

## Bubbles and Balloons: The Amman Theatre Festival (1995)

**Bubbles and Balloons: The Amman Theatre Festival (1995)** By **Nehad Sel aiha**

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The real drama in this festival, which lasted from March 27<sup>th</sup> to April 10<sup>th</sup>, took place off stage. On the morning of my arrival, I was visited by a ghost from the past. I had met Dr. Mohsen Musawi at the Baghdad theatre festival in 1978 when he was head of the then thriving and vast Iraqi state publishing organization, and enjoyed health, wealth and power. In those days, despite his heavy responsibilities (he was also a writer, a translator, an academic scholar and university professor), he had an unbridled zest for life and boundless *Joie de vivre*. But the man has suffered a sea-change. He is now a frail, grey, broken man whom diabetes has deprived of the few pleasures of life the collapse of his kingdom had left him - an exile, wandering in the Arab world from one teaching job to another and from one publisher to the next to market his books. He endures his fate with stoical resignation and a soft, pensive smile, but cannot stop worrying about the fate of his brother who is still in an Iraqi cell and suffering from cancer. In meeting me, I am sure Dr. Musawi was seeking to capture a glimpse of his golden, care-free days, of many dear absent faces, of those distant evenings by the Tigris when the glasses clinked happily and the strains of a distant lute wafted on the summer breeze.

At the Royal Arts Centre the same evening, at the opening of the festival, the Iraqi drama continued to spin out. In the middle of the second row was a delegation of Iraqi theatre artists and their aspect made a shocking impact on me. Veteran playwright and actor Yusef El-Ani, whom I had known as a small, nimble man, quite nifty despite his years (three score and more), now looked totally subdued. The thick muffler round his neck made his white head look pathetically small, as if he had shrunk. Beside him, actress and playwright Awatif Na'im, in a simple, rough-textured black coat, looked sallow and emaciated. Her husband, Azia Khayyoun, a director and actor of immense talent, and once a man of great vitality and vigor, looked pale and haggard. I had heard the night before, on my arrival, about the rigors of their trip from Baghdad to Amman - a 16-hour bumpy bus ride in bitter cold (the route crosses a desert) with long waits on both sides of the frontier. But the journey, however arduous, could not reasonably explain why they looked so ailing.

Food. The word suddenly flashed before my eyes. These people had come from a country which lives in a state of near famine. I remembered all the sad stories I had heard at lunch from a Palestinian friend who had recently left Baghdad. With meat costing 1500 Iraqi dinars per kilo, and onions 650, it has become a struggle indeed to keep body and soul together. (The average monthly income now is, optimistically, 2000 dinars - formerly about 6000 and currently worth \$2). Serious malnutrition is currently a hard fact in Iraq, and children are the ones worst affected by it. Last Ramadan, the Iraqi regime decided, in a magnanimous gesture, to remind its subjects of the taste of poultry in honor of the holy month of fasting. Each family got two chickens free (for the entire month), and the Iraqi media made a propaganda meal of the occasion. For many, it was the only meat they had tasted, or are likely to taste, for many months. Still,

it is not only the physical health of the Iraqi nation, which is being deeply damaged by the international economic sanctions, but also its mind. Currently, with so many intellectuals, artists, scientists and writers rushing out whenever they get the chance, the country is undergoing a serious brain drain. Awatif Na'im's glazed eyes and the sight of a handful of expatriate Iraqi theatre people, living in Jordan now (but who knows where they will be next year), were cruel reminders of the tragic state of affairs in that once thriving land.

I was pondering the cruel indifference of history to man when the ceremony began. Mohamed El-Abedi, the honorary head of the festival, gave a highly emotional, lyrical speech which hinted at the many obstacles encountered by the members of the Fawanis (Lanterns) Theatre Group in organizing this non-governmental festival, at the resistance the idea had met with in many quarters, and at the many struggles that lie ahead. It all sounded familiar; it is the story of any free artistic enterprise in the Arab world. I remembered how our free theatre groups had struggled for the past five years to hold their annual free theatre festival, how disturbing the phenomenon had proved for all official theatrical organs, and how, after four festivals, the movement had run out of steam and fizzled out. This year, instead of holding their 5th festival, the once defiant young Egyptian artists are waiting meekly at the door of the Cultural Development Fund which has decided to sift through the different troupes and choose a few to subsidize and put under its direct supervision. I wonder if the lucky chosen ones will still retain the word 'free' in their names.

The non-governmental denomination of the Amman Festival was its major attraction for me. I wanted to compare the experience of the Fawanis Group in launching their festival with that of our Free Theatre Movement and find out how they had navigated their way round the many lethal autocratic rock formations that infest the treacherous waters of cultural life in the Arab world. The secret, as I discovered from many sources, lay in a triple policy of:

- a) Seeking out the most enlightened people in authority, gaining their support as patrons, in their individual capacity, and wheedling as much money as you possibly can out of them while publicly and quite vociferously acknowledging your debt.
- b) Pacifying your enemies and opponents by dragging their names in as benefactors, even though they have done nothing but oppose you, which is tantamount to cornering them publicly into keeping quiet, or throwing them the proverbial bone.
- c) Keeping all your ropes in your hand, financial, artistic, administrative, while cutting a low profile in the opening and closing ceremonies, leaving the limelight for the patrons, real or nominal. But whatever you do, do not surrender your independence.

This may sound thoroughly Machiavellian, but it has worked for Fawanis. When the Ministry of Culture denied them financial help (you would never guess that from the festival's pamphlet) they sought out the enlightened head of the Amman Municipality and walked out with 20,000 Jordanian dinars (the equivalent of \$30,000) and permission to hold all the festival's functions in the Royal Arts Center.

The Royal Arts Centre holds two theatre, a large traditional one, highly equipped, and a small, intimate, semi-circular one. On the second floor, there is a huge conference hall, which housed the festival's 3-day central seminar on scenography. The seminar was, predictably, a flop; when tempers ran high over the

different interpretations of the term, I discovered, perhaps for the hundredth time, that we, Arabs, cannot abide difference and are eternally committed to conformity. Besides, the sessions were held at 4.30 in the afternoon when most people would be either out or resting from their morning itineraries; no wonder they were so scantily attended.

Out of the 13 productions taking part in the festival (representing eight countries, including Jordan, which contributed five of them), eight were performed at the small theatre and only five at the big one - which is clearly indicative of the loosely experimental bent of the occasion. I only watched eight shows in all, since I couldn't stay more than ten days in Jordan, and the remaining five shows were crammed into the last three days of the festival. It was a light schedule (even including the 3-day seminar), which left me plenty of time for sightseeing. I climbed up to the ruins of the old Amman castle, at the top of one of the seven mountains that make up the city; there, the purity of the air and the beauty of the spot make you feel deliciously light-headed; I glided down to the ancient Roman amphitheater, where I spent hours declaiming my favorite Shakespearean speeches at the top of my voice and generally admiring the fantastic acoustics of the place (and possibly making an utter fool of myself into the bargain). I was shown a particular spot in the center of the arena where, if you stand, your voice acquires a vastly magnified resonance, as if the stones are reverberating with it. It was presumably the spot where the leader of the chorus stood.

Another astonishing acoustic feature of the place is that if you stand at one end of the concave, semi-circular base of the tiered spectators' stone benches, put your cheek against the wall and whisper, a person with his ear to the wall at the other end can hear you perfectly - as if the stone is a conductor of sound. On another day I visited the old Roman city of Jerash, and reveled in the architectural beauty of its magnificent amphitheaters and the gentle charm of its green slopes and wild flowers. Later, I spent two hours on the shore of the Dead Sea, thrilled and awed by the idea that I was on the lowest spot on the surface of the earth, and tasted the water; I nearly choked. Of all the sights, however, Petra, the ancient capital of the Nabataean Kingdom, proved the most wondrous, an unrivalled jewel. Carved in the sides of a cluster of dusty pink, old volcanic mountains, where wild plants and fig trees sprout mysteriously out of the rocks, it is truly a miracle of natural beauty and human creativity. Most of those trips were arranged by Nader Omran, the leader of the Fawanis Theatre Group and manager of the festival - a courtesy for which I, and the other guests who joined me, will remain eternally grateful.

For next year, Omran is already planning a street-theatre festival. He is determined to transform Amman from a commercial into a cultural and artistic center and to subvert what he regards as its philistine, smugly complacent way of life, even for two weeks. "It will be a carnival in the streets," he mused dreamily.

Inside the Royal Arts Centre, it felt like a carnival - the lights, the flowers, the hustle and bustle, and the balloons - so many balloons everywhere. Clusters of them framed the door of the Centre, the door of the main theatre, and streamed on either side of the proscenium arch of the big stage. In the opening performance, *Maria's Eyes and Sinbad*, written and directed by Omran, with sets, costumes and lighting by Ra'id Asfour, a single balloon hung in mid-air in the center of the stage; it functioned as a visual metaphor for the setting of the action - an imaginary autocratic state, imprisoned inside an air bubble which lies on the bed of the sea like the rotting wreckage of a drowned vessel. On a back screen the lighting drew images of waves of a blood-red sun disc above, of streams of bubbles rising up to the surface, and reflected the shadow of Maria, who drowned herself to escape the corruption and oppression of the

bubble-state, and turned into a mermaid floating in the free waters of the sea. In front of the screen (inside the bubble), the stage was populated with grotesque characters who had thick and clownishly painted faces. They were rich and bizarrely costumed in a fantastic medley of styles that evoked many theatrical traditions. The action of the play consisted mainly of revealing the different aspects of rottenness inside the bubble and proceeded in the manner of a Christmas pantomime, with lots of buffoonery, slapstick and knock-about farce. The only real person in this phantasmagorical world is Maria's old lover, a fisherman called Abu El-Nur (source of light) whom the play develops into an obvious symbol of the legendary Fisher-King.

Omran's one balloon proliferated into 10,000 balloons in Khali El-Turifi's *You Are Not You*, based on Aziz Niseen's text. Walking into the small theatre that evening felt like wading through a of colored balloons. Balloons covered the whole stage and most of the auditorium. The audience had a whale of a time bursting there before, during and after the show; and since the play was about false heroes and myth-making, and a clear invitation to burst all the empty myths and heroic bubbles promulgated by military regimes, the incessant din of pops and bangs provided a fitting and most effective sound accompaniment to the show.

The third Jordanian production was of Albert Camus' *The Misunderstanding*, performed by the students of the theatre department at Yarmouk University, and disappointingly directed by the Iraqi Awani Karroumi who currently works there. Karroumi used to be an inspired director when he lived in Iraq. In Jordan, he seems to have lost his touch and authenticity. The puzzling feast of sound and lighting gimmicky. The Iraqi *Um Al-Khoush*, on the other hand, a monodrama based on a character in Abdel-Rahman Mounif's novel *Mudun Al-Milh* (Cities of Salt), seemed to touch a real chord: the agonised, delirious waiting of the old mother for the return of her son, who was snatched away from her by the forces of the Emir (prince) to work for the foreign, oil-prospecting companies, and her eventual drowning in an oil-barrel built up a forceful theatrical metaphor which genuinely expressed the tragic state of feeling experienced by most Iraqis nowadays and their attitude to the West, on the one hand, and to their own regime, on the other.

Of the four foreign (non-Arab) participating shows, I managed to catch three, missing only the Russians. The Spanish *How to Walk*, by a young, travelling theatre group (formed in 1991), which consists of four actors, including one from Italy and another from Portugal, was a mime show, hilariously funny and vaguely philosophical. The attempts of the four actors, clad in white, with black bird-masks, to explore an empty square-shaped area builds up a light-hearted, metaphor for man (or woman's) journey in life. It proved quite popular with the audience and attracted hordes of children on the second night. It seems everybody, young and old, likes clowns and the old routines of the *commedia dell'arte*.

The two Ukrainian shows (*Save Me And Keep Me*, by the Theatre Group of Sevastapol, and *Script Votillo*, by the Suzirja Theatre) used a lot of language; but it proved no barrier. There was enough pure theatre language in both to carry their meanings across. In the former, based on a script by the Russian novelist and poet Ivan Bounian and using many of his poems, the lighting played the major part in recreating the sense of loneliness and alienation experienced by the Russian intellectuals who fled to France after the Bolsheviks took power in Moscow. In the latter, the struggles of a Jesus-like figure, naked and with long streaming hair, to break free of the man-size box which encases him constituted a metaphor for the thirst of the soul to break free of the prison of the flesh. Here, again, the lighting and the background music were prominent and essential structural components.

From Egypt, the festival, i.e. the Fawanis Group, invited only one company, the only still truly free one, Al-Warsha, and their *Tides of Night* captured the imagination of many. The official invitation, when it arrived from Jordan, was opposed by some members of the theatre committee of the official Supreme Council for Culture. Fortunately, they were over-ruled and sanity prevailed. At the end of the festival, a 'pact of fraternity' between Fawani. and Al-Warsha was announced. And in view of the current conditions in the Arab world, this form of Arab unity is, perhaps, the only one that might possibly work. A pity no free Iraqi group could announce a similar pact with Al-Warsha; but then, perhaps more than meat, freedom, at present, is a rare commodity in Iraq.

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## MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER PUBLICATIONS

Arab Stages

Volume 6 Nehad Selaiha Memorial Issue (Spring 2017)

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