

Yussef El Guindi's Arab Spring: Revolutions, Upheavals, and Critical Critiques

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jar Arab Stages,

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Egyptian-American playwright Yussef El Guindi is arguably the most prolific and widely produced Arab American playwright working today. During and after the Arab Spring, El Guindi wrote three plays that dealt specifically with the uprisings in his native Egypt: *The Tyrant*, *The Mummy and the Revolution*, and the provocatively titled *Threesome*. Despite his contention that he did not specifically set out to write a trilogy of plays about this subject, his imagination and his desire to address the concerns and arguments surrounding the Arab Spring led to three plays that consider the events of 2011 from the perspective of both the dictators and the protesters. El Guindi's triad explore the exigencies of Western-backed dictatorial regimes, the post-trauma suffered by the protesters who participated in the revolutions, and the painful disconnection exiles experience after leaving their homelands and desiring normalcy abroad. In all three plays American audiences are asked to evaluate their preconceived notions about U.S. foreign policy, the role of women in Arab society, and the Orientalization of Arabs in mainstream media and culture. El Guindi's plays, although somewhat accepted by mainstream American theatres,^[1] challenge many of the notions that surround American views regarding Middle East affairs.

In his book *The Revolt of the Young: The Case of the Twenty-First Century*, Tawfiq al-Hakim wrote,

The distinction between "revolution" and "upheaval" is that the latter sweeps up with it both the good and the bad, just as the turbulent wind does with both green leaves and withered ones, the fruitful tree and the barren one. A "revolution," however, retains what is useful and derives strength thereof. It does away with what is useless, worn out, that which impedes vigor, shuts out fresh air, and stands in the way of renewal and development.^[2]

If al-Hakim's thesis is correct, what befell his native Egypt was much more of an upheaval than a revolution. Instead of a new regime that did away with the useless order that stands in the way of renewal and development, the two leaders that followed Mubarak's abdication have led to further instability and, worse, a return to the status quo. Instead of democracy, Egypt finds itself under yet another military dictatorship that provides order at the cost of silencing any dissent. According to *Public Radio International* correspondent Matthew Bell, "Unlike during the Mubarak era, the Sisi government has taken a uncompromising approach toward the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood organization. Whereas Mubarak gave the Brotherhood some leeway to function as an underground political movement, the current regime is taking steps to eradicate the Brotherhood as a political player altogether."^[3] The hopes of the revolutionaries have been stifled by the re-emergence of a military government that has a complete intolerance for dissent.

El Guindi's plays examine the conflict from multiple angles. In the 2014 one-act monologue titled *The Tyrant*, an imprisoned man named Habib sits on a chair beside a table on which rests a projector, a water pitcher, and a glass. Habib speaks directly to the audience that was invited to attend what he calls an "observation." He warns audiences that they, too, will be made a spectacle of. He tells the audience he does not fear the death that befell other dictators, only that he will die before a proper accounting of his acts is made known. In the course of the monologue Habib excoriates the audience, accusing them of backing his regime while he was needed then allowing his ouster as soon as he was no longer of use. He asks, "at what point do you good people become liable for the crimes done in your name?"^[4] Before retreating to his cell he tells the audience he is free in his mind and it is they, and not he, who are actually locked up.

In his 2014 play *The Mummy and the Revolution*, an Egyptian woman named Mushira visits an American antiquities dealer named Roger to retrieve artifacts that an American collector has purchased illegally. A mummy in his collection turns out to be an Egyptian antiquities dealer named Magdi who is hiding from authorities. The second act revolves around the debate between Mushira, a woman proud to be an Egyptian revolutionary during the Arab Spring, and Dr. El Magdi, who was a Mubarak regime crony who wants to make a fortune smuggling precious Egyptian artifacts and selling them on the black market. Mushira tries to take back what El Magdi stole, but he has no intention of letting her do so. The play ends with a fight, a talking bear, and Roger and Mushira falling in love. Despite the somewhat shallow plot, the play has several interesting exchanges regarding the Arab Spring itself. In one speech, Mushira tells El Magdi what she thinks about the revolution in her native Egypt:

MUSHIRA. We had a revolution, Mr. Roger. It was real and nobody can take away that moment in our history. It hurts me now to think of everything that wants to kill it, but that great moment happened. To live with the weight of something that keeps you on your knees for so long and then have that weight lift. To have joined with others to lift that weight off. Even better than if I had done it alone, Mr. Roger. Even if I, Mushira, had marched into the office of the dictator and by some miracle had persuaded him to leave, no, that would have been nothing in comparison to what was done as a country, together. *That* was the victory. The people of my country found each other and after eighteen days of painful labor we were born. Born as citizens. Do you have any idea what that means? [...] But like all tyrants that want to put down expression, the forces of darkness fought back. With whips and bullets they tried to drive us away. With thugs on camels and horses, but they couldn't. Yes: I was honored to be there. ^[5]

Mushira likens the current Egyptian leaders to the Ancient Egyptians themselves, and that the Arab Spring was a break in a long succession of dictators that came before. "Our culture of obedience," she tells Roger, "that never seems to end but that we were finally saying no to."^[6] El Guindi contrasts Mushira's optimistic view of the revolution with El Magdi's more cynical and bitter account of the events of that time.

EL MAGDI. I don't begrudge you your moment of triumph. Not at all, I get it. It's tough out there. Watching the rich mopping the floor with your sweat. The police beating you up for no reason. A little blowing off steam, even a little blood letting is good for the soul of a country. Long live the momentary triumph of the people. And then let's get back to business.^[7]

Mushira's disguise as a fellow plunderer of her country's riches is betrayed by the love she has for her country. She tells Roger,

MUSHIRA. Whatever else you may think of me, Mr. Roger, know that I am a true Egyptian. You speak of America like you're proud of it, well I am proud of my country too. Unfortunately—when history falls on our heads like it did recently, there are many people, like my family, who will get caught up in this explosion of history, even as they say 'yes' to wanting a revolution and a new life... All you Westerners who have plundered our culture over the centuries. What are actual people to you? Art and culture make me so sick sometimes. Yes, our history is great; but the backs of ordinary Egyptians have been broken to make these pieces. They could make them, but could they own it? No. Well I wanted to take it back on behalf of all those workers and their descendants.[8]

By setting his play in the world of art and antiquity theft, El Guindi opens larger questions about the role of history in the making, and owning of cultural artifacts. This question of antiquities has become more and more relevant in recent years, especially in light of the controversy regarding the Elgin Marbles, the looting of the Iraqi and Egyptian national museums, and the recent destruction, and selling of, artifacts by ISIS. Magdi refutes Mushira's thesis that the revolution led to freedom, instead, he tells her,

MAGDI. But that's the point my dear, you *are* in chains. You were before you rioted and here you are still in chains. For two minutes during your protests you imagined you were out of some prison, free. But as soon as the festivities were over, you turned around and found you are still in the worst prisons of all: those small minds of yours. And those small minds will always damn you to the petty desires of an uneducated people.

This imperious attitude is one that is shared by El Guindi's character Habib in his one-man show titled *The Tyrant*. In this drama, Habib is the captured dictator who is on trial before an audience of revolutionaries. Imagine having an opportunity to hear Hosni Mubarak himself speaking out about his dictatorial reign, his capture, and his feelings about those who deposed him. "Seeing one's enemy fall is really a delightful feeling" he tells the audience. In Habib's view, tyrants are "overly helpful people" who overstay their welcome. The only prop on the stage is an overhead projector onto which Habib writes several of what he calls "confessions": "arrogance/hubris", "Fuck you too, Love, your President", and "Fuck you, America—cocksuckers." Habib insists he does not fear death, but rather a full accounting of his actions before he is relegated to the dust-bin of history. He addresses Americans first, telling them:

HABIB. I love Americans. You are a unique species. The rest of us, we live on a different planet, but you: you occupy the space of the elected. For the moment, anyway... you insides are not bruised the way ours are. This block we go around, you have not been around it as many times as we have. For over five thousand years of recorded history we have gone around this block. We built the fucking block. But you, you feel a little separate from us, no?[9]

Habib reminds Americans that they live in a "perfect bubble called America" because of tyrants like himself, who protect what he calls "ungrateful Americans" from the mad fanatics that accuse America of

being the problem. Habib tells the Americans that his people like strong leaders since they "live in a dangerous neighborhood." In his view, tyrants are like fathers who must be strict and keep order. In addition, he lambasts Americans for their hypocrisy:

HABIB. You really are more progressive when it comes to torture. Really, you have my respect. I have been taking mental notes on your well researched techniques for breaking a man down. We never had the funds to explore such exquisite methods. But I approve; it's working... It's really amazing how you Americans continue to celebrate your values when your misdeeds make the people you accuse look like amateurs.[\[10\]](#)

Habib then recounts slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, and the wars America has waged during the last centuries as examples of the mendacity of a nation that continually commits atrocities, yet dares to lecture other nations who do so. Habib tells the American audience that there are multiple reasons others wish to lash out at Americans for their free thinking, their ability to offend other religions, and their bombing and invading other nations. Habib believes that he, and other tyrants, keep the fanatics away from their people and the Americans themselves. What is worse, he says, is that Americans befriend and back tyrants until they no longer need them.

HABIB. Don't you have any morals? Do you even *know* what's being done in your name? To this day? My God, the privilege of being you. Having the power to outsource your darkest deeds so you don't have to look in the abyss. *We do it for you and then get attacked for doing it. All so you can continue your pursuit of happiness; and amusing yourselves to death while we get bent over. Well fuck you too!*[\[11\]](#)

Habib then turns his attention on those revolutionaries who deposed him.

HABIB. I was your man... you don't want to get rid of me. Some people's demands should never be given in to. My people do not have the character for freedom. They are on a course they do not understand. After wanting food on the table they have no ideas after that. They'll ruin everything. And their ruin will come to your shores. It will come to your shores![\[12\]](#)

El Guindi's play actually puts words in the mouths of those who we might consider the world's antagonists — despots and dictators who rule brutally and are eventually toppled by war or coups. This is quite a bold act on his part since he is both accusing the Americans of their complicity in the so-called "war on terror" and pointing a finger at the Egyptian people for starting a revolution which they cannot possibly understand.

El Guindi's last play of this triad, *Threesome*, is yet another instructive Arab Spring story. Leila, an Egyptian American woman, and her partner Rashid (also Egyptian American) are awaiting another man named Doug who Leila has invited to their home for a threesome. Rashid is not pleased with the arrangement but allows it given Leila's changed demeanor after their return from Cairo following the uprising there. Doug, a hapless Caucasian man, is not physically shy (he spends the majority of act one stark naked), but he is emotionally clumsy. The three characters try to carry out the sexual tryst but, after

much hilarious deliberation and uneasiness, Doug leaves frustrated and Leila and Rashid are even more distant. Act two takes place in Doug's photography studio where Doug is the hired photographer for Leila's book. Leila has agreed to be the model on the cover but does not realize that Doug wants to dress her in a *burqa* and place her in an Orientalized setting replete with rugs, lamps, and hookahs. Leila objects to the treatment when Rashid arrives drunk and angry after finally reading her manuscript and realizing that Doug, and not he, was chosen as the photographer for the book. After Rashid lambasts Leila for explicitly detailing the rape she endured both in Tahrir Square by the protesters and later at a police station by the police themselves, Leila sends him away telling him that she does not believe they can continue on given their damaged relationship. After Doug returns and photographs Leila in the *burqa*, he tells her of his exploits as a war photographer where he took sexual advantage of an Arab woman who had to prostitute herself to feed her children. Leila verbally attacks Doug and, while he runs off trying to find her clothing, she hears the sound of the revolution and stands naked on the stage in an act of defiance.



Threesome by Yussef El Guindi. Directed by Chris Coleman. Photo: Patrick Weishampel/BLANKEYE.

El Guindi's play is both a comedy and a drama, but for the purposes of this exploration, only the second act is relevant. Leila carries with her the trauma of being both a proud revolutionary and a woman who has been sexually assaulted both by her fellow protesters and by the police of the dictator state she was protesting against. In addition, she is being Orientalized by an American publisher and photographer who believe that, by doing so, the book would sell more copies. Unlike Mushira, the bold and brash figure in his play *The Mummy and the Revolution*, Leila is a much more empathetic character because she refuses

to be treated like a victim. As she tells Doug,

LEILA. One of the things my book is an argument against, Doug, if you'd bothered to read it, is how the West, in its own little way contributes to things sucking for Muslim women by making them seem so very helpless every time they're depicted. One of which is shoving them into these things (re: the abaya.) Which turns them into these weak, oppressed creatures who have to be rescued by the oh-so enlightened Western man who sweeps in and rescues them. I don't want to contribute to that.[\[13\]](#)

Leila is caught in the double bind of finding a publisher who wants to print her book, yet having to deal with the ridiculous ideas that publisher has about her culture and herself. When Doug tries to convince her that the cover will attract readers, Leila tells him she doesn't need allies, but a partnership.

LEILA. A partnership, yes, not some re-imagined Uncle Tom's retreat for Muslim women who need to get rescued by you invading our countries. *We* get screwed while you walk away feeling self-righteous for being outraged on our behalf.[\[14\]](#)

Later, when Rashid tries to understand why Leila included the explicit details of her rape in her book, he goes so far as to call it pornography. Leila tells him that "Good pornography spares you the woman's point of view. Those gruesome details that you guys don't like."[\[15\]](#) Rashid turns on Leila and her decision to wear the *burqa* in the photograph:

RASHID. You're going to get into that sack and peddle the most obvious, most hateful ideas about us? You're going to become a part of this sham? This minstrel show they have about us? That's where all your moral stands and bravery ends up? You want to know what shame is? That is. That's the dishonor you bring upon your family by wanting to make such a public spectacle of yourself. First with the threesome and now you want to invite *the whole fucking world into our bed?*[\[16\]](#)

After Doug divulges the fact that he took sexual advantage of a poor Arab mother, Leila slaps him repeatedly and demands her clothing. Then, El Guindi writes the following stage direction:

The sounds of the revolution become louder. Perhaps there's another sound playing underneath to heighten the effect. Leila is seated, or crouching, head buried, rocking. Perhaps she continues to persistently say "I want my clothes". Then, after a few moments, she stops rocking. She lifts her head up. She is trying to temper her breathing, calm herself. She stands. She closes her eyes. She wills herself not to succumb to this terror. She wants to be in command of her emotions. She lets go of the sheet that covers her and is naked now for the first time. Note: The idea here is to communicate a fearlessness; a challenge to all those who would have her shut up, covered up, ashamed. She stands there, trying to steel herself, embolden herself. All the sounds stop, and for a moment we see her standing there, in the silence. A beat, then blackout.[\[17\]](#)

In my interview with El Guindi, he stated that he did not set out to write a trilogy about the Arab Spring but after the events in Egypt his imagination was consumed by the idea. He said he started a fourth play but after seeing that the revolution in Egypt was not going to turn out as he hoped, he abandoned the project saying he was too depressed to complete it. He told me,

In terms of what holds them together — apart from the obvious climactic event that was the Arab Spring — is that these revolutions promised to usher in new horizons, new opportunities for democracy that no one imagined could happen so soon in the Arab world. The sense of elation that fear of the "deep state" was now dissipating, and courageous voices were stepping up and challenging inhibiting traditions, both social or political. *The Mummy and the Revolution* is the most hopeful of them all. *The Tyrant* speaks to the fears of change, but is contextualized in such a way that we see the old order retired, ushering in the chance for something new, regardless of the dangers that lie ahead. And while *Threesome* speaks to the ugly side of the revolution, it also promises that the social and political issues that have inhibited women from fully participating in society in the past would now change with the brave barging in of women's voices, and their rightful demands for equality in all areas.[\[18\]](#)

Regarding the strong female characters he wrote in both *The Mummy and the Revolution* and *Threesome*, El Guindi stated that he is wary of falling into the Orientalist trap of presenting Arab women as oppressed and having to struggle against powerful Arab men who then need to be rescued by Western enlightenment. Both Mushira and Leila have moral agency and are the active protagonists of both plays. "They don't react to events, they are instigators of the action," he said.

Despite the apparently political nature of the plays, El Guindi insists he does not write from the stance of the political playwright.

I often say I don't have a political agenda when I write, and I don't. But clearly my imagination coughs up characters and situations that end up expressing the concerns and arguments I'm having over something happening in the world, and that has me riled up consciously or unconsciously. And very often I will have characters, in a Shavian manner, express strong arguments that I personally disagree with. But in this case, I sort of have to agree with Habib. It is the privilege of Empire to not have to fully pay for the consequences of their actions. Those within its protective borders can ignore the consequences of the political actions taken by that Empire to protect their interests. Habib wants his American audience (here I was also thinking of the examples of both Noriega and Saddam Hussein, two leaders taken into American custody), he wants them to know that their hands are bloody too. That he was their man abroad. He did their dirty work for them so that they could continue to have the kind of privileged lifestyle that they enjoy. Habib was a way to hold up a mirror to America's foreign policy. As if to say, "When you look at me, you also look at yourselves. You supported me in order to remain top-dog in the region. And now you have the nerve to want to clear your conscience by getting rid of me, now that the tide has turned? The hypocrisy!" Of course, the U.S. has gone back to supporting another dictator now that the tides have turned yet again![\[19\]](#)

By writing these three plays, Yussef El Guindi is one of the few playwrights that have directly addressed

the so-called "Arab Spring." In doing so he presents a uniquely Egyptian view of the situation which is based both on his connection to his native Egypt but also from observing the events from afar. After searching about for other playwrights that have addressed this period of Arab history, I could only find Sulayman Al-Bassam's play *In the Eruptive Mode*, which is a series of monologues that also address the uprisings. In an interview Al Bassam said, "It was important for us to explore more than one side of the coin, and the theatre is also a space that is ultimately a utopic space of freedom."^[20] Despite the Arab Spring's lack of change in the real world circumstances of the people living in the Arab world, the plays that address the issue are powerful reminders that this event was a seismic shift that forever changed the lives of Arabs in many countries, and reminded those living in the West that the status-quo that had defined the Arab world throughout the late nineteenth and through the twentieth century, was not one that was tenable. El Guindi's plays remind American audiences of their complicity with the events that led to the Arab Spring and that there are many souls who have forever been changed from those powerful protests.

Michael Malek Najjar is an assistant professor of theatre arts at the University of Oregon. He holds a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from UCLA, M.F.A. in Directing from York University (Toronto), B.A. in Theatre Arts from the University of New Mexico. He is an associate member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC), and an alumnus of the British/American Drama Academy (BADA), Lincoln Center Director's Lab, Director's Lab West, and RAWI Screenwriters' Lab (Jordan). He directed the world premiere of Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones* and a staged reading of his own play *Talib*, both at the Silk Road Theatre Project, Chicago. He is the editor of *Four Arab American Plays: Works by Leila Buck, Jamil Khoury, Yussef El Guindi, and Lameece Issaq & Jacob Kader as well as Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present*, published by McFarland & Co., Inc. Publishers.

^[1] *The Tyrant* premiered at the Sandbox One-Act Play Festival in 2014. *Threesome* received a full staging at Portland Center Stage from January 24-March 8, 2015 in the Ellyn Bye Studio, and the production also ran at 59E59 Theatres in New York City from July 11-August 23, 2015. *The Mummy and the Revolution* had a staged reading at Silk Road Rising from July 13-July 15, 2012.

^[2] H?aki?m, Tawfi?q, Mona Radwan, and Roger Allen. *The Revolt of the Young: Essays.* , 2015. Print.

^[3] Bell, Matthew. " In Egypt, It's Almost Like the January 25th Revolution Never Happened." *PRI's The World*. National Public Radio. 25 January 2016. Web. 1 April 2016.

^[4] El Guindi, Yussef. *The Tyrant*. N.d. TS, 6.

^[5] El Guindi, Yussef. *The Mummy and the Revolution*. N.d. TS, 21, 22.

^[6] El Guindi, *Mummy* 23.

^[7] El Guindi, *Mummy*, 71.

[8] El Guindi, *Mummy* 37.

[9] El Guindi, *Tyrant* 3.

[10] El Guindi, *Tyrant* 7.

[11] El Guindi, *Tyrant* 10.

[12] El Guindi, *Tyrant* 11.

[13] El Guindi, Yussef. *Threesome*. N.d. TS, 55.

[14] El Guindi, *Threesome*, 55.

[15] El Guindi, *Threesome*, 69.

[16] El Guindi, *Threesome*, 70.

[17] El Guindi, *Threesome*, 76.

[18] El Guindi, Yussef. Personal Interview. 8 September 2015.

[19] El Guindi interview.

[20] <https://youtu.be/UE-nUHmY6lY>



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