

## The Last Supper by Ahmed El Attar

### *The Last Supper*

by Ahmed El Attar  
By Marvin Carlson and  
Philippa Wehle

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Despite the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and the coming to power of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2014, the life style of the Cairo elite has not significantly changed, a situation that forms the basis of *The Last Supper*, by Egyptian director Ahmed El Attar and his organization, the Temple Independent Theatre Company, which continues, despite more and more strict government oversight, to offer an independent theatrical voice in Egypt's capital. Their efforts were recognized this summer when this play was presented to much praise first at the Avignon Festival in July and then at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers in Paris in November as part of the Parisian Autumn Festival and in January of 2016 in Brussels.

With his 2004 satire, *Mother I want to be a Millionaire*, El Attar firmly established himself, along with Mahmoud al-Lozy, as one of the most important and most outspoken dramatists and directors in the contemporary Egyptian theatre. His best-known work, *On the Importance of Being Arab*, an autobiographical monodrama performed by himself, was first presented in 2009. *The Last Supper*, his most recent work, made its premiere in Cairo's Falaki Theatre in November of 2014. El Attar placed both the audience and the action on the Falaki stage, creating an intimacy that truly suggested that the actors and audience were part of the same community. When the production began to tour to Avignon and elsewhere, it was presented in a more conventional proscenium situation which, like the language and many local references, created a distance that was far from the intention of the original. Still, the work's social satire surmounted these obstacles, as can be seen in the following report from Avignon by Philippa Wehle, a part of her report on that Festival which appeared in the online journal *European Stages*, 5 (Fall, 2015):

The production suggests a contemporary reality with a portrait of Egypt's ruling class at table. Their supper takes place in a vast space with a backdrop of shimmering blues and silver. A very long table made of plexiglass dominates the scene. It is set with expensive glasses, silverware, and china. A man sits on the edge of the table looking out into the distance. Another joins him while another walks over to the table to make sure the place settings are correct. Soon an entire family is seated, *paterfamilias* smoking an expensive cigar, in the center, a general next to him, the father's son and daughter-in-law and their children, their daughter and her husband, a close family, friends, and three servants. This is clearly not "Christ's Last Supper," as the ironic title of the play infers. As the play began, I realized that I could not read any of the French supertitles. They were much too light on a light background. I decided to sit back to see what I could understand of the play. Interestingly, as it turned out when checking with other audience members after the show, my understanding of the "plot" and even the insipid conversation was quite accurate.

*The Last Supper* presents a microcosm of "Egypt's class-led society with its hegemony of despotic father figures," to quote the director. Even if I could not understand what the characters were saying, the visual composition of the play speaks volumes. Here is a self-satisfied, vacuous group of people, incapable of imagining or even thinking about their country's needs. The Arab Spring has come and gone, and Egypt's economic elite is not the least bit changed. As the general says: "It's just a few months and everything will go back to normal. It will even be better than before." His words illustrate the general tenor of the dinner conversation. The play's dialogue was actually composed from private telephone conversations that El Attar recorded.



Temple Independent Theatre Company, "The Last Supper." Directed by Ahmed El Attar.

A very large cow's head serves as the centerpiece for the table. It is bright and white and visually symbolic, perhaps, of the emptiness of these frivolous people. The woman at the far end of the table is especially mindless. She is the mother of two children seated on the floor in front, and a baby who is held by a nanny who is not allowed to approach the table unless beckoned by her. She clearly cares little for children or her baby, who is handed off to the nanny whenever it doesn't suit her. She prefers to read her tablet while the general talks on the phone and a younger woman sends text messages on her I-phone. The children, a boy and a girl, are spoiled brats, of course, the boy in particular. He gleefully runs around throwing things at one of the servants and hitting him. The conversation turns to their preferences in cities other than Cairo. The mother prefers London to New York: "London is amazing," she announces in English. "Big Ben, Harrod's, shopping" sum up her preferences. The uncle is cooking up some prank with the boy. It concerns the servant, who is obliged to kiss the boy's hand to ask forgiveness for something he did not do and he is fired for no reason.

Most striking of all is the role of the servants. They are not allowed to approach the table except to bring food or pour water. In the case of the children's nanny, she must stand at a distance from the table, ready

to take out whatever is needed for the children's pleasure—games, books, and lollipops (which she has to unwrap for them). If the mother wants her head massaged, the nanny may perform this duty and then return to her standing position. The waiter never walks; he runs to fetch more water or whatever else is needed. Throughout the fifty-five minutes of the show, the supper is never served. It seems that the group is waiting for the father's wife to appear. While they are waiting, they cannot resist taking a selfie to post on Instagram. They all gather and the group is captured in all of its inanity, frozen forever in a red light that El Attar shines on the group from time to time to immortalize their futility.

**Philippa Wehle** is Professor Emerita of French Language and Culture and Drama Studies at Purchase College, State University of New York. She writes widely on contemporary theatre and performance and is the author of *Le Théâtre populaire selon Jean Vilar*, *Drama Contemporary: France*, and *Act French: Contemporary Plays from France*. She is a well-known translator of contemporary plays with a specialty in creating supertitles in French for emerging theatre companies. Dr. Wehle is a Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters.

**Marvin Carlson** is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Editor-in-Chief of *Arab Stages*. His research and teaching interests include dramatic theory and Western European theatre history and dramatic literature, especially of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He has been awarded the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the George Jean Nathan Prize, the Bernard Hewitt prize, the George Freedley Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been a Walker-Ames Professor at the University of Washington, a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Indiana University, a visiting professor at the Freie Universität of Berlin, and a Fellow of the American Theatre. In 2005 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Athens. His best-known book, *Theories of the Theatre* (Cornell University Press, 1993), has been translated into seven languages. His 2001 book, *The Haunted Stage* won the Calloway Prize. His newest book is *Four Plays From Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous* (Martin E. Segal Center Publications, 2014).



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