WAR STORIES, LANGUAGE GAMES, AND STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

Margaret Litvin

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Located on the Nile Corniche, the Semiramis Intercontinental Hotel reveals only a picture-window slice of Cairo. Guests of this year’s Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre (CIFET) entered a security fortress: concrete barriers, bomb-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, and handbag searches. Inside, the cappuccinos were perfect; the sunset, through a double filter of pollution and tinted glass, looked magical. Some visitors wondered if this wasn’t too sumptuous a place for the Egyptian Ministry of Culture to lodge the foreign guests it had invited for the festival’s accompanying three-day seminar on “Challenges Facing the Independent Theatre and Threats to Its Survival.”

Having lived for a year (2001–2002) as a student in a rooftop flat in downtown Cairo, listening to a constant din of mosque loudspeakers and taxi horns, I appreciated the change of scene that came with being an invited seminar participant. Even more welcome was the conversation. The organizers had assembled a wonderful international group of eleven jurors, eighteen seminar speakers, and eleven “honorees”; the group included Lee Breuer (United States), Paul Chaoul (Lebanon), Baz Kershaw (UK), Rolando Hernandez Jaime (Cuba), Hans-Werner Kroesinger (Germany), Rodolfo Obregon (Mexico), and others. Left largely to their own devices (the honorees had no obligations at all), these diverse talents lingered over leisurely breakfasts, trading impressions of the previous night’s shows and telling each other about their work. Laptops were pulled out; bits of video were shown and eagerly discussed. Moroccan, Jordanian, Iraqi, Greek, Spanish, Italian, American, and some Egyptian theatre people joined in these discussions on an equal footing, creating a multicultural theatre conversation that would have been difficult to replicate outside the Arab world.

But where were the performers? All the troupes participating in the festival, it turned out, had been parcelled out to less fancy hotels scattered all over the city and even out by the Pyramids in Giza. Aside from the performances, they
Yahya Ibrahim and Abdelsattar Albasry in *Sub Zero* at the 20th Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. Photo: Courtesy Samir Atoun.

*Falso*, Sidi Bel Abbès Theatre (Algeria) at the 20th Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. Photo: Courtesy *The Experimental*/Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre.
were left alone. Several foreign troupes regretted that they found no way to connect with their Egyptian and other Arab counterparts—a primary reason for coming to Cairo. (Both American casts, the Mugwumpin Company from San Francisco and Margo Lee Sherman from New York, mentioned this as a disappointment.) Many of the foreigners (even the Arabic speakers) said they could have benefitted from better information, orientation, and perhaps a central gathering place for festival participants—a need already identified by Marvin Carlson in his review of the festival nearly a decade ago in a May 2000 issue of *Theatre Journal*.

**WAR STORIES**

In its twentieth iteration, CIFET has continued to attract a range of companies from student troupes to professionals. (A full list is at http://www.cdf-eg.org/English/exp_theater/index_e.htm.) Arab and former-Soviet countries were especially well represented. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of this year’s seventy-five or so plays dealt with the theme of war. Approaches ranged from the crudely literal (*The Fairy of Abu Ghraib* by the Spanish Teatro El Mercado) to the self-indulgently narrative (Sherman’s one-person *What Do I Know About War?* based on interviews with American Iraq veterans but somehow making Iraq sound almost exactly like Vietnam) to the generically allusive (*The Tale of Antigone* by the Italian Mistral Modern Dance Company, which juxtaposed, rather than integrated, some evocative choreography with a flatly acted script assembled from Sophocles, Brecht and Zambrano). The most subtle treatment of the theme was the Iraqi entry, *Sub Zero*. Directed by Emad Mohammed and produced by the newly resurrected Iraqi National Theatre in Baghdad, *Sub Zero* was nominated for the Best Director and Best Performance awards; its two performers shared the Best Actor prize, and Mohammed’s haunting and versatile design took the Best Scenography prize.

A disco remix of *Flight of the Bumblebee* opened this frenetic, highly physical forty-five-minute performance. Two characters, called simply Old Man (Abdelsattar al-Basry) and Young Man (Yahya Ibrahim), tormented each other in Beckettian mini-dramas that gestured abstractly at the daily difficulties of occupied life: finding one’s way through different parts of the city, navigating checkpoints, avoiding military bases, distinguishing friends from enemies. On a stage hung with dangling papier-maché dummies (representing corpses, lines of people at checkpoints, etc.) the two men sparred for verbal and political dominance. Questions like “How do I get to the Eastern Quarter?” and “Where were you on April 9?” (the day in 2003 when U.S. forces entered Baghdad) triggered surreal bouts of pseudo-violence. A torture session was simulated as a sponge bath with a washcloth and bucket of suds. A quick basketball game turned into soccer, then into volleyball, then into a nap with the ball for a pillow, and finally into an attack on the audience as the ball was suddenly hurled out into the house. The athletics imagery—the ball games, a jump rope, Ibrahim’s karate suit, a boxing match with oversized gloves, and so on—brought out the associations and dissociations between sports and war.

Sub Zero’s quality—even its presence—showed the dedication and courage of
those Iraqi theatremakers who have chosen and managed to remain in the country. It also offered some perspective on the (ubiquitous, justified) complaints of underfunded theatre people worldwide. I heard Iraqi National Theatre director Aqbal Na‘im tell CIFET selection committee member Ginka Tscholakowa-Henle: “The conditions for theatre are much better now that security in Baghdad has improved a little. Now it is safe for audiences to go out at night. This month we have been able to hold performances in the evening. Before, we had to perform at one o’clock in the afternoon!” (She did not mention the car bomb that had exploded 100 yards from the National Theatre door two weeks earlier, killing two people but not halting the opening of a new play the same night. In general, the Iraqi group expressed a mixture of dismay, frustration, resignation, and hope about the U.S. invasion and its aftermath.)

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Like Sub Zero, many of the Arab-country productions played language games, juxtaposing standard or classical Arabic with colloquial Arabics (of Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, etc.) or playing both against English or French. Diglossia animated the Algerian play False (adapted by the Sidi Bel Abbés Theatre from Nikolai Erdman’s The Suicide), which followed a hapless ingénue named Nasir (Abdellkader Djeriou) through encounters with dour Islamist fanatics, lying Christian missionaries, and fascistic nationalists. The fanatics spoke comically classical Arabic; the protagonist’s mother and their neighbors spoke Algerian Colloquial. Even the Egyptian audience members would have appreciated a translation: they understood the zealots, but not the voices of common sense and home.

Language games deepened the fun of the Syrian entry Layla and the Wolf, which also made clever use of video projection to present a young person’s battle against the social conformism of her elders. In this deconstructed Little Red Riding Hood story, the charming Layla (Rama Issa, who took the Best Actress award) told her own version, in her own language, of her love affair with the Wolf. Her rejection of standard Arabic for Levantine Colloquial positioned the play on the modern side of a somewhat caricatured generational divide.

Making just the opposite critique, the Egyptian sketch comedy Black Coffee derided the decline of contemporary Egyptian culture into globalized and Gulf-influenced slang-gabbling vulgarity. Intercut with photos of nineteenth-century architecture and recordings by such mid-twentieth century icons as singers Abdel Halim Hafiz and Umm Kulthum and vernacular poet Salah Jahin, the play was an extended requiem for an imaginary composite golden age of Egyptian culture. Sharply produced and performed by the thirty-five-member ensemble cast, the play won Khaled Galal the festival’s Best Director award.

After a wonderfully intense week of two to three shows per night, the last performance I was able to catch was Memory for Forgetting, a solo play based on a memoir by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In a powerful and multifaceted performance, François Abou Salem of Jerusalem’s Hakawati Theatre became an anxious bundle of Darwish’s fears, regrets, and desires.
François Abou Salem as Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish in *Memory for Forgetting*, Hakawati Theatre (Jerusalem). Photo: Courtesy *The Experimental*/Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre.
during Israel's 1982 invasion of Beirut. Confined to a three-foot-wide bookstrewn space between two white walls, Darwish had only language to console him for the invasion. Shelling had put his kitchen off limits; a lovingly drawn-out description of brewing a pot of Turkish coffee became his only substitute for the absence of the act itself.

Like Memory, most of the Arabic-language plays at CIFET—and many of the Eastern and Western European plays I saw or heard about—explicitly foregrounded the issue of language. In view of this focus, it was particularly sad that the festival did not provide surtitles or even programs for most performances. The handful of shows that were translated, like the Italian Tale of Antigone (performed at the opening ceremony), had titles only in English. All the Arabic plays could have benefited from translation into English (and even, at times, into standard Arabic). Other plays (from China, Uzbekistan, Brazil, etc.) were in languages understood by almost none of the Cairo audience.

Printed programs would have helped. Galal's Black Coffee, supported by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's Cultural Development Fund, sported a glossy brochure summarizing all the sketches in Arabic, English, and French. In a festival that reportedly cost LE 20 million (about U.S. $4 million), most of the shows lacked even that. As Chinese playwright and festival juror William Huizhu Sun lamented to a member of the Egyptian press, this organizational lapse amounted to a bias against text and drama.

Perhaps the lack of linguistic context helped draw the jury's attention toward less language-oriented entries. Some of these, like the highly stylized Ukrainian Lady Macbeth From the Provinces, were riveting. The festival's Best Performance award went to Grasping the Floor with the Back of My Head, a piece featuring a live trumpet performance by the Mute Comp Physical Theatre (Denmark).

Unlike the plays, the seminar presentations had been translated in advance between English and Arabic; simultaneous interpretation was available for the Q&A, and the papers were later distributed bilingually. What we lacked, by contrast, were images. Many of the invited theatre scholars and practitioners, and even some honorees, had brought along photos or video. But it was only on the day after the three-day seminar that a projector finally materialized, making possible an ad hoc presentation by Lee Breuer and Maude Mitchell on Breuer's Gospel at Colonnus and their Mabou Mines Dollhouse (in which Mitchell plays Nora). Organized by theatre scholar Hazem Azmy with help from director and professor Sameh Mahran, who has since been named the head of the Academy of Arts, the presentation struck those who attended as one of the festival's high points. Some expressed hope that the event would set a precedent for making better use of the CIFET honorees: for instance, inviting them to present and discuss their work with festival participants and interested theatre students.

INDEPENDENT THEATRE

An unfortunate irony this year was the festival's treatment of "independent" Egyptian theatremakers. Since its emergence in 1990, Egypt's independent theatre movement has had an uneasy relationship with the state cultural sector.
The state theatres have either ignored or tried to co-opt the most promising “young” directors (in a gerontocracy like Egypt, youth can last until fifty). The directors, in turn, have demanded both artistic autonomy and official state support: rehearsal spaces, performance venues, funding. By making independent theatre the theme of the festival and its seminar, chairman Fawzi Fahmy seemed finally to be promising the independents a hearing. However, rather than be included in the main seminar, they were relegated to a separate “roundtable” on the following day. The forty-some directors, playwrights, and actors were given a rigidly structured two-hour session to voice their grievances.

Meanwhile, only one independent Egyptian play actually went up on the festival’s fringe, compared to more than sixty performances (a few of them abysmal) from abroad, representing more than forty countries. Two shows especially recommended by the pre-screening committee, Dalia El-Abd’s dance piece Forging (Tashkeel) and a play called Cafeteria by the Wuguuh (Faces) troupe from Alexandria, were denied a venue. In her weekly theatre review, Egyptian critic and longtime CIFET insider Nehad Selaiha excoriated the “preposterous, sadistic farce thought up and stage-managed by the festival organizers for the sole purpose of crushing the only two troupes representing the Egyptian independent theatre movement in this session—a session that was purportedly intended . . . to celebrate alternative theatre the world over.” (Al-Ahram Weekly, Oct 23, 2008, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/919/cu1.htm).

Past reviewers of CIFET have noted the imaginative use of Cairo-specific spaces such as the Bayt Suhaymi Ottoman house in Old Cairo and the outdoor theatre by the pyramids. Those locations were not used this year. This seemed to exacerbate the shortage of venues and may have reduced the festival’s magic for first-time Cairo visitors. On the positive side, however, the focus on the Opera complex, Agouza, and Downtown made it easier to follow the festivalgoer’s frenetic and exhilarating pace. Jurors saw three plays per night. Toward the end of the eleven-day festival, no one I spoke with complained of monotony or a shortage of new experiences.

MARGARET LITVIN is assistant professor of Arabic and comparative literature at Boston University, focusing on contemporary Arabic drama and political culture. Her book manuscript, Hamlet’s Arab Journey, about post-1952 Arab appropriations of Hamlet, is forthcoming with Princeton University Press. Her work has appeared in Critical Survey, the Journal of Arabic Literature, and Shakespeare Bulletin.