

“Crossing Borders: A Theatre Practitioner’s Odyssey:” An Interview with Hassan El Geretly by Iman Ezzeldin



Photo courtesy of Alaa Yehia

Hassan El Geretly is a theatre director who has also worked in cinema. He studied theatre and French literature at the University of Bristol (U.K.). He then got a higher diploma in audio-visual staging (cinema, video and radio) at the Sorbonne University in Paris. He has worked in the fields of theatre and cinema since the 1970's in France, then in Egypt. He worked as an actor, assistant director, and then as director in the Centre Dramatique National du Limousin in France. He founded the touring theatre company Les Tréteaux de la Terre et du Vent that toured in France between 1975 and 1980. In 1987, El Geretly founded El Warsha theatre company in Egypt. In 1988, he was appointed director of the first experimental theatre in Cairo. He resigned in 1992 to devote himself entirely to independent theatre. EL Warsha, the first independent company in Egypt, creates contemporary theatre works, and tours them locally and internationally. With a career spanning over 40 years as a director, dramaturge, and actor, Hassan

El Geretly has been a pioneer in the realm of independent theater, reviving old traditions while embracing modern techniques. His artistic journey has left an indelible mark on the theatrical landscape, challenging conventions and inspiring countless artists along the way.¹

Iman Ezzeldin: Good morning, Hassan. Could we start with your work at the Centre Dramatique National De Limousin?

Hasan El Geretly: Of course. After graduating from the University of Bristol, I had the opportunity to work at the Centre Dramatique National De Limousin. It's an independent company based in Limoges, the capital of the Limousin region, that is recognized and subsidized by the state to operate outside of Paris. The company's main goal is to decentralize the cultural scene in France and shift it away from being solely centered in Paris. I worked there from 1972 to 1980, which was truly a transformative experience. Limousin, also known as "Le Désert Français," is sparsely populated due to migration and industrialization. Working in different governorates in the region was like an apprenticeship for me. I gained valuable experience and insights into French theatre and culture. During my time there, I worked as an actor, assistant director, and administrative staff member. Eventually, I became second-in-command and established my touring company Les Tréteaux de la Terre et du Vent, in 1975. This experience at the Centre Dramatique De Limousin shaped my perspective on decentralization and exploring different regions and cultures. It influenced my perspective on eventually returning to Egypt and seeking to move out of the centralized Cairo theatre scene to explore other provinces.

¹ These interviews were conducted in English via zoom between 22 and 25 September 2023. The four and half hours of interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

IE: I've heard so much about your experiences in France and how they influenced your work in Egypt. I'd love to hear more about the "veillées" nights?

Geretly: The "veillées" nights were inspired by the traditional concept of staying up late. In Limousin, these nights held a special significance as people would engage in various evening activities, such as singing, storytelling, and even working on tasks like mending socks. We aimed to recreate these nights through theatre, incorporating stories, songs and plays adapted from other regions that had a strong regional movement. For example, we adapted a play called *Villages à Vendre* or "Villages for Sale" from the nearby city of Marseille. The play focused on the invasion of rural areas by tourists from different countries who occupied the houses left abandoned by local peasants. We incorporated Limousin singers who performed songs in the regional language, between the various scenes, narrating the story of the countryside invasion by tourists. It was a way to bring the spirit of the "veillées" nights and the cultural heritage of Limousin to life through theatre.

During my time in Limousin, I had the opportunity to explore the connection between theatre and education to some extent. There were certain activities where we would go into schools and transform theatre from something confined to pages on a desk into a dynamic and interactive experience for the students. Before our visits, the kids had a limited understanding of theatre based solely on what they studied through works by renowned playwrights. However, our engagements were sporadic, occurring perhaps only once a year, which led to a gradual fade in the memory of our interactions.

In contrast, when we established our own theatre and education activities in El Minya, Egypt, we consciously tried to create continuity and regular engagement with the same children.

We would visit the same places and meet the same children regularly outside of the school context through associations. This meant seeing the kids once a week during the school year and for two days during the summer holidays. The results of these sustained interactions were dramatically different from our experiences in France. The deeper connections we formed with the children and the regular engagement allowed us to have a more significant and lasting impact on their lives through theatre and education.

IE: It's incredible how regular and sustained engagement with the same children can make such a difference in their experience of theatre and education. Now, I'd love to hear more about your work in marginalized or economically disadvantaged areas and with special needs children. Can you elaborate on how these experiences differed from the more traditional theatre curriculum in schools?

Geretly: Working in marginalized or economically disadvantaged areas and with children with special needs was a particularly fascinating experience for me. These classes often faced neglect from educational authorities and unique challenges related to their social and economic situations. These experiences differed from the more traditional theatre curriculum in schools, as they required a different approach and focus. What made these experiences particularly rewarding was the opportunity to work with children who might not have had access to or benefited from the traditional theatre curriculum. These were children who needed additional support and resources to thrive. We aimed to provide that support by engaging directly with them and fostering self-expression.

IE: Your work in marginalized communities and with children with special needs highlights theatre's transformative power. Now, let's focus on your decision to return to Egypt. Can you tell me more about the incident behind your motivation to return home and how it influenced your decision?

Geretly: The incident that triggered my motivation to return to Egypt occurred while I was walking behind the opera in Paris. I caught the aroma of Oriental pastries from an Armenian bakery, and in that moment, a strong sense of homesickness washed over me. It was a powerful reminder of my connection to my home country. Reflecting on all I had experienced and accomplished while abroad, I realized I needed to return home.

Initially, I left Egypt to pursue my education, theatre training, and apprenticeship. I was disheartened by the oppressive nature of the police state during the 1960s and sought new opportunities and perspectives. However, deep down, I always knew that I would eventually return. The political and social climate in Egypt, including the failure of the regime and the 1967 defeat, significantly shaped my perspective. I felt a calling to contribute my skills and knowledge to my home country. Once I became a master of my trade, I viewed myself as a "plumber of art" who clears the pathway for actors to express themselves authentically. My focus shifted from talent to discovering the hidden actor, particularly through my exploration of clowning. Returning to Egypt, I felt like an autonomous artisan prepared to collaborate with my actors and team. During my home visits, I had already established connections and plans with individuals in Egypt. They played a significant role in shaping my decision to return.

IE: It's incredible how specific moments and experiences can trigger a profound sense of belonging and motivate us to make important life decisions. Now, I'd like to touch on the

influence of foreign theatre and film on your creative process. Can you tell me more about the impact of watching thousands of plays and films during your time in the U.K. and France on your imagination, passion, and creative work?

Geretly: Watching thousands of plays and films during my 15 years in the U.K. and France profoundly impacted my creative process. It became a wellspring for my imagination, passion, emotions, and feelings—all crucial elements in the creative journey. Experiencing such a wide array of theatrical and cinematic works allowed me to broaden my artistic horizons and draw inspiration from different styles, genres, and cultures. It deepened my understanding of storytelling techniques, character development, and the power of visual and auditory elements in evoking emotions and creating impactful narratives. Each play and film I absorbed added a layer of richness to my creative arsenal.

IE: I'd like to touch on your experiences working with renowned filmmakers like Youssef Chahine and Yousry Nasrallah. Can you tell me more about your collaborations with them and the impact they had on your career?

Geretly: With Youssef Chahine, I had the opportunity to work as an assistant in the art department for his film *Wadā'an Būnābarṭ* [Adieu Bonaparte, released 1985]. My role involved coordinating the set, costumes, and props, with a primary focus on props. I also had the privilege of assisting in coordinating the French designers for the costumes. It was a valuable learning experience to collaborate on such a grand production. Also, with Chahine, I initially participated in co-writing the scenario for the film *Al-Yawm al-sādis* [The Sixth Day, released 1986];

however, I soon realized that my ideas and suggestions didn't align enough with Chahine's unique vision. While some elements from my work were incorporated, they didn't have an essential impact. So, I shifted my role and offered my assistance in helping him bring his vision to life. Chahine's distinct imagination and how he colors his world is his own, and I recognized that no one else could fully share that with him. As a result, I served as a scenario assistant and assisted in directing the actors. I also had the chance to work with Yousry Nasrallah, who was producing his first fiction film, "Sariqāt Şayfiyyah" [Summer Thefts, released 1988], under the banner of Misr International Films. I suggested to Nasrallah that real people from everyday life should be considered for the main characters in the film, individuals who weren't necessarily from the realms of cinema or theatre but had unique qualities that could bring depth to the roles. This approach brought authenticity and richness to the film and allowed me to explore the intersection between documentary and dramatic storytelling.

IE: I'd like to explore further the visual aspects of El Warsha's work. Your plays often have a fluid and cinematic quality, incorporating precise images and capturing moments of stillness and subtle movement. Can you tell me more about how you approach the visual elements in your productions and how they contribute to the overall theatrical experience?

Geretly: In El Warsha, we strongly emphasize the visual elements of our productions. The sets we design are carefully crafted, paying attention to composition, lighting, and spatial dynamics. We create a sense of rhythm within the space by utilizing the empty spaces and the actors' bodies. The way we approach scenarios and train actors has a connection with cinema, even if not always consciously. I've always had a deep appreciation for the art of cinema, which began

during my childhood when I used to go to local cinemas to watch films. This upbringing fostered my interest in imagery, composition, and capturing precise shots or moments. These influences are reflected in our work at El Warsha, where our plays are often described as a sequence of vivid pictures, incorporating moments of stillness and subtle forward movement. This cinematic quality allows us to create a unique visual experience for the audience, engaging them with the story and evoking emotions through carefully crafted images.

IE: Let's discuss the origins of El Warsha and how it came to be. Can you tell me more about the journey that led to the establishment of El Warsha as a theatre company?

Geretly: We started our journey in 1987 by reviving *Nawbat ṣaḥyān* [Geretly first staged *Nawbat ṣaḥyān* or *Waking Up* by Dario Fo and Franca Rame in 1983 with students from the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University] and Menha El Batrawy's wordless play *Yamūt al-Mu'allim* [The Teacher Dies, an adaptation of a French translation of Peter Hanke's *Das Mündel will Vormund sein*]. Starting our career as a theatre company with a wordless play was quite unconventional in the Egyptian and Arab context, as the theatre scene thrived on words, dialogue, and the explicit expression of ideas. It was a radical choice, although we didn't consciously make that decision. We continued to explore the power of words in plays by playwrights like Harold Pinter, Dario Fo, and Franca Rame, where violence, ambiguity, and conflicts were conveyed through explicit dialogue and subtext, body language, and moments of silence. Our plays became exercises in finding meaning in the spaces between and behind the words.

We also had a deep commitment to expanding the theatrical vocabulary beyond words. We explored the use of scenography, which encompasses costumes, lighting, and other visual elements that contribute to the language of theatre. Our aim was to create a rich, multi-disciplinary theatrical experience encompassing the actors' presence and physicality, the interaction with scenography, stage space, rhythm, and the spoken words, all working together like a symphony. Our adaptations of various writers, from Peter Handke to Harold Pinter, allowed us to explore different ideas, linguistic experiments, and diverse artistic influences. We were gradually developing our theatrical vocabulary that went beyond words, drawing from a wide range of artistic expressions and weaving them into our productions. The incorporation of social and political commentary, without resorting to slogans, further enriched the fabric of our plays.

Kafka's writings profoundly impacted my exploration of the dangers of military logic. His work delves into the dark corners of power structures and the absurdities that can arise from them. The play I created based on Kafka's vision allowed us to comment on our reality without directly referencing specific political figures or events. Kafka's characteristic mix of irony and nightmarish visions provided a powerful framework for exploring these themes. Metaphors played a crucial role in this exploration. Metaphor is at the heart of art as it allows us to express ideas indirectly and delve deeper into their implications. By utilizing metaphor in the play, we were able to create a layered and nuanced reflection on the paranoid, megalomaniac military logic that has engulfed us since 1952. It allowed us to comment on the profound realities of our society in an indirect yet impactful way.

IE: Now, let's shift our focus to Alfred Jarry's work and its exploration of power dynamics.

Geretly: Certainly. Alfred Jarry's work is a fascinating commentary on power dynamics within society. *Ubu Roi* uses Shakespearean characters like Hamlet and Macbeth to illustrate these dynamics in a satirical and provocative manner. The play originated from Jarry's experiences as a student and his observations of the power structures within the school he attended, delves into the conflict between imagination, humor, and control. In our creation, *Dāyirn dāir*, [All round, 1989], we drew inspiration from Jarry's *Ubu* cycle of plays, which were part of the absurd theatre movement that emerged in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Drawing from Gamal El Ghitani's novel, *El Zeiny Brakat*, [which is set in Mamluk Egypt] we created our own Mamluk version that incorporated elements of Jarry's vision. The themes somewhat inspired the events in our play in the *Ubu* cycle. The exploration of power dynamics and the use of absurdity and satire became central to our creation. Through this play, we aimed to comment on the power structures within our society, using Jarry's work as a springboard for our unique artistic expression.

IE: Remarkable. Let's shift our focus to the overall theatrical experience that El Warsha provides. Can you tell me more about the importance of sensory elements like space, sound, light, and movement in your work?

Geretly: In El Warsha, we place great importance on creating a multi-dimensional and impactful theatrical experience. We understand that theatre is about the spoken word and engaging all the audience's senses. The sensory elements play a crucial role in this. For example, the use of space is paramount. We often work in smaller spaces to maintain an intimate connection between the actors and the audience. This proximity creates a sense of immersion and allows the audience to

truly experience the performance. Sound and music also play a significant role in creating the desired atmosphere. Whether it's the soundscape integrated into the play or live music performed on stage, it adds depth and emotional resonance to the experience. Lighting is another crucial element. We carefully design the lighting to create the desired mood and focus attention, enhancing the overall visual impact. Movement is integral to the theatrical experience as well. We pay great attention to the physicality of the actors, their gestures, and the way they interact with the space. These elements contribute to the rhythm and flow of the play, adding layers of meaning and impacting the audience on a visceral level.

IE: How did El Warsha transition from performing established texts to producing its original work?

Gerety: It surprised me that we had neglected the rich theatrical and dramatic sources in our own culture. Instead, we treated them as mere local color, adding a touch of flavor to our works but not fully exploring their material, spirit, and the inherent architecture of our indigenous performance arts. There was a tendency to remain within the Western model and use our culture as a decorative local element. For example, we would take a story from the *Arabian Nights* and turn it into a play that remained within the Western imagination without fully engaging with our cultural heritage. But then we started examining this neglected heritage, looking beyond the surface and delving into the material, spirit, and worldview these works represent. It was a process of utilizing our cultural sources and reshaping the hegemonic Western theater model, which had been dominant for centuries. It opened up many sources to explore, starting with our rich heritage.

IE: Can you elaborate on how your encounter with the shadow players and the spirit of comedy and fear influenced your productions, particularly about the *Ubu* project?

Geretly: The encounter with the shadow players in 1985 sparked a newfound interest in elements drawn from popular Egyptian traditional performance arts. Witnessing the performance by the last group of shadow players, who had reunited after many years, left a lasting impression on me. During the staging of *Dāir maydūr* [All Round, 1989] and *Dāyirn dāir* [All Round, 1990], adaptations of the *Ubu* cycle, these elements began to influence our work. We incorporated the essence of the art of shadow play into our techniques and performances. All the actors were trained in shadow play with puppets, and we even brought the masters to work with us. One of the masters, Hassan Al Farran, taught the children in our outreach work, sharing their artistic secrets and passing on their knowledge. The spirit of comedy and fear, elements inherent in shadow play, started to find their way into our productions. For example, in *Dāir maydūr* we incorporated shadow play on stage in shadow form, along with performances by belly dancer Hanan Youssef, who portrayed the wife of Mamluk Dayer and the mistress of Ibrahim Ibn El Sokar. We designed puppets specifically for the shadow players to perform with, using shadow forms as well. The practice of shadow play, which had nearly vanished, became an integral part of our production. Exploring popular Egyptian traditional performance arts allowed us to infuse new elements of comedy, fear, and creativity into our work. We learned from the masters and shared their techniques with our actors, further enriching our artistic expression.

IE: Now, let's discuss your training in popular performance arts, specifically storytelling. How did storytelling serve as the core of your training, and what other art forms did you immerse yourselves in for inspiration?

Geretly: Storytelling was central to our training, forming the core of exploring popular performance arts. We recognized the power and significance of storytelling as a means of communication and artistic expression. Through immersive training, we delved into the art of storytelling, embracing its techniques, narratives, and connection with the audience. In addition to storytelling, we immersed ourselves in various other art forms as a foundation for inspiration in our subsequent plays. For example, we incorporated elements of the *al araguz* tradition, a form of puppetry, into our productions. Scenes were designed to evoke the spirit of comics, adding a touch of humor and liveliness to our performances. Our exposure to these art forms allowed us to tap into the creativity and expressive potential they offered. By integrating storytelling, puppetry, and other traditional performance arts, we created a dynamic and multi-dimensional theatrical experience that captivated audiences and enriched our productions.

IE: I'm intrigued by your exploration of the *mulid* or saint's feast as a setting for a play. Can you tell us more about the inspiration behind this concept and how you incorporated it into your production "Ghazīr al-layl" [The Tide of Nights 1993]

Geretly: Certainly! The mulids have fascinated me for years. It's a rapidly disappearing phenomenon, much like many aspects of everyday life in Egypt. I saw it as the perfect setting and time for a play because it possesses a timeless quality, with a vibrant atmosphere and various

popular arts being practiced. To bring this concept to life, I drew inspiration from the story of Hassan and Nai'ma, a popular ballad set in the countryside in 1926. This love story between a talented singer named Hassan and a young village woman named Nai'ma provided the narrative framework for the play. We wanted to explore her love for him and her family's disapproval. The mulid allowed us to move back and forth in time, as the essence of the celebration remains unchanged throughout the years. It allowed us to immerse the audience in the timeless ambiance of the mulid and incorporate various elements of popular arts practiced during the festivities. In addition to the love story, we intertwined other strands into the production. We incorporated elements of Pharaonic history, drawing on the possibility that the mulid originated from local Pharaonic manifestations of celestial power. We also included the Armenian story of 1926, incorporating an Armenian character played by Vania Exerjian, who sells tobacco at the mulid and interacts with the Egyptian characters. Furthermore, we envisioned a Greek bar where local landowners would gather to drink and buy alcohol. We created a poetic continuum with a unique structure by intertwining these different elements. The play was structured poetically, combining diverse stories, characters, and cultural influences. Through interviews and interactions with various personas, including a singer who felt jealous yet mourned Hassan's death, we aimed to create a rich and evocative theatrical experience.

IE: Could you elaborate on the significance of the mulid and how it relates to the themes and emotions explored in the play?

Geretly: The mulid holds deep significance both historically and culturally in Egypt. It is an annual religious ceremony in every quarter and town across the country. While its roots can be

traced back to medieval times in Fatimid Egypt, I believe it has even deeper roots, possibly originating from local Pharaonic manifestations of celestial power. The mulid provided an ideal backdrop for our play because it carries a timeless quality. The atmosphere and practices associated with the mulid remained relatively unchanged throughout the years. It is a canvas for various popular arts, creating a vibrant and lively ambiance. In our play, the mulid was a setting where different characters and narratives converged. It allowed us to delve into the themes of love, family disapproval, and the struggle for justice. The mulid's inclusive and celebratory nature provided a symbolic backdrop to explore the complexities of human emotions and societal dynamics. Moreover, the mulid's connection to local traditions and cultural heritage added depth to the storytelling. By intertwining historical events, such as the 1919 revolution, within the context of the mulid, we aimed to evoke a sense of collective memory and reflect on the spirit of the times. In essence, the mulid became more than just a setting for the play. It became a metaphorical space that encapsulated the spirit of Egypt, its traditions, and the ongoing journey of societal transformation.

IE: Now I'm curious about the production's scenography and the unique role of the storyteller. Can you elaborate on how you brought these elements to life?

Geretly: The scenography of the production was designed to enhance the narrative and immersive experience for the audience. We incorporated a bed that served multiple purposes within the play's scenography, acting as a stage, shrine, and bed. This antiquated bed became a focal point, symbolizing different aspects of the story. It transformed into various objects and settings, allowing for seamless transitions and a dynamic visual representation of the narrative.

In addition to the scenography, we introduced a unique role to the production—the storyteller. Sayed Ragab played this role and appeared on the bed, serving as the narrator and guide through the story. His presence added a layer of storytelling that connected the different elements and characters in the play. Ragab's role as the storyteller provided continuity and a sense of unity throughout the production. His interactions with the other characters and his narrations served as a bridge between the past and present, creating a cohesive and engaging theatrical experience for the audience. Overall, the scenography and the inclusion of the storyteller were integral elements in bringing the narrative to life and immersing the audience in the poetic continuum we aimed to create.

IE: Let's dive into incorporating *taḥṭīb*, the stick dueling art, into the play. Can you elaborate on why you chose taḥṭīb [stick fight/ dance] to represent Hassan's murder and its significance in the play.

Geretly: Taḥṭīb holds deep cultural and historical significance in Egypt, originating from ancient times and serving as a training exercise for the Egyptian army. Using taḥṭīb, we wanted to connect with our cultural heritage and showcase a recognized and respected art form. We saw it as a representation of the broken cycle of violence, as there is no expectation of revenge in this case. It allowed us to explore a different narrative where the focus shifted from vengeance to the tragic consequences of the characters' actions. The use of taḥṭīb also carries a symbolic meaning within the play. It represents a connection to ancient Egyptian culture, drawing on the war paintings and engravings that depict the Egyptian army practicing taḥṭīb as a training exercise. This connection to the past, combined with the fusion of traditional and contemporary elements

in the play, adds depth and complexity to the storytelling. Tradition, to us, is about more than just idolizing the past. It's about actively preserving and continuing the flame of cultural practices and artistic traditions. In our engagement with popular culture, we strive to honor Egypt's rich heritage while bringing it into contemporary contexts. Rather than simply reviving or imitating popular traditions, we aim to breathe new life into them by integrating them into our plays and performances. By passing on these traditions through our work, we ensure their relevance in the present and future, allowing them to evolve and remain dynamic.

IE: Can you tell us about the establishment of the Centre for Taḥṭīb Art and its importance in preserving this unique art form?

Geretly: El Warsha and I established the center in honor of Medhat Fawzi, a young dancer and stick fighter from Malawi who sadly passed away in a car crash a few years ago. It is the only independent center for popular arts in Egypt, located in Malawi, Egypt. The center is in an old, abandoned cinema built in the 1930s.

IE: Can you tell us about the training programs and groups at the center?

Geretly: We have scores of young men, and sometimes young girls, who train twice a week at the center. Our company consists of men of different ages, and we now even have up to 8 generations of men in our company. In addition, we have a group of children who also receive training. Initially, finding trainers willing to teach others was challenging, so we had to train our own trainers. Only a few professional stick fighters or dancers were part of government

institutions, like the Mass Culture Institution or the Palaces of Culture. They were reluctant to pass on their knowledge, so we took it upon ourselves to preserve and disseminate this art form. Stick fighting and stick dancing are martial arts and sports that are performed during popular ceremonies such as saints' birthdays and weddings. The art is always accompanied by music, although the duel itself is not performed to a specific rhythm. There is a distinct aesthetic sense as the stick fighters engage in duels. It's important to note that this art form is not about defeating your adversary but rather about contemplation and aesthetics. From the duel, the dance emerged, and Egyptian folkloric companies now incorporate stick dancing into their group choreography.

El Warsha had acquired the reputation of a company that specialized in folklore. And of course, this is not really true. We worked during this period of the aforementioned performances in bringing this source into our work that has been neglected in the short history of Egyptian theatre, except in an artificial way, as I already pointed out. But because it was a very successful introduction, El Warsha was quickly identified with this stage of its history because it was such a powerful move that led on the one hand to an acknowledgment and recognition of this popular culture, and on the other hand to some virulent attacks on the Warsha claiming that we were creating shows for tourists, or creating shows to export to the West which was very interested in traditional cultures. And, of course, our moves didn't originate in this kind of motivation at all though we got invitations from time to time to the west. But our product was very unlike all the other products that were exported from Egypt.

When it comes to our traditional art forms being exported to other countries, especially in the West, there is often a tendency to present them as folkloric versions rather than authentic representations of our culture. This happens because people in our own countries may not have a thorough understanding of these art forms. As a result, there is sometimes ignorance regarding

the existence and significance of these arts in our own reality. This can lead to rejecting these art forms as belonging to a past that we should move away from to embrace modernity. This attack on our traditional arts has increased over time, but there have been companies that create plays inspired by our work to meet the desires of audiences who wish to explore our multiple identities, including the aspects we may have overlooked in the twentieth century with the rise of modernity.

IE: Can you discuss your work on the Bani Hilal epic?

Geretly: Bani Hilal is a medieval epic that surpasses even the scale of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. However, it has never been written down in its entirety. Instead, it exists in various versions told by different storytellers. Each storyteller adds their own variations and personal touches, creating diverse interpretations of the epic. When we wanted to bring the epic to life on stage, we divided the lines among different characters based on the versions of the great bards, such as Sayed El Dawwi. We kept the lines intact, without changing a single word, using the exact recorded version from Sayed El Dawwi.

IE: It's fascinating to see how the epic was adapted for the stage. Could you share an example of how you turned the collective lines of different poets into a play during your experiment in Holland?

Geretly: In our experiment in Holland, we took the collective lines from different poets and initially divided them between a chorus, responsible for singing the narratives, and the actors,

who sang the lines of the characters. By doing this, the epic seamlessly transformed into a play without much effort. Our first play, *Ghazal al-A'mār* [Spinning Lives, 1997], was derived from a version of Sayed Al Dawwi's recordings. We edited the recordings into a play, introducing one quatrain to create a flashback since the original epic did not have flashbacks. This allowed us to adapt the epic to the theatrical medium.

IE: Could you tell us about your ongoing work on the epic in recent years?

Geretly: In recent years, we have resumed our work on the epic. We focused on the last book of the epic. Our goal has been to train a new generation of El Warsha performers in speaking, narrating, and singing the epic using traditional tunes. We have also been working on the dramaturgy of a new play based on the theme of the last book, which explores the disunity and internal conflicts among the Arabs after their triumph over Tunis. We delve into the economic motives behind their actions, as they left Yemen due to drought and invaded Tunis for its fertile land. This period of the epic reveals how the four Arab tribes and their 360 thousand soldiers fought among themselves for power and wealth, gradually losing their original purpose. We have been working closely with various storytellers, singers, and actors to understand the different versions of the epic and learn from their expertise.

IE: Could you share your experience working with Sayed Al Dawwi and his impact on your artistic journey?

Geretly: Working with Sayed Al Dawwi was a truly amazing experience. He was not just a teacher or a facilitator, but a master. We spent years immersed in his recordings, transcribing thousands of quatrains that became our primary source material. Sayed Al Dawwi considered himself responsible for preserving and propagating the epic throughout his life. His relationship to the epic was phenomenal. He carried it on him like a religious book. He considered himself responsible for this book and for propagating the epic throughout his life. He would sing nothing else. There were would be other singers in his music group that would sing the lighter songs for the audience to relax in between the dramatic episodes while he would take a break. His relationship to time, to the epic, to politics, to God, gave us lessons. He did not teach anything in a direct manner. We learnt off his tapes.

IE: Let's move to talk about operettas in Egyptian theatre. You mentioned that they have played a significant role in exploring the history of Egyptian theatre. Could you tell us more about that?

Geretly: Certainly! operettas have played a significant role in exploring Egyptian theatre's short but impactful history in its Western sense. We have brought back several masterpieces from the 19th century onwards, including Tawfik El Hakim's 1931 play *Rusāṣah fī al-qalb*, [A Bullet in the Heart, 2003] and two operettas from the 20th century. The most recent one you saw was *Yawm al-qiyāmah* [Doomsday, 2017] which we adapted as *Qiyāmah qayma*, [Domesday Has Come]. We also revived a 1924 operetta called *Ayyām al-‘izz* [Days of Splendor, 2007].

IE: It's interesting how operettas have been revived in Egyptian theatre. Could you explain why Egyptians have a strong attachment to singing and how that has influenced our culture's popularity of musical plays and operettas?

Geretly: Egyptians have a strong attachment to singing, and Egyptian cinema has evolved from silent films to singing films and eventually to talkies, much like Western cinema. Singing has always been a fundamental element of Egyptian cinema, so it's only natural that operettas and musical plays are popular forms of theatre in our culture. As a company, we train our actors extensively, focusing on voice, singing, and dance. This comprehensive training allows our actors to handle various styles of performance.

IE: It seems that your company not only focuses on traditional operettas but also explores different forms of musical performances. Could you elaborate on this?

Geretly: Yes, we are continuously exploring different forms of musical performances. Our productions are often musical, so they don't necessarily have to be operettas to include music and singing. Our adaptations of foreign plays and our original works often feature music, and the plays written in El Warsha typically include songs as well. We aim to create a diverse range of productions that incorporate music and singing.

IE: I'd like to touch on your development of the "Nights of El Warsha" form. Can you explain how this form has evolved over the years and what it offers to both the performers and the audience?

Geretly: In 1992, we started a form called "*Layālī al-warṣḥah*" [Nights of El Warsha] which allows us to experiment with different sources of writing and provides an opportunity for new members of the company to develop their performing abilities, especially as singers. It is a review or a musical play that contains stories, sketches, and sometimes short plays, but always includes songs. This evolving form changes its content while maintaining its structure. It has become a platform for our discoveries and experiments in writing, as well as a training ground for our performances. "Nights of El Warsha" has gained its own recognition and is always in demand. On average, we perform a "Night of El Warsha" once a month. Recently, we performed a production called *Ṭuyūr al-Fayyūm* [The Birds of Fayoum, 2014] as part of the Avignon Festival. It had a political theme, similar to a French cabaret. However, I should clarify that the Arabic term *cabareh* has a different connotation, referring to a lively nightclub. This form has been our most successful medium for exploring our creative ideas and experimenting with writing, and it continues to thrive as a unique style, always offering something new and enjoyable to the audience.

IE: Your theater group explores the intersection of art and politics. Can you elaborate on how this connection is reflected in your performances and the role it plays in your work?

Geretly: The connection between art and politics is a central aspect of our work. In our performances, we often integrate political texts and themes to create a dialogue with the audience. For example, we projected texts by Victor Hugo and La Fontaine during our shows, which had strong political undertones. We also introduced a powerful text by Alia Mossallam,

reflecting on freedom and the significance of political activism. These collective works explore the notion of political engagement without directly addressing the political issues of the day. By choosing to create art that is politically engaged, we participate in a national dialogue that encourages Egyptians to openly discuss the realities of their country.

IE: Your play, *Ṭuyūr al-Fayyūm*, incorporates themes of freedom and is a reflection on the political activism of imprisoned individuals. Can you explain how these themes are explored in the play and the impact they have on the audience?

Geretly: In *Ṭuyūr al-Fayyūm* we drew inspiration from Alia Mossallam's reflection on freedom during a birthday outing with her daughter. This reflection and La Fontaine's "The Wolf and the Dog" story about freedom became integral to the play. The play serves as a reminder of the imprisoned political activists and the importance of freedom. By weaving these themes into the performance, we profoundly impact the audience. Through the projection of texts and the exploration of diverse cultural expressions, we encourage our audience to reflect on the idea of freedom and its significance in their lives.

IE: The play *Zawāyā* [Perspectives, 2012] tackles the revolution of 2011 from different perspectives. Can you tell us more about the characters portrayed and how their varying viewpoints contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the revolution?

Geretly: In *Zawāyā*, we present the story of the 2011 revolution from different angles through various characters. These characters include a mother who lost her child, a human rights woman,

a henchman whose attitude towards the revolution evolves, and an Ultras who experienced the loss of fellow members during a football match in Port Said. Each character represents their own interests and points of view, providing a multifaceted interpretation of the revolution. By presenting these different perspectives, we challenge the simplistic narratives often presented by the media and offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex reality of the revolution.

IE: Your exploration of themes also included the subject of Troy and the "Ḥikmat al-munkasirīn" [Wisdom of the Defeated]. Can you tell us more about your work on this subject and the challenges you faced in creating a contemporary interpretation?

Geretly: "Hikmat Al Munkasirin" is a concept introduced by Mahmoud Darwish, which explores the wisdom that can emerge from the experiences of the defeated. In our play "Mahmoud Darwish, A Poet of Troy," we incorporated this theme to shed light on the complexities and nuances of defeat and its inherent wisdom. However, we faced challenges with the formation of the team, which led us to pause and shift our direction. Nonetheless, the theme of "Hikmat Al Munkasirin" remains a subject of interest and can be further explored in our future work.

IE: Your approach to funding for your theater productions has been unique. Can you elaborate on how you sought funding and the role cultural institutions played in supporting your work?

Geretly: We approached funding naturally by establishing connections with cultural institutions based on the nature of the plays we wanted to bring to Egypt. For example, the Goethe Institute

supported our first play under the name of El Warsha, as well as other productions such as our adaptation of Kafka's "The Penal Colony" [1989 and 2012]. Similarly, the British Council covered some of the costs for our productions during their 50th anniversary in Egypt. We didn't seek plays to fit these institutions; rather, we looked for institutions that were interested in the type of plays we wanted to bring, fostering a mutual understanding and partnership.

IE: Your theater group faced criticism for receiving foreign funding. How did you navigate these criticisms and maintain your artistic integrity?

Geretly: The criticisms we faced for receiving foreign funding revolved around accusations of aligning with imperialism and supporting certain political agendas. However, it was important to emphasize that the funding we received came from institutions managed by progressive intellectuals and individuals who had been active in movements such as the 1968 protests. We engaged in rich dialogues with them, and the funding provided essential support for our work. Over time, the criticisms subsided as it became clear that independent funding opportunities within Egypt were limited. Many institutions and artists who criticized us for foreign funding ended up receiving similar support themselves. It was important to maintain our artistic integrity and focus on the work we wanted to create, regardless of the criticisms faced.

IE: You mentioned conflicting dynamics within the institutional structures and bureaucracy that hindered the creative process. Can you share your experiences in navigating these challenges and your decision to focus on independent initiatives?

Gerety: I had experiences working within institutional structures, such as being the director of Al Hanager, the first theater for young experimental contemporary arts. However, I eventually resigned from that position due to the realization that the conditions required aligning with the state's propaganda machine. I wanted to be part of a movement rather than an isolated independent artist. Unfortunately, in Egypt, accessing state funding without being part of the established system or a theater that acts as a mouthpiece for the authorities is incredibly challenging. I remained committed to the idea that the theater should belong to the young independent initiatives in the country rather than an individual or company. Despite being told that I had the freedom to do as I pleased, I recognized the bureaucratic obstacles within the system and chose to focus on maintaining true independence with El Warsha.

My father's experiences as a Minister of Finance in 1954 and the challenges he faced due to the price of being in power profoundly impacted me. Similarly, my own experiences within institutional structures, such as my position at Al Hanager, made me realize the difficulties involved in executing my decisions and the extent of external interventions. These factors reinforced my desire for true independence and freedom to negotiate my place within the system. Consequently, I resigned from that position and focused on El Warsha, making it clear that Al Hanager would be a theater for the new independent initiatives in Egypt rather than a personal entity.

IE: How have you have navigated the challenges of securing funding and the transition to alternative financial systems?

Geretly: Securing funding has been a dynamic process for us. In recent years, we have faced funding limitations due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a decrease in cultural support. We have shifted our approach by focusing on generating income through our trainings and maintaining social responsibility. For example, for every two trainees, we offer scholarships to two others or provide free training to a percentage of participants. We have also become proactive in marketing and branding our performances through social media and public relations. Additionally, we are exploring partnerships with the private sector and relying more on local resources to finance our productions. It has been a challenging transition, but we remain determined to maintain true independence and financial stability.

IE: I'm curious to know how El Warsha, the first independent theater company in Egypt, came to be. Can you share the story behind its creation?

Geretly: El Warsha was unintentionally created in 1987 while we were working on *The Pupil Wishes to be a Master* by Peter Handke and the revival of Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *Nawbat sahyān*. We thought, why not continue? We named it El Warsha. Although we had discussed working together for years while I was in France, there was no preconceived idea.

IE: As the first independent group, how did you establish yourselves and inspire others to join this movement?

Geretly: We initially called ourselves the Free Groups, but as more groups emerged, we began referring to ourselves as independent. We held small festivals occasionally to celebrate the

emergence of this movement. One significant event was when we invited all the groups to gather at the Greek Club and performed “The Wolf and the Dog,” a parable about freedom by La Fontaine. This gathering became a trend, and every amateur group started dubbing themselves independent. Individuals from various groups paradoxically met in the cafeteria of Hanager, the theater I built and then left. The phenomenon grew and developed, although it became confusing as some individuals belonged to multiple groups.

IE: It's fascinating to hear how this movement gained momentum. Did the government support the independent theater scene during this time?

Geretly: Throughout our 36 years of existence, the government contributed only to our travel expenses and provided pocket money to represent Egypt abroad. We were seen as a prestigious product of Egypt's artistic creativity. Despite this minimal support, we survived, and our continued existence encouraged others to enter the independent theater landscape. However, it's important to note that the government didn't provide substantial support, despite ongoing discussions within various institutions such as the *Sunduk tanmia thaqafiya* [The Cultural Development Fund].

IE: I can imagine the challenges you faced without significant support from the government. How has the independent theater movement evolved since then, and what are some of the current challenges you face?

Geretly: Looking back, the image isn't as glorious as it initially seemed. While some companies have managed to survive through traveling, funding, and outreach work, I wouldn't say there is a flourishing independent theater movement. The challenges we face are abundant. The ultimate issue is being completely marginalized and lacking dialogue with the authorities and the state. There is no space to work and be truly independent. Funding is scarce, and censorship fluctuates depending on the state's leniency towards expression. Additionally, the patriarchal nature of our society instills a longing for adoption by the state, which seems paradoxical.

IE: Looking ahead, what are your aspirations as a theater professional? Do you have any upcoming projects or collaborations that you are excited about?

Geretly: As a theater professional, I live without hope but with a strong desire that keeps me motivated. As I navigate the present, I carry the past within me, envisioning myself as a crescent holding the remaining piece of the moon, symbolizing my journey into the future. While hope may be absent, my desire propels me forward. In terms of projects, I have several in progress. One of them is the second version of the epic of Bani Hilal, titled *The Orphans*. This project brings together three generations: myself (the oldest generation), then the writer, Shadi Atif, and finally Ali Abdel Latif (the youngest), the actor who portrays Abu Zaid in the scene of his death. It reflects on our lives and the sense of despondency we feel post-2011, acknowledging the defeat of the uprising while recognizing the rich contributions and ideas that emerged during that time. We have already showcased a demo of parts of the play and are currently seeking additional funding to complete the project.

Additionally, we have been exploring the roaring twenties and thirties following the 1919 revolution, which marked a significant period of unleashed freedom in Egypt. We are excited about this thematic exploration. We recently presented a night of El Warsha called "Ba'd El 'sha" [After the Evening Falls], which combines stories, songs, and sketches from this project. Beyond that, I am involved in various projects, such as developing podcasts based on Egyptian proverbs focused on sustainability, collaborating with a cultural center in Qena, Upper Egypt and supporting cultural activities in Malawi, Egypt. These projects motivate and engage me, fueling my passion for new ideas and societal development through art.

As we conclude this captivating interview, we are left in awe of this remarkable theater figure's profound wisdom and artistic vision. With over four decades of experience, his contributions to the theater industry have been extraordinary. Through his commitment to reviving old theater traditions, while embracing modern techniques, he has bridged the gap between past and present, breathing new life into the theatrical realm. His impact as a director, dramaturge, and actor will continue influencing and inspiring future generations. We sincerely thank this theater luminary for their time, insights, and unwavering dedication to the craft.

Iman Ezzeldin
Ain Shams University

Dr. Ezzeldin is Assistant Professor at the Department of Drama and Theatre Criticism of Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt (founder of the department in 2006). She is the founder and coordinator of the "Film Criticism Diploma". She is also the former director of the "National Library of Egypt, Bab-Al-Khalq". A classicist by training and an active player on the wider cultural scene. She is a member of the IFTR and a jury member for many literary, cultural, theatre, and film awards. Additionally, she was a member of the Theater Committee of the Supreme Council of Culture, Ministry of Culture, Egypt, for many years. A visiting professor at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, and the Kuwait High Institute for Theatre Studies in Kuwait. Furthermore, she acts as a consultant for the "El Nahda Scientific and Cultural Organization (Cairo Jesuit)". She has to her name many publications in Arabic, English and Italian.