

SCRIPT: "WOMEN AND THEATRE IN EGYPT: TWO FACES OF A COIN"

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This documentary tackles the situation of Egyptians women artists who are struggling to work in theatre nowadays and how their impact was there ever since the 20s even if it has become forgotten.

MUSIC: FADE IN – Track 1: (0:00 – 0:41 sec.):

Women and Theatre in Egypt have become a mirror to one another. Both struggling against their decline, and demonstrating for their existence, **to mark a place** for themselves in the field.

Through the journey of the first Egyptian woman to direct for the stage **Fatma Roushdy** back then in the 20s, up until Laila Soliman's performances of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, comes the journey of theatre and Egyptian women theatre artists searching for their voice and mission through the years.

LAILA SOLIMAN (LS): "If you look at the research from 1914-1920, it was women who were the pioneers were the producers and they had the say over the whole business. So the idea of the woman as an entrepreneur and the main figure, was quite intense at that period." (0:22)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 1 – (0:41 sec)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 2 – (0:42 sec)

That was Laila Soliman, a **well-known** woman director in Egypt who studied theatre at the American University in Cairo in 2004.

LS: "The 20s for me are very tricky because we don't have print materials of the 20s. there was definitely at that point it was not about the state policy but live entertainment was the only form of entertainment really available to large numbers. So there was a huge need and a huge commercial market in the sense of a commercial market. And also of course other than the commercial market it was still part of the state and the building of its image, to produce theatre or at least to import theater know-how and occasionally productions. "(0:42)

But this huge commercial market for theatre changed the path for women artists and made the attention more on men in that period. **Mahmoud El Lozy** who is an actor, stage director and professor of drama at AUC continues to explain the path of theatre and the change after the first attempts of the 20s.

MAHMOUD EL LOZY (ML): "There was a very active theatrical movement in the 50s and 60s. it was a period in which saw actually the blooming of the Egyptian playwright. I mean I am talking people like Noaman Ashour, Alfred Farag, Naguib Serour, Michael Roman, then later Mahmoud Diab and so on; and Tawfik El Hakim of course. So it was a period in which the playwriting was

blooming and together with that there was also very deep con on the part of the state at the time to educate young people.” (0:41)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 2 – (2:44 sec)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 3&4 –(2:44 sec)

With mostly men making an impact in theatre, some wonder about how women contributed.

DALIA BASSIOUNY (DB): “We have very few women writer. I think there is something about the sacred text that scares us. I worked in the theatre for 20 years before I wrote something, because it was like writing, I mean the writer.” (0:14)

That was Dalia Basiouny, a former AUC professor, a stage director, and performer who shared her opinion about the golden age of theatre and women.

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 3 – (3:14 sec)

DB: “The 60s did not witness a lot of women writers or directors; usually there is one attempt or one credit to it. Then things happen, I think life happens, they get married or raise children or feel a lot of difficulties, so they don’t continue which is quite frustrating. So its not till the late 80s and the early 90s that we see a number of women that we can say there is enough women or like enough presence of women directors.” (0:29)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 3 – (3:31 sec)

But after a rise in the 60s theatre fell drastically. This was claimed to be the fault of the government and the alliance between the Sadat regime and the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia that discouraged arts and progress.

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 3 – (3:54 sec)

ML: “What happened was that little by little a dismantling of the state in Egypt. A softening of the state and instead of having a strong state, you had individuals who are very rich in a country that had no laws. And then what happened is that you saw the rise or at least the proliferation of the private theatre, which is basically the theatre of the petrodollar that came after the 74 war.” (0:30)

This brought theatre in a dark place, leaving it non-existent in terms of space in the 70s and early 80s.

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 3 – (4:26 sec)

ML: “There is no theatre really to speak of. The state theatre is dead and buried. You know the National Theatre was burned and then they spent a fortune, supposedly renovating it, it turned out to be a botch job of course. So you have no theatres, actual theatres. If you look at the physical space, you have disasters with the exception maybe of the Opera House and the Gomhureya Theatre but those also will fall apart soon enough.” (0:26)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 3 – (5:00 sec)

Is it a question of the decline of the Egyptian Theatre only or did the interference of technology and Television affect the whole industry?

DB: "I don't think its an Egyptian phenomenon as such I think it's a worldwide struggle for theatre. Theatre almost everywhere is struggling. In general theatre is receding. Its still amazing to have life performance but it will really not be able to compete with the convenience of television. You have so much, why would you leave your house? And within the current circumstances in Egypt, it's really really a challenge." (0:41)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 3 – (5:38 sec)

Women theatre artists were struggling more than ever to create a revival. But the two major challenges for the twentieth century women, working in theatre remained the constraints of patriarchal society and financing their theatre work.

DB: "It's the societal limitation, I don't think the theatre itself like the spaces or the work environment, its going home late at night, rehearsing in strange places and in odd times. Like a combined kind of patriarchal society, but also a patriarchal society in the theatre world." (0:20)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 3 – (6:12 sec)

The circumstances did not demotivate them. Women artists started an independent movement that happened to revive theatre again.

DB: "The experimental theatre festival, it was its third year, was cancelled. So there were a lot of us and a lot of plays. We were not performing in the festival but it was just the fringe or the excuse. And we realized that we have a lot of plays. We don't need a festival to show the plays. We could just do our work. All what we needed were spaces to show them." (0:18)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 4 – (6:48 sec)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 1 – (6:48 sec)

CROSSFADE NAT SOUND REVOLUTION – (6:51 sec)

The 2011 revolution was another landmark in Egyptian Theatre. That created a safe space for expression, allowing for more artistic expression and creativity than the country had ever witnessed before.

NAT SOUND REVOLUTION FADE OUT – (7:06 sec)

DB: "Something cracked in the Egyptian society in a good way and an explosion of self expression I think happened. Of all the graffiti, people finding their voice, all these songs. It was this euphoria for quite an amount of time. Even when there was violence, how we overcame that or survived that, it was a astatic moment of people finding their voice."(0:29)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 1 – (7:21 sec)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 5 – (7:08 sec)

After the rise of the revolution, a few women artists started carving names for themselves in the independent theatre world such as Abeer Ali, Efat Yehia and Nora Amin, who competed with male directors for the limited funding and performance spaces available in Cairo.

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 5 – (7:48 sec)

MUSIC: FADE IN Track 1 – (7:48 sec)

DB: “There are a lot of young women who enter into the movement but not many of them continue. But right now its quite different from 20 years ago when I started doing theatre. Like there are a lot more young women who are defined. It’s post revolution in Egypt, so there is a bigger margin for negotiation; many women are rebelling against the stereotypes.” (0:37)

But even after the awakening of the revolution, theatre and women directors remain in danger **of decline**.

ML: “If you want to revive theatre in Egypt then you would have to revive the Egyptian, you have to make him human again. I don’t know if you can do that or how you could go on doing that, but as far as I am concerned you know; you are as your theatre and your theatre is as you are.” (0:18)

CROSSFADE NAT SOUND REHEARSALS – (8:47 sec)

AUC professors try to contribute to theatre by preparing a new generation to enter the field confidently.

NAT SOUND REHEARSALS FADE OUT– (9:02 sec)

ML: “We train and teach people and we hope that we are producing at least people who are educated in theatre whether its in acting or directing or playwriting or design.” (0:14)

And if we fast forward time a bit... maybe 2030. Will there still be theatre and woman theatre artists?

DB: “So many people woke up and its really hard for all these people to go back to sleep. We are in a very dark patch, as in history and geography are grinding us, sometimes what happens when coal is grounded that you get a diamond. When? How long would it take? I don’t know but that process the turning process is whats gonna create the future. I hope in our life times.” (0:24)

MUSIC: FADE OUT Track 1 – (9:55 sec)

This documentary was produced by Amira Sherif for the audio production course at the American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in spring 2015. Special thanks to Mahmoud El Lozy, Dalia Bassiouny and Laila Soliman for their interviews. Music composed by Ahmed Salah, Bassem El Kahky and NAT sounds were gathered by me and Jehad Ragab.