

EGYPTIAN THEATRE AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY:  
HISTORY, DETERIORATION, AND PATH FOR REHABILITATION

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Egypt is one of the oldest civilizations in the world, yet the lifespan of its theatre is rather short. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that Egyptians were introduced to the disciplined form of theatre. Although the history of theatre in Egypt is short-lived, it had witnessed vigorous changes that lead to its rise and fall only within a few decades.

Namely, those vigorous changes were the byproduct of the social and political movements that the Egyptian society underwent in less than a century. The Egyptian Theatre not only got affected by those political changes but also induced an integral influence on the Egyptian socio-political landscape, especially from the 50s until the mid-70s. It was during those years that the Egyptian Theatre witnessed a golden age transitioning to a rapid phase of deterioration.

Therefore, it was critically important to conduct an in-depth study towards finding means for reviving a theatre movement in Egypt. This is not only for the sake of reviving theatre as an art form but most importantly for theatre's potential in contributing to the development of a more stable, literate and civil society, especially after two revolutions (January 25, 2011, and June 30, 2013.)

Thus, at its core, the purpose of this study aims to identify the current potential elements and challenges in the existing Egyptian Theatre landscape through exploring features and causes for the rise and fall of the Egyptian Theatre. Due to the significant potential of independent theatre in enriching the theatre in Egypt and impacting the cultural backdrop, the study places a special focus on the independent theatre movement (interchangeably, the 'underground') theatre, how it affected, and was affected by the political, cultural, and social changes. The study will conclude in providing recommendations for theatrical ventures that will aid in promoting the independent

Egyptian Theatre to play a more effective role in the lives of Egyptians.

History has been explored to achieve this purpose. Theatre types have been identified and analyzed, leading to the reasons why the independent theatre movement becomes the focal point of this study. In addition, interviews have been conducted with pioneering practitioners of the Egyptian independent theatre to conclude lessons learned and identify common themes derived from their professional trajectory. Further, the exploration of different terminologies and how they have an effect on theatre-making, especially on the independent theater. Moreover, the complicated relationship between the West and the Egyptian Theatre has been chronicled. Finally, informed recommendations have been provided.

As a result, this study will illustrate the results of exploring the short history of the Egyptian Theatre through its evolution and devolution. It will reflect how Egyptian Theatre existed in three sectors, the public, the private, and the underground; the turning points that affected their operation; the reasons behind each sector dominating an era; and how those three sectors now co-exist with one another. It will demonstrate how the public theatre mainly thrived during the 50s and 60s era (post-colonization). This study will also demonstrate how and why the commercial theatre took over during the mid-70s until the early 2000s, creating frustration to the Egyptian cultural scene, but also paving the way to the underground theatre movement that was initiated in 1990. Each of those sectors reflect and represent the sociopolitical conditions of the Egyptian society when they thrived, which will also be explained in the study. Nevertheless, the reliance on either the private or commercial sectors for the proposed and recommended theatrical ventures will not apply, simply because both of them are content with their condition,

influenced, and sometimes motivated by corruption and preservation of the status-quo. The real potential exists in the underground theatre movement, which provides a ripe backdrop that creates a culturally informed alternative.

Egyptian underground theatre has grown in the past twenty years, with only a handful of exceptions that made a career out of it, joined international theatre festivals, and started a few festivals of their own. Even though there has been a growth within this small theatrical community, it remained to be a bubble that communicated within itself and that had no recognizable impact on the local Egyptian culture at large. Conversely, its practitioners managed to penetrate the international theatrical sphere to become recognizable amongst those who shared their artistic language globally.

Therefore, the prevailing question that was initially undertaken for exploring throughout the entire study was why the *underground* theatre movement appeared to be more renowned and recognized internationally than it was in Egypt. What are the truths about the complicated relationship of Egyptian Theatre with the West?

Taking this into account, instead of conducting traditional academic research, and because of the limited number of resources available addressing contemporary Egyptian Theatre, the study was mostly driven by personally conducted interviews with current Egyptian theatre practitioners. After an in-depth research, six independent theatre pioneers were selected, with four being successfully interviewed.

At first, this study started around the term *underground*, under the impression that this was the right classification of the type of theatre to be explored. However, after conducting some interviews with theatre practitioners in Egypt, it became clear that some of them prefer the term *independent*; others prefer the term *free*, and a few thought of it

as *alternative*. While terminologies are not the main root of this study, it is worth noting that these terminologies frame the theatre scene in Egypt and how it operates within itself. Even though the term underground may not be fully representative for the purpose of this study, the study will be using it mostly in the next few pages, until reaching the section that accounts for the different terminologies, including the right ones, the false ones, how they had an impact that landed strongly on the theatre community, and how they approached their productions.

As indicted in the introduction above, it is important to chronicle the history of the theatre in Egypt, or as this research refers to it; the evolution and devolution of Egyptian theatre.

Storytelling in Egypt can be traced back to ancient Egyptian times, but the history of theatre in Egypt in its formal definition is short and only attributed to what historians consider the modern Egypt. “The first recorded performance of a European play took place 150 years ago, and since then the theatre has developed as an essentially western form. The commercial theatres are dominated by domestic farces while the improvised private companies superficially ape European experimentalism, both scrupulously censored for any shred of explicit sexuality and political critique.”<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of the Egyptian people to theatre started when Khedive Ismail<sup>2</sup> wanted Egypt to become part of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He exported all elements of the European civilization to modern Egypt, and that included theatre and Opera. With the

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<sup>1</sup> Harring-Smith, Tori. “Preserving a Culture through Community Based Performances in Cairo.” *Performing Democracy*. P. 281.

<sup>2</sup> Ismail Pasha was the Khedive of Egypt and Sudan from 1863 to 1879. He was removed at the beginning of the United Kingdom’s occupation to Egypt.

help of then journalist Yaqub Sanu<sup>3</sup>, Egypt started forming an organized theatre culture and started getting into the habit of theatre-going. Sanu was very adamant about Egyptianizing<sup>4</sup> the western theatre form by developing plays that relied on shadow puppets, Karagoz<sup>5</sup>, and improvisations. Sanu had a strong belief in the specific role that theatre plays. He always ended his plays by giving a speech about the importance of theatre as a moral and educational platform, and how it plays a major sociopolitical role. This sociopolitical discourse eventually led to a conflict between him and the Khedive, despite the fact that the latter was a strong advocate to both the theatre and Sanu. The Khedive was deeply offended by one of Sanu's plays, which critiqued the Khedive's polygamous lifestyle, and therefore Sanu's theatre was shut down and he was forced into exile<sup>6</sup>. This incident indicates that since its beginnings in Egypt, the theatre has never been devoid of politics, and the two have always been interconnected with one another.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt was known to be more liberal than Syria, and in turn Syrian troupes migrated to live and perform in Egypt in which they played a major part in the development of the Egyptian theatre. The actors and performers were referred to as *impersonators* and were considered citizens with lower standings, to the extent that they were not allowed to testify in court. Nevertheless, that did not stop those artists from finding the right environment to start playing with different forms/genres of theatre, such as musical theatre, farce, comedy, and tragedy. These different forms became populist and were competing with each other. Classical tragedian western Theatre was still

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<sup>3</sup> Egyptian Jewish journalist, nationalist activist and playwright.

<sup>4</sup> Adding Egyptian cultural elements to works. Egyptians hardly use the term adapting, and usually resort to 'Egyptian-zing.'

<sup>5</sup> The Turkish form of shadow puppets.

<sup>6</sup> *Egyptian Theatre: Part One*. Al Jazeera Documentary. Dec 2015.

performed in tradition, which was more tailored, towards an aristocratic audience whom could afford to see and comprehend these texts, similar to those produced by George Abyad<sup>7</sup>. After a while, comic, vaudevillian, and farcical trends took over the theatre scene deriving from and making Egyptian popular culture. This led to a birth of a few progressive artists, such as Aziz Eid, who directed a young actress with a bikini on stage in 1907, and put the first Muslim Egyptian actress in a play in 1915. This was a trend that could not survive for long because it did not appeal to the likings of the most other conservative Egyptians.<sup>8</sup>

With the eruption of 1919 Revolution the country started undergoing a different societal landscape, which reflected on theatre artists who took a more nationalistic tone to their works. This new theatre fostered artists like Sayed Darwich<sup>9</sup>, who took the theatre to a new thriving phase of musical theatre using colloquial language. Thus, during this time, the theatre became a nationalistic platform, providing creative and emotional support to the revolution.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that all the theatre companies were private and independent from the state, as Galal Amin<sup>11</sup> states in his book, *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak*. According to Amin, “Cultural works were produced almost exclusively by private publishers, and they did not receive any financial support from the state unless the state

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<sup>7</sup> A renowned theatre director, playwright, and actor. In 1942, Abyad was elected as the first director of the Actors’ Syndicate, and when the Acting Institute was launched in 1944, he taught there until his death.

<sup>8</sup> *Egyptian Theatre: Part One*. Al Jazeera Documentary. Dec 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Sayed Darwish was an Egyptian singer and composer who is considered the father of Egyptian popular music and one of Egypt’s greatest musicians and its single greatest composer. His claim to fame was through performing musical theatre texts. He ended up writing the national anthem of the nation before dying in his thirties.

<sup>10</sup> *Egyptian Theatre: Part One*. Al Jazeera Documentary. Dec 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Galal Ahmad Amin is an Egyptian economist and commentator, professor of economics at the American University in Cairo.

established that their work really deserved funding. Plays were mounted by private troupes, and films produced by private production companies.”<sup>12</sup> This is essential in the understanding of how and why theatre artists had a freer environment to work in than the years to follow, with fewer pressures exerted on them from the state or the rulers. Even if censorship took place, it was mostly self-imposed, deriving from the societal traditions at that time.

In 1952<sup>13</sup> the monarchy came to an end and the first Egyptian Republic began. The aftermath of 1952 resulted in a large-scale cultural and economic revolution. Starting this point, following the changes in the societal fabric of the Egyptian community and the evolution/devolution of the theatre will be recounted hand-in-hand with the insights of the theatre practitioners who were interviewed throughout this research.

After 1952, the Egyptian society underwent what is considered a post-colonization nationalistic awakening that led to a renaissance in many facets and industries. Theatre was one of them, and perhaps one of the main industries that remarkably developed during the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser<sup>14</sup>. Despite his oppressive political policies, Nasser had given Egyptians a stronger sense of national pride than no other successor president has done. In achieving that, everything in the country, and all industries, were utilized to serve this purpose. There is no fault in admitting that Nasser’s era is the golden era of Egyptian theatre. Perhaps this was the only time that the state

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<sup>12</sup> Amin, Galal. *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak*. P 103.

<sup>13</sup> The Egyptian movement of 1952, also known as the July 23<sup>rd</sup> Revolution, by the Free Officers Movement, a group of army officers led by Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser. It overthrew King Farouk, and initiated the process to end the British occupation.

<sup>14</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser was the second President of Egypt, serving from 1956 until his death. Nasser led the 1952 overthrow of the monarchy and introduced far-reaching land reforms the following year.



fostered artists in an organized manner. Even Sayed Ragab<sup>15</sup>, who regards himself as a Nasserist, confirmed Nasser's strategy while being interviewed when responding to a question about the uniqueness of this golden era. Ragab said, "This was the strategy during Nasser times. He used art to mobilize national sentiment; it worked, and the arts thrived."<sup>16</sup> There was no space for argument after hearing this. Ragab is right. The arts did indeed thrive under Nasser's administration.

Primarily, this was a byproduct of Nasser's support for the arts that encompassed the reinforcement of national identity. But secondly because Nasser was lucky for falling back on the Egyptian intellectuals and artists of the time who were talented, educated, and cultured. Those were the intellectual minds of the generation that underwent their education during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prior to the beginning of Nasser's time. This generation had strength in its identity, historical accumulated experience, and enough understanding of their heritage to translate the contemporary Egyptian works produced post-colonization. As stated by theatre scholar, Ahmed Zaki, "The generation of the late 1950s and 1960s was socially and artistically committed. Their work covered Egypt's historical past, its present and its role within the Arab world. They aimed not only at portraying reality, but also at reshaping it using a variety of styles ranging from realism, folk art, symbolism, naturalism, and expressionism, very often with European influences from Ibsen, Checkov, Pirandello, Brecht, Ionesco and Beckett."<sup>17</sup>

Under Nasser's administration, the theatre in Egypt became a playwright-based

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<sup>15</sup> A contemporary prominent actor in Egypt, and one of the main subjects interviewed for this study.

<sup>16</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

<sup>17</sup> Zaki, Ahmed. "North Africa: Egypt." *A History of Theatre in Africa*. P 31.

theatre, one that managed to stop relying heavily on classics and texts from the West. It began to adapt/Egyptianize texts in parallel to producing original Egyptian works that were written to address contemporary issues of this time. The prominent names are endless. It is those names that until this very day are remembered and recalled when lamenting the end of the golden era of Egyptian theatre. Such names include, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Alfred Farag, Salah Abdul-Saboor, Mikhail Roman, Saad Eddin Wahba, Yusuf Idris, and many others.

It was during Nasser's rule that the National Egyptian Theatre was inaugurated, and radio plays were constantly being listened to. Ahmed El Attar<sup>18</sup> remarked on the mission of the National Theatre at that time, saying, "At a time, the great Karam Mutaweh led the state theatre when he was 30-years old. It used to nurture and foster talented, young and new directors, and playwrights like Mikhail Roman and others. That was its mission, to give artists a platform and encourage an alternative form of art."<sup>19</sup>

But unlike the time of the monarchs, everything was nationalized and became public property – economically. Those theatres and cultural centers were under the patronage of the government. This led to the occupation of governmental jobs by a few artists and intellectuals in order for them to do their art. There is no doubt that the mainstream sentiment at the time backed Nasser up in all of his policies, but this regime relied heavily on propaganda. Amin recounted that the intellectuals of the time were the mouthpieces of Nasser's propaganda. "Perhaps more important was that the new regime had taken power by force, without course to parliament or elections, and had replaced

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<sup>18</sup> Theatre Director, Founder of The Temple, Studio Emad Eddin, D-CAF, and 2B Continued. He is a subject of the personally conducted interviews.

<sup>19</sup> El Attar, Ahmed. Personal interview.

party rule with the rule of one man, who tended to retain power for as long as possible. He had to find ‘intellectuals’ willing to help him fulfill this mission.”<sup>20</sup> It was certainly easy for Nasser to find such intellectuals at the time and take them under his wing because Egyptians were united in the support of Nasser’s post-colonial Egypt.

Theatre became a staple activity in the day-to-day lives of Egyptians during this time. It was only through broadcasting recorded plays on TV screens that helped the introduction of television sets to the Egyptian public. This happened through a theatre company, fostered by the state, called “The Theatre of Television.” It was through this, that Egyptians got acquainted with the TV set, and started adapting to the notion that theatre is not solely a live experience, but it could also be televised.

Contrary to popular belief, Nasser was not anti-west. He may have antagonized the West, but he aspired to follow their footsteps in their development so that Egypt would prosper. “Nasser was not ambitious as to imagine that the Arabs could develop their own version of ‘progress.’ His aim was to be equal with the West, but not necessarily different from it.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, the generation that grew up under Nasser’s rule, and the generation that followed, were educated through curriculums which mimicked or responded to the West, instead of curriculums that taught them their eastern heritage in parallel to western civilizations. “Instead of graduating students who were proud of their heritage but able to reinterpret it in the light of contemporary needs, it brought together students who suffered from an inferiority complex because of their inability to reconcile the old religious teachings with the modern sciences.”<sup>22</sup> This eventually reflected on the theatrical and

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<sup>20</sup> Amin, Galal. *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak*. P 106.

<sup>21</sup> Amin, Galal. *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?* P 46.

<sup>22</sup> Amin, Galal. *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?* P 48.

intellectual circles.

While this cultural renaissance is attributed to the strategy that the state adopted, it was also attributed to the generation of intellectuals that were adults at the time. This generation was highly exposed to the West and other cultures growing up, yet they were educated and well aware of their heritage so that this exposure did not have an imposing effect on their personalities and values. It only enriched them with what they needed as opposed to wiping their understating of their culture:

The intellectuals of the day had opened up to the West, having either seen it for themselves, or been strongly exposed to it. Nevertheless, they remained rooted in their Arab and Islamic heritage, and even those among them who advocated adopting as much as possible from the West, retained a greater confidence and pride in their own culture than did succeeding generations of westernizers,<sup>23</sup> says Amin.

A clear example is drama pioneer, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, who had a strong grasp of his heritage even though spending years studying in Paris. He utilized a historical backdrop and his Arab cultural heritage in order to shed light on contemporary issues through his works, like *Al Sultan Al Ha'er (The Sultan's Dilemma)* which started a dialogue regarding the choice between the law (democracy) and the sword (force); a pressing issue that plagued the Egyptian society post-1952.

Alfred Farag as well, took after this school of thought and theatrical form, with adding modern colloquialism to this formula of using history to project contemporary sociopolitical struggles. Through the 50s and 60s, he specialized in researching different

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<sup>23</sup> Amin, Galal. *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak*. P 106.

indigenous arts and histories so he would include them within his dramatic texts.

Academic Dina Amin describes Farag's style by stating,

He means to celebrate and compliment the hopeful present moment (of the 1960s) with the glory of Arab history and tradition. So whereas the first excludes the present as worth of standing alone, the second uses the past as foundation for a present that is full of possibilities.<sup>24</sup> She adds, In Farag's view the use of dramatic themes from the cultural heritage allows for an artistic discourse between past and present forms, as well as between other interesting, more comprehensive, and deeper artistic syntheses.<sup>25</sup>

Two of his most prominent works of this time were *Suqut Fir'awn (The Fall of Pharaoh)* and *Suliman Al-Halabi*, which are history plays with classical features, yet they address contemporary issues, such as the role of artists within a society and fighting colonialism, respectively.

This quality of the understanding of one's own cultural heritage, despite of heavy exposure to the West, is important to note, because what will happen later to the generations educated under Nasser's time and the rulers succeeding him is one of the major factors that had a direct effect on the state of theatre now, the devolved Egyptian Theatre.

It was also during this time that a new trend of theatre infiltration started to grow in the Egyptian society. In addition to theatre clubs existing in schools and universities, theatre, amongst many activities found their ways to companies and unions. A national

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<sup>24</sup> Amin, Dina A. *Alfred Farag and Egyptian Theater: the Poetics of Disguise, With Four Short Plays and a Monologue*, P 32-33.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* P 37.

car manufacturing company, like Nasr, would have a theatre club formed by some of its workers. This club would then compete with other theatre clubs from the industry in a regional league and then a national one. This phenomenon, according to Ragab, ignited the thirst of knowledge within the circles of the common workers. They would approach the members of these theatre clubs and start addressing ideas and themes from the shows they'd performed. This too, helped most workers practice their hobbies without the burdensome feeling of a life wasted on a routine-like day job.<sup>26</sup> Apparently, this was one of the many ways that theatre was an intricate part of the Egyptians' day-to-day life, affecting it and being affected by it.

Having said that, a recurrent political crackdown would take place to remind various artists, especially the popular ones, that they should never consider going against the state. Stand-up comedy Trio Tholathy Adwa' Al Masrah once called in for interrogation by the Minister of Interior because of teaser-promotional materials for the trio's new play *Matloob Lamoona (Lemon Wanted)*. As a consequence of the Minister of Interior's misinterpretation of the title of the play, as a subversive message that signified the need of a lemon for a sick country.<sup>27</sup> The interrogation resulted in the suspension of the play before it opened.

Fifteen years after 1952, a major shift occurred in the society as a whole, one that played a direct effect on theatre. This was the 1967 defeat<sup>28</sup>. The defeat spread an overwhelming disappointment, heartbreak, and pain into the hearts of all Egyptians, but specifically, the intellectuals who were passionate advocates to Nasser and his regime.

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<sup>26</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

<sup>27</sup> *Egyptian Theatre: Part Two*. Al Jazeera Documentary. Dec 2015.

<sup>28</sup> The Six Day War initiated by Israeli forces on Arabs. It resulted in the devastating defeat of the Egyptian army, and the occupation of Sinai.

The defeat or 'El Naksa' as Egyptians called, cemented two exiting types of theatre and generated a type that was considerably new to the mainstream theatre.

The first kind of theatre was one that was devoid of politics, separated from the state, and was craftily entertaining. This type of theatre was spearheaded by the actor/director Fouad El-Mohandes. El-Mohandes and his wife Shwikar, along with their company, starred in popular successful comic productions that adopted both original and adapted texts. Their most recognized production is their Egyptianized version of the musical *My Fair Lady*, which was translated and adapted appropriately to the Egyptian audience, setting it in an historical Egyptian era under Khedive and monarchy rule. It succeeded and remained faithful to the dramaturgy of the book and music of the original western production.

The second kind of theatre was that which advocated for the nationalistic/patriotic plays that either lamented the defeat or glorified the Arab nation and how being an Egyptian feeds directly into the Arab identity as a whole; an identity that attacks the Jewish state/religion relentlessly. This type of theatre, as mentioned earlier, existed before, but it was intensified after 1967. This kind of theatre was more present on stages that belonged to the state than on the commercial ones.

The third kind of theatre, which was new to the mainstream/commercial scene, was that which belonged to the genre of political criticism. Plays of this genre were exceptionally harsh in their opinions about the existing regime, and how this regime led to their defeat, exposing them as liars, yet through symbolism.

Direct criticism of the military, politicians, or appropriating responsibility for the defeat, and the pervading feelings of disillusion and despair and oppression were all

expressed indirectly in purely theatrical terms. Playwrights used symbolist forms, folk arts, verse, historical parallels and realism. Audiences related to this new somber, often angry and critical mood, was written and performed with the same intellectual fervor against a backdrop of an increasingly intrusive censorship and a state policy that felt that theatre should be providing entertainment rather than making people more politically and socially aware,<sup>29</sup> says Zaki.

Of course, those who adopted this genre were facing frequent arrests, interrogations, and captures.

One prominent and widely commercial example is the theatre company formed by famous belly-dancer-turned-actress Tahiyah Karyioka in partnership with her husband, Fayiz Halawah. The Karyioka/Halawah Company produced plays that attracted two kinds of audiences, the common man as well as the intellectual. They are, until this day, one of the few companies that managed to appeal to these two kinds of extremely different audiences in the same house by providing multi-layered texts and performances. They attracted the common man who sought cultured entertainment through intelligent comedy and attracted the intellectual crowd through the symbolic layer, which provided political satire and nuances. In her study on women in Arab Theatre, Dina Amin stated, “The importance of this company did not emerge until the 1970s when Egypt’s theatre generally was muffled by censorship. Amidst this silence, Karyioka’s theatre was the only politically subversive venue that remained. When the censorship tried to stop her play *Yahya al-Wafd (Long Live the Wafd!)*, she took the case to court, won the lawsuit, and mounted the play. Halawah was the director, dramaturge and actor star of most of the

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<sup>29</sup> Zaki, Ahmed. “North Africa: Egypt.” *A History of Theatre in Africa*. P 33.



theatre's performances, but the audience most often came to see its favorite dancer turned actress perform, responding to her political satire, her comments on current affairs, and her candor. The Karyioka/Halawah Company closed its doors for good in the early 1980s with the demise of the couple's marriage and professional association."<sup>30</sup>

Symbolism has always been an essential element in Egyptian theatre, but this was a particular time that symbolism was relied on heavily due to the need of finding means of theatrical expression without being subjugated to arrests, shutdowns, or censorship.

Poet and playwright Salah Abdul-Saboor excelled in employing symbolic absurdist lyrical texts as a tool to chronicle oppressive practices by the state towards its subjects. His play *Night Traveller* relies heavily on the symbolic aesthetic in which it includes three characters, the Passenger, the Conductor, and the Narrator. The Passenger represents the everyday man who is victimized by the powerful Conductor. The Conductor is the oppressive antagonist who tortures his victim (Passenger) in a psychological manner. Throughout the whole play, the Conductor is exerting all possible means to break his victim psychologically. Simultaneously, the Narrator watches, addresses the audience and explains the dramatic events. The Conductor manipulates, degrades, and dominates the Passenger, who is terrified of the former and complies with all of his demands. The Conductor's oppressive conduct doesn't end at using the Passenger, but leads to the former killing the latter for a false accusation of killing god and stealing his identity. This type of theatre was mostly prevalent from 1967 until 1973 and contributed to what theatre scholars consider the Golden Age of Egyptian Theatre.

During those six years, many changes took over the country. Military wise, those

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<sup>30</sup> Amin, Dina. "Women in Arab Theatre: Finding a Voice." *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre Volume 4*. P 28.

were the years of the War of Attrition against Israel, leading to the 1973 war and the return of the occupied Sinai to Egypt. Political wise, it was in regards to the change of ruler; Nasser's death in 1970, and Anwar Al Sadat's<sup>31</sup> succession as president. Which takes us to the big economic shift that eventually led to the devolution of Egyptian theatre, this was the time of 'Infitah' – the Open Door policy in Egyptian economy, and overnight Egypt shifted from being socialist to being a capitalist-based economy. This research is not coming from an economic background or expertise to claim that one type of economy trumps the other, but it can be fairly stated that this sudden shift came as a shock to the Egyptian community, leading to deterioration in many cultural values that reflected in theatre and art.

1973 was the year of Egypt's defeat of Israel, but it was also the year when *Madrasat El Moshagbeen (School of Rebels)* hit the theatres and was received with a raging commercial success. Adapted from the British film, *To Sir with Love*, this play was also received with harsh criticism. Though presented as a slapstick comedy, this play was held responsible for the demise of theatre and the educational system simultaneously. Like *To Sir with Love*, the play is about a class of failed high school students who create nothing but havoc to their school and families, only to be eventually disciplined by their new philosophy teacher. In its premise, the play is not harmful, yet in its execution it mainly modeled the chaos of rebellion through improvised jokes by actors, and only got to the message of the playwright near the end, in a very abrupt serious and didactic manner. When attacked, the playwright Ali Salem defended himself by saying that he presented

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<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Anwar El Sadat was the third President of Egypt, serving from 15 October 1970 until his assassination by fundamentalist army officers on 6 October 1981. He is a peace Nobel Prize winner and the first Arab leader that executed a peace treaty with Israel.

what he was foreseeing to be happening to a generation that had witnessed the “death of its father”, the great defeat of its country, and with their despair they resorted to chaos to challenge tradition and authority. While this defense may be sound, the execution and directorial choices of this production only glorified disorder and mockery at the expense of the playwrights’ moral of the story. Until this day, this play is broadcasted in every Egyptian household multiple times a year. It created a model of theatre that is all about cheap laughs with no substance for hours on end, and an abrupt serious conclusion. What this play also did was present negative role models of scholarly conduct within educational institutions that is mimicked by real-life school students today. Due to its significant success, unfortunately, this play represented a deteriorating turning point and resembled, till current time, the role of theatre in society, on a negative basis. This play, as well, generated the star-controlled trend in the commercialized sector.

It is strongly believed that the commercialized/private theatre trend that took over in the mid-1970s was the first step towards theatre decay in Egypt, simply because those commercialized productions were no longer tailored towards an Egyptian audience, but rather towards tourists from the Gulf region. This was a consequence of the Open Door policy; profit was all that mattered to producers, and state-run theatre no longer had any weight in the Egyptian theatre scene. Ragab agrees strongly with this belief, stating that there is no fault in saying that theatre in Egypt has witnessed a lot of development since it started, but then came a time that it remained stagnant/stable, and with this stagnation it started deteriorating – because then, the only function was to generate money – and in order to generate money, it had to insert many elements for aid. Examples of those elements include; frivolous jokes, songs, flashy costumes, and all elements that would

attract Arab and Gulf tourists to “enjoy” it seasonally. Producers also resorted to highly sexualized jokes, light political jokes, and humor that depended on laugh-stimulating movements. This type of theatre was solely targeting entertainment, which is not the type of theatre my generation grew up knowing during the 60s.<sup>32</sup>

While the demands of Gulf tourists for said commercialized productions seemed to be easy to fulfill, they lacked artistic integrity and meaningful substance, as they primarily served the purpose of superficial entertainment with no dramaturgical characteristics of storytelling. This was mainly occurring through factors that Ragab had mentioned, and he added that the private sector needed to make a profit, so they resorted to easy money-making methods, inserting belly dancers to dance exotically on stage. During this time, mostly rich non-educated people, who made their money through open economy, and Gulf tourists seeking simple entertainment, were the ones who could afford to see these plays in the summer.”<sup>33</sup>

While an outsider might say that this sounds familiar in format to the American commercial theatre and Broadway musicals and that there is no fault in producing plays that are merely entertaining, one begs to differ. This is because what those Egyptian commercialized productions eventually relied on was the stars’ skill in getting off script, not in an improvisational sense, but rather as a byproduct of the whims of the comic star on stage by badgering their cast mates. This practice became so common that it reached the extent of those comic stars calling their cast mates by their actual names on stage. They were also wildly famous of humorous tangents unrelated to the story that attempted to be told. All these practices seemed to be to of liking to the audience at the time where

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<sup>32</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

they would rave and wait for those moments when their favorite comic star goes off script and starts hassling other actors on stage by inserting his/her personal life.

As mentioned earlier, this type of theatre started in the 1970s, extended, and continued to thrive until the 2000s. Adel Imam, Mohamed Negm, and Samir Ghanim were the bright names and comic kings of this type of theatre, separately. The lifetime of their productions could have exceeded eight to ten years, using the same texts that had little to non-dramatic plotline to follow. In 1992, Ghanim's *Akhoya Hayis We Ana Layis* (*My Brother Is Carefree while I'm Unfortunate*) was widely successful among the gulf tourist circles. It supposedly retold the story of estranged twins (both played by Ghanim); one who is a multi-millionaire and the other who leads an underprivileged life, how they find each other, and how their worlds collide. Ghanim's unfaithfulness to the script was apparently dismal. His idea of comedy was derived from highly sexualized jokes that had nothing to do with the story and his unexplainable dress in drag. This was not Ghanim's first success nor was it the last. He, and many other comic stars, provided a formula that appealed to his audiences who came from oil money.

It is not fair to say that all plays produced during this time fell under all these faults, but those were the dominant characteristics of this trend, which lasted for more than 30 years. There are however a few exceptions that still followed the star-controlled part of the commercial model, but presented works that had richer substance to them; aesthetically, artistically, and morally. Those exceptions were motivated by respecting the sanctity of the old theatrical form, and hence refused to resort to the cheap elements used by the comic kings of this time. Such examples include *Aal Raseef* (*On the Side Walk*) produced in 1987, which addressed the impact of migration to Gulf countries on

Egyptians returning to home. This play also viciously attacked the Open Door policy. Another example is, the partnership of actor/director Mohamed Sobhy and playwright Linen El-Ramly which produced a canon of works that addressed sociopolitical issues through dark(er) comedy. For example, in 1989, they produced *Takhareef (Hallucinations)*, a play about five siblings who realized after their father's death that their mother was a genie and that she was back to grant their wishes. The play followed the five siblings and recounts the wish granted to every one of them individually. This play sheds lights on issues, such as feminism, greed, and oppressive regimes. Despite the success that Ramly and Sobhy had, the partnership came to an end, primarily because Sobhy, who is the considered the star of this collaboration, wanted to be in control of everything. This separation did not stop Sobhy from pursuing plays that are pseudo politically charged and presenting projects that assist in the affordability to a theatre going to audiences with minimal income. Among many works, he produced *Mama America* in 1998 that solely attracted audiences due to the claim that the play is strongly anti-west. In 2000, he started the initiative "Theatre for All" that presented a repertory of plays that were either revivals of older Egyptian plays, or adaptations of western ones. Sobhy was rumored to be fostering young actors and artists through his company. However, this rumor has proven to be false. There are many accounts of his animosity towards those who seem to appeal to the audiences more than him, or take away his spotlight, leading to the premature departure of those young actors from his company. Sobhy, as the star of his company, prefers being in control of every aspect in a production; he even takes pride in saying that his process in work is that of a dictator.

Those few exceptions mentioned were individual efforts that did not generate a

phenomenon or trend that could compete with the exciting cheap formula of private theatre trend that appeals to the liking of the Gulf rich tourist. What this type of theatre represented, how much it cost in production, the expensiveness of its tickets, and it being devoid of artistic substance, little by little made theatre practitioners who underwent this path get detached from the Egyptian community. This did, however, contribute in skewing what common Egyptians regarded as theatre, which is merely comic.

As for those who did not go down this path, or found a place in the star-controlled model, struggled gravely in making theatre. These practices eventually led to a boom in a parallel movement in the 1990s, which was referred to in the introduction as the underground theatre scene. This movement primarily relied on amateur theatre making, minimal/experimental productions, and participating in international festivals, as opposed to relying on performing to Egyptian audiences. Non-commercialize/non-populist theatre-making became a hobby rather than a profession. This was mainly due to the reasons of lack of funding, absence of any theatrical organizational structure, and the inability to reach out to a large base of audiences. Furthermore, any competition between this underground theatre and the populist private one would always come in favor of the hollow populist theatre. After all, moneymaking and profit were the sole concern of producers who were initially businessman and tradesmen before investing in the theatre industry.

The issue has become that of an uneven struggle between two sides. One side represented a culture that is largely in the service of commercial interests, with foreign and domestic, backed by huge resources as well as by the authority of the state. The other side represented another type of culture

that is far more sophisticated, with nobler motives, and which is far more sensitive to the needs of most Egyptians, of whatever class.<sup>34</sup>

But before going further in explaining this underground theatre movement, its characteristics and struggles, it is essential to lay out and present all factors that have played a part in the rise of the commercial populist trend of theatre at the time, how it had an effect on the society, its perception of theatre, and vice versa.

The drastic social changes that Egypt underwent between the 70s and 90s gravely affected theatre, like any other sector/industry in the country. Also, those changes lead to a transformation in the Egyptian character and the prevalent cultural taste. In turn, the traditional means of reaching out to theatregoers of the early 1960s and 1970s have proven to be a failure. Amin attributes all those changes to;

the many factors that have worked together to produce the prevailing cultural climate in Egypt, such as a sudden and indiscriminating opening up to western economic and cultural influences, a high rate of migration to the oil-rich Gulf states, steep rises in the inflation rate, a wide expansion in education concomitant with a noticeable decline in its quality, a rapid growth of the middle class combined with a widening disparity between income earned and the effort expended in securing it, along with rapid accumulation of wealth by new segments of society with less sophisticated tastes and little or no education, the increased penetration by foreign companies into Egyptian economic life with a concomitant increase in the activity of foreign, and international cultural and financial institutions in financing social research.<sup>35</sup>

There was a direct correlation between education and corruption that was prevalent

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<sup>34</sup> Amin, Galal. *Whatever Else Happened to the Egyptians?* P 123-4.

<sup>35</sup> Amin, Galal. *Whatever Else Happened to the Egyptians?* P 123.



during this phase and is manifested until this day. The distinct factor differentiating between the intellectuals and artists who were adults leading the cultural movement at the time of Nasser and the generations following, was education. Upward social mobility before 1952, only came with high quality education. It was slow, but it engrained enlightened values and ideas in the minds of those exposed to it. They were a select limited group of students, granted scholarships and sponsorships for educational purists, who would not jeopardize their new social standing with corruption. After Nasser, education became free and expanded, but on the quantitative rather than the qualitative level. Upward social mobility became faster, not founded on an educational base, but rather on quick fortune, or an affiliation with the authorities. This formula created individuals (and intellectuals) who were highly susceptible to corruption as means to keep their new social standing. Corruption had many forms, in this instance it was the corruption of artistic taste that prevailed.

The great expansion of education at all levels during the previous two decades, which emphasized quantity at the expense of quality of education, had created a new demand for various types of light culture and forms of entertainment that appealed to unsophisticated tastes and inclinations.<sup>36</sup>

Another major element that infiltrated the community at the time and is necessarily worth mentioning is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the community starting the 70s. This all happened under Sadat's tenure. The country started morphing visually from a secular society to a fundamentalist one that was deeply rooted in Wahabism.<sup>37</sup> "The

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* P 116.

<sup>37</sup> Wahabism is a fanatic religious movement or branch of Sunni Islam. It grew in Saudi Arabia, and infiltrated the Arab world, leading to the current extremist terrorist thought.

spread of higab<sup>38</sup> (women covering their hair) and modest styles of dress during Sadat's era created another source of alienation that one should not ignore just because those feeling it found that alienation hard to express."<sup>39</sup> Despite the fact that the society itself started looking more fundamental, and that religion has always been a rooted and integral part of the Egyptian society, this fundamental trend never found its way to the stage. Perhaps it is because that this would go against the desire of the Gulf audiences who attended commercial plays in Egypt precisely because it is different from what they are exposed to in their homelands. The other strong reasoning would be that the intellectuals and theatre artists of the time, and of today, resented this type of fanaticism that goes against the religiously tolerant Egypt they grew up to. This resentment and refusal may be the reason behind them dismissing those Wahabi effects to appear on stage. On the other hand, and maybe as a result of this resentment, Egyptian Theatre did not demonstrate any serious attempts to fight against, or influence a reversal impact of Wahabism on the Egyptian society.

All those elements, except for religious fundamentalism, found their way to the theatre industry and the plays seen on stage. With the rise of this trend, the frustration of theatre practitioners and enthusiasts who wanted to do real theatre grew stronger. This frustration reached its peak when the state (Minister of Culture) decided to cancel its annual Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET) because of the eruption of the Gulf War in 1990. As a result, theatre critic and actress Minha El Batrawi called for a meeting that assembled all those artists, in an attempt to exert pressure on the state to host a festival on a national scale as opposed to an international one.

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<sup>38</sup> The Islamic headscarf worn by Muslim women, it mostly covers the head and chest.

<sup>39</sup> Amin, Galal. *Egypt in the Era of Hosni Mubarak*. P 141.

Theatre critic and scholar, Nehad Selaiha, attended this assembly and took it on her to document every step that followed for the coming 13 years. Selaiha is the main resource for this subject and a major player in advocating for this movement. Consequently, anyone who ventured on writing about this movement, or its theatrical era, uses her as a primary source. She, like Minha, was surprised and overwhelmed by the turnout of this first assembly and described it as follows:

On 23<sup>rd</sup> August, things began to snowball. What Minha hadn't bargained for was the existence of a strong and militant, if politically and artistically immature, underground theatre movement; young and ardent self-supporting offshoots of the university and state regional theatres, manned by talented former students and armatures, and lacking any legal status. They came in droves, flaunting fanciful names and clamoring for recognition and the right to participate. The world had certainly gone round: the Jugglers, the Loonies, the Visionaries, the Rebels, the Luminaries, the Sudanese Drummers, the Protestors and the Apollonians, not to mention the more sober Warsha, Movement, Encounter and Theatre Club groups – they were all these, like jinnis late loosed from their bottle.<sup>40</sup>

As the main documenter of this assembly, Selaiha adds that it quickly turned political and the attendees went on discussing and brainstorming about the state's control to the arts as well as its subsidizing policies and treatment of the artists who do not work within the governmental, cultural structure, i.e. under the patronage of the Minister of Culture. This meeting was the beginning of many that stretched until September (. . .) leading to a drafting of a fiery Manifesto that resulted in the inauguration of the Free

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<sup>40</sup> Selaiha, Nehad. *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*. P 16.

Theatre Movement and the launch of the 1<sup>st</sup> Free Theatre Festival.<sup>41</sup>

Just like that, a movement was born; a movement that embraced young theatre companies and allowed them to act as a pressure group that stood up for their right to exist and perform, away from the suffocating and unwelcoming walls of the official cultural body. What those artists primarily needed was freedom to create theatre freely, free from censorship, free from monetary restrictions, and free from spatial limitations. The inauguration of this movement gave its founders the promise of this freedom. As a result, the initial name for this movement had the word *free* in its title, as opposed to *underground*.

Four of this study's research subjects and interviewees were chosen thoroughly because of their presence at this assembly/meeting and were founders of companies that were vital to the formation of this movement. It was time that these artists found channels and resources to present their work, practice their theatrical pursuits, and contribute to the Egyptian theatre industry at the time. This is especially true because most of those artists were young and deeply politically involved, so they had many opinions, and the theatre was their desired medium for expression. They were ready to fight the existing theatrical establishment, yet all they needed to know was that others were fighting alongside with them. "There was no denying that a substantial body of theatrical talent, however, amorphous and submerged, did exist outside the stuffy official establishments and needed an outlet and some form of care and nurturing."<sup>42</sup>

It was obvious that the most pressing issue that plagued the state/public theatrical institutions was close-mindedness and bureaucracy. Those institutions did one of two

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<sup>41</sup> Selaiha, Nehad qtd in Ahram Online. Selim, Mai.

<sup>42</sup> Selaiha, Nehad. *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*. P 16.

things, either turned artists into mindless corrupted employees that obeyed the state, or repelled the artists that continued having the urge to create theatre in a free environment. There was no doubt or denial of the incompetence of the state officials that ran those institutions, leading to a despair in attitude regarding reforming it from within. “At a recent panel discussion at the National Cultural Centre, Karma Mutaweh himself, the head of the theatre sector at the Ministry of Culture, admitted that bureaucracy had overrun the theatre organization, eating up four-fifths of its five million budget and putting the proverbial spanner in the works; it had become so stultified, so antiquated.” He went on to say that the only way to deal with it was to dismantle it.<sup>43</sup>

Both Hassan El Geretly<sup>44</sup> and Ahmed El Attar had experiences that add to the confirmation to this claim. At the beginning of their careers, like any young artist, they needed stability, so when offered an artistic job in the government, they thought it would be worth the try and a good opportunity to create their works in an atmosphere with no worry of monetary limitations. During a conversation with Geretly, he recounted that in the mid/late 80s he took a job in the Department of Media Culture in the Ministry of Culture, and what he had to say was anything but positive:

I got employed as the first Assistant Director in Talee’a Theatre (Vanguard Theatre). It was around this time that I realized that, as an artist, I had to be independent from the state, but it took me some time. When I proposed a play, it was given to others, and another play was put in the drawer of my boss for years and never came to light. Meanwhile, I disappeared from the theatre and didn’t

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* P 17.

<sup>44</sup> Geretly is regarded as the father of the independent theatre movement. He is the founder of El Warsha troupe, which have had major successes in the past 20 years. He is also a subject for personal interviews for this study.

want to work. But it was an illegal breach at the time, because even though I wasn't doing anything I had to collect my salary. There was a lot of conflict at the time, so we reached a compromise that I take an unpaid leave.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, Attar chose not to spend a lot of time speaking about his experience of working with the state. It is worth noting, though, that the institution that Attar worked for, the Cultural Development Fund, was launched after the rise of the Free Theatre Movement. But just like anything that the state decides to bud into, it eventually created obstacles and conflicts that hindered the work of theatre-makers of this movement, and it went against what it was initially set out to do. “The stir that this new independent wave caused was quickly noticed by the government,”<sup>46</sup> according to theatre director and critic Dalia Basiouny. “Cultural officials first lured theatre-makers with awards, then with offers of spaces in which to perform, such as the Hanager Arts Theatre,<sup>47</sup> a venue that had rigid rules about content and programming that directors could not bypass. Accepting their awards meant accepting their censorship,”<sup>48</sup> Basiouny attests. “Several companies succumbed to being institutionalized and, in time, disbanded.”<sup>49</sup> Geretly and Attar are not the only two examples of artists that belonged to this movement that had occupations within the Ministry of Culture walls; there is a third example that will be detailed at a later stage, a name that unfortunately became

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<sup>45</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

<sup>46</sup> Basiouny, Dalia qtd in “Theatre in Egypt Before and After the Revolution.” Fahim, Joseph. *American Theatre Magazine*.

<sup>47</sup> The Hanager Arts Theatre is a state-run theatre that exhibits art works by Egyptian as well as international artists. It hosts rotating performances. It was a home for many independent theatre troupes.

<sup>48</sup> Basiouny, Dalia qtd in “Theatre in Egypt Before and After the Revolution.” Fahim, Joseph. *American Theatre Magazine*.

<sup>49</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

wholeheartedly institutionalized.

The Free Theatre Movement by time became known as the Independent Theatre Movement, perhaps because this is more accurate as it was independent of both the state and the mainstream private theatre industries. Consequent to the fact that participating in festivals was the only opportunity for those troupes to be recognized, parallel to the growth of the movement, was a growth in the number of festivals launched. The CIFET was the main staple event of theatre festivals in Egypt and the Middle East region. But since CIFET became a state-run festival and a lot of politics became involved in the selection of troupes chosen to represent Egypt in this festival. “Independent theatre is not on the radar except for when the CIFET happens – which only presented new works. And most experiments that came from abroad came for that reason; until the state started inserting itself and getting involved bit by bit until they took over this event”<sup>50</sup> says Ragab. This, however, did not stop these troupes from expanding their network. On the contrary, they had momentum that motivated them to exist.

Cairo and big Egyptian cities are known to host many cultural institutes from various countries; the German Cultural Center (Goethe), the French Cultural Center, the Italian Cultural Institute, the British Council, and others. Those centers and institutes became a home for those independent companies, who were not favored by state officials, to which they participated in theatre festivals launched by those centers. Those festivals, in particular, became the window for the independent theatre troupes to the international world. Through those festivals, they branched out their networks to surpass Egyptian borders and found an artistic platform where they met collaborators who spoke the same

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

artistic language as they did. The international artists' exchange with the Egyptian troupes was easier than trying to fight for recognition within Egyptian borders, even after the birth of the movement. This too, of course, was the pathway to a non-traditional form of funding to the Egyptian world, i.e. foreign funding.

This leads to the question of why the independent theatre practitioners in Egypt found more artistic grounds internationally as opposed to in their own land. The answer to this question is not one direct answer that can be easily laid out. Therefore, before answering this question, it helps to examine the characteristics of independent theatre practitioners and what they have in common; what they disagree on; what sets them apart from troupes adopted by the state; the kinds of works they produce, and other impacting factors.

Most, if not all, members of the independent theatre movement are the theatre practitioners who rejected the performance practices of contemporary Egyptian Theatre. They do not seek profit. Their headquarters and region of work are in Downtown Cairo.

The most prominent troupes of the independent movement like El Warsha (the Workshop), The Temple, and Encounter were founded by theatre-makers that were expatriates at a certain point in their lives when they studied theatre abroad; mostly in Europe. El Warsha's Geretly spent his university years studying theatre between England and France, The Temple's Attar spent his post-graduate years in France after graduating from the American University in Cairo (AUC), and Encounter's Galal spent his post-graduate years in Italy. They chose to study western disciplined theatre so they would come back to Egypt and pursue a career in theatre and theatre only. It is not inherent to be theatrically educated abroad to be part of the independent theatre



movement, but these three names are veterans and pioneers in achieving major developments for the independent theatre in a course of 20 years. They sustained a career in the theatre solely. Another model that would be considered a prominent name and addition to this movement is Teatro's Omar Motaz'bellah,<sup>51</sup> who is younger and did things rather differently than the names mentioned above.

Hassan El Geretly, however, is considered to be the father of independent theatre troupes in Egypt. He was the first to inaugurate a troupe of this kind, four years prior to the birth of the movement. This troupe, El Warsha, nurtured and trained many actors and drama practitioners that are notoriously prominent and known for their craft in Egypt today. One of those names is Sayed Ragab, who was trained with Geretly's El Warsha. Ragab became a master of storytelling and narrator and went about to teach workshops. After years of practicing acting in the theatre, he is now a TV and film star. But unlike his fellow colleagues who migrated to the screen, he did not abandon the theatre and is currently working with Attar. Ragab was also one of the first group of actors to perform *Red Rabbit, White Rabbit* in Egypt. Ragab describes the works that were initially produced by the new independent, or free theatre movement troupes as one-act plays, like works of Ali Salem – smart, political, comic, and intellectual. Because young theatre-makers didn't have the resources for big productions, they chose the one-act play format. According to Ragab, this was the start of the Free Theatre movement when it was still underground and unorganized.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps, this minimalism is the reason why those troupes were constantly faulted as 'Experimental'.

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<sup>51</sup> Theatre Director, Founder of Teatro Theatre Company and Osiris Cultural center. He is the youngest subject personally interviewed from the independent theatre movement.

<sup>52</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

In addition to the one-act plays, many of these troupes began their careers with producing adaptations and reinterpretations of Western works. Galal was notorious for experimenting with Shakespeare's cannon in a manner that was innovative to the Egyptian eye, and yet still faithful to the dramaturgy of the Bard's texts. Attar first major production with *The Temple* was an adaptation of *Oedipus*. Similarly, Geretly initially experimented with western text. While many may consider the western aspect in the beginnings of those artists as a negative indicator, it is not necessarily to be seen as such. Simply because as young artists, those theatre-makers needed to experiment with the familiar, and to them that would be western works based on their theatre training. Most practitioners would have normally done the same.

It is important to raise the question and not rely on assumptions. Geretly explained this western text preference as being a vehicle to explore different elements of storytelling, and that it is by no means a form of imitation;

El Warsha avoided imitating, and even though we used western rooted works, like Pinter, Hanka, Jarry, in our first years, we chose works that would serve a theatre of intimate resemblance. Like space, scenography, working on the body of the actor, the economy of language, etc. The first play I did was a play without words based on a work by Hanka. Then we worked on Pinter and explored economy of language and silence (. . .) So when we were done with this period and experimented with western heritage, which is the heritage of Egyptian theatre, as we know it, then suddenly the world opened up to other sources. There was no more hegemony; all this became relativized, up came your heritage, away from the fake-logic tradition.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

Teatro's Motaz'bellah, however, came to prove that this assumption is not entirely correct, because unlike the names mentioned earlier, the veterans of the independent theatre movement, he comes as a fresh younger example who did not study abroad, yet, most of his works relied on the structures of known western texts. That is how he started 12-years ago, and how he is proceeding until now. Motaz'bellah is currently working on a theatrical experiment with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. His answer to "Why western," was rather insightful:

I don't really think much on the origin of the source when I work on something. I'm mostly concerned with works that are timely and human; and even though *Metamorphosis* is from a diff country, continent, and century, it remains to be timeless. It addresses a pressing issue that we are facing now; we are in a devolutionary phase. We are stuck between a man and something else.<sup>54</sup>

One of the other striking resemblances between independent theatre members and practitioners is that most of them, if not politically active, are at least politically aware. There is no fault in claiming that they are all socially responsible and believe in the essentiality of the social accountability of theatre towards a society. This even applies to Attar, who revels in the fact that when he works on a play he does not think of the message it sends, and that when he creates he does art for art's sake. The argument regarding this issue with Attar was long yet discerning, because, unlike the rest of his colleagues, he wears two hats; the hat of a theatre director (through the plays he directs) and the hat of a cultural operator (through the two festivals he produces annually). Attar agrees that he always felt that there is an artist's role in a society, which goes beyond

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<sup>54</sup> Motaz'bellah, Omar. Personal interview.

creating art, yet, this is not a must:

I don't think it's a must, I believe that for the artist, by just doing art is enough. They don't need to do anything else, they don't need to be engaged politically, they don't need to be social activists; they don't need to think about poverty. They have just to do what they know best because art for me contains everything, art is social, is political...it's everything. It doesn't have to be engaged to be political, art is political by definition, and is social by definition. But I also think that those artists who have the capacity, not necessarily the capacity meaning the desire, but also the capacity in skill, should utilize those extracurricular skills to benefit the society. Some artists are really great artists, but they don't know how to do anything else, that's just enough. Other artists know how to do other things, some of them could be politicians, some of them could be activists, some of them could be producers, and some of them could be cultural operators. If they do have these other skills, especially in third world communities and underdeveloped societies, then they should use their other skills if they can.<sup>55</sup>

Attar does, in fact, contribute in the stirring of the societal landscape, even indirectly. As mentioned earlier, Attar is a veteran of the independent theatre movement, primarily through his theatre company, The Temple. However, that is not all to him, next to the successes of the Temple, Attar launched three projects in the course of 20 years, which directly aided the development of the cultural backdrop of the downtown theatre community. With him, it all started with problem-solving, and Studio Emad Eddin (SEE). His entrepreneurial mind inspired him to start a project that resolved, perhaps one of the

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<sup>55</sup> El Attar, Ahmed. Personal interview.

most pressing issues that faced the independent theatre community at the time, and that was the lack of space, or as he described it as a very specific need:

In 2004, I had a big production called *Mother, I Want to Be Millionaire*, which was at the Berlin Theatre Festival (Berliner Festspiele), a huge, prestigious festival. It was a big cast, a big set, a ton and one-half set, and a huge crew. It was a production by Berliner Festspiele, and we had the production money to do the work we wanted to do, so I got the designers I wanted, I had money to pay for everything and the actors were well paid, but the only thing that was missing was a place to rehearse. Accordingly, we were rehearsing in my living room downtown, and that's when the idea came to my mind. At that time, I thought if I was probably the only one getting the most funds to produce theatrical works in this entire region, and I was still facing this issue, then what about the younger generation or other companies who don't even have personal resources? That's where the idea of SEE came from so that people could at least have a place to rehearse their works.<sup>56</sup>

Attar indeed succeeded in achieving his goal. SEE has opened the doors to many young theatre professionals by just giving them the space. SEE is a cultural hub where artists meet, network, rehearse, and participate in workshops and trainings. For example, in 2010 a stage-management workshop was conducted at SEE. This workshop highlighted many important features and certainly resulted in giving helpful gained knowledge to its participants regarding theatre management. Attar also is the founder of the festivals 2B Continued and D-CAF.

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<sup>56</sup> El Attar, Ahmed. Personal interview.

The other side of the coin of political involvement of independent theatre members is the raging example like that of Khaled El Sawy, the writer of the Manifesto for the movement in 1990, founder of Movement Theatre Company, and a current box-office film and TV star. Sawy was one of the first targeted names to be interviewed, but unfortunately, schedules were never aligned during the short time, which was available for the field research in Cairo. Through his theatre company, he wrote, directed, and acted in a few plays that were highly politically charged. In 1997, Movement performed the political satire *The Birth*, reviewed by Selaiha as follows,

The satirical reading of modern Egyptian history and reality offered in *The Birth* (which turns out to be a series of miscarriages) concentrates on the plight of the young and enlightened and is projected from their point of view. Beleaguered by a military dictatorship, political chicanery, a stultified, authoritarian educational system, poverty, unemployment, corruption cultural and ethical confusion, a crumbling ethos and the spread of bigotry, hypocrisy and fanaticism, they can hardly be expected to take cool, objective, analytical view of their situation. What we got from the author, director, and actor Khalid El-Sawi in this production is not an integrated critique of modern Egyptian reality in all its complexity, but, rather, a Brechtian kind of totalitarian dichotomy that leaves no third space where one can elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the 'other' of one's self.<sup>57</sup>

*The Birth* put Sawy and his colleagues from Movement on the map of prospering young theatrical minds, paving the road to stardom to a few of them. Even though Sawy is not currently involved in the theatre like before, his unwavering and uncompromising

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<sup>57</sup> Selaiha, Nehad. *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*. P 140.

responsibility towards theatrical society cannot go unstated. Sawy is a fierce and notorious political activist that has been seen protesting and dodging teargas canisters on many occasions, especially from 2011 until 2013.

Another production/movement that is attributed to the independent theatre, however, was launched by students, is the theatrical series *BuSSy (Look)*. Initially inspired by the *Vagina Monologues*, *BuSSy* was first performed in 2006 at the Howard Theatre at the American University in Cairo. The series presented performed monologues recounting real life day-to-day incidents facing Egyptian women. Though not overtly political at first, the act of having young girls and women allow their stories to be on performed on stage is a political statement on its own. In a recent interview with *American Theatre Magazine*, Egyptian theatre maker Adham Hafez explains the types of works that are considered necessarily political,

What is political performance now? In certain cities, a political performance is the fact that a woman is making work and she is there onstage alone making work and that's enough. If she is there dancing the music of Chopin or talking about apples and peaches, that's enough; that's very political. But of course, it doesn't translate as political to people in the West and the U.S., where it's a whole different story.<sup>58</sup>

It is worth noting that through the performance of *BuSSy* in 2006 sexual harassment was first openly addressed on the Egyptian stage creating a dialogue and narrative towards the prohibited subject. *BuSSy* remains to be performed annually, however in different venues. In 2012, *BuSSy* was performed in Attar's D-CAF festival.

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<sup>58</sup> Weinert-Kendt, Rob. "Staging A Movement." *American Theatre Magazine*. 2016.

Ragab also is a ferocious political activist who was arrested twice in the 80s for his political engagements. Ragab does not separate theatre from politics and believes that theatre needs to be always politically and socially responsible because he regards theatre value as such, “For a long time and while I was growing up, theatre was a value on its own. Valuable for its effect on societies and showing them the means to solve, face, and address their problems.”<sup>59</sup> This is how Ragab perceives theatre in its basic form, and remains to carry this perception even after he migrated to the screen.

During January 25th, 2011 and the 18 sit-in days in Tahrir Square, underground art – theatrical, cinematic, musical and visual – had prominent presence in the Square and made an impact on revolutionary art that derived from this political movement. Two years and a half later, it made another influential reprise in June 2013 that fueled the resistance against the Muslim Brotherhood rule and extremist religious groups. These examples only indicate that at times, underground art – and in this case, theatre – has a potential to penetrate the Egyptian societal fabric and function as a socio-political platform for Egyptians, but due to many factors, it remains to be hindered. “This independent wave has kept Egyptian theatre afloat, carrying it for nearly 20 years while the traditional art form struggled to find a place in a rapidly evolving cultural scene. And it is this generation that would plant the seeds for the biggest uprising Egypt has ever witnessed.”<sup>60</sup>

It is important to elaborate further on why the research is narrating this common, politically involved trait between different independent theatre members. Why is it

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<sup>59</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

<sup>60</sup> Fahim, Joseph. “Theatre in Egypt Before and After the Revolution.” *American Theatre Magazine*.



considered vital? Why is that in every political protest it is almost a guarantee that one would end up finding a significant presence of independent theatre practitioners? And why is this connection between politics and independent theatre is both strong and relevant? Simply because the momentum these troupes had was a direct result of a vigorous need to change and stir the theatrical status quo, which automatically translated into a societal and political status-quo. As indicated earlier, they were ready to fight the already existing theatrical stuffy and governmental establishment. Accordingly, the choice to proceed with practicing theatre independently and refusing initialization was an activist act on its own. In turn, the ultimate goal that those troupes had was surviving. Geretly regards El Warsha's survival as its main legacy,

What will we be best to be remembered for? Having survived – which is very precarious, but it wasn't easy. When western professionals come here and see our space, they feel sorry for us that this is the space we had for all those years, poor and minimalistic in their eyes. I feel the contrary, I feel proud for having this space, maintaining it, and that I managed to keep it all these years. In our country, this is a privilege.<sup>61</sup>

This brings us to the core of this study. What is it that is true about contemporary independent Egyptian theatre? What are the obstacles that they face/faced that made their survival the main goal in itself? What hindered them from penetrating the Egyptian community at large and kept them bubbled? What is it that was offered to them in the international theatrical circles, which allowed them to thrive and develop? Finally, how

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<sup>61</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

far is it true is that the state, through the Ministries of Culture & Education, played a big role in the deterioration of the theatre industry?

Whether intentionally or not, the state seemed to be content with the condition of theatre-making, and anyone who would considerably present a new innovative thought was not necessarily welcomed, especially when operating outside the state's establishment. The state had been responsible for the devolution of theatre in many ways, especially in regards to corruption of intellects. Furthermore, the state had no vision. The fundamental truth about the Nasser regime is that it utilized all the tools and powers in the society to serve one strategy, the enforcement of national pride. Whether to agree with his approach or not, he succeeded, and a vast world of culture was at the fingertips of every Egyptian from all socio-economic classes. But all the rulers that followed him, Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, and Abdel Fatah El-Sisi, had no vision or strategy where arts and in which culture can play a part. Consequently, the support to artists and innovators was sporadic and inconsistent. But perhaps the one strategy or value those regimes cared to exert was containment. In other words, if and when the state gives support to an independent artist, this support is conditional with censorship. Censorship did not always have much effect on the works produced without the involvement of state. Many times, while working on university productions, students had to flush down scripts simply to avoid carrying a documented text that may jeopardize the shutdown of a production if the authorities decided to overlook what was done on stage. It was a hit and miss. Sometimes the risk was worthwhile and students got away with presenting uncensored works. Yet, the support of the state undeniably imposes censorship and dictates the kind of work that will be put on stage. Rephrasing Dalia

Basiouy's quote earlier, the recognition by the state, whether through awards or support, means accepting censorship.

Additionally, the expansion of the number of employees in all state-run institutions over time, including cultural ones, creates a ripe environment for monetary corruption that directly benefit those corrupted employees. Thus, this corruption infiltrates the cultural climate as a whole, supporting the preservation of the status quo.

Although the combined effect of these domestic and external developments was not necessarily all negative, the resulting general intellectual climate has been quite dismal. The rapid growth of a middle class whose economic success derived largely from unproductive activities was combined with a rapid expansion of poor quality education, and with a large role for a 'soft' state that allowed a small number of individuals to exploit its resources for their own private gain.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, organizers of state-run festivals who work for the Ministry of Culture have confirmed more than once their unfounded hostility towards independent theatre-makers. Some might think that this hostility is an exaggeration, but unfortunately, it is not unfamiliar in the Egyptian professional life that different institutions and individuals hold hatred for each other and commit acts that would sabotage each other's works. It does sound childish, and maybe driven from excessive competition on limited resources and markets, but it is one of the sad truths in Egypt. This claim was reflected in the testimonies given by most of the artists interviewed, and also explained by Selaiha,

Because theatre in the Arab world has always had an irreducible political

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<sup>62</sup> Amin, Galal. *Whatever Else Happened to the Egyptians?* P 118.

dimension and continues to be inextricably bound up with a critique of domination, official theatre festivals are often viewed by government as effective means to divert attention from the many arrant abuses of human rights in this part of the world, and project a spurious facade of democracy, freedom of speech and conscience.<sup>63</sup>

Ragab particularly had a lot to say regarding this subject, as he witnessed it when working with Geretly, and is witnessing it while working now with Attar. He connects the aggressive feelings of state officials towards independent theatre practitioners to foreign funding:

When I was in El Warsha we were antagonized because we worked with foreign funds, and to fight us, we ourselves were name-called by critics that always align with the state. The disparaging names were many, but the most striking ones were traitors and/or queers...Geretly's connections, talent, and getting constantly invited to perform abroad helped him in having a strong presence internationally, but in turn, it backfired locally because he got despised for it. When state theatre officials see how welcomed and appreciated he is aboard, they come back and attack him in the media and give him negative reviews.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, getting foreign funds or being labeled as funded is stigmatized in the mainstream and official artistic circles.

Consequently, it would be highly improbable for an independent troupe to represent officially Egypt in any of the festivals that the Egyptian state has a hand in organizing in the entire Middle East/Arab region. Even the younger generation of this movement

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<sup>63</sup> Selaiha, Nehad. *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*. P 435.

<sup>64</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

remained to have the same struggle:

We weren't allowed to perform in the name of Egypt as an independent troupe in those festivals, under the reason that we are not a mainstream – even though the foreign contribution does not always have to be mainstream. What we realized is that Egyptian representation mostly came from the National Theatre, the Vanguard Theatre, and House of Arts Theatre, all state-affiliated institutions.<sup>65</sup>

What happens though is that when those independent theatre troupes have an international critical claim, only then does the state consider their representation in their festivals. This juvenile competition existed only between state-run theatre and independent theatre troupes, and not between independent theatre troupes among themselves, whose main struggle was just to survive.

However, there are two exceptions those live to prove that the relationship with state-run theatre institution was not hostile at all times, but it remains to be questionable and unpromising. The first was in 1998 when El Geretly's play *Tides of Night* won various awards in European and Arabic theatre festivals. He was then chosen to perform his epic theatrical tale in CIFET for that year, and Sayed Ragab won the award for best actor. According to Ragab, he was later approached by a state official persuading him to leave Geretly's troupe to join state-run troupes, but the former responded with absolute refusal. State officials and employees were creative in implanting a divide between populists and intellectuals. To them, the independent theatre-makers were loud in their objection to the current state of theatre, and the state representatives would try

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<sup>65</sup> Motaz'bellah, Omar. Personal interview.

relentlessly to either lure them to become stars and populist artists or try to divide between them.

The second occurrence of an exception was rather recent when Attar's play *The Last Supper* represented Egypt in what is now named the Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre (CIFCET) in November 2015. As expected, though, the show did not win any awards. Geretly himself attests to this unfair inclination of the state, "There happens as a natural selection. For example, Attar was in the International Festival this year, and while nominated too many awards, he got none, this is an indication." This is all in spite of the fact that Attar's play went on to acquire a raging success in many European festivals, bringing Attar a flow of awards and the recognition that his work truly deserves. (e.g., d'Avignon 2015, Berlin 2016).

Khalid Galal, on the other hand, managed to find a way to be flexible with the rigid and uncompromising rules of the state. As hinted earlier, Galal was one of the veterans of the independent theatre movement. He was the founder of Encounter and was later adopted artistically by the head of the Hanager Theatre, giving him the creative resources to produce his works:

There are others like Khalid Galal who managed to balance the free theatre in alignment with the state theatre. So he managed to create a different type of theatre with the state. Primarily because he created a good network when studying abroad, and secondly because he was adopted artistically by the Hanager. His theatre did go against the mainstream, old, dying theatre.<sup>66</sup>

It is true that Khalid Galal became a resident in the Hanager Theatre Arts Center, and

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<sup>66</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

started his youth training program that discovered many talents and graduated actors that occupy the TV and film screens as we speak. In 2009, Galal wrote and directed *Ahwa Sada (Unsweetened Coffee)* at the Cairo Opera House, making it a huge success that was unprecedented in mainstream circles, attracting a wider range of audience than the ones independent theatres usually attract. Perhaps, this success was triggered because this play addressed younger audiences and was divorced from the stuffy theatrical form. It also addressed pressing issues (like the deterioration of the Arabic language, late marriages, Gulf-anization, capitalism, illiteracy, corruption and ugliness in the arts, and illegal immigration) in a witty manner, and performed on a stage that is highly regarded and respected by the majority of Egyptians. This success was a one-time endeavor that the state and Galal failed to sustain or replicate. Galal is the institutionalized example mentioned earlier.

In 2015, The Ministry of Culture announced the appointment of Galal to be the head of the production sector at the Egyptian Opera and the Ministry of Culture, acting on behalf of the Minister. It helps that Galal is a strong political supporter of the current regime, but that does not negate his innovation as a theatre director. His appointment may seem to be a good move on behalf of the state, in embracing the independent theatre talents, including new theatrical blood, and giving them the chance to make a change. What was witnessed though, sparked doubts of any change.

While an interview/meeting with Galal was successfully scheduled, it ended up with hours of waiting in his office and not getting an interview. Galal was very generous and welcoming, but he had no control, whatsoever, of his time. Spending three hours in his office the first day, and eight the following, without managing to get a minute with him

did not however go wasted. There was a lot of learning by just witnessing the cultural establishment he is operating within. Yes, having a mind like Galal to run this monster of a cultural institute, and the major number of theatres under its management may revive the theatre scene. It was most certainly worthwhile witnessing his programming to works of younger theatre companies and giving them his time to listen to their needs. The time he spent in negotiating and breaking between tedious bureaucratic topics, was quite frankly, sad to observe. Not that paperwork or bureaucracy is futile, but the tedious circular quarrels that occurred at his office were unproductive to say the least. Maybe Galal has the energy now to fight within the system, in an attempt to provide a better climate to theatre practitioners to do their work. There is skepticism of fearing that, like everything in Egypt, especially the governmental establishments, this will wear off, and the machine of this gigantic institute will eat up whatever creativity Galal possesses, especially after the novelty of the position wears off. Only time will tell.

However, can we claim that the state's animosity towards most of the independent theatre-makers is the sole culprit to why they could not penetrate the Egyptian culture at large? Is the state the only perpetuator that led to the devolution of Egyptian theatre? The state and its strategy may be the main contributing cause, but it most certainly is not the only one. There are many other factors that strongly hindered the Egyptian theatre community to thrive.

A trap that most artists in the independent theatre movement (and out of it) fall into is the confinement in terminologies and labels. At the beginning of this study, certain terms were introduced as being used by both practitioners and audiences to describe and label theatre performances and trends. The reason why terminologies matter is because



whatever term/label chosen indirectly dictates the kind of work an artist will put on stage, will have an effect on its artistic and technical quality, and reflect on the audience's response to the theatrical piece. Attar simplifies his choice of labeling, "I call it alternative theatre, that's the word that I like now after many years in the industry. After alternative, we can call it anything else."<sup>67</sup>

There are many terms that impose a negative impact on the work produced, but there are certain terms that are considered to be detrimental when used in Egyptian theatrical circles, such as amateur, experimental, intellectual, and contemporary. This is not to say that every independent theatre practitioner falls under these misconceptions. Many of them know exactly what those terms and genres mean, but unfortunately the wide base does not, especially the younger age group.

The terms experimental and contemporary often have the same interpretation while used by young theatre practitioners. For some reason, practitioners characterize works that they label either as experimental or contemporary to be minimalistic, philosophical, non-linear, including a lot of movement, and resolution is not always necessary. Those works tend to be of a certain look, design, and aesthetic; yet the content is often inconceivable. Geretly is one who understands the real definition of experimental, how it is misinterpreted in Egypt, and hence refuses to label his works as such.

I like to do exploratory work; I don't like to use the word experimental. So then I started El Warsha, which is an exploratory company. We do a lot of research and explore topics and forms. We don't experiment, because the term 'experimental' in Egypt is a description of a way of working but not in describing the attitude. I

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<sup>67</sup> El Attar, Ahmed. Personal interview.

suppose we are experimental, but not in the Egyptian definition of experimental, because we do not look experimental. We are a kind of lab, but we have avoided this word in Egypt because it is used on new works by the way they look, like fashion, so it became a fashionable trend. Since our society is very traditional and likes to live in boxes, new works are designed to look like experimental European works that when they came to Egypt for festivals left a trail of imitation that was adopted by many Egyptians.<sup>68</sup>

Ragab and Motaz'bellah both point out this main fault in a wide range of works they see performed on the Egyptian stage today. It is a fault committed by those who do not understand those labels and use them to classify their works. They both agree that even though the term is contemporary the works produced under this label are often dated in style and belong to an older era. Although both come from different generations, their descriptions are similar; Motaz'bellah says, "Our notion of 'experimental' is still stuck to post-modernism and avant-garde, works that are extra stylized and are only based on movement."<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Ragab confirms the datedness of what is regarded experimental theatre stating, "It is a theatre different in type than the populist/mainstream theatre we know in Egypt. It is the kind of theatre you could find in France 20 years ago."<sup>70</sup>

There is another term that has many issues and proved to have a negative outcome. During the late winter of 2015, 2B Continued was taking place in Cairo, which is one of the festivals that Attar produces. This festival has been known for years to foster many young artists who do not have the resources to do their work. It provides them with

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<sup>68</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

<sup>69</sup> Motaz'bellah, Omar. Personal interview.

<sup>70</sup> Ragab, Sayd. Personal interview.

designers, facilities, and production funds. While 2B Continued has been running for many years, witnessing it in 2015 was certainly a good chance to how far it developed. Out of three performances, only one was worth the watch. It had a story to tell. The story was told well, and technically it was on point. Technical is where other shows had fallen short, and as a result, spilled over to the story telling. What was particularly a disappointment is a play directed by someone whom can fairly be described as a professional. The production played on stage that of a script well written and well-known, was dismal. The production was poor in every meaning of the term, not monetarily, but technically and aesthetically. For example, the actors were screaming on stage, as opposed to projecting. The blocking was a result of the whims of the actors as the play went about, and many other issues that fall under basic tools of any theatre training. It is a fact that those involved backstage and on stage have been theatrically trained. Some of them even give workshops to new practitioners. In expressing disappointment after the show, many who attended responded stating, “It is okay since it is amateur work, no more should be expected.” This certainly led to important questions. Is the labeling of artists to themselves as amateurs, even though their training says otherwise, gives those artists a crutch to produce poor theatrical productions on stage? Does that label they chose for themselves as amateurs make it acceptable for them not to put the least effort needed to make their work presentable?

These questions were plaguing and accordingly were brought up while conducting the interviews. Motaz’bellah absolutely agreed that artistic incompetence is indeed a crutch when some artists label themselves as amateurs. Geretly, however, believes that any and all labels, not just amateur, lead to laxness in productions:

There is indeed laxness when falling back on the labels of experimental and amateur. Any labels hurt. It is indeed, important to be free, and while we started as free, we ended being independent instead. At the end, it doesn't matter what you call us, because while we did good work, we also did bad work, but we tried our best and survived.<sup>71</sup>

In most cases it is indeed harmful to limit one in terminologies or labels, however not at all times. In the cases of terms like independent, underground, free, and alternative the debate does not matter much, because all those terms reflect and serve different, yet true sides of the identity of the independent theatre movement. At first, it was considered underground, because most of those troupes were disorganized, unrecognized, and were operating separately with no resources for rehearsal space or production. After 1990, the choice was initially free because the movement was intentionally breaking free from all conventional existing theatrical constraints. Then it slowly became defined as independent because of them being organized and being independent from the stuffy establishment of the state theatre and the commercial sector – and it remains to be defined as such. Some, like Attar, choose the term alternative because the works that independent troupe produce are not intended to replace or remove the public or private sectors. However, they are intended to create an alternative form that is affordable, innovative, and with quality.

This debate becomes necessary and important in addressing terms like experimental, contemporary and amateur. This is because they have proven to harm the work produced

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<sup>71</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

under these boxes due to the reliance of their makers either on blind imitation of avant-garde European work, or producing works with the bare minimum of effort.

It is perhaps easier for those artists to fall on labels that confine and limit them to certain models, even if interpreted incorrectly. It is true that most of those artists copy and imitate more than innovate. The root of it all is the lack of exposure, training, and education. This is not only on the theatrical level but also on the level of basic general and common knowledge. As stated by Basiouny,

A lot of the works were (are) technically poor. Many were not coherent, and writing remains the weakest element in our theatre. There are no proper programs that teach theatre writing. Another problem is that many of those independent groups did not have proper training, and nearly all actors are attuned to the acting style of bad Egyptian soap operas. There was a deep desire to share stories, and to express oneself. It was clear that the whole society was on the brink of a revolution, and it showed in different art disciplines, including theatre.<sup>72</sup>

A related point to consider is that by pursuing a career in independent theatre, a theatre-maker is mostly doing one of two things, participating in festivals, or taking workshops in between. But it has been evident frequently that those workshops are not reflecting positively on those who contribute to them. Not because they have no learning value, but rather because those who participate do not practice what they learn. They binge on learning a skill through workshops but then abandon those learned skills as soon as the workshop/project is over. Additionally, when those theatre-makers get exposed to

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<sup>72</sup> Basiouny, Dalia qtd in “Theatre in Egypt Before and After the Revolution.” Fahim, Joseph. *American Theatre Magazine*.

well-presented productions from the West during festivals, they get fascinated and aspire to do what they saw; accordingly imitate.

My problem with most contemporary art in Egypt is that it looks contemporary, but it is derivative. This is also my problem with the word experimental, because when we had the festival; many Egyptians just imitated the works of those European troupes as opposed to being inspired by them.<sup>73</sup>

This is no claim that all Western participations in those festivals are necessarily impressive, but the majority of those works are produced by trained professionals, and accordingly what they produce is something that young independent theatre practitioner gets impressed by. It is unfair to cast the blame on the young generation for these faults. Ragab explains,

The blame shouldn't fall on them, though. Because this is a product of a 40-year exposure to defined mainstream theatre – as decided upon by the state and the private sector. They are the ones who make those decisions and truly control the type of theatre that 'supposedly' generates money."<sup>74</sup>

Those artists are not consciously aware that they imitate, rather they believe they are inspired by other works, but in most cases the outcome is a cheap copy of what they have been exposed to.

There is another type of imitation and labeling that Egyptians have been guilty of over time, but it is prevalent in the arts. Egyptians tend to describe their works in a Western lens. Sometimes the creators of the work fall into this trap, and most times critics and media do the same. For example, with the rise of Ragab now to fame, the

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<sup>73</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

<sup>74</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

media often refers to him and the Egyptian Morgan Freeman. Also, Geretly's *Tides of Night* has been promoted as the Egyptian Romeo & Juliet; even though it is based on an old true-life ballad reciting real tragic events that happened in rural Egypt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both Ragab and Geretly refuse these labels, but unfortunately, they have no control over how they are being covered in the media, whether local or western. Geretly has his interpretation of this inclination, "Some artists are trying to translate Egypt for the other, and I don't think this is either good or important. Those who are telling the stories are one thing, but those who are telling a story to a listener is another. It's always good to have a listener." He added, "Labels are very dangerous, especially in examples of the West, because they always try to understand our world through theatre, and their Western lens."<sup>75</sup>

It is a cultural issue that is ingrained in all of us, always to see things through the lens of something pre-existing in the West, which always ends up being an unfair comparison, inappropriate, and unfitting.

Independent theatre also suffers from televised theatre. Exceptionally, there are fortunate few who reaped the one advantage of televised theatre in Egypt and owning a library of all recorded Egyptian theatre classics at their fingertips. The phenomenon itself, however, plays an unwavering role in the decline in theatre-going in general, and the audience's exposure to independent theatre productions in particular. Televised theatre is not a brand new phenomenon to the Egyptian society, as mentioned earlier; it was only through theatre that Egyptians got acquainted with the TV set. However, the development of this phase morphed into a factor that stalled theatre going overtime. With the rise of

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<sup>75</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

commercial comedies during the mid-70s until now, the enterprise of broadcasting those plays became a main component of the celebration of Egyptians during holidays. Those plays do not get broadcasted live; they usually do after the play closes after multiple years of a run. This trend results in two things. The obvious one is that it gives Egyptian audiences the delusion of getting their theatrical dose, so they stopped going to the theatre to enjoy the communal experience. The second thing it did is that for 40-years it enforced the misconception of the necessity of the comic element in a play. To any random person in Egypt, theatre is comedy and only comedy, “Across all social classes, from my experience, theatre is something that makes them laugh. So even when I invite people to see my shows now, they ask me, will it make us laugh?”<sup>76</sup>

What was added to this theatre-disabling phenomenon is that in the last three years a cheaper and cruder version of televised theatre has surfaced on most TV screens. It is sad to see people raving about those programs and saying that theatre is finally back, even though streamed to their living rooms, and the product that is on screen is nothing but poor, unconnected sketches that rely on cheap laughs. “But in this society which lost the meaning of theatre, what theatre means – as it being a live art and how that differentiates it from other forms of art – then it will be a different experience. People will simply stay at home to watch the televised plays than to go to the theatre. What MBC, CBC, and Masrah Masr <sup>77</sup>are now doing isn’t even a bad idea; it’s a cheap version of bad commercial theatre.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Motaz’bellah, Omar. Personal interview.

<sup>77</sup> Arab and Egyptian privately owned media networks and TV programs.

<sup>78</sup> El Attar, Ahmed. Personal interview.



All the factors mentioned above are valid reasons behind the hindering of the independent theatre movement to penetrating the Egyptian society on a large scale. But what is it about the international theatrical scene that made it particularly a ripe environment for independent Egyptian troupes to thrive and become recognized? The answers to this question will be rather axiomatic especially when the local scene is as complicated as demonstrated throughout this study. What opened doors to independent theatre troupes in international, particularly western circles? Three elements: Foreign funding, the professional quality of work that travels, and the exoticness of the east.

However, before getting into these elements in-depth, it is important to recap briefly and contextualize the complicated and contradicting relationship of Egyptian Theatre to the West. Modern Egyptian theatre, as we know it, is initially based on the Western theatre tradition. This is primarily due to the influences of colonization on the Egyptian society, and the education of most theatrical pioneers and scholars in the West. Those scholars, writers, and theatre practitioners, upon returning to Egypt, maintained the challenging balance of preserving their heritage while adapting and performing western texts, like Mohandes' Egyptianized *My Fair Lady*. This balance, however, faded by time and the influence from the West became stronger – surprisingly a few decades post-colonization – on the Egyptian society and the theatre in particular, as a result of an educational system that constantly responded to the West on the expense of the educating Egyptian roots. This was translated on the stage – and many other lifestyle trends – with the thematic translation of many of the works through a western lens. Examples are, framing the *Tides of Night* story of real life Hassan & Naiima as the Egyptian Romeo and Juliet; or Sayed Ragab's portrayal in the media as the Egyptian Morgan Freeman. This

reflected in the lack of originality in the younger generations by blindly imitating the western look on stage, as opposed to comprehending the real substance of the works on stage.

In addition, the xenophobic tone undertook by most governmental and state officials, yet preserving ties with embassies, western cultural centers and festivals, created this perplexing sentiment towards any troupes that are foreign funded, accusing them of treachery, yet legitimizing such funds, putting it more in the unexplained frowned-upon list of activities. Those who venture on accepting foreign funds are allowed to do so, yet they would not be allowed to represent the state in any of the state-run theatre festivals, as a form of an unspoken punishment. Consequently, this xenophobic sentiment, adopted by many Egyptians, limits the ability of those independent troupes to cultivate a wide range of Egyptian audiences, constricting them to the downtown community of artists and intellectuals. In other instances, those xenophobic sentiments were used by some populist theatre-makers in the private sector to mobilize pseudo national sentiment and generate sales to plays that claim to be anti-west, like Soby's *Mama America*.

This complicated relationship of the Egyptian Theatre with the West allows the transition to discuss the answers to the questions that sparked this study in an elaborate manner. Foreign funding is the obvious and predominant factor in the prominence of independent Egyptian troupes in international circles. As mentioned previously, independent theatre troupes mainly participated in festivals run by foreign cultural centers in the big cities of Egypt. It is through those festivals that they found channels to extend and expand networks that surpassed borders. Of course, it helped that most of those who utilized foreign funds are ones that have been mostly educated in the West, or

at least know one foreign language. The most prominent examples that employed the benefits of foreign funding to the trajectory of their careers and troupes are Geretly and Attar. Consequently, those two names are the most recalled names when one mentions Egyptian Theatre representation within the presence of western theatre practitioners. Both Geretly and Attar developed a long-term bond with the organizers of most international festivals, so that when Egypt is mentioned, they become the obvious go-to candidates for participation.

Accordingly, foreign funding supports the sustainability of 95%<sup>79</sup> of the currently existent independent troupes through which a few of the independent theatre veterans utilized to build and inaugurate centers for rehearsal spaces and providing training workshops (Attar's SEE and Gertley's El Warha) to beginning artists for a minimum fee. Despite the fact that they do not have government support, those theatres have survived chiefly through foreign funding, and marginally through volunteers and their personal money. Ragab indicates, that if not for those foreign funds, neither Attar nor Geretly would have been recognized internationally or locally.<sup>80</sup>

Interpreting why western institutes invest in Egyptian and eastern art particularly could perhaps be a byproduct of post-colonial guilt. Selaiha seems to endorse that same interpretation, but in regards to foreign participants in general, "Burdened with a sense of guilt, and a heritage they feel they have to apologize and make up for, they find themselves in the position of having to suspend all judgment and exercise the virtue of

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<sup>79</sup> The 5% refers to practitioners similar to Motaz'bellah's theatre troupe Teatro and his rehearsal center Osiris, which are predominantly funded and operated by a circulating monthly fund provided out of the pockets of company members. Motaz'bellah relies heavily on volunteers to sustain his company, refusing individual giving or foreign funding.

<sup>80</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

tolerance and respect for difference to a fault.”<sup>81</sup> However, when discussing that with Ragab, his analysis flipped the coin saying, “or maybe it is a softer form of colonialism, a cultural one as opposed to militarily”<sup>82</sup> Geretly however, sees the interest of the West in Eastern art from a different perspective. “After the success of *Ghazeer Al Layl (Tides of Night)*, I discovered that the West is interested in two things. One, they recognize the exotic, and you become the other. And I say I am not the other, I am somebody else. Two, familiarity. So when we do something of their liking, they see it as a good version of something they know.”<sup>83</sup>

Moreover, the deterioration in the quality of works presented and performed by many troupes who represent Egypt in festivals, whether state or independent representation, plays a role in why there are only a few theatrical names recognized more than others. When festival organizers find grounded and professional theatre representation from Egypt, they assure fostering this artistic relationship and develop on it. Ragab clarifies on this point by saying, “After 40 years of backward thoughts, the few examples that shine and do respectable work despite all of the difficulties they face locally will, of course, be recognized internationally. Because it is rare when good Egyptian representation travels, once those are discovered, international festival organizers stick to them.”<sup>84</sup>

This is also true in the case of Motaz’bellah, even though he gets no foreign funds, and insists on financing his institution from within, relying on volunteers, including himself. He recounts his experience of the West’s surprise that he is Egyptian. To their

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<sup>81</sup> Selaiha, Nehad. *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*. P 436.

<sup>82</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

<sup>83</sup> El Geretly, Hassan. Personal interview.

<sup>84</sup> Ragab, Sayed. Personal interview.

surprise, he produces works that are theatrically sound and presentable. “My visuals are a bit different and very detailed since I’m a painter to begin with. When my posters and artwork promoting my plays were presented abroad, people presumed that we were a European troupe. We always got a pat-on-the-back since we are an Egyptian troupe that does work of *quality*. People would get surprised because most – not all – Egyptian representation that they see is poor/minimalistic. This condensation angered me.” Consequently, he explains why is it then that he refuses to receive any foreign funding. “Accordingly, I made sure that all communication and everything that goes abroad have the label “Made in Egypt” on it (like Egyptian cotton). To maintain this romantic principle, it is inappropriate for me to take any non-Egyptian funds to fund a work that says, “Made in Egypt,” despite the fact that all the funds that we are offered are non-Egyptian.”<sup>85</sup>

In brief, the answer to the question of why is the independent theatre in Egypt more recognized internationally than it is local is that the problem with the Egyptian theatre is similar to many other sectors in the country. It faced many obstacles internally that led to the devolution of the theatre industry generally, and the independent movement particularly. This stemmed from years and years of sociopolitical disturbances resulting from vigorous regime changes. These changes were reflected in the state’s shifting its strategy towards the importance of the utility of arts. This is in addition to the corrosion in the educational institution, which reflected on the new generations who produce the current theatre, and caused them to misinterpret the labels they chose for themselves. The wrong perception by the larger base of Egyptians that theatre needs to be comical through

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<sup>85</sup> Motaz’bellah, Omar. Personal interview.

televised theatre was also a factor leading to this devolution. The divide between intellectuals and populists was another factor. The infiltration of corruption to commercial and public sectors of the theatre industry was also a factor that resulted in producing works which are unsophisticated and poor, works which may be polished from the outside but rotten from the inside.

That is why when a movement came in the 90s, the independent theatre movement, to challenge all these elements through artists wanting to do theatre, a good, conscientious theatre, they were antagonized and fought by the state. Instead of them trying to penetrate different sociopolitical circles in Egypt, their energy was/is consumed in striving to survive, as opposed to expand. Therefore, survival locally was an achievement on its own. Hence, for that kind of survival to take place, they had to resort to foreign funding that would support them. This, in turn, gave them a beacon internationally as opposed to locally. They had a platform and a channel for their voice, and that was the main reason they could create work freely.

In summary, the evolution and devolution of Egyptian theatre, which is reflecting on the independent theatre movement, occurred in the course of three generations. This course started with a vigorous renaissance era during Nasser's time due to his reliance on enlightened intellectuals that were well educated before his time. Subsequently leading to the seed of corruption growing in all industries and sectors in the country, resulting from a fear from and being hypocritical to Sadat's regime, and coupled with solely targeting profit. This remained constant and stationary during Mubarak's time. Despite the fact that a huge dent was made by the birth of the independent theatre movement; the stagnation was not fully combated on the local level.

After two revolutions, January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013, there was a realization of the little effect that art can do, primarily fed by independent practitioners of many art forms. Today in 2016, there are a few facts that are true, including the creation of more obstacles that need to be fought, and the existence/appearance of opportunities that further recommendations could be built on.

For example, foreign funding represents an opportunity and obstacle at the same time. While it is aiding the sustainability of independent theatre troupes, it could sometimes slow down the creative process to many theatre-makers. Often, those funds are given to explore a certain topic, both social and political, through storytelling in a course of a number of years. As a result, some of the troupes that receive those funds will fall into the trap of becoming more academic focused at the expense of rehearsing and performing. In addition, applying to foreign funding remains to be restricted due to the limited number of Egyptians who know a foreign language and hence apply for a grant. The restriction is also born from the charged xenophobia adopted by the government, and the raging fear of political accusations of being a conspirator against the Egyptian nation.

On the governmental level, the state keeps closing in on itself with no strategy to develop the arts. The state has one strategy, which is to kill terrorists, as opposed to fighting terrorism. Accordingly, it achieves this by building walls around itself, and any new thought (especially foreign funded) is violently rejected. Therefore, the proposal of integrating state theatre with independent theatre-makers is highly improbable, if not impossible. "Now there is no hope in integrating anything. Right now we are in a society that wants to close itself off from the world. It is a huge downfall for us, not because we have no vision, but because we have a very scary vision of the world, and we are closing

ourselves from the world. We are going to suffocate, and not even allowing our people to get out. It's hard to have hope for the state to help with a cultural revolution because the state is busy closing doors while it should be busy opening them and thinking of ways of securing them. No matter how many doors you close, you are still vulnerable, because you are weak from the inside. You are living in fear, and those who live in fear cannot continue to live. It is as simple as that."<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, state theatre these days is notorious for hiring stars to perform on its stages. This is the only form of development they made in the past ten years, and even though it slightly boosted theatre-going, it reinforces the well-made only comic theatrical format in the minds of those who see it.

Furthermore, a social media campaign was launched in 2015 in an attempt to promote the tradition of theatre-going and making on the mainstream level. This campaign used the hashtag #IWantTheatre and was endorsed by some celebrities. It quickly faded into the background resulting in utter failure.

On the other hand, a few things nowadays shed a positive light that creates optimism in believing in an opportunity for a change. Television drama has developed rapidly in the past few years because now film and TV producers, like El Adl Group family<sup>87</sup>, are investing in actors that are professionally trained in the independent theatre world. Those actors usually possess more skill than those who go directly to the screen. Admittedly, a lot of the younger actors use theatre training as a stepping-stone, but it is also true that there is a noticeable advancement in the quality of acting on screen, which is directly

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<sup>86</sup> El Attar, Ahmed. Personal interview.

<sup>87</sup> EL Adl Group Company was established in 1997 by the three brothers; producer Dr. Mohamed El Adl, scriptwriter Dr. Medhat El Adl and the producer Gamal El Adl. The company is a pioneer and leader of both film and TV industries.



attributed to the presence of a large number of theatre actors on those screens. Current screen names like, Khaled El Sawy, Sayed Ragab, Ahmed Kamal, Ramsi Lehner, and Salwa Mohamed Ali are initially theatre-trained and can bring more audiences to the independent theatre productions while preserving the quality of work on stage, unlike what happens with their celebrity counterparts in state theatre. A very recent example is that during D-CAF 2016, Attar successfully brought in Sayed Ragab to recite snippets from the novels of the currently detained author Ahmed Naji<sup>88</sup>. This resulted in bringing more people to the festival, while utilizing one of the most talented and recently famous actors to address a political issue like freedom of speech.

To recapitulate, why does the true potential lie within the independent theatre movement? What sets this movement apart from the private and public sectors? What is the magnitude that that they could have if they succeed in expanding their audience base? Those troupes stand on a solid platform that is the value of theatre. Neither do the private nor do the public sectors believe in the value of theatre as a live art and its role towards a society. One can claim that 95% of independent theatre makers have that belief, or else they would not have had to struggle to do theatre in such demotivating conditions. There is potential, because when given the appropriate space and utilizing the right elements, independent theatre can find ways to expand beyond the downtown theatre audience and make waves within untapped communities like the examples of *Ahwa Sada* and *BuSSy*. The glimmers of strong impact on the Egyptian community at large also were witnessed

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<sup>88</sup> A young writer who is a subject for a notorious public opinion case that violates basic human rights. In March 2016, Naji got maximum two-year sentence for ‘violating public modesty’ for writing a novel containing sex and drug references. This is the first sentence of this kind in Egyptian history.

during the uprising against the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, when artists rallied random pedestrians and together they collectively performed works in the street to defy the fundamentalist thought of the terrorist group. However, such success within the Egyptian circle needs to be sustained through strategic planning and an organized body with a mission to do such.

Finally, after presenting all of the above histories, developments, facts, and opinions about the Egyptian theatre in general, and the independent theatre in particular, this study must result to, and be coupled with recommendations for potential development. The recommended ventures aim at aiding the enhancement of the process of blending the independent theatre with the Egyptian society. The proposal also aims at returning Egyptian audiences to theatre seats, as well as the development of the societal and educational structures bringing them closer to cultural awareness.

Since, at the present time, there is no hope in collaboration between the state and independent theatre-makers, the recommendations fall under two folds: a short-term plan that utilizes currently existing tools that can be invested in as opportunities, and a long-term plan that utilizes the core values of theatre in affecting the Egyptian culture and sociocultural fabric.

The short-term plan needs to involve the existing independent theatre-makers in reprising again and forming one front, i.e. a coalition. The fact that these troupes strayed from the unified front they created in 1990 does not indicate that they became competitive with one another, but rather indicates that they started operating individually after the state's involvement in their movement. They still, however, share the same values they did in 1990, sharing now the added advantage that many of them exist as

establishments and have theatrical weight. Those independent theatre troupes still reject the theatrical practices executed by both the public and commercial sectors. They are all not-for-profits and have survived. The majority of them are still socially and politically involved, whether through theatrical works or protests, sharing the same liberal/socialist political values that they share with their downtown audience. The independent theatre movement, in particular, exported talents to the film and television industries in the last decade that aided the flourishing of Egyptian drama. This is one of the new truths about the independent theatre movement, and if utilized, would help tremendously in their expansion, especially that most of those actors now famous on screen are eager to being on the stage again.

Those troupes need to gather themselves again, create an updated Manifesto, and a unified organized coalition to execute the following: First, expand on the training of the younger generation of theatre makers through workshops and festivals like Attar's D-CAF and 2B Continued. Achieving this expansion requires reaching out to foreign funders, and proposing new grants that specifically target producing local festivals. Second, bring in the current big names of theatre-trained actors and celebrities that migrated and made successes in TV and film, to return to the stage. This alone will bring in new audiences to the theatres. Third, initiate the culture of talkbacks post-performances to open up a dialogue between theatre-makers and audiences. Fourth, after being involved in two revolutions, younger troupes and independent theatre artists have been more politically charged than before<sup>89</sup>, even though it is more dangerous now that it was prior to Jan 25<sup>th</sup>. The government is now scared from any youth related movements

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<sup>89</sup> *No Time for Art* by Laila Soliman, *Tahrir Monologues*, and *Zawya* by Geretly's El Warsha.

that could be political by any means. The most recent example was that of El Warsha's performance night that was scheduled to celebrate the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution at a remote location from El Warsha's downtown headquarters, and its cancellation last minute due to the frenzy of high security of the state, which was on the lookout to crackdown any youth gatherings. The prescription to that is for the independent theater troupes to temporarily abandon addressing direct political issues on stage, and resort to symbolism that the Egyptian theatre was notorious of in the 60s. In addition, focus more on pressing social and cultural issues that would contribute to rebuilding educated theatre demand and taste. This is primarily to avoid state's resistance and hindrance. For example, do what the older generation and what the current state failed doing, which was/is to start an informed religious dialogue on stage, and challenge fundamentalist terrorist thought and ideas. Fifth and finally, create a unified social media campaign to promote and raise awareness about Egyptian theatre and its current condition.

As for the long-term plan, education is in its DNA. This plan does not aim to educate people through theatre, but rather educate them to do theatre. Of course, the organized involvement of all independent theatre-makers will give this plan an exponential boost. However, the inclusion of only a few of them will make an effect as well. This plan proposes a project that targets a socially responsible, heavy weight businessman, like Naguib Sawiris<sup>90</sup> or the El Adl family, to be the entrepreneur(s) behind this venture. They need to be economically and politically connected so that the state does not harass those working on the project or attempt to shut it down. The tangible

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<sup>90</sup> Naguib Onsi Sawiris is an Egyptian billionaire businessman. Next to his telecom investments, Sawiris is also the founder of ONTV network, and Free Egyptians political party.

result of this project will be reflected in the next 10-20 years, to say the least, and what it aims to achieve is to educate the much younger generation to take part in the theatre. But first, a five-year plan to train those who will train the much younger students is inherent. It is suggested that both trainings of instructors and future students happen in the same format, i.e. an intensive theatre camp. To the trainers, this commitment needs to be ongoing, perhaps by resorting to certain online courses so they would become theatre instructors. The face-to-face exchange of expertise could happen twice a year in a remote location.

This project needs to be large scale, utilizing social and mass media, coupled with marketing the entrepreneur(s) who adopt this project. Once those instructors have an understanding about theatre education, a larger campaign can be inaugurated to include the students. Students need to be of all age groups until high school, and of all social classes. This campaign needs to enforce that theatre is not elitist, and that a zero tolerance policy against any classist attitude will be in effect. The 10-20 year goal of this project is to graduate classes that know how to do theatre, can venture on starting their theatre companies to practice what they learned, and blend within the independent theatre movement.

Admittedly, the educational damage has already happened with the existing generations. Yet, it is essential to have instructors that will educate those much younger (under 10-years-old) students to do theatre. This younger age group is the real hope and target behind this whole project. By investing in this generation educationally there will be hope for the country's cultural future to thrive. A project, if implemented properly, will help tremendously the infiltration of the independent theatre movement in the

Egyptian society and restore the value of theatre within the community. Further, it will give a helping hand to the cultural progression of the Egyptian society. Class integration is a key factor in this project, as well as being solely funded with Egyptian money.

The proposal of this long-term project is far from just promoting theatre as an art form, but it is rather an advocate of theatre education. Theatre training and education encompasses two main core values for which the Egyptian society is in need of. The first is learning the value of teamwork and belonging to a community that is not based on class, gender or religion. The second is encouraging reading, research, and opening up to new intellectual worlds, to combat the close-minded thoughts that are constantly channeled through TV and computer screens. Those core values that come with theatre training, if instilled in the day-to-day lives of the younger generation and upbringing, will offer powerful keys to the progression of the Egyptian society as a whole.

**Appendix 1:  
Guidelines to Interview Questions**

1. Who are your current audiences? And what kind of audiences would you desire to attract?
2. What are the challenges that you've been facing to attract such desired audiences?
3. With the current divide between people and having many opposing Egyptian communities, how can we utilize theatre to reach all?
4. Should we even aspire to reach all?
5. Do you think the term "Experimental" is the right term to be used to describe all works produced in the underground theatre?
6. Do you think using terms like "Experimental" and "Amateur" hinder and affect the quality of work getting produced? In other words, do artists rely on those terms to justify the lack of effort put in their works?
7. Please describe in your terms the current independent theatre movement in Egypt.
8. Do you believe that those current-existing troupes, had they been in the sixties, would have remained underground?
9. How much do we need government funding?
10. If we have it, what kind of restrictions will come with those funds?
11. What about local corporations?
12. Can theatre ever thrive and have an effect on the community with the presence of government, religious, and citizen censorship?
13. Egypt is a country that embraces the phenomenon of televised theatre (old mainstream productions, and now shows like Masrah Masr, Teatro Masr, and Mohamed Sobhy's show. Do you think this gave people the fulfillment of their theatrical wants without their having to go physically to the theatre?
14. Who's responsible for narrowing the perception of theatre for Egyptians as only being comedic?

15. If we start with education and start implementing an organized theatre education program within school systems (private and public) could we salvage Egyptian theatre?
16. How can we reconstruct old theatre organizations (like The National Theatre) and utilize new existing ones (like yours) to be less alienated to the public and produce works that interest and challenge them?
17. Can those organizations become more sustainable by investing more into education and creating educational programs that outreach and encompass creative students from all school systems?
18. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the fact that most of those independent theatre organizations mostly rely on the contributions of volunteers as opposed to people who make a living out of working in the theatre?
19. Why is the underground art community in general more in touch and communicative with international communities than it is with locals?
20. Do you think we are given a platform in the international communities out of post-colonial guilt?
21. What is the difference (if there is one) between inter-cultural and cross-cultural theatrical dialogue?
22. If publishing houses invest more in contemporary Egyptian playwrights, would this have an effect on the popularity of this form of art?
23. How can we use theatre to become a tool of social and political mobility?
24. From your point of view, please map the difference between opportunities and resources available to theatre-makers in the eras of the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, post-Jan 25 and post-June 30th?
25. How much effect has the change in the Egyptian character in the last 40 years had an effect on the tradition of theatre-going and the works produced?
26. Do you believe that the underground theatre movement that started in the 90's had a direct or indirect impact on the 2011 revolution? If so, how?
27. Rawabet Theatre is now closed. What could the theatre community do to combat that decision and stop it from happening again in the future?



28. Do you think artists have that power?
29. Egypt regards itself as a leader of the region. Not only so, but we have many identities Egyptian, Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and African. Is there a difference between our roles locally, regionally and internationally artistically?
30. How could this have an effect on the Egyptian artistic identity, if there is any?
31. Do you think Egypt's responsibility as a region leader plays a factor in hindering or enhancing the works we produce?
32. With the current political situation, the War on Terror, and the propaganda to follow one specific thought to combat terror, do you think there is time for art?

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