

The 24th Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre



The 24th Cairo International Festival for Contemporary and Experimental Theatre By Marvin Carlson

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Long-time observers of the Cairo Theatre scene will remember that in 2011, after more than two decades of operation (since 2008, when it was launched as the International Festival for Experimental Theatre) this important annual event disappeared. It was not until 2016 that it was revived by the Ministry of Culture with its new title. The new version of this festival, like the old, has many critics on both sides. Some consider it too conservative, too much under the control of a ministry that sees it more as a public relations event than as a truly artistic endeavor, while others object to its attempt to offer a variety of fashionable experimental styles most of them alien to regular Egyptian audiences. Whatever one's views on these matters, one must respect the ambition and range of the festival, one of the largest and most international of the Arab world. Running this year from September 19 to the 27, it offered more than twenty productions, about half of them from the Arab world and half from other nations, from Mexico to China.



Three Sisters. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

The opening ceremony on September 19 was one of the highlights of the festival. It began with a dazzling display of work derived from traditional dancing, especially the whirling movements of Sufi ritual, and virtuoso performances by various performers of wind and percussion instruments, all accompanied by dazzling displays of costume and lighting. After this came one of the most striking and innovative offerings of the festival, an interpretation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* by the Georgian Tbilisi company, headed by Konstantin Purtseladze. The production removed all dialogue, presenting the play through a series of choreographic movements which especially for those with a general knowledge of the play, captured exceedingly effectively its shifting emotional and physical relationships.

The festival itself fittingly opened with an Egyptian play, *The Day They Killed Singing*, created by Mahmoud Gamal and directed by Tamer Karam. This work, presenting the ongoing struggle in Egypt and elsewhere between tolerance and fanaticism, here personified by two brothers in conflict, won the first place earlier this year in the National Festival of Egyptian Theatre. It was followed by a more abstract production, also from Egypt, Slawomir Mrozek's *The Ambassador*, directed by Adnan Ak Mubarak. Here a young man, representing contemporary Egypt, is encouraged by a young woman, symbolizing his higher convictions, to resist the oppressive social and political conditions that surround him. The production moves effectively from real world to fantasy, thanks to an ingenious use of black cloth, ultra-violet lighting, and projected sound.



Women With No Tomorrow. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

Five other Egyptian productions were included in the festival. One, *The Bridge* by George Theotika, earlier shared a first place in the National Festival with *The Day They Killed Singing*. This was a musical retelling of an Egyptian folk tale where the people of a small town keep rebuilding a bridge that is mysteriously repeatedly destroyed. Another musical work, *The 40 Rules of Love*, directed by Adel Hassan, depicted a literary agent whose fantasies are taken over by a book she is working on. It was a great success earlier this year at Cairo's Peace Theatre (Masrah El-Salam). *Shamman*, directed by Said Soliman, an exploration of mental and spiritual failings within a character's subconscious, drew heavily upon Sufi traditions. *The Experiment*, directed by Ahmed Ezzat, was a reinterpretation of Peter Handke's *Kaspar*, showing the attempt of the "wild child" Kaspar Hauser to become a functioning human being. All of these works clearly reflected in indirect or symbolic terms, the tensions of contemporary Egyptian society. Only one play dealt openly with contemporary political conditions, but this was notably not about Egypt. Gawad el-Asady's *Women with No Tomorrow* portrayed the unhappy condition of three Syrian refugees in contemporary Germany.



Shadows of a Woman. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

The other Arab nations represented at the Festival were Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia, each with a single production. The Jordanian play, *Shadows of a Woman*, was presented at the Hanager Theatre by the Jordanian company Liberate. Written by Hazaa El Breary and directed by Eyad Elshatanawy, it depicted three women with suitcases waiting for a train that never arrives. Although the situation recalls Beckett, the presentation is much more that of a dance piece with the three women, in simple red dress, physically expressing their desperation in a pool of light against a black background.



The Autumn Night. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

Indeed, plays dealing with women's experience formed an unprecedented portion of the 2017 program, ten out of the twenty offering exploring this theme. In addition to the Egyptian and Jordanian works, the French-Lebanese co-production *Autumn Night*, directed by Cerine Ashkar, presented a woman reciting French tragic love poems accompanied by an imaginative choreography, while Arabic translations were projected on a dark background. *Women in Love and Resistance*, from Tunisia, directed by Fathi Al Akary, presented two women giving excerpts from Goethe's *Faust* with quotes from the Tunisian activist Beleid denouncing war, male dominance, and injustice. The Moroccan production *Autumn*, written by Fatma Hourri and directed by Asmaa Hourri, shows a woman victim of cancer who has been deserted by her husband. Like most of these productions, it is largely a dance-piece and very movingly presented.



Autumn. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny



Wandering Time. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

The non-Arab entries also made important contributions to this theme. In addition to the Georgian *Three Sisters*, the Russian Laboratory of Physical Theatre presented a dance piece *Wandering Time*, directed by Lidia Kopina, in which women from a distant galaxy visit the men of a primitive Earth. The Chilean company Teatro del Cuerpo, directed by Vicky Larrain, presented *The Hen Woman*, a strange play based on the actual story of a Chilean woman trapped in a chicken's cage for twenty years. Eventually she adapts the movements and cries of the bird itself. The Armenian offering, *Flight Over the City*, presented by the Yerevan Puppet Theatre (which also uses human actors), tells the story of a young blind girl who falls in love with the doctor who introduces her to the world, but then abandons her when her sight returns.



Flight Over the City. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny



The Hen Woman. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

The festival also offered two woman's monodramas. Mimouna Gallo, from Kenya, presented *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, dealing with polygamy, while the Chinese play *Nine and a Half Love*, directed by Meng Jinghui, presents an actress portraying love stories from the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* set in contemporary China.



Nine and a Half Love. Photo: Bassam Al-Zoghny

The United States was represented by three productions at the Festival, headed by the Theater Mitu's production of *Death of a Salesman*, earlier performed at BAM in New York. The LaGuardia Performing Arts Center offered a modern absurdist comedy, *Privatopia*, while Performance Space 122 offered *Go Forth*, a photo installation by Kaneza Schall with mime, dance and songs inspired by the Egyptian Book of the Dead.



Go Forth. Photo: PS 122

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