

## In Memoriam: Lenin El Ramly (1945-2020)



By Girgis Shoukry

Translated by Dalia Basiouny

Lenin El Ramly did not engage with the theatre community's debates about forms of stage writing, origins of Egyptian theatre, theories, festivals, or even awards. Instead he focused his writing on the Egyptian character, its features and characteristics, and on ways to portray this character on stage through comedy and satire. In his fifty-five plays, eleven films, and five television series, in addition to a large number of radio dramas, El Ramly wrote over half a century about Egypt and described life there in his particular comedic style. His deep understanding of theatre made him choose a style that suited the spirit of Egyptians, who truly appreciate humor even in their darkest times, resisting tyrants through irony and satire.

El Ramly realized that theatre opposes power, both religious power and government power, hence it should not be politicized on behalf of an institution or a government. He also believed that people created their own dramatic arts throughout history away from those in power and outside the religious frameworks, so he decided early on to free himself from the official channels.

Looking at El Ramly's life and work suggests that this writer should have lived in the second decade of the twentieth century with the pioneers of theatre, who wrote texts for the theatre companies they worked for. They wrote directly for performances, creating pieces to be mounted on stage, not to be read. All of Lenin's life and works asserts that he is a theatre maker, not only a literary writer. He did not just write for the stage, he wrote on the stage.

El Ramly did not concern himself with heritage, in either form or content; he cared even less about ideology or discussions about the problems facing theatre. His only concern was the theatre game on stage. His choice of comedy and private theatre at the beginning of his career is significant, though these choices changed in a later stage in his life. As he writes in his notes about Egyptian theatre:

“Theatre started in ancient Egypt in the form of religious tragedies presented by those in power during pharaonic times. But People created their own dramatic art away from the authorities and outside the religious frameworks and most likely away from its watching eye. Now we see that the authority and bureaucratic administrations are not enthusiastic about theatre. And if they ever are, they present serious works with clear directed objectives, while the semi-official religious view almost forbids theatre and arts in general, meanwhile people present their own simple popular theatre after developing it a little bit.”

El-Ramly continued to be true to people's theatre in all his works, staying close to the popular spirit, while supporting it with a close study of world theatre forms. In a short time, he managed to achieve both a strong connection with the audience as well as the appreciation of the critics. He started writing at the beginning of the 1970s, which was a critical time in the history of Egyptian theatre, as well as the history of Egypt. The late twentieth century was time of confusion for theatre, and for the whole society as a result of the defeat of Egyptian army by Israeli forces in 1967.

After the flourishing of Egyptian theatre in the 1960s, some major writers and critics withdrew from the scene in objection to the deteriorating situation and the trampling of the 1960s traditions under the feet of the generals of the commercial theatre. The 1970s private sector presented shows to meet the needs of the new classes which quickly rose in society under the open door policy and free markets. This commercial form of culture production tried to numb audiences and create a fake consciousness.

El-Ramly's first play *The Word is Now for the Defense* was completed in 1973, following a number of incomplete plays, that he would finish later. The theatre scene pushed the new playwright to work in the commercial sector away from the tight grip of the government controlling theatre makers and oppressing them in severe ways.

I believe that El-Ramly did not adopt president Nasser's views, or accept the popular rhetoric touting his major political or cultural achievements. The playwright presented his perspective on this era in a later play *Sadoun El Magnoun (Sadoun The Madman)*. He also moved away from the theatre communities' arguments over discovering true Egyptian or Arab theatre forms. This discussion dominated the cultural conversations in the 1960s, and led to explorations of new theatre forms by Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Youssef Idris and Mahmoud Diab. El-Ramly did not partake in the popular opinions or the major political issues either. His main concern was the human being. Later in life, though, he engaged with the political conversation indirectly, in the satirical style he had developed.

El-Ramly dedicated himself to theatre making and performance; he only published two of his plays before performance. The rest of his large body of work was always tried on stage and completed in performances first before being made available in print. He wrote dialogue and imagined characters for the theatre, to move and fill the stage in front of an audience, away from decorative language or literary achievement. He did not try to promote a belief, an ideology or a political issue; his main priority was the

art of theatre. He was concerned with discovering new theatre talents and establishing theatre companies, one in 1980, the second in 2000, with an eye on box office success. He changed the notion of commercial theatre, which was a synonym for cheap slapstick comedy, to a theatre that tackled the concerns of the current moment, being human and raising existential questions, through comedy. He chose the commercial theatre to present entertainment and thought-provoking topics, focusing on social humanitarian content while offering a satirical critique of society, in comedies that have deep philosophical understanding of issues of people and society in his late works, often mixing realism and fantasy.

His theatre journey can be divided into four stages, although some of them overlap: the commercial theatre, Studio 80, government theatre, and independent theatre.

His first stage in the commercial theatre lasted from 1974 till 1980, when he presented *They Kill Donkeys*, *The Lesson is Over..Stupid*, *Aly Beh Mazhar*, *Mabrouk*, *Try to Understand Zaki*, *The Week Point*, and *Lock Up Your Daughters*. Most them are social comedies that satirize society or the lead characters who possess odd characteristics.

The second phase from 1980 till 1991 was a collaboration between El-Ramly and Mohamed Sobhy, his colleague from the Theatre Institute. They established "Studio 80," and presented six plays written by El-Ramly, and starring and directed by Sobhy: *The Shaken*, *You are Free*, *The Barbarian*, *A Point of View*, and *In Plain Arabic*. This rich phase offered a successful alternative of a theatre that is independent from the government, while not replicating the commercial formula. It was a unique mix that succeeded in offering a balance between entertainment and deep meaning. This successful experiment changed the notion of commercial theatre which previously had relied solely on cheap laughter. In it, the young playwright became more daring in his social critique, offering more complex characters, while discussing existential questions on stage.

The third stage started in 1988, when the government-run Comedy Theatre in Cairo produced *A Jinni for Every Citizen*, directed by Mohamed Abu Daoud, where El-Ramly discussed the phenomenon of "el Zar" exorcism rituals and the idea of having a non-physical twin living underground. This play, which he started writing in the 1970s, attributes the wide spread of metaphysical ideas and charlatan practices to the difficult conditions and intense pressures that people have to endure; their only escape becomes magic and the metaphysical.

His following play was a big success that is still echoing till today. *Welcome Bakawat* was presented on the National Theatre in 1989, gaining the highest box office revenues in the history of the National theatre since the 1930s. Here the playwright dropped the commercial formula altogether, taking his two lead characters two hundred years back in time, dropping them in the Mamluk era. He launched an attack on the past, and many of the sacred beliefs, highlighting the intense levels of ignorance, backwardness, extreme misogyny, hatred for science and knowledge, and preference of metaphysics and charlatan practices. This play managed to have a serious message within a comedic framework, questioning reality in a fantasy setup, making it a success with all levels of audiences.

The fourth stage started in 2004 when he chose to write and direct for amateur actors in one of his most interesting theatrical experiments. Forsaking the limelight of commercial theatre and the support of government theatre, El-Ramly chose to work with a small budget and unknown actors creating a truly

independent experience. The playwright became a theatre maker, writing, directing and producing, and sometimes creating sets.

He directed earlier when he presented *In Plain Arabic* for the second time in 1998. In 2004 he adopted Aristophanes' *A Parliament of Women*, titled it *Women's Peace*, and presented it at Cairo Opera house. Then director Essam el Sayed presented his play *Life Spring* at Hanager Theatre. While dedicating time for his new company he wrote two more plays for El Sayed to direct: *Zaki in the Ministry* 2008, and *A Ghost in Our House* 2012.

For his new company he wrote and directed *Remove the Masks*, *The Hostages*, *The Lecture*, *Forbidden Dreams*, *Hasawy and his Days*, *The Upstairs Room*, *The Illusion of Love*, *Let's Make a Movie*, and *The Perfect Crime*. Watching his smaller performances I wondered why an established playwright would leave the limelight of large theatres and the possibilities of grand productions, and chose limited spaces and poor budgets. I believe he made a conscious choice to remove himself from the corruption of theatre administrations run by ignorant employees, who control the production of the theatre based on their whims. A world class theatre maker at the height of his career presented his new work in odd non-theatrical spaces; such as the garden of Mokhtar Museum, or the Gezeera Art Center, or the roof of the Cinema Culture center in poor productions. He created unique theatre experiences, freeing himself to experiment in form and content away from the formulas, creating a truly independent theatre.

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