

**REVIEW: *ACTING EGYPTIAN: THEATRE, IDENTITY, AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN CAIRO, 1869–1930*. By Carmen M. K. Gitre. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019; pp. 192 + xii.**

Carmen Gitre’s multifaceted analytical examination of “modern Egyptianness” is presented in four chronologically arranged chapters, each exploring compelling cases of performance, plays, and performers, spanning the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. As a book on social history highlighting the processes of “nontextual historical recuperation,” *Acting Egyptian* draws the readers’ attention toward playfulness, ambivalences, liminality, and tensions of theatrical practices, events, and spaces. In doing so, Gitre gives due recognition to the visions and processes of theatre-making that willingly or unwittingly reflect and restore those ambivalences and multiplicities. Pivoting her analysis on the conceptual model of ambivalence allows her to privilege complexity and multiple frameworks, eschewing binarized and generalizable concepts. As such, in this recuperative account, the author foregrounds subalterns’ tenuous pursuit of negotiating and reformulating their national identity in the face of overbearing and monolithic discourses around Egyptian nationalism, including the *effendiya* bourgeoisie and other modernizing forces. Across the four chapters, she subtly examines four distinct categories: the upwardly mobile, secular-educated middle-class men (known as *effendis*) striving for modernity and social advancement, elite individuals well-versed in European culture, women trailblazers involved in performance at theatres and cabarets and their management, and urban working-class individuals including immigrants from rural and Upper Egypt (*Sa‘id Misr*).

Chapter one, “Aida in Egypt,” begins with the debut of Verdi’s *Aida*, commissioned by the Ottoman governor of Egypt at Cairo’s Khedivial Opera House in 1871. The chapter’s multidisciplinary discussion examines signs and processes of urban renewals and social hierarchies as indicative of unifying processes of identity formation through reframing spatial

configurations and authentic Egyptianized narratives. The Opera House's architecture was used as a platform to represent the hierarchies and status of audience members, giving visibility to Egyptian court elites, their patronage of performances and their Euro-centric taste for entertainment. In a detailed discussion about alternative spatial designations, the author highlights that binaries that were maintained in the Opera House were in compliance with Ottoman court culture, complicating the public/private binary. Spatial designation for women in "harem boxes" in the Opera House, for instance, represented the binaries such as "interior/exterior" (34). In effect, while showing women in isolation, these boxes also manifested the horizontal dynamics of hierarchy in the Ottoman courts. Gitre then suggests that the harems' central location in the Ottoman palace allowed women to have both physical proximity to the throne and a significant standpoint in exercising sovereignty. She concludes the chapter by bringing European and elite Egyptian audiences' responses to the spotlight. Reframing Egyptian coherent identity and national pride in opera performances in tandem with urban development created a unique experience for these audiences at the turn of the century and paved the path for developing *effendiya* nationalism as a hegemonic social identity in 20th-century Egypt.

In chapter two, "How to Be an *Effendi*," Gitre sheds light on how effendis, as the culture-savvy elites, created an Egyptian national identity by splicing Western culture and technology with indigenous customs and lifestyles. Here, the author focuses on the Arabic-language theatre district 'Imad al-Din Street, its proscenium stages, and realistic theatre-making as a territorial space for disseminating consensus on effendi identity, masculinity, and narratives (43). The chapter discusses Farah Antun, a well-known Syrian Christian émigré and effendiyya member, and his effective role in perpetuating hegemonic discourse of "civilized" and modern Egyptian identity. This modern Egyptian identity is distanced from *sha'bi* (popular

and working class) and indigenous dispositions. For example, Gitre discusses Antun's linguistic innovations in utilizing an "elevated colloquial" in his canonical play *Misr al-Jadida* (New Egypt) to distinguish effendis' distinct social status (46). Ironically, Antun's efforts in magnifying Egyptian nationalism led to his own marginalization and a "fraught position" in the discursive and practical milieus of Egyptian nationalism. Gitre devotes the rest of this chapter to sharing the outcome of her close reading of Antun's works substantiated by compelling archival research on periodical press. Her nuanced account convinces the reader to agree that the ambiguities, instability, and fluidity in effendi identity and narrative, as reflected in their theatrical practices, are worthy of unstinting attention.

Building on this understanding, chapter three familiarizes readers with grassroots and interactive street performances by the *sha'b* and women. Focusing on "The Story of Ahmad the Rat," also situated at the turn of the century, Gitre examines playfulness and satirical improvisation as resistive tactics used in farcical playlets called *fasl mudhik* that destabilize the pillars of effendiya's hegemonic nationalism. The author begins by foregrounding specific characteristics in such comedic performances, including vulgarity in dialogue, language, action, fantasy, inverted gender roles, and audience participation, all challenging the decorum and rationality of the effendi value system. These sha'bi versions of modernity prospered in tensions with national homogeneity reinforced by effendi discourse and the dominant practice of cultural gatekeeping. More remarkably, Gitre's attention to the multiple endings to a single narrative in *Riwayat al-Sa'idi* (Upper Egyptian's Story) allows her to illuminate the ambivalences that she contends charge the history and historiography of Egyptian textual and nontextual performances. In doing so, she emphasizes how such hegemony extends to archives and documentation as it has overshadowed these subaltern voices.

Chapter four, “Cabarets and the Mothers of the Nation,” gives an in-depth analysis of the social and cultural context and processes of fandom and stardom in which female trailblazers, as singers, actors, dancers, or managers, worked to both challenge and perpetuate the values that effendi nationalism imagined for them and their peers. By critically examining primary sources with the help of a variety of secondary sources, the author argues artists like Munira al-Mahdiyya took effendi and elite feminist values and ideas in unexpected, ambiguous directions by being practical and opportunist about indigenous values of *adab* (proper upbringing and social mannerism) and *‘afaf* (purity and chastity) while performing on stage. These performing women perpetuated a unique freedom by practicing “disciplined transgression,” meaning while defying the effendi unified patriarchal freedom, they defined certain boundaries for their own sense and practice of freedom (116).

*Acting Egyptian* offers substantive glimpses into Cairenes’ daily life in addressing “permeable and porous spaces,” including theatres that reflect and reflect upon a diversity of identities and experiences (7). In this vein, the author’s clear-eyed historiographical methodology reminds the readers that theatre history can bear marks of ideological coercion and needs to be revisited. One might wish that some of the discussions that surface in her analysis of plays and performances had delved deeper into examining performance and aesthetic elements. For instance, in her chapters, Gitre could have elaborated on the acting styles, scenic design, and directorial choices and processes in her analysis of plays under discussion. Admittedly, though, an entire book could be devoted to the subject of acting style and performance analysis. As is, *Acting Egyptian* is a superb, sweeping account of the critical role that theatre and performance can play in forming, transforming, and reforming national and political discourses in a multi-layered shifting context. Readers from various fields are bound to find numerous concepts

of interest in *Acting Egyptian*. It is a highly readable page-turner and will appeal to Middle East researchers and students and the theatrical, musical, and dance scenes of the Global South. There is a growing body of scholarship about theatre in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Thanks to Gitre's book, this body is taking shape and spirit.

**Marjan Moosavi**  
**University of Maryland-College Park**

**Marjan Moosavi (Ph.D.)** is an educator, researcher, digital curator, and dramaturg. She holds a Ph.D. in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Toronto. She is the Roshan Lecturer in Persian Studies and Performing Arts and the Associate Director of the Roshan Initiative in Persian Digital Humanities at the University of Maryland, where she designs curriculum, mentors graduate students and pursues her interdisciplinary projects at the intersection of Theatre Studies and Digital Humanities. Her digital and curatorial collaborations include two pioneering and transnational digital projects: Digital Guide to Theater of the Middle East and the Digital Photo Exhibit on the Middle Eastern Theatre. Her work, whether academic or artistic, examines the dynamics of theatre-making in MENA countries and theatre's intersection with gender, history, and politics. Her research has been published in venues including *The Drama Review (TDR)*, *Asian Theatre Journal*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Routledge Handbook of Persian Literary Translation*, and *Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*. She is a longstanding Regional Managing Editor for TheTheatreTimes.com.