

The

# EXPERIMENTAL



2009

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## The prophecy that was

**Bahaa Abdelmegid** writes

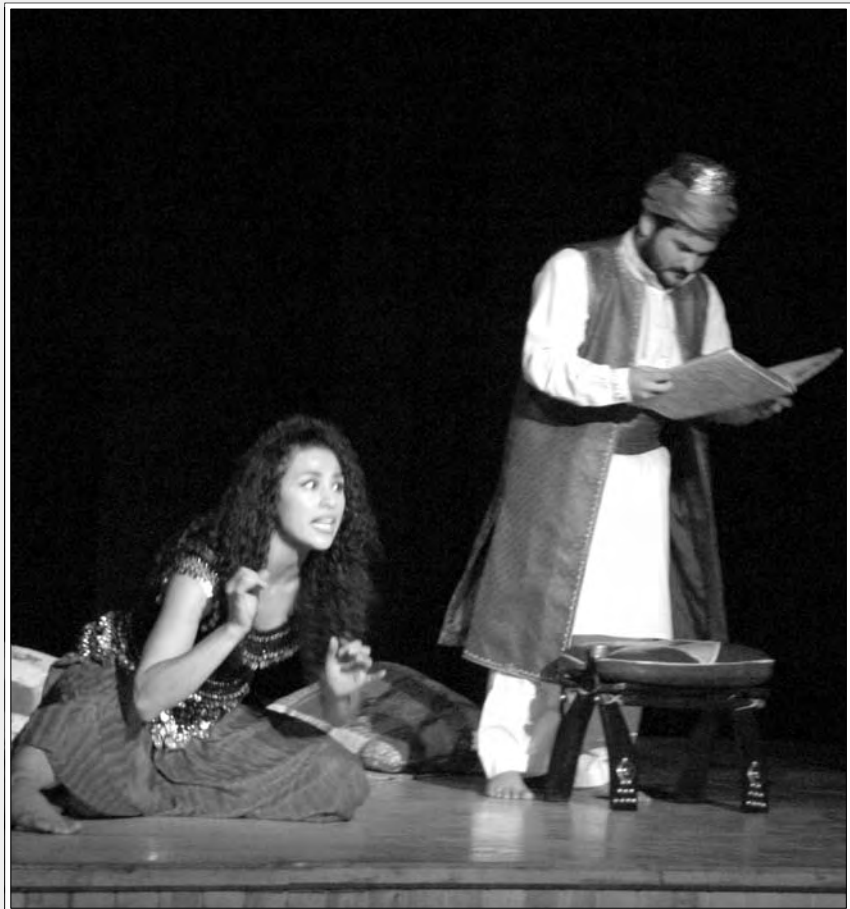
In the UK entry, *Prophecy in The Future Tenses* the medium the theatre is once again recruited to attack the war on Iraq as well as all the war-related atrocities on middle East.

This might be an ethically sound aim for a performance, but the way the performance seeks to achieve this aim is just as exoticising as the butts of its attack: The performance represents this issue through a very traditional plot of Scheherazade, who prophesises what will happen in the future so she tells Shahryar about the invasion of Iraq by American and British troops, along with those of their allies.

The story is told against the backdrop of a large screen projecting what is meant to be terrifying scenes of the war and its victims. These gory images are, of course, complete with the now-iconic images of Abu Ghraib, featuring Iraqi men stripped naked and sexually humiliated.

The play relies heavily on the traditional frame story of *The Arabian Nights*. It is the story of the despot King Shahryar and his wily wife Scheherazade, who manages to escape the King's bloody game by telling him each night an interesting tale without ever reaching its end, thus forcing the king to keep her alive so that he may hear the conclusion.

**A l'intérieur des pages en Français**



**UK entry *Prophecy in The Future Tenses***

In here, the story takes a bleaker ending when the King orders the execution of Scheherazade, having found her prophecy about the impending invasion too revolutionary and rebellious. The King in the play represents all the dictators of the worlds who listen only to the voice of their insanity. Our contemporary Scherazade one the other hand becomes a victim of her own prophecy. The storyteller is executed but still the war takes place and troops are still fighting on the eastern front. When performance finally ended, it left this reviewer with an earnest ques-

tion about its relevance, if any. For all its good intentions, what is the aim of this show in an international festival, especially in the Middle East? The rules of the game have changed irrevocably, although not necessarily for the better. Preaching an anti-Iraq War message to today's Arab audiences seems like preaching to the choir, a message made all the more irrelevant and outdated by the fact that it is delivered with a new president now at the White House.

And he is a Nobel peace laureate at that!

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On her way back to super-orderly Dubai, **Nina Hein** reflects on her personal experience as a Western spectator of an Egyptian Hamlet set against the hustle and bustle of Cairo

## Hamlet intimately alienated



When I recently visited Cairo for a few days to attend the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre, I certainly did not expect to find Egypt's official entry to be a Hamlet adaptation, director Hani Afifi's *I Am Hamlet*. Why not an Egyptian play? Why resort to Shakespeare? An import?

Yet I was intrigued to see how Hamlet sounds in Arabic. Confident that I will easily follow the play—admittedly, my Arabic is limited—I went to the Artistic Creativity Center expecting yet another somber version of the tragedy of the Danish prince.

Even before I entered the theatre, my expectations grew. People were squeezing against the entrance to be able to see this production. It was a bit of a fight to get in. People were very eager to see this show, and I got very excited when I managed to get inside. I am glad that I was so persistent.

First, my expectations of a serious production were met: Hamlet deeply in thoughts in what seems to be a modern-day bedroom, part of a simple but colorful set. Fortunately, the production soon steered away from rehashing tragic conventions.

The opening was followed by a video showing a rather melancholic Hamlet in Cairo—I was very happy to recognize a few sights and places even though my stay here was short. One of the places was the metro, and soon I saw why it was featured in the film.

After the video, the entire cast entered the stage, lining up along downstage to—as it quickly turned out—board a metro car. Cairo metro during rush hour. Everyone squeezed against other passengers (not unlike the scene I just experienced when trying to get into the theatre), yet still carrying on his or her own business. I remember that Hamlet was trying to read a book while a man behind him shouts into a mobile

phone. I do not know the title of the book—if it was shown or mentioned, I didn't catch it—but Hamlet was really absorbed in his reading.

The metro was a recurring theme in the play. I think I saw a map of the Cairo metro onstage. Perhaps it was a prolonged trope for life in modern Egypt. Another metro scene framed the show. So was everything I saw in the meantime just taking place in Hamlet's head?

Reduced to a good hour, the production loosely followed Shakespeare's play hitting all the famous moments—the Ghost of Hamlet's father appears (he wears a uniform, but I do not recognize the "period"), Polonius gets murdered (this scene is a bit muddled and the characters' intentions are not clear), and Ophelia goes mad (which does not show as much as she seemed infantile from the beginning). And Hamlet's famous line "To be or not to be" is delivered in English.

However, best of it all were incidents showing some *couleur locale*. These additions added humor and freshness to the play and made me appreciate seeing an Egyptian Shakespeare.

Even though the production was a bit uneven, I enjoyed the dynamic, eager cast and was impressed by the actor playing Hamlet. He effortlessly switched from tragedy to comedy and entertained fantastically as Hip Hop dancer (the play-in-the-play that Hamlet staged to find out his uncle's reaction to his crime was staged as a pop/Hip Hop performance).

*I Am Hamlet* was for me truly an unexpected fresh look at an eminent play. And even though I might not have gotten all the references to life in Cairo, unable to grasp the relevance of this play for Egypt today, I must say I greatly enjoyed this localized rendering of Hamlet laughing along with the engaged Egyptian audience.

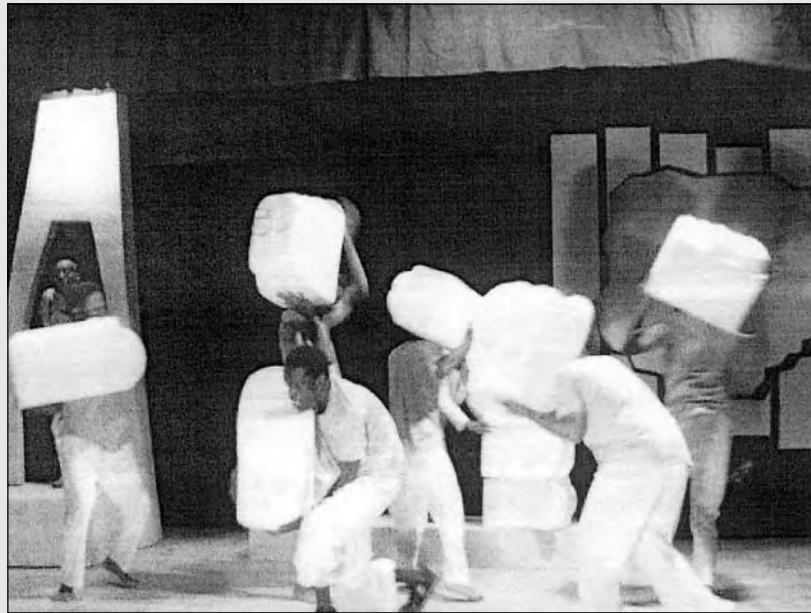
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# The Mountain

(Egypt)

(Based on *The Night of the Powe or Laylat Al- Kadr* a novel by Al Taher Bin Gloon)

The play is working on the idea of heritage and how it controls us and how we can dismantle it in an attempt to flee its domination. Through the notion of "contiguity", the play tries to collect different texts from Islamic and Arab heritage to make them appear more ambiguous. Dance and music from heritage are also selected to play the same role. The composition of the space primarily relies on the shape of a circle that symbolizes "the world" in the Arab thinking.



# Horizon Threads

(The Sudan)

The city is under siege. Everyone is trying to find a way out, but the situation is getting intense till oxygen has become scarce. In their attempt to find a way out, new ways are invented to face death . . .

The 48-minute performance will be presented today (8 p.m.) and tomorrow (12 noon) at the Small Hall of Cairo Opera House.

## Tomorrow's Schedule

PLACE OF PERFORMANCE	مكان العرض Arabic Address	TIME	COUNTRY	TITLE OF PERFORMANCE	NAME OF COMPANY	DURATION OF PERFORMANCE
As-Salam (Main Hall)	مسرح السلام لفاحة الرئيسية شارع القصر العيني	12:00pm	Egypt	Playing with The Masters (Antara)	Youth Theatre Group	
Al-Talyaa (Salah Abdel Sabour)	مسرح طلعية «صلاح عبد الصبور» ميدان العتبة بجوار المسرح القومي	12:00pm	Egypt	Hay Bin Yak Zhan	Al-Talyaa Theatre Group	
Miami Theatre	مسرح ميامي شارع طلعت حرب بجوار سينما ميامي	12:00pm	Egypt	The Mountain	Youth Theatre Group	
Al-Ghad	مسرح الغد لعجوزة بجوار مسرح الجالون	12:00pm	Egypt	Soktom...Boktom (Hush...Hush)	Al-Ghad Theatre Group	
Cairo Opera House (Small Hall)	المسرح الصغير الأوبرا	12:00pm	The Sudan	Horizon Threads	The National Company for Acting	48 min
Al-Gomhoureya	مسرح الجمهورية شارع الجمهورية	12:00pm	Egypt	The Virgin Butterfly Story	Modern Dance Group	

The Experimental takes no responsibility for changes introduced to the above schedule without a 24-hour advance notice

The Experimental is available online daily at 6 p.m. (in PDF format) at the Cultural Development Fund's Web Site:  
[www.cdf-eg.org/English/exp\\_theater/news.htm](http://www.cdf-eg.org/English/exp_theater/news.htm)

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