



Oedipus in Egypt *oil on canvas *60,3 x 93,4 cm *signed b.r.: J.L. GEROME *1886

Articles, Essays, Volume 5

Abū-l-ʿIlā al-Salāmūnī: the Rewriting of History in Egyptian Theatre

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Abū-l-ʿIlā al-Salāmūnī: the Rewriting of History in Egyptian Theatre

An Essay by Tiran Manucharyan

Arab Stages, Volume 5, Number 1 (Fall, 2016)

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The plays *Riwāyat al-Nadīm* ‘an hoogit al-zaʿīm (1974), ‘Al-Nadīm’s Story about the Uprising of the Leader’, *Maʿādhin al-maḥrūsa* (1983, ‘The Minarets of the Protected City’), and *Abū Naḍḍāra* (1988, ‘The Man with Spectacles’) by contemporary Egyptian playwright Abū-l-ʿIlā al-Salāmūnī (b. 1941) were performed one after the other in the 1970s and 1980s, and are strikingly similar in their content and form. These are history plays that look back to the modern history of Egypt from Napoléon’s invasion to the period of British dominance: the foreigners want to subdue the Egyptians, while the Egyptians fight for their right to be free. Both parties use the power of the arts or politics to achieve their purposes. In this essay I analyse the artistic arsenal exploited by al-Salāmūnī in the plays mentioned above, arguing that al-Salāmūnī’s plays both in their content and form refer to the indigenous historical and cultural heritage, rewriting and reworking it in the context of contemporary reality.

In all three plays al-Salāmūnī refers to the periods when Egypt had to resist the exploitative policy of foreigners and of internal leaders acting with the foreign powers. *Riwāyat al-Nadīm* concerns the Egyptian national uprising from 1879 to 1882, against the *Khedive* Tawfīq (1879-1892) and British and French control over Egypt, in *Maʿādhin al-mahrūsa* the subject is Napoléon's Egyptian expedition, and in *Abū Naḍḍāra* the *Khedive* Ismāʿīl's (1863-1879) notoriously wasteful handling of the country's finances.



The antagonists in these plays are foreigners, such as Napoléon, who want to dominate Egypt, or self-serving governors, such as the *Khedive* Tawfīq and the *Khedive* Ismāʿīl, who subordinate the freedom of the country and national interests to their personal welfare and ambition. The protagonists are theatre artists, who oppose those in power, using the media of performing arts which are expressed through various theatrical activities within the framing plays. In *Maʿādhin al-mahrūsa* al-Salāmūnī revives the performances of *muḥabbazīn*, folk entertainers once popular in Egypt; in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm* the character of an intellectual who opposes the regime is represented by the Egyptian nationalist intellectual ʿAbd Allāh al-Nadīm (1842-1896) and his companion Ḥasan, and in *Abū Naḍḍāra* by Yaʿqūb Ṣannūʿ (1839-1912), the so-called 'father of Egyptian theatre.' He was also known as Abū Naḍḍāra, which is the dialectal version of *Abū Naẓẓāra* ('the man with spectacles'). Simply put, these plays are about the confrontation between political leaders and artists. We might say that the protagonist in the plays is the theatre and the antagonist is the invasive or anti-national and totalitarian leadership. The leaders want to force theatre to serve them and help them influence society, while the theatre artists within the plays try to use their power to influence society to join them in opposing the leaders.

The discussion of the two al-Azhar students in *Maʿādhin al-mahrūsa* illustrates the author's vision of how the leadership wants to use the arts and how al-Azhar students, who later take the role of actors in the performances within the play, try to oppose it:

Aḥmad: It's simple, Shaykh Muḥammad... The commander wants the entertainers to present his point of view so as to find a way to bring it to people. We'll also present our point of view and try to bring it to people in our way.

Muḥammad: We? Who do you mean by us?

Aḥmad: We, the students of al-Azhar, Shaykh Muḥammad..

Muḥammad: Heaven forbid! Do you want us, students of science and religion, to act as folk artists, Shaykh Aḥmad?

Aḥmad: And what's wrong with acting, Shaykh Muḥammad? It isn't a fault or a sin... It's a respectable art... And now look how you will see the commander and his soldiers enter to watch the performance with all their respect and reverence as if they are entering to pray.

As we will see below, in each of the plays troupes of actors play various scenes 'to change people's ideas and thoughts', in the words of one of the characters from *Ma'ādhin al-maḥrūsa*.

Apart from the relationship of leaders with artists, two other main relationships can be distinguished in these plays: the relationship between leaders and the society and the relationship between artists and the society. However, in al-Salāmūnī's plays, there are no main characters representing the ordinary people or the *fallāḥīn* ('peasants'), who are referred to as a symbol of Egyptianness in al-Salāmūnī's plays in particular and in twentieth century Egyptian literature in general. The portrait of the Egyptian people is given as a whole from the points of view of the main characters: leaders and artists. For example, in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm*, al-Nadīm who plays 'Urābī, tells the *Agha* who plays the *Khedive*:

Al-Nadīm: My Khedive, the Egyptian people whose voices you are hearing are free people. And there is an obvious proof in front of you that our people are not an inheritance or a commodity you can buy and sell in the slave markets. That was in the past. Today it is impossible that our people accept direction. Our people today are rebels, people who reject all the shackles of exploiters and tyrants. My Khedive, the calmness of our people has never meant they were humiliated. Our people are a burning ember that starts to blaze when the time is right. No matter how long the journey of history and the distance of time have been, nevertheless their time will come.

So, however much the Egyptian people might be glorified and praised, the audience sees them and the relationship between them and leaders and artists only from the points of view of leaders and artists. There is always a strong man talking in their name. Now let us look into each of the plays more thoroughly to get an insight into how society is portrayed in them.

Ma'ādhin al-maḥrūsa depicts the resistance and armed revolt of the Egyptian people against Napoléon in 1798. A troupe of *muḥabbazīn* performs various spectacles, such as scenes from historical events or religious and social rituals, in front of Napoléon and the public. The British orientalist Edward William Lane in his 1973 *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* describes the *muḥabbazīn* as 'players of low and ridiculous farces' whose 'performances are scarcely worthy of description: it is chiefly by vulgar jests, and indecent actions,' he reports, "that they amuse, and obtain applause.' Lane describes one of the performances acted by a troupe of *muḥabbazīn* before Muḥammad 'Alī (1805-1848), the first *Khedive* of Egypt, 'with the view of opening his eyes to the conduct of those persons to whom was committed the office of collecting the taxes.' Al-Salāmūnī brings the *muḥabbazīn* back in his play, stressing the function of "opening [the viewers'] eyes" to specific issues. Lane does not give any information as to whether the *muḥabbazīn* whose performance he witnessed succeeded in their goal, but in the

performance within al-Salāmūnī's play they succeed in encouraging their audience to resist. The play ends with the uprising of the people of Cairo against the French occupation.

In *Riwāyat al-Nadīm* 'an hoogit al-za'īm 'Abd Allāh al-Nadīm, who took part in Egypt's uprising of 1879-82, and his companion Ḥasan, disguised as a Moroccan *shaykh* and his servant, entertain the inhabitants of a random Egyptian village with a performance about the uprising of Aḥmad 'Urābī *Pasha*. Al-Nadīm plays the part of 'Urābī, the leader of the uprising. The performance is improvisational. Al-Nadīm and Ḥasan call it the Maghribian *Qarāqūz*, which is the name of the antagonist of many popular puppet performances throughout the Arab world, and choose their performers from the framing play, "the audience" who has come to watch their spectacle within the play. The type of spectacle played by al-Nadīm and Ḥasan in al-Salāmūnī's play is reminiscent of Egyptian folk entertainment, with elements of improvisation similar to that described by Yūsuf Idrīs as Egyptian *sāmīr* in his series of articles *Naḥwa masraḥ miṣrī* ("Towards an Egyptian Theatre"). In this 1948 manifesto on the direction in which Egyptian theatre should develop, Idrīs declares that the main feature of a truly Egyptian theatre should be *tamasruḥ* ("theatricalisation") which suggests the theatrical state when the boundary between audience and stage is dissolved, and the audience finds itself or feels itself to be in the play, engaged in its actions as much as the actors, and when a complete unification of the performers and spectators is achieved. Idrīs visualised how theatricalisation could work in his plays, such as *al-Farāfīr* (1964, "The Farfurs;" English translation *Flipflap and his Master*, 1977) and *al-Mukhaṭṭa'īn* (1969, "The Striped Ones"). However, in none of them does real theatricalisation occur. Everything is written and prescribed in the play. In *al-Farāfīr*, for example, the main characters, Farfūr and Sīd (a colloquial term for "Mister") like al-Nadīm and Ḥasan in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm*, put on an improvisational performance, casting the performers from "the audience," who are not real spectators but characters of spectators within the play. Idrīs's suggestion is to put spectator-actors among the real spectators of the performance, giving the impression that they might be real spectators.

Many scenes in al-Salāmūnī's plays also can serve as visualisations of what Idrīs calls theatricalisation. For example, in *Ma'ādhin al-maḥrūsa* in the scene where the *muḥabbazīn* troupe member, playing Napoléon, puts a garment with the three colours of the French flag on the shoulders of the character who plays a *Shaykh* of al-Azhar, and the *Shaykh* throws it on the ground angrily, the audience within the play move towards the *muḥabbaz* ("folk entertainer") exclaiming "*Allāhu akbar*" and start to beat him. Only after the "real" soldiers interfere does it become possible to make the audience within the play calm down.

When the borders between the stage and life dissolve, not only can theatre be taken as reality, but also reality can be taken as theatre. In *Riwāyat al-Nadīm*, for example, there is a scene where al-Nadīm's performance is interrupted by the English soldiers who come to arrest al-Nadīm, and the peasants from the audience defend al-Nadīm. A battle starts between the soldiers and the peasants, but the dignitaries from the audience and other peasants watch the battle, considering it to be part of the performance. Al-Nadīm's intention in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm* is the same as the *muḥabbazīn's* intention in *Ma'ādhin al-maḥrūsa*, that is to inspire 'the audience' within the framing play to revolt against the foreign power, this time the British.

In one of the most impressive scenes in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm* the character of the *Agha*, a local minor dignitary, representative of the colonialism of the Ottoman Empire,

comes on stage riding a peasant. The peasant tries to complain that he is tired but falls silent when the *Agha* threatens to have him shod with horseshoes, like a donkey. This scene is the condensation of the theme that is clearly apparent in the two plays already discussed, as well as in *Abū Naḍḍāra*, that the true owners of Egypt are voiceless, whereas those who have the destiny of the country in their hands act towards them in the most disrespectful ways.

Riwāyat al-Nadīm ends with exclamations by al-Nadīm and the peasants, such as “Egypt without forced labour and exploitation of the peasant’s efforts,” “Egypt free from moneylenders, brokers and foreigners,” “Egypt without poverty, ignorance and disease,” “Your cry, ‘Urābī, is alive and it can never die.”

If we assume that al-Salāmūnī is promoting the idea that theatre has power in society and can influence people’s thoughts and actions, the calls quoted above should be interpreted in the context of the current reality. So, why was the theme of liberation from foreign powers relevant to the reality lived by Egyptian society in the 1980s? Is this al-Salāmūnī’s not very concealed call for a revolt, or at least a protest against the contemporary regime in Egypt? The next play to be discussed here might provide us with an answer to this question.

The antagonist in *Abū Naḍḍāra* is the *Khedive* Ismāʿīl, whose enormous wastefulness resulted in increasing the national debt to the European banks and finally putting the finances of the country under Anglo-French control. The representative of theatre is Yaʿqūb Ṣannūʿ who ran a theatre troupe in Cairo from 1870 to 1872. He put on several performances in the *Khedive*’s private theatre. As he claims in a speech given in Paris in 1903, reproduced in the play, he wrote and performed during this period thirty-two plays. In 1872 he lost the *Khedive*’s support and his theatre was shut. It is hard to imagine a better story to portray the relationship between leadership and artists.

Abū Naḍḍāra has many discussions and debates in the play with the *Khedive*, the *Khedive*’s courtiers, the members of his troupe, Islamic thinkers, such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh, as well as with ʿAbd Allāh al-Nadīm. In all these he defends his views on democracy, freedom of expression and parliamentarianism, and the role of intellectuals, the arts and the media in achieving these ideals, revealing the hypocritical nature of the reforms and innovations introduced in Egypt by the *Khedive*:

The *Khedive*: No, I haven’t sold Egypt. All my life I have desired a free Egypt, a piece of Europe. I myself leaned on, borrowed from and applied to everyone so as to make the desire of a European Egypt come true and to move Egypt out of the darkness of the middle ages. Who will deny what I have done for Egypt? I established an opera house, a library, a museum, schools, newspapers, a parliament... Who will deny all of these? Who?

Abū Naḍḍāra: All of those are nothing without freedom of speech. If the people can speak up for freedom from the stage, this means these people are civilised. That is the measure. If expression is suppressed on stage, this means that the people are suppressed and grabbed by their throats, unable to speak or even to breathe. What is the use of what you’ve done when the people are silenced, not knowing how to express what they need to say from the stage? The outcome of all the things you have

done, your Excellency Khedive, is nothing in the end, just décor in a comic play, in which a crazy ruler is portrayed.

The sharp and outspoken criticism of the *Khedive's* policy can easily be applied to the policy of President Hosni Mubarak or his predecessors. Mubarak's government presented itself as a defender of artists and intellectuals in a political context devoid of real democracy. Theatre in the play mirrors society as a whole: there is no real freedom of speech on stage within the plays just as there is as no freedom of speech in society. It is clear that al-Salāmūnī is referring to his own reality here. According to the Egyptian theatre scholar Nehad Selaiha [Nihād Ṣulayḥa], writing on Egyptian theatre censorship in a 2013 essay in *The Drama Review* "no less than 76 plays were banned between 1968 and 1988." So the problem of freedom of expression had similar relevance for the time when the play was staged as it did for the historical time in which it was set.

We can also see in the play a representation of the political leaders' views of theatre and the democracy that can be inherent in this art form. Khalīl Agha, a character in *Abū Naḍḍāra*, formulates the parallels between theatre and democracy, albeit from a cynically self-serving perspective: "in an eastern country like ours" he observed, theatre is something impracticable just as democracy is impracticable: "It is useful for a European country but not for us. All of those things are temptations." For the corrupt leaders theatre, as well as democracy, is a "temptation" because it is a threat to their power. In this play, as in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm*, the artist speaks about the revolution not being far off:

The Khedive: It seems that you have read a lot about the Paris Commune and the French Revolution, Abū Naḍḍāra.

Abū Naḍḍāra: I am sure your Excellency has also read about the Paris Commune and all the revolutions in the West and the East. I would like to warn your Excellency. The revolution is not far from Egypt. The revolution lives inside the people and one day will erupt [...].

Although the play ends with Abū Naḍḍāra being exiled from Egypt by the *Khedive*, the expression "The revolution is not far from Egypt" in the text makes the play sound not only optimistic but also prophetic, if we assume that al-Salāmūnī chooses to speak about the revolution against foreign influence, rather than against internal autocracy and corruption, in order to avoid censorship.

To sum up, all the three plays by al-Salāmūnī discussed in this paper are focused on the confrontation between foreign leadership, or agents of this leadership, and the Egyptian people who struggle for Egypt's liberation. However, the issues discussed in these plays, such as freedom of expression, democracy and equal rights, are relevant for the period when they were written and staged and for today as well.

Al-Salāmūnī depicts them through the prism of theatre by using the technique of theatre within theatre, in other words, making theatre the main hero of his plays and creating theatre about theatre. There are three main conflicts in his plays between: The leadership and the arts, the arts and the society, and the leadership and the society. Given that the main characters in the plays represent the leadership and the arts and that the characters representing the society have only a supporting function,

these relationships are inevitably portrayed from the perspective of leaders and artists, while society is portrayed as some general concept.

The technique of theatre within theatre allows al-Salāmūnī to integrate many representations of the indigenous dramatic tradition into his plays, thus continuing the tradition of Egyptianising and Arabising the theatre in Egypt. Al-Salāmūnī revives the *muḥabbaẓīn* in *Maʿādhin al-maḥrūsa* and refers to *Qarāqūz* in *Riwāyat al-Nadīm*, where there is a long and comic discussion between the characters as to which *Qarāqūz* is the best one: the Maghribian, Egyptian or Turkish. In the troupe of the *muḥabbaẓīn* he includes recognizable characters from the tradition of Egyptian folk theatre, such as ʿAlī Kākā and Abū ʿAjjūr or Abū ʿAggūr. In *Maʿādhin al-maḥrūsa* there are also different representatives of Egyptian popular culture, such as *muddaḥs* (panegyrists), *zammārs* (pipers), dervishes [darwīshes], *ṭabbāls* (drummers) who take part in the celebrations organised by Napoléon, as well as numerous popular rituals, such as the celebration of the Flooding of the Nile, the Birth of the Prophet and a wedding ceremony. All these details enrich al-Salāmūnī's writing aesthetically and dramatically and help him recreate the historical environment which is brought to life in the plays.

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**MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
PUBLICATIONS**

Arab Stages

Volume 5, Number 1 (Fall 2016)

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Table of Contents

Essays

- The Development of Diegetic Practices in Iranian Indigenous Performances: a Historical View by Mohammad J. Yousefian Kenari and Parastoo Mohebbi
- Abū-l-ʿIlā al-Salāmūnī: the Rewriting of History in Egyptian Theatre by Tiran Manucharyan
- The Interwoven History of Moroccan Theatre by Jaouad Radouani
- Heather Raffo on *Noura* by Heather Denyer
- The Third Identity: An Interview with Tareq Abu Kwaik by George Potter
- Chasing the Gaze of the Killer: Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* by Mara Valderrama
- Conducting a Theatre Workshop for Syrian Refugees at Berlin's Tempelhof Center by Fadi Fayad Skeiker
- *The Village of Tishreen* by Ahmad Mahfouz

Announcements

- Tangier International Conference for 2016, "The Narrative Turn in Contemporary Theatre," by Marvin Carlson

Reviews

- Mohammad al Attar's *While I was Waiting* at Avignon by Philippa Wehle
- World Premiere of Arabic Drama at Cornell by Marvin Carlson
- Cairo in the '60's: Review of *This Time* by the Rising Circle Theater Collective New York City, May 19, 2016 by Michael Malek Najjar

Short Plays

- *A Crime on Restaurant Street* by Wajdi al-Adal, Trans. Katherine Hennessy
- *Firestarter* by Hassan Abdulrazzak
- *Before Dinner* by Yasser Abu Shaqra, Trans. by Faisal Hamadah

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Arab Stages is a publication of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center ©2023

ISSN 2376-1148



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