

The EXPERIMENTAL



2009

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Coming of Age?

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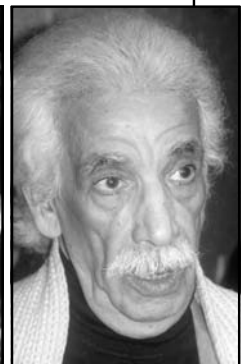
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'Malaweyya' and 'Hamlet' Egypt Official Entries

Al-Ghad Theatre's revisiting of the mystic performance traditions and an innovative re-working of a Shakespeare classic by the Artistic Creativity Centre are to officiate as the two Egyptian entries in this year's competition.

Veteran director Intissar Abdel-Fattaah's *The Mawlaweyya* is described in its press material as a contemporary artistic vision of the Sufi tradition. Far from being a naive or essentialist celebration of any "oriental" ritual, the performance promises us of a taste of Abdel-Fattah's signature innovative use of sounds, which merge here with feelings to produce a transcendental spiritual journey.

Such an interest in reworking traditional performance practices is nothing new to Abdel-Fattah, whose performane *Kohl Pillow* won Egypt the best performance award in CIFET 1998.

Also officiating as Egypt's second official entry in the competition is director Hani Afifi re-working of Shakespeare, to which he gives the title *I am Hamlet*.

For various historical and socio-cultural and political reasons Hamlet has always been a very tempting object of identification for Arab artists and audiences alike. Afifi's program note, however, highlights a particular existential dimension: "I and Hamlet are partners, in sadness, in stress, in perplexity, in searching for truth, in hesitation, in claiming rights, in confronting corruption . . . perhaps in the same morbid fate."



The Mawlaweyya

CIFET 2009's Seminar Highlights

Epic Theater in a Censored World

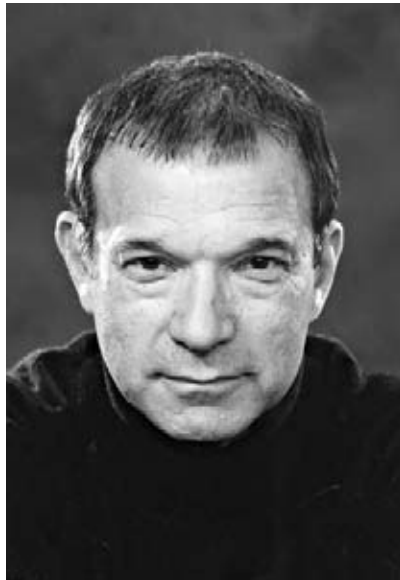
Stephen Greenblatt
Harvard University

With a succession of plays written in the 1590s, Shakespeare helped to invent and perfect a theatrical genre known as the history play, a staging of momentous events and crucial figures from England's past. Depicting on the public stage contemporary figures such as Queen Elizabeth or her glittering courtiers would not have been at all prudent: both the Elizabethan theater and the printing press were censored, and it was extremely dangerous to represent or to reflect in public on those in power. As Sir Walter Raleigh remarked, explaining why he was writing a history of the ancient past, he who follows truth too close on the heels is likely to have his teeth kicked out. But Shakespeare contrived to reflect with remarkable candor on his own society and on the underlying forces that shaped the nation's destiny. He did so by powerfully chronicling a series of violent struggles in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that, as he depicts them, constituted the birth pangs of the modern world.

Shakespeare's achievement entailed the creation of a new form of theatrical entertainment: before he burst onto the scene and made his name with the *Henry VI* tetralogy, no one had written a linked set of plays on a secular theme, plays that constituted an epic vision of the fate of the nation. (The sole possible exception are the two parts of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, but Marlowe's fate – stabbed to death by government agents – would certainly give anyone pause.) There had been linked plays, but these had been the great religious cycles that professed to trace the whole history of the world from the creation to the Last Judgment. These cycles, associated with the Catholic faith, had been banned by the Protestant regime, and were no longer to be seen. Out of their ruins, Shakespeare did something startling and powerful.

The basic conditions then for the creation of the epic theater in Elizabethan England included several key features: 1) State censorship with potentially serious consequences including fines, imprisonment, torture, and mutilation. 2) Virtually no secure public sphere for open political discussion and debate. 3) A banned popular religious theater

whose energies could be exploited. 4) An economically risky and competitive theatrical world. 5) A enormous potential audience for the playwright and company that could figure out how to reach them successfully. To these features one should add another: an alert, aggressive religious faction deeply suspicious of all secular currents, dangerously critical of the government, and profoundly hostile to the theater. Ultimately, in 1649, this faction succeeded in both killing the king and shutting down the theater, as they attempted to impose a fundamentalist religious order on the nation.



In the theater of realpolitik, you also want the audience to grasp the presence of hidden forces ... the ruthless forces of policy ... that lie hidden beneath the moral or ideological considerations.

Shakespeare's epic theater at once plays off and integrates two very different conceptions of history and two very different conceptions of theater: let us call them the theater of enchantment (or myth) and the theater of realpolitik. In the theater of enchantment, you want the audience to feel that there are occult forces – the will of God (or the gods), the ineluctable power of fate, the inflexible demands of justice – that are driving the actions represented on stage. You want them to feel that the play has a privileged access to these forces, which are ordinarily outside the perceptual field and beyond the grasp of ordinary men and women. The audience should experience a certain ironic satisfaction -- the peculiar pleasure of understanding the

deep underlying structure of the universe.

In the theater of realpolitik, you also want the audience to grasp the presence of hidden forces, but these are not occult or metaphysical. They are the ruthless forces of policy – a name, like that of politician, that had evil connotations in Shakespeare's time – that lie hidden beneath the moral or ideological considerations to which men and women pay lip service. Here too the audience's experience involves ironic satisfaction, but it is of a different kind – more cynical and disillusioned. The plays, from this perspective, offer pleasure of being in on a secret, a secret that only the theater can disclose.

World-renowned Renaissance scholar STEPHEN GREENBLATT will deliver a paper with the same title as part of the CIFET seminar titled "The Epic Theatre: Roots and Genesis," to be held on Monday Oct. 12 (11 a.m.) at the Supreme Council of Culture.

The Experimental is available online daily at 8 p.m. (in PDF format) at the Cultural Development Fund's Web Site: www.cdf-eg.org/english/exp_theater/news.htm

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Performing in a Time of Crisis

CIFET 2009's honouree and iconic founder of performance studies **Richard Schechner** will give the following "keynote" address at the opening ceremony

We live in a time of great crisis, violence, and unmet human needs. South of Cairo is Darfur; northeast is Gaza and the Occupied Territories; still further northeast, Iraq and Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. We humans are ruining the air, oceans, soils, and forests. Billions of people are hungry, poor, sick, under- or unemployed, ruled by despots, exploited, and justifiably angry. Some are hopeless.

In the face of all this, what is the role of experimental theatre? Does it matter, can it somehow address the needs of today's world?

What the avantgarde has become during the past 100 years or so is much too complicated to be organized under one heading. There is the historical avantgarde, a forward-looking avantgarde, a tradition-seeking avantgarde, an intercultural avantgarde, and a current avantgarde (always changing). A single work can belong to more than one of these categories.

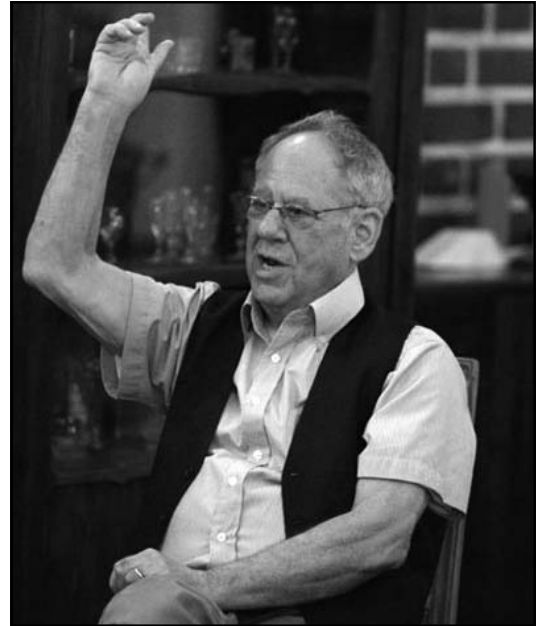
The five avantgardes have emerged as separable tendencies because "avantgarde" meaning "what's in advance of"--a harbinger, an experimental prototype, the cutting edge--no longer describes the multiple activities undertaken by performance artists, auteurs, directors, designers, actors, and scholars working in many different cultures under a wide variety of circumstances.

The historical avantgarde began in Europe during the last third of the 19th century. It soon spread to many places around the world. This first avantgarde was realism, which almost immediately evoked its opposites in an explosion of heterodoxies: symbolism, futurism, cubism, expressionism, dada, surrealism, constructivism ... and many more with names, manifestos, and actions that came and went with such speed as to suggest their true aim: the propagation of artistic difference and the destruction of whatever appeared to lay claim to permanence.

In Europe and North America, since the 1950s there has been both forward-looking and tradition-seeking artists. Those looking forward thrive on multimedia, the internet, holograms, robots, cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and so on.

Some forward-looking artists -- such as Stelarc and Orlan, following scientists experimenting with genetic modifications and implant surgery believe they are creating a new kind of human being.

Others, such as the American Builder's Association, replicate the global web of communications mixing live performance with



As engaged and radical as ever: Schechner in a picture dated June 2009 while at a festival in Poland

media and internet hookups. Forward-lookers enact two very different kinds of future: the utopian, and the oppressive.

Radically opposite to the forward-looking are the tradition-seeking such as the acolytes of Jerzy Grotowski throughout the world, or the practitioners of Japanese butoh.

The underlying idea of the tradition-seeking experimental theatre is that "ancient" or "archetypal" actions can be uncovered/rediscovered by means of highly disciplined "performance research." This research is both personal and cultural -- and, generally, it is accomplished without using the digital technology that characterizes the forward-looking avantgarde.

The intercultural avantgarde is closely related to the tradition-seeking. The difference is that while tradition-seekers strive to make unified artworks, some practitioners of the intercultural explore contradictions and ruptures resulting from cultural contacts and mixing.

For example, Guillermo Gomez-Pena writes: "I physically live between two cultures and two

An Encounter with Schechner

Richard Schechner will give a PowerPoint presentation of some of his most definitive works on Wednesday 14 Oct. 2009. The presentation will take place at 11 a.m in the Opera House Grounds' Supreme Council of Culture.

The session will be moderated by prominent Egyptian critic and theatre scholar Nehad Selaiha

epochs. [...] When I am on the U.S. side, I have access to high technology and specialized information. When I cross back to Mexico, I get immersed in a rich political culture. [...] I walk the fibers of this transition in my everyday life, and I make art about it."

Gomez-Pena's uneasy art enacts the situation that within almost every nation are people who feel they do not "belong," who live multiple cultural lives. The nation as a category is dissolving. On the other hand, some intercultural theatre makers celebrate this diversity.

Ong Keng Sen's Flying Circus Project brought together artists, genres, and styles from different Asian cultures. Ong writes: "The Project is an ambitious large-scale laboratory that brings together diverse Asian artists -- documentary filmmakers, drag queens, visual artists, rock and computer musicians, disk jockeys, modern dancers, and actors, as well as ritualists, and other traditional performers."

The fifth and last of the categories is the current avantgarde, by definition what's happening now. Of course, "now" is always changing, both in regard to time and place.

I don't know what I will see here in Cairo, but I know it will be unique to the given circumstances of this Festival, its organizers intentions, and the experimental theatre world as viewed from an Egyptian perspective.

The current avantgarde includes work that is future-looking, tradition-seeking, and intercultural. What we see here during the next 10 days will give us a basis for measuring how far the current avantgarde is from the historical. Is the work we are going to see innovative? Does it offer new ideas regarding at least some of the global problems I outlined at the outset of my talk?

I believe that artists -- experimental artists especially -- have unique responsibilities. Etymologically the word "experimental" means to go outside or beyond the boundaries. Boundaries are both actual and conceptual. Boundaries separate nations, peoples, and ideas. Often boundaries are necessary. But there are also times and places to cross boundaries, to think the unthinkable, and perform within the realms of the imaginary both what is happening now and what is to come.

Experimental science proceeds on the basis of hypothesis, testing, and revision. Artistic experiment is something else. Experimental art proceeds on the basis of embodying, metaphorizing, and playing with the whole range of human imagination.

To what purpose? To push the boundaries further, to expand the horizon, to challenge accepted orthodoxies, to create temporary but strong communities of artists and audiences, to show how people can cross over from the imagined to the actual and back again into the imaginary and then to the actual and so on in an ongoing process.

It is by living this process of crossings, of going outside the boundaries and returning, and then going out again, and again, that experimental artists contribute to the well-being of humanity.

About Tonight's Opening Performance



Today's opening performance, the Polish entry *Don Quixote* by Teatr Nowy W Zabrze (The New Theatre in Zabrze) is based on "Don Quijote de la Mancha," an iconic novel by the Spanish author Miguel De Cervantes.

In the novel, the protagonist, Alonso Quixano, has read so many stories of chivalry that he descends into fantasy and becomes convinced he is a Knight engaged in a grand mission. Together with his companion Sancho Panza, the self-styled Don Quixote de la Mancha sets out in search of adventures. However, using the formula of theatre within theatre the Polish performance seeks to depict the clash of dreams about a mythical past with the screeching reality. The action is set within an actual theatre. It is based on the confrontation between Don Quixote and the members of the theatrical team -- a confrontation which ends in a collision between the two competing ways of creating fiction.

Sunday, October 11, 2009

Experimentation and Political Theatre

(The Conference Hall- The Supreme Council of Culture, 11:00 a.m.)
The Living Newspaper Theatre: Why and How? Its raison d'être and techniques.

Chairperson: Hani Metawe

Participants

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| - Ahmed Saksoukh | Egypt |
| - Alexandre Marcos Helfer | Brazil |
| - Paul Chaoul | Lebanon |
| - John Elsom | England |
| - Xiong Yuanwei | China |
| - Adel Al Baz | The Sudan |
| - Luigi Maria Musati | Italy |