

## Women Playwrights in Egypt (1993)

Women Playwrights in Egypt (1993) By Nehad Selaiha

©2017 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publication

The list of women playwrights in Egypt is depressingly short. When you have counted everybody, including the one-timers and those who never made it to the stage, and even if you add for a bonus Amina El-Sawi, who adapted some novels in the sixties, the number does not exceed a dozen.

Compared to other Arab countries, however, Egypt does not seem to have done too badly in the space of forty years. If we were to expand our theme and make it "women dramatists in Egypt", we will find that at least six women have tried their hand at television drama. My business here, however, is with women who specifically wrote with the stage in mind.

Recent scholarly research has revealed that in the first half of the 20th Century, actress Dawlat Abyad, who founded a company in her own name in 1944, wrote two plays, *Dawlat* and *Al-Wagib* (Duty), of which the manuscripts have been lost and that writer Maï Zeyadah published two short stories in dialogue-form which hardly qualify as plays. In the second half of the 20th Century, the first woman playwright we meet is Sufi Abdallah whose *Sweepstake* was performed in the 1951-52 season. The play, which is not available in either manuscript or print, was a social drama about the trials and tribulations of the poorer classes. Theatre historian Samir Awad remembers it as faintly reminiscent of Gorki's *Lower Depths* and technically unimpressive. There was nothing fresh or challenging about it in either stagecraft or point of view, he declares; it seems also to have had its fair share of sentimental morality, according to him.

The faults of the play may have been many, but they are the kind that one frequently comes across in first attempts even by men. Criticism, however, traditionally a masculine domain, tends to be particularly niggly and inordinately censorious when it comes to women. As early as the 17th century, Aphra Behn noted with bitterness this sad fact of literary life. It is a pity that Sufi Abdallah did not possess the stamina of her British counterpart. She never wrote another play and for years afterwards *Sweepstake* remained an oddity.

Sufi's example, however, together with the progressive ideas of the period, inspired other women to repeat the attempt. Saniya Qura'a followed with a group of historical plays. They received little critical notice and their theatrical viability was never tested in performance. Though published, all copies of the book seem to have evaporated; I am still trying to locate one. In the same boat with Qura'a's unstaged, vanished texts are the plays of Nadia Abdel-Hamid, which were published in the 1960s. At the moment, no real appreciation of the merit of either writer can be made.

Next, we meet Amina El-Sawi, who was busy adapting novels for the stage, including Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*. El-Sawi, however, soon deserted the stage; she wore the veil, called herself an "Islamic

writer" and devoted her energies to T.V. serialized religious drama. For the next burst of female dramatic activity we have to wait a number of years. And, indeed, it is at once a curious and sobering fact that the decade renowned as the golden age of the Egyptian theatre should have produced only one female director, Layla Abu-Seif (though her major output belongs to the 1970s), and two original plays by women.

In 1968, the avant-garde branch of the National, staged Layla Abdel-Baset's one act play *Papers, Papers!* It was to be the beginning of a long and arduous struggle to build up a career as a playwright and win recognition. Unexpectedly, Abdel-Baset's marriage to director Abdel-Ghaffar Ouda did not make it any easier for her. She was silent throughout the seventies, and her total output to date remains very meager. Apart from some television work and a couple of adaptations of foreign plays, she has written only four plays, three of which are in one act, and two are monodramas.

The only other woman writer to make it to the stage in the 1960s was Fathiya El-Assal. Hussein Gom' a directed her *Swing* for the Alexandria National in 1969 and *The Passport* followed in 1972 at El-Gomhoriya theatre. In the eighties, she produced two more plays: *Women Without Masks* was presented at El-Salam theatre, but not before the censor had axed the "women" from the title; *Betwixt and Between*, however, failed to get a sponsor and eventually appeared in book form. Currently, El-Assal is fighting hard to give her latest play, *Women's Prison*, a viewing chance.

With five full-length theatre pieces, countless radio plays, 20 T.V. plays and 22 T.V. drama serials. El-Assal is by far the most prolific woman dramatist in Egypt and the Arab world. She is the only woman too who has made writing her sole profession and source of income. This appears all the more striking when we consider her beginnings. Indeed, she can be said to have had the most inauspicious childhood possible for a future writer.

Born into a family which believed that girls should be kept at home and ignorant, and rigorously coached in the rituals of female obedience, El-Assal never went to school and was denied a home education.

Fortunately, she married journalist and would-be-novelist Abdallah El-Tookhi. Not only did he help her teach herself to read and write, but also coached her in left-wing politics and Marxist philosophy. At the first signs of her literary talent, he encouraged her to write and introduced her in the right circles. Understandably, El-Assal has little patience with the brand of feminism that regards man as the archenemy.

"I have no quarrel with men," she asserts. "If anything, I am a man-lover," she adds laughing. "My quarrel is with capitalism and the patriarchal ideology and systems it has spawned," she goes on; "these are the forces that oppress both men and women." About the traditional images of women and the gender-specific division of social roles, she says: "some roles are imposed by nature, like child-bearing. I do not mind those, so long as they do not exclude other possible roles. I bore four children myself and enjoyed it. But I also enjoy writing. I would resent it very much if someone tried to stop me writing. But I would resent it equally if someone tried to stop me having children or looking feminine."

Not infrequently, El-Assal's moderate views have made her unpopular with radical feminists. "The feeling is mutual," she confesses. The first time she went to a Marxist meeting she was greeted with a lot of harsh criticism from her female comrades. "I was all dolled up and they were all in jeans and men's shirts, with their sleeves rolled up. I told them I was quite willing for my mind to be improved, but will not have my

body tempered with." These women, she maintains, are as hard as the Islamic fundamentalists who urge women to obliterate their femininity by wearing the veil. "I fully support the equality of the sexes," she says, "but I also recognize their difference."

In El-Assal's thought and writing, the freedom of the body is deeply linked with the freedom of the mind. The historical confinement of the female body to the home has been, in her view, the main cause of women's intellectual backwardness. "Denied education, social mobility and access to public life, how can women hope to develop their minds, or become artists or scientists?!" she exclaims. In such circumstances, any kind of creative writing becomes difficult, and writing plays becomes will-nigh impossible.

A woman, she explains, can weave novels out of her simple and limited daily experience. Theatre, however, is a communal art and a public forum; it tackles broader issues and requires a public type of discourse, more comprehensive, dialectical, and politically conscious - in other words, the type of discourse women are rarely trained into. Besides, very few women can write good plays without seeing some first; how else could they learn the craft? In most Arab countries, however, including Egypt, theatre going is still regarded as an almost exclusively male pastime. If women are allowed to go at all, they seldom choose the play themselves or go without a male relative.

No wonder the number of women fiction-writers far exceeds that of women playwrights. For one thing, writing novels does not involve going out, mixing with actors and directors or staying out late at rehearsals. Besides, fiction is better suited to the housewife's daily pattern. Unlike drama, it does not require long periods of uninterrupted concentration and planning. A novelist can interrupt her writing to answer the door, see to the cooking or the baby without substantial damage. For a dramatist, this could prove disastrous. Serialized drama, however, whether for radio or television, is a different matter, she points out. It is closer to fiction and can afford to ramble and digress. It is, therefore, a form of writing that women can easily accommodate within their daily routine. "I suppose that is why I wrote so many," she adds.

Now that the children are all grown-up and married, El-Assal plans to devote more time to stage writing. It would be a pity if she didn't. Her long experience in radio and television has given her a sureness of touch and a degree of technical confidence that other women playwrights, with rare exceptions, lack. Her last three plays are more original and experimental in form, and more challenging and daring in their ideas.

The only other woman playwright whose artistic stature matches El-Assal's is Nehad Gad. Sadly her promising career was tragically cut short by cancer after only two stage plays. Both are fine specimens of dramatic writing and evidence a great talent, which makes one regret all the more deeply her untimely death in 1989.

Unlike El-Assal, Gad was a late arrival on the theatrical scene. It took her twenty years to discover the medium best suited to her talent. She was born into an upper middle-class family, the only child of an aging couple. Her father's job as a police commissioner meant frequent moves to new towns, new homes and new schools. Very early on, the little girl discovered that books were the only friends she could carry with her from place to place. By ten, she was a voracious reader, and by twelve, she was writing stories.

Though painful, this lonely childhood brought with it a lot of independence. At 17, Nehad was working as a journalist, writing short stories and children's strip-cartoons, and also reading, first science, then English literature at Cairo University. She made an early, unhappy marriage, which lasted only a few years. Shattered by the experience, she left for the States after the divorce. There, two events happened which significantly influenced her later career. She read for an M.A. degree in drama and met her second husband, playwright Samir Sarhan.

For the next ten years she was in close and almost daily contact with the theatrical world. This gave her the valuable first-hand experience of the stage she needed. Armed with both theoretical and practical knowledge of drama, she felt confident enough to embark on her new career as a professional playwright.

Her first play *Adilah* was a virtuoso piece for one actress. The late Naima Wasfi undertook the part and Zeinab Shumees directed. The production, which opened at El-Tali'a theatre in 1981, was indeed an all women show - written, designed, directed and performed exclusively by women. This pleased Nehad no end.

The production delighted many and dismayed a few. Those disliked the candid image Nehad projected of the frustrated, materialistic and petty-minded middle-class housewife. She was told that she ought to challenge those traditional images of women by presenting different ones. Nehad would listen calmly to such criticism, then shrug her shoulders innocently and say: "I write about life as I see it around me, not as I think it should be." Among friends she would add: "I think what is wrong with women's writing is that they tend to write themselves into their works and idealize a bit. The result is that their heroines are always good, sensitive, and intellectual. I would like to see some of them in real life. If our patriarchal culture can produce such fine specimens, why challenge it then?!"

In this, and her next play, *The Bus Stop* (an expanded version of which, renamed *On the Pavement* and directed by Galal El-Sharqawi in 1986, became a smash-hit), Nehad insisted on telling the truth, however painful and unflattering. Nothing annoyed her more than when critics regarded her second heroine, Safiyya, as a symbol of Egypt in the hallowed tradition of the sixties. "I write about real women," she often said, "not about symbols. Safiyya smuggles in a big video machine under her clothes at the airport. I don't think a symbol can do that." Safiyya is a very ordinary Egyptian middle-class woman who gains awareness at the cost of great suffering. She is shown at the beginning uncritically upholding the bourgeois world-view and value-systems and blithely free of any intellectual concerns or pretensions. Her dreams are simply a husband, children, an elegant home and a fat income. The rest of the world can go to hell for all she cares. At the end, however, she realizes that the dreams she was taught to cherish are nothing but traps designed to ensnare unsuspecting females into bondage, humility and exploitation.

Between *Adilah* in 1981 and *On the Pavement* in 1986, Nehad Gad wrote a film-script and called it *Women*. In it, she completely reversed the traditional images of the hero and heroine. She made the hero a negative, idealistic dreamer, and the heroine a positive, down-to-earth realist who sacrifices her moral and professional principles as a lawyer to keep the family going.

After watching the film, I told Nehad jokingly: "If you go on like this, you will soon be called a woman-hater!" She replied: "I am not attacking women, I am simply saying that in societies like ours, many women cannot afford the luxury of ideals. In their daily struggle to ensure the physical survival of the family, they have to be sometimes ruthless and even unscrupulous realists. Most women spend nearly half

their lives cooking, cleaning, washing and nursing the sick. I don't see how they can remain romantic!"

El-Assal's and Gad's tolerant view of the male stands in sharp opposition to Nawal El-Sa'dawi's. In her single play, *Isis*, she goes all out to advocate and affirm the supremacy of the female. The ancient Egyptian goddess here is not a character, but simply a mouthpiece, and a noisy and long-winded one at that. The text is marred by an over-abundance of speeches, exhortations and ideological debates.

The central conflict between the authoress, disguised as the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis, and the patriarchal culture, embodied in the evil god, Set, who, according to the pharaonic myth, murders her husband, Osiris, the god of fertility, is represented in terms of white versus black and is depressingly lacking in dramatic complexity. More disconcertingly, it never seems to move or bring about any real change. It does not even move in circles. One cannot here speak of dramatic action. The characters never seem to do anything but yap at each other. To cover up for the lack of dramatic action, El-Sa'dawi treats us to some gory scenes of physical violence, involving murder, rape, female circumcision and two castrations on stage. As the horror piles up, the whole thing becomes ridiculous and vulgarly sensational.

*Isis*, published in 1986, was never performed and is, perhaps, not performable, not on account of its structural faults (worse texts have been performed), but on account of its iconoclastic message and radical views. It is precisely this, however, which makes it very exciting reading. Its dauntless questioning and intellectual audacity remain unparalleled in all the writing by Egyptian women.

Roughly of the same generation as El-Sa'dawi, Fawziya Mahran is blissfully free of that brand of aggressive feminism. Reading her *Cabuchi* after El-Sa'dawi's *Isis* is like hearing Chopin after a raucous concert of jungle music. Indeed, the play itself closely resembles an oratorio. The voices of the characters - a bishop, a nun, a young Palestinian couple and their Israeli torturers - are sensitively orchestrated to render the color and texture of their emotions. To the external conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis, Mahran adds a more complex internal one between the peaceful teachings of Christianity and the political necessity of fighting. Both the archbishop of Jerusalem, who gives the play its name, and the nun, MargaretMartha, are embroiled in this conflict, and their doubts, prayers and self-questioning provide some of the most moving scenes in the play.

The stage-sets Mahran suggests in the published text, as well as many of her stage-directions, reveal her sharp awareness of the multiple languages of theatre and the value of light and pure sound. It is a pity, therefore, that the play was never seen in performance. Her other play, *The Statue*, a realistic short piece about the frustrations of a sculptor, was also published in a magazine, and also remains untested on the boards.

The four remaining names on our list of Egyptian women playwrights belong to a younger generation. Nahid-Na'ila Naguib, a trained actress who retired in the seventies, wrote many plays of which only *Two in Bliss* was seen by the public. They are, however, available in print. In the mid eighties, Naguib became engrossed in her career as a professional translator but lately she has resumed writing. Nadia El-Banhawi was luckier with three plays staged so far.

The other two, both poetesses, have so far proved one-timers. Neither Wafa' Wagdi's lyrical *Nissan and the Seven Doors*, nor Fatma Qandeel's more robust and rebellious *Sheherezade* have any sisters. Wagdi, however, has written a lot of poetry since then and won a state award. Qandeel, on the other hand, seems

to have vanished into thin air. After the production of her play at the Youth Theatre, she went home to the provinces and no one has heard from her or about her since. She may have been discouraged by the undeservedly modest success of her play and decided to give up, or she could be married and bringing up a horde of children. Whatever the case, the result is that she has been disturbingly silent for years. Her *Sheherazade*, however, still speaks to me and tells me how she never consented to marry the misogynist butcher Shahrayar and how she led a revolution to overthrow him. Her story is good, and I keep wishing for more. But she always says, with a sigh of sorrow, that her creator's voice has dissolved into silence before she could teach her another story.