

Maya Abouelnasr

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Interviewee: Maha Hussein

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**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:01] Thank you for agreeing to do this with me. So first, I have a couple of sample survey questions, so if you could please introduce yourself and state your age and gender.

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:10] I– My name is Maha Hussein. I'm a 58 year old Egyptian female.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:17] All right... and where in Egypt do you live?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:19] In Cairo.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:20] And how long have you lived in Egypt? Like, have you lived anywhere else or...

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:24] I've been in Egypt since 1982. Before that, I lived in Germany and in Pakistan and the U.S.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:35] All right... and what is your marital status?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:39] I'm divorced.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:40] And do you have children?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:42] Yes. You.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:43] And what is the highest educational degree that you've completed?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:47] Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication from the American University in 1985.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:00:54] All right... and what is your employment status?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:00:59] I'm a freelance film and video producer and English copywriter and copy editor.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:01:06] And how long has this been your employment status?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:01:10] Since 1992. Before that, I worked in advertising for seven years at Publi-Graphics, and after that, I went freelance with production.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:01:23] Of those years, how many were spent in Egypt? Was it all in Egypt or was there any work outside of Egypt as well?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:01:29] I- A lot of the work— most of the work happened here in Egypt, but I did... there were some shoots that took us to the U.S. or to the UK. Nothing in the Middle East... and all the, uh, post-production work that we did, most of it, especially in the 80s and early 90s, happened in in the UK.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:01:50] And what about the copyediting and copywriting?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:01:54] That has all been here in Egypt, except for possibly two jobs that took me to Austria.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:02:00] Okay, and which sectors did you work in?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:02:03] Private. Always.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:02:05] Okay, and on average, how many hours do you work per week? Or did you work per week also... like in the jobs that you're no longer in?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:02:12] Back in advertising, our... it was 14 to 16 hour days in production. You really cannot... I mean, you cannot count the hours or say how many hours per week, because sometimes you worked straight through for-for 70 hours without any sleep... and whatever, however much time you needed for production, you just spent there. And then sometimes you just took a month off after that. Freelance is a completely different world. You cannot determine the amount of hours and such.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:02:46] Ok, and my last question is, which social class group do you most identify with?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:02:52] I would say upper middle class, but since there is no identifiable middle class in Egypt anymore – hasn't been for a long time–, we kind of got bumped up to affluent.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:03:02] All right, and onto the oral history questions... So, how has your education revealed what makes life worth living to you and how has it helped you discover your own convictions?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:03:16] I find it a strange question. Of course, it must have contributed at some level, especially the time I spent in Pakistan where I went to high school, to an American overseas high school, um, because there were a lot of experiences. I mean, we experienced a lot there, especially during the time when we were there in the late seven- mid to late 70s. The turmoil that happened in Pakistan and Afghanistan and in India later on. But I can't– I don't want to attribute anything specific to the education as far as my own experience went. I left Egypt from- I was.. where I went to a German school and changed my education to- I made a switch to the American system and in that, there- that was an experience in itself since I didn't speak much English at the time. Has it changed- Has my, ha- have all these years contributed to my life? Of course, they've shaped me into the person that I am. They- I gained a lot of independence, a lot of strength. I also discovered my love for writing, but I can't say much more.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:04:35] Ok, well, you said it helped you in terms of experiences, in terms of maybe getting to know more people. So, the next question is, how is your education or rather the experiences you had whilst getting an education helped you... how did they help you feel connected to others?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:04:56] OK, let me give you a quick example. I was in in Kabul, Afghanistan, with my school attending a cultural convention because there are six American schools that that used to have all these interschool activities, whether it was sports tournaments or cultural conventions or whatnot. And this was their only, I mean... our schools' way of keeping us busy; of giving us extra extracurricular activities and social functions. So, I happened to be in Afghanistan when Afghanistan changed for the much worse, of course. OK, so in April of 1978, my school, along with the other five schools, were attending a convention in Kabul, Afghanistan... and all hell broke loose around us. And our lives were in danger. We wa- I mean, as a 15 year old, to see somebody get killed was humongous; was life-changing; was earth shattering. To be lined up against the wall with guns pointed at us was, again, a very... I mean, an experience that changed my life and created a bond between me and all those who were there at the time that is very, very strong to this day. The people I identify the most with in my life are people who went to school with me and I'm in very, very close touch with them.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:06:32] And in what ways would you say your education enriched your or added to your life beyond the classroom, or rather the experiences you had during that time, if not the education itself?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:06:44] It has in every possible way. I mean, like my high school English teacher who discovered my ability to write more-so than I can speak. I know how to express myself so much better in writing and that later on... that later on shaped... I mean, that later on led me to where I, I ended up. At first, I mean, I wanted to become a journalist. I wanted to be a journalist, I wanted to write. But there were no opportunities, which is the reason why I ended up switching course and going into advertising and later on to production. But when things needed to slow down in my life, I went back to writing... but I started writing mostly for ad agencies.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:07:37] And do you feel as though your education affected your sense of confidence in your abilities?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:07:45] Absolutely, absolutely. It absolutely did, especially since I was always very lucky to- to have great teachers, amazing professors. One of my professors at AUC was Martin Ochs, who came from the Ochs family, the New York Times family. He was one of the people who pulled me aside and said, "You need to continue, you need to go on with this." And he gave me, I mean, he was, like, he was guiding me throughout the four years that I was at AUC. Unfortunately, when I graduated, there were just no opportunities.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:08:31] And in what ways would you say your education affected your ability to communicate your ideas with others?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:08:38] Hugely because I've always been able to express in one way or another, especially in writing. I mean, this has really contributed to that. My- At AUC, I was the editor of The Caravan and I was probably the only, I mean, editor during that era who was there for three semesters, three full semesters. And I used to get to communicate my thoughts that I probably did not speak about, uh, anywhere on campus, but when I got into the little Caravan office, I sat down and I let it all roll out.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:09:20] Ok, I think that's all my questions.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:09:24] All right, onto the opera questions. So, first of all, did you ever attend a performance there? I know you must have been quite young.

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:09:33] Yes, I was young, but I did go to several puppet shows there and I even got a backstage tour at one of the shows.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:09:43] So, I'm guessing when you attended, you... Could you tell me a little bit about the vibe, the feel, you know, the kinds of attendees who were there, what it sounded like, felt like, all that?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:09:55] In one word, elegant. Respectful. These were matinees because we were children. These were shows designed for children at hours that were

appropriate, but 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 and one thing that I have to say that, um, a little over a year prior to my visit to the Opera and to my tour backstage, I'd been invited- I mean, my family was invited to go to the Vienna Opera House for a show... a Christmas show. We got a backstage tour because of a friend of my father's, who was with the UN in Vienna at the time, and went in there, and it was... I mean, the- while the Vienna Opera House was so much bigger than the Cairo Opera House, the scene, the whole atmosphere backstage was almost identical. The faces, the people, the hustle and the bustle, the dancers, and everything. It was just- it was almost like anything you would see in Europe, which was wonderful... which was beautiful, but again, back to my one description is elegant, fine... and that was the scene over there. That's the vibe over there. It was beautiful.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:11:31] And do you know anything about a certain period, maybe the where this artistic you know, this creativity, the scene was kind of maybe derailed perhaps or kind of had a bit of a pause maybe?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:11:48] Before or after?

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:11:49] Before,

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:11:50] I definitely know historically and also from stories because my uncle was a playwright, um, that- I'm talking about, the whole scene; the arts in general in Egypt, not just the opera, not just the music scene. The theatre, the cinema, everything, um... That came with the 1952 Revolution when things kind of came to a standstill. But then with the appointment of Tharwat Okasha, when he was handed the Ministry of Culture, he tried to revive the scene. He tried to to bring the glory days back. Umm Kulthum, Abdel Halim, Farid Al-Atrach... All these these stars were given concerts. I mean, these were televised concerts, some from the Opera House, some from other theaters, where- where you would see, again, that that whole elegant atmosphere recreated. People would go... these were like soirées, very elegant. Women were dressed in their finest. Men were all in suits. And the audiences were, you- you know, there's a lot of finesse in the whole scene. So, this came late in the- in the late 50s and went on until around 1970.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:13:12] And what would you say, um, what did the Opera House mean to people? Like, I mean, we see sometimes there are certain videos online – of the few videos that do exist – where people are crying on the day it burned. So, why did it mean so much to people? Like what exactly did it mean?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:13:30] It was it was basically the heart of the Egyptian arts, and it also put Egypt on the map with other countries, with other capitals that had opera houses. There weren't many countries in this region that had opera houses, but we stood out.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:13:51] I think I read the Cairo Opera House was actually, maybe up until the burning was maybe the oldest in Africa.

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:13:56] Yes.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:13:57] As well.

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:13:57] Yes. And you know- all the exchanges... I mean, like, artists coming and going, Our artists going all over the world, receiving artists from all over the world here.... I mean, it was- it was like the center, the heart of it all. 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.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:14:54] And what would you say the impact was of, like... Obviously during that same decade, afterwards, you have the deaths of a lot of Egyptian legends, specifically music legends like, um, first, I believe, uh, Umm Kulthum in I believe, 1974 and then Farid Al-Atrach in like '77 or '76, something like that... you had some Umm Kulthum, Farid Al-Atrach, and then Abdel Halim Hafez. But I mean you also had all these deaths of these greats of the golden era of music and then the burning of the Opera House... all that happened in the '70s. So, how would you say that whole decade, that whole time, affected the music scene?

**Maha Hussein (MH):** [00:15:34] Greatly. There was a huge shift. I mean, the Opera House went, the greats went, and the scene changed forever. I mean, you would never- you will never see a concert as- as elegant and- and beautifully presented as these concerts that were held, even for these artists, not just the Opera. People will now interrupt an artist while he's singing. I mean, right in the middle of his singing. In the past, people would not even clap until it was appropriate to clap. People dress down now. People will- will- will clap, whistle. Some people will try and attack the stage, go up and dance, do whatever. It's just ridiculous. Plus, the quality of the of the material itself that is being presented by our artists, even as low as the shaabi or the popular music, which is- which has mass appeal. Always had mass appeal. In the past, it was, um... These- these shaabi songs had a story that had a lot of humor, often had a lot of humor, but there was- it was- it never went beyond certain limits, while today, it is vulgar. A lot of- a lot of the time, there are a lot of obscene insinuations. You'd have to say- you can bet, you can easily read between the lines. Everything has just gone down. I mean, it's sad to say this, but we are... I mean, as an Egyptian, I am somebody – while everybody else is moving forward in the future–, my- my dream is to go back in time to regain those glory days because our history was so full of- of a lot of good things, a lot of fine art, a lot of elegant people, a lot of good audiences, a lot of finesse that no longer exists unfortunately.

**Maya Abouelnasr (MA):** [00:18:04] So, I think that's all my questions. So thank you very, very much for this very insightful interview. I really appreciate it.