

The 2016 Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre

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A Theatre Review by Karen Malpede

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In Egypt, as in most of the rest of the world, theatre is part of the dissident, liberalizing political scene, and it becomes impossible, therefore, to separate a discussion of plays from a discussion of the aspirations and the sufferings of a people. Maybe the most important thing for Americans to understand in the midst of our ongoing invasions, occupations, drone attacks, endless "war against terrorism," and terrifying election rhetoric, all of which impacts and frightens Egyptians, is that in this predominantly Muslim country secularists and the vast majority of believers alike are virulently opposed to Islamic fundamentalism.

After a five year hiatus, the [Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre](#) returned, September 20 through October 1, 2016, the 23rd such event. At the closing ceremony, Festival chairman Dr. Sameh Mahran said through bringing world artists to Cairo, the Festival intends to stand against terrorism; and this has been true since its inception. I was invited to Cairo for the festivals of 1998 and 1999 and reported the same intention in articles in *New Theatre Quarterly* and *The New York Times*.

The five years without a theatre festival coincided with political turmoil: first the populist hopes of the Arab Spring and the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. After the Revolution, a Muslim Brotherhood fundamentalist government was elected, in a rushed vote with what is widely regarded to be a fraudulent majority. The religious regime was toppled after a disastrous year of bad governance, but by a military coup that installed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Egyptians now live in an increased security state in which all public protest is forbidden. A number of people from the Brotherhood, many awaiting execution, former President Morsi included, are in prison, but so are liberal dissidents, pro-democracy advocates and people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Paradoxically, we find in Cairo a largely dissident theatre festival funded by a mainly authoritarian state. The festival is back, with the mandate of bringing world theatre to Cairo in a mix of panels, workshops with students, and productions open to the public. And most of us invited guests are political dissidents in our own countries. We write plays defying fundamentalism ([Shahid Nadeem](#), Pakistan), governmental corruption and rape culture (Sitawa Namwalie, Nigeria), and plays that are antiwar and ecofeminist ([me](#)). Torange Yeghiazarian, Executive Artistic Director of San Francisco based [Golden Thread Productions](#), was honored for her pioneering work producing Arab and Arab-American plays; New York's [Noor Theatre](#) was represented by co-founder Maha Chehlaoui.

There were theatre groups from Sweden/Iraq, Poland, Rwanda, the United States, Chile, Lebanon, Tunisia, and elsewhere plus a number from Egypt. The festival selections were subtly but clearly critical of the status-quo. There were comedies, puppet plays, adaptations of classics, and serious new work.

“I won’t criticize anything about the festival this year,” said Effat Yehia, independent theatre director, who served as translator for my playwriting workshop, during lunch at a restaurant over-looking the Nile on the posh island of Zamalek, where the Opera House and a cluster of smaller theatres are located. “Next year, I will be highly critical. This year I am just glad it’s back.”



Students in the "Writing from the Thinking Heart" playwriting workshop, with translator, Effat Yehia, George Bartenieff, and Karen Malpede. Photo Credit: Karen Malpede

Also glad were the young students in my two-day workshop titled, “Writing from the Thinking Heart,” the majority of whom were women, wearing the hijab or not, eagerly participating—their assignment on day one was to imagine a precipitating event. Day two brought Wafaa’s thought of a play set just after three inmates of an insane asylum escape. They are a religious fundamentalist, aka the deposed Morsi; a military man, who is a bully who and self-proclaimed victim of childhood bullying; and a communist, i.e. Nasser. Each will grab and grapple with the chance to rule. Nesma sets her play in prison on the day a long-time inmate learns of his imminent release. But he is has become afraid of freedom: a prison guard who wants the prisoner to leave plays chess with “death” to determine the terrified prisoner’s fate. There will be a part two, set in a hospital, concerning a child who does not wish to be born. “Do we want to live or not; are we frightened of freedom,” she asks. Another student, Eman, proposes a movement-theatre piece for women with bold images depicting the social shaming of young girls and their bodies. And there are other ideas, equally strong.



The Good Human Being, written and directed by Said Soliman. Photo Credit: Karen Malpede

The Good Human Being

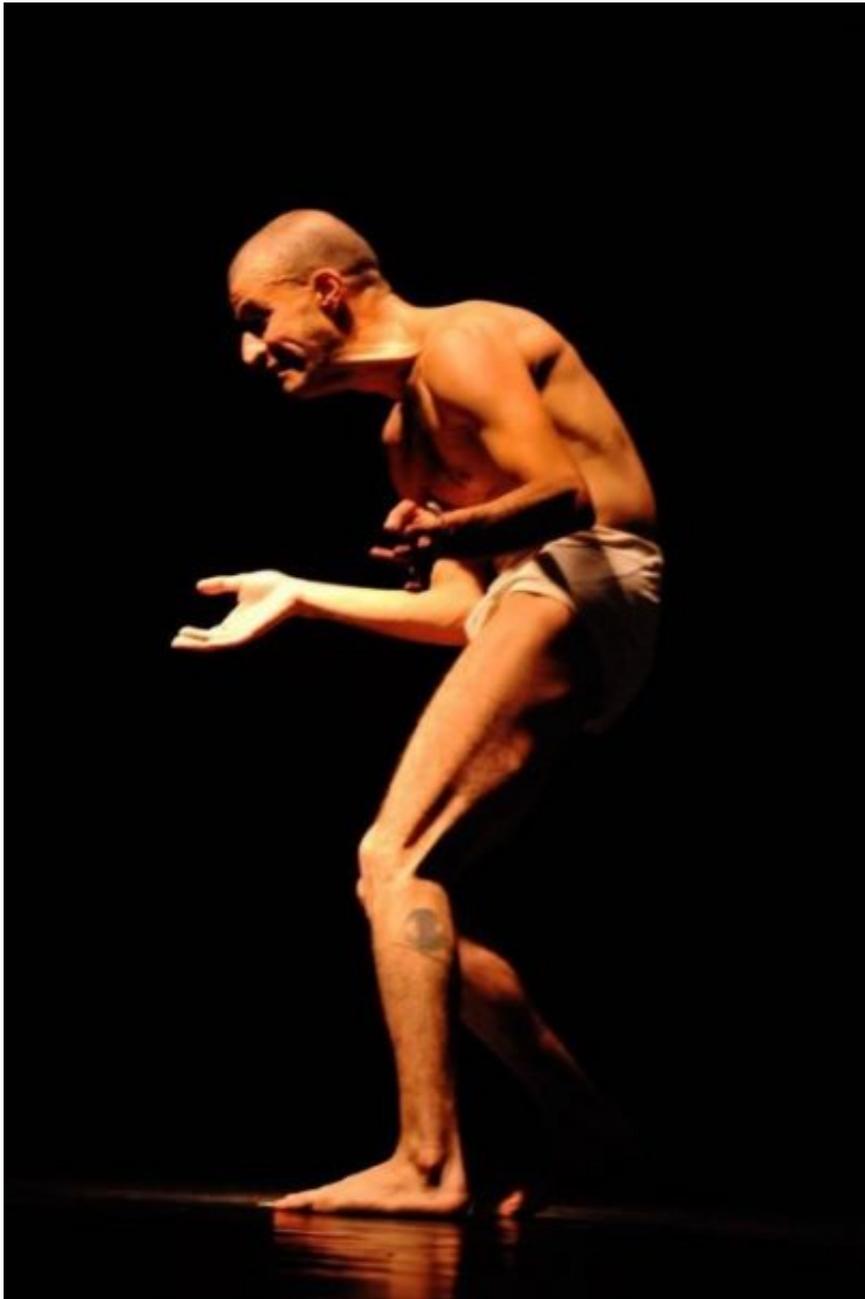
The first play I saw was *The Good Human Being*, written and directed by Said Soliman, who has directed in Egypt since 1998 a series of Sufi-inspired dramas. Staged at Al-Taliaa (The Experimental) Theatre, the work has an original musical score by Hani Abdel-Nasser rich in the tradition of Egyptian folk and Sufi music, and is sung and danced by a talented ensemble. This is a ritual-theatre piece, originally inspired by Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, but bearing scant resemblance in final form. It follows a woman's descent into the underworld, where she is assaulted, tempted, and persecuted by a chorus of hooded demons. She shakes them off and manages an ascent to the light. The set is changed from black to white and the demons become Sufi-like bearers of enlightenment. The audience, too, visibly changes, as music, set, and movement turn gentle and beatific. As if becoming enlightened, we lean forward in our seats, smiling across the stage at one another; petals and blossoms are passed out by our guides to bliss. Then comes a third movement, when the Good Human discovers herself in the midst of contemporary Cariene society. The chorus separates into individuals: the soldier with his chains and gun, the cigarette-seller, beggar, the journalist with her sunglasses and tight jeans, the prostitute, the fat, religious, bombast, and others. The Good Human is tossed about and taunted; she is tortured and ultimately buried under the detritus of modern life—pots, pans, cigarettes, weapons, sunglasses. The play ends with her barely audible song of liberation from beneath the rubble. This Sufi-like meditation becomes a powerful and poignant indictment of contemporary social realities, ending with small sounds of hope.



The Good Human Being written and directed by Said Soliman. Photo Credit: Karen Malpede

Pillars of Blood

Pillars of Blood, by Iraqi-Swedish artists Anmar Taha and Josephine Gray, hit me with a force that recalled the visceral experience of watching Jerzi Grotowski's *Acropolis* so many years ago and performance of Ryszard Cieslak—high praise, indeed. Each muscle of Taha, the nearly naked actor, contains a world of suffering written on the bodies of the victims of the current wars, quite possibly by now carved into the DNA of most us, whether we wish to know it or not. Taha, an Iraqi refugee who was almost killed there by a bullet to his gut, and has seen many friends die, has used his agony to become a physical actor of enormous discipline and skill; his tautly muscled body creates a stunning dance of anguish revealing the trauma of the constant fear of death (and of killing, for, at first, he's dressed in military garb). He is a time bomb of wounded flesh, fear, suspicion, and suicidal urges—a noose for hanging is suspended just out of reach and since that option is closed he has no choice but suffer in the flesh, rather like a contemporary Christ figure. Vision of his suffering feels redemptive to me as if, at last, the truth of this war is being told. But to many in the audience the sight of his suffering feels like too much to bear (as indeed, it should be); this includes an American who critiques, as Americans so often do, the “form” without realizing it is the passion contained within that makes her squirm: “the duration of his gestures go on too long.”



Anmar Taha as the suffering soldier in *Pillars of Blood* by Anmar Taha and Josephine Gray. Photo Credit: Karen Malpede

Bracketing Tahar’s mesmerizing performance were the words of a Swedish philosopher, Lars Bergstrom, delivered by Gray, half-masked in commedia-style, dressed in a naqab, barely balancing on stilts. At the start, she debates the virtues of pre-natalist non-existence verses posthumous non-existence. The play’s end offers speculation on the United Nation’s belief in human rights and their lack in actuality. In the middle, sinister figures masked, one as an ape (which makes an Iraqi friend and actor say, “we have all been turned into monkeys.”), another with pale, white, exaggerated features calls to my mind the leer of Dick Cheney; is he an intellectual, journalist, or from the secret service?—and what anymore is the

difference as people make careers in increasingly authoritarian states and use their professions to support the authoritarian view. There is a frantically praying woman, dressed in a black naqab, but with red boxing gloves and a red exercise suit underneath (a hidden pillar of fire), and another in white shroud is dragged, corpse-like, through the space. The effect is deeply, utterly disturbingly mesmerizing and at the same time intelligent. One doesn't "understand the meaning," instead one feels and thinks simultaneously about all that passes understanding—the ravages of war on the flesh of the world, questions of human consciousness and whether or not we have achieved it, lacking conscience as we do. For if we were truly conscious how could we then endure the situation of the wars we've manufactured and their devastating penetration of our sentient selves? There is a haunting musical score behind and underneath all this, beginning with the plaintive howl of Tom Waits. This is a convulsively redemptive, purely affective theatre piece that ought to tour the US, the nation at the center of Iraqi suffering and the refugee so-called "problem" so we might dare ourselves to experience a bit of we've wrought.

He Who Saw Everything

And so should this Lebanese play come to the US. *He Who Saw Everything*, is a skillful textual mix of the foundational Mesopotamian Gilgamesh myth, with its quest for immortality, and a contemporary history of violent sacrifice for a god, or for a cause. It is sung, chanted, and narrated to drumming, while behind the five actors two artisans on scaffolds are constructing a huge tapestry (or carving into stone) a panorama that documents the heroic-quest in folk art. A group of actors watch their friend get beaten to death at an American check-point in Baghdad, and like Gilgamesh after his friend Enkidu's death, they go on an epic journey to reclaim, not the body, but the memory of their friend.



He Who Saw Everything acting ensemble. Photo Credit: Karen Malpede

We hear rousing songs for the glory of the cause—god, tribe, or nation—as they descend into the underworld. Sacrifice is everywhere, the slit throats of animals and humans, until this group of friends throws off the weight of history, renounces glorified death in battle, and discovers emotions far simpler and more profound—the bonds of memory and grief, the camaraderie of shared loss. This piece was enormously resonant with its audience, including me, for it touched lightly but distinctly upon the suffering of the Middle East. It explores how heroic story-telling helps all cultures get into such a mess and works to change the narrative. In its middle, comes a sarcastic interlude in which the actors give up the emotional difficulty of acting to become fashion models and exercise freaks, attaining the Western

prowess not to know or feel anything. Then they return to their senses, continuing their quest for meditative consciousness. At the play's end, they form a beatific group, an allusion to a peaceable kingdom, or an expanded holy family. They create tender memories of their dead playing in an Elysian field.

The Fable

In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring was born, in reaction to the pro-democracy movement, ultra-conservative Salafists attacked and destroyed the brothels, rendering the prostitutes homeless. *The Fable* is the story of three of these women, their pimp, and their madam (his mother). The language of this play is intense, obviously layered and in performance, deeply, nearly operatically, felt. Without super-titles for translation of the Tunisian French-Arabic which neither I, nor Egyptians, including my friend seated to my right, professor and theatre critic, Nehad Selaiha, could understand, the details of the personal stories of the women were unavailable, unfortunately. What we saw were homeless, desperate sex-working women, telling long stories to each other. They hid their sexy clothing underneath naqabs, but if they wish to eat, they must continue their sex work surreptitiously and dangerously alone on the streets, under bridges and lamp-posts, and keep delivering their pay to the pimp who reports to mom. At their pimp's suggestion the women take refuge in a mosque while praying, or pretending to pray, or both, and he robs them. The play struck me, and most of the audience, as brave and bold.

Ya Sem

The festival's final performance, *Ya Sem*, at the gala closing night in the large opera house, is also a story of female sexuality. The dance-theatre troupe led by an accomplished female drummer exposes women's bodies on women's terms. They use the tradition of the belly-dance to define their strength and reclaim their bodies; their movements become much less about sexual display than about physical prowess. (Even the traditional belly-dance performed for a leering male audience is perhaps about nothing so much as women's strength and looks very much like being in labor and giving birth as the gyrations of hips and breasts may be read as an ecstatic, seductive pain in motion). Then comes a moment in which the women are threatened with forced covering of their bodies; they become entangled and half-wound in long, black robes in reference to the short-lived but frightening fundamentalist government. They resist. Later, they find themselves contained within large picture frames, still objects of a male gaze. But they break free for one final self-determined dance.

The enormous promise of the nonviolent, democratic Egyptian revolution, its euphoria, is gone; in Egypt, as around the world, these are repressive social times. But there is also the return of The Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre with its commitment to dissident art and artists, to Egyptian youth and world theatre, to grappling emotionally with the challenges of war and violence, and with women's evolving force for change within patriarchal cultures.

I am grateful to: Abbas Noori Abood, who acted in my anti-torture play [Another Life](#) and is creator of Bicycle Barbershop, and who is currently living in Egypt, for introducing me to Anmar Taha, and for his commentary; Nehad Selaiha, wonderful critic, for sharing her article on The Good Human Being, and journalist [Nahed Nassr](#) for sharing her interview with Taha.

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