

The 2015 Egyptian National Theatre Festival

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National Theatre Festival

1 By Dalia Basiouny Arab Stages,

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The Egyptian National Theatre Festival started its eighth iteration with a full fare of plays produced during the 2014-2015 season. The festival ran from 4-21 September with 40 performances on fourteen Cairo stages.

This year's edition was dedicated to the actor Khaled Saleh, who not only had a long and productive theatre career, but supported young actors and the National Theatre festival itself till his last breath. The opening ceremony honored Khaled Saleh, and the late actor Nour El Sherif with short films showing some of their artistic achievements. The ceremony, held at the Main Hall at Cairo Opera House, was directed by Alexandrian director Gamal Yakout.

Honoring Theatre Artists

The festival's inauguration honored some of the seminal theatre artists - living and departed - who have enriched Egyptian theatre life. The first honoree was Sanaa Gameel, who came from upper-Egypt to Cairo to study acting. The late actress trained with master director Zaki Tolaymat, who helped her lose her accent, and become one of the major Egyptian heavy weight actors on stage and screen. The other actors honored were comedian Mohamed Awad who became a household name in the sixties through Television Theatre, and Hassan Mostafa, who had his own unique comedic style.

The National Festival also honored set designer Dr. Samir Ahmed, who taught generations of stage designers at the Theatre Institute, and Director Dr Hany Motawe, who died only a few days before the festival opening. Also honored was the late Mohamed El Sherbeeney, writer, director, and administrator of the Popular Culture department. Among the living, the festival honored two important figures - writer Lenin El Ramly and critic Hassan Attya. Both were honored for their continued contributions to the theatre world.



Participating Production Bodies

This year's festival presented work from eleven different organizations, which included major governmental departments from the Ministry of Culture such as the Artistic House for Theatre, and the General Authority of Cultural Palaces, the Cultural Development Fund, and the Opera House. It also presented plays produced by independent theatre companies, university theatres, NGOs and private companies.

***Equus* by the Cultural House of Senbellaween**

The first day had an unexpectedly strong beginning with a performance of Peter Shafer's *Equus*, directed by Farid Youssef from the Cultural House of Senbellaween. This psychological drama about a teenager who blinds five horses unravels to show a complex psyche and poses deep questions about human beings and their relationship with the divine.

The simple set, designed by Aya Islam, managed to give the small space of the Creative Center at the Opera Grounds a sense of depth through the use of platform risers. The director used two side screens to play with shadows representing the inner psyche of the teenager and his doctor, while the lit backdrop image of the horse eyes added more visual dramatic intensity.

The basic aesthetics of this production of *Equus* provided a good background for the impressive feat the cast of young actors performed. With simple tools they managed to convey a complex drama, and create real tension and poignant dramatic moments that gripped the attention of the festival audience.

Hanager's *Viva Egypt*

On the other hand, *Tahya Masr* (Viva Egypt), the performance presented by Hanager Arts Center was a

major failure. Though it had a much larger budget and better production circumstances, it lacked artistic integrity and theatrical ingenuity.

Assem Nagaty, the director and one of the lead actors, did not have a clear direction for his performance. The play moved haphazardly between a Brechtian approach of breaking the fourth wall, and half-heartedly engaging with the historic story of the end of the Mamlouk rule of Egypt.

This large production by one of the most experimental stages in Egypt, with a large cast of actors and dancers, wearing historic costumes, felt like a rushed amateur production with no vision or a clear plan. The loose ending added to the feeling that the creators of *Viva Egypt* did not know what to do with this jumble of meta-theatricality and historic story. They asked the audience if it was OK to change the ending to a known historic event, confusing notions of historiography and re-reading/re-writing/ revisioning history with slack imagination and a lack of originality.

It was hard for them to get out of the mess they created after comparing Mamlouk leader Toman Bey, who united Egyptians to fight Sultan Selim the First, to the current political leadership. The historic events lead to the killing of Toman Bey and the display of his head on one of the Gates of Cairo: Bab Zewela. If they finished the story as it is recorded in history, it might suggest a reference to beheading the current leadership. As they had not thought it out during production, however, they did not end their performance at all.

The performance antics worked well with the children in the audience, who laughed at the belly of the Sultan and at the made-up words and weird sounds created by the actors. It is baffling, though, why the creators of *Viva Egypt* chose to work with a text in classical Arabic, then break the language with no dramatic need, just to crack a silly joke in colloquial Egyptian, or to make fun of a fellow actors!

This kind of theatre, if we could call it theatre at all, is not worthy of being part of a National Theatre festival, which claims to present “the best” of Egyptian Theatre in a year.

Spirit (The Rose and Crown)

The majority of the forty plays presented as part of the official competition or on the fringe were presentations or adaptations of European plays. Some of these plays worked and some simply didn't! The Tale'a Theatre production of *Rouh*' (Spirit) performed on the small space of Salah Abdel Sabour Hall was a good example of an adaptation that worked.

Spirit is based on the British play *The Rose and Crown*, written by J. B. Priestley as a television play in 1946. The playwright adapted his one-act morality play for the stage in 1947. That text was adjusted by dramaturg Yasser Abul Eineen for an Egyptian production for Tale'a theatre in Ataba Square.

The impressive set, with great attention to details, engaged the audience the moment they entered the space of Salah Abdel Sabour Hall. The small black box was transformed into a bar. Set designer Mohamed Gaber converted the room, altering its energy completely, adding more depth and surprising nooks and corners for actors.

Every bit of space was well used for the actors' movements. The promising set design was fully utilized

by director Bassem Qinawy, who moved his actors gracefully all around the space, integrating them with the audience, who felt truly involved in the events and the unfolding of the story. The set design and the clever direction engaged the audiences in the drama unfolding around them, in front of them, beside them and behind them.

Spirit traces the simple story of a group of villagers gathered in their local pub, with their usual complaints, bickering and joyful moments. The mundane gathering is disrupted by the entrance of a stranger, all in black, in an elegant suit and black gloves. He is passing by their village on business relating to a departed neighbor.

Soon after the audience gets a glimpse into the lives of each of the characters, the stranger reveals himself to be the Grim Reaper, coming to collect the Spirits whose time has come. He gives the group a chance to volunteer one of themselves, as most of them were complaining about life and its hardships, and expressing their willingness to kiss life goodbye at the first opportunity. When the opportunity comes, however, all those who complained about life and only saw what was not working, cling to life, as hard as it is, and refuse to die.

The most convivial character, Harry, who complimented everyone, bought them drinks, danced with them and enjoyed life in spite of his deep pain at losing any hope of being united with his beloved, is the one who eventually volunteers to go.

This simple morality play, with often clichéd comments and stock characters, was transformed at the hands of the vivacious cast of veteran actors into a riveting piece of theatre. Omar Abdel Halim, with perfect excellent comedic timing, abrupt calculated responses, and mumbled language, brought life to the somewhat banal role of Percy, making every move an opportunity to share an aspect of his character, even closing a book!

Not every actor was as subtle. But even the exaggerated reactions of Yasser Ezzat as Mr. Stone, the grumpy plumber character, worked in this exciting ensemble of performers. Actor Lobna Wannas was impressive and presented a very convincing old woman, playing her role with the perfect mix of passion, gusto and frailty. While Fatma Mohamed Aly showed her talent as a singer, as well as an actor in the role of Mrs. Red. With warmth, ease of being, and toned-down charisma, Adel Allam embodied the role of the convivial Harry, offering a sensitive and touching performance.

Good actors at the hands of a great director like Bassem Qinawy can transform any text to an exciting evening of theatre that touches the hearts and minds of theatre-goers. The impressive achievements of the director, cast and creative team behind *Spirit* restores our faith in Egyptian theatre makers who are capable of producing such tight productions with finesse, elegance, beauty and spirit.

Midsummer Nightmare

Shakespeare's playful comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a popular play as it delights audiences from all age groups and backgrounds, and touches the imagination with a mixture of love, intrigue, fairies, magic potions and physical comedy.

Unfortunately, the National Theatre Festival audiences were not blessed with a decent production of this

fun play. Award-winning director Mazen El Gharabawy tried his hand at Shakespeare's comedy, and messed it up. He made a number of odd choices in his adaptation of the classical piece. He replaced most of the comedic dialogue with songs, badly sung to banal melodies that were not easy to understand, hence making it harder to follow the unfolding of the story.



A Midsummer's Night Dream

El Gharabawy, for no clear reason, also divided the character of Puck, the servant of Oberon, king of the fairies, between four actors. The four actors said their lines together and did the same movements, adding nothing to the drama, and more clutter to the visual imagery. Most of the actors moved and delivered their lines as if they were animated characters in a cartoon. The interesting rich characters of Shakespeare were reduced to two dimensions with annoyingly fake voices.

Visually the space was overloaded with images hanging over and around the proscenium arch, sculpted structures, platforms, colored moving globes, strobe lights and strange lighting effects. All of that compounded with the loud unnerving music suggested the title of another of Shakespeare's plays: *Much Ado About Nothing!*

Many theatre directors choose to present classical texts as a fool-proof way to guarantee powerful plays

with the tried and true texts as firm basis for their productions. And most ambitious directors, while leaning on the solid work of well-known playwrights, try to shed light on a specific angle in the play through highlighting or eliminating aspects of scenes in order to foreground what they deem relevant to their contemporary audiences, or the current socio-political situation. Unfortunately, some of the plays participating in this year's Egyptian National Theatre Festival, however, failed miserably in preserving the essence of the original plays.

Wannus' Rituals of Signs and Transformations

It is always thrilling to see works by late Syrian playwright Sa'adallah Wannus. His early plays questioned the prevailing political atmosphere, and his late plays are gems from a powerful writer who knew of his eminent death, and had nothing to fear and was willing to challenge the status quo head on!

Toqous Al Isharaat Wal Tahawoulat (Rituals of Signs and Transformations) is one of Wannus' exceptional late plays which confronts many of the taboo issues in Arab societies. It exposes the power relationships between politics and religion, explores new aspects of women's sexuality, and presents the first respectable gay love affair in the Arabic Theatre.

Director and dramaturg Tarek Ezzat of the independent theatre company Modern Teatro was ambitious in his reading of the text, hinting that Islamists are behind the scenes of the corruption, conspiracies and deceit that the play reveals.

Unfortunately, Ezzat was not fortunate enough to have a good ensemble of actors to translate his vision onto the stage. Maha Omran did not understand the depth and breadth of the character she played: Mo'mena, who later turned to Almasa, one of the best female roles ever written for the Arabic stages. Her vocal and physical interpretation of the character limited her to a sex worker, rather than a woman confronting society through liberating her body from the limitations imposed upon it.



The role of Abdallah was too big for Mohamed Ashraf, who tried his best to capture the downfall of this

prominent figure, and his turn toward the Sufi path to find inner peace. Even worse, Mohamed Adel ruined the role of El Mofty, incompetently opting for cheap jokes rather than building the complex inner life of the character.

Unfortunately, Abdallah Shaher and Mohamed Ibrahim were not able to capture the beauty that Wannus created in the gay love. And the performance as a whole missed its mark. Instead of celebrating all kinds of love and acceptance, this version of *Rituals* seemed to make fun of homosexuality, especially in the scenes between Semsem and the Governor.

Hamlet Al-Million

What was more painful than the poor production values of Tarek Ezzat's play was the poor vision of the lavish production of *Hamlet* by Future University. Director Khaled Galal became a household name following the success for his improvised play *A'hwa Sada* (Black Coffee) at the Creativity Center, which he runs at the Opera grounds. There he created his own style of theatre based on improvised comedic vignettes, vibrant colors, sparkle, moving lights and a large number of performers.

His work style is encapsulated by the lyrics of a song in the popular musical and film *Chicago*: "Razzle Dazzle 'em" summarizing the logic of the twisted lawyer in the musical: "Razzle Dazzle 'em! Razzle Dazzle 'em! How can they see with sequins in their eyes?"

Galal's take on the classical Shakespeare play, arguably the most well known play of all times, was full of glitter, sparkle and a lot of bizarre choices. Galal and dramturg Mostafa Seleim chose a contemporary frame story to present the famous tragedy about the Prince of Denmark. They created a game show based on the television program *Who Will Be a Millionaire?*

They dismembered the original play, dividing it into thinly sliced scenes, each presented in a different format, according to the "vision" of one of the contestants. The audience got to see ten scenes from the famous play, each presented in a different style: As a Turkish soap opera dubbed in Syrian accent, as a classical play, as an Indian film, as a marionette performance, as a film in popular cinema style, in a more serious cinematic form (that looked like a historic TV series), as a modern dance, in Saudi accent, in addition to a version for children fashioned after *the Lion King*, and a sung version in the style of *Evita*.

Galal, considered by some to be the most important director of his generation, is a show biz man galore! He knows how to package and present his work in flashy costumes and colorful lights. But even the most frivolous of show biz and the entertainment industry work pays attention to details; it's not just showy costumes and dancing lights that "razzle dazzle" without holding a play together.

The international game show and its Arabic version *Man Sayarbah Al Millioo* is based on the accumulative score of contestants who win a number of successive rounds. In Galal's play, the ten participants fight for one winning position, which is decided by caller's voting for their favorite scene! This watered down theatrical version of the game show is just a phony excuse to dissect Hamlet, not trusting that the original play works on its own without so many additions.

The text of Hamlet itself has much of what Khaled Galal wanted to express in his production. He and Mostafa Selim unfortunately missed many opportunities by replacing these sections of the play with over-

acted, melodramatic, phony wailing scenes and meaningless songs and dances.



What's more powerful than a play that contains the impactful and telling line "There is something Rotten in the State of Denmark," a line that did not find its place in the current production! The dramaturg and the director also ignored Hamlet's speech to the performers who were going to present a small play in court, to reveal the truth about the murder of the late king. This speech is generally considered the first manifesto for actors, advising them to be subtle, not to over-act, or needlessly move their arms, etc. While watching the over-acting and forced comedy of the young performers, one wonders why they skipped that speech?

One major error is ignoring the powerful ending of the original play. After all the court members are dead, some killed in the duel, others by poison, the enemy enters the court, taking over the State of Denmark. A wiser director would have used that compelling scene, instead of writing a series of wailing lines and noisy exchanges about the current state of affairs. Saying "we do not want others to erase our wonderful Egyptian tradition" in a couple of minutes, while celebrating the opposite of that throughout the production, this extravagant University performance of *Hamlet*, is paying lip service to principles that their play choices refute.

As the director who works the most with his generation, Galal has a lot of experience in organizing large groups of performers on stage. In this case, he was able to create some nice visuals with the help of set designer Hazem Shebl, but he was not successful in creating a performance with a sense of integrity that respected either the text or the audience. Galal had another chance to impress the National Festival

audience with *Ba'ad El Leel*, (After the Night). However, his second play was misogynistic and artistically lacking.



Khaled Galal - Ba'ad El-Leel (After the Night)

The Awards

After two weeks of performances, the eighth version of the Egyptian National Theatre Festival concluded with a grand finale, an award ceremony in the Main Hall of Cairo Opera House on September 21.

It was not surprising that the Tale'a theatre's performance *Spirit* received the lion's share of awards. It won eight awards for Best Performance, Best Rising Director Bassem Qinawy, Best Actor Yasser Ezzat, Best Supporting Actor Ahmad El Rafie, Best Actress Fatma Mohamed Ali, Best Supporting Actress Lobna Wannas, Best Dramaturg Yasser Abul Eineen and Best Music Hatem Ezzat.

What was surprising is that it did not get Best Set award, though Mohamed Gabr's set was the most impressive element of this production. The Best Set award was split between Wael Abdallah for *3D*, and Moustafa El Tohami for *Catching Mice*. Best Director was awarded to Tamer Karam for his production of *Here..Antigone!* While Best Rising Actress went to Hend Abdel Haleem for her role as the lead character Antigone.

The Best Rising Actor award was given to Mohamed Ali for his role in *Equus*. In addition to the honor and the monetary award, the Rising Actor will also be supported by Al Adl group, and given a role in a future production of the group. Mahmoud Gamal was named Best Writer for *Al Ghareeb*, The Foreigner. Gamal had won the same award in 2013 for the production of *1980* and *Beyond*, which is still running successfully after two years. The Best Rising Writer award went to the creators of *Men and Women*, Islam Imam, Yasmine Imam and Ayaat Magdy.

Men and Women in the Festival

This team based their play on the pop psychology book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. Their piece had a number of sketches summarizing the essence of the book which claims that women and men belong to different planets, and they do not even speak the same language.

The oversimplified notion of the book and the show recreated the typical stereotyping of males and females. Islam Imam, also the director of *Men and Women*, chose to dress women in pink satin dresses and men in baby blue suits! The piece had many sketches which presented a superficial aspect of relationships, without offering any depth or deeper understanding of the complexity of partnerships. The opening scenes were dedicated to showing how each partner had changed with marriage. The woman insisted that her fiancé was “taller” before she married him, while the husband described how beautiful his wife once was.

Another scene presented a couple fishing. They fished for faults in each other, while the rest of the group cheered for the better insult! The long final scene attempted to dramatize the idea of a dictionary translating the meanings of what each gender says in an attempt to create common grounds and understanding.

What saved the performance from being a total failure was the comedic timing of actor Salah El Daly, who created a rapport with the audience, especially as the Chef, who is advising them on how to add spice to their relationships. This award winning performance was an indication of the way women were represented in this year’s National festival.

Where Are The Women?

With forty offerings, thirty-five of them participating in the official competition, there was not one play by a woman director. And only two plays with women as a writer or co-writer.

The lack of women’s presence in the festival had its effects on the content of the performances presented. There were no strong female roles, and even the decent roles were diminished in this year’s iteration. A clear example is the powerful role written by Syrian playwright Sadallah Wannus of *Mo’mena/ El Masa* in his play *Rituals of Signs and Transformations*. Unfortunately, this role was seriously marred in the version of the play in this year’s festival.

What is more disturbing is not just how women were limited to the traditional roles of the temptress, oppressed mother or objectified ingénue but how plays which claimed to champion women’s causes

actually participated in the cycle of violence against women. Khaled Galal's *After The Night* (winner of Best Ensemble award) did a great disservice to women. While the performance asked the question "what made you like that?" to those who have lost hope and those who harass women, the play itself promotes violence against women, not just through presenting females as objectified sexy bodies, showing how men mindlessly drool over them. The play ends with a very long scene making fun of an incident of rape, eliciting laughter from the audience at an exaggeration in relating the number of rapists!

Can The National Festival Revitalize Egyptian Theatre?

If the National Theatre Festival organizers see its main role as presenting some of the successful performances of the previous season, then the festival has succeeded in this year after year. However, if the Festival wants to play an active role in re-vitalizing the Egyptian theatre scene, it needs to implement a different strategy.

Year after year, the Festival Jury writes its recommendations, which start with variations on the notion of "stop slaughtering the Arabic language." What if the selection committees refused to allow the participation of performances that did not respect the Arabic language rules, and only allowed plays whose actors actually pronounce the language accurately!

Throughout the festival's life, many have complained about the lack of Egyptian performances in the Egyptian National Festival, which often has a majority of adapted classical plays and translated European texts. This could change if the Festival decided to include only Egyptian and Arabic plays in its official competition for two or three years. This would not only affect the festival, but it might have an impact on the theatre scene at large, encouraging artists to look into the large heritage of Egyptian plays. It might also inspire writers to create new plays, pumping fresh blood into the theatre's veins.

Awards to really support the actors

The Festival awards set trends in the theatre scene. When a play or a performer gets an award, other artists in the milieu imitate them, hoping that they would one day be award winning as well. A problem thus arises when awards are given to artists who are below par, under the guise of the belief that it is the best of what is available! When others copy their style, the whole theatrical scene becomes part of a vicious cycle that no one knows how to break.

One suggestion about how to get out of that dilemma is to provide training for awardees as part of the award, at least for the awardees of the Rising artist category. This gives the chance to a budding writer to work with experienced writers and dramaturges, and for new directors and actors to be mentored by veteran directors and actors. It would also encourage them to participate in training workshops in Egypt and abroad to expand their experiences and invest in their future.

Now that the festival festivities have ended, it is time to question if this festival, with its thirty-five plays in the official competition and a few more on the fringe, was able to truly represent the intense experiences and deep shifts the Egyptian society and the region at large have been going through in the past five years, or are we still reproducing the same old theatre of the past century?

Dalia Basiouny is an Egyptian writer, theatre director and founder of Sabeel for the Arts in Cairo. She has performed her Monodrama “Solitaire” in a number of countries, including Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, and the United States. Her more recent work includes “The Magic of Borolus” (see Arabic Stages, volume 2).



Arab Stages

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