

Boundaries of History, Memory and Invention: Laila Soliman's *ZigZig* in Light of Absence of Egyptians' Right to Freedom under Information Law



Boundaries of History, Memory and Invention: Laila Soliman's *ZigZig* in Light of Absence of Egyptians' Right to Freedom under Information Law
By Hadia abd el-fattah Ahmed

Arab Stages, Volume 8 (Spring, 2018) ©2018 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

In Egypt, from 2011 until 2016, more than one draft law on free access to information has been written by the Egyptian government and some civil society members or groups. Most of the drafts agreed that, depending on sort of information that the public authorities have, a reasonable disclosure ban could be determined. However, the maximum ban must not exceed 50 years, even if the information is categorized under the title of "top-secret." The natural result of having such a law is that after a certain period of time most, if not all, documents would be handed over to national libraries and archives which means that

citizens, including artists, would then have the right to freely access information of interest.[\[1\]](#)

After witnessing the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 and its consequences in Egypt and the Arab region, Laila Soliman, Egyptian director, playwright and dramaturg, wanted to spotlight aspects of the various revolutionary movements in Egypt, especially these movements which took place between 1914 and 1919. [\[2\]](#) While searching for historical materials that covered this period, she found, to her dismay, a paper in the British Foreign Archive referring to some raping and violent incidents that happened in a number of small villages in Al-Giza district in Cairo. But then, when she returned to the Egyptian resources to learn exactly the circumstances which led to and surrounded these incidents, she could not find the Egyptian investigations which were held then to document in detail the brutal deeds which had been done by the British soldiers.[\[3\]](#)

In light of the limited access to information that she was given, Soliman only found some meager news and a couple of books describing the incidents, the rape of victims and the actions taken by the Egyptian authorities.[\[4\]](#) Also, she found evidence that Saad Zaghloul, the Egyptian nationalist leader, when he went to the Versailles Conference to defend Egypt's right to gain its independence, brought with him a file reporting what had happened in the Al-Giza villages. As a reaction to these scandals, the British invaders decided to hold their own investigations, two months after the incidents, to defend their position. These investigations refuted completely all the reports of raped victims and the villagers' accusations. What might happen if these fake investigations, which are already released and available to whoever asks for them, brought to light the concealment or absence of the Egyptian investigations which would provide real evidence of what the villagers and the raped victims were subjected to—atrocities done by the British occupiers.

In order to expose this dilemma, Laila Soliman decided to take it as the subject of her latest piece, entitled *ZigZig*.[\[5\]](#) In this piece, fundamentally, Soliman wanted to represent what was mentioned in the investigations that she found in the British Archive, using a narrative technique from time to time to convey what really happened in the incidents that took place in Nazlat El-Shobak, a small Egyptian village near Giza, and in some other surrounding villages. Using the form of tribunal play, Soliman revealed the dimensions of this issue in a one-hour-and-ten-minutes span.

In a dark and bare room, except five chairs and small five desk tables with desk lamps, both the audience who serves as the jurors of the trial and the performers, four actresses and a female violinist, confronted each other. Each one of the four actresses played three roles: one of the raped victims, one of the British prosecutors, and herself as a narrator and commentator on the trial and investigations. Also, the three songs used to comment on the context of the investigations were sung by the actresses accompanied by the violinist. The unchanging scenery of the hearing room, which made up the acting space, was dull and melancholic most of the time. A pale blue lighting prevailed in the space. Only the office lamps were on during the factual reciting of the contents of the investigation papers. The gloomy atmosphere reflected and symbolized the revealing process of such a painful and shameful reality.

Using the English/foreign language in the court hearing parts, although this was translated and projected as subtitles on the wall above the actresses' heads during the questioning of the four rape victims, illustrated the degree of unfairness that the victims were subjected to. In order to reveal the fact that the victims were talking in Arabic, one of the actresses stood behind one of the victims when she was answering the questions of the British prosecutor. The actress acted silently as if she was translating these

questions directed to the victim. The idea was to give the impression of what happened in reality—the victims had to use a translator to repeat their answers in English. These two threads were used to foreground the problem of not having the Arabic documents accessible.

The most shocking and enlightening moment came when one of the actresses started to tell the audience about the fact that when the delegates from Alwafed, one of the most prominent Egyptian parties in 1919, obtained permission to travel to the Versailles Conference, carrying with them "The White Book" written in English. This was a manuscript that contained all the official documents related to the case for independence especially those documents which described what happened in Al-Giza villages such as Nazlat El-Shobak. Reaching this point, the actress raised a question summarizing the main target of the performance, "Where is the Arabic version of this book which demanded the independence of Egypt? Where is the Arabic version of any investigations related to these incidents? It is a miserable thing that the voices of these victims could not be heard in Arabic."

For the few spectators who may have read about the historical period of 1919, they would likely only be aware of what happened in Nazlat El-Shobak in general. When Abdel-Rahman Al-Rafey, an Egyptian historian, for example, referred to what happened in the small Egyptian villages, he did so just once in one of his books. [6] In about ten pages, a general description was provided, including what happened in about seven villages, the reactions and denunciations of some Egyptian officers and an indication of the Egyptian reports submitted by the victims at the police stations. However, nothing was mentioned about the fate of the investigations' details that had been written by the Egyptian officers and what the victims had said literally in their reports expressing the inhumane deeds that they experienced. The only preserved and available reports of investigations were those on the British side which were held in May 1919, about two months after the incidents. However, knowing that the British were the responsible authority in these investigations, the kind of verdicts would have been expected and this is exactly what Laila Soliman demonstrated through the court hearing scenes.

The British prosecutors tried hard to prove the contradictions and inconsistencies in the victims' testimonies. When pushed hard, some of them could not articulate their rights and became perplexed. Even the two raped victims who provided elaborate stories of what had happened to them were simply ignored. In the end, the jurors declared that all the allegations presented by the villagers and the raped victims about "murdering, looting, setting of fires, and raping" were "*untrue and void of foundation.*" All the evidence was considered fabricated and the real victims were considered to be the unarmed British soldiers who unfortunately had gone back to the United Kingdom during the court hearing sessions, which means they were unable to defend themselves. In other words, no one would be able to charge them for anything.

The effect of such an unfair and humiliating verdict was unforgettable and really hard to be expressed with any sort of words. This was true not only for the victims but also for the people who would read or hear about them later. This is why Laila Soliman chose to suggest the raping accidents through some expressive physical movements. While the victims were responding to the questions of the prosecutors, some of these movements started to be presented. By the end of the performance, during the declaring of the final verdict, three of the actresses together pursued what they had started in their scenes. They performed recurrent physical movements representing what happened to them at the hands of the aggressors. By doing that, the actresses were keeping the memory alive in their bodies. Embodying the pain that these women felt quite prevented the likelihood of forgetting it.

An actress: *"Despite the fact those women exist in another time entirely, I feel like they are here, present with us right now, even if only as rape victims, these investigations make them present even though the investigations are horrible, they were there."*



ZigZig. Photo: DCAF Festival.

It is obvious that through the whole performance Laila Soliman was addressing this issue not only from a historical and humanitarian perspective, but also from a feminist point of view. The way she cast the performers confirms this feminist idea. All of them were women, including the violinist. At the very beginning of her piece two of the actresses talked about their feelings towards these investigations saying that:

Actress 1: *There's something very personal about these rape investigations ...*

Actress 2: *I'd rather not talk about personal matters in public. We're better off talking about things that apply to us all alike."*

Although Soliman and the actresses considered that such a matter belongs to them as women, they still decided to set aside this point and to generalize the case to include all the attending audience. At some points they drew some comparisons between their current position in Egyptian society as women and the women's status in 1919. As a matter of fact, the idea of testifying in a case connected to the "honor issue"

and a woman's reputation in 1919, must be considered as an act of great courage that many Egyptian women may lack today. Finally, an English actress^[7] rendered a song called "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier"^[8] as a sort of comment on the brutal and shameful acts the British soldiers did to the unarmed villagers in general and to the innocent women they had raped in particular. In the lyrics, if a woman had said clearly that "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier," the other women would not have suffered any sort of pain.

By questioning the boundaries between history, memory and imagination in this theatrical piece, it is obvious that Laila Soliman was attentive to the historical or fact-based background of the incidents she handled in her piece. According to the documents, there were two accounts of the events; the British one which trivializes and denies completely the allegations of the Egyptian villagers and the raped victims, depending on the investigations which were held by British judges in the absence of the soldiers who committed these shameful deeds. The other account came from the Egyptian side, documented briefly in only a few Arabic resources. In her attempts to achieve authenticity Laila Soliman depended on the English transcript of the inquiry hearings as her primary material to a large extent since it was the only available resource.^[9] Moreover she presented her findings in English. From a historical or factual perspective, however, she remained committed to presenting the documented materials to a great extent with as little distortion as possible.^[10]

Generally speaking, part of the general aim attributed to documentary theatre, especially tribunal play, is that it represents a sort of counter-fact to those distributed by the ones who are in power,^[11] which it does either by criticizing the existing system of justice or by creating "*a historical additional account*."^[12] But when Laila Soliman tried to deconstruct and criticize the final result and the way the hearing sessions had been conducted and proceeded, she was not concerned about doing these things in particular. Her intention in interrupting and commenting on the represented investigations was to create a distance and an estrangement effect. The Brechtian technique was intended to prevent the audience from becoming immersed in the rape case or being preoccupied with the fate of the raped victims. Soliman wanted to awaken them to the whole case. To achieve such an effect, she depended on three things. First interrupting the hearing sessions with the Egyptian alternative narration. Second mocking some of the provocative questions which were directed to the victims after every hearing session. And finally, constantly shifting the roles the actresses were playing.

Adopting such techniques, Soliman sought to focus on the fragile position of the victims, not because of the terrible experience they went through and the bitter courtroom battle that they faced, but because of the absence of any supporting Arabic voice. Soliman wanted the spectators to think about the impact of not having their own history documented and the right to access it freely without restrictions. In order to magnify this case she exploited the fact that no one really knows what the real victims looked like. What was the age of the original heroines/victims? Here the director was obliged to resort to her imagination in order to illustrate their movements, reactions and their facial expressions.^[13] At the end she came up with the idea of casting four good-looking young ladies to represent the raped victims. It was a successful directorial decision which evoked public sympathy towards these innocent young ladies. These victims could easily be a member of our families; a mother, a wife, a sister or daughter.

Not being able to defend them, even in a theatrical play, clearly reflects the problem of this case. Denying the people their right to access their historical records and documents is not only a provocative thing, but it also can hinder them from proving their rights. Moreover, the absence/concealing of important

documents like this makes the people skeptical about the way that history has been written and the sorts of historical information that they have learned. Perhaps this was the reason Soliman decided to represent the hearing sessions in such a provocative way. The director sought to create a troubling and unforgettable memory. Actually, due to the lack of the Arabic version, what Soliman's performance did was to make a sort of engraving a memory on the minds of those who attended her piece. This is why even when the actresses were commenting on the hearing sessions, by narrating the alternative Egyptian story, they tended to depict physically whatever they were talking about.



ZigZig. Photo: DCAF Festival.

For instance, at the beginning of the performance, when one of the actresses started narrating the preliminary incidents which preceded the violent and brutal attack done by the British soldier, the actress sat down on the floor to draw with a white chalk a circle representing the Nazlat El-Shobak village and its broken railways. The director here was trying to make a vivid and unforgettable picture of what had happened. One of the actresses said, "those women are there still with us, as long as these investigations exist in the archives." Thus, by presenting this case/performance the memory of these women will last forever.

Conclusion

It is obvious that Soliman did her best to achieve a so-called *historical* authenticity in that she presented

most of the play in English despite the fact that such an act could frustrate the audience. Regarding memory, Soliman shaped her piece not only to revive a concealed memory but more importantly, to create an unforgettable new memory in the minds of the spectators. Finally, the aim of the whole piece was to draw the spectators' attention to the consequences of not having the freedom of access to our own historical and administrative documents. Exploiting her right to *imagine* how the victims looked and the way in which the British investigations were conducted, Soliman directed the hearing sessions using Brechtian techniques. She was seeking to give the audience the opportunity to use their critical minds and see with their own eyes what could happen when a nation neglects the importance of having its own documents/voice or denies its people the freedom of access to such information.

The absence of accessible Arabic documents/investigations of this historical period, while the biased British investigations have been released and are available for everyone, deprives these innocent victims from getting their historical and legitimate rights. In their era they could not take their rights from their oppressors, but at least the people then were aware enough of what really happened. What about now after the witnesses have died? Being aware of such a tragedy, Laila Soliman decided to raise this issue before the eyes of the Egyptian audiences and to turn it into a case for public opinion. Having the right of access to information must be considered as a part of the human rights of everybody.

[1] Alas, in Egypt, some archives are restricted and available only for those in certain professions, like journalists. Moreover, the process of applying for permission to have the right to see the documents in these archives can take as much as six months, even if access to the documents is allowed.

[2] Laila Soliman was preparing for her theatrical piece *Hawa ELHorreya* (Whims of Freedom), which was premiered in 2015.

[3] Egypt was under British occupation from 1882 to 1956. In 1914 the Britain declared Egypt under its protectorate to exploit the raw materials possessed by the Egyptians during WWI. The results were very devastating economic conditions, for Egyptian villagers in particular. Then after four years, in 1919, Saad Zaghloul, an Egyptian national leader, and some other Egyptian activists demanded an Egyptian representation at the Versailles Conference to defend Egypt's right to be an independent national state. For that reason, the British arrested and expelled him and his companions to Malta in March 1919. Then Egypt witnessed a nationwide upheaval, the "1919 Revolution." When the Revolution occurred, some of the villagers and activists cut off connections and destroyed the railway stations in some villages. Consequently, the British soldiers decided to give them a lesson not to be forgotten. They entered some small villages in the Al-Giza district in Cairo, perhaps the most famous of them being Nazlat El-Shobak. They set fire to most of these villages, looted them and above all they raped some women.

[4] See what Laila Soliman said in a lecture held in the Centre of Translation studies at the American University in Cairo under the title "[Bilingualism on Stage. The case of *Hawa Al-Huriya* \(Whims of Freedom\)](#)"

[5] Premiered in April 2016 at the DCAF festival, and then staged at Cairo's Jesuit Nahda Centre.

[6] See AbdelRahman AlRafi, "Thawrat 1919: t?r?kh Mis? al-qawm? min sanat 1914 ilá sanat 1921",

(3rd edition) (Cairo, Muʿassasat Dʿr al-Shaʿb, 1968), pp.292-303.

[7] It is worth noting that using an English actress among the cast was to internationalize the case of the Egyptian raped victims. One sentence was repeated in the song saying that "there wouldn't be a war today if mothers all would say I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier".

[8] An American song, was composed in 1915 before the US joined WWI.

[9] At the beginning of the play, one of the actresses emphasized that the file (no. 3713722) they got from the British Foreign Office Archive consisted of 275 pages.

[10] I agree that we cannot describe a documentary play as completely true. For that I said "to a great extent".

See also Stephen Bottoms: "Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?" *TDR*, Vol. 50, No. 3, (Autumn, 2006), p. 60

[11] Clas Zilliacus, "Documentary Drama: Form and Content", *Comparative Drama*, Vol 6, No. 3 (Fall 1972), pp. 223-253

[12] Carol Martin eds, *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 22

[13] See Lib Taylor, "Voice, Body and The Transmission of the Real in Documentary Theatre," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, (2013). p. 373

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MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER PUBLICATIONS

Arab Stages

Volume 8 (Spring 2018)

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