

***A FAMILY THAT HAS BEEN BLOCKED.* By Mustapha Shohaib. Directed by Mohamed Sobhi. Sonbol City Theatre, Egypt. Feb. 18, 2023.**

At the outskirts of Cairo, on the way to Alexandria, lies Sonbol City, a cultural complex established by prolific Egyptian actor and theater director Mohamed Sobhi (b. 1948), who named the place after a famous role he played in a television series. Sonbol City hosts the Mohamed Sobhi Theatre House, which showcases a photo gallery of Sobhi's works before the audience enters into the auditorium of the stage. There, I recently watched the play *A Family That Has Been Blocked*.

First performed in 2022, *A Family That Has Been Blocked* is a comedy that traces changes to Egyptian family values through time. The play is written by Mustapha Shohaib and directed by Sobhi, who also plays the leading role as patriarch of a family that spans four generations, with supporting roles played by Wafaa Sadek, Kamal Attia and others.

At the beginning of the play there is a mix of cinematic and theatrical tools. A screen projection plays a video showing a future time where life has been dehumanized, and humans have become more like robots. Then the scene shifts to the house of an average Egyptian family. The play follows this Egyptian family and its patriarch, Zeinhom Effendi (Mohamed Sobhi), from the time of the revolutionary figure Saad Zaghloul, who led the 1919 Revolution. The family is shown to abide by strict decorum and tradition. We follow the same family's descendants through time until we reach the present, witnessing their deterioration in values, respect and their level of language use. One symbolic example is the willingness of the descendants to sell the family's library and books. Another example shows the impact of technology—such as the phone,

television, media and social media—on the disintegration of family relationships. One particular scene refers to the deterioration of education, to the extent that the family's children take private lessons and memorize their lessons like a song accompanied by drum beats.

The title of the play can be interpreted on several levels. First, the family members have blocked one another, dissolving the family connections. "Blocking" may also refer to the family's neglect of the past glory of Egypt and of the family's relationship with their ancestors. In addition, the play's title may refer to a general societal tendency to neglect familial values. This socio-political satire draws our attention to the role of family, and didactically promotes family values while criticizing materialism, the domination of social media, and the deterioration of the educational system.

Sobhi was famous for his collaborative theater work with the late playwright Lenin El-Ramly (1945- 2020). Their collaboration during the eighties produced famous comedic and political satires, such as, for example, *You Are Free* (1981), *The Savage* (1985), *The Indecisive* (1985), *Hallucinations* (1989) and *Point of View* (1989). Later on, Sobhi directed and acted in a number of successful plays with Egyptian actress Simone; these included *Carmen* (1999), *A Woman's Plaything* (2000) and *The Road to Safety* (2000). This play is a comedy that incorporates several songs, but its spirit is slightly different from the Lenin/ Sobhi comedic style, which was subtly satirical. Here, the play seems to be trying too hard to re-capture the previous commercially successful formula of comedy, song, political satire and nationalistic fervor.

Sobhi's directorial style depends on some physical slapstick, as well as satirizing social situations and changes in societal taste concerning the quality of music and songs. The comedic effect happens through the repetition of certain motifs and phrases that seem to slightly change across the scenes and times. For example, different scenes refer to the prices of goods and make fun of how prices have become inflated. But this comedic effect felt predictable and labored at times. The scenery also sometimes failed to evoke warmth and intimacy; this may have been intentional, however, to show the alienation of the family members and the coldness sweeping over their relationships. Despite some biting jokes about inflation and education, the play ends on a didactically nationalistic and hopeful note.

Overall, *A Family That Has Been Blocked* is a pleasant family outing. The front of the house team at the theater is well-managed and punctual, the play is neatly blocked, and all participants appear to be well-trained and highly disciplined. Sobhi has managed to leave a mark in the history of Egyptian theater both as actor and director, and his years of theater experience show to good effect in his work. However, for this play, it may have been a better idea to train another actor in the leading role; more humor could have been created from the combination of Sobhi's experience with the fresh perspective of a budding comedic theater talent. But Sobhi's play is worth watching for its humor, values and professionalism.

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