

## In Memoriam: Nehad Selaiha

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ha By Karen Malpede

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Nehad Selaiha was the sort of theatre writer artists crave and need if we are to remain at the top of our game. She was immensely knowledgeable, enormously passionate; she loved theatre that was daring, immediate, beautiful and layered. She encouraged this sort of work in generations of Egyptian and Middle Eastern theatre artists who work, often, in difficult situations—as theatre artists do world-wide—bucking censorship, economic hardship and narrow-mindedness—as we do world-wide. For whatever nation theatre artists inhabit our job is to go up *against it*—the prejudices of our cultures and its fears. Nehad believed the theatre could make a difference in the life of a nation and that its artists, therefore, were to be cherished, encouraged, held to high standards, scolded, goaded and, also, taught. She did all this in her writing and in person. She brought people together and she expected great things from them.

I did not know her well, and she never had the opportunity to write about my work—how I wish she had—but we felt an immediate connection that persisted over several decades, during which we seldom met. When we did meet, most recently at the revived Cairo International Experimental and Contemporary Theatre Festival, this past September, just months before her untimely death, it felt as if we had never been apart, so warmly did we embrace and so quickly enter into meaningful talk. It seemed as though we knew one another well, although we did not. Simply, we felt each other deeply. Nehad got me, and I got her.

She did me a great favor in 1997, when we first met at the CIF, by introducing me to Dalia Basiouny, a wonderful Egyptian theatre artist, scholar, writer and director, who has become one of my close friends. Nehad knew that Dalia and I should know each other, especially since Dalia was going to do her Ph.D. at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, where I live. She was right. Dalia and I worked through the attacks of September 11, 2001 together, and we protested the violent responses of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We worked together on a documentary drama, *Iraq: Speaking of War*, which was presented at the CUNY Graduate Center on the second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. Dalia directed the Greek-like chorus that read the names and causes of deaths of children, up to 18 years of age, including 15 Iraqis for every one American soldier—that was the fatality ratio, then.

In 1998, the second Cairo Festival I attended, Nehad took me under her wing and led me to what she felt were the best and most risky theatre pieces. One called *The Harem* was the first gay and lesbian Egyptian

play. Its director later received political asylum in the United States. His play had been produced at a moment of opening that soon collapsed into state persecution of homosexuals.

When Nehad and I met this past September, she remembered she was the one who told me I had to see *The Harem* and she remembered, too, that I had written about it and that my article, published in the *New York Times*, was one reason the director was able to apply for asylum.

We sat next to each other at *The Fable*, a Tunisian play about the persecution of prostitutes by Salafists during the Arab Spring, a passionate piece. Nehad, as always, sat on the edge of her seat, following with that intense intelligence and emotional openness that were her trademarks. Afterwards, she introduced me to the playwright and director, translating for us both. She and I were equally admirers of *The Good Human Being*, a work by an Egyptian company and she shared her in-depth article about the historical antecedents (Brecht), creation and realization of the piece. She was a long-time supporter of the director, Said Soliman.

Last September in Cairo, we vowed to stay in closer touch. She apologized for having so little time. She was very tired, she said. She asked to read a recent play of mine. I sent it, hoping for a detailed response.

I was shocked by news of Nehad's death. I feel I've lost a kindred spirit, but, worse, that Egypt and the world have lost a voice that spoke for our deepest humanity and our most meaningful creations. It's difficult to part with such a light in these dark times.

*Karen Malpede is author/director of 17 plays, co-founder with George Bartenieff, of Theater Three Collaborative, editor of Acts of War: Iraq & Afghanistan in Seven Plays, Women in Theater: Compassion & Hope. An anthology of four of her plays, Plays in Time is forthcoming (Nov. 2017) from Intellect Press. She teaches theatre and environmental studies at John Jay College.*



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