

Sabour's Night Traveler in Cairo



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By Marvin Carlson

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I have often observed in attending even the most prestigious of the many international theatre festivals that one or two local performances, not included in the festival, were as impressive as anything granted the official stamp of the celebration. This was certainly the case on my recent trip to Cairo in September of 2018 to attend the Cairo International Festival, when I had the good fortune also to see outside the festival a superb production of Sabour's *Night Traveler* which in terms of acting and directing rivalled the best work in the festival and in stage design was clearly the most memorable production of this visit.

Night Traveler (Musafir Lail) is one of the classics of the Egyptian theatre. Since its creation in 1968 it has received countless revivals in Egypt and throughout the Arab world thanks to its horrifying but profoundly comic absurdist depiction of the eternal dictator/oppressor and his victim. The action is simple, and much in the absurdist tradition. On a railway car a narrator introduces us to a tired, bored

traveler, who soon after is approached by a rather overbearing ticket agent demanding his ticket. As the action develops the conductor becomes more and more demanding and tyrannical, removing layers of clothing to reveal himself in a variety of historical guises—Alexander, Hannibal, Tamerlane, Hitler, and others. More and more he overwhelms the desperate passenger, while the narrator retreats in fear, until at last the confrontation culminates in the conductor stabling the passenger to death. All of this is done, however, is an exaggerated comic style that increases both the humor and the horror.

For this new production, director Mahmoud Fouad Sedky conceived a marvelous new visual concept for the play. Instead of building a train interior on the stage, as has always been done in the past, he created an actual full-sized wooden train car carried in the large open plaza in front of Cairo's leading experimental theatre, the Hanager. The audience thus was seated as actual passengers in this train, with the characters moving among them. The effectiveness of this ingenious arrangement was increased by the director's design of the car, which was not laid out in a straight line, but had a small flat acting area in the center of the car, with the sections on either side tilted slightly upward, so that the audience all had something like a conventional raked view of the central area. Most of the action took place in this area, but the entire interior was clearly part of the setting. The effectiveness of these arrangements was increased by a continually shifting play of lights which both provided atmosphere to the evolving scenes and contributed to the illusion that the train was actually moving.



Night Traveler stage. Photo: Marvin Carlson.

The ingenious staging alone would have made this a unique and memorable production, but the three actors were as outstanding as the visual setting in which they performed. Highest honors go to Alaa Quqa as the mercurial but always menacing ticket agent, whose constant shifts in tonality, slipping into different registers, and manipulation of his hefty body, reminded me of the great American actor Zero Mostel. He well deserved the Best Acting Award which this performance gained him at the National Theatre Festival earlier this year. Mustafa Hamza, whose small and slender body contrasted nicely with the conductor's bulk, was a perfect foil—cringing, confused, desperate to accommodate at any cost. The narrator, Jihad Abu Al-Enein, moved nicely from a neutral authoritative voice to another frightened and cowed observer, attempting to hide among the audience as the conductor grew in power and violence.



Exterior of *Night Traveler* stage. Photo: Marvin Carlson.

Even a modest production of Sabour's play has a powerful resonance in the Arab world today, but this imaginative and beautifully acted production, with its immersive absorption of the audience, marked a truly outstanding experience in the contemporary Egyptian theatre.

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