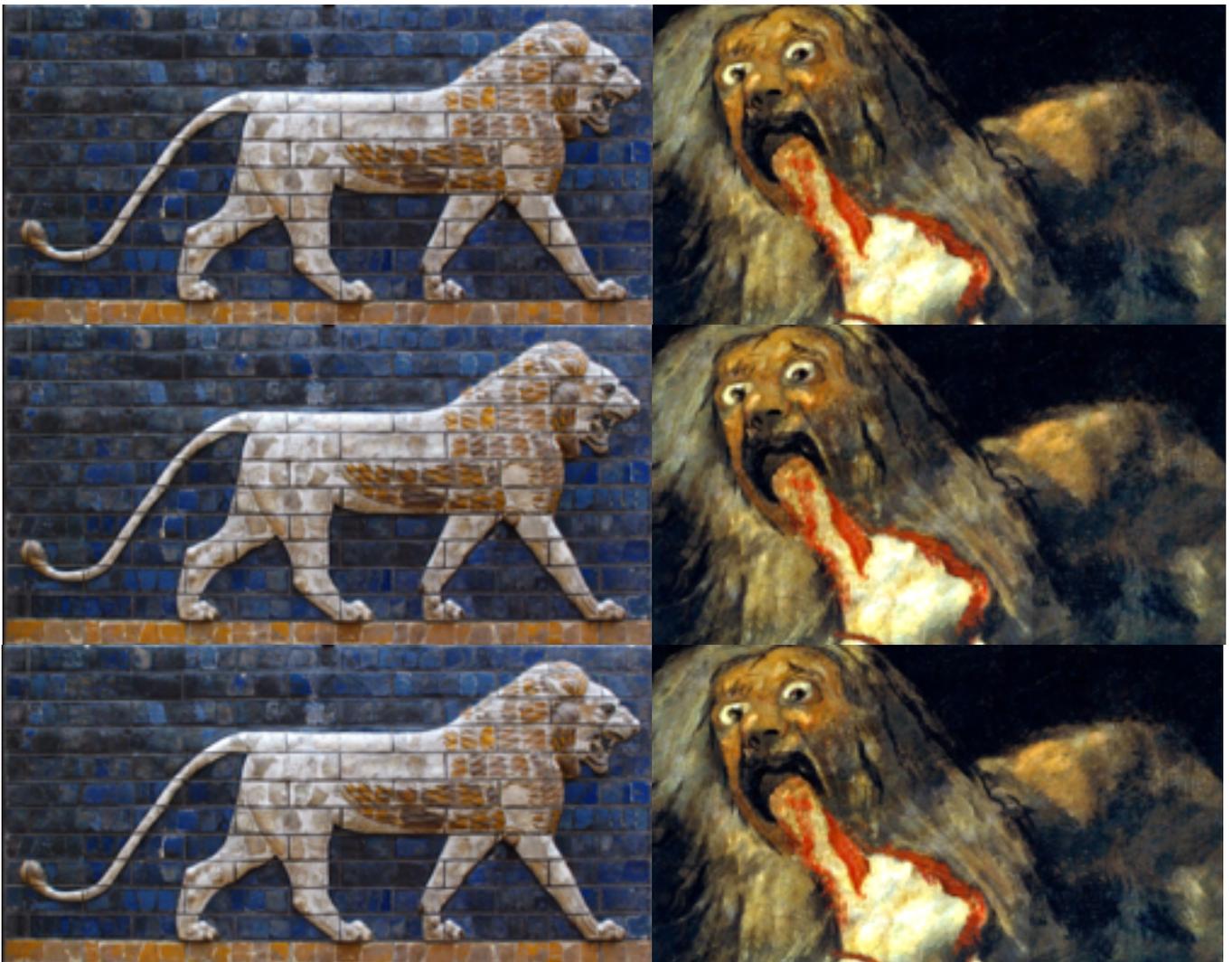


Arif Alwan

Perdition of Babylon



(Halak Babil)
A play in three acts

Halak Babil, the play that predicted forty years ago what is now happening in Iraq. The main publishing houses in Beirut refused to publish this play in the beginning of the 1970s, due to the rise of the Nationalism and Ba'athism in the Middle East. When Al-Khaleel publishing house took on publishing the play in 1975, more than two thousand copies were sold in under a year, yet it was only staged twice in Lebanon and Syria.

Act One

Scene One

(Night, public square with amphitheatre-style seats. A guard marches precisely at the lowest part of the amphitheatre, huddled over with cold. The howling of a dog is heard in the distance.

After a short while a movement is heard off-stage, catching the guard's attention.)

The Guard: Who is there?

A voice sings offstage:

The winter comes quickly
And the cold creeps to the bed
Tomorrow I grab for a cat
There is no other solution
For one in such loneliness as mine

The Guard: The Scavenger! I know it's you!

(The Scavenger enters, a bag hanging from his shoulders, and a bundle of wood in his hand.)

The Scavenger: Good evening!

The Guard: Drunk?

The Scavenger: Not completely.

The Guard: You've started drinking too much.

The Scavenger: Not to bother, you have here (taking a bottle out from his sleeve) a bottle of some of the highest quality wine, and here a kilo of grilled meat. We'll round off the evening together, why are you trembling? Ah... (he throws the bundle of wood on the ground. You're facing the cold in a shameful way.

The Guard: What are you doing?

The Scavenger: We're lighting a fire.

The Guard: Here?

The Scavenger: Here.

The Guard: No, no, the law forbids lighting a fire near the guillotines, you know that well.

The Scavenger: But the people who made that law were in their homes.

The Guard: The law is the law.

The Scavenger: (continuing to arrange the bundle of wood regardless the Guard's opposition) The cold tonight will be stronger than the law.

The Guard: Do you think so?

The Scavenger: Certainly.

The Guard: But the law...

The Scavenger: (lighting the fire) Let the world enjoy the warmth while the laws are still sunken in sleep. I personally, don't have any wish to die for the sake of a law. (He sits near the fire and places the bottle and food in front of himself and indicates to the guard to sit down).

The Guard: (Sits after hesitating) This infraction will put me in a tight spot.

The Scavenger: The real difficulty is that we are not being clear about our wishes, that I am describing our need for warmth as a 'wish'; the stomach alone has needs, as for the rest... they are merely desires, nothing more, the only ones to understand the nature of man are the merchants. They make for you a wooden bed, and tell you that it is comfortable, warm, modern, to force you to desire it, not to remind you that you need it. They hardly even mention that it's for sleep.

(He presents the bottle to the Guard. The Guard gulps from it then passes it back). Let's be frank, what does a human need in order to lead a reasonable life? A few simple needs, which however can only be obtained with difficulty, why are difficulties placed in the path of humans? If we followed that question to its end, we would arrive at banal truths. (He offers a piece of meat to the Guard, who takes it).

The Guard: But.. beware, you could call this a kind of bribe.

The Scavenger: A bribe? I haven't heard this word before. No doubt it infiltrated the empire from abroad.

(The Guard devours a piece of meat, then gulps down from the bottle and mutters...)

The Scavenger: When everyone is comfortable and warm in their beds, those who are left roaming in the night and the cold have to be good to one another. Do you agree with me on this principle? Eh?

(The Guard nods his head...)

The Scavenger: Excellent. This type of mutual understanding which happens quickly between two humans, is a rare thing in our time. (He turns to the guillotines). How old are they?

The Guard: Who?

The Scavenger: Those who carry out the sentence.

The Guard: Between twenty and thirty years old.

The Scavenger: Great...the desirable age. At this age, the eyes are at their brightest.

The Guard: What?

The Scavenger: Don't worry...concerns of the job.

The Guard: (Drinking from the bottle then looking at it). It seems that it wasn't properly full in the first place.

The Scavenger: Don't worry, there is another one. (He brings out a second bottle). Here you go.

The Guard: (After taking the bottle, shyly) This is too much...

The Scavenger: Keep it. The important thing is that we understood each other amazingly fast on a number of issues (the Guard takes another piece of meat). They're both necessary for resisting the cold, meat and wine.

The Guard: I don't know, but they're enjoyable.

The Scavenger: (turning to the guillotines) Don't you think that they are a civilised idea?

The Guard: What?

The Scavenger: The guillotines. More effective than the rope with a knot. I wonder who invented them?

The Guard: The Emperor imported them especially from the Europeans when he visited their lands.

The Scavenger: He has exquisitely refined taste.

The Guard: He was amazed by their speed. Therefore he placed an order for several of them and brought them back with him on his return.

The Scavenger: But the last one to the left was broken two days ago.

The Guard: Because recently they neglected maintaining them, due to time constraints.

The Scavenger: That is unjust.

The Guard: What is?

The Scavenger: The lack of caring for them. I don't think the Emperor will stand the idea of one of them breaking down (pause). Look at them. What do they resemble?

The Guard: (Unwillingly turns towards the guillotines) I don't know. Do they look like something to you?

The Scavenger: They look like a yawning God.

The Guard: (Looking at the guillotines) Really? I never saw a yawning God before.

The Scavenger: Me neither, but the guillotines call that image to mind. It seems as though the Emperor chose them in this shape in order to become closer to the Gods. Because of his piety (he laughs). What a great balance...the pillars of the empire and its majesty are founded upon religion and the guillotines.

The Guard: (belching) What?

The Scavenger: Don't worry. I know him.

The Guard: Who?

The Scavenger: The Emperor.

The Guard: (looking at the Scavenger with disapproval then breaking out into laughter) Ha ha ha!

The Scavenger: (taking part in the laughter then looking into the darkness on the right hand side) One of them is coming towards us.

The Guard: Are you sure?

The Scavenger: My eye doesn't get its business wrong.
(The Executioner enters from the right and walks along the top of the amphitheatre at the back of the stage; only his shadow is seen. He heads directly to the guillotines. The Guard hides the bottle in his pocket and readies himself, slightly staggering at the same time).

The Scavenger: What has brought him so early?

The Guard: I'll go see.
(The dog howls again. The Guard climbs up the amphitheatre and goes towards the Executioner. They speak without us hearing them. The Scavenger observes them from his place. After a short while the Guard returns, slowly descending the amphitheatre.)

The Guard: He has several special tasks to carry out in the morning, so he came early to complete the work. I have to inform the jailers.

(The Guard exits. The Scavenger is alone at the front of the stage. The Executioner is working at the back of the stage.)

The Scavenger: (Looking at the right hand side) What a frightening blaze going up in the city, the third fire I've seen tonight.

(The light of the fire begins to gradually be reflected on the front of the stage and the amphitheatre, and the howling of the dog increases.)

The Scavenger: (Directing his speech in a loud voice to the Executioner). Brother, was there a fire in the direction that you came from?

(The Executioner does not answer. The Guard enters.)

The Guard: Who was shouting?

The Scavenger: I was asking the Canary about the origin of the fire.

The Guard: The Canary? Why do you call him this name?

The Scavenger: Because he doesn't talk at all. Look how he works with astounding energy. It's the one profession which doesn't require speech, yet...if I gave him a day to speak! What heartbreaking warbling would we hear? (Pause) Look at them, what do they look like now?

The Guard: Who do you mean?

The Scavenger: The guillotines.

The Guard: The guillotines! Haven't we dropped that subject. You said that they look like a yawning god.

The Scavenger: Whereas now, they look like a god thinking about his breakfast.

The Guard: I don't see anything at all.

The Scavenger: These machines perform their job well. It's civilisation. Killing the largest number in the shortest time. That was their issue in the past, Ashurnasirpal, Nero, Hulagu, Henry VIII, that their low numbers of killings demanded a lot of time. This caused them a lot of irritation. As for nowadays, things are different. Now, killing thousands only needs a very short time. However, they are still complaining. Civilisation did not yet ripen according to the leaders' imaginations. They're ahead of civilisation by hundreds of years in their demands.

(The Guard exits from the left hand side. From the back of the stage five condemned men enter, led by two guards. We can only see their shadows. The Executioner is standing by the first guillotine. The heads of the condemned are fastened to the guillotines, then the two guards withdraw. The howl of the dog becomes stronger and turns into something resembling a wail. The Executioner advances from the guillotine and pulls the rope. The blade swoops down, then the sound of the head falling into the basket is heard without us seeing it. The same movement with the second, third and fourth guillotine. At the fifth we hear the same sound, but the head falls outside of the basket and rolls heavily down the amphitheatre, coming to rest at the front of the stage.)

The Scavenger: (calling to the Executioner in a loud voice, pointing to the head) It escaped from the basket...the head escaped from the basket. (The Executioner exits without turning to the Scavenger, who stands next to the head for a moment, then picks it up with his hands) Dear God...it jumped from the basket...It's still warm...What obstinacy!

(He ascends the amphitheatre, returns the head to the basket then goes to the first guillotine. He vomits close to it, and bends over occupied with the action. After a short while the Emperor enters the stage, followed by his bodyguards and three officers bristling with weapons. They spread out across the amphitheatre).

The Emperor: (shouting) Stop!

The Scavenger: (shouting from his position) What?

The Emperor: I said stop!

The Scavenger: (without moving from his place) Everything's over, so why this shouting?

The Emperor: What is over?

The Scavenger: A few moments ago all the necks were cut through, and that's that.

The Emperor: Damn you! (he walks around with angry steps).

The Scavenger: You should have come earlier if you wanted to say goodbye to one of them.

The Emperor: (exasperatedly) What an idiot!

The Scavenger: Don't feel down, my friend, everyone ends their passing through this world in one way or another. On the guillotine or in bed. Calm yourself.

(The first and second officers ascend the amphitheatre and head towards the Scavenger, then return with him, almost carrying him by his shoulders.)

The Scavenger: (from the top of the amphitheatre after noticing the officers) Ah... so it's an official matter then it seems. Confusion about the names, or a mistake in the judgement?

The Emperor: You idiot, the sentence was supposed to be carried out at dawn.

The Scavenger: I beg your pardon! I am not the executioner.

The Emperor: (angrily) Where is the executioner?

The Scavenger: He left just now. He finished his task early to head off for some family issues.

The Emperor: (pause, then paying attention to the Scavenger) And what are you doing here?

The Scavenger: (indicating the officers with his head) I can't speak. I'm choking. (The officers bring him to the bottom of the amphitheatre and throw him on the floor. He looks at the Emperor). Oww...

The Emperor: What were you doing there? Who are you?

The Scavenger: (standing up slowly) A spectator.

The Emperor: A spectator!?

The Scavenger: Do you think it's just for this carnival to take place without spectators?

The Emperor: (unsheathing his sword and placing it on the Scavenger's neck) I am not joking with you. Who are you?

The Scavenger: A Scavenger.

The Emperor: A Scavenger? ...and both of your hands stained with blood! What were you doing?

The Scavenger: Gathering eyes.

The Emperor: What eyes?

The Scavenger: The eyes of the lost. Your sword is bothering my neck. Take it away, while we're still not joking.

The Emperor: (Relaxes then removes his sword) Do you practice magic?

The Scavenger: I'm not one to believe in hocus-pocus.

The Emperor: Then what are you doing with the eyes?

The Scavenger: I sell them to foreigners. They're very eager to buy them.

The Emperor: And why foreigners?

The Scavenger: Because they pay irresistible prices. In addition, the people here don't think about making improvements to their eyes whilst their necks are still at risk of being cut at any moment.

(The first officer suddenly begins to attack the Scavenger and hit him. The Emperor stops him with a movement of his hand.)

The Emperor: Let him speak. I need audacity such as this.

The First Officer: He's drunk.

The Emperor: Never mind. (To the Scavenger) You consider that the state of the people is as bad as that?

The Scavenger: I wasn't talking about badness. I was considering some affairs of the profession.

The Emperor: You were complaining in a very daring fashion. Do you deny that it is bad?

The Scavenger: If this is your Majesty's wish, then there is no call for denial.

The Emperor: You know who I am?!

The Scavenger: The simplest national pretensions require the citizen to recognise his Emperor. But why such a look of distress residing on your Majesty's face? Could it be because of them!? (indicating the executed)

The Emperor: (nods his head in agreement)...

The Scavenger: (with amazement) Because of five necks? (He laughs) How strange!

The Emperor: How so strange?

The Scavenger: That the Emperor is troubled by the execution by five members of the general public.

The Emperor: I wanted their pardon to be the start of a new page in the history of the Empire. (pause). But that damned man ruined everything.

The Scavenger: Who?

The Emperor: The executioner.

The Scavenger: The executioner? (He laughs loudly) All the air of the earth will be ruined, and the night will disintegrate before an executioner ruins the projects of the Empire.

Second officer: Get this drunk away from his Majesty the Emperor.

The Emperor: (shouting at him) No... (then quietly) Let him speak, it didn't happen before in Babylon that such eloquence of speech was laid in front of me. Oh Scavenger, there will not be an executioner in this land after today.

The Scavenger: Because of a simple mistake that the poor man did not mean to make? And what about the guillotines? Who will be in charge of them?

The Emperor: They will be burned at dawn.

The Scavenger: No doubt you are joking (he becomes overwhelmed by laughter) It's the first time I've heard an emperor's joke (Seriously) Is it a temporary truce? Or... (he thinks) Ah...I guessed it. Is it war then? Mobilisation. Recruiting the people in order to recover the Empire's possessions. I congratulate you on this new spirit of nationalism. But... for ten years you've been involved in a successful war against your people, so why bother yourself with a hopeless war against another state?

The Emperor: War is not the reason.

The Scavenger: (backing down) What then?

The Emperor: Justice...

The Scavenger: Justice? Did you say...justice? (He withdraws and sits on the amphitheatre)
The world has become unfathomable. What business do you have with justice?

The Emperor: I decided to be just.

The Scavenger: (Jumping up from his place) When did you make this decision?

The Emperor: Tonight.

(Pause)

The Scavenger: It's like that then? Do you want to inaugurate justice? (Pause) Yet this will come dearly.

The Emperor: Justice comes at a high cost?

The Scavenger: That depends on who undertakes it.

The Emperor: What?

The Scavenger: It's not my job to hinder history. Humans doomed themselves to witnessing the foulest of massacres before arriving to true justice. (Pause)
What made you think of justice, your Majesty?

The Emperor: I became bored of tyranny.

The Scavenger: A sensible reason. But not enough to completely convert a person.

The Emperor: (With resolution) I have made my decision.. Justice will be applied. (He heads towards the right to exit. His officers follow him).

The Scavenger: You are trying to take on for yourself the biggest of tasks...yet the most dangerous. (The Emperor stiffens in his place) If you wanted to atone, look for another way.

The Emperor: (returning to where the Scavenger is standing) It is not atonement that drives me.

The Scavenger: What then?

The Emperor: Justice...justice itself.

The Scavenger: (whispering near the Emperor's ear) Don't lie to yourself, it's the past, isn't it?

The Emperor: The past doesn't frighten me.

The Scavenger: And the tyranny? And the destruction of the past?

The Emperor: All that will be the price of the justice to come.

The Scavenger: And the upcoming justice that you intend... what will that be the price of? (The Emperor does not answer) You will need hundreds of fires to grope your way forward on your new path. If you're searching for immortality by means of virtue, don't go to all this trouble.

The Emperor: (suddenly becoming annoyed) Do you know where your vices are hiding? (Fiercely grabbing the Scavenger's jaw) In the impudence of your speech. (He pushes him far away. He thinks for a moment, examining the Scavenger) You bargain intelligently, have you worked as a minister before?

The Scavenger: This job in our country needs family relations or connections, not intelligence, you know that.

The Emperor: (an idea occurring to him) Okay, let's come to an agreement.

The Scavenger: About what?

The Emperor: I give you the most eminent position in the palace, so you can help me in my task.

The Scavenger: The most generous offer I've ever had in my life. (Severely.) Absolutely not... I am not disposed towards these games.

The Emperor: (Somewhat friendly) Why do you oppose justice?

The Scavenger: Only idiots trust the justice of a tyrant. My lord Emperor... you're overreaching yourself.

The Emperor: You wretch, you're vindicating the reason for your fortune, there will be no guillotines after today (to the others) Set the guillotines on fire, and put this imbecile in prison.

(Some guards enter, leading away the Scavenger and others ascend to set fire to the guillotines).

The Scavenger: (laughing loudly) Justice has begun with a victim.

(An uproar is heard offstage. New guards enter.)

(to be continued ...)