

## *We Live in Cairo*



The set of The Lazour Brothers' *We Live in Cairo*. Courtesy: American Repertory Theater.

“Write what you know,” two generations of American writing students have been schooled. On some campuses the stakes have risen further: “How dare you write what you don’t know?” Regarding the Arab world, because its people have suffered such terrible real-world consequences of outsiders’ fantasies, decent people’s hesitation is palpable: only those with a PhD or fluency in Arabic or a personal background in the region (or preferably all three) dare say anything at all about an Arab society without fearing dismissal as dilettante Orientalists, cultural appropriators, or neo-colonial oppressors.

*We Live in Cairo*, a new musical premiered at American Repertory Theatre this season, provides a smart rejoinder. This unlikely musical, written by two American brothers with no pre-2011 experience of Egypt, dramatizes Egypt’s “Arab Spring” uprising from its prehistory in the organizing of the early 2000s, through the 18 days of protest in 2011 that led to President Hosni Mubarak’s ouster and the rollercoaster year that followed, ending with the popularly backed military coup of June-July 2013 and dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s bloody August 2013 crackdown at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. Creators Daniel and Patrick Lazour, Bostonians of Lebanese background, wrote the play with the help of a Richard Rodgers Award for Musical Theatre, a reading at the New York Theatre Workshop, and a residency at the American University in Cairo (AUC). The show knows its limits, taking most of its viewpoint characters from the bilingual and privileged milieu of AUC artist-activists. Yet, in the hands of Egyptian-American director Taibi Magar and international choreographer Samar Haddad King, it evokes the emotional arc of that milieu with astonishing authenticity. In the [words of Harvard-based Egyptian political scientist Tarek Masoud](#), who advised the production, *We Live in Cairo* “comes to remind us that ... what happened during those eighteen days in Egypt was real.”

[Inspired](#) by media reports [like this one on Cairo’s “Facebook Flat,”](#) *Cairo* conveys the inherent drama of Egypt’s 2011 uprising, [consumed as spectacle](#) not only in the West but also by its participants. The show shares its two-act structure with another unexpected recent musical hit, *Hamilton*. Perhaps this is the dramatic shape of all revolutions: act 1 ends with a euphoric victory—you come out at intermission wanting to join a dance party—but in act 2 the politics get messy and the revolutionaries’ friendships fray. Yet unlike *Hamilton*, *Cairo* showcases no charismatic titular genius. Instead it enlists a cast of six leads and just two other actors in a true ensemble performance. Starting with a moment of coached audience participation even before the lights go down, the audience is led to cheer for this carefully arranged sample of young Muslim and Christian creatives: Karim the graffiti artist, Fadwa the activist, Layla the photographer, Amir the musician, his brother Hany the budding lawyer, and the non-elite character Hassan, an aspiring street artist from a lower-class family loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood. (Hassan’s background as a Cairo doorman’s son recalls, perhaps intentionally, the character of Taha el-Shazly in Alaa al-Aswany’s novel *The Yacoubian Building*; the novel’s gay subplot finds echoes here as well. Yet Hassan gets a more imaginative story arc, straining to rise above Egypt’s sectarianization rather than collapsing like Taha into violent fundamentalism.) Each of the six dances subtly in character. Each has a personal reason to want Mubarak gone.



Figure 1 Projection Design in *The Lazour Brother's We Live in Cairo*. Courtesy: American Repertory Theater.

Anyone who followed events in Cairo in 2011-2013 will recognize these six revolutionary types and mourn their fates after Muslim Brotherhood-nominated President Mohamed Morsi is elected in June 2012, then violently deposed a year later. Karim and Hassan, who grew close during the 18 Days, are soon divided by their class differences and social allegiances; their closeted romance is doomed. The happy-go-lucky songwriter Amir, who despite his Coptic Christian background has built a deep relationship with the Muslim photographer Layla, goes with Hassan to Rabaa Square and is massacred there alongside hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Amir's brother and songwriting partner Hany, who has left Egypt in disgust, returns after Amir's death and joins a futile protest; we last glimpse him in a prison jumpsuit and handcuffs. Fadwa is arrested and forcibly "disappeared," [as more than 1500 real-life protesters have been](#), by the military regime whose 2013 takeover she supported. Only Layla is left to mourn Amir and all the lost utopian possibilities of the revolution. "What if I wanted you for longer?" she sings, in a wrenching reprise of their gorgeous earlier love duet.

Conscious of the political perils of attempting to speak for Arabs, the ART production urged its good intentions at every turn. The pre-show emergency exit announcement was broadcast in Arabic as well as English just to get the sound of Arabic in the theatre (the performance, in English without surtitles, was unlikely to draw a non-Anglophone audience). The actors' bios highlighted any Middle Eastern heritage with notes such as "proud Anglo-Egyptian," "proud Palestinian activist," or "proud daughter of immigrants. Aiwal!" But despite its insecurities, *We Live in Cairo* managed to engage meaningfully with Egyptian writers and artists. The musical aesthetic drew on Egyptian revolutionary singer/songwriter [Ramy Essam](#); when the onstage band's guitar-heavy orchestration brought in an *oud* (lute), it functioned not as an Orientalist flourish but as a musical callback to a more traditional generation – for instance, accompanying Hassan's quotation of his father. Readable Arabic graffiti festooned the set. The projection quoted activists' real writings in Arabic and English from the time. The excellent poster and lobby art was by Egyptian artist and designer [Ganzeer](#) (Mohamed Fahmy), whose [mural of a bread-delivery cyclist](#)

[facing down an army tank](#) was one of Cairo's iconic works of 2011. (Ganzeer also helped design the official freedom-themed [merch](#) sold in the lobby, attractive if a bit incongruous for those who saw the show just after former President Morsi had collapsed and died in a Cairo courtroom.)



The six lead cast members of The Lazour Brother's *We Live in Cairo*. Courtesy: American Repertory Theater.

The performances were stellar; especially noteworthy were Dana Saleh Omar, who brought brilliant energy and irony to the role of Fadwa, and Jakeim Hart as the songwriting idealist Amir. In a cast that included non-heritage speakers, the pronunciation of the Arabic words that peppered the show was convincing. This had perhaps required some layers of speech coaching; for instance, one song's lyrics had "sheikh" as a rhyme for "take a break," as American pronunciation would allow, but the singers pronounced the word correctly in Arabic, not rhyming. Yet the most affecting lines were not those with Arabic or Middle Eastern touches, but things any US audience member might have uttered. When the Internet was shut off in mid-demonstration in January 2011, the activists' cry of "What the fuck!" rang just right. (With projections of Facebook and Twitter telegraphing those platforms' role in the Tahrir Square events, act 1 looked like a now oddly anachronistic love song to social media.) The dialogue was witty, sharp, and occasionally sarcastic. The musical numbers may not yet be catchy enough for Broadway, but sold-out audiences and standing ovations in Cambridge bode well for the show's next run.

Like the activists it depicts, *We Live in Cairo* is in some ways naïve. The uprising did not, as the play's

climactic song claims, begin with “one person who had an idea.” Nor did it boil up mostly or only in Egypt’s capital, or among that city’s polyglot elite. Such a perspective misses what most western and Arab media missed at the time: the depth of Egyptians’ support and trust for the military, the extent to which the uprising rejected Mubarak’s neoliberal economic policy and not his autocracy *per se*. The show marginalizes Muslim Brotherhood supporters, represented only by Hassan’s offstage relatives, as sinister or pitiable; the sole Rabaa casualty we are made to care about is the Christian. (Yet the Brotherhood and even more strict Islamist parties together [took 71% of lower house seats in Egypt’s 2011-12 parliamentary elections](#).) But then, we find the same perspective – and an even less forgiving structure, with the lone Brotherhood protagonist sidelined after the revolution – in works made by Egyptians, such as Jehane Noujaim’s 2013 documentary *The Square*. Post-2011 Egyptian theatre-makers, too, have struggled to represent characters outside their political bubble. *We Live in Cairo* performs different work, bringing the somewhat embubbled community around ART into direct eye contact with its Egyptian peers and counterparts; this it does very well. It cannot transcend the social gulf that bedevils Egypt and many other societies, but it does a fine job of sketching its contours.

Vivid and credible, the Lazour brothers’ success demonstrates a fact somewhat distrusted today: listening works. Good reporting by both international correspondents and local bloggers can actually inform as well as flatter. With enough humility and research, even quite foreign structures of culture, history, and politics can be absorbed and represented sympathetically, without parody. Outsiders can learn, and they can even come to “own” the stories of others’ struggles enough to give them voice. If their perspective is broken and partial, if they cannot grasp the whole reality of what happened in Egypt’s turbulent past decade, in this they are no worse than anyone living it. When *We Live in Cairo*’s audience emerged into the Harvard Square night confused and heartbroken about Egypt’s strangled-in-the-crib revolution (and perhaps about our own country’s trajectory too), we shared the bewilderment of the characters themselves.

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