

FINAL SCRIPT: “The Musical Magic and Legacy Egypt Lost in 1971”

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21 May 2021

LEAD IN: It’s been fifty years since the 1971 burning of the old Cairo Opera House, which was a source of great national pride. It housed many artistic and creative institutions that contributed greatly to the golden era of Egyptian arts [music and cinema]. This piece is an attempt to add to scholarship on the societal significance of the Opera House, alongside emphasizing how its burning impacted the society.

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MUSIC: *Intro to “Layali El Ons Fi Vienna” by Asmahan*

Growing up, I’ve heard countless stories from my mom and grandparents about the national pride derived from Egypt’s golden era of cinema and music, particularly from my mom who is a freelance film and video producer. They would tell me all about well-loved figures such as singers Abdel Halim Hafez, Asmahan, and Umm Kulthum, as well as about cinematic legends such as Faten Hamama and Omar Sharif.

A source of national pride that no longer exists is the Khedivial Royal Opera House, also known as the old Cairo Opera House.

MUSIC: *“Triumphal March” from Aida by Giuseppe Verdi, performed by United States Marine Corps (Wikimedia Commons)*

Inaugurated in 1869 to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal under the reign of Khedive Ismail, the Opera House would bring Egyptians great joy with performances by the Italian opera

and Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. One Egyptian who's in his 80s now, but fondly remembers this time is retired doctor, musician, and composer Tarek Ali Hassan.

*Tarek Ali Hassan (TAH): It was a lovely, lovely, lovely opera house with lovely acoustics. (00:07)*

MUSIC: *Relaxing music by TheoTeravainen (Free Sound)*

In the Opera House's early days in the 1870s, the Arabic-language Egyptian journal *Wadi El Nil* sought to make the concept of an opera theater more accessible to an Arabic-speaking audience through writing reviews of the performances held there and translating the text, otherwise known as the "libretti".

*(TAH): It was very loved between the, uh, in the higher echelons of society who could pay the tickets and also pay for the clothes necessary to go to the opera. (00:12)*

MUSIC: *Relaxing music by TheoTeravainen (Free Sound)*

The 1930s to 1970s was the peak of Egyptian cultural production, and at the forefront with music and cinematic legends was the Opera House. But that hadn't always been the case.

MUSIC: *"Brooke's Triumphal March" by United States Marine Band (YouTube Audio Library)*

Khedive Ismail had wanted to turn Cairo – at least downtown Cairo – into a "Paris on the Nile" and invested hugely in projects to do so, such as redesigning the area to look more European with lush gardens and ornate buildings.

This eventually led to a major debt issue. The dire situation contributed to Ismail's decision to cease his funding of the Opera House in 1877, which resulted in its closure except for special occasions until the start of the 20th century.

Following the 1952 Egyptian Revolution that overthrew the monarchy and yielded full independence from the British, the Opera House became a hub of artistic creativity, with the

founding of institutions such as the Cairo Symphony Orchestra and the Cairo Opera Ballet Company.

*NAT sound: Crackling fire from stove*

*NAT sound: Ambulance siren (fire engine sound)*

This creative and artistic legacy was tragically destroyed on October 28, 1971 when the Opera House went up in flames due to an electrical mishap.

My mother, Maha Hussein, remembers that tragic day.

*(MH): Of course, people were crying. My own uncle, who was a playwright, came home sobbing... came over to our house, sobbing that night. Youssef Bey Wahbi, who was like one of the greatest theater actors of the era, was seen sitting on the sidewalk and crying his eyes out. It was just- it was a terrible scene. A lot of these artists really wanted to run into the place and try and save whatever they could save, but were held back because the place was burning down and it was going to come down. Everybody knew. It was just absolutely unsavable. (00:36)*

*MUSIC: Relaxing music by TheoTeravainen (Free Sound)*

But why did it mean so much? How did its burning impact the overall society?

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Designed by Italian architect Pietro Avoscani, the Opera House truly was a sight to behold. Fittingly located on Opera Square, which is around a ten minute drive from Tahrir Square, the 800-850 seat house was primarily made of ornate gold woodwork that would later be completely consumed by the flames. Other than two statues, very little physically remains from the once spectacular opera house, fondly remembered by Maha Hussein who attended matinee puppet shows there as a child.

*(MH): The audience was all very elegant, very elegantly dressed, very well-behaved. We knew when to clap. We were kind of prompted by the- by our elders, but it was all very... I mean, there was a lot of finesse [...] The- It was almost like anything you would see in Europe. (00:18)*

It took until 1988 for another Opera House to be constructed. Tarek Ali Hassan, whom I spoke to earlier, was actually the first head of the new Opera House, also known as the National Cultural Center, which is now located in Zamalek.

*(TAH): It's a completely different affair because it's a modern building. It's good and well-designed And very equipped with modern equipment, but the old Opera House had its- was built essentially of wood, and it had the magic of the old Opera houses. (00:20)*

*MUSIC: Relaxing music by TheoTeravainen (Free Sound)*

Though it's been fifty years since the burning of the old Cairo Opera House, the abundance of fond, nostalgic stories are a testament to its societal impact and artistic legacy, one that will continue so long as memories and stories are documented and passed down through generations.

This audio feature was produced by Maya Abouelnasr for the Audio Production course at The American University in Cairo, taught by Professor Kim Fox in the Spring semester of two-thousand-twenty-one. Special thanks to Dr. Tarek Ali Hassan and Maha Hussein for sharing their memories and insights. Also, credit for the music goes to YouTube Audio Library, Free Sound, and Wikimedia Commons, as well as Maha Hussein's CD collection of old Egyptian music. All NAT sounds were created by me, Maya Abouelnasr.