Syria under the Spotlight:
Television satire that is revolutionary in form, reformist in content

By Marlin Dick

October, 2007. Picture the scene. We are inside Syria's monolithic Education Ministry witnessing a highly charged committee meeting, convened to tackle one of the country's most entrenched problems: overcrowding at state universities. All too willing to apply an absurdly cold logic in the matter, a logic that is likely familiar to Syrian viewers at home, the committee plans to make university tests so difficult that hardly any students are able to pass. The committee members are enthusiastic as they review their options but tension arises as they compete for the approval of the minister, who chairs the session. A female bureaucrat who offers her proposals on how to wage psychological war against the students giggles and squirms like someone receiving physical or sexual pleasure from the idea of failing so many young people. Meanwhile, the committee members exhibit other subtle nervous tics and expressions that add a garish unease to the proceedings. The sketch cuts quickly to examination day, and the proctors are Nazi-like characters who terrorize the students into abject fear and fainting spells. A male student is caught cheating after a miles-long crib sheet inside his clothing is discovered; a female student screams at her oppressor: "If you're really a teacher, then YOU answer these questions!!"

These images and dialogue epitomize the spirit of Syria's most popular television sketch comedy, *Spotlight* (*Buq'at Daw'*), in its first Ramadan series of 2001. Combining lively jumps between different settings (ministry, schools, hospital), the use of many actors (15 speaking parts), and a willingness to take things to their illogical conclusion, the sketch *Imtihanat* (*Exams*) is typical of the fresh, egalitarian and modernist sensibility *Spotlight* has brought to Syrian television. The absurd but all-too-real portrayal of Syria's anxiety-inducing, nationwide end-of-year school exams not only demonstrates the show's winning formula of realism balanced with outlandishness, but also points to how well the show's makers were able to hone in on the actual experiences of millions.

This article attempts to evaluate the success of *Spotlight* in the context of recent television satire in Syria. The essay argues that key to understanding *Spotlight*'s novelty is an appreciation of the way the sketch show has combined what might be termed revolutionary innovations in comedy form with more daring reformist content. It is this that has enabled the program to make its mark both on a production industry fast learning to assert itself across the wider Middle East and on audiences desperate for new avenues of satirical critique. In this way, *Spotlight* has fused new approaches to comedy production—cinematic techniques combined with flourishes more in keeping with theatre, an emphasis on collective talent over the individual, slapstick interspersed with social realism—with new more reformist, more self-referential, more visual material to bring adulation from mass and elite audiences alike.

Passing the Baton

Perhaps it was inevitable that in a country in which more than half the population is under the age of twenty-one, a show driven so blatantly by young people in an innovative, collective effort would unseat the star-driven shows that preceded it. Well before *Spotlight* came along, the dean of 1980s Syrian television sketch comedy was Yasir Al ‘Azma. His multi-year series *Maraya* (*Mirrors*) offered satirical pieces, often dependent on word-play, in which Al ‘Azma used various characters and costumes to poke fun at Syrian society. Al ‘Azma ruled the airwaves for years when it came to both standard send-ups and “political” sketches; his show was usually among the top local draws and enjoyed a regional following in the *musalsal* (television serial) industry.[1] While a number of younger, up-and-coming actors have benefited from significant exposure on *Maraya* in the last decade, their roles have usually been subordinated to those of Al ‘Azma, who either wrote or inspired most of the sketches and thus offered a quasi-one man show. Meanwhile, as the Arab world’s satellite era took shape in the mid-1990s during the dominance of *Maraya*, a generation or two of young actors was staking its claim to the comedy *musalsal* spotlight in Syria in both standard comedy television series and the theatre, rendering Al ‘Azma’s monopoly on the sketch format vulnerable in an industry with rising production rates and competitive pressures.

So it was that, as *Maraya* continued into the first decade of the twenty-first century with uneven results, the younger, fresher series *Spotlight* eclipsed it on various

[1] The show has appeared nearly every year since its early 1980s debut, sometimes with slight variations in title, such as *Hikaya Maraya* (*Stories of Mirrors*), or *Maraya Al Hikaya (Mirrors of Stories*).

fronts. With similarities in form, featuring sketches lasting anywhere from a few minutes to nearly the entire episode, the newcomer has generally been more cynical and caustic in its bite. Even though a good number of sketches turned out to be duds, the youthful, "experimental" spirit of *Spotlight* has boasted many successes. The idea for *Spotlight* came from Ayman Rida and Basim Yakhur, representing the younger generation of Syrian actors, and the young director Laith Hajjo, who has helmed the show in three of its five editions to date.[2] *Spotlight*'s youth-dominated cast helped the show run at 45 and sometimes 78rpm, compared to the slower pace of *Maraya*, where one usually watched and waited for Al 'Azma's character to provide an episode's punch-line or message. A true comedy collective had been launched and it rapidly gained viewers, who now wondered which fine older actor, and more frequently, which talented younger performer, would deserve special watching in a given sketch.

The Making of *Spotlight,* 2001-2007

As Syrian *musalsal* production grew during the second half of the 1990s, the industry was vibrant enough to see comedy sub-genres, sequels and spin-offs. These and other *musalsal*s were not sketch shows but rather approximated the American sit-com. Several signature comedies were created during this period: for example, the earthy *'Aileh Khams Nujum* (*Five Star Family*), which had three further editions that immediately descended in quality, and vehicles starring comedy mainstay Ayman Zaydan, such as *Yawmiyyat Mudir 'Amm* (*Diary of a Director-General*) and *Jamil wa*

[2] Rida was born in 1962, Yakhur and Hajjo in 1971.

Hana (*Jamil and Hana*). The latter show prompted copycatting in the form of *Hello Jamil… Hello Hana*, a name that signaled the imitation behind its creation, and was in fact devised to head off a conflict with the original producing company.[3] As Syria's *musalsal* market sought winning formulas, young actors were gaining prominence on television, albeit usually as second-rank players. Perhaps the real creative bubbling that eventually produced *Spotlight* first surfaced in 2000, when the private firm Al Sham International produced a show called *2x2* (*Two By Two*), with Rida and Yakhur as the male leads. Each episode was split into self-contained halves, with the same general plot unfolding for two different young couples, one inhabiting a lavish villa, the other a lower-middle class traditional home. The *musalsal* explored how the same events impacted different classes, and while it did not always successfully execute the idea, a novel treatment did reach people's television screens.

In this competitive environment, where new ideas were being tested and older ideas re-worked, another leading firm, Suriya Al Duwaliyya, tasked Rida and Yakhur with developing a comedy *musalsal* for the 2001 season, with the two enjoying carte blanche to come up with a winner. They agreed on Hajjo as director and the three convened at the Bayt Jabri restaurant in Old Damascus to decide on the format. After toying with the idea of send-ups of popular songs, they finally settled on a sketch-based *musalsal*, even though this would mean an intrusion into the territory of *Maraya*. In a sign of their fresh approach, the three soon realized that they would be unable to author

[3] See Marlin Dick, The State of the Musalsal: Arab Television Drama and Comedy and the Politics of the Satellite Era, in *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 15, Fall 2005, for a brief description of these shows.

the number of sketches required and informally put out the word that they needed material. This generated a storm of proposals and submissions, sometimes in the form of an idea for a sketch that was then re-worked by other individuals. The creators even sought novelty in the title, as Hajjo initially opted for an English name for the new program. But, in an early reminder that the team was working in the constraining environment of the Arab world's most Arabic language-obsessed state, this name was subsequently translated by officials at Syrian Television, with both titles appearing in the credits, side by side.

Spotlight has travelled a bumpy arc of mass resonance, creative collaboration and artistic merit. The initial, 2001 edition was a slightly truncated *musalsal* in which episodes were around 30 minutes long, compared to the roughly 45-minute standard format of later years. Hajjo directed the show again in 2002 and this version offered more daring treatments of overtly political topics, with a heavy dose of sketches lampooning corruption and the *mukhabarat* (secret police). However, Hajjo's creative differences with the founders saw his exit the following year and replacement by Naji Tu'ma. In a sign of the growing competition among Syria's *musalsal* makers, Hajjo and one of *Spotlight*'s leading writers, Raffi Wihbi,[4] put together a rival show during the 2003 Ramadan season entitled *'Al Makshuf* (*In Public*). Although the show had good content, it ran for only a single year, suffering from marketing problems.[5] The result was initially positive for the ongoing success of *Spotlight* as Hajjo and Wihbi returned to the show in

[4] Born in 1972.
[5] Hajjo said that people often referred to the show as "the *Spotlight* being aired on Abu Dhabi," to distinguish it from the original show being aired on Syrian State Television.

2004. By this time, several inter-cast spats had become public, with actors, writers and directors seeking to retain control over the execution of certain sketches. Hajjo opted out once again after a strong year and was followed by veteran director Hisham Sharbatji in 2005. Despite some fine moments along the way, *Spotlight*'s momentum appeared to be fading, both in the eyes of critics and the public. In the light of the show's slide, Suriya Al Duwaliyya dropped it in 2006. While it is scheduled for a possible return in 2007, the search for a willing director, quality scripts and a workable format have marred the pre-production phase as of the writing of this article.

But perhaps the internal differences that led to *Spotlight*'s current troubles were precisely what made the show so compelling to watch for Syrian audiences. When the founders were able to cooperate, the series reflected and benefited from their diverse artistic priorities and preferences, which also arguably tore them apart. On the one hand, Rida presented quirky characters drawn from daily life, exploiting his wiry frame and a court jester persona, while the lanky and equally physical Yakhur toyed with experimental sketch ideas. Wihbi is an aficionado of adapting various foreign authors' works, while director Hajjo has used the visual techniques of dramatic productions to tell comic tales.[6] When the show "worked," these different talents and strategies certainly complemented each other. And despite these differences, the principals in the show were agreed on the task of critiquing the system and challenging power. Hajjo said that upon the show's inception the creators based their risk-taking firmly on the 2000 inaugural

[6] Another level of content analysis could focus on the show's many writers, who happen to be diverse in terms of gender, sect, region and generation and include a good proportion of actors.

address of President Bashar Al Asad, whose call for a new era of openness and a drive to fight corruption resonated with the *Spotlight* team and audiences alike. "People thought the show had a green light [from the authorities] because of the producer," says Hajjo, referring to Suriya Al Duwaliyya owner Muhammad Hamsho, a member of parliament with close ties to pillars of the regime. "In fact, the producer didn't really know what we were up to. We kept telling the censors that, look, the president said X, so we're following that policy." These political and inter-personal tensions and this venting of creative energy led to the show's huge popular success, cemented by its fine first two seasons, and rendered *Spotlight* a veritable brand name for Syrian television sketch comedy, albeit one marred by conflicts over ownership of the show's identity.

Quirky Personas and Self-Referencing

Spotlight has enthusiastically offered send-ups and off-the-wall takes on topics that Syrians have privately laughed about for generations: the "authentic" Lebanese *zajal* tradition,[7] traditional Bedouin society in Syria, Aleppines, the (Alawi) coast, and the Jabal Al Druze regions. It has even re-worked and often subverted traditional Old Damascus settings. But what is unique to *Spotlight* is the extent to which it makes fun of its own kind. Central to the show's appeal is its sending up Syria's *musalsal* industry in a way which is more self-aware than anything before. The industry characters are not always surprising—vain stars, oppressive and lecherous directors, a fickle public, and abused and abusive production company employees in the middle—but the material's

[7] A rhymed chanting or singing of short verses common to certain Lebanese and Syrian rural regions.

freshness has produced positive results. For example, in *Al Luss wal Fannan* (*The Thief and the Actor*, 2001), the two title characters encounter each other on a dark street. Contrary to expectation, it is not the thief but the actor who is broke. To get off the hook, he acts out a scene from a historical *musalsal* for the thief, complete with makeshift costume, props and special effects: the thief wraps the actor in a large banner he has cut down, hands him a wooden stick for a sword, and sets alight a trash bin to provide fire and smoke. After providing the "dramatic" score by humming loudly, the thief is unimpressed by the actor's performance. The sketch sees the actor bitterly describing how he and his colleagues must humiliate themselves to secure roles from production executives, while the thief criticizes the industry like a quasi-insider.[8] But there is a final twist—after the two embrace and are about to part ways, the actor cannot resist informing the thief that he has in fact picked his pocket, demonstrating his fine acting ability, as he had merely played the part of an innocent and helpless victim. The show has offered stereotypical *musalsal* industry characters as well as more nuanced ones, and we see the details of how the industry works; several sketches alone touch on the sub-category of extras.

Another example is *Bayt Abu Walid* (*Abu Walid's House*, 2005), in which the title character hosts the filming of a *musalsal* in his Old Damascus home. Abu Walid objects to the show's portrayal of Damascenes and general dramatic standards and ends up forming his own ad-hoc censorship committee in order to screen scripts and ensure they

[8] Although the piece is in fact a re-tread of a 1960s Syrian theater sketch from *Masrah Al Shawk* (*Theater of Thorns*), the updated version mocks the 1990s historical television fantasy genre of director Najdat Anzur and the shaved-head and black eyeliner look of actor Sallum Haddad in such fare; they are not named.

are up to par.[9] Several other sketches also poke fun at an industry that has been producing more shows and experiencing more aggressive competition for good time slots during the period in which *Spotlight* has become a household Syrian name. In *Drama Ramadaniyya* (*A Ramadan (television) Drama*, 2004), a station executive ends up suggesting that *iftar*, the meal which breaks fast during Ramadan, be delayed by 30 minutes in order to solve the scheduling problems during the holy month. *Al Bahth 'an* (*The Search For*, 2004) portrays *musalsal* production firm executives as traditional merchants (each speaks a distinct regional dialect) who strive to get their goods to the market and show a nervous concern about expenses, counting extras by "the head" as if they are livestock.[10] The sketches on *musalsal*s often keenly portray the mushrooming industry, warts and all, while venting criticism of a system in which connections and the bottom line enjoy the upper hand over merit.

Meanwhile, Rida has provided *Spotlight* with the biggest and boldest portion of the generally quirky personae that underpin the show. The actor goes much farther with his characters than Syria's earlier icons Al 'Azma and Durayd Lahham, and evokes the Marx Brothers, but in shifting combinations of Groucho, Harpo and Chico. After borrowing pen and paper from the restaurant staff at Bayt Jabri during their initial meeting in 2001, the three collaborators mapped out one of these many signature

[9] Abu Walid is played by one of the quintessential "Old Damascus" actors, Rafiq Sbay'i. See Christa Salamandra in *A New Old Damsacus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 102ff.

[10] The title is a direct reference to the two shows produced on Salah Al Din in 2001, *Salah Al Din* and *Al Bahth 'an Salah Al Din* (*The Search for Salah Al Din*). A production executive becomes enraged when a stranger compliments him, mistakenly, on the other firm's show.

sketches. The piece appeared the following year, credited to Rida, as *Ktir Al Ghalabeh* (*A Busybody*), which begins with his down-and-out, bicycle-owning and slightly garishly-dressed character at a *musalsal* shooting location, lecturing several dozen extras on how to get ahead in the world of bit part acting. When Rida files in with them for the scene, a production executive orders him off the premises since he "died" in an earlier episode and cannot be used again.[11] Rida then overhears the extras being chewed out—they had been following his flawed advice to them, such as "do exactly the opposite of what they tell you to do"—and beats a hasty retreat.

Rida's personas, whether urban or rural, often ridicule "the system" in a way that is more visual, more physical and more dismissive than in Lahham and Al 'Azma's earlier work. *Spotlight* banter can be quite wacky, and non-speaking comedy is often used successfully. For example, in *Tadshin* (*Inauguration*, 2001) a pompous official accompanied by two bodyguards arrives from the capital for a folkloric and vapid official inauguration ceremony to mark the linking of the village to the state electricity network. Rida is wearing the clothes of a traditional Bedouin-rural tribesman, along with white calf-high plastic boots, and pushes the boundaries of visual comedy. His silent part is a lowly villager who, unasked and unappreciated, tries to lead the crowd in applause; he dances in a *debkeh* line and nearly falls to the ground from his exuberant twists; he leaves the *debkeh* and approaches the official, momentarily enticing him with a few out-of-place twists and shakes of the head. On a wider level, director Hajjo said that the creators set out to upgrade television comedy from a second-rank, throwaway type of cultural

[11] Prompting Rida's fine response, "Ahh, you and your *musalsal*, who's going to watch it anyway?"

production into a first-class effort, meaning higher production values, ensemble scenes and a heavy dose of location shooting. This can be seen in the characters. Hajjo described how he purchased unheard-of amounts of used clothing and accessories to allow actors the freedom to create the kind of quirky characters that the public obviously had a taste for. But it is not just characterization that is visual in *Spotlight*; the inner workings of government and society also come to be treated in sophisticated visual tropes.

Visuals and Repercussions

While *Maraya* sketches can often be followed aurally, giving them the feel of a radio show, Hajjo's initial guidance rendered *Spotlight* a television show that employed more of a cinematic approach to story-telling. Even when the physical action is static, viewers follow vertical and horizontal trajectories during the sketches, and the transformation from oppressed subordinate to oppressive superior is distinctive in several pieces, reflecting the regimented aspect of Syria's state, and by implication its society. Civil servant or *mukhabarat* officer A receives orders and abuse over the phone from an unseen higher-up, kowtows and repeats "yes, yes… of course, of course… certainly, certainly," and then finally puts down the phone. Person A then calls person B, chews him out, and barks out the new orders. Person B is obsequious and deferential until it is his turn to switch roles, and so on. One such set of orders and abuse is passed down in *Kasuf* (*Eclipse*, 2004), when Syria prepares for a solar eclipse and the *mukhabarat* spring into action. In the sketch, a security official tells a subordinate that it's time for a "voluntary curfew," to prevent general panic and chaos in the streets. The subordinate is

surprised by the novel concept and receives a light dressing-down. After the superior then explains what is going to happen by using desk items to represent the sun, the moon, and the Earth, the scene switches to the former subordinate giving orders to a new subordinate, following the same routine and asking a secretary to hold various parts of the solar system. Perhaps this type of sketch could be condensed into a work by Ali Farzat, demonstrating an affinity with the multi-panel format of political cartoons.

In *Hawamish* (*Margins*, 2003), a transfer of official directives veers off course. Set in government offices, the sketch begins with a top official (probably a minister) who tells his staff that free expression is to be encouraged. The official announces that so long as expression is responsible and fair, there are no longer any forbidden topics.[12] The official gives the orders but at each stage, subordinates gradually alter the directive and cast increasing abuse on journalists and writers who have been voicing the criticism. The final character in this bureaucracy blames journalists and writers for acting irresponsibly and discourages, rather than encourages, the practice of free expression. The satire here is ambiguous and sophisticated. On one level, it appears to ridicule middle- and low-ranking functionaries or citizens, suggesting there is little chance of change in Syria. But while the regime's higher echelons escape direct blame in this process, the system over which they preside is criticized for producing an authoritarian outcome.

[12] When asked by a participant what the "red lines" actually are, the official laughs off the question, remarking that they are so clear that no one should have to ask for their enumeration.

A fine example of a visual approach to critiquing the bureaucratic chain of authority comes in *Akhtam* (*Stamps*, 2004). The sketch tells the story of an idiotic public servant (Yakhur) who is promoted in leaps and bounds, literally, by a scheming director general who has purposely selected this pliable "jackass." The employee jumps in and out of his new chairs with each promotion, which is accompanied by a short, close-up shot of his personnel file getting stamped. The employee's stratospheric rise appears to tire him out, and he asks and gets a 15-day leave. The director-general is then ousted and replaced by the employee, who used his vacation to go abroad and obtain (i.e. purchase) a higher degree, returning with what was needed to take over his boss's position. Quick camera cuts, characters leaping in and out of frames, a forte of the 6'3" Yakhur, and the visual stamping motif render sketches such as this one heavy on images and movement, not drawn-out dialogue. These works present a nasty picture of a system populated largely by victims and average citizens, some corruption "entrepreneurs," and conniving characters at the top, whether in the public or private sector. It is the kind of upside-down system in which a bureaucrat in a village misleads a colleague by pretending to take bribes—if his superiors discover that he is clean, he will be out of a job (*Li-llah fi Khalqihi Shu'un, God Has His Reasons*, 2002).[13]

The show's aggressive criticism and innovative visual satire helped *Spotlight* garner a mass audience in Syria. Thanks to its large pool of writers, fresh material and collective nature, *Spotlight* managed to keep the public's attention as it experimented with new ideas, while achieving a form of interactivity with Syrian society. When it truly

[13] The sketch is credited to Wihbi, adapted from a story by the Turkish writer Aziz Nissin.

succeeded, it either related to people's everyday concerns, held those in power to account, or both. The popularity it has subsequently enjoyed has informed youth culture in today's Syria: moments from particularly funny sketches have been relayed by fans via mobile phone, while Syrians who witness a surreal or otherwise darkly comical incident have employed the phrase "it was like *Spotlight*" or "they could make it into a sketch for *Spotlight*" as a reaction. In a few instances, public sector officials have even been transferred or lost their jobs because of what has aired. One such incident took place after Hajjo requested an ambulance from the Ministry of Health for the sketch *Is'af Yunis* (*Yunis' Ambulance,* 2004). The vehicle he got was hopelessly run-down but was actually still in service. The revelation that ambulances were in such a sorry state was a public relations disaster, and resulted in a department head being axed. When Hajjo made a similar request for a later *musalsal*, another state official showed up with two ambulances—both in perfect condition—and told Hajjo with a smile, "The (new) director sends his greetings."

Even more astonishing is the story of the sketch *Tufula* (*Kids*, 2002). The piece tells of a young girl who claims that one of her schoolteachers has struck her. Her father, a *mukhabarat* officer, summons the faculty for questioning and abuse, but it turns out that his daughter is merely playing an April Fool's Day joke. Based on a real-life incident that differed only slightly in its details, people in the rural region where it took place were happy to see an example of the *mukhabarat*'s exactions brought to public attention, and there were reportedly professional repercussions for two people involved. Whether or not a writer is inspired by an actual incident, the creators of both *Spotlight* and *'Al Makshuf*

have revelled in transforming stories from real life into material for sketches. During the making of *'Al Makshuf,* the show's executive producer presented actor-writer Wihbi with a tape recorder so that he would not forget what people were telling him about their daily lives and experiences. The way both sketch shows have been firmly grounded in the local realities of their audiences is another reason for their popularity in Syria.

Reform and Its Discontents

In this way, *Spotlight* certainly raised the ceiling of free expression in Syria. Key to achieving this is the show's portrayal of a late- or "post"-Ba'thist Syria in which the country's dialects, regions and sects are no longer taboo. Al 'Azma had certainly done, for example, the Druze dialect of southern Syria, but in many *Maraya* sketches, he is the only one speaking the idiom while other actors are artificial Damascene transplants in the rural setting. *Spotlight*'s lead actors have been a hodgepodge, coming from places like Latakia, Tartus, Aleppo, Suweida, Dar'a, Homs, Zabadani, Mashta Al Hilu, and the Yabrud region, as well as the capital. Individual actors often showcase their own dialects in *Spotlight*, whereas on other shows, they would likely be speaking a more standard "Greater Damascus" dialect construct. *Maraya* is blander on this front; it took *Spotlight* to introduce the sub-dialect of Slaybi, a neighborhood of Latakia, into the national TV-watching vernacular. The fracturing of the generic Syrian citizen in mass-media cultural production—a trend led by *Spotlight*—might suggest less rigid state control over public discourse, and a weakening of national affiliation. On one level, the Ba'th Party's ethic is one of "We all are Syrians," one that discourages any focus on differences. On the other

hand, the gain in resonance when shows treat Syrians as diverse individuals, from specific regions and sects, can also signal a growing Syrian nationalism and certainly reflect the state's moving away from its other, Ba'th-influenced focus, on a pan-Arab identity.

Meanwhile, the target of criticism has been raised by *Spotlight*. The producers of earlier comedy sketches and shows would not dare to criticize anyone higher than the level of director-general, but in *Spotlight* this has been raised to the level of government ministers and the sons of important officials. In *Bodyguard* (2001) we see four burly men in dark black suits and sunglasses, lounging outdoors at a villa, and sipping *mate*. This South American tea is consumed heavily in several rural regions of Syria, but here it is intended as an indexical marker of the 'Alawi sect, from which Syrian President Bashar Al Asad's family hails.[14] Cue loud heavy metal music, and a twenty-something man walks out of the villa. The bodyguards at the pool spring into action, following him in a second Mercedes, the kind used by the *mukhabarat*. The young man, later identified as being from Latakia—the capital of the 'Alawi region—is clearly the son of an important official, and his behavior shows it. When he stops at a green light while waiting for his girlfriend to forgive him for a trivial matter he blocks all the cars behind him, including an ambulance. But this critique of Syria's officialdom is not just play; it has a realist edge to it. True to form, *Spotlight*'s cultural producers try not to miss details, and *mukhabarat* characters usually speak distinct rural dialects, as many do in Syria. When *Spotlight* episodes premiered during Ramadan during the first half of this decade, viewers were

[14] The Syrian regime is often referred to as 'Alawi-dominated, although this is a stereotype more than an accurate description.

often on the edge of their seats, wondering how far a given segment might go. At times they were rewarded with what was certainly the most daring prime-time lampooning of power in a police state, at least in the Arab world.

The *mukhabarat* are pilloried in many sketches and might be portrayed as bumbling or venal, or both. More significantly, secret police and low-level *mukhabarat* in certain sketches are protagonists and not props, and the occasional piece shows them as victims of the system. In *Li-Min Al Shabah?* (*Who Will Get the Mercedes?,* 2002), an informer is enthusiastic about gaining access to a fancy car, if he wins a contest to write the best "report" on a disloyal citizen. When he is unable to turn up anything, he and his wife scour their own relatives for possible material. The informer finally breaks down and regrets his actions, but the sketch ends with his wife recording her husband's complaints about the regime so that she can win the prize. There are bureaucrats and security officers who cannot leave their past behind; they cannot tolerate retirement without there being people to harass or situations in which they can flex their muscles. Another recurring theme involves *mukhabarat* personnel and officers who have received orders to "lighten up" with the public and these characters struggle mightily with the new circumstances. In a few instances, they hit themselves rather than their victims, since they must relieve their tension in some fashion. The whole notion that the *mukhabarat* have eased up is treated head-on in *The Old Days* (*Ayyam Zaman*, 2005), in which two middle-aged men complain that these days, fruits and vegetables have been ruined by hormones and/or have lost their taste, compared to the days of their youth. As they complain about this general state of affairs the conversation turns to the secret police and how in the old

days, a person taken in for questioning would be lost without a trace and might not even return. One of the men vociferously laments today's "weak" *mukhabarat* until one of them actually appears and politely asks the man to accompany him for questioning. The man challenges and insults the *mukhabarat* character until he finally hoists up the irritating and fearless man and carries him off. This prompts the remaining man to turn to the camera and exclaim, smilingly, "Now THAT'S what it was like in the old days!" There is no doubt the *Spotlight* creators knew this level of criticism would shock, however liberal the rhetoric of Bashar Al Asad's inaugural address. And indeed this kind of sketch has enraged top officials for its very, very dark humor about Syrian society (and the regime, by implication).

In 2002, the then-vice president, 'Abd Al Halim Khaddam, was reportedly livid after the airing of *Mudhakkirat Mughtarib* (*Diary of an Emigrant*). In the sketch, Yakhur delivers a voice-over of a letter he writes to an unseen friend in Canada. The piece describes daily life in Syria with the bitterest irony imaginable on prime-time television—Yakhur's upbeat narrative juxtaposed with visuals of his character's encounters with political-social oppression and life-draining bureaucracy. The character even stops at a newsstand and picks up the satirical weekly Al Domari, a symbol of Al Asad's initial policy of openness, but silently grimaces at the unseen content, hinting that the newspaper was more about defamation and innuendo rather than principled criticism. The sketch ends with Yakhur heading to Canada to join his friend.[15] In the same vein, *Tumuh* (*Ambition*, 2002) makes a damning criticism about the role of the Syrian state in

[15] Khaddam's reported complaint was that the show was undermining the tremendous efforts made by the state to attract foreign investment. Yakhur authored the sketch.

defeating the dreams of its young people. The sketch begins with a schoolteacher asking what children want to be when they grow up, at which a 10-year old boy whispers his answer to her. While we never learn what this goal is, it is sufficiently "sensitive" to prompt the boy's father to intervene, and sternly stamp all trace of ambition out of his young son. In the end, the father is pleased that he has destroyed the boy's individuality and drive, the not-so-subtle but very cynical message being that the son can now become a "model" citizen in authoritarian Syria.

But it is not just the state that is the object of *Spotlight*'s humor. The third year of the series sparked controversy when several sketches tackled religion. For example, *Al Anisa Shakira* (*Miss Shakira*) lampooned the female religious movement of the Qubaysiyyat, while *Shaykh Salti'*s title character was a charlatan who similarly took advantage of pious young men. These sketches led to negative public reactions and saw actress Amal 'Arafa apologize for her role in the former piece. Meanwhile, the latter led Mufti Ahmad Kaftaru to summon Rida, who played the shaykh, for a session to discuss the controversial treatment. The following years saw officials from the state, Ba'th Party and the *mukhabarat* continue to take their lumps in *Spotlight*, but the show's creators acknowledged that the arena of religion was not to be revisited.

Playing the Margins

What helped put Spotlight in such a leading position was the show's two-pronged contribution to Syrian sketch comedy, in both form and content. In terms of form, the

show jolted the *musalsal* industry in several ways. One was its comedy collective aspect, as those involved reveled in demolishing the dominant protagonist strategy of Al ‘Azma.[16] As the formula caught on, top actors had no problem accepting small parts on *Spotlight*, or appearing in only a single sketch or two, to take part in a show they believed in and which was a popular success. A second tactic was director Hajjo’s effort to upgrade the production values of sketch comedy and approach the cinematic, through the use of location shooting, lighting contrasts, night-time scenes, props, and long pans balanced with quick cuts; a third was a variety of scripts and writers, producing a show in which the traditional and the experimental happily coexisted. On yet another level, the diversity of sketches let the show’s producers serve up both mass and elite comedy, in a show in which slapstick could trade off with something grounded in social realism, but often in a hipper, more modern treatment. As for content, *Spotlight*’s comedy noir take on today’s Syria certainly captured the post-2000 moment—cynicism about the regime’s ability to reform and a grudging hope that something might work—while pleasing the general public as well as much of the intellectual elite. To enjoy the show, the average viewer did not need to know that *Spotlight*’s enthusiastic innovation was an attempt to bring the best of theatre and cinema to television sketch comedy. The use of specific regional dialects (heavy on the ‘Alawi) reflects the migration to television of what was earlier only permitted in cinema, beginning in the late 1980s, or in theatre, such as in the wild mid-1990s play *Al Naw* (*Sea Storm*), a quasi-improvisational effort in which two

[16] Several interviewees used the same term—*tadmir al batal al awhad*—for their achievement, indicating how well-articulated the mission was in their minds.

actors rotated daily in playing the protagonist.[17] Meanwhile, the cutting-edge political criticism is a legacy of the biting 1960s' *Masrah al-Shawk*, which featured Lahham, Nihad Qal'i, Rafiq Sbay'i and the director's father and part-time *Spotlight* actor and writer, 'Umar Hajjo.[18] These theatrical and cinematic elements were now shining through in the genre of prime-time television, which is often less willing to take chances, whether this means being experimental in form or caustic in content.

Industry figures will argue for some time over whether *Spotlight* was as controversial and critical as it could have been. Some cite the show's strong points while others argue that it was somehow co-opted by the authorities, or failed where the state-produced cinema of the 1980s succeeded.[19] Leading drama and comedy producers in Syria have often faced the accusation that they are engaged in *tanfiseh*, a term that approximates "letting off steam" or relieving excess pressure: anyone who pushes the margins on television is thought to have a green or yellow light from the powers-that-be

[17] Yakhur was one of the two leading actors in the play, which also featured *Spotlight* regulars Shukran Murtaja, Nidal Sayjari and Muhannad Qutaysh. The characters in this fictional coastal village speak specific regional dialects, and the diversity of idioms in a single place is purposely absurd. The leading role was alternated after a bet between Yakhur and another actor over who could get more laughs in the character.

[18] In one sketch, which is difficult to imagine being done on television today, Lahham does a rambling monologue as he advertises a whiskey brand, after having gotten stinking drunk, and finally belts out at one point: "I fear only God and the *mukhabarat*!"

[19] Most importantly, on the question of how the 'Alawi sect is portrayed; it could be argued that *Spotlight*'s generally mocking take was inferior to the more nuanced portrayals in 'Abd Al Latif 'Abd Al Hamid's *Layali ibn Awa* (*Nights of the Jackal*, 1988) and *Rasa'il Shafahiyya* (*Word of Mouth*, 1993) and Usama Muhammad's *Nujum Al Nahar* (*Seeing Stars*, 1988). The first two are entertaining light comedies while the third is an award-winning work whose bitter dose of criticism and humor earned it an official ban in Syria, although it, like the other two, was produced by the state. However, a cross-medium and -genre comparison of this sort has its limits, in terms of elements such as character development, for example.

to ease popular discontent by taking on taboo topics, whether or not this takes place due to direct contacts with a member of the regime. In its defense, *Spotlight* has certainly pushed the envelope but some insist that the show is in fact guilty of *tanfiseh*, since it skewers lower- to middle-ranking figures but not the actual rulers or those ultimately responsible for corruption, waste, and mismanagement in Syria. But these observers often miss what is unique about *Spotlight*—its determination to take on new avenues of critique and social commentary using innovative comedic, dramatic and production techniques. Perhaps the show's title sums up its individuality better than anything else. *Spotlight* literally is the show that puts characters under the spotlight, as clever lighting contrasts shed light on enthusiastically crafted comic figures. In its mission to uncover and expose aspects of Syrian society that involve corruption, exploitation and mismanagement with the dark humor they deserve, *Spotlight* remains unrivalled in Syria.

The skill with which *Spotlight* has variously combined innovative sequences, vivid characterization, and biting criticism is best shown by the sketch *Tarikh Harami* (*History of a Thief*, 2002). In it, we see a prehistoric cave-dweller (Rida) with a wife and young baby who must be provided for. When he tries to steal livestock, he is discovered and chased by the other members of the community. The next scene is in the Roman period, and begins abruptly with Rida jolting awake from a dream, which we discover is the previous segment. He turns to his wife and tells her about the dream, then confesses that he is guilty of illegal enrichment and fears that Julius Caesar will order his arrest. The knock at the door then comes, as Roman soldiers wait outside to haul him off. This is followed by the same waking-from-a-dream, confession of corruption, and arrest

sequence, in the Islamic era, followed by a Bedouin setting, and then a modern, urban (Damascene) home.[20] In this final segment, the man, who is trying to import a shipment of spoiled foodstuffs, receives a brief telephone call and then tells his wife that "the deal has gone through and the goods have arrived," meaning punishment for illicit acts comes in every age but the present. But tellingly, the final scene which originally ended the sequence was cut by the censors. In it, the phone call brings a knock at the door and the news that the individual has been named a government minister. The sketch does not name names, but then, does it really have to?

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[20] What might seem repetitive is offset by the sketch's use of five different idioms: grunts, a "neutral" Classical Arabic, an Islamic-flavored Classical Arabic, a Bedouin dialect, and modern Damascene colloquial, as well as outdoor shooting, day and night sequences, and elaborate costumes.