

The

EXPERIMENTAL



2009

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CIFET's Balancing Act: Local Cairenes Speak Out

The opening Ceremony of CIFET was marked by a unanimous stress on the festival's role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. **Shady Badran** sounds out local Cairenes

Aly Hammouda, a young pharmacist at an international pharmaceuticals company, is representative of a sizable section of his generation in at least one respect: Like many of them, "experimental theatre" and its annual festival remain well outside his immediate interest zone. Recently, however, the news of the man behind the festival, Minister of culture Farouk Hosni, has been fondly followed by Hammouda-- thanks to the recent UNESCO chairmanship elections, in which the minister launched a well-fought and high-profile campaign. Regardless of what he thought of the man and his achievements, Hammouda, like many of his fellow citizens, wished success for whomever represented Egypt.

Like them, too, Hammouda believes that Hosni's loss was due to a certain conspiracy engineered by a Western Lobby that could not tolerate the idea of having an Egyptian in such an important position. Hammouda, however, thinks that this brouhaha should not lead Egypt to stop engaging in intercultural activities such as CIFET.

"If anything, we should multiply these international events. We must invite intellectuals and artists from all over the world – if only to prove to them that some were mistaken in undermining Egypt's culture and history."

A l'intérieur des pages en Français



Syria's *Don Quixote*

Karim Meghawry, a young Egyptian actor who had participated in CIFET 2003, thinks differently. He believes that the festival has lost much of its original value, both artistic or cultural. Most of the plays in the festival are too traditional and do not offer any innovative ideas or experiments.

Nor can the festival encourage any cultural or civilizational dialogue in the actor's view: "because the festival does not represent the true image of our Egyptian and Arab culture." Instead of unearthing Egyptian identity to create an innovative type of theatre that best represents the host culture, "We create plays that are pitched to Western tastes and styles."

Begging to differ strongly with Meghawry is Heba Ismail, a Syrian student in one of the private universities. For her, the mere gathering of individuals from various countries of the world to engage in sharing their art is in itself a deep dialogue between different civilizations. That Egypt was keen to hold this festival as scheduled, despite the frenzy that accompanied Hosni's UNESCO loss, proves that Egypt was keen on maintaining this

dialogue between different civilizations and that Egyptians wish to have their voices heard.

Cairo-based French expatriate Carol Irigoien offers a different inside-outside perspective. She believes that the establishment of Egypt for such a festival is a very important step, although it is still marred by poor publicity.

Irigoien admits that that, by definition, all experimental theatre, even in Europe, caters to a niche market of intellectuals and avant-garde elite, and so the function of achieving cultural dialogue via this festival may only extend to this small select group. "Still, we must not forget that it is those intellectuals who direct public opinion in Europe, and this is why the festival remains important."

For the French expatriate, we cannot cancel cultural events merely because they do not appeal to the larger public or because the West still cannot understand Arabs as much as it should. Quite the opposite, this is all the more reason for these events to be maintained and developed further.

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'Lost' *Cardenio* Rediscovered in Egypt



Photo: Michael Lutch.

A scene from A.R.T's 2008 *Cardenio*: The Shakespearean play-within-a-play

The Egyptian fringe performance *The Illusion of Love* is freely adapted from *Cardenio*, a text written by Stephen Greenblatt and Richard Mee and staged at the American Repertory Theatre in May 2008. Mee and Greenblatt's play is itself an attempt to re-imagine Shakespeare's "lost" play with the same title, one which he is said to have co-authored with Fletcher in 1613, based on the story of Cardenio and Lucinda in *Don Quixote* (Part 1, chs. 24–8).

Greenblatt, one of the world's leading scholars on Shakespeare and a distinguished CIFET seminar speaker (see issue 1, p. 3) has been engaged ever since in an ambitious international scholarly and artistic project that seeks to examine the idea of "cultural mobility" – how the selfsame text of *Cardenio* may be re-imagined differently by diverse cultures and contexts. *The Illusion of Love* is renowned playwright Lenin El-Ramly's Egyptian version of the text. As such, it should be seen, first and foremost, as an experiment in cross-cultural theatrical transfer.

El-Ramly's 125-minute one-act play takes place in the country mansion of Anees, a Western-educated wealthy businessman in his mid-thirties. Anees, who is tying the knot again after two failed marriages, has invited a select group of his close friends and old classmates to his estate in Upper Egypt so that they may all join him in celebrating his projected wedding to Kamla, a young free spirit and an aspiring painter. He promises them a wedding party "the like of which you have never seen".

The performance begins with a flashback on the part of Walid, whereby he recollects the

events that have taken place on that most unforgettable night. When the act of recollecting is over, towards the end of the play, the cynically-minded confirmed bachelor is left with a difficult choice dropped on him by Kamla in the beginning of the performance: to choose "life" or "non-life".

There is also a parallel drama which we only hear about but never see. Off-stage loud music announces another wedding ceremony taking place at the house of Anees's rural and much poorer neighbours. It is a folk wedding, complete with all the traditional trappings of life in the rural south of Egypt: time-honoured rituals of marriage, virginity cult, along with many other intricate aspects of the dominant patriarchal mindset.

Intriguingly, this parallel wedding ceremony not only sheds light on the relationship between Anees and Kamla, but also influences the course of subsequent events and, ultimately, leads to an ending not unlike that of the original *Cardenio*.

The Illusion of Love revisits the everlasting question that humankind and its philosophers have been debating since time immemorial: Whether love is an illusion or an unshakeable truth? Is it true that love has its own terms and rules? Or is it just an illusion that humankind has made up in order to shield itself from the one ugly truth: that a person is born to live and die alone, all the while leading a life where he or she is in love with no one else but their own self.

The performance will play tonight and tomorrow (8:30 pm) at the Opera House Grounds' Al-Hanager Theatre.

The House of Bernarda Alba

(Mexico)

The play centers on the events of an Andalusian house during a period of mourning, in which the title character Bernarda - An elderly widow who exerts excessive will over her five daughters - is preoccupied with ideas of honor and tradition, in particular relating to the role of women in society. The deliberate exclusion of any male character from the action is highly significant as it helps to build up the high level of sexual tension that is present throughout the play. The play explores themes of repression, passion, and conformity, and inspects the effects of men upon women. Bernarda's cruel tyranny over her daughters foreshadows the stifling nature of Franco's fascist regime.



Tomorrow's Schedule

PLACE OF PERFORMANCE	مكان العرض Arabic Address	TIME	COUNTRY	TITLE OF PERFORMANCE	NAME OF COMPANY	DURATION OF PERFORMANCE
Al Aim (The Main)	مسرح لعالم الكبير المسرح كورنيش النيل بجوار كورنيش الجامعة	9:00	The Republic of Uzbekistan	A Very Beautiful Woman	Karakapak State Musical Theatre	100 min
As-Salam (Main Hall)	مسرح السلام (القاعة الرئيسية)	9:00	Morocco	Lifhamatour	We Play "for Arts"	60 min
Al-Talyaa (Zake Tolymat)	مسرح الطليعة (زكي طليمات)	9:00	Qatar	The Last Ballet Dance	Qatari Theater Troupe	45 min
Al-Talyaa (Salah Abdel Sabour)	مسرح الطليعة (صلاح عبد الصبور)	7:00	Ghana	Mieux Que Nos Peres (Tibi'a Law)	National Theatre Company Abibigromma	90 min
Al-Arayes	مسرح العراش المسرح القومي	7:00	Sultanate of Oman	Art Evening with Saad Alla Wannous	The Civil Theatrical Awakening	50 min
Metropol Theatre	مسرح متروبول شارع عماد الدين وسط البلد	6:00	Bosnia and Herzegovina	The Beast on The Moon	Mostar Youth Theatre	100 min
Metropol Theatre	مسرح متروبول شارع عماد الدين وسط البلد	8:30	Bosnia and Herzegovina	The Beast on The Moon	Mostar Youth Theatre	100 min
Miami Theatre	مسرح ميامي شارع طلعت حرب بجوار سميث ميامي	7:00	Jordan	Without a Title	The Modern Theatre	50 min
Al-Ghad	مسرح الغد الجوزة بجوار مسرح البلون	8:00	Egypt	Macbeth	Al-Ghad Theatre Group	
Cairo Opera House (Small Hall)	مسرح الصغير الأوبرا	8:30	Iraq	Echo	National Acting Group	60 min
Cairo Opera House (Open Air)	المسرح الكشوف الأوبرا	10:00	Qatar	The Coming Illusion	The Youth Centre for Theatrical Arts- Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage	45 min
Al-Gomhoureya	مسرح الجمهورية شارع الجمهورية	9:00	Sultanate of Oman	The Stairs of The Sun	Rustaq Theater Team	45 min
Artistic Creativity Centre	مركز الإبداع دار الأوبرا المصرية	9:00	Mexico	La Casa de Bernarda Alba (The House of Bernarda Alba)	Compania de Teatro del Espacio Cultural Metropolitano	86 min

Without a Title (Jordan)

It is based on a prophecy which depicts "Jerusalem" as an old woman who tells her story to a blind man.

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

3

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