

A Place Under the Sun: To Be or Not to Be? The Question of the “Fringe” (1990)

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Last August, when the state-sponsored Experimental Theatre Festival was abruptly cancelled on account of the Gulf crisis, a group of young theatre people met under the rallying cry: “War or no war, the show must go on!” The leader and agitator was journalist and actress Minha Al-Batrawi, who felt very angry at the high-handedness and overweening arbitrariness of the decision. “They have no right. They consulted nobody,” she bawled on the phone when she rang up to invite me to a protest and consultation meeting at the Acting Professions Union downtown. I knew how she felt; for some artists the festival is the only chance for public exposure, and they work very hard for it all year, paying dearly in terms of cash and time, even though they know they will only get a place on the outer margins.

Initially, all Minha had hoped for was to create a pressure group, to persuade the Ministry of Culture to allow a *national* theatre festival to go ahead if an international one proved unfeasible or politically embarrassing. It would cost nothing, she thought; an elected voluntary committee, from amongst the artists themselves, could manage the festival and do all the work; there would be no administrative, technical or publicity costs, and no travel expenses or fat hotel bills. All the government had to do was hand over a couple of theatres and their facilities for the duration of the festival.

At the first meeting on August 23rd, 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 of young and ardent self-supporting offshoots of the university, state regional theatres, manned by talented former students and amateurs, lacking legal status. They came in droves, flaunting fanciful names and clamoring for recognition and the right to participate. The word had certainly gone round: the Jugglers, the Loonies, the Visionaries, the Rebels, the Luminaries, the Sudanese Drummers, the Protesters and the Apollonians, not to mention the more sober Warsha, Movement, Encounter and Theatre Club groups -- they were all there, like genies late loosed from their bottles!

"Where have they all sprung from?" asked Minha. I must admit that I too was a little taken aback though, for I had known of the existence of some such troupes, and had seen a few of their performances at some foreign cultural centers, and at the GEBO's Book Fair the previous January. However, I hadn't counted on there being so many!

We were no fools. Some of these flamboyant appellations, we suspected, must have been thought up on the spur of the moment; nonetheless, their overwhelming physical presence was a solid fact. 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. The theatrical

organization in Egypt, however, in its present condition, is not qualified to give such care. Indeed, if these incipient fringe troupes are to realize their potential and bloom into a vigorous alternative theatre, on the western model, the state will have to revise its whole policy vis-a-vis the arts and its anachronistic machinery.

It is amazing that a government which advocates a policy of general liberalization, and seems all too anxious to relinquish its direct control of the economy, and encourage a free market, and the privatization of the public sector, should prove so recalcitrant when it comes to surrendering its control of the performing arts and the mass media. In the case of theatre, everybody, including the managers of the five state companies and the official regional troupes, agree that what is badly needed are more state subsidies and less state control. At a recent panel discussion at the National Cultural Centre, Karam Mutaweh, 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 dismantle it.

Karam Mutaweh seemed to be echoing what the angry young men and women of the fringe had vociferously argued for, three months ago, at that historic meeting on August 23rd. The crucial moment was deciding the name of the proposed 'non-governmental' festival; from practical considerations we slithered fast into the 'politics of theatre' and the 'philosophy' of the festival; the thorny issue of state control became the subject of a heated debate. In passionate outbursts, grievances, old and new, and bitter resentment poured out; feelings ran high, and what started as a modest peaceful project threatened to turn into open rebellion. One is tempted to go on, and give you the full inside story of that serendipitous fluke of a festival. However, this is neither the time nor place, and Minha would probably do it better than me. So, to cut a long story short, the fringe troupes won a brief victory and had their fleeting hour of glory: they christened the festival The Free Theatre Festival; drew up a manifesto and published it in the first number of the festival's bulletin; they got some attention from the media and, above all, ten days at the Opera House (albeit confined to the Small Hall and the Open Air Theatre only). Still quite an achievement, they being the beggars!

Compromises were inevitable; and some of them were quite absurd. The most ridiculous of all was putting the festival under the aegis of the Acting Professions Union to escape legal prosecution and spite the Ministry of Culture into the bargain. Ironically, in ordinary circumstances, this self-same Union would be the first to pursue, harass and prosecute the members of these troupes for performing without a license, and would, furthermore, deny them one if applied for on the grounds that they lack official qualifications and official sponsorship! At that moment, however (it was approaching election time), it suited the purposes of the Union to pit itself against the Ministry, to pose as the guardian of the arts and the champion of the theatre's underdogs and outcasts - or, more appropriately in this case, outlaws. Such contradictions lent the staunch anti-government defiant stand of the festival something of a Quixotic air. Those frustrated young men and women, with no money, formal training or legal protection, wanted desperately and rather pathetically to believe for one brief moment that they had finally defeated the Gorgons and were in control - the Gorgons being the bureaucrats, the Censor and the emergency laws. In fact, they had only managed to stick their tongues out at them!

It is a sad truth that in a country like ours, with no tradition of private patronage of the arts, no tax concessions to private artistic enterprises, so many crippling laws and statutory constraints, the theatre, in

any serious sense, fringe or otherwise, cannot survive without some form of enlightened state support and cooperation. The Theatre Festival may have been, artistically, a flash in the pan; but as a protest, a political gesture, it had far-reaching implications. Not only has it revealed the existence of an Egyptian Fringe, but also diagnosed the ailments of the current Egyptian theatre scene and tentatively suggested the cure.

Freedom, and more freedom, and yet more freedom is required. And money too, and knowledge: access to professional training courses. It is scandalous that in a country with a population of fifty million, the only training venues for theatre artists are one theatre institute in Cairo with a very limited capacity (60 places a year), an even smaller theatre section at the University of Alexandria, and the odd workshop at the National Cultural Centre! More drama schools, workshops and performing areas are badly needed, together with a freer subsidies system on the model of the British Arts Council and *less censorship*. The alternative is a depleted, ever shrinking Egyptian theatre. More grimly, these frustrated young artists who are fighting on the side of the enlightenment may soon tire or despair and join the forces of darkness. Rather than budding artists, we could end up with a lot of bigots and fanatics on our hands.



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