

The Comedy of the East, or the Art of Cunning: A Testimony

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Translated from the Arabic with Notes by **Hazem Azmy** *

Discussing the French Expedition to Egypt of which he was a witness,¹ Egyptian Chronicler Abdel-Rahman al-Jabarti wrote that the French had constructed [special buildings at al-Azbakiyya quarter](#) at which men and women would gather to engage in unrestricted entertainment and acts of licentiousness. It was theatre that he was describing. As we get to know later, Egyptian natives would go out of their way to steal a look at what took place inside.

Another important description of the theatre came from the pen of Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, a pioneer of the Egyptian enlightenment who served as the *Imam* (religious leader) of the Egyptian educational mission sent by Muhammad Ali to France. Encountering the theatre for the first time in his life, al-Tahtawi famously described it as serious acts presented in a playful form, a refreshing departure from the moralistic censure of al-Jabarti.²

It is worth remarking in this connection that the first Western play adapted into Arabic happened to be a comedy. In 1847, the rich Lebanese merchant Marun Naqqash presented a play called *Al-Bakhil*, a freely adapted version of Moliere's *The Miser*. Presenting the play at his own home to an invited audience consisting of his friends and acquaintances from the upper class, he introduced the play to them in the following words: "Here am I stepping forward all alone, scarifying myself for your sake lest this act should incur blame." Just how precarious he must have felt at the time is clear from very Arabic word he used to describe his initiative: *fedaa*, Arabic for sacrifice. His

* Unless otherwise indicated, all the footnotes in the text are provided by the translator.

¹ See: *Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the First Seven Months of the French Occupation of Egypt*. Edited and Translated by S. Moreh. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1975.

² al-Tahtawi's experiences in Paris are recorded in his 1834 *magnum opus*, *Takhlis al-ibriz fi talkhis Bariz*, available in English as *The Extraction of Gold, or an Overview of Paris*, translated from the Arabic by Ihsan Abbas, in Ra'if Khuri, ed. *Modern Arab Thought*. (Princeton, N. J.: Kingston Press, 1983).

word choice instantly recalls its derivative *Feda'ee*, the freedom fighter who puts his life to risk for the sake of the larger community. Perhaps in instilling theatre into this part of the world Naqqash saw himself as such.

Naqqash's second play was adapted from Arabic literature.³ Here, hairless men played the roles of women (who were not, at any rate, present among the audience, which again included the elite and the dignitaries of the city). The performance presented the story of a woman cheating on her husband. As it happened, however, the audience on that night included the *Mufti*, the highest religious authority in the community. Enraged at the boldness of the wife and the foolishness of her husband, he started shouting angry comments while the performance was in progress, scolding her and warning the cuckold of her stratagems. In effect, he was acting as the first censor in our theatre history. Many would gladly take upon themselves the same role from then onwards.

In the period that followed, Egypt became a regular destination for numerous itinerant troupes of entertainers, whose improvised comic scenes were often vulgar and even obscene, as a contemporary Western observer once remarked.⁴ A comic formula of more or less the same caliber still thrives to this day in what is known in Egypt as the "commercial" (read: sleazy) theatre.

The year 1896 marks the opening of Suez Canal as well as the opening of the first opera house in Africa at the behest of the Khedive Ismail, Egypt's Europeanizing viceroy under ottoman suzerainty. Not unexpectedly, the program of the new opera was confined to Western classics. In the next year,

³ The play was called *Abu al-Hasan al-Mughafal* (Abu al-Hasan, the Gullible), loosely based on a story from *The Thousand and One Nights* known as *al-Na'im wa al-Yaqzan* (the Sleeping and the Wakeful). Scholars date the performance to either the end of 1849 or the beginning of 1850.

⁴ The reference here is apparently to the folk jesters known as *al-Muhabbizun* (with the indigenous performance form itself known as *Tahbeez*). British Orientalist E. W. Lane who lived in Egypt during the 1820s and 1830s tells about a farce he watched in an Egyptian village. He has this to say about the performance:

The Egyptians are often amused by players of low and ridiculous farces which are called *al-Muhabbizun*. They are frequently performed in the festivals prior to weddings and circumcision, at the houses of the great and sometimes attract auditors and spectators in the public places in Cairo. Their performances are scarcely worthy of description; it is chiefly by vulgar jests and indecent actions that they may amuse, and obtain applause. (*An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, London: 1890, p. 384).

however, in the same neighbourhood but on a far smaller stage, the first Egyptian troupe [trod the boards](#) to present the first Egyptian play, attempting as it did to imitate the European model but still adapting it into the indigenous idiom and atmosphere. The man behind this initiative was Yacub Sannu, who presented only comedy since he saw in Moliere a role model and a source of inspiration. Initially, the Khedive admired Sannu's work and even called him the Moliere of the East. Sannu's plays, however, ventured into a critique of social and political problems, albeit disguised in symbols and tacit references. But the time was yet too early for such tactics and all the cunning of Arabia could not save Sannu from the inevitable wrath of Ismail. His theatre was closed down and he had to flee to Paris.

Adaptations from Western comedy remained a regular fare in the East, with the gamut running from French Vaudeville to Ionesco and his successors. It was through the new art of cinema, however, that people could get their intake of western comedy directly from Western artists. Charlie Chaplin presented a significant case in point. I recall as a child that I often saw downtrodden and barefooted children sitting on dusty floors, laughing and clapping to his every move on the screen. What was it that drove them to identify with him more than any other Western star? First, Chaplin was silent, speaking no language foreign to them. He did not even have a distinct name, to start with. Like the East and its people, he was poor thus giving the feeling of being one of the common people. Like people in the East, too, he was sentimental, and he was always the target of some cruel chase, thus echoing a predicament that people here see as theirs too. He was continually being beaten and defeated by far stronger beings; the East is also weak and consistently vanquished. Chaplin, however, always achieves some victory in the end, thanks to his cunning in getting around difficult situations. This may be far from the reality of the East, but it is its ultimate dream: Using the cunning of images rather than that of words, Chaplin could help our people realize their victory, even if only in their imagination. With Chaplin, there was no cultural difference: His Eastern audience could be counted on to intuitively sense, if not always understand, what he wished to communicate.

Yet, ultimately, cunning did not serve Chaplin any better than it did Sannu. The McCarthyism of his day could soon read into his works certain meanings that he may not have intended. Like Sannu, then, Chaplain had to flee, in his case to Switzerland. Perhaps it was too early in America, too.

Theatres of the East continue to adapt Western works – typically two or three generations after the fact. Everything that ends and becomes past in the West finds a new lease on life in the East and becomes part of its active present. This is what I call the difference between two cultural time zones. Indeed,

there was a time when many predicted that the cultural gap would narrow gradually, especially with Eastern societies having embarked on their own development. Yet the ultimate paradox is that the gap became even more gaping as the world set out to become a small village. In the societies of the East many voices could be heard calling for a rupture with Western culture and a return to our own heritage. A form of thinking that belongs to the dark middle ages reared back with its ugly head; the space for freedom and democracy started to shrink by the day, while the cultural gap between the East and the West continues to grow wider.

Since the 1970s onwards, then, it became increasingly difficult to adapt contemporary Western comedy. This could be the result of a personal discomfort on the part of the adapting writer or for fear of censorship and the public opinion. Not so long ago it was possible to draw inspiration from the story of Romeo and Juliet. Today, however, it would be completely unthinkable to adapt a contemporary play in which Romeo marries another Romeo, or in which Juliet leaves her Romeo for another Juliet. No less unthinkable is an Othello who would forgive Desdemona instead of killing her to avenge his honour, or a play with a third-sex hero, or one that deals critically with a religious topic (be it Muslim or Christian), or a comedy in which scientists succeed in creating a human being, or one that deals with mercy killing. And so on. Life in the West has become remarkably different from ours. An intimate relationship between a man and woman is still forbidden outside marriage. In our latter-day "clean" cinema, kisses have all but disappeared.

You can not hope to adapt a play that satirizes Bush or Blair by putting an Arab ruler in their place (although, of course, you are welcome to put on the original lampoon as it is). In our part of the world, historical dramas are produced for the sole purpose of glorifying the historical figures they are depicting. Comedy thus arises when it is least intended in an Egyptian feature film that has the late President Nasser confiding his dream of touring the world after he reaches the age of compulsory retirement. In the East, rulers rule for life, only to circumscribe the present long after their death. What is past is forever sacrosanct.

Was it by sheer coincidence that the art of theatre should be [born in the lap of Athenian democracy](#)? The essence of all drama is inner conflict, democracy being the recognition of this conflict within the one society. Thanks to a deeply-rooted legacy, the societies of the East are unable to grasp the full meaning of democracy and thus find it difficult to recognize a drama based on the inner conflict within the individual. When this conflict erupts – in the teeth of all the incessant attempts to deny its very existence – our rulers are

quick to picture opponents as *the* enemy, thus conveniently and manipulatively turning the conflict into an external one with a national dimension. In the East, then, we welcome a Danish Hamlet soliloquizing "To be or not to be"; when, however, an Arab Hamlet asks whether, say, he should go to war or not, he is instantly branded a traitor by the overwhelming majority, including those [who would dodge from any war if it ever became actual](#).

Devoid of all inner conflict, [then](#), our comedy is mass-produced in a form as safe and stomach-friendly as cholesterol-free food. At its best, [it is half-skimmed drama](#): Tired stories repackaged in the form of disconnected and irrelevant gags and jokes, innocent of all meaning and, indeed, of all comedy. These are told by a jester – as distinct from a comic actor in the true sense of the word – whose job it is to represent neither a character nor a type but only himself, his very own star persona that emboldens him to usurp the functions of both the writer and the director. This setup is only a natural reflection of a society in which officials "run the show" in whatever way they please, turning an essentially objective and systematic process into a never-ending ego trip.

It is true that the Egyptian government has recently allowed a more democratic atmosphere in which it tolerates criticism of itself and its officials. But this newfound freedom took place only after the field had been left open too long for the forces of obscurantism and religious authoritarianism. [In this new climate, then, artists and intellectuals](#) suffer far more tribulations at the hands of the thought terrorism of the society, thanks to the abject state of education and culture. An author attempting to present his own take on the main intellectual concerns of the day is likely to find the task all the more challenging. Hordes of writers and journalist [are only too ready](#) to brand him an atheist or as being morally loose. The result is a type of art that rehashes the same old ideas without ever daring to critique them. [Departing from the path of the tribe is today's most unsafe venture](#).

The situation [tends to become](#) somewhat better if you happen to be a poet or a prose writer of novels or short stories; it is always possible for you then to publish your work outside your country (on the Internet, for instance). Writing Plays is a totally different game, since a play is never complete unless it is put on stage, a condition that requires the approval of the authorities, of the society at large, and of the very artists doing the staging. The author of plays is by definition a man who cannot function except through the help of the others.

Most of the writers in the 1960s worked under the wing of the State. The State returned the favor by extending its support to them and producing their own

works inasmuch as they tended not to contradict the cause of the State, even upholding it at times. After the defeat of 1967, however, the censorship rejected almost all such works. If anything, this should show the precariousness of the position of an independent writer like myself, one who has never been affiliated with the government in any sense. Such being the situation, cunning presented itself as the only solution in my case.

Cunning is the norm in the East because its rulers *routinely resort* to it *whenever they wish* to abuse the law. *Following the example of its rulers, the society seems to have defined* its eternal wisdom as: *Woe betide him who follows not cunning* (!) But cunning is to be found more often in works toying with sexual taboos rather than those discussing intellectual, political, or religious topics. This disparity may be due to the writer's fear of entering any confrontation with the powers-that-be, a fear that turns all creative work into a mere job done for the sole purpose of securing an income. It could also be blamed on the fact that he or she does not have enough talent or intellectual depth.

Be these limits and constraints as they may, I have always found through them avenues of voicing my opinion, even if only in part sometimes. Comedy has proven a great tool in this regard, given the Egyptians' proverbial love for humour and comedy. *Comedy transcends reality only to catch it red-handed with the truth*. It pretends to speak in jest while being the height of serious thinking. A joke is a lie that reveals part of the truth or at least suggests it.

In what follows, then, I would like to dwell for a while on my own experience as a writer of drama in Egypt. By using examples from my own works I hope to show the extent to which I had to resort to cunning in a variety of forms and guises.

Scene One: My Cunning Strategies with the Conditions of Artistic Production:

When I first entered the scene, the state-run theatres were floundering under the control of a number of self-serving bureaucrats whom writers (often lesser ones) needed to supplicate to have their plays produced. Commercial theatres, on the other hand, were searching frantically for good scripts – but not for good playwrights. The offerings of these theatres consisted mainly of brainless farces: the formula they had concocted was a mixture of whatever was left of indigenous performance forms (such as the *Karagoz*, *Khayal al-Zil* [Shadow plays], and folk humour) along with some song and dance thrown into the mix. In other words, it was a hastily cooked meal combining folk entertainment with the ingredients of a bourgeois nightclub soirée. This

formula enjoyed enormous appeal among Egyptians and Gulf Arab tourists alike, but it could not be any further from the reality of either group. It was my ultimate challenge, then, to find my way through this setup.

In the beginning, I tried to make use of the same folkloric spirit while also drawing on my hands-on experience with various theatrical forms in world theatre. My aim was to express social and intellectual concerns, while hoping to transcend these local issues towards a more humanistic vision. My guiding assumption was that Western styles of writing are not incompatible with the taste and sensibility of our audiences. It was the actors, however, who found the greatest difficulty in understanding this new mode of writing. Whenever they encountered a script of mine, they ended up presenting it by means of their own clichés and tried-and-true bag of tricks. The result was productions that enjoyed considerable commercial success but which, for me, left a lot to be desired artistically.

I had to devise a strategy out of this morass: I joined forces with a colleague of mine (who studied acting at the same Theatre Institute, where I obtained my degree in dramatic criticism and playwriting). Still fledgling and obscure at the time, he seemed pliable enough to adapt to the new style in which I wrote my plays. After only our first two productions as a duo, he was already a recognized star in his own right, so I prevailed on him in 1981 to form our own troupe. The six plays that we mounted together sent a clear message that some space for change is still possible. The audience were totally in tune, and the critics followed suit, if somewhat later. For my part, I always took more pride in the loyalty of my audience. A mutual trust had developed between us since that time onwards.

Scene Two: My Cunning Strategies with the Censorship:

One of my earliest works in 1972 was a screenplay endorsed by the guru director Salah Abu-Seif but vehemently rejected by the censorship of the day. It was Abu-Seif's idea that we call the film *Madrasset El-Gens* (The School for Sex). This was his first mistake: To this very day, the word *Gens* ("sex") is sure to cause great offence if it were to be thus flashed on street billboards. The film, I hasten to add, depicted a dysfunctional sexual relationship between a man and his wife due to the conflicting conceptions of sex inculcated into men and women by the society. Still, the film included no sexually explicit scenes, since the director was keen on appealing to the viewers' intellect rather than their lower instincts. His aim was to tackle the problem openly.

This, as it turned out, was his second big mistake. Whenever a new head of the censorship took office, Abu-Seif would re-submit the controversial

screenplay for official approval; Successive censors remained adamant, though. At long last, the screenplay was approved – after 25 years of continuing rejections during which Abu-Seif himself died. The film finally appeared in 2002, with direction by Mohamed Abu-Seif, the late director's son. During the film's long struggle to come into being, Egyptian cinema churned out numerous other films with far raunchier content. That the censor gladly allowed these films to appear was because they resorted to cunning in suggesting their taboo material rather than presenting it explicitly. This was the lesson that I had to learn the hard way over the years, with many of my earlier scripts also having been rejected by Egyptian TV censors.

In my play *Weghet Nazar (A Point of View)*, a blind man named Arafa Al-Shawaf joins an institution for the blind, only to discover that the administration is making use of the inmates' handicap to steal their benefits and financial dues. The play concludes with the visit of some Mrs. Box, a UN official on a mission to assess the volume of Foreign Aid to be given to the Institution. Under the leadership of the assertive and insightful Arafa, the blind inmates expose the administration by unveiling the truth to the visiting foreign observer.

The play had originally been written as a screenplay that, once again, director Salah Abu-Seif was enthusiastic to turn into a movie. By way of doing our homework, we went together to some of these institutions for the blind. Those visits left him with the impression that the abuses depicted in my script had no equivalent in reality. It was not "real" life that I was keen to depict, though, but rather a form of a higher truth.

For me, the blind inmates stood for any (Arab) people "blinded" to their country's scandalous reality. The administration, by extension, echoes the very dictatorial regime controlling the lives of such a people through manipulation and deceit. In one scene in the play, Arafa brags about having a visual impairment rate of 99%, thanks to his being the "leader of the blind": a dig on the time-honoured practice of Arab heads of state to "win" their referendums with a 99% of the votes.

Following the final rehearsal, my wife approached the head of the censorship and asked her whether she, the censor, had any reservations. Seemingly baffled, the lady confided in my wife that I certainly knew how to say whatever I wanted without making the work censorable. In eventually approving the play, then, this censor knew full well she had nothing to fear: After all, there were no direct references to Egypt as such with its people and rulers, nor did the play present any foreign power intervening to demand internal reform. It was only a play: *Cunning is the art of telling the truth in broad*

daylight while leaving behind no traces of the crime. In the end, you are acquitted for lack of proof – but then you remain a suspect ever after!

Scene Three: My Cunning Strategies with the Public Opinion:

I understand public opinion here as the modern expression of the mores of the tribe. As a rule of thumb, I have never entertained any dream of winning all the members this tribe to my side, but neither did I wish to lose them completely. I thus figured out that cunning could help me expose the thinking of the tribe without risking my total banishment from it. After all, *no theatre and culture is likely to flourish amidst the desert.*

In 1970, I wrote three scenes of a play that would later be known as *Bel Arabi al-Faseeh (In Plain Arabic)*. The play attempted a critique of the Arabs' modes of thinking and their relationship with the West: In it, we see a group of 14 students coming from all over the Arab world and now living at a London hotel. When their Palestinian colleague disappears mysteriously, the others assume that he has been kidnapped while the British police uphold a theory that he is a terrorist who fled after setting fire to a bookstore. So daring was this line of thinking that I, safe in the knowledge that no censor would ever allow it to see the light, eventually stopped short of finishing the text, leaving it to gather dust in one of my drawers. Also, given I had in mind a cast of Arab students living in Cairo, I resigned to the fact that no member of this community would endorse the play's line of thinking, much less take part in it.

Many years later, I returned to the script, and put it on stage with an all-Egyptian cast of amateurs. The play's biting self-criticism soon attracted the attention of foreign correspondents in Egypt, who produced some 40 reviews of the plays in their respective papers. Many of them were surprised then to see Egyptians and Arabs laughing at their own abject predicament: at their own self-deception, internal defeat, and backward mindset. Indeed, one of our homespun ideologue critics accused the play of being a sadistic "act of self-flagellation." For my part, however, I derived no small pleasure from seeing audience members on many nights laughing out loud with tears pouring from their eyes. One female spectator, coming out of the performance fully exhausted from laughing and crying simultaneously, thanked me wholeheartedly for such an entertaining night yet in the same breath blamed me for being so cruel to my Arab characters. It then dawned on me that *comedy is the act of fending off the causes of tears, so numerous as these causes are in our world.*

Many of the foreign correspondents covering the play asked me at the time whether it stood a chance of being presented in Arab countries other than Egypt. I told them to wait and see. As it happened, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture nominated the play to represent Egypt at Carthage Festival in Tunisia. Even more so, the President of the Festival saw it himself while in Cairo and assured me that it was heading to win the Festival's top award. The Tunisian cultural attaché, however, sent a report to his government complaining about my depiction of the character of the Tunisian student. I was then bombarded with requests to omit the offending character from the play so that it might become acceptable. I rejected the request, and the play was never shown in Tunisia. In another instance, the president of the Jordanian Festival of Jerash, after having signed a contract with me for the play to be performed at the festival, called me to request the omission of the character representing his country. Once again, I held fast to my rejection. Although the play continues to be popular with amateur and college theatres in Egypt to this very day, the Censor at the Egyptian State-run Television saw fit to reject its broadcasting. Such a position is likely to leave a Western observer in some confusion as to what constitutes the official reaction to the play: that of the Ministry of Culture, whose affiliate censorship permitted the play to be presented and which went as far as nominating it to represent Egypt internationally, or the one endorsed by the Ministry of Information, which runs the Egyptian TV? Perhaps this is the Egyptian version of political pluralism!

My 2004 adaptation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, titled *Salam El-Nisaa (A Peace of Women)*,⁵ presented another case in point. When Dr. Marina Kotzamani (then of Columbia University) invited me to her *PAJ Lysistrata on the Arab Stage Project*, requesting me to write an essay on how Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* could be presented in today's Arab world, I ended up writing a whole play instead, initially for no other purpose except to see how the censor would react to it and thus make my answers to Kotzamani's questions more grounded in reality. The play's action takes place in Baghdad, shortly before the American-led invasion, with the Chorus of Old Men in Aristophanes replaced here with a Chorus of Iraqi Anti-Riot Police. In her efforts to stop the impending war, my Iraqi *Lysistrata* allies with American and other Western women activists. Unlike Aristophanes' play, however, the Iraqi and American officials do not agree on the terms of peace but rather ally against the insurgent women from both sides. For their part, and despite their consensus

⁵ Hazem Azmy's English translation of the play as *A Peace of Women* is currently in progress, under the editorial supervision of Professor Marvin Carlson. Select extracts from the English translation are forthcoming on the website of the US-based *Words Without Borders* (<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org>).

on peace and their willingness to go beyond any political differences, the women from the East and the West end up becoming more bitterly divided by their two radically different cultural (read: moral) value systems.

When Kotzamani asked me whether the Censor would tolerate Aristophanes' use of sexual puns and jokes, my answer was both yes and no. This is probably one important aspect of cultural difference, since our Arab audiences are not accustomed to hearing such biological facts thrown right in their faces. On consulting the existing Arabic translation of Aristophanes' play, I realized that the translator had already bowdlerized some of the raunchier passages and jokes in the original text. I then decided to use these translation choices as form of self-chosen moral check.

In so doing, I resorted to writing in *Fus'ha* (Modern Standard) Arabic for the first time in my life. In essence, *Fus'ha* is characterized by a certain abstract quality that allows it to suggest the most shocking meanings without explicitly stating them. My choice of this language form was thus due to the internal cultural distance it was bound to create in the spectator's mind. Although it is the language of education, media, and official discourse, few people are actually fluent in it, even among the educated classes. The spectators were thus likely to translate *Fus'ha* utterances in their mind to their everyday *Ammeya* (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic), a process that would mitigate, in the course of its execution, any strong effect produced by the sexual jokes I opted to borrow from Aristophanes.

Conceiving of the play as such, I was aware that it fit the requirements of neither the commercial theatre nor, of course, the State-run ones. This left me with the sole option of directing the play myself with a cast of amateurs, in a production that the Greek Community in Egypt stepped in to finance. It was during the casting process that I knew firsthand the answer to one of Kotzamani's central questions: Are there any Egyptian actresses willing to undertake the sexually suggestive roles that Aristophanes' text included?

As I knew at the time, few Egyptian amateur actresses were indeed ready to flash many parts their bodies on stage, especially as demanded by the roles of the Western women. It then occurred to me to get around the problem by re-invoking one of the oldest traditions of ancient Greek theatre: to cast men in some of the female roles.

Emboldened by this solution, I declined to omit some of the raunchy speeches over which the censorship had seen red. In one of these speeches, the German activist announces that "modern technology has given women many alternatives to men." Some of the audience members were unable to

understand the reference; Sex Shops are not part of our reality – at least not yet!

Upon watching the play on stage, some critics and intellectuals complained that in showing the Western female activists in such a burlesque manner and clad in semi-nude dresses I was, in effect, confirming the stereotype of the licentious West already strong in the Egyptian spectator's imagination.⁶ While I knew that this stereotype was far from reality, I was keen to give the spectator his familiar image of the Western women by way of setting him up to better accept these women's scathing criticism of the East and its abject reality regarding the status of its distaff, a criticism mounted at times in opposition to arguments parroted by the Iraqi women themselves.

The reception of the audience was particularly positive – against many odds, I must add. As a comment on the most recent Gulf War, the play appeared at a time when the public opinion could not be more opposed – rightly, I think – to the US-led invasion of Iraq. Where these angry free voices seem to me pathetically contradictory is in their long and dubious silence regarding the dictatorial practices of Saddam's regime, ones that the play sets to expose and lampoon. Hardly anyone bothered in the past to oppose this most barbarous regime with the same fervour with which the US and its war are currently being attacked. Far from it, in the best tradition of protecting the interests of the Pan-Arab tribe, one of our homespun ideologue critics called my critique of Saddam's Iraq "an inappropriate interference in the internal affairs of a sister Arab state" (!)

Such being the climate, it is hardly surprising that any call for peace in today's Arab world risks being branded as an act of treason. In this vein, one Western reaction to the play is equally alarming: The doyen of foreign correspondents in Egypt, a German journalist who has been living in Egypt since 1054, told me after watching the performance: "This time you have not left anyone unscathed: The East and the West alike" Is this annoyed reaction a form of Western Chauvinism? Or has his long stay in Egypt gotten into him?

Scene Four: My Cunning strategies with the Audience:

I see the audience as the less vociferous section of the public opinion. When I set out to write a new script, it is the total attention of this audience, rather

⁶ For a better understanding of this point, see, for instance, Hazem Azmy, "*Salam El-Nisaa le-Lenin El-Ramly: Men El-Nass Al-Moqtabass ila al-Waqeh El-Moltabes*" (Lenin El-Ramly's Peace of Women: From the Adapted Text to the Confused Reality). *Al-Moheet Al-Thaqafi*. Also available online at (<http://www.almasrah.com/arabic/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=779>)

than their admiration, that I care about most. I devote the major part of my energy to using my chosen form in a way that best communicates my ideas, but all with the defining aim of keeping my audience glued to their seats, to have them hold their breath, crack a laugh, and shed a tear. Once all this is accomplished, it matters less to me whether they support my opinion or not. Prominent Egyptian writer Anis Mansour once described this comic strategy of mine as "tickling the spectator with a knife."

In my film *Al-Irhabi* (The Terrorist), a Muslim extremist in disguise goes to live with a modern Egyptian family without them knowing his identity. In one scene, he plays the cards with the younger daughter of the family, then dressed in hot shorts. Taking her appearance as an invitation for sex, he tries to touch her body, only to receive a slap in the face that leaves him dumbfounded. In writing this scene, I could anticipate the rather uneasy reactions of some viewers, who held that the young lady only had herself to blame for dressing that suggestively. Yet I was confident that, long after they have forgotten all about the film, the memory of this scene will persist in some hidden corner of their minds, warning them against any facile or quick moral judgements based on the appearance of women dressed in the same manner.

The film was a commercial success, but also a much-needed warning against the rising wave of Islamist terrorism. In this regard, it was doubly ironic that some of the fiercest criticism of the film came from the pen of some members of the liberal left, accusing me of writing the film upon directives from the State to support its official line. Cultural idiosyncrasies? Perhaps not, or so one surmises from the case of the American critic who wrote about the film in a magazine issued by the American University in Cairo, effectively repeating the same tired accusations of the left-wing chorus. More ironical still, for all these attacks against the writer of the film, the film became a huge success for Adel Imam, the superstar actor who played the title role. His wage doubled, while, critically, he won the best actor award for the first time in his life!

Scene Five: My Cunning Strategies with Myself:

At that point, my actor artistic partner and I came to a parting of ways. When the media started to confuse between my words and the performer uttering them, he ended up buying into this mismatch himself; like all stars, he wanted to play the author as well. Our partnership ended in 1993. Since that time onwards, I continued to produce my plays all on my own, presenting a number of risky theatrical experiments, some of which were performed with free admission. The financial loss was often big. Why the trouble? Perhaps because I wanted remain true to myself, to maintain self-respect and internal

satisfaction, even if this demanded that I be cunning with myself at times. I had long known that the best way to achieve this end is never to see playwriting as a profession, but as a vocation by means of which I write "real" plays whenever the urge came. It is not a means of earning my living but a means of bearing with the price of staying alive. I became aware that genuine writing is the one resulting from anxious questions and not from settled convictions, with my anxiety pushing me in turn to embody these questions theatrically, in a form and manner as palatable as possible to the audience. I have never entertained any hope of winning this audience to any particular cause, dogma, or party line; the very act of raising questions is enough for me. I decided long ago never to consider changing the world.

By way of an Exit

In 1987, my film *Al-Bidaya* (The Beginning) received "Charlie Chaplin's Golden Stick", which is the Audience Award at Vevey International Festival for comic films in Switzerland. It occurred to me then that, even in its French subtitles, the comedy in the film could transcend any cultural differences and reach out to the foreign viewers who chose it for this honour. If anything, this happy occurrence is only one proof that, be their different cultures and values as they may, all human beings are essentially same – to the extent that you appeal to them as just that: *as human beings*. Comedy presents itself as an exemplary way of transcending all differences. Its domain is not the presentation of cultural or ideological specifics, nor the propagation of any set of values no matter how noble. Rather, laughter arises out of the sincere depiction of truth, albeit through the use of the imagined and the improbable. Comedy incites laughter as well as a sense of sorrow. In its depiction of the Human Being, it inspires us, moves us, and leaves us with numerous questions as to the nature of this admirable creature who also incites in us a mixture of pity and fear. This is the selfsame catharsis that Aristotle mentioned in his famous definition of tragedy. After all, tragedy is but the dark canvas against which the entire colours of comedy shine and disperse.