

A Hair-'razing' Adventure: The Head of Mameluke Jaber (2000)

A Hair-'razing' Adventure: The Head of Mameluke Jaber (2000) By Nehad Selaiha

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Whoever said that we generally think in metaphors, which accounts for a lot of the absurdities, incongruities and contradictions in human thought, and that this confusion is further confounded by an inveterate human habit of waywardly mixing metaphors, was absolutely right. In this respect, one particularly irritating example is the metaphor of "heavy industry" when used in connection with the theatre. I am not quite sure who thought this up, but I first heard it from veteran director Sa' d Ardash in the course of a symposium on the future (very bleak indeed if you believe him) of the Egyptian theatre.

I am used to Ardash and his generation's nostalgic, puffed up glorification of the achievements of the past and to their supercilious, sententious, and often tendentious denigration of the present. I remember blinking very hard when I heard him describe the National theatre as "the forte of heavy industry;" that was new. I pictured the National - the old, fragile building down in Ataba square, with its graceful Islamic architecture - then the ugly, utilitarian complex of steel and iron factories in Hilwan, the most familiar forte of heavy industry to Cairenes (its emissions mix with the air they daily breathe) and therefore the handiest to the imagination, and tried to reconcile the two images. I failed dismally. The stumbling block was the actors: I simply could not imagine them as factory hands or machines. When I asked Ardash afterwards what he meant, he waved his hand vaguely, drawing a circle in the air and murmured something about the classics, serious drama, the repertoire system, the present management's abject dereliction of duty and betrayal of its sacred mission. I squinted. Still grappling with the metaphor of the industrial forte, I was now asked to consider that of a holy temple or a crusade!

Ardash's censure is frequently echoed, in various pitches, by critics and artists of the old guard and has recently erupted in a fierce, vituperative, choral denunciation of the National's current revival of Sa' dallah Wannus's *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber's Head* (1969), retitled *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber*. This time, the quarrel is not over the choice of play: Wannus's piece, though experimental at the time it was written, is now a popular classic of the modern Arab theatre and the most frequently revived of the 1960s dramatic heritage. Wannus is also universally acknowledged as one of the greatest, most intellectually daring and artistically innovative Arab dramatists. His premature death of cancer in May 1997 at the age of 56, and his heroic struggle to continue writing till the end have enhanced his prestige and popularity almost to the point of canonization. Besides, *The Adventure of Mameluke Jaber's Head* belongs to Wannus's middle, pronouncedly socialist and politically committed period and is, therefore, right up Ardash's and his generation's street; it is also very much in line and tune with the resurgent taste for obstreperous political declamation and heavy-fisted didacticism (of the kind promoted by Mohamed Subhi in his Theatre for All project), as well as the pervasive critical mood which dismisses as inane and frivolous anything which does not vociferously blazon its moral or political message.

In this respect, Murad Munir's new stage-version of *Jaber's Head* at the National does not fall short; the message is there, loud and clear, shouted from the stage, the boxes on both its sides, the back of the auditorium and its front; it is further underlined by Sayed Hijab's lyrics which clinch every scene and by the comments of the narrator or *hakawati* (storyteller) who connects the scenes. The new adaptation left the main action - the story of Jaber - substantially unchanged, restricting its alterations to the outer framework. Writing in his favorite form, that of the-play-within-the-play, and adopting Brecht's alienation principle and its techniques, cherished by the 1960s generation of leftwing writers, Wannus presents the tragic adventure of Jaber (which he lifted out of an ancient history book by Al-Dinari) as a series of scenes conjured up from the past by a story-teller in a humble cafe, and physically enacted before the audience (the one on the stage, in the fictional cafe, and the one in the auditorium at any performance).

The cafe audience constantly intrudes upon the scenes with their comments, betting on the future course of events, comparing their lot with that of the common people of Baghdad in the story, and establishing pointed parallelisms. They complain that the *hakawati* has been feeding them nothing but tales of misery and oppression, corruption and famine, as if they haven't enough of that in real life; what they ache and clamor for is an escape route from the present, wish-fulfilment and vicarious satisfaction through stories of heroic exploits, serendipitous adventures, and miraculous changes of fortune. In response, the *hakawati* darkly tells them that the time for happy stories has not arrived yet, that it is up to them to make it arrive, and that it all depends on what they can read in his sad stories and the kind of moral they draw from them.

The moral couched in the parable of Jaber, a reckless and crafty slave to the vizier of Baghdad at some unspecified point in history, is obvious enough and quite familiar in the 1960s leftwing drama. It simply says that the quest for individual salvation is always fruitless and doomed to end in tragedy and disaster. When a deadly power struggle develops between the Khalif of Baghdad and his vizier, disrupting the life of ordinary people and causing great suffering, the Khalif puts his guards at the city gates to intercept a suspected message from the vizier asking for foreign help. Everyone going out is thoroughly and minutely searched. The vizier is desperate and at his wits' end and Jaber sees his chance and seizes it. The prospect of freedom, fortune, high rank and marriage to his beloved whets his already sharp intelligence and he comes up with a devilishly ingenious stratagem.

The only way to sneak out the message is to have it written on his scalp after it is shaved bald, then let the hair grow back again to cover it. The guards may search everything, even the food and private parts of a person, but it would never occur to them to search under the hair, he tells the vizier. When the shaving ceremony, performed like a mock-religious ritual, is over and the message duly inscribed on the silky smooth scalp, the wily vizier adds a postscript instructing his ally, the king of Persia, to destroy the evidence of their collusion and cut off the precious head. From that moment on, and unbeknown to him, the smugly confident and self-congratulating Jaber walks with his death sentence literally written on his head and this turns everything he says or does into a cruel irony. But if you do not already know the story, have not read the play, and are watching it for the first time, you do not get to know about the postscript till the end; but though you miss out on the irony, the thrill of the final shocking revelation is more than enough compensation.

It is only after Jaber is beheaded in a savage scene that the *hakawati* reveals the secret of his death and picks up the narrative thread to describe the terrible sack of Baghdad and the horrible endless night into which it has plunged. From that pitiless night, the citizens of Baghdad, Jaber's contemporaries, address the cafe audience across the chasm of centuries and warn them of a similar fate unless they wake up, shed

their fear and indifference, become politically active and involved, and take their destiny into their own hands. The lesson, however, falls on deaf ears and the play ends on a cynical note with the cafe regulars threatening to boycott it if the *hakawati* persists in telling them such gruesome tales.

In Murad Munir's current production, the initial cafe setting is dismissed and the traditional, old-fashioned *hakawati* is replaced by the fair and voluptuous Fayza Kamal in a wine colored trim jacket and skin tight black trousers. Acting like an impresario or master of revels, she welcomes us, pays tribute to former masters and introduces the evening's entertainment. When she launches into her narrative, hitched up high in the loge on the right, facing a small band and a singer on the left, she assumes the tone of voice and intonation of female presenters of children's programs on the box. The suggestion of a children's game gains force as she announces that, rather than a stage, as Shakespeare (and Yusef Wahbi after him) would have it, the world is really a marionette show. In any case, the performance proceeds as one: actors hang from the flies on strings like marionettes, climb up toy-like high towers, hide behind cartoon-like columns, bounce up and down on beds, or gleefully sway on brightly colored swings. The sets have the vividness, simplicity and boldness of children's drawings, and Munir's renowned passion for visual exuberance and kinetic effervescence is fully indulged.

The sprightly mood, which informs the new frame extends to the inner action, pervading many scenes and infecting the style of acting, particularly in the case of Ahmed Bedeir who plays Jaber. Wannus's serious message is still there, very much so, but Munir and his actors do not see why they should not have as much fun, and give as much pleasure as they can delivering it. It is perhaps this spirit of fun, the rejection of pompous gravity and glum solemnity, which has led many of the critics who can only think of the serious in terms of the lugubrious to accuse the production of levity and frivolousness. This does not mean that the production is one long frisky romp or a round of unadulterated merriment. There are sad, moving scenes, and the most poignant are the ones, which subtly evoke, without the least direct reference, the tragic suffering of the Iraqi people.

Other targets for critical attacks were the alterations made by Munir in the parts framing the central story and his choice of popular singer Hassan El-Asmar (the contemporary extension of Ahmed Adaweyah who flourished in the 1970s, and Shukuku before him) as commentator. But in making his alterations, Munir was in fact obeying Wannus's own instructions in his introduction to the printed text which he insists is not a play but, in his own words, "a work-project" to be completed by the director and his cast through improvisation. He explicitly states that the initial cafe-setting and frame-scenes are not mandatory and can, indeed should, be altered to suit the time, place and specific conditions of every production; even the dialogue should be changed into the dialect of the place of performance. Munir who knows and loves his Wannus well (he did *The King is the King* and *Drunken Days* in the 1990s) has actually done nothing but obey the author's instructions. As for the choice of El-Asmar which was described as "beneath the National," I think that Wannus would have been the first to approve it, if only to spite the smug, bourgeois critics. Admittedly, El-Asmar's songs occupied more space than they should have, and his coarse, unpolished voice may not appeal to refined ears; but to contemptuously dismiss him as "unfit to tread the boards of the National" is nothing short of rank snobbery. The National's director, Huda Wasfi, ought to be congratulated indeed for turning a deaf ear to such stuffy criticism and for treating the National for what it is: a playhouse and not a school, a temple, or, indeed, a forte of heavy industry.



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