

Laugh Till/When You Die: The Throes of Tahrir Square





Lenin el Ramly, *Laugh Till/When You Die (Idhak lama t'moot)*, directed by Essam el Sayed. Courtesy: El Sayed Abdelkader.

On its opening day, 1st February, 2018, the Egyptian National Theatre in downtown Cairo showcased *Laugh Till/When You Die (Idhak lama t'moot)*, Lenin el Ramly's last play, directed by his longtime artistic partner Essam el Sayed. The play, their ninth joint theatrical venture in a row, was preceded by their widely acclaimed *Welcome, Gentlemen (Ahlan ya Bakawat)* (1989-1991 seasons), and its sequel *Farewell, Gentlemen (Wada'an ya Bakawat)* (1997). *Laugh* is acknowledged by both dramatist and director, as the finale of the *Gentlemen* trilogy. The four-scene play is, thus, part of their larger artistic project that involves theatre, politics, and history, among their other chronic Egyptian idiosyncratic concerns.

El Ramly and el Sayed are no strangers to the National Theatre; *Laugh* is their fifth on its stage. For two seasons from February to April, the national theatre had full houses as evidence of the audience response to their long awaited comeback. NT is Egypt's oldest theatre and finest national cultural institution, built

in 1870 by the khedival decree of Ismaeel Pasha next to the Royal Opera House. At a time when Ismaeel was bent on Europeanizing Cairo, the NT was designed to embrace a European proscenium arch stage in an Islamic new-Mamluk architecture theatre.

The audience's journey to their seats is a travel through time which forces them to watch the play shrouded in memories from the Bonaparte theatricals at the Azbakeya gardens (1798-1801), and the 2008 devastating fire that destroyed the dome, gilded curtain, backdrop, and the velvet seats. Starting from the front-of-house calls, the seated audience is facing the famous Ahmad Shawqy verses carved in decorative Arabic calligraphy along the upper horizontal border of the auditorium curtain:

Nations are but morals, as long as they remain,

If their morals are gone, they are, thereby, gone.

El Ramly's epigraph is superimposed on the political history of the theatre, the fire, Shawqy's verses and the theatrical stories of the *Gentlemen*, setting a controversial mood for the play: "To those who were martyred a long time ago, and weren't buried to date." El Ramly started writing the text in 2010, finished it in 2014 and published it in 2016, to be performed in 2018! During that process, the text was edited by both writer and director. From page to stage the play gained deeper theatrical nuances, though not departing radically from el Ramly's text.

The stage is Yahiya's room, whose fragile 'peace' is threatened by the arrival and presence of Taher, an old *friend*. It becomes a No Man's Land in which the Egyptian anachronistic *Odd Couple* add their own stories to the tradition of the "Gentlemen" who once journeyed two centuries back to the past, and three centuries ahead to the future. However, in *Laugh*, the audience is stuck with the couple in a national present limbo.

The action is a series of child play between the two septuagenarians: Yahiya, a demented history professor, and Taher, a suicidal artist. The quasi-Beckettian microcosm is a playground for the interplay between the declining memory and the death wish. Both protagonists are psychologically impaired. The rehearsal routine evolved into a discipline establishing an Estragon-Vladimir bond. The play was originally cast with Ezzat el 'Alaily and Hussein Fahmi, who played the Gentlemen in both prequels. Later, both declined the parts. Eventually, Nabeel el Halafawy (Yahiya) and Mahmoud el Gendy (Taher) landed the roles with a distinguished longtime artistic repertoire which was part of sustaining their strong stage presence as regular Egyptian grumpy old men. A natural explosive chemistry between them developed through rehearsals, showing a more belligerent and feisty intimacy and adding darker and brighter shades to a growing onstage humor. Their personal illnesses which resulted in cancelling the show several nights added to their reception on stage: old, tired, and disappointed! Sadly, with the demise of el Gendy in April 2019 a rerun was not to be expected.

El Sayed hinged his rehearsal lingo on the "seriocomic" peculiar to his dark comedies with el Ramly. He recalls in cold readings when the actors inquired: "Where is the comedy?" The Egyptian audience is in favor of heavy-handed tragedies or farcical goons; otherwise the play is doomed to failure. Rehearsal routines gradually accentuate the political dichotomy expressed in the intermittent scuffles of the two goofy snarling underdogs. The comedy, in consequence, gushes out between Yahiya, the recluse and Taher, the socialite.

A historical dichotomy, familiar to the audience, is externalized. Yahiya and Taher are the two *Gentlemen* from the sixties who fight over the Nasserist flaws, and Sadat's peace treaty, and open-door policy. They represent the traditional two sides of the Egyptian national persona, corresponding with el Ramly and el Sayed's known opposing political views. The heated dialogue is interspersed with side reference to their personal lives, women, and children. The onstage presence is accompanied by offstage video mapping. The rest of the cast enter and exit leaving traces that the protagonists pick up to continue the agon.

El Sayed maintains the idiosyncratic prophetic nature of el Ramly's writings: "Remember his (El Ramly's) prophecy in '*There's a Ghost in our House*' (2004)? And '*Welcome, Gentlemen!*'? We had to acknowledge in the program note that there were no readjustments in the texts." El Sayed adds: "This play (Laugh), too, written in 2013 and performed in 2018, is prophetic!" (interview with the author, Cairo, January 2018).

The director commences a paratheatrical dialogue prior to the performance. In a press conference, el Sayed announced that the *Gentlemen's* new adventure is a spatiotemporal impasse. Nobody travels in time or place. In the playbill, his director's notes send a presage to the audience: "At a decisive moment in history which requires precision trust your heart to tell you which is the right choice. We laugh at the plot events and weep during intervals, harnessed between the cut and the connected, but our tongues remain glib, though!"

Yahiya's 'living' room is his chosen grave. Atrophy is in the air; the all-time minimal set is Yahiya's junk yard, a living room scarcely furnished with a dilapidated sofa and two chairs. The walls are covered in torn, faded paper. The neglected TV set which is placed on heaped large volumes of books turns its back to the audience. The wall clock is broken. The entire space is messy and littered with pages torn from old newspapers and magazines. The living room leads to a bedroom and another room which Yahiya uses, symbolically, to store outdated newspapers, his books and academic research works. The backdrop is a balcony overlooking al Tahrir Square, whose giant glass doors, though luminous, are kept closed throughout the performance. Beyond the square there is the Nile, a rare view for Cairenes; yet, no single character bothers to open the balcony door to enjoy the view.

The scenes depict the odd couple arguing, exhuming their personal and public political history! Their arguments are interrupted by a *mélange* of onstage and offstage characters; and a post-absurd shrouded dead body that walks freely around Yahiya's apartment and chooses his fridge as its from-time-to-time resting place! Yahiya does not recall when or how the body became his flatmate. He is undisturbed by its Walking Dead business. "It keeps me company and amuses me!" He tells Taher.

Using images as well as live action, el Sayed interpolates two levels of onstage visual reality. The past fits smoothly within the jigsaw of the present. Yahiya's deceased wife, father and estranged (potentially dead) son are presences of the past resurrected into projected interactive displays. Taher's westernized daughter is a mere audio presence demonstrated in a cell phone voice message. Temporal breaks melt as the action flows gracefully, though painfully, exploring the odd couple's no man's land. El Sayed manages, subtly, to merge absences with presences and silences with language. He also softens the wailing tendencies of the original text. The allegorical dialogue continues, though, to demonstrate the personal impasse for which el Ramly and el Sayed use the 2011 Egyptian edition of the Arab Spring as a catalyst.

The performance alludes to famous stage couples whose separateness is transformed through drama into affinity. A diehard thespian audience would naturally feel the intertextual shadowy presence of scenes from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* and *Comedies of Menace*, and even the elderly Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*, and Eugène Ionesco's *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*. On top of all, el Halafawy and el Gendy maintain a tension-relieving performance line where they are sometimes reminiscent of Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau's grumpy old men comedy, yet in a political garb.

The memory of the old protagonists is unreliable. Both el Ramly and el Sayed flirt with quadruple gender politics to refresh their memories. Two female characters spice up the dramatic struggle and add to its histrionics, one representing the past, the other the future: Horreya (freedom) and Sharbat (sherbet). The dynamics of the scenes are heightened with the possible division into variants of a light comedy *ménage à trois*. The two males fight over the authentication of memory as well as Horreya's heart and/or Sharbat's.

Horreya is the odd couple's teenage sweetheart. Salwa Othman's strong physical presence and change of heart and soul authenticate possible changes in an Egyptian female. The odd couple, though failing in memory, represents the patriarchal society which denies her a solid identity. They cannot determine whether her name is Horreya (freedom), Horeya (nymph), or Harbeya (military). Taher gambles with a marriage by painting a portrait of his alleged teenage sweetheart, dreaming of their possible reunion. Yahiya reminisces about the poetry of the past he wrote for her.

Both men are embittered by her transformation and the realization of the truth. The two septuagenarians were delusional teenagers. Flaunting her overweight old body in a flamboyant caftan summarizes her changeable allegiance to authority, be it religious extremism, nouveau riche economics, or the body politic! Taher's portrait, originally Nagi Kamel's, is a strikingly different icon. The portrait's wide-eyed, clad-in-white female with hair adorned with flowers, is the total opposite of the seductive, flirtatious cougar! Horreya is an eye opener to the artist and the poet, both saddened and embittered by the revelation that her elevated status as their muse was based on teenage niche obsession.

Sharbat, Iman Imam, is the sweet innocent part-time prostitute from the square who is adopted by Yahiya to recompense for his past political passivity. Though their relationship is purely platonic, Taher relishes assuming that Yahiya is her sugar daddy. The development of the scene shows Sharbat as a bed-wetter, and an object of harassment in the square. In a nightmarish episode, hands come out from the book shelves behind her, attempting to grope her body, reviving memories of Tahrir harassment! She is not an object of desire; her hair is styled in double buns, the curves of her female body are grotesquely covered in clownish outfits with her pajama shirt tucked in her pants. Her smooth transformation from an adolescent into an activist, and a square revolutionary revives Yahiya's old soul and inspires him to join the youths in al Tahrir.

As the play draws towards a closure, the audience's awareness of an accumulative superimposition, where history and geography intersect, culminates. The audience is transposed from al Azbakeyya gardens to Tahrir square and from 1801 to 2018 to 2011. The play creates an atmosphere of sad serenity involving issues of aging, belated coming of age, swan song slapsticks of the invigorated sulky septuagenarians, as well as hints of Edward Said's notion of late style dawning on el Ramly.

El Ramly's finale depicts both protagonists crouched breathless on either sides of the stage emotionally

exhausted and disappointed, while the finale is highlighted by playing Egypt's 1923 national anthem "Egypt, be thou secure" (Eslami ya Misr). El Ramly does not choose another anthem that could be disfigured by a political, tense argumentation, in its futile reference to Ismaeel Pasha, Gamal Abdul Nasser, or Anwar al Sadat. He chooses one which reminds the audience of the age of innocence in politics, and patriotism.

The stage is a closed space, a cell imprisoning the actors whose exits are short terms of escapades under surveillance. Using no agit-prop shenanigans, el Sayed sets his characters free as he strengthens the finale, placing shadows of moving bodies miming familiar demonstration gestures. The crowd is seen en masse from behind the backdrop. Yahiya, Sharbat and her revolutionary male friend are seen behind transparent panels in the square. The balcony sliding doors open up gradually as the young demonstrators proceed to fill in the acting space formerly known as Yahiya's living room. Their choreography becomes more intense as the song gets louder. They proceed down stage with their gradually strong silent mimics. The rebellious youth from the square fill in the stage; Yahiya and Taher are no longer noticeable. The visual prophecy tells it all.

Karma M. Sami Farid is an Egyptian short story writer, dramatist, critic, translator and academic. She is Professor of English Literature in the Faculty of al Alsun (Languages) at Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt where she chaired the Department of English from 2006 to 2009 and served as Vice Dean for Graduate Studies and Research from 2008 to 2015. In 2000 she was awarded the Abdul Hameed Shoman Award for Young Arab Researchers (Humanities field). She published in 2019 her latest collection of short stories: *The Right to Eat Dirt*.



Arab Stages

Volume 11 (Fall 2019)

©2019 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Founders: Marvin Carlson and Frank Hentschker

Editor-in-Chief: Marvin Carlson

Editorial and Advisory Board: Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Dina Amin, Khalid Amine, Hazem Azmy, Dalia Basiouny, Katherine Donovan, Masud Hamdan, Sameh Hanna, Rolf C. Hemke, Katherine Hennessey, Areeg Ibrahim, Jamil Khoury, Dominika Laster, Margaret Litvin, Rebekah Maggor, Safi Mahfouz, Robert Myers, Michael Malek Naijar, Hala Nassar, George Potter, Juan Recondo, Nada Saab, Asaad Al-Saleh, Torange Yeghiazarian, Edward Ziter.

Managing Editors: Jacquelyn Marie Shannon and Adam Ashraf El-Sayigh

Table of Contents:

1. [In Memoriam: Sami Abdul-Hamid](#)
2. [Humanism through performative arts: A comparative study of *My Papers Weren't Done?* and *Zapi Rouge* by Daniela Potenza](#)
3. [*We Live in Cairo* by Margaret Litvin](#)
4. [*Laugh Till/When You Die: The Throes of Tahrir Square* by Karma Sami](#)
5. [*Oslo* vs. The Accords: Examining the Global Consequences of Fractional Truths on Stage by Marina J. Bergenstock](#)
6. [Yussef El Guindi's *Hostages*: Thirty Years Later and Still Frighteningly Relevant by Michael Malek Najjar](#)
7. [From Dystopia to Utopia: Finding Hope in *Now You Have A Trial* by BGST by Eylem Ejder](#)
8. [We are talking about Contemporary Theatre and Politics in Turkey by Handan Salta and Eylem Ejder](#)
9. [Arab World Contributions to the Avignon Festival, 2019 by Marvin Carlson](#)
10. [Middle Eastern Representation at the Brussel's Kunstenfestivaldesarts \(2019\) by Manuel García Martínez](#)
11. [Events from the Arab/Islamic World at the 2019 PRELUDE Festival, New York by Jacquelyn Marie Shannon and Dohyun Gracia Shin](#)
12. [*Al-Marakbi* and Ceaseless Visibility: The Creation of "Docile Bodies" and a "Disciplinary Society" by Dina Amin](#)
13. [Review of *Modern and Contemporary Political Theater from the Levant: A Critical Anthology* by Ibrahim Areeg](#)
14. [*The Boatman: A Play* by Sameh Mahran | Translated by Dina Amin](#)

www.arabstages.org

arabstages@gc.cuny.edu

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center
Frank Hentschker, Executive Director
Marvin Carlson, Director of Publications
Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director

Arab Stages is a publication of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center ©2019
ISSN 2376-1148