

3.2 About *Nancy*

Nancy premiered in Tokyo in 2007 and then toured Lebanon and other countries.¹⁷² Four actors, Ziad Antar, Hatem Imam, Rabih Mroué, and Lina Saneh, sit next to each other on a black sofa (Fig. 1.3), which, as Monique Bellan points out, does not provide enough space for them to sit comfortably. Like Lebanon, the sofa seems to be too small for all the different people who are located very close to each other.¹⁷³

For one and a half hours, the four protagonists narrate fragmentary anecdotes about incidents from the conflicts that took place in Lebanon between 1973 and 2007. The actors use lighthearted language and talk at quite a fast pace in Ami-yeħ, the Levantine version of colloquial Arabic that is spoken in Lebanon. *Nancy*, as the critic Jim Quilty notices, does not follow conventional theatre forms. This is because the actors are not communicating with each other but are delivering monologues, and they almost never react to the anecdotes the other actors relay.¹⁷⁴ This has also been pointed out by film and media scholar Stella Bruzzi, who understands *Nancy* as a speech act, in Judith Butler's terms, because the speech itself forms the action of the play.¹⁷⁵

As *Nancy* progresses, the four protagonists repeatedly tell that they die as martyrs. Each time they die, they return to life, only to die again in another incident of conflict. Almost every anecdote of death that the actors tell the audience is accompanied by an image that pops up on one of the four large, rectangular screens that are located above the heads of the actors. Most of the visuals, which were created by graphic designer Samar Maakaroun, are appropriations of posters—taken from various Lebanese sects—of martyrs who died during the Wars. In the play, however, the visuals include photographs and the names of the actors. Some of these photographs came from the personal collections of Antar, Imam, Mroué, and Saneh; others were staged for the play. The selection of posters from the Wars is based on Maasri's research for her 2009 book *Off the Wall*, which I introduced in Chapter 2. While working on her publication, Maasri showed the posters she had collected to Mroué, who used them as a source of inspiration. Maasri agreed to provide Mroué with all her visual material, and Maakaroun based her remakes of the posters on this collection.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Cis Bierinckx, 'Reconstructing Fragments', in *Interviews: Rabih Mroué*, ed. Nadim Samman (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022), 218.

¹⁷³ Monique Bellan, *Dismember Remember: Das zeitgenössische Theater von Rabih Mroué und Lina Saneh* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2013), 157.

¹⁷⁴ Jim Quilty, 'How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke', *Bidoun* (2008), <https://new.bidoun.org/articles/how-nancy-wished-that-everything-was-an-april-fool-s-joke>.

¹⁷⁵ Hila Peleg and Stella Bruzzi, 'Towards 'Approximation'', in Hlavajova and Winder, *Rabih Mroué*, 52.

¹⁷⁶ Samar Maakaroun, Zoom conversation with the author, 17 February 2021. The production of the posters for *Nancy* took around three weeks.

While the actors speak, the Arabic text is visible on the floor in front of the sofa and the English translation can be seen on a screen above the images. The stage set-up, including the sofa, the actors, the screens, and the text in Arabic and English, creates a certain excess of speech and visuals. This was intended to point to the overkill in daily life during the *Wars*.¹⁷⁷

The curator and art researcher Arkadiusz Poltorak describes the visual strategy in *Nancy* as 'archival appropriation', and in the play this strategy is used to reveal how figures, such as martyrs and heroes, are constructed.¹⁷⁸ Bruzzi also understands the visuals as a critique of the images of martyrs in Lebanon and as complementary to the speech.¹⁷⁹ In Quilty's reading, the posters 'reflect different phases in each character's political career'. Importantly, he mentions the interplay between the posters and the text and indicates that the screens are not only 'ornaments' but a vital part of the play. He also remarks that, via the posters, the individuality of the actors is subsumed.¹⁸⁰ In a similar vein, Bruzzi describes the actors as composite characters who represent multiple personalities, but not necessarily themselves as individuals.¹⁸¹ Theatre and performance studies scholar Solveig Gade notes that because the actors only tell combat-related stories, they become de-individualised. They are presented as fighters and martyrs but not as human beings with feelings and emotions, 'reduced as it were to the archetypal identity of the figure of the fighter'.¹⁸²

Some visuals show the martyrs in almost comical heroic poses, which might emphasise their readiness to fight.¹⁸³ These very images are the reason why Haugbolle, a sociologist, locates *Nancy* in a gender-based framework and reads the play as a critique of the stereotypical roles of men in warfare and of political discourses that celebrate violence and masculinity.¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, Mayssa Jallad mentions that Murr Tower, which was Beirut's highest building during the *Wars* and a site of battle, appears on the screens. She understands the building, which is still present as a widely visible ruin in Beirut,

177 Ibid.

178 Arkadiusz Poltorak, 'History as an April Fool's Joke: Defamiliarising Collective Memory in Rabih Mroué's *So Little Time*', *Art History & Criticism* 14 (2018): 43.

179 Peleg and Bruzzi, 'Towards 'Approximation'', 55.

180 Quilty, 'How Nancy'.

181 Peleg and Bruzzi, 'Towards 'Approximation'', 61.

182 Solveig Gade, 'Learning to Live with Ghosts in the Aftermath of War: On Documentary Strategies in Rabih Mroué's *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April's Fool's Joke*', *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 8, no. 4 (2015): 334.

183 Bellan, *Dismember Remember*, 156.

184 Sune Haugbolle, 'The (Little) Militia Man: Memory and Militarized Masculinity in Lebanon', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 133–34.

as a 'fifth character' of *Nancy*.¹⁸⁵ Also, the cultural analyst Naeff stresses the role of Murr Tower at the end of the play and interprets it as 'admonition'.¹⁸⁶

Regarding the choice of title, Quilty suggests it refers to 13 April 1975, the official starting date of the *Wars*.¹⁸⁷ According to Mroué, however, it is related to the ongoing violence in Lebanon. He explained that he read an article about the tensions between Palestinians and Israelis in Ramallah that was called 'How I Wished that Everything Was an April Fool's Joke' and that had as its author a writer whose first name was Nancy. He liked the title, as it points to the inability to leave the vicious cycle of never-ending violence between Palestinians and Israelis, which can be perceived as absurd. As the different sects in Lebanon also continue to fight in different ways, this vicious cycle reminds Mroué of the one in Lebanon—and of an April Fool's joke.¹⁸⁸

This situation of ongoing violence relates to the four protagonists' repeatedly dying as martyrs, then returning to life. Contrary to the claims of some researchers, these returns to life are not resurrections.¹⁸⁹ In a Lebanese context, resurrection is associated with the Druze belief in the return of the soul, which, as Mroué stressed, is not addressed in *Nancy*.¹⁹⁰ Instead, Mroué compares the actors' deaths and their returns to life to a videogame, saying:

We know that all the new generation is going into these video games where you die and you continue the game from the point where you died, not from the beginning. And you continue and die and come back alive and couldn't end—so on and so forth. [...] As if we are saying that we are the Lebanese. We are destined to be killed and to come again and continue to war again like we'll not stop. We are not tired, so.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Mayssa Jallad, 'Beirut's Civil War Hotel District: Preserving the World's First High-Rise Urban Battlefield' (MA thesis, Columbia University, 2017), 134–35.

¹⁸⁶ Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries*, 93. Haugbolle had already drawn attention to the significance of Murr Tower as a *lieux de mémoire* in *Nancy* in 'The (Little) Militia Man', 134.

¹⁸⁷ Quilty, 'How Nancy'.

¹⁸⁸ Claire Shine, 'How Rabih Beat the Censor', *Financial Times*, 12 October 2007, <https://www.ft.com/content/44be3f1c-7864-11dc-8e4c-0000779fd2ac>.

¹⁸⁹ For example, Jallad, 'Beirut's Hotel District', 134 and Poltorak, 'History as an April Fool's Joke', 42 write of resurrections.

¹⁹⁰ Rabih Mroué, Zoom conversation with the author, 18 May 2021. Druze beliefs in reincarnations in relation to martyrdom are addressed in Lawrence Abu Hamdan's work *Once Removed* (2019). Abu Hamdan interviews the reincarnated self of a former militiaman of the PSP, who tells Abu Hamdan that he died when he was seventeen and shows Abu Hamdan photographs of his previous self during the *Wars*. In 2019, this very PSP militiaman, whose name is Bassel Abi-Chahine, did a photo series called *West Beirut Shot Twice*. He juxtaposed photographs of sites in West Beirut, where he believes he was active at during the *Wars*, with images he took of the same sites in 2019. These juxtaposed photographs were also used in *Once Removed*.

¹⁹¹ Deborah Amos, 'Play Challenges Lebanese to Face Past, Present', *NPR*, 6 October 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15067619>.

Dying and coming back to life are related to the current situation in Lebanon. In this way, the transgenerational sectarian strife in the country has similarities to a videogame where protagonists are caught in a loop, a continuous cycle of violence, as recently manifested in the 2021 Tayyouneh clashes. Even if someone who is fighting for a certain party dies, there is someone else living who is willing to continue this fight. Mroué further clarified the ongoing situation of violence when he explained the concept of the coming-back-to-life element in *Nancy*:

In each battle, each one of the four fighters is killed but soon comes back to life to fight again, only to be killed once more. This cycle repeats indefinitely. It resembles a war taking place inside a video game, but it is not. It is a kind of *mise en abyme* of the same thing. It seems to me this is our reality. Wars have been ongoing in Lebanon for decades, and people are still ready to be killed for the sake of warlords, leaders, political parties, or their 'religious beliefs'. It seems as if no one has learned anything from the past, or as if we, the Lebanese, are stuck in the feedback loop of the same idea: fighting to be killed and becoming a hero/martyr for a few days, rewarded with a poster to be commemorated for a short time, and then coming back to life to fight again.

Nobody questions or asks: Why are we fighting these wars? Why are we unable to stop this killing machine? Who can stop it? The killing machine continues, and we are feeding it with our bodies.¹⁹²

However, the returns to life in *Nancy* were not convincing for the artist and writer Jalal Toufic. After the play was first staged in Beirut, he argued that it would only work if its intention really was to be an April Fool's joke, because it is clear that the actors are living people who pretend to be dead. Thus, *Nancy* allegedly failed to deal with madness and undeath.¹⁹³ Toufic's critique was one of the earliest the play received. Media coverage of *Nancy* that occurred shortly after its 2007 premiere focused instead on the euphoric reactions the play received when performed in Beirut and on the initial banning of the play in Lebanon.¹⁹⁴ *Nancy* was censored because it mentioned the names of still-active politicians, such as Nabih Berri and Michel Aoun. The former was the speaker of Parliament and the latter the president

¹⁹² Rabih Mroué, Zoom, 18 May 2021.

¹⁹³ Jalal Toufic, *Undeserving Lebanon* (n.p.: Forthcoming Books, 2007), 73–75.

¹⁹⁴ Amos, 'Play Challenges Lebanese'; Quilty, 'How Nancy'; Shine, 'How Rabih Beat the Censor'; Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, 'Lebanon Bars Production on Militia Follies', *The New York Times*, 20 August 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/20/arts/20iht-mroue.1.7180112.html>. For the blurry regulations on censorship in Lebanon, see Ghadir Hamadi, 'Film Censorship in Lebanon: How Does It Work', *L'Orient Today*, 25 August 2023, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1347431/film-censorship-in-lebanon-how-does-it-work.html>.

of Lebanon at the time of the play's writing.¹⁹⁵ Crucially, *Nancy* presented these figures not in a glorifying manner, but as warlords. Finally, after Tarek Mitri, who was then the minister of culture, was about to take the case to the Council of Ministers in August 2007, the play was granted permission to be staged without any changes.¹⁹⁶

During the 2010s, *Nancy* was repeatedly but briefly addressed in scholarly works. While Jallad describes it as a 'chronological documentary play',¹⁹⁷ and the art critic Wilson-Goldie as a narration of the history of the *Wars*,¹⁹⁸ Yvonne Albers, a scholar in Middle East studies, frames *Nancy* as an attempt to deal with the inability to find closure with the past.¹⁹⁹ In a similar vein, Haugbolle notes that *Nancy* reflects how the Lebanese state is unable to deal with the effects of the *Wars*, including the conflict's multiple memories, which still exist today.²⁰⁰ Bellan argues likewise, writing that the play reflects how violence and history repeat themselves in the country. She further locates the anecdotes told in *Nancy* in the blurred space between fact and fiction and points to the potential, but not yet proven, reality of the stories told.²⁰¹ Bruzzi situates the play 'explicitly' in a trauma discourse because the fragmented stories of the actors refer to their disjointed memories, which are due to the trauma they have lived through.²⁰² This is contested by a very thoughtful reading of *Nancy* that was published by Gade. She interprets the play as a negotiation of Lebanon's recent past via the return of revenants. Due to the absence of notions of loss and mourning, *Nancy*, in Gade's opinion, should be read not in the framework of trauma studies or as a representation of history but as a juxtaposition of different coexisting narratives.²⁰³ Her approach is shared by Poltorak, who reads *Nancy* as a negotiation of the contested remembrance of the past, in which a universal, true account cannot be found due to the different narratives of the *Wars* that are clashing in Lebanon.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁵ Aoun's term ended on 31 October 2022.

¹⁹⁶ Rabih Mroué and Fadi Toufiq, *How Nancy Wished that Everything was an April Fool's Joke* (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2012), 11; Mroué, Zoom, 18 May 2021; Fadi Toufiq, Zoom conversation with the author, 6 May 2021.

¹⁹⁷ Jallad, 'Beirut's Hotel District', 134.

¹⁹⁸ Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, 'The Body on Stage and Screen: Collaboration and the Creative Process in Rabih Mroué's Photo-Romance', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 25 (2010): 74.

¹⁹⁹ Yvonne Albers, *Scheiternde Zeugen machtlose Wähler: Der Zuschauer im zeitgenössischen libanesischen Theater* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2011), 38.

²⁰⁰ Haugbolle, '(Little) Militia Man', 133–34.

²⁰¹ Bellan, *Dismember Remember*, 155–61.

²⁰² Peleg and Bruzzi, 'Towards "Approximation"', 60–61.

²⁰³ Gade, 'Learning to Live', 330.

²⁰⁴ Poltorak, 'History as an April Fool's Joke', 42–43.

Almost all the publications I have cited focus on the text of the play and only briefly mention the images. Only Gade has analysed one of the posters in relation to the poster of the *Wars* it appropriates. She claims that Mroué investigates how martyr posters were used as political tools during the *Wars*, specifically for convincing men to join militias and ‘distributing competing ‘truths’ and histories’ by ‘taking the cynical ‘appropriation logic’ of political parties ad absurdum’. These truths and realities, Gade argues, are undermined in *Nancy*, as the posters are transformed from documents into an artwork, where Mroué questions whether the poster can be trusted as testimony.²⁰⁵

In summary, the existing writings on *Nancy* focus mainly on the actors’ speech, which is interpreted as revealing how difficult it is to achieve closure from the *Wars*, or as a comment on the instability of history and identity in post-war Lebanon. Individual publications also address peculiar aspects of the play, such as masculinity (Haugbolle), Murr Tower (Jallad, Naeff), or fact-fiction (Bellan, Gade). Most authors read *Nancy* primarily as a reflection on the memory and history of the *Wars*. In my understanding, which is informed by a background in art history—rather than Middle Eastern, cultural, or theatre studies—the play unfolds only when read not only via the text, but via the combination of text and image.

3.3 Reading *Nancy* as an Interplay of Text and Image

The above-mentioned publications, with the exception of Gade’s writing, tackle but do not analyse the combination of text and image. While Gade certainly provides a fruitful start to the discussion of *Nancy*’s visuals, her examination is limited to the appropriation of just one poster. In this book, I will scrutinise not only one image, but a substantial selection from the play.

In my reading, *Nancy* carefully and deliberately reflects on, questions, and appropriates the image and thus the figure of the martyr. I do not understand *Nancy*, as Bruzzi does, in the framework of trauma. This is because, as mentioned, I do not think it is productive to think of artists as traumatised victims. I also do not read *Nancy*, like Wilson-Goldie and Jallad do, as a historical documentation of the *Wars*. This is because the play does not cover many crucial events of the conflicts and because there are important historical figures, such as Mussa al-Sadr, who do not appear in the play. This also corresponds to what Mroué and Fadi Toufiq, who co-wrote the play, write in the script’s foreword:

The text narrates the history of our long and various wars; however, it does not strive to provide an alternative history to add or compare to the other existing histories of these wars.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Gade, ‘Learning to Live’, 335–40.

²⁰⁶ Mroué and Toufiq, *How Nancy*, 9.