demonstrated that "what matters is not what happened yesterday or

two years ago but what will happen in the future, what *always* happens” (120). It was Büchner who originally turned to the failure of the French Revolution to find a precedent for the failure of his own attempted revolution in Hesse, only to write about the dreadful fatalism of history and the terrible uniformity of human nature, both of which he believed would pre-determine the result of any such assault on pre-established structures of power. Litvin argues that the reason this particular play was performed in Egypt at this time was “its ingenuity, its passion, and, ultimately...its spectacular pessimism” (120). Furthermore, Litvin argues that the play- despite acknowledging the necessity of social revolt and casting a sympathetic eye on the characters’ aspiration toward progress and emancipation- is nevertheless a warning that “the release of these tightly written social rules/codes leads only to anarchy, not to dignity”(121). It is, furthermore, a warning about “the chaos that is released when traditional political, religious and gender structures of authority are suddenly undermined in a society previously deformed by a long experience of despotism” (Litvin 121).

In conclusion, formal aspects of Büchner’s work were transferred through Brecht and Adamov to Arab playwrights and theatre practitioners. However, one of Büchner’s primary contributions to Arab theatre is a thematic one. Büchner, who himself felt a passionate disgust with oppressive societal and economic structures and engaged in a revolution he later recognised to be futile and doomed from the beginning, was able to combine both those seemingly contradictory aspects of his experience in his artistic work. He became part of what Gray calls “the tradition of critical thought which dares strategic assaults on ideologically entrenched positions despite the staggering odds against the success of the critical endeavour” (79). Through Brecht and Adamov,

who both followed in Büchner's footsteps, this outlook was available as a precedent for the work of influential authors, such as Saadallah Wannous, who were able to speak both to the disappointment of the Arab defeat of 1967 and who proved prophetic of the disappointment following the so-called Arab Spring.

CONCLUSION

To speak of Western theatrical influences in the Arab world is generally to speak of Bertolt Brecht, William Shakespeare, and Samuel Beckett and the other exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. The work of Georg Büchner is rarely mentioned. However, Büchner is certainly an interlocutor in the Arab theatrical tradition. As mentioned before, Abdel Ghaffar Makkawi believed Büchner to be “the true father of modern theatre in its different trends and styles” (69). Büchner’s work contains in it most of the elements Arab theatre practitioners consider appealing. Büchner’s technical formal innovations--his presentation of realistic, clinical detail; his de-rhetorized language that nevertheless acquires the texture of poetry; his complex portrayal of working-class characters as tragic figures in themselves; his abandonment of linear plot and his use of folkloric songs, soliloquies and carnivals to create an ambience rather than to advance a plot-- were all recognized by prominent Arab theatre commentators to have helped to foster a wider range of theatrical techniques for the use of dramatists from Europe and elsewhere in the word and, more recently, for Arab theatre professionals.

Furthermore, Büchner’s plays themselves are open to a myriad of valid interpretations and adaptations. Arab commentators have identified a combination of communist, absurdist, and nihilistic tendencies in plays such as *Danton’s Death* and *Woyzeck*. Moreover, the plays resonated with Arab audiences. The atmosphere of disillusionment and disappointment that pervades *Danton’s Death* appealed to Arab intellectuals and audiences left devastated by the 1967 defeat of the Arab forces. The play also warranted several commentaries in Arab mainstream media publications after the 2011

Arab Spring revolutions: its complexity and ambivalence meant the play could be used by these commentators to promote revolution or to stress the futility of all such endeavors. The constant humiliation endured by the title character of *Woyzeck*, whether from his military superiors or from the doctor for whom he serves as an underpaid research subject, spoke to the concerns of the thousands of protesters in the Arab Spring who demanded dignity above all else. Furthermore, the economic need and social deprivation that enabled the constant humiliation of *Woyzeck* are also pressing issues in the Arab world that were, on the whole, left unresolved by the Arab Spring revolutions. Adaptations have either highlighted the nightmarish oppression of the original play or softened its bleak despair by attempting to inject hope into the work. As has been discussed, Arab directors and playwrights did not hesitate to adapt Büchner's texts to better suit both the local milieu and their own artistic vision and political agenda. Whether it was by changing the German names to more familiar local ones, transforming a condescending and petty military superior into a condescending company executive to highlight everyday capitalistic exploitation, emphasizing the oppression caused by the military superior, or even pandering to optimistic revolutionary aspirations by altering the bleak ending into a hopeful one, each adaption helped express specifically Arab concerns.

Büchner featured significantly in the careers of Arab poets and playwrights such as Adunis and Jawad al-Assadi as a direct influence. However, his indirect influence on the Arab world is arguably even more far-reaching. As has been mentioned, Büchner played a significant role in the development of Bertolt Brecht and Brecht's epic theatre, and he set a precedent, whether through his nightmarish visions in *Woyzeck*

or his commentary on the meaninglessness of life and endeavor in *Danton's Death*, for the Theatre of the Absurd. Both strands of theatre were vastly influential in the Arab world: works written in both traditions were translated widely into Arabic and played significant roles in the development of major Arab writers such as Saadallah Wannous, Tawfik el Hakim, Unsi el-Hajj and others.

The purpose of this thesis was to attempt--by citing and analysing translations, adaptations and literary and journalistic commentaries--to reconfigure cultural memory in order to credit Büchner with having a significant role in Arab theatrical tradition post-1967 and to highlight the significant contributions this underrated writer made to this tradition. However, the analysis is far from complete. A thorough investigation of the complete Arabic texts used for performing Büchner's works is necessary. Complete manuscripts of the translations and adaptations are, however, difficult to obtain. Such an investigation would give more insight into the translation process and the choices made for adaptation by comparing these texts with the originals. Understanding the choices made would in turn allow for a better understanding of not only the appeal of Büchner's plays but, more importantly, the artistic and political concerns of the translators and adaptors. In future studies it will also be important to trace the modes of transmission of Büchner's texts from Germany in the 1800s to the Arab world post- 1967, especially in the case of Adunis' translation of *Danton's Death*, which was not a translation from the original German but from a French translation¹⁰. Also, this thesis fo-

¹⁰Büchner drew heavily on French sources for his plays. Victor Price states that "In I. iii, for example, the speech of the citizen of Lyons is from Thiers and almost all of Robespierre's from [*Unsere Zeit* by] Strahleim. Robespierre's other great speech, in II.vii, is from Thiers, as is Dan-

cused primarily on Büchner's best-known plays *Danton's Death* and *Woyzeck*. Further research can take into account the formal innovations and influence of Büchner's novel-*la Lenz* and his only comedy *Leonce and Lena* and attempt to find more information about adaptations, translations and productions of the latter and translations of the former.

Another important limitation of this thesis is that it presents only one side of the story: namely Büchner's influence on Arab thought. It is important to investigate whether Arab thinkers had a direct or indirect influence on Büchner himself. One possible route which might prove promising is an investigation of the well-documented influence of tropes of Arabic literature on Goethe, one of very few literary figures whose work Büchner held in high esteem and learned from. If traces of this influence can be found in Büchner's work, transmitted through Goethe, it would shed light on a previously unknown but nevertheless profitable cultural exchange.

ton's speech in his own defence before the Revolutionary Tribunal (III. iv)" (xiv). In theory, over a sixth of *Danton's Death* was translated word for word from French to German. It would be interesting to investigate the process of translating this material back into French.

APPENDIX

List of Adaptations of Büchner's plays in the Arab World.

I. *Woyzeck*

- A. A performance of *Mandali* by Jawad al-Assadi (1996).
- B. Mustafa Murad's adaptation of *Woyzeck* performed at the 17th annual Cultural Palaces Theatre Clubs Festival in Egypt (2008).
- C. Jawad al-Assadi's *Mandali* performed at the Youth Theatre Days Festival (Ayyam Masrah lil-Shabab) in Kuwait under the direction of Abdalla Turkumani (2012).
- D. Jawad al-Assadi's *Mandali* performed at the Fifth Arab Theatre Festival in Qatar, also under the direction of Abballa al-Turkumani (2013).
- E. The Resuscitation Theatre's adaptation, *Al-Khayef: Love and Loss at the Bottom of the Barrel* performed in the United Arab Emirates (2014).
- F. An adaptation of *Woyzeck* performed at the Theatre Chamates in Morocco (2015).

II. *Danton's Death*

- A. A performance of Adunis' translation of Büchner's *Danton's Death* at the Baalbeck International Theatre Festival (1970).

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