

Theatre in Egypt

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Thousands of years ago Ancient Egyptians excelled at architecture, sculpture, painting and music. They are also said to have introduced religious theatre several centuries before the Greeks. According to Western scholars the tragedy based on the legend of Isis and Osiris was the first play in history. However, ancient Egyptian civilization stopped after thousands of years when Egypt fell for the Greeks, the Romans, the Persians, the Arabs, the Turks then the French and the British in modern times. Throughout history Egyptians have absorbed these cultures in varying degrees making it part of their unique identity while trying to stay independent from the rulers who oftentimes attempted to propagate one culture over all others.

In Egypt during the Middle- Ages drama was presented in primitive shows such as the shadow play, the Keraguz, and the Entertainer (the latter is an activity that was presented during the evening where peasants presented sketches emulating certain aspects of their lives). In those days several traveling theatre troupes were established. These shows, according to the accounts of a European traveler who saw one of them were usually liberal and simplistic mostly made up of improvised funny situations that were often characterized by obscenity and vulgarity. (This tendency still characterizes most of the shows presented by the so called private sector today.)

Even though theatre in Egypt originated in religious tragedy under the supervision of the authorities people could still develop their own dramatic arts independently from the rulers and religious influences. During the Egyptian Renaissance, which started in 1805, the conflict between the old and the New started, and it continues until today. An example of this is seen in the writing of the historian Al- Gabarti, who lived through the French invasion of Egypt. Al- Gabarti wrote that the French built private venues where men and women gathered for amusement and wantonness referring by this to the theatre. He mentioned that Egyptians used to peak into these houses to watch. Even though his view is rather prudish, Al- Gabrit's 19th century opinion of the theatre is still mild compared to the views held by some contemporary Salafis who deem the theatre, and all arts to be evil. Another 19th century view of the Egyptian theatre is that of Refa Jal-Tahtawi the Imam of the Egyptian students in 19th century Paris: Tahtawi , unlike Gabarti, regarded the theatre as an art that "presents seriousness in the form of jest."

Later in the 19th Century at the same time of the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 the first Opera house in Africa was inaugurated under the supervision of Khedive Ismail in order to present Western Operas (one of which is Verdi's Opera Aida). The following year in the vicinity of the opera house at a small theatre the first national troupe presented

the first Egyptian play that followed the conventions of European drama. This was done under the supervision of Yaqoub Sanua who presented nothing but comedy influenced in that by the French playwright Moliere. The Khedive liked Sanua's work and even called him Egyptian Moliere. Sanua's plays tried to put symbolism at the service of social and political themes, in other words, he attempted subversion. However the time was not right and his work earned him the Khedive's wrath leading to his exile to Paris.

During the 19th Century the presence of different European communities facilitated the establishment of theatre, cinemas and exhibitions the thing which led the Syrian and Lebanese artists to flock to Egypt in order to partake in this cultural and intellectual Renaissance which could not have occurred in their countries due to the political conditions there. During this Renaissance period musical plays adapted from European romantic theatre prevailed in productions. Also, melodramatic adaptations which have strong appeal to the Eastern mentality were abundant. Consequently, plays by writers such as Racine, Corneille, Moliere, Hugo, and Shakespeare were Arabized and presented in a style that combined prose, poetry and songs. This led to the development of writing, songs, solo performances, as well as dramatic group performances. Along with these developments talented artists excelled in song compositions, singing and direction. At a later stage adaptation stopped giving way to original plays that emulated the Western structure but espoused Eastern views replacing the European background with an Arabic one. Egyptian theatre shows, then, started touring around the Arab countries leading to the propagation of the Egyptian dialect aided in that by Egyptian cinema which is also known as Hollywood on the Nile.

** In a like manner, Western cinema imposed on us Western drama when we watched it performed by its proponents directly. As a young child I have watched Chaplin's movies and I have also seen miserable barefooted children watch him as they sat on the ground laughing from the heart and clapping their hands. Chaplin succeeded in our society more than other Western comedians because he did not speak a foreign language; he was silent, without a fixed identity. He was like the East, a poor sentimental man who was always chased and defeated. However he usually won by subverting all conditions; indeed, this is not the reality of the East but it is its dream. With Chaplin all cultural difference disappeared as he used subversion through the image in order to relay meanings that supersede words. The East felt, and I am not saying it understood, what Chaplin wanted to say. In the States Chaplin's subversion did not succeed because McCarthyism understood, and I am not saying it felt, things beyond what Chaplin had intended. Like Sanua who was an exile in Paris Chaplin was in Switzerland proving by this that in the States time was also early.

Throughout modern times the artist fell victim to conservative proponents of religiosity on the one hand and the authorities on the other hand. The latter established itself as a judiciary power between the artist and the conservatives allowing the artist a strip of freedom which expanded and contracted according to the political interests. During the Sixties, under the rhetoric of the revolution and socialism the state supervised all sorts of human activities including the dramatic arts in order to implement it as propaganda for the regime. As a result, the Public sector of theatre, as opposed to the

private sector, was established, here the State played the role of the producer who funds, directs, and plans production. In that context the state also established the Television, the Ministry of culture, several theatre troupes, as well as the institute of popular culture in order to allow the youth of every region a chance to present their shows. During those days censorship was rather strict welcoming of plays that called for changes in the pre-revolutionary political and social order even though the government had already accomplished that task earlier. However, in spite of the state's conditional production a flourishing of all theatrical arts making room for the emergence of new talented artists.

In the meantime, the influence of European theatre continued and various genres and plays were adapted ranging from works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shaw, Chekhov, Beckett, Eunesco, Brecht, Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller, and Harold Punter. However, the adaptation of Western works always took place two decades after its first appearance. Whatever ended and became past in the West began as a present in the East, and this is what I call the difference in cultural timing. It was indicative, nevertheless, that the cultural discrepancy was bound to diminish gradually when Eastern societies developed. Yet surprisingly the wheel stopped when the world turned into a small village! Then, groups appeared in the East calling for the rejection of Western culture and the return to eastern heritage. Moreover, a kind of Medieval stream of thinking became popular leading to a contraction in the space of freedom and democracy which had beamed in the horizons earlier. In the end the East and the West became more distant. As a result, starting from the Seventies it has become harder to adapt Western comedy either out of personal rejection or for fear of the censorship and public opinion.

To illustrate this by way of examples consider this: previously it was possible to adapt Romeo and Juliet but it is challenging to adapt a work that depicts the marriage between two Romeos, or a work where Othello does not kill Desdemona but forgives her, or a play where the lead figure is a transvestite. Besides, it is not possible to dramatize any religious topics whether Islamic or Christian, or to depict the problem of apathy, or to write a play based on the premise that scientists have succeeded in cloning another human being. Add to this that one cannot adapt a work that satirizes Bush or Blair by replacing their figures with one of an Arab ruler- one could only show it as is. Western culture has become even more alien to us for still a premarital relation between a man and a woman is viewed as sinful. Even our new films, unlike the earlier productions, are almost free of kisses. And historical adaptations must glorify the forefathers because in the East the dead continue to rule because all that is past is sacred.

In this manner drama has become devoid of internal struggles as if it was a health hazard; something like Cholesterol. Comedy had to be skimmed to being merely a repetitious story set in different scenes constructed around a series of meaningless and unrelated jokes pronounced by a farcical actor, not a comedian, who does not enact a character or even a type as much as he enacts himself thus becoming both the writer and the director. This is of course a natural reflection of a society where the bureaucrats rule according to their whims and management is subjective and not objective.

When I first started writing for the theatre in 74 I chose to stay away from the

government's theatre because it was mostly run by bureaucrats and profiteers; it clearly preferred boring propaganda plays. As for the private sector it presented mostly meaningless farce; more or less along the lines of Keraguz, the shadow play or the improvised popular comedy combining between popular songs, and belly dancing. That is to say it presented a mixture that combined the elements of a plebian and a bourgeois show at a night club. This combination is accepted by many Egyptians and Arab tourists from various social backgrounds but it does not reflect their reality. I had to pierce through these conventions, so I tried to use the same Plebian spirit putting to use my knowledge and expertise of world theatre hoping to dramatize intellectual social woes, even aspiring to put it in a larger human context. All along I believed that Western dramatic writing methods do not contradict the taste of our audiences. My original plan was to attempt winning over some of the popular actors to try to change their style, but the producers and the actors did not accept my plays easily because it differed from what was common then.

After I wrote several plays, I started a partnership with a colleague of mine from the Theatre Institute. Through him I tried to change the dramatic structure of the theatre, and when he became a well-known star we managed to start our own theatre troupe in 1981. Starting from that time we presented a number of well-known plays that proved the possibility of affecting change in the theatrical structure to some extent. I was encouraged in that because the government since the beginning of Mubark's reign has given some license to works that criticize it, even when the government acts as the producer. Yet one must say that the old taboos like religion and sex are still censored in the same manner as before, even more austere than the sixties for example which were in turn stricter than the forties. In acting strictly, the censorship committee cites public opinion as the cause, where the latter appears to have become a censorship board overseeing the original censors.

For it must be noted that granting the artists a bit of freedom did not take place except after cultivating the atmosphere for ignorant authoritarian streams of thought that take religion as a cover. This makes the writer's mission a tough one if one sets to treat basic intellectual matters. Here charges of atheism or westernization await one from a long line of journalists and Salafis. As a result a lot of writers have avoided dealing with the core problems in the society, in this manner art sustains its old thoughts instead of discussing it because straying away from the tribe is an unsafe adventure. I attempted to uncover such regressive attempts in my play (Welcome Beys). This play was shown in the national theatre which is one of the biggest theatres owned by the state, and it will be shown again for the fourth time next month because there is still a need for it. Similarly in my (In Plain Arabic), which I produced by myself and presented it through a group of talented young actors, I tried to question the Arab way of thinking and our relation with the West. The play's self-critical tone of Arab societies grabbed the attention of European and American reporters and so they wrote more than forty articles about it in their papers.

In conclusion I would say that the problem of theatre in Egypt is not censorship in the political sense or even what I called the censorship of public opinion but rather it is a

problem of production. This is exemplified in the high rent of theatres and the unavailability of small theatres consequently new artists are unable to work independently and are incapable of presenting innovative and daring productions. Admittedly the economic conditions act against the development of the theatre especially that capitalists and businessmen did not develop intellectually enough to realize the importance of supporting the arts, and the civil society is equally underdeveloped.