

## Royal Buffoonery: *King Lear* at the National (2002)

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at the National (2002) By N  
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Any production of a revered classic, particularly in a cultural context other than that of the original text, is bound to foreground the question of audience expectations. More often than not, such expectations are not born out of any direct exposure to the text without preconceptions, but tend to originate in academic institutions and the writings of prestigious critics and authoritative literary figures and are passed on from one generation to another, without scrutiny or revision, in the name of refined taste and high culture. Nowhere is this more clearly exemplified than in the case of Shakespeare in Egypt. He was first introduced to Egyptian audiences in the early 20th century by veteran classical actor, George Abyad, in a forbidding halo of respect as an awesome classical model, a tragic poet of unparalleled genius, a great moralist and grand rhetorician. The archaic, stilted, overblown and heavily ornate Arabic into which the plays - not only *Othello*, *Hamlet*, or *King Lear*, but also *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew* - were declaimed, ranted and spluttered from the stage further intimidated the audience, deepening the sense of awe and making those early productions real feats of cultural browbeating. The implicit message was that if you did not like what you saw, then, clearly, something was wrong with you.

This misleadingly narrow and elitist view of Shakespeare was bequeathed to subsequent generations and progressively fortified by translations of traditional Western criticism, such as Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (mandatory reading in all English literature department in Egyptian universities at one time). The fact that Shakespeare was an actor who never made it to university, consistently flouted the classical rules, and was a member of a commercial theatre company who sought above all to delight its customers, whatever the means, was discreetly ignored and so were all the bawdy, naughty, skeptical or sacrilegious bits in the plays which were either tacitly removed or phrased in such pompous language that made them sound more like ethical edicts or profound philosophical musings.

Surprisingly, the spirit of experimentation, which informed the Egyptian theatre in the 1960s left that stultifying Shakespearean cult quite untouched. Between 1963 and 1965, three consecutive National theatre productions of *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* (the first two starring Hamdi Gheith, the third, Karam Metaweh) flaunted the old grandiose, pseudo-classical mode in full opulence, with all the clichéd paraphernalia. The audience loved them, and so did most of the critics; there was nothing there that ruffled the inherited expectations of either. The stereotypical view of Shakespeare initiated by George Abyad and his contemporaries seemed to have finally and irrevocably stuck to him like an ugly odor that all the perfumes of Arabia could neither sweeten nor dispel. When British director, Deborah Warner, arrived in Cairo, in 1987, with her Kick company, and presented *King Lear* at Al-Gomhoria theatre in the mode of a harsh black comedy (à la Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, popularized by Peter Brook), with a crippled female fool, doubling as Cordelia, almost completely naked actors, climbing and jumping

off ladders and pouring buckets of water all over the stage in the storm scene, while the octogenarian king pranced around in his underwear, the production was dismissed as experimental horseplay. When she came back two years later, in 1989, with the British National Theatre company, with a more sedate production of the same play - this time, in a bare, ascetic, anti-emotional-identification style, reminiscent of Brecht's epic theatre - the verdict was even more negative: the proverbial 'English coldness' was often trotted out to explain the sense of icy emptiness communicated by the production and many complained that they had looked very hard for the King Lear they know and love, but could not find him.

Warner's two visits, however, despite the lukewarm reception and adverse criticism, did create a ripple. They showed some young directors here that there were ways of approaching Shakespeare other than those of the National. More significantly, they revealed to them that far from being a rigid, priggish, old-fashioned and extremely verbose pontiff (as the traditional productions or drama classes made him out to be), he was lively, highly theatrical, full of tricks, great fun, and insidiously subversive to boot. At last they had a Shakespeare they could love and play with. In 1991, a young director, Mohamed AbdelHadi, embarked on what could only be described as a thoroughly insane project - a production of *King Lear* at the small hall of El-Tali' a (avant-garde) theatre, with only six actors, no sets (except a small round platform in the middle over which hangs a crown) and invasively, indeed defiantly, subtitled, "a grotesque, farcical travesty."

The show was unlike any of the run-of-the-mill parodies of Shakespeare you come across in many countries. It was *King Lear*, but slightly shortened, more condensed, and projected from the point of view of the fool. With the help of simple, black cloaks, huge masks (with hoods attached) which grotesquely caricatured their real features, stylized movement patterns marked by exaggeration and distortion and significant vocal and gestural changes, the six actors - five men and one woman (Salwa Mohamed Ali who plays Regan in the National's current production of the play) - doubled and trebled in all the parts, like most travelling troupes in Shakespeare's day, and they did it with such amazing efficiency that it was difficult sometimes to guess which actor was playing which part under the mask. The constant fusing and splitting of the characters as the actors wore the horrible masks to enact the wicked characters, or took them off to impersonate the good ones, invested the whole performance with a deeply unsettling sense of fluidity, giving it a surrealistic quality, as if it was a nightmare experienced by the fool in the grave, long after the storm was over.

In my review of that production on March 21<sup>st</sup> 1991, I described it as "the real thing;" not only had it eschewed the dominant, antiquated view of Lear, enshrined by George Abyad's rumbling performance in 1927, but had also embraced wholeheartedly the in-built comic potential of the play, its prevalent sense of existential absurdity, of transience and instability, as well as its unmistakable folk-tale provenance and unashamed exploitation of the tradition of the rough- and-tumble popular comedy of its day and the conventional patter and routines of clowns. For Abdel-Hadi, I added, the world of *King Lear*, the one he evoked on stage, was one where witches, monsters and hobgoblins rubbed shoulders with the rugged illusion-makers of a rough itinerant show, and the essence of Lear's tragedy did not lie in his dethronement as king and head of the family, but rather in his self-abnegation as tragic hero. Needless to say, Abdel-Hadi's Lear was suspiciously received, sparking off a controversy about how much freedom artists should allow themselves when dealing with the classics.

No such controversy surrounded a revival of *Macbeth* at the National, which opened the same month; it was all as it should be, or, rather, as everybody expected it to be - i.e., deadly dull - and everyone heaved

a sigh of relief. And the sense of relief was compounded when, in the following year, Ahmed Isma'il produced *King Lear* for a regional Mass Culture theatre troupe in Mansoura in a highly melodramatic vein, which swung us safely back to the 19th century. With a history of raving Shakespearean heroes, histrionically strutting and fretting on the Egyptian stage for decades, melodrama could easily pass for tragedy, even supplant it, and, therefore, Isma'il doing *King Lear* as a strident melodrama was on much surer grounds than AbdelHadi. Predictably, almost tragically, I would say, Abdel-Hadi never attempted another Shakespearean mad venture.

It is against this background that one can best appreciate the current production of *King Lear* at the National and understand its phenomenal popularity with both audiences and critics - including even the most finicky and nitpicking ones. Despite its many faults and shortcomings, it seems to work for almost everybody, operating or, rather, transmitting, as it were, on many different wavelengths, which takes us back to the question of audience expectations. What do the people who flock to the National every night, filling it to brimming point expect to see? And why is it they are so genuinely delighted and excited with what they see that they keep coming back, bringing along fresh spectators every time? Is it simply the irresistible chubby-baby charm of superstar Yehia El-Fakharani and his overwhelmingly bewitching presence? But who would want to see this delightful, attractive actor, still in his fifties, as an irascible, cantankerous, doddering old fool? One can understand El-Fakharani's reasons for taking on the part: it is a tremendous, daunting challenge. But only a demented director, hysterically obsessed with experimentation would think of casting him in it. Was it just a stroke of luck? Or part of a bigger, intentional design?

Ahmed Abdel-Halim frankly admits that he never sought the honor of directing *King Lear*; rather, it was thrust upon him by the indefatigable Huda Wasfi, the former director of the National, a year before she resigned her post. He accepted the assignment with great trepidation and freezing feet. His spell at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in London, back in the 1960s (where he gave a memorable performance of *Othello* for his graduation project) had made him wary of Shakespeare and alerted him to the many dangerous pitfalls and slippery paths of his plays. More than any other Egyptian director, he was aware of the enormous difficulties and hard choices any production of an elusive, protean text like *King Lear* would involve. He had read the theatre history of the play in its country of origin, as well as in Europe, and knew how disconcerting critics, since Goethe and Coleridge, and actors, since Betterton, had found it, and how much hacking and mauling it had undergone at the hands of directors.

Luckily for Abdel-Halim, he had happened to be in England at the time director Peter Hall, as head of the Royal Shakespeare Company, was initiating a new method of producing Shakespeare. The four seminal precepts, which constituted Hall's new method were: liveliness, textual care, social relevance and theatrical totality. With these provisos in mind, Abdel-Halim embarked upon his *Lear*, carefully steering it on a middle course between innovation and conventionality. His *Lear* would be the extreme opposite of George Abyad and the horde of classical actors who toed his line; hence Yehia El-Fakharani. To further disorient the audience and splinter their traditional pattern of expectations, he chose for the role of the vicious, demonical Edmund, the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, Ahmed Salama, who always plays 'the good boy' in television soap operas, giving him a marvelous opportunity to prove his versatility - which he did, and quite magnificently too, taking the audience into his confidence with the kind of unabashed theatricality one usually associates with Iago. For the two evil sisters, he cast the lovely, willowy Sawsan Badr, who has wrung our hearts with her poignant performance in her recent film *Closed Doors*, and the 'petite', explosively sexy, but outwardly innocent-looking and childlike, Salwa Mohamed

Ali. The performances of the rest of the cast, uniformly competent, and some of them quite vibrant - like Mohamed Nagi's Kent, Emad El-Arousi's Edgar/Poor Tom, Rushdi El-Shami's Oswald, and Magdi El-Edrisi's Cornwall - tended more or less to conform to what the ordinary spectator would expect from the characters they represent.

What kind of world did Abdel-Halim cast all those lovely performers and intriguing characters in? It was definitely a palpably stagy world, the kind of world you would expect from any rugged illusion-makers of a rough itinerant show. It was more polished though, with lots of tinsel and glitter, like a conventional, commercial Christmas pantomime. The show has that kind of ambience, the atmosphere of a festive make-believe charade. To bring Lear nearer home and achieve 'social relevance', the director wisely used Fatma Musa's lucid and infinitely accessible translation and harped, somewhat simplistically, on the theme of the ingratitude of children towards their parents, cashing in on the current wave of public dismay triggered by news stories of sons butchering their mothers (Sawsan Badr's *Closed Doors* features such a crime) or chucking their old, feeble fathers out onto the streets. He also unearthed the fool, whom Shakespeare had safely disposed of in the third act, to recite short poems by Ahmed Fouad Nigm, and roped in Rageh Dawood with some mellifluous tunes for accompaniment. For 'liveliness,' Abdel-Halim used dancers to represent the storm and battle scenes, impressive sword-duels, back projections of thick clouds racing across a stormy sky, dripping rain which looked like thick clots of white blood, and painted plastic backdrops which seemed to shudder all the time.

Of 'theatrical totality,' very loosely interpreted, the show achieved a substantial measure. Apart from the music, the dancing, the fencing and Nigm's intrusive lyrics, the acting displayed such a dizzying mixture of styles that made one imagine one was watching three or four different plays running simultaneously - a chilling melodrama, a realistic domestic tragedy, a farce, a pathetic black comedy and a classical heroic epic. Strangely enough, each was convincing in its own way, and executed with plenty of verve and panache. What holds the show together and gives it some semblance of coherence is the acting, particularly El-Fakharani's, and the evil trio's (Sawsan, Salwa and Salama). Together, they managed to inject a sense of reality in what is ultimately a Christmas pantomime and to soar above the long established, hallowed traditions without completely severing all connections with them.



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