

Contemporary Theatre in Egypt



A Symposium



Three Plays



Bibliography

Editor
Marvin Carlson

class. This is a way that they have been able to move on to a more embodied sense of what they were studying last term which of course is a wonderful educational tool also.

Now I'd like to move on and ask each one of our playwright guests to say something about their career, whatever they might like to say about it, and also, if they could, to say something about the contemporary theatre scene in Egypt, the contemporary state of theatre. I think it is most proper to start with Dr. Farag.

FARAG: As for my career, it started in the 1950s. I had some plays that were hits and others that were less than hits. I write normally in very different, I can't say styles, but different atmospheres. I write some plays in colloquial Arabic and some plays in classical Arabic. It depends on the subject. I write comedies, I write tragedies, I have written also one drama and social dramas. I don't like to repeat myself and to stay in one place. I like to go from here to there. Of course this play, *The Person*, is a philosophical play. It is not a repeat of anything I have done before. My audience likes me, I wish censorship could be more tolerant or as tolerant as my audience. Because of course, good theatre is an attack on the audience. People like theatre to change society, that is, they are not happy with this society. They want to change or they want the people who are listening to change, so theatre is an attack on the auditorium. But I am happy to say that I have been applauded and cheered for that by the audience, but not by everyone else maybe [laughter].

Of course the Egyptian theatre traditionally has a long history, starting back in the mid-nineteenth century, but the folkloric theatre goes back to the middle ages, maybe before. Some archeologists also

tell us about a ritual play of very ancient times. But I am not satisfied with the scene of Egyptian theatre. I think that Egyptian theatre could do better, and could be more spread through the country, because it is concentrated in Cairo and everywhere else it is more amateur theatre. The professional theatre is always in Cairo, which I don't like. I hope that theatre in Egypt will do better. I think also that Egyptians love theatre. One German director told me when he visited Egypt "The best thing in your theatre is the audience. Because they are very warm. We have a very warm audience, an audience that gives the artist the prize in response. They are very lively. When you want to make them laugh they laugh. They are impressed very deeply and they show it to the artist. So it is an atmosphere of great magic in our theatre because of the excellent audience. I think that is all. [applause]

CARLSON: I think I will move to my right and then to my left, so Doctor El-Ramly?

EL-RAMLY [in Arabic]: I started writing in the mid seventies. I wrote for the so called private sector theatre [commercial theatre]. I wrote about twenty-nine plays, and I produced too. After a while I preferred to have my own company to produce the kind of plays I wanted to do.

I am proud of myself because I reached the audience directly without the support or interference of the state. In spite of that, I was able to present—through the private sector—experimental plays. I did experiments with young amateurs. I believe this was an important issue for me, to present experiments with the young actors, one of which is a play that, I believe, had a big impact and a lot was written about it in America, in many of the American newspapers,

that's *In Plain Arabic*.

I also wrote different kinds of plays, most of them in a comic frame, as they say. In spite of the fact that they don't have happy endings. Some people think I wrote political plays, I believe I write about the patterns of thinking, our way of rationalizing. As expected, these plays caused various reactions, some people liked them, others didn't. I believe it's important that one should capture the audience whether or not one agrees or disagrees with the audience or pleases them [applause].

CARLSON: Moving to my left now, another distinguished Egyptian dramatist Gamal Magqoud

MAQSUD: I would like to add a few words on tonight's performance, then move on to my statement. What we saw tonight, Mr. Farag's one-act plays show him as a challenger. Mr. Farag swims against the tide, as far as theatre is concerned. For example, repetition has a bad reputation and all playwrights, especially in playwrights on playwriting advise new playwrights to avoid repetition on the grounds that it is boring. But Mr. Farag puts repetition to a good use. The repetition of the complaints is not boring. It gives us a laugh. It was functional. This reminds one of what Brecht says, The proof of the pudding is in the eating. And Mr. Farag's new use of repetition is quite competent, efficient and functional. Besides, Mr. Farag uses two other devices pertaining to other genres, narration and poetic language. As far as poetic language is concerned the theme says keep away from poetic language, keep to everyday language. Martin Esslin has a different point of view. He opts for poetic language on special instances. Mr. Farag sides with Martin Esslin and he takes his point of view to some

extremes and is successful. Narration belongs to the novel and Mr. Farag uses it in the two one-act plays, the Last Walk and the Person yet he uses words sparingly and he uses this device, which is considered alien to the theatre very efficiently. We have a playwright who has his own individual independent full-fledged work and I say praise him for this contribution {applause}

Now to move on to myself. It is difficult to speak of oneself, yet I will add a few words. I started writing plays in 1967. I wrote a tragedy [*The Absent One*, published in this volume-ed.]. Now I am known for writing comedies and this play, *The Man Who Ate a Goose*, is a comedy but I started with a lucky tragedy. It was in one act and it was lucky because it was in the theatre not in Egypt but in French academic circles. It was the topic of two famous books on the theatre, *Le theatre arabe* and *L'Histoire du romanesque d'Egypte moderne*. Written by the Sorbonne professor Dr. Madat Thoms. A playwright to me has two functions and he has to perform these in a certain way. He has to carry a message, and he has to deliver it in an amusing way to attract an audience, because I agree with my colleague that the audiences are a very important side of the theatrical performance. So what is serious in one's writing is the message and the medium is the comic devices. I end my report on myself with a paragraph from a study of my play by a famous Egyptian critic. "He is another master of modern drama in Egypt, picked as his basic theme the fate of modern man and his helplessness between the grinding stones of capitalism and fake brands of socialism. He also tapped the popular conventions of dramatic art and humor and the public response to the words of this physician turned playwright was remarkably lively. Gamal Abdel Magsoud shifted the emphasis from

abstract notions and conceptional groundwork toward more concretized treatment of private cases which developed to take on phenomenal proportions. His main contribution has been the attempt to create in a refined manner a balance between the needs of the fun-seeking theatre-goer and constraints of the sober text writer who writes with a theme in mind. Magsoud's comedies, which are mostly based on aspects of daily human existence, neither have the simplistic happy ending of the commercial theatre nor the tired didactic ending of the more earnest comedies in current circulation. Moreover, his idea of realism is essentially crystallized around a private case which is not occurring mechanically rather it is put to the test in a variety of a situations ultimately reaching its rational conclusion which paradoxically smacks of fantasy. However it is a crucial kind of fantasy from which the audience infers the importance of having a sense of rational self-defense rather than waiting in the sun for the just despot who will rid them of their social ills and political oppression." Thank you. [applause]

CARLSON: To Dr. Magsoud's left is Dr. Atef Al-Ghamri. As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Al-Ghamri, who is himself a playwright but who is perhaps as well known or better known to you as the president and bureau chief of *Al-Ahram*, a very distinguished international newspaper and in my opinion has the best reportage of any of the Arabic newspapers about cultural events in Egypt in general and on the theatre in particular. If Dr. Al-Ghamri wishes to say something from his position as playwright that would be fine but I would also be curious, given his key position on the cultural scene as a cultural commentator if he would have anything to say generally on his observations about the current theatre scene in Egypt.

AL-GHAMRY: Of course all my colleagues are older than me, I am the youngest [laughter]. I began my first play in 1983, it was performed by the national theatre, and from that day on, as I mention the titles of my plays, I can notice that all of them or most of them have focused on one theme, the metaphor of expression and freedom. The first play, *The Man at the Top* and there was also a drama [brief discussion in Arabic among Al-Ghamri, Maqsoud, and Zeid concerning play titles]

ZEID: How fascinating our Arabic language is. It can hide a lot as well.

AL-GHAMRY: Maybe because I am a journalist I write on politics and that is why I noted that it is not intentional, but finally after I finish I find that I am still dealing with political subjects. I think that's all [applause]

CARLSON: I notice that almost every one of our playwright panelists has remarked on how important confrontation with the audience is, and so clearly it is time to move on and given them a chance to confront you [laughter]. At this time I would be delighted to entertain questions from the audience to anyone on the panel or general questions to which anyone on the panel can respond if they wish. We have mikes on both sides. If you can handily get to one, please do so. Yes, in the back.

QUESTION: Do any of your plays reflect any specific events that are going on in Egypt in recent times?

MAQSOD: Art is different from journalism. It is not necessary that art keep close to everyday events. It takes some time for ideas to be mature and ferment in the minds. The theatre differs a bit from the press. This is the function of the press, to follow everyday

events. But art or the theatre in general has to keep in mind all the old lines, not only the detailed events. So the reply is for the time being there are no plays that reflect what is taking place on the scene of events in Egypt.

CARLSON: We have another one or two of the panelists who have a slightly different view. Let's hear.

AMIN: Well I hope you don't mind my commenting. Who does not take the bus to go to the doctor or take the train to upper Egypt. There cannot be more everyday activities than in *The Person*. Secondly *The Last Walk*, I am only talking about the plays that we saw today, of course we can apply the same criteria to plays that are written by Drs. Maqsoud or El-Ramly. *The Last Walk*, as you probably have felt is the dilemma of a woman, not only in Egypt but all over the world. So I do think that Egyptian drama does reflect everyday life and deals with contemporary problems.

EL-GHAMRY: If I understand your question, about how drama deals with current events. My last play in Egypt in 1993 was involved with terrorism. Terrorism is not a local phenomenon, but involves the whole world, as you know. That means that we in drama write on any subject. We are not isolated from events locally or internationally.

QUESTION: I agree very much with the idea that theatre should address itself to changing reality, I would like you to address the question of censorship. How do you work with this? In communist countries theatre people usually found a way to get around this by trying to convey messages through clever adaptations of classics and their audiences got their messages. How far can

you go without getting into trouble. That's what I would like to ask.

MAQSUD: Rest assured that as far as censorship is concerned, in Egypt now there is complete freedom now. In the past we used to resort to strategies to get around censorship. But now we say whatever we please. This is an honest and frank system. In this respect there is complete freedom now.

AMIN: It seems I am the right wing here and I must say I completely disagree with this statement [applause] and perhaps Mr. Farag can comment..

CARLSON: Dina has challenged Dr. Farag to comment on this.

FARAG: Well, frank censorship no longer exists in Egypt, but we have some seven veils of censorship [laughter]. When you are a play author and courageous you don't go on television, the play doesn't go on television and if you ask they say your play is very boring, and if you are less bold, perhaps the play doesn't run long enough on stage. Some plays don't have the facilities to go abroad, and so on. Of course, we don't feel perfectly all right, but then the situation is better than it was before and we hope it will be better in the future. Please note that I myself do not think that censorship is a proper thing in a modern democratic society, but we hope for better in the future [applause].

EL-RAMLY: I want to say that censorship in our country is not a problem now-a-days. I'd like to add that there is a difference between censorship in the theatre and cinema, and that in television, it's more severe in television. I want to add that there is another important element, that of the censorship of society itself. Society

can practice censorship from within, not needing anyone from outside forcing society to do it [applause].

ZEID: I would like to add that censorship is a very tough question. Even in America here we have some productions that might be taken to be too much. For example, Karen Finley, yes she will be allowed to do things, but she will be fought against in many ways. There are degrees of censorship, how far we can go with what we can say. It is as problem, has been a problem and will remain a problem.

BASIOUNY: I disagree with most of the other panelists. I think that most of the artists in Egypt practice self-censorship in order not to get into trouble. I know that there are hundreds of plays that I would love to put on stage but I will not be able to. Sometimes I try to push the limit a little bit more, but because I want to continue to work there I practice self-censorship and either cut those scenes or not do this play so it is a big influence there. Trying to put on the play and not have the money for it if it doesn't go with what is allowed at this point in time. Of course, things have improved dramatically recently but there is still a different kind of censorship, mainly financial. For me I cannot put on a play that this particular manager would not like or the people in power would not be in favor of. Thank you. [applause]

CARLSON: We are near the end of the time. I am going to take two more questions.

QUESTION: She said that some plays she cannot or might not present. You have to say what are the comments you are not allowed to make.

FARAG: What is the question?

CARLSON: The question is what sorts of topics in terms of self-censorship do you feel that you must be cautious about?

BASIOUNY: I am not that cautious. I have translated a play by a Timberlake Wertenbaker, who is an English/Canadian playwright, and it is about violence against women and I have tried for two years to raise money to do the play and haven't been successful. I have the full project ready if I find the stage and the money and they will never be there. It is about violence against women.

AMIN: As a matter of fact I have a very concrete example. I translated a play that was written by an upcoming playwright for the Eugene O'Neill Center Arab project and it was denied performance....

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Why?

AMIN: Because it was a story about two people who have been engaged for seven years and cannot get married.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Everybody has to admit that Egypt takes care of writers. We have right now some kind of freedom in what we have...more than before...and I'm sure that Mr. Alfred Farag and Mr. El-Ramly and everybody here can say more now that what they could say some time ago. That's number one. Number two. Theatre is not like television. Even now, in America, this year, we have started to have censorship aimed at television, in America, OK? So can we have in Egypt open theatre? Our culture does not permit it. You cannot have that. You cannot have whatever you want in theatre.

CARLSON: A point that several people have made is that there

are many, many different kinds of censorship, particularly in an art like the theatre, which is a public art. You can of course write a play privately, circulate it among your friends—all right, but that isn't theatre. It really isn't theatre until you go out and display it before a public. And one of the prices that we in the theatre pay for this in every country, in every culture is that the theatre is therefore more susceptible to a whole variety of pressures, more than the other arts. This has always been true. Of course here in the United States we have no, or not much of an official censorship but everybody who works in the theatre in the United States knows that there are all kinds of difficulties in writing...I mean you can write anything you want but can you get it produced, can you get some television station to pick it up? Of course not! There's all kinds of economic pressures, and there we go back to the public, and who's paying for it, and whatever. I do think that everyone in the theatre wants to and should struggle for the freest expression possible, but I think that we should recognize that it is a continual struggle and I think that no theatre culture that I am aware of is totally free of it. Now we are getting to the end of the hour. All right, here's what we're going to do. This person over at the microphone will speak, Wagdi will speak, Dalia will speak. And then, I will speak [laughter] This is censorship.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I just want to add something here. Mr. Lenin El-Ramly is one of the most interesting theatre writers in Egypt, and not only in Egypt, in the Arabic world. And in the last ten years he is one of the most interesting writers and he did many plays that will never be played, at least not in these times. *A Point of View* et cetera, et cetera, and about censorship. Right now there is no censorship of the sort that you have in

mind. But our society is absolutely different from American society. You can't compare censorship in our society and censorship in American society. If you are going to compare American and Egyptian censorship in theatre then you have to compare American and Egyptian society in all aspects, in everything. You can't compare Egyptian society with American society when it comes to theatre. And right now we have sixty or seventy-five percent of freedom, which is great.

ZEID: Those Egyptians here, if you don't remember, Sami [the last speaker] was an actor himself. Do you remember him? [applause]

BASIOUNY: Some of the panelists and people in the audience insinuated that the Egyptian psyche is underage and needs protection. I do not accept this notion. Egyptian society is a society that can accept any play. I mean, who is to decide when this society is grown up and can take this play? [applause]

CARLSON: I am going to back off a little. Dr. Farag has asked me for half a minute, which I will give him, and Dr. El-Ramly, who has been spoken of, should have a chance to say something. So I'll ask Dr. El-Ramly to speak first and then Dr. Farag.

EL-RAMLY: [In Arabic] I'd like to clarify what I have said about society's censorship. I am going to disagree with you [Dalia]. You said the society can accept anything.. I believe the reality of the situation is different, or else there would have been no problems. If we left the theatre, cinema and art would suffer. Of course our society has its problems. Of course there are people in our society who reject things and express this violently. [audience response.. to this he answers] It's not a

matter of all societies. I am a writer and I believe I'd rather say all what I want, of course I will be a different person, but I believe, without any connection to censorship or the government. Now, at this point of time, there is a form of censorship even in what we are saying now, not from an outside force, but from ourselves. There are different currents in the society. You are talking about governmental censorship. The government says, for example, this actress shouldn't wear this costume on stage.. this is understood. But you can perform the same play in a different place or even on a different night and the audience themselves would prevent this.. This is what I call "society's censorship".. you can't say this doesn't exist. There are limits. If the government allowed the actress to go naked on stage, I, as a playwright, director, or producer, can't do that even if the government allows it.

CARLSON: A brief statement now from Dr. Farag, and then I have an announcement to make.

FARAG: Unfortunately, somebody changed the subject of the evening. The fellow over there, instead of telling us whether or not he enjoyed the plays, he took us away from that to discuss censorship in Egypt. We do not have any objection to discussing anything in Egypt. We can discuss that in Egypt and abroad. We are not embarrassed to say that in Egypt, a developing country, we should do so and so, or we want complete freedom of the theatre or of television. It doesn't embarrass us to say so, because the Americans say so also, for television, for films, for everything. We are the intelligentsia. We are the intelligent ones. We want to change the world. Not only Egypt or the Arab world. We want to change the world. We are trying to express our desire for a changed world, for a happier world.

Why should this embarrass anybody or upset anybody? It doesn't upset us. We are the artists. We are those who create things and who leap in the dark. We may step on a mine that explodes or land in a paradise or land wrongly in the abyss. So give us the courage to do whatever we like because art is all about change—changing the minds and the hearts of the people. We want to live in a happier world, and not only oppose the Egyptian censorship but also oppose the American censorship, which has drawn a line before the Arabic countries and Arabic plays [applause] We don't have any plays in the world repertoire, or in the American repertoire. Why? They have plays from Romania, from Bulgaria, even from Asia, from India, China, and Japan. Why shouldn't there be Egyptian, Arabic plays in the repertoire? So we should criticize America here. Why should we criticize the Egyptian censorship or whatever? We are criticizing the world. We are the artists. It is our profession to criticize the whole world [applause] and I begin here tonight by criticizing America. And I am not embarrassed by my country or by its censorship. I have told you that I am not satisfied with the Egyptian theatre scene. Don't be embarrassed to hear that, because we want Egypt to be the best country, the top country, the country of freedom and happiness and everything. Why do we write? We don't write to be paid for what we write. We write to make people happier, to enjoy. We write for an audience that enjoys everything and we enjoy them enjoying our plays. So let's be happy [applause].

CARLSON: Once again, as after the production, I feel that anything that I say will be anticlimactic, but that won't stop me. Actually, the wonderful words from Dr. Farag serve as a very nice transition into what I am in

fact supposed to do at this point. Certainly I couldn't agree more with the expression of concern and the wish and desire that indeed the Arabic theatre and the Egyptian theatre in particular be given more attention than the shameful neglect that they've had in American culture. A number of us are working on this, believe me, including several in the audience, and of course this evening's event, small as it is in the whole cultural context, is an important gesture in that way, and indeed I think that my experience, forgive me for speaking as an American and not at all as a member of the Egyptian an American scene. My experience, often, in speaking with my Egyptian friends about the Egyptian theatre and Egyptian culture there is often a feeling of "Well, we have these problems and we have those problems and it would be so much better if we didn't have them." I think any artist has that side. But I think that whatever problems Egyptian playwrights have, now and in the recent past, my students I am sure, will witness that this has not resulted in mediocre or uninteresting plays. There are wonderful, wonderful plays out of Egypt and indeed those of you, and I imagine there are some in the audience, who have never seen an Egyptian play performed before can judge simply by what we saw this evening. There is a rich and wonderful acting tradition going on here whatever problems they may have with censorship or whatever else the dramatists are concerned about. That's why it's so wonderful for me to hear Dr. Farag make so positive a statement. If we are not familiar, we as Americans, with these plays, this is no fault of the plays, it's our fault. Now, connected with that, not only do we have the great pleasure of having the experience, all too rare in New York, of seeing some wonderful plays very intelligently done, but I also want to take this occasion to call your attention to a major new translation project of Egyptian

plays into English. As you were coming in, a number of you may have noticed the books on the tables. I think most of them have been picked up now but by all means if there are still some out there and you want to pick up a copy, do so. This is a wonderful translation project that the Secretary General of the Supreme Cultural Council of Egypt, Gabor Asfour, himself a very distinguished literary critic and patron of culture, has sponsored and worked very hard and very fast to make available to us for this meeting—a whole new set of major translations by a large number of major Egyptian playwrights, some of them with us tonight and some not. They are beautiful little books, the bindings are beautiful, the covers are lovely, the paper is nice, and they're wonderful translations. If you would like to have copies and you are unable to get them this evening, the Supreme Council for Culture is giving them away for free. You have only to contact them. Would that American were enlightened enough to have one of our cultural institutions give away free plays, but you only to contact them and they will be happy to send these to you. If you didn't see them, I do have sample copies that I will have out in the lobby. We have a very nice buffet of middle eastern food. I urge you all to join us and take the occasion now to continue discussing or congratulating. I thank you all for coming.

The Egyptian Theatre Translation Project

The following new translations of contemporary Egyptian plays were prepared under the direction of Dr. Gabor Asfour, Secretary General of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Culture and were presented at the February symposium.

The House of Al-Doughry

by Nomaan Ashour
translated by Dr. Mohammed Abdel Aty
revised by Wagdi Zeid

Revenge: A Quest of Pain

by Mohammed Salamoni
translated by Professor Fatma Mousa and
Mohammed Al Gindi

Bawabet Al Fetouh

by Mahmood Diab
translated by Professor Fatma Mousa and
Dr. Amal Mazhar

Layla and the Madman

by Salah Abdel Sabour
translated by Mohammed Enani

A Point of View

by Lenin El-Ramly
translated by Yousef Al-Hefnawi
revised by Wagdi Zeid