

Much Ado About “Theatre and Censorship Conference”

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“Theatre and Censorship Confer

ence” By Dalia Basiouny Arab Stages,

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The churning of the second decade of the 21st century resulted in social and political unrest across the globe. Revolutions in a number of Arab countries created new margins of freedom and an urgent desire to question what it means to be a citizen in modern society while challenging much of what used to be taken for granted as rules of the game. During these transformational times, one of the hot topics has been censorship, especially as it relates to controlling artistic freedom of expression.

In May 2015 the Egyptian National Center for Theatre, Music and Folk Arts organized a conference in Cairo entitled “Censorship and Theatre”. The conference proved to be intense from the onset, illustrating how hard it is to discuss such a complex topic; the topic generates difficult questions which demand unsettling conversations about core issues.

The opening Ceremony was held at Hanager Arts Center on Sunday 24th of May 2015. It was well attended by many Egyptian artists, academics and intellectuals, in addition to an array of Arab and international conference participants from three continents.

The conference organizers screened a short film documenting Egypt’s journey with official censorship, which started with a decree by Khedive Tawfik in 1881 as part of his attempt to control political criticism. Though the film clearly states that censorship was connected to the political control of expression from the start, later presentations seemed to ignore this connection, reducing censorship to issues of morality and freedom of the body.

Interestingly, during his welcome speech, the Minister of Culture, Dr. Abdel Wahed El Nabawy, asserted that censorship was “helpful” to Egyptian theatre as it encouraged artists to create a wide range of theatre forms!

American theatre historian Prof. Marvin Carlson offered the conference’s opening remarks, proposing that the most common forms censorship are political, moral and religious, and that the three often overlap. He referred to “self censorship” as the process by which some artists stop themselves from creating, or only create what would be accepted in society. He also spoke about “economic censorship,” which controls the modes of production (who is going to pay to produce “what,” and who is going to pay to see it). This seemed to be a new concept for some of the attendees.

The first session, titled “The Role of Censorship between Past and Future” turned out to be an explosive one. And it was followed by a heated discussion between supporters of official governmental censorship and opponents of all forms of censorship.

Egyptian Researcher Wissam Nabih Nasr summarized her longer paper about “The Role of Censorship between Past and Future” while Egyptian director Dr. Gamal Yaqout spoke about “Censorship and Value Reference in Modern and Contemporary Theatre.” Then Dr. Abdel Sattar Fathy, Head of the Censorship Institution in Egypt, spoke about the role of censorship historically. The sessions closed with Sudanese actor/ director Aly Al Mahdy’s paper on “The Prospects of International Cooperation and Global Content of Censorship, and Mechanisms of Optimal Use of Public Censorship Terms.”

It is understandable that the head of the censorship authority would defend his institutions work, but it was shocking to hear the contradictory statements by artists who claimed to oppose the notion of censorship, while finding some forms of it “necessary” in the current situation. And the attendees responded with fervor.

Gamal Yaqout posed two contradictory ideas. He said he is against censorship, yet he feels that our society needs censorship at this transitional phase. He gave examples of such necessary moments of censorship through discussing choices he made in his plays to avoid presenting explicit scenes on stage. Thus he reduced the issue of censorship to protecting the audience from “unnecessary explicit sexuality.”

Egyptian actor Salwa Mohamed Aly responded by expressing her shock at Yaqout’s statement. She zealously defended the rights of artists to present whatever they want, in whichever way they would like to.

Ali Abu Shady, previous head of Censorship and the chair of the first session, expressed his support for artists through his interpretation of legal protections, while affirming family values to protect children.

This gave Prof. Lassaad Jamoussi, Tunisian artist and head of Carthage Theatre Festival, the perfect opportunity to encapsulate the argument in a poignant statement. Jamoussi articulated that he passionately supports all censorship for “works presented for children” but vehemently refused the idea that the whole society should be treated as children by whoever is placed in the position of power with the ability to control how the whole society operates.

Another passionate voice in support of freedom of expression was Tunisian artist Meriam Bouselmi. She refuted Gamal Yaqout’s argument which lumped television, social media, and theatre together into one category. She asserted that the kind of theatre she believes in is of a completely different rank; by definition it is out to affect change, and challenge the status quo. She accused speakers of mixing up notions of self censorship and responsibility!

There has been a popular refrain on Egyptian social media regarding revolutionary progress - “The answer is Tunis.” The clear voice and vision of progressive Tunisian artists seemed to suggest that when it comes to issues of freedom and censorship, the answer is still “Tunisia”!

In the other camp, some attendees thought freedom and abolishing censorship would translate into “destroying society and its moral codes” and strongly defended the role of censorship in society, as they believed it is much needed.

Ahmad Amer, Egyptian academic, critic, and founder of the Critics of the Continuing Revolution Movement told Ahram Online that he categorically disagrees with censorship. He believes that the

problem with people who “think” they are against censorship is that they mostly serve the other camp, through undeveloped arguments that focuses the conversation on moral behavior or “naked bodies on stage.” Amer ardently asserted that “Censorship is a political act, and it is not logical to ask those who create the problems to be the ones to solve it.”

The seemingly safe theme of the first day “The Role of Censorship between Past and Future” led to heated exchanges shaking some participants out of their comfort zones. It revealed that the thinly attended conference seemed to have three camps: one that stressed the necessity of having censorship, another that did not approve of any place for the censorship in modern society, and a third group that theoretically disapproved of censorship but felt the need for it at this juncture.

It was surprising to see a number of Egyptian artists, writers and directors in the third camp. Most of their reasoning in defending the presence of censorship equated abolishing censorship with encouraging immorality!

There is a grave danger when the act of censorship is disconnected from its political roots and tagged only to corporal issues. The body is political, of course. But since the establishment of official censorship in Egypt, it was intended mainly to monitor and silence the dissident voices against Khedive Tewfik in 1881 relating to the bigger “political” issues.

It is a troubling indicator that the conversation in 2015 focuses on the small scale freedoms of whether to show less or more flesh on stage, and ignores the larger sense of freedom and the pressing political issues.

While most Egyptian and Arab speakers spoke about their own experiences or locales, there were a few presentations that expanded the conversation. Lebanese researcher Gulnar Wakim introduced the attendees to the role of censorship in Latin America, and how theatre artists in countries such as Mexico, Argentina and Chile suffered at the hands of officials, and the tactics they used to continue their work.

Thomas Engel, the executive manager of German Centre of the International Theatre Institute (ITI), spoke in his capacity as the Secretary of the ITI Action Committee for Artists Rights. He emphasized the important role of civil society activists, giving an example of how the worldwide public solidarity with Kazakhstani director Bolat Atabayev, after his arrest because of his support to oil workers on strike, led to his release from prison. He was concerned with posing questions on how can artists react to violation of free expression, and the challenges and responsibilities of democratic dialogue.

Janice Sze Wan Poon from Hong Kong presented touching examples of tactics to avoid censorship in conflict zones, between the public and the government, and her presentation gave audiences some tangible examples from Hong Kong and China.

On the other hand, Tunisian director Meriam Bousselmi took the conversation to another level in her presentation on “Theatre and the Art of Disturbing General Order.” She proposed that censorship is not practiced in dictatorships only, posing a number of examples from contemporary Europe and elsewhere, where theatre censorship had transferred from “institutional censorship” to that of the “intellectual lobbies” who use disguised moral terrorism. She got a few knowing laughs from the attendees when she asked, “Why don’t we arrest artists who do bad theatre?”

Lebanese actor and director Nidal Al Achcar's paper was a crowd pleaser; her passionate delivery and grandiose rhetoric impressed people to the extent that it was included as part of the results of the conference.

The session titled "Theatre in Schools" raised questions about the criteria for inclusion in this conference. The conversation that ensued after one presenter stressed the "necessity of censorship" unveiled the split in the Egyptian society regarding this issue.

The detailed paper by Egyptian writer/ director Ahmed Adel Al Qudaiby about the range of freedom experienced through "Theatre Clubs" prepared the floor for one of the most sincere debates during this conference. Critic Mohamed Mosaad related an incident about a group of young actors presenting a play about gay issues in Damietta under the umbrella of the Theatre Clubs' organization. He expressed his conflicting views regarding how to support these youth and how to protect them. Dr. Nehad Selaiha summed up the conversation with a poignant question about who has the right to "protect" (i.e. censor) youth from the consequences of their creativity!

The final session was the most loaded. Most of the attendees, speakers and audience alike, were surprised to hear the conference organizer Assem Nagaty proudly announce the Second Cairo Declaration. The First Cairo Declaration, it appears, was issued at the end of a previous conference organized by the same institution six month prior about African Theatre.

This Cairo Declaration, which came in place of a conference recommendation, proposed some interesting notions such as: challenging censorship, canceling the guardianship over audience, activating the role of civil society, dealing with legislative challenges in censorship laws and applying pressure to create changes in the laws. Unfortunately, most of these noble ideas are likely to remain just words, without any practical plans for implementation or follow up, as Nagaty assumed that he would hand these recommendations to the office of the Minister to execute!

Most shocking was Nagaty's audacity in using this platform to declare that Egypt has no oppression. He only said that in Arabic, and did not translate it to English, as he did with the rest of the declaration, because he could not say that in front of the international guests! His announcement enraged a few attendees who had patiently waited over an hour and half for the late final ceremony to start.

Most vocal was writer and critic Mohsen El Merghany, a co-founder of Critics of the Continuing Revolution Movement. El Merghany stood up to challenge Nagaty's declaration and forcefully said to him "You are altering what happened and making a statement that misrepresents what took place in this conference. Not one presenter or commentator or attendee in the three day conference mentioned that there is no oppression in Egypt. The opposite is true, and we are suffering from oppression!" Nagaty had nothing to say in response.

It seems that Nagaty found that because this conference was held, there is adequate proof that there is no censorship in Egypt and that the country is free from oppression, regardless of the content of the sessions and the level of conversations.

One interesting initiative proposed at the final session was establishing an Arab Network for Artists Protection. Palestinian-Jordanian artist Ghannam Ghannam said he will take immediate steps to activate

this much needed network, which will serve as a platform for Arab artists.

At the end of three lively days of sessions and conversations, a question arose about the criteria for the selection process with the intention of making this kind of gathering truly a conference, not just a meeting. Those responsible for the programming presented a few Egyptian voices. However, enlightened voices such as renowned critic Dr. Nehad Selaiha and previous Minister of Culture Dr. Emad Abo Ghazi had limited contributions as their role was to facilitate sessions in the conference.

Other questions were asked about the absence of artists, both the independent artists and the more established ones, who had long battles with the censors in this country; some wondered if they were boycotting the conference or was it just bad timing, or lack of advertising for what some described as a “secret conference”!

Egyptians who presented papers in the conference were treated like second-class citizens in their own country; a lot of attention was given to honoring the Arab and International guests. This started at the opening ceremony, when international guests were asked to go up on stage for a conference photo, and continued to the final ceremony where only the foreign guests were given a plaque as a gift. More troubling was the choice NOT to ask the Egyptian presenters for their input for the recommendation or what came to be known as the Second Cairo Declaration.

Post conference:

What happened following the conference was as dramatic as the conference itself.

One of the most vocal opponents of the conference, who spoke passionately during the last day about his own achievements in documenting censorship in Egypt was Dr. Sayed Ali. He proudly described how he learned that many documents from the censorship office were going to be incinerated, and he bribed the driver of the van carrying these documents to give him some of the documents. He later published these documents in a number of books about the history of Egyptian censorship. He was angry that he was not invited to present in the conference, claiming that he is the most knowledgeable person in the world about the topic of censorship.

When asked to submit these public documents to Egyptian National Center for Theatre, Music and Folk to be kept safely for future reference, he was not keen on that, saying he has other plans once he finishes publishing them.

Soon after the conference closed, Dr Sayed Ali was appointed as head of the Egyptian National Center for Theatre, Music and Folk, replacing Assem Nagaty, who was found to be illegally appointed to this post. Weeks later another official replaced Sayed Ali, and the whole cabinet changed, bringing a new Minister of Culture, Helmy Namnam. This minister, with the new leadership he is bringing to different organizations, is not likely to stay long in his post as Egypt expects parliamentary elections to happen before the end of 2015, after over two years without a parliament! This may bring a new government. The post-revolutionary churning continues!

Dalia Basiouny is an Egyptian writer, theatre director and founder of Sabeel for the Arts in Cairo. She has performed her Monodrama Solitaire in a number of countries, including Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, and the United States. Her more recent work includes The Magic of Borolus (see Arabic Stages, volume 2).



Arab Stages

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