

MIDNIGHT IN CAIRO: THE DIVAS OF EGYPT'S ROARING '20S. By Raphael Cormack. New York: W.W. Norton, 2021; pp. 384.

Raphael Cormack's *Midnight in Cairo* offers a glimmering portrait of the female stars of Egypt's Roaring '20s. The book combines meticulous research and a narrative style that appeals to a broad audience, which bring to life the 'divas' of the era through detailed biographical vignettes. These stories capture the jubilant glamor of the period, showcasing the lives of these fascinating performers both on and off the stage. *Midnight in Cairo* has resonated with readers beyond academia, as it offers an entertaining and insightful foray into a pivotal moment in Egypt's performance history. Cormack organizes the narrative into "a theatrical story in three acts": *Act I: Setting the Scene*, which focuses on the historical performance context pre-1920s; *Act II: The Leading Ladies*, which provides the biographies of the key female performers; and *Act III: Curtain Call*, which tracks the political and social developments in Egypt from the 1950s forward, providing a brief retrospective in contrast to the earlier era (10).

In the first act, *Setting the Scene*, which encompasses chapters one through four, Cormack provides a brief overview of Egyptian theatre and performance history up to the 1920s. By beginning with Ibn Daniel's thirteenth-century shadow plays, Cormack pushes against the narrative that Egyptian drama began with the intrusion of European colonialism. This approach not only counters pervasive historiographic narratives but also positions Cairo of the 1920s within a broader regional performance history. Cormack vividly paints Cairo of the 1920s as a sort of cosmopolitan fever dream, suggesting, "Egypt was all over the front pages, and Cairo's residents must have felt they were living at the centre of the world" (100). He focuses, in particular, on the vibrant nightlife and cultural scene in Ezbekiyya, a Cairene district known at that time for an abundance of dance halls, theatres, and other performance venues. Written in an engaging narrative style, this first 'act' of *Midnight in Cairo* serves as an excellent primer on performance history in Egypt; the focus on a diverse array of notable figures, writers, producers, and actors, as the narrative throughlines makes for a delightful read.

In the second act of *Midnight in Cairo*, *The Leading Ladies*, which spans chapters five through eleven, Cormack explores the lives of significant female film, stage, and musical stars of 1920s Egypt through chapter-long vignettes. The biographies intersect and build on each other, with some women becoming recurring figures, background players in the others' narratives. The chapters focus respectively on stage-actress turned journalist Rose al-Youssef, theatre troupe

leader Fatima Rushdi, singer and actor Fatima Sirri, widely known songstress Oum Kalthoum, musical theatre star Mounira al-Mahdiyya, film actor Aziza Amir, and comic actor and dancer Badia Masabni. While a few men, such as Aziz Eid, feature prominently throughout, the chapters focus on the women's groundbreaking careers and complex lives. Notably, Cormack addresses both their triumphs and challenges, a choice that is exemplified by the highlighting of Rose al-Youssef's controversial editorial choices, use of misogynistic cartoons, and an all-male staff for her eponymous still-running magazine. Yet, her story is ultimately portrayed as a tale of triumph, as Cormack emphasizes her unlikely rise in Egyptian society, stating, "it is hard to imagine that a young girl who had turned up alone in Alexandria at the beginning of the twentieth century could possibly have started her own literary journal in Egypt if she had not found her way into the world of arts and become one of Egypt's biggest stars" (148). Cormack extends the stories of these women into the twilight of their careers and lives in the 1950s, fulfilling the book's core mission to "tell the history of Cairo's nightlife through the eyes of the women who made it what it was" (321).

Curtain Call, the final act, which covers chapter twelve and the conclusion, serves as a fitting denouement, opening with an anecdote of a young Edward Said visiting Badia Masabni's establishment in 1950 to watch the famous dancer Tahiyya Carioca. Cormack leverages this happenstance encounter between Said and Carioca to chronicle Egypt's journey from the precipice of the 1952 Revolution to the present day. In the concluding chapter, Cormack adopts a more personal tone, reflecting on feminism, contemporary Egypt, and regional cultural transformations. While providing a modern perspective, this subjective shift sometimes contrasts sharply with the detailed historical narrative he established earlier, which casts a somewhat somber tone on the ending. This discordance may feel jarring, yet it also effectively draws the reader into the ongoing dialogue about Egypt's past and its present.

In crafting nuanced portraits of the iconic 'divas' of the era, Cormack extends beyond drama and theatre to include music, dance, and film. He situates these arts within the broader historical, political, and cultural contexts that shaped the performers' lives, their artistic expressions, and their legacies. Cormack enriches the narrative by interweaving tales of lesser-known figures and personal dramas, creating a rich tapestry that captures the vibrancy of the 1920s Cairo stage scene. The book touches upon fraught subjects, if too briefly, such as intercultural tensions, misogyny, blackface, and colonialism. While Cormack does not approach these critically or

in-depth (as that is neither the style nor objective of the text), their inclusion serves to make *Midnight in Cairo* a well-rounded entry into the performance history of the region. This approach makes the book accessible and informative, appealing to a general audience as well as theatre students and scholars from other disciplines, such as historians and literary scholars who focus on Egypt or the Middle East. However, performance and theatre scholars will also find much of interest within the text as Cormack gives a glimpse into oft-overlooked pre-1950s Egyptian drama, music, and dance. Cormack's use of archival photographs and excerpts from interviews and the writings of the stars themselves adds authenticity and depth, showcasing the era's glamour and the significant, yet often overlooked, contributions of these women. Cormack's *Midnight in Cairo* is a love letter to a bygone era of Egyptian glitz and glamour. Bringing to light some of Egypt's most fascinating female figures, often marginalized in narratives that typically focus on Western perspectives, the text makes these women both legible and truly dazzling.

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