

Manifold Oedipus: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* at the National (2001)

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Rex at the National (2001)

1) By Nehad Selaiha

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The earliest record of a production of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* in Arabic dates back to 1912, when George Abyad (1880-1969), the greatest classical tragedian in the history of Egyptian theatre and as much a monolithic figure as the legendary Yusef Wahbi, presented it with his newly-founded company at the old (now defunct) Cairo Opera house in Ataba Square. It was a bold, unprecedented step, and not just on account of the play's dodgy plot, which combines patricide with an incestuous marriage involving mother and son. The classics of the European theatre, whenever staged, which wasn't often, were either presented in hacked and patched, or thinly diluted musical versions - like Sheikh Salama Higazi's *Martyrs of Love*, a musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (first staged in Alexandria in March 1888, according to a notice in *Al-Ahram*), or performed in their original language by visiting companies, from Europe, or amateur dramatic societies, made up of members of the foreign community in Egypt and Egyptians with a foreign education.

Abyad himself, had been active in such groups since he arrived in Alexandria in 1898 as a Lebanese emigre to join his uncle and work as station-master for Sidi Gaber Railway station. Indeed, it was while acting with a French amateur group in 1904 that Khedive Abbas spotted his talent and sent him, at his own expense, to study acting in France. Abyad's five years at the Paris Conservatoire, plus one year on the road, touring the provinces with his teacher, Silvan, and his company, molded his taste and acting style for life. For two years after his return to Egypt, in 1910, he acted exclusively in French, forming a company for that purpose and taking the lead in such famous classics of the French stage as *Louis XI*, Racine's *Andromache*, and Molière's *Tartuffe*, among others.

After two successful seasons, however, Abyad, who was equally proficient in Arabic, was instructed by the minister of Education then to use his knowledge and experience to improve the state of the Egyptian theatre by joining the theatrical mainstream, seeking a wider audience, and offering them the great European classics in Arabic. The French company was disbanded, and with generous financial help from a wealthy benefactor and theatre-lover, by the name of Abdel Raziq 'Inayet, Abyad formed another in his name; it opened its first season at the Opera on March 19th, 1912, with a production of a verse drama by the famous Hafez Ibrahim, 'the poet of the Nile' (as he was nicknamed), called *The Wounded Lover of Beirut*. *Oedipus Rex* and *Othello*, followed and, in subsequent years, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* were added to the repertoire, as well as Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* and a dozen French classics, including Molière's *Don Juan*, *Les Femmes Savantes*, *Tartuffe* and *L'Ecole des Femmes*.

The company survived for twenty years, despite frequent lack of funds, the avid popular taste for

vaudevilles, farces, musicals and violent social melodramas (invariably performed in the accessible colloquial rather than the forbidding classical Arabic), and notwithstanding the fierce competition offered by Yusef Wahbi and Fatma Rushdi who followed Abyad's example and helped themselves liberally to the classics (with Wahbi at one time playing Iago to Abyad's Othello when the latter, in deep financial straits, joined the former's Ramses troupe for a brief spell in 1923.) It was a hard but rewarding struggle, which continued with few brief interruptions, until 1932; and throughout, *Oedipus Rex* remained a regular and frequent item in the company's repertoire, with Abyad always the eponymous hero and Dawalat Qasabgi (who joined the company in 1918 and married him in 1923, becoming Dawalat Abyad) as Jocasta. So enamored of the play the couple seemed that when they joined the Egyptian National Theatre Company, founded by the government in 1935 (when almost all the private companies had gone bankrupt and closed down), they took it along with them, together with a few other favorites.

Unfortunately, given the notoriously inaccurate available records of the Egyptian theatre, not to mention their many gaps and lapses of memory, one cannot find out when the last performance of *Oedipus Rex* by the Abyads took place. One may be sure at least that it wasn't after 1944, when the couple left the National company - the wife to pursue her career in cinema, where she was much in demand, and the husband to become professor of acting and elocution at the newly founded Acting (later, Theatre) Institute. Although we know that Mrs. Abyad rejoined the company briefly, first, in 1948, then in 1952 (the year it was rechristened The Egyptian Company for Acting and Music and George Abyad was appointed its general manager), it is extremely unlikely they attempted Sophocles's masterpiece another time. For one thing, they were too old; for another, Abyad's health was failing and he resigned his post as company manager in July, 1953, within less than a year of his appointment.

For the rest of the 20th Century, however hard we look, we find no mention, not even a hint of another production of *Oedipus Rex*. It was not until last month that it suddenly burst upon us, in its full textual splendor, at the National - albeit in the least expected and most ill-suited space: the (Abdel Rehim El-Zurgani) small hall upstairs. The performance I saw was modest and frugal in the extreme, with deplorable costumes (particularly in Jocasta's case), an unknown director (Mamdouh 'Aql), and half-known actors, not to mention the cramped space and the bulky Greek-façade-set which ate up most of the performance area, forcing the principal actors to stay too close to the audience most of the time, literally breathing and spattering in their faces, and leaving practically no room for the chorus, with the result that they constantly bumped into the audience on their way in and out of the single door in the hall (the only access to it for actors, audience and technicians), and not infrequently obstructed our view of the stage. Nevertheless, and despite these and other similarly egregious faults, the current production at the National works and is exciting and strangely moving.

After ten or fifteen minutes, I stopped noticing the many errant threads trailing from the uneven hems of the sloppily sewn gowns of the chorus, their cheap, ill-fitting, shaggy wigs, Jocasta's absurd, unflattering getup, the low-arched entrance to the palace which wore a pathetic, squashed look and barely allowed Oedipus to go through it straight without banging his head against it; I even forgot the irritating smells and perfumes of my neighbors and the oppressive spatial constriction. It was as if something had slowly sneaked up on me, unawares and suddenly gripped me; before I knew it, I was swept along by the chilling, pitiful drama unfolding before me.

Though thoroughly familiar with the text, I was filled with fear and suspense as I watched poor, doomed Oedipus (Hamada Ibrahim) eagerly playing detective and fervently investigating the murder of the

previous king of Thebes, whose throne and conjugal bed he now occupied, not knowing that he himself was the murderer he was seeking and that, unwittingly, he had already fulfilled the curse put on him at birth (that he would kill his father, marry his mother and get children by her) - the curse he strove desperately to elude and thought he had succeeded. The cruel irony became unbearable, almost sickening, as Jocasta (Amal El-Zoheiri) - who equally thought she had outwitted the prophecy of the vengeful Delphi oracle when she allowed her new-born son be taken away and left to die at the top of a mountain, began to sense the first intimations of the approaching horror and tried frantically to fend off the final appalling revelation. I was seized by a mixture of intense pity and anxiety, which kept mounting until it became physically painful. I knew the dialogue almost line by line, and yet, I found myself foolishly hoping something would happen to stop the tragic discovery. The pity of it, I kept repeating, and suddenly I understood, not mentally, but with my whole being, what Aristotle (with whom I don't often agree) had meant when he spoke of tragedy arousing fear and pity. I also thought that he was perhaps right when he cited this play in his *Poetics* as an ideal model for tragedy.

Except for the acting, which was simple, unaffected, low key and deeply candid, I do not think any other production of *Oedipus Rex* could have looked less promising or had as many fateful drawbacks. And yet, it worked for me, and for all the other people who filled the hall the night I saw it. And judging by the size of the audience who flock to see it every night since, making it the most successful production at the National Upstairs this year, my own experience of it was not just a question of me being in a particularly susceptible mood that night, or that night's performance being a one-time fluke. What does this prove? If anything, that given a modicum of decent acting, a really good text can make up for almost any lack and take everything in its stride.

But this leaves us with something of a riddle: why was such a powerful, well-tested play neglected by directors and theatre companies in Egypt for over half a century? The puzzle becomes more of an enigma when you know that the text is widely known among educated Egyptians and features regularly (in the original Greek or in translation, and usually hand in hand with the *Poetics*) on the curricula of almost all Arabic and European languages departments in Egyptian universities.

Furthermore, of the many the European adaptations of the myth (twenty-nine were produced between 1614 and 1939), the most famous, namely, Seneca's, Corneille's, Voltaire's, John Dryden's, Jean Cocteau's (*The Infernal Machine*) and Andre Gide's - are either available in Arabic or taught in their original languages in universities. It wouldn't do to argue that Sophocles' text would be too shocking in performance and trot out its web of taboo relationships as an explanation. Between 1949 and 1970, four local variations appeared - all by prestigious, morally upright and highly respected authors - and two of them found their way to the stage.

In 1949, Tawfiq El-Hakim and Ali Ahmed Bakathir published their versions; in 1968, Fawzi Fahmi wrote *The Return of the Absent* (performed at the National in 1977, with Mahmoud Yasin in the title role and Ayda Abdel-Aziz as Jocasta), and two years later, Gala El-Sharqawi directed Ali Salem's hilarious political satire in the vernacular, *You Who Killed the Beast*, for (the now defunct) El-Hakim theatre. Read together, the four plays reveal common features. All view the myth from a political perspective (as their authors openly admit in their introductions to the published texts), waving aside the central conflict between Oedipus and the gods and centering the plot on a power- struggle, riddled with conspiracies. In all of them, Oedipus invariably appears as a good, benevolent king, misled, corrupted, or led astray by priests and courtiers, while Tiresias (or Luskias in Bakathir's case) and Creon always play the villains.

Written in response to a national crisis: Fahmi's and Salem's were immediate reactions to the 1967 disastrous war in which they tried to make sense of or exorcise the terrible nightmare of the June defeat. In both, Oedipus was a thin disguise for Nasser who, in Salem's case, was blamed for shutting himself off from his people, leaving them an easy prey to his demonic clique, while in Fawzi's, his fatal mistake was hiding the truth from his people. The late critic, Ghali Shukri, has written extensively about the recurrence in the Egyptian drama of the 1960s of this representation of Nasser, which, while not completely exonerating him, lays most of the blame on his coterie of trusted colleagues and assistants.

It seems, however, that this lenient, sympathetic view of the people in power, however grievous their mistakes, dates back further than the 1960s. El-Hakim's *Odeeb* is a case in point. Noting the play's political relevance in his book, *The Egyptian Theatre after World War II* (1979), Sarni Munir relates it to its immediate historical context, reading it as a political metaphor of the events of 4 February, 1942, when the British troops surrounded King Farouk's palace and forced him to appoint a Wafdi government, with El-Nahas Pasha at its head. Similarly, according to Munir, Tiresias (the British), in El-Hakim's play, manipulates Oedipus, the rightful heir to the throne (the Wafd party), for his own ends, bringing him to power by lies and a show of force. In both cases, the Wafd's and Oedipus's, it was a fatal mistake to get to power through the machinations of a sly enemy of the people, and, therefore, both inevitably lose their power and credibility and meet with a tragic end.

Bakathir's *Odeeb*, on the other hand, was written in the wake of the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948. "At the time," he says, "I felt despair regarding the future of the Arab nation and shame, disgrace and ignominy. Our dignity had been trampled underfoot. I remained in the grip of this deep, heavy pain a long time, not knowing how to relieve it." The play, which offers an Islamic/political reading of the myth, was obviously his way of relieving it. More than anything, it reflects the intensification of the Islamic movement in the late 1940s, and was obviously influenced by Sayed Qutb's book, *Social Justice in Islam*, which sought to stem the rising tide of Marxism at that time by formulating an integrated, coherent Islamic theory of social justice. Oedipus, portrayed as a kind of popular, epic hero, is an ardent believer in social justice; unfortunately, however, he is an atheist who believes only in the power of the human intellect and will. His lack of faith blinds him to the evil intrigues of Luskiyas, the wily, ungodly, mammon-worshipping priest and politician, and he falls an easy prey to him. Tiresias, however, who speaks like a preacher, in a language redolent of the Koran, leads him back to God and converts him to the belief that without faith in God and total submission to his will and guidance, social justice can never be attained. By the time Bakathir's Oedipus leaves Thebes (and the stage), he has become a devout Moslem (like his author) who believes that only through Islam can his nation triumph and find justice and prosperity.

Maybe any Egyptian play based on the Oedipus myth has to be political. As some Arab thinkers have argued, and El-Hakim remarked in his preface to his own treatment, the Greek concept of tragedy is inherently antithetical to the Islamic view of the relationship between human beings and God. A Moslem Oedipus can only grapple with earthly issues and fight sordid politicians and mean-spirited foes. An occasional glimpse of the Greek, pagan hero, therefore, is always a refreshing, welcomed treat. Pray to God our increasingly repressive times do not deprive us of it.



MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER PUBLICATIONS

Arab Stages

Volume 6 Nehad Selaiha Memorial Issue (Spring 2017)

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