

Home-Made Theatre (1998)

Home-
Made Theatre (1998) By Nehad Sel
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To get to the Women and Memory Research Center through the Muhandiseen maze of small streets, you have only to follow your nose. As you approach, your nostrils will be deliciously tickled by the mouthwatering smell of kebab wafted on clouds of smoke from the *Hati* (Grillroom). Once inside the building (the address is available on application to *The Weekly*), your nostrils begin to itch and twitch. You are greeted by more fumes - this time coming from the poor smokers relegated to the stairwell and landings. Barring a heavily curtained balcony, the Center (a small flat on the second floor -consisting of two rooms - knocked into one to form a spacious rectangular hall which, at a pinch, can accommodate up to eighty people - a kitchen and a bathroom) is strictly 'no smoking'. The atmosphere inside is quite genial and informal, and if you are one of those who cannot resist a drag after half an hour of exciting discussion, you are most welcome to let yourself out. You will be surprised how many have succumbed to the same temptation. They stand or sit in small clusters on the stairs and landings furiously puffing and chatting. Inside, you can get up any time and help yourself to the plentiful supply of tea and coffee, *salaisons* and biscuits ranged on a long narrow table on one side of the hall.

My first visit to the Center about a month ago had been theatrically motivated: the center was hosting Dalia Basiouny's live presentation of a project to produce Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* and I went purely to watch her. Soon enough, however, I realized that far from being a detached observer, I had become an active and deeply involved participant in a broader theatrical performance. The presentation was part of an evening dedicated to the issue of violence against women, and the scenes Basiouny and her partners read from the play, together with all the 'taboo' things that were said before and after, formed a very lively 'dramatic text' - one that cut across the prevailing cultural codes and staged an alternative dialogue which the culture at large discouraged and even condemned.

It was all very theatrical - not in the derogative 'male' sense of the word, but in the feminist definition of theatre as "an engaged dialogue, built on mutuality and intersubjectivity, operating by enactment, not mimesis, and rooted in everyday life. "Even the space itself seemed to change character: it was no longer a real room in a research center run by academics and experts, but an imaginative *empty space*, in Peter Brook's sense, where "the personal became the aesthetic" (in Sue-Ellen Case's words), as well as the political. In this space, the women present became a community of 'performing dramatists' (as distinct from 'authorial' playwrights) who collectively created, out of the dialogue between personal experience, the concrete realities of daily living, and art (Wertenbaker's text), an improvised 'performance script' specific to that evening. Unlike traditional 'authorial' dramatic texts, it was not mimetic, aimed at lasting repetition, nor did it claim "a beauty independent of any particular or finite significance; "it was transient, tentative and contingent - what Case would describe as a "dialogue of present time, caught up in the

movement of history and development, without the secure fourth wall of formal closure," that is, an ongoing, changing dialogue without final resolution.

What added to the excitement of being caught up in a fortuitous performance unawares was a combined feeling of freedom and secrecy. It was as if we were an underground theatre group giving a performance the censor would never condone. I found myself suddenly remembering the Czechoslovakian playwright Pavel Kohout who (as British playwright Tom Stoppard who dedicated his play, *Cahoot's Macbeth*, to him tells us) was, together with the well-known actor Pavel Landovsky and many writers and actors, prevented from pursuing their careers during the last decade of 'normalization' which followed the fall of Dubček. According to Stoppard, "it was Landovsky who was driving the car on the fateful day in January 1977 when the police stopped him and his friends (including Kohout) and seized the first known copies of the document that became known as Charter 77." A year later, Kohout wrote to Stoppard announcing the opening of a Living Room Theatre "with nothing smaller than *Macbeth*." He described his LRT as "a call-group. Everybody who wants to have *Macbeth* at home ... can invite his friends and call us. Five people will come with one suitcase." Two months later, he wrote to Stoppard: "*Macbeth* is now performed in Prague flats."

It was perhaps the presence of Basiouny, which reminded me of Kohout and his Living Room Theatre. A month earlier, around the beginning of May, she had staged a performance at a private flat in downtown Cairo. The owner of the flat, Maher Sabry (a young theatre artist of diverse talents who has just published a collection of poetry) had refitted one of the spacious rooms into a rehearsal space. For nearly a year, he gave Basiouny free use of this space to develop, in collaboration with eight performers (five males and three females), a performance piece called *What Do You Want To Be When You Grow 'Down'?* As the punning title indicates, it was a journey through memory (not unlike the ones undertaken by the Women and Memory Center) -an attempt to uncover and rediscover the world of childhood without the traditional romantic trappings and fictions attached to it. Many activities were used as keys to unlock the gates of memory: doodling and scribbling on the walls (carefully covered with drawing paper by Sabry) was one of them; another was storytelling, done individually or collectively. In one rewarding exercise, Basiouny would start a story and then 'throw' it to one of the performers who would carry it along a bit further before 'throwing' it to another, and so on, until everyone had had a turn at developing the story. The few privileged friends who were allowed to attend the rehearsals found them more exciting than the final product, which came across as a collage of movement, mime, music and songs based loosely on the theme of childhood.

What Do You Want To Be was performed twice in the same private, domestic space, the rehearsal room in Sabry's flat, which proved capable of accommodating as many as fifty people. The composition of the audience, which consisted mainly of friends, supporters and kindred spirits (the Women and Memory people, Al-Warsha members, and Al-Hanager crowd) could raise for some the problem of elitism and, indeed, the term 'ghetto theatre' did cross the minds of some. However, it all depends on what you mean by elitism and ghetto. If by the former you mean social, economic and political privilege, then the question does not arise: this was a very heterogeneous audience in socio-economic terms. If you confine the word to the realm of ideas, liberal attitudes, and shared dreams and ambitions, you would be right in describing it as a 'special' audience. If by ghetto theatre you mean a theatre of a deprived community, not necessarily socially or economically, but mainly in terms of freedom of thought and expression, then, yes, you could put such experiments and events under the rubric 'ghetto theatre.'

Other nontraditional spaces explored by Basiouny, Sabry and El-Sabil group included an actual *sabil* (public drinking fountain) recently renovated and reopened in Bayn Al-Qasrain street (in El-Hussein quarter of old Cairo) where they read excerpts from El-Maqrizi's *History* to the accompaniment of a lute, and a tent at the last International Book Fair with a more developed version of the same performance.

Such performances are usually great fun, even though some of the passers-by in El-Hussein thought El-Sabil group were a bunch of lunatics recently let loose from *El-Abbasiyya* (the Cairo Mad House); but, by dint of their public nature, they cannot afford to be openly provocative in their handling of the heritage; the most they can do is poke fun at it in a genial way without truly criticizing its basic assumptions; the general effect is predominantly one of nostalgia. The same timidity and nostalgic sense characterize the one-woman storytelling performances of selected tales from *The Arabian Nights* which Sherin El-Ansari sporadically gives at various sites, including *Wikalat al-Ghouri*. Despite the substantial dose of parody she injects into her performances through the use of puppets and certain props, and the subversive ironical framing of certain scenes and episodes, she stops short of openly contradicting or even questioning the misogynistic representation of women in the *Nights* as bitches, witches, vamps and virgins.

Curiously, no questioning of the gender-specific roles and images underpinning *The Nights* was ever attempted in the sixties despite the rage for using folk literature as material for drama and the craze for drawing on popular forms of entertainment to create an indigenous theatrical form. With practically no exceptions, the *Siras*, the popular ballads, *The Nights* and other folk tales, and even the three extant texts of Mohamed Ibn Danial's shadow plays (which date back to the 13th century), were used mainly as safe conductors for political comment, criticism, and propaganda; and while such traditional male images, as the image of the hero, and with it the concept of heroism, were often challenged and revised, the same stereotypes of women persisted. It was not until the late eighties that someone dared strike a blow at the very foundation of the *Nights*, and that someone was a woman. In her verse drama, *The Night after the One Thousand and One Nights*, Fatma Qandil redefined the relationship between Shahrayar and Scheherezade in terms of fear and violence, coercion and resistance. A few years later, another woman playwright, Nahid Naguib, took a stab at Scheherezade, redefining her as an epitome of the distorted female bred by patriarchal societies.

It was not until last week that *The Nights* came once more under the scrutiny of feminist eyes. Sumaya Ramadan's retelling of the story which in *The Nights* is meant to explain and justify Shahrayar's extreme and ferocious misogyny was cunningly subversive: it parodied the language and rhythms of the original narrative, sticking to its basic outline, while changing the point of view, bits of the dialogue and some details. Ramadan's *The Tale of King Shahrayar and his Brother: A Different Version Never Published Before* was part of an original evening of storytelling at the Women and Memory Research Center. Nine stories were read or, rather, performed by the writers (ten women) with the help of one male, Gasser El-Mogi. All the stories, the fruit of a two-month workshop at the center on the rewriting of folk tales from a feminist point of view, were either new versions of old tales (culled mostly from the *Folklore Magazine* published by GEBO) - such as Mona Ibrahim's *The Mistress of Wisdom and Perfection*, or Amal Omar's *A Woman-Made Man* - or original writing inspired by them - like Munira Suliman's *The Beginning* or Iman Ghazala's *Mahasin and Ihab*. The reworkings of old texts were preceded by a reading of the original, and the contrast between the old and new versions was often hilarious and extremely dramatic. At one point, we got three versions of the same story, each from a different perspective: the tale of *Sit El-Hosn wa al-Gamal* (The Mistress of Beauty and Propriety) and *Her Seven Brothers* was read in the original by Omayma Abu Bakr, then given in a new version by Hoda El-Sadda (read by her with Amal

Omar and Gasser El-Mogy), then projected in a further version by Ranya Abdel Rahman from the point of view of the evil *ghoula* (ogress) who emerges in the new narrative very much like the untouchables of India.

At another point, a summary of the original of *The Tale of Na'am and Ni'ma* was read by Hala Sarni, then followed by two new versions of the story, the first by Hala Kamal and the second by Sahar El-Mogi and Dalia Basiouny. The effect of being exposed to three different versions of the same story in quick succession was startling, stunning and extremely theatrical. We were in the presence of genuine theatre, ghetto or otherwise: competent performers who acted the stories rather than read them, and used many of the ploys and affective techniques of the old, popular storyteller; a genuinely dialectical, dialogic text made up of many stories, clashing voices and shifting points of view; an intelligent, responsive and critical audience; a meeting place and a set duration. Of course, El-Sadda and her partners never intended their evening of storytelling as a theatrical performance; they meant it as a presentation and discussion of the results of their workshop. But once the process was set in motion, they intuitively realized that oral storytelling was inherently theatrical and instinctively behaved as performers. Without knowing it, they had used storytelling - the live presentation of personal views and feelings in fictional terms - as a point of intersection between feminism and theatre. Hopefully, the Women and Memory Research Center will continue to cultivate and explore this fruitful meeting point and will eventually venture into more public spaces and address a wider audience. But if and when they do, will they have to make concessions? Ay, there is the rub.



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Table of Contents

Essays

- Editorial Note: Nehad Selaiha by Marvin Carlson
- A Place Under the Sun by Nehad Selaiha
- Women Playwrights in Egypt by Nehad Selaiha
- Bubbles and Balloons: The Amman Theatre Festival 1995 by Nehad Selaiha
- Great Art and Brave Hearts by Nehad Selaiha
- Home-Made Theatre by Nehad Selaiha
- Two Plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker: *The Love of the Nightingale* at the Women and Memory Forum and *Our Country's Good* at the AUC by Nehad Selaiha
- For Future Reference: Art and Politics by Nehad Selaiha
- A Hair-'razing' Adventure: The Head of Mameluke Jaber by Nehad Selaiha
- Manifold Oedipus: Sophocles's Oedipus Rex at the National 2001
- Royal Buffoonery: *King Lear* at the National 2002

Tributes

- ???? ?? ??????? by Sana' Selaiha
- ???? ????? ????? ?????? ?????? by Mohammad Samir Al-Khatib
- My First Encounter with Nehad Selaiha by Katherine Hennessey
- The One and Only: Nehad Selaiha by Nora Amin
- The Godmother, Obituary: Nehad Selaiha (1945-2017) by Ati Metwaly
- In Memoriam: Nehad Selaiha by Karen Malpede

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