



# This Is What Happened

## Personal testimonies on the state of independent culture in the Arab region

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## At the Minister's Door

By Mourad Al Kadiri – Morocco

The time had come for us to tell him “Leave!”

On the morning of March 8, 2011 a procession of Moroccan artists and intellectuals turned into Gandhi Street in Rabat, where the Ministry of Culture is located. Since the summer of 2009, when the author of *Majnun Al Hukm* (The Megalomaniac) moved in, that building had decayed into a ruin haunted by ravens and ghosts. Only lunatics went in and the stupefied staggered out.

With every passing day we had been hearing one report after the other that made everyone's heart pound in fear for the fate of Moroccan culture. We were watching the disintegration of what little progress had begun to coalesce when the poet and novelist Mohammed Al Ash'ari and the actress Thuraya Jubran headed the Ministry of Culture. Together with a retinue of Moroccan intellectuals and artists and their professional organizations, they had begun to pursue such vital causes as a law for artists, a professional identity card that would afford them certain rights, and the creation of a National Cooperative Association for Artists that, as of 2008, would be charged with ensuring health care and social coverage for the artists, writers and intellectuals that were its members. The eras of these ministers of culture also brought about legislation to support writers, theater, and music.

Unfortunately Bensalem Himmich, the Minister of Culture that followed and towards whose premises we were heading that morning of March 8, was of a different frame of mind, one opposed to the positive dynamism that had imbued Moroccan cultural life since the arrival of the government for democratic transition that was led by the socialist Prime Minister Abdul Rahman Al Yousefi. Himmich applied himself to rescinding or obstructing most of the laws that regulated cultural and artistic practice, in defiance of the

widespread expectations that these would be developed, revitalized and reinforced by new legislation. His Excellency would also shut the door to dialogue with cultural workers and their professional syndicates and organizations.

At precisely 10:30, the square facing the Ministry of Culture was thronged with prominent faces from the realms of art and culture. There were novelists and poets, dramatists and filmmakers, singers and folklore troupes. This demonstration had managed to gather a range of groups rarely found in one place.

But they were all there at the appointed time, and they all shared a single demand. Bensalem Himmich had to go! He had turned the ministry away from its proper function, which in their opinion was to serve culture and Moroccan cultural practitioners and not to abuse them, sideline them and spit on them.

That morning, downtown Rabat witnessed an unprecedented event. For the first time in its history, more than 300 writers and artists had assembled to denounce the minister of culture and tell him to leave. Their demonstration caused many passersby to gather and stand in solidarity with the cultural and artistic figures, many of whose faces were familiar from the cinema, television and the theater. These were the same faces that had given the people wonderful moments of happiness and here they were revealed in all their humanity, baring their pain and wounds, and crying out their anxieties over the few simple gains they had won that were now jeopardized by the impetuous decrees of the “*Majnun Al Hukm*.” This was why they were shouting at the top of their lungs “Down with the megalomaniac!”

One of the passersby who joined us asked me what this chant meant. Who was this “megalomaniac” that all these writers and artists, whose names and faces were imprinted in the Moroccan national memory and soul, were telling to leave?

I stopped chanting for a moment to explain. I said that *Majnun Al Hukm* was the title of one of the most famous novels written by the

current minister of culture, and we were using it to metaphorically underscore the similarity between him and the Fatimid Caliph Al Hakim bi Amr Allah, a protagonist in the above mentioned novel by Himmich. This caliph, I continued, was the epitome of the mentally deranged authoritarian ruler who excelled in ways to oppress and denigrate his people and reduce them to wretchedness. He was so arbitrary and impulsive that the people grew convinced that he was more naturally suited to an insane asylum than to the throne of the caliphate and the turban of the Leader of the Faithful. The same applied to the man sitting on the throne of the Ministry of Culture. Clearly those that had appointed him had made a grave error in judgment. Moroccan culture did not need a man who ruled by the dictates of his whim, but a responsible ministerial official who was aware of the problems and issues that concerned the various sectors of national culture, whether writers, artists or others who shape our material and nonmaterial heritage. The fact that this minister boasted the highest and most exalted academic degrees did not necessarily make him a successful manager of cultural affairs or a skilful architect of a clear cultural policy.

In addition to the ordinary people, who had stopped to look on and whose presence and interest drove home to us that we were not an isolated elite but rather an integral and influential part of society, there were others watching. These were the security forces in both official uniform and plain dress. They had taken up stations in and around the area earlier that morning, and they were now keeping a close eye on Morocco's first ever protest demonstration organized by a cultural and artistic movement. The officers among them were intently transmitting the developments via their walkie-talkies and faithfully relating every word of every slogan we chanted. Meanwhile, their superiors who sat in their air conditioned offices listened to the reports that crackled over the wireless devices and busily tried to decipher the codes of the messages being conveyed by a segment of society that was behaving in a very unusual way that day. I refer, of course, to the workers and practitioners in figurative and metaphoric fields who work to enrich people's lives with the beauty of their output and who strive to expand the aesthetic and

humanitarian horizons of the individual in his relationship to himself and in relationship to the causes of his society.

The demonstrators' slogans and chants voiced various pressing demands. Foremost among these was the demand for a National Charter for Moroccan Culture, to serve as an authoritative frame of reference for all involved in the cultural domain, from the government to civil society organizations, and from local bodies to the private sector. The government had already drawn up long and short term plans and projects for most other social and economic sectors. There was the National Charter for Education and Training, the Green Plan for Farming, Agriculture and Forestry, and the Blue Plan for Fishing and Maritime Wealth. So why shouldn't the cultural domain have a similar national plan? Surely a plan that received a consensus among all official and civil cultural actors and that was allocated sufficient human and material resources would reinstate culture's vital role in society, in the context of a project for revival. Such a project would not only enhance the Moroccan people's awareness and appreciation of their multifaceted national identity, it would also promote culture as an engine for economic and social development through a comprehensive vision that linked culture to modern industry and technology, tourism and the traditional industries in an integrated way.

Since March 8 coincided with International Women's Day, the protest organizers arranged to bring flowers that we presented as gifts to the women participants, with our congratulations on their national day. It is no surprise, that our first cry that day was "Long live the struggle of the Moroccan female artist! Long live the struggle of the Moroccan female intellectual!"

The slogan reflected the value and appreciation that all present accorded to Moroccan women. The women among us, whether performers or creators, were writing important chapters in the epic of arts and culture in our country, imparting a special flavor combining creative and activist elements. These are the Moroccan women who remained true to their educative and cultural mission, and broke free of the confines of the home in order to take parts

in the worlds of drama and song, defying traditional mindsets that held that such careers were shameful and sinful.

Therefore, we were delighted to have among us that morning women writers, artists and performers of all generations. Among them were some of the pioneers who had paved the way for other Moroccan women to forge careers in all fields of public life, and who had made precious sacrifices to further the cause of art in Morocco. This is why we opened our chants that day with a salute to all these women.

In that warm and heartening atmosphere, filled with cheer for the International Women's Day and pride in the noble and valuable role that Moroccan intellectuals and artists play to create something that people can cherish and remember long after all else is forgotten, we read out the statement in which we declared our position with regard to the decisions that the minister of culture had taken in opposition to and in disregard for the real needs of Moroccan culture.

Was I happy that day? Of course I was. A throng of prominent and worthy figures in the arts and culture had arisen to take a stance, the organization was successful and the turnout was great. However, there remained certain sadness deep inside. The structure of the cultural sector in a country like Morocco is fragile. It does not need wars and it does not need attrition of its energies which, in my opinion, should be invested in starting new efforts to revive the Moroccan people's confidence in how vital culture is, and in the essential roles it plays in society, as well as opening horizons for the reconciliation between people and their memory, language, body and identity with its Arab, Amazigh, Andalusian, African and Mediterranean dimensions.

Culture has no time for war. Rather, it needs time to build, starting with the development of a national strategy that identifies the roles and duties to be performed by all public, private and civil agencies and institutions involved in culture. This would strengthen the cultural and artistic system in our country and improve the

conditions for the supply of cultural services.

As if it were judgment day, we stood as one against in the face of single man: Bensalem Himmich. He would eventually exit from the Ministry of Culture's back door, beneath a hail of curses from a send off declaration that friends in the House of Poetry in Morocco had given me the honor of writing. This statement, which was immediately picked up by the national and international media and spread rapidly across the electronic media, proclaimed an end to the worst two years in the history of Moroccan culture. It heralded the departure of the "Megalomaniac" from those premises in Gandhi Street that had embraced our protest action of that morning. And, indeed, Himmich left, surrounded by his "military materiel." He had rolled out the guns in order to terrorize the cultural movement and bring it to its knees. But there came a day when the barrels were turned against him, banishing him and his name to the exile of memory, where he will taste the bitterness of oblivion and disregard commensurate to his crimes that the statement carefully enumerated, describing the toll they took on Moroccan cultural and political life.

Today no one mentions Bensalem Himmich. Indeed, everyone is resolutely determined to forget his name after having turned that dismal page in our cultural history without shedding any tears. With his departure, cultural and artistic life picked up again in Morocco as we looked forward to a new roadmap after two years of wandering in the barren wilderness. But one of the outstanding landmarks of that period will remain forever etched in our memories: that beautiful demonstration in which we were girded by two powerful symbols: the wise Gandhi and the great Women's Day of March 8, which stood their ground against the megalomaniac and the misery that can be inflicted by power.



**Mourad Al Kadiri - Morocco**

**Poet and cultural activist;** Al Kadiri obtained a PhD in modern Moroccan literature, Faculty of Humanities and Literature, University of Dhar Al Mahraz, Fez. He is a member of the executive boards of the House of Poetry in Morocco and the Moroccan Federation of Writers, and a member of the board of directors of the Moroccan Coalition for Culture and the Arts, the Moroccan Front for Good Governance in the Management of Cultural Affairs, and the Moroccan Association for Cultural Policies.

## 2011

By Rana Yazaji - Syria

What would have happened if the “cultural problem” had continued for another ten years?

Exactly two years ago, at the very beginning of 2011, it seemed that ten years was the expected time frame for a “new” cultural regression in Syrian society. This would have occurred in stages that gradually diminished the understanding and field of creativity and the intellectual and emotional specifics of the Syrians. What would have happened if the cultural exclusion in Syria, ordained over long decades of the mechanisms of political rule, had continued? A reader of Syrian history, particularly of the history of civil society, would be aware of the enormous effect on every Syrian on the human, social and cultural levels.

Until the end of the year 2000, many artists and intellectuals found themselves outside official institutions “...in the context of the state of emergency and the bloating of the state. With the collapse of the middle class and as a result of socialist development projects being turned into projects for aggrandizement, many intellectuals were forced to live on the margins or even on the verge of penury. For them, the institution became a refuge and a kind of “relief fund” where a few crumbs might be picked up in accordance with the degree of closeness to it. Other intellectuals were forced to adopt a disguise when silence was impossible.”(1) The separation of the intellectual from official institutions does not seem strange given the undermining of civil society by means of suppressive laws that linked cultural action to a defined ideological vision. There was an attempt to impose a politicized alternative that completely undermined civil society and that created in its place a parallel society that worked within the mechanisms and confines of the

(1) Mohammed Najati Tayyara, “Syrian Reform: the dialectic of culture and politics”, Al-Adab, April 2001, Vol. 49.

Baath party and would be responsible for ensuring the infrastructure and the forms of backing to deliver its imposed culture to the largest section of the masses. It would seem that a large part of what was achieved during the long decades of Baathist rule literally embodies the words of the Syrian Minister of Information, Ahmed Iskander Ahmed, who served in successive governments until 1980: “If the intellectuals around today are not willing to work with us, we will create a new generation of intellectuals that sympathizes with us and understands us better.”

However, like other countries, Syria could not remain captive. It began to aspire to change from the latter part of Hafez Al Assad’s rule. This was helped by global changes, most importantly the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the cold war, the magnified role of multinational corporations, and the global spread of the concepts of civil society (and the human rights groups and grassroots networks this entailed). The information revolution has also played a very significant role. There were many signs of the growing power of the voice of the intellectual from the end of the 1990s. Perhaps among the most important of these were the articles on “the triangle of corruption” by Tayyeb Tayzini, and his lecture series that travelled throughout Syria in the autumn of 1999, in which he demanded the adoption of pluralism and the ending of martial law and the state of emergency. There was also Mohammed Jamal Barout’s article, “Civil society is the political formula to fight corruption and for reform,” which affirmed the impossibility of reform and change in isolation from a revival of civil society whose modern social and political institutions would be guaranteed relative independence from state institutions.

When Bashar Al Assad came to power, this change at the pinnacle of power imparted a general sense that change was possible in the static frameworks that had ruled state and society for decades. The long series of articles published in the form of open letters to the new peak of Syrian power throughout the summer and autumn of 2000 should be noted in this regard. In this context, new voices of academics and former diplomats such as Nazmi Qadmani and

(2) The Declaration of the 99 was published on 27th September 2000 in Al-Safir, Al-Nahar and Al-Hayat newspapers.

(3) Tayyara, op. cit.



Burhan Al Din Daghestani came to the fore. There were also well known intellectuals such as Antoun Maqdissi, who in a famous letter talked about the long absence of the people and the need for years of taking the view of the other into account before the gradual transformation from the condition of being subjects to that of citizenship.

It was in this context that the Association of Friends of Civil Society was born. Its meetings began at the end of May 2000 in Damascus, with the goal of “enabling Syrian society to restore its role as an entity independent of the power structure by furnishing it with the knowledge and forms of awareness to enable this.” Two months later the Declaration of the 99 (in reference to the number of signatories) appeared. This focused on the demand for democratization by an end to the state of emergency, amnesty for political detainees, and the launching of general freedoms.(2) The civil movement also aspired to give birth to a movement of intellectuals to monitor public affairs, to safeguard the intellectual’s attachment to the truth, and to be independent of politicians tied to interests and power balances. The project of the Association of Friends of Civil Society developed and at the beginning of 2001 the project for Committees to Revive Civil Society made its appearance. Its Founding Charter was leaked to the press and became known as the Declaration of the 1,000. (3) By the end of 2000, the phenomenon of what were known as “forums” had spread to most regions of Syria, and many Syrian intellectuals had turned their homes into cultural forums.

No sooner had 2001 started than the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society and the forums were confronted by a large scale campaign against them. This was carried out for the most part by executive security and censorship bodies, while another faction of intellectuals criticized them. The experience began to express a crisis of both the social contract in Syria and of the elite.

Nevertheless, from another perspective this experience laid the foundations for a socio- cultural drive that was finding its place and that some tried to make independent, according to the available spaces. They took advantage of the declared economic transition

to a social market economy, and of the participation of some government bodies themselves in opening up the paradigm of sponsorship before independent cultural groups. This was especially the case for groups that after the “Damascus Spring” preferred to avoid direct engagement with questions of politics, even if they aspired to mobilize the public sphere which cannot be separated from the political in any circumstances.

It is possible to talk about the birth of a living relationship between Syrian culture and Syrian political society when there is “independence of culture from power and from direct politics. This means the reestablishment of culture’s linkage with the free production of thought and meaning, something which allows it to air ideas, values and meanings in a fragile freedom without mediation, compulsion or subordination. Individuals in society circulate them and adopt them according to free choice. This gives culture back its prestige and its ability to influence society and allows ideas to integrate with the social mass.” (4)

The political decision that ended the Damascus Spring had exclusionary effects, even if there were growing efforts to reach a largely cosmetic accommodation with intellectuals and artists. This accommodation certainly did not intend to end cultural exclusion but rather to disguise it, by exchanging the Baathist/grassroots organizations that had occupied the space of civil action for decades with a grassroots/authoritarian structure that was more developed, modern and open in reality to individuals and broad groups outside the ideological system.

What if the “cultural problem” had continued for another ten years? At the beginning of 2011, two months before the start of the Syrian revolution, a long term vision for a new socio-cultural regression was laid down. This was to be achieved over the course of ten years, which at the time seemed like a long period. This vision was based on four main precepts that together formed a general framework for an image of Syrian society in which the idea of citizenship and belonging would have been weakened, that would have regressed

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(4) Shams Al-Din Al-Kilani, “The dialectic of politics and culture in Syria: from liberalism to the embrace of the single opinion”, Al-Hayat, Beirut, 1st June 2011.

intellectually, where there would be no consensus over the cultural identity of the Syrians, and where the Syrian communities would have degenerated into secondary loyalties at the expense of higher affiliations.

Two months before the revolution it seemed that regression towards this society would be slow but inevitable, agreed upon without being ratified. It seemed that the independent culture sector would have a large role in preventing this from happening. Direct political action has not always been the only solution to confront authoritarian political plans.

How has it been possible to shorten ten years into nineteen months, the length of the “suppression” of the Syrian revolution till this moment? How can we really grasp, and more importantly accept, that the potential but distant cultural regression that was envisioned has become actual fact in a matter of months? Was the analysis at the time faulty, or were we much closer than we anticipated to the “crumbling of identity”? In either case, the main issue to be understood is the depth of the drastic and unexpected changes that affect the culture and identity of Syrian society at the roots. What we should have done to prevent this happening has now become a reality, and what was setting our compass towards a future without siege, has come to besiege us.



**Rana Yazaji - Syria**

**Researcher, trainer and cultural operator;** Rana received a diploma in Theatrical Studies from the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts, Damascus, Syria in 2001, and also earned an MA in Conceptualization and Management of Cultural Projects from Paris III and an MA in Dramaturgy and Theater Direction from Paris 10. She has published a number of articles and studies on various cultural topics in Syrian and Lebanese newspapers and magazines, and has worked as a researcher in the field of cultural policies and contributed to a study monitoring cultural policies in Syria. She also conducted a number of studies on Cultural Economy.

Apart from working as a researcher and trainer in cultural and developmental projects and community initiatives, she has worked as a manager of cultural projects and programs in at a number of institutions, including the General Secretariat of Damascus Capital of Culture 2008 and Rawafed, the Cultural Project of the Syria Trust for Development. During her time at Rawafed, she designed and launched the Cultural Projects Incubator program and was responsible for managing the Interactive Theater in Public Schools project. At the end of 2011 she and a group of independent cultural activists founded the organization Ettijahat for Independent Culture that works to activate an authentic relationship between cultural and artistic acts and Syrian society with its diversity and plurality.

## Vibrations

**By Hanan Al Hajj Ali – Lebanon**

On April 19, 1969 a detachment of the Internal Security forces forced their way into the Teatro Beirut theater,(5) where the third performance of the play Majdaloun(6) was being performed. The audience, composed of students and others, was prevented from entering and the security forces formed a barrier between the audience (and those who managed to sneak through the security cordon) and the cast and performance. When the actors continued performing their parts, members of the security forces went on stage and made them leave it by force. But they continued acting in the auditorium and then in the street, accompanied by spectators. They reached the Horseshoe Café on Hamra Street where they were joined by a crowd of students carrying placards condemning the ban and singing the play's theme song. The demonstrating crowd immediately mingled with the patrons of the café and the procession from the theater. Everyone became the live audience of the play that had taken the city's public space as a stage, in defiance of the arbitrary ban and in exercise of a civil, political and social right.

On March 27, 2012 on the occasion of World Theater Day, in an effort to save Teatro Beirut from demolition in the interests of property speculation and from the indifference of the state towards safeguarding and developing Lebanon's cultural heritage (if the state is not implicated in its dissipation), a host of artists and cultural activists took to the stage of the Medina Theater in Beirut for a mass protest performance(7) where they jointly gave expression to the stifling of the space for culture and art in Beirut.

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(5) Teatro Beirut was the first permanent theater and cultural space to open in the Ras Beirut - Ain El Mrayseh neighbourhood on 6th May 1965. Its activities continued until 21st December 2011.

(6) Majdaloun is a play where the author airs the social and political problems that afflicted Lebanon, chief among them the danger of Israeli aggression, the details of guerrilla activity, the mercantilist ethos and the greed of capitalism. The play is critical of the stance officials took on these problems and names them. Majdaloun is the name of an empty village on the Lebanese border with the occupied territory. The author uses it as the stage to show these problems and critique the way they have been handled.

The first performance of Majdaloun ended with a scene where guns are passed from hand to hand, Palestinian to Lebanese and vice versa. This was the first time that a guerrilla fighter and his weapons had been represented on stage.

(7) Fifty-two theater groups took turns to present one minute of their play. This meant there were about 150 actors on the stage simultaneously.

This stifling is the result of ongoing curtailment of the freedom of expression, worsening practices of official and religious censorship, and the confiscation of the public spaces that permit people to meet, debate, criticize and create.

At the end of the mass performance, the minister of culture and his retinue forced their way on to the stage so as to be “in the picture” presented by the media. The organizers protested and the minister was asked to leave the stage to the artists. That day, the platform was for those who deserved it, and there was no room for slogans and speeches void of any practical indications of an effective cultural policy or of lacking any hint of official steps towards permanently saving the Teatro Beirut space by legally declaring it a part of the “cultural patrimony”.<sup>(8)</sup> Those present intervened, and the stage and auditorium became a single surge towards the street. A multi art protest march proceeded from Hamra Street in front of Costa Coffee (formerly The Horseshoe), heading for the now shut-down Teatro Beirut. Heading downhill, this was the same uphill urban route taken by the Majdaloun march, still without being able to penetrate a web of crumbling, abortive, social relations.

History does not repeat itself, but there are movements and actions that break through our awareness of this history, whether missing or overlooked. The two events described above which took the same path linking Ras Beirut to Hamra Street, one climbing up and one heading down, correspond on more than one level. Will the latest mobilization lead to the same results as the mobilization that surrounded the Majdaloun event?

The goal in both cases is the same: to defend citizens’ rights of expression, assembly, protest and creativity. The driving force is also the same, embodied in a coalition from civil society made up of individuals, groups, CSOs and NGOs, creative artists, specialists and activists in the cultural and artistic sphere, rights activists, lawyers

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<sup>(8)</sup> The specifications for what is termed the “cultural patrimony” apply to the Teatro Beirut because of its historical, cultural and symbolic role and value. As a result, the minister could have expedited the application of the provisions of the Cultural Patrimony law. This is what the Bring Back Teatro Beirut campaign has been pushing for since its inception.

Article 15 of Law 37/2008 concerning the cultural patrimony states as follows: “By his decree, the minister can take temporary possession or confiscate any cultural asset at risk of any of the threats included in the provisions of this law. This includes the potential for the asset to be transported out of Lebanese territory, or alteration to its features or the agency using it without prior permission, or the asset being neglected, or being exposed to damage in whole or in part. In the case of confiscation, he must set compensation for the confiscation on the basis of a written opinion from the competent general director and committee.”

and figures from the media.

The means of mobilization are the same: two parallel and overlapping tracks. One is legal advocacy (based on objective studies that combine theoretical research with written and direct surveys). The other is artistic expression and cultural mobilization.

The precedent established in the Majdaloun case, that of seizing natural and constitutional rights by means of the rule of law, has become a basis for the independent advocacy movement of recent years. The beginning was a re examination of the censorship laws and the consequent discovery of the unlawfulness of the censorship exercised by the General Security body over artistic works, which led to the discovery of legislation unknown to society and state both. <sup>(9)</sup> Chief among such laws is the Cultural Patrimony Law mentioned above. The group Bring Back Teatro Beirut is endeavoring to have this law applied, which would be a pioneering step towards saving a number of other spaces from collapsing in turn. However, even now many obstacles stand in the way of this goal. There are huge divisions that undermine and choke off most efforts at change.

In 1969, mobilization began in a public space shut down by force (Teatro Beirut), and migrated to de facto open public space (the city of Beirut as represented by Hamra Street). In 2012 on the other hand, the starting place was public space open by force (the city of Beirut as represented by Hamra Street), moving to a de facto shut down public space (Teatro Beirut ).

In the Majdaloun events, members of a wide spectrum of the society, with an “independent” judiciary at the forefront, championed the artists’ cause. They won the first case brought by them against the state, which led at the time to the whole censorship process being declared null and void.<sup>(10)</sup> The judiciary, at first instance and on appeal,<sup>(11)</sup> halted the prosecutions against Roger Assaf<sup>(12)</sup> on the grounds that there was no law in force. It also accepted his civil case, resulting in the state being declared to have assaulted a

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<sup>(9)</sup> On the way there was the experiment of drama in prisons led by the Catharsis group run by Zeina Dakkash which shed light on the unlawfulness of detaining people for years without legal mandate and helped to bring about a decree limiting this prejudicial treatment.

constitutionally guaranteed freedom when it prevented him from carrying on this work in theater on the pretext that he had not been given prior permission.(13) The judges reached this conclusion when they ruled that the Administrative Governor of Lebanon's Decree 1576 of October 12, 1922 was annulled by the ending of the office of governor, and that there was no other decree that permitted curtailment of the freedom to stage drama.(14)

Lebanon in the 1960s was a real draft of an institutional state that was legally enshrining the rights of its citizens, founding a real national university, adopting political, environmental, cultural, and educational decentralization, and sowing the seeds for a real and effective cultural policy. The capital, Beirut, was a space open to things and their opposites, and for bridging divides. These contradictions opened the doors to modernism and made Beirut a true Agora which tolerated prohibition (the prohibition on freedom of dramatic work) and its legal challenge and condemnation at the same time.

Lebanon in 2012 is the mirage of a nation and the ghost of a city. Constitutional rights are usurped, laws are not functioning or not enforced, distorted or overlooked. The judiciary rules in favor of

(10) Prior censorship of dramatic works was reinstated by virtue of legislative decree no. 2 of 1st January 1977 during the Lebanese Civil War at a time of exceptional circumstances when there were grave suspicions of the negative security ramifications of any means of expression. The best evidence of this is that the government issued this decree simultaneously with decree no. 1 which imposed prior censorship on periodical newspapers. Decree no. 1 was subsequently revoked by the government, whereas decree no. 2 remains in force.

(11) Judgement of single criminal judge in Beirut, 7th March 1970 (see above, unpublished) and judgement of the criminal appeal court of Beirut of 5th May 1970 (unpublished).

(12) Founding member of Beirut Professional Theater, he directed Majdaloun with Nidal Al-Ashqar.

(13) Judgement 258 of the first degree court of first instance in Beirut (third chamber) of 5th May 1971, published in Al-Adl, section on jurisprudence, 1973, p. 730

(14) From a study entitled, The Eyes of the Censor in the Lebanese Legal System by Nizar Saghiya, Rana Saghiya and Nael Jaajaa at the request of the Observatory on Censorship. In view of their significance we cite the chief grounds given in the judgement:

"Since the Lebanese constitution at article 13 guarantees the Lebanese the freedom to express their opinion in speech and writing within the bounds of the law;

"Since political theater forms one means for expressing or criticising political opinions, and since the play Majdaloun falls within this category of play as has been clarified by the statements of the two troupes and in particular the statements of the respondent (i.e. the state) when justifying its ban;

"Since freedom to perform political theater falls within the remit of freedom to express opinion, and in consequence within the remit of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Lebanese constitution;

"Since the administration in banning the performance of the play Majdaloun will have violated one of the fundamental freedoms without lawful grounds and without providing any legal text permitting such an act;

"Since this action on its part constitutes a transgression by virtue of its containing a clear violation of the law and its assault on a general individual freedom in the knowledge that it was not linked to the enforcement of any law or regulation..."

financial and political power. The state is hostage to its foreign debt and its domestic sectarian divisions. The three branches of government cling to their own narrow political and financial interests. These hang around the neck of a fractured society being politically, economically and socially strangled, and a mostly fragmented civil society formed of paralyzed trade unions and broken down political parties and whose cultural lever is dependent on external material backing.

The unwritten, and never to be written, history of Lebanon is a history that "crushes its makers"(15) and produces an accumulation of material and immaterial ruins, both movable and immovable. The ruins of Studio Baalbek, Teatro Beirut, Martyrs' Square and of 17,000 kidnapped and disappeared. Nobody will believe how ruins can be made stronger as the vibrations of protest increase. Who would have expected that at the beginning of the 21st century, the ruined squares of Arab cities would be, if only for a truncated moment, a true Agora with an organic, and I might almost say natural and spontaneous relationship between art and politics?

We have so often asked whether politics serve culture or culture serves politics, on the basis that politics and culture are two spheres, each with its men, who are sometimes brought together by an ability to criticize and analyze reality. What separates them is the ability of the intellectual alone to imagine and envisage changing this reality. But now young men and women from outside the political and cultural centers and on the margin of the intersection (or dissonance) of those two centers have become themselves the center where action speaks louder than words, where politics means culture, and where the ability to imagine comes before the ability to criticize and analyze. Stanislavski consumed his life in taming the body to impersonate the folds of the human soul. Then Meyerhold taught his master a lesson he would never be acquitted of: It is sufficient to set the body in the appropriate gesture to energize the latent spirit and hone the potential mental abilities.

We "independent cultural movers" were ingeniously renewing the concepts of independent cultural action, twinning it with government action and catalyzing it within tripartite partnerships that joined

(15) See <http://Al-akhbar.com/node/169905>. "The Lebanon that is crushing history and its makers" from an article by Hassan Aliq in Al-Akhbar, 20 October 2012.

them both with the independent sector. This independence is threatened, at times by its links with foreign funding and at times by its links with a foreign political agenda, by its occasional compliance with globalizing trends, and by frequent official containment. In the midst of all that, the revolutionary movement, in its genesis and its varied expected or unexpected outcomes, has led to a reconsideration of the position of this independence and just how far from or close to the circle of official action and its dictates it really is. Once again Antonio Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual and the margin of the margin is raised, which is now at the heart of the clear equation: opposition versus power, including the opposition of the opposition that has come to power; resistance versus domestication; accountability versus delivery; rejection versus compliance.

While we were categorizing the Arab regimes into two main camps, and two alone—rare democracies and common totalitarian regimes—we are now confronted with a shifting reality that is shuffling the deck and turning some of what was common into a rarity and some of what was rare into recourse. The transitional phase has not revealed all its hidden contents that are being buffeted on two fronts: by contradictory foreign alignments in the interests of the states involved rather than in the interests of democracy, and by constitutional changes and domestic electoral obligations of no guaranteed outcome.

We were dealing with the idea of civil society as a compact bloc providing suitable conditions to reap the benefits of any change for the better. In light of what has happened we can see more clearly the gaps in this society, when we have witnessed with our own eyes how the youth in the squares span their own fabric around these gaps, making good use of their electronic webs, and thereby manifesting a surprising fact: the web is not the weakest house.

When political ideas are almost totally accepted as pointless and exclusionary, and art and culture are believed to be almost totally worthless when it comes to changing society, interest in them (as documented or photographed for example) takes on new dimensions, as restitution or innovation, that rehabilitate the social function of art and culture in the process of change.

The clarity of these dimensions does not necessarily depend on the clarity of the images that represent these squares. 'Pixilated' images, to borrow the phrase of Rabia Marwa,<sup>(16)</sup> taken on mobile phones have scrambled the rules of the media game which only relied on or trusted high quality images. Political calculations have also been scrambled. A motile readiness has and will dictate the relationship between culture and politics and vice versa. Is it reasonable for political cultures and cultural politics to remain fixed frame while they dwindle away, invariant in their fragility, well defined in their absence? Is it not time for us to listen to the vibrations resonating in the ruins of the present?

These vibrations are always capable of surprising us and giving us renewed meanings to interpret and comprehend, capable of liberating language, in words and actions equally. "Free" speech was the fulcrum of the Agora. The language of "political" intellectual debate, that is economic, social, legal, artistic, cultural and athletic. A language of debate and negotiation where the people periodically choose officials and participate in creating laws and running the country's affairs, where the "citizen assembly"<sup>(17)</sup> votes on all important and fateful decisions, chief among which are laws, budgets and taxes (to be distributed to the arenas mentioned above), going to war and on the necessary mechanisms to enforce them on society and its mandated authority alike. A language that links the social channels and that makes the democratic city a cultural beacon. Apart from that, what remains of the Agora is at best a space for trade, bargaining, barter, tender and buying and selling.

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(16) See Rabih Mroueh's article "The pixelated image" in Kalamon, no. 4.

(17) The parliament of the citizens of Athens was formed in the fifth century BC from 40,000 citizens of a total of 340,000.

## Hanan Al Hajj Ali - Lebanon



**Actress, cultural activist, researcher and trainer;** Hanan Al Hajj Ali currently teaches contemporary theater practice at the Institute for Dramatic, Audio Visual and Cinema Studies at St. Joseph's University in Beirut. She has worked as an actress since 1978, particularly with the Lebanese group Hakawati, which helped spread her reputation regionally and internationally. She has won a number of awards and has put on performances at many Lebanese, Arab and international theaters.

She has contributed to a number of publications, including her important documentary retrospective book *Teatro Beirut*. She is a cofounder of Culture Resource (*Al Mawred Al Thaqafy*) and served as president of its artistic board. She also helped found Shams, the Cultural Cooperative Association for Youth in Theater and Cinema, in Lebanon. In the past two years, along with cultural actors from a number of independent artistic and cultural associations and institutions, she founded the Censorship Observatory for the reform of censorship laws in Lebanon. She is currently working as part of the Bring Back *Teatro Beirut* to save *Teatro Beirut* and other cultural assets. She recently joined the expert group of the Syrian organization *Ettijahat* in Syria.

In terms of training and education, she has participated in and led many regional training workshops in arts and culture administration. She also works as part of the Culture Resource research and training team in the field of cultural policy. She edited the book *An Introduction to Cultural Policy in the Arab World* in 2010.

## A Guy from the Hood

By Rafiq Al Omrani - Tunisia

My upbringing in El Kef had a distinct impact on the development of my relationship with cultural affairs. At that time, this city in northwestern Tunisia was the cultural capital of the country. It had succeeded in building a theater community that was both unique and defiant of the national theater in the capital. At a broader level, this predominantly agricultural town, which is steeped in a rich and diverse cultural heritage, was transformed by the exuberant spirit of its people, their Bedouin songs and their various social rituals into a bastion of culture. What its people excelled in most were the arts and industries in the diverse fields of culture.

Ironically, my own beginning in cultural work, in 2000, was not set against the lyrical backdrop of El Kef. On the contrary, it occurred in El Tadamun, the poorest and most densely populated quarter of the capitol city Tunis. It involved the creation of a multidisciplinary culture club (for theater, cinema and music) in Space 21, which at the time was sponsored by ANDA. The project sought to socially assimilate marginalized youth, a very difficult segment of society that was vulnerable to drug addiction and delinquency, by supporting a cultural and artistic outlet for them and stimulating a spirit of creativity and dialogue. The most beautiful part of this experience, which lasted a year before we were expelled from the Space, was our success in introducing a group of marginalized and so called delinquent youth into a cinema for the first time in their lives. There they watched and then participated in the discussion of Nabil Ayouch's award winning film, *Ali Zaoua, Prince de la Rue* (screened in the Al Salam Film Festival in 2000).

The decision to turn to a non-governmental organization had been informed by an accumulation of frustrations with the relationship

with governmental cultural spaces whose doors were shut to young men and women. The only official avenues open to these youthful talents was temporary employment in the tawdry electoral campaigns of the ruling regime. However, international organizations also presented a problem. On one hand, there was the ever present specter of the national security apparatus; on the other, there was the question of whether our priorities would overlap or diverge from theirs.

Following my first adventure in independent cultural fieldwork, I engaged in diverse experiences with other international NGOs, as well as with the Tunisian League of Cinema Clubs and the Tunisian League of Amateur Filmmakers. But as cumulatively useful and important as these experiences were, I was constantly haunted by the sense of a lack of effective independence. Sometimes, too, I regretted being disconnected from field work as the result of a climate plagued by the harassment of the Ben Ali security machine, which was constantly on the alert against the possibility that free and independent thought might reach the masses. In those days, most cultural activities in the country took place in what were akin to closed cultural salons. They might produce a considerable amount of cultural output of a high artistic caliber, but that output generally remained isolated from the general public.

In 2008, I returned to the El Tadamun neighborhood in Tunis, where I launched a personal initiative without legal authorization. I wanted to create a core of young talents for an independent cinema workshop that I called *Wled el Hay* (The Neighborhood Kids). My main purpose was to break the barrier of fear and to develop the courage to film in the open without a license and without deference to sacred rules. The core principle was to learn through experience.

In the wake of the recent political change in Tunisia, there was a breakthrough in the margin of freedom in the period that preceded the Constituent Assembly elections. We took advantage of this to establish Taabir, the Tunisian Association for Artistic and Digital Expression. Taabir aims to support creative artistic expression, especially in its digital form, by organizing workshops and training



courses. It also seeks to contribute, at the national level, to the promotion of a network of like minded independent societies. It is our belief that in the absence of a clear national cultural strategy, independent cultural organizations must develop the ways they work and examine means for fostering legislation related to cultural work that will enable them to act as the engine in the system of democratic transition and radiate across the domestic social fabric.



**Rafiq Al Omrani - Tunisia**

**Filmmaker and cultural activist;** Rafiq Al Omrani holds several university degrees in audio visual arts and technologies and in administration. A film director and civil society activist, he is a member of Taabir (Tunisian Association for Artistic and Digital Expression).

## What to Write and for Whom?

**By Tamer El Said - Egypt**

As I write this testimony, I am still being barraged by emails from my friends at Culture Resource who have endured, with all possible patience and affection, my constantly being remiss in meeting my promises to hand it in on time.

The problem is that while I love film, I hate writing. I get a mental block when I have to express myself in words. My friends poke fun at my vocal stumbling and the endless “ums and ahs” that intersperse my sentences as I search for the right words.

This is attempt number 23 at writing this testimony, and once again I am plagued by the question: what should I write and who will read it?

In my first attempts, I started to tell my story of my experience in alternative film. I have never seen myself as anything but a director who likes make films about people, nothing more. I never wanted other attributes associated with my name. However, I found myself making a choice, or rather having to make a choice. This was to become involved with a small group of friends and supporters in a long struggle to establish a film production system outside of the establishment that rejects and shuns us. Our goal was to be free to create what we want.

But when I read over these attempts, I was annoyed by the victimized tone that crept into my writing. I reminded myself that these are the choices that I made in my life and that I had to bear responsibility for them. Had I not chosen the hard path, I would not have had the opportunity to make films with the degree of freedom and independence I sought.

So, in my next attempts, I discussed the impediments that kept independent cinema and alternative art from reaching a wider audience. I proceeded to analyze the role of dictatorial regimes, their control mechanisms and their systematic brainwashing of the public through the state controlled media. I discussed the deliberate marginalization of any real art in our country, the degradation of the values of professionalism and perfectionism in work, and the use of religion to fill people's minds with extremist and reactionary notions that seek to snuff out art, beauty and life itself. Then I spoke of the spurious system of laws and regulations that stultify the imagination, the blight of censorship on creativity, the difficulties of funding arts and culture, the monopolization over the means of production and distribution networks, the poor standards of education in our country, the high illiteracy rates, the corrupt intelligentsia that corrupted the consciousness of our people, the rampant corruption that infects all the institutions of the state, and all the other obstacles and ailments that I believe we know by heart and have reiterated ad nauseam.

Then I read over those drafts and was bothered by the fact that they sounded defensive, failed to acknowledge our own mistakes, and showed no confidence in our ability to make change. They sounded as though I had resigned myself to our inability to confront the factors that isolate us from our societies.

I asked myself again, what should I write and who will read it? The question nagged at me more insistently while on a visit with a delegation of Egyptian and Arab artists to the Kilis refugee camp for Syrians on the Turkish-Syrian border. This time, the question became agonizing as I saw in a tangible way how dictatorial repression drives people into the embrace of reactionary and sectarian ideas because they have no alternative. I felt enraged at our inability to reach people, abandoning them to that bitter duality of repression and extremism. That duality and the absence of an alternative are just as strong in Egypt as they are in the Kilis refugee camp. Extremist reactionary ideas are spreading like wildfire. In the morning when I wash my face and look in the mirror, I ask myself: what should I do? What is my role?

Now I will turn these questions that haunt me over to you. What is our role? What should we do? What should we write and for whom?

I do not think that there is anything so exciting in my own story that is worth the telling. I believe that each and every one of you has a far better story to tell. Nor am I keen to repeat ideas that you know more about than I do and, anyway, I'm tired of us trying to convince each other about what we are all convinced of already. I do not see the point in sitting around talking to ourselves while the street is still occupied by the forces of repression, extremism and fascism. The opportunity that we have today thanks to the people's struggle to win their freedom will not present itself often, and I believe that we would be wise to choose our battles well, for otherwise we risk losing our presence altogether. I suspect, though I hope I'm wrong, that the people who are going to read this already share my ideas and questions. So my question to you is whether we can find a way for others to read us. What can we do so that we can speak to others, ask them the questions that we ask ourselves, and work with them to shape the imagination and dreams of the nation? How can we break out of our rings of isolation and stop talking to ourselves? What will it take to make us realize that we have no choice but to become – regardless of all our differences – a unified, influential and inspiring force capable of defending itself and its right to freedom and to life? Can we act on the awareness that the dangers that loom against us are the same and that if we do not confront these dangers together they will pick us off one by one?

When I walk through the streets of downtown Cairo, where I live and work, I look into people's eyes and wonder whether they are aware of what we produce, and I continue to dream that we are really forging, together, a unified drive emanating from our common pursuit of free and inspiring artistic creativity. I dream of a drive that will protect us from those who seek to eliminate us, that will prevent us from causing our own demise, that will transcend our exalted individual selves so as to honor the uniqueness of this moment and enable what we write to be read by others.



## Tamer El Said - Egypt

**Filmmaker and producer;** Tamer El Said studied journalism and film directing. He worked as assistant director in numerous feature films and taught at the High Institute of Cinema and the Actor's Studio in Cairo. He joined Hot Spot Films in Dubai between 2003 and 2007, where he took part in producing over 300 documentary films, of which many received local and international awards. He directed the documentary *Take Me* in 2004, and the short feature *On a Monday* in 2008. Both films won awards in film festivals locally and internationally.

In 2007, Tamer founded Zero Productions, an independent production company supporting independent filmmaking in Egypt and the region. He is currently part of setting up an alternative film center, Cimatheque, in Cairo. Tamer is finishing his first feature film, *In The Last Days of The City*.

## Independent Cultural Organizations in Yemen:

### Twigs before a Storm

By Ammar Al Naggar - Yemen

Prior to the revolutions of the Arab Spring, Arab societies shared two salient traits that had profound effects on their culture and cultural institutions. The first was their repressive political regimes which were wary of anything new and different, and ready to pounce on the merest peep of an initiative that strayed from the tunes produced by the political authorities in their cultural discourse and instruments, their deformed ideologies, and their hollow shams of democracies that made no real room for qualitative diversity or freedom of opinion and expression.

The second characteristic was a prevailing traditional culture that had become mired in retrograde biases, stagnation that was stubbornly resistant to change, and a blind insularism that rejected other cultures and was averse to plurality and diversity.

Due to the regimes' authoritarian blockades and the chasm with society, independent cultural organizations were faced with a torturous uphill drive brimming with obstacles and dangers, such as the following:

- Assorted regulatory encumbrances and legal stipulations that impeded the ability to establish these organizations and obtain official operating licenses.
- Other types of legal or regulatory encumbrances that impeded the operations and activities of some cultural organizations that managed to get licenses.
- Fabricated problems, threats or spurious rumors about some organizations so as to create an unstable environment for them.

- The risk of falling in the crosshairs of political and religious extremist groups and their verbal assaults and charges of heresy, and, sometimes, their physical assaults.

- Blockages of the means for obtaining support and funding for cultural activities.

- Various forms of intimidation or enticement to persuade independent organizations to espouse and endorse the government's political positions and to lure them into the orbit of its official cultural institutions.

- The authorities' tactic of hatching parallel cultural societies subordinate to the authorities so as to marginalize free and independent cultural organizations.

- A general public trend away from cultural organizations and toward religiously oriented societies as a consequence of the huge promotional and financial facilities that these societies enjoy.

- Depleted financial resources and the general reluctance on the part of society and local businesses to support cultural work.

Due to the foregoing circumstances, there has been a marked decline in the role of culture in society and in the ability of independent cultural organizations to have a tangible impact on social realities. This decline, in turn, helped make it possible for retrograde forces and their tyrannical mechanisms to expand their influence on the Arab mind and to increase their control over the shape of the future. It simultaneously facilitated their drive to mar and distort perceptions, ideas and values; to eradicate our societies' historical and folk heritage; and to eliminate art and beauty from the dynamics of daily social life and from the human soul.

In the seven years since we established our cultural organization, there have been many events that have considerably changed the way we understand and evaluate things and the way we work. On the whole, our experience has led us to the conclusion that the

activities of any cultural organization should not solely seek to add to the aesthetic side of life; they should also try to contribute to changing what is wrong in that life.

Over the past years, the Al Sharq Cultural Foundation has moved slowly and arduously against the tide. In addition to its traditional culture and tribal composition, Yemen had no infrastructure for culture. For example, in the 1990s, Sana'a had only three cinemas and although one would normally have expected such establishments to increase, they actually dwindled to one – the sole cinema in the capital. Yemen currently has no theater, neither in the commercial nor the artistic sense. Dramatic activities only occur sporadically and in a token way simply to mark some occasions. The country has no opera or fully fledged orchestra whatsoever.

These few indicators alone are sufficient to inform us of the magnitude of the problem of cultural services in Yemen. But a number of cultural indicators reveal something graver yet. According to statistical studies, cultural interests account for only one percent of the family budget.<sup>(18)</sup> In the field of education, by the 1990s extremist forces had succeeded in eliminating art and music from the school curricula and in forcing all university science, humanities and technical faculties to teach Islamic culture. As it is taught, this subject prohibits aspects of cultural and artistic activities and condemns some cultural and intellectual figures as heretical. In addition, extremist groups have sustained vehement and systematic campaigns against writers and intellectuals, cultural newspapers and publications, and artistic activities. These groups are proliferating by the day and are spreading ideas that are inimical to all that is artistic, cultural and civilized.

When the Al Sharq Cultural Foundation was founded, its main goal was to create channels of communication with other cultures. Yet while we worked to disseminate the value of constructive openness to the other, the forces of terrorism further entrenched hostility to the other in increasingly horrifying ways. Terrorist groups launched a series of strikes and kidnappings that succeeded in bringing the

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(18) National Population Council, Multipurpose family budget survey 2005-2006.

flow of tourism to Yemen to a complete halt, depriving our country of one of its important economic resources and impoverishing more than 10,000 families that had been entirely dependent on tourism for their livelihood. In addition, these appalling practices distorted the image of the Yemeni people in the world media, further isolating them and their country.

As we inched our way forward, alone, to promote the acceptance of the other, the forces of darkness were steps ahead of us in their drive to destroy all contact with other cultures. They had the advantages of a conducive environment and huge resources that they enjoyed due to the negligence or active collusion of ruling regimes and various social and religious forces. This overwhelmingly bleak situation offered precious little in our favor and the most we could do was the equivalent of throwing out a lonely life raft to save an entire city that was submerging beneath a flood.

Moreover, even as our foundation struggled to perform this crucial task, it was not safe from threats hailing from other directions. During the past years, the Al Sharq Cultural Foundation was forced to cease work entirely twice and once its offices were broken into and all its equipment was stolen. In addition, its meager funding from the Cultural Development Fund was cut off three years ago and, most recently, its office was bombarded and torched during the war that accompanied the revolution in 2011. It has yet to receive compensation for the damage.

A few successes and a large font of hope – these are what make up the fuel that keep us going in our struggle to bring change. This hope was boosted by the Arab Spring revolutions last year, which eliminated some of the obstacles to culture. However, many hurdles remain and are awaiting a huge bulldozer to remove them. In the meantime, independent cultural organizations must strive to move forward, as precarious as the road may still be. We have to keep the beacons burning in order to keep the darkness from engulfing all.



### **Ammar Al Naggar - Yemen**

**Poet;** Ammar Al Naggar is a member of the Federation of Yemeni Writers, and has served as Executive Director of Al Sharq Cultural Foundation since 2005. He has published four anthologies of poetry in Arabic. In addition, he has published more than ten studies and training and program manuals in the fields of human and social development.

In 2004, he took part along with a number of other writers in leading the New Media Movement, which sought to break barriers to freedom of expression through a series of articles opposed to dictatorship and hereditary rule. As a result, Al Naggar was subjected to persecution and ostracism.v

## The Wolf and the Dog

### Hassan El Geretly– Egypt

In Tahrir Square I confirmed, for the first time and with my own eyes, that – to borrow from the verse of the famous Tunisian poet Abou Qasem Al Shabi – “fate does respond when the people want life.” Suddenly we were exercising our strength instead of letting others exploit our weakness, which we had learned to do over the ages as a people that experienced many waves of subjugation.

There we were, liberating ourselves from the specter of the pyramid which our civilization invented. Tahrir Square turned the pyramid upside down so that it now stood on its tip. The spirit of freedom had re-cemented the fragments of our nation, just as the goddess Isis had reassembled the scattered limbs of her lover. In our celebration of freedom, the boundaries between giving and receiving vanished and the walls of fear collapsed as we shared our differences.

Freedom, which is a political need, has given birth to so much artistic ingenuity. If the people in Tahrir Square were determined to remain in Tahrir Square, that was because they did not trust the regime one iota, regardless of the concessions it was making one after the other in order to salvage what it could. As one of the placards in the crowd explained, quoting the Egyptian saying, “When your mouth gets burned by the soup you start blowing into the yogurt!” Once bitten, twice shy, English speakers would say. Nor will I forget that brilliant sign that another person was carrying: “An hour of curfew has no recompense.” By adding a single letter, it played on the Egyptian proverb, “An hour’s of lost happiness has no recompense.” And how right that is. Nothing can compensate for an hour’s lost happiness or an hour lost in curfew.

Politics and subsequent developments aside, what was happening

in Tahrir Square brought to mind various incidents, memories and stories, many of which I believe are totally germane to our discussion on “independent” cultural work, which has been the focus of my life in one way or the other. To me, this field is not just about ideas or theories. Art precedes ideas and, sometimes, it precedes life itself. Also, I have always had this yearning for the future, a longing for what is yet to come. So, allow me to relate to you these stories, in no particular chronological order. The first is a tale that I read in Egyptian colloquial Arabic:

### The wolf and the dog

Once there was a wolf that was nothing but skin and bones. That was because of all the guard dogs who were numerous and strong. One day, the wolf happened across one of those dogs. What a beautiful and elegant creature! Clean, portly, well groomed – whatever brought him to these parts?

As he watched the dog, the wolf wished that, if only just one time, he could attack that dog and even tear him into a hundred pieces.

But the dog was way too big for that imaginary brawl. So the wolf cautiously approached the dog, with the idea of getting to know him better. He introduced himself and expressed his great admiration for the dog’s fine appearance.

The dog answered, “It’s no great secret. If you want to be tough and strong like me, take a look at yourself and do something about it. Leave that wretched life out in the wilds where the likes of you are down on your luck, down in the mouth and down at heel. You’re dirt poor and hungry, and whatever food you scrape up is, frankly, disgusting. And you know why? Because there’s no security. You’re living on a knife edge. So take my advice and tend to your future. You’ll gain from it.”

“Okay, so what do I have to do to become like you?” asked the wolf.

“It’s very simple, so simple as to be hardly worth the mention,” the



dog said. "You growl and snap at anyone carrying a stick, meaning beggars and have nots, of course. And you grovel up to those who have and give you handouts. But most important of all, do your best to:

Please your master

who'll all the faster

toss you his remnants

of chickens and pheasants

which'll make you fatter

and what's even better

he'll pet you."

Tears sprang to the eyes of the wolf at the thought of all the luxury that awaited him. So happy was he that he turned circles around himself and several more around the dog. He was just on the point of acting on that advice, when he caught sight of something on the dog's neck.

"What's that on your neck?"

"Nothing," the dog replied.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"It's really nothing at all. Just a simple thing."

"Tell me about it," the wolf insisted.

"Well, this thing on my neck is ...um... It's an old scar. Maybe from the collar I get tied up to."

"You get tied up? You mean that you can't come and go as you

please?"

"Well, not always. Anyway, it's not important."

"But to me it's very important," said the wolf. "In fact, it's more important than meat and juicy bones. Even if it meant the chance of a whole calf on a plate, I couldn't take it. So, excuse me, but I have business to attend to."

This story, which was written by La Fontaine and translated into Egyptian colloquial by Hoda Eissa, is so important to me that I wish it could stand here as my testimony. I'm speaking metaphorically, of course. The moral of the tale is obvious: independence means the quest for freedom, regardless of the sacrifices one has to make to remove the yoke.

The next story is a recollection that affected me very strongly. After Magda Saleh founded the new opera house in Cairo and made it into something worthy of the name Cairo Opera House, there came the inevitable official interventions. Tensions rose and when the situation reached a head, a government official snapped at her, "Who do you think you are? You're just window dressing!"

This is precisely the government's attitude towards artists and other practitioners of culture: they're "window dressing." Was the Ministry of Culture willing to fund El Warsha theater troupe? I'll speak more about this further on, but for now I will supply the answer to the question: no way. Yet if, for example, El Warsha was invited to present a performance in some theater abroad, then and only then the government might fork out the expenses for flights and accommodation. In other words, it was only prepared to pay the costs for the "window dressing." When it came to funding the art itself, the answer was a definite "No."

In the 1990s, at the time when Adel Imam went to Assiout, the government might have footed the cost of my flight to Tokyo, but I couldn't go to Assiout, because that would have been "against the Ministry." The government could tolerate some opposition and

criticism, as long as you remained within its reach. But it would never tolerate you working apart from it. For the government, not to be the center around which you revolved, whether for it or against it, was something it could not abide.

Whenever I recalled the story of that “window dressing” curse that was flung in the face of Magda Saleh, I found myself trying to think of a response that I could hurl back at the government official. Although I tend to evade humiliating confrontations, a response is still important. Eventually I came up with a fitting one: “I might be the window dressing, but why do you keep the store empty?”

At one stage of my career I worked in France in a post that was at once governmental and independent. I was director of a French theater company in what was termed “decentralized theater.” The decentralization of the theater is a principle I strongly believe in and feel is especially important today. The theater company I worked with was one of the fruits of the first wave of decentralization in France. At the time, the French government’s sole criterion for supporting theater troupes was for them to move to the provinces. Until then, Paris held a virtual monopoly on theatrical productions.

But there was another feature of that decentralization process that made it distinct from just setting up shop in the provinces. There was a contractual component. The creative artist would enter into a three year contract with the state, after which the contract could be renewed. In other words, the relationship between independent artists and the government was a contractual one, rather than a subordinate one.

When I returned to Egypt, I brought with me my belief that government institutions were important. I applied for and received an appointment with the Tali’a Theater company, having followed the advice of my professor, Dr. Louis Awad, who told me that if I wanted to become a director I had become a government appointee. I quickly discovered how hard it was to work with a governmental institution due to the bureaucratic hurdles and obstacles it throws in the path of independents. The problem in Egypt is that we are

operating in system laden with bureaucracy, which is why I gradually withdrew from the governmental domain.

At one point I applied for leave without pay so that I could work with the film director Youssef Chahine. I worked in art direction on Goodbye Bonaparte and then as first assistant on The Sixth Day. Then I met Menha Batraoui, Ahmed Kamal, Sayed Ragab and Abla Kamel. This was followed by the very important meeting with Naguib and Khaled Guweili, who would be the writers of Dayeren Dayer (All Around) and Ghasir el Leil (Tides of Night), the performances that became El Warsha’s entrance pass to wider audiences and the international stage. The Guweili duo hailed from the womb of politics which, at the time, was probably incapable of accommodating their creative energies.

In any case, all these artists were eager to explore new ideas and ways to produce a completely different kind of theater than that which prevailed in Egypt. What happened was that following our production of Yimout il Mu3allam we said, “Let’s keep going.” But then we asked ourselves, “But how, exactly?” That was when the idea of forming an independent theater troupe was born and we began to realize our dream.

I suppose you could say that El Warsha was the product of a fortuitous coincidence that contained a thousand perfect arrangements. I was living on Champollion Street in downtown Cairo at the time. Next door to my apartment block was a garage/car repair shop (a warsha, or workshop, in Arabic), which got me thinking about the relationship between “masters and apprentices” and this kind of dialectic. Suddenly I hit on the idea of calling the troupe El Warsha (workshop). It encapsulated the interaction between generations, the transmission of expertise across them, and the transition from one level to the next. Also, in general, the word warsha means “something that makes a lot of noise and turns out a collectively made product.”

My reminiscences with El Warsha are interspersed with occasional scenes from my relationship with the government in that period.

Oddly, in the six years since I'd returned to Egypt, I had been unable to join the theater syndicate. It was as though my degree in theater from the UK and my ten years of experience in France counted for nothing. I couldn't get into the syndicate until I was appointed director of the Hanager Theater. Only then was I permitted entry. From 1988 to 1992, I worked on the construction and preparation of Hanager, but I resigned several months before it was scheduled to open. I had come to the conclusion that I could not be a government functionary and an artist at the same time.

When I resigned, many people said, "Are you out of your mind? You're the director of a theater. Do you know what that means?" But I'd always recall the La Fontaine story. I knew exactly what being a theater director meant.

"Are you out of your mind?" I had heard this before, when I moved back to Egypt. But the fact is that I had never really left. I lived 15 years outside of Egypt, but I never once thought of myself as an immigrant. Instead, in a corner of my mind was the ever present desire to work in Egypt. Eventually there came a moment when I began to feel that I was becoming an "artisan" and I took the next plane home. My five years in the UK and ten years in France were for two purposes: to study theater and to learn more about it through practice. It would have been difficult for me to accomplish these purposes in Egypt. When you're 25 in Egypt, it is very hard to become a director of a theater company, because in Egypt the age bracket of young directors starts at 40. It's another of those professions where you have to turn grey to become "young."

Because of all the above, I continued with El Warsha throughout the time I that worked in the Hanager. El Warsha was my "home." It was what life meant to the little wolf that turned down the yoke.

The process of funding El Warsha passed through several phases. At first, foreign cultural centers funded us. On one occasion, I had decided to present a German production and by coincidence I discovered that the Goethe Institut would fund it. Similar coincidences enabled us to pay for the costs of subsequent productions. Then,

El Warsha obtained funding through international festivals that it contributed to and from NGOs involved in the arts. We also found that we could partially fund the troupe by training new generations of theater artists in a spirit not dissimilar to Al Azhar University's tradition of mujawara, or living side by side, between the "seekers of knowledge" and the "servants of knowledge,".

But the creative artist does not live on funding alone. As a general principle, funding should help a project grow in an organic way so that one phase of development can lead to the next. When we first started, we could have found funding to finance a production or two and then called it a day. But we had something different in mind. We wanted every phase in our quest to lead to something new.

The question of funding is also connected with the nature of the theater troupe. Theater is a collective experience. I cannot produce a play alone. All our works had to be the process of a group endeavor because theater's vitality and dynamism is always contingent on the whole. We create a society within society that follows different rules from society at large. Funding is important. But without a collective project or troupe spirit, it won't help a company survive for a quarter century or more.



### **Hassan El Geretly - Egypt**

**Theater director;** Hassan El Geretly is a theater director who has also worked in film. In 1987, he founded El Warsha troupe, an independent company dedicated to the production of contemporary theater. Currently the troupe's works are inspired by the breath of freedom that came with the January 25 Revolution.

El Warsha has sought to promote a realm of alternative culture by training new generations of talented youth eager to become theater professionals, stimulate the culture, and tour and develop independent networks in collaboration with others in Egypt, the Arab world and abroad.

## Independent Cultural Work

By Marie Elias - Syria

I am going to write about my experience of running projects that are viewed as culturally, artistically and/or educationally independent, such as the interactive theater projects that included a number of regions and were implemented through various social incubators within Syria. This included the countryside, where interactive theater was employed to further development and awareness under the supervision of the UN Population Fund and sponsored by the Fardous organization in Damascus. Government schools were also included in a project funded by the Drosos Foundation of Switzerland and administered by the Rawafed program of the Syria Trust for Development. The interactive theater was an important satellite to the educational process involving the development of libraries and literacy with librarians, on the basis of a request from various institutions, most importantly the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs. The techniques of interactive theater were used to promote reading. I will also discuss my experience as part of the project to support youth theater in Damascus, a unique project in Syria that lasted for five years in cooperation with SIDA and the Swedish Theater Institute, under their auspices without recourse to any Syrian incubator.

I was involved in these projects in artistic, technical and administrative aspects. For the most part, I designed the projects before implementation, and when designing them I always thought about the project philosophy, no matter the kind of project. Before explaining a little about the state of culture in Syria and the role of the projects I directed in activating the culture, I have to point out that over the eight years I worked in such projects as director or consultant, working with a large number of young Syrians, neither I nor any of those who worked with me were part of any institution, official or independent. This was for reasons related to the difficulty of registering independent institutions in Syria. I did try to work

through the University of Damascus where I teach, but most of the time I worked as a consultant or artistic director, that is, in an individual capacity.

In Syria, we have grown accustomed since the 1960s to artistic work being under the management of the state and part of its annual and long term planning. This situation continued and was comfortable for decades, since artists or intellectuals were wholly reliant on official institutions and all they had to do in order to produce artistically was focus on their art and its production. This ideal situation did not last long, and the system started to appear “flabby” because it had not developed at all. The same frameworks of the 1970s and 1980s have persisted till now. Starting in the 1980s, it became clear that these frameworks required reinvigoration or revival. Talk about the need for change started to grow on the national and regional levels. From that time on, we started to hear demands for an independent art, as if the existing frameworks had turned into a burden for culture and art. I will not go into an analysis of this problem here, but will return to it over the course of this piece to make my starting point clear. So from that time there began to be ideas of something new, but what was this new thing, and what was its relation with the status quo? Was it a continuation or a revolutionary break? Was it in coordination with what existed or had it turned its back on it and become totally independent? These were the questions we started from. Today, I believe that these problematic questions are still present everywhere and are raised regarding independent art, even if states have found answers to them as diverse as their number. Naturally these questions were not posed in isolation from what was happening all over the world in terms of cultural globalization and the technological developments that shook the status quo.

Then there is another question that arose around this new situation and its relationship with the issue of funding and its mechanisms in a country like Syria and in other countries: what did this new thing represent? Would it be marginal with respect to the society it was living in and that nurtured it, or would it become involved with it? I think this question converged into two problems. Who funds independent art projects? What is the grounding of this art? By grounding, I mean the infrastructure it is launched from and returns to in terms of institutions, spaces, people and so on. These

are pressing questions and have often been raised before, but their answers remain a matter for negotiation. Furthermore, is the kind of work termed independent by its nature elitist and undemocratic, in that it does not give opportunities to everyone in the same fashion, while the other is considered “democratic” work?

Despite these important questions, our conviction of the need to think of cultural projects outside the official frameworks grew. There was a cautious attitude on the part of those involved in traditional culture towards people who were trying to go beyond the familiar, as if this was going beyond the culture of the herd. At a certain stage (even if belated) we got over all of this, because the situation on the ground demanded a break with the status quo. We thought we wanted to produce new cultural forms and we waited for the right circumstances. We—I use the plural here to avoid pretensions—started to plan and implement cultural projects without recourse to creating an independent institution. For this reason we were obliged always to work under the umbrella of existing institutions that ensured the necessary protection in the country where we were operating. Why didn’t we register ourselves, given that the number of people working on the projects was considerable, particularly in the case of the interactive theater projects? In my opinion, this goes back to the prevailing political situation. It is not easy to register as an institution with full rights to exist and continue. The situation remains the same until today in this respect despite the great changes in mentality.

Here, I would like to talk about two experiences: interactive theater and supporting the youth theater. The existence and development of interactive theater resulted from the request of institutions within Syria as well as funding institutions. I would like to make it clear that interactive theater was something new to us, and in order to work in that field we had to become familiar with the genre, experiment with it, and develop its mechanics so as to be able to use it in a way that matched the reality in Syria. I won’t go into the details of this form of theater, but will say that it requires an arena that

permits dialogue, because it rests upon the idea of creating dialogue with the audience. This was no easy matter, particularly when we consider the subjects which were raised through these projects, which included women and work, polygamy, freedom and so on. We designed and implemented a number of projects based on a proposal from powerful institutions at that time in Syria: Fardous (an independent nonprofit institution) and then the Rawafed program of the Syria Trust for Development, also an independent nonprofit body. However, in both cases these two institutions had sufficient protection to allow us to work at ease in varied social contexts. To emphasize, the joint technical team and I initially worked under the cover of a “professional work unit” at the University of Damascus where I teach. After a while this unit was disbanded for reasons unconnected to my work.

Theoretically and practically, these projects, especially interactive theater and the youth theater, allowed me to turn to a group of graduates of the various faculties of the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts, and the theater studies department in particular because it had gathered a large number of them to work in this field. This was important because it encouraged many graduates to follow training courses and learn the techniques of this form of theater and deal with it creatively and produce new things after they had been without work, or barely finding anything to do. The prevalent idea at the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts was that graduates of that department would be invited to work in theoretical aspects of theater, such as criticism and the like, and that they were not suitable for involvement with dramatic creativity, even though their studies qualified them for this to a great extent.

Concerning the subject of funding and imposed agendas, which is a charge brought against this kind of work, I can confirm that for most of the projects it was me who defined the project agenda based on the needs and requirements I saw on the ground. Basically, I can say that the success and positive evaluation of any project is linked to a great extent to having set a project philosophy. I mentioned concrete examples of this above. I am not against foreign funding, but on the basis of my experience I find that there are conditions that must be met:

The project must be tied to the need of society and not the opposite, i.e. that we do not impose this kind of art on society but rather introduce it to society when there is a need for it and when we find that it is of some benefit, so that we have the say over accepting something new. This was the main problem that I posed to myself with regard to interactive theater and its introduction into various arenas in Syria. Before we learned and applied interactive theater (it is also termed community theater and participatory theater) we were unfamiliar with it, although I had heard of it and read about it in France during my studies. I became convinced that we had to develop and teach it in a way that corresponded to the needs of society, to enable us to use it in varied, and perhaps extremely varied, circumstances. We had to consider the idea and logic of this form of theater on the practical and theoretical levels. We published two guides to interactive theater, when we worked in the countryside and when we worked in government schools, where we outlined the project philosophy and our vision of interactive theater in society.

I was convinced by my experience that interactive theater is a major asset for those working in the field of theater and social activation and those working in the field of education. I will say that the experience of interactive theater in government schools was highly successful for a variety of reasons. When we proposed the project, we felt the need to develop theater in schools and to develop curricula and styles of teaching. In this way, the private independent institution that we represented converged with the official institution of the ministry of education in terms of the need to develop. We were asking for funding to launch a pioneering experimental project in this field, and the funding body interacted positively with us and was even welcoming in that we were expressing a real need.

There were no agendas or conditions imposed on us apart from the logical condition of running the project well. Thus the success of the experience derived from the convergence of two different institutions, both of which were convinced of the need for the project.

The design of the project and the specification of its mechanisms, stages and goals were completely independent in two dimensions:

the relationship with the official institution and that with the funder. We took conditions on the ground into consideration and the style needed for dealing with schools. We did not rely on any previous experience from anywhere else in the world. This allowed and required us to pose numerous technical questions around defining interactive theater and its aims, where we wanted to take it. The results we achieved in the end can be found in the booklet on the project, and our website gives figures and details that show the extent of the project, its size and its results.

There was a paragraph in the project document signed with the Ministry of Education that gave the project a sort of independence, but more importantly, in the initial agreement there was a paragraph concerning the formation of a working group within the Ministry of Education devoted to interactive theater. A section for this form of theater was also created in the Theater and Activities Directorate at the ministry. I think this dimension is significant, because by the end of the project, it had become able to continue in an independent fashion. Naturally all of this required additional time, and at the end of the two years of the project, we requested an extension, but the conditions the country was facing did not permit it.

At the end of the project, we were able to make available to the country a number of trained specialists who will work with us or in an independent fashion in the future.

I would also like to briefly recount the experience of a project we undertook with the Swedish Institute for Drama in cooperation with SIDA to support youth theater. In my opinion this was an important project, because it attempted to give opportunities to young people in the theater and was able at the end to be part of the birth of a new generation of thespians. Why this project? First, because we were convinced that projects that have a purely artistic character must be supported, and theater is art. This kind of support is rare and differs from the usual development project. Second, because current laws provided financial and logistical facilitation for older and veteran artists and only rarely provided opportunities for young people to create. Third, because we wanted to found a new paradigm for theater production, one where young artists are responsible for their work and not just their ideas or creativity. We wanted them to

be aware of the production aspects involved.

I wanted this project to support and be a natural outcome of the existence of a Higher Institute for the Theater and to graduate a number of the country's dramatists. I also wanted to give graduates of a specific department of the Institute, the Department of Theater Studies, opportunities to be creative and to produce. Perhaps in an unintentional fashion, I also wanted to respond to the way television drama was swallowing up the graduates of all departments of the Theater Institute. The dream of graduates is to work in television and television production in search of a livelihood.

The project supported youth theater projects in whole or part. In fact we became convinced in the project's second year that we should give partial support. In most cases this equaled half the production of the projects of beginners, to the extent that we thought of calling the project 'First Work'. This support or encouragement covered the script, direction and technical aspects and even art direction. Many names gained prominence and their first opportunities over the five years the project lasted.

In this case as well, the project sprung from a need on the ground. The funding body did not have control over it, but had a rational and technical oversight role, which was only its right given that we were not an institution and did not operate under institutional cover.

What I wish to say in the end is that independent work is a necessity today, but this does not mean it needs to occur at a remove from existing or official institutions, nor does this mean it should be hostile towards them. On the contrary it may further what they are doing and play a critical role because it has to be achieved via different means that are removed from the existing weaknesses and nepotism and can give a chance to something new.



### Marie Elias - Syria

**University Professor;** She teaches at a number of educational institutions including the University of Damascus, the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Damascus, and St. Joseph's University in Beirut. She has authored a number of publications and translations in the field of theater, including a critical dictionary of theater in three languages (in cooperation with others), an anthology of modern French drama, and research papers on theater. She has managed a number of training workshops in various fields, most significantly in dramaturgy.

She has directed a number of development projects in Syria, chief of which are the interactive theater programs in government schools and in rural Syria and a project for the development of youth theater.



## **The Experience of Makan, the Egyptian Center for Culture and Art**

**Ahmed El Maghraby - Egypt**

My journey with Makan started in 2004, the year I commenced my cultural activity, though this time was in fact preceded by a long period of institutional work through the Egyptian Center for Culture and Art (ECCA) which was set up in 2002. This involved preparations, forming bands of musicians, setting the plan in motion and participating in the recording and preservation of the popular and folk musical tradition. We reached the point where we needed a permanent place of our own where audiences could see regular performances. Coincidence played a part in the selection of the Center's current downtown premises, as I spotted an excellent site opposite the mausoleum of Saad Zaghloul. When I went by it was locked, but I felt the location was the perfect place for ECCA/Makan. So I set to work to make this happen, and in the process I discovered that this place had once housed the printing presses of Al Balagh newspaper, founded by Abdel Qader Hamza Pasha. I took this as a good omen.

Over the course of a full year, we worked to equip, furnish and decorate the space to suit our new activity. When I thought about the design of the space, I did not think that a rustic peasant design was right for the downtown location. Besides, we would be presenting a spectrum of folk music heritage to reflect the whole of the Egyptian people and their diverse environments. This would include the Nubian, the rural agrarian, the Upper Egyptian and the desert Bedouin environments. Simplicity and minimalism was therefore the key to solving the question of Makan's design and its relationship with the cultural function it would fulfill.

As a result of this effort, Makan became a space where the audience can sense the ambience of simplicity and minimalism that is apparent in all its details. The walls were cleaned while preserving the traces of the spontaneous human touches that were added over time, making them much more than if we had simply painted over them. The floor was covered with locally made rugs and carpets of

Spartan design, which fitted in with the other elements of Makan. There is no stage. Performers and audience are on the same level. The performance space is neither cavernous nor cramped. On one side are some wooden steps that lead to an upper balcony with a wooden railing that extends along one side of the space. People sitting up in the balcony look down on the performers and audience below. For some this is the place to sit, and others chose the wooden steps themselves, but the larger part of the audience usually sits right in front of the musicians and singers. When the music starts, the space is in tune with the simplicity, warmth and authenticity of the folk and non-folk arts being seen and heard. This atmosphere and orientation and the virtuosity based on specialist knowledge is not to be found anywhere else.

There is another impetus to our experience which is no less important than the above, and also linked to it from the very beginning. This is the belief in the importance of preserving the tradition of folk music and song from extinction. We value the role played by our various authentic folk arts and affirm the values of diverse local creativity, and how continuing to foster these values of creativity has far reaching effects upon the formation of an Egyptian public sensibility and taste that lifts feelings beyond the superficial and helps cleanse them of their many destructive blemishes. By a process of re-filtration, feelings become capable of confronting elements of effacement and destruction.

The Egyptian folk tradition of music and song is considered one of the most important and richest repositories of the spiritual, social and cultural memory of the world's peoples. For this reason, we have been zealous in the collection, recording and documentation of this tradition in all its various forms and tones. This is one of three fundamental goals that ECCA has striven to achieve. We have made great strides in meeting this goal, embodied in the thousands of hours of audio and video we now have. This huge archive of recordings is scientifically documented and classified, and includes all forms and tones of the Egyptian popular musical tradition from the different governorates and local cultural habitats, in all their richness and diversity.

Given the proliferation on the cultural scene of local bands that

imitate mostly western styles in their various forms, and in the notable absence of bands performing the popular folk heritage, our second goal was to create bands that play within the tradition of folk music and song. We chose the core of these groups from those retainers of the traditions still alive, and gave them the best training. This gave them the ability to perform this tradition of music and song for an audience while maintaining the inherited form of each of these traditions.

In terms of achieving the second goal, we have been able to train and create a number of excellent groups which have been well received by our audiences of Egyptians, Arabs and foreigners of all kinds and ages. At Makan or at our outside performances, audiences are united by their love for this popular tradition and the special way we present it in its authentic form as mentioned above.

Among the groups we have formed are Aragide, which presents the folk tradition of Nubia, Jaafra in the tradition of the tribes west of Aswan, Mawawil in the folk ballad tradition, a group for the ballads of Alexandria, and Mazaher, who present the music and movement of the Zar (community healing ritual). Other groups perform music of the Egyptian gypsy tradition and the Bedouin song tradition from the oases and the valley.

We have not neglected the vital importance of traditional instrument making, and have photographed and documented various techniques in their manufacture. These instruments include the arghul (a reed clarinet), the salamiya (pipes) and the mizmar (reed pipe). We did not think that our experience would be complete without educating and training a new generation to set out on the way, so we set up a school specializing in the teaching of youngsters to train them to preserve, play and perform the traditions of folk music and song. As a result of the earnest desire to be as complete as possible, we have produced a number of books that deal with the history and forms of the popular musical tradition and its various instruments. In this way we can offer those interested in this field with a background in the underlying culture.

Perhaps this makes me turn to official culture's relationship with the various strands of the popular tradition, particular in its heritage

form. This relationship is blighted by a great deal of misunderstanding and a lack of strategic vision. At times, popular art is presented in a superficial, touristic manner, at best diminished. At other times, it is totally ignored or more generally marginalized. The worst part of this relationship is found in the negative view of folk arts, which sees them as of much lower standing than other artistic forms such as singing along to saxophone or guitar melodies, playing the piano, or other such “clean cut” performances.

This elitist, arrogant and narrow official view looks at the arts from a perspective of differentiation rather than integration. One of the major reasons for setting up ECCA was to raise the status of the popular musical tradition and demonstrate its great richness and diversity, as a means to rehabilitate its value and that of the men and women who preserve, play and perform it.

Despite our belief in the importance of these two goals—safeguarding the tradition from dying out and forming groups to ensure its artistically authentic continuation in the face of the disparagement it faces—and despite the hardship in fulfilling these two aims, we have made renewal the Center’s third goal. On the basis of the same sound scientific method, we have taken care that our understanding of renewal conforms with the special features of our work to achieve the two prior goals. We adopted this understanding of renewal from the Egyptian intellectual Amin Al Kholi who said “The beginning of renewal is to put an end to old by understanding it.” If we tolerate the extinction of the cultural forms that contain within them our diversity and difference, we will soon no longer find any signs of uniqueness between people. Renewal, then, as we see and practice it at Makan, starts with the comprehension, understanding and assimilation of the old to form a solid basis for the innovation of new cultural and artistic forms. In the context of this goal, we have presented many musical experiments and performances which have been no less creative and outstanding than the authentic folk tradition we have offered. Through workshops given by performers, preservationists and musicologists from all over the world, we have succeeded in exchanging expertise and ideas, and in innovating through musical experiments grounded in their own territory while surrounded by other more fragile and unauthentic spaces. Such experiments include the Egyptian Mozart and Nas Makan, where we

try to put forward a new musical sound presented by preservers of the tradition and inherited folk maqamat (modes) and techniques.

As those working in independent cultural activity know, there are aspirations and a longing for completeness. We always think of this as a positive factor pushing us to acquire more expertise and knowledge, and to build bridges of cooperation among us. But reality and the nature of the work often impose unforeseen challenges and obstacles such as:

1. The lack of awareness of the value of the heritage in its traditional form among the singers who keep the tradition going. Such singers wrongly believe that their performance of the tradition is just their adapted rendition which may meet with the approval of people who see them as major folk artists in the prevalent superficial sense, or in its touristic sense of exploiting the folk artist and our folk arts in general. This is a preliminary challenge that requires us to engage in further awareness and training programs, as well as human efforts appropriate to such a stance. This should aim to raise the value of the product in its authentic form in the minds of performers, particularly as all the elements of cultural and artistic richness and diversity are latent in this inherited image.
2. The difficulty in finding people to safeguard the tradition among reciters and performers. This is due to Egypt’s geographical extent, and the demise of many performers without having passed on the musical tradition to their children for a variety of economic and cultural reasons. This means we are basically looking for a needle in a haystack.
3. In addition to official culture’s familiar belittling perception of the folk artist and of the role folk arts could play, the weak and distorted official cultural arena presents a new and more dangerous challenge. This is the ascent of religious currents with extreme and reactionary views of art and artists, a view that in some cases goes as far as a prohibition on the arts in general and on music and song in particular.



## Ahmed El Maghraby - Egypt

**Translator and cultural activist;** Ahmed El Maghraby graduated in 1983 from the School of Humanities, Ain Shams University, where he obtained his Masters and PhD in Italian theater and literature. He has taught at both Ain Shams University and the Institute for Oriental Studies at the University of Naples. He is fluent in Arabic, Italian, French and English. He has worked as a translator and writer for the Egyptian Broadcasting Organization, and has translated many published literary works. He is currently the program director for the Egyptian Center for Culture and the Arts, also known as Makan. El Maghraby has been involved in cultural work in an intensive way since 1992, when he founded an independent cultural center and a group of music ensembles dedicated to the preservation of spontaneous oral folk heritage.

El Maghraby has helped present many Egyptian music ensembles to audiences abroad and he participated in the execution and production of several CDs, such as Coptic Liturgies and Egyptian Sufi Chants from the Shazeli Order (both of which are part of the Institut du Monde Arabe CD series), as well as The Egyptian Mozart and a CD by the South Ensemble.

## Decision, Pain, Birth, Memory Lapse

By Abderrahmane Ahmed Salem - Mauritania

I was in preparatory school when I first engaged in cultural work. That coincided with the National Festival for Youth in 1985. I ventured into theater acting, and before long that adventure soon developed into a “benevolent virus.” For a time, at least, it rid me of a latent passion for the cinema which, from my childhood, had been my greatest dream.

I joined the National Federation for Amateur Theater, initially as an actor, then as a playwright, director and, eventually, as fate would have it, an administrative director of the federation’s regional office in Trarza, a southern region on the border with Senegal. There I remained until I became involved in national television as an actor in a comedy program. Then came further developments as I changed from actor to journalist, to information designer and then to founder and director of a satirical newspaper.

I remained in the latter capacity until 1999, when film director Abderrahmane Sissako visited me in my office to inform me of his plan to shoot his forthcoming film Heremakono (Waiting for Happiness) in Nouadhibou, and to invite me to participate in the experience. For me, that was what physicists call the “Big Bang”.

I took part in the film as assistant director, after which one thing led to another: a trip to Paris to help in the montage, a trip back to Paris to study at the International Film School (EICAR), and then it was back home again to found the Maison des Cinéastes (House of Filmmakers). That was ten years ago, in April 2002.

I began with a dream that failed to convince some, frightened others, was dismissed as sheer madness by many, and won the whispered

faith of a tiny few.

The backdrop then, as it remains today, was a country that ranked cinema among the “cultures of ill repute.” There was no administration for cinema, no film institute, no movie theaters, no political desire. No one spoke that “language”.

Today, the facade has changed, but the backdrop has changed little. Today the word “cinema” carries some weight in the cultural scene of the country. There are audiences thirsting for film, scores of young filmmakers, national films, a cinema festival, production companies, and associations by the dozens with a regional and international presence.

Still, the backdrop has barely budged. Official interest in the cinema is nonexistent. There are no cinema schools or institutes, and no specialists in cinema in the cultural sector.

Even so, I still keep going.

To a large extent, my experience resembles what every mother goes through in pregnancy and childbirth: the pains and agonies before the newborn sees the light of day. Every time, I swear that if I make it through this one, I’ll never do it again.

But after the birth, as the newly born brainchild begins to grow and I grow attached to it, I begin to sense its need for care and nurture, and for a “brother” to stand by him and play with him.

Then, in a careless moment, I forget the pain and I forget the vow I made to myself and there I go again. The pains begin again, the agony gets worse, and I pray that it’s only a “false pregnancy”.

But the labor pains come and they are agonizing. Sometimes the birth is “natural,” many other times it is a “cesarean,” conducted by surgeons from the security agencies or by the official guardians of culture.

And so the cycle continues: decision, pain, birth, resolve, memory

lapse, decision, pain, birth, resolve, memory lapse...

I can never recall how and when I think of starting a cultural project, but I do recall every detail of how others respond and relate. This applies to the recipient, the partner, the sponsor and the funder.

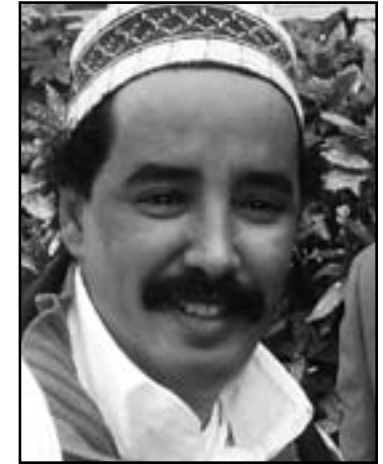
The recipient sees the work as a debt that is long overdue. The “interest” has been accruing and he expects payment immediately, and in sterling quality with no flaws or shortcuts.

The partner sees the project as “his” and is proud of how generous he was to let me be the poster boy.

To the official sponsor, the project is an act of charity that I had better remember and count my blessings for at every moment. If I do not do this, even in the most “private” moments I have with other members of my family, then I’m a thankless ingrate.

As for the funder, as I have learned to my lasting edification, I am “nothing” without him. Therefore, I should praise his supreme munificence, laud his innumerable virtues and pay tribute to his boundless benevolence. He is the be all and end all. Without him, there can never be fat times, only lean times.

Such is my life. Such is life for the “cultural project brainchild”: an unexpected pregnancy, a perilous birth and growth among family members that include a long absented recipient, a self important partner, a magnanimous sponsor, and a deified funder.



**Abderrahmane Ahmed Salem**

**- Mauritania**

**Filmmaker,** Abderrahmane Ahmed Salem joined the National Federation for Amateur Theater, where he worked for ten years as an actor, director and writer, and studied cinema in the International Film and Television School (EICAR) in Paris. After graduating in 2003, he returned to Mauritania where he founded the Maison des Cinéastes, which he continues to direct. He is a member in many cultural and academic organizations in Africa, the Arab world, and Europe. He was voted person of the year for human rights in 2009 and cultural personality of the year for 2010.

He currently serves as chairman of the Artistic Board of Culture Resource, the director of Arterial Network’s North African office, president of the Association of Moroccan Filmmakers, and director of the Maison des Cinéastes in Mauritania.

## I'm Free to Do What My Conscience Tells Me

**By Yasser Gerab - Egypt**

In Youssef Chahine's film *Return of the Prodigal Son*, we hear a Salah Jaheen song that goes "I don't belong to anyone, good sir. I'm free to do what my conscience tells me." This verse pretty much sums up one aspect of my approach to independent cultural work in Egypt.

As the verse suggests, this aspect is twofold: independence and freedom. Taking this a step further, I'd say that "independence" consists of several components. Above all, while it means not being subordinate, it does mean commitment to international conventions, principles, treaties and divine laws.

I also measure the strength of cultural work by the extent to which it relates to and reflects an awareness of the local environment in which it is carried out. Artistic and cultural activity (workshops, seminars, exhibits) that might work in the upscale neighborhood of Zamalek would not be appropriate for Sayyida Zeinab, for example. Each area sets its own conditions.

Cultural work involves the ability to present a "real" service, not an abstract one. A cultural worker might be able to produce fantastic theories on the means and mechanisms of cultural work, but these theories mean nothing unless they can be translated into actual practices on the ground. To further cultural development we need to deal with concrete "givens", and this involves other skills.

The dimension of freedom entails the ability to take and act on informed decisions. This, in turn, imposes two prerequisites. Firstly, you cannot be fully reliant on a single source of funding, sponsorship and partnership. Naturally, I am not opposed to receiving funding. But I strongly encourage diversifying funding sources so that you can impose your own conditions and meet your criteria for the cultural project that you agree upon with partners and/or donor agencies,

and also so you have alternatives in the event that support from one source stops. This is part of how you stay “free to do what your conscience tells you.” The second prerequisite is decentralization, a subject that merits further discussion and to which I will return below.

Once I submitted a film scenario that I had written to the censorship authority, and got it back with the authority’s stamp of rejection. I still recall every detail of that film and how its bold idea clashed with the talents and abilities of the cultural censor. I thought at the time, this is no way of being creative, and since I felt that artists had more freedom of expression I decided to turn to the plastic arts. Since the 1990s my works have been displayed in a number of individual and group exhibitions in Egypt and abroad.

The foregoing helps explain why I became involved in independent development and syndicate work. Although I never worked in the cinema, I was a member in the Cinema Professions Syndicate, and I was an active member, eventually becoming the chairman of the syndicate’s cultural committee until 2001. I also produced several independent social science studies and joined task groups involved in cultural development.

The Townhouse project, which I had the honor of cofounding with my friend William Wells, a professor of contemporary art, was pioneering among cultural organizations operating in Cairo. This was not only because it was one of the first of these, but also because of its ability not only to survive all these years but also to expand – vertically and horizontally – in all its artistic and cultural projects and programs.

Townhouse never subscribed to the logic of a “culture shop.” It sought to serve as a cultural center open to all artistic activities, and whose plans and projects proceed in accordance with long term strategies and policies. This type of planning did not start when Townhouse first opened its doors, but well before that when in 1997 we began to study cultural work in Egypt with an eye to comparing the performance of the cultural bodies in the public and

private sectors. Once we completed this study, we forged a concept for Townhouse that sought to avoid all the weak points and benefit from the strong points that we found in other cultural entities, and we developed a clear strategy and working plans accordingly.

Among the shortcomings that our study identified in cultural work in Egypt, whether in governmental or in non-governmental organizations, was one mentioned above: the reliance on a single source of funding. Like it or not, this type of funding relationship not only pins you to the criteria of the funder, it also jeopardizes your survivability. If, something happened to make the donor agency cut off funding – an economic crisis, for example – this would force you to stop work. This has, in fact, happened to many organizations.

In the course of our study we discovered another major problem that hampers organizations with great potential. I refer to centralization, that voracious monster that feeds on organized work, especially in the field of culture. I used to live close to a private sector theater in Cairo. The owner was the administrative director, the legal and financial director, the artistic director, and an actor as well. He oversaw everything, including the janitorial work. The theater was doomed to fail.

In the Townhouse, we made sure to delegate the finances to an accountant, legal matters to a specialized lawyer, and cultural and artistic projects to project directors. All of these people were our partners in drawing up the general policies for our organization. By distributing functions and responsibilities in this way, we would better be able to improve and develop our work, and we would simultaneously reaffirm who we are, our desire to interact with others, and our openness to initiatives. We know how hard it is to keep things in order and to follow through on hundreds of details without centralization, but we know how vital decentralization is to the realization of our goals. This is why we have remained as determined to preserve this element as we are dedicated to the work we do.

We also observed in our study that for some independent cultural



entities, one of the synonyms of “independence” is “going it alone”. This is very dangerous in cultural work. One should remain open to everything. Also, “braiding” among organizations is extremely important, to ensure the fullest possible participation in the preparations for and the execution of cultural projects benefiting people in society, without discrimination or bias. I have used the term braiding to mean something distinct from the term “networking” that we frequently hear in civil society work. Being a strand in a braid does not imply merging or identifying with the other. Rather, it signifies a mode of interaction within the framework of a certain dialectic, which can eventually deconstruct, allowing the strand to be “braided” with others in another dialectic.

Finally, we found that many of the cultural organizations we studied were vulnerable to two afflictions. The first was that of having a political affiliation or being explicitly pro or anti regime, or pro the ruling party or pro the opposition. Political ideology restricts independent cultural work, whether artistic or developmental. The second affliction was seeking profit before all else. While it is true that Townhouse is officially established as a company, we as partners agreed that we would work on a nonprofit basis. We take salaries in exchange for the time we put in, like employees in any company, but we do not receive dividends or the like. All profits or surplus in the company’s revenues is reinvested in the vertical and horizontal expansion of our cultural programs.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, we chose to work in two parallel tracks: the promotion of contemporary art, and cultural development. The early stage of Townhouse’s existence was plagued by rumor wars that began by targeting its initial sources of funding, which many intellectuals eyed with suspicion at the time the organization was founded. The old generation of leftists customarily received funding from the East and was uncomfortable with funding from the West. On the other hand, we encountered no problems or obstacles from the official establishment. Since its founding, Townhouse has continuously cooperated with a number of official cultural institutions, from the National Center for Theater to the Hanager Theater. People would often ask me how we dealt with

government bureaucracy and whether it stood in our way. I would answer “Bureaucracy is everywhere. In order to obtain funding from a donor agency for any one project, we have to submit dozens of documents to prove the probity of our activities and transactions. With Egyptian government agencies, the solution is not to boycott them but to contain them and try to bend them to the service of cultural work. But I would never ask an artist or creator to deal with that bureaucracy. Rather, I would engage an administrator who specializes in the mechanisms of cultural work and, at the same time, who has the ability to handle the bureaucracy and overcome the administrative hurdles so as to help foster a suitable climate for the creative artist to work in.”

In principle, I oppose boycotting the official cultural establishment. I believe that independent cultural organizations should try to work with it as they pursue their projects. The cultural establishment is everywhere, as embodied in the cultural houses and palaces, for example. Cooperating with it will ultimately benefit cultural work in Egypt, in general.

The Townhouse Gallery for contemporary arts and cultural activities opened its doors in 1998 in the heart of downtown Cairo. Its purpose was to stimulate and support the local, regional and international arts movement by offering opportunities for artists to exhibit their work. It also sought to help form and train independent artists, especially those who never had access to such opportunities due to the limited sources of funding for the arts. Thirdly, it aimed to develop and hone the skills and talents of amateurs, students and professionals, and members of marginalized groups interested in or occupied in the visual and performing arts.

With regard to the cultural development programs that form Townhouse’s second or parallel track of activity, from the outset we thought to achieve the following aims:

- To effectively support members of the community by interacting directly with artists and creators and specifically by offering them

appropriate and suitable opportunities to create and prepare their artistic projects and display them to the public.

– To participate academically and practically in cultural development projects connected with improving the capacities of artists, technicians and others interested in practicing visual and performing arts, whether as individuals, groups or troupes.

– To participate academically and practically in multimedia projects seeking to develop the community by affirming social developmental concepts through cultural artistic practices.

– To encourage individuals, groups and troupes to contribute to and to enhance their skills and contribute to the development of culture. We also sought to encourage such individuals or groups to take the necessary steps to establish their own legal and independent artistic entities.

– To work with developmental initiatives and cultural activities aimed at promoting cultural activity, and to cooperate and participate in the reaffirmation and realization of the sustainable comprehensive development of all people in society without bias or discrimination. We accorded particular priority to the design and implementation of cultural development programs for marginalized members of society or persons with special needs.

– To manage the Rawabet Theater for Performing Arts in a way enabling us to cooperate directly with creative individuals and groups, by providing a modestly sized independent space in which they can present and promote their cultural activities in the performing arts (theater, cinema, music, contemporary plastic arts) through public exhibitions or performances on the basis of a set and ongoing program.

As I mentioned above, Townhouse, like most independent cultural organizations, is not working for profit. Therefore, to me the criterion that serves as the best gauge for the success of our projects is continuity. Take for example our Workshops for Working

Children project. This project has been in progress for seven years. We have seen the children who took part in it grow up, develop and hone skills and talents and, in some cases, become cultural activists themselves, supervising and managing workshops. We have also continually developed these workshops, most recently introducing theater as part of the development and training activities, which led to the public presentation of a play performed by the workshop participants. As the foregoing illustrates, cultural work to the Townhouse does not stop at exhibitions or performances that deliver a cultural product to an audience. It extends to transforming the individual into someone with the skills and abilities to appreciate cultural output and participate in its creation.

I should mention here that the developmental track that shapes Townhouse's programs has stirred reservations in the artist community. Some object that this orientation places too many restrictions on artists and forces them into contexts that might not coincide with their creative projects. To such objections I say that artistic creativity does not mean that one has to be narcissistic and aloof from society, or cut off from society's collective concerns and issues. At the very least, an artist should have a way to help people receive and appreciate his work. In fact, this is why whenever Townhouse holds an exhibit, a day or two later we organize an open dialogue between the artist and the public. With such mechanisms, the artist retains the right to exercise his creativity freely, while simultaneously opening a direct channel of communication between him and the public, enabling him to participate, as an artist, in cultural development projects. We should also bear in mind that the position of the creative artist in Egypt, the Arab region, and in the Third World is totally different than that of artists elsewhere in the world. We still have to struggle to build an infrastructure for independent cultural work. For art to exist there has to be a place to present it, but there must be something more. If Townhouse restricted its activities solely to exhibiting art, it would become isolated from society. Conversely, by becoming a locus for the interaction between the producers of art and society, the Townhouse space brings benefit to all.

Townhouse Gallery began with an apartment. It has since expanded to include several spaces for diverse projects and activities. There is the First Floor Gallery, the library, the factory space, the Rawabet theater, and the Rooftop studios project.

Another criticism we have faced is that Townhouse supports certain particular forms of art that some have labeled “orientalist,” and have been accused of promoting stereotypical images of art in Egypt. To this I would like to respond that we should presume that any cultural work project is inspired by good intentions. This applies to the activities of Townhouse. In addition, we do not have a fixed budget that permits us the luxury of saying, for example, that this year we are only going to display the works of ten artists. All our projects are undertaken with partners who sometimes help in the execution of the projects, but they do not impose their outlooks and conditions. We have always retained the right to set our own strategies. Thirdly, it is not Townhouse’s fault that some artists’ work seems “orientalist” or stereotypical. If this is the case, then the reason, in my opinion, is that most young artists derive their creative vocabulary from Western art. I do not think that this is a major problem. Moreover, I believe that by displaying their artworks we are indirectly encouraging them to transcend their earlier phases and to explore new areas and methods that will lead them to a distinct artistic voice and identity. Let us bear in mind that the collective identity of a society is ultimately forged by artists.

In the course of my cultural development work since the 1980s, I have observed some considerable progress in the life of independent culture and the arts in Egypt. It may have seemed slow, but there are indicators that make me optimistic for the future of the independent cultural sector, as individuals and a community, alongside the other cultural sectors. I wish independent cultural actors the best possible success in their work and in their cooperation with all others concerned, for the sake of all people in society.



**Yasser Gerab - Egypt**

**Visual artist and independent cultural activist;** Yasser Gerab graduated in script writing from the Higher Institute for Cinema. He joined the Syndicate of Cinematic Professions, in which he served as chairman of the Cultural Committee until 2001. He undertook a number of independent studies in sociology and joined various groups involved in cultural development.

Since the 90s, he has held numerous solo exhibitions and taken part in group exhibitions locally and internationally. In 1998, he cofounded the Townhouse Gallery for Contemporary Arts, assuming responsibility for the cultural development program. He has worked as a trainer for diverse artistic workshops and participated in the establishment of Rawabet theater. In addition to serving as a jury member in several art competitions, he is a member of the board of directors of the Independent Theater Troupes Support Project, and a member of the National Group for Cultural Policies in Egypt.

## Questions on Culture and Revolution

By El Habib Belhady - Tunisia

We dreamed, imagined, wrote, went without sleep, resisted, got photographed, photographed, lived on the streets, debated, organized, resigned, went out, appealed, demonstrated, stood in solidarity, understood, interpreted and, at the end of December, we launched ourselves into its midst. It was ours and we belonged to it. How great were its slogans.

Freedom and Dignity

This brought us together and united a whole people in a movement that changed the image of this small, safe and secure country. We were stripped of our image as a humble and submissive people. One of the most vicious modern dictatorships was swept away by peaceful demonstrations that united the unemployed with the female intellectual, the marginal with the woman lawyer, the poor with the trade unionist, the student with the professor, and the young woman with the indigent.

We heaved a deep sigh of relief and believed that we had made the miraculous come true at a time when the power of despotism had strengthened. The security forces were stable and oppressive, shored up at home and abroad thanks to their friends and those who had first and foremost a higher economic interest. The riches of society had been plundered, the poor starved and favor given to the wealthy.

We clung on to the first step when the head of the regime left the country, leaving the people in a state of euphoria except for the very few whose interests had been damaged by the flight of the coward.

We experienced a joy the likes of which had only been felt by those who witnessed Tunisia's independence. We imagined we were embarking on a new age with no possibility of a return to dictatorship. The people that had held on to the streets and squares imposed their demands and achieved a general amnesty. The exiles returned. Freedom became a lived and breathed reality on screen, in the press and on the radio.

Everything became political. Talk about politics, lessons in politics, political insults. Private and public discourse was political. The politician talked politics. The revolutionary became a politician, the sportsman became a politician. Youth talked of nothing but politics. Everyone was organizing politically. Political voices rose loud and everyone forgot that they had known something else before the revolution to add to the politics.

The clamor rose and the country became a political marketplace. This political offensive took in everything and everybody. The water, the air and the weather turned into politics. Everyone plunged in vying, shouting, lying, true and false. No voice was louder than politics.

The public sphere became polluted with politics despite its importance. The voice of reason, the voice of the dreamer, and the low voice of the revolutionary youth disappeared. Many withdrew, leaving the arena to those who could shout loudest in the face of their interlocutors.

The sky darkened and listening became impossible. No voice could be heard above the shouting and the din.

Paths crossed and the way was lost. Achieving simple aims became more complicated.

In the absence of reason, thought and imagination, the preacher took the opportunity to valorize the divine word, leaving ordinary people with the legacy of the dictator. He arrests us in the name of religion, in the name of God, in the name of religious law, so returning us to the place that some of them imagine we have grown

used to. Or perhaps God ordained that we should not leave it for long before we return and perhaps accept it as an inevitable fate.

Let those who imagine that obedience, fear and poverty have been ordained for us know that this people has become cognizant and understands its poet Abul Qasim Al Shabbi.

Those who differ have become heretics, atheists, followers of Satan, Masonics, Jahili parties, breakers-away from the herd, a threat to the aims of the revolution and traitors to the people, Arabism and Islam. The new rulers have made us believe that the sacrifice was made for them alone, and that they alone were imprisoned and exiled, even though they feared God.

Where are you, creative artists? You've left the politicized preacher to decimate our side and try to subjugate a people that no longer accepts highhandedness and force?

Where are you, my country's intellectuals, to save your people from a return to the Middle Ages in the age of digital, knowledge and technological revolutions?

Where have you disappeared to?

Why have you broken up with your people?

Is all that you have learned of no use?

How have you withdrawn from the environment that you live within?

Where have you run to?

Where is your voice? Do you prefer bourgeois luxury?

Have you been shaken by the call to prayer?

Do you have a problem with your past?

Have you become used to accommodation and obeying authority?

Is it because you didn't spend your lives in prison and exile?

Has your political independence become an obstacle to you joining with those you spent your whole lives defending?

Are you ashamed of the funding you grabbed for your works from your people's money in the time of the dictatorship that marginalized you, starved you, excluded you, oppressed you and isolated you?

Why have you left the arena to the hocus pocus charlatans?

Why are you silently participating in the extinguishing of citizenship in your homeland?

Head to the front lines to vindicate truth and progress, to champion freedom and dignity. You are their army and support. Your time has come, and without you this revolution will be left to the spiteful, the ill-spirited, the reactionary. The battle is your battle. What you cede today you will be accountable for. Do not leave the revolution on its own to be seized by opportunists, peddlers in religions, and those bandwagon jumpers of the fifteenth of January.

All these revolutions will become the stomping ground of the past and of the reactionaries if you do not nourish them with new revolutionary thought that embraces humanism and respects universal values and freedoms in all their diversity. If we abandon them, they will revert to those who enchain and suppress them.

This is the battle they want to impose so they can finish off freedom and liberation and consolidate violence in all its forms. Might will become right, and once again fear will haunt us and kill the poet within us. All the women will be covered and the crows will croak in the expanse of our dreams, as if nothing had changed.

Safety, security, religion and reverence to the Creator's representative on Earth, free to do as he pleases with us and to us in the name of the true religion and in the name of the fight against apostasy and

atheists and in vindication of the Arabs, the Muslims, the allies, the friends and the enemies. Water, electricity, the internet and gas will be cut off and we will return to wells and oil lamps as an act of mercy and out of love as we are compulsorily re-homed in Paradise after a miserable Hell on Earth.

They are observing us to strike at our gains and to intentionally confuse between those gains and the previous rulers. Our achievements are the result of the struggle of our grandparents and parents, not those of the rulers. We developed a way of life that curbed liberation and so we have reached the point we have also.

Backward constitutions that do not open up prospects to freedom and that go against the rights and freedoms which all of humanity has agreed upon have been imposed. We are being swept into the prisons of religious law, the cutting off of hands and feet, the forbidden and the permitted.

We dream of a freedom only restricted by the soul, conscience, consciousness, reason and spirit. We aspire to the liberation of the creative artist from compulsion and the universal spread of culture and creativity so they can play their role and break with censorship and self censorship. This will make them an important sector that can play a real part in this revolutionary field and help elevate Tunisians to their humanity by achieving equity in the distribution of culture among Tunisians wherever they are on the map.

We are now confronting a serious challenge from the legions of the Salafis under an authoritarian cover that sees creativity as an affront to the feelings of Muslims which must be respected. There have been a succession of attacks, assaults, violence, arson, tricks, bans and confrontation in the hope that we will be afraid and submit and in the hope that audiences will be afraid and leave their seats empty and desert theaters, festivals, galleries and cinemas in fear of the violence of bearded extremists.

The main support for the future of this revolution is our free, liberating culture, which is open to its past and future, to its Salafis,

anarchists, the right and the left.

This revolution has no limits and will never accept limits. If limits are imposed it will rise again and again. Did we rise up to return to a distant, unfamiliar and unknown past?

Did we rise up to get rid of science, competence and progress?

Did we rise up for hypocrites and philosophers of religious deliverance to finish us off?

Have we fallen into a trap of illusion?

Has thought stifled us to return to oppression?

Have we been miserly and has fate been miserly with us?

Why are our peoples taking us backwards?

Why are our peoples not taking us to modernity?

Why all these gains at the outset of our revolution?

Who is responsible?

Are we alone in the dock before history?

For all this we are destined to do more.

To think more

To propose more

To reassess ourselves more

To listen more

To change more

To love more



### **El Habib Belhady - Tunisia**

**Theater director and filmmaker;** El Habib Belhady worked in cultural institutions and Tunisian festivals until 1985, and then devoted himself to theater production and assumed the management of the Tunisian National Theater from 1987 to 1992. He also produced some international works with France and Belgium.

In 1992 with Fadhel Jaïbi and Jalila Baccar he founded Familia Productions for Theater and Film. He was responsible for production and distribution. He produced numerous plays and arranged for these productions to tour around the world.

He has produced some plays for television, cultural programs, documentaries and science fiction films. In 2007 he established Arts Distribution and opened the CinemAfricArt to showcase cinema created in Tunisia, which was closed down following an attack by Salafis in 2011.

## Total Independence

**By Mohammed Abla - Egypt**

I am often confronted with the question, “What do you gain from the Fayoum Art Center?” It is a valid question, but it still leaves me baffled. The reason it is valid is not so much because it is logical or reasonable, but because it is so widespread in today’s world. People have grown used to speaking in terms of profit and loss.

I might sound naïve, but I still find the question strange. Generally I answer with another question, such as “What do you gain from raising your children?” “What did the person who founded the University of Cairo have to gain from that?” or “What gain was there for the founders of the Mubarra charitable organization for children?”

What does anyone gain from realizing a dream? Perhaps for you the answer to this is nothing. To me it is: everything.

I believe that the brief introduction above is the best avenue to open a discussion on independent culture work. To me the idea of independent culture work seems as clear as the rising sun. Independence can only mean one thing: independence. You cannot be independent if you’re dependent, and you’re dependent as long as you have to rely on others for support – any kind of support, but especially funding. Precisely for this reason, I receive no funding from anyone whatsoever, not locally or internationally, and neither from the public or the private sector. In everything I rely totally on myself. This is what I do, quite simply and without a lot of philosophizing or presumption.

This is not just a moral stance. It follows from my understanding of the meaning of independent culture work, itself. Clearly, the value



of any cultural work derives from the specificity of the experience which, albeit, should embrace both the old and the new. This is how I see things.

As I contemplate the current state of cultural work, I notice major problems that impede community cultural work in Egypt. The government, as we all know, is mired in bureaucracy and it lacks a cultural policy. Through my minimal experience in working with government institutions (which occurred only once), I learned that the workings of the establishment are contingent on persons and, specifically, the personality of the official in charge. If an official believes in a particular project, he'll promote it or smooth the way. If his successor does not believe in or is not enthusiastic about that cause, he'll obstruct or cancel it.

But the situation is not all that different outside the government. Most cultural organizations that are funding recipients are restricted by the standards and conditions set by the funder. This brings me to a certain phenomenon that I find disturbing for the entire field of cultural work.

International institutions tend to treat Egypt as though it is new to civil society work and no matter how much time goes by it looks like they are not about to change their attitude. Yet, Egypt was among the first countries to engage in this field. Our experience began at least as early as the 1930s. There was a Society of Friends of Art, among other nongovernmental cultural organizations. There were also societies that were not specifically dedicated to culture work, but offered a respectable cultural service. Mubarra is a case in point, but there were others.

Under the Abdel Nasser regime, community associations fell into decline for various political reasons that are unnecessary to discuss here. When these societies revived under Anwar Sadat they were heavily dependent on foreign funding agencies, which always regarded us as "beginners." Decades have passed since some mammoth donor foundations established themselves in Egypt, but their ways and attitudes have changed little.

I find it hard to contain my surprise when I come across a foreign director of an NGO who imagines that his organization's approach to cultural work is oriented to the specific needs and conditions of the target country. I will relate a personal experience I believe is worth contemplating in the context of dealing with large and weighty foundations.

When we founded the Caricature Museum, to which I will return in further detail below, an international foundation approached me with a generous offer to fund the archiving of the cartoons we were collecting. As I read through the proposal they subsequently submitted, I discovered that the bulk of the funds would return directly to the foundation, leaving the archiving project with precious little. According to their conditions, the writer of the project takes a percentage and the supervisor of the writer of the project takes another percentage. Then there were dozens of other points that meant further deductions from the amount that was ostensibly destined for the museum. In short, it looked like they were applying for salaried jobs, via the Caricature Museum.

I rejected the offer, of course. Afterwards I was not surprised by those projects that receive extensive funding but end up producing nothing on the ground. The foundations do not teach us how to fish. They offer us a fish and then eat it themselves! Meanwhile, Egyptian culture suffers and Egyptian society loses a cultural service that it should have received.

Cultural development does not require huge sums of money or reams of tidy forms and documentation. It requires a little risk and a lot of love and effort. Before turning to the experience of the Fayyoun Art Center and the Caricature Museum, I would like to turn back to 1994 when I took part in an artistic cultural initiative that I still feel proud of.

This experience unfolded in Kom Gharab, a slum in the area of Old Cairo, not far from the famous Hanging Church and Mar Girgis Church and in the vicinity of the pot makers community. Government officials felt they had to do something about the "eyesore" so near a

tourist area, and, as we all know, the easiest answer to such problems is simply to erase them. But before the bulldozers were sent in, a group of us went to the officials and persuaded them to give us a chance to renovate and beautify the neighborhood and save it from demolition. We then put in a lot of effort and, together with the inhabitants there, we succeeded in turning the neighborhood into an important cultural locale.

This experience epitomises the type of interaction that gives me the greatest pleasure. We worked in that neighborhood for nearly four years, during which time we got to know the people there very well and came to appreciate their powers of sense and emotion, as well as their unbounded industriousness. But as fulfilling as this was, it made us all the more sorry for the neglect of the cultural fabric and aesthetic abilities in the popular neighborhoods whose people merit care and kindness. In fact, this is all they ask for: care and kindness.

That experience also disproved the theory that the arts, and the fine arts, in particular, are “elitist.” This theory is propounded by various pseudo-intellectuals and creative types who will add that if you take the artist out of his demographic and cultural environment he will die. Nothing could be further from the truth, to which testify the immortal works of the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar and of Sayyid Darwish in music. Theirs is truly art from the people and for the people. The notion that art is elitist is a crime against the right to culture of the people. It effectively accuses them of being backwards, whereas, in fact, they are intellectually and culturally steps ahead of those intellectuals who spout such ideas.

I will turn now to the Fayyoun Art Center, which I founded in 2007 on the banks of Lake Qarun. The center strives to make a special contribution to stimulating and enriching artistic dialogue and the principles of tolerance and mutual understanding between artists from all parts of the world and Egyptian artists. I realize that the foregoing might sound like something you might come across in any cultural brochure and make you feel that it is part of the usual fodder for media consumption. But I am certain that if you were

to visit our center in Fayyoun, you would discover that the words above ring true.

In Tunis, the village in Fayyoun that harbors the center, art is the lingua franca for the exchange of ideas in a special Egyptian environment, set against a backdrop of palm trees, mountains and sand dunes interspersed with patches of luxuriant green. Everywhere one senses the tranquility and beauty of the Fayyoun oasis.

The idea for the center was inspired by a summer academy where I studied in Salzburg, Vienna in 2006. Legally, the center is established as a single-member organization and, as an artist, I am exempt from taxes. In any case, the center makes no profit.

As I mentioned above, I seek “total independence,” literally. I am opposed to the idea of funding. The Fayyoun Art Center hosts 25 Egyptian and foreign artists every year and provides studio spaces for painting, graphic art, sculpture and video. The center costs around 50,000 LE a year to run which, thankfully, I am able to produce from my own pocket, and I will continue to cover these costs until I declare bankruptcy.

Tunis in Fayyoun is an oasis of art and artists. Many writers, musicians and artists visit or spend long stays there because it is a land full of inspiration. Perched on a hill overlooking Qarun Lake, the village is surrounded by verdant fields. It is one of the most beautiful rural locations in Egypt and I was into joining Tunis’s creative community 20 years ago.

The Fayyoun Art Center organizes annual training workshops in the art of caricature, attracting artists from all around the world. In general, the center seeks to revive ancient techniques in the plastic arts. Many Egyptian artists feel held back by the huge costs of pigments, paints and other materials that have to be imported from abroad. Yet Egypt’s artistic heritage is rich in the diversity of techniques and raw materials that can be used in producing colors, and in painting. By drawing on such resources even artists with

modest means can find breathing space for their creativity.

The Fayyoun Center's Caricature Museum is the first of its kind. Nothing like it exists elsewhere in the Middle East or in the rest of the world. Ultimately, it is a very special museum.

I suppose you might call me a cartoon fanatic, but I'll be collecting them all my life. The idea of creating this museum was born in the wake of the controversy over the Danish cartoons that became notorious for their offence to the Prophet. I wanted to offer a civilized response to this controversy in my own way. I also wanted to underscore the fact that Egypt had a tradition of cartoon drawing that voiced social and political criticism. I had begun collecting Egyptian cartoons a long time ago in order to preserve them as part of the Egyptian cultural heritage. Egyptians should be proud that we have a very rich tradition in these arts.

The visitor to the museum will find 14,000 caricature drawings by artists of different generations. These acquisitions, which appeared in various Egyptian newspapers and specialized publications since the mid 1920s, constitute the first nongovernmental museum of caricature art in the Arab world. In addition to saving the treasures of Egyptian caricature art from extinction and oblivion, I wanted the museum to serve as a school of caricature art teaching both the origins and the methods of this art.

The pieces on display offer a cross section of some of the museum's oldest and best acquisitions. These have appeared over the years since 1927 in magazines specializing in caricature art, such as *Al Matraqa*, *Al Shu'la*, *Roz El Yusuf*, *Idhak* and *Ba'kuba*. We have also tried to ensure diversity in the subjects treated, from various social and political concerns to portraits of famous personages. Nor do the exhibits restrict themselves to the old. The museum is constantly updating its exhibits to feature new and contemporary creations, and especially works by young artists. Entrance is free of charge.

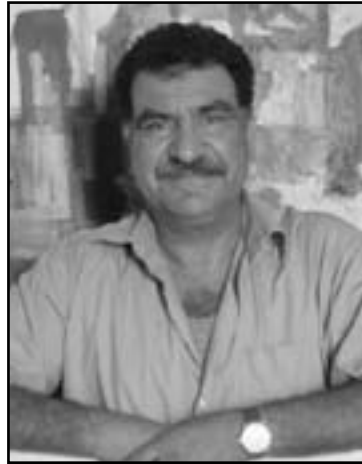
The museum is not just the fulfillment of one of my dreams, it is also the realization of the dreams of the pioneers in caricature art,

notably the late Zuhdi Al Adawi who will remain an inspiration for the establishment of a National Museum for Caricature, for which he amassed many assets that are currently being housed in the Egyptian Association for Caricature Art.

Alongside the Fayyoun Art Center and Caricature Museum, I engage in independent culture work in all other ways available to me, whether as chairman of the board of directors of the Atelier Gallery in Cairo, or as a participant in the El Fan Midan project. In fact, I have made it a point to be a permanent contributor to El Fan Midan, because I see this project as an essential part of raising the general public's awareness of art and the beauty of art through its practitioners such as myself and many others.

Artists must get closer to the people. They must work for them and enable them to experience art. I paint people in order to make them part of art and because they are a part of life. I also believe it is important to make them feel that the artist respects them by painting them and that his efforts are for their sake. This is the duty of all artists.

## Mohamed Abla - Egypt



**Visual artist;** Abla studied Fine Arts in Alexandria and in 1978 he started a seven year journey to Europe, where he showed his first solo exhibition at the Hohmann Gallery in northern Germany, studied graphics in Vienna and exhibited his work at the AAI Gallery, and studied graphics and sculpture and gained two years experience in art therapy in Zurich.

He has held many solo and group exhibitions in Egypt and in Europe. In 1994 he won the 1st Prize at the Kuwait Biennale, and in 1997 the Grand Prix at the Alexandria Biennale. In 2007 Mohamed Abla founded The Fayyoun Art Center where artists meet, work and collaborate. In the 2009 he established the first caricature museum in the Middle East. Mohamed Abla now lives in Egypt and works between Cairo, Fayyoun and Germany.

## Theater, Independence and Other Matters

**By Abeer Ali - Egypt**

A female theater critic once suggested to the owner of a satellite channel that they put on a program about the theater. He replied sarcastically “What? There is still something called theater?”

“Yes sir, there is still theater, whether you like it or not.” Of course that response was made in forceful and desperate defense, but in fact, a few days before that, I had been saying to myself in despair that theater is an art form without a memory. Any film can be seen 200 years later, but a play becomes a memory as soon as the run is over. A play, when it succeeds, is seen by 5,000 or perhaps 10,000 people. But film and video are watched by millions. What an effect that is!

Talented artists are leaving us and abandoning theater because it is exhausting when the income for being an extra in a video clip is equal to the pay for being an artist in a play. We should add in the fact that the middle classes are staying away from the theater, the same middle classes that bloomed in the 1960s. They left it because it abandoned them.

First, state theater was controlled by employees who were not creative people and its bureaucracy offered a stale, arrogant, alienating theater devoid of beauty and pleasure. Second, the middle classes also gave up on private sector theater, as ticket prices rose and quality declined. This form of theater was not interested in them but in petrodollars and tourists. Third, and in parallel, there was an upheaval in values after a military and political defeat. This was followed by consumerist liberalization and the destruction of all the symbols and achievements of our history. Fourth, and in parallel, the Wahabi movement gained entry to society with the return of Egyptian workers from abroad and also through the awful media and satellite channels, and lastly because it was an easy matter to find art on various other platforms and technologies.

That was the picture. What would emerge from those circumstances?

A deformed child? An incomplete birth?

No, it wasn't a deformed child, but a group of embryonic developments at various stages. The embryos of a living creature called the independent theater, which was the legitimate offspring of that period. It was born in 1989 with the first Free Theater Festival. This replaced the Experimental Theater Festival canceled during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The companies involved, El Warsha, El Daw, El Haraka, El Shazaya, El Iqtirab, El Mesaharaty and others, despite their different origins and orientations and their shared implicit independence, were all civil sector artistic bodies, although these terms had yet to be fully formulated at the time. They were the harbingers of ideas imposed by reality and expressed needs and solutions to the problems and crises of the artists of this nascent movement.

The founders of these bodies were artists who had not been absorbed by Egyptian theater in its private and public sector forms. For some artists, the reason for this was their leftist orientations. For them, theater became one of the channels for participating in change once they began to despair of change coming through political organizations. So they turned to theater as an alternative. Others sought to escape the confines of censorship and the entrance of “fundamentalists” (be it political, religious or artistic fundamentalism that rejects any new artistic or intellectual proposal) into the theater. They sought freedom within independent theater. Finally, there were those who sought to escape the hegemony over the creative process that those working in the state institutions had by only dealing with specific people, and similarly with regard to the commodified rules of private sector theater.

The first Festival for Independent Troupes came in this context full of contradictions. The companies began to seek a purpose and formulate their artistic and intellectual orientations, individually and in their relationships to each other and with the official institution and other supportive institutions.

Turning to the official establishment and its influence over the artistic directions of independent companies, we can see a journey full of points of contact and divergence, support and attack. To

begin with, support came in the form of prizes for the best plays. Companies used these to fund their next productions. At times the award would be monetary, 2,000 LE from the Ministry of Culture for each company as production funding. After the staging of the play, the form of support developed into the buying “nights” of the performance. This began with two nights during the Independent Theater Forum organized by the Association for Study and Training of Independent Companies (founded by Theater Atelier, Mohammed Abdel Khaleq, El Daw, Tareq Said and Amani Sameer, El Mesaharaty, Abeer Ali, El Shazaya, Hani El Matanawi; and critic Rasha Abdel Meneim). This continued with the Independent Season organized by the Association of Young Independent Artists where the nights purchased ranged from two nights for new companies to ten nights for those well established. It was also possible to buy extra nights from the successful productions.

Some companies failed, others continued, and new ones developed. There were new initiatives for nascent projects. The Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni continued to promise support and cooperation with the independents. For example, in 1999 the Ministry of Culture issued a statement that was published in the official press to the effect that the ministry had chosen twelve companies out of all those active at the time that had presented an application to be considered by a committee formed by what was then the Cultural Development Fund, to be supported by the Ministry with a fixed annual grant. Nothing of this came true. The number of independent companies continued to shrink and its slowed artistic development was a result of official absence and disregard.

The minister of culture met with the founders of the independent companies more than once. He proposed that they set out their ideas for support, to which he would agree then sign and forward to the Cultural Development Fund. This was followed by total silence. Once it was on the grounds that we were not legal bodies capable of receiving state support. So the El Mesaharaty, El Daw, Atelier and Shazaya companies formed the Association for the Study and Training of Independent Companies, and El Ghagar and El Haraka formed the Association for Young Independent Artists. Still, total silence.

In light of this lack of activity of work opportunities, the major role of the Hanager Center must be highlighted. This was under the sensitive direction of Dr Huda Wasfi, the shining light of support within the Ministry of Culture, and one of the few intellectuals supportive of the movement for renewal in culture and the arts. She opened the door for the support of the young independent artists and their productions and outreach. She provided space for rehearsals, performances and workshops with theater people from the Arab region and elsewhere in the world. She sent many young people for training and study. She also understood the various mechanisms of production. Her leadership respected the independence of the creative people running these companies, and their right to put in place their own administrative and artistic mechanisms. Finally, she put the names of the companies on their productions without such bureaucratic packaging as “The Ministry of Culture, Department of Cultural Production, Hanager Center, presents the ..... Company.”

The Art House for Theater, under the direction of Dr. Hani Mutawa, also represented progress in its purchase of two nights of a production from each company for performance on one of the Tali’a theater’s two stages. This came after a bitter struggle with the administration of the Art House for Theater.

Contrary to this, and for many reasons, there was the disregard by the official establishment, its fluctuating position and a failure to put into effect projects that had been agreed upon with independent companies. This led to relative artistic stagnation and regression in the absence of a space to house training and performances, and to build an audience to help critique and develop these artistic directions through many performances and experiments, good and bad, repeats and renewal.

As for businessmen and their relation with the independent companies, until now there has been no support from them for the theater in general, and independent theater in particular, because there is no profit in theater. However, they support the cinema, just as banks support the plastic arts at times by buying paintings. From the above it is clear that the lack of any role played by businessmen has been highly negative. Without support for theatrical production there is no theatrical movement, no growth, and no cultural and

artistic drive.

Let's turn now to the foreign cultural centers and their relationship with independent companies. Their support has come through their funding of short and intermittent workshops, which are disconnected and do not develop. We must ask what the purpose is of these workshops, which absorb a large part of their funding budget for arts and culture, instead of supporting real technical training that stimulates the growth and accumulation of skills and the continuation of the artistic movement?

Foreign cultural centers support artistic projects that submit to their cultural orientations and also to their political agendas. This pushes creative artists to tailor projects to European tastes, which makes them divorced from problems of their society and the taste of the audience. When these institutions fund artistic projects of a more "local" nature, it is usually on the basis of collecting folklore as an "antique" to be placed in a gallery for the consumption of European tourists.

Concerning the relationship between the independent bodies and their influence on the artistic orientations of the independent companies, we can say that, to begin with, these bodies only shared the same historical conditions. Then the relationship developed in a narrow context, through their coming together in the context of independent theatrical gatherings to show their productions. Coordination between them was only for the achievement of short term objectives.

Some funding bodies signaled their support and there was explosion of independent companies seeking to obtain this support. Some were real, others creations on paper. Independence as an artistic and production orientation is changeable. It is not born complete, but needs time, practice, and trial and error. Time and practice are the two arteries of independence.

At that time the only large companies were those that had already manifested their projects before the offer of funding. There were none who had done so among the beginning and amateur companies. These illusory bodies appeared with weak projects thrown together to obtain funding. Then there was disagreement

between the older companies, which by virtue of their experience proposed artistic projects that brought them together, and these scattered new companies. They attacked the projects presented by the older companies and accused them of "promising the earth" to the funders and thereby receiving the funding. In fact, there are two misconceptions here. First, since the right to present projects that combine groups of independent companies under artistic or administrative formulations is everyone's right, why didn't the new independents put forward projects that gathered their own together in artistic projects? They always worked individually and only made an appearance when the functioning companies (El Mesaharaty, El Ghagar, El Daw, El Haraka, El Atelier) put forward a project that brought the independent companies together.

The second misconception is that funding, if available, goes to a prior project and it is very limited and meager. It is the right of the companies proposing the project to set fair criteria for which independents benefit from the project. Independents means bodies that have gone through a continuous artistic project for at least five years. This is a suggested criteria.

Add to this the shocking confusion and despair felt by theater people at mixing an artistic and intellectual project by a professional independent theater company with amateur dramatics. This confusion is found in the usual question: how can independents accept financial support from the state and still be independent?

It's as though independents have to work during the day to fund their artistic projects at night. As if the Ministry of Culture is the ministry of government culture, and not Egyptian culture in both its governmental and nongovernmental divisions.

Thus the shared general features to the independent companies' artistic orientations become clear. Most of them have a technical and artistic project in a state of creation, development and formulation, of varying degrees of maturity. Most are interested in real, major issues such as political and social freedoms and the reworking of the global and local cultural and intellectual heritage.

The founder of most of these companies is also their director and the author of most of their works (except for El Haraka where

direction alternates between Khaled El Sawi and Sayid Fouad). Most of the companies do not rely on prepared scripts. Rather, they rework old texts, novels or the vibrant material gathered from new, unconventional and non-traditional texts. Also, they do not rely on the idea of the individual hero, heroism is always collective. All the characters in a play exchange existence and importance reciprocally. They exchange the parts of the dramatic game and there is no hero and no extra.

Most founders of these companies adhere to the idea of the theater man or woman and not the director. Most independent performances are characterized by a rich formal vision and a poverty of production values.

To conclude, independent companies will be a fundamental part of changes in the field of theater. First, in changes to the idea of the structure of the traditional script, an end to the idea of the individual hero, the spread of the idea of collective authorship of history, stories of daily life and other ideas by means of writing workshops based on the experiences of independents in this arena. Secondly, independent companies will lead the way in developing the concept of a theater visually and artistically rich while poor in terms of production. Thirdly, independent companies will lead the way in creating contemporary artistic forms and subjects arising from a dialogue with the cultural and artistic heritage. It is working assiduously on this project to achieve in practice the idea of the contemporary and the authentic.

I affirm that all these directions are in the process of coming about, rising and falling on the chart, but the trend is always upwards and it is not possible to return to square one. The ascent might be slow and the features not clear enough for some until now. But these experiments are endless and reach the aim, which is to start on the path to a new goal that suggests itself to them.



### **Abeer Ali - Egypt**

**Theater director and researcher in folklore and social history;** Abeer Ali graduated from the College of Fine Arts in set design and went on to obtain a diploma from the Higher Institute of Folk Arts. In 1989, she founded the independent El Mesaharaty theatrical laboratory.

She is the director of the workshops, experiments and training program and the director of regional administration for the General Bureau for Theater, which is a department of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's General Organization of Cultural Palaces.

Abeer Ali is also a member of the Independent Culture Coalition, the National Group for Cultural Policies, the secretariat of the National Festival for Egyptian Theater, and the board of directors of the Project for the Support of Independent Theater Troupes.

She has directed many theatrical works for her independent troupe, as well as for El Beit El Fanni Theater and the General Organization of Cultural Palaces Theater. She received several awards for theatrical direction, set design and scriptwriting.

Abeer also works as a trainer in collective writing, and storytelling as a written and performing art. She has engaged in many projects using art in social development projects in collaboration with the League of Arab Women and the Egyptian Association for Comprehensive Development.



## The Dialogue in Algerian Culture Project

By Habiba Laloui - Algeria

The idea for Dialogue in Algerian Culture was born out of the firm conviction that in a society just emerging from what might be charitably termed the disaster of a tribal system, with all its catastrophic fallout for the individual and for the Algerian community, it is essential to help embed a culture of dialogue. Dialogue in Algerian Culture represents the first effort to create a network of young independent cultural activists who share a basic concern to create new traditions to drive culture and reinvigorate the Algerian cultural landscape. The major new initiatives envisioned are at a remove from the predominant celebratory and festival-based mentality, the herd mentality, the logic of “blocs” and the deep polarities that, for three decades, have exhausted the Algerian cultural scene with pointless conflicts, like that between the proponents of Francophonie and the Arabisers, which continues to sap the vitality of the Algerian cultural scene.

The project made its first appearance as a Facebook group in December 2009, a group that continues until today to attract those interested in and persuaded by the idea of cultural change based on initiatives that are simple and profound at the same time. These initiatives are independent from the “supreme guidance” of the official institutions of culture and hold that the participation of civil society is essential for building a different image for the country’s cultural scene. An image that expresses the essential and the authentic, and that is close to the everyday concerns of the country, and not superior to them.

Over these three years this cultural group has chiefly worked on three main fronts:

1. Cultural Media: This is an effort to make news of cultural activities, publications and initiatives accessible to the citizen. In the absence of a media policy that supports cultural action, news concerning culture only circulates among those already familiar with the labyrinths of the narrow cultural milieu. We support the democratization of culture and the breaking up of any monopolies.

2. Cultural Dialogue: This is concentrated in an effort to formulate the idea of cultural dialogue by embedding dialogue within Algerian culture, to question its authenticity and essence, to invest in its richness and diversity, and to build bridges between its different and complementary (or at least supposedly complementary) elements.

This idea has and continues to be met with a great deal of criticism because it holds to the principle of unity in diversity that makes an authentic whole of Algerian culture, comprised of distinct and authentic components that both enrich its diversity and support its unity. This is a difficult formula in light of a cultural reality that is ruled by blocs and marginal conflicts. Real players are absent, since they have chosen isolation to escape a cultural reality that excludes them with its superficiality and its elevation of the “elite” that fawns to official institutions.

This approach requires a great deal more attention, investment, and creativity, in order to create occasions that bring together the active parties representative of the different cultural bodies in Algeria, within single projects that focus on serving Algerian culture rather than stoking disagreements and conflicts that are not easy to understand, analyze and solve in light of Algeria’s difficult history.

3. Cultural Policy: The network’s third front is cultural policy in Algeria. It is working in cooperation with the Algeria Culture blog to launch dialogue and lively debate about Algerian cultural policy, and to organize periodic gatherings for cultural actors in Algeria to support the drafting of a new cultural policy by civil society. A draft was released by Cultural Policy in Algeria, a group supported by Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy).

Prospects for this project can be divided into long term dreams and short term potentials. In the short term, there is the work to expand the network for dialogue to encompass the largest possible number of cultural actors. These should be from the various regions of Algeria, representative of all its cultural sensibilities, and should be proponents of the idea of dialogue as a new and alternative language to support the cultural and social scene, and even the economic and political one, in Algeria. This relies on social media networks and electronic and traditional media channels.

To achieve this goal in practice, the team is planning in the project’s fourth year to launch a website with content oriented towards serving the goals of the network, supporting cultural dialogue in Algeria, and helping to enrich the cultural landscape with critical, creative and factual content that challenges the normative and raises the novel. The website is based on respect for all the cultural entities in Algeria, and should provide a space open to those who differ or disagree so as to build bridges of dialogue.

As to the long term, the project hopes to foster and strengthen its work in the field by continuing cooperation with independent cultural institutions and organizations that believe in the same principles, by proposing cultural activities and initiatives that support their ideas. At another stage, we will try to create physical spaces for these activities. The network is trying to forge into a new tradition in Algeria by bringing opponents together in one space for the purpose of dialogue and cooperation, for the sake of launching a new movement in Algerian culture. This aim naturally remains linked to the degree that it is taken on board by activists and their readiness to serve, enrich and develop it.

There is also the matter of the practical possibilities that are provided, and the team is working to develop these with funding institutions that meet the fundamental condition of offering basic independence.

The real achievement of this project to date remains the networking that brings together a number of independent cultural actors—now more than 500—for one purpose, despite their ideological, linguistic and cultural differences. This purpose is to enshrine the basic principle of building bridges between different, supposedly complimentary, cultural bodies through dialogue. Since the beginning this has relied on the intense efforts of a group of cultural actors. Chief among them are:

- Professor Faris Buhajila, the author and researcher of Algerian history who has contributed major critical works on the political and cultural condition of Algeria. He is active in Constantine in eastern Algeria.
- Professor Kamil El Shirazi (Rabih Hawadif), the cultural journalist

and theater director who recently won the major prize at the Sidi Bel Abbas theater festival in western Algeria for his latest play *Women Without Faces*. He is primarily active in the capital and its suburbs along with other cities.

— Professor Boumedién Belkabir of the University of Annaba in eastern Algeria, an economist with many publications and manuscripts on development and the prospects for change in Algeria.

— Professor Ammar Kassab, an expert in cultural policy and coordinator for the project to draft a new cultural policy for Algeria. He runs the *Algeria Culture* blog that has been working for some years to enshrine the idea of the participation of civil society in cultural work and cultural directions in Algeria.

— Professor Nasser Shaquri, who is interested in Algerian cultural issues and active in the city of Hassi Messaoud in the south of Algeria.

— Professor Rahma Bousahaba of Mascara University in western Algeria.

— Professor Suheila Bourizq, the writer and journalist who runs the *Fobyaa* cultural website and is based in Washington in the US.

— The journalist Samira Bouhamed of Algiers.

The website has also been joined by non-Algerian activists who are interested in Algerian culture and protective of it. These include Professor Kanaan Al Banna, the Syrian journalist specializing in theater, and Professor Abdel Khaleq Al Saidi, the Iraqi social scientist. This openness on the part of the network to experiences and expertise from outside Algeria supports the network with different critical viewpoints which may open up future prospects for Arab and regional cooperation.

One of most important initiatives launched by the network has been to organize a second session for the drafting of the new cultural policy for Algeria in cooperation with SOS Bab El Oued on 4 February 4th 2011. The gathering witnessed heated debate among artists,

cultural actors, writers and administrators from independent cultural institutions. They produced a list of basic demands that formed the first draft of the new policy. This document was then distributed for wide discussion over social media networks and the electronic and traditional media. It represents the core from which the working team from the Algerian Cultural Policy group will write the final document for the new policy.

“*A Book for Your Child is a Book for Your Future*” is among recent initiatives launched by the network. This aimed to bring together the network members at the International Book Fair in October 2012 to collect as many children’s books as possible in order to set up a remote library in Tizi Ouzou, a tribal region.

Such initiatives naturally remain limited in comparison to the network’s ambitions. The way forward faces objective obstacles, most significantly the far-flung geography of Algeria, which makes coverage a practical difficulty without a large and robust network able to facilitate the movement and meeting of its members. This remains out of reach given the newness of the network and its limited means. There are also the problematic issues of culture, society, politics and ideology which continue to undermine and threaten the fate of any serious project that aims to bring differing Algerian energies together to serve one goal. Here we might mention by way of example the plague of regionalism, the crisis of centralism, and the conflict between Francophones and Arabisers.

The network continues to rely on the energies of its members and their deep conviction of the need to remove even a little unfairness from the Algerian cultural reality despite the difficulty involved. Any careful observer of successive Algerian crises will discover that herein lies the essence of the problem and the breakdown.

The founding statement of the Network for Dialogue in Algerian Culture may be found here: <http://www.fobyaa.com/?p=15184>.

## Habiba Laloui - Algeria



**Writer, journalist and poet;** Habiba Laloui holds a master's degree in discourse analysis and is currently working as a researcher at CRSTDLA (The Scientific and Technical Research Center for the Development of the Arabic Language) in Algiers, where she is attached to the semiotics translation lab and responsible for the journal Lisaniyat (Linguistics).

In 2009, she founded the Dialogue in Algerian Culture network for young independent cultural activists. In 2011 she was elected as the North Africa representative to U40 Africa for young cultural actors under the age of 40. The same year she joined the National Group for Cultural Policies that is writing a new cultural policy for Algeria. Her first poetry collection *Sips of Bitter Coffee After Midnight Sadness* was published by Dar Al Farabi in Lebanon in 2011.

## Arbitrary Lines

**By Karima Mansour - Egypt**

In spite of my long and deep experience in this field, I have to say that in general I am not fond of talking about “independent” cultural work. Or, let’s just say I speak about it with some reserve, at least with respect to the concept of independence as it is commonly understood by the majority of the Egyptian intelligentsia.

Whenever they speak of this field, they give me the impression that it is connected to a philosophical ideal of “freedom” in the abstract, with no appreciation for the contexts in which we live and move. Although such a notion of freedom could never exist on the ground, if it did, I doubt that it would yield welcome results. Freedom, as they say and as I understand it, is responsibility. There is no such thing as freedom without limits. Freedom, in itself, can be a restriction.

Without mentioning names or specific fields, I believe that many “independent” organizations or, rather, many organizations that call themselves “independent,” are not truly independent. Or more precisely, they are not fully independent, because they have to work in keeping with the vision of a funder. The whys and wherefores of this are not the issue here. I simply wanted to indicate that the “independent” in independent cultural work is not as absolute as many imagine. This is why I reject that arbitrary line that is drawn between independent cultural work and state-sponsored cultural work. We must strive to move ever forward and upward, using whatever means are at our disposal towards this end, so long as we do not betray our legitimate principles and dreams and our commitment to serving society through whatever avenue we choose.

I am not opposed to working with government institutions in principle, though without a doubt, they do present difficulties. I currently direct the Center for Contemporary Dance which is based

in the Egyptian Opera House complex and which falls under the auspices of the Cultural Development Fund. In other words, I have been working with the government for a year, or just a bit less than a year. But this has certainly not been the case throughout the rest of my career in contemporary dance. In addition, I am perfectly prepared to leave my current post if I feel compelled to, and my commitment and dedication to my art and to society will never flag for a minute. Nevertheless, following the revolution I believe that at the very least I should give working with government institutions a good try.

Ideally I would like to see the state fulfill its cultural duties to the people as happens in developed nations, where I personally saw the respect accorded to the creative artist, without bias, discrimination or injustice.

Only here do we have problems in this regard. Artists have a right to access to the tools that enable them to present their art to the people, because that is the social function they serve. Therefore, the least they should receive in exchange is the means to help them do this.

When the state refuses to help, or when corruption intervenes, or when the government official looks down his nose at the artist, or when some minister shows favoritism to some people over others, then the situation can only continue as it has for decades, with artists who seek to promote their art having to look for help outside the government and, sometimes, outside the country, as was my case, to which I will return below.

After obtaining a bachelor’s degree in cinema from the Higher Cinema Institute in the Academy of Arts in Cairo, I went to the UK where I obtained a bachelor’s degree and then a master’s degree in contemporary dance from the London School of Contemporary Dance. I returned to Egypt in the late 1990s, only to find contemporary dance under occupation – a single individual ruled the affairs of this realm throughout the country. I worked with him for less than a year and then decided to go my own way. This was

not so much a “decision” in the customary sense of the word as it was a compulsion. The situation at the time, and up to the January 25 Revolution, was so confining that one could contribute nothing new. It was my sense of injustice that drove me to found MA’AT.

MA’AT, the first independent company for contemporary dance in Egypt, is the channel that has enabled me to practice my art and exercise my creativity in the way that I had dreamed of ever since I began dancing at the age of five. The goddess Ma’at is the daughter of the ancient Egyptian god Ra. Choosing this name reflected my desire to express my connection with my roots. Ma’at, herself, stands for justice, harmony and individual and cosmic consciousness.

The company was funded by independent organizations in a manner that served to advance our concept with no loss of our independence. We have had fruitful and rewarding experiences with many international institutions, such as the Royal Netherlands Cultural Fund and the Young Arab Theater Fund (YATF). Through MA’AT we have staged performances and participated in international festivals around the world, such as the following:

Dampfzentrale, Switzerland 2012

Kennedy Center, Washington DC 2009

Marseille Festival, France 2009

Dancing on the Edge, Holland 2007

Orleans, France 2007

Blois, France 2007

Alkantara Festival, Lisbon, Portugal 2006

Hamburg, Germany 2005

Blois, France 2004

Madagascar 2003

Rotterdam, Holland 2003

Florence, Italy 2002

Institut Du Monde Arabe, Paris, France 2001

As you can see, I have presented performances in many countries around the world. Naturally, when I look back on all those contributions and how well they were received abroad, I feel happy and sad at the same time.

The source of happiness is obvious. The sadness stems from the fact that, in spite of MA’AT’s growing success, I could not present a single performance in my own country for seven years. From 2004 to 2011, I was virtually banned by virtue of a ministerial decree in favor of a certain individual. It had never even occurred to the minister himself to attend a performance of mine. It was as though he thought I was committing prostitution instead of producing art. In such cases, the artist has no choice but to go independent. Still, despite that wall, I continued to do my duty as an academic, teaching in my own country as well as in various places abroad.

MA’AT also became my platform for launching the MAAT Movement for Egyptian Contemporary Art (MAAT MECA). The movement seeks to develop the art of dance through lectures and workshops delivered by myself or by prominent artists, dancers and choreographers invited from various parts of the world to share their expertise. Activities also include screenings of films on dance and roundtable discussions on dance and choreography. The MAAT MECA initiative has organized several intensive and extended workshops in collaboration with the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the American University in Cairo, Studio Emadeddin, the Jesuit Center for Development in Cairo, and Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy) .

After the revolution, I was invited to take over the management

of the Center for Contemporary Dance. Located in the Artistic Creativity Center in the Cairo Opera House complex, the center is supported by the Cultural Development Fund. I accepted the post, in spite of its challenges. The Minister of Culture Emad Abou Ghazi had been forced to resign against the backdrop of the events of Mohammed Mahmoud Street. My available resources would, in the most optimistic estimate, come to a tenth of the amount of funding that was officially available to my predecessor. I would also encounter stiff resistance at the level of encouragement and moral support.

Soon, the center opened its doors for admissions – for the first time in Egypt – to a professional training program in contemporary dance. It is a three year intensive program with courses held five hours a day, five days a week. We had initially hoped to make this a four year program, but we ran up against the Ministry of Education which made us to reduce it to a three year program after which graduates are awarded a certificate of completion. The program offers technical and artistic training to devotees of contemporary dance and those who are serious about becoming professionals in this field, delivered by a staff of specialized professional trainers and professors.

Since the courses in the program above are held in the evenings, from 5:00 to 10:00, we were able to maximize the use of the small space available to us. We therefore now run two sections at different times and with different levels of intensity, thereby making the opportunity to learn and practice creative dance available to everyone without discrimination. In addition, the premises are available at certain times to independent artists who lack studio space in order to hold rehearsals to develop works of their own.

After all, this is our mission.



**Karima Mansour - Egypt**

**Choreographer and cultural activist;** Karima Mansour graduated with both a BA and a Masters degree in Contemporary Dance from the London Contemporary Dance School, London, England after having completed her BA in Film from the High Institute of Cinema, Academy of Arts in Cairo, Egypt.

Upon her return to Egypt she founded MA'AT for Contemporary Dance in 1999, which is the first Independent dance company to be established in Egypt. Since then she has created 11 full choreographic works that continue to be performed in various International festivals. Karima has also formed MAAT MECA (MAAT Movement for Egyptian Contemporary Art) which is an initiative that continues with the work MA'AT has been busy with throughout the years of developing dance, through choreographic works and organized workshops that are taught by Karima Mansour and/or invited guests, and through dance film screenings and discussions revolving around the topic of dance and choreography.

Mansour continues to work as a freelance teacher nationally and internationally while creating, performing and developing her own choreographic work and language as an artist.

## I should at Least Try to Imagine the Future of All of This.

By Ola El-Khalidi

On ██████ February 10th 2011, just as I was about to leave my house to attend a Critical Theory and Art History class as part of my curatorial ██████ studies, I received news that Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt at the time, was shortly going to deliver the long-awaited speech in which he was expected to announce his forced abdication. I found my feelings conflicted; on the one ██████ this was a potentially historical moment in the making, on the other I had to attend a class that was going to involve a discussion about ██████. Equipped with a desire to share my uncontrolled sense of enthusiasm for the promising possibilities paired with a fear of the aftermath if Mubarak did not in fact resign, I forced myself to go to class. Upon seeing my state, (I am not sure that—with a set of their own anxieties—I left them much choice), my classmates decided to watch the speech live in class encouraged by our teacher ██████.

The projector was plugged in and ██████ live news channel occupied the white wall of the classroom, which normally reflects images related to our ██████ of artworks, historical exhibitions, and museum spaces or ██████ of international ██████. The anticipated moment was so critical that two laptop screens were additionally showing news from other channels. (Figure 1)

I realized at that moment that I had to make an active decision as to how to engage in these unexpected current events, which started with ██████ a vegetable vendor, setting himself ██████ in Tunis ██████ December 2010. This event led to the absconding of the country's leader and the participation of its people in a democratic ██████ and then on to what seemed to be a full-█████ revolution in Egypt, ultimately promising to instigate a wave of serious change across the Arab world. With family in Alexandria, I had traveled often to Egypt since my childhood and more recently, in relation to my work in the arts over the past ten years or so, I have regularly visited at least twice



a year. I have attended board meetings at the Culture Resource, visited artists in their studios to plan for future [REDACTED] and supported art events including those [REDACTED] in downtown Cairo [REDACTED], a short walk away from Tahrir Square where more than a million Egyptians from all over the country gathered and marched for a month until they [REDACTED] their president.

As a curator and a cultural worker whose work has been based in Jordan and the Arab [REDACTED] for the past ten years, being located thousands of miles away in San Francisco at this particular moment, undertaking a Masters [REDACTED] in Curatorial [REDACTED] dramatized the situation even further. Naturally, I found myself questioning the [REDACTED] of my existence within this educational structure and more specifically how I could relate what I was learning in school to what was happening back home.

At the beginning of these [REDACTED]—which later became referred to as the Arab [REDACTED]—I found myself in constant contact with a number of my colleagues and friends in Egypt, mostly artists, through email, phone, Skype and Facebook, whatever [REDACTED] were available at the moment. It was an attempt to stay as close as possible to what was happening. I was trying to understand and to [REDACTED] the euphoria resulting from the collective action, the promise of change, challenging the deeply rooted fear that ruled over until that moment, and most importantly, I wanted to make sure that my colleagues were still alive.

Eventually, after a month or so, the pace of this communication started to slow down, dissolving into random emails here and [REDACTED] Yet, changes have been happening rapidly, haphazardly, violently and with [REDACTED] sense of immediacy and urgency. It is as if there were no time any more for the present; no time to pause, reflect and react. What remains possible, however, is to imagine the future of all of this. How will my [REDACTED] practice, upon graduation in May 2012, fit into this, what will my role be?

These talks [REDACTED] to

look at a certain reality, to capture a moment before it escapes unnoticed and possibly to map out a collective understanding of what is happening.

For something is happening in the [REDACTED] world today. It could be described as a moment [REDACTED], [REDACTED] doubt and [REDACTED] which so far is difficult to evaluate. Although there may be some answers found along the way, this attempt does not claim to know which answers it is aiming at.

We the members of *Makan* announce the [REDACTED] of the space. This closing is exclusively of the [REDACTED] space on [REDACTED] Street in Amman and for a short [REDACTED] of time. *Makan* the project lives on. For nine years since we opened we have operated as a [REDACTED] in a form of a collective, reacting and interacting within our social and political context.

We were always open. We continually examined our role within the art scene and the community at large. So much has happened over the past [REDACTED] years, we feel that this is a right moment to pause. It is our responsibility as curators, artists and cultural workers, or more so as citizens to rethink how we want to continue with our work. And [REDACTED] in light of the happenings over the past two years, this is a time for evaluation. Change is happening. We must try to understand it and learn how to best participate in it.

*Parts of a thesis submitted to the faculty of California College of the Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Arts In Curatorial Practice-May 2012*



**Ola El Khalidi – Jordan**

**Cultural activist;** Ola El Khalidi is an independent curator and cultural worker who received an MA in Curatorial Practice from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2012. She is a member of Makan, an art space, project and collective based in Amman and San Francisco and somewhere in between.

..... **Continues!**

**By Fathy Salama - Egypt**

What should an artist write in a testimonial?

Should he register ideas? Offer a vision? Complain? Analyze? Confess? What should he say when asked to introduce himself?

It's a perplexing task. But I'll end my perplexity by taking the plunge and presenting myself and my testimonial on my experience in independent cultural work. Please bear with me as I think out loud.

Mostly what I recall in this regard is how my creative work reached the light. Yes, artists' creations are the product of their experiences, ideas, visions, complaints, analyses and admissions. This applies especially to music, which has been my life and my companion since my very first moments on this planet.

I began playing piano at the age of six. When I was 13, I performed in clubs in Cairo. Because of this early relationship with music, when I look back today I see decades of interaction with artistic and cultural work. Those decades also tell me that practicing this kind of work and creativity in Egypt is difficult. It sets enormous challenges and demands a battle.

The first point I'd like to draw your attention to in this regard is that the government in Egypt does not perform its normal and expected role. Everyone concerned with this subject, let alone the creative artist, must be now asking in despair "Are we really still discussing the obvious?"

Everywhere else in the world, discussions of the role of art and culture in the advancement of society and the state have drawn to a close. The question has been settled as to the need to support arts

and cultural activities, to form music groups or theatrical troupes, to organize workshops, to discover talented people, to help hone their talents and to benefit from them, and so on. Such things are no longer written off as luxuries; they are regarded as basics, as essential as healthcare, education and transport.

But in Egypt, where healthcare, education and transport are not given an appropriate level of attention, talk of supporting culture is seen as a form of madness. The arguments are familiar: Egypt is too poor to afford it. It lacks the capacities and the technological advancement needed to support culture. In fact, however, these are not the problems at all. The problem is the mentality.

The Egyptian government does have sufficient resources to support culture and the arts, at least to a reasonable degree. This is apparent from the amount of money spent by the Ministry of Tourism, for example, on some rather curious campaigns. The other ministries, too, seem to have money to spend, including the Ministry of Culture. If this tells us anything it is that the money is being spent where it doesn't belong and on the people that don't need it.

While the government possesses the means, it does not possess the desire or the will. There are a hundred words we could use to explain this attitude in order to paint a nicer picture and avoid calling things by their real name, but I prefer to be blunt. The reasons are two: corruption and ignorance.

The arts and culture sector of government shares the same characteristics as all other sectors. The officials, apart from the rare exception, are less concerned with performing their ministerial roles and functions than they are with promoting themselves and their personal interests. I imagine your average street kid knows this. It is such common knowledge as to have become a cliché. The minister of culture will not organize cultural activities and do whatever else it takes to promote the development and dissemination of culture, because he has nothing to gain from it. He will organize activities that line his pockets and increase his personal wealth.

Ignorance, as has been amply demonstrated, comes in inestimable and inexhaustible quantities. Many of those who have occupied ministerial seats could not tell art from kitsch, or music from Muzak. So even if we were to presume that they were not corrupt, they were still clueless as to what was needed to alleviate society's intellectual, cultural, artistic and spiritual hunger.

One result of the foregoing was that the state could not distinguish between the role of producer and the role of funder, which is its natural role. The funder furnishes care and support. It organizes workshops to help people learn art, or in my field, music and song, and it helps defray the costs of this learning which is one of the basic rights of citizenship and of human rights.

On the other hand, those agencies that ostensibly offer support for independent cultural activities tend to confuse the cultural with the commercial. Such agencies, on the whole, are few. The largest of them behave little differently from your average producer – the bottom line in their criteria for assessment criteria is the volume of ticket sales. If a singer or band can draw in the crowds, then they are beautiful, brilliant, and fantastic, regardless of whether or not what they have to offer has any bearing on art. But if ticket sales are low, then Beethoven himself would be dismissed as a poor talent due to his failure to be “popular” in the fullest sense of the term, which can also mean vulgar and commonplace.

But where is the care that we might expect this agency to show for artists who have talent and a dream, but not yet the fame? Where is the interest in training and developing talents? These attitudes or functions are nonexistent, even if the organization splits the meager proceeds from concerts given by “successful” bands, after deducting the syndicate fees, taxes and other such expenses.

So, let's be frank. Egypt only began to see some artistic and cultural movement with the emergence of independent cultural organizations, such as Culture Resource, Townhouse, Sharkiat and others which have taken it upon themselves to fight the battle to promote a level of arts and culture worthy of Egypt.

These organizations have encountered enormous problems in their struggle to perform their mission. Foremost among them is the problem of money, of course. Money is needed to pay for tools and equipment, for renting spaces, for paying fees and wages, and so many other requirements.

I have often been asked, in connection with my experience in Sharkiat, for example, “How did you manage to overcome this problem?” My answer is that I haven't overcome it, and the battle continues.

Sometimes I manage to obtain funding from donor agencies. Often – in fact, very often – I have to rely on my own resources. For concerts in the Opera House, for example, I have to pay out of my own pocket because the revenues are not great and the Opera House cannot furnish everything, such as much of the sound equipment I need.

Our battle to advance the development and spread of culture and the arts resembles the revolution to a considerable extent. “The revolution continues,” as we say. The same applies to this battle. I am dumbfounded when I hear of campaigns to promulgate laws criminalizing receiving foreign funding, while the campaigners make no attempt to make funding available at home. It is though we are engaging in scandalous behavior that they feel they have to stamp out, rather than performing a cultural service for which we should be encouraged and praised.

However, to be fair, I should also mention another problem facing independent cultural work. Some cultural organizations lack sufficient expertise and awareness and, consequently, perform poorly and offer a quality of service that is not commensurate with the task at hand. Some of them also confuse cultural work with other ideas and concepts. The result of such shortcomings is that they give an inaccurate impression of what independent cultural work is about. I believe we should make it one of our duties to address this problem.

In spite of all the problems and difficulties, sustaining our work is not only possible but a duty. As I look back over my career, I believe that I have succeeded in offering something to cultural life in Egypt. Difficulties were never, and should never be, an excuse to stop.

This is not the place to relate the whole story of my career, but I would like to mention some highlights along the way. The most important is the creation in 1989 of the Sharkiat ensemble, which continues to reap success today. I am also proud of my electronic musical project “Koshary” and the two prizes I won for soundtrack music. More significantly, I won two more important prizes: the BBC Award and the Grammy Award for world music for my album Egypt. I remain the only Arab musician to have received these awards. But awards aside, I have had the ability to present a music that reflects my love for taking risks and my desire to depart from the familiar and to create a bridge between the foundations of oriental music and modern trends.

Early in my career, in the 1980s, much of my work was with “superstars” such as Amr Diab (on the Khalsin album and the famous hit “Mayaal,” for example) and Mohammed Mounir. After a while, in spite of this “success,” I decided to switch my artistic path. I had observed that musical innovation was in a rut and that performers, in general, were in it solely for the money. From the 1980s to today, there has been no significant change in Arabic music. When producers or singers announce that they have come out with something “new,” you will quickly discover that it’s a slipshod copy of western pop.

Perhaps this was why I decided to hold workshops. In over 15 of these workshops and countless hours of work, training and seizing the creative moment, I encountered incredible talents and gave them the opportunity to learn, to perform in public and establish a foothold in the musical world. From these workshops there emerged the voice of Dina El Wedidi and the musical groups Massar Egbari and Cairokee, and others who have contributed to changing the musical scene in Egypt.

One of my favorite workshops, which I look back on with happiness and pride, was the “workers’ workshop.” I gathered a number of people who had never played music in their lives – a licorice juice seller, a carpenter, a metallurgist, a housewife who used a mortar and pestle as her instrument. Together with three professionals from our ensemble, we engaged in a creative experience that drove home the message that music had no boundaries and that any implement can be used to make music. Out of our workshop emerged two large concerts, one in the Jesuit Center’s theater in Fustat and the other in a coffeehouse in El Daher.

In a similar spirit, I launched the “Koshary” project because I felt that we in the Arab region lacked sufficient awareness of electronic music which, abroad, is a fully fledged independent genre. If audiences here have any familiarity with electronic music at all, it is with “house” music that they dance to at beach parties. Even the DJs we use on such occasions are commercial for the most part.

As I mentioned above, I won the Grammy Award for the best world music album. This was Egypt, the product of a comprehensive musical project that I worked on with the Senegalese singer, Youssou N’Dour. Our work explored Islamic music from Senegal and its historical connection with Arab music. The music for the album was produced in Senegal, Egypt and France between 1999 and 2003, and the huge opus was delivered to audiences in live performances on international stages in Africa, Europe, the US and Egypt from 2004 to 2007.

I am often amazed when I hear some people here claim that they won this award, since I am the only musician in Egypt to have done so. But words cost nothing. The Grammy has a website that lists the recipients of the award, a truly respectable award that cannot be “bought” like some other awards. Suffice it to say that some 12,000 music specialists are involved in selecting the winners.

Still, the most important highlight in my career was the creation of the Sharkiat ensemble for oriental jazz. “Oriental jazz” is originally a western term that emerged in the 1950s and gained popularity in

the 1970s and 1980s. A look back at history also tells us that I am the first musician to introduce this genre into Egypt in 1989 with the founding of Sharkiat. All other groups that now perform oriental jazz in the country have followed the footsteps that I first took out of my longing to bring change, and my desire to experiment with the arts of music, regardless of the success of my experiments.

There is insufficient space here to recount my résumé in full, including my ongoing participation in international festivals, my collaborations with world artists, the awards, the musical groups I have founded, the help I have given to non-professionals to make and present music, the rediscovery of great vocal talents such as Gamalat Sheha. But my point here is to reaffirm that we are working with all our energy to sustain our battle for the dissemination of art and culture. Yes, the battle continues.



### **Fathy Salama - Egypt**

**Composer, arranger, producer and pianist;** Fathy Salama has won both the Grammy Award and the BBC Music Award, and won the Cairo International Film Festival prize in 2000. In 1988 Fathy Salama formed his group Sharkiat which has performed more than 2000 concerts on the world's most prestigious stages and in the world's biggest jazz and world music festivals. Fathy Salama's collaborations with renowned artists such as Youssou N'Dour, Cesaria Evora, and others resulted in nine albums, two of which feature the Sharkiat project.

**Homeland and Art in the Arms of Diaspora:  
A Reflection on Various Feelings While Talking to Wael  
Qaddour on Skype.**

**By Abdullah Al Kafri - Syria**

“We have to think about Syria in terms of a territory that extends, an endless territory without borders—a homeland that remains as one, but is scattered here and there.” This non-ironic description was proposed by my friend the writer Mohammed Abul Laban while we were discussing what could be done in Syria with cultural actors, and how to prevent cultural action in the Syrian context from falling prey to trendiness or cliché.

I am thinking of setting what Mohammed said as my “Mood” on Skype, which now provides my only access to friends scattered throughout the world. Before, at “home,” we used to meet at Shabandar Square or at Ishtar in the Bab Sharqi neighborhood of Damascus. I’m thinking of this from Beirut as I wait for Wael Kaddour (the ultimate friend for engaging with life and art) to come online for what may be our one thousandth conversation. That’s because he has been in Amman for a year, and we promised each other we would work together whatever happened.

The pretext for this conversation is to discuss progress in the production of the play Madam Ghada’s Threshold for Pain<sup>(19)</sup> which is being readied in Beirut. It became impossible for Wael to travel from Amman to Beirut, for fear that he would not be allowed back in. For a limited period, which unfortunately clashed with rehearsals, the Jordanians imposed restrictions on the comings and goings of Syrians for reasons unknown or unannounced to us. Every effort at mediation and all the requests made by Wael in Amman and by the production team in Beirut for temporary permission to

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(19) Madam Ghada’s Threshold for Pain was performed by Mohammed Al Reshi, Hanan Al-Hajj Ali, Reem Khattab and Kamel Najmeh; dramaturge Wael Kaddour; artistic director Zakaria Al-Tayyan; written and directed by Abdalla Al-Kafri. It opened on 28th July 2012 at the Sunstroke Theater, Beirut, Lebanon in cooperation with Shams, Culture Resource, the British Council and the Swedish Drama Institute in Stockholm.

travel between the two countries came to nothing. Especially as those who were approached in this regard denied the existence of the measures that everyone was talking about.

A characteristic feature of Syrian artistic and cultural projects is their acceptance of the triad of distance – isolation – mediation. Three painful terms that are strange, exclusionary, dictatorial, and the opposite of art and cultural action. Yet today they are the fate of many Syrian cultural actors who want to combat the mandatory monotony and inaction.

The set for Madam Ghada's Threshold for Pain was designed under heavy bombardment at a workshop in Rif Damascus. The set was built by Abu Khaled, a friend to most of Syria's theater community, who does not start work on the set until he has read the script and been persuaded by it. Transporting the set to Beirut was another drama, and not a happy one. The journey required that the set be broken down into one meter square sheets of wood and transported by a small car, which had to be changed after reaching Chtaura. All this cost a thousand dollars for a journey that a year ago would have cost two hundred and fifty. From Amman, the dramaturge could only attend the rehearsals via video link over a slow and patchy internet connection. To make matters worse, the internet in Lebanon went down for three days.

"It's good practice for our work and it'll do for solving problems," is what Wael and I would say to each other after having spent our time with me telling him how the rehearsals had gone that day, with only two weeks left until opening. I would ask him about certain things that still needed working on, and pass on to the cast his ideas and observations concerning the form of the performance and how we would have to put this into effect. I would get back to him at night and tell him what had happened and the most significant problems we were facing. During our conversation together we would propose

solutions and agree on other tasks to be tackled before morning. Rehearsals would start with emails from Wael.

The production team had realized that putting on a play while "Damascus has no bread" meant giving up on the state of "here and now," at least while working. "Here" has become "there." It has become Damascus, Beirut, Amman, and other cities where we have been dispersed. Syria has become islands within which we are separated. The coordinates of "now" and its password are linked to the venture of meeting up: leaving home and reaching the city, talk and action. Under current conditions in Syria, perhaps the word "now" being excluded from the dictionary would be a dream come true.

Hanan, who shared in the work and the dream and without whom this project would have been impossible, asked why all the hassle. Why not just build the set in Lebanon and work with a Lebanese dramaturge and set designer? Especially as the play would be performed there. Why the insistence on the technical and production team being from Damascus?

Her question did not raise question marks nor require that I change my mind. She asked because she wanted to make things easier for me and bring me some consolation amid the fragmentation between "here" and "there." Hanan herself, wherever she has landed on her journey, has always asked "Where are the Syrians? Why aren't they with us?" As much as she can, she has tried to stop the world of Arab and international cultural institutions from thinking of Syria as a sealed black box labeled "out of scope till further notice."

Hanan was not expecting an answer. She was trying to support the project and make it work. This project was resistance, as she and the crew saw it. I did not answer Hanan because I knew all that had gone before, and because I knew she was not expecting an answer. But the desire to answer has built up inside me. There is no answer, except my belief that Damascus, the city where I learned theater, is a city of artistic creation, a city of citizenship and beauty. I learned there that lack of dialogue is a disaster for us, and that our generation



is living on the remains of a memory that is mixed and confused but is the fuel for the future. The only answer is that this city, despite its wounds, will not surrender to ugliness and oppression. Despite the city's arteries being severed by barricades, art will sneak through the checkpoints and fly out to the world. Despite the efforts to stop it living, Damascus will restore hope in days to come. Working here imitates being at the heart of Damascus so that Beirut should not become "a lump in Damascus' throat", as expressed by my dear teacher and friend Roger Assaf who adopted and hosted this project without hesitation or delving into detail.

A recent session on Skype with Wael started as usual with a summary of the previous hours of rehearsal. We each check that the other's family is fine, a few quick jokes and comments about the day's developments, what our friends are writing on their Facebook pages. Then we plunge into a round of virtual dramaturgical support and the psychological assistance it has come to contain. The day's discussion is supposed to be about scene nine in the play. Ghada, forty two years old, is having an operation that she hopes will help her get rid of a memory full of painful events. Her mother, Mona, comes to visit her daughter, who has not told her about the operation. We do not know how Mona learned of the operation, but she has at last found a chance to meet her daughter and say all she wants.

Wael begins with some general approaches for understanding the scene: "Mona is sad because Ghada did not tell her about the operation, as is made clear later on in the monologue. Mona is afraid that Ghada, or anyone connected to Ghada, does not want her there. I think she was very hesitant about going, but her desire to check up on her daughter settled the matter." He underlines this when he says "What I want to concentrate on in this scene is Mona's mixed feelings towards her daughter. She's upset with her behavior on one hand, but wants to make sure she's all right on the other. It's the tension between these two feelings that produce Mona's monologue." Wael lets slip the following monologue himself: "Personally, I can't read or write about this monologue neutrally. It always makes me cry. Because it makes me feel part of my story

with my father, who died without giving us the chance to talk and become close, even though we had loads of time. We wasted it because of embarrassment, fear and insufficient love."

The new feelings that Syrians are experiencing now are like Wael's words. Departure has become the tragedy of a people that neither perceives nor is any good at dealing with the temporary and the absent. We are so used to talking in the active voice, using it to make ourselves beautiful. Artistic practice was so conditional on the presence of everyone from all sectors. At a play you would find painters, filmmakers, musicians and poets. We were sarcastic about the full culture bus and the few cultural initiatives. Today I see that that was support and solidarity. I am now thinking about who will be able to leave the borders of Syria and come to Beirut for the play, and the endless list of obstacles.

The play arrives after a great deal of work in very little time. Three performances on successive nights are attended by audiences from all over. Rana, Rania and Reem come from Damascus with Mudar and Ibrahim, bringing the spirit of the city with them and the apologies of my family and friends unable to travel. When the show is over, I allow myself to think again about why I put it on. I cannot say that the need to direct that script was the only reason. That would be an incomplete answer. The answer also includes the meaning of practice and the search for a stance. Artistic projects cannot hold their value in isolation from the values, contents and mechanisms of their production and the circumstances of their creation.

Theater will not change the world, but it teaches us that changing the world is possible, that our capability is not fashioned in the reaches of heaven, that our dreams are legitimate, that the revolution is better late than never, that if you can't make the world beautiful, you can make it less ugly.

In my case, and that of many of those of my generation, daily practice in the theater has never been separate from nurturing it in society. My belief in change derives from the theater, so in 2011 I chose to join four Syrian friends and cultural actors in founding an

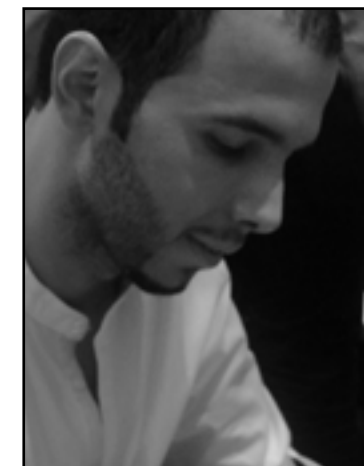
independent cultural institution. We shared a dream which we saw being born under the name Ettijahat Independent Culture.

I realize today that the contemporary story within Madam Ghada's Threshold for Pain is about the bewitching women of Damascus. Their beautifully painful and painfully beautiful stories were one of the strong affinities that made me take on this experience. It is the story of a generation of miserable middle class women who live life and kill the dream.

I do not describe my project as a Syrian play in Lebanon. Not because such a designation would require work permits for Mohammed Al Reshi, Reem Khattab and Kamel Najmeh, but because of my belief that in this project, with the presence of Hanan Al Hajj Ali, we presented a work of art from Syria and Lebanon to a Lebanese and Syrian audience. We were able to open a dialogue about the reality of the theater and put on a story about the memory of a city.

I suspect that the ultimate sense of the relationship between theater and civil mobilization and the various means to achieve it, can be found in current artistic practice in Syrian art and among a generation I am proud to belong to. The first thing I learned at the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in the Square of the Omayyids in Damascus was that theater was born in the city. And what city is there other than Damascus?

"Three months in Beirut taught me the essence of the practice of theater." I say this to Wael Kaddour during our last conversation on Skype concerning this project. We promise to drink a toast to the performance in person, unmediated. We agree on our new project and also agree to swap roles. I will be the dramaturge for his new production (Small Rooms) to be shown in Amman with a Syrian cast. I tell him I'll speak to him the following day for us to start work. But by then I'll be in Damascus.



**Abdullah Al Kafri - Syria**

**Writer, journalist and cultural activist;** Abdullah Al Kafri works in the field of theatrical training and arts planning. He has participated in many playwriting workshops and is a member of the Street Workshop for playwriting and on the script selection committee for Arab Contemporary Dramaturgy's project to publish an anthology of plays from the Arab world in cooperation with ENPI and the 2012 Avignon Festival.

In July 2012 he staged and directed Madam Ghada's Threshold for Pain in Beirut. His script Damascus Aleppo won the Mohamed Taymour Award for Creativity in Theater in 2009. He reached the final round of the BBC competition for the world's best translated script for 2009. He has been the dramaturge for a number of productions, including Zoo Story and Literary Society. At the end of 2011, in collaboration with a number of cultural actors he founded Ettijahat, a foundation that supports independent culture in Syria.

Al Kafri graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts Department of Theater Studies and is currently doing a Masters in theater at Saint Joseph's University in Beirut.

## The State of Culture in Yemen: Not Reassuring

**By Wedad El Badawy - Yemen**

The state of culture in Yemen is unlike anywhere else in the world. Yemen possesses numerous cultural components and a rich store of important cultural assets. Unfortunately, government authorities have had little interest in this sector. In fact, over the past years they have destroyed the infrastructure of the public cultural sector and fostered a social mindset hostile to theater and the arts and indifferent to antiquities. As a result, intellectuals face a constant threat from retrograde extremist forces who call for the blood of poets, writers and thinkers on charges of disowning their affiliation with Yemeni society and of offending the values established by tribal custom and upheld by the laws of an ultraconservative religious establishment.

In spite of such challenges, a small number of young men and women were able to take advantage of the Internet and use the realm of information technology to foster modest cultural activities. However, such activities could not reach far. For the most part they depended on personal funding, given the absence of agencies or individuals in society that might support them, and particularly given that qat sessions have a higher priority among the Yemeni people and further diminish their concern for and interest in cultural activities.

Recently, because of the February 2011 Revolution, we had begun to expect some positive change. We imagined that the status of culture would rise again, since it plays such a pioneering role in bringing change. Sadly, the complete opposite occurred. Many intellectuals, and the cultural milieu in general, have become the target of a vicious campaign. This has escalated since the Islamists rose to power in Yemen and occupied a number of key offices, which made them even stronger than they were before, as it put them into positions that gave them the right to interfere in and

encroach on intellectual and artistic life. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture is as weak as ever, as it lacks the minimum resources and is unable to find the appropriate support and budgetary allocations that will enable it to perform its functions or sustain its work. This is the prognosis of officials in the ministry itself.

Since culture is the domain that has the greatest impact on societies and yet is the most neglected and forsaken domain, we felt compelled to found a cultural organization dedicated to this dilemma. Specifically, we saw the need for an organization focused on the relationship that should exist between the cultural and media sectors and how to foster a healthy relationship between the people and culture. The Cultural Media Center (CMC) was founded following the start of the Arab Spring revolutions, out of our belief that a cultural revolution is vital for Yemeni society, which is plagued by ignorance, marginalization and illiteracy. The CMC's activities since its establishment have been connected with the revolution, the forces of social change in Yemen, what links the Yemeni people to the Arab world, and the role of the intellectual in this framework.

However, in the pursuit of our cultural activities we encountered a number of obstacles. On the one hand we were operating in one of the most religiously conservative environments in the Islamic world and faced strong resistance to some activities that were regarded as inconsistent with the spirit of Islam. On the other, we had to contend with illiteracy and ignorance of many concepts and aspects of culture among a large segment of society. Then there were those self appointed defenders of the values, customs and traditions of society who regarded culture as an encroachment upon the prevalent social mores. In this unsupportive social environment, official agencies were reluctant to lend support as well. The private sector offered no alternative, whether because of the general lack of a sense of social responsibility or because private firms, if they were going to contribute at all, were more interested in donating to religious charities in order to enhance their public reputation. Nor did international donor organizations operating in Yemen prove an alternative since, for the most part, they were focused on human rights and were reluctant to support culture.

Such conditions confront all workers in the cultural sector who, as a consequence, are marginalized as cultural actors and whose cultural output and creativity is ignored. Numerous artists, poets and performers have been forced to abandon their creative efforts and take up other occupations because their material circumstances would not permit them to continue with their creative professions. Among these are many who found no financial support when in dire need of medical care. How often we have seen in various parts of Yemen such tragedies as that which occurred in Yemen's cultural capital, Ta'izz, to Yemen's foremost artist, Hashem Ali. Hashem Ali was famous for having pioneered a school of fine arts that formed and influenced many of today's generation artists in Yemen. Yet he could find no one to offer him the costs for his treatment when illness ravished his body, and he had no one to pay for his funeral when he died.

Other noted creative talents have been in a similar position. When the famous singer and composer Ayoub Tareh, who composed and sung Yemen's national anthem, fell ill it was a group of Yemeni students studying in Germany who donated the costs for his treatment. Appeals to the government in the Yemeni press had fallen on deaf ears.

Independent cultural organizations are particularly hard hit by the marginalization. Recently formed, they are unable to find people to respond or listen to their concerns and unable to generate pressure on official agencies or to shape a public opinion that would help them to convey their appeal for attention to cultural needs. Cultural workers are leaving cultural NGOs to work in human rights activism because it is easier to obtain financial support.

We can safely say, then, that there are no strong cultural organizations in Yemen apart from those sponsored by public figures or commercial firms, as is the case with Al Said Foundation for Science and Culture in the governorate of Ta'izz and the Afif Cultural Foundation in Sana'a. However, such organizations are restricted by the funding they receive from public figures or companies that sponsor them and are unable to generate a cultural dynamism that

engages a broad diversity of activities. Rather, for the most part, the activities of these organizations are restricted to seminars or academic research, sidelining the arts and other aspects of culture in keeping with the policies of the company or outlook of the public figure. Culture thus loses its substance and its mission.

At the same time, the activities sponsored by the cultural centers of foreign embassies are limited and seasonal. Moreover, these centers seem to have acclimatized to Yemeni conditions in the selection of their activities. Few, if any, are the activities that can make a difference or generate a desire in the general public for culture.

The situation in schools and universities is worse. There are no cultural activities for students and no courses that focus on culture. No attention whatsoever is given to culture in the curriculum and schoolbooks contain nothing to encourage students to take an interest in culture or to develop their awareness of it. Yemeni universities defy all expectations. They offer no department for the arts, drama or cinema, the sole exception being a decent department for the fine arts in the University of Hodeida, which focuses on plastic arts and media. There are no specialized institutes or academies in the arts now that the Jamil Ghanem Institute in Aden has gone out of operation and its services have ceased.

In light of the foregoing, the challenge facing the independent sector is enormous. It has to shoulder the formidable burden of rehabilitating culture and reviving interest in culture in order to generate the impetus for an independent cultural and artistic movement capable of elevating the level of the potential that Yemen possesses in this regard, which is worthy indeed.

Looking ahead, it is impossible to predict the state of culture in the near future. But one can venture two possible scenarios. The first is that the state of culture will improve in the post Arab Spring period, because the people who made that revolution and formed its kernel were the young and educated, who share a thirst for cultural activities and programs and a hope that the next revolution will

be a cultural and intellectual one. This optimism grew after many young men and women began forming new cultural centers and organizations.

The second scenario is a pessimistic one, and foresees a condition in which culture will be suffocated and sink to a more dismal state than before. The prime reason for this is the rise of hard line Islamists to power, tribal control over decision making centers, and military control over the state. This troika will never allow culture to progress in society for fear that this would generate a consciousness that would cause these forces to lose their grip over the reins of control.



### **Wedad Al Badawy - Yemen**

**Journalist and cultural activist;** Wedad Al Badawy graduated from the Faculty of Media at the University of Sana'a. She worked as a writer and page editor for the women's pages of Al Jumhuriya newspaper. Together with a group of young colleagues she founded Al Intilaq, a newspaper for youth. She also became involved in civil society work with a number of cultural organizations and institutions. In addition to volunteer work with the Afif Cultural Foundation, she took part in many local fairs and events focusing on women, political and human rights, journalism and freedom of expression, and culture.

Recently, she founded the Cultural Media Center, through which she directs various cultural activities at the national level in Yemen.

## My Musical Journey

### By Zakaria Ibrahim - Egypt

I'm no good at theorizing and I don't like it. As a result, my ideas are as simple as people and life. My idea about independent work is in itself independent work. My journey is my ideas. My life with music and the tradition is my testimony. I haven't had a connection with the state and I haven't been preoccupied with thinking about problems. Because I see the solutions are always in the work, and the extent to which your work fulfils your vision.

From the moment I was born in 1952, I have been involved with music, playing music, and dance. The turning point in my life came in 2000 when I founded El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music.

You can consider this discussion of El Mastaba Center as tantamount to my autobiography. It is a summary of my relationship with the simsimiya, with displacement, and with folk musical instruments. The Center was the fruit of years of delving into the roots of Egyptian music.

I have never once stopped to ask myself what independent cultural work is. Yet I put it into practice on a daily basis. I founded the Tanboura group in 1989 and worked as its artistic and administrative director. The band has participated in many performances and festivals worldwide, in the UK, Germany, Italy, France, Sweden and Norway since 1989 and gives a weekly performance in its hometown of Port Said. The band won first prize at the International Folk Festival in Montreal, Canada in June 2000.

I find it hard to believe that the band has achieved so much over the years. We have taken part in many festivals: in 1996 at the Institut du Monde Arabe's Lights of Egypt festival in Paris, in 1997 at the Amman Festival for Independent Groups and at the Jerash International Festival in Jordan, and in Italy at the Folk Music Festival in Florence, in 2000 in Canada at the International Festival of Music in Montreal, in 2001 in Sweden at the Rai Orient Festival in Stockholm, in 2002 in France at the Montpellier Festival and at the Institut du Monde Arabe. The band performs weekly in Port Said

and annually for Abdel Nasser (at the commemoration of the 1956 invasion) and at Sham Al Nasseem, the spring holiday. There are also ongoing performances in villages, towns and cities throughout Egypt at various venues from concert halls to the street and to diverse audiences of workers, intellectuals and farmers.

Tanboura's first CD appeared in 1999, produced by the Institut du Monde Arabe and distributed by Harmonia Mundi. An Egyptian narrative film Al Damma was made in 1998, directed by Saad Hindawi, and a 15 minute documentary was shot in 1997 for the Franco German ARTE channel, directed by Mustafa Al Hasnawi. A video of the band, "Coo of the Dove", came out in 2002. This was the first music video ever of an Egyptian band.

Here, I must mention the names of the band members. In order of their joining: Maestro Imbabi (who died in 2001 aged 63), Maestro Ahmed Walem (died 1992, aged 75), Master Mohammed El Qutt (died 1993, aged 78), Saad Abul Shahat (died 1994), Sheikh Ragab, Ahmed Mugahed, Mohammed El Saeed (Abu Islam), El Saeed El Librati, Ali Awf, Gamal Awad, Mursi Ibrahim, Hamam, El Sayed El Gizawi (Abu Adel), Salah El Hasri, Gamal Farag, Alaa El Shazli, Sami Abdel Nabi, Masaad Musa, El Arabi Jakomo, Masaad Bagha, Muhsin Gabreel, Ahmed Kanash, El Arabi El Bay, Mansour Hussein, Muhsin El Ashri, Shawqi El Reedi and Saber Gazar.

Thanks to the band, the tanbura musical instrument (a large lyre) has come back into use, when before it was reserved for closed Zar (ritual healing) ceremonies. We brought it back to the light for audiences to see and hear in halls, on the streets, and on television.

After this came the Sahbagiya band, founded in Ismailia in 1994. This too has taken part in many performances such as at the Library of Alexandria, the Cairo International Book Fair, the Talaat Harb Library, and more along with weekly performances in its hometown of Ismailia. The band Henna was formed in Suez in 1994. It has performed at many venues including the Garage Theater in Alexandria and the Cairo International Book Fair along with weekly performance in its hometown of Suez.

Nevertheless, it hasn't been just a matter of creating bands. Their

work has to have an impact. So I revived the rango instrument and set up the Rango band in 1996. The instrument has mixed Sudanese, African and Egyptian origins. The band became known in the Sudanese communities in Alexandria, Ismailia and Cairo and toured in the UK in 2009 and 2010. Rango has taken part in many international festivals including WOMAD in the UK and in Abu Dhabi and Wayout in Sweden. It has also performed at top venues in Cairo, Alexandria and elsewhere.

The process of setting up bands and researching into the traditions led me in 1997 to discover the Baramka family, languishing in isolation in the Matariya region of Daqahliya Governorate. Their band now performs in venues such as Beit El Harawi, the Manager Center, the Cairo International Book Fair, and more.

The turning point came with the foundation of El Mastaba Center for Folk Music in 2000. This played a role in systematic documentation and fieldwork and the production of audio-visual materials. The Center was a link between the folk bands and researchers and students in Egypt, and helped foster cooperation and exchange of expertise between them. It has also founded two schools to teach folk music.

Matters progressed with the founding of the Simsimiya Quartet in 2002. This band made use of two new folk instruments, the bass tanbura and the tanbura cello, which together with the simsimiya and the tanbura made up the quartet. It has performed at the Gomhuriya Theater, Rawabet Theater and Beit El Harawi.

The Bedouin Jerry Can Band was formed in 2003 in Sinai. It participated in the Port Said Folk Music Festival in October of that year, and has toured in the UK, Italy, Spain, Australia and New Zealand.

I also discovered the gandooh, which is like a harp, in 2004 and undertook to promote its use in three sizes and formed the Gandooh Quartet.

In the course of documentation I made the documentary film Al Nadaha in 2005 which tells the history of the simsimiya. Then I founded the venue Tanbura Hall in Cairo in 2010 to create a space

to showcase the bands.

I also composed many songs for Tanbura and the Bedouin Jerry Can Band and wrote a TV script for Rango and for Al Waziri's band, and he is considered the best known simsimiya player in the Suez region.

This sequence of work and discoveries came over a long and difficult period. I still remember how I combed the Canal area looking for dispersed bands and isolated singers. I was looking for the music playing in my memory, the music I would hear in Port Said before the displacement, that was all that was played before 1967.

Before the war, I was a member of a band that played in the Port Said tradition. I was a good singer and dancer, the Bambouti dance. I had memories of group sessions of playing, singing and dancing. When we came back, these were gone. Then in the 1980s the development of Port Said began.

I returned to Port Said driven by nostalgia for the place and the music. I carried within me the songs written by Ibrahim El Bani, whom you could consider the poet of the Port Said displacement. I met him during the displacement and heard his songs. He was the only person able to express the pain of displacement and having to leave the town. Ibrahim was able to really touch my pain.

When I went back, the city had changed. The songs were no longer folk songs. Commercial pop reigned alongside professional busking. So the words to one of Tanbura's songs, "We want to restore the tradition and sing it again," was tantamount to a slogan. I founded the band in 1988 in Port Said, but the story goes back to 1980.

At that time I was looking for simsimiya players and could not find one. It was as though they had vanished. Nobody sang to the simsimiya anymore. Everyone had given up. After eight years of looking I found a player, Mohammed Al Shinawi. He was the only one who hadn't given up.

Al Shinawi was the only one convinced that there was third way, different from commercial songs and the cultural palaces. The idea was for new, young people enthused by the tradition to hear it from the mouths of veterans and so the tradition would be passed on and



also developed. Young people listened to the songs and rearranged them. There was a session to listen and sing at a regular time every week for the band members, which is how we formed.

In 1994, bands followed in Ismailia and in Suez. I wanted to expand the circle of the revival of tradition and not leave it just within Port Said. These two bands were based on the same recipe, that of veteran singers and musicians joining together with new blood at a regular weekly meeting. The dynamo for the Ismailia band was Maestro Mohammed Al Waziri, who was on his own but had memorized the musical traditions of the Ismailia governorate.

Al Waziri told me a great deal about the Sudanese, particularly about the Sudanese Zar and its music and instruments, the tanbura, the rango (a type of xylophone), the mangour (a belt strung with animal hooves which is worn and provides the rhythm through the dance movements of its wearer), and the touza drum. I listened to these stories from a different perspective which saw that it would be possible to take these instruments out of their special ritual context in the Zar.

At that time I was feeling a sense of boredom with the fixed rhythms of the simsimiya and was thinking about how to develop them. The defined metallic tone of the simsimiya requires another melody to support it. When I attended a Sudanese Zar I saw that the ritual was linked with the appearance of the tanbura. As the rhythm intensified it was put in a bag or inside a robe. Then it would be pulled out and the incense lit. The drummers surrounded it with an aura of the sacred because it was the instrument that attracted the spirits to the Zar!

Al Waziri's words and the tunes of the tanbura drew me in. I, the simsimiya player, had found the lost melody. I spent a year attending the Zar until I was finally able to obtain the instrument. I had found the sister of the simsimiya. The band changed its name from Simsimiya to Tanbura.

There is a story about Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Mohammed Ali, bringing Sudanese slaves to Egypt to enter the army (what was known as the slave army) and to work in the cotton harvest. More importantly, the Sudanese smuggled musical instruments into

Egypt. What attracted me to this tradition was what Al Waziri said about the tunes and music of the "slave stockades" neighborhood of Ismailia, which was devoted to the Sudanese, who at the time of the founding of Ismailia were slaves. When I visited the place I did not find Zar musicians or instruments, but I did hear about the last rango player.

The last famous player was Abbas Mastoura who died when I was beginning my quest for the musical instruments of the Sudanese Zar. By chance I came across someone who knew the last player still alive, Hasan Bargamon. In 1996 I met Bargamon for the first time. He had given up playing. The last time he had played was before the displacement. I could find no one who owned an instrument and started to look for one. That's a long story. We visited the homes of the departed masters of the Sudanese Zar. We asked their children about the instruments and finally we were able to find one. By visiting the homes of the Sudanese I was able to collect all the Sudanese Zar instruments. Then we were able to set up the fourth band, Rango.

The whole project was an effort to preserve the Port Said tradition and it expanded into the evolution of the simsimiya and the introduction of new instruments. Suddenly I found myself running eleven bands representing musical tradition from Port Said, Suez and Ismailia to the Bedouin Jerry Can Band founded in 2003.

I wrote one song for them and they created a musical arrangement for it. The jerry can provided their name and is also a main instrument for them. The musicians drum the jerry can and also use metal ammunition boxes as a rhythm section. In the beginning I tried to arrange the music for them, but they preferred to perform as they liked. The band members are from Abu Haseen in the Sinai desert, 30 kilometers from El Arish.



### **Zakaria Ibrahim - Egypt**

**Musician, cultural activist and researcher in musical heritage;** Zakaria Ibrahim founded El Tanbura – a troupe composed of fishermen, plumbers and ordinary people who are also master artists. In 1996, the troupe went on its first foreign tour to France and now tours regularly in global festivals. He also brought to light the music of Zar and Rango. He continues to sing and compose for El Tanbura, and composes for the Bedouin Jerry Can Band from Sinai. He founded El Mastaba Center for Traditional Egyptian Music in 2000 to build on his efforts of several decades to preserve the heritage of this music.

## **Bidayat (Beginnings):**

### **The First Glimmer Light in the Realm of Darkness,**

#### **Assiut, Upper Egypt**

**By Emad Abo Grain - Egypt**

Founding statement:

In December 2009, the Upper Egyptian city of Assiut saw the first signs of an emergent independent cultural and artistic movement. It took the form of Bidayat Al Tashkiliya (Beginnings for the Fine Arts), which in its founding statement declared that this society marked the true beginning for a group of young practitioners of the fine arts and a starting point for injecting a new vision into a listless cultural environment. In the declaration, the founders said:

“In view of the lack of attention accorded to us as young artists by the official establishment responsible for the supervision of arts and culture in the governorate of Assiut in Upper Egypt, as embodied by the Ministry of Culture and its General Organization for Cultural Palaces, which monopolizes cultural work throughout most of Egypt, and given the indifference to the value of the artist as a cultural innovator with a vital role to play in society, we felt it our duty to act. In so doing, we were driven by a spirit of optimism for the future and by a desire to break the moulds of stagnation and traditionalism that prevail in the arts milieu in the governorate of Assiut and that have confined the hearts and minds of young artists, preventing the emergence of new and outstanding talents and energies, and hampering the generational progression which is a prime engine for the creative process. These motivations shaped the impetus and the hope to found an independent artistic society consisting of a group of young plastic artists from Assiut. The purpose of this society is to furnish them with aid and assistance in their creative careers, to promote a good working environment in which their creative output would receive the appreciation it merits, and moreover to encourage them to confront the deteriorating state to which culture and the arts have sunk in Upper Egypt and, indeed, in all parts of the country and the Arab world, since we firmly believe

that art is the cornerstone upon which any cultural revival is built.”

This was our first cry against the stagnation and rigidity that kills dozens of creative talents by the day.

#### **The birth:**

The idea for the society was born several years before this, following a workshop that had brought together a group of young artists in Assiut in 2005 with the purpose of helping them to prepare to compete in an official contest. It was then that the dream first dawned on us to found an independent artistic entity that would foster a qualitatively new vision for the plastic arts, one that would deliver creativity “shocks” that would stimulate cultural dialogue and debate, after which we, as artists, would come together in a new spirit that we would draw on as we reached out to other diverse segments of the public and encourage others to join us.

After issuing its founding statement in 2009, Bidayat El Tashkiliya initiated the project Wilad Tisaa with children in New Assiut. This project, inspired by the folk proverb that we are all born in nine months, which is to say, we are all human, germinated the idea of offering works of art to the public for free, as gifts, so that people could display them in their homes. The exhibit from which these gifts were presented featured both paintings and photographic art. It was followed by Chants of Form, an exhibit of the work of six young sculptors from Assiut that was also pioneering in that it simultaneously incorporated a theatrical performance that attracted young artistic energies from diverse creative disciplines.

#### **The second signs:**

Soon a number of young dramatists, musicians and writers joined the artists. They sensed that something new and different was happening and they were enthused by the notion of an “independent artistic group” because it offered them opportunities to take off, without complications and with the simplest resources, and in a spirit of honesty, cooperation and dedication, towards the successful realization of any artistic project or dream. But when our numbers grew to over 35 male and female artists, we knew we had to find a place, however modest, that would be large enough for

us to meet, exchange ideas, air artistic and cultural proposals, and discuss where we were heading. Eventually our thinking extended to a place large enough for artists to work on their output and for others to hold rehearsals.

### **The Marsam:**

Within the space of a few months, the Marsam (atelier) became a Mecca for young artists and intellectuals and a host of artistic talents whom we had never heard of before and who represented a diverse range of creative disciplines. It was not long before the idea came to change the name of our society to Bidayat lil Funun (Beginnings for the Arts) and to expand its scope to include sections for music, theater and literature. In fact, we began to create an independent theater troupe.

Meanwhile, we persisted in our mission to produce something new every day. We held frequent meetings and roundtables to discuss the dismal state of culture in Upper Egypt and how to develop our performance in the arts and culture. At the same time, we sought to keep abreast with the latest artistic and cultural movements and schools in the capital and, indeed, around the world, and we explored opportunities to cooperate artistically and culturally with other bodies. Of equal importance, we applied ourselves to becoming more familiar with the nature of the society to which we had chosen to dedicate our efforts, to elevate its aesthetic and emotional senses and to raise its intellectual and cognitive capacities.

### **The revolution and a dream:**

The January 25 Revolution came as a magnificent surprise. Suddenly we saw new horizons and we had a new surge of hope and optimism. As we watched the graffiti and street art appear on the walls in the major squares and streets of Assiut, we were struck by the magnitude of this moment and the need to make a stance in the streets with all our might. Around this time we first heard of the drive to create an Independent Culture Coalition. A few weeks after the revolution began we signed the coalition's founding declaration and joined in our capacity as an artistic society from Upper Egypt. There followed a call to hold a meeting to air and discuss proposals

for artistic activities that would involve various forms of street art that would work in tandem with the political and social goals of the revolution. The result was the inauguration of the countrywide event El Fan Midan. Bidayat offered to coordinate and host the event in Assiut. As a society of young artists from that governorate we enjoyed good relations with other artistic and cultural groups and entities in the area and their member artists and intellectuals of all age groups. We were handed the responsibility and El Fan Midan opened in Assiut in April 2011. This magnificent event gave us a wide platform to express ourselves and introduce new talents, as well as to meet with all segments of the public in a new way and with a unique revolutionary spirit.

Bidayat continued to cooperate with the Independent Culture Coalition and to help support it, and the Marsam continued to perform its function of bringing together young artists and intellectuals from Assiut and nearby towns.

### **Becoming official:**

Of course, we encountered obstacles with respect to funding and our lack of legal status. However, we held on to our dream and the more it grew, the more we realized how important it was for us to work in the framework of an organized cultural entity with a clear administrative structure and effective distribution of roles and functions. We debated the need to establish ourselves officially so that we could present our artistic and cultural activities more professionally, and so that we could have access to material support and improve the level of cultural management of our society, which was a pioneering experience in the contemporary cultural history of Assiut. There was so much we wanted to do. We were a group of young people who were on a quest to contribute to our society in original ways, and to produce something new in form and substance that would leave an impact in the souls of the people and on their auditory and visual memories, for we knew that this was our key to realizing change and rectifying the warps and deformations that had set in over the preceding decades. We therefore set the following among our highest priorities:

– The creation of an independent cultural entity for the support and dissemination of cultural activity in the governorate of Assiut, which would then serve as a platform for extending this effort to the rest of Upper Egypt and other parts of the country.

– To make the young creative artist the cornerstone of the plans, aims and activities of Bidayat.

– To profile the identity of Upper Egyptian society as part of the activities and outlooks of Bidayat.

– To develop effective partnerships and forms of artistic cooperation between Bidayat and other cultural entities.

### **The Bidayat spirit:**

We are still, up to this moment, operating on a volunteer basis, independent from any pressures that could influence the integrity of our choices. While we are continuing our search for new opportunities, we are planning to take on a larger space to serve as our artistic center where larger numbers of artists and members of the public can meet. We also foresee this space to be a cultural haven in Upper Egypt for the production and experience of serious and worthy art and culture events that reach out to ordinary people.

In addition, since the January 25 Revolution, there have been a number of cultural and artistic initiatives that have derived their energy and spirit from the experience of Bidayat for the Arts. They include the One Million Artists Creativity Center, founded by a group of young artists and intellectuals. The aim of his initiative is to reclaim old derelict buildings and unused neglected spaces and to put them back to use for artistic and cultural purposes. The first experience of this sort was the First Creative Forum Tunnel, hosted in a 170 meter long pedestrian tunnel and in certain areas in its immediate environment such as public gardens. This event took place in March 2012. Currently preparations for a second forum are under way and include plans to transform the tunnel into the first arts exhibit hall open to the public 24 hours a day. In a second initiative by the One Million Artists Creativity Center, the ancient Islamic wikalas, or caravansaries, located in the western part of Assiut city such as Wikalat Shalabi, are gradually being transformed

into cultural centers for the presentation of various forms of creative output and for hosting cultural and artistic forums, fairs and other activities. Each of these centers will have its own teams of artists and intellectuals who will draw up the cultural and artistic plans and programs most appropriate to these venues.

### **The beginning of the road:**

The road is long, of course. In the rich and edifying process so far we have become aware of how difficult it is to offer a proper and genuine cultural service. At the same time, we have come to realize the importance of working in an organized and institutionalized manner that, simultaneously, observes the respect for the freedom of the artist and his/her creative energies and impulses. We have also realized how important it is to constantly strive to keep our relations with other cultural entities alive, and to work to develop new relations in the spirit of promoting a climate conducive to creativity and to generating support commensurate to the ongoing artistic and cultural activities and to forthcoming proposals and projects.

The foregoing has been an attempt to offer a brief account of the origins of the Bidayat for the Arts Group and its experience in stimulating a cultural and artistic revival in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Assiut since 2009, through a range of workshops, projects and other events and activities. As this group prepares for future plans and projects, I would also like to stress the extent to which this artistic and cultural venture has affected all of us, as artists. It has given us strength, self confidence, and moral and spiritual support for a value that was one day just a dream but now has become a reality. This value is manifold: it means giving before you think to take, striving to add something new to the cultural reality in Egypt, and finally, being a socially committed artist.

Bidayat is an artistic group from Upper Egypt dedicated to the love of art and sustained by the love for Egypt.



### **Emad Abo Grain - Egypt**

**Visual artist and theatrical set and costume designer;** Emad Abo Grain co founded Bidayat Group for the Arts in Assiout in Upper Egypt in 2009. He launched an initiative to establish the Million Artists Creativity Center in 2012.

He holds a B.A. degree in art education in the Faculty of Special Education of Assiout University. After graduating, he worked as an art education teacher, but in 2004 he resigned so that he could devote himself entirely to art. He took part in a number of group exhibitions featuring painting, photography, installations and physical performance. At the same time, he created set and costume designs for several theatrical performances.

In 2009 he started a series of artistic ventures, with children and ordinary people in the street as their intended recipients. Most of these took place in Assiout city or nearby towns and villages.

## Work Fuelled by Imagination

### By Hala Galal – Egypt

It is such a central question, so central that its answer shapes my philosophy of my work and in fact, my whole philosophy of life. The question itself is very simple: What distinguishes Fleming?

Alexander Fleming is the discoverer of penicillin. He invented or created a substance that helped alleviate the sufferings of millions. What made him so different?

Of course, he had to have had the necessary scientific knowledge under his belt as well as access to the required technology. But this does not answer the question as to what set him apart from the many others who had the same degree of knowledge and expertise along with the advantages of a suitable research environment and a need for their work.

I believe that what Fleming had that others did not was imagination. Yes, imagination, the sole father of invention. He possessed this quality in enough measure to lead him to where others could not go. Everyone else would resign themselves to the idea that there were no solutions. They would stick to cauterizing wounds and sealing them with molten wax, or they would put the patients in isolation wards for days. They would follow the existing practices. Only imagination enables one to conceive of what does not exist and do the work to make it exist.

This is how I try to be, and this is how SEMAT tries to be. This is how I “imagine” art and how my fantastic colleagues at work imagine it.

SEMAT is the organization I belong to. I feel proud whenever I say this. But before talking about SEMAT, I should say a little more about the party I call the Enemies of the Imagination.

This party is authority, in all its various shades and forms, be they political, religious, social or cultural. Authority, by its very nature, strives to entrench the status quo. Change inherently creates new realities. New realities threaten authority’s grip on power and generally leads it to lose that power. Therefore, in its drive to survive and perpetuate its control, authority has to perpetuate what already exists.

In my field of work – the cinema – there is an existing “reality” which has been entrenched and perpetuated by a massive media machine that serves authority in its broader sense. This reality is founded on a number of assumptions that are as unshakable as religion or the laws of science. Firstly, a film must obtain approval from the censors (be they political or religious). It has to be shot in 35 mm film and last an hour and a half (so decrees the cinema authority). It has to have a “message,” play a “role,” and serve society (social authority). These are just for starters in the list of “musts” that ultimately make commercial cinema output so much the same, whether produced by the public or the private sector.

To the foregoing, add a set of fictions spouted by almost everyone in the film industry from producers to the most obscure actors. We often hear them in those talk shows hosted by television personalities whose chief interest in life is their hairdo. These fictions are: “Egyptian cinema will never become world cinema.” “The cost of producing a film should be no less than X number of pounds.” “‘Intellectual’ cinema is not necessarily commercial.” “There is cinema for the intelligentsia and cinema for the general public.” There is no end to such absurdities.

Returning to penicillin, Fleming had sufficient imagination to produce a remedy that, at the time, seemed like a kind of magic. But this does not refute the fact that he also had the basic prerequisites, such as the right skills and knowledge, as well as the right technology and the equipment.

Cinema is different than poetry, fiction and the plastic arts. The poet only needs pen and paper (and sometimes even can do without

these). The same applies to the written arts, in general, and even to the plastic arts. Although theater may require more tools and equipment, these pale in comparison to what is needed to make a film. In the theater, an actor can wear a pair of shorts and put an umbrella on the stage to convince spectators that he is on a beach. In cinema, there is no choice but to film the seaside, and in high quality. Cameras cost money. So does travel to the seaside, accommodation, transporting equipment, and so on.

This is where SEMAT comes in. SEMAT, which stands for Independent Filmmakers for Production and Distribution, was founded with the purpose of helping filmmakers realize their dreams by helping them overcome such obstacles as the inability to afford production costs.

Five people formed the company with me: Kamla Abou Zikry, Samy Hossam, Islam El Azazi, Ahmed Hassouna and Abdel Fattah Kamal. We began work informally in 1999 before our company became official in 2001.

Our mission, as we saw it, was to make the word “independent” come true. To us, independence means freedom in a sense. Freedom is not just about being able to display a film with daring content. Essentially, freedom is being able to confront authority, the nature of which we were all agreed on.

We do not like to produce work that aims simply to make a profit. Ours is a quest for freedom, and toward this end we chose to free ourselves from dependency on the circumstances of the market. We decided to benefit from scientific advances and use modern technologies that make it possible to project the vision of the creator unimpeded by the control of a producer or distributor. We also prefer digital cameras because they are easier to use.

But above all, what we did was to smash some false idols. The first was that god that ordained that there were no resources for independent cinema that were free from the conditions of a producer (whoever that producer might be), the conditions of the market, and the conditions of society. We cast around for people like us and

everywhere we looked, we found that there was someone prepared to support artistic production. We did not share the common anxieties or reservations with regard to the idea of “funding” which have been greatly exaggerated by the media for no logical reason. We have our set conditions with regard to receiving funding and we could impose these conditions on prospective funders. We also had conditions with regard to who we would accept funding from. We would not accept funding from Israel, for example. Nor would we take it from an Arab country such as Saudi Arabia, because these countries have certain ways of operation that do not conform with our values.

We have produced 120 films, more than 70 of which have received respected international awards. Not that the media machine would shine the spotlight on these, since it is only interested in films made with the kind of money that can “pay their way” into festivals and cover the costs of the rented red carpets and exhibition halls. We produced international works whose value was attested to in real life.

We also destroyed the graven images of the director and screenwriter who hail from a particular class and are endowed with a certain look and “style.” The directors who we have worked with come from diverse classes and backgrounds. Each and every one of these delivered the fruit of his or her own particular art, ingenuity and imagination. And they succeeded.

Having touched on the matter of success in this context of our drive to destroy idols, I would like to bring up the subject of “the public.” Producers always harp on this subject as an excuse not to fund “cultural films” on the grounds that they have no “public.” However, the Egyptian population now numbers over 80 million and may well have reached the 90 million mark. Every single one of these millions has his or her own particular sense of taste. In reality, the films that are billed as “smash hits” are never seen by all these millions, not even a small percentage of them.

The Egyptian public is not all made up of “summer vacation, public



holiday and midterm school break” audiences. Filmmakers would be quite content if 100,000 people saw a work they create. I myself am a filmmaker with a number of my own works that I believe touch closely on the problems of the people. I will not forget our experience in screening our films in El Fan Midan, that festival that helped us rediscover ourselves through the eyes of all the people who do not belong to the world of “intellectuals” in its conventional sense, yet who came to the festival to see and experience art, in its fullest sense. If only those proponents of the theory that “intellectual art is not meant for the general public” had been on hand at that moment. They would have seen the thousands of people standing in Abdin Square watching a “different” film and sharing in the laughter, tears and emotions of their fellow beings, regardless of their assorted classifications.

I was on the receiving end of this experience in my capacity as a filmmaker when, thanks to SEMAT, I had the opportunity to present my short and feature length documentary and narrative films in European festivals and cinema centers. These factors encouraged producers to take on my films, market them on DVD, and get them aired over satellite television.

True, we have yet to reach an appropriate level of representation on the satellite channels. Most Arab television stations are funded by governments or by mammoth organizations that resemble governments and have certain policies they stick to. Egyptian television broadcasts only what the national television organization produces. It does not purchase films produced by others and if it does broadcast them, it would have to be free of charge. The Lebanese are reluctant to purchase films by young Egyptian artists because they want to promote the idea that Egyptian cinema consists only of the “classics” while Lebanese cinema stands at the cutting edge of contemporary film in the region.

So we have to add this to our burdens and to our battle, as filmmakers, against authority. It is a long and protracted battle, the battle of a lifetime. We have to take advantage of the greater openness we see today, as manifested in the spread of satellite television, a normal

development in the evolution of today’s world. We need to have the means and mechanisms to exist, yet as Egyptians we have a number of fears and are uncertain how to move forward. With the rise of the religious current in society, further conditions are being placed on art that we now have to confront on top of everything else.

Returning again to penicillin, I doubt that Fleming, in the wanderings of his imagination, gave a moment’s thought to the nationality, identity or religion of the prospective beneficiaries of his “magical” remedy for infectious diseases. His mind was focused only on the solution.

The solution, in our context, emerged from the need to connect with and even to create bonds with those like us. We had to help this process along, just as it helped us. We needed to bring together the organizations that could further this process and we also needed to look for those whom we could help.

Our place is open, our cameras are available, our resources are at the service of those who possess imagination but only lack something that we have. Ours is a comprehensive quest. It is a quest for those who have something to give us, and a quest for those who we can give to. We believe that offering possibilities is the first step toward freedom.

Freedom immediately raises the question of censorship. On this matter, we feel proud. SEMAT does not censor the films it produces in any way. We refuse to allow these works to be subjected to any type of censorship whatsoever. The artist must have total freedom. That is the prerequisite for imagination, for otherwise Fleming would never have discovered his miraculous remedy.

SEMAT is one of 12 projects jointly funded under the Euromed Audiovisual program that supports intercultural dialogue and exchange. I should state here that one of the difficulties we encountered was with the domestic media that portrayed anyone who received funding from abroad as “traitors,” “agents” and other such labels taken from that canned lexicon that authorities

of all sorts keep ready in their top drawer. I believe it is a sign of backwardness when we accuse creative artists of “espionage” just for having forged a fruitful cooperative relationship with directors or production companies abroad. We are living in an age in which the world has become like a small village and when we should rejoice at the cultural and intellectual exchange between peoples and organizations around the world. It is also a good thing to see support for successful work whether in the media or in any other field of human activity.

An example of fruitful cooperation between us and international agencies is the Arab Cinema Caravan we organized several years ago. Carnival was funded by the EU through its funding to SEMAT for Artistic Production and Distribution that implemented the festival. The idea arose out of the brainstorming between five Arab and European partners who were keen to organize a series of cinema events and activities that year. Arab Cinema Caravan toured the Biennale Institute, l’Institut du Monde Arabe, the Rotterdam, the open air theatres in Alexandria and Beirut in the summer, and Marseille.

Truly, the invention of penicillin was a stroke of genius!

### Hala Galal - Egypt



**Filmmaker, scriptwriter, and producer;** Hala Galal founded and is the executive director of SEMAT Production & Distribution, an organization that seeks to support independent cinema in Egypt and the Arab World. She was the director of The Caravan of the Euro Arab Cinema for 3 years. She has directed more than 18 films and produced more than 15 films, and her long documentary Women Chit Chat won the Silver Prize in Rotterdam Film Festival 2006.

She is a member of several local and international film festivals and has been a guest speaker and lecturer in many festivals, conferences and workshops. She is also a member of the Cinema Committee in the Egyptian National Higher Council of Culture in Egypt.

## Out of Control

**By Mohamed Abdel Fattah - Egypt**

In my first year as a student in the Theater Department of the Faculty of at the University of Alexandria, I realized the importance of two things in my life: chance and independence. Since my profession, my passion and my preoccupation is telling stories, allow me to start at the beginning.

In the course of my studies at the University of Alexandria I tried to put on a play. I did not have access to a rehearsal space and my “professor” told me that it was not possible to direct a play before the fourth year. I did not understand the justification, but I rehearsed in the street.

When it came time for the performance, I discovered I was not a favorite of some officials at the Pop Culture Theater. So I decided to stage the play in the street and I founded my company, Hala, as a street theater company.

So where is the chance? And the independence?

Chance comes in from being in Alexandria, where the only place I could stage the play was at the sea. In that way, the theatrical performance had to bow to the sea as a backdrop, with the citadel visible, and this became part of the drama. Chance sets many things in motion, and the response to chance means being out of control. I founded the Hala company in an independent environment, in the wide or even extreme sense of independence.

Do you know what it means for nobody to impose their ideas on you, when there is no place, no time and no set course to what you offer? I look around me, in front of me and behind me and wonder how an organization can take an interest in some subject, be it the empowerment of women, democracy, or any other noble goal, on

the basis of a request, and then design its art on the basis of that request. How can this institution say that it is independent?

I had one experience that induced both amazement and sadness. Hala worked with the director Ibrahim Al Batout in making the film Ain Shams, and we wanted to show it at the Jesuit Center. We had publicized the performance. People got dressed up, left their homes, and took transportation to Ramses, all to see “our film.” But they did not see it, because we discovered that it was no longer ours. The company that had bought it prevented us from showing our work because the company had accumulated capital. Capital is going to be mentioned frequently. I just want to confirm that the ownership of the fate of an artistic work, after it has been made, is of no less importance than the ownership of the ideas beforehand, and ownership while it is being made. Otherwise we are not independent.

We performed in the street, by the sea, in an unequipped place. The audience responded and we learned how to benefit them. We do not need an introduction and we can work in any place under any conditions. Indeed, these conditions can be part of the performance.

I had yet to hear about the Theater of the Oppressed or read Augusto Boal. I learned about him later when the theater critic Nehad Al Selaiha suggested that I read him. There were more than twenty performances in the street, with the audience right there, so that we produce, act, stage and obtain a fresh reaction. At the beginning of 2006 Hala made a big leap with the production of Castor, which was shown on more than 300 nights, something that has never happened with an independent production.

We also put on The Last Days of Umm Al Dunya, which met with similar success. We put things on because we are, quite simply, truly independent.

In 2005 there was the Beni Suef fire. From the grief grew the idea of the Rawabet Theater space, which we founded together with the Townhouse Gallery. At the same time we started to be interested

in film and music and we cooperated with the director Ibrahim El Batout on the film Ain Shams.

Because we, myself and the group that works with me, had no material resources yet wanted to make films, we decided to use mobile phone cameras. We showed a collection of mobile phone films at the first Cairo Independent Film Festival, which we set up in 2006. As the idea was a success, we decided to organize our festival at the beginning of 2007 to spread the idea of mobile phone films.

Once we had started moving on the independent cinema festival, our problems with the censors began, and with the state, which I will relate below. We also had problems with the censor over the film Ain Shams. Those problems ended with us showing parts of a film with a different story. We emerged from the experience believing in the importance of being independent, particularly from capital. This belief of ours grew after another problem, this time with Townhouse. Because it is legally and materially the body responsible for the Rawabet theater, we had to exit the theater we had established. We were no longer even a partner in it, for the simple reason that we had no capital.

There was another form of authority that I was against, the authority of the state. I have more or less not dealt with the institutionalized state, and will not, whatever happens. Not because I refuse to, but because oil and water don't mix.

I had one ordinary experience that drove me mad. I put on a show that I was directing and there was state support from the Organization for Cultural Palaces in terms of a venue and some equipment. When you deal with the state sector you learn a great deal, including the virtue of patience, the tangible and practical meaning of bureaucracy, and the true meaning of ignorance.

I don't reject working with the state on principle. I just think that my character and that of those with me, the character of what we present and the character of the state itself, make finding common ground an impossibility.

Another clash between me and the state happened when we were organizing the Cairo Independent Film Festival. It was close to the opening when I was told bluntly, clearly, revealingly and flagrantly, that I would not be organizing the festival unless the name of the National Center for Cinema appeared on the masthead of “my festival.”

I looked at the man who belonged to a “sovereign body” without reply. The festival did not go ahead at the time, but I am persistent and despite everything I will organize the festival next February under the name the Independent Film Festival. No one can block out the light. Besides, I think one of the most important features of my experience that I take pride in is that I’m not like others who are afraid of politics and don’t take a stance.

I formed links with the revolutionary movements from the outset. The politics and commitment of Kefaya and similar movements were the incubator for my experience. We put on many performances and numerous artistic works before and after the revolution that intersected with the political situation in the country and intervened in events. Even so, we were not a member of a party or body. However, this does not imply isolation and being content with drifting aimlessly.

I can say cheap and easy things like “we’re with the people, from the people and for the people,” and we really do feel that way. But let me say that since we are artists and intellectuals, how can we relate to common everyday concerns? Particularly if we maintain the hair’s breadth between interacting with audiences on the one hand and leading them by the nose on the other.

Regarding the audience, I would like to talk about an important aspect of independent work. Some people deal with this field on the basis that it has no interest in the audience, and the audience has no interest in it. These people consider “successful” works to mean only commercial ones. As a result they more or less hate success, or rather dissemination, which is more accurate.

Someone who observes the theater, for example, will find the audience for plays familiar down to the last face. You might not know his name, but you saw him at the last performance and the one before that. If he’s away, travelling or abroad, you’ll find an empty seat. If those interested in performances of a cultural nature all emigrated, you wouldn’t find a single spectator.

This doesn’t just apply to Egypt. It’s the same in many Arab countries. In fact when we visited one of the Arab states, we noticed the same audience every day. When we skipped a day and went to deal with some personal matters, no one at all turned up. I don’t find the idea of being the piece and its audience, the creator and the audience, the sender and the receiver, attractive. I am trying to reach an audience with all my strength.

I’m not perturbed by criticism, not am I afraid of being accused of running after commercial success, which is another story.

This raises the question as to whether we should consider the commercial cinema productions that we watch at the two Eids and in summer as independent films, in that their producers are not subject to state control.

I say this is not so, because these works are tethered to the control of capital. The producer holds sway and the creative types are at the margin of the margin. In the circles that produce such works, the closer your piece approaches the creative, the smaller your role in its production, and the closer you become to the circles of money, the greater your role. It is indeed a flawed equation, and completely different from what I am talking about.

What I want to suggest is that the success of a “creative” lies in bringing his art to the largest possible sector, by his creativity, and not by monopolizing the cinemas, or through advertisements broadcast every five minutes, or by presenting a work from a different world to the world of art, despite its being called a film or a song.

That is not independent art, because it is quite simply not art in the

first place, neither in regard to how it is made, nor in regard to its artistic content that bows to aesthetic relativism.

This certainly leads us to “cash” and funding and the like. For me, this is a clear and simple matter. I’m not against anything and am not subject to any “moral” criteria. Rather, I try to be the producer of my work, and hence am independent. I work in the theater and the Hala company does not make money, I finance it from my own pocket. I could brag about this, but I realize that wouldn’t be right, because without the company I wouldn’t have been able to obtain work that gets me the money that I spend on the company. I’m very careful to maintain the separation, and dream of the day when I won’t have to do that and the company makes plenty of money that lets me spend better.

My only criteria are not to be a small cog in a bigger machine, for my work not to be put to use for some campaign or business or state, for nothing to come between me and the audience, whatever it is.

The only large circle I’m prepared to be a cog within is the revolution. The revolution is more important and enduring than anything else. More important than the company itself, more important than art itself. Revolution and a life for people of freedom and social justice and human dignity are the only things on whose account I would give up everything. Apart from that there is my art, my audience, and creativity.



**Mohammed Abdel Fattah - Egypt**

**Theatrical director and acting instructor;** Mohammed Abdel Fattah founded the Hala theater company in 2000 and has directed it since. In addition, he helped found the Rawabet Theater for Performing Arts, that he directed for a time, and he founded and directed the Cairo Festival for Independent Film and the Cairo Festival for Mobile Phone Film. He also organizes film and stage acting workshops and he currently directs the Beit el Hawadit (House of Tales) project which produces the television program by the same name.

