

Mechanisms of Renewal in Children's Theatrical Texts in Algeria: Selected Models

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Abstract

Dramatic writing addressed to children in Algeria has undergone a qualitative shift, enabling it to move from imitation to renewal. This transformation has been achieved thanks to the efforts of numerous Algerian playwrights who have sought to elevate this art form and bring it to the level of other literary genres, while also developing it as an artistic practice no less important than they are. This is particularly significant given that it is addressed to the child, who constitutes the primary pillar of society and the foundation for the construction of civilisation and national and cultural identity. Therefore, children's theatre must combine pleasure and excitement with education and instruction. This study seeks to demonstrate the key mechanisms of renewal adopted by writers of children's theatre in Algeria, including Azzedine Djellaoudji, Ahcene Tlilani, and Youcef Baaloudj. These writers have attempted to break away from the traditional model in line with the requirements of the new society and the needs of the Algerian child, who today is increasingly attracted to technology and digital media. It has therefore become necessary to keep pace with these developments, to promote this art form, and to move it out of the sphere of imitation towards broad horizons of renewal.

Keywords: theatrical text; mechanisms of renewal; Algerian child; Azzedine Djellaoudji; Ahcene Tlilani; Youcef Baaloudj.

Introduction

Algerian theatre, like other literary genres, has undergone remarkable development, moving from imitation to renewal, in keeping with the age's developments and in pursuit of a new theatrical writing compatible with the present. This has not been limited to adult theatre alone, but has extended to include children's theatre as well, as the writers of this art have sought to address new social, cultural, and educational subjects that accord with social, cognitive, and technological development, in addition to drawing upon heritage and cultural legacy in their various dimensions.

Among these writers, one may mention Azzedine Djellaoudji, Ahcene Tlilani, Youcef Baaloudj, and others who have attempted to produce a theatrical writing specifically intended for children, who are regarded as the centre of society and the basis of its formation. On this basis, the following research questions may be raised:

**- How does children's theatre contribute to refining the personality of the Algerian child and highlighting his talents and abilities?*

**- What are the most prominent mechanisms of renewal adopted by writers of Algerian children's theatre in order to develop this art?*

**- To what extent have writers of children's theatre in Algeria contributed to renewing this art and transcending the traditional pattern in theatrical writing? And how has theatrical writing addressed to the Algerian child moved from imitation to creativity and renewal?*

The Concept of Children's Theatre

Theatre is regarded as the father of the arts because it brings together several artistic forms and is distinguished by its direct impact on the audience. Children's theatre, for its part, is an educational means that aims to develop children's perceptions and broaden their understanding of themselves and their surroundings by presenting experiences that provoke questioning, inquiry, and exploration.¹ "Children's theatre plays an important role in guiding children in light of the dominance of technology and social networking sites and their effects on their thinking. It relies on beautiful language and a refined style in order to communicate with the child and enter his private world. It is also a system of moral and educational values and principles that contributes to his sound upbringing."²

Children's theatre seeks to present a noble educational and instructional message, grounded in advice and guidance, aiming to instil moral and aesthetic values while combining education, knowledge, entertainment, and culture. It also relies on several essential elements, such as illusion, imagination, integration, empathy, and emotion."³

2) Types of Children's Theatre

The types of theatre addressed to children are determined as follows:

1. Spontaneous or Natural Theatre: This type is created with the child through innate instinct. He practises it during his early childhood, such as the doll game that is found among girls.

2. Educational Theatre: This is the theatre that the child produces together with his teachers, including school theatre performed by children within educational schools.

3. Puppet Theatre: This is the theatre of puppets and Karagöz. The characters' roles are played by puppets designed for the purpose, and the actors move them by means of strings. This type is preferred by young children because it accords with their thinking.

4. Shadow Theatre: This is the oldest type of theatre, known among the ancient Egyptians. It relies primarily on shadow play, reflecting light onto a designated wall or cloth.⁴

3) The Emergence of Children's Theatre in Algeria

Algerian children's theatre emerged late compared to other Arab countries, with actual activity beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, despite early attempts dating back to the 1930s. This type of theatre came to prominence with the writers of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, who were concerned with education, advice, and guidance. Among the most prominent of them was Mohamed Laïd Al Khalifa, who wrote the play *Bilal Is Tortured* in 1938. Mohamed Salah Ramadan also wrote the plays *The Migrant Youth* and *Al-Khansa*, while Ahmed Ben Diab composed *The Stepmother*, and Djelloul Ahmed El Badawi wrote *The Cursed Shoe*. Algerian children's theatre then became active in the 1970s and thereafter.

4) The Objectives of Children's Theatre

Children's theatre, as one of the most important positive pillars in children's lives, seeks to achieve numerous objectives, including:

- *- Attracting the child's attention and entertaining him.
- *- Developing the habit of attentiveness among children.
- *- Providing children with new experiences.
- *- Releasing the child's emotional energies.
- *- Satisfying children's passion and love of adventure.
- *- Developing the child's creative thinking.⁵

5) The Characteristics of Children's Theatre

Theatrical writing addressed to children is distinguished by a set of characteristics and features, the most important of which are:

- *- Avoiding devices that are difficult to pronounce, as well as long words and complex morphological forms.
- *- Avoiding long sentences except when necessary, and varying declarative and performative styles in all their forms.
- *- Employing the element of suspense in order to attract the child's attention and avoiding the style of preaching and direct discourse.
- *- Employing dialogue and short sentences, while choosing attractive titles that arouse the child's interest.⁶

Among the good features of a play addressed to children are also the following:

- *- Presenting an engaging and exciting story and paying attention to movement and action.
- *- Presenting a likeable, convincing, and distinctive character whom the child admires and imitates, whether realistic or imaginary.
- *- Performing the dialogue in a simple language that reaches the child's mind, whether in standard language or in refined colloquial language.
- *- Establishing a theatrical structure based on a single, simple, non-complex event.
- *- Time and place are defined, and the conflict is likewise clear, understandable, and enjoyable.
- *- It should aim to present educational, moral, pedagogical, and behavioural values that contribute to developing the child's personality and highlighting his personal creativity.
- *- The play should be short, lasting no more than one hour, and children should be allowed to participate in the performance.
- *- Taking into account children's social and psychological environment in both form and content.
- *- The rhythm of events should be appropriate and built in an ascending manner, and in a natural way without haste or artificiality.
- *- Avoiding the direct preaching style so that the text does not turn into a report-like text.
- *- Taking into account the age stage of children and presenting what the child desires, loves, and finds entertaining.⁷

6) Renewal in Algerian Children's Theatre

Algerian theatre has witnessed significant development, enabling it to move beyond traditional methods towards creativity, renewal, and engagement with modern reality. This transformation has been marked by the incorporation of spectacle and popular festivity into performances, the replacement of traditional music with popular singing and dance, and the adoption of sets inspired by popular spaces, such as markets and cafés in both rural and urban settings.”⁸ Among the most important names who contributed to the advancement of Algerian theatre are Ould Abderrahmane Kaki and his experience in epic theatre, Abdelkader Alloula and the theatre of the *halqa*, and Kateb Yacine and his experience in the theatre of the sea.⁹

As for Algerian children's theatre, it, too, has not lagged behind adult theatre, especially since it has established its presence alongside other literary arts addressed to children. Since the child loves spectacle and play, is highly active and fond of change, and is attracted by colours, images, and music,¹⁰ the writers of this art have sought to provide everything that may bring happiness to the child, attract his attention, and encourage him to listen to and take an interest in what is presented before him, with a view to developing his abilities and his linguistic and verbal faculties.

Algerian children's theatre has developed in both form and content and has become capable of satisfying the needs of children living in a technologically advanced society. This is a child who is no longer attracted to reading old books or stories, especially since he has access to devices that differ greatly from them, such as a smartphone, a smartwatch, electronic games, and a tablet. This is what writers of children's theatre in Algeria, such as Azzedine Djellaoudji, Youcef Baaloudj, Ahcene Tlilani, and many others, have sought to achieve, as they have moved from traditional models to innovative dramatic forms that combine heritage with modernity.

The focus has therefore shifted towards the introduction of marginalia and interconnection with other literary genres, in order to meet the child's intellectual and recreational needs while abolishing the linear structure.

A. Manifestations of Renewal in Children's Theatre in the Work of Azzedine Djellaoudji

He is considered one of the most prominent pioneers of the experimental movement in Algerian theatre, including children's theatre, having written more than forty plays¹¹ addressed to children, among them *Salem and the Devil*, *Shadows and Love*, *The Bulls and the Lion*, *The Betrayed Bull*, and others. The writer relies on theatrical marginalia and narration to impart an artistic and educational dimension, moving from imitation to renewal through innovative characters and an aesthetic formation that develops the imagination. He believes that theatre is an essential part of human life, and that the world resembles a great theatre in which we play various roles, both acting and watching.¹²

In the play *Salem and the Devil*, the writer focuses on presenting the character and clarifying its features, making it clearly defined and free of ambiguity so that the young recipient may respond to it, “because the lack of clarity in the characters, or their being affected by some degree of ambiguity, hinders children's interaction with them, just as it hinders their understanding of the content of the play. The writer was therefore keen to make the characters

bright and revealed.”¹³ This facilitates communication and makes the events clear and evident to the young recipient.

The characters of the play are: the Narrator, Lazy Salem, Good and Evil, Salem’s parents, the Teacher, and Salem’s classmate.

The Narrator: an old man with a cheerful and attractive personality.

Lazy Salem: a fourteen-year-old child whose hair and appearance indicate his negligence and carelessness.

Good and Evil: two imaginary characters representing good and evil within the self; they wear what expresses the quality that characterises each of them.

The Father and the Mother: the parents of Lazy Salem.

The Teacher: the teacher of Lazy Salem.

The Classmate: Lazy Salem’s companion in class.¹⁴

Among the manifestations of renewal in Azzedine Djellaoudji’s children’s theatre is his creation of a new form he called the *masradiyya*, meaning the fusion of narrative with theatrical art. This is evident in several examples, including the plays *The Betrayed Bull*, *Saniora the Hen*, and *The Bulls and the Lion*, which feature certain narrative texts.

In the play *The Bulls and the Lion*, the characters of this theatrical text are embodied as follows:

The Lion: the lord and king of the forest.

The White Bull, the Red Bull, and the Black Bull: they live in the forest as loving friends.

The theatrical text begins with a narrative passage: “In a barren forest, suggesting drought and aridity, the lion was pacing back and forth in a state of extreme anxiety. Near him, two bulls were lying down, one black and the other red, both showing signs of hunger and emaciation.”¹⁵

B. Manifestations of Renewal in Children’s Theatre in the Work of Youcef Baaloudj

He is regarded as one of the prominent pioneers of children's theatre in Algeria, as he draws on popular heritage while intensifying the dramatic structure, keeping pace with technological developments and modern themes. He has also introduced experimental elements into his texts by drawing inspiration from themes in world and Arabic literatures and reformulating them through a contemporary vision that accords with the modern life of the child and society.”¹⁶

The Play *Saving the Scarecrow*¹⁷

The play revolves around a young girl who is separated from her doll, which her father sells because she is preoccupied with it at the expense of her studies. The doll then moves between a toy seller and a farmer who uses it as a scarecrow in the field. After the girl misses it and excels in her studies, the father continues searching for it until the doll finally returns to its owner.¹⁸

The play addresses educational values such as not judging others by appearance, cooperation, diligence, and forgiveness. It also relies on artistic techniques, most notably involving the child recipient in the event by addressing him directly and employing symbolic characters, such as the sun and the moon, in the dialogue.¹⁹

The Play *Namoula’s Wings*

The events of this theatrical text take place in an art museum visited by school pupils, where the teacher recounts the story of a small ant named Namoula, who dreams of flying despite not

having wings like the butterfly and the fly. She faces challenges from a lazy, mischievous cockroach, while she demonstrates perseverance and diligence.

The text of the play carries many values, as it calls for earnestness and perseverance to achieve goals, for not belittling others, and for extending a helping hand to them. Displacement is also present in it, for the writer removes it from its main subject, contrary to the original story, as the ant proceeds to help the cockroach without hesitation.²⁰

In the end, the cockroach passes the remedial examination, and Namoula joins the aviation specialisation after her wings grow, thanks to her diligence and perseverance.

C. Manifestations of Renewal in Children's Theatre in the Work of Ahcene Tlilani

He is regarded as one of the most prominent writers of children's theatre in Algeria, as he relies on artistic experimentation, rhythmic language, and sensory elements, while blending heritage and innovation in the construction of his texts. Among his most important works are *The Secret of Life*, *The Olive Tree of the Furthest Limit*, *The Vixen and the Hats*, and *The Line and the Point*.

The Play *The Secret of Life*²¹

The events of the play take place among three brothers who were playing outside their house when rain suddenly began to fall heavily. The children rushed home in fear, all of them resentful of the rain, which had soaked their beautiful clothes and kept them from playing outside. The brothers wished that the rain would dry up and decided to waste water. In the end, after drought had set in, the young children became aware of the value of rain and water.

This theatrical text was able to teach children many educational values, including not wasting water and the necessity of preserving it, the importance of water for human beings, animals, and plants, cleanliness, supplication to God and drawing closer to Him through prayer and worship, not denying God's blessings, and the obligation to give thanks so that these blessings may endure.

As for renewal in Algerian children's theatre, Ahcene Tlilani has pointed to several fundamentals to which writers of children's theatre must pay attention, namely:²²

1. Presenting events in an engaging manner and according to a simple plot, beginning with the preliminary exposition, then proceeding along an ascending graph marked by complication, in which crises are brought to a climax, after which the graph descends towards the resolution, thereby achieving profound effect and persuasion.
2. Using simple and appropriate expressive media, such as beautiful, dramatic language that is far removed, on the one hand, from vulgar colloquial expressions and, on the other, from difficult and obscure expressions. It is also appropriate to use songs and chants that interact with the objectives, values, and other elements.

The Play *The Line and the Point*

The dramatic musical play revolves around a conflict between the arrogant line and the humble point, ending with the line's discovery that it is composed of points. The point represents goodness and humility, whereas the line represents power and tyranny. The events are

presented in a natural space through the performance of a boy and a girl.²³ The lesson of the theatrical text is not to despise, belittle, or demean others, because each of us has a role in this life, whatever his work, qualities, or other attributes may be.

Conclusion

In the end, the research arrives at a set of findings, the most important of which are:

- Children's theatre in Algeria is one of the most important educational and instructional means for shaping a child's personality and directing their intellectual, cultural, and educational path. It develops his linguistic and expressive abilities and enables him to communicate easily with others.
- The child acquires a linguistic faculty and a body of knowledge that enable him to continue his educational path.
- Writers of Algerian children's theatre have sought to raise it to the level of other literary forms, such as the short story, the novel, and poetry.
- The performance is transformed into a space of participation and dialogue, rather than mere instruction, while developing the child's imagination and expressive skills.
- Texts are constructed in a way that is closer to the world of the child today, while employing simple language, lively dialogue, and characters close to his interests.
- The folk tale and Arab heritage, in their various forms, are invested in a modern, attractive theatrical mould.

Endnotes:

¹ Tariq Jamal al-Din Atiya et al., *Introduction to Children's Theatre* (Alexandria: Horus International Foundation, 2002), 31.

² Venus Hamid Muhammad Jawad, "Representations of the Hero's Character in Children's Theatre Texts," *Al-Academy Journal*, no. 115 (2025): 162.

³ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴ Salah Eddine Baouia, "Teaching Educational Values in Children's Theatre: Ahcene Tlilani's *The Secret of Life as a Model*," *Ishkalat in Language and Literature* 11, no. 3 (2022): 502.

⁵ See Alima Naoun, "Children's Theatre in Algeria: Azzedine Djellaoudji as a Model" (master's thesis in modern Algerian literature, University of Batna), 50-51.

⁶ See Naoun, "Children's Theatre in Algeria," 69.

⁷ See Youssef Maroun, *Children's Literature between Theory and Practice*, 1st ed. (Lebanon: Modern Book Foundation, 2011), 227.

⁸ Mina Merah and Hamid Allaoui, "Experimentation in Algerian Theatre Addressed to Children: A Reading of the Plays of Youcef Baaloudj," *Al-Mudawwana* 11, no. 1 (2024): 633.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 633.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 634.

¹¹ Azzedine Djellaoudji, *Forty Plays for Children: Theatrical Texts* (Algeria: Moufem Publishing House, 2008).

¹² Mohamed Layadi, "Mechanisms of Narrative Experimentation in the Plays of Azzedine Djellaoudji: The Masradiyya as a Model," *Maqalid*, no. 15 (2018): 123.

¹³ Rima Laoues, "Children's Theatre between the Authority of the Model and the Temptations of Experimentation: The Plays of Azzedine Djellaoudji as a Model," *Al-Nass* 8, no. 15 (2021): 28.

¹⁴ Azzedine Djellaoudji, *The Betrayed Bull*, in *Plays for Children*, 9.

¹⁵ Azzedine Djellaoudji, *The Wooden Sword: Plays for Children* (Algeria: Al-Muntaha Publications, 2021), 89.

¹⁶ Merah and Allaoui, "Experimentation in Algerian Theatre Addressed to Children," 634.

¹⁷ Youcef Baaloudj, *Saving the Scarecrow* (Sharjah: Publications of the Department of Culture and Information, Government of Sharjah, 2011).

¹⁸ See Merah and Allaoui, "Experimentation in Algerian Theatre Addressed to Children," 638.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 639.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 637.

²¹ Ahcene Tlilani, *The Olive Tree of the Furthest Limit: Theatrical Texts* (Algeria: Union of Algerian Writers; Dar Houma, 2004).

²² See Ahcene Tlilani, *Children's Theatre Inspired by Experience: Interrogating Reality*.

²³ See KaterElnnadaBoumaiza, "The Importance of Theatrical Art in Structuring the Child's Personality in Ahcene Tlilani's *The Line and the Point*," *Al-Nass* 8, no. 2 (2021): 401.