

## **Two Giants of Egyptian Theatre: Conversations with Mohamed Abul-‘Ela El-Salamouny and Lenin El-Ramly**

On 19 June 2023 I was working on the final edits of my upcoming book *Of Kings and Clowns: Leadership in Contemporary Egyptian Theatre since 1967*, when I read that Mohamed Abul-‘Ela El-Salamouny (1941-2023) had passed away. El-Salamouny is one of the playwrights whose work is at the centre of my book alongside that of Yusuf Idris (1925-1991), Fathia El-‘Assal (1933-2014), and Lenin El-Ramly (1945-2020). I was fortunate enough to meet both El-Salamouny and El-Ramly on two occasions, in 2015 and 2016 in Cairo.<sup>1</sup> Both playwrights were extremely generous with their time in discussing their work with me, a foreign PhD student who was a relative newcomer to their work back then. For a long time, I could not see how such long conversations could be converted into publishable interviews because these were not interviews in a traditional sense but rather long discussions about their work, their visions of the state of theatre in Egypt, and of the political atmosphere in their country.

After El-Ramly’s death on 7 February 2020 I wanted to publish parts of my conversations with him to celebrate his contribution to theatre and to invite the attention of a non-Arab readership and theatre public to this playwright whose work has been enormously popular in Egypt and in other Arab countries but has remained almost unnoticed outside the Arab world. Very little scholarship or indeed any information at all can be found in English on the playwright’s work, and I hoped that publishing my interview could have contributed to promoting his name outside the Arab world, even if only in a small way. However, shortly after El-Ramly’s death the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. We all needed to adapt to a new normality of isolation, and I had to postpone the work on the interview.

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<sup>1</sup> My first meeting with El-Salamouny took place at the Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Giza in August 2015. In August 2016 I visited Egypt again when we met a second time in a café in Cairo. Both meetings with El-Ramly took place in his flat in the Mohandiseen district of Giza, in September 2015 and August 2016.

El-Salamouny's work has also been almost unremarked upon in Western academia, to an even greater extent than El-Ramly's. This is despite the fact that he was a pioneering figure among his generation of playwrights. It was after the production of his play *Revenge: Quest of Pain*<sup>2</sup> in 1982 that critics began to speak about the revival of Egyptian theatre after the so-called decline that followed the *Naksa*—the defeat of the Arabs in 1967 Arab-Israeli war—and about the emergence of a new generation of playwrights onto the scene.<sup>3</sup> Now after El-Salamouny's death, it seems appropriate to gather together parts of my conversations with these two of the most influential Egyptian playwrights of the previous five decades, whose passing marked the end of an era in the theatre scene of the country.

As artists El-Salamouny and El-Ramly are obviously very different and, as a result, unique in terms of their paths, writing modes and styles, and even in relation to the sectors of the theatre establishment they predominantly worked with. El-Salamouny mostly worked with state theatre and El-Ramly worked with the private sector, although neither of them shut themselves off from the other sector. What unifies them however is their lifelong devotion to theatre and their commitment to promoting and popularising this form of art.

It is symbolic that El-Salamouny's last public appearance was in a discussion at The National Centre of Theatre, Music, and Folk Arts, where he voiced his opposition to the Centre's plans to close the print version of the journal *Al-Masrah* ('Theatre') and to keep only the online version of the periodical. As the Egyptian media reports of the meeting describe, El-Salamouny spoke enthusiastically about the importance of the journal in promoting theatre and its exceptional role for younger playwrights in disseminating their work. During his speech he felt unwell and lost consciousness. News of his death emerged shortly afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Tha'r wa-rihlat al-'adhab* was first staged in 1982, directed by Abdelrahim El-Zurqany (1913-1985), and published in 1983, English translation 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the many reviews reprinted in the 1983 publication of the play.

<sup>4</sup> See Muhammad al-Khuli, 2023. 'Abu-l-'Ila al-Salamuni... al-sarkha al-akhira'. *Al-Akhbar*, 23 June <[https://www.al-akhbar.com/Culture\\_People/364796/](https://www.al-akhbar.com/Culture_People/364796/)> [2/10/2023].

One might wonder whether the playwright's opposition to the publication's proposed move from print to digital mode represented another clash of the old and the new: the representative of the older generation was unwilling to adapt to the changing world in which the online realm provides us with opportunities to engage in intellectual discourse with a wider public than ever. However, perhaps it is thanks to the devotion of people like El-Salamouny to this quite conservative art form that theatre still exists and that neither cinema and television nor the Internet have managed to take over the space that belongs to theatre. Even though these new modes might have occupied more visible, larger, and perhaps more effective spaces for public engagement, the directness of interaction between the art on stage and the public in the auditorium has remained irreplaceable. At the same time, both El-Salamouny and El-Ramly were always innovative in their playwriting, trying to find effective ways of maintaining and increasing direct contact between the stage and the auditorium.

**Conversations with Mohamed Abul-'Ela El-Salamouny: *'We felt that we were lost, so we held on to our roots' 'The influence of heritage surely brought a unique taste to Egyptian theatre and made it flourish'***



*The author with El Salamouny courtesy of Karim Helemish*

**Tiran Manucharyan:** There seems to be a consensus among researchers in Egyptian culture that theatre in Egypt has declined since the 1970s, with the implication that the art form was not worthy of much scholarly interest. You started as a playwright in this atmosphere of the so-called decline. How would you describe the beginning of your path and of the path of your generation in Egyptian theatre?

**Abul-‘Ela El-Salamouny:** Our generation [of playwrights] is considered the third generation in Egyptian theatre. The first generation is the generation of the pioneers, up to Tawfiq al-Hakim. The second generation is the generation of the Sixties. The theatre of the Sixties was associated with the national project.<sup>5</sup> This project collapsed in 1967. My generation succeeded those two generations and was informed by them. We have borne the responsibility of theatre after its collapse in the Sixties. As Faruq Abd El-Qadir, one the most important theatre critics, described our path, we rose onto the collapsed stage.<sup>6</sup> We had experienced the Naksa of 5 June and at the end of the Sixties Egyptian theatre turned into a theatre of lamentation, mourning, and sorrow. Our generation has borne the responsibility of confronting this collapse by resurrecting hope. We felt that we were lost, so we held on to our roots. The medium of confronting defeatist thought in theatre was through revisiting the history of the struggle of the Egyptian people and through a return to our cultural heritage. We found inspiration in the history of our people. For example, my play *Al-Nadim’s Story about the Uprising of the Leader* was an attempt to raise the moral spirit of the people in the face of the occupation of Sinai.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> El-Salamouny here implies specifically the attempts of reinventing an Egyptian or Egyptian-Arab national form of theatre in the 1960s, for example as discussed by Yusuf Idris in his influential series of articles ‘Towards and Egyptian Theatre’ (1964, ‘Nahwa Masrah Misri’) and implemented in his 1964 play *The Farfurs (Al-Farfir)* as well as Tawfiq al-Hakim’s (1898-1987) book *Our Form of Theatre (Qalibu-na al-masrahi)*. El-Salamouny referred to the influence of these two playwrights on his writing modes on many occasions.

<sup>6</sup> Faruq Abd El-Qadir entitled his study of the new playwrights of the 1970s’ and 1980s’ Egyptian theatre *The Knights Rising onto the Collapsed Stage* (1984, *Al-Fursan al-sa’idun ila al-khashaba al-munhar*).

<sup>7</sup> *Riwayat al-Nadim ‘an hoogit al-za’im*, 1974, had several productions, including by Mohamed Salim in 1974, Abbas Ahmed in 1974 and Abdel Ghaffar Ouda (1940-2003) in 1981. The play’s protagonist is the 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian intellectual and social reformer Abdallah al-Nadim (1842-1896).

**TM:** In many of your plays, and Al-Nadim's Story among them, the antagonists are the representatives of colonial power. However, the main target of your criticism seems to be the local, Egyptian system of power. Al-Nadim's Story ends with anti-capitalist slogans which were not exclusive to Abdallah al-Nadim's times but were also applicable to the time period when the play was produced.

**El-Salamouny:** We live in an authoritarian society where there is oppression and lots of uneasiness. We have problems that have no beginning and no end: tyranny, corruption, poverty, ignorance. As a writer, I have to address all of these issues, but I cannot speak directly without my work being banned. I wrap what I want to say in a package, so it reaches out to the people. In my writing I did not aim to speak about or to glorify a specific figure. My aim was to learn from the history of people. History for me is a raw material which I cultivate. Art in general does not speak directly. *Al-Nadim's Story* was indeed addressed to Anwar el-Sadat. I still remember the demonstrations against Sadat by the people who wanted to resist the occupation [of Sinai], but it is not just an anti-colonialist play. The chants at the end of the play refer to the realities of Sadat's era and the capitalist direction of the country adopted by him which increased social injustice. Poverty, ignorance, and diseases started to spread. When we were arrested during a staging of this play, and later were taken in cars from prison to court, in cars we were chanting similar slogans, addressing Sadat. In *The Man in the Castle* I draw the example of Muhammad Ali's fall as he gives up popular leadership.<sup>8</sup> My quest here was to discuss the importance of democracy, because tyranny leads to failure eventually, as happened with Mubarak. In *Revenge: The Quest of Pain*, which dramatises the pre-Islamic poet and king Imru' al-Qays, I respond to Sadat saying that 99 percent of the cards are in the hands of America, but the play was only staged after Sadat's death. Imru'

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<sup>8</sup> *Rajul fi al-qal'a* was first staged in 1987 by the director Sa'd Ardash (1934-2008). There seems to be a clear parallel between the character of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century ruler of Egypt Muhammad Ali (reign 1805-1848) in this play and the president Gamal Abdel Nasser (in power 1954-1970).

al-Qays's father was killed. He wanted to avenge his father's assassination and thus he sought help from the great powers. He had to choose between the Romans and the Persians. The outcome was his defeat, and it was the great powers that brought about this defeat, because they were never interested in assisting him.

**TM:** You have chosen a form of public engagement which is in general quite niche, particularly in an era when there are so many different ways for intellectuals and artists to access the public. How can theatre remain attractive for people when they have the choices of cinema, television and now the Internet?

**El-Salamouny:** Perhaps the classical style of *Revenge* could be a bit difficult for the wider public. The target audience of the play was the elite, although in fact *Revenge* was my first big success on stage as well as my first play on a state-run stage. Before that my other plays had only been staged in cultural palaces.<sup>9</sup> In my other plays I tried to reach out to the wider public, beyond the urban elites. It was our generation's fundamental diligence to have our work reach out to the public. It is true that the theatre of the Sixties was triumphal and the enthusiasm then was predominant. In that same period, there was a movement of employing the popular heritage and the theatrical techniques that exist, for example, in *samir*, in folk personification, and in other forms of festivities and public performances.<sup>10</sup> We resorted to the same means to reach out to the public. In *Al-Nadim's Story* I reworked the folk performance in an historical setting. In *The Man in the Castle* I reworked a *zar* ritual.<sup>11</sup> In my plays I also applied *samir* and personification, all of those with the same aim of reaching out to the public. Other playwrights of my generation have also experimented with local forms of

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<sup>9</sup> Cultural Palaces are cultural centres in Egypt owned by the state, tasked with extending theatre, film, literature, and folk arts to a mass public across the country. By contrast, the typical audience of state-owned theatre venues in Cairo is the Cairene middle class.

<sup>10</sup> *Samir* is a rural form of evening entertainment with elements of performance, which Yusuf Idris discusses in his 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre'.

<sup>11</sup> *Zar* is a dance ritual, practised in North Africa and the Middle East, for exorcising or pacifying spirits, often referred to as Masters (al-asyad) which supposedly possess the person for whom it is organised.

performance, to such an extent that this is considered to be the predominant direction in Egyptian theatre. Even Lenin El-Ramly, who is a realist and mainly dramatises a contemporary reality, resorted to cultural heritage in at least one play, *Welcome Beys*. To what extent we have succeeded is a question that the critics and specialists should judge, but this influence of heritage surely brought a unique taste to Egyptian theatre and made it flourish. The use of cultural heritage in contemporary theatre usually contributes to making a good show and creating a nice atmosphere in the auditorium. I believe I have succeeded in this, although people know me more from television than from theatre because television reaches out to those people that theatre does not. If we speak about impact, unfortunately theatre does still not have any other impact than among the elites who watch it.

**TM:** In most of your plays you rework a form of local folk performance or entertainment. I wonder whether it is also your intention to reaffirm the existence of the theatre tradition in the Arab world in the pre-modern era.

**El-Salamouny:** There is a point of view which considers that this region did not know theatre before the Europeans introduced it. The reason for this perspective is that the Arabs were interested in oral and narrative forms of art, while they despised performing arts. They existed in Spain for 800 years and never spoke a word about theatre, not a single historian, a writer, or a poet. When the French expedition arrived [in Egypt], al-Jabarti mentioned that the expedition brought a theatre with it. Ibn Daniyal was a poet and perhaps a good poet, but because he resorted to folk performance, the educated looked down upon him: they would mention that he wrote poetry but would not mention theatre. When Tawfiq al-Hakim started writing plays for the Okasha Brothers' Troupe at the beginning of his career, he would not use his name for fear of his father.<sup>12</sup> Yaqub Sanu was rejected from Muhandis Khana School

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<sup>12</sup> The Okasha Brothers' Troupe was an Egyptian theatre troupe founded in 1921 by Zaki, Abdallah and Abd al-Hamid Okasha brothers.

because he was practising folk theatre.<sup>13</sup> The educated classes had double standards in regard to theatre. There is another example: when Muhammad Taymur acted in Ibrahim Ramzi's play *Azza, the Caliph's Daughter*, Sultan Hussein Kamel, the sultan of Egypt, attended the production.<sup>14</sup> He applauded the performance, but he did not know about Muhammad Taymur's involvement in it. When he learned that the son of Taymur Pasha, who was working at the court, had participated in the play, he banned him from practising theatre and sent him to the palace, to work with the protocol. Still today if your son practises theatre, for example, joins the Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts, he is questioned: what are you going to work as?<sup>15</sup> Will you work as an *artist* [*in a derogatory manner*]? Still the general stance is against theatre.

**TM:** It seems that theatre inherently shatters the existing order of things. This is in line with the role that you attribute to various forms of performing practices in your plays, in that they confront authoritarianism, religious extremism, or societal stagnation. However, theatre can also be exploited by the system of power for its own agenda, a topic that is also touched upon in your work. How can the artist or the writer avoid that?

**El-Salamouny:** In *The Minarets of the Protected City* I dramatised folk performances of *muhabbazin* performers.<sup>16</sup> These were the local equivalents of clowns who personified a fool or a specific ruler in their performances, whenever this was needed. The events of the play take place during Napoleon's expedition. Napoleon attempts to get close to the people through festivities in which the *muhabbazin* are involved but the *muhabbazin* manage to turn

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<sup>13</sup> Yaqub Sanu (1839-1912), known by the nickname Abu Naddara ('the man with spectacles'), ran a theatre troupe in Cairo from 1870 to 1872. Muhandis Khana School is the School of Engineering.

<sup>14</sup> The play *Azza bint al-khalifa* by Ibrahim Ramzi (1884-1949) was staged in May 1916. The performance was famously attended by Sultan Hussein Kamel of Egypt (1914-1917). Muhammad Taymur (1892-1921), the Egyptian writer of short stories and plays and a member of the famous Taymur literary family, the son of Ahmed Taymur (1871-1930) and the brother of Mahmoud Taymur (1894-1973), participated in the performance.

<sup>15</sup> My first meeting with al-Salamouny took place at the Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Giza.

<sup>16</sup> *Ma'adhin al-mahrusa* was first staged in the courtyard of the Wikala of al-Ghuri caravanserai in Cairo by Sa'd Ardash in 1983.



the tables on him. I wanted to say that the role of the arts is always to confront tyranny, power, and colonisation, and it has the means to do it even when the ruler tries to exploit art for his own interests. Similarly, in *Abu Naddara* I depicted a tyrant ruler who was against freedom of thought but was confronted by Yaqub Sanu and his theatre troupe.<sup>17</sup>

**TM:** Abu Naddara ends up with the exile of the artist who confronts the tyranny. In 1974 during the staging of *Al-Nadim's Story*, you and the director were arrested for practising your own freedom of expression. What are your reflections on this event?

**El-Salamouny:** I was kept in prison for four months. At the time, we were running a literary association in Damietta which was calling for a writers' union. The idea was that this union would be independent from the government, whereas the government wanted it to be under its umbrella and under its control. The government created a political organisation called The Socialist Organisation and wanted us to be affiliated with it, while we wanted to be independent from official agencies. So we organised a conference in Port Said which took place at the time that *Al-Nadim's Story* was being staged on the occasion of Victory Day, on 23 December, 1974. We were planning to work on the proposal during that night and convene the conference. We made a statement which we hung on the door of the Culture Palace in Port Said and started to discuss our cause. The head of the Palace was terrified and contacted the security services. They arrived and arrested everyone involved in the performance. We were all thrown into prison. This was done under the existing emergency law. For ages Egypt has been ruled by emergency law which allows the state to imprison people without investigation, without a trial or anything. Then we tried to inform the public, to leak the news and to make some noise until they arranged a trial. There was a court and in the first session they released us.

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<sup>17</sup> The play *Abu Naddara* (meaning: *the man with spectacles*) was staged in 1994 at the Mohamed Farid Theatre in Cairo, directed by Mohsen Helmy (d. 2019).

We have had censorship in all ages, whether in the age of Mubarak or in the age of Sadat. Often the issues with censorship can be solved just by talking with the censors. They might have understood the text incorrectly and might object as a precaution before making the final report, but when they understand the matter, they might back down. My biggest issue is not with official censorship but with the mid-level artistic administration, those who act out of fear of losing their chairs. They are constantly afraid of being reproached by their superiors and of being told off for their mistakes. Higher-level authorities are not among us and do not see what we do. When someone reports on us, as happened in Port Said, the authorities or the police learn about the incident from the point of view of those who have reported it. The reactionary, backward, fearful, and cowardly mid-level bureaucracy, who act out of fear, with their hands trembling and have no daring, are our biggest problem.

**TM:** Is there a specific theme that is more difficult to get past censorship?

**El-Salamouny:** Often they are afraid when there is anything related to religion. If there is any mention of Islam in the play, they want to send it to al-Azhar. Then you need to explain to them that there is nothing to worry about. I have a big problem with various administrations in theatre itself as well as directors who do not want to host performances on the theme of religious extremism and terrorism, trying to be more royal than the king. There is an illustrative example that when I wrote the play *The Chronicles of the Cows* and Karam Motawie staged it, Dr Huda Wasfi was responsible for El-Hanager Arts Centre.<sup>18</sup> She allowed the performance to happen despite all the pressures and nothing terrible happened. In other words, fear is from inside as those in responsible positions are the ones who are afraid. With a head of theatre like Huda Wasfi and a strong director like Karam Motawie a play like this could be staged even during the peak of terrorism in 1995. Meanwhile, in 1993 I wrote another play called *The Prince of Assassins* that portrayed what resembled the terrorist

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<sup>18</sup> *Diwan al-baqar* was staged in 1995 by Karam Motawie (1933-1996).

groups.<sup>19</sup> The play was being staged by the director Sa'd Ardash. The rehearsals took place in El-Salam Theatre. The head of the theatre company was Fahmi El-Khuli. He had to stop the production because of the threats from extremist groups. In regard with my play *The Incident that Happened in September*, which is about 11 September, the heads of two different theatres mentioned in the newspapers that the play was against Islam.<sup>20</sup> They should have said that it was against the Muslim Brotherhood rather than Islam. By doing so they give justification in shedding blood similar to what happened to Naguib Mahfouz and Farag Foda, who were both attacked as a result of announcements in the newspapers that their works were against Islam.<sup>21</sup> How can a writer reach out to the public if such incidents occur in theatre administration?

**TM:** When it comes to the plays that target religious extremism, as you say, higher authorities would be more willing to give the green light to productions whereas the mid-level officials are afraid of the reaction of Islamist groups. In a way your engagement with the theme of religious extremism since Mubarak's era aligns you with the official politics. How do you maintain your independence as a writer in this new atmosphere?

**El-Salamouny:** Throughout our history politics and religion have been intermingling, even if they seem to be in opposition with each other. Everything I write challenges tyranny, but the dangers of the extremist groups are still there. They are inside us, in our houses, and among my own relatives. So I invite these people to watch my plays and to see on stage the dangers of the ideas that they embrace, even if this makes me be seen with the system of power. We have military rule, the military authority, because of these groups.

**TM:** Do you like what the younger generation brings to theatre in Egypt?

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<sup>19</sup> *Amir al-hashshashin* was staged in 2009 in the Cultural Palace of Badrashin.

<sup>20</sup> *Al-Haditha allati jarrat fi shahr sibtambir* was staged in 2010 in El-Taleaa Theatre.

<sup>21</sup> Farag Foda (1945-1992) was assassinated in 1992 by the members of the Islamist groups. In 1994 Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) was stabbed by an Islamist extremist but the writer survived this attempted assassination.

**El-Salamouny:** I am very optimistic in regard to the current theatre movement as it relies on a group of talented young people. I consider that they are the future. The intellectual content of the new generation in current theatre is of a very high quality on the technical side. They brought their innovations and perhaps benefited from the Experimental Theatre Festival greatly, because it was a window on a world of experiments.<sup>22</sup> We needed to see that and to see those experiments and movements that exist in theatre. But our directors need content. In the Sixties there was high quality content and less technique. Now while there are advanced directors as well as advanced critics, we need new writers. I believe that, with time, change will occur.

**Conversations with Lenin El-Ramly:** *'My aim was to bring meaning to theatre rather than to hunt for laughter by "tickling" the audience'*



*The author with El-Ramly courtesy of author*

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<sup>22</sup> The Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre was founded in 1988.

**TM:** The start of your career as a playwright coincided with the so-called decline in Egyptian theatre. In your experience, what were the main factors contributing to this decline?

**Lenin El-Ramly:** During the Nasserian age there was state support for the field of the arts, not exclusively for theatre. Books were published—there was a state politics called ‘a book every six hours’—and there were opportunities for the arts and for artists to flourish. The spirit of the revolution was in the air, which was also nourished by the powerful charisma of Nasser even though in fact he was a dictator. The generation of writers, directors, and actors of this period prospered in this atmosphere. After the defeat in the war in 1967, the belief in the revolution was completely lost. The writers started to expose the true nature of the reality that they had been falsifying before. As a result, many writers and their works were banned until Nasser’s death, although in their writings they were not even attacking Nasser personally, but rather the situation. It was not possible to criticise Nasser in person anyway. Then Sadat came to power. He was not interested in theatre or the arts at all and did not care much about the artistic field. However, the playwrights who remained on the scene still had to play safe, because of the restrictions enforced by theatre officials. Therefore, in the Seventies the quality of the plays declined. The field became corrupt. The writers who had connections in the government had more chances to get their plays onto the stage of the National Theatre than those who wrote good plays. The other factor that contributed to the decline of theatre was the emergence of the private sector. Troupes that worked in this sector would stage things only for commercial interest. Their productions were simplistic performances that aimed to provoke laughter through unsophisticated humour.

**TM:** How did you negotiate your writing within the existing situation at that time?

**El-Ramly:** My first play was staged at the end of 1974, in the period that I described.<sup>23</sup> I deliberately refused to stage a play with a state-run theatre because of the reasons that I mentioned: I had a huge mistrust in the state-run sector. My friend from the theatre institute, a director, took my play, which had been published beforehand, to the National Theatre and offered to stage it. This was done without my knowledge. They had an unusual system of control with only one person responsible for deciding whether they would stage a play or not. The person in charge rejected it. When my friend asked her to explain, she told him that the play was very bleak. She did not have any further reservations in relation to politics. So I decided to write for the private sector. For my next play, I collaborated with Mohamed Sobhy who was an unknown actor then. The first play that we produced, called *The Class Is Over, Stupid*, ended up being a huge success.<sup>24</sup> However, while working in the private sector, my aim was to bring meaning to theatre rather than to hunt for laughter by ‘tickling’ the audience and making the actors appear like clowns. In effect, with Sobhy I created a troupe which was different from anything that existed on the theatre scene at that point and was not related to the commercial theatre [of the time] at all.<sup>25</sup> I wrote plays in which laughter is achieved through sophisticated and meaningful content.

**TM:** While extremely funny, your plays are also highly political. What has your relationship with censorship been?

**El-Ramly:** I don’t like to interject politics directly into my plays but that doesn’t forbid me from saying what I want. My dislike of direct references to politics is not due to my fear of censorship. Politics is inherent in what I write without the need for direct references. The people who watch the plays understand the political essence, but nobody ever banned my

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<sup>23</sup> *Who Killed al-Bura’i* (*Man qatala al-Bura’i*) was staged in 1974 by the director Galal El-Sharkawy (1934-2022) under the title *They Kill the Donkeys* (*Inna-hum yaqtulun al-hamir*).

<sup>24</sup> The play *Intaha al-dars ya ghabbi* was staged by the director El-Sayed Radi (1935-2009). Sobhy (b. 1948) was in the lead role.

<sup>25</sup> The first production of *Studio 80*, the troupe founded by El-Ramly and Sobhy, dates to 1981. It ceased to exist in 1993.

plays. The censors did not have any outstanding reasons for it. Only a few minor things were censored. Afterwards I went to Sa‘d al-Din Wahba, who was in the government then. He got involved so that whatever I wrote was permitted.<sup>26</sup>

**TM:** Although your first attempt to access the National Theatre did not succeed, you eventually worked with state-run theatres and your plays, such as *Welcome Beys*, have enjoyed huge success in the National Theatre too.<sup>27</sup> This is not a ‘bleak’ play, but it is as political as any of your plays. I wonder how it got past the censors.

**El-Ramly:** *Welcome Beys* has been the most successful play in Egypt to date. The play is about two old friends who meet after a long time apart and during the meeting find themselves in Ottoman times. One of them is a scientist who adapts to the past and invents things in the service of the authorities so that they do not harm him. The other is a painter who wants to change the people and bring to them ideas from his own time, such as the liberation of women. When people watched the play, they would applaud the arguments of both the scientist and the painter. I asked the critics to explain why people applaud two contrasting opinions in the same way, and no one could find an explanation. Some might have thought that the painter should be more sympathetic, but the actor was criticised for representing the character as messy and confused. However, that was how I intended him to be. As a writer, I present arguments and all the sides of the reality. People reflect on what they watch and take from it whatever they want. It is from that position that I say I do not do politics and I do not take sides, but politics is inherently there in my writing.

**TM:** In this play your stance seems critical of both characters. Neither of them manages to bring about change for the people. One is not interested; the other does not understand the

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<sup>26</sup> The playwright Sa‘d al-Din Wahba (1925-1997) held various posts in the Ministry of Culture from 1964 to 1980, including that of deputy minister from 1975 to 1980.

<sup>27</sup> *Ahlan ya bakawat* was staged in 1989 by the director Essam El-Sayed (b. 1952). This production became one of the longest-running performances in Egypt and was staged for around eighteen years, with only a few breaks.

reality in which he lives and does not know how to negotiate it. In the play there are also clear references to the politicisation of Islam. I wonder how the audience reacted to it.

**El-Ramly:** I will tell you something funny about a specific scene, in which the shaykh in the past comes out of the mosque and with a microphone, he makes an announcement. He says: ‘God assigned science and progress to the foreigners, exploiting them so that they invent and create for our service, leaving us free to worship His Sublime Glory and enter Paradise through its wide doors’. These are the words of shaykh al-Sha‘rawi whom people used to worship in our country.<sup>28</sup> I heard these words many times before writing the play. When people watched the play, they would applaud and laugh at this scene without realising where the line comes from. I wrote the scene so that first it represents an Ottoman neighbourhood and then the time frame changes with everything remaining the same, except three things: there is a microphone that the shaykh uses, there is a magazine seller and there is a radio playing some old and banal song that has gone out of fashion. I wanted to show how little change there is. The Prime Minister, Atef Sedqy, watched the play and after shaking my hand, he told me: ‘Bravo, it’s a powerful thing, but take care of yourself’. Although that was a joke, there was also a true warning in his words, of the dangers coming not from him but from the terrorists of the Muslim Brotherhood who also tried to murder him. As you know, they tried to assassinate Naguib Mahfouz, and they assassinated Farag Foda. The Brotherhood accused me of everything, their supporters wrote against me in the media, there were people who brought legal cases against me for insulting Islam and for contempt of religion. That is what they saw in my work, but these cases were not successful and were eventually dropped. When the film *The Terrorist* was in cinemas, for which I wrote the script with Adel Imam in the lead role, the cinemas were guarded by the police forces so that there

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<sup>28</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Metwalli al-Sha‘rawi (1911-1998) was an extremely popular Islamic preacher, whose sermons resonated with the public in Egypt and in the Arab countries.



were no terrorist attacks.<sup>29</sup> The stores that were selling the video tapes of the film were being attacked. For Adel Imam the result was that his wage rose by forty percent. There were critics who alleged that the Interior Ministry requested that I write the film. These accusations first came from the left wing here, then an American critic repeated them. I never considered it worth replying to any of these accusations.

**TM:** You mentioned about the meaningfulness of the details that you wrote into your play. You give so much detail in your plays that sometimes it seems there is nothing left for the directors to do but follow your directions. You also directed some of your plays yourself. How important is it for you that your directions are followed precisely?

**El-Ramly:** When I direct, I do not like working with professional actors. I have worked a lot with amateurs as a director, but I work with them until they are recognised by the public. From then on, I am not interested in working with them. You are right in noticing that everything is detailed in my plays. When I work with a director, he can make two or three suggestions, as long as these suggestions are in line with my vision. If I see he is doing nonsense and doesn't precisely understand my vision, I will not work with him. What I mean is I am not a dictator, but I only work with those [actors and directors] who like my work, understand it and are passionate about it. Every detail is important in my plays and nothing should be ignored. Perhaps later there can always be new perceptions of my plays brought by directors, as happens with productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but even when some details are changed in these new perceptions, the details still matter as the public know what has been changed, what comes from Shakespeare and what comes from the director.

**TM:** You have had a very productive, successful, and influential path in Egyptian theatre. People quote your plays in random discussions in the street and on social media. There is

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<sup>29</sup> The film *Al-Irhabi* was released in 1994, directed by Nader Galal (1941-2014). Adel Imam (b.1940) is an extremely popular comedy actor in Egyptian cinema.

always something that one can quote from your plays in reference to almost any occasion that one might encounter in life. It seems you have written about everything that has happened and can happen. Are you working on anything new now?

**El-Ramly:** After *Welcome Beys* I wrote another play with the same characters called *Goodbye Beys*, in which the scientist and the painter go to the future where they do not recognise anything.<sup>30</sup> Here the scientist falls in love with someone and then finds out that she is a robot. The catastrophes that humanity is encountering are also the result of the stupidity of scientists and intellectuals, and in this play I wanted to expose that side of the scientist more vividly. So you are right that I have written about the future, but whether I write about the future, the past, or the present, the reality of my plays is the current reality, the present. Now I am working on a play that is similar to *Welcome Beys* but is blunter and more direct. I have a couple of pages to write to finalise this play, and I am writing my opinion into it in an honest and unconcealed manner.<sup>31</sup> The characters here are in the present. Again they are two old friends. They meet after the revolution. The debate between them here is different than that in both *Welcome Beys* and *Goodbye Beys*. At some point in this new play, one of the characters says: ‘We still live in the Middle Ages’ and this is my opinion too.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Wada ‘an ya bakawat* was staged in 1997 by the same director as *Ahlan ya bakawat*, Essam El-Sayed.

<sup>31</sup> *Laugh When You Are Dying (Idhak lamma tamut)* was eventually staged on the stage of the National Theatre in 2018, by Essam El-Sayed. The final published text of 2016 is hugely different from the manuscript that El-Ramly shared with me in 2016 and many of the more direct references to the political realities of the country have been removed. However, as in his other plays, the playwright’s vision is clear and uncompromised.

<sup>32</sup> The interviews are edited for length and clarity. The translation from Arabic is mine. I am grateful to Karim Helemish who accompanied me during both meetings with El-Ramly and the second meeting with El-Salamouny helping with the nuances of Egyptian Arabic when needed, as well as a lecturer from the Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts who did the same at the first meeting with El-Salamouny. I am also grateful to Ferdinand Arslanian for his help in transcribing the recordings.

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